

all its senses, of self-sacrifice, have given way in the West to the ideals of the barbarians. The individual is sacrificed to the rulers. Ostentation, unending demands, the glorification of material success have ousted to a great extent the older philosophies. Those Greek and Christian ideals were never realised, but it is only comparatively recently that they have been rejected even as ideals and that whole nations have come to ape the barbarians.

Jo Grimond's politics stemmed from the heart and mind, not from focus groups and market research.

At his overcrowded funeral in St Magnus Cathedral one of his constituents read a poem she had written:

Lord Grimond of Firth they ca'  
him.  
'Tis right that should be so,  
but here in the isles where we  
loved him  
he'll aye be known as Jo.

Jo Grimond was one of the last real orators in our country. It was the job of the leader to inspire and fire up his annual party audience to go out to greater endeavours. Nowadays all the party leaders are made to behave like performing seals ambling around an empty space chatting to their audience. In 1963 when the party was at a particularly low ebb he thunderously addressed the pre-election assembly in Brighton with his most famous quote:

In bygone days the commanders were taught that when in doubt they should march their troops towards the sound of gunfire – I intend to march my troops towards the sound of gunfire.

And so he did, and those of us who followed him and, even more, had the privilege of knowing him and counting him as a friend will be forever grateful.

*The Rt Hon. Lord (David) Steel of Aikwood KT KBE was MP for Roxburgh, Selkirk & Peebles, later Tweeddale, Ettrick & Lauderdale, 1965–97, Leader of the Liberal Party 1976–88, MSP for Lothians and Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament, 1999–2003.*

# REPORT

## Jo Grimond: The Legacy

Evening meeting, 10 June 2013, National Liberal Club, with Peter Sloman, Harry Cowie, and Michael Meadowcroft; chair: Tony Greaves

Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

JO GRIMOND CONTINUES to hold a particularly affectionate place in the collective memory of Liberal Democrats. His charisma, charm, good looks, political courage, intellect and inherent liberalism inspired many new people to join the Liberal Party in the late 1950s and 1960s. He gained a reputation as someone who could give politics a good name, which has endured to the present day. To mark one hundred years since his birth in 1913, the meeting sought to examine Jo Grimond's legacy to the modern Liberal Democrats and more widely to British politics and political ideas.

The meeting was chaired by (Lord) Tony Greaves. Tony, who first joined the Liberal Party when Grimond was leader, had kindly agreed to step in to replace William Wallace (Lord Wallace of Saltaire), who had been press assistant to Jo Grimond during the 1966 general election, but who had been called away on government business.

### Ideas

Our first speaker was Dr Peter Sloman, of New College, Oxford, who was asked to explore Jo Grimond's ideas, with a focus on his thinking around the role of the state and free market. Dr Sloman started by saying that Grimond was one of a rare category of politicians, those whose legacy was mainly associated with their political thought. While Grimond was not an original political theorist he was certainly an ideas man and was perhaps the best political communicator that British Liberalism has had since Gladstone. While many Liberals or Liberal Democrats have had more electoral success or held more political power, very few have had

Grimond's ability to expand Liberalism as a philosophy or political creed. Grimond wrote four major books setting out his vision in addition to pamphlets, speeches and a volume of memoirs. In addition his political career spanned much of the twentieth century, from his Oxford days, when he apparently admired Stanley Baldwin, through his entry to the House of Commons in 1950 when Attlee was prime minister, to his stepping down in 1983 during the Thatcher era. Inevitably, therefore, his thought developed over time, but there were important consistencies in Grimond's understanding of what Liberalism was and its implications for policy. Dr Sloman proposed to explore Grimond's thought under four headings: his philosophical position, his attitude to socialism and the state, his vision of a liberal society and his view of Britain's role in the world.

Grimond's conception of Liberalism was at root a philosophical one. He understood Liberalism to be a humanitarian creed, grounded in men and women's experience in the world and dedicated to ameliorating their problems; a creed based on the individual and innately suspicious of deities and dogma. At Balliol, where he read PPE, Grimond had come under two influences: the legacy of T. H. Green, with an emphasis on self-development, civic participation and the common good; and also early-twentieth-century ideas reacting against idealism, hence his emphasis on experience and the individual. This background came to give his thought its balance and vitality. People were both individuals and members of wider communities. He was suspicious of abstract ideas and utopian solutions and

**Jo Grimond's politics stemmed from the heart and mind, not from focus groups and market research.**

believed politicians should confine themselves to dealing with particular social issues as they arose. Dr Sloman said that Grimond's conception of Liberalism was not exceptional but what gave it its hard edge was the way he defined it against socialism. This sprang from his political career being contemporaneous with the Cold War and the post-war social democratic settlement at home. He was passionately against the practice of Marxist socialism behind the Iron Curtain which denied the individual the opportunity for choice and self-development. He also saw it as economically flawed as the market system could satisfy needs more efficiently than state planning. Labour's policy of nationalisation at home stood equally condemned. So from the moment he became Liberal leader in 1956, Grimond argued that the British left had to choose between two paths to progress: the socialist path based on equality and public ownership or a Liberal path based on freedom, democratic participation and the free market. While most Liberal thinkers would have agreed with Grimond to that point, many in the radical tradition like Beveridge and Keynes would probably have stopped there, as would some later social Liberals such as David Steel. They would have argued that once Clause IV socialism had been eliminated there was not really much to fear from the democratic state being used as an essential tool for bringing about a fairer society. But Grimond was more cautious about the state. He believed that modern governments had an inbuilt tendency to ever expand their activities and waste money on prestige projects, Concorde or nuclear weapons for example. Whereas historically MPs had been sent to Westminster to restrain government spending, since the Second World War they had abandoned this role and had become lobbyists for government intervention. Grimond saw the growth of the state as having two malign consequences. Firstly, high government spending overloaded the British economy, imposing a heavy tax burden on private industry and making economic management more difficult. Secondly, it fostered a culture of dependency on the state and discouraged personal responsibility. This approach

placed Grimond close to some new right philosophers like Arthur Selton of the IEA, accounting for his qualified sympathy with elements of Thatcherism.

However, moving to his third heading, Dr Sloman stressed that Grimond had a positive vision of a liberal society as well as his negative critique of the state, which served to make him such a successful Liberal leader. His vision centred on the need to return to the individual and the community the power that was rightfully theirs. These ideas were reinforced by Grimond's role as MP for Orkney and Shetland. The islands were remote from London and Edinburgh. So despite his links to the establishment by education and marriage, Grimond came to see the governing classes from an outsiders' perspective. Grimond also saw the islanders as representative of that spirit of sturdy independence and mutual personal responsibility he valued so much. He consistently sought to push political power closer to the people, championing Scottish home rule and supporting devolution to Wales and the English regions. At the same time he was very much aware that nations and regions could also be remote and bureaucratic. The real prize was to create active and participative communities on a human scale. That included effective local government but was not limited to it. Nor was community responsibility limited to a vote at the ballot box. In the 1970s Grimond helped organise independent civic development initiatives, with financial support from the Rowntree Trust, believing that these grassroots experiments could achieve more than government bureaucracies. One of his later inspirations was the Mondragon cooperative in the Basque country founded in the 1950s but which by the 1970s had its own local bank, school and technical college as well as its own social insurance scheme. It also chimed with Grimond's longstanding interest in industrial partnership. Grimond very firmly believed in the Elliot Dodds concept of 'ownership for all' wishing to spread property ownership across the community and to democratise industrial relations. He also wished to see power devolved in the area of social welfare. Again following Dodds' approach in the *Unservile State* essays, Grimond felt that state

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universal provision was inferior to a system in which individuals or voluntary institutions were able to provide for their own or their members' needs because the latter gave citizens greater independence and choice. The welfare state should be allowed to wither away as living standards rose or reduced to a safety net for the poorest. Liberals should focus on raising the incomes of the poor through tax credits or negative income tax rather than provide state subsidies or benefits in kind. Social services were there solely to meet a need, not good things in themselves. To this end Grimond was sympathetic to education vouchers, charges for GP consultations and the sale of council houses.

In his final section, Dr Sloman turned to Grimond's internationalism and his ideas about Britain's place in the world, which were as important as his ideas on domestic policy. Grimond was one of the first politicians to recognise and say publicly that Britain could no longer be the great power she had been up until the 1940s. Particularly in the wake of the Suez crisis, Grimond was forthright in arguing that Britain's destiny had to lie in Europe with membership of the Common Market. This was not just on economic grounds but as a matter of political and strategic interest. He called for Britain to reduce her global military interests and pool her nuclear capabilities with other western countries. The common thread between Grimond's domestic and international visions was his low view of the nation state and his belief that power should rest at the most appropriate level.

Dr Sloman concluded that while the main elements of Grimond's ideas were consistent through all his writings and speeches, the more anti-statist aspects did tend to predominate during the early 1950s and the post-leadership phases of his career, rather than in the period of Liberal revival around the time of the Orpington by-election. Yet this was the time when Grimond seemed to inspire people most and draw them into Liberal Party membership or activity. At this time he proposed more public investment and indicative planning to get the British economy moving, in contrast to his usual caution over state intervention. Dr Sloman felt that Grimond was seduced

by the modernising mood of the early 1960s and the opportunities this presented. He hoped the Liberals might capture the spirit of the age, drawing Labour revisionists like Crosland and Jenkins into a new progressive movement. Yet somehow it never quite seemed that Grimond was fully swayed by the slogans and policies the party was using. Once out of the leadership, while Thorpe and Steel continued in more social democratic mode, Grimond reverted to his anti-statist ideas and this could explain Grimond's detached stance towards the Lib-Lab pact and the alliance with the SDP towards which his own strategy of realignment of the left had so clearly pointed.

### Policy

Our next speaker was Harry Cowie, a former Director of Research at the Liberal Party and speechwriter to Jo Grimond, with a remit to talk about the development of policy under Grimond's leadership. Tony Greaves remarked that while Jo Grimond was very definitely an ideas man he was not really interested in policy, despite the party producing a great deal of it at the time of his leadership, and he introduced Harry Cowie as the man who responsible for formulating much of that policy at a time when the party had minimal resources to research and develop it.

Harry began by agreeing that Grimond was much more interested in ideas than policy but pointed out that under his leadership the party had set up policy committees and appointed a Director of Research with three assistants funded by Rowntree Trust money. This team also briefed the parliamentary party and did work for Grimond himself. They also produced policy briefings for candidates, not only setting out the Liberal approach but also providing critiques of Conservative and Labour policies. This meant that come the general election, the party was able to produce a useful candidates' handbook answering points which might arise. As a result of their efforts a series of policy reports were published in advance of the 1964 general election. Grimond called Harry to a meeting in his office at the House of Commons and told him he did not want the reports

published. Firstly on the grounds he would have to read them. Secondly because Tory Central Office would add up all the costs of the proposals and this would lead to Robin Day asking Grimond on TV how the Liberals were going to pay the bill. Harry contacted the chairman of the department, Mark Bonham Carter, whose view was the very practical one that if the Liberals were to be taken seriously they had to have a credible platform. He knew the party could not rely any longer simply on the traditional policies of free trade, proportional representation and industrial co-partnership. Bonham Carter took on Grimond over the issue of the publication of the reports ensuring they saw the light of day.

One of the new, key, elements of the policies was the issue of regionalism and the passing down of power to other levels of government, introduced as a means of implementing Liberal ideas. This flowed through the whole of Liberal policy, although it was not clear that Grimond actually fully agreed with it, mainly because he feared the cost of new tiers of government might outweigh the benefits. One such reform was the abolition of the hereditary peers and the introduction of appointed Lords with a strong regional element. Regional development plans were to be drawn up by people in the localities backed by a Land Development Corporation to undertake urban renewal, develop new towns, magnet areas and check the drift to the south-east. The regions were to have independence in financial terms with responsibility for health, education and town and country planning. While not directly elected in the first instance, this was expected further down the road. Grimond was keen that these new bodies should take advantage of new techniques, like cost-benefit analysis, or social benefit analysis, to investment decision-making. He also feared the dead hand of the Treasury and supported the party's moves to develop a strategy for growth. The party adopted a flexible target for growth across the economy with a ministry responsible for overseeing progress, a ministry for expansion which would take some of the Treasury's functions. The idea was then followed up by Labour which set up a Department for Economic Affairs after the 1964

**On co-partnership, Grimond was a repeated critic of the class divisions reflected in British industrial relations.**

general election and to an extent by the Conservatives when they set up the National Economic Development Council in 1962, although Grimond dismissed this as a talking shop. Liberals were also taking the lead on reform of income tax. A heavyweight panel led by Professor Wheatcroft, the editor of the *British Tax Review*, and Hubert Monroe QC wrote a report recommending the abolition of the standard rate of income tax. The standard rate was hardly paid by anyone and made the whole system too complicated, allowing high levels of tax evasion. The scheme was welcomed by Douglas Houghton, the Labour MP, who was General Secretary of the Inland Revenue Staff Federation, as a major and innovative proposal.

On co-partnership, Grimond was a repeated critic of the class divisions reflected in British industrial relations. The policy committee on co-partnership was chaired by Peter McGregor, a Ferranti executive. They updated the policy, which went back to the Yellow Book, taking account of developments at the Esso refinery at Fawley where great productivity gains had been made by the dropping of demarcation by the unions. This was in return for generous wage settlements and redundancy schemes. Success depended on the decentralisation of wage bargaining. Under McGregor's plan the union shop stewards were the most likely people to be elected to the works' council, they would get to see the whole picture of the company's development and have a real stake in making things work.

As ever, a key area of Liberal policy was education, as it rested on the liberal principle of individual development and personal happiness. Again the regional approach was important. A major adviser to the party was Alec Peterson, head of the Department of Education at Oxford, who came in as a result of Grimond's leadership. Peterson believed that regional authorities would be able to promote research and encourage fresh thinking in contrast to Labour's centralised approach of building huge comprehensive schools. The study group on the public schools suggested that the independent sector should find new roles. The headmaster of Westminster School was a member of the panel, although he did not wish

that to be known publicly. One of their recommendations was that the public schools should become a new generation of liberal arts colleges on the American model. Grimond's attitude to the public schools was that they should enlarge their intake to wider sections of the community. At the same time Liberals were calling for a large increase in the number of universities, doubling in ten years.

An area of Liberal policy that was especially important to Grimond was foreign policy. His principal adviser was Alastair Buchan, professor of International Affairs at Oxford, who was a proponent of the gradual withdrawal by the UK from worldwide commitments. At the Llandudno conference in 1962, Mark Bonham Carter hardened policy on the EEC. No longer were the Commonwealth or EFTA members to have any simplified veto on British membership and there was a call for greater political unity in Europe with a directly elected European Parliament, proposals which were far in advance of their time.

How to decide the success of these policy initiatives? Seven documents were published before the highly successful 1962 assembly and appropriate resolutions were drafted to get them debated. The press reaction was then very positive. The *Daily Mirror* reported that '... the Liberals have practical policies on housing, town planning, health, old people ... they are projecting an image of a party led by hundreds of intelligent professionals. ... They are real radicals who want to have a new society. Watch out George Brown and Ian Macleod.' On the day before the 1964 election the first leader in *The Times* was headed 'A Radical Influence'. It read, 'Geographically Britain is an island. She cannot stay one politically ... the test is Europe. She needs a government committed to forthright and radical changes, a competitive economy and more sensibly articulate society. The Liberals represent millions of voters on all these things ... There should be the largest possible Liberal vote.'

### Leadership

Our final speaker was Michael Meadowcroft on Jo Grimond's leadership of the Liberal Party.

Meadowcroft joined the party in Southport at the end of the 1950s and his key early role was as local government officer. He went on to become Liberal MP for Leeds West from 1983 to 1987.

Meadowcroft began by recalling how Jo Grimond, in contrast to the current Twitter generation, used to say, 'Never ask me to say a few words. I will give you a speech, a lecture, write an article at the drop of a hat but "just a few words" is much too difficult.' Meadowcroft admitted that when he joined the Liberal Party in 1958 he did not know much about Jo Grimond. But later that year he went to a huge rally in Blackpool, one of those affairs that the party could put on, even in the dark days before the revival and heard Grimond speak – and he was magnificent. Grimond had physical advantages. He had a wonderful resonant voice. He was a large, tall man and could never be intimidated by the press – or by hecklers. At the rally a member of the League of Empire Loyalists began shouting. Grimond challenged him to come down to the front if he wanted to ask a question. Then he waited while the heckler slowly trudged down from the gallery only to wave him away when he got there. Grimond also projected a slightly anarchic or academic air when it suited the occasion but when he needed to be direct he was unstoppable. The general election of 1959 was the first time that politicians could be asked questions by members of a studio audience posed through the presenter, Robin Day. A questioner wished to know if Grimond was in favour of joining the Common Market and wanted a 'yes or no' answer. So Grimond just said 'yes'. Day attempted to follow up but Grimond stood his ground. This was an example of his sense of humour used for political purposes. In response to Harold Wilson's comment that he was willing to join Europe if the price was right, Grimond commented this was rather like reserving judgment on the Reformation until you knew what the monasteries would fetch. He used self-deprecation but was not a humble man. He possessed a sentimental arrogance about himself that he was capable of achieving things. He took on the Liberal leadership at a time when the party was in a poor

state but he truly believed he could recreate a viable Liberal Party. His style filled a gap in contemporary politics and he used it to appeal to the social democratic side of the Labour Party to create a progressive consensus. He was disappointed in the long run but he felt it was possible to mix syndicalism with social reform, as advocated by George Orwell, much to the horror of many senior Liberals. The self-assurance and confidence with which he proposed such things appealed to people greatly. Before becoming leader, Grimond had been chief whip of the tiny parliamentary party. Despite there only being six MPs, they frequently voted three different ways and it was Grimond's responsibility to keep the disparate members together. He understood this and still felt he could achieve it by leading from the front. A good example of this was his line on Suez, which he got the party to follow even though many believed it was wrong.

Grimond used his gifts even more effectively outside the House of Commons. From his performances in the House, people in parliament at the time often used to be bemused at what people outside saw in Grimond. Given that he usually had to speak once the House emptied after the front bench speeches it is not surprising that he saw little merit in trying to use the floor of the House to make an impact. His element was television or groups of people (especially the young). His crinkly smile and disarming, slightly crumpled appearance showed a common touch which people found tremendously attractive. He was also popular at party headquarters because he did not interfere, perhaps unlike every other party leader before or since. His knew his job was to lead the party not administer it. As a platform performer Grimond was absolutely magnificent. He was perhaps the best orator of his day, epitomised by his 'sound of gunfire' speech, and could genuinely enthuse and inspire. The structure of his speeches was similar. The first segment hit you between the eyes to get your attention. In the middle, came fifteen minutes of ideas. You were always struck by his ability to close by hitting the Liberal nail on the head when talking about the current topics of the day.

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Grimond was also a great believer in the power of politics. For that reason he used to hate staged photo-shoots which he regarded as insufficiently serious. He refused to take part in stunts such as pretending to sleep rough, always preferring reflective, rationale debate and the exchange of ideas. He insisted on reading the morning papers even when general election timetables required him to be elsewhere and held court at his home at Kew into the small hours with amusing anecdotes as well as serious debate about the election.

During the 1966 general election, Grimond's eldest son Andrew, committed suicide. The prime minister arranged for RAF transport to help him travel. Meadowcroft concluded that the shock of the death of his son took more out of Grimond than was realised at the time. In 1967 he resigned the party leadership against the advice of many in the party including Meadowcroft himself, saying he had had nearly ten years in which to get on or get out and he felt he had done all he could do. In retrospect however Meadowcroft believed Grimond had served one year too many. In the final year he got very stubborn and it was often necessary to have two people present at meetings with him to ensure he stuck to what he had agreed. His deafness, while it could be used to his advantage with people he preferred not to engage with, was getting to a point where it was a problem for him. Harry Cowie added that a major factor in his decision to retire was his sense of having been let down by Harold Wilson with whom Grimond felt he had an agreement to bring in proportional representation. Whether such an agreement was reached is unsure but there is no doubt Grimond did feel sidelined after the result of 1966 election. To end, Meadowcroft quoted Grimond as saying, 'What should alarm us about politicians is not that they break their promises but they frequently keep them.'

Tony Greaves ended the meeting with a reading from the Young Liberal publication *Gunfire*, which was named after Grimond's famous 'Sound of Gunfire' assembly speech. When it was written in 1968, Greaves was the editor of the publication. The article was headed

'The Grimond Generation'. 'We are the Grimond generation. Whether we like it or not most of joined and became active in the Liberals and Young Liberals when Jo Grimond was not only the Liberal leader, to all intents and purposes he was the Liberal Party. He had virtually no Parliamentary party and policy was whatever Jo said at the time. It must

have been shockingly undemocratic but we were newcomers and did not really notice. We joined because the Liberals (Jo Grimond) seemed to be bright and new and relevant and sensible.'

*Graham Lippiatt is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group executive.*

## LETTERS

**'He had virtually no Parliamentary party and policy was whatever Jo said at the time. It must have been shockingly undemocratic but we were newcomers and did not really notice. We joined because the Liberals (Jo Grimond) seemed to be bright and new and relevant and sensible.'**

### Honor Balfour

It was fascinating to read about Honor Balfour in *Journal of Liberal History* 78 (spring 2013), not least because I was one of the people mentioned as having consulted her papers while she was alive. I thought readers would be interested to know more about this and about Honor in her later years.

I started the research for my doctorate on the Liberal Party 1945–64 in late 1994 and began the task of identifying suitable interviewees. My supervisor, Dr Michael Hart, mentioned that Honor Balfour lived locally and had fought a by-election during the Second World War as an independent Liberal. I contacted Cotswolds Liberal Democrats and got her address. In those pre-Google days I knew nothing about Honor: all I had to go on was the close result in Darwen in 1943.

We met in Burford in January 1995. She was tiny, spoke in precise terms, and seemed amused to be of interest to a research student. I was crammed into her tiny car for the short drive to her cottage at Windrush. There it was soon clear that she had a passion for post-war British politics. Her library was enormous. She owned the biography or autobiography of every major politician active during her career. She had incisive views on the current political scene, when New Labour was on the rise and the Major government was beginning to collapse. Although she was not a name-dropper, it was clear that she still had links to the politicians from the 1950s, 60s and 70s whom

she had interviewed. Former cabinet ministers sometimes dropped in for lunch.

My interview covered her early political career, her views on the Liberal Party during the war, the circumstances of the Darwen by-election and her subsequent interest in politics. A left-wing Liberal, she had been tempted to join the Labour Party, not least because Harold Laski offered her a choice of safe Labour seats, but she had been put off by the party's link with the trade unions. Had she taken up Laski's offer she might well have become a cabinet minister under Harold Wilson (whom she knew at Oxford). Instead she committed herself to a career in journalism.

Towards the end of the interview Honor said that she had some papers upstairs which might be of interest so, mindful of the time of the bus back to Oxford, I arranged to return. When I did so I was ushered up to a spare room and invited to rifle through some boxes of papers, press clippings and photos. Some were hers and some she had inherited from Lancelot Spicer, head of the Liberal Party's Radical Action group in the 1940s. Here was a treasure trove of information which had not previously seen the light of day and which I wrote up in my thesis and then for an article in this *Journal* ('Radical Action and the Liberal Party during the Second World War', *Journal* 63, summer 2009). As a research student, finding something new and interesting was like discovering gold dust.