

Reviews

A perfect balance

Jo and Laura Grimond: A Selection of Memories and Photographs 1945–1994 (Orkney Liberal Democrats, 2000; 96pp)
Reviewed by **Geoffrey Sell**

This booklet, published to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Jo Grimond's election to Westminster, contains reminiscences from over fifty contributors, accompanied by many photographs.

Jo Grimond is best remembered as an inspirational leader of the Liberal Party, responsible for the party's first revival since 1929. Every successful politician needs a secure political base, and Orkney & Shetland provided him with this for thirty-three years. In the process he clocked up an estimated two and a half million miles' worth of travel, and 1300 letters about seal protection (as opposed to three on Scottish devolution). He loved his constituents and his constituency. He loved his house, the Old Manse of Firth, the pictures by Scottish painters that decorated its walls, its garden, his expeditions to Skara Brae, Scapa and Hoy, and St Magnus Cathedral.

Grimond's association with Orkney & Shetland, that was to last until his death in 1993, began in 1940, when Lady Glen-Coats, the prospective Liberal candidate, decided to give up and suggested him as her successor. On paper it was an unlikely empathy. The well-connected Eton- and Oxford-educated son of a Dundee jute manufacturer had never been to the constituency. In the event, he appeared to have landed among soulmates. He narrowly failed to win the seat in 1945, but after some persuasion agreed to stand again at the next election. Nationally, the 1950 election was a severe setback for the Liberal Party;

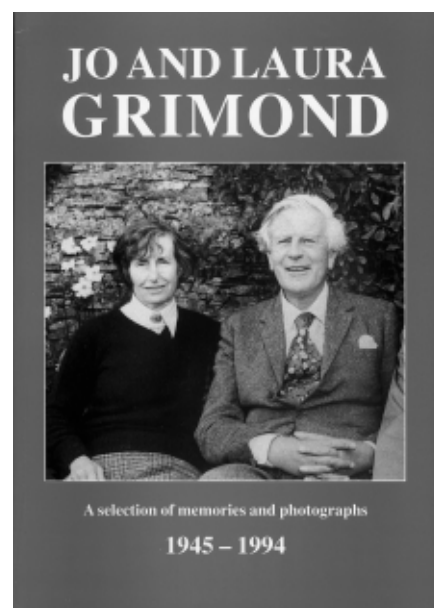
even today, older Liberals remember it as the infamous year of 'the liberal candidate lost his deposit', as all but one hundred of the party's candidates suffered this fate. Two and a half million votes produced only nine MPs. One of these was, however, Grimond, who had been returned with a majority of 2,956, and had seen his share of the vote increase from 34.2% to 46.8%, a notable personal achievement.

It would be impossible to exaggerate the importance of Orkney & Shetland to Grimond. The constituency's location at the extremity of Britain helped nurture his radicalism and gave him an unique vantage point from which to view the political scene. Grimond's skill was as a thinker, not a tactician. As such he was a considerable publicist for the party. From his pen came a constant stream of pamphlets, books and newspaper articles setting out the Liberal message. His books applied to the problems of the modern age the traditional Liberal principles of liberty, voluntarism and trust in the people. They drew heavily on the robust values of Orkney & Shetland, which remained – for longer than most of the United Kingdom – immune to the twentieth century tides of secular materialism and passive conformity. Grimond's constituency helped to shape his thinking, for he found in its small self-sufficient communities paradigms against which he measured the lunacies of central government and the welfare state. It was where he felt

most at home, and could relax and recharge his intellectual batteries

But Orkney & Shetland's isolation may also have contributed to Grimond's lack of empathy with the industrial voter. He wrote in August 1959 that 'at the back of our troubles is the disunity between capital and labour, social classes and the shifting conglomerations of our great towns'. 'Every summer,' he added, 'when I go back to Orkney I feel the immense well-being of people free from the jealousies, stresses and antagonisms of industrial life'.¹ Jim Heppell, a former Liberal parliamentary candidate, felt that Grimond 'was too remote from working-class interests'.² Peggy Edwards, who fought two elections under Grimond's leadership, agrees. She felt that Grimond had 'an incomprehension of the very people whom he so wanted to help. His ivory tower doubled as a sort of social chastity belt that kept him untouched by social class V'.³

The booklet also rightly celebrates the life and work of Laura Grimond. Some wives of leading politicians, such as Norma Major and Mary Wilson, do not regard themselves as political animals. The same could not be said of Laura Grimond. Grand-daughter of a Prime Minister, daughter of Lady Violet Bonham Carter, one of the best speakers, male or female, in the country and wife of arguably the most distinguished and charismatic of post-



war politicians, Laura carved out and adorned her own political niche. *The Times* in its obituary described her as 'one of her party's strongest hidden assets'.⁴ Former party official Sir Leonard Smith felt that she not only backed Grimond up, but that intellectually she was his equal, and had the independence and spirit of the Asquiths.⁵

Lord Holme's portrayal of the Grimonds is also interesting. When it came to policy formulation Jo Grimond was a bit of an agent provocateur, who liked to toss a hand grenade into the room and see what happened, whilst Laura Grimond was much more realistic, much more political. It was – he believed – in the genes.⁶ Grimond's marriage in a sense gave him his passport into Liberal politics. His mother-in-law was the formidable high priestess of Liberalism. She took a proprietorial interest in the Liberal Party and the political hopes that she had once entertained for herself were transferred to Grimond. Lord Esher, a contemporary and close friend, feels that he took a pretty relaxed view of politics until his marriage. 'Laura not only brought him into the Asquithian inheritance but also confronted him with her (and her mother's) stronger feelings and more concentrated ambitions.'⁷

Jim Wallace, who succeeded Grimond as MP for Orkney & Shetland upon his retirement in 1983, describes in the Foreword to the booklet how Laura's support for Jo was unswerving. In many ways, he states, Laura was the dynamo, the force which drove things on. Her single-minded determination was as inspirational as Jo's leadership and vision. As a team, they had the perfect balance. According to John Grimond, his mother was more interested in politics than was his father. Until her final illness, she would be campaigning in by-elections.

In conclusion, Orkney Liberal Democrats are to be congratulated for publishing this booklet. It is a fitting tribute to two very special people who not only made their mark upon their community but who enriched national politics.

Geoffrey Sell is a college lecturer. He completed a PhD thesis on Liberal Revival: British Liberalism and Jo Grimond 1956–67.

- 1 Bulletin, 21/8/59.
- 2 Completed questionnaire dated 10/9/94 received by author from J. P. Heppell, Liberal candidate for Shipley 1964 and 1966.
- 3 Completed questionnaire received by author from Mrs. P. Edwards MBE, Liberal candidate for Ilkeston 1964 and West Derbyshire 1966.
- 4 *The Times*, 18/2/94
- 5 Interview with the late Sir Leonard Smith, 14/2/89.
- 6 Interview with Lord Holme, 17/3/89.
- 7 Letter from Lord Esher to author, dated 3/9/93.

the Blair and Brown of the nineteenth-century Liberal Party.

That alone would have made Lord John Russell a key figure in the history of Liberalism, yet it was not his main contribution to the history of the party. That was made in the field of the history of ideas, and was done as much through writing and speaking as through his record in office. He was the man who did most to establish that the Liberal Party of the nineteenth century would inherit the ideals, the principles, and above all the inherited electoral loyalties, dating back to the first Whigs of the seventeenth century. Lord John's ancestor, William Lord Russell, had been the first Whig martyr of 1683. Lord John was steeped in his life and thinking.

The early nineteenth century – when the succession and religious toleration were effectively dead as political disputes, and the key issue was becoming the extension of rights to a wider social circle – was one of those periods when the issues of politics are in a state of flux and party organisations are correspondingly likely to break up. The Tory party formally split, and was lucky to recover. Lord John succeeded in reformulating what E. F. Biagini has called 'the old Whig cry of equality before the law' in a way that gave it a constant daily relevance to the politics of the nineteenth century. Nothing had been more central to the principles of 1688 than the idea of government by consent. This had meant, in 1688, that Parliament should be able to determine who should be king. To Lord John, it meant that a wider circle of people should be able to decide who would be in the House of Commons. He said in 1822 that of the 513 English members, 290 were elected by 17,000 persons, and 'the votes of the House of Commons no longer imply the general assent of the realm'. This attack on electoral property would have horrified his ancestors, yet he saw correctly that it followed unquestionably from principles which they had often enunciated. He carried this belief in government by consent through into international

Liberal inheritor of the Whigs

Paul Scherer: *Lord John Russell* (Associated University Press, 1999)
Reviewed by Conrad Russell

It is not an exaggeration to say that the event which created the Liberal Party was the agreement of Russell and Palmerston, announced at Willis's Rooms in 1859, that either would serve under the other. They had long enjoyed a tempestuous relationship, resigning with a regularity which contributed very heavily

to the short life of most mid-nineteenth century governments. Their decision created a party which enjoyed unrivalled success as an election-winning machine for the next fifty years. Yet this agreement did not mark the end of their disagreements, nor even the beginning of a respect for each other. They were