

was down to a single MP who was challenged by both Labour and Conservative opponents. That MP was Jo Grimond, a hero of Steel's, who, in his view, restored the fortunes of the party. Even as recently as the general election of 1970, the party was on its heels. Of the six MPs returned, three (including Steel himself) had majorities in only three figures. The Liberal Party was again nearly wiped out. Since then there had been a new revival, and Lord Steel paid tribute to two guests at the event who had come to the Liberal Democrats through the Alliance with the SDP: Bob Maclennan and Charles Kennedy. The Alliance and the merged party had echoes of the coalition which came together in 1859 – an attempt to break the mould of established political structures. Under Charles Kennedy's leadership the Liberal Democrats had elected the largest number of MPs since 1929, an amazing story and a tremendous achievement.

In thanking David Steel, William Wallace mentioned the move, the following day, of the Law Lords to their new home as a Supreme Court in Parliament Square. This was another of Gladstone's ideas which had had to wait until the present day to be implemented. In 1873, a bill to remove the Law Lords from Parliament passed both Houses but was undone by Disraeli the following year.

In contrast to the historical themes of the other speakers, Ros Scott, the President of the Liberal Democrats, had a brief to talk about the future. But if you forget where you come from, how do you know where you are going? It was impossible not to dwell on history in the magnificent surroundings of the National Liberal Club and in the company of many people who had made their own contribution to the formation of the Liberal Democrats. But there had never been a time when

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liberals and liberalism had been needed more than the present day. Liberalism was under threat from three specific movements. The first was those who believe that the answer to the current economic crisis is to close our borders, to exclude people who are in fear of oppression and poverty in their home countries, and who think we can also close our borders to trade. The second danger was from those who think that protecting the environment is something we can only afford when times are good. The third danger was the growing disenchantment with the political process.

As politicians, as liberals, we should now be going back to our radical roots, getting back in touch with the people and their concerns – without

pandering to illiberal viewpoints. This required the defence and strengthening of domestic and international institutions in a context which recognised economic, environmental and social concerns. A sense of community needed to be built from the smallest village to the international stage. This was a liberal message with echoes of liberal values and policies from our history, going back to 1859.

To close, a formal vote of thanks on behalf of the Liberal Democrat History Group was proposed to the chairman and speakers for their contributions and to the National Liberal Club for hosting the event.

*Graham Lippiatt is Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group.*

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## Thorpe bust unveiled

Report of the unveiling of a portrait bust of the Rt Hon. Jeremy Thorpe at the House of Commons, 15 July 2009.

Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

**T**HE ADVISORY Committee on Works of Art is appointed by the Speaker to make recommendations on matters relating to works of art in the House of Commons. Part of its remit is to ensure that leading and notable parliamentarians are represented in either portraits or sculptures in the Permanent Collection at the Commons.

Accordingly, on 15 July, at a reception in the House of Commons, a bust of Jeremy Thorpe, Liberal leader 1967–76, was unveiled.

Jeremy and Marion Thorpe were both present, unfortunately both now in wheelchairs but both as eager and willing to mix with the crowd and talk politics as ever. The bust

unveiled was a copy of one in Jeremy's London home. The Advisory Committee on Works of Art apparently first saw the bust last year and tried hard to find out who sculpted it in advance of commissioning the present copy. Thanks to the efforts of Nick Harvey, Liberal Democrat MP for Jeremy Thorpe's old seat of North Devon, the identity of the original sculptor was discovered to be Avril Vellacott, who was present at the reception. Ms Vellacott was wearing a delightful straw hat and I was told by her friend that she had done this in salute to Jeremy Thorpe, as in his heyday he was always seen in a bowler or trilby hat. The cast of the original bust was made

for the committee by Pangolin Editions.

Nick Clegg, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, then made a speech about Jeremy Thorpe's political life. He illustrated some of Thorpe's main attributes through a series of anecdotes. He mentioned recently discussing Thorpe with Sir Cyril Smith in Rochdale and Smith's suggesting that no one invited to pick the most stimulating guest for a dinner party could fail to choose Jeremy Thorpe. It was one of Thorpe's greatest gifts to be clubbable and witty, at ease with the company of politicians, media and the public. This led Nick to recall meeting a Devon couple who were complaining of the sameness and ordinariness of today's politicians, all young, professionals, lacking depth, flair and imagination – quite unlike the days of Jeremy Thorpe when he regularly used to be observed disembarking from his hovercraft and charging up various beaches in trademark hat, rolled umbrella to the fore, to discourse on the inadequacies of Tory and Labour policies in colourful yet down-to-earth language.

Nick then referred to Thorpe's bravery and commitment over the question of Europe, a Liberal policy priority when the other parties were hedging and divided, and revealed that he had chosen a speech by Thorpe on the issue of British participation in the European Community as his contribution when asked to select a greatest speech for a recent selection. Nick concluded by reminding the audience that Jeremy Thorpe's contribution to Liberal history ought to be judged by the difference in the vote achieved by the Liberal Party at the general election of 1970, when just over two million votes were polled, and the general election of February 1974, when the tally went up to more than six million. That leap in support was



a testament to Jeremy Thorpe's political talent and his leadership of the Liberal Party.

Speaker Bercow then made a presentation praising Jeremy Thorpe's achievements. He reminded listeners that it was now forty-two years since Jeremy Thorpe was made a Privy Counsellor and that he had represented his North Devon constituency for twenty years. Jeremy Thorpe had a wit and eloquence that could charm even opponents; when he spoke in the House of Commons the chamber filled up. Speaker Bercow praised Thorpe for being a progressive in an age that was less progressive than it is today, and for being a whirlwind political campaigner – when Jeremy was on the stump, there was always excitement in the air. Moreover, Thorpe was a politician with a considerable intellectual hinterland. He was knowledgeable about many subjects, including music, and was something of an expert in Chinese ceramics. Thorpe was 'writ large' and could comfortably stand in the company of politicians who had achieved high

The unveiling of the bust, 15 July 2009 – Jeremy Thorpe (left), Speaker Bercow (second from right), Nick Clegg MP (right) (Photo courtesy of *Liberal Democrat News*)

office such as Harold Wilson and Margaret Thatcher. He was, said Mr Speaker, remembered with affection and respect. The portrait bust of Jeremy Thorpe which had been commissioned would be displayed in the Grimond Room.

Jeremy Thorpe then made a gracious and moving speech of appreciation for the honour of the unveiling. He made clear his enormous debt of gratitude to Marion for all her love, help and support over the years and to members of his family as well as to friends and colleagues in the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats. Thorpe's Parkinson's disease makes it hard for him to contribute with the spontaneity and humour that have been so central to his political appeal, but the dignity of his vote of thanks and his bearing in defiance of his illness will be remembered for a long while with admiration and esteem by those attending the unveiling. The applause was heavy and heart-felt.

*Graham Lippiatt is Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group.*