

Lord Rea

Philip Russell Rea was born into a family of strong Liberal traditions. His grandfather, Russell Rea, was Liberal MP for Gloucester (1900–10) and for South Shields (1910–16). He became President of the Free Trade Union and was among the leaders of the campaign which resulted in the establishment of the eight-hour working day for miners. His father, Walter Russell Rea, ennobled as Baron Rea in 1937, was Liberal MP for Scarborough (1906–18), for Bradford North (1923–4) and for Dewsbury (1931–5). He held junior office during the First World War and again in the early stages of the National Government. Many Liberal progeny of Philip Rea's generation made their way into other political parties, usually out of the belief that Labour offered a more practical vehicle for the realisation of their radical aspirations in a period when the Liberal party itself appeared to be in a state of irreversible decline. But Rea remained loyal to the Liberal faith. Though, unlike his father and grandfather, he was not himself elected to the House of Commons, he played a not inconsiderable part in keeping the Liberal torch alight during some of the party's darkest days – that period when, as Bernard Wasserstein has written, the party 'displayed a stubborn capacity to survive and to make a fruitful contribution to British public life that belied the Liberals' shrivelled parliamentary state'.¹

Born on 7 February 1900, Rea was educated at Westminster School, Christ Church, Oxford and the University of Grenoble. He served in the Grenadier Guards in the last stages of the first World War before joining the family firm of merchant bankers. Entering Liberal politics, he was active in his father's election campaigns in the 1920s and 1930s before being adopted himself in 1938 as Liberal candidate for Darwen, the seat held until 1935 by Herbert Samuel.

The coming of a second world war inevitably delayed Rea's political ambitions and in fact he never stood for election to the Commons. He became a Lieutenant-Colonel in the King's Royal Rifle Corps, attached to the Special Forces. In later years, as his *Guardian* obituary noted, Rea 'said little' about his wartime activities.² In fact he was an important figure in fostering resistance movements inside enemy-occupied Europe. He joined SOE in August

1941 as an acting Captain and was appointed to SOE headquarters where he was engaged as a Conducting Officer in briefing and equipping agents who were about to depart for the field. His duties often involved his taking those agents to their airfields of departure, and he sometimes went with them in their aircraft as a despatcher. He was also responsible for pinpointing the dropping grounds which agents reported to London by wireless, clearing them with the RAF and arranging clandestine air operations. In these duties his fluent French, learnt at Grenoble, proved invaluable.

In December 1942 Rea became a Major in SOE's AM Section where he was responsible for work connected with the so-called Massingham Mission in Algeria. Then in August 1943 he became a personal staff officer to Brigadier Colin Gubbins, the head of SOE. The following March he transferred to be head of the AD section, dealing with honours and awards.

Rea left SOE on 5 August 1945, but continued to work for the organisation in a civilian capacity until SOE itself was wound up in January 1946. For his

Lord Rea in 1979



wartime services he was awarded the OBE, made an officer of the Order of the Crown of Belgium, created a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour and awarded the Croix de Guerre with Palm. Rea served in the Foreign Office until 1950, but the death of his father in 1948 and his succession to the latter's hereditary peerage opened up the possibility of restarting his political career. Just twelve Liberal MPs had been elected to parliament in 1945; at the General Election of 1951 this figure dropped to six. But sixty-three peers took the Liberal whip in 1945. Rea became the party's Chief Whip in the upper house in 1950, a post he held for five years, earning the respect of his colleagues. In the same period he was Deputy Lord Chairman of Committees.

In June 1955 Lord Samuel, who had held the position for eleven years but who was then eighty-five years of age, was obliged to resign the leadership of the Liberal peers. Viscount Thurso, who as Archibald Sinclair had led the party in the Commons from 1935 to 1945, considered taking his place, but had never fully recovered from the stroke he had suffered in 1951 and his doctor vetoed the idea. In these

circumstances it was anticipated that Lord Layton, who had for some time served as Samuel's deputy, would now be elected leader. But Layton felt unable to accept because of the pressure of his business commitments. It was in this way that Rea was unanimously

elected to the leadership. He was to hold this position for nearly twelve years and thus to pass through the nadir of Liberal fortunes and witness the first stirrings of the party's revival. His elevation soon necessitated his resignation as President of the Liberal Party, to which office he had been elected earlier in the year.

Rea proved a popular figure on the Liberal front bench. It was some indication of his parliamentary standing that he became a member of the Political

Honours Scrutiny Committee in 1962. In this capacity he called for a reform of the whole scrutiny system following the publication of Harold Wilson's controversial 'lavender list' in 1976.

Rea's wit and lightness of touch were well suited to the debates of the upper chamber. He disliked pomposity and was particularly irritated by vague or euphemistic language. In March 1963 he objected to the use of the phrase 'sanitary convenience' in a parliamentary bill. 'A sanitary convenience,' he complained, 'did not, presumably, mean either a handkerchief or the driver of a dust cart.' 'Above all,' he told their Lordships, 'he wished to protest against "powder room" which seemed to indicate in transatlantic ladies a touching and remarkable belief in the relieving powers of pulverised talcum.'³

As Liberal leader in the Lords Rea found himself obliged to speak on a wide range of issues. But, with the Cold War at its height, he was especially concerned with reducing the risk of nuclear war and for Britain to abandon her pretensions to great power status. The country 'seemed to find it difficult

to realise that her nineteenth-century position in the world was not in abeyance but actually gone. Britain must adapt her ideas to the modern world.'⁴ Such thinking made him particularly contemptuous of the notion that Britain remained an independent nu-

clear power. 'Why should we attract an onslaught on this undefended island by the provocative possession of a virtually useless contribution to American nuclear arms? That would be the very reverse of a deterrent.'⁵

Traditional Liberal issues and values were close to Rea's heart. He campaigned tirelessly for electoral reform; he presented a bill for the better preservation of the liberty of the individual; he voted at the party's annual confer-

ence to lower the voting age to eighteen; and he never tired of reminding the Conservative government and its Labour successor that the commitment to reform of the House of Lords, contained in the Parliament Act of 1911, remained unfulfilled:

For half a century the Conservatives had failed to tackle realistically the problem of Lords reform because [they] liked the Lords; Labour had failed to tackle it because it did not like the Lords. The Liberals liked a second chamber but saw much room for improvement.⁶

Rea suffered a heart attack in the autumn of 1966 and felt obliged to resign the leadership in the following March. His tenure of office thus coincided almost exactly with that of Jo Grimond in the Commons, and the latter's resignation in January 1967 may have helped to prompt his own. At all events he had stayed at the helm long enough to know that the Liberal Party's fortunes had at last turned the corner. He remained active in the Lords and was a Deputy Speaker until 1977.

Outside politics Rea had a wide range of interests. His family base was in Cumberland and he identified himself with a variety of organisations which promoted the enjoyment of the fells. From 1957 to 1962 he was a member of the BBC General Advisory Council. He was a gifted musician, composed pieces for choir and piano and was an enthusiastic member of the parliamentary Catch Club which met to sing madrigals and other works for a male voice choir. He married the novelist Lorna Smith in 1922. She died in 1978. A son of this marriage pre-deceased Rea and the title passed on his own death in April 1981 to his nephew, Dr J. Nicolas Rea.

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Notes

1. B. Wasserstein, *Herbert Samuel: A Political Life* (London, 1992), p.371.
2. *The Guardian*, 23 April 1981.
3. *The Times*, 19 March 1963.
4. *Ibid.*, 7 February 1963.
5. *Ibid.*, 12 February 1959.
6. *Ibid.*, 30 April 1965.