



Roy Jenkins (Lord Jenkins of Hillhead) died on 5 January 2003, at the age of 82. He was a good friend to the Liberal Democrat History Group, speaking at several of our meetings and contributing a number of articles to the *Journal*. **Andrew Adonis**, Jenkins' authorised biographer and currently Head of Policy in 10 Downing Street, wrote this appreciation of his life, which first appeared in *The Times* under the title 'The man who towered above left and right'.

ROY JENKI

Shortly before his sudden death, Roy Jenkins called to discuss his next book. He had almost finished writing a life of FDR, already two books on from his epic *Churchill* published barely sixteen months ago, and he did not want 'an excessive interlude' before his next project. He was 'veering strongly' towards JFK, 'who, with his circle, were for me the glamour of the sixties, and whose reputation is I think in need of re-rating upwards'. It was a neat vignette of Lord Jenkins's unstinting appetite for work and play, and his view of the good life (even at the age of 82) as one which keeps the two in harmony. A day without work – he typically wrote 500 words daily until his death – was as rare as a day without a good lunch.

The gibe of diletantism, directed by erstwhile cabinet colleagues, was the opposite of the truth. Jenkins was thoroughly dedicated, even driven. Politics, literary endeavour and a wide social circle were all pursued with a

passion which few devote to any one of those pursuits. It was the combination of these, together with Oxford, his wife Jennifer and the influence of his remarkable father, a Welsh collier who won a scholarship to Ruskin College, which formed his outlook. Churchill, Jenkins liked to joke, 'combined a puritan work ethic with a great capacity for pleasure, even self-indulgence, a combination I find very attractive'.

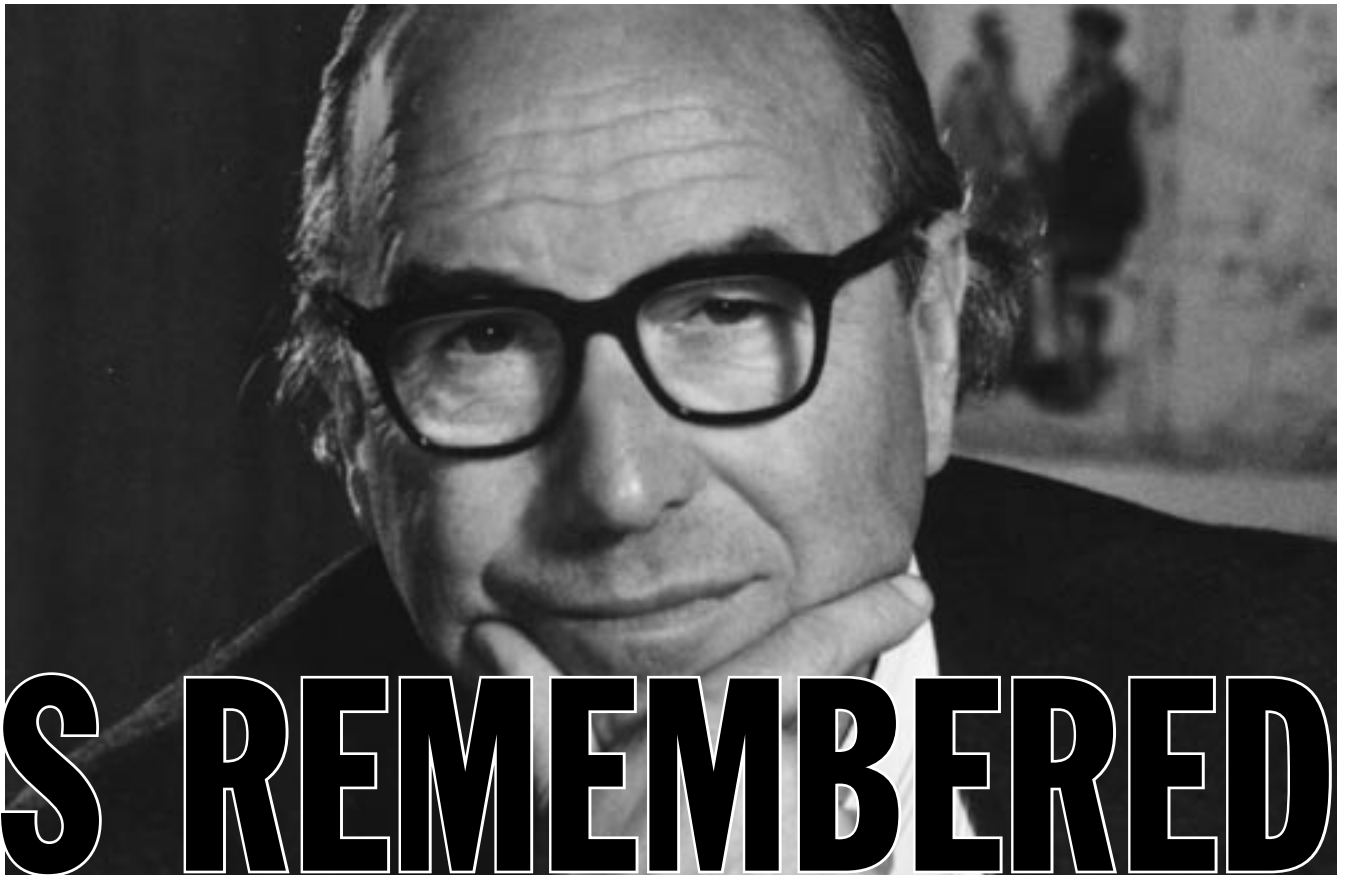
His instinct for rating and classifying was an abiding Oxford trait. And the desire to 'upgrade' Kennedy, a glamorous liberal President leading a broad social coalition in pursuit of moderate progress, was of a piece with principles and prejudices ingrained by the time Jenkins left Balliol for war in 1942. But what of his ranking on the scoreboard of political history?

Most disputed is the wisdom of breaking with Labour and establishing the SDP in 1981, and the impact of that on Labour's reformation under Neil Kinnock and his successors. Perhaps Jenkins's critical misjudgment

was of Britain's electoral system, which usually invests power in broad social coalition parties led from the centre – a force the SDP/Liberals could not become without winning more Labour voters than they were able to once Denis Healey had beaten the left-winger Tony Benn for the Labour deputy leadership.

After the failure of the SDP, new Labour successfully built its coalition out from the Labour heartlands into new territory. However much or little this process owed to the Jenkins legacy, the result is precisely the kind of broad cross-class coalition led from the centre-left which he preached, a movement of breadth and dynamism to match those led by Gladstone, Asquith and Attlee in their heydays.

Jenkins's other achievements are less disputed – the bold reforming Home Secretary, the resolute Chancellor who salvaged the first Wilson Government and Labour's claim to governing competence, and the pro-Europeanism which did so much to inspire a progressive generation



and to establish Britain as a serious force in the EU.

As the details of past battles fade, it is as a political inspiration that Jenkins will stand out. And in one respect above all: as a beguilingly tough radical who was serious about power yet never saw the 'radical Centre' as a mushy territory of no fixed beliefs. He refused to equate centre-left moderation with weakness – and his new Labour heirs are in the same mould.

Little given to the cant of party politics, Jenkins generally avoided calling himself a socialist even while climbing the Labour ladder. His earliest political tract, published in 1953, *Pursuit of Progress*, set his creed in the 'English progressive tradition' bestriding Liberals and Labour. Unambiguously on the left, with a coherent argument for greater equality (including more public ownership – a cause he dropped through experience), it also argued for levelling up not down, for economic stability and dynamism as the precondition for reform, and for individual

empowerment as the principle of progress.

By the early sixties these elements had combined with an ardent Europeanism and a conviction of the need to liberalise (or 'civilise' as he put it) the relationship between state and citizen, to create a set of ideals and objectives more radical and relevant than anything on offer from either the Labour left or the Tory right until the rise of Thatcher. By 1960 Jenkins was calling for 'wholesale reform' in the Home Office, for the state to 'do much less to restrict personal freedom', and he had resigned from the Labour front bench in protest at his mentor Gaitskell's failure to embrace Europe.

He was as rigorous in government as in his thinking. As Home Secretary in 1965, Jenkins's first act was to change the entire management of the Home Office, including his do-nothing Permanent Secretary, a decision that enabled the enactment of a comprehensive liberal programme in only 23 months. He skilfully used Private Member's Bills as devices

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to enact abortion and sexual law reforms that would have proved impossible to pass quickly as government measures. He took the helm at the Treasury after the catastrophe of devaluation in November 1967 and within two years the balance of payments and public finances were largely restored. His only regret was that he failed to act more decisively to raise taxes at the outset.

'He was a very considerable servant of the state; he kept the train of government on the rails over difficult stretches of country,' Jenkins writes of Harold Wilson, in a forthcoming essay intended as another 're-rating upwards'. The same could be said of Jenkins himself. But more than that, he was a bold social democratic reformer with a rare talent to translate vision into reality through force of personality and, at his peak, a superb mastery of the art of politics.

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