

CONRAD RUSSELL



Conrad Russell (Earl Russell) died on 14 October 2004. Well known to *Journal* readers as Honorary President of the Liberal Democrat History Group, and author of *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Liberalism*, he will be much missed. **Celia Thomas** writes this appreciation.

The letter written in 1987 from Conrad Russell to Lady Seear, then Liberal Leader in the Lords, could not have contained better news: a Professor of British History at University College, London, who had just inherited an earldom from his half-brother, was asking to join the Liberal benches. He said he was a member of the SDP in Brent, but only because there was no functioning Liberal branch. The relatively small number of active and lively Liberal peers constantly needed refreshing, but Margaret Thatcher was not generous in her allocation of new peerages for this part of the House – and so the prospect of a hereditary peer joining the Liberal ranks with a first-class brain and pedigree to match was more than welcome.

Conrad's maiden speech followed soon after he joined in 1988 and was as robust as it was fluent. It was obvious that he was completely at home in the Lords, with its curious procedures and its distinctive language, culture and history. He spoke in the Second Reading debate of the Education Reform Bill which, as well as introducing a national curriculum and allowing schools to opt out of LEA control, also reorganised higher education. He quoted a (Conservative) Minister in 'the other place' as saying that 'the cohort of the education establishment and its camp followers have been gnawing away at the bill and its provisions like rats in a cellar', and went on:

I am tempted to say that I address the House as one of the rats, save for the fact that I am visibly

aboard the sinking ship. Indeed, in 1984 I gave up a good job in the United States and came back aboard the sinking ship to help to man the pumps. That speech also reminds me of the seventeenth-century anti-clerical who said that there was no need to listen to the protests of the clergy because they were all our servants.

Already the pattern was set of how Conrad prepared his speeches. Metaphors came naturally to him, and he was always 'reminded of' an apt parallel in another century – usually the seventeenth – with which he was just as familiar as he was with the present. The speech went on to say that between 10 per cent and 20 per cent of his working time was spent 'trying to clear up the mess caused by government cuts'. Not for him the

anodyne maiden speech, full of flowery expressions of gratitude to all and sundry; there was business to get on with.

Conrad Sebastian Robert Russell was born in Sussex on 15 April 1937, the son of philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) and Marjorie Spence, Bertrand's third wife, who changed her name to Patricia but was known as 'Peter'. The earldom was created in 1861 for Conrad's great-grandfather, Lord John Russell, twice Prime Minister and an architect of the hard-won Great Reform Act of 1832. Conrad's early years were spent in America where his father was briefly a professor at the City College, New York, before having his appointment terminated on the grounds that he was considered 'morally unfit' to teach. The family returned to England, Conrad only just surviving pneumonia, for which he was treated by an antibiotic obtained in America which was not yet available in the UK.

His parents' relationship was a stormy one, and eventually hit the rocks when his mother, fed up with her husband's philandering, took off with Conrad, aged fifteen, to Cornwall. He hardly had contact with his father until the final phase of Bertrand's life when they were reconciled, although that cut him off completely from contact with his mother who became a recluse, and who only just pre-deceased her son. After Eton and Merton College, Oxford, he was appointed Lecturer in History at Bedford College for Women, part of London University, where he met his future wife, Elizabeth Sanders. In later life, alongside the recreations of swimming and cricket in *Who's Who*, he always listed 'uxoriousness', presumably to distance himself from his warring parents.

It was in this period that he began to publish political histories of the Tudor and Stuart periods: *The Crisis of Parliaments: English History 1509–1660* (1971); *Origins of the English Civil War* (1973); and *Parliaments and English*

Politics 1621–1629 (1979). In 1979 Conrad accepted a chair as Professor of History at Yale University, and stayed until 1984, when he returned to this country to be Astor Professor of History at University College, London. In 1990 he moved to become Professor of British History at King's College, and published three more books: *The Causes of the English Civil War* (1990); *Unrevolutionary England 1603–1642* (1990); and *The Fall of the British Monarchies 1637–1642* (1991). Conrad became known in the academic world as a leading revisionist on the English Civil War, refuting the conventional view that the clash was simply between the King and Parliament. He believed it was much more to do with the English attitude to Charles I's attempt to enforce observance of the Prayer Book in Scotland and the revolt there.

Within two years of his arrival in the House, Conrad had taken over the social security portfolio from Desmond Banks and was immediately plunged into the controversy about the withdrawal of benefit from students. He knew all about impecuniousness, and once said that his father only wrote *The History of Western Philosophy* because he was desperate for funds. The Education (Student Loans) Bill horrified him. Not only was he against the whole idea of student loans, but the bill itself was, in his eyes, a constitutional outrage as all the detail of the scheme was left to regulations and was not on the face of the bill at all. It was a 'skeleton' bill which all but bypassed Parliamentary scrutiny, as regulations usually went through both Houses 'on the nod' and were unamendable. Conrad's first action was to table a 'reasoned amendment' to the bill's Second Reading motion – a most unusual step, leading to a division. Although this vote was lost, it singled him out as a master of Parliamentary procedure, and one who knew instinctively where the boundaries lay between robust opposition and recklessness.

He was a pioneer of ways to draw attention to unimportant-looking regulations which were likely to have a devastating impact on the lives of vulnerable people, while understanding the convention that the Lords did not vote down orders over which they had powers unfettered by the Parliament Acts. Thus he moved motions calling on the government to withdraw certain regulations, for instance on the withdrawal of benefit from students, or on another occasion the transfer of maternity pay to industry, which could lead to fewer women being employed. In one session he moved no fewer than four of these 'non-fatal' motions: from benefits for asylum seekers pursuing appeals to child benefit.

His dogged persistence in drawing attention to the most Cinderella-like part of the Parliamentary process has led directly to the establishment of two most welcome new committees: the Delegated Powers Scrutiny Committee to examine the bills which delegate powers in the first place, and the Merits of Statutory Instruments Committee which can 'warn' peers of major issues coming up in statutory instruments. As Conrad himself would say, that reminds me of the time at a Lib Dem conference when there was a social event with dancing. He asked the young researcher in the Whips Office – a striking redhead – to dance, and afterwards I asked her what they had talked about. 'Statutory instruments', she said, with a hoot of laughter. Conrad never had any small talk.

Conrad's arrival in the House in 1988 coincided with the formation of the Liberal Democrats, and, over the next decade he was anxious to help the party to trace or remember its roots. The following two extracts from an essay on Liberal philosophy are particularly telling as they highlight what was surely Conrad's chief preoccupation in practically every cause he championed – that is, the nature of power, particularly the dangers of arbitrary power

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Conrad in the Lords; his father, Bertrand Russell (1872–1970); his parents, Bertrand and Marjorie, in 1961; his great-grandfather, Lord John Russell (1792–1878).

and his absolute abhorrence of the abuse of power.

It is in England that Liberal politics have their longest continuous institutional history. The Liberal Democrats are the heirs of the Liberal Party, just as the Liberal Party were the heirs of the Whigs. The Whigs traced their continuous history back to the attempt, in 1679, to exclude James II from the English succession, and John Locke was our first serious political thinker. We are the heirs of a continuous tradition which stretches from Locke through Mill to Keynes and Beveridge. Beveridge, trying to protect people from the giants of poverty and want, came from the same tradition as Locke trying to protect them against an arbitrary king. It is a tradition of protecting individuals from the effects of arbitrary power.

And:

For us, from John Locke saying that even God Almighty must keep his promises, down to our Deputy Leader, Alan Beith, saying in 1991 that ‘we are the only party committed to coming into office ready to reduce our power’, we have a continuous ideological tradition. As Locke’s remark suggests, our chosen instrument for control of power is law, combined with an ascending theory of power which bases government on the consent of the governed. Law does not protect classes: it protects individuals. From the championship of the seventeenth-century non-conformist criminalised for not attending Church of England services, to the championship of the twentieth-century unemployed threatened with loss of benefit for turning up to a job interview with ‘unsatisfactory appearance’, the basic reflex to defend the individual against a bullying power is the same.

He believed that power – wherever it occurred – always had to be dispersed and accountable.

Electoral reform was one of his causes, and he became President of the Electoral Reform Society in 1997. Although he was committed to voting reform for the Commons, he never involved himself in the interminable arguments about Lords reform, believing that the former was the answer to the latter.

Conrad juggled his teaching and research commitments with his Parliamentary work often by bringing his students down to the Lords where they might have tutorials in the interview rooms, or where they might be taken to the gallery while he spoke or voted. The experience his students had of taking jobs to make ends meet, or running into trouble of any kind, was all grist to Conrad’s mill, and made him a formidable opponent for a government minister. He was not just interested in student poverty, but in how all those who fell foul of the benefit system managed to live at all. One student who had cause to be grateful to him was Austen Donnellan, the King’s student who was charged with ‘date rape’ in 1993. The college tried to deal with the matter internally, but Conrad was instrumental in making sure the case came to court where he spoke up for his student, who in the end was acquitted.

In 1995, the government introduced the Child Support Bill, establishing the ill-fated Child Support Agency – a flagship bill which Conrad abhorred. He predicted its problems from the outset, and was vehemently opposed to the formulaic way it operated, without taking individual cases properly into account. It is significant that the CSA’s problems are as bad today as they were when it was set up. He was also highly critical of the Jobseekers Bill of 1995, with its punitive disqualification to benefit – warning the government that not since 1649 had anyone died of starvation in England, and that the notion of a welfare safety net went back to the Poor Law of 1601, not to Beveridge, as many thought.

By the mid-nineties most of the chattering classes were looking forward eagerly to a change of government. But Conrad was never sanguine that a New Labour government would be any better than the Tories. In the famous debates about 'equidistance', for example, in 1995, he wrote: 'It is not clear to me that "New Labour" are any better than "Old Labour" ... They are still the party of the big stick and the strong executive. The thought of a Prime Minister who admires Margaret Thatcher makes my blood run cold.' He called their spending plans 'cowardly' and foresaw the time when a Labour government was unpopular and the Tories were failing to provide an effective opposition. One of the major differences he saw between New Labour and the Liberal Democrats was in the word 'liberty': 'What for us is at the very centre of our message is for them a peripheral ideal, which they are in favour of if they remember to mention it.'

Although Conrad, like all Liberal Democrats, warmly welcomed much of the first Labour administration's constitutional reform programme, he was very exercised over the bill in 1999 bringing in closed lists for PR elections to the European Parliament, obeying the whip only at the last possible stage, when an amendment in favour of open lists failed. In the end, the bill was only passed because the Parliament Act was used to bypass the Lords, such was the opposition to any system of PR by the Conservatives. But the bills of which Conrad was perhaps most critical – and there were quite a number over his years in the House – were those concerning immigrants and asylum-seekers under both Tory and Labour governments. He fought tirelessly for their rights, particularly for their right to have their cases considered properly and for their benefits, saying in 1996, that 'we are practically all descended from immigrants. In my case, that is from 1393; we were Bordeaux wine merchants. Even the most

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ancient of the aristocracy normally came over with the Conqueror, if not later.'

No piece about Conrad would be complete without recalling his penchant for anecdotes starting 'Did I ever tell you about the time ...?' or throw-away witticisms which often left his colleagues perplexed. If one had time, it was well worth asking him to elucidate, which he never minded, but mostly he was led to believe we were all as clever as he was in knowing what he meant, as we laughed heartily – with him laughing loudest of all. Limericks were another favourite way of making a point, and his formidable memory meant that he always had an appropriate one in his head.

He was a great telephoner – particularly at weekends – ostensibly for 'advice' which was often an excuse for a gossip. He asked for advice most often on which engagement to fulfil when duties clashed – advice he only took if it accorded with his own perfectly well-made-up mind. Sometimes he asked whether something could be 'put round the grapevine', but sadly had to concede that that sort of grapevine may have existed in a former century but not in the present. He never criticised anyone personally, and curiously for a non-religious person, quoted the Bible more than any peer in the House, including the Bishops. He was careful

about his appearance, and knew that looking like a wild-haired absent-minded professor sometimes suited his cause. 'Should I get my hair cut?' was a question he asked more than once, but he never asked whether his shoes needed cleaning, knowing that dirty shoes would always count against him in the House.

He was a tireless letter-writer to newspapers, and would often succeed in sending a short and suitably tailored one to the *Daily Telegraph*, knowing that there was not much competition there from those of a left-of-centre persuasion, but the *Independent* was the newspaper he wrote to most often. He never quite broke into the world of television or radio, the broadcasters perhaps sensing that his views could be expressed somewhat elliptically for a mass audience.

In the end, his lifelong addiction to cigarettes caught up with him. His beloved wife had died in 2002 of lung cancer, and almost immediately his own health began to deteriorate. In the end, his admissions to hospital with chest infections and his need for constant oxygen wore him out, and he died peacefully in the early hours of 14 October 2004.

Celia Thomas is the Head of the Liberal Democrat Whips' Office in the House of Lords; she has worked there since 1977, and before that in the House of Commons.

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