

## REVIEWS

the result is a refreshing mix that makes fascinating reading for anyone interested in current affairs, one which will also be appreciated by students of politics, history, journalism and cartoon art.

*Dr Tim Benson is Director of the Political Cartoon Society, an organisation for those interested in history and politics through the medium of cartoons.*

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### When personal ambitions collide, mutual co-operation is precluded

Giles Radice: *Friends and Rivals: Crosland, Jenkins and Healey*

(Little, Brown & Co., 2002), 382 pp.

Reviewed by **Tom McNally**

Let us start with the conclusion. Giles Radice has written an important book, a very readable book and one that entirely justifies the many favourable reviews it has received since its publication in September 2002. By the device of interweaving the careers and ambitions of Anthony Crosland, Roy Jenkins and Denis Healey, Radice is able to tell the tale of the rise and fall of social democracy within the Labour Party in a way that is both readable and understandable to those coming fresh to this period of recent contemporary history, while being positively unputdownable for those of us who lived through it as active participants.

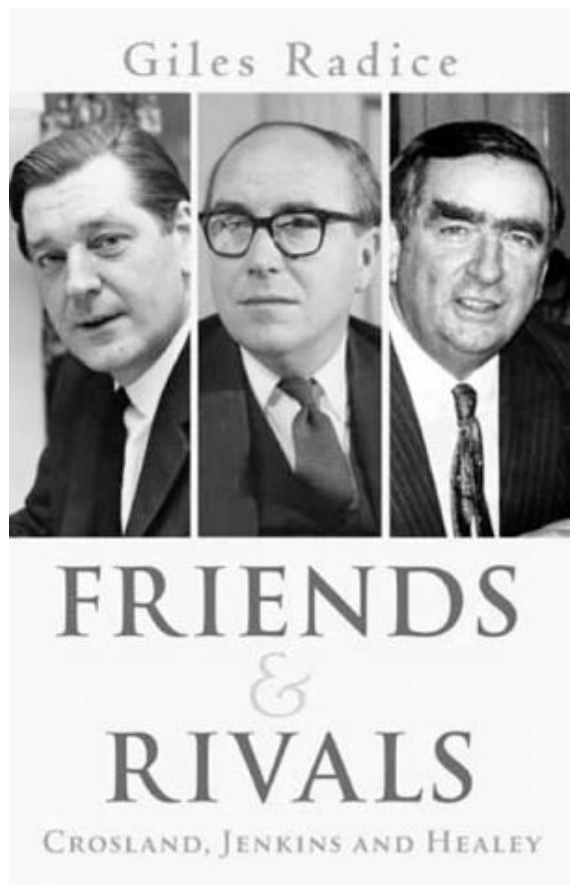
The Wilson Government of the 1960s had probably the cleverest cabinet of the twentieth century. Radice's three heroes were among the cleverest of the clever. I disagree with Giles Radice that they were the Blairites of the 1960s. Both singly and collectively they had an intellectual depth to their politics and their convictions, the absence of which is the most disturbing aspect of the post-1997 New Labour government. Yet this trio of heavyweights, whose basic political philosophies were remarkably close, lost the battle for the soul of Old Labour. In a way, Radice's

narrative parallels Dangerfield's *The Strange Death of Liberal England* in seeking to explain how both a political establishment and a political philosophy lost its way.

I watched this story unfold first of all as a Labour Party researcher in the mid- and late sixties, then as International Secretary of the Labour Party from 1969–74 (the youngest since Denis Healey, who served in the post from 1945–52), followed by the position of Political Secretary to Jim Callaghan from 1974–79, and finally as a Member of Parliament from 1979–83. As Denis Healey once memorably told me, it was a vantage point from which you could peep under the table and see the true colour of the political knickers people were wearing.

Although the book is the story of the rivalry of a triumvirate, my old boss, Jim Callaghan, is a kind of Iago figure, a brooding presence in the narrative whose influence on the unfolding tragedy is a malign one for our three noble failures.

Radice's central thesis is probably true: if mutual jealousies and ambitions had not prevented it, an alliance between Crosland, Jenkins and Healey at almost any time between the late sixties and the mid-seventies could have delivered the premiership to one of



them. In that respect Tony Blair and Gordon Brown did learn the lessons of history by cementing their own non-aggression pact, and reaped their full reward for so doing.

We will never know whether the battles which Neil Kinnock began in the mid-eighties and Tony Blair completed in the nineties could have been achieved a decade earlier by a more resolute and united centre-right. I have my doubts. Those who remained deny it, but the analysis presented to me by Bill Rodgers, when in 1981 I left the Labour Party to join the newly formed SDP, is, I believe, valid: 'Tom, what we are doing will force the Labour Party to either reform or die. If it refuses to reform then the SDP will replace it.' Faced with that stark choice, Labour chose to reform, but there was not much stomach for it before the arrival of the SDP, as a close examination of the careers of some Cabinet members would testify. Although the key reforms lay a decade ahead, the defining moment came, as

Radice records, at the 1981 Labour conference when Denis Healey defeated Tony Benn for the Deputy Leadership by four-fifths of one percent. In his diary, Giles Radice wrote on the evening of the Healey victory: 'By beating Benn, however narrowly, Denis Healey has saved the Labour Party.' If that is so, then I played a part in that rescue. My final vote as a Labour Member of Parliament was to vote for Denis Healey at that conference. It was my parting gift to a Labour Party to which, as Roy Hattersley told me at the time, I owed everything.

But I have my doubts whether any of our three heroes could have led the Labour Party better or more effectively in the 1960s and 1970s than the 'consensus' leaders, Wilson and Callaghan. The structure of the party gave too much power to the trade unions (fine when the unions are in the control of the right, poison when controlled by the left – as Tony Blair may shortly find out). In addition, the Benn reforms on reselection emasculated the Parliamentary Party so that most of them opted for the 'quiet life' option of Michael Foot when Jim Callaghan belatedly stood down.

Politics is about great issues. But it is also about personalities and how their weaknesses and strengths play on the great issues. Radice does not allow his admiration for his subjects to blind him to their flaws. Tony Crosland could be cavalier and peevish, Roy Jenkins pompous, and Denis Healey, in Roy Jenkins' memorable phrase, carried light ideological baggage on a heavy gun carriage. In the end all that this tells us is that politicians, like the rest of humanity, have human failings and weaknesses. Whether a politician gets to the top or not depends as much on time and chance as on personal qualities. Yet what led to Crosland, Jenkins and Healey all failing to reach Number 10 – although at various times all three had both their time and the chance – was Radi-

ce's third element in their interaction, which makes the exercise of a triple biography worth telling in this form: 'When personal ambitions collided, mutual co-operation was precluded.'

So it was that time and chance delivered No. 10 to Jim Callaghan. When Jim was elected leader of the Labour Party and appointed Prime Minister in March 1976, it was to me (not, as stated in the book, to Peter

Hennessy) that he said: 'There were a lot of them who are cleverer than me; but I am here and they are not.' There was no doubt which trio of old rivals he had particularly in mind.

Giles Radice's book goes a long way to explaining how he outsmarted them all.

*Lord (Tom) McNally is Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords.*

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## His books were read

Roy Jenkins: *A Life at the Centre*  
(Macmillan, 1991; 658pp)

Reviewed by **Conrad Russell**

**T**ell me. Where is fancy bred?  
Or in the heart. Or in  
the head?

Shakespeare's question has curiously been answered by modern science and the answer is in the head. One may ask the same question about political power. Is it bred in the heart of government, in 10 Downing Street – and perhaps in No. 11 – or is it bred in the ideas that are the petrol such people take from the pumps to put in their engines?

Roy Jenkins was perhaps the first major politician since Gladstone to pursue both sorts of political power at once. That is why, though great it is, the sequence of Home Secretary – Chancellor of the Exchequer – President of the European Commission grossly underestimates his importance. Plenty of twentieth century prime ministers – Home, Major, Callaghan even Wilson – did less to shape twentieth century politics than he did. If one calls a man a Callaghanite it has no meaning. If one calls him Jenkinsite this instantly tells us what we can say to him and what we cannot. Those who prepare the language politicians feed into their brains have more

power in the end than any office-holder, and Roy was one of these. Though he may have been the most successful post-war Chancellor of the Exchequer, that, by comparison, was a minor achievement.

It underestimates Roy Jenkins even to describe him as a great political thinker. When candidates are nominated for election to the British Academy they may be proposed on honorary grounds for their service to scholarship through public life. Roy, defender of literary merit, Chancellor of Oxford University, drafter of the academic freedom amendment of 1988, deserved such a nomination. Yet the biographer of Gladstone, Dilke and Asquith as a historian of standing in his own right also deserved a nomination. I know of no-one since John Morley who deserved consideration on both grounds at once.

What has not been remarked upon is the extent to which his academic and his political work concentrated on the same issue. The link is perhaps made most clear in the Dimpleby Lecture. He said that the British political system had not changed much

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