Interview

Adrian Slade looks back with **John Pardoe**, Liberal MP for North Cornwall, 1966–79.

What might have been

The Liberal Party of the '60s and early '70s was personified by Jo Grimond and Jeremy Thorpe but, of the half-dozen newer MPs who deservedly won important places in the hearts of Liberals, two made a particular impact on the public at large. David Steel was quickly respected, not just for his skilful piloting of his ground-breaking Abortion Bill but also as an effective Chief Whip for Jeremy Thorpe, while John Pardoe, the towering, booming MP for North Cornwall, later become equally widely recognised as the party's economic spokesman, and the scourge of Chancellor Denis Healey during the 1974 and 1979 elections and the Lib/Lab Pact..

In 1976 it was Pardoe and Steel who fought out the succession to Thorpe in the party's leadership election. If Pardoe had won, third party politics in Britain might have been very different. He did not favour the Pact – 'There was nothing in it for us' – and he says he would have encouraged Roy Jenkins to join the Liberals rather than create a separate SDP. He may have lost the leadership argument at the time but it took the Liberal front bench some years to recover from the unexpected loss of his seat in 1979.

John Pardoe's political career had begun in the '59 election, not as a Liberal but as postal votes officer for one of the Labour Party's leading left-wingers, Lena Jaeger, the MP for St Pancras. 'I regarded myself as being very much part of the left of the party', he says. 'It was my friends who ran up the red flag over St Pancras Town Hall! But I was unhappy with Hugh Gaitskell and bitterly disappointed when it became clear that Nye Bevan was never going to become Labour leader. So really I came to the Liberal Party thinking that I was moving left. That was entirely due to Jo Grimond. He had changed the whole vision of what Liberalism was about. He had set it definitively to the left of centre, indeed in many respects left of the left. It was "left" in that curious Liberal fashion – you know, co-partnership and ownership through industrial democracy, not state ownership.'

It did not take long for Pardoe to be selected as a Liberal parliamentary candidate – in Finchley, where the recently elected new MP was Margaret Thatcher. In the '64 election he achieved a significant Liberal vote, remembered thirty years later in the lady's memoirs. 'It was quite a favourable mention, much better than I got from Denis Healey, who was vitriolic about me', he recalls with feeling.

Expecting to fight another election in Finchley, he and his wife Joy had bought a small house in Hampstead (an affordable possibility in those days). Instead he was offered, and took, the opportunity of a much more winnable seat, North Cornwall. The Pardoes kept on the Hampstead house, where they still live, but felt obliged also to buy a small place in Cornwall. They still own that too.

In March '66 a triumphant John Pardoe, a tenor of fine voice and theatrical leanings, led the singing on his day of victory – one of thirteen seats won or held for the Liberals on that day. Just four years later only six of those MPs survived a disastrous election for the party, but Pardoe was one of them. Immediately he became crucial to the party's survival.

'In those first few years there were actually only three of us who ever turned up', he says. 'Russell was off doing his usual Europe- and world-wide bit, Emlyn (Hooson) went back to court and Jo really didn't appear, which left Jeremy, David and me to do almost everything. With such a small number we even had a terrible job keeping the Liberal table in the House of Commons dining room!'

Despite these privations their efforts bore fruit in a clutch of by-election gains during the Heath Government, leading to the Liberal high point of more than 6 million votes polled in the February '74 election. The party had still only won twelve seats but, with no overall majority for anyone, how should Liberals react?

'The results fell short of our hopes in terms of seats but were nearly as good in terms of votes, and obviously we were now a power in the land', says Pardoe. 'I was in North Cornwall when we heard the outcome and I rang Jeremy immediately, saying that he should find every possible excuse not to go up to London for discussions with Heath over the weekend. I told him that all hell would break loose if

he did. And, when I was interviewed for the national news that night, I said firmly that I had known Jeremy for years and that there would be no deal.'

Nevertheless Jeremy Thorpe did soon go and see Heath. There was a major party outcry, but, as Pardoe had predicted three days before, no deal was ever done. 'I had rather set the cat among the pigeons but there wasn't anything Heath could offer' he says. 'The mathematics didn't add up. Our two parties did not amount to a majority. We would have had to do a deal with the Northern Ireland MPs. In any case Heath had not even thought for a moment about PR, not even a Commission. It was never on.'

Deal or no deal, Pardoe feels that opportunities were then lost between the two elections. 'I didn't know at that time why Jeremy seemed not to have any idea what to do with the situation we had created in February. I know now that it was a lot to do with the personal pressures that were building on him, but I didn't know that then and I kept going to him saying "Come on, Jeremy. The goal's open. We've got to do something." In the end nothing really happened until the amazing hovercraft tour, and that was a bit of a disaster. I don't actually think that Jeremy had his mind on the job, for reasons that are obvious now, but the tragic thing is that the outcome in October was a great disappointment.'

The personal pressures to which Pardoe refers led later to Jeremy Thorpe's resignation and Pardoe's battle with David Steel in the ensuing, rather bad-tempered, leadership election – remembered by many Liberals for an unwarranted suggestion that Pardoe wore a hairpiece. Did he enjoy the contest? 'No.' Did he ever think he was going to win? 'I suppose I did for perhaps the first week, but the problem that research soon made very clear was that David was much better known than I was. However, later there was an interesting statistical aberration. Analysis by Michael Steed indicated that the majority of party activists and people who voted after attending election meetings voted for me, while the vast majority of members who stayed at home and read newspapers or watched us on the television gave their votes to David.'

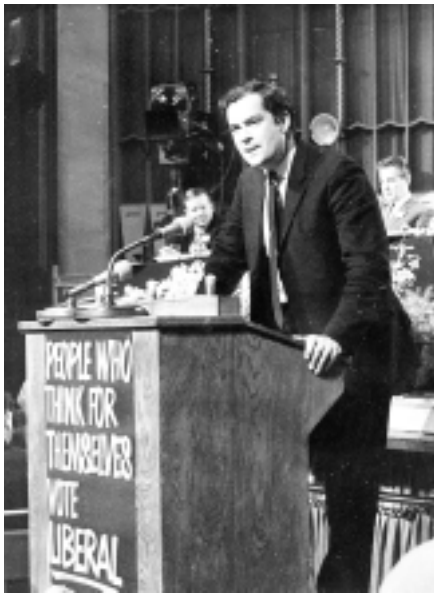
'The press were pretty vitriolic, having set us up as a choice between the Radical v. the Other or the Left v. the Right. There was some truth in that but it was not particularly helpful.' When the election was over the two candidates buried their differences and generally worked well together, but the relationship was put under strain by David Steel's enthusiasm for a Lib/Lab Pact, designed to keep Thatcher's Tories out of power.

'That wasn't a happy situation either', says Pardoe 'but again we were more or less set up to have that kind of continuing row. David Steel had formulated the view years before that the future of the party lay in some kind of deal with Labour moderates. That was not my view of the realignment of the left. He and I had both come into the party attracted by Jo's ideas of realignment, but his view was very much, not that it would be the Liberal Party that would become the realignment of the left, but that we would have to do a deal, as junior partners, with people in the Labour Party. I did not agree with that but I followed his line because we had to sink or swim together.'

'It became perfectly clear at the outset of those negotiations that David was going to be the good guy as far as Labour was concerned. He was absolutely determined to make the Pact work at the expense of actually achieving anything about which Liberals could say "look what we have done". I took the view that my voters and party members needed something to assure them that we had got something other than just the chance of saving our seats.'

'I have always taken the view that, unless it becomes very, very large, probably number two in terms of seats, the party cannot enter into any arrangement with another party safely without the absolute certainty that the next general election will be fought on PR. Otherwise you are opting for total disaster. And the problem with any other form of alliance is that it is likely to be a centrist compromise.'

'There had been a moment in the early Pact negotiations when some form of PR might have been considered, not proposed by Callaghan but pushed for by me, but in the final outcome we got nothing from it. That was the tragedy and, in the event, that was the perception of the press and the outside world.' Did any MPs actually vote against the Pact? 'Yes. Jo Grimond. I think he was the only one.' Why Jo? Did he not favour realignment? 'Not of that sort. He and I both believed in realignment through the Liberal Party', says Pardoe. And if there hadn't been a Pact? 'There would have been a general election and I believe we would have done better in it that we did two years later in 1979.'



Improbably Pardoe does not blame the Pact but the leadership election for the surprising loss of his seat. 'I think North Cornwall expected me to win the leadership. They certainly voted for me in vast numbers but, when I didn't win, the comment the press had made about me then and during the general election rebounded. That's the main reason why I lost.'

Now out of Parliament, Pardoe decided to turn to making money in business and the media. For two years he hosted a Sunday programme about television for London Weekend. 'But people like Ian Trethowan advised me not to get too involved in television because of the difficulties of getting long-term work, he says. 'So, at the same time, when I was lucky enough to be offered the managing directorship of Sight & Sound, a staff and computer training company, I accepted the job.' And he remained in it until 1989 when the company received 'an offer we couldn't refuse' from the Davy Corporation. He

agreed to remain involved for a further two years, deciding to retire for good in 1992.

In the '80s he made two further forays into politics. Very shortly before the '83 election David Steel asked him to join the first Liberal/SDP Alliance campaign committee. 'The only problem with that one was the mess as to who was actually leader', he says. 'David was chairman of the campaign and was expected by Liberals to be the front man but the press kept asking Roy questions. To say the least that led to a lot of contradictions, which I was supposed to sort out. I may have been almost the only person in England at the time with a mobile telephone but that was not enough. The results of the election were not as good as we had hoped.'

Pardoe had not expected to continue in this role, but it was not long before he was approached again, this time jointly by Steel and David Owen, who asked him to chair the committee for the next election. They wanted him to plan the campaign and, particularly, to chair the press conferences with both of them present. This was supposed to avoid the confusions of the previous election. 'I know I was asked because I was the only Liberal that David Owen could bear', he says. 'And I was the only Liberal who could bear David Owen. Of course it never really worked out the way they wanted.'

Politically, did he feel more in tune with Owen or Steel? 'Oh, Owen.' Why? 'Because David Steel was a Social Democrat. He had always been one. He came from that tradition, but I had never had a strong feeling for Social Democracy. We used to view Social Democrats as the great white soft underbelly of the Labour Party.' So what was Owen? 'A very curious creature. Clearly not wet through, but from a very different strand of Social Democracy.' But very much from the right of Labour and to the right of the Social Democrats? 'Oh, yes. As I say, I never felt much for Social Democracy.' But given that he had a strong feeling for Liberalism, surely he wouldn't describe Owen as a Grimondian Liberal? 'No, no, no. Not at all,' he says quickly. 'And I disagreed with him on defence, but we got on well personally.'

If Pardoe had been around during the merger negotiations, would he have voted for merger? 'No. The '87 election was my most searing political experience and, to my horror, I discovered during it just how much most Liberals hated David Owen and most Social Democrats, and wanted to screw their necks.' By merging or not merging with them? 'Preferably by not merging with them.' But didn't some Liberals see merger and absorption as the way to do it? For once uncertain of his answer, Pardoe pauses and casts his mind back to the '70s. 'Look, Adrian, you've got the problem here that, if I had been leader, the Pact would never have happened for the simple reason that you cannot put the Liberal Party's head in a noose unless you are absolutely sure that you have PR in your grasp.'

And would the SDP have happened either? 'I wouldn't have thought so. I don't know whether it is true, as David Owen alleges, that over dinner David Steel persuaded Roy Jenkins not to join the Liberals and to start his own party, with a view to siphoning off Labour MPs and later merging, but I doubt if Roy would have come to dinner with me. I do know that, if he had, I would have encouraged him to join us. It would have been a very different Liberal Party, and it might not have been any more successful, but it would certainly have been different.'

Finally, how much of the Grimond legacy did he see in the Liberal Democrats of today? Was the party closer to the Grimond left of centre than the Alliance had been? 'Yes, but the Liberal Democrats have to be careful to be left but not Labour left. Jo didn't believe, and nor do I, that you can ever really win, or achieve electoral satisfaction by simply putting more money into public services – health, education, whatever. You will never be able to prove, or persuade electors, that what you have spent has made their service better. That's the shared fallacy of some Liberal Democrats and members of the government.'

Pardoe has played no part in politics for fifteen years. At 68, he remains the energetic radical he always was, but spends his time reading, walking all over the world, going to the theatre, doing home improvements and, very deliberately, not reading a daily newspaper or watching television news. 'And nor should any politician,' he says somewhat provocatively. He keeps up with current affairs through the Sunday newspapers, the occasional weekly newspaper and radio. It appears to be enough to keep his political views firmly intact.

Adrian Slade was the last President of the Liberal Party before merger with the SDP in 1988. He was elected to the Greater London Council in 1981 and led the Alliance group on the GLC until abolition. A shorter version of this interview was first published in Liberal Democrat News *in July 2002.*