

ASSESSING JEREMY THORPE

Jeremy Thorpe, leader of the Liberal Party from 1967 to 1976, died three weeks before Christmas 2014. In the last issue of the *Journal of Liberal History* (issue 85, winter 2014–15), we carried two articles by Robert Ingham and Ronald Porter commemorating Thorpe's political career. Several of our readers subsequently wrote to take issue with, or to supplement, the picture of Thorpe's life and political career they portrayed. Here we carry articles by **Michael Steed, Tony Greaves, Andrew Duff and Joyce Arram.**



JEREMY THORPE

Jeremy Thorpe – myth and magic

The announcement of Jeremy Thorpe's death on 5 December 2014 unleashed a wide range of feelings and claims.

The Jeremy fan club came out in force, with views from Sir Nick Harvey (present MP for North Devon) that his predecessor had 'shaped the political landscape' to *The Times* news report by Lucy Fisher, calling him a 'crucial moderniser who turned the Liberal Party into a radical force'. But late on the evening of 5 December, BBC Radio 4 broadcast what had originally been put together in 1979 as a documentary by Tom Mangold, scheduled to go out following the expected 'guilty' verdict at Thorpe's Old Bailey trial. In this, the Thorpe story was presented, with emphasis on the class character of 1960s British society, as an establishment conspiracy, including contemporary interviews establishing early police knowledge of Jeremy's risky sex-life, and clear evidence that the purpose of the plot in which he was involved was indeed to kill his former lover, Norman Scott. The former leader had been a would-be murderer.

Not surprisingly, the obituaries found it difficult to strike a balance. Of those I read, the *Daily Telegraph's* was the most comprehensive and balanced, while that in *The Times* contained most errors and doubtful judgements (both were anonymous). Richard Moore's in *The*

Independent offered an interesting and very personal appreciation, while fighting old battles against the Young Liberals (about whom both he and Thorpe were rather ill-informed). Michael Meadowcroft's reflections in *Liberator* were also something of a witness statement, this time about how difficult Jeremy made it for party officers to do their job, even whilst they were striving to protect the reputation of their leader, or (by 1978 at the Southport Assembly) that of their party against the way its former leader wanted to drag it down with him.

Michael Bloch's long-awaited biography was hurriedly (with inadequate time for proper index-checking) published straight after Thorpe's death, a fascinating and thoroughly researched delve into Jeremy's psychology, though not always so reliable on political and electoral detail (reviewed by me in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 April 2015; review in the *Journal* forthcoming). No attempt to evaluate his life and career should now be made without taking this magnum opus into account. Bloch is careful to reserve judgement on some critical points, e.g. whether the point of the plot was to kill Scott or just to scare him into silence.

Bloch, however, makes a bold judgement on Jeremy's character. He argues that he was a fantasist, who needed to live dangerously;

he developed an obsession with the idea that Scott was a serious threat, even after his pathetic ravings had been dismissed by everyone who then mattered. Thorpe's addiction to risk-taking brought about his nemesis. It was close to a case of political suicide, in which the passengers in the vehicle he piloted (his party) were put recklessly at risk. It is an interpretation which fits my own encounters with Jeremy Thorpe.

My own full reflections would be coloured by the fact that the major part of my personal contributions to the Liberal cause came during the two decades that Jeremy sat for North Devon, first as the rising hope of the Grimond revival, then as my leader for nine years and finally (in the three years following his resignation as leader) as a haunting presence still demanding a leading role in politics. It was during this last period that I found myself, as party president, investigating what had happened to large donations secured by Thorpe from Jack Hayward for the party – they turned out to have been used for legitimate political purposes, but with loose accounting procedures that would today be outside the law.

That was not the only investigation I once made into his darker side – I saw that when as returning officer for the 1971 Young Liberal elections I had to deal with (and for

Thorpe arrives at 10 Downing Street for talks with Prime Minister Edward Heath, 2 March 1974

the sake of the party's reputation draw a veil over) his attempt to rig those elections to block Peter Hain, as Tony Greaves explains below. I am also witness to many occasions in which he undermined, bypassed or trampled over party officers, so weakening the party's collective leadership. If the Liberal Party organisation was sometimes ineffective or muddled during his leadership years, his behaviour bears much responsibility.

Yet I also recall a leader of real passion and deep principle, truly capable of inspiring. A leader who really does bring tangible political benefit to his cause can be forgiven a lot of rough handling. So let us focus on simply what good he did for the Liberal Party.

He was a superb constituency Liberal MP, not the first, and certainly not the last – but a model for many who followed and have learned how to cultivate their patches and so build up the party's Commons representation.

He has been said to have made an intellectual input. This is absurd, not least as it is what he specifically claimed not to do. Rather, he claimed that, Jo Grimond having brought intellectual credibility to the party, his purpose was to bring it political credibility. Did he?

The unexpected six million Liberal votes cast in February 1974 suggest some success. Anyone who knocked on doors then (as I did) can witness to the wave of personal support he aroused – similar to Cleggmania in 2010. His style matched the moment, aided by the way he led the campaign by press conferences relayed from Barnstaple to London. He decided on this innovation (paid for by Hayward) to save what he wrongly thought was his vulnerable seat in North Devon; it gave him simultaneously presence and a curious magisterial detachment from a frayed national campaign. He deserves some credit for the six million.

But the relevant innovation was that the Liberal Party, previously scarred by the mass loss of deposits in 1950, decided to fight on a broader front, while Heath's hesitation about using the miners' strike as an excuse for a precipitate election allowed the party organisation to get a lot more candidates in the field. Thorpe played no part in that; credit goes to John Pardoe, who

had argued for the broadest front (against Thorpe's judgement) from 1970 on, and the president-elect, Arthur Holt, who made it happen. The jump from 328 candidates in 1970 and the 380 the party had in the field on 8 February 1974 to the 517 that stood at the general election on 28 February was achieved by the very party officers that Thorpe liked to bypass; characteristically, Jeremy grabbed the credit for the extra votes this produced. On 28 February, Labour (which took office) lost more deposits than the Liberals.

We must also put the surge of February 1974 against the slumps of June 1970 and October 1974. When they led the party, both Grimond and Steel achieved two surges against one slump; Thorpe's campaign track record was the worst of the three. The party's misfortune in the 1970 and October 1974 elections owed as much to its leader as did the February 1974 fortune – in particular, his final broadcast in 1970 telling the electorate that it was about to vote Wilson back into power (Heath won), so the country needed a few opposition Liberal MPs. In October 1974 he seemed not to know what he was doing; Bloch's revelations on the growing pressures on him at that stage may help to explain why.

Those seeking credits for Thorpe's leadership point to his focus on winnable seats, some even seeing it as the herald of the party's successful targeting strategy. Yet targeting was not new; in the 1950 election, the student activist Jeremy had gone (in vain) to the target seat of North Dorset to help the chief whip, Frank Byers. He went on to raise funds personally to disperse directly in secrecy (a practice now unlawful) to favoured candidates or seats he spotted as winnable. A leader raising funds outside the party's accounts, and dispersing in that manner, was also not new: Lloyd George had done it before, on a grander scale.

To spot winnable seats, he did what we all did in those days – picking the few, mainly in the Celtic fringe, with a good vote in the depths of the 1950s, or those which had returned a Liberal MP sometime after 1931. Some now possess, once more, Liberal (Democrat) MPs; some like Denbigh or North Dorset proved to be

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bottomless pits for cash and human effort. It is difficult to identify a single seat which Thorpe's methods or money made winnable – the best case perhaps is the Isle of Ely by-election in 1973. The test in the end is what happened to Liberal representation at Westminster. Under Grimond, the party rose from 6 MPs (half of them dependent on Conservative votes) to 12 (all in three-cornered fights); under Thorpe it just limped up from 12 to 13. With Steel it went from 13 to 17 (or 19 Lib Dems).

Further, the myth of Thorpe's success hides the real revolution in targeting. Already in the mid 1950s, some Liberals locally took the view that the party could win outside Celtic fringe or traditional areas by patient, hard work and a long-term commitment. Typically in newer urban areas, they set about building up support through local elections; from 1960, that became a national strategy. The credit for that goes to men (*sic*) like Richard Wainwright, Pratap Chitnis and Michael Meadowcroft, i.e. despised party officers and generally Thorpe's opponents. The fruits were victories in seats not previously within the party's radar: Orpington (1962), Cheadle/Hazel Grove (1966/74) and Birmingham Ladywood (1969). By 1970, Trevor Jones, with his innovative techniques, and the Young Liberals, in search of an ideal, brought methods and philosophy together as the community politics strategy; many more electoral victories have followed.

This of course happened on Thorpe's watch, but he played little part in it. It is doubtful that he really understood what was happening at his party's grassroots; he was always an Oxford Union and House of Commons man, not a community politician. Yet as a role-model constituency MP, he nicely complemented the strategy his party adopted.

He could also inspire activists to go out delivering the leaflets and knocking on the doors that the strategy required. He was, too and for a time, immensely popular with them, whilst ill at ease both with his own party officers and those (by the early 1970s grouped around *Radical Bulletin*) who were promoting the strategy. What was his magic?

At the personal level, he had an exciting platform and TV screen

presence; his view of politics was theatrical and he was a top-class performer on his chosen stages. His fantasist's self-confidence saw the party through setbacks, and played up meagre advances into triumphs. With drive, wit, mimicry and old-fashioned (Oxford Union) rhetoric, he could soar over reality. The Young Liberals, with whose own drive and commitment he struggled, greeted him at Great Yarmouth in 1967 (their first conference after his election as leader) with chants of 'Jeremy, Jeremy, Jeremy' – more like a Nuremberg rally than a gathering of rational Liberals or the revolting young! Only later did they identify him as an obstacle to radical Liberalism. But many Liberals continued to idolise him until, and even after, his disgrace.

At the political level, he joined a party struggling to survive but convinced that in its internationalism, its understanding of Britain's changed role in the world, its commitment to freedom with social justice, its programmes of constitutional reform and of co-partnership in industry, it stood for distinctive principles. He was a skilled articulator of this identity, and persuaded many who sympathised with the consequent policies – particularly with European integration, African freedom and a pragmatic moderation on economic issues – to join with and work for the Liberal Party. The party's tradition and Jo Grimond defined his starting points. He did not need to add to them; he maintained them well.

So how do we balance the Thorpe account? Nick Clegg's concise tribute, circulated to party members on the day that Jeremy Thorpe died, is a reasonable summing up:

Jeremy Thorpe's leadership and resolve were the driving force that continued the Liberal revival that began under Jo Grimond. Jeremy oversaw some of the party's most famous by-election victories and his involvement with the anti-apartheid movement and the campaign for Britain's membership of the Common Market were ahead of his time.

Michael Steed

Thorpe and the Young Liberals

I fear that too many people are rewriting the history of Jeremy Thorpe's leadership of the Liberal Party. Others will debunk the idea that he was personally responsible for all the electoral advances in the early 1970s (or indeed in the 1960s) better than I can. However, the following true stories from 1970–71, when I chaired the Young Liberals, may give a sense of the flavour of his leadership.

Attempt to bully the YLs

The annual Easter conference of the National League of Young Liberals (NLYL) in 1970 took place at Skegness. I was elected as YL chairman. Apart from the forthcoming South African cricket tour, the main topic of discussion was Israel/Palestine. There was a long and thorough debate, with proposals from all viewpoints. A pro-Palestinian resolution was very clearly carried which resulted in national publicity, including hostile coverage in the Jewish press.

Shortly afterwards I travelled to London on YL business. When I arrived I was told that Ted Wheeler (head of Liberal Party HQ – known as the Liberal Party Organisation, or LPO, and located in a scruffy yard off the Strand) wanted to see me urgently. I was rushed into his room. 'Jeremy wants to see you – now,' he said. I explained that I was due to meet fellow YL officer David Mumford over lunch and could not see him until the afternoon.

I insisted, but Wheeler said: 'I can't tell him that – you will have to tell him', rang his number and passed me the phone. 'You must come to the House of Commons now,' said Thorpe, 'We are all waiting for you.' I wondered who they 'all' were but told him firmly but politely that I would see him at 2.30. He slammed the phone down.

When I got to his office in the Commons, I found Thorpe himself sitting behind his desk, Lord (Frank) Byers (leader of the Liberal Party in the Lords and perhaps Thorpe's main party manager) sitting nearby, and Desmond Banks (chairman of the Liberal Party Executive, later a Liberal peer) sitting at the other end of the room. I sat on the green leather chaise longue that was a feature of the office.

Thorpe then tried to bully me into changing YL policy on Israel/Palestine. 'Tony – you are now Leader of the Young Liberals.' (No, I said, I was the chairman, not the leader). 'We believe that you must show the necessary leadership on behalf of the party. The future of the party is at stake and we are relying on you.'

I asked what this was all about and he said that the YL policy on Israel and Palestine and the publicity from it was very damaging. He said it had been passed by a few unrepresentative individuals and I had to make it clear that it was not the view of the Young Liberals. He said they had prepared a press statement for me and all I had to do was agree to it.

I said that there had been a very thorough discussion at the conference with several hundred members in attendance, there had been a long debate with all sides putting their views forward, and the final vote had been quite decisive. The YLs were a democratic body and there was no way I could overturn the decision. And really, why was it so important?

Lord Byers looked me in the eye and said I must understand how serious it was. The party was almost bankrupt, with a general election pending, and it relied heavily on a few important donors. I looked back at him and he paused. Then he said: 'We are talking about a few very generous members of the party who are also leading members of the Jewish community.'

Desmond Banks looked unhappy but said nothing throughout the whole interview. I said I was sorry but there was nothing I could do, and after some further but repetitive discussion I left. I reported back to the other YL officers that I had been asked to change YL policy and had refused, but was otherwise circumspect in what I told them.

The Terrell Commission

In the year I chaired the YLs I was teaching at Colne Grammar School in Lancashire. One lunchtime in December 1970 the school secretary put her head round the staff-room door and said: 'Jeremy Thorpe is on the phone for you.' (The phone in the school office being the only

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one in the school at the time!) I had about five minutes before I was due to take the first class in the afternoon.

Thorpe said: 'Tony – we are getting all these complaints about the Young Liberals and we would like to help you to sort things out. This afternoon I am announcing to the press that we are setting up a commission of inquiry to investigate the relationship between the Young Liberals and the party. We have prepared a statement and I am asking you to add your name to it.' He said that the inquiry (which subsequently called itself the 'Liberal Commission') would be chaired by Stephen Terrell, a Liberal QC who had contested Eastbourne at the 1970 election, and he hoped that we would co-operate fully with its work.

I told him I had to teach at 1.30 and had no time to talk. I asked him to delay by a day so I could consider the matter and consult my other officers (answer – no); and then if we could nominate a member of the inquiry (answer – 'we expected you to say that and we have considered the matter but we have decided against it'). I refused to put my name to it, told him we would discuss our attitude to it and let him know, and rushed off to meet my geography class.

The YL National Executive did subsequently agree, though not unanimously, to co-operate and give evidence. The inquiry reported to the party and in spite of some not totally coherent criticism of NLYL the only proposal was in regard to the membership system. Previously all members of YL branches were automatically members of their constituency association (and thereby the party). The proposal was that all members should be enrolled through the party. However, the report was seriously undermined by two of the three members of the commission (Lord (John) Foot and Councillor Gruffydd Evans) who each issued a separate addendum which started with the words 'This is not a note of dissent ... but ...'.

In the event the Women's Liberal Federation objected to the terms of the proposed constitutional amendment and it was amended (and adopted at the Liberal Assembly in 1971) to merely give a constituency association the right to deny party membership

to any member of a YL branch (or other 'recognised unit' such as a Women's Liberal Association) within their area. The YLs did not disagree with this, and I never came across a single instance of the provision being used. What is certain is that the Terrell Commission took up a lot of fruitless time and energy during the rest of the year, including a night spent by me on Kings Cross station after missing the last train after giving evidence to them!

Postal vote scam

In 1971 an attempt was made to rig the election for the new chairman of NLYL and some other posts. The election took place at the annual conference of NLYL in Plymouth at Easter. I was the retiring chairman but not standing again. The plot was based in North Devon and it was and is clear that Thorpe was behind it and funded it, though that could not be proved at the time.

The expected successor was Peter Hain, the retiring publicity vice-chairman and the only candidate from amongst the existing YL officers. The challenge came from Chris Green, a young mainstream radical Liberal who had contested Surbiton at the 1970 general election and by Easter 1971 lived in the North West. Chris had organised a large and successful community action programme while a student in London, and wanted to bring that experience to the YLs. He was not involved in the vote-rigging plot and was dismayed when he found out how he was being used. (He was later to fight almost successful parliamentary campaigns in Cheadle and Hereford and played a leading part in Liberal and Liberal Democrat policy-making in the arts field).

The YLs had a system of individual membership in which branches paid an 'affiliation fee' to YL HQ in London for each of their members. They had also introduced a system of postal voting on demand for their internal elections. In the weeks leading up to the conference YL HQ received several hundred new membership registrations, followed by postal vote requests, mainly from YL branches in North Devon, with some from other parts of the Devon and Cornwall area.

There were also a number of press articles in Devon and

Cornwall and nationally linking the leadership to a campaign to defeat Hain. Suspicions were raised when YL HQ reported that most of the cheques for the memberships were from one person, a young activist in Barnstaple (North Devon).

On the recommendation of the joint returning officers, Michael Steed and Margareta Holmstedt, the conference agreed to set up a commission to investigate the matter, and a group of people including me spent much of the conference weekend doing that. We were fortunate to be able to include two regional party officials, one of whom was Frank Suter, a respected Devon solicitor, Liberal candidate in Tiverton and Devon County Councillor, who had just come along to observe the proceedings! Stuart Mole was appointed to carry out fieldwork, since he had turned up in his own car – luckily we were meeting in Plymouth – and was nicknamed 'Inspector Mole'. (Stuart was subsequently the almost successful Liberal candidate in Chelmsford and a leading member of Chelmsford Council; he is still in the lists this year in his now home patch of East Devon.)

Various irregularities came to light. Not only were some of the people on the lists not aware that they had been signed up as YLs, and some of the Devon village branches were clearly fictitious, but the supposed YLs also included grannies and aunties, and even family pets and farm animals among many genuine young Liberal supporters. Bizarrely, it was also discovered that members of an anarchist commune in Cornwall had signed up as YLs in order to help block the plot!

The outcome was that many of the postal vote applications which were generated by this activity were disallowed (the technical reason in many cases was the lack of any signature on the lists of names sent in by post) and the plot failed. NLYL benefited from the money which was not returned, Peter Hain was elected as YL chairman, and the plot by the party leadership to 'take over' the YLs was thwarted. Chris Green went on to play a part as an officer of the Young Liberals in the North West and in retrospect would have made a good radical YL chair – something that neither we nor Thorpe realised at the time!

Tony Greaves

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The European cause

Robert Ingham and Ronald Porter are surely right to insist that, despite his downfall, Thorpe left an important legacy to the Liberal Party. At the first election in which I could vote, in February 1974, I was drawn to join the Liberals because of Thorpe's stylish, modern leadership, his clear articulation of the need for Britain to be radically reformed, and, above all, his advocacy of the case for UK membership of the European Community. In the latter cause, Thorpe appeared to be rather less defensive than Ted Heath and much more sincere than Harold Wilson; only the Liberals, so it seemed, offered a

sense of British potential in a united Europe.

Jeremy Thorpe was hugely encouraging to young aspirants like me. He could charm both party and public audiences. Clement Freud told me that when Thorpe came up to the Isle of Ely by-election in 1973, he wooed the crowd at the Ely Maltings by declaring: 'If you elect Clement Freud, nobody will ever again have to ask who is the Member of Parliament for Ely'. Freud told him afterwards how touched he had been by those words. 'Oh, that's alright,' said Thorpe, 'I say that at all my campaign meetings.'

Andrew Duff

Candidates, coalition and charities

I first met Jeremy Thorpe when he had been recently elected MP for North Devon at a ball to raise funds for the Liberal Party, held at the home of Laurence and Stina (later Baroness) Robson at Kidlington – think Gosforth Park and Downton Abbey and you can imagine the scene. I was one of a party of young hopeful parliamentary candidates. Jeremy was dashing, elegant, witty and charming in his white tie and tails. We remained friends ever after and, along with a small band of other loyal friends, were there for him to turn to during the time of his losing his seat and throughout his trial. We recognised his faults and weaknesses and did not hesitate to tell him when we thought he was in the wrong.

As a member of the committee of the Parliamentary Candidates Association (of which he was a Vice President at the time) during 1974, when there were the two general elections, I was one of the organisers of the emergency meeting of candidates held to consider the situation after the February election and to tell Jeremy that if he entered into any deal with the Tories he would find himself without any parliamentary candidates prepared to stand for the party at the next election. When an article about these events appeared in the *Journal of Liberal History* in late 2008 (issue 61, winter 2008–09) I showed

it to him and he told me that he had had no intention of taking up Heath's invitation, but felt that he had at least to hear what he had to offer. He was fully aware of the party's feelings about a coalition at the time.

Jeremy's ability to remember people was renowned. I once asked him what his secret was and he told me it was 'association of ideas', and recounted an instance when a woman came up to him gushing: 'I don't suppose you would remember me, Mr Thorpe'. 'Oh yes, I do, Mrs Bag', came the reply. 'My name is Mrs Sacks', was her frosty retort!

Jeremy was deeply devoted to his wife Marion, and she reciprocated his devotion. Her concern was that she would die before him, which sadly happened. You could not but be moved at his distress and loss at her funeral.

Despite his cruel illness, which gradually robbed him of his agility, his mind remained as acute as ever and he loved having friends call and tell him the latest events, gossip and progress of the party. His interest extended to his charities, including the National Benevolent Fund for the Aged, of which he was one of the founding trustees in 1957 and of which he remained a trustee until his Parkinson's made it too difficult for him to get to our trustee meetings; he stepped down as recently as November 2002. When its 'legal'



Election poster, February 1974 general election

trustee retired in October 1993 he suggested that I should replace him, which I did. Despite his no longer being involved, whenever I came to see him he always wanted to know how the charity was faring and what it was doing.

His other charity was the Caroline Thorpe Memorial Fund, set up in memory of his first wife and mother of his son Rupert, which raised funds initially for the Caroline Thorpe Children's Ward at North Devon Hospital, and then expanded to include all deprived children in North Devon.

Jeremy's nickname for me was 'the Arum lily', a play on my surname. I last saw him ten days before he died, dropping in on the off-chance and, despite his loss of voice due to his throat cancer, he still managed to say to me: 'how did we do in the by-election?' – a reference to the Rochester & Strood by-election in November 2014. Unfortunately the exertion of this small question rendered him voiceless for the rest of my visit, and he communicated in signs for the rest of the time. I am so glad I had that opportunity of (unwittingly) saying goodbye to a good friend.

Joyce Arram