

CONRAD RUSSELL

Memorial service, 14 June 2005

Address by Sally Hamwee

In February 2002 an amendment was tabled to delete the term 'etc' from the State Pension Credit Bill by peers who just wanted to know what on earth it meant in the context. Conrad Russell contributed to the discussion:

My Lords, if I were to be given one of those word-association tests and offered the word 'etc', I do not believe that the first word that would come back would be precision. On one famous occasion in 1640 the Convocation of Canterbury required people to take an oath to the government of the Church, by archbishops, bishops, deans, 'etc'. Many people believed, or affected to believe, that 'etc' meant the Pope.

One London preacher maintained that 'etc' was the curled lock of the Antichrist. I do not need to express agreement with that preacher to say that the Government might be wise to chose a word a little more precisely defined.

Anyone who worked with Conrad would not be surprised at that example: a historical reference, often preceded by 'It reminds me of ...' – the seventeenth century as vivid to him as the twentieth – and the assumption that all the rest of us knew exactly what he was talking about. I have to say that, sitting alongside him in the Lords, I realised that ministers opposite were often bemused, but some were better at disguising it.

Conrad paid all of us the compliment of assuming we were his intellectual equals, and I never knew whether I fooled him – my laughter often had to take its cue from his own. An intellectual aristocrat he may have been, but his respect for other people was not dependent on their attainment.

It was his intellectual integrity that meant that he respected – and said so – people with whose views he may have profoundly disagreed, if those views were coherent. Though, for instance, he took such a different view of the notorious Section 28 from Janet Young, he quite clearly held her personally in high regard. But then, as he once muttered to me on the bench during an exchange on zero tolerance, 'One should have zero tolerance only of zero tolerance itself'.

That love of liberty drove him, and his love of language enabled him to express it. He spoke in beautifully honed paragraphs, both in private and in public – from sparse notes, just a few lines in capitals, some of them very deliberately in red (I never worked out the colour code), in an exercise book to which he rarely referred once he was on his feet. When names for his new granddaughter were being considered he said 'Liberty would be a good name, but you can't say to a three year old: "Liberty, don't do that".'

Along with liberty, his values were justice and liberalism rooted firmly in the belief that power of all sorts should be dispersed and accountable. He wrote: 'As far back as I can remember, I assumed the purpose of politics was to fight injustice, poverty and oppression; what else could be worth all that sweat?'

And in doggedly pursuing in Parliament the causes of student poverty and the treatment of asylum seekers, he pioneered ways of drawing attention to unimportant-looking regulations which were likely to have a devastating effect on the lives of vulnerable people, without flouting the conventions which govern the Lords' relationship with the Commons.

He was an assiduous writer of letters to the papers. When Tony Blair claimed he never gave money to beggars, in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* Conrad suggested that:

He should remember that need may happen to anyone. Belisarius in his day was the best general in the Roman Empire, but ended up at the gates of Rome chanting 'Give a ha'penny to Belisarius'. If, after Mr Blair has reformed the welfare state and gone out of office at the moment his pension fund goes broke, I find him at King's Cross chanting 'Give a tenner to Tony', I will give it to him, even if my gorge rises at it.

He was not one for small talk, and as for recreations he listed 'uxoriousness' in *Who's Who*. His speeches were full of mentions of Elizabeth, always to make a wider point.

He may have looked the caricature of a scatty academic, with his hair standing to attention (or sometimes less disciplined) and his portable filing system of Waitrose carrier bags, but he loved nothing more than a good gossip, and better still a good plot. Many of us will have had late-night phone calls (we knew never ever to call him early in the morning) which began 'Conrad here'.

The party loved him and he loved the party. During a late night, when the Liberal Democrats were voting alone – one of our principled futile gestures on an issue of liberalism – we went through the lobby singing traditional songs; Conrad's refrain was 'Lloyd George *jailed* my father'.

It was entirely consistent that he gave huge support personally to individuals. He supported his students, in his teaching and pastorally. He encouraged individuals within the party – his foreword to his book *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Liberalism* thanked, 'for reactions at party functions which have been constructive, informative and helpful', a list

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ELECTION 2005 IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The 2005 election saw the Liberal Democrats win a higher number of seats than at any time since 1923, and, for the second election in a row, gain both votes and seats after a period of Labour government – a historically unprecedented achievement. Yet many had hoped for an even better result, and the election campaign itself saw relatively little movement in the Lib Dem standing in the opinion polls. Does 2005 represent steady progress, or a missed opportunity?

Speakers: **John Curtice** (Professor of Politics, Strathclyde University), **Andrew Russell** (Senior Lecturer, Department of Government, Manchester University; author of *Neither left nor right? The Liberal Democrats and the electorate*), and **Chris Rennard** (Liberal Democrat Chief Executive).
Chair: **Tony Little**.

8.00pm Sunday 18th September

Louis Room, Imperial Hotel, Blackpool

Please note that due to increased conference security, only those with conference photo-badges will be able to attend. For those only wishing to attend fringe meetings, registration is free but is limited to Liberal Democrat party members; and please allow time to register and pick up your badge at the Winter Gardens in Blackpool.

Harcourt into context; for the reader who is not already familiar with the details it is difficult to make much of the account.

This failing becomes serious in the remarkably brief treatment of what was surely the peak of Harcourt's career: his famous budget of 1894. Despite his orthodox past, this had some appearance of a break with Gladstonianism; the GOM certainly didn't like it. Harcourt adopted several innovative policies, including a scheme of graduated death duties that reached a peak of 6 per cent payable on estates worth a million pounds. Harcourt also wanted to introduce a graduated income tax. There is certainly a case for seeing this budget as a crucial step on the way to the radical measures implemented by Asquith and Lloyd George after 1906 and as an early manifestation

of the ideas of the New Liberalism.³ But there is little attempt in the book to evaluate his thinking or the evolution of Liberalism in the late-Victorian period. Instead the author presents the 1894 budget largely in terms of the infighting between Rosebery and Harcourt, as revealed in the correspondence. This approach trivialises a crucial theme in both Harcourt's life and the development of Liberal politics.

It may well be that Harcourt himself failed to see his innovations in terms of their wider significance. When the party lost office in 1895, his work as Leader in the Commons suggested that he had little consistent idea about the direction Liberalism should be taking. As one colleague remarked, Harcourt had 'always been a hand to mouth man and always will be'. There is clearly

something in this comment, but whether it offers a satisfactory perspective on his career remains in doubt.

Martin Pugh was Professor of Modern History at Newcastle University until 1999 and Research Professor at Liverpool John Moores University 1999–2002. His latest book is The Pankhursts (Allen Lane, 2001).

- 1 A. G. Gardiner, *The Life of Sir William Harcourt* (London: Constable, 1923).
- 2 *Daily Telegraph*, 3 May 1880, in Martin Pugh, "'Queen Anne is dead': The Abolition of Ministerial By-Elections, 1867–1926", *Parliamentary History*, 21, 2002, pp. 351–366.
- 3 See H. V. Emy, *Liberals, Radicals and Social Politics 1892–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1973); Bruce K. Murray, *The People's Budget 1909–1910* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989).

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of colleagues, some of them as young as his students. He was particularly supportive of women candidates – when he died there was much reference to his role during the Brent East by-election, both his contribution to it and how it provided him with a project. Sarah Teather tells me that his stories distracted others, and his practical ineptitude led the organisers to create a category of jobs for 'idiots or very clever earls'. Conrad was the worst envelope-stuffer in the world.

How lucky we were to work with him, to learn from him, and to be able to remember him with so much affection.

Baroness Sally Hamwee is a Liberal Democrat ODPM spokesperson in the House of Lords and is Chair of the London Assembly.