

Scottish Devolution

The Grimond Years

After 300 years, Scotland is to have a Parliament again. *Dr Geoffrey Sell* examines the role of Jo Grimond in the story of Scottish devolution.

For the first time since the Act of Union of 1707, Scotland will soon have its own directly-elected Parliament. The part played by the Liberal Party in bringing this to fruition, and specifically that of Jo Grimond, its leader from 1956 to 1967, repays examination.

Devolution, or home rule, is a very old issue in Scottish politics. It dates back at least to the middle of the nineteenth century, and was adopted as a policy by the Liberal Party in Scotland in 1888. There has always been some dissatisfaction with the Union and with the way it worked. It was muted when government was minimal and when, in Sir Walter Scott's words, Scotland was left 'under the guardianship of her own institutions, to win her silent way to national wealth and consequence'. But Scott also protested against what he saw as a 'gradual and progressive system' of assuming that Scottish interests were always identical with English ones.

Contentment with the Union lasted until Gladstone's proposal to give Ireland home rule

encouraged some to demand the same thing for Scotland. Between 1889 and 1914, Scottish home rule was debated 15 times in Parliament. A Liberal Bill for Scottish Home Rule reached and passed a second reading in 1913; the war, however, interrupted its further passage. In 1924 a federalist Scottish Home Rule Bill, supported by Scotland's Labour MPs, failed in the Commons. In 1927 a Government of Scotland Bill was talked out.

The Labour Party, initially favourable to Liberal ideas on devolution, lost interest in the 1920s. For years Labour was seen as the party of the centralist state; in 1956, Hugh Gaitskell finally confirmed what had been clear for years, and told the Scottish Labour Party that Labour was now unionist and against home rule for the Scots. It was against this failure that radical Liberalism organised – for some 50 years, up to 1974, the most consistently distinctive feature of its general election manifestos was the regular call for Scottish and Welsh devolution.

Under Grimond's leadership, the Liberal Party offered a critique of the British state that focused on the erosion of the constitutional checks and balances necessary to provide safeguards against executive dominance. Eccleshall suggests that the Liberals' common anti-statist position gave them a distinctive ideological role in post-war Britain.¹ Individuality required a centrifugal dispersal of power, involving electoral reform, devolution and a reform of local government, demonstrating a commitment to political pluralism. If socialism was about equality then liberalism, for Grimond, was about freedom and participation. Participation was the carat of modern Liberal politics, standing in contradistinction to the bureaucratic elitism of socialism and the social elitism of the major strands of conservatism. Grimond appreciated that the extent to which the state embodied trust, participation and inclusion was the extent to which those values were diffused through society at large.



Grimond's commitment to devolution was in evidence from the beginning of his political career. As Orkney and Shetland's prospective candidate in 1949, he detected a lack of enthusiasm in the country and a pessimism about the future. This was because people no longer felt responsible for their own destinies; their lives were subject to controls which seemed arbitrary and exasperating. 'It was not strong government we needed,' Grimond commented during the 1950 general election, 'but less government, better government and government nearer home.'²

That Grimond chose to devote his maiden speech to devolution is significant, for it distinguished him from most other Scottish MPs. Many people, he believed, felt that the government 'was a remote and even a fairly hostile affair which is not their concern.'³ The solution was to bring government nearer to ordinary people. Opponents, he argued, 'can soft pedal the issue as much as they like, but the feeling for it is growing. These sentiments found favour with the Kilbrandon Report some 20 years later, which stated that it was widely felt that government was remote, insensitive to the feelings of the people, and had inadequate machinery for the expression of grievances.

Grimond claimed that devolution would never have been raised in the Debate on the Address in 1950 had it not been for him and A. J. F. Macdonald (Liberal MP for Rox-

burghshire and Selkirkshire). The Liberal Party, Grimond argued, not only thought of it first, but 'we alone have the plans for its practical application. We'll punch that home whenever we get the chance'. Although the Party pursued a rather lonely parliamentary furrow in its commitment to devolution, Grimond detected a groundswell of support in Scotland: in the late 1940s the Scot-

ish Covenant movement had managed to secure over a million signatures in favour of a Scottish Parliament. The movement never penetrated national politics, however, and after 1951 even this small flame began to gutter. It was not until the early 1960s that the issue began to attract significant support.

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liament, and it was a step forward in freedom which would not weaken, but strengthen, the unity of the Kingdom. Grimond was not a nationalist; he had no desire to separate from England. Liberals did not believe that devolution was another word for nationalism; it was a logical response to the growing feeling of alienation in parts of the UK.

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Grimond did not particularly like the word 'devolution', as it implied that power rested at Westminster, from 'which centre some may be graciously devolved'. Enoch Powell's aphorism, 'power devolved is power retained', sums up that side of the affair. Grimond would rather begin

operation in the UK and the Common Market, and a Scottish Treasury to levy taxation. (Significantly, despite Liberal protestations, the Callaghan government refused to entertain a Scottish Assembly having any independent powers of taxation in its Scotland Bill of November 1977.)

To what extent did the Liberal Party's espousal of devolution find a resonance amongst the Scottish electorate? During the 1964 general election campaign, Grimond was convinced that one of the big issues would be the debate between centralisation and decentralisation. This concern was reflected in the Liberal manifesto. It proposed a national plan, the keystone of which would be the decentralisation of power and wealth from London. It believed there were plenty of able men and women in Scotland who could make a bigger contribution to the running of their own affairs. Launching the Scottish Liberal Party's supplement to the manifesto, Grimond claimed that Scots were faced with the decision as to whether they were going to retain or lose their identity as a nation. More and more of the top level decisions were taken in London and the whole tradition of Scottish democracy was in danger of being swamped.

The Scottish Highlands were perceived as fertile Liberal territory,

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**The Liberals have a
Plan for the North**

and are, in addition, the only party pledged to give Scotland self-government in Scottish Affairs. They would give the problems of Shetland priority over those of East Africa where millions have been squandered.

Published by Basil F. Wishart, 52 Commercial Street, Lerwick, Sub-agent for the Liberal Candidate, Joseph Grimond.

and Liberal commitment to devolution was particularly stressed there. An election advertisement in the *Northern Times* pictured two young women school teachers. They believed that Scotland had to run her own affairs in order to achieve the prosperity of which she was capable. The Liberal Party, they added, 'in offering a measure of Home Rule, appeals to us, and therefore we want a Liberal in Sutherland this time.'⁵

That the Liberals were perceived as the most nationalist of the main parties was undoubtedly a factor behind their electoral success in 1964. Grimond was not slow to play the nationalist card. He told Sutherland Liberals that 'we are in an area not only far from London generally but also far from the thinking of people in London. If this was colonial territory I sometimes think we would

be more generously treated.' In an eve-of-poll message to Highland electors he stated that 'if you feel patriotism in yozU own land and the North, you must vote Liberal tomorrow.' This reference to colonialism was repeated at the 1965 Assembly by leading Scottish Liberal John Bannerman. Occasionally, he remarked, 'we get visits from Tories who like to see the natives. They come on safari from London.'

With the Liberals acting as the pacesetter for devolution, why were they unable to prevent the rise of the Scottish National Party? Part of the problem, Budge & Urwin suggest, was a lack of communication with the electorate.⁶ As was the case with other pioneering Liberal policies such as entry into the EEC, or the abolition of Britain's independent nuclear deterrent, many electors

were confused about where the Party stood. An opinion poll taken in the Kelvingrove and Woodside areas of Glasgow at the 1964 election showed that only 22% of respondents thought that Liberals were in favour of giving Scotland home rule. 44% thought they were against and 34% didn't know. These figures were disappointing, but Glasgow was a traditionally weak area for Liberals.

During the latter part of the Grimond's leadership, the SNP began to make an electoral impact. It perhaps unconsciously positioned itself as a classic protest party, as natural a haven for those disillusioned with the two-party system, as was the Liberal Party. Its political philosophy, other than nationalism, was of a familiar 'plague on both your houses' sort. It evolved during the 1960s into a mixture of individualistic and anti-state leftism that mirrored the Liberal revival in England. The real SNP threat to Liberal hopes became apparent when William Wolfe, the party's chairman, polled nearly 10,000 votes in the 1962 West Lothian byelection, and the Liberal candidate lost his deposit. The Liberal result was a 'sharp reminder to the party of the fruits of years of neglect'⁷ It was disturbing for it showed that the SNP had an ability to reach a section of the electorate – the industrial working class – where the Liberal Party was traditionally weak.

At the 1964 general election the SNP fielded 15 candidates and obtained 2.4% of the Scottish vote. This increased to 23 candidates and 5.0% of the vote in 1966. This had a traumatic effect on Scottish Liberals who had regarded the nationalists in the early days as slightly errant Liberals who tended to extremism on the home rule issue. The form of the relationship between the two parties bitterly divided Scottish Liberals. Just before the 1964 election there were attempts to reach an arrangement. Wolfe persuaded the Scottish Nationalists to offer the Liberals an electoral pact if they would give top priority to their declared policy of a federal Britain. The move foundered as the SNP set impossibly rigid con-

ditions and the Liberals denounced separation. In March 1964 the Scottish Liberal Party issued the following statement:

Nowhere is there a place in Liberal policy for any separatism of the extreme character advocated by the Scottish Na-

Nevertheless, with his advocacy of devolution and the creation of a Highlands and Islands Development Board, Grimond was able to plant roots that have lasted until the present day. With the success in 1964 of Russell Johnston at Inverness, Alasdair Mackenzie in Ross and Cromarty

Peebles in 1965, and James Davidson's victory in West Aberdeenshire in the 1966 election, as had those in Russell Johnston's pamphlet *Highland Development* in 1964.

Ironically, Liberals MPs' enthusiasm for giving the Scottish people a greater say in their own affairs did not always find an echo with their own electorates. The referendum result of March 1979 showed that both the Borders and Orkney and Shetland voted against the Government's devolution plans. Fear of domination by a Labour-controlled central belt is still a powerful emotion.

Dr Geoffrey Sell is a college lecturer and a member of the History Group's Committee. He recently completed his Ph.D thesis on 'Liberal revival: British Liberalism and Jo Grimond 1956-67.'

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tionals. For that reason there is no possibility of a pact with the Nationalists unless they agree to travel the Liberal road of federal home rule for the United Kingdom.

James Davidson, Liberal candidate and subsequently MP for West Aberdeenshire, recalls that whereas Grimond and Bannerman were in favour of maximum cooperation, Russell Johnston and George Mackie took the diametrically opposite point of view.⁸ John Mackay, Liberal candidate for Argyll in 1964 and 1966 comments that it was the 'ever-closer moving to the SNP in 1966 and 1967' that was the final straw in leading him to defect to the Conservatives.⁹ Incidentally, it was not until the October 1974 general election that the SNP first fielded a candidate against Grimond.

and George Mackie in Caithness and Sutherland there was now a Highland bloc of Liberal MPs who would champion their region's interest at Westminster. The voice of the Highlands would be clearly and forcefully heard; the periphery had struck back. The Liberal flag was hoisted in triumph over 11,000 square miles of Highland territory. Mackie exulted that it was now Liberal country all the way from Muckle Flugga in the Shetlands to Ballachulish in Southern Invernesshire.

Further electoral success took place against a background of policy work, in which the Party developed a regional strategy. The ideas contained in the pamphlets *Boost for the Borders* and *A Plan for the North East* played an important part in the dramatic byelection victory in Roxburgh, Selkirk and

Notes:

- 1 R. Eccleshall, *British Liberalism* (London: Longman, 1986) p. 51.
- 2 *The Orcadian* 2 March 1950.
- 3 Parl. Debs., vol. 472, col. 626, 10 March 1950.
- 4 Jo Grimond, *A Personal Manifesto* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1983), p. 54.
- 5 *Northern Times* 4 September 1964, p. 5.
- 6 I. Budge and D. Urwin, *Scottish Political Behaviour* (Longman, 1966)
- 7 *The Guardian* 10 June 1962.
- 8 Completed questionnaire (6 November 1991) received from J. Davidson, Liberal candidate for West Aberdeenshire 1964 and MP for the constituency 1966-70.
- 9 Completed questionnaire, (26 November 1991) from Lord Mackay of Ardbrecknish.

Research in Progress

This column aims to assist research projects in progress. If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other helpful information – or if you know anyone who can – please pass on details to them. If you know of any other research project in progress for inclusion in this column, please send details to the Editor at the address on page 2.

The Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922-88. Book and articles; of particular interest is the 1920s and '30s; and also the possibility of interviewing anyone involved in formulating the foreign and defence policies of the Liberal Party. *Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Millway Close, Oxford OX2 8BJ.*

The Liberal Party 1945-56. Contact with members (or opponents) of the Radical Reform Group during the 1950s, and anyone with recollections of the leadership of Clement Davies, sought. *Graham Lippiatt, 24 Balmoral Road, South Harrow, HA2 8TD.*

The grass roots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945-64; the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. *Mark Egan, First Floor Flat, 16 Oldfields Circus, Northolt, Middlesex UB5 4RR.*

The political and electoral strategy of the Liberal Party 1970-79. Individual constituency papers from this period, and contact with individuals who were members of the Party's policy committees and/or the Party Council, particularly welcome. *Ruth Fox, 7 Mulberry Court, Bishop's Stortford, Herts CM23 3JW.*