

Transcript

'Courage With Wisdom'

The Roy Jenkins Centenary Lecture, given by Lord Adonis

The Strand Group

King's College London

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Jon Davis: Good evening. Welcome to the forty-fourth Strand Group. I'm the director, Jon Davis. It's a great pleasure, for me personally, and for all of us at the Strand Group, to welcome, once again, Lord Adonis, one of our repeat performers over many, many years.

When Andrew, during the summer, tweeted that this year was the hundredth anniversary of Roy Jenkins's birth, and put out a call asking if somebody would like to host this, I immediately gave him a text and said, "Do you know, it's something that I think we would absolutely want to be doing." Why is that?

Well, first of all, it's Andrew talking about something of which he knows a great deal, which will be of a very serious nature. Secondly, I personally got to interview Roy Jenkins back in 1999, when I was doing my Master's thesis on his time as Chancellor, with Peter Hennessy; and I was struck at the time, and for ever after that – well, awestruck, I suppose, is the phrase – at somebody with such learning, with such experience, but also with such a great capacity to actually convey all of that. And thirdly, I think that Roy Jenkins – although passing nearly twenty years ago now – what's interesting, certainly in my classes, is that his name crops up quite often. Not just when we're teaching the history of the Treasury, for example, where he was Chancellor between 1967 and 1970, and by most – not all, but most commentators, was one of the great Chancellors since the Second World War; but also, for his own historical works, and although I know that not everyone would agree, I think that Roy Jenkins's *Churchill* is one of my favourite History books.

I think it's a masterclass in the quality of its writing; it's also got incredible insight, but that insight comes from the fact that, although it has hardly any actual primary research itself, what it does is it brings his own experience. Not just of being a young man, when all the great figures of the time would come through the house – his father's career would bring them to the house in Wales – but also, him being Chancellor, him being Home Secretary, him going to the European Commission... It just brings a flavour. And I think that Andrew's perfect to give this lecture, not least because he was a great friend of Jenkins, but because I think that Andrew's most recent book, on Ernest Bevin, has got a similar angle to it, and I'm sure that I'm not the only one who hasn't just bought it for themselves but has bought it for family members too.

Without further ado, here with the Roy Jenkins Centenary Lecture, "Courage with Wisdom", is our great friend, Lord Adonis. Andrew, you're very welcome.

[Lord Adonis's lecture until approx. 01:05:55]

Jon Davis: Thank you very much, Andrew. Our great friend, Captain Aitken of the Royal Navy, on Twitter, has put: "Insightful and thought-provoking. I think the phrase I'm searching for is 'subject-matter expert': comprehensive and coherent."

OK – let's turn to some questions. First we have a comment, from Tom Robinson up in Manchester, who says, "Please pass on my hearty approval of Andrew's Grand Old Man picture."

The first question is from Lord Liddle, who wrote in earlier today:

Did Roy always get it right? Do you believe he thought his resignation as Labour's deputy leader in 1972 had been a mistake, when the issue at stake was not membership of the European Community but Wilson's commitment to a referendum on membership, and Jenkins went on to join the 1974 government that was committed to a referendum, that Jenkins then played a key part in winning?

Didn't this misjudgement fatally weaken his position in Labour for no real gain?

Lord Adonis: That's a very good question, because Roy himself at the end of his life thought that the biggest mistake he thought he *might* have made – he said he wasn't sure – was resigning as Labour's deputy leader. By resigning as Labour's deputy leader in 1972, he weakened his position for 1974, when he could easily have become Chancellor if he'd been deputy leader, indeed probably would have been Chancellor. And if he'd been Chancellor in '74 – given that he wouldn't have allowed such a big expansion to take place from '74 to '76, so he wouldn't have had the scale of the crisis in '76, the IMF and all of that – his chances of becoming Prime Minister after Wilson would have been very good indeed.

However, one of my golden rules of life is that, whether you think it or not, Roy was usually right. And though at the time I thought that he was wrong, and even he thought he might have made a mistake, the issue on which he resigned – which, as Roger has just said, was the referendum, not Europe itself – looks remarkably different, now, in retrospect. Roy was concerned about the constitutional validity of the referendum, and how it would work with parliamentary sovereignty, which in the '70s didn't appear to be an issue, because of course there was a two-to-one majority for backing up the decision that Parliament had already taken on membership of the European Community. Seen from 2020 – after the experience of 2016 – maybe he was right.

Jon Davis: Next question from Matthew Lloyd, of my old *alma mater*, Queen Mary:

What do you believe Roy's advice would have been to Labour Party moderates during Corbynism? (Andrew, while you've been speaking, Corbyn's been readmitted to the Labour Party.) Would he have advocated leaving the party?

Lord Adonis: That's a tricky one, that one, because I thought all the time, during the last four years, "What would Roy have done now?" And the problem was that you had a much worse takeover of the Labour Party by the left than ever took place in Roy's day. I mean, this is the equivalent of Tony Benn winning the leadership of the party in 1980/81, as opposed to not even winning the deputy leadership – which is what happened, by a hair's breadth, when Denis Healey won it. However, there was a real, existing crisis taking place at the same time, in a hung parliament, on the issue which Roy cared about most passionately, which was membership of the European Union.

And the judgement I – and many other people who I think are at this event this evening – made, was that to split the Labour Party – at the moment when only by united Labour action was there any prospect whatsoever of stopping Brexit – would be a betrayal of the biggest objective of all; and the

thing to do was to try and seize the situation – to get Corbyn to move decisively in favour of a second referendum. Now in retrospect we know that that strategy failed. However, it's very hard to think that the strategy of splitting the Labour Party – more comprehensively than happened with Change UK – was more likely to succeed. The fundamental problem was that the social democrats in the Labour Party never had a strategy for maintaining control, and a vision of the future, for the party and the country after Tony Blair. And Roy was always good at constantly painting a picture of the path which lay ahead, and it was the failure to do that after 2007 which lay at the roots of all the problems that came thereafter.

Jon Davis: Thank you. Robert Chote, ex of the OBR:

With hindsight, did Roy feel – or do you feel – that he could have handled Callaghan better in delivering what he wanted on Europe in the 1970s?

Lord Adonis: Roy and Callaghan had a terrible relationship, because both of them were vying, essentially, for the leadership of the party; and both of them not only massively distrusted each other's motives, but were actually much further apart – in terms of their political objectives – than might be thought by just lumping them together with the phrase "the Labour right", which is too often done by historians. In fact their objectives were very, very different. Roy was a bold, liberal reformer, whereas Callaghan was an old-style Labour trade-union deal-maker, who basically wanted to keep the status quo working with better deals for his members. So he was quite good on terms and conditions, and issues to do with pay and straight living standards, but didn't share any of the wider liberal and pro-European objectives.

Remember it's Jim Callaghan who makes the famous "language of Chaucer" speech after the 1970 election – claiming that the language of Chaucer was at stake in any move towards joining the European Community, and that what we should say to the French, if they tried to make French the language of the Community, was "*Non, merci beaucoup*" – which was a great and decisive speech in moving Wilson *against* joining the European Community, which he'd previously favoured. Because what he feared was that he was going to lose both the Labour left *and* the Labour right.

Roy had utter contempt for that whole strategy – both its objectives and its means of achieving them. So maybe, if they'd found a way of working more closely together, they might have been able to stem the rise of the left; but the problem was that Roy didn't even see Jim Callaghan as on the same page as himself; and I'm afraid, looking back at the history of what Callaghan did, in his fairly disastrous stints in all the posts he held – Home Secretary, Chancellor, Foreign Secretary, and Prime Minister – I on balance agree with Roy. The only way this could have been done, I think, was by Roy himself becoming Wilson's successor as leader; the moment Callaghan became the successor, I don't think there were ever the makings of a partnership between them that would have worked.

Jon Davis: Peter Haydon asks:

Democracy is everywhere under attack from populists and authoritarians. What do you think Roy Jenkins would, today, be advocating as the best means of defending liberal democracy?

Lord Adonis: He wouldn't be in favour of compromise. You see, the key thing about Roy is that, having decided what his ground was, and worked out that it was defensible ground, he was never in favour of ludicrous, quixotic gestures; he didn't flinch. He wouldn't have flinched for one moment, before 2016, in making the passionate, pro-European case. A good part of the reason why we lost in 2016 – as Peter and I know only too well, because we've talked about this – is that people who were supposedly in favour of staying in the European Union were never prepared to make the case for

doing so. It was always the "Cameroons", and a half-hearted, pragmatic defence of [the idea of] change being worse than the status quo, which were the arguments put forward; and of course, in Jeremy Corbyn, we didn't even have a leader who himself really believed in staying in the EU. What we lacked all the way through that referendum campaign was anyone with Roy's passion and vision, and preparedness, to make the case.

You heard it in the clip, just then: how he set out his whole vision of a Europe that worked closer together, that shared common values, and that didn't hark back to a violent past; he would have been making the passionate arguments for European cooperation and integration, which were just never made in 2016. And looking at what happened, and how close the vote was, it's my view that if we'd made those passionate arguments, we would have won.

Roy was never in favour of appeasing those who were fundamentally hostile and on the other side. He was every bit as tough as they were; he was a *tough* liberal – much tougher than you might have thought, given some of his other, non-political interests – and it's this essential toughness in defending the liberal and social-democratic cause which was his abiding feature, as well as his decisiveness and ruthlessness in moving at the right time. To be absolutely frank, we've missed those badly in the last ten years.

Jon Davis: Andrew, we haven't got much time left, but we do have lots of questions – I'm just going to take three. So, Joseph Oliver asks:

Did you ever try to get Roy to re-join Labour in the Blair years?

Lord Adonis: No. His view was that it would have been, as he put it to me, "ludicrous for me to change parties *again* at my stage of life" – and he said, "I'm also a close friend of Paddy Ashdown's, and I never betray my friends."

Jon Davis: Jeremy Clarke asks:

Would Roy, with his view about private life being largely private, have been able to survive in the current media climate, where very little can be private?

Lord Adonis: I think Roy wouldn't have had any difficulty surviving, because Roy was never a hypocrite; he never – and this was one of his great and abiding qualities – he never criticised other politicians for how they led their private lives. Indeed, he never even raised the issue of his opponents and their personal lives. Remember, in 1987, his opponent in Glasgow Hillhead was George Galloway, and he never made a thing, at all, of any of the many features of George Galloway's life, public and private, that he could have raised. He thought the politicians who did that were beneath contempt. And so my view is that he would have been fairly secure, as well... because if the Daily Mail had tried to go [for his private life] – and his affairs were quite well known in his own political lifetime, and had got some publicity – I don't think it would have made much mileage, because there was never a scintilla of the hypocrite in Roy Jenkins, which was one of the characteristics that made him so attractive.

Jon Davis: A last question from Mohammad Khpal:

Can you identify a spiritual successor to Roy Jenkins in the Commons today?

Lord Adonis: No – I can't see one at the moment. But I keep looking. And let's hope – because if we don't have one, we've probably got the Tories in for another ten years.

Jon Davis: Andrew, thank you so much. I'm sorry to those who've asked questions, but we do need to draw it to a close.

Lord Adonis: And thank you, Jon, and thanks everyone. It's been a great experience.

Jon Davis: All that's left for me tonight is to say: Lord Adonis, I thought that was wonderful – certainly incredibly rich – and I think you did Roy proud. Andrew, thank you so much.