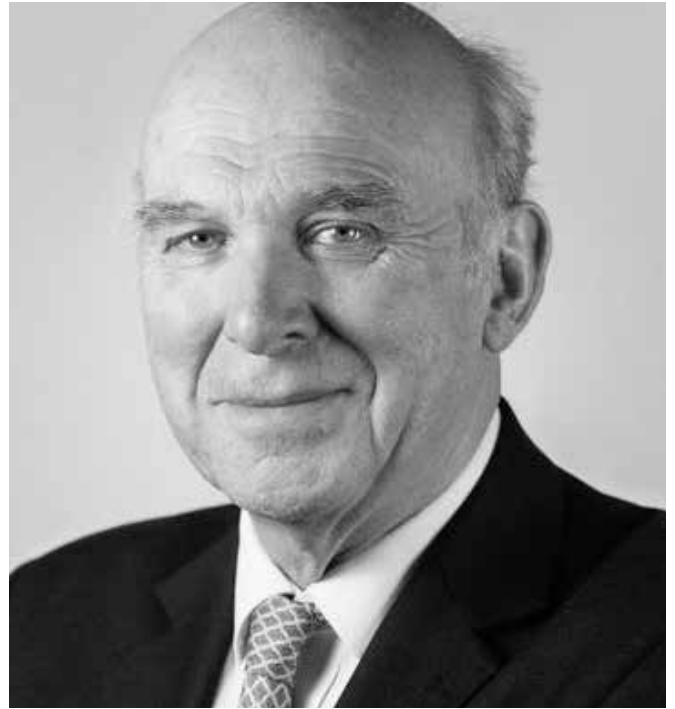
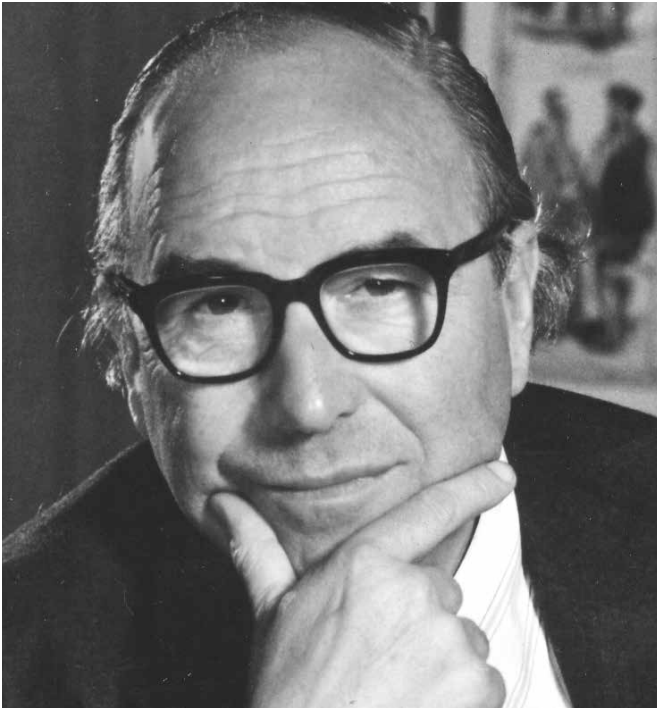


Political heroes

Vince Cable describes why Roy Jenkins is his political inspiration

Old Heroes for a New Leader

As we have in each of the last four Liberal Democrat leadership elections, in 1999, 2006, 2007 and 2015, in July this year the Liberal Democrat History Group prepared to ask the candidates for the Liberal Democrat leadership to write a short article on their favourite historical figure or figures – the ones they felt had influenced their own political beliefs most, and why they had proved important and relevant. In the end the election was not contested, but the sole candidate, Vince Cable, kindly provided us with the following article.



I CHOOSE ROY JENKINS as my political hero since his lifetime political journey from Labour social democrat to Liberal Democrat – strongly European, liberal, a believer in the power of government to shape things for the better – reflects and inspired my own journey.

He wasn't my first choice. I originally opted for Anthony Crosland, whose thought and writings made a bigger impact on me at an earlier stage. But Crosland died prematurely, in 1976, and never completed the political journey; nor can we be sure he would have, had he lived. But, reading about Jenkins' history, I realised that in choosing him I was getting two for the price of one. Crosland was Jenkins' friend and political mentor – indeed, subsequent biography has established that they were lovers as students; their intimacy was political, intellectual and physical. The two of them represented that fusion of social democrat and liberal ideas, and pro-European identity, which came to dominate the centre ground of British politics.

Jenkins was Labour aristocracy. His father was a former miner, a mining union official who served time in prison after speaking at a

demonstration which turned violent, and then became an MP. The leaders of the Labour Party – Attlee, Morrison, Dalton – were family friends who encouraged Roy's political interest as a teenager and smoothed his path into parliament and his early career. He was academically bright and went to Balliol, Oxford, to read PPE, fraternising with such political contemporaries as Edward Heath, Denis Healey and Mark Bonham Carter, debating in the Union and falling under the spell of Anthony Crosland.

His politics were mainstream Labour and he became part of the post-war, idealistic generation which believed passionately in the model of socialism enacted under Attlee's government. He first became an MP in a by-election (Central Southwark) in 1948, aged 27: an economist, a loyalist and clearly destined for higher things. He described himself then as a socialist, without awkwardness.

Cracks started to appear after the Labour government fell in 1951, exhausted, and Labour took to feuding between the supporters of Hugh Gaitskell and Nye Bevan. Jenkins was clearly in the former camp. His writings became less

socialist, more eclectic. Then in 1956 his friend Crosland produced *The Future of Socialism*, which was a clear intellectual break from the left: nationalisation was increasingly seen as largely irrelevant; what mattered was economic competence leading to faster growth financing improving public services, consumer goods for the working class and increasingly liberal, and European, lifestyles. Crosland's work inspired a generation of social democrats, including Jenkins – and also me (I read the book for the first time aged 18 and together with the contemporaneous writings of J. K. Galbraith in the US and the speeches of Jo Grimond, it helped to frame my own approach to politics, on the fault line between Labour and the Liberals).

Jenkins developed this social democratic thinking in his 1959 book, *The Labour Case*, albeit amidst many of the Labour orthodoxies of the time. This book also opened up a new strand of radical reforming liberalism, making the case for abolition of the death penalty, reform of the law on homosexuality, divorce and abortion, humanising immigration, decriminalising suicide and much else.

As the battles within the Labour Party became more bitter – over nationalisation and nuclear weapons – Jenkins discovered the cause that, more than any other, defined him: Europe. Harold Wilson was, however, initially able to bridge the gap between left and right and get Labour into government, after thirteen years' absence, in 1964. Jenkins was (after a delay) given the Home Office, where he embarked upon the purpose of social reform which cemented his reputation as a true liberal.

Jenkins' long goodbye to the Labour Party revolved around disagreements about Europe in the second Wilson government after 1974. A referendum secured Britain's position in the EU but the Labour Party was seriously divided over the issue, as it was over NATO, industrial

relations policy and the austerity measures that followed from the intervention of the IMF. Jenkins embraced exile in the form of chairmanship of the European Commission, a perfect position in which to establish his credentials as a European statesman and to develop serious thinking about Britain's position in Europe.

Brussels was also where Jenkins began to prepare the split from Labour in the form of the SDP and to build bridges to David Steel's Liberals, which later became the SDP–Liberal Alliance and, thence, the Lib Dems. His finest hour was probably the Hillhead by-election in 1982 where he showed courage in taking on a massive challenge in a city with its own distinctive political culture and of which he had no experience. He gambled and won, giving the SDP enormous credibility (having been a councillor in Glasgow and fought the Hillhead seat myself, for Labour, I can attest to the scale of the task he took on).

The Hillhead campaign also helped to defuse the criticism that he was becoming rather grand and aloof. His critics pointed to the fact that he had developed a taste not just for fine wines but for the company of socialites and the seriously rich. He developed a mannered, rather pompous, style of speaking which became something of a liability in TV interviews (though he could be brilliant with live audiences, as I experienced as a candidate in the 1983 election in York).

He was, flaws and all, one of the most important and influential figures in post-war politics. His copious and brilliant biographical writing would, by itself, mark him out for distinction. He did not just write about but gave substance in office to what we mean both by social democracy and liberalism. And he launched a new political party which, in the form of the Lib Dems, I am now privileged to lead. What would, however, have broken his heart would be to see his legacy of Britain as a European nation trashed today by lesser political mortals.

Liberal Democrat Leadership

In the summer 2014 edition of the *Journal of Liberal History* (issue 83), a special issue on the first twenty-five years of the Liberal Democrats, we included an article on 'Liberal Democrat leadership' by Duncan Brack. The article included a table comparing the performance of the four Liberal Democrat leaders until 2014 in terms of their personal ratings and party ratings in the opinion polls, performance in general, European and local elections and numbers of party members, at the beginning and end of their leaderships.

Although these statistics of course ignore the political context of the leader's period in office, and can mask large swings within the period – and other, non-quantitative, measures of a leader's performance may be just as, if not more, important – these figures do have value in judging the effectiveness of any given leader.

We have therefore reproduced the table in this issue, extended to include the end of Nick Clegg's leadership, and the whole of Tim Farron's leadership. We hope readers find it of interest.