

# REVIEWS

## A Well-Rounded Life

John Campbell, *Roy Jenkins: A Well-Rounded Life* (Jonathan Cape, 2014)

Reviewed by **Bill Rodgers**

**I**N THE FINAL chapter of this absorbing and perceptive book, John Campbell describes Roy Jenkins' last political initiative in trying to persuade the new prime minister, Tony Blair, to commit himself to proportional representation. When Blair became the Labour leader in 1995, Jenkins hailed him as 'the most exciting Labour choice since the election of Hugh Gaitskell' forty years earlier. As Campbell says, he saw Blair as the man to forge a united moderate, progressive front and 'realise the thwarted ambition of the SDP.' But that was not to be. Blair rejected the outcome of the Independent Commission on the Voting System, chaired by Jenkins. And 'The Project', the bridge between the prime minister and Paddy Ashdown, the Lib Dem leader, never became a route to political partnership.

For Roy Jenkins there had been two peaks and two troughs in his career between his arrival in 1948 at the House of Commons at the age of 28 and his appointment in 1993 aged 73 to the Order of Merit which Campbell calls the seal of Jenkins' status as part of 'the great panjandrum of the British Establishment'. During the 1960s, Jenkins had been a young, reforming home secretary (sometimes said to be his greatest achievement) and then a chancellor of the exchequer who had pulled around the Labour government after the 1967 devaluation. When Labour lost the 1970 election and George Brown his parliamentary seat, Roy Jenkins was elected the deputy leader of the Labour party. The old 'conscience and reform' Gaitskellites seemed to be coming back to power. If Jenkins could work reasonably well with Harold Wilson, he would become his successor and, in due course, prime minister.

But within less than two years, in an extraordinary transformation of fortunes, this expectation

fell apart. Roy Jenkins resigned his deputy leadership and a fissure opened in the Labour party over Europe. A cartoon in Campbell's book shows Wilson and Jenkins together and Jim Callaghan hiding behind with the caption saying, 'Heir today, gone tomorrow ...?' Jenkins spent four more years in parliament including a further stint as home secretary but when Wilson resigned, Callaghan was elected the Labour leader with Jenkins in third place, below Michael Foot. As Campbell says, this marked the end of Jenkins' 'dwindling hope of the premiership.' It remains to be seen whether Jenkins would ever have reached No. 10, given the crumbling and divisive Labour party of the late 1970s.

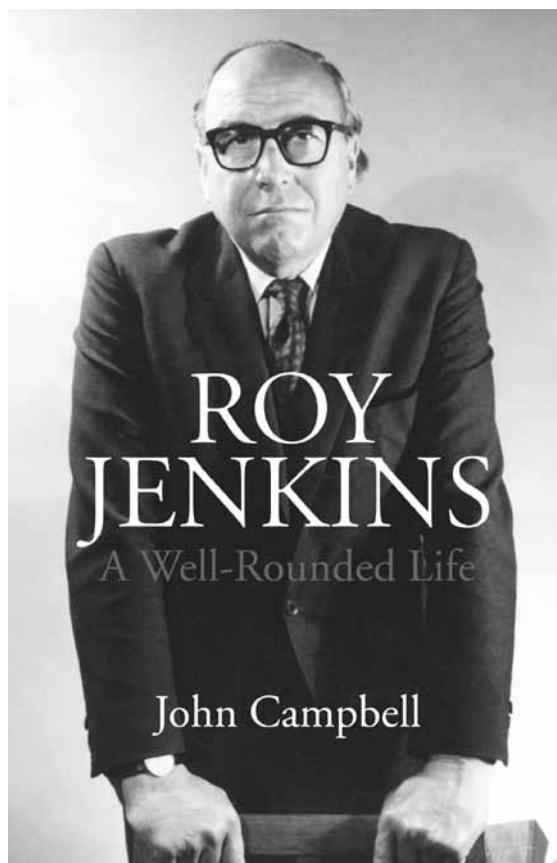
As it was, he chose to give up his long parliamentary career to become the president of the European Commission. John Campbell says that once he had made up his mind to go to Brussels, Jenkins felt liberated by the prospect of escaping the drudgery and dishonesty of domestic Labour politics. Given that not much more than thirty pages of Campbell's book cover Jenkins' presidency, I would recommend that a student of this period read Jenkins' 600 pages of his own *European Diary 1977–1981*. But summing up, Campbell says that Jenkins could claim that he was the godfather of the euro but in hindsight he 'must bear some of the blame for foisting a flawed vision on the continent before it was ready for it.'

Shortly after Jenkins had been installed as president of the Commission I called on him at his new Brussels home. He glanced ruefully at the half-empty red despatch box, a memento of his years as chancellor. There were no manuscript notes lying on the table, and the telephone did not ring. We talked about domestic politics but only in a desultory way. Few of his former parliamentary colleagues expected

him to return from exile to British politics.

It was the outcome of the general 1979 election – when he did not vote – that provoked Jenkins' change of mood and led to his Dimbleby lecture, 'Home Thoughts from Abroad' of November 1979. The language of the lecture was hardly a battle cry but it struck a sympathetic note for those who were despairing between Tony Benn's far-left Labour and Margaret Thatcher's doctrinaire Toryism. When the Gang of Four came together early in 1981, it was mainly Jenkins who brought the so-called political virgins into the new centre-left SDP. When Jenkins fought a by-election at Warrington, a working-class northern town, the sketch writer Frank Johnson said, 'the surprising news' was that 'people rather liked Mr Jenkins.' Far from a remote grandee, he was energetic, relaxed and sociable and never talked down to the voters. By November after Shirley Williams had won Crosby, the polls were showing that the SDP/Liberal Alliance was overtaking both the Labour party and the Conservatives, reaching over 50 per cent.

In March 1982 Jenkins fought another by-election and won



Glasgow Hillhead. John Campbell says that 'On a personal level Jenkins' victory at Hillhead was perhaps the high point of his political life.' He was now to be seen as prime minister designate and he pencilled-in a putative Alliance Cabinet including David Steel as home secretary and leader of the house, Shirley Williams as foreign secretary and me, to my pleasure, as chancellor. This was the second peak of Jenkins' career – but all too soon followed his second trough.

He was elected leader of the SDP but with a much smaller margin over David Owen than had been expected. He found difficulty in adjusting to the Commons because for many years he had spoken with gravitas and authority to a respectable House. But now it was a less disciplined place, with Labour and Tory MPs determined to make his life as hard as possible. In addition, as Campbell puts it, on television Jenkins 'looked and sounded old, flabby and long-winded': nor was he good at 'the quick-fire exchange of pithy soundbites' in which David Owen and David Steel excelled. In the middle of the 1983 election, the Liberal hierarchy tried, although unsuccessfully, to replace Jenkins with Steel as the Alliance leader.

In perspective, the 1983 election result was far from a disaster for the SDP–Liberal Alliance. Its share of the vote was 25.4 per cent (against the previous Liberal high-water-mark of 19.3 per cent in 1974), only 2.2 per cent short of Labour at 27.6 per cent. Nearly 8 million votes had been cast for either of the two Alliance parties and it could be seen as a remarkable achievement. But that is not how it felt. With David Owen pressing for his immediate resignation, Jenkins accepted the verdict, remaining in the House of Commons until he was defeated at Hillhead in 1987.

A few weeks earlier, Jenkins had been elected Chancellor of Oxford University. When he was installed in June, he wrote that 'Nothing in my life has been given me greater pleasure.' It was, says John Campbell, the perfect retirement for him. But far from retirement, Jenkins continued to enjoy his well-rounded life for another fifteen years. In some ways, Jenkins' political career had been a parallel to R. A. Butler's, as Butler had been chancellor of the

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exchequer, a liberal home secretary and, briefly, foreign secretary. In retirement, Butler became Master of Trinity College, Cambridge and wrote an elegant personal memoir. But this was nothing compared with Jenkins' busy social life and writing nine books, and a tenth – about Franklin Delano Roosevelt – published after his death, making twenty-two in all. His books on Gladstone and then on Churchill were outstanding, building on his experience in writing *Asquith* (1964), the royalties of which had enabled him to buy his modest but comfortable country house in East Hendred, Oxfordshire, which he made his principal home.

In writing *Asquith* and drawing on Asquith's love letters to Venetia Stanley, he came up against the formidable Violet Bonham Carter who did not approve the publication of these matters. Very differently, Jennifer Jenkins, his wife – also formidable – has allowed John Campbell to write freely about her husband's adolescent sexual relationship with Tony Crosland and his affairs with his adult girlfriends. All of this can be found in the impressive, comprehensive

index at the end of the 818 pages of Campbell's book.

I first met Roy Jenkins in July 1951 when he interviewed me for an appointment. So 'Jenkins' became 'Roy' for more than fifty years. I was very fond of Roy and I thought of him as my elder brother in politics. Sometimes we shared our holidays in Tuscany and in later years we talked regularly on the telephone on Sunday morning. On the last occasion we met, shortly before Christmas 2002, my wife and I enjoyed lunch with Roy and Jennifer at one of his favourite country pubs. Clearly he was unwell and due to enter hospital after the holiday season but I was dismayed when his son Charles telephoned me on the morning of Sunday 5 January 2003 to say that Roy had died. After a gap of ten years, John Campbell has written a fine book fully reflecting both on Roy Jenkins' distinguished public career and his intimate personal style and life.

*Bill Rodgers (Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank) was a member of the 'Gang of Four' who founded the Social Democratic Party in 1981. He led the Liberal Democrat peers from 1997 to 2001.*

## Minded to slay national ignorance

James Dixon, *Out of Birmingham: George Dixon (1820–98), 'Father of Free Education'* (Brewin Books, 2013)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

WHEN TONY BLAIR chose 'education, education, education' as the mantra for his government's priorities, he unintentionally echoed George Dixon's 'educate, educate, educate', while also demonstrating the enduring importance of state schooling within political debate more than 140 years after the passage of the Gladstone administration's 1870 Education Act. That act enabled the provision of government elementary schooling, a field that till then had been largely a matter for private enterprise, charities and the churches.

The 1870 Act is usually, and rightly, credited to W. E. Forster who introduced the bill to the House as the appropriate junior

minister. But Forster was not acting in a vacuum. Vigorous campaigning had created the environment in which the government felt compelled to take action and campaigning had also fashioned the choices and compromises by which the government modified its proposals; compromises which dictate that we still have church schools and that education has largely been a responsibility of local authorities despite the depredations of Blair, Gove and Laws.

George Dixon was pre-eminent among those crusading for education to be provided by the nation for all children whatever their family income. Dixon is now largely forgotten, or at least largely forgotten outside Birmingham, the