

# Jo Grimond: an appreciation

Jo Grimond brought the Liberal Party back from the brink of extinction. Michael Meadowcroft, former MP for Leeds West, who worked for Grimond in the 1960s, remembers the man and his achievements.

The death of Jo Grimond on 24th October had a curious impact on friend and opponent alike. For Liberals who lived through the heady days of Jo's leadership his affectionate obituaries were more than a tribute to the man. In reality the Grimond era had long since passed but, whilst its figurehead was still around, part of one's mind had somehow retained a sense of connection and a willing self-deceit that his period of leadership was somehow far more recent than it was. Jo's death brings a sense of sad finality to a vivid chapter of political history. The words and ideas remain on the page but, much more than with most leaders, it was the spark of the personality behind them that gave them the added inspiration that causes many fifty pluses still to call themselves "Grimond Liberals". It is that same vivid recollection of vitality that moved editors to give over so many column inches to the obituary of a former MP who, by any cold, unemotional, mathematical calculation had achieved very little in the normally unsentimental world of politics.

It is difficult now to recall the political conditions and the state of Liberalism when Jo Grimond took over the party in September 1956. Five years of Conservative Government with a country at last clambering out of its post-war austerity and beginning to believe that one could aspire to greater prosperity. A Labour Party which in Government had completed a transformation in the structure of the economy and, with the bloom of public ownership still largely intact, which still commanded a massive vote. Finally a Liberal Party with half a dozen MPs and 2% of the vote but which had enough former Ministers and Members still pottering around to persuade the gullible that the halcyon days were but yesterday and that the party could somehow sweep into power again on the strength of folk memory alone.

Why then should a young, aspiring politician, possessed of an original mind and a self-confident talent for debunking pretension, have joined the Liberal Party at such a time? Even more puzzling is why, having by his own admission been frustrated and embarrassed by the lack of discipline and absence of coherence amongst the handful of MPs he purported to organise as Chief Whip from 1950, did he take on its leadership when Clement Davies, under pressure to retire, made his "stepping down from the bridge and handing over the helm" speech at the 1956 assembly?

Leaving aside any additional influence from his marriage into the Asquith family, the answer was to be found in a succinct phrase of another Liberal candidate of the period: "We couldn't stand the Tories and we didn't trust the state." In many respects this is the constant thread of all Jo's writing and places him in the direct succession to T H Green, Maynard Keynes, Ramsay Muir and Elliott Dodds. As for the leadership question, one must not mistake Jo's mischievous self-deprecation for humility; he had considerable vanity and never appeared to lack faith in his ability to recreate a relevant Liberal Party. There is even a sense in which, for all the many 1970s Liberals' regrets that he was before his time, he would have found the later Liberal Party more difficult to lead when it had developed party machinery which might not have taken quite so kindly to a leader producing policy on the hoof.

In 1956, according to Jo himself, there was no consultation as to who should take over the leadership. In fact, however, Clement Davies would not have been pressed to retire had Jo not been in the wings. A year before, at the party assembly immediately before the general election, Davies had been ill and unable to make the closing speech. Jo, who was not then particularly well known to the rank and file as a platform performer, stepped in and electrified the gathering. Alan Watkins' 1966 book *The Liberal Dilemma* is still well worth reading as possibly the best and shrewdest analysis of Jo Grimond's contemporary leadership.

## Style

Charisma is a much over used word but Jo certainly possessed it. He was the finest platform performer of his time. His speeches were always impressive but no-one present at the two or three of his most memorable performances will ever forget the emotion and excitement of the occasion. He didn't have to demand one's loyalty and work; he inspired it. I remember a Liberal Councillor saying to me immediately after the "sound of gunfire" speech at the 1963 Brighton Assembly, that "if he'd said 'all those who will march with me come to the front now', I'd have been first there." Jo's set piece speeches tended to follow a similar pattern: a resounding opening for ten minutes or so, which startled the audience into attention, dropping into a more reflective fifteen minutes or so of Liberal commentary on the current political agenda - always including new, often startling, policy. He would then begin gently and deliberately to

increase the rhythm and volume into the final peroration, with its resounding phrases and call to action, leaving the audience wanting more. On one assembly occasion, alas, I cannot now remember which, the delegates refused to let him go without an encore!

Whereas Jo Grimond's lasting contribution to politics comes, and will continue to come, from his intellect and political judgement, it was his additional attributes which enabled him to make such a powerful impact on the his contemporary political scene. The handsome good looks, the crinkly smile which disarmed and attracted so many television viewers, the immense physical stature and the resonant voice, all gave added value to the clarity of mind and vivid choice of phrase to encapsulate a point. Because he was so manifestly capable and attractive he could disguise the weakness of his party.

The Times summed this up well on the occasion of his resignation as leader in January 1967:

*So long as Mr Grimond was leader, his personality hid from his party the true frustrations of its position. Because he looked the equal of the other party leaders it was possible to believe that the party itself might one day win the same equality.*

In a later interview, to illustrate the difference with the current style of leadership with banks of researchers and speech writers, Jo said that he wrote all his own speeches. This was not strictly true as Harry Cowie and, occasionally, I prepared items for his speeches and television scripts. What was true was that, however much we endeavoured to imitate Jo's distinctively staccato style, the phrases and cadences were never as good as Jo's own. Given that he could be very lazy, he tended to incorporate any text supplied as written and we therefore eventually resorted to producing notes only, in order to ensure that he rewrote the items in his own style.

There are no embarrassing campaigning pictures of Jo. He abhorred gimmicks and invariably refused to go along with typical suggestions for what would later become known as "photo opportunities". In the sense that it was too important to be damaged or demeaned, politics to Jo was a serious business, though none the less enjoyable for that. He was not, however, in any sense a dour personality. Far from it. He was one of the most amusing individuals I have ever met in politics with an ability to use wit and humour to enliven small meetings and large rallies alike. Indeed, one reason why he virtually refused to start election campaign days before 11am was not because, as he would say, "Must read the papers, y'know", but because the night before he would usually have been regaling those members of his entourage who drove him home to Kew, with a string of hilarious stories, often interpolated with the curious expletive "Hell's teeth" - and white wine - until the small hours.

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One such story, no doubt apochryphal, but told to illustrate how distant the Shetlands are from London, was of a Whitehall bureaucrat during the war who sent a call up directive to the men of Unst to report to their nearest railway station. When after two telegrams no-one appeared at Wick in the far north of Scotland, the civil servant duly went, complete with bowler hat, to Unst and demanded why the directive had been ignored. It was perfectly simple, they said - the nearest railway station was in enemy hands. This being Bergen in Norway!

Occasionally we party hacks had to try and persuade Jo to add the leadership's weight to some vital organisational matter we were working on. Jo invariably feigned total ignorance of such mundane matters. Once I had to get him to mention in his Assembly speech the need for all candidates to have agents in place as soon as possible. "Agents?" mused Jo, "Yes ... I remember I once had an agent. Man called Robertson. After I'd hired him I discovered he suffered from seasickness. Now mine is not an appropriate constituency for anyone suffering from such a malady. I spent the entire election campaign holding his head over the side of boats and arranging hotels for him on the islands."

Jo Grimond's politics

For all Jo's habit of producing new ideas apparently off the cuff he was first and foremost an analyst rather than a synthesist. He had a remarkable ability to spot the weaknesses in an argument and to highlight such flaws with short but devastating questions. After leaving some unfortunate advocate of party policy floundering in acute discomfort, Jo would sit back with a wry smile and murmur, "Hmm, I thought so." In later years at Parliamentary Party meetings Jo would often remain silent for most of the meeting and then



ask a single question, usually to highlight some nonsense that a spokesman had committed the party to.

As a trustee at Rowntree Social Service Trust meetings - a duty he took very seriously, particularly when cash for some pet Scottish project might be forthcoming - he would demolish one after another well-meaning but inadequately thought out grant application bearing on the current political agenda. Often, in the ensuing silence, it would be left to Richard Wainwright to suggest some course of action to rescue the idea.

Another rather typical Jo tactic would be occasionally to suggest some extremely odd course of action on a current issue. Given Jo's usually sure-footed judgement, there would usually be a pause while we silently pondered how to deal with the situation. "Where did you get that idea, Jo?" someone would venture. "Oh, someone put it to me recently." "Who, Jo?" "Oh, someone I met." "Where, Jo?" "Oh, if you must know, on the District line this morning." It would turn out that, whilst strap hanging on his way by tube from Kew to Westminster, he would be harangued by fellow commuters and would thereby absorb some rather bizarre ideas from time to time.

He was, of course, absolutely direct and determined on key issues. The Suez crisis burst on the scene almost as soon as he had taken over the leadership. Without hesitation - and, apparently, consultation with colleagues - Jo denounced the military action against the Egyptian occupation of the canal. Over the EEC Jo was forthright and consistent over the need to unite Europe and for Britain to be within the Community from the start. And if these seem obvious policies in the 1990s it was far from being necessarily the case in the party in the 1950s.

On one of the early equivalents of the election "Phone In". Robin Day said to Jo: "We've had a question

"from a Mrs Smith of Newtown who wants to know whether you are in favour of a united Europe; and, Mr Grimond, she wants a Yes or No answer." "Yes," replied Jo. Robin was slightly nonplussed for a moment. "But, Mr Grimond, it's a very difficult question just to answer like that?" "Yes," said Jo, "it is, and I've decided it."

On other occasions Jo could produce the perfect image to demolish illiberal opponents. When Labour went through its phase of not wanting to decide whether or not they were in favour of joining the EEC "until they knew what the price was", Jo caricatured their attitude as waiting to decide whether one was for or against the Reformation until one knew what the monasteries would fetch.

His four books are sometimes said to depict his own changing views, with *The Common Welfare* (1978) being, in Keith Kyle's words, "premature Thatcherite". Certainly, a superficial comparison with Jo's earlier books, and particularly with carefully chosen quotes from them, would suggest that he had drifted to the right. Liberals to whom such a thought was nigh on heresy, largely pretended that they hadn't heard aright. In fact, it was not so much an aberration as an emphasis - perhaps even an over emphasis - on a consistent theme of Jo's thought: that of the need for individual and community self-help rather than relying on the state. It also needs to be borne in mind that during all his time as leader, and for many years after, his task was to define Liberalism in contrast to the "Butskellist" two party consensus. By 1978 the country was suffering from Labour incompetence and was sliding towards its socialist irrelevance. I suspect that Jo would have expressed himself very differently ten years later in the face of actual Thatcherism. He did after all tell Keith Kyle in their 1983 interview that his accusation was only possible in hindsight and that individualism had gone too far and, perhaps, more equality was required, adding that, when pressed to continue as leader in 1976 he found himself "more individualist and less statist" than the then Parliamentary Liberal Party. "After all", he said, "realignment [of the left] had been seen as a Grimond eccentricity."

In the immediate post election atmosphere of 1959 Jo put the anti-statist position from the opposite angle:

*I would like to see the radical side of politics - the Liberals and most of the Labour Party - make a new appeal to people to take a more active part in all sorts of real political issues ... There must be a bridge between socialism and the Liberal policy of co-ownership in industry through a type of syndicalism coupled with a non-conformist outlook such as was propounded on many issues by George Orwell.*

Even at the time of the 1976 Assembly Jo had similar words of advice for new party leader David Steel:

*What Steel has to do now is to forge a new libertarian radicalism and get it past the party to the public at large.*

Jo Grimond ensured that the Liberal Party was firmly opposed to the whole concept of an independent British nuclear deterrent - a policy reversed by the Liberal Democrats - which he regarded as both wrong in principle and realistically impossible. Although, so far as I know, he never espoused an anti-deterrence position he did, in 1962, state, in characteristically vivid terms, that:

*Time is short. Deterrence is not a policy for eternity - except in a sense we should none of us welcome.*

Another constant target for Jo's pen was the dangerous effect of a stifling bureaucracy. The Unserving State Booklet *The Bureaucratic Blight* set the argument out at length but he had earlier summed his case out in a deliciously wicked picture:

*If the Good Samaritan had found the wounded traveller today he would, like the Pharisee, have passed by on the other side of the road, but for different reasons. He would have argued that this was a case for the Director of Maladjusted Cases. The traveller would have gone undetected because the director would be either dealing with a mountain of correspondence or at a conference on socially deprived travellers.*

Jo's political legacy deserves much lengthier attention than can be given here. Certainly his extensive literary output is still well worth reading. The comparison with the total lack of published work by his successor Jeremy Thorpe is itself a commentary on the post Grimond problems of the Liberal Party. Incidentally Jo's only on the record comment on the Thorpe affair was that "politics is an endless adventure in which all sorts of peculiar things happen"!

#### Grimond's Strategy

Jo's constant call was for realignment. He was fond of complaining about the Liberal Party's impossibilism, caricatured by him as, if pushed, recognising that it could not sweep to power on its own in one fell swoop, but deeply suspicious of any hint of co-operation with another party. The party signalled its position by fighting the 1960 Bolton East by-election, thus formally marking the end of its arrangements with the Conservatives of Bolton and Huddersfield which had hitherto given the Liberals two precious seats. In December 1961 Jo sent a sympathetic note to Gaitskell when the Labour leader was struggling to modernise his party in the teeth of opposition from the left.

The first Wilson Government, in 1964, almost produced the arithmetic that would have given Jo the leverage he had worked for since 1956. It produced his famous Scarborough Assembly speech of 1965, saying that "the Liberals had their teeth in the real meat of power" (Jo always complained that the reported phrase "the red meat of power" was a misquote, even though it was probably more memorable.) Later Jo would say that he regretted making the speech and said that he made no formal approach to Labour as "rejection by

Labour was certain and, therefore, why stir up Liberals?"

Jo very much approved of the non conformity of the later '60s and this made him the darling of the young Liberals in their "red guard" phase, even though he was rather scathing of their pretensions, later saying - wrongly - that they never had more than two hundred members.

Despite the long years, with their many disappointments, Jo Grimond was not for Lib-Labbery at any price. He was against the Lib-Lab pact of 1977 because it did not deliver proportional representation, which he believed was possible. He saw it as a failure of David Steel's negotiations and that, in any case, if the issue had been electoral reform or an election the party would have done better than in 1979. He also commented to Tony Benn - a most unlikely pact "pairing" if ever there was one - that one was "either in government or nothing." Despite his original opposition, he thereafter loyally backed the pact, just as he did the Alliance, even though he had great misgivings as to the libertarian credentials of the Social Democrats.

The years of Jo's leadership were certainly halcyon days but the last year or so following the 1966 election was difficult for everyone at headquarters. He wanted to resign but "HQ" wouldn't let him. He became stubborn, agreeing to do things and then claiming he hadn't. He had said when he became leader that he gave us ten years to "get on or get out". He was right and that last year was one too many. I was in charge of his arrangements for the 1966 election and I personally believe that one devastating incident took more out of Jo than maybe we realised at the time. In the middle of the campaign his eldest son, Andrew, died suddenly in Edinburgh. Jo could only take a few days off the treadmill and, when he returned, he seemed to have aged considerably. I suspect that this extra blow devoured more of Jo's enthusiasm to continue than we appreciated. Just as he had a personal distaste for political gimmicks and for anything which might detract from the importance of politics so he also preserved a reticence over family life. The steadfastness of Laura and her own solid Liberalism, being a candidate herself, as was their younger son John, were their own testimony to a close and shared family life.

I end this appreciation with an extract, without comment, from an article Jo wrote during the Alliance, in September 1987:

*The name Liberal is still too much seen as the label of a sect and the beliefs of liberalism have lacked the backing of a movement which can give them meaning to the public as much in the great cities of the north and among those who benefit so much from the new technology as those of us who have been active in the old Liberal Party. I believe that a majority of people want liberalism but so far they have not been offered it.*