

Michael McManus examines the Liberal role in the Suez crisis of 1956, and the long-term consequences for the Liberal Party.



LIBERALS AND THE SUEZ CRISIS

Events' was Harold Macmillan's famous answer when asked what he feared most in politics. Yet it was events – or rather one event in particular – that propelled him into the job that, in his deceptively laid-back way, he had long coveted, that of Prime Minister.

The Conservatives under Winston Churchill had received fewer votes than Labour at the general election of 1951, but won more seats. In 1955, under Anthony Eden, the party had gained both votes and seats and began to reclaim the mantle of the 'natural party of government'. Although it was already clear that Eden was no longer the man he had been – the principled and courageous *matinée* idol who resigned from the Chamberlain Government as a protest against appeasement – the economic situation was beginning to improve and both Prime Minister and party looked settled for a decent tenure.

The Liberal Party was effectively becalmed in the 1955

The Liberals' new leader, Jo Grimond, on the campaign trail.

general election. Leader Clem Davies was enduring one of his increasingly common bouts of ill health and the party's Chief Whip, Jo Grimond, had largely led the line in his stead. Although the party's manifesto was criticised both for lack of invention and for its leaden tone, in its way it was arguably both radical and far-sighted, advocating closer British involvement in Western European integration, parliamentary assemblies for Scotland and Wales, measures against monopolistic practices in industry, and protection for individual citizens against racial prejudice, union harassment and even against arbitrary actions by the state itself. The number of candidates – 110 – was one higher than in 1951 and the Liberals neither lost nor gained any seat. In only a tiny handful of constituencies did the party's support rise significantly, notably in North Cornwall and North Devon, where Jeremy Thorpe's newly minted brand of highly personalised campaigning was setting the pace.

What is not always recognised nowadays is the fact that the position of the Liberal Party had already begun to recover even before the Suez Crisis. Local elections in 1954 and 1955 had shown only the tiniest flickers of improvement, but parliamentary by-elections began to bring some seriously good news. At Torquay in December 1955, Peter Bessell increased the Liberal vote by almost 10 per cent. Only two months later, at Gainsborough and at Hereford, Liberal candidates enjoyed significant swings in their favour. The foundations were fragile, to be sure, but the first shoots of recovery were apparent and, when the party enjoyed a number of unexpected gains in the local elections of May 1956, some of the younger generation of Liberals apparently began to feel that a renewed leadership might be able to take better advantage of the shift in public opinion.

Then came the 'event' to end all events for a country still grappling with its decline from

imperial power to the international second division. Following the refusal of the Americans and British to finance the Aswan Dam in southern Egypt, on 26 July 1956 the Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasser summarily nationalised the Suez Canal. The governments of Britain and France, the two countries where most of the shares in the Canal were held, immediately concluded that they should settle for nothing less than 'regime change' and, in due course, entered into a secret and opportunistic arrangement with the Israeli government – the notorious Sèvres Protocol – to bring that about, by military means if necessary. There followed a domestic political crisis that would bring the British political establishment to breaking point, also fundamentally and permanently changing many people's perceptions of the Conservative Party. A huge opportunity was about to be created for a re-energised Liberal Party.

An entry in Violet Bonham Carter's diaries, describing a meeting of the Liberal Party Committee on 31 July 1956, both records the (possibly surprising) initial reaction of one leading Liberal of the time – the then Chief Whip Jo Grimond – to the Suez situation and neatly embodies the Liberal dilemma in the face of such unilateral aggression:

Jo – describing himself as the Capt. Waterhouse of the Lib. Party – is in favour of 'going it alone' & landing troops in the Canal Zone. He says Nasser's action is the parallel of Hitler's when he invaded the Rhineland & that unless we bring about his fall the whole Middle East will go his way – nationalise their oil, threaten to cut us off, etc. I think this is true. Yet I hardly feel that we can 'go it alone' & align world opinion against us ...

Confronting the Suez Crisis was not at all straightforward for the Liberal Party of 1956. Even a parliamentary party of only six MPs

was seriously divided on the matter. In many ways the Liberals were still close to the Conservatives in a way that seems quite alien today. Two of the party's MPs – Donald Wade in Huddersfield and Arthur Holt in Bolton – held their seats only because they were involved in *de facto* pacts with local Tories, and three others – Clement Davies, Rhys Hopkin Morris and Roderic Bowen – had been greatly helped by the absence of Conservative candidates in their constituencies at the 1955 general election. Decisive leadership was now required; the party desperately needed someone to forge a distinctively Liberal position around which everyone could unite. Importantly, Jo Grimond himself was soon engaged in a profound 'learning process', which no doubt involved some interesting exchanges with Lady Violet.

Grimond moved rapidly away from his Blimpish initial reaction towards Nasser's occupation of the Canal Zone. In a statement on 18 August 1956, for instance, he denounced the Government's pompous behaviour at the disastrous Suez conference. He was certain that, as soon as Nasser had nationalised the Canal, 'the best that could be hoped for from the conference was a compromise by which the Egyptian act of nationalisation would be virtually accepted, while the canal administration was placed under some sort of international control'.¹ He also foresaw longer-term problems arising from oil and the Middle East. On Thursday 13 September 1956, however, along with Arthur Holt and Donald Wade, he did give the Eden Government the benefit of the doubt by supporting it in two critical divisions on Suez. Rhys Hopkin Morris too had privately evinced robust support for Anthony Eden's stance at Suez, but as a Deputy Speaker he kept his views off the public record and did not take part in these controversial divisions.

It is impossible to separate Jo Grimond's assumption of the Liberal leadership from the Suez

Crisis. Clem Davies stepped down from the leadership at the party's autumn conference in Folkestone in late September, when the opening act of the Crisis was being played at full intensity, and Grimond emerged effortlessly from a field of one as the obvious successor. By a peculiar twist of fate, Grimond had to travel to the USA for a six-week tour and was not even in the hall when Davies made his emotional speech of resignation, the tears streaming down his cheeks. By the time he returned to the UK, it was all too clear that the situation at Suez was about to turn ugly. He had learned at first hand that, even though it was arguably the Americans who had precipitated the seizure of the Canal by abruptly refusing to finance the Aswan Dam, in an election year neither the Democrats nor the Republicans had any intention of supporting a military intervention. Nonetheless, at the end of October the Israeli army deliberately provoked hostilities by invading the Sinai peninsula and, given that pre-arranged and agreed pretext, British and French forces began to land at Port Said and occupy the canal on 5 November – the very day on which Jo Grimond was confirmed as leader of the parliamentary Liberal party at an eve-of-session dinner with his five colleagues at the House of Commons.

Grimond had still been in the USA when the most recent crucial votes on Suez had taken place, on Thursday 1 November 1956. Holt had abstained but Davies, Wade and Bowen had supported the Labour opposition. By the time Grimond returned to take up the reins as the party's parliamentary leader, the British and French governments had issued an ultimatum to the Egyptians and, once Nasser had summarily rejected it, the threat of invasion was both real and immediate. Grimond knew that the Liberals must come completely off the fence. He was supported in this by the officers of the Liberal Party Organisation, who agreed

Confronting the Suez Crisis was not at all straightforward for the Liberal Party of 1956. Even a parliamentary party of only six MPs was seriously divided on the matter.

LIBERALS AND THE SUEZ CRISIS

on 2 November that, 'the policy of the Government, because it has dealt a serious blow at the establishment of the rule of law, would stand condemned even if it were successful'.² Yet both Hopkin Morris and Holt still sympathised with Eden's actions, and Wade too had to be mindful of his vulnerable situation in Huddersfield should he become too outspoken in his criticisms.

Although his public stance was slightly equivocal in the early days, Grimond's old friend David Astor told me that he was privately at one with the sceptics from the start, regularly attending meetings of a group that Astor set up to organise anti-Eden forces. He arrived at this position by an impeccably rational process. The Liberals had always been in favour of a stronger United Nations, and had long argued that it should ideally have set up some kind of international 'police force' to deal with just this type of situation. As it was, the British and the Israelis were dealing with the problem in their own way, which could not be tolerated. As the Korean War so nearly did, it could have dragged the superpowers into a conflict that was being waged by their allies and *de facto* surrogates. Even the UN as it was, short on respect, might and firepower, would be a better arbiter at Suez than Eden and his post-imperial 'might is right' coalition. Up in Bolton, Arthur Holt continued to argue that, although it would have been greatly preferable for the UN to be up to the job, until and unless it was suitably 'beefed up', the British and their allies were perfectly entitled to get on with sorting out the Suez situation by themselves. On that basis, Grimond could argue, the disagreement was about tactics rather than principles.

In his first speech in the House of Commons as Liberal leader, Grimond was cheered from the Labour benches when he mocked the Government's claim to have inspired the creation of a United Nations force to sort out the

In his first speech in the House of Commons as Liberal leader, Grimond was cheered from the Labour benches when he mocked the Government's claim to have inspired the creation of a United Nations force to sort out the mess at Suez.

mess at Suez. This, he said, 'was like the burglar claiming that that by his skill and violence he had compelled the police to improve their methods greatly'. Grimond felt that the Suez crisis had been the inevitable consequence of years of weak policy towards the region, and pressed the Government to adopt a sustainable and coherent attitude towards the Middle East. He now proposed what he described as a policy of the 'extreme centre', under which clear guidelines would be drawn up for the final stages of decolonisation. Britain would also have to play a leading role, working through the Commonwealth and Europe, in setting up really effective international mechanisms for dealing with future flare-ups in the Middle East and elsewhere. In his New Year message for 1957, Grimond warned against Britain becoming a new Middle West – 'midway between Europe and America, understanding neither, vaguely resentful of both, trying to wrap jingoism around us and vent our troubles on foreigners; yet expecting the same foreigners, particularly the Americans, to lend us money and give us oil'.

Suez provided Grimond with a wonderful political opportunity. By the time of the last critical vote on the crisis, on Thursday 6 December, he was able to lead all of his colleagues into the opposition lobby. Furthermore, along with the question of colonial policy, Suez had the effect of dramatically radicalising a section of public opinion. By playing up the Liberals' opposition to Eden's policy, Grimond greatly enhanced their image as an 'anti-system' party. For the thousands of people who were stimulated into political activity by their opposition to Suez, the Liberals now looked like a serious and attractive proposition. The crisis also gave Grimond the opportunity of making a mark in Parliament. As Ian Trethowan wrote in the *News Chronicle*, 'day by day, he was able to wait until some luckless Minister had backed himself

into a corner ... Then, gracefully but mockingly, Grimond rose to deliver the knock-out.'³

Although the Suez Crisis clearly buoyed Jo Grimond through his early months as Liberal leader, the likely long-term political consequences must have been less easy to discern at the time. It was unfortunate for Grimond that his assumption of the leadership was followed by a series of political misfortunes for the party. The first by-election, for instance, took place at Chester, where the Liberals never had a chance. Then Rhys Hopkin Morris died suddenly and unexpectedly on the night of 21–22 November 1956. Hopkin Morris had won his seat by fewer than 500 votes in both 1950 and 1951 and, although his majority had risen to over 3,000 in 1955, he had a sizeable personal vote and Carmarthen was by any token a highly marginal seat. Labour's by-election candidate was Megan Lloyd George, formerly deputy leader of the Liberals, and the local Liberals selected John Morgan Davies, who shared Hopkin Morris's pro-government views on Suez. To his great regret, Grimond felt obliged to support the candidature of a man with whom he disagreed profoundly on the most important issue facing the nation. In February 1957, Megan Lloyd George was returned to the House of Commons as Labour MP for Carmarthen and the Liberal parliamentary party was reduced to only five MPs.

In this instance the night most certainly was darkest before the dawn. As Grimond and his circle had hoped, the Carmarthen result was not indicative of some deep malaise for the Liberals. It was almost entirely attributable to local factors, not least the deep local affection that there had been for Hopkin Morris and the sheer force of personality of Megan Lloyd George. Suez had not only changed the way in which Britain thought about itself: it had permanently moved the political goalposts. There had been a

subtle shift in public opinion, particularly with regard to the Conservative Party, and a small but significant group of voters and (perhaps more importantly) political activists had detached themselves from the Tories. They were now in search of a new home, and the Liberals' charismatic new leader was just the man to build one for them. One obvious gain close to home was the decision of Laura Grimond's brother Mark to turn down overtures from the Conservative Party, and stick with the Liberals instead. His narrow victory at the Torrington by-election in 1958 would be come to be seen as a watershed, the first Liberal gain at a by-election for three decades.

With Suez and Carmarthen out of the way, Grimond began in earnest to lead his party on its long march and 1957 became the year in which he made his personal imprint on the Liberal Party, setting out a distinctive political platform on nuclear defence, the economy and Europe.

Suez reared its head again at the end of March 1957, when the French press first leaked word of the Sèvres Protocol, the secret document in which collusion between Britain, France and Israel had been formalised. The Government had explicitly denied in the House of Commons that Britain had any foreknowledge of the Israeli attack on Egypt; so, said Grimond, if these French disclosures were true, they would demonstrate that the Eden Government was 'made up of rogues and their dupes – not to mention incompetents'.⁴ Outside the furnace of Westminster twenty years later, Grimond was able to take a more relaxed view – 'while I personally rather welcome the veil which has been drawn over this incident – there may well be occasions when ministers must lie in the national interest – yet the contrast between the treatment of the dissemblers on this occasion and the way that others have been expelled from public life for lesser offences, is strange to say the least of it'.⁵

What Grimond always knew, however, was that Suez had given the Liberals – and him personally – a crucial lifeline when they were at their weakest.

What he always knew, however, was that Suez had given the Liberals – and him personally – a crucial lifeline when they were at their weakest. At by-elections in Gloucester, Rochdale and Torrington, the Liberals soon demonstrated that they knew how to campaign – and how to hurt the two big parties. In the wake of Suez, the Liberal Party was back in business.

Michael McManus is a former SDP member and was the Conservative Parliamentary candidate for Watford in 2001. He is the author of Jo Grimond: Towards the Sound of Gunfire (Birlinn, 2001) and is Political Director of Vote 2004.

- 1 *Guardian*, 20 August 1956.
- 2 *The Times*, 3 November 1956.
- 3 *News Chronicle*, 18 December 1956.
- 4 *The Times*, 1 April 1957.
- 5 Jo Grimond, *Memoirs*, p. 192.

REVIEWS

Reformism and the Risorgimento

Derek Beales and Eugenio F. Biagini: *The Risorgimento and the Unification of Italy* (Longman, 2nd edition, 2002)

Reviewed by **Piers Huggill**

Derek Beales (with, in this new edition, additional input from Eugenio Biagini) has set out a knowingly revisionist history of the Italian Risorgimento, at least from the point of view of traditional Italian historiography. In fact, as Beales himself recognises, there have been a number of reassessments of the Risorgimento since the fall of fascism and the consequent historical anti-fascist consensus of the Italian Republic.¹ Indeed, this post-fascist revisionist trend, by consciously historicising the process of unification in Italy, has entailed reviewing the concept of 'nation' itself and the very idea of a national unity project ever having existed in Italy in the accepted form of Risorgimento.

Part of this reassessment of the processes that defined and facilitated Italian unification is evident in Beales' decision to go further back in time than is usual and to

trace his chosen narrative from the end of the Austrian War of Succession in 1748. The signing of the Treaty of Aix-La-Chapelle, which 'inaugurated nearly fifty years of peace in Italy', was first considered the starting point of the Risorgimento by the poet Giosuè Carducci (1835–1907). However, it is only comparatively recently that it has been suggested again (the first edition of this book was published in 1971). Previous reckoning began with the Napoleonic invasion of Italy in 1796 (for the left and liberals) or with the Congress of Vienna in 1815 (for conservatives).

Since this book was originally intended to form part of a series of works reassessing historical topics from a contemporary liberal political perspective, it is no surprise perhaps that the origins of the Risorgimento should be sought in the Enlightenment (or the indigenous Italian form of *Iluminismo*) and in the slow