Roy Jenkins: A Well-Rounded Life

In one of Disraeli’s novels, we are told to ‘read no history, nothing but biography, for that is life without theory’. It is a maxim that political historians, in particular, have taken enthusiastically to heart, though they may find the current generation a less attractive prospect. Of our current party leaders, few have led especially captivating lives. Nick Clegg, we are told, once set fire to a cactus. Ed Miliband organised a student rent strike, while David Cameron’s sole contribution to the cultural life of the nation was his membership of the Bullingdon Club. Nigel Farage probably thinks a ‘hinterland’ is a variety of Real Ale. Reflecting on the class of 2015, Disraeli might have reworked his famous aphorism: ‘Write no biography, not of this lot; for that is life without interest’.

Roy Jenkins, the subject of John Campbell’s latest memoir, poses no such difficulty. Jenkins spent almost 60 years in public life, serving as Home Secretary, Chancellor of the Exchequer and President of the European Commission. He was Chancellor of Oxford University and founder of the Social Democratic Party; had he so wished, he could have been Governor of Hong Kong and editor of The Economist. He helped to abolish capital punishment, reformed the criminal justice system and oversaw major legal reforms on homosexuality, abortion, race relations and sexual equality. His patrons included Clement Attlee and Hugh Gaitskell, while his protégés ranged from Tony Blair to Paddy Ashdown.

Jenkins was always more than a politician. He wrote guides to European cities and studies of American history, as well as biographies of Gladstone, Churchill and Asquith. In a single year, his holiday reading included a life of Franklin Delano Roosevelt; novels by Iris Murdoch, Barbara Pym and Angus Wilson; Graham Greene’s autobiography; and three essays by Lytton Strachey. He was a connoisseur of food, wine and women, maintaining a well-stocked cellar and an exhausting roster of mistresses.

Jenkins is a natural subject for the biographer, not least because he tended ‘to see his own career as a biography in the making’ (p. 335). Yet the sheer range of his activities also poses difficulties. What is the ‘theme’ that might connect such diverse interests? Campbell’s oddly uninspiring sub-title, A Well-Rounded Life, suggests that this was a problem to which he never entirely found a solution. While his outstanding study of Margaret Thatcher’s early years, The Grocer’s Daughter, made an innovative argument about the construction of the Thatcher myth, the core argument of A Well-Rounded Life appears to be that its subject
was active on many fronts. In consequence, while this is undoubtedly a well-researched and readable biography, it shares some of the characteristics of Churchill’s pudding. This biography lacks a theme.

Campbell does not disguise his admiration for Jenkins, whom he describes as ‘the first public figure I was aware of and always the one I most admired’. Campbell was ‘an enthusiastic foot soldier in the SDP’, voted for Jenkins as leader and wrote a short biography of him for the 1983 election (p. 7). A year earlier, he had campaigned for Jenkins in the by-election at Glasgow Hillhead. It is to Campbell’s credit that this does not protect his subject from criticism. While some of Campbell’s judgements seem generous – that the SDP ‘narrowly failed to break the stranglehold of the Conservative and Labour parties’ (p. 1); that ‘the shock of the SDP defection … led within barely more than a decade to the creation … of New Labour’; and that ‘Jenkins’ 1998 proposals will continue to be the starting point for discussion [of electoral reform]’ (p. 3) – he casts an unflinching eye on Jenkins’ infidelity, egotism, snobishness and gluttony. As a contender for the Labour leadership, Campbell acknowledges, Jenkins lacked the stomach for the fight. ‘As an opposition leader he did not cut the mustard’ (p. 609). He ‘was an effective populariser, but never an original historian’ (p. 367). His European Diary is dismissed as ‘a shamelessly self-indulgent book, much concerned with the author’s stomach’ (pp. 630–1). By the time Campbell has finished with Jenkins, one suspects that his patience has worn rather thin, his admiration transferred to Roy’s impressive and long-suffering wife, Jennifer.

Jenkins grew up in the Welsh coalfields; his father, Arthur Jenkins, was a miner and trade unionist who was imprisoned during the General Strike. In 1935, Arthur was elected as MP for Pontypool, serving as Parliamentary Private Secretary to Attlee and as a minister in the 1945 government. The family’s social circle included Arthur Greenwood, Herbert Morrison, Hugh Dalton and Attlee, while Roy made his first appearance on the campaign trail alongside the former leader George Lansbury. Attlee kept a benevolent eye on his progress, commissioning him to edit a volume of his speeches in 1945. When Arthur died, in 1946, Violet Attlee picked up Roy and his mother at the hospital and brought them to Downing Street for the night. Jenkins could hardly have had better Labour credentials if he had been born down a mine; but he was never especially comfortable among the horny-handed sons of toil. As a teenager, he noted approvingly that the railway line from Newport to Paddington ‘passes no areas that are disfigured by basic industries’ (p. 23), and, like Margaret Thatcher, he shed his provincial background as soon as possible. After a year of ‘cramming’ at University College, Cardiff (an institution that was omitted from Who’s Who), he went up to Oxford in 1938 to study Politics, Philosophy and Economics. Here he encountered many of those who would be most influential in later life, including Madron Seligman, Nicholas Henderson, Mark Bonham Carter, Ronald McIntosh and Edward Heath.

His closest Oxford friend was Tony Crosland, who appeared one afternoon in his doorway and chatted for two hours. The two became friends, sparring partners and probably lovers, exploring a revolutionary socialism that was far removed from the labourism of Pontypool. Crosland, wrote Jenkins in 1941, ‘completely changed my political outlook by making me accept the class struggle as the fundamental tenet’ (p. 52); yet this did not derive, in Crosland’s case, from any close familiarity with the working class. This was to change with the coming of war in 1939. Crosland joined up in 1940, and was stunned to find himself in a railway carriage filled with cockney recruits. ‘I spoke to nobody’, he told Jenkins, ‘and was quite literally on the verge of tears the whole time’. Crosland would come to understand his fellow recruits better and to like them more, but he continued to find their ‘lack of political consciousness … almost incredible’ (p. 43). Thrown into close proximity with workers for the first time, he concluded that Marx had been wrong: the masses were motivated less by class struggle than by patriotism, religion, a robust liberalism and ‘strong conservatism’ (p. 53).

Jenkins’ own war service followed a different trajectory. Called up in 1942, he spent ‘six god-forsaken months’ at Alton Towers, an experience that left him ‘completely dazed’. The food (already a preoccupation) was particularly disappointing, and he despised having to eat ‘liver & messy potatoes ladled out of a bucket’ (p. 67). He spent the evenings alone in his billet, reading Hansard, Trollope and Proust,
emerging ‘slightly more well-read than I was two years ago’, but politically ‘less mature’ (p. 77). In 1944 he was transferred to Bletchley Park, where he befriended the historian Asa Briggs and worked as a cryptographer. It was important work, but Jenkins’ ‘relatively comfortable war’ (p. 81) would be disadvantageous later in his career.

After a short spell with the Industrial and Commercial Finance Corporation, Jenkins won a by-election at Southwark Central in 1948. Two years later he switched to Birmingham Stechford, which he would represent for the next 26 years. Jenkins never took to Birmingham as a place, complaining characteristically that ‘the city’s restaurant resources were minimal’ (p. 121). He never bought a home in the constituency and spent as little time there as possible. Yet he was grateful to it for demanding so little of him, allowing him to be that ‘now distinctly endangered species – the part-time MP’ (p. 147).

Aged just 27 in 1948, Jenkins was the youngest MP in the House, and his youthful politics retained a considerable left-wing zest. His two political heroes were Aneurin Bevan and Sir Stafford Cripps (like many sybaritic politicians, Jenkins took a distinctly puritanical view of the public finances). In 1950, he identified three key objectives for a Labour government: ‘a large-scale capital levy’; abolition of the public schools; and an infusion of industrial democracy into the nationalised industries (p. 124). In a Tribune pamphlet published in 1951, he demanded tax rates of 95 per cent and new forms of nationalisation, to secure ‘the widest possible diffusion of control and responsibility’ (p. 127).

The Left, however, was never a natural home for one of Jenkins’s temperament. A confirmed Atlanticist, he was already troubled by the ‘Russia complex’ to be found in sections of the party, and mocked those who saw nationalisation as ‘an infallible proof of robust radicalism’ (p. 137). His 1953 book Pursuit of Progress rowed back from the assault on private fortunes and abandoned the goal of abolishing public schools. As Campbell writes, Jenkins ‘was already, by temperament and conviction, a man of government, interested in winning and using power’, and he was exasperated by the ‘opposition-mindedness’ of the Labour left (p. 172). The word ‘socialism’ faded from his vocabulary, replaced – with characteristic cussedness – by those ‘r’ words he found so difficult to pronounce: ‘radicalism’, ‘reform’ and ‘progress’.

As Campbell acknowledges, Jenkins’ ‘dropping of his more left-wing ideas’ coincided awkwardly with the ‘widening of his social circle in the 1950s’ (p. 169). Labour politicians have often been prone to ‘the aristocratic embrace’, but Jenkins took this more literally than most. He established his bedroom as a sort of aristocratic salon, playing host between the sheets to a series of well-heeled women. His two most enduring mistresses, Caroline Gilmour and Leslie Bonham Carter, were married to two of his closest friends, and it was a requirement that his paramours should be on good terms with his wife. As Jenkins later reflected, he ‘could not imagine loving anyone who was not very fond of Jennifer’ (p. 166).

As his finances became more robust, Jenkins began to indulge his self-image as an Edwardian grandee. He was enchanted by the fin-de-siecle; even his children, as Bill Rodgers observed in 1956, had ‘turn-of-the-century names’ (p. 159). His more aristocratic friends found Jenkins’ wilting Labour credentials a subject of wry amusement. Writing to Evelyn Waugh, Anne Fleming recalled a party attended by the Avons and the Devonshires, which had erupted into a volley of ‘four-letter words’. ‘Debo’ Mitford appealed to Jenkins to ‘stop them by saying something Labour’; ‘but this’, Fleming wrly observed, ‘is something Roy has never been able to do’ (p. 218).

Yet if Jenkins’ commitment to ‘socialism’ had always been suspect, his ‘radicalism’ was more deeply rooted. He had called for the decriminalisation of homosexuality long before this was conventional on the Labour benches, and spoke out against censorship, capital punishment and restrictions on Sunday trading. He was liberal on both immigration and race relations, calling not for ‘a flattening process of assimilation’ but for ‘equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity’ (pp. 271–2). When Anthony Eden launched his ill-fated Suez intervention in 1956, Jenkins accused him of a ‘squalid imperialist adventure’ (p. 187), and he despised Labour’s ‘absurd, almost craven silence’ on Vietnam (p. 357). Having served on the Labour delegation to the Council of Europe in 1955, he became a convinced advocate of Britain’s European destiny.
Though robustly anti-Soviet, he pushed harder than most for a liquidation of commitments East of Suez, warning that there was ‘no greater recipe for disaster than a persistent refusal to face unwelcome facts’ (p. 317).

In this respect, the guiding thread of Jenkins’ politics was a peculiarly patrician brand of popular liberalism; it is no coincidence that the book which made his historical reputation, *Mr Balfour’s Poodle*, explored the struggle between ‘the peers and the people’ before the First World War. His patrician progressivism had an obvious ancestry in the Liberal Party of Asquith and Campbell-Bannerman, from which it had been absorbed into elements of the Labour tradition. It had no necessary connection with socialism, and in Jenkins’ case the link was not enduring.

Such positions made Jenkins suspect to some on the Left, but they did not impede his ministerial progress. Jenkins was a highly effective minister, despite a remarkably relaxed working day. He rarely arrived at the office before 10 o’clock in the morning and insisted on an hour and half for lunch each day. He would return to the office nourished and lubricated shortly before three, then refused to take work home (though he sometimes did half an hour in the car). As he freely acknowledged, he could hardly claim to be ‘excessively overworked’ (p. 250). Barbara Castle confessed to her diary in 1968 that ‘The way that man refuses to sacrifice his social life to his political duties never fails to astonish’. Jenkins was contemptuous of such attacks, believing that a minister should focus on ‘the main areas of policy’ and resist the temptation to micromanage. Castle, he wrote, ‘made exhaustion into a political virility symbol, and was foolishly critical of those who did not believe that decisions were best taken in a state of prostration’ (pp. 326–7).

Jenkins’ record as a minister suggests that he was right. His first spell at the Home Office, from 1965 to 1967, lasted less than two years, but left behind a remarkable legacy. He backed private members bills decriminalising homosexuality and legalising abortion, as well as reforming the law on race relations and immigration. He oversaw what *The Times* called ‘the greatest upheaval in policing since the time of Peel’ (p. 267), and introduced majority verdicts in criminal trials to prevent the ‘nobbling’ of juries. Success at the Home Office made Jenkins the obvious candidate for the Exchequer, following the devaluation of 1967. Untainted by the crises which had engulfed his predecessor, Jenkins drove through a series of defence cuts and accelerated the withdrawal from military bases in the Far and Middle East. His first budget raised taxes by more than £900 million, pairing the ‘vice taxes’ traditionally beloved of the Left with a ‘special charge’ on unearned incomes over £3,000. Jenkins himself called it ‘the harshest budget for a long time’, but its candour and ambition secured a political triumph. As Castle acknowledged, ‘the most swingeing Budget in history left our people positively exultant’ (pp. 322–3).

By 1968, Jenkins had held two of the big three departments of state. Had Labour won in 1970, he would probably have completed the set with the Foreign Office; but his eyes were already on a larger prize. Harold Wilson may have been paranoid, but that didn’t mean people weren’t plotting against him. In the spring of 1968, Jenkins was told that 60 MPs would sign a letter demanding Wilson’s resignation. In a sign of things to come, however, Jenkins prevaricated, first asking for 100 signatures and then for 120. He then requested that 70 per cent of the party should sign. As his friend and colleague, Bill Rodgers, later reflected, Jenkins seemed to lack ‘the muscle or the will for the ugliness or the infighting’ (p. 416). Castle mocked his ‘political daintiness’ (p. 461), noting shrewdly that he was ‘in some strange way an observer of politics rather than a practitioner’ (p. 335).

Jenkins would have further opportunities for the leadership, but his position was never so strong again. His calls for pay restraint angered the unions, and some blamed Labour’s defeat in 1970 on his refusal to engineer a pre-election give-away. He emerged with little credit from the debacle over *In Place of Strife* in 1969, having first backed the proposals and then retreated in the face of opposition. Most importantly, Jenkins was increasingly at odds with his party over the European question, which was to become the dominating passion of his career.

Wilson’s gyrations on the EEC epitomised, to Jenkins, everything that was wrong with British politics, and
he spoke sharply against the tactics of renegotiation and referendum. He voted with the Conservatives in 1971 for membership, and, when the Shadow Cabinet agreed to demand a referendum, he resigned the deputy leadership. ‘Jenkins’, writes Campbell, ‘was not temperamentally a rebel’ (p. 399), but he was increasingly alarmed by the rise of the Left. He was already wondering by 1974 whether it would be better if Labour remained in Opposition.

After a second, less happy spell at the Home Office from 1974 to 1976, Jenkins went to Brussels as President of the European Commission. Strikingly, his farewell dinner was attended by only one (former) Labour politician, Woodrow Wyatt; other guests included Victor Rothschild, Ian Gilmour, Mark Bonham Carter, Claus Moser and Robert Armstrong. Yet Brussels was to prove almost as unhappy an environment as Transport House. Jenkins spoke awkward French and was mocked for his grandiose tastes as ‘Le Roi Jean Quinze’. Though he led the Commission effectively and laid the foundations for monetary union, he sank into what, by his own admission, was a state of ‘suicidal depression’ (p. 484). As Campbell reflects, it was ‘arguably a waste of a major politician to condemn him to the frustrations of Brussels; and yet it takes a major politician to achieve even as little as Jenkins did’ (p. 538).

Yet there was little in British politics to draw him home. Jenkins despaired of the Labour Party and was unimpressed by Margaret Thatcher, loftily dismissing her as ‘slightly below the level of events’ (p. 495). (She ‘doesn’t know very much about wine’, he lamented, noting how she ‘refused the Lafite’ and ‘asked Giscard whether the Dom Perignon was French champagne’ (p. 528)). When he visited her in Downing Street in 1979, he ‘primly refused’ her offer of a drink. Twelve o’clock, he suggested, was rather early in the day. ‘Let us have one at 12.30. It will give us something to look forward to if the conversation goes badly’ (p. 526).

There was, however, to be one last great adventure in British politics: the formation of the SDP in 1981. Jenkins had appealed in his 1979 Dimbleby Lecture for ‘a new grouping with cohesion and relevant policies’ (p. 513), and the SDP promised for a brief, heady period a new political epoch. Within days of its launch, the party had recruited 43,000 members and raised £500,000. An early poll gave it 36 per cent – or 48 per cent in alliance with the Liberals. A secret list detailed 80 MPs the SDP hoped to recruit, ranging from Roy Hattersley and John Smith to Giles Radice and George Robertson. Jenkins was narrowly defeated in the Labour stronghold of Warrington, before winning Glasgow Hillhead with a 19 per cent swing.

The early success, however, was not to last. With one exception, the hoped-for Tory defections failed to materialise. As Campbell points out, ‘Tories like Heath and Gilmour were so sure that Mrs Thatcher was a temporary aberration who could not last long that they never thought seriously of jumping ship’ (p. 546). Most of the Labour centre-Left also stayed put, determined to haul their party back to the centre rather than risk all on a new and untried force. The electoral system posed a formidable obstacle, rewarding a party that won almost 8 million votes in 1983 with just 23 seats in Parliament. Relations between the ‘Gang of Four’ were also far from easy. Jenkins and David Owen never got on, with Owen convinced that the party ‘would have been better without involving Roy’ (p. 554). Jenkins admired Shirley Williams for her ‘demotic appeal’ (a characteristically back-handed compliment), but found her a frustrating colleague (p. 574). As he wrote in his memoirs, ‘I never came away from an encounter with her without being encouraged, bewitched and inspired, yet also totally mystified about what she was going to do next’ (p. 545).

Jenkins defeated Owen for the leadership in 1982, but, as Campbell observes, ‘having secured the prize, he turned out not to be a very good leader’ (p. 609). His talents were ministerial, not oppositional; he struggled to get a hearing in the Commons and was ‘ponderous and ill at ease’ (p. 620) before the cameras. At a time of political polarisation, his calls for moderation ‘seemed platitudinous and his prime ministerial pretensions merely pompous’ (p. 609). Parliament itself had changed since his departure to Brussels. Debates had become more raucous, with more playing to the camera, and he was visibly disconcerted by the new, more aggressive style of heckling. Jenkins had never been comfortable with party politics; privately, he had described the Dimbleby Lecture as ‘a new anti-party approach to British politics’ (p. 508), but this left him ill-equipped for the task of building a new party from scratch. Though he narrowly survived a coup attempt
during the 1983 election campaign, he resigned the leadership merely 11 months into his tenure.

The House of Lords, to which Jenkins retired in 1987, suited him better, providing a platform from which ‘he could deliver magisterial, somewhat lofty speeches to a respectful audience of his similarly ennobled contemporaries’ (p. 667). With more time to write, he produced best-selling biographies of Gladstone and Churchill, as well as a much-feted memoir. As Chancellor of Oxford University and mentor to Tony Blair, he achieved the dreaded status of an emasculated national treasure. Even Mrs Thatcher was shocked by his defeat at Glasgow Hillhead in 1987. ‘A man of such great distinction and stature’, she lamented – adding darkly, ‘It tells you something about the Scots’ (p. 661). Tony Benn likened his funeral in 2003 to ‘the memorial service of a Roman emperor, a man who had great talent, a great capacity for friendship, great charm, wildly ambitious, and who believed in maintaining the Establishment and the power of the Establishment’ (p. 749).

If Jenkins had indeed been an Emperor, his model would surely have been the philosopher and stoic Marcus Aurelius. Aurelius was a warrior, not just a thinker, who could summon the legions of Rome against the Bennites of the Ancient World. Jenkins was a more fastidious character, and disappointed many who rallied beneath his banner. Yet he, too, won more battles than he lost. On Europe, on policing, on race relations and ‘the permissive society’, he left a remarkable and enduring legacy. Jenkins was not, like Aurelius, proclaimed a god on his death in 2003; but he was the patron saint of the liberal conscience, in which role he exercised more real power than many who climbed higher up the greasy pole to Downing Street.

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