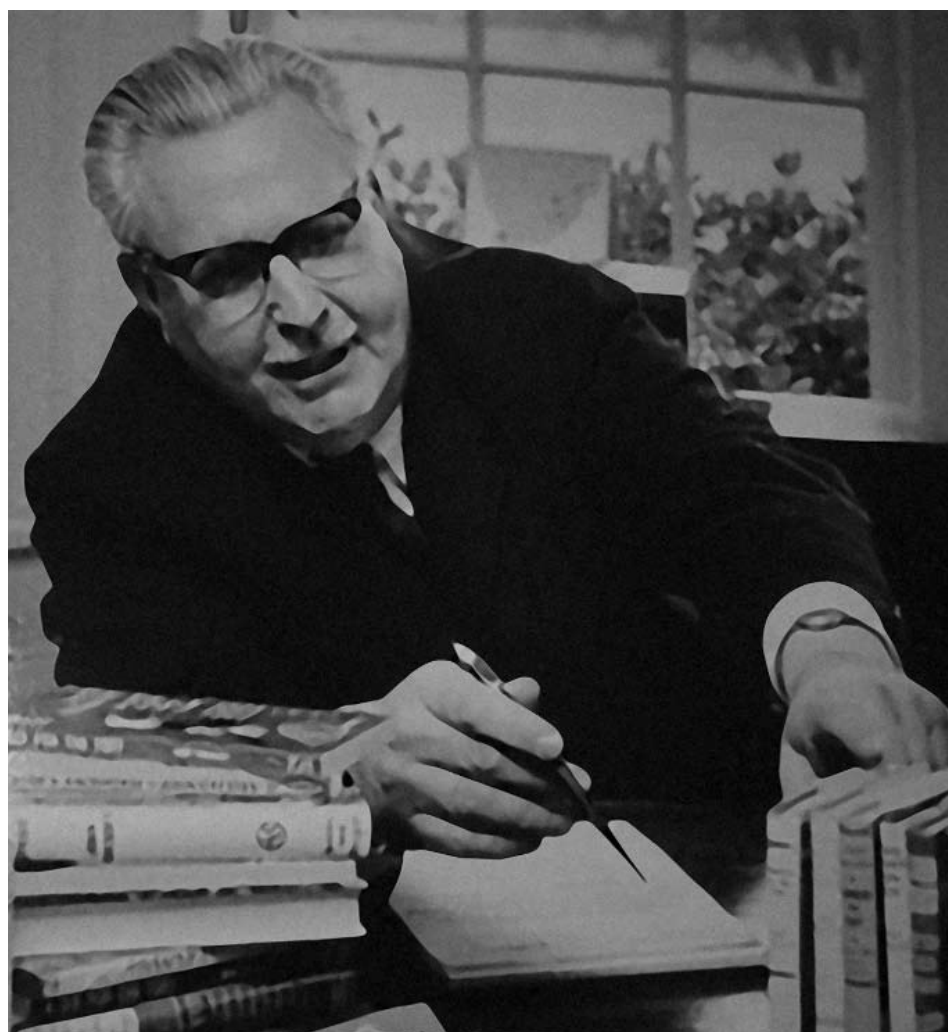


MAN OF MYSTERY

The single-minded determination that John Creasey showed in pursuing a writing career despite receiving 743 rejection slips prior to his first sale suggests that he should have been ideally suited to be a Liberal parliamentary candidate in the difficult decade of the 1950s. However he stood only once for the Liberal Party, and his energies ultimately went in other directions. **Ian Millsted** reviews the life and political activities of John Creasey, author of almost 600 books, thrillers, crime novels ... and mysteries. To what extent did his Liberal views influence his writings?



JOHN CREASEY was born in Southfield, Surrey, on 17 September 1908, the seventh of nine children. He suffered polio aged two, and as a consequence could not walk until the age of six. His interests in writing and politics were both manifest from relatively early ages. As a student at Peterborough Road School in Fulham at the age of ten, he

wrote a piece about an imaginary conversation between Marshal Foch and the Kaiser which elicited the suggestion from his headmaster that he might earn a living for himself as a writer. Of his interest in politics, Creasey later wrote, 'I have been a political animal all my life. At twelve I was organising and speaking at street corners for the Liberal Party.'¹

Y: JOHN CREASEY

Creasey left school at fourteen and started work as a clerk. This was the first of many jobs he passed through, often getting into trouble or being fired for writing when he should have been working. His family were not always supportive or sympathetic but he did manage to sell his first short story at the age of seventeen and eventually had his first novel accepted at twenty-three. Thereafter, and especially with the start of his series about 'The Toff', the floodgates opened. He wrote at least 560 books in his lifetime and still stands as one of the most prolific authors ever. 'I'm a phenomenon,' he said. 'I can't explain myself.'² His output is even more remarkable given that even after becoming a full-time writer in 1935 he only wrote in the mornings, leaving the afternoons free for business meetings, watching cricket and activities for his voluntary organisations.

Creasey wrote to make a living, but he paid attention to his craft. When his early writing was criticised by Dorothy L. Sayers for carelessness he hired an assistant to check the details. His first novels were stand-alone mysteries which were plot-driven and had a fast pace. Plot and pace remained consistent features of his writing. He soon started developing the various series for which he is best known. 'Department Z' was the first series, from 1933 onwards, and ran to twenty-nine titles. The first of forty-nine 'Baron'

books was released in 1937 and the next year the first of fifty-eight 'Toff' books (though the character had been known from magazines since 1933). Creasey also wrote westerns, romances and others, often under one of his many pseudonyms. He used his first wife's name, Margaret Cooke, for some of the romance titles. He also tried to include social issues in some of his stories (most obviously in the 'Toff' books) and the title *Vote for Murder* from 1948 reflects his ongoing interest in politics.

The childhood polio meant that Creasey was rejected for service in World War Two. He was, though, active in many public spheres. He became a public supporter of National Savings for which he was awarded the MBE in 1946. He supported Oxfam, campaigned for road safety and was a supporter of United Europe.

Creasey was more ready than most for the resumption of normal politics in 1945. By now resident in Bournemouth, he had become Chairman of that town's Liberal Association; though unfortunately it may not have extended much beyond Creasey. The Liberal candidate for the 1945 general election was Basil Wigoder, newly returned from war service. The campaign was based mainly on public speeches and letters to the influential local newspaper rather than canvassing, but Wigoder polled over fourteen thousand votes to come second.³ This was a good result

John Creasey
(1908–73)

compared to the national picture, and was probably due to a combination of residual pre-war support, Creasey's skill at publicity and an unsuitable Labour candidate. The outcome encouraged more support from the party at large when a by-election arose in the seat in November 1945. Wigoder was again the candidate, but this time the Labour Party put up a stronger showing and the Liberals were pushed into third place, with 9,548 votes.⁴ Wigoder departed to pursue his legal career.

John Creasey was selected as candidate in late 1946 (and selected again for Bournemouth West following boundary changes that split the constituency). It was in this period, up to the 1950 election, that he was most active both locally and nationally. He was elected to the National Liberal Council, and when the Liberal Assembly opened in Bournemouth in 1947 he was on the platform.⁵

Creasey was a frequent correspondent to local newspapers, which enabled him to maintain a high profile against the two bigger parties. They also give an insight into his policy views at this time. He criticised the closed shop, and opposed monopolies.⁶ He was broadly in favour of private enterprise as well as profit-sharing co-ownerships.⁷ He opposed the first-past-the-post electoral system.⁸ He was in favour of the Health Act, though he felt it needed some correction.⁹ He was anti-communist and

pro-Europe.¹⁰ He was against the continuation of conscription.¹¹

Outside the newspaper columns, a Liberal Party 'Brains' Trust', with Creasey as question-master, sold out for an audience of two thousand.¹² Despite this the local party did not fight council elections at this time.

The Conservatives selected Viscount Cranborne to defend Bournemouth West in the 1950 election. Creasey addressed forty meetings during the campaign but despite this, and his high profile, the result was still third place. The 9,216 votes and 17.3 per cent share of the poll were good compared to the party's national showing, but down from the result Basil Wigoder had achieved in the 1945 by-election.

Given the Labour government's narrow victory in 1950, another election in the near future was not unpredictable. However, Creasey seems to have been pursuing other interests at this point and scaled down his party activities. Neither he, nor anyone else, stood for the Liberals in the seat in the 1951 election; in fact he was away on a world tour with his second wife, Evelyn, and their two sons. He was, however, re-elected president of the local Liberal Association.

The 1950s were a busy enough time for John Creasey without adding extensive political activity. He was still producing a dozen or so books each year. He co-founded the Crime Writers' Association in 1953. With his family he travelled to America (resulting in a travel book and added business and publishing links). His well received novel *Gideon's Day* (written under the pseudonym J. J. Marric in 1955) was made into a film by legendary director John Ford. He established the *John Creasey Mystery Magazine* in 1956 and became publisher of Jay Books in 1957. He also moved from Bournemouth to Wiltshire.

It was not only lack of time that led Creasey to move

away from Liberal politics. He resigned from the party in 1956. 'I left the party over Suez, not simply because I disagreed with its condemnation of Anthony Eden, but because Suez seemed the final proof that it was morally indefensible for decisions affecting the lives of every one of us to be made by one party.' This was written some time later¹³ but maybe Creasey was already thinking along different political lines by this time. However it is an odd criticism to make of the Liberal Party at the time, when it was affecting the lives of people less than it ever had before or since. The party had been reduced to five MPs, and even they held differing views on the Suez affair. It seems more likely that Creasey was generally disillusioned with the party at this time and that Suez was the event required to finalise a decision to leave. He did, however, maintain his membership of the National Liberal Club.

Nor did the Suez affair mark Creasey's last links with the Liberal Party. In 1962 he announced that he would be appearing on a Liberal platform with Jo Grimond.¹⁴ Possibly his enthusiasm had been rekindled by the Orpington by-election result in March of that year. He also said, referring to the possibility of becoming a Liberal candidate again, 'I think it unlikely if I were approached at the right time that I would refuse'.¹⁵ However, he was due to leave the country on a fourteen-month world tour at this point, which took him away from domestic politics in the physical sense, and possibly away from Liberal politics in the ideological sense. Whether he would have become an active Liberal again had he remained in Britain in 1962–63 is unknown. It does seem likely that many local associations would have been interested in a candidate who would have been able to finance his own campaign although, as shown below, Creasey and the Liberals were

to move further apart from each other in policy terms over the following few years.

Some insight into Creasey's thinking can perhaps be gleaned from one of his more political books written at this time. *Gideon's Vote* was published in 1964 (by Hodder & Stoughton Ltd.) but would have been written at least a year before – Creasey's discipline meant he was always well ahead of the publishing deadlines and, indeed, new Creasey novels were being published several years after his death as a result. Gideon describes himself as 'politically a middle-of-the-road man who did not always agree with middle-of-the-road politicians' and this is probably how Creasey saw himself. The main plot of the novel is the threat to the democratic process from extremists on the left and right of the political spectrum. A sub-plot involves Gideon's son running as a Liberal in his school election and coming a good second.

The world tour was partly a working holiday, as before. Creasey wrote, and sold, stories and articles as he travelled. He completed one novel on the sea voyage from Britain to southern Africa. In South Africa, despite declaring that 'multi-racialism is the eventual answer',¹⁶ he also said of the anti-apartheid campaigners: 'I listened to Scott, Paton, Huddleston and so many others and thought – They've some axe to grind ... but it looks to me like a form of intellectual idealism divorced from realism'.¹⁷ This was not a view likely to be shared by an increasing number in the Liberal Party back in Britain.

By visiting such thriving places as Hong Kong, Australia, Japan and the US, Creasey grew to perceive a malaise infecting Britain. This view may have been reinforced or, possibly, inspired by many of the ex-pats he met on his travels. Appropriately enough, two high-profile television series of his characters 'Gideon' and 'The Baron' were made at this time and were sold

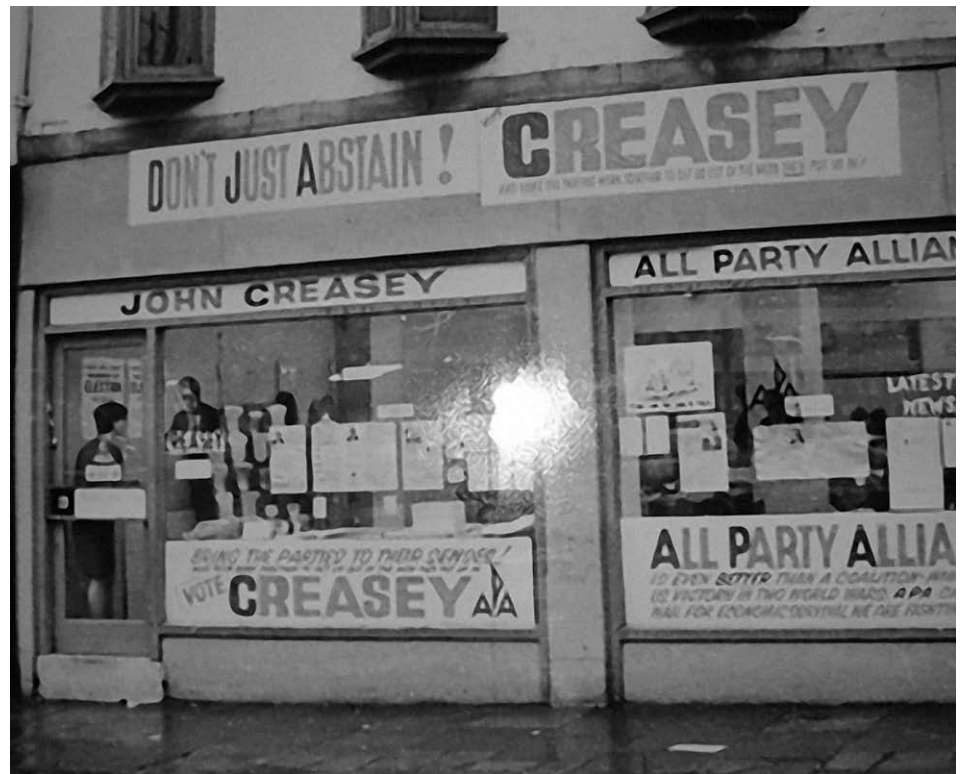
Gideon describes himself as 'politically a middle-of-the-road man who did not always agree with middle-of-the-road politicians' and this is probably how Creasey saw himself.

internationally. Creasey showed some disappointment that the BBC showed little interest in adapting his stories though he was surely better served by the entrepreneurial ability of Lew Grade whose company produced both these series.

Creasey took no public part in the general elections of 1964 or 1966 but he did begin developing the ideas that he pursued, in political terms, for the remainder of his life. He established the All-Party Alliance in January 1966. Although he fought elections under this label, it was more a pressure group than a political party. Its principal aim was to see elected a government of the best people from all parties in order to sort out the problems of the day. Creasey explained his beliefs further in the books *Good, God and Man* (1967) and *Evolution to Democracy* (1969). He wanted fixed-term elections, a cabinet made up in proportion to votes for respective parties, and no party whips. He suggested an industrial democracy divided between the four groups, state, private enterprise, workers and unions, and management.

These ideas were put to the test when a long anticipated by-election was held in Nuneaton following the resignation of Frank Cousins to return to trade union activity. Creasey had indicated as early as August 1966¹⁸ that he might stand, and the poll was finally held in March 1967. In November 1966 he was asked if he was still a Liberal at heart. He replied, 'No, I am opposed to some of their policies ... I remain a small-l liberal'.¹⁹ In the run-up to the campaign Creasey commented on the unwelcome decline of Britain's economy as well as its national and international prestige.²⁰ He wanted to see the balance of payments in credit.²¹ He also paid attention to local issues, calling for a local colliery to be kept open.²²

Another former Liberal, Air Vice-Marshal Donald Bennett,²³ also stood at the by-election,



fighting as an Independent on an anti-Common Market platform. The presence of five names on the ballot paper was unusual at a time when even three-cornered elections were not yet the norm. In the event the Labour Party retained the seat. Creasey came fourth with 2,755 votes and 6.4 per cent. This was a remarkably strong result for an independent candidate for the time. Bennett was fifth.

Soon afterwards Creasey stood again in the Brierley Hill by-election. Coming only six weeks after Nuneaton there was little time to campaign and his result was 1,305 votes (2.2 per cent) and another fourth place. The Conservatives held the seat with an increased majority.²⁴

Even the support of Lancashire and England cricketer Brian Statham did not draw many more votes in the Manchester Gorton by-election in November 1967. In his election leaflet Creasey called for a national referendum on capital punishment, immigration and the Common Market. This would have been in line with his belief in matters being taken out of the hands of party machines, but also suggests that

One of Creasey's campaign HQs for the All-Party Alliance

he was trying to gain populist votes. The mention of capital punishment would have been particularly significant in a north-west constituency where the details of the Moors murders were still fresh in people's memories. He secured 1,123 votes (2.7 per cent) and again came fourth. Labour just held the seat against a challenge from the young Winston Churchill (the grandson of Sir Winston).

Creasey's final campaign was also his most successful under this label. The Oldham West by-election was set for June 1968. Creasey was joined on the campaign trail by actor Robert Beatty. This time he polled 3,389 votes (13.2 per cent) and third place, beating the Liberal candidate. As was noted with regard to his Bournemouth campaign, Creasey used local newspapers to raise his profile in elections, employing a combination of direct correspondence and newsworthy events, such as the celebrity support mentioned above, to maintain a high profile. Nuneaton and Oldham had local, daily evening newspapers corresponding to the constituencies which may have maximised

the impact of this technique. This was not the case in Brierley Hill or Manchester Gorton.

The Conservatives won Oldham West, gaining the seat from Labour. Creasey, no doubt encouraged by such a good result for a non-aligned candidate, announced that he would concentrate on Oldham West at the next general election.²⁵ In the event that never happened, and he announced in 1970 that he would not fight the election. The same year saw him divorced and subsequently marry his third wife, Jeanne Williams.

Even at this point Creasey did not seem entirely done with the Liberal Party. In July 1969 he congratulated Wallace Lawler on his victory in Birmingham Ladywood. He attended the Liberal Assembly in September 1969 in an attempt to try to persuade the party to embrace the ideas of the All-Party Alliance.²⁶

The All-Party Alliance made an appearance in his fiction as well. The 1971 novel, *Vote for the Toff* (Hodder & Stoughton Ltd), probably came as a surprise to those people who read his book without being familiar with his politics. There is a mystery element to the story but this runs secondary to the main plot, wherein the Hon. Richard Rollison, otherwise known as 'The Toff', decides to run as an Independent candidate in a by-election on a political unity ticket. The point is made by many of the sympathetic characters in the book that the two-party system is the cause of many of Britain's problems. Creasey even writes himself into the story under the name Jack Withers who, as head of the All-Party Alliance, comes to help Rollison in the election. Although 'The Toff' series was the one where Creasey had most often tried to address social issues the passages detailing his political thinking may well have been skipped by the readers expecting a straight mystery. Both Creasey's normal working practice and internal

The point is made by many of the sympathetic characters in the book that the two-party system is the cause of many of Britain's problems.

textual evidence suggest this was written prior to the 1970 general election but after his own by-election campaigns.

The All-Party Alliance continued as an organisation and as late as April 1973 Creasey was praising Dick Taverne for his stand against the party machines.²⁷ Ultimately the organisation changed its name,²⁸ merged²⁹ and then folded, to the general disinterest of most. After completing one of his most ambitious novels, *The Masters of Bow Street*, in 1972 Creasey suffered a heart attack. During his convalescence he married his fourth wife, also his nurse, Diana Farrell. He died on 9 June 1973.

As well as the aforementioned MBE, Creasey was the winner of the Edgar Allan Poe Award in 1962. He was President of the Crime Writers' Association in 1966–67 and was awarded Grand Master of the Mystery Writers of America.

John Creasey was very much his own man and this served him spectacularly well in his writing career. If it is a partial mystery that a man of his undoubted energies did not do more in the field of politics to which he was also drawn, that may be fitting. Some of his views, even prior to the All-Party Alliance, may seem maverick when viewed from today but not necessarily more so than those of some others who were Liberal candidates, and even MPs, in the 1950s and '60s. Had he lived another ten years would his antagonism to strikes have led him to support Margaret Thatcher, or would he have been drawn to the mould-breakers of the SDP and the Alliance? In either case he would have written even more of the books which remain popular and collectable today.

Ian Millsted is a teacher of Philosophy and Ethics. He lives in Bristol. The author's thanks are due to Trowbridge Records Office, Richard Creasey, Michael Steed, Robert Ing-ham and Lawrence Fullick.

- 1 *All-Party Alliance*, May 1968.
- 2 *Personality* (South Africa) 28 June 1962.
- 3 The result was Sir C. E. L. Lyle (Con) 34,544 (55.5%); B. T. Wigoder (Lib) 14,232 (22.8%); R. S. W. Pollard (Lab) 13,522 (21.7%). As canvassing was little-used, Wigoder went to the cinema on polling day as there was nothing else to do.
- 4 Rt. Hon. B. Bracken (Con) 22,980 (46.8%); E. A. A. Shackleton (Lab) 16,526 votes (33.7%); B. T. Wigoder (Lib) 9,548 (19.5%).
- 5 *Bournemouth Daily Echo* 23 April 1947.
- 6 *Bournemouth Daily Echo* 12 December 1946.
- 7 *Bournemouth Times* 9 May 1947.
- 8 *Bournemouth Daily Echo* 16 December 1947.
- 9 *Bournemouth Daily Echo* 1 April 1948.
- 10 *Bournemouth Daily Echo* 3 November 1948.
- 11 *Bournemouth Times* 17 February 1950.
- 12 *Western Gazette* 2 May 1947.
- 13 *All-Party Alliance News* May 1968.
- 14 *Southern Evening Echo* 11 May 1962.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Johannesburg Star* 15 October 196.
- 17 *Durban Tribune* 27 October 1963.
- 18 *Sunday Times* 14 August 1966.
- 19 *Birmingham Sunday Mercury* 13 November 1966.
- 20 *Liberal News Commentary* 23 September 1966.
- 21 *The New Daily* 26 August 1966.
- 22 *Country Evening Telegraph* 16 January 1967.
- 23 Briefly MP for Middlesbrough in 1945 and Liberal candidate at the Croydon North by-election in 1948.
- 24 Michael Steed was the Liberal candidate, polling 4,536 votes. Michael also supplied the observation regarding the importance of daily evening newspapers in Nuneaton and Oldham.
- 25 *London Evening Standard* 14 June 1968.
- 26 *All-Party Alliance News* September 1969.
- 27 *Evolution to Democracy* 5, April 1973.
- 28 To 'Evolution to Democracy'.
- 29 With 'The Organisation'.