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"Roy Jenkins as transformational minister"

Mr Speaker's lectures on great 20th century parliamentarians

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Mr Speaker,

It is a privilege to be speaking not only in your presence but also in the presence of Dame Jennifer Jenkins, who celebrated her 90th birthday this year.

As a biographer, Roy Jenkins had something to say about several of Mr Speaker's predecessors. He didn't have a great deal of time for Mr Speaker Thomas, but then George Thomas suffered the severe defect in Roy's eyes of being both Welsh and proud of it, a condition which Roy never experienced even as a boy in Pontypool.

Nor was Roy much enamoured by Mr Speaker Clifton Brown. They were together on a parliamentary delegation to Rome in 1949, but Roy wasn't quite sure why Mr Speaker was there. "He was a rather surprising participant, particularly as he appeared not much to like abroad," he comments. Even at the age of 28, the Jenkins world divided into pro- and anti-Europeans.

Then there was Mr Speaker Hylton-Foster, Solicitor-General under Macmillan, with whom Roy crossed swords when he was striving to reform the law on print censorship. At a crucial meeting of the bill committee, most of the Tories failed to turn up, exposing Hylton-Foster to a string of embarrassing defeats. Roy writes: "He was however compensated for his punishment by his being made Speaker six months later."

In those days, if you failed as censor you became Speaker. Nowadays I think Mr Speaker rather wishes the two offices went hand-in-hand.

These lectures commemorate the centenary of the Parliament Act of 1911, the culmination of the struggle between Asquith's Liberal government and the Tory-dominated House of Lords. The Parliament Act was the subject of one of Roy's first books – entitled Mr Balfour's Poodle, after Lloyd George's famous quip: "The House of Lords is not the watchdog of the constitution: it is Mr Balfour's poodle."

Re-reading Mr Balfour's Poodle, published when Roy was 33, I am struck by the already powerful admiration of the urbane and worldly-wise Mr Asquith. This admiration flowered in Roy's later biography of Asquith, and perhaps more profoundly still in his own political career, which was Asquithian throughout: the steady, moderate liberal reformer, the delight in the good things of life, the intellectual self-confidence and fastidiousness, the passion behind the urbanity, the courage in the face of age and defeat.

Roy told me he was thinking of Paisley, Asquith's triumphal by-election return to the Commons in 1920, as he sought and won his own by-election return at Glasgow Hillhead in 1982. Both triumphs were short-lived and forlorn. But the courage is undeniable, not just at Hillhead but at the very end of his life when, at the age of 80 and seriously ill, he struggled to complete his magisterial biography of Churchill, the longest and to my mind the best of his books.

Aficionados will also be glad to note that Mr Balfour's Poodle already displays the orotundity which was to captivate Roy's admirers and critics alike.

Asquith is introduced to us as "in the fullness of his great powers of physical resilience ... his constructive intellectual equipment ... certainly more massive than that of any Prime Minister since Gladstone."

In plain English, he wasn't often ill and he got a first at Balliol, which in Roy's estimation was the highest and purest of intellectual achievements.

Better still is this description of Asquith's political make-up: "He was circumscribed by the limitations which had beset his predecessor [Campbell-Bannerman] and was prevented, partly by these and partly, perhaps, by his own temperament, from that feeling of impatience to put his hand to the plough and to strike out in new directions which was to be experienced most strongly by Lloyd George and by Churchill when they, in turn, ascended to the central control of affairs."

In other words, Asquith was calm and collected, unlike that rash and impetuous Welsh upstart. Of Churchill, Roy was more tolerant. After all, Churchill saved Britain from Hitler, whereas Lloyd George merely wrenched Downing Street from Asquith.

The question I want to address in this lecture is this: in what respect was Roy Jenkins great? Put differently, what is his enduring inspirational quality?

Roy, of course, never ascended to the central control of affairs. Nor was he in the very front rank of 20th century orators, in Parliament or outside, although he was a sharp debater and he coined good and telling passages. This was true right down to his last speech in the House of Lords, in the recall of Parliament to debate the Iraq crisis in September 2002, three months before his death. His speech contains this insightful and prescient passage about his friend Tony Blair:

"I have been repelled by attempts to portray [Tony Blair] as a vacuous man with an artificial smile and no convictions. I am reminded of similar attempts by a frustrated Right to suggest that Gladstone was mad, Asquith was corrupt and Attlee was negligible. My view is that the Prime Minister, far from lacking conviction, has almost too much, particularly when dealing with the world beyond Britain. He is a little too Manichaean for my perhaps now jaded taste, seeing matters in stark terms of good and evil, black and white, contending with each other, and with a consequent belief that if evil

is cast down good will inevitably follow. I am more inclined to see the world and the regimes within it in varying shades of grey."

That was six months before the invasion of Iraq. It was also 54 years after his first speech in the House of Commons. But as I say, it is not for his speeches that I believe Roy will be remembered above all.

What of Roy's large and fertile hinterland? Apart from Churchill, he was the most prolific and successful author to hold high office in the 20th century, and his books continue to be read. But I find little evidence for the view that hinterlands – literary, social, sporting or collecting – tend to make politicians more effective, although sometimes they make them more agreeable. Politics is a profession, and in my experience and observation those who do best at it are generally those who work hardest and most skilfully at it.

Anyway, it is quite wrong to see Roy as a part-time or dilettante politician. He fought every general election from 1945 until 1987 apart from 1979 when he was President of the European Commission, as well as three by-elections, two of which he won, and the 1975 Europe referendum, as a leader of the yes camp. In all, he was a parliamentary candidate 15 times, spent 28 years in the Commons, was a Minister or Commission President for twelve years, and topped it off by founding and leading a new political party, then leading the Lib Dems in the House of Lords. If that isn't a professional politician, then I don't know what is. As for Roy's literary pursuits, his books were almost exclusively on British politics and politicians, and all were written while he was in Opposition or retired. For Roy, writing was politics by other means, it wasn't a life apart from politics.

However, being professional at politics isn't the same as being ruthless in the pursuit of power. Here, Roy hesitated, fatally for his prospects of ascending to the central control of affairs. He hesitated to move against Wilson when he might have done successfully in 1968 and '69; then, by resigning the Deputy Leadership of the Labour Party three years later, he in effect threw up any prospect of leading

the Labour party. Harold Wilson made a telling remark to Mr Speaker Selwyn Lloyd on the evening of Roy's resignation of the deputy leadership. "It has worked out for the best," said Wilson. "Roy will go off and write books, which is what he most likes doing, and we will all have a more comfortable life."

If Roy's enduring legacy doesn't in my view lie in oratory, hinterland or supreme leadership, nor is it ultimately in broad ideas and programmes. There were Jenkins-ites, fiercely loyal to Roy personally; there were also Jenkins causes, of which more anon; but there was no Jenkins-ism.

Roy did of course found a new political party. As a personal quest this was brave and courageous. Jim Callaghan told me it was one of the most courageous things he had seen in politics, by someone who wasn't mad or bad or both, and some of us here were proud to belong to the SDP. Perhaps the SDP helped rebuild the Labour party, perhaps it delayed the process; you can argue both ways. But in terms of its social democratic programme, it essentially followed in the well-trodden path of Roy's friend and rival Tony Crosland, except on Europe, where Crosland was equivocal while Roy was unflinching.

I say "except on Europe". That is a pretty big caveat. Without the Jenkinsites, Britain's entry into the European Community would have been still more difficult in the 1970s. But except on Europe, the label "Jenkinsite" didn't go with a bold forward agenda on a par with being a "Thatcherite" in the 1980s or a "Blairite" after 1997. I remember even at the time, as a student Jenkinsite, being a bit depressed in the 1983 election when the best that Roy could say about the future of British industry was that he did not favour more frontier wars between the public and private sectors. It was a good phrase but grist to Ralf Dahrendorf's jibe that the SDP stood for a better yesterday.

This goes to the heart of Roy's most intriguing remark about his own career. He said that he would like to have been Prime Minister, but didn't think he would have enjoyed being Prime Minister. In truth,

faced with the violent industrial and social conflicts of the 1970s and '80s, Roy did not have enough self-belief that his own leadership and vision were the answer. To make a Jenkins-style analogy, he was Adlai Stevenson rather than JFK.

I am aware that I'm beginning to sound a bit like Roy himself, awarding alphas, betas and gammas – as he was wont to do, in great Oxford style – for different categories of achievement. So far we have been in the realm of what Roy I guess would have judged beta triple plus, with touches of beta alpha, in the 20th century parliamentarian stakes, a rating I recall him giving to Stanley Baldwin when we played this parlour game one day over lunch at Brooks's. He gave Attlee alpha beta, Macmillan beta alpha, Eden straight gama. Asquith, of course, was straight alpha, until 1915 at least.

In Roy's case, I would apply alpha to his record as a minister. It is as a minister, not as a parliamentarian or political leader per se, that Roy Jenkins is an enduring inspiration.

Roy was good or outstanding in all his positions of executive leadership – as Home Secretary twice, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, and as President of the European Commission.

I shall argue in a moment that as Home Secretary in the 1960s, he wasn't simply outstanding, he was the model of the transformational minister.

But in all his executive posts, he demonstrated remarkable qualities of clarity, decisiveness, confidence, administrative competence, and the ability to mobilise middle as well as radical opinion.

Roy became Chancellor in 1967 in the wake of devaluation, a catastrophic collapse in the central plank of a government's economic policy matched in recent times only by Black Wednesday in 1992. Within two years, acting decisively on public spending and on what we would today call the "growth agenda", and exuding confidence and measured optimism, he had largely restored the government's economic credibility.

Roy liked to quip that most Labour governments require two Chancellors – one to get into an economic mess, the other to try to get out of it; except for Dennis Healey, who as he put it, "had that India rubber quality to get himself into the crisis, and then out of it, as if he were two entirely different people." In this view Roy was to Callaghan as Cripps was to Dalton. Labour still lost in 1970. Whether Roy's 1970 budget helped or hindered Labour's prospects is much debated; but compared to the situation when he took over the Treasury, the remarkable fact is that Wilson was in with a shout at all.

Roy was similarly solid in adversity as President of the European Commission for four years from January 1977. He took and initially treated the job as consolation prize for not getting the Foreign Office when Callaghan succeeded Wilson and gave it to Crosland. The condition of the European Community was similarly depressed in the wake of the mid-1970s oil and inflation crises.

Arriving in Brussels, Roy's morale was poor and his agenda thin. He even had to fight, semi-farcically, to be allowed to attend European summits alongside heads of government.

But once he got into his stride, he set and largely achieved a bold agenda. Greece joined the EU – Europe rejoices still – and Spain and Portugal were put on the path to membership. His greatest impact was on monetary integration. Once Roy set about promoting a European Monetary System in his Florence speech of July 1977, momentum for the idea grew. The European Monetary System was set up less than two years after the Florence speech, in March 1979. Without Schmidt and Giscard it would not have happened; but without Roy, they may not have wanted it to happen in the first place. And, of course, the EMS led on to other things, which I won't get into here.

Roy was a one-term President of the Commission. In that one term he reinvented the office. He turned it into an essentially ministerial and political office, an achievement not lost on Jacques Delors in

particular. The general view in mid-1970s Brussels was that Walter Hallstein had been a founding one-off, and that the weak and almost immediately forgotten bureaucratic tenures of Rey, Malfatti, Mansholt and Ortoli were par for the course – and I had to Google those four even to recall their names. After Roy, the presidency of the European Commission was a post for prime ministers and dominant ministers. All of Roy's successors have been prime ministers apart from Delors himself.

So as Chancellor and as Commission President, Roy was a highly effective executive leader. But it was as Home Secretary in the first Wilson government that he was transformational.

It is an astonishing fact that Roy was Home Secretary for only one year and eleven months, from 23rd December 1965 to 30th November 1967, and those 23 months included the 1966 general election. But it is not too much to say that in those 23 months he and his allies changed the face of society.

The legalisation of abortion. The legalisation of homosexuality. "No fault" divorce. The prohibition of racial discrimination. The abolition of stage censorship. The abolition of flogging in prisons. Radical reform of the police. Majority verdicts in criminal trials. Individually these reforms were important, some of them seismic. Taken together – and together with subsequent reforms extending their principles, including, equally radically, the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 – taken together, as I say, they changed the face of society.

Several of these reforms took the form of Private Members' Bills, and some were not finally enacted until after Roy left the Home Office. But few if any of them would have passed in the mid 1960s without Roy as Home Secretary. It was Roy's bold and skilful ministerial leadership, including the way he supported private members' bills, which got them seriously going.

Roy always intended these reforms to be taken together and to be seen as a whole. He didn't see himself as a Home Secretary enacting a few liberal reforms, he saw himself – unashamedly – as a liberal

Home Secretary. The Home Secretary chapter in his memoirs is entitled "The Liberal Hour." He intended his reforms to foster, across society, a liberal spirit to challenge rigid social control of the individual by, as he put it to me, the bishops and the bigots. (He didn't, I hasten to add, see these two groups as entirely congruous: he liked some bishops, particularly those who didn't go on about God, in the way that Trollope was fascinated by Barchester.)

Long before becoming Home Secretary, in his 1959 book The Labour Case, Roy set out a whole unauthorised programme of proposed liberal reforms. "There is the need for the State to do less to restrict personal freedom," was his theme, and he sought, systematically, to promote and enact as much as he could of this programme as Home Secretary.

In the rest of this lecture I dissect Roy's first stint as Home Secretary, to present the anatomy of the transformational Minister. Before doing so, what of the obvious point – wouldn't it all have happened anyway?

The answer, in respect of the major liberal reforms, must of course be: "yes, over time". It was a matter of time, in Britain as across secularising Europe, before abortion and homosexuality were legalised, divorce made easier and censorship on grounds of morals abolished. You could make the same long-term inevitability point about, for example, the privatisation of industry in the 1980s, devolution to Scotland in the 1990s – or indeed, the limitation of the powers of the House of Lords by the Parliament Act of 1911: they had all become more or less inevitable, given the spirit of the age.

But because something beneficial is in the long-run inevitable doesn't reduce the benefit of doing it sooner rather than later, doing it boldly rather than grudgingly, and doing it well rather than badly. The purpose of the politician as reformer is to do precisely this, and this is what Roy did.

One only has to look, for example, at the vexed history of abortion across western democracies to see what this means in the specific

context of the Jenkins reforms. In Britain, illegal abortions were running at between 40,000 and 200,000 a year, with dozens of women dying each year from criminal abortions, before the change of the law in 1967. In France the equivalent reform did not happen until 1975. In Italy 1978. In the Netherlands 1980. In Belgium 1990. In West Germany and later the united Germany, the right of women to abortion was fought in the courts throughout the 1960s, 70s, 80s and 90s until a general legal right was finally established in 1995, a whole generation after Britain. For years, women from all these countries came to Britain for abortions because they weren't legal at home. And I haven't time even to start on the Republic of Ireland or the United States.

It can be said with reasonable confidence that some if not all of the major Jenkins reforms would have been delayed several years without him, and even then they might have been implemented more tentatively and piecemeal.

In the case of abortion, bill after bill had failed in the previous twenty years, while on homosexuality there had been no progress whatever since the Wolfenden Report nine years earlier. Rab Butler, Home Secretary after Wolfenden, did a hand-wringing response, saying it was all too difficult, and although he wasn't necessarily against legalisation in principle, more time was needed for research and the education of public opinion.

However, for a 1960s counterfactual of the Home Office without Jenkins there is no need for a crystal ball, just consider the other two Home Secretaries in the Wilson government – Roy's predecessor Sir Frank Soskice, and his successor Jim Callaghan.

Frank Soskice has the distinction of being the first Home Secretary not to hang anyone. In other respects he was weak, indecisive, and behaved almost apolitically as a lawyer. Only months before Roy became Home Secretary, a private member's bill to legalise homosexuality was defeated outright on a free vote in the Commons, with Labour whips organising against because, as Richard

Crossman recorded, they “objected fiercely that it was turning our working-class support against us.” Soskice wouldn’t even countenance a law against racial discrimination, arguing that this might stir up racial prejudice. At a loss for a policy on immigration and racial tension, in late 1965 he proposed a Royal Commission. Crossman records the Cabinet discussion thus: “It is difficult to conceive of a sillier proposal. By setting up a Royal Commission we should simply announce our determination to postpone any action at all for years. ... Fortunately Gerald Gardiner [Lord Chancellor] and Bert Bowden [Leader of the House] bashed poor Frank Soskice right away.”

No one could accuse Jim Callaghan< Roy’s successor, of being apolitical or weak. In Opposition, Callaghan had been parliamentary spokesman for the Police Federation; he was the archetypal bluff and tough Home Secretary.

Callaghan wasn’t hostile to all liberal reform. He saw through three Jenkins reforms which were in train but not yet enacted by the end of 1967 – the bills on race discrimination, divorce and censorship.

But a mid-1960s Callaghan home secretaryship would clearly not have been in the Jenkins mould. One need only look at the positions he took at the time. When in late 1966 Roy asked the Cabinet for government time to enable the private member’s bill to legalise homosexuality to make progress, and to be allowed to speak and vote in support of it, Crossman records the discussion as follows: “Callaghan, Wilson, George Brown and others asked why any time should be given at all to such a Bill and why we should abandon the neutrality which the Labour Cabinet had always shown to such controversial issues as homosexuality, abortion, divorce and Sunday opening of cinemas.”

Roy prevailed, but when the bills on abortion and homosexuality came before the Commons, Callaghan did not vote for either of them, either on second reading or at any subsequent stage.

As for the forces strongly opposed to change, on both bills they included Willie Ross, Wilson's old school Secretary of State for Scotland, who even after the legalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales refused to support legalisation north of the border – and so it remained in Scotland, illegal, until 1980, thirteen years after the change of the law in England and Wales. In Northern Ireland, homosexuality wasn't legalised until 1982.

Let me make another general remark about the Jenkins reforms. A moment ago I included police reform and majority verdicts in the summary of his greatest hits. To be precise, Roy culled the number of police authorities in England and Wales from 117 to 49, where – plus a few further amalgamations taking the number to 43 in the early 1970s – it has remained ever since, impervious to further rationalisation. On juries, Roy carried legislation abolishing the rule that jury verdicts in England and Wales had to be unanimous. Instead they could be 11-1 or 10-2. This now seems plain common sense, but the unanimity rule dated back to the 14th century, and was still in the 1960s regarded as sacrosanct by traditionalists on the right – including Margaret Thatcher – as well as most of the legal and civil rights community on the left, despite evidence of jury nobbling undermining trials in serious criminal cases.

These police and jury reforms were essentially about modernisation. They weren't inherently liberal. But Roy presented them as integral to his liberal programme, arguing that by improving the efficiency of the police and the courts, and thereby tackling crime more effectively, the public was better protected and populist demands for drastic punishments would reduce. Fewer police authorities improved the capacity of the police in respect of serious organised crime, while majority verdicts increased the conviction rate which, as Roy put it, "fitted in well with my general approach to deterrence, which was to regard the likelihood of detection and conviction as more powerful factors than an enormity of punishment."

As an aside, there is an article in the latest Economist on the fiscal crisis in California, where on the back of three-strikes-and-you-are-

out and draconian prison sentences, spending on prisons has risen from 4 per cent of the state budget thirty years ago to more than 10 per cent today, which is more than the state spends on universities. California's governor is seeking to reverse this trend by more efficient courts and better non-custodial sentences. The Economist says: "The idea, based on research and recent experience in states such as Texas and Hawaii, is that people change behaviour in response to swift and certain consequences, not necessarily severe ones." That is word for word the Jenkins view of 50 years ago, although territory less agreeable to Roy than Texas and Hawaii it is hard to conceive. As his son Charles said at his funeral, "I suspect he always wished that Boston was on the mouth of the Gironde."

My point is this. Roy understood that to carry middle opinion behind progressive reform, you have to be big on modernisation and efficiency as well as big on reform; and you have constantly to make the connection between the two. Then you are in a good position to build consensus across party lines, and you should seek to do so. On majority verdicts, Roy cultivated both Quintin Hogg, his Tory shadow, and Michael Foot, leader of the backbench left. Neither were natural bedfellows, yet both supported the reform on free votes.

Part of Roy's skill at the Home Office was to counter the notion that liberals are soft on crime, and to create a powerful sense that being modern and being liberal are two sides of the same coin.

This is the first point in my anatomy of Roy Jenkins as transformational minister. The successful reformer is also the successful moderniser.

My second point is implicit in noting that Roy was Home Secretary for only 23 months. It is not length of tenure that makes a transformational minister, but having a credible agenda and being able to implement it. As it happens, 23 months is only marginally shorter than the average tenure of Cabinet ministers in Britain since the war, which is 28 months according to a recent Institute for Government study. So although Roy's tenure was brief, it was

typically brief. By contrast, none of the longest serving Home Secretaries since the war have much by way of reform to show for it. To be fair to Michael Howard, who held the post for four years, I don't think he ever wanted the word "reformer" on his tombstone. But Chuter Ede, Home Secretary for the entire Attlee Government, might have been expected to strike out more radically, yet didn't. Rab Butler, much respected by Roy, not least as a fellow President of the Royal Society of Literature, was Home Secretary for five and a half years and had little to show for it either.

Clearly if you have only got 23 months and you want to be a reformer, it is not enough to work up an agenda over time. You generally need to arrive in the job with a broad plan pretty well worked out.

This isn't just about length of tenure; it is also about the nature of power. As a minister, you are rarely more powerful than in your opening months in post, when you set the pace and expectations of your ministerial life and people expect you to be there for at least a while.

Roy arrived as Home Secretary with his reform plan pretty well fully worked out. He was receptive to technical advice, but he had made up his mind on the big issues and he wasn't put off by civil service or media conservatism. For more than a decade he had been forming his views on how to liberalise the state and free the individual, and from day one he simply got on with it.

But it's not just that Roy knew what he wanted to do. He was passionate about it, and his passion was infectious. I am taken by a remark of Jonathan Freedland's in a recent article. It's quite untrue, he writes, that people believe in ideas. Rather they believe in people who believe in ideas. The two go together, and that was certainly true of Roy Jenkins. As David Marquand, one of the 1966 Jenkinsite intake of Labour MPs, puts it: "It is hard to recapture in retrospect the excitement Roy generated as Home Secretary."

This leads to my third point. In order to be a transformational minister, it helps if you want to do the job. This may seem stark staring obvious; but it is remarkable how often Cabinet ministers occupy posts in which they evince little interest, let alone passion, simply because it's what they were offered. Conversely, it is all too rare for a Prime Minister to choose someone for a post who knows what they want to do with it and could set out a semi-coherent plan at the time of their appointment.

In Roy's case, not only did he badly want to be Home Secretary, but as a minister outside the Cabinet he adopted the exceptionally high risk strategy of turning down Harold Wilson's first offer of the Cabinet.

It was January 1965, the first reshuffle after the 1964 election. Wilson offered him Education Secretary, a significant promotion and in the Cabinet. Roy asked for a few hours to think it over, and decided he would chance it and hold out for the Home Office, or another post in which he was more interested, at a later stage. And so he told Wilson. When I read the account of this in Roy's memoirs twenty years ago, I took it at face value. Re-reading it, with my experience since, I am awestruck. In all my time in No 10 and as a minister, I cannot think of a single case of an ambitious up-and-coming minister refusing a significant promotion, let alone a first job in the Cabinet, for any reason, let alone because they weren't particularly interested in the subject matter of the job on offer and preferred to hold out for another. It wasn't even the case that the Home Office was imminently vacant. Frank Soskice had only been in it for three months; it took nearly a further year, and a plenty of ups and downs, before it came Roy's way.

All in all, it testifies to an extraordinary political nerve and strategic sense.

I particularly treasure Roy's exchange with Wilson when turning down the Education Secretaryship – which Tony Crosland promptly accepted. In his memoirs he puts it thus: "Looking for an excuse, I

said that all three of our children were at fee-paying schools and that this surely was an obstacle to being Minister of Education in a Labour government. Wilson brushed this aside as being of no importance. "So were mine," he said.

Just to add, it is certainly true that Roy wasn't much interested in education – or rather in schools, since he became interested in universities as Chancellor of Oxford. Schools are a particular concern of Jennifer's and indeed mine, but the only conversation I remember with him on the subject was when, on one occasion, his train-spotter and high society sympathies came together and he rattled off all the headmasters of Eton since Robert Birley.

To recap: three features so far of the successful reforming minister, exemplified by Roy Jenkins as Home Secretary. You have got to want the job. You have got to have a plan at the outset. And the plan needs to combine reform with modernisation. But all this is to no avail unless you can get the machine to work and do your bidding.

The machine, for a minister, is Whitehall, your party, the media and Parliament; without reasonable competence in all four arenas, the most passionate and well prepared minister comes to little. Roy mastered all four as Home Secretary – and, again, he is a case study in how to do it. Let me take them in turn.

Whitehall, for a minister, is two overlapping but distinct entities: your ministerial colleagues and the civil service.

The most important relationship for a Home Secretary is of course with the Prime Minister. Harold Wilson had a high opinion of Roy, even when they fell out, not least for his writing. The story goes that Wilson read Asquith on the plane to Washington for his first meeting with LBJ after the 1964 election, and muttered to his private secretary something like: "That man should be in my Cabinet." He appointed Roy as Home Secretary largely on merit, telling him the Cabinet Secretary said he was the best minister in the government. As ever, there were personal and factional factors; but competence,

dynamic energy, and strong media reputations were at a premium by the end of 1965, and Roy supplied all three.

For his part, Roy cultivated Wilson carefully. The relationship became strained when he was Chancellor as Wilson came to see plots all around him, most of them real. It broke down completely in Opposition after 1970, for which they were about equally responsible. It recovered a bit, but was frosty at best during the second Home Secretaryship. But during the first Home Secretaryship it was generally good, with mutual respect and tolerance.

Tolerance was essential, because Wilson – MP for Huyton in Liverpool – was, politically and personally, no fan of the Jenkins reforms. Like Callaghan, he voted for neither the legalisation of abortion nor homosexuality in the Commons. He wasn't even keen on abolishing theatre censorship. The stage adaptation of Mrs Wilson's Diary was threatening to erupt on the West End in the summer of 1967. Wilson had been warned that the script "made him out to be a complete mugwump," as he told Crossman, and he tried to get Roy to drop the measure, on the excuse that Buckingham Palace feared it might lead to the Royal Family being satirised. Roy didn't budge, Mrs Wilson's Diary, uncensored, was a success, and that was that. Wilson needed Roy's cachet as a strong and popular minister – he didn't have many others – and at every crucial juncture, he backed him.

Roy's relations with other colleagues were serviceable. He allowed Callaghan to patronise him, Crossman to lecture him, and George Brown to rant at him, periodically at least.

As for the civil service, Roy was the mandarin's minister. Among top civil servants I have spoken to over the last 25 years, only Michael Heseltine receives as many plaudits. This isn't because he was conventional, let alone supine. His first act on becoming Home Secretary was to sack his permanent secretary, after bitter exchanges about working practices and Roy's desire to widen the net of official advice. He also relied heavily on special advisers, then a

new and distrusted breed – now they are just old and distrusted. His long-serving special adviser and friend John Harris was at his right hand throughout his ministerial life. They became so close, in manner as much as opinion, that John came to speak like Roy, act like Roy, think like Roy, drink like Roy, even look like Roy – indeed, when they sat side by side in the House of Lords in their last years, John the Lib Dem chief whip to Roy as leader of the Lib Dem peers, the one was easily mistaken for the other.

Being unconventional in such ways – indeed in any ways – can easily set the Whitehall machine against you. But Roy's strategy wasn't to circumvent the machine; but rather, by decisive moves early on, to establish working practices which suited him, to surround himself with officials he rated and trusted, then to depend on them totally and deploy them as his agents with the machine beyond. This generally worked well. His key private secretaries were so close, they moved from Department to department with him – or in the case of Hayden Phillips, to Brussels from the Home Office. Apart from the one he sacked, his permanent secretaries and top officials in Brussels became confidants as well as advisers, and were proactive and protective on his behalf. For his part, Roy was solicitous not only for their careers, but also for their honours – a cause dear to the heart of Sir Humphrey, which Roy took immensely seriously. When I worked at No 10 for Tony Blair, there was almost no subject on which Roy had a stronger opinion than the composition of honours lists, particularly the deserving nature of those who had worked for him in the past or – in the case of vice-chancellors of Oxford – in the present.

So much for Whitehall. As Home Secretary, Roy was equally effective at mobilising his party. Again, this wasn't by means conventional, let alone supine.

Roy arrived at Westminster, the baby of the House at the age of 27 in 1948, with the purest of Labour pedigrees. His father, Arthur, had been Labour MP for Pontypool after long and distinguished service in the South Wales Miners' Federation. Arthur was PPS and friend to

Attlee, who spoke at Roy and Jennifer's wedding, and who gave Roy the run of No 10 to write his biography, which was Roy's first book, published in the same year he became an MP. If there was a post-war Labour aristocracy, Roy was born into it with almost ducal pretentions.

It didn't turn out quite that way. Oxford and Brooks's shaped Roy more than Pontypool and the miners. Even in the 1950s he rarely described himself as a socialist. He took, uncompromisingly, the "radical moderate" course in almost every internal Labour battle from Gaitskell v Bevan in the 1950s, to the conflicts over Europe in the 1970s, to the decision to split the party in 1980 rather than launch an internal fightback against Bennism.

Put like that, it sounds like a steady linear progress from the Welsh valleys to the bosom of the Liberal establishment, whose historic leaders Roy admired so much.

But that is quite unhistorical. After the deaths of Bevan and then Gaitskell, and three election defeats in a row, Labour under Harold Wilson went through a short but successful period determined to win, with factions at bay. Wilson and his white hot heat of the technological revolution was the New Britain; the 14th Earl of Home was Old Britain; and it was as a broad church of the centre and left that Labour won in 1964 and 66.

Roy was well within this broad church. As Home Secretary and Chancellor, he came to symbolise it more than the Prime Minister himself. But although he was in some ways a liberal right marker of the Labour coalition, he wasn't at this stage a notably divisive figure, and he cultivated support among the unions and across the party.

This included the Left. When conducting interviews about Roy in the late 1990s, I was struck by how near universal, on the Left, was praise for Roy as Home Secretary. Barbara Castle was effusive. Michael Foot told me, in his pokey Tribune office on Grays Inn Road, that Roy was "a damn good Home Secretary" although he was quick to add: "it went downhill after that." This wasn't just because he

supported the liberal reforms. Roy took care to court Foot for the modernising reforms as well, as I noted earlier.

Roy was especially popular among the large and young 1966 Labour intake, where – left and right – he was seen as a dynamic force and perhaps the face of Labour's future as Wilson became increasingly embattled and jaded. It wasn't to be. But these were the MPs who rallied to Roy as Home Secretary, sticking it out across the all-night sittings needed to get the liberal reforms through the House of Commons – which being private members' bills, were not subject to government whips.

If Roy's position was strong in the late-60s Labour party, it was stronger still in the media. In the 1960s he was a highly adept media operator. The liberal left media loved him, and he cultivated them assiduously. The Observer was a particular fan. David Astor, the Observer's proprietor-editor throughout the 1950s and '60s, wasn't just an admirer of Roy's: he put Roy on his payroll before the 1964 election as a feature writer, giving him far greater prominence than he would have got as a mid-ranking Opposition spokesman.

But Roy wasn't just the darling of the liberal press. He had a strong following on Hugh Cudlip's Mirror, as well as, in the centre and centre-right, the Times under William Rees-Mogg, the Economist under Alastair Burnett, and much of the BBC. Here it was Roy the Balliol moderniser and capable administrator which appealed, rather than the liberal reformer. Rees-Mogg, ex-Balliol but a Catholic, wasn't remotely in the liberal space, yet The Times strongly supported Roy to succeed as Chancellor. As for the Economist, Roy nearly became its editor in the early 60s, so much did they admire him, and the paper gave John Harris a job after the 1970 defeat, whereupon he continued to assist Roy much as before, not least over lunch with journalists at the Reform Club.

Roy's media popularity continued into the 1970s and 1980s. By the mid-1970s it far exceeded his popularity inside the Labour party. By the late 1970s the mainstream liberal and right-wing media alike

were urging him to break with Labour, and they were keen supporters of the formation of the SDP. Indeed, the whole SDP project was in effect launched by Roy in a prime-time lecture on the BBC – the Dimbleby lecture of November 1979.

If the media could collectively have chosen a Prime Minister, at almost any time from 1967 to 1983 it would probably have been Roy Jenkins – at any rate, if the election had been by AV.

This brings me finally to Roy Jenkins the parliamentarian. I put this – the seventh attribute of the transformational minister – last not because it is least. I would not dare suggest any such thing in your presence, Mr Speaker. Rather I come to it last for this reason: for a reform-minded minister there are parliamentary skills which are essential but ephemeral, and those which are essential and critical, and the two need to be distinguished.

By starting this analysis of Roy as Home Secretary with policy and ending with Parliament, the classic trophies of parliamentary fame – the set-piece despatch box triumphs – can be seen for what they are to the reforming minister: essential but ephemeral.

They are essential, in that a minister who can't survive in Parliament can't survive at all. Roy had no difficulty in this respect. His greatest parliamentary test as Home Secretary was the escape of the Russian spy George Blake from Wormwood Scrubs in October 1966. Ted Heath tabled a censure motion after Roy mishandled the initial response. In a debate of high drama, Roy trounced Heath and Quintin Hogg by demonstrating that everything he had done and not done as Home Secretary in dealing with prison security, his Tory predecessors had done and not done worse. Crossman described it as "a tremendous annihilating attack which completely destroyed the Opposition." There was much cheering, waving of order papers, and all that.

Yet as Roy put it in his memoirs: "It was all rather ludicrous and showed that debating ... really is the harlot of the arts ... [For] nothing of substance had happened. .... It was as foolish to pretend

before the debate that I had any real responsibility for who got over a wall in W12 as it was to suggest that I had suddenly become a superman whose ability to deflate leaders of the opposition more than compensated for my inability to find absconding spies."

The parliamentary triumphs which mattered to Roy weren't the set-piece parliamentary dramas, but the subtle and collaborative work needed to facilitate the passage of his contentious reforms.

His key challenge was to get through Parliament the two highly sensitive liberal reforms on which he immediately fixed his sights – the legalisation of abortion and homosexuality – but which, as I explained earlier, he couldn't conceivably get Wilson and the Cabinet to endorse as government measures.

It had to be done by the way of private members' bills. This was hazardous at best, but here Roy's parliamentary experience was invaluable. He knew the private members' bill world back to front from his 1950s campaign to abolish print censorship on grounds of morals. After years of literary and parliamentary agitation, Roy succeeded in piloting a private member's bill through in 1959 allowing for a defence of literary merit. It was a half measure, although it turned out to be a sufficient half measure when Penguin Books was acquitted in the Lady Chatterley trial which followed. But it was the best he could get past the sphinx-like Rab Butler, who as Home Secretary was prepared to open the shutters a bit, provided the Tory colonels and matrons weren't too scandalised.

The lesson Roy drew from this, and from the abolition of hanging after the 1964 election, was that the private member's bill route was serviceable, so long as you had the right backbench promoter and so long as the Home Secretary came in behind a private member's bill with total support, even while the government was officially neutral and the issue a matter of individual conscience. This had to include vocal and organisational support, and providing however much government time was needed on the floor of the Commons to break

filibusters, so making the private member's bill a quasi-government bill but without collective ministerial responsibility.

This was a significant parliamentary innovation. As we have seen, it was also controversial within the government, once colleagues realised what Roy was up to. But Roy did more than this. With an instinct for seizing the initiative and building momentum, he decided immediately after the 1966 election to move in this way not just on one of the two legalisations, but on both abortion and homosexuality at the same time. This was another high-risk strategy. Not only did it double the controversy; it also divided the support. Some of the leading supporters of legalising homosexuality – including Leo Abse and Norman St John Stevas – were strongly opposed to legalising abortion, which involved, as Roy put it, treating the same MPs as "heroes" and "hobgoblins" on different days while retaining their goodwill throughout.

But Roy's calculation was that this risk was outweighed by the narrow window of opportunity to mobilise, on the run, the 1966 influx of new and progressive Labour MPs, while they were still enthusiastic and while he was still Home Secretary.

This judgement was vindicated, in that both bills passed in the first session after the election. By the second session Roy was no longer Home Secretary, Jim Callaghan was in his place, and glad confident morning was receding fast on the Labour backbenches.

As for the tactics needed to get the bills through, the private members' route required a high degree of collaboration. David Steel, who promoted the Abortion Bill, and Leo Abse, the Sexual Offences Bill, were effective parliamentarians of great energy and persuasion. Without them there would have been no Bills. But without the Home Secretary behind them, their Bills wouldn't have stood a chance. It was a remarkable team effort. The Home Office not only drafted the Bills and provided back-up support. Roy orchestrated Whitehall and the parliamentary machine in the ways I have described, including repeated allocations of extra government

time on the floor of the House to enable the passage of the bills. Roy's junior ministers also played an important part in facilitating the passage of the Bills.

I said a moment ago that Roy got the Cabinet to agree he could speak and vote for the two Bills. This wasn't just a symbolic gesture. He spoke strongly in support of both bills at every stage on the floor of the House. On the second reading of the Abortion Bill he described the status quo as "harsh and archaic" and "in urgent need of reform." On the Sexual Offences Bill he didn't hide behind arguments about enforcement and police corruption; he stated baldly that homosexuality was a fact of life, and not "a matter of choice", for a sizeable minority; "it is not concentrated in any particular social classes or occupational groups .... the majority of homosexuals ... [are] ordinary citizens who do normal jobs," and deserved legal protection not legal oppression. Taking head-on Rab Butler's argument that public opinion was unprepared, Roy simply asserted that more time had passed and "to a substantial extent [public opinion] has now been educated."

It took three all-night sittings to get the two bills through their final stages on the floor of the Commons, after months in committee. Roy was on the front bench throughout, voting in all 45 divisions on the two bills, both speaking and voting against every significant proposed amendment to water down the bills.

The third all-nighter, on the Abortion Bill, started at 10.15pm on a Thursday and finished at noon on the Friday. A mammoth filibuster ended only when it was clear to the opponents that Roy and David Steel had rallied enough supporters to keep the House sitting through a second night and into Saturday if necessary to get the Bill through.

So it was that the Sexual Offences Bill became law at the end of July 1967, and the Abortion Bill at the end of October, a month before Roy ceased to be Home Secretary.

In his life of Wilson, Ben Pimlott states boldly: “most Home Secretaries are unpopular and fail; Jenkins was popular and succeeded.”

I have tried to explain why Roy succeeded; the interaction between the skilful parliamentarian, the effective policy-maker, the energetic moderniser, and the bold and inspirational minister.

But to me – and now I speak personally and not analytically – Roy’s achievement isn’t that he was so technically accomplished, but that he was so accomplished in a cause which was so great.

For millions of men and women, then and since, the Jenkins reforms helped bring liberation, dignity, freedom. They built a stronger, more open society. They demonstrated the nobility of politics at its best.

For years after, debate raged on the pros and cons of the so-called permissive society. Roy always called it the civilised society; and as he pointed out, not one of his reforms was reversed, even under Margaret Thatcher; indeed almost all of them have been extended. Only this month, David Cameron told the Conservative party conference that the government intends to legislate for gay marriage. The Prime Minister claimed this as a great Tory cause to strengthen social bonds. He was speaking 45 years almost to the day after the introduction of the Sexual Offences Bill.

A final recollection. Roy’s memorial service, in Westminster Abbey, was for me somewhat fraught. Tony Blair had been due to give the address – I still have the draft – but he had to pull out at the last moment to fly to Washington to commune with George Bush about Iraq. Quite some irony. Shirley Williams stepped in and, of course was brilliant. I undertook to get her a message to read from the Prime Minister. Until she started speaking I wasn’t sure she had received it by email, but all was well.

As Shirley spoke I glanced up, to see I was sitting next to the simple memorial tablet to Asquith. On it are the words of Milton:

Unshaken, unseduced, unterrified

His loyalty he kept, his love, his zeal.

Nor number, nor example with him wrought

To swerve from truth, or change his constant mind.

It is what Roy admired in Asquith. It is what so many of us admire in Roy.