

The election of Jeremy Thorpe to the Liberal Leadership

The first phase of the Liberal postwar revival came to an end with the resignation of Jo Grimond as leader. Tim Beaumont recalls the election of his successor.

Diary writing is a High category of Art and I am mortified that I do not appear to be able to accomplish it. I rather pride myself on my ability to write sermons, speeches and articles, but I suspect that I am lacking in descriptive ability. In any case almost all my attempts at diary writing have come to nothing, which seems to be rather a waste in a remarkably diverse life.

There are as a result only two volumes of diary on my shelves. The first, dating from my Oxford days, I cannot even find, the second dates from 1964 to 1972, albeit with enormous gaps, and therefore covers some matters of interest to Liberals, including the election of Jeremy Thorpe to the leadership. In the ensuing account any passage in quotes is verbatim from my diary unless the context shows otherwise.

During the general election of 1964 I was vice-chairman of the General Election Committee under Frank Byers and was therefore with him and Jo Grimond in the little upper room of Party Headquarters when the results started to come in on the evening of polling day. The five years since the previous election of 1959, when Jeremy won North Devon and Mark Bonham-Carter lost Torrington, had been good ones, containing as they did the Orpington byelection when TV viewers were able to see Jo half fall out of his seat in surprise at the size of the majority.

As a result we were all feeling rather hopeful that election evening. Jeremy, ever optimistic, had been forecasting that we would win fourteen seats. But the results were almost universally disappointing that first night and early the next morning. Jo in particular had been hoping for some additions to the Party in the Commons of a calibre to take some of the weight off his shoulders; in particular he wanted his brother-in-law Mark back again, together with Christopher Layton who was fighting Chippenham. When the latter result came in, with Christopher 1500 votes off, Jo slumped in his seat, seemed to have aged five years and left HQ gloomily to fly up to his count in Orkney the following day (P+2). During the campaign we had hired a car with a professional chauffeur for Jo, who had naturally spent some time in Chippenham, and the chauffeur afterwards confided to me that he thought Christopher could have won if only he could have cut twenty minutes off each of his speeches. ('He bored himself out of that seat', was his verdict.) And it was not till the end of the first day after the election, and

indeed the morning after that, that the Scottish results which were to keep the party in good heart for the next six years came in, to be greeted by no doubt inane comments to the press by me, as the only person left at HQ.¹

It was soon after that the election that Jo started muttering about resigning as leader, although it is not until after the '66 election that I record in my diary that Jo definitely told me that he wanted to go soon. He first intended to go before Christmas '66 but was persuaded that it would be unwise to leave the recess wide open for lobbying for his successor. I noted that 'unless we can get Richard Wainwright to succeed it is going to be a major disaster and that even if we can it will be a bitter blow'. On December 21, I note that Pratap Chitnis, (the successful Orpington agent and now Press Officer) and Richard Holme (whom I had recently brought on to the Organising Committee) agree that 'Richard W is the only sensible candidate. Richard H & Pratap both feel strongly about launching a "keep Jeremy out" campaign. I do not think that this is important as I am pretty certain that he has little popularity within the Parliamentary Party. I still think that the most likely successor is Eric [Lubbock].'

By December 22nd we are deep into pushing for Richard Wainwright. 'Pratap tells me that Bob Carvel, political editor of the *Evening Standard*, is very much in favour of Wainwright. and since he [allegedly] regards himself as a Liberal first and a journalist second would almost certainly be prepared [to co-operate]'. We then analysed the probable voting intentions of MPs which led us to the [erroneous] conclusion that neither Emlyn nor Jeremy had a hope and that if Richard could not be persuaded to stand, Eric Lubbock would walk it. It subsequently transpires that Jo whom we had "put down" firmly as being for Eric is not averse to Richard as leader but merely thinks that the Parliamentary Party as a whole will think him too short of Parliamentary experience.'

December 29: 'Meeting with Frank Byers, Richard Holme and Pratap at Rio Tinto [of which – shades of things to come! – Frank was a Director]. Agreed that since it was difficult, if not impossible to make Jo postpone his departure till July, it had better occur in mid-January. Agreed that we still want to see Richard chosen as leader. Richard Holme & Pratap are still adamant against Jeremy, Frank and I less so.

I now think it may be a close thing between Jeremy & Eric on the first ballot', and we learn that David Steel is a possible new recruit to the Jeremy camp.

Over the New Year I was on a family holiday in the Alban Hills and returned on January 14th [1967] to find the campaign out in the open. 'Jo has now spoken to both George Mackie and Eric Lubbock. George immediately called a meeting of the Scottish Liberal MPs Eric has told Pratap that under no circumstances whatsoever was he a candidate for the leadership he proposes [as Chief Whip] to organise the election'.

January 16: 'Richard Wainwright, approached by Frank, Pratap and myself, says that he will not stand for leader. He finds it difficult to cope even with the duties of an MP. He says that Eric is weakening and may be a candidate. He (Richard) is determine that Emlyn should not become leader and agrees that the question of Jeremy's security standing is an unfortunate one. In particular he raised the point that this might stop him getting a Privy Councillorship'. [This is the first mention in my Diary of the great Thorpe Scandal.]

On Monday January 16 I went up to Manchester to interview prospective candidates and talked to Gruff Evans, chairman of the Party Executive, and Roger Cuss, Chairman of the North West Federation. Their reactions showed that there was going to be a row over whether the election was to be held in 48 hours, which some people, including Jo, thought would be enough time for consultation, or over a longer time as the "party in the country" wanted.

I travelled back to London early on the Tuesday morning, leaving behind me a flurry of phoning, conducted in the first place by Gruff and Roger, shortly joined by Terry Lacey of the Union of Liberal Students, Michael Steed and George Kiloh, Chairman of the National League of Young Liberals. Their aim was firstly to get the MPs bombarded with messages urging more time for the party in the country to have its say, but secondly, according to Geoff Tordoff, who was a candidate in the North West at the time, to 'stop Jeremy'. But the Parliamentary Party had already met that evening and, heavily influenced by Eric Lubbock, who according to an unnamed 'senior Member of the Party' [who may have been either Gruff or me] 'was frightened of the mass of the party', had voted 8 to 4 for an immediate ballot.

Nominations closed at noon by which time Gruff and Roger had arrived in London to be met at the station by me and taken first to Party HQ and then to the Commons, where they were faced by a fait accompli.²

That night was even busier since there was an all-night sitting of the Commons, during which intensive lobbying went on, particularly by David Steel acting as Jeremy's whip.³ He reckoned that Jeremy had the votes of Jeremy himself, Peter Bessell and John Pardoe (the west country gang), plus David. Eric was backed by Richard Wainwright and Michael Winstanley (the north) and Emlyn by Alistair Mackenzie and Russell Johnston (the Celts). The floating voter was one of the Scots, James Davidson. Steel finally nailed him so that the

vote was Thorpe 6, and Lubbock and Hooson 3 each.

That, of course, did not get Jeremy an overall majority, so Donald Wade, as returning officer, had to start transferring second preferences. But here a major snag surfaced. The second preferences of Hooson were all for Lubbock and the second preferences of Lubbock for Hooson.⁴ So no-one was any further forward. Faced with this situation, the three candidates retired to the Whip's inner sanctum together and emerged with a unanimous vote for Jeremy!

These peculiar proceedings started the move to reform leadership elections, but I have little doubt that if it had been an election of the kind we had next time round, the result would have been the same – and equally little doubt that, in spite of subsequent events, it was the best result for the party at that particular stage of its life.

Tim Beamont (Lord Beaumont of Whitley) was Chair of the Liberal Party 1967–68 and President 1969–70. Made a life peer in 1967, he is currently Lords spokesman on environment (conservation and the countryside).

Notes:

- 1 The Liberal Party won nine seats in the 1964 election, including three gains in the Scottish Highlands.
- 2 My diary is supplemented for those vital but confused two days by a largely accurate article in the *Guardian* (19 January 1967) by Harold Jackson.
- 3 For an accurate account of this, see Walter Terry's article in the *Daily Mail* (19 January 1967).
- 4 Verbal communication by Donald Wade to the author during the subsequent Thorpe resignation crisis.

In this month ...

June 1922 (*Liberal Magazine*)

'It was inevitable that the Manchester Guardian's fanatical though intermittent fondness for Mr Lloyd George would some day lead it into trouble. Since 1918, it has not been possible for a Liberal to defend Mr George by fair means. Conservatives can do it consistently and honestly; but Liberals who desire, from any special motive, to protect or excuse Mr George are driven to devious and doubtful methods.'

June 1952 (*Liberal News*)

'Clement Davies, who sailed for New York on Wednesday week, faced the ordeal of an American press conference at the Institute of International Education two days ago.'

June 1987 (*Social Democrat News*)

'On the eve of the general election, the SDP-Liberal Alliance has taken over the running of Colchester Borough Council – which covers two highly winnable SDP-led seats the new Alliance leader will be SDP councillor and former Mayor, Bob Russell.'