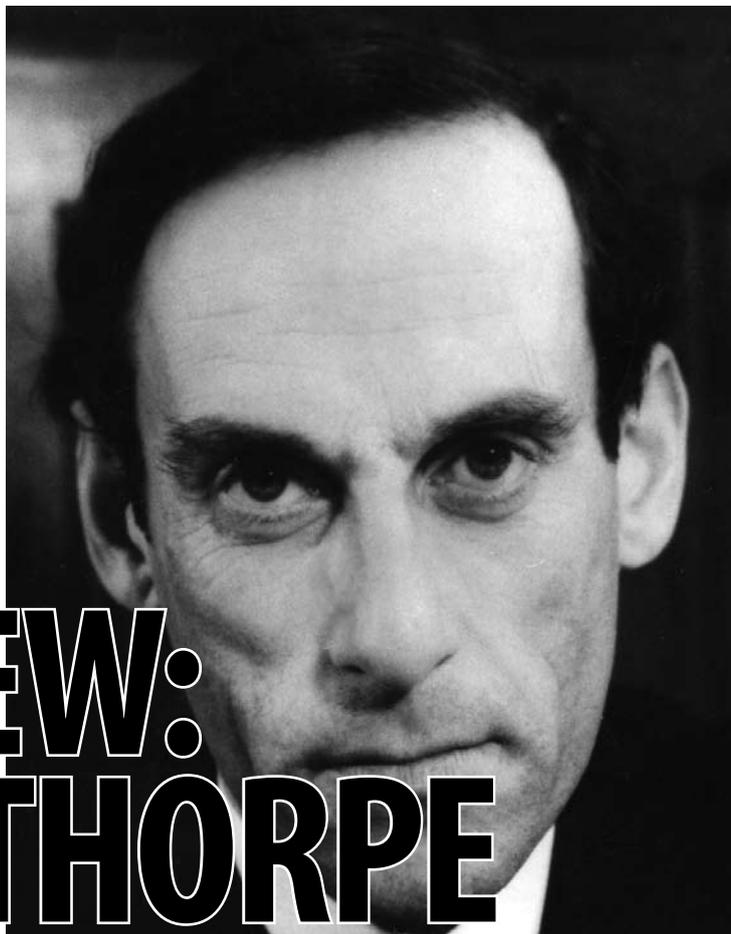


Thirty years after being charged with conspiracy to murder Norman Scott, former Liberal leader Jeremy Thorpe gives a rare interview and talks frankly about the party, his role in its history and much more besides. Interview by **York Membery**.



INTERVIEW: JEREMY THORPE

THE YEARS have clearly taken their toll on Jeremy Thorpe but few politicians have had to endure such trauma in their lives. Forced to step down as Liberal leader following the whirlwind that erupted following allegations made by a male model, he lost his seat at the 1979 election, and was subsequently struck down by Parkinson's Disease. While he is treated with due respect by the party establishment – Nick Clegg recently attended a low-key 79th birthday party at his London home – his reputation has never fully recovered from being charged with conspiracy to murder Norman Scott in 1978, even if he was subsequently acquitted.

Given his Parkinson's, it is not altogether surprising that he looks his age. Despite the disease robbing him of much of the power of his speech, however

– he speaks in short sentences in a barely audible whisper – it is soon apparent when we meet at his elegant Georgian house near Kensington Gardens in London that his brain remains sharp.

This once formidable campaigner, who led the Liberal Party to its best post-war result in the February 1974 election, when it polled an impressive six million votes, nearly 20 per cent of the poll, is a lifelong Liberal, despite being the son of John Henry Thorpe, and a maternal grandson of Sir John Norton-Griffiths, both of whom were Conservative MPs.

Educated at Eton and then at Trinity College, Oxford, where he studied law, he became Chairman of the Liberal Club, and subsequently President of the Oxford Union in 1951. 'I joined the Liberals because the other two parties were polarised between Left and Right,'

he says. 'I'd also been lucky enough to know both Megan Lloyd George – who was a huge influence on me – and her father David, of whom I was an enormous admirer. The Conservative Party never held any appeal for me.'

At Oxford he learnt the importance of public speaking and still believes that the Oxford Union is 'vital grounding for those wanting to go into politics'. Despite proving a natural on the platform, he goes on to reveal: 'I was terrified the first time I stood to make a speech at a Liberal Assembly.'

Adopted as Liberal candidate for the Conservative-held North Devon constituency in 1952, he managed to halve the Conservative majority at the 1955 general election, before going on to narrowly win the seat in the 1959 election, which saw Harold Macmillan's Tories win a near-



Jeremy Thorpe in 2008 (photos; York Member)

landslide. 'I captured the seat thanks in part to its Liberal tradition', he says modestly although in truth to win in 1959 was just as much a tribute to Thorpe's outstanding campaigning skills. The 1950s saw the Liberal Party reach a nadir in its fortunes, with the Conservative and Labour parties hogging the central ground in politics, and as a result many called into question the Liberals' continuing existence. And with just a handful of MPs, Thorpe readily admits: 'We came very close to extinction during the decade.'

While the 1960s saw the Liberals triumph at the Orpington by-election, and go on to win over three million votes in 1964, almost double the 1959 figure, under Jo Grimond's leadership, the decade ultimately proved disappointing – even if from a personal point of view, it saw Thorpe make rapid progress through the party ranks, in 1965 becoming Party Treasurer and, following Grimond's resignation in 1967, party leader, with the support of six of the twelve Liberal MPs.

Somewhat surprisingly, Thorpe takes what could be interpreted as a bit of a swipe at Grimond (Liberal leader 1956–67), the inspirational figure who is widely credited with helping to revive the Liberals' post-war fortunes. 'He was a great ideas man,' says Thorpe. 'But the organisation was a shambles when I took over the party – and you know, I played a part in just about every by-election campaign that we won in the sixties and early seventies.'

However, for all Thorpe's youthful dynamism, and assorted Edwardian suits, waistcoats and trilby hats, which undoubtedly raised his public profile, the 1970 general election proved a disaster for the party. Its number of MPs slumped from thirteen to six, resulting in opponents joking that 'the entire parliamentary party could fit into a taxi'. It was a grim time, admits Thorpe.

'The party nearly died in 1970', he says. 'It was a close run thing. And if I hadn't survived as an MP – my majority had been slashed – I really don't know if there would still be a Liberal Party.' What would he have done if he had lost his seat? 'Perhaps gone into television,' he muses.

As it happens, Thorpe survived, if by the narrowest of margins, and the next three years saw him lead the party to a string of by-election victories at Rochdale, Sutton & Cheam, Ripon, the Isle of Ely, and Berwick. Those successes paved the way for his moment of glory: the general election triumph of February 1974, when he won the party six million votes (19.3 per cent of the vote) even if it only ended up with a paltry fourteen seats.

Following the inconclusive February 1974 general election, which produced a hung parliament, Heath even invited Thorpe to join a Conservative-led coalition government, offering him a position in the Cabinet as Home Secretary, in a desperate bid to stay in power. Tempting though the offer must have been, Thorpe turned it down, knowing that to accept would have torn the party apart. 'It was a pointless exercise anyway because even with our support Heath wouldn't have had a parliamentary majority', observes Thorpe.

There had always been rumours about Thorpe's sexuality and in 1975, Norman Scott, who claimed that he had had a homosexual affair with him, was confronted by Andrew Newton, a former airline pilot, who shot and killed the dog Scott was walking and then allegedly pointed the gun at Scott himself. The subsequent scandal engulfed Thorpe and forced him to step down as leader in 1976. His political career was effectively over and three years later he lost his seat at the 1979 election, a week before his trial.

For all his personal tribulations, Thorpe has continued to

take a keen interest in the Liberal Party and, following its merger with the SDP in 1988, the Liberal Democrats – and is clearly buoyed by the party's strong showing in this year's local elections, when it won more votes than the Labour Party. So how does he think the party and its leader Nick Clegg are faring? 'The party is much stronger now than when I was leader,' he says, despite its failure to stem the Tory surge in Crewe & Nantwich which resulted in a headline-grabbing Conservative by-election win, albeit the party's first for twenty-five years. 'It's better organised. It has more MPs and more councillors. And I think Nick's doing well ... although it takes a bit of time to settle into the job.'

What of the recent storm in a teacup when Clegg admitted during an interview that he'd had 'less than thirty' sexual partners? 'It will soon be forgotten,' he says with a shrug, obviously regarding it as a trivial matter. What would Thorpe advise the party's young leader if he is asked something similarly risqué again? 'Just be tough – and if he doesn't particularly want to answer something, ask himself "Do I really want to answer this question?"', whispers Thorpe.

He readily admits to being unhappy about the way the party treated Charles Kennedy, who like him, was forced to step down as leader. 'I think he was treated very badly,' says Thorpe. 'Drunkenness is not a permanent disability. It can be treated.'

Despite David Cameron and the Tories' current double-digit lead in the polls over Labour, and their Crewe triumph, Thorpe believes 'a political realignment of the "left" is still very much on the cards' in the years ahead. 'The Labour Party is increasingly becoming a two-strand party – of socialists and social democrats,' he says, 'while the Tories are similarly divided – between "liberals" and the more hardline, right-wing Tories.

There's everything to play for, in my opinion.'

If the Lib Dems were indeed to hold the balance of power after the next election, what advice would Thorpe have for his successor in the ensuing negotiations? 'We've simply got to take a tougher approach to negotiating – something I think we could have done in the days of the Lib-Lab Pact [1977–78] too,' says Thorpe. 'But with so many more seats, today's party is much better placed to take a more robust approach and negotiate that bit harder on electoral reform among other things.'

It is clear that Thorpe looks back sentimentally on his time as Liberal leader (even if it saw the death of his first wife Caroline in a car crash) – at least until the Norman Scott affair blew up and sent his career crashing down to earth. 'I enjoyed leading the party enormously and if I could have carried on doing so I would have done but it just wasn't possible,' he says quietly, his voice trailing off.

I am about to raise the Scott affair when, perhaps reading my mind, he pre-empts me. 'Of course, you know Norman Scott has been discredited,' he says before adding quietly: 'Although the affair had a very serious effect on my career ...' Not to mention his health. For Thorpe goes on to suggest that 'the terrible stress and strain' of those dark days helped trigger the onset of his Parkinson's Disease.

The old politician is clearly tiring and it seems an appropriate time to wrap up our interview. As we walk slowly down the stairs he asks if there is anything else I'd like to ask. What does he think about Robert Mugabe, I say, knowing he's always taken a keen interest in African affairs? 'I think he is a ghastly, wicked man,' whispers Thorpe. 'He should be assassinated.' 'Sorry?', I ask, seeking clarification. 'He should be assassinated,' he reiterates – something which is not Liberal Democrat policy as far as

So what is Thorpe proudest of, I ask? 'Helping the party win six million votes – and putting us back on the electoral map'.

I'm aware, although it's a view that many people of all political shades probably secretly share.

And what about the European Union, I ask? Has he changed his views in any way? 'I think Europe has grown too powerful,' says Thorpe to my surprise, for he played a prominent role in the pro-Europe campaign in the 1975 referendum to decide whether Britain should stay in the EEC. And perhaps too unaccountable as well? He nods in agreement.

So what is Thorpe proudest of, I ask? 'Helping the party win six million votes – and putting us back on the electoral map', he says with just the slightest hesitation – and the glimmer of a smile. But does he ever think that he and his accomplishments have, to an unfair extent, perhaps been written out of the party's history as a result of the Norman Scott affair, I ask as sensitively as possible? He appears not to hear me. I'm about to repeat the question when I catch his eye and sense that he's heard me but would simply prefer not to answer. And given his fragile state of health, now is clearly not the time for a Paxo-style grilling. So instead I thank him for his time, shake his frail hand and make my way out.

Few politicians in modern British political history can have been condemned to such a harsh fate as Thorpe: to lose a wife, and then suffer disgrace, political ignominy and the slow living death that is Parkinson's. Furthermore, he will almost certainly never be accorded the late-life accolade of a peerage or knighthood like so many of his peers. Perhaps posterity will treat this most intriguing if tragic of political figures, who in his heyday was perhaps the most popular party leader and brilliant campaigner in the land, more kindly.

York Membery is a journalist and a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group executive.