

LETTERS

Another curious episode in Liverpool Liberal history concerns a deselected Labour councillor, Bill Smythe, who won Childwall ward for the Liberals in 1973 though still a member of the Labour Party. Peter Kilfoyle MP, in his excellent book on the city, *Left Behind*, recounts how Smythe became Liberal group leader and leader of the council whilst still being a Labour Party member – after being voted for by Labour

and Conservative councillors and the anti-Jones portion of the Liberal group! How did this come about? How significant was Cyril Carr's declining health in the whole episode?

Finally, if there is to be a residual 'How we won Abercromby' style to such a meeting, then, from an historical point of view, we also need to know 'Why we lost Abercromby'.

Michael Meadowcroft

department' into 'an engine of radical reform'.

The second reason for Dick Taverne's fulsome assessment was Jenkins' record as Chancellor of the Exchequer. He went to the Treasury after the disastrous 1967 devaluation and slowly but surely masterminded an economic recovery – and is generally recognised as one of the best post-war Chancellors. Still, aspects of his stewardship have been criticised in recent years, most notably by Edmund Dell in *The Chancellors* (1996). Dick Taverne agreed with Dell that Jenkins delayed taking some tough decisions for too long, for example in acting to reduce demand. But he argued that Dell's analysis of Jenkins' 1968 budget – that, tough as it was, the measures may still have been too lax – was only made with the benefit of hindsight. Similarly, Taverne mounted a robust defence of Jenkins' handling of the sterling balances, arguing that, ultimately, it succeeded.

But the meeting was no dry discussion of Roy Jenkins' many accomplishments, important as they were. The speakers went to some lengths to explain the personal gifts that made Jenkins such an important political figure. Dick Taverne said that his mastery in debate, grasp of his subject and excellent judgement, along with his influence over events and his work as a writer on events had made him one of the most outstanding figures of modern political history. In describing his mastery of the House of Commons, Taverne gave as examples two important milestones in Jenkins' ministerial life. The first was his skilful, incisive reply to the Conservative front bench in the Commons debate that followed the escape from prison of George Blake. The second was his speech laying out the tough Budget of 1968, which imposed the largest tax increases this country had ever seen. This time Taverne quoted with approval the judgement of Edmund Dell: 'Never has

REPORT

Roy Jenkins – Reformer, Visionary, Statesman

Fringe meeting report, September 2004, Bournemouth, with Dick Taverne, Shirley Williams and Peter Riddell

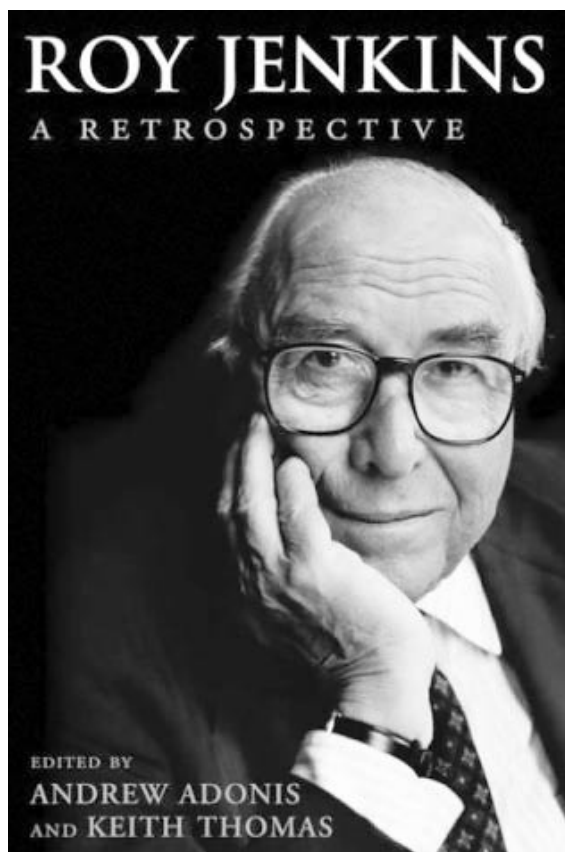
Report by **Neil Stockley**

On the Sunday night of autumn conference a standing-room-only audience, including Dame Jennifer Jenkins, gathered to hear three distinguished guests reflect on the life and career of the late Lord Jenkins of Hillhead. The meeting was held to mark the publication of a new collection of essays, edited by Andrew Adonis and Keith Thomas, *Roy Jenkins: A Retrospective* (Oxford University Press, 2004). The speakers were Lord (Dick) Taverne, who served under Jenkins as a junior minister at the Home Office and the Treasury, Baroness Shirley Williams, a co-founder of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), and the veteran political journalist Peter Riddell.

Dick Taverne argued that Jenkins had been 'the most significant member' of the disappointing 1964–70 Labour government and that he was

'responsible for its most important achievements'. By the late 1960s, he was widely seen as the 'dominant force' in Harold Wilson's Cabinet. The first reason was the big list of reforms that Jenkins was responsible for introducing during his time as Home Secretary. His roles in enabling the passage of private members' bills to liberalise the law on abortion and to decriminalise homosexual practices between consenting adults are well documented. So are his work to set in train the Race Relations Act and the relaxation of theatre censorship. Taverne also pointed out that Jenkins passed comprehensive, progressive criminal justice legislation and drove reforms to improve the ability of the police to bring crime under control. Shirley Williams agreed that Jenkins had taken over the Home Office and turned it from a 'heartbreaking

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pain been inflicted with greater elegance’.

Shirley Williams acknowledged that Jenkins was a great orator with a brilliant command of language, whose contributions were lightened by his wit and use of anecdotes. But she paid more attention to the depth and breadth of his political vision. She contrasted Jenkins with his old friend and rival Tony Crosland who, despite being the main philosopher of post-war democratic socialism, had not devised the reformist agenda that Jenkins pioneered at the Home Office. For instance, Crosland’s seminal work *The Future of Socialism* said nothing about issues around race and gender equality, which are now ‘part of the meat and drink of being a Liberal Democrat’. Williams believed that the attainment of social reform was all part of a ‘learning process’ for the progressive forces in British politics that had been ‘led by Roy’.

Peter Riddell argued that it was his grasp of the big picture that made Jenkins so successful as a minister. Riddell believed that rather than being a policy wonk,

he mastered ‘the broad themes, the broad sweeps’ of politics and still managed to achieve a great deal. He contrasted Jenkins to the current Chancellor, Gordon Brown, who was ‘obsessed with the detail of policy’. Riddell said that it was Jenkins’ grasp of the ‘broad historical sweep’ that linked his roles as a biographer and a politician.

But Riddell also pointed out that, in terms of the broad sweep of politics, Jenkins was not ‘a mould breaker’ in the way that Margaret Thatcher had been and in so doing, brought out the central paradoxes of Jenkins’ career. On social reform, Europe and the future of centre-left politics, Jenkins was indeed a visionary. As Home Secretary and – although the meeting did not really get to it – President of the European Commission, Jenkins achieved a great deal. If he was not a perfect Chancellor, he was certainly a successful and masterful one, who made the very best of a grim inheritance. But the so-called Keynesian approach to economic management – to which he closely subscribed – unravelled not long after he left the Treasury in 1970. After 1979 the Conservatives ruled for eighteen years and Mrs Thatcher’s government turned the old political consensus on economic policy on its head and brought in a new economic orthodoxy. Neither John Major nor his Labour successors have tried to alter its fundamental tenets.

In other areas that were central to Jenkins’ political vision, the picture seems similarly bleak. More than thirty years after he led the Labour rebellion on joining the EEC, Britain still does not play a full role in Europe. Even if his main social reforms are part of the fabric of national life – and some have been extended further – the Home Office under Michael Howard, Jack Straw and David Blunkett has hardly been an engine of liberal reform. In the wake of Belmarsh and with ID cards

looming, we clearly do not live in the age of Jenkins.

The first reason is obvious: unlike Margaret Thatcher, he never became Prime Minister, let alone the leader of a purposeful administration that stayed in office for a long time. But if he was so gifted, why did Jenkins never get to the very top? The question is most relevant to his time as a leading Labour politician, when he had two serious chances to take the top job. Taverne recounted how, as Wilson floundered in 1968, a coterie of Labour MPs plotted to mount a putsch that would install Jenkins as Prime Minister. But, he said, ‘Roy called them off’ because, he believed, Jenkins thought it would be ‘dishonourable’ to try to topple the Prime Minister who had appointed him; he consistently supported him in Cabinet over some very difficult issues. A second opportunity came the following year, after Wilson was forced to make a humiliating retreat over the reforms to industrial relations law set out in the White Paper, *In Place of Strife*. But Taverne explained that Jenkins had supported the proposals and believed that it would be opportunistic to use their failure as a basis for mounting a challenge. All of this reflects very well on Jenkins as a man.

There were other, more personal reasons why he did not become leader of the Labour Party or Prime Minister. For example, Jenkins was often portrayed as too aloof, too grand and as something of a bon viveur who did not take his political work as seriously as he might. There was a suspicion that Jenkins had enjoyed something of an easy life and, therefore, expected political fortune to somehow fall into his lap. Here, the speakers vividly and affectionately brought to life some of the tremendous personal qualities that may not have been so apparent to most of his colleagues – particularly in the Labour Party – and the public;

REPORT

when they started to emerge, it was too late. Dick Taverne recalled how, as a young MP, he got to know Jenkins and entered a wide circle of devoted friends. 'No friend could ever say he let them down,' he said. Peter Riddell also said that Jenkins was very kind to younger people.

Shirley Williams suggested that the apparent remoteness was really a kind of shyness and that when he contested the 1981 Warrington by-election for the SDP, Jenkins reached out to people in a way that he never had before. 'There was no side to him,' she insisted. She also paid a generous tribute to the 'astonishing self-discipline' that he brought to all his work, including as a writer and author. Perhaps, however, he was not single-minded or ruthless enough to be Prime Minister. Indeed, Shirley Williams was clear that Jenkins was never dominated by his own political ambition. She believed that he really coveted the Foreign Office rather than Number Ten.

Peter Riddell took us back to Jenkins' successful candidacy for the SDP in the crucial Glasgow Hillhead by-election of 1982. As the nascent party's star started to wane, victory in the cold, wet and difficult campaign was by no means assured. But Jenkins knew he had to fight to win and Riddell reminded us that he did so with great vigour.

The second reason we do not live in the Age of Jenkins is the failure of the SDP to break the mould of politics and, more importantly, for the Labour Party to modernise itself quickly enough. Margaret Thatcher became the political giant of the late twentieth century and repainted the political landscape. Nobody could seriously suggest that any of this, or even the fate of the SDP, was Jenkins' fault. Still, the meeting touched on some uncomfortable realities. If Lord Taverne vividly captured the essence of Jenkins' superiority as a debater

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and parliamentarian during the 1960s and early 1970s, Shirley Williams showed just as clearly that as leader of the SDP in 1982–83, he did not find the Commons a very happy place to be. Jenkins was simply not used to being interrupted and to suffering the brutal heckling of Denis Skinner and others. She also argued that he was damaged by the growing and changing role of television because 'his thinking was too deep' to be easily condensed in ten-second soundbites: whereas Jenkins was suited to the 'age of words', we lived in 'the age of images'. Williams was surely correct that this demonstrated the 'shallowness of our politics', but the hard truth was that his political style was simply not suited to a more populist era.

More fundamentally, Peter Riddell questioned whether, for all his mastery of the broad sweep of politics and history, Jenkins had really understood the extent of what was happening in British politics during the 1980s. Riddell did not spell it out, but he was presumably referring to the rise of more materialist, consumerist and, indeed, individualist values within the electorate as a whole and the slow acceptance – however grudging – of a more bitter political medicine and a greater demand for tough leadership. Riddell believed that Dr David Owen did recognise how politics was changing around him – but the SDP was still promising a 'better yesterday' or, at heart, trying to create a better Labour Party.

This is not to suggest that the meeting saw Jenkins as, to quote Harold Wilson's former spin doctor Joe Haines, 'a gifted failure'. Far from it. We heard how, in many important respects, Jenkins was way ahead of his time. Dick Taverne reminded us that as early as 1959 he was campaigning for Britain to play a full part in Europe. Similarly, Jenkins had contemplated starting a new social democratic

party in the early 1970s, some ten years before the SDP was formed. Shirley Williams recalled how from 1974 to 1976 she had served in the last Wilson Cabinet with Jenkins, who was a reluctant, recidivist Home Secretary. He had submitted to the Cabinet proposals to hold a Speaker's Conference on three important constitutional reforms: electoral reform for the House of Commons, a human rights bill and freedom of information legislation. All three were resoundingly rejected. Thirty years later, proportional representation is used at a number of levels of government, there is a Human Rights Act and, now, a Freedom of Information Act. All were a long time coming and Shirley Williams was clear that 'they all started with Roy'.

It could be added, however, that we still await electoral reform for Westminster (which Jenkins made a valiant attempt to achieve in 1998), the broader purposes behind the Human Rights Act are in grave danger and Labour's FOI Act is, to quote Shirley Williams, 'castrated'. In these areas, and in others, such as Europe, Jenkins left important business for others to finish.

The speakers did not comment on it in detail, but it was his 1979 Dimbleby Lecture that started the chain of events that led to the formation of the SDP. It was also the party's philosophical foundation and much of it has stood the test of time, both as a critique of the Thatcher and now of the Blair administration, and as a statement of the shared political credo of modern liberals and genuine social democrats. Shirley Williams was surely right when she said that the Liberal Democrats are 'Roy's legacy'.

The Journal will be publishing a full review of Andrew Adonis and Keith Thomas, Roy Jenkins: A Retrospective in issue 48 (autumn 2005).