

Radice records, at the 1981 Labour conference when Denis Healey defeated Tony Benn for the Deputy Leadership by four-fifths of one percent. In his diary, Giles Radice wrote on the evening of the Healey victory: 'By beating Benn, however narrowly, Denis Healey has saved the Labour Party.' If that is so, then I played a part in that rescue. My final vote as a Labour Member of Parliament was to vote for Denis Healey at that conference. It was my parting gift to a Labour Party to which, as Roy Hattersley told me at the time, I owed everything.

But I have my doubts whether any of our three heroes could have led the Labour Party better or more effectively in the 1960s and 1970s than the 'consensus' leaders, Wilson and Callaghan. The structure of the party gave too much power to the trade unions (fine when the unions are in the control of the right, poison when controlled by the left – as Tony Blair may shortly find out). In addition, the Benn reforms on reselection emasculated the Parliamentary Party so that most of them opted for the 'quiet life' option of Michael Foot when Jim Callaghan belatedly stood down.

Politics is about great issues. But it is also about personalities and how their weaknesses and strengths play on the great issues. Radice does not allow his admiration for his subjects to blind him to their flaws. Tony Crosland could be cavalier and peevish, Roy Jenkins pompous, and Denis Healey, in Roy Jenkins' memorable phrase, carried light ideological baggage on a heavy gun carriage. In the end all that this tells us is that politicians, like the rest of humanity, have human failings and weaknesses. Whether a politician gets to the top or not depends as much on time and chance as on personal qualities. Yet what led to Crosland, Jenkins and Healey all failing to reach Number 10 – although at various times all three had both their time and the chance – was Radi-

ce's third element in their interaction, which makes the exercise of a triple biography worth telling in this form: 'When personal ambitions collided, mutual co-operation was precluded.'

So it was that time and chance delivered No. 10 to Jim Callaghan. When Jim was elected leader of the Labour Party and appointed Prime Minister in March 1976, it was to me (not, as stated in the book, to Peter

Hennessy) that he said: 'There were a lot of them who are cleverer than me; but I am here and they are not.' There was no doubt which trio of old rivals he had particularly in mind.

Giles Radice's book goes a long way to explaining how he outsmarted them all.

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His books were read

Roy Jenkins: *A Life at the Centre*
(Macmillan, 1991; 658pp)

Reviewed by **Conrad Russell**

Tell me. Where is fancy bred?
Or in the heart. Or in
the head?

Shakespeare's question has curiously been answered by modern science and the answer is in the head. One may ask the same question about political power. Is it bred in the heart of government, in 10 Downing Street – and perhaps in No. 11 – or is it bred in the ideas that are the petrol such people take from the pumps to put in their engines?

Roy Jenkins was perhaps the first major politician since Gladstone to pursue both sorts of political power at once. That is why, though great it is, the sequence of Home Secretary – Chancellor of the Exchequer – President of the European Commission grossly underestimates his importance. Plenty of twentieth century prime ministers – Home, Major, Callaghan even Wilson – did less to shape twentieth century politics than he did. If one calls a man a Callaghanite it has no meaning. If one calls him Jenkinsite this instantly tells us what we can say to him and what we cannot. Those who prepare the language politicians feed into their brains have more

power in the end than any office-holder, and Roy was one of these. Though he may have been the most successful post-war Chancellor of the Exchequer, that, by comparison, was a minor achievement.

It underestimates Roy Jenkins even to describe him as a great political thinker. When candidates are nominated for election to the British Academy they may be proposed on honorary grounds for their service to scholarship through public life. Roy, defender of literary merit, Chancellor of Oxford University, drafter of the academic freedom amendment of 1988, deserved such a nomination. Yet the biographer of Gladstone, Dilke and Asquith as a historian of standing in his own right also deserved a nomination. I know of no-one since John Morley who deserved consideration on both grounds at once.

What has not been remarked upon is the extent to which his academic and his political work concentrated on the same issue. The link is perhaps made most clear in the Dimpleby Lecture. He said that the British political system had not changed much

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since 1868, but Britain had changed very much in those years, so that stability risked turning into 'stultifying political rigidity'. He was interested in two moments when such pressure for change ran into conflict with the political system. One was the rise of the Labour Party and the other its fall. The big question of twentieth-century politics that Roy did not become conscious of until around 1975, but which may have haunted him since 1959, was whether the rise of the Labour Party was a blind alley and a wrong turning. Did it have any continuing use or should it be marked 'Return to Sender'?

Both the rise and the decline of the Labour Party force us to consider the electoral system. It is not clear whether Roy noticed the relevance of the electoral system to Labour's rise. The key evidence is printed only by Colin Matthew in his *Gladstone Diaries*. The Liberal Party of the 1890s needed to attract the growing group of working-class politicians. It was doing well enough for a while, but the near abolition of the two-member constituency in 1885, struck it a near-fatal blow. In 1891 Stuart Rendel of that ilk submitted a memo to Gladstone in which he pointed out that Liberals in a two-member constituency were prepared to choose a working-class candidate for the second seat, just as they are often prepared now to choose a woman for the second place on a list. Given single-member constituencies they ceased to choose the working-class candidates. The result was that Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald and Arthur Henderson all applied for nominations to safe Liberal seats and were turned down. With those three on board the Liberals would surely have been in a far stronger position to repel Labour boarders. Roy's work, and particularly his *Asquith*, demonstrate a Liberal Party that in 1914 was very far from ready for eclipse and yet, thanks to a quirk of the electoral system as well as its own internal

death wish, it was indeed eclipsed four years later.

Once it had collapsed it stayed collapsed. It is characteristic of 'first past the post' that once a party becomes a clearly established second it is very hard to dislodge. As Machiavelli said: 'there is great difficulty in seizing the estate of the Turk but once it is taken, great ease in holding it'.

It is that great ease which has kept a Labour Party recognised as obsolescent by 1959 firmly in its place in spite of all inward decay. It is almost impossible now for people who learnt their politics after the beginning of the Cold War to understand the extent to which the Labour Party of those whose beliefs were formed before 1939 was in hock both to Moscow and to Marx. Roy Jenkins in *A Life at the Centre* complains that he and Tony Crosland were two of only three members of the Labour Club committee at Oxford who were not on the Moscow line on questions such as the Russian invasion of Finland. The result was that they decided to split the Club and won a comfortable victory among the membership. Roy was Treasurer of the democratic socialists and Iris Murdoch of the Moscow traditionalists. The resulting correspondence between 'Dear Miss Murdoch' and 'Dear Comrade Jenkins' is the beatification of incongruity.

Perhaps the importance of this Marxist presence is the extent to which it created a confusion of identity on the Labour right. The persistent awareness of the *ennemi à gauche* enabled them to hold together an unnatural unity against Marxist or Communist infiltration and, more seriously, inhibited many of them from developing genuine ideals that they actually held but which they made known to very few at the time. I never knew at the time of Roy's proposed programmes for Labour of 1959 (*A Life at the Centre* p. 130) but I would have been delighted to have done so.

The liberal right to which Roy belonged and that he made

his own was small and noteworthy. Among my contemporaries, Bob Maclennan was one of its recognisably distinguished figures from the early sixties onwards. On the other hand the frequent pairing together during the seventies of Shirley Williams and Reg Prentice – of which there is a good deal in *A Life at the Centre* – is sheer illusion. They were united in certain negative propositions aimed at Tony Benn and Michael Foot but we can see now that they were united in very little else. Reg Prentice in his final Conservative years in the House of Lords showed himself an unadulterated right-winger of a sort who sometimes made me prefer Enoch Powell. He reminded me of Donne's line 'busy old fool, unruly sun, go choose sour prentices'. Not even her worst enemy in the grip of a nightmare could have said any of this of Shirley Williams.

With these came a tradition that I identified under the name of Comrade Blimp, which was Labour only because it was working class, while being thoroughly reactionary on everything else. Bob Mellish was a prime example of this tradition.



He once tried in the late 1980s to divide the House of Lords in favour of the closed shop and failed because he could not find a fellow teller. The issues of the sixties – race and social liberalism as well as Europe – split this group apart and exposed what had always been an artificial unity. There is very little sign in *A Life at the Centre* that Roy Jenkins perceived the artificiality of these alliances on which he perforce depended. The shock of his split with Gaitskell over Europe equally illustrates this lack of eye for the crevasses under the snow of their glacier. Bill Rodgers remaining seated with his arms folded and Dora Gaitskell lamenting that ‘the wrong people are cheering’ illustrate this to perfection.

Only some of the Labour right were ever democratic socialists. They were a miscellaneous crew of party bosses, ambitious parliamentarians, working-class chip wearers (of whom David Blunkett is a survivor), isolationists, and people like Woodrow Wyatt who are best classified as mercurial. They were not a stable base for any movement. Some of the worst sufferers were people like Bill Rodgers who were genuine idealists but spent so long policing the left touchline that their idealism was not made visible even to those who would happily have admired it if it had been. Bill Rodgers on criminal justice is a Liberal through and through, but there is nothing in *A Life at the Centre* and very little in Labour politics which might have led anyone to realise it.

Roy was beginning the search for a new creed as early as his *New Fabian Essays* of 1952 in which he said that Marxist-Leninism was ‘more interested in capital maldistribution as a flaw to be used for the overthrow of the system than in an evil to be rectified for its own sake’. His seven great issues of today and tomorrow set out in a *Spectator* article of 1959 indicate a programme in which all of the issues

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save that of colonial freedom are as much keys to the future as the past. Some, such as ‘whether we can expose and destroy the abuses and inefficiencies of contemporary private industry without only offering the sterile alternative of an indefinite extension of public monopoly’, are at the very cutting edge of the current debate within the Liberal Democrats. That members of the Labour Party had got there forty-four years ago and were unable to move on is surely a terrible indictment of their party. It seems that such ideas, by inserting something positive in the face of the negatives that had held the Labour right together, simply exposed a depth of difference that had long been latent.

It was not just Roy’s Europeanism that raised this spectre. His liberalism at the Home Office did so just as much and still does on some parts of the Labour benches today. It was this that led Ernst Armstrong to tell Roy, when he contemplated him as a successor to Wilson, that he had long expected to support him ‘but the party was now so fragile that it needed Callaghan’s bedside manner’. Maybe it did but there were people who would have gone to the stake for Roy’s measures at the Home Office, including his incipient policies on gender and race. Who would have gone to the stake for Jim Callaghan? The twenty-three months of Roy Jenkins’ tenure at the Home Office remain for me one of the highest points of British politics since the war. He was the greatest Home Secretary since Sir Robert Peel.

In 1974 Roy submitted a memo in favour of PR to the Labour cabinet. It was shot down in flames by Barbara Castle – his causes were not hers. As Roy always said, Labour was a coalition and that coalition was falling apart. Thus the rivalry over Europe that has riven all political parties except the always internationalist Liberals was a consequence as well as a cause of instability in the Labour Party.

The question that needs explaining over Europe is why there has been so little meaningful dialogue about it. More than anywhere else the two sides in Britain have talked past each other like ships in the night, generating more heat than light. When Jim Callaghan spoke of the need to preserve ‘the language of Chaucer’, what would he have done if he had known that Chaucer wrote equally well in English, French and Latin, because he did not know which of them would survive? The more that Enoch Powell and Peter Shore ranted about sovereignty the better a European they made me. No wonder Roy Jenkins could not prevail by reason. He was unable to address the issues that concerned his opponents because as soon as he conceded they had any importance he would have been forced to abandon his own beliefs.

Against this background Roy was forced for lack of any other political outlet to set out on the course that led to the Alliance. The clash with David Owen once again encapsulated the incoherence of the Labour right. The path has been slow because neither Labour nor Conservative were as efficient or as single-minded in their attempts to commit suicide as Asquith and Lloyd George. Give them time – they are certain to get there in the end. In reading *A Life at the Centre* and then today’s paper on Europe (22 May) I read of a story that is still going on. Europe, like Mount Everest, is there and while it is, so will we be, for we are the only party that is capable of running a government that has to deal with it. Roy will be able to enjoy Hilaire Belloc’s epitaph:

When I am dead, I hope it may be said,

His sins were scarlet but his books were read.

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