

Jo Grimond's leadership of the Liberal Party

'The personification and the hope of postwar Liberalism.' **Geoffrey Sell** examines the record of Jo Grimond.

Jo Grimond's leadership of the Liberal Party from 1956–67 made a difference not just to the fortunes of his party but to British politics. Such was his impact on the former that he has been described as: 'the personification and the hope of postwar Liberalism.'¹ His idealism, his imagination, his ability to communicate, his freshness, were clearly of central importance to the postwar revival of the Liberal Party. As such, he contributed more than any other individual to the reestablishment of a three-party system in the United Kingdom. His leadership was notable, for he was the first Liberal leader to have a major national profile since Lloyd George. As such, it was quite impossible from the early 1960s onwards to think about the Liberal Party without thinking of him.

When he became Liberal leader, the party that had once seemed a natural vehicle of government was close to extinction, commanding the support of little more than two per cent of the electorate and securing the return of only three MPs to Westminster without benefit of local pacts. In only fifteen constituencies in Great Britain at the 1955 general election were Labour and Conservatives not the top two parties. The pattern of party competition was that of a stable and balanced duopoly. Just six Liberal MPs were returned in 1955, reduced to five in 1957 with the loss of Carmarthen to Labour. The parliamentary party was rumoured to hold its meetings in a telephone kiosk and Conservative MP Sir Gerald Nabarro dubbed them 'the shadow of a splinter.'

Although it still occupied the status of third party of the land, its claim to be a national party was hollow. For it did not exist in half the constituencies in Britain. Probably no more than fifty seats had active Liberal Associations. Its residual support rested almost entirely on what was loosely, if inaccurately, described as the Celtic fringe. It was in danger of becoming a curiosity, as anachronistic and irrelevant as Jacobitism in 1760. Under Grimond's leadership the party went through the process of rebirth, discarding shibboleths such as free trade and once again becoming relevant to contemporary politics.

His leadership was significant because he led the Liberal Party out of the political wilderness. In doing so, he rejected any thought that it should be satisfied with a role as a 'brains trust standing on the sidelines of politics shouting advice to

Tories and Socialists alike.' It would not survive if it was content merely to 'write in the margins of politics.'² Instead the party was given a long term aim, power, and the seemingly remorseless process of electoral decline was halted and reversed. At his first assembly as leader, Grimond proclaimed, 'in the next ten years it is a question of get on or get out'. Under his leadership the first Liberal revival since 1929 occurred, thus giving early indications that the previously hegemonic two-party system was showing signs of strain.

Grimond, like Paddy Ashdown, was genuinely interested in policy and ideas. He was the catalyst for a real renaissance in Liberal thinking. In his books *The Liberal Future* (1959) and *The Liberal Challenge* (1963), and in numerous pamphlets, he gave political liberalism a new direction and purpose. This was based on a reassertion of the traditional liberal insistence that ideas and principles were more important than interests, a rejection of class-based politics and of the lingering imperialism of the postwar era, and a belief in the possibility of a realignment in British politics to reflect the real division between progressives and conservatives.

On issues such as the abolition of Britain's independent nuclear deterrent it was principally due to his leadership that the party adopted this policy position. He set about making it a pacemaker for such ideas as entry into the European Common Market and non-socialist planning. He deserves credit for placing on the political agenda issues such as how Britain should handle her relative decline in the world and how government should be brought closer to the people. As late as 1988, Ashdown could say, 'We have lived for far too long off ... the intellectual capital of the Jo Grimond era.'³

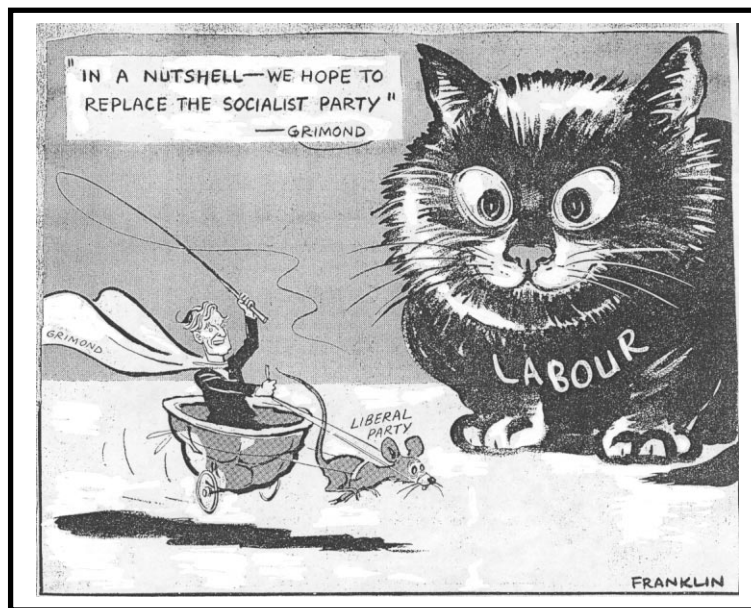
Increasingly as he became a national figure and a popular television personality, Grimond came to embody the Liberal Party, and to set the tone and quality of the Liberal appeal. One of his greatest assets was an irreverent iconoclasm, which enabled him to deflate the establishment and the status quo. In the era of *That Was the Week that Was* and *Private Eye* this quality served him well. He was astute enough to articulate the prevailing anti-establishment, anti-deference mood found particularly amongst the young.

As well as providing a policy lead, Grimond gave the party a sense of political direction which it had previously

lacked. Realignment of the left, the uniting of Britain's progressive forces, was a central theme of his leadership. This required the Liberals to replace Labour as a major party. Yet the heart of the strategy contained a paradox. For success it required a systematic and sustained attempt to capture Labour's vote, but this was never really mounted. Where the Liberal Party did come a good second, it did so for the most part in Conservative seats in the south far away from Labour's industrial heartlands. Nonetheless, he sowed the seeds of realignment, the fruits of which were reaped at the 1983 general election when the Alliance polled 25%. Roy Jenkins generously paid tribute to Grimond, claiming that he was the father of the Alliance.

While the electoral fortunes of the Liberals improved in the years after Grimond's resignation, paradoxically the calibre of its leaders steadily declined. Certainly neither Thorpe nor Steel enjoyed the same rapport with party members that Grimond did. Liberal Democrat MP Sir Russell Johnston states of Grimond's leadership: 'Liberals are not natural leader-worshippers but we were captivated and proud.'⁴ The ability to motivate and install confidence is an essential quality of leadership. Hugo Young noted upon Grimond's retirement from the House of Commons in 1983 that he left one legacy: 'Most modern Liberals between the ages of 40 and 55 joined the Liberal Party when their similarly radical contemporaries were joining Labour. And the reason they did so was Jo Grimond. His vision, oratory and personal magnetism is what drew into Liberal politics many hard-headed people led by David Steel himself.'⁵

Although an inspiration to many Liberals, some of whom still call themselves Grimondites, there was a persistent criticism that a small third party needed a brasher touch from its leader. He was a politician dedicated to the decencies who played the political game according to the traditional rules. The Liberals' prospect of political advance was held back by the inhibitions that their approach to politics imposed upon their activities. His leadership was therefore flawed. As a promoter of ideas there were few better, for he gave the party a clear vision of the kind of society he wanted, but the strategy of how to achieve it was less clearly marked out. For Grimond's political persona was paradoxical. Although he was an extremely popular politician both within and outside his party, nevertheless



'THE NUTSHELL KING' *Daily Mirror*, 11 April 1959

his personality contained ingredients which help to reveal why it failed to make the electoral breakthrough. Instinctively radical in his impatience with the hierarchies of English life, he was himself a quintessentially establishment figure, (Eton, Oxford and the Bar) whose own career owed much to the network of influence. Shrapnel notes that although Grimond was in some respects radical, he did not look it or sound it. He 'had the air of a Whig grandee in modern dress.'⁶ As such it was a political stance unlikely either to fire the disaffected masses of the 20th century or to instil any overwhelming desire for office. Grimond lacked the pugilistic instincts of Ashdown or the ruthlessness of Steel.

Let us allow Grimond almost the final word. Asked to sum up his achievement he replied:

A leader who had grasped more firmly the 'schwerpunkt' of politics could perhaps have achieved more; a leader perhaps who had more confidence in his and the party's destiny ... The power of the leader is overestimated, yet in the short term the leader is preminent.⁷

Nevertheless, the Grimond decade will be remembered as a time when Liberals sowed for others to reap. He lit the blue touch paper of revived third-party politics. Consequently he made a unique contribution for, as David Steel commented: 'No single person has done more than Jo Grimond in the whole postwar era to keep alive the values and principles of Liberalism. Without the foundations

he laid, nothing in the years ahead could have been attempted.'⁸ That is his real achievement.

Graham Sell is a college lecturer and a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group committee. He has recently completed his Ph.D thesis on 'Liberal revival: British Liberalism and Jo Grimond 1956-67'.

Notes

- 1 I. Bradley, *The Strange Rebirth of Liberal Britain* (Chatto & Windus, London, 1985), p. 2.
- 2 *Liberal News*, 27 September 1957, p. 1.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 19 February 1988.
- 4 *The House Magazine*, 8 November 1993, p. 20.
- 5 *Sunday Times*, 6 March 1983, p. 11.
- 6 N. Shrapnel, *The Performers – Politics as Theatre* (Constable, London, 1978) p. 201.
- 7 J. Grimond, *Memoirs* (Heinemann, London, 1979) p. 205.
- 8 *Liberal News*, 23 November 1982.