

The Crosland Centenary

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Anthony “Tony” Crosland, who was born 100 years ago on 29 August 1918, was undoubtedly the most influential Fabian of all time, having a larger effect on the course of British politics than even the ‘founding fathers’, including George Bernard Shaw and the Webbs. The Fabian Society played an important part in his life: He was one of the authors of *New Fabian Essays*, in 1952, was a member of the executive committee for many years, and its chairman in 1961-2, and wrote for many of its publications and spoke at innumerable events.

He was, of course, a major figure in Harold Wilson’s governments of 1964-70 and 1974-76, occupying four important posts, including education secretary and president of the board of trade and environment secretary, though he was bitterly disappointed not to be chosen as chancellor of the exchequer when James Callaghan resigned – a post for which he was highly qualified. The position went instead to Roy Jenkins, with whom he had enjoyed a close friendship since their Oxford days, though their relationship was never the same again.

When Callaghan became prime minister in 1976, he preferred Crosland to Jenkins as Foreign Secretary – a post he had never sought, but to whose challenges he responded with growing enthusiasm, and for the first time began to be seen by many as a future party leader and Prime Minister. My view at the time was that for this to happen, Callaghan would have to carry out his apparent intention to swap jobs between Tony and Denis Healey, and for Tony to be seen as the more successful chancellor. Whether this would ever have happened we shall never know, because one year later, in February 1977, he was struck down by a stroke, and died at the age of 58.

Yet Tony’s considerable achievements as a minister were undoubtedly eclipsed by his fame as an author, particularly of his master work, *The Future of Socialism*, first published in October 1956, and widely seen as the most important political book published – at least on the left – of the 20th century. It was re-issued in a special 50th anniversary edition in 2006, which I had the great pleasure of editing, and to which Gordon Brown, on the eve of his premiership contributed the foreword. The late Professor Anthony King, of the University of Essex, wrote that Crosland was “the greatest British Socialist thinker of all-time – greater than Robert Owen, William Morris and R.H. Tawney”. The strength of his message has not diminished over the years. Although many of the issues with which he dealt are no longer relevant, it remains the most cogent and lucid presentation of the underlying values of democratic socialism ever attempted, and still has a great deal to say to future generations. Younger readers would be well advised to tackle it in parallel with Susan Crosland’s [remarkable memoir of her husband](#), and the recent [comprehensive study of Crosland’s life and work](#) by Patrick Diamond.

As a personal reminiscence, I first encountered Tony Crosland in the early 1950s, when I was a keen young Bevanite and he was a leading supporter of Hugh Gaitskell.

I started off with a distinct disapproval of him, but this did not survive the first two occasions when I heard him speak, both at Fabian functions.

The second of these was at a weekend school at Beatrice Webb House (the former trade union conference near Dorking), in 1952 or 1953. Tony was to speak on the economics of nationalisation. It was shortly after Labour's defeat in the 1951 general election, and the nationalised industries were extremely unpopular, partly because of the large losses several of them were making, but mainly because of the high prices they were charging their customers. The main theme of Tony's talk, however, was that these prices were far too *low*. They had mistakenly not taken advantage of their monopoly position, and had supplied coal, electricity and gas far too cheaply to privately owned industry at well below world prices enabling them to make huge profits while the state-owned firms were in the red. Had they charged 'realistic' prices, Tony argued, they could have raised sufficient funds to pay for the massive updating and development which otherwise had to be subsidised by the Treasury.

Not being an economist, I had no idea if his argument was sound, but I was deeply impressed by his willingness to challenge what had become conventional wisdom, and the brio with which he advanced his case. A few years later I started work at the Fabians as deputy general secretary, and soon discovered that by far the ablest members of its executive committee were three still youngish Labour MPs. They were the three men that Giles Radice wrote about in his book *Friends and Rivals* – Crosland, Jenkins and Healey.

It was only after the 1970 election, when I was elected for Romford, that I got to know Tony very well. He asked me to be his PPS and said that he wished to be able to talk together with total frankness, most specifically about his relations with Roy Jenkins, which superficially were good, but underneath both were deeply distrustful of each other. I agreed to this, and soon after told Bill Rodgers that I would be unable to attend meetings of an unofficial group he was running, which was effectively "the Friends of Roy Jenkins". This was made up largely of pro-European MPs, of whom I was certainly one, and it was Europe that drove Jenkins and Crosland further apart, and occasioned the only serious disagreement which I ever had with Tony. I was one of the 69 Labour MPs who voted to stay in, and Tony, who basically was in favour of Europe, put party unity first, but eventually could not bring himself to vote against, in accordance with a three-line whip, and abstained. He thought I was mad to vote for, potentially putting my parliamentary career in jeopardy. He was right about this, but I never regretted my action as I would have lost all self-respect if I had acted otherwise. Crosland was heavily criticised by the pro-Europeans, who thought he was putting personal ambition before his convictions. I don't think this was true, at least consciously, but I do sometimes wonder if he would have voted differently if somebody other than Roy Jenkins had been leading the pro-Europeans.

Some time later, Jenkins resigned the deputy leadership (and the shadow chancellorship) in protest against the shadow cabinet's decision to back a referendum. Tony was at a conference in Tokyo at the time, and was doubtful about running for the deputy leadership, but very keen to be appointed shadow chancellor. He asked me to go and see Harold Wilson and arrange a time when they could speak on the phone.

Harold received me warmly, and said he was available at any time, but when Tony phoned he was very evasive. It transpired that Denis Healey had already been to see him, and had been promised the post. Healey was certainly less qualified than Tony, but as an elected member of the National Executive, carried more clout. So Tony ran instead for the deputy leadership, and in his absence I had to start his campaign. In the end, he came a respectable third with 61 votes, being eliminated behind Ted Short, who went on to beat Michael Foot in the run-off. I canvassed a large number of MPs on Tony's behalf, and was surprised that a significant number, who might have been expected to vote for Tony, were backing Ted Short, but gave very implausible reasons for doing so. I remember, in particular, that both David Marquand and David Owen were among these, and seemed very uncomfortable explaining themselves. It was only several years later that I learnt that there had been a secret meeting of some 40-50 Jenkinsite MPs, who had pledged all to vote the same way.

A little coda on the rivalry with Roy. I went to Brussels as a journalist in 1980, and saw quite a lot of him. At dinner one evening, Roy was in a very relaxed and candid mood and began by sketching out his plans for setting up the SDP. He asked my view, and I replied that it was an ill-conceived venture and I certainly wouldn't join it – though I eventually did. He then started to talk about Tony, and said how much he regretted that they had fallen out. It was purely by chance, he said, that he had been chosen as chancellor in 1967, and he could well understand why Tony had felt he had the better claim. When we were at Oxford, he said, Tony was the great star, and I was NOTHING – nothing, he said. He went on to say that he was certain that Tony would have been chosen as Callaghan's successor had he lived. I felt a strong sense that this had troubled him for a long time, and that he was grasping for a final opportunity to settle old scores and to bury the hatchet.