

Reports

The legacy of Roy Jenkins

Evening meeting, 27 June 2016, with John Campbell and David Steel. Chair: Dick Newby.

Report by **Douglas Oliver**

ON MONDAY 27 JUNE, the Liberal Democrat History Group met in Committee Room 4A of the House of Lords to discuss the legacy of Roy Jenkins. The timing was apt but deeply bittersweet, following as it did in the wake of Britain's decision to leave the European Union in its referendum, on the longest day of the year, the Thursday before. The discussion, thirteen years after the death of one of the most important facilitators of Britain's European engagement, reflected on how capricious events can turn history's perception of people upside down, even a long time after they leave the scene.

The timing was, however, accidental. The discussion of Jenkins' legacy was originally scheduled to coincide with the half-century anniversary of his first tenure as Home Secretary. This lasted only two years, between 1965 and 1967, but has an enduring salience to this day,

ushering in a self-proclaimed 'permissive society'. Jenkins is often seen as one of the most important British politicians never to have become prime minister, and this was reflected, also, in the third central issue of enduring relevance: Jenkins' efforts to realign the centre-left and centre of British politics.

The event was chaired by Dick Newby, who worked with the SDP in the early days after its establishment, and knew Jenkins well, before being elevated to the House of Lords in September 1997. Since the meeting was held, Newby succeeded Lord Wallace of Tankerness as the sixth Liberal Democrat leader in the House of Lords – the first was Jenkins.

The discussion was led by John Campbell, whose 2014 biography of Jenkins, *A Well-Rounded Life*, was met with acclaim, and did much to strengthen the impression of the former Labour Chancellor and Home Secretary – turned

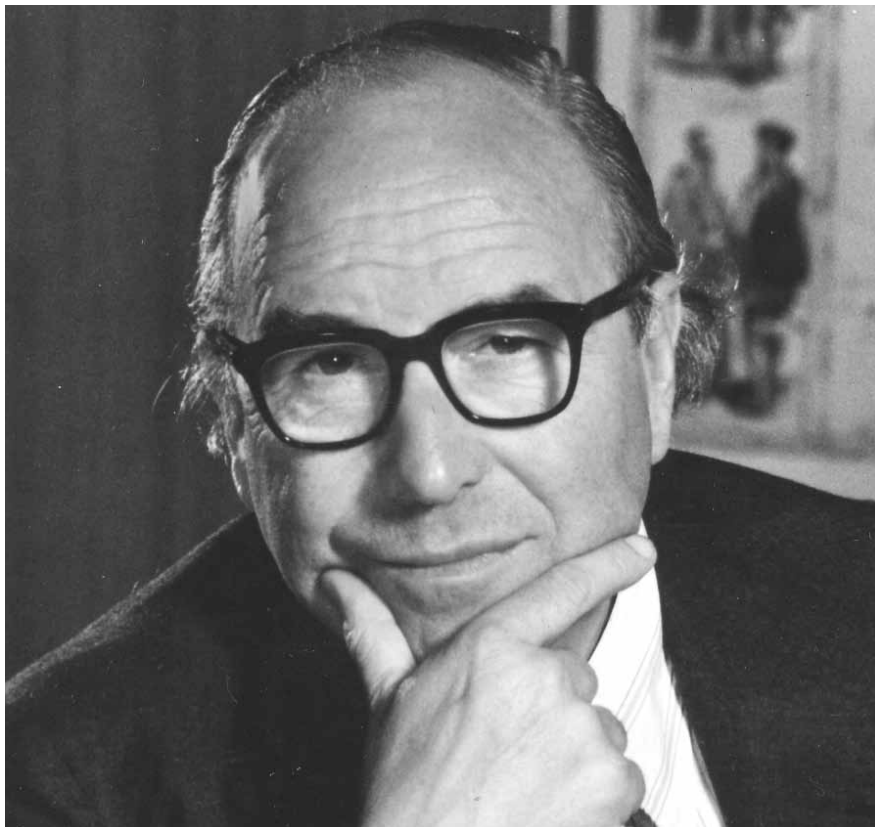
founder of the SDP and Liberal Democrats – as a giant of post-war politics. Campbell looked at the enduring resilience of Jenkins' three main themes. Campbell shared the platform with former Liberal leader, David Steel.

Campbell began with an exploration of Jenkins' legacy as Home Secretary in the 1960s, as well as his less celebrated but fruitful time in the role between 1974 and '76. Jenkins was, Campbell felt, 'the right man, in the right job at the right time'. Jenkins had always been a moderate and liberal-minded member of the Labour Party, and as early as 1959 had set out how he felt a future Labour government should seek to change Britain's social fabric for the better.

It is easy with hindsight to forget how difficult and radical some of Jenkins' changes were within the Labour Party, whose less liberal and less 'metropolitan' factions were more averse – or at best lukewarm – to ideas like liberalising homosexuality and abortion. Campbell praised the contribution of Harold Wilson – often underappreciated – who had given the crucial role to Jenkins.

Campbell did point out that Jenkins is sometimes accused of more than he actually did, not least by the reactionary section of the right-wing press. Jenkins did not, as is widely believed, end the death penalty or liberalise divorce: the former had already been abolished in a private member's bill by Sydney Silverman earlier in 1965, and the latter was not reformed until 1969.

However, he rightly defined his age, and probably did more to make 'the 1960s' happen than any other politician. He played a crucial role fostering Steel's private member's bill to liberalise abortion; Steel was only aged 29 at the time, and had placed third in the 1967 lottery for private members' bills. Jenkins' tutelage and guidance was also very useful for Leo Abse, Labour MP for Pontypool, who also introduced a private member's bill to legalise homosexuality.



Jenkins also abolished theatre censorship, introduced a Race Relations Act and ended flogging in prisons. Campbell noted that his latter period as Home Secretary in the 1970s was almost as productive as he helped along a new Race Relations Act as well as fulfilling an instrumental role in completing parliamentary approval for the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act.

Despite this, Campbell pointed out that Jenkins had a strong pragmatic streak, and did not see liberalism in gospel terms. Jenkins was tough on law and order, and controversially changed the requirement for unanimity in jury trials. Furthermore, he streamlined the organisation of the police, cutting local force numbers around the UK from 117 to 43. He introduced an independent police complaints commission, and though he was concerned by the prison population – then only about 40,000 in number – did nothing significant to arrest its growth.

Campbell then went on to look at Jenkins' catalytic role in ensuring that Britain joined the EEC in 1973, and its continued engagement with it thereafter. Jenkins' explicit support dated back to 1958, and he had backed Harold MacMillan's attempt to join in 1960. He had been deeply dismayed by the Euroscepticism of his leader and mentor Hugh Gaitskell. However, it was a decade later that Britain first joined the community during a Conservative government.

Jenkins supported Edward Heath's decision to join the Common Market enthusiastically, and was willing to pay

a hefty political cost by leading sixty-nine Labour rebels in support of the Tory prime minister's move: by doing so, Campbell felt, Jenkins effectively sacrificed his chance to lead his party and eventually move in to 10 Downing Street.

Two years later, after Labour had returned to government under Harold Wilson, Jenkins had opposed calls for an EU referendum, which he had felt was reckless. Nonetheless, he took on the role of leading the 1975 'Remain Campaign'. In contrast to the campaign of 2016, it was a genuinely ecumenical campaign and included Liberals like Jo Grimond and Jeremy Thorpe, along with Conservatives like Willie Whitelaw, Margaret Thatcher and Douglas Hurd. The campaign did not, as has been said in the intervening decades, deny that membership would involve some pooling of sovereignty. However, it did sell the positive benefits of cooperation with our nearest geographic, economic and strategic neighbours. Jenkins also showed himself as a strong leader, selling the case for Europe with clarity and conviction, unlike David Cameron.

Campbell accepted, however, that he did not always succeed in selling the EEC to the rest of Europe in the years thereafter. In 1976, Jenkins was appointed Britain's only European Commissioner. He was a key advocate of a single European currency, and played an important role in selling it to German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. Campbell suggested that he did at times speak too enthusiastically

about the EEC and EU, and often used terms like 'momentum' and 'energy' when in reality there was little strategic need for haste. Jenkins, felt Campbell, should be held responsible for some of the later problems in the Eurozone and even his strongest supporters in terms of EU cooperation would be troubled by his lack of foresight at the pooling together of eclectic economies in a common currency block.

Along with the EEC, the third pillar of Jenkins legacy also appears vulnerable, that of the attempt to 'break the mould of British politics' with the establishment of the SDP in 1981. Jenkins had always been on the right of his party, and following the failure of initiatives like *In Place of Strife* he had become frustrated by the left-wing drift of the Labour Party throughout the 1970s. His 1979 Dibleby Lecture, 'Home thoughts from abroad', spoke of a new 'radical centre' and this set the scene for the SDP's launch.

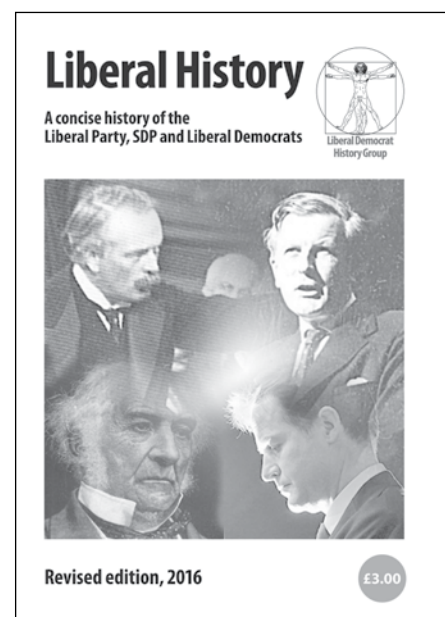
Whilst the SDP is not looked on as a great success in 2016, according to Campbell it played an important role in setting the scene for the 1990s, and the New Labour political philosophy. According to Campbell, whilst Jenkins believed in political ecumenicalism, he would have only reluctantly accepted the 2010 coalition government with the Conservatives. Nonetheless, he would have recognised it as being in the national interest and ultimately supported it. In many ways, Jenkins was a man ahead of his time who could see

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a coming fracture in the Labour Party – one which looks like being brought about again by Jeremy Corbyn.

In summary, Campbell described Jenkins as foremost an Asquithian Liberal who happened to have been born in a family in the heart of the Labour Party. When Jenkins set up the SDP it had become clear that the Labour Party was beginning to outlive its usefulness as a political concept. Since its emergence as a governing force in the 1920s, it had always been an uneasy mix of intellectual socialists and trade unionists, by 2016, its *raison d’être* really has passed. Indeed, according to Campbell, the Labour Party’s greatest achievements – the welfare state and mixed economy of Beveridge and Keynes – were philosophically and practically conceived by two members of the Liberal Party.

Campbell concluded that Jenkins was unsure he wanted multi-party politics; he really wanted a return to two-party

politics, but with a less harsh flavour, in keeping with the Victorian Liberal and Conservative party division. Lord Newby questioned whether such a distinction could be democratically sustained given the fragmentation of the electorate’s wishes on both the left and right wings of British politics. Former Labour voters are now looking to UKIP and the Greens in England as well as the SNP in Scotland.

Steel thanked Campbell for his analysis and recommended his book. He noted that he could not embellish the discussion significantly further. However, he commented that he knew Jenkins well and was happy to add colour to a discussion of a man he knew well.

Steel described his experience working with Jenkins over abortion reform in the 1960s, and praised Jenkins’ vision, competence and moral encouragement. Steel noted the passion with which Jenkins embraced liberal reforms and

commented on the party that Jenkins held to celebrate the passage of the private member’s bill.

Commenting on the formation of the SDP, Steel said that whilst he would have been glad had Jenkins defected from Labour to the Liberal Party, he recognised the impact of a new faction in politics was likely to be more seismic and profound. He was therefore glad to when Jenkins emerged as part of the ‘Gang of Four’ although his Liberal Party colleague John Pardoe was more frustrated.

Steel noted that in contrast to his occasional public image, Jenkins was a charismatic and witty man in private and proved himself a strong political street fighter when he stood as the SDP candidate with Liberal backing in the Warrington by-election. Although Jenkins lost, he reduced Labour’s majority to just 1,700 votes, a result which he described as ‘his first political loss and greatest victory’. Jenkins political leadership was later shown a short period later when he was elected as a member of parliament in Hillhead in Glasgow.

Whilst the SDP appeared to be on the brink of bringing about a radical change in politics in 1982, Margaret Thatcher’s political incumbency was much bolstered by her victory in that year’s war against Argentina in the Falklands and, according to Steel, everything changed from this point onwards. Despite missteps in the 1983 general election, Steel records that the campaign would have been difficult to improve upon. David Marquand suggested, he recalled, terming Jenkins ‘Prime Minister Designate’ and although this backfired to some extent, it was a logical description of a man who could readily have served as the nation’s political leader if required.

In the questions and answer session that followed, there was much discussion about Jenkin’s legacy, particularly in the context of Britain’s vote to leave the EU. Although the strongest political platform is Jenkins’ legislation for the permissive society, Steel commented that many of the sentiments of the Brexit campaign had echoes of the 1960s, and the dark reactionary impulses that Jenkins rightly reviled.

Birmingham member Alistair Dow reminisced about Jenkins’ skills and charisma as a platform speaker and that he would never run away from his famous speech impediment. Once he spoke in Inverary, and was perfectly happy to explicated it in his own idiosyncratic

style. Duncan Brack, editor of this journal, recalled the affection with which ‘Woy’ was treated, and Campbell highlighted his lack of pretence, which indicated an inner well of esteem and intellectual self-confidence. It was also pointed out by a member of the audience that he was well liked in a personal capacity by his political foes including Tony Benn – who attended his funeral after he died.

A member from Bedford questioned Campbell’s notion that Jenkins would really act as a proponent of two-party politics today, and was of the opinion that Jenkins’ efforts to realign the left would have to adapt to a new paradigm in 2016. The lesson of this year, he felt, was that Britain’s politics is splintered in to 10–12 ideologies, which cannot easily be divided by two parties. Furthermore, the real obstacle to Jenkins-ite politics is not conservatism, but nationalism and nastiness.

The panel also reflected on Jenkins’ predilection for the finer things in life including claret, intellectual stimulation, good food and the ‘fairer sex’. In a 1995 documentary, Jenkins had remarked on his admiration for ‘pleasure’ with a mischievous glint in his eye. After his death, details emerged of various affairs that Jenkins had had with women such as Caroline Gilmour, wife of his close friend Tory MP, Ian Gilmour. It was widely acknowledged amongst the room that Jenkins had made the most of his four score years and two, before his death.

Tony Little, chair of the History Group, questioned whether it was inevitable Jenkins would fall out with David Owen. The answer from Campbell was yes. Owen had been over-promoted too soon as Labour Home Secretary, and had always been more hostile than Roy to the Liberal Party. This meant that Owen and Jenkins were always likely to clash in

the 1980s when the younger man sensed his ambitions were under-sated.

After the discussion ended, the audience melted off into an overcast mid-summer evening. It was one with which Jenkins would have been familiar: a sonorous crowd of hundreds were packed out in Westminster Square in support of Jeremy Corbyn’s campaign to be re-elected leader of the Labour Party. Meanwhile, in the City of London, analysts were looking on in despair as the pound collapsed in value, soon to become the worst performing global currency of the year. As Jenkins quoted from Yeats in 1979, when ‘the best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity, the centre cannot hold’. In 2016, Britain misses Jenkins’ leadership, intellect and liberal vision more than ever.

Douglas Oliver is Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

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