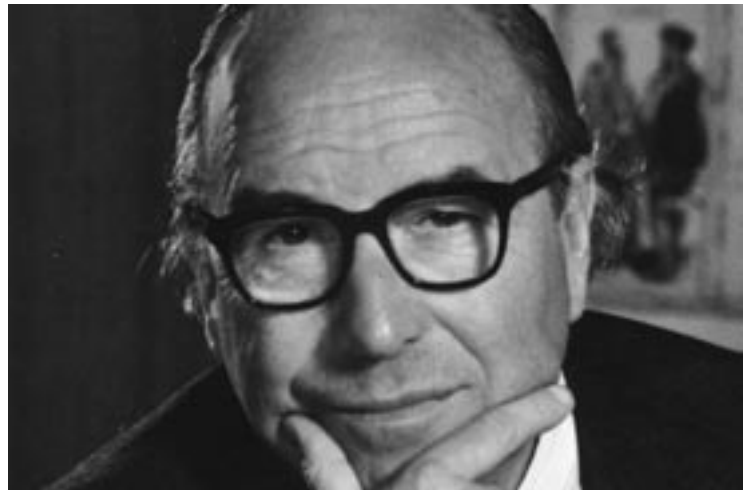


# WRITING ABOUT R

The obituaries and essays on Lord Jenkins of Hillhead brought forward the usual tributes and obsequies. They almost all noted Jenkins' first-rate intelligence, applauded the scale of his achievements as a political biographer and recounted his penchant for interesting conversation, good food and fine wine. The breadth of his hinterland – his life outside politics – was widely recognised.



At the same time, the Roy Jenkins that many friends and former colleagues remembered was a more disciplined and more professional politician and, indeed, a more down-to-earth person than was often supposed. He was polite and friendly to his political opponents, a delightful luncheon companion and, in the words of Lord Healey, 'a singularly civilised man'.<sup>1</sup>

But, as befits someone who was a significant figure in the country's public life for fifty years, the discussion of his political achievements and what they represented was more contentious, more politically charged.

Jenkins' record during his two stints as Home Secretary was widely praised. In the *Guardian*, David Marquand argued that Jenkins did 'as much as any other single person to make Britain a more tolerant and civilised country to live in'.<sup>2</sup> For the *Observer*, Vernon Bogdanor wrote that 'his tenure ... was marked by a massive attack on

prejudice and a bonfire of repressive legislation (homosexuality, abortion divorce) ... decriminalisation of homosexuality has done more to alleviate human misery than any other post-war Act'.<sup>3</sup> And Lord Healey described Jenkins' first period at the Home Office as his 'greatest contribution', claiming 'it was nothing less than a social revolution'. Predictably, some conservatives struck the only sour notes. Ferdinand Mount saw Lord Jenkins as 'the personification of ... the peculiar thoughtless complacency about the way we embarked on these new directions' in the 1960s. Thus he held Jenkins implicitly responsible for the free availability of drugs and pornography and blighted family lives on run-down council estates today.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, what was most remarkable was the way in which the writers of obituaries and essays portrayed Lord Jenkins' achievements through their own political lenses. To David Marquand, who followed Jenkins to Brussels and then into the SDP, he was first and foremost the hero of the European cause. Jenkins

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# OBITUARIES AND APPRECIATIONS REVIEWED BY NEIL STOCKLEY

had, Marquand wrote, 'played an indispensable part in taking Britain into what is now the European Union'. He admired Jenkins' courage in leading the 69 Labour MPs who defied the party whip to vote in principle for joining the Common Market and argued that this 'gave the European cause a cushion of moral authority without which it would almost certainly have foundered'. Vernon Bogdanor lauded his integrity and political courage. And yet, as only *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* pointed out, in an attempt to save his position as deputy leader, Jenkins ended up voting with his Labour colleagues against the legislation that permitted Britain to join the Common Market.<sup>5</sup>

Marquand described Jenkins' achievements as President of the European Commission in considerably more detail than any other writer. During his four years in Brussels, Jenkins had 'left a more enduring mark on European politics than any British politician since Ernest Bevin'. In putting monetary union back on to the agenda, he said, Jenkins had set in train the European Monetary System (EMS), which 'laid the foundations for the European Single Act of 1985, the European Union of the 1990s and the single currency of today'. In a generally affectionate essay, Lord Owen, who broke with Jenkins partly on the European question, saw his record there as 'in some respects, a disappointment'.<sup>6</sup> The *Daily Telegraph* noted that the creation of the EMS 'attracted as much criticism as praise'. The *Times* was more positive, praising Jenkins' skill as an ambassador

for Europe and stressing 'it was doubtful whether he could have done more'.

By contrast, Jenkins' achievements at the Treasury were the subjects of less praise from 'centre-left' writers and, indeed, somewhat more ambiguous comment. For making devaluation work, balancing the government's books and putting the balance of payments back into the black, *The Times* placed him 'in the first flight of Chancellors in the twentieth century'. Both Lord Owen and the *Observer's* business correspondent, William Keegan, were also very positive.<sup>7</sup> But Keegan and, to a lesser extent *The Times*, noted that Jenkins had initially been too timid in his approach to fiscal policy. For their parts, Ferdinand Mount and the *Daily Telegraph* complained he had raised taxes too high. In my view, Dennis Kavanagh made the most accurate criticism: 'living standards for ordinary people showed only a tiny improvement and the pent-up wage pressures exploded under the successor government of Edward Heath'. Still, economic policy is intrinsically less suited to absolute moral judgements than either social reform or European integration. And perhaps we have seen so many booms and busts, false dawns and fallen idols that the heroes of post-war British economic policy are hard to recognise.

The most politicised aspect of the obituaries was surely the discussion of Jenkins' role as the 'principal begetter of the Social Democratic Party (SDP)' (*Daily Telegraph*). The debates over the party's impact were just as fierce as ever. To his erstwhile

colleagues – and rivals – on the Old Labour right, he provided the perfect alibi for their defeats in the 1980s. 'Without Roy', said Lord Healey, 'Thatcher would never really have happened'. In other words, had the SDP not existed, she would not have been in power long enough to do her worst. *Tribune's* political correspondent tried to show that in 1983 the Liberal-SDP Alliance increased Mrs Thatcher's Commons majority, despite a small drop in Conservative support, by splitting the centre-left vote.<sup>8</sup> But there is no guarantee that without the SDP, those opposed to Thatcherism would have fallen in behind the Labour Party that Tony Benn and his followers had fashioned. Indeed, the available evidence suggests the very opposite. Nor does Healey's claim that in taking away 27 moderate MPs '[the SDP] shifted the balance of power in the party to the left, and made its recovery much more protracted' hold much water.

As was widely noted, the SDP failed to break the mould of British politics. (This was partly Jenkins' fault, for his period as leader was hardly a success – a point that only *The Times* came close to developing fully). But both David Marquand and Ferdinand Mount were sure that the party gave Labour the shock therapy and, starting with Jenkins' Dimpleby lecture in 1979, the roadmap for its long march back to power.

**Both David Marquand and Ferdinand Mount were sure that the party gave Labour the shock therapy and, starting with Jenkins' Dimpleby lecture in 1979, the roadmap for its long march back to power.**

## WRITING ABOUT ROY

media commentators believed that Jenkins paved the way for Blair and in the words of Tony Benn, acted as the 'grandfather' to Tony Blair's 'New Labour Party'. But this is too simplistic.

First, Jenkins did not save the Labour Party. The traumatic process of policy reviews that turned Labour into a pro-'social market', pro-Europe and multilateralist party did not even start until the late 1980s – after the SDP's demise – and they were driven by Neil Kinnock and the erstwhile 'soft left'. And Middle England did not embrace Labour until the mid-1990s, after Tony Blair had forced yet more change on a demoralised and desperate party.

This leads into a second, more significant point about Jenkins' political legacy. After 1994, Blair embraced Mrs Thatcher's major economic changes and promised to keep to the Tories' spending limits for two years and not to increase income tax. This was a departure from Jenkins' repeated declarations that he believed in the mixed economy but thought there was much that should be done to make it less unequal. The Dimpleby Lecture was egalitarian and strongly anti-Thatcherite. Indeed, many of Jenkins' speeches from the 1970s and 1980s now read like a left-wing critique of the Blair Government from the left.

*The Times* noted that Jenkins acted as Blair's mentor, providing much of the historical case for 'the project' that sought to reunite the Liberal and Labour strands of Britain's progressive tradition. But it is well documented that he died disappointed with both Blair's reluctance to provide leadership over the Euro and his failure to pursue electoral reform for the Commons. And it is impossible to imagine a Jenkins Government indulging in the penal policies that we have seen since 1997 or being so eager to clamp down on civil liberties in the wake of al-Qaeda.

Still, Jenkins' political principles were, in many ways, inchoate and this was the subject of much discussion. Dennis Kavanagh

believed they were largely a state of mind. 'He was committed to libertarianism, a mixed economy and internationalism [but] he did not espouse a political philosophy. He seemed to believe that, if you found twenty men and women of liberal disposition, good will and minds of their own, government could function almost by instinct; it did not need an ideology'. The *Daily Telegraph* saw him as 'more of a Whig than a radical'. The *Economist* simply called him a 'political reformist'.<sup>9</sup>

But these descriptions do not quite paint the complete picture. Lord Healey's comment that 'Roy was always really a liberal, no matter which party was in', while not meant as a compliment, may have been closer to the mark. For Jenkins started out as a Labour politician but came to recognise the limitations of a trade union-based party; he saw that the dichotomy between the liberal and the illiberal was, if anything, more important than the left-right divide. Vernon Bogdanor hailed him as the pioneer of 'a liberalised social democracy' that was based on two tenets: 'an aspirational society (individuals must be allowed to regulate their personal lives without interference from the state); and [the belief] that a post-imperial country like Britain could only be influential in the world as part of a wider grouping (the EU)'. This surely made Jenkins the grandfather not of Tony Blair's New Labour but of Charles Kennedy's Liberal Democrats.

Roy Jenkins' political creed still has plenty of relevance for the twenty-first century. Harold Wilson's ex-spin doctor Joe Haines

was not wrong when he called Jenkins 'a gifted failure'<sup>10</sup> because he did not become Labour Party leader or Prime Minister. But this is less important than the inspiration many still take from Jenkins' achievements as a practical reformer and the insights that were in many respects ahead of his time. In its editorial the day after Lord Jenkins' death, the *Independent* concluded: 'As the weakness of Mr Blair's attachment both to the European ideal and to liberal principles is increasingly exposed, the values Lord Jenkins espoused will become more precious'.

*Neil Stockley is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group executive.*

- 1 'Death of a singularly civilised man', *Independent*, 6 January 2003.
- 2 'The Lord Jenkins of Hillhead,' Obituary, *Guardian*, 6 January 2003.
- 3 'The great radical reformer,' *Observer*, 12 January 2003.
- 4 'Roy's lunches were better than his legacy,' *Sunday Times*, 12 January 2003.
- 5 'Lord Jenkins of Hillhead,' Obituary, *The Times* 6 January 2003 and Lord Jenkins of Hillhead OM, Obituary, *Daily Telegraph*, 6 January 2003.
- 6 David Owen, 'Roy's hand in Britain's destiny,' *Evening Standard*, 6 January 2003.
- 7 William Keegan, 'Jenkins and the war for Blair's ear,' *The Observer*, 12 January 2003.
- 8 Hugh Macpherson, 'Jenkins: pomp and circumstance,' *Tribune*, 10 January 2003.
- 9 Obituary, 'Roy Jenkins' *The Economist*, 11 January 2003.
- 10 Joe Haines, 'Resolved to be irresolute,' *New Statesman*, 13 January 2003.

**Jenkins' biggest gamble? The launch of the Social Democratic Party, 26 March 1981. Jenkins is flanked by David Owen and Bill Rodgers.**

