REMEMBERING J

Jeremy Thorpe, leader of the Liberal Party from 1967 to 1976, died three weeks before Christmas 2014. The infamy of his political downfall in the late 1970s unfairly colours all else in his life. Thorpe was a stylish, progressive and popular politician, and under his leadership the Liberal Party won more votes than ever before at a general election and helped drive legislation taking Britain into the European Community through a divided Parliament. To commemorate his life for the *Journal of Liberal History*, **Robert Ingham** analyses Thorpe's political legacy, while **Ronald Porter** takes a look at his life and times.

JEREMY THORPE

Jeremy Thorpe's Liberal legacy

Coverage of Jeremy Thorpe's death inevitably dwelt on the sensational end to his political career. Questions had been raised before Thorpe's resignation as Liberal leader in 1976 about his judgement, his finances, his choice of friends and his sexual orientation, in an era when homosexuality had only recently been legalised. All of these issues swirled around Thorpe's trial for conspiring to murder Norman Scott. It hardly mattered that Thorpe was acquitted. The trial destroyed his reputation. He lost his seat in Parliament and was unable to rebuild his career. Tragically, he was afflicted by Parkinson's Disease for his last thirty years.

These issues have tended to eclipse Thorpe's political career, which is worthy of reappraisal. Thorpe is sometimes characterised as a showman, all style but no substance, an unworthy successor to the intellectual rigour and undoubted integrity of his predecessor, Jo Grimond. This is unfair. If Thorpe lacked an intellectual commitment to Liberalism he would surely have joined the Conservatives, given his family background, where he may well have ended up as a cabinet minister under Ted Heath. That he chose to plough the stony ground of the post-war Liberal Party demonstrates that Thorpe had more political depth than is often appreciated.

Thorpe first became prominent in Liberal circles at the 1953 Assembly. The party was at that time in the midst of a lively debate between strident free-marketeers – some of whom later resurfaced as Margaret Thatcher's most ardent supporters – and social liberals, grappling with the implications for Liberalism of nationalised industries and the mixed economy. The Liberal Assembly witnessed an annual battle between the two factions; whichever side was better organised came out on top. The Liberal leadership, such as it was, did not intervene. The free-marketeers were making the running in 1953 until Thorpe, still in his early twenties, intervened to say that Liberal candidates in the south-west would resign if the party disclaimed agricultural subsidies on doctrinal grounds. Thorpe swung the vote and helped change the climate of opinion within the party against the economic liberals. In speaking out he demonstrated the pragmatism which was at the heart of his political outlook. He wanted to advance Liberal politics by winning elections, not by running a debating club.

Thorpe's pragmatism was evident in the early 1960s when he developed the party's first scheme for targeting resources into winnable seats. He pored over details of election results, party membership and the activities of local associations to decide where money should be focused – money he often raised himself rather than via official party channels. Local associations were surprised, and appalled, to be told that funding depended on dropping a candidate they had selected or on increasing membership by a certain amount. At first, targeting was Thorpe's initiative and he kept the party's governing committees in the dark. When they found out what was happening they were unimpressed but his view prevailed. A number of the Liberal gains of the mid 1960s owed a debt to Thorpe. More importantly, he established the principle of targeting and the concomitant responsibility on local associations to do what they were told, in the overall interests of the party, in order to receive money.

As leader, Thorpe initially seemed out of his depth. He inherited a party whose electoral fortunes were in reverse and which contained numerous divergent strands of opinion. Just six Liberals were elected to the Commons at the 1970 election, a result which seemed to show that the 1960s revival had been a temporary blip in the party's long-term decline. After Thorpe's first wife died in June 1970 he appeared to lose interest in politics. And yet, his party revived with a series of improbable by-election victories and Thorpe was reinvigorated. He recognised that the leader of the third party needed to stand out from the crowd in order to gain any media attention. Combining an old-fashioned, debonair style of dress with the newest campaigning techniques – helicopters, hovercraft and the like – he got the coverage the Liberals needed. It was also significant that, under Thorpe's leadership, the Liberals stood in every constituency in Great Britain for the first time. In February 1974 the Liberals had their best general election result for over forty years (6,059,519 votes, a total not surpassed until 2010, and 19.3 per cent of the vote), although it still fell well short of the breakthrough the party hankered after. Later third-party leaders – mostly Paddy Ashdown – have followed Thorpe in combining their own personal characteristics with innovative and high-profile campaigning to good effect.

Jeremy Thorpe speaking at Liberal Assembly

Thorpe was a pragmatist and a campaigner but his intellectual input into the Liberal Party should not be overlooked. Internationalism was the most prominent aspect of his Liberalism and he was a principled exponent of views which were not intended to garner popularity. He spoke out against apartheid in South Africa at a time when many British politicians preferred to remain silent. Although he was ridiculed for suggesting that the UK should bomb the railway line by which Ian Smith's renegade regime in Rhodesia was supplying itself with oil, it was at least a possible way of enforcing sanctions. With air strikes against dissident regimes now an established part of US and UK foreign policy, it can now be seen that Thorpe was ahead of his time. Thorpe also ensured that the Liberals maintained the pro-Common Market course first set by Jo Grimond, voting for British entry amid stormy scenes in the Commons, during which punches were thrown. Thorpe could have sought narrow partisan advantage by compromising on the Common Market issue to bring down the Heath Government, but he was not prepared to do so.

Thorpe was also the first Liberal leader for over twenty years to be offered a seat in government, after the inconclusive first election in 1974. Details of precisely what happened remain murky and it seems unlikely that Thorpe would have been offered the post of Home Secretary, as has been suggested, given the rumours already circulating about his private life. Crucially, Thorpe could not proceed without the consent of his party, which he did not have. The similarities and differences between the coalition discussions in 1974 and 2010 deserve further exploration, but Thorpe understood that the Liberals would not be bounced into coalition.

Thorpe's political legacy to the Liberal Party is complex but, looking beyond the obvious negatives, there are positive aspects which deserve recognition. Most significantly, it is difficult to see how any of his rivals for the leadership in 1967 would have done better in the 1974 elections, which put beyond debate the question of whether the party was declining or on the way up.

I will be developing these themes further in a chapter on Jeremy Thorpe's leadership in the History Group's forthcoming book on Liberal leaders, due for publication in autumn 2015.

Robert Ingham is a political writer and Biographies Editor of the Journal of Liberal History.

Thorpe was a pragmatist and a campaigner but his intellectual input into the Liberal Party should not be overlooked.

Sex, Jeremy and Me

The purpose of my piece is to concentrate on the private life of Jeremy Thorpe.

John Jeremy Thorpe was born on 29 April 1929, the son of John Thorpe KC OBE and Ursula Thorpe, nee Norton-Griffiths. His mother was the most the dominant force in his early – and formative – years. Socially, Thorpe came from the world of the Forsytes, the upper middle classes; his father was a successful barrister and a Tory MP. He left the upbringing of Jeremy to his intimidating and interfering wife, a role she relished. The daughter of a baronet, Sir John Norton-Griffiths, she often wore a monocle, and dominated Jeremy's early years in the same way as E. M. Forster's mother dominated that author's sad childhood years. There are other parallels: both lacked strong father figures, and other men came to play important roles in their lives – Bob Buckingham, a plump and jovial working-class policeman, in Forster's life, and the former stable lad and male model Norman Scott in Thorpe's life in the 1960s. And both were homosexual. However, while Buckingham was a calm and reassuring figure in Forster's life, Scott was a temperamental, hot-headed and fundamentally jealous lover who eventually destroyed Thorpe's political career.

Thorpe was educated first at Eton, but in 1940, because of wartime bombing in England, he was sent to the safety and security of the United States and educated at the Rectory School, Connecticut. His interest in Liberal politics began at the school; his interest in blokes became common knowledge, with family and friends, at about the same time. Before he returned to Eton in 1943, he was reputed to have had consenting sex with at least two young American truck drivers. After Eton, Thorpe went to Trinity College, Oxford, to read law. His aim was to get a law degree, then do the Bar Finals, be called to the Bar and use his career at the criminal bar as a stepping stone to adoption for a winnable Liberal parliamentary seat. He was never really interested in a legal career as such; a parliamentary career was always the ultimate goal, just as it was for graduates who followed after him such as Emlyn Hooson or Menzies Campbell.

At the age of 30, Thorpe won the seat of North Devon in the October 1959 general election. It was about this time that the Devon Constabulary opened a file on Thorpe and his 'weekend liaisons' with other young men, in their twenties and early thirties, in a hotel in his constituency, not far from the seaside town of Ilfracombe. Well before the liberating Sexual Offences Act of 1967, this was a period when homosexuality was still a crime, punishable by imprisonment.

Thorpe soon became a good, and very witty, debater in the House of Commons. He first came to the public's attention after Ian Smith's unilateral declaration of independence in Rhodesia. In 1966; he advocated bombing Rhodesia's railways in order to bring the country to its senses. This won him a following with the radical wing of the Liberal Party, and particularly the Young Liberals. He was also good at sucking-up to the aristocratic side of the party, getting on very well with the Grimonds and the Bonham Carters. He was keen to make it clear that he was a member of both the Reform and the National Liberal Clubs, had been to Eton and Oxford, that his grandfather was a baronet and his father a King's Counsel.

When Grimond resigned the Liberal leadership in 1967, Thorpe decided to become a contender. He was by no means certain of success, but he thought it was a useful way of getting known and be a good way of a putting up a marker for future contests. To his surprise, he won the contest, and served as leader from 1967 until 1976. Through the years, he steadily

managed to increase the profile of the Liberals at general elections. His flamboyant personality, his wit and penchant for publicity, were useful assets. When the February general election of 1974 left the Commons with no overall majority, Prime Minister Heath invited Thorpe to Downing Street for talks on forming a coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberals. Thorpe was absolutely delighted and desperate to enter government; it was rumoured that Heath was going to make Thorpe Home Secretary, though this was later denied by Heath. The talks soon petered out, however, because most of Thorpe's MPs had no desire to sit in government with the discredited and divisive Tories, a party which after all, had just lost the election – a view shared by the party as a whole.

Thorpe's downfall began in January 1976 when Norman Scott, a former lover of Thorpe's, began a campaign of vilification against him, alleging that Thorpe had had an affair with him in the early 1960s and then had tried to silence him by trying to have him murdered. Soon the police got involved, leading to Thorpe's prosecution at the Old Bailey in 1979. Thorpe lost his seat in the general election of 1979, just before his trial, and he had already been forced to resign from the leadership of the Liberal Party in 1976. A few days before the resignation, a Sunday paper got hold of one of Thorpe's numerous love letters to Scott, which referred to a holiday the couple were planning and ended up with the words 'Bunnies [Thorpe's nickname for his lover] CAN and WILL go to France!'

Thorpe's trial at the Old Bailey garnered phenomenal press coverage. After Scott's first day of evidence in the witness box, one tabloid came out with the headline: 'SEX, JEREMY AND ME'. Later, after a ruthless cross-examination of Scott by Thorpe's counsel, George Carman QC, another tabloid used the headline: 'Scott : I'm not the Woman Scorned!'.

The prosecution case rested firstly on evidence from Peter Bessell, a former Liberal MP, chosen by Thorpe to buy Scott's silence with periodic cash payments. Bessell alleged that Thorpe became impatient and floated the idea of having Scott murdered. Carman, for the defence, found it easy to destroy Bessell's credibility, showing him to be an inveterate liar and fantasist. The other star prosecution witness was Norman Scott. Again, Carman destroyed his credibility by giving the impression that he was nothing but a vindictive sponger, a tearful whinger who was angry at being discarded by Thorpe. As the defence team did in the 2014 Shrien Dewani murder trial in South Africa, Carman, very early on, astutely conceded that Thorpe had homosexual 'tendencies', thus denying to the prosecution the chance to bring forward, day after day, damaging evidence to 'prove' those tendencies in detail.

The trial judge, Mr Justice Cantley, subsequently came in for much criticism. He was accused of repeated bias in favour of Thorpe throughout the lengthy trial. Peter Cook, for example, playing the judge for a satirical TV comedy, told the jury that 'the time has come for you to retire to consider your Not Guilty verdict.' But the Crown's case was always a weak one, resting on little real evidence and relying too heavily on the testimony of just two main witnesses, whom Carman was able, very quickly, to discredit. The acquittal, when it came, was an immense relief to Thorpe – but the damage it did to his political career was devastating and irreversible. It also contributed to a long and very cruel decline in his health which ultimately caused his sad death on 4 December 2014.

Although he had strong homosexual feelings throughout most of his life, Thorpe married twice, first in 1968 to Caroline Allpass. They had one son, Rupert, who was born in the same year, but Caroline died in 1970 as a result of a dreadful car accident. Thorpe married again in 1973, to Marion, Countess of Harewood, who had divorced the Queen's cousin, the Seventh Earl of Harewood, in 1967 on the grounds of his adultery. Humiliated by the publicity of Harewood's adultery and the subsequent divorce, Marion disliked the sense that she was 'on the shelf' and resolved to marry again if the chance arose. When Thorpe, with his taste in classical music, was first introduced to her by Moura Lympany, at a concert in 1972, it was only a matter of time before they married.

When Marion became Thorpe's second wife in 1973, she was a very rich woman as a result of a generous divorce settlement. She had a substantial income and some large capital sums, and Harewood also gave her a grand and spacious central London house in Orme Square, full of quality furniture, some of it of museum standard, along with some excellent pictures. In order to meet the defence costs of the trial, however, a large amount of her money went on Thorpe's legal bills, but they continued to live in Orme Square and in Devon. There were no children from this marriage, but it was a long and happy one, ending only with Marion's death on 6 March 2014.

Ronald Porter was a Good Food Spy for 'What's On' for over twenty years, and has written book reviews for Political Quarterly*, articles for the* Conservative History Journal *and numerous obituaries for* The Independent. *He is currently researching the life and times of Jeremy and Marion Thorpe for a talk at the National Liberal Club.*

Liberal Democrat History Group online

Website
See **www.liberalhistory.org.uk** for details of our activities and publications, guides to archive sources, research resources, and a growing number of pages on the history of the party. (Please note that we are ciurrently upgrading our website, and there may be some delay in making all content available.)

Email
Join our email mailing list for news of History Group meetings and publications – the fastest and earliest way to find out what we're doing. Fill in the form at: **http://bit.ly/LDHGemail**.

Facebook page
News of the latest meeting and publications, and a discussion forum:
www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup.

Twitter
A daily posting of Liberal events on this day in history. Follow us at: **LibHistoryToday**.