

## JENKINS, ROY HARRIS Baron Jenkins of Hillhead (1920 - 2003), politician and author

**Name:** Roy Harris Jenkins

**Date of birth:** 1920

**Date of death:** 2003

**Gender:** Male

**Occupation:** politician and author

**Area of activity:** Politics, Government and Political Movements; Literature and Writing

Roy Jenkins was born on 11 November 1920 at Greenlands, Snatchwood Road, Abersychan, near Pontypool, the only son of Arthur Jenkins (1882-1946), a trade unionist and politician who served a prison sentence for his role in the 1926 General Strike, and his wife Harriet (née Harris, 1886-1953). Educated at Pentwyn Primary School and Abersychan County Grammar School, he then attended six months of classes at the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire, Cardiff as preparation for applying to Balliol College, Oxford (1938-1941), where he took a first in Politics, Philosophy, and Economics. From here, Jenkins's career progressed quickly, often aided by his father's connections in the labour movement (he was MP for Pontypool 1935-1946 and served as Clement Attlee's parliamentary aide during the period) and his own Oxford acquaintances. During the Second World War Jenkins served as an officer on a domestic artillery battery after 1942 before being moved to work as a codebreaker at Bletchley Park from 1944 until war's end. He met Jennifer Morris (1921-2017) at a Fabian Summer School in Devon in 1940, and they married on 20 January 1945 in London. They had two sons, Charles and Edward, and a daughter, Cynthia.

Now 24, Jenkins attempted to get himself elected to Parliament. Despite trying in several Midlands constituencies, he was only able to secure the candidacy in Solihull for the 1945 election and, though unsuccessful, narrowed his opponent's majority to only 5,049 in a predominantly Conservative area. The next opportunity appeared only months later. His father's early death, likely caused by overwork, in 1946 meant a by-election in the Pontypool constituency. Jenkins applied to be the Labour candidate but lost out to local solicitor [Granville West](#). This was Jenkin's only real attempt to seek election in Wales, and until 1982 he only contested English constituencies. Alongside working as an economist for the Industrial and Commercial Finance Corporation and as a journalist, he compiled a volume of Clement Attlee's speeches for publication and published his first political biography, an 'interim biography' of Attlee. By the time this book was published, he was Labour's candidate for Southwark Central in a 1948 by-election. The seat was due to be abolished in 1950, but it offered an opportunity to get into the House of Commons and find another seat as an experienced member. He was successful, and was able to secure the constituency of Stechford, near Birmingham, in time for the 1950 election, and held this until his resignation in 1977. Once Labour went into opposition, he was a firm supporter of the moderate former Chancellor (and Oxford graduate) Hugh Gaitskell over his fellow south-Walian [Aneurin Bevan](#). During this period, he continued to write, producing *Mr Balfour's Poodle* (1954) about the 1910-11 Parliamentary crisis, *Dilke: a Victorian Tragedy* (1958) about the destruction of Charles Dilke's political career, and *Asquith* (1964) about the former Liberal Prime Minister.

Jenkins remained close to Gaitskell after he won the leadership in 1955, despite a major disagreement over Europe in the

early 1960s. During this period, his important essay on Labour's ambitions for legal reform was published in the Penguin Special *The Labour Case* (1959). When Harold Wilson secured the party leadership after Gaitskell's death in 1963, and then the premiership through his 1964 election victory, Jenkins entered his most influential period as a policymaker and minister. Between 1964 and 1977, he was Minister for Aviation (1964-65), Home Secretary (twice, 1965-67 and 1974-76), Chancellor of the Exchequer (1967-1970), and Deputy Leader of the Labour party (1970-1972). In his first term as Home Secretary, he facilitated the passage of legislation reforming the laws on homosexuality, abortion, and divorce, implemented the abolition of the death penalty, and restructured the police. As Chancellor he dealt with the fallout from devaluation and restored confidence. Yet, while he began his deputy leadership as heir apparent, his commitment to joining the European Common Market ended any hope for this. In the early 1970s, Labour was a primarily-anti-Common Market party, and its having a Deputy Leader who led 69 Labour MPs to support Edward Heath's application in 1971 was problematic. Despite supporting the party line throughout the passage of what became the European Communities Act, 1972, Jenkins felt obliged to resign as Deputy Leader after his refusal to support Labour's policy of a referendum on membership. Europe in many ways shaped the rest of his career. Although he passed important legislation on gender and racial equality after his return to the Home Office (1974-1976), his main act was to lead the Yes campaign during the 1975 European referendum. This directly led to his appointment as the only British President of the European Commission (1977-1981), but also ended any hope of becoming a Labour Leader and Prime Minister.

While in Brussels, Jenkins had time to consider the future of British politics and his own political career. In 1979, he delivered the BBC's Dibleby lecture, in which he advocated centrist politics and a move away from Britain's two-party system. After his Presidency ended in 1981, he met with likeminded Labour MPs (the so-called 'Gang of Four' of Jenkins, Shirley Williams, David Owen, and Bill Rodgers), issued the 'Limehouse Declaration' of their ambitions and proceeded to form the Social Democratic Party. Jenkins was its first leader (1982-1983), and successfully contested Glasgow Hillhead at a 1982 by-election and held the seat until 1987. During his brief leadership he helped negotiate an electoral alliance with David Steel's Liberal Party and was that alignment's 'Prime Minister Designate' in the 1983 election, when they sought to 'break the mould' of British politics. Their success can be measured in vote share. While Labour secured 27.6% of the vote, the SDP-Liberal Alliance won 25.4%, with Labour the beneficiary of the British electoral system. Despite this, Jenkins did not remain party Leader long and David Owen succeeded him. He stood down from the House of Commons in 1987, was appointed to the House of Lords the same year and served as leader of the newly merged Liberal Democrat's peers under Paddy Ashdown (1988-1997).

His later life remained busy, with Jenkins advising both Ashdown and the post-1994 Labour Leader Tony Blair, who appointed him to lead a commission looking at the voting system. In 1987 he was also appointed Chancellor of Oxford University, a lifetime appointment, and in 1988 took office as President of the Royal Society of Literature. During these final years of his political life, he produced a number of books, including his own autobiography, *A Life at the Centre* (1991), and biographies of *Gladstone* (1995) and *Churchill* (2001). A biography of Franklin Delano Roosevelt was near completion at the time of his death.

Roy Jenkins died on 5 January 2003 at his home in East Hendred, Oxfordshire. His funeral took place on 10 January at the village church, where he was buried.

## Author

Marc Collinson

## Sources

Anthony Howard, '[Jenkins, Roy Harris, Baron Jenkins of Hillhead \(1920-2003\), politician and author](#)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [accessed 18 July 2022]

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John Campbell, *Roy Jenkins: a well-rounded life* (London 2014)

## Further reading

Roy Jenkins, *A Life at the Centre* (London 1991)

Neil Stockley, [Roy Jenkins \(Lord Jenkins\), 1920-2003](#), Liberal History website [accessed 18 July 2022]

Wikipedia Article: [Roy Jenkins](#)

## Additional Links

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