

Adrian Slade talks to the Liberal Democrat leader in the Lords, Tom McNally.

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In 1980 he was a comparatively late convert from Labour to the newly trumpeted SDP. He even stayed in the Labour Party long enough to vote for Denis Healey as Deputy Leader. Of the two SDP leaders he felt more at home with David Owen than with Roy Jenkins, although he was no acolyte to any member of the original 'Gang of Four'. When Liberal/SDP merger came under discussion, unlike his then party leader, he supported the concept, but for many Liberals at the time he was never their favourite Social Democrat, and in the nearly seventeen years of the Liberal Democrats' existence he has often chosen to cast himself, almost deliberately, as the obverse

of the radical Liberal coin, occasionally clashing vigorously with the more grassroots members of the party.

And yet the sheer political effectiveness of Tom McNally over a period of more than thirty years has now seen him move into the role previously occupied by Roy Jenkins, Bill Rodgers and Shirley Williams – that of leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords – with the almost full support of his peers and certainly without having to stand for election. It is a remarkable achievement for a man who, for all his outward affability and sense of fun, has not had a smooth political or personal life and is very much his own person.

**Tom McNally
outside the House
of Lords.**

What Liberal Democrats sometimes forget is that, apart from the party's three famous ex-Secretaries of State – Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams and Bill Rodgers – Tom McNally has been closer to the real levers of power at Westminster than any other active member of the party. It was he who, in 1969 at the age of just twenty-six, became International Secretary of the Labour Party, a job in which he continued for five years. It was he whom Jim Callaghan picked out in the early 1970s to work in his office as his speech-writer and one of his international advisers, and he followed Callaghan back into government in 1974 when Callaghan became Foreign Secretary and de facto deputy to

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Harold Wilson after Roy Jenkins' departure to the European Commission in Brussels. McNally travelled everywhere with Callaghan, including Vietnam, the Middle East and the Soviet Union, meeting political names of now distant legend, such as Andrei Gromyko of the Soviet Union.

In 1975 for the first time he also met Paddy Ashdown, when Ashdown was notionally working as the 'librarian' at the Geneva peace talks. 'A dodgy cover for a trained killer, if ever there was one!' comments McNally, but the friendship that began to form then later led to him becoming close adviser, speech-writer and a necessary purveyor of jokes to Paddy Ashdown for the eleven years of his leadership.

In 1976, when Callaghan moved into 10 Downing Street, so did Tom McNally – to run his Political Office – and he remained there until Labour's defeat in 1979, witnessing the full impact of the IMF crisis and the subsequent Lib-Lab Pact that kept Callaghan's government in power. It was a time that helped to formulate many of his views about the future of British politics.

'Jim Callaghan and I got to know each other very well,' he says. 'He was always extremely kind to subordinates but he could be very difficult and very tough with people who were as big or bigger than him. I remember the meeting with Gromyko in Moscow. It was supposed to last an hour and went on for four. Gromyko was playing very hard ball but Jim matched him minute for minute and it was quite something to watch these grizzled old pros battling it out with each other.'

'I was an enthusiastic supporter of the Lib-Lab Pact. I liked David Steel from the moment that I first met him, and so did Jim,' he says. 'The saddest thing is that, in all those discussions, nobody ever thought that the best outcome of the pact could have been to put it to the country as a working coalition. It would have

been a tragedy for democracy and for government if Labour had fallen solely on the bankers' ramp of the IMF crisis. In my view, that period of the pact was a period of very good government. I accept that there was more in it for Labour than there was for the Liberals, but that was partly because, unlike the Liberal Democrats today, the Liberals did not have the policy-making machinery to push their ideas. Jim wanted to give them more. I think both sides can feel genuinely proud of what they did in steadying the ship at a time when people were talking about Britain becoming "ungovernable".'

Life in Downing Street obviously suited the political animal that Tom McNally accepts he has always been. 'My father was a process worker for ICI, an active trade unionist and a Labour Party supporter. He never ran for office but he loved talking politics and, as I was the youngest of my family by fourteen years, he had more time to do that with me. The first election I was involved with was North Fylde in 1959, when I was sixteen. Labour was the only political home for me in those days, although one of my closest friends at grammar school was Chris Walmsley. We used to exchange provocative Labour-Liberal correspondence with each other in the *Blackpool Evening Gazette*.'

After three years at University College London, where he read Economics & Social History and was heavily involved in student politics and debating at every level, including the National Union of Students, Tom McNally applied for jobs with the TUC, the Labour Party and the Fabian Society. In 1966 it was Bill Rodgers who offered him his first political position, as Assistant General Secretary of the Fabian Society.

Surprisingly he did not stand for election to parliament until 1979, when he won Stockport for Labour. 'That was not a happy time,' he says. 'There had always been a vicious faction locally that

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did not want to adopt me, and at the other end of the line the party was supporting policies that I could never have supported. I cannot tell you what being in the Labour Party was like at the time. I felt I had no firm ground to stand on. But I was not a natural Social Democrat. It took me six months after the Limehouse Declaration to make a move to talk to Bill Rodgers. I remember him saying that he didn't know what would happen to the SDP, but either it would succeed and replace the Labour Party or the Labour Party itself would reform.'

You get the feeling that McNally's move was more one of despair than of positive conviction. 'I wasn't a particularly active member of the SDP. I was uneasy with some aspects of it, for instance its top-down nature. Nor, although I admired him, was I a particular fan of Roy Jenkins. I was more a supporter of Owen. I even opposed a move for merger after the 1983 election. I believe that Owen's performance between 1983 and 1986 was one of the most brilliant individual political performances I have ever seen.'

McNally himself was not closely involved with the internal workings of the Alliance between 1983 and 1987. 'I was going through a lot of difficulties in my personal life at the time. I had left Labour, both my parents had died, I had lost my seat, my marriage was breaking up and I was drinking too much. I needed to sort myself out. My first real re-entry into mainstream politics was in 1987 when Alec McGivan asked me to be Rosie Barnes's minder in the Greenwich by-election [won by her for the SDP-Liberal Alliance]. That was also the time I first met my now wife Juliet. She worked in David Steel's office.'

Unlike Owen, the result of the 1987 election convinced him that merger was the best way to combine in one political force both the Liberal campaigning organisation on the ground that the SDP had never had and the SDP's more formal and less 'anarchic' approach to policy-making,

which he believed had been the Liberal Party's failing. 'The SDP undoubtedly had been the catalyst for change in the Labour Party, but that change had already begun under Kinnock and Brian Gould in 1987, and the Alliance had fallen back by ten points. We had to think afresh. The departure of Owen was sad in that we lost some good people but many of them have come back.'

He believes that the greatest difficulties in the early days of the merger had their roots in old SDP paranoia about controlling the party from the top and the Liberal Party's natural, 'anarchic', again, inclination to want to do the opposite. 'But as new people have joined who were neither one nor the other before, that problem has diminished significantly,' he says – although some might say that on bodies like the Federal Executive it is he who sometimes keeps the flame burning, if more slowly than in the past.

Tom McNally does not claim to be a Liberal but he believes that philosophically he is much more liberal than perhaps he is given credit for: 'For example, I am not enamoured of market economics. In fact, in those terms I am possibly what Tony Greaves would call a social liberal. Tony Blair has got the political roots of a box of watercress whereas mine go back to my background. I feel no empathy at all with what this government is now trying to do with civil liberties and human rights. I feel extremely comfortable with the way the party is holding its nerve on these issues, sticking out against an authoritarian state and being equally consistent in its commitment to Europe and internationalism. I can honestly say that I feel more comfortable in the stance of the party today than I have felt at any time in thirty years of politics.'

This forthright endorsement of today's independent party prompted me to remind him that perhaps he had felt rather differently in 1997 when he had been one of the stronger supporters of Paddy Ashdown's 'project' for

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closer and more permanent links with the Labour Party. His first response was to remind me that, when Charles Kennedy became leader, it was Tom McNally who was one of the first to call for an end to the Joint Cabinet Committee and for a distancing from Labour, but he admitted his earlier support, suggesting it was on practical grounds. 'I don't think any of us thought there was going to be a Labour landslide and a hung parliament was quite a possibility. I felt that we should be prepared for that.'

So his support was only in the case of a hung parliament and not in any eventuality, as some Liberal Democrats apparently favoured? 'I don't think that was ever really on but I never say never. When Roy and Blair were talking about healing the hundred-year rift on the centre left, I thought an

alternative to another century of predominantly Conservative rule was very attractive and I fully supported Paddy in exploring what was on offer. I think he had a right to do that. Whether or not Paddy would ever have got support for what he wanted to do is another matter, but we mustn't run away from the reality of these things. And, if you look at what did actually happen, the Cook-Maclennan committee on constitutional reform certainly had a considerable influence on Labour's subsequent devolution legislation. I am in politics to get results and with that report we showed what was possible.'

To make sure I understand that his own thinking has now changed, McNally adds: 'Where Charles is right, of course, is that, if there were to be a hung parliament after the next election, we

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could not sustain Blair in office because the people would have spoken decisively.'

McNally speaks highly of Charles Kennedy as a leader and communicator but you sense that his greatest loyalty may have been to Paddy Ashdown. Out of very difficult beginnings after the merger he believes that Ashdown 'did lots of good things' for the party, perhaps including exploring 'the project'.

Since the mid-1980s Tom McNally has spent a number of years working in the lobbying end of some of London's larger PR firms, and in the past his connections have occasionally led him into controversy. However he is less involved now and is free to concentrate fully on his new job as leader in the House of Lords, a House he first entered as a peer in 1995.

Commenting on the Lords, he says: 'We are and should be a revisory chamber. I see absolutely no role for a veto on legislation but we should retain strong powers to delay and force reconsideration if necessary. I am not against frustrating government in that sense. The screams of Labour ministers when we do frustrate them are proof that we are doing our job. The problem of these massive majorities delivered in the Commons is that, unless there is some check and balance, we will have what Hailsham described as an elective dictatorship. The powers we now have were given to us four or five years ago and, until they change them, we should use them to improve legislation and limit the powers of the executive.'

'As far as Liberal Democrats are concerned, we should be making sure that, whatever may be thrown at us about, for example, being "soft on crime", we maintain our commitment to human rights and civil liberties. We may be misrepresented occasionally but for a steady, solid, firm voice it is worth the risk.'

In the run-up to the general election he wants to see the Liberal Democrat peers working

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closely with colleagues in the Commons to put clear markers in the key policy-making areas but also making themselves available to help campaigning in the country. Within the House he will want, among other issues, to continue to harass the government about its links with the media. To illustrate his point he says: 'Norman Lamb has a question down asking the Prime Minister who has been entertained in Downing Street recently and, do you know, they won't tell him.'

He wants to see further reform of the Lords included in the manifestos of all the parties and believes that, as a starting point for the longer term, almost any element of election to the Lords would be better than the current appointed House, and he pleads for party flexibility in making sure that some reform takes place.

In conclusion we talked about party prospects, which he believes are better than at any time since the first Alliance election of 1983

and the Liberal Party's success of February 1974. 'Don't forget that in votes we fell back in 1987, 1992 and 1997, and that it was only the clever targeting of Chris Rennard and others that gave us our extra seats. I think the opportunity is now there to win the campaign. Charles at his best is one the best campaigners and communicators in British politics, particularly on television, and I think you only have to look at the parliamentary party as a whole to see that we don't need to prepare for government: we are ready for it. For example, people like Vince Cable are more than a match for Gordon Brown, and of course in Menzies Campbell we have the Foreign Secretary that Blair has always wished he had.'

That's a pretty reassuring endorsement from the party's longest-running pro.

A shorter version of this interview appeared in Liberal Democrat News in November 2004.

REVIEWS

Why bother with the Liberals again?

David Dutton: *A History of the Liberal Party in the Twentieth Century* (Palgrave, 2004)

Reviewed by **Matt Cole**

Jorgen S. Rasmussen's seminal study of the Liberal Party published in the 1960s opened with a passage headed 'Why bother with the Liberals?', in which the author sought to justify his dilation upon such an apparently insignificant and neglected topic. Curiously, David Dutton's much-awaited history of the party opens in a similar way, but for very different reasons. Now the question is one of

what benefit there is to be gained from revisiting debates that have been so thoroughly researched and rehearsed in the years since Rasmussen's work; for example, since 1965 over a dozen substantial monographs and readers on the Liberal Party have been published – the result of an attraction to the subject which Dutton says 'might fairly be deemed excessive'. The question this time might perhaps be 'Why bother