

Report: The 1979 general election

the party emerged with just eleven seats but won just one constituency, 'the Liberal perennial' of Orkney and Shetland, on both occasions. In 1979, the Liberals were almost entirely a party of the Celtic fringe – Devon, Cornwall, parts of Scotland and parts of Wales. In 2019, however, the seats won by the Liberal Democrats were mostly in south-west London and in university towns in England and Scotland. 'There is very little left of the Celtic fringe, but this is now a party that can win seats in the capital [and is] over-represented in the university towns and in parts of southern England,' he said.

The point was underlined when Sir John explained how much the geography of the party's support has changed. Whereas the Liberal Party underperformed in London in 1979, the opposite was the case forty years later, and the Liberal Democrats also did relatively well in southern England. In Devon and Cornwall, and even more so in the Midlands and the north of England, the party's support is now weaker than in 1979. 'This has become much more a party of London and its environs, in a way that is quite remarkable,' he concluded.

In 1979, the Liberals claimed to be the only 'classless party'. Even if the reality was not quite that simple, their successors now receive twice as much support from middle-class voters as from working-class voters. Similarly, in 1979, the Liberal Party performed better amongst university graduates than among non-graduates, but that gap has now widened considerably.

Sir John also noted some marked, probably related shifts in the political beliefs of the party's supporters. In 1979, the Liberals had gained the support of 14 per cent of those who had voted 'Yes' in the 1975 referendum on European Common Market membership and 12 per cent of those who had voted 'No'. In 2019, 21 per cent of Remain voters backed the Liberal Democrats, compared to just 3 per cent of Leave supporters, indicating that the party's supporters are now much more pro-European Union.

In 1979, Lord Steel could reasonably claim to lead a centre party, as

measured by its supporters' attitudes on such issues as nationalisation of industry. 'Now, the Liberal Democrats are distinguished [by] above all [being] strong amongst social liberals, people who value cultural diversity [and] think what people should do in terms of morality and social mores is up to them ... the party's support is much more clearly rooted in that perspective than it was back in 1979,' said Sir John Curtice.

To some Liberal Democrats, all this might sound like the basis of the stable and philosophically coherent 'core vote' that has eluded the party since Lord Steel's time. But whether the party is better placed than in 1979 for renewed growth and development remains to be seen.

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Reviews

The twisting path

Tudor Jones, *The Uneven Path of British Liberalism: from Jo Grimond to Brexit* (Manchester University Press, 2nd edn., 2019)

Review by **William Wallace**

THE REVISED EDITION of Tudor Jones's study of the ideas and policies behind the revival of British Liberalism is, understandably, less optimistic in its conclusions than its predecessor of 2011. Over half of the Liberal Democrats' present party members have joined since that date, however. A book that focuses on the shifting interpretations of the Liberal tradition since Grimond led the Liberal Revival should therefore be valued by many involved in current debates and searches for messages that will appeal to voters.

It is well-researched. The author is a member of the editorial board of *The Journal of Liberal Democrat History*. Several other members of the editorial board, notably including our editor Duncan Brack, appear in this intellectual history of the party. Newbies will discover the important contribution of the two Greaveses, Tony and Bernard, as well as of Gordon Lishman and Michael Meadowcroft. The links between the modern party and its predecessors are traced through the

writing of Elliott Dodds, sadly largely forgotten today, and Donald Wade. But the overwhelming impression from the early chapters is of how great an intellectual debt we still owe to Jo Grimond.

It would now be impossible for a party leader to behave as Grimond did in his early years as leader. He sought out leading experts in various fields, held seminars, wrote books and pamphlets, and captivated student audiences (myself amongst them) with his questioning of the conventional wisdom. The development of twenty-four-hour news, and the demand for instant responses to each new event, has made it far more difficult for his successors to step back and reflect, and to ask uncomfortable questions. Grimond, in 1957–8, was already challenging the slow pace of decolonisation, questioning the case for an independent nuclear deterrent, calling for British entry into what was then the European Economic Community, and supporting stronger civic participation, decentralised government,

The uneven path of British Liberalism

FROM JO GRIMOND TO BREXIT

TUDOR JONES

co-ownership, and market regulation instead of nationalisation or the free market.

Jones starts with Grimond, and therefore underplays the extent to which he rescued the party from the followers of Friedrich von Hayek, who doubted the concept of a public interest and viewed the state as a constant threat to individual freedom. As late as the 1958 party assembly, this wing of the party, better funded than its 'Radical Reform Group' opponents, was strong enough to block social liberal proposals. When Grimond, with the support of the tiny parliamentary party, took the party in a different direction, they departed – some to form the Institute of Economic Affairs and influence the Conservative Party, others to profit from pirate radio.

Subsequent chapters take us through the repeated cycles of party reflection on how Liberal principles matched current challenges, with working groups after each decisive general election. He takes us up to the incoherent and disastrous 2015 election campaign and the 2017 referendum. Recent recruits to the party may puzzle at the extent to which Liberals attempted to return to first principles as they set out to reshape policy priorities after general elections. The 1979 party conference devoted an entire session to speeches on party philosophy – though the development of Margaret

Thatcher's deregulatory economic policies, followed by the emergence of the Social Democrats, sharply impinged on subsequent Liberal thinking.

Jones is less persuasive in analysing the convergence and divergence of ideas within the SDP–Liberal Alliance than elsewhere in his volume. David Steel was in many ways a social democrat, while Shirley Williams was a passionate liberal. David Owen was a natural authoritarian, setting out his concept of a 'social market' as much to separate the Social Democrats from their Liberal partners as to promote a coherent economic strategy.

After Grimond, the party owes most to Paddy Ashdown in terms of its intellectual legacy. He picked up a party with minimal popular support after the botched merger of 1987–8, sparked off domestic and international policy initiatives, travelled around Britain picking up ideas, and pulled people in for informal seminars. I remember meetings in his office on the Bosnian war which included people who had just returned from Sarajevo as well as academics and UN advisers. I also remember how he drove the 1997 manifesto, meeting after meeting, posing questions, checking with outside experts. No leader since then has shown such an interest in strategic policies.

The picture that emerges from successive chapters is of a party that has taken policy very seriously, but which has ground policy development through the slow procedures of the Federal Policy Committee and the policy groups it has set up. Between 2001 and 2010 a series of volumes from outside the party's formal structures – *The Orange Book* in 2004, *Beyond Liberty* in 2007, and *Reinventing the State* in 2009 – sparked some lively debate about the balance between what David Laws called 'the four strands of liberalism': personal, political, economic and social. Jones summarises their main arguments, concluding that the *Orange Book* has acquired in retrospect an over-critical reputation.

There's little here on Liberal think tanks, because few rich sympathisers were willing to fund them. Richard Wainwright (given too little credit in

this volume) provided the money to set up the Centre for Reform, but not enough to enable it to compete with wealthy Conservative-leaning bodies or union-funded Labour ones. Paul Marshall then transformed it into CentreForum, more generously funded but with a bias towards economic liberalism that alienated many within the party. Jones does not add that the poverty of groups outside the party's formal policy-making structures has been one of the many factors that has held the Liberal Democrats back. Policy Exchange, the Taxpayers Alliance, the Henry Jackson Society and others supply their staffers for radio and TV discussion programmes and give newspapers regular copy with their published reports; LibDems lack comparable research reports or staff to gain visibility in the public debate.

Reading this history in 2020, what should lessons should today's Liberals learn? Perhaps the most important is the stubborn opposition of both established parties to cooperation, and the difficulties that has created for Liberal leaders dedicated to multi-party politics and to reasoned compromise. Grimond, Steel and Ashdown all pursued the social liberal strategy of centre-left cooperation. Harold Wilson first played with and then ridiculed Grimond in 1964–5, before winning a clear majority in the 1966 election. David Steel negotiated a Lib–Lab pact; but most of the Labour cabinet refused to give anything in return, ending in the chaos of 1978–9 and the election of Mrs Thatcher. Paddy Ashdown's 'project' was better prepared than either of these. It succeeded in persuading Labour to introduce devolution for Scotland and Wales, thanks in large part to the support of Robin Cook. But many of Cook's colleagues were opposed to cooperation; with Labour holding a majority of seats, if not of votes, the LibDems were no longer useful and could be disregarded.

We have now half-forgotten the weaknesses of the Labour governments of 2001 and 2005, which led Nick Clegg – the first party leader not to have been shaped by the bitter experiences of the Labour 1970s

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and Thatcherite 1980s – to look more kindly on David Cameron’s ‘modernising’ project. Jones touches on the disputes over the tuition fees pledge in the Federal Policy Committee in 2008–9, where Evan Harris led successive revolts against leadership attempts to modify the proposal. He notes Clegg’s acceptance that the coalition’s deficit reduction should come overwhelmingly from spending cuts rather than increases in taxation – to my mind one of our crucial errors in 2010. But he underplays the systemic dilemma that faces any third party in our two-party system: that the only way to national power is through coalition, but that the junior partner in any coalition gets the blame and not the credit.

One lesson is that a party of ideas needs to rethink its approach in the light of changing circumstances every decade. Jones could have discussed more directly the impact of economic, technological and social change on Liberal politics and policy. He gives the party too little credit for its influence

over British social regulation, from abortion reform through to sexual equality and LGBT rights – with a voice and parliamentary influence, outside government, that has helped to make Britain a more open and liberal society. But globalisation, the replacement of British enterprise by multinational investment, the continuing technological revolution and its impact on the unskilled, all pose challenges to liberalism that the party has struggled to address. For these we need to develop new policies. But many of the old policies that Grimond espoused remain directly relevant, and some are underplayed by the party today: active citizenship, the importance of the third sector between the state and private enterprise, profit-sharing and co-ownership, decentralisation of government and strong local democracy, spreading power and wealth as widely as possible.

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and the good of the time, including Viscounts Samuel and Simon (former Liberal and Liberal National leaders respectively), the Liberal classicist Gilbert Murray, and Jan Christian Smuts, then prime minister of South Africa, had contributed fulsome tributes. Waugh then goes on to contrast these comments on the character and achievements of Campbell-Bannerman with his relegation to someone whom, even in 1973, Wilson called an almost forgotten figure.

Whilst it is perhaps not surprising that the general public have almost no knowledge of Campbell-Bannerman – indeed I remember a ‘University Challenge’ contestant thinking he was a Tory in answer to one of Jeremy Paxman’s questions – his obscurity among Liberal Democrats is more surprising. In part, perhaps, this relates to a more general ignorance about Liberal history among a party most of whose members have joined since the 2015 general election. It also, of course, relates to the gap in the ‘big picture’ story of the Liberals between Gladstone (the ‘Grand Old Man’) and Irish home rule, and the rivalry of Asquith and Lloyd George, the ripples from which were felt through the party even as late as the 1970s. Even Campbell-Bannerman’s role as the Liberal leader who achieved the party’s greatest electoral victory in the 1906 general election does not in itself restore him to the prominence he deserves in its history. What Waugh

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Alexander S. Waugh, *Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman: A Scottish Life and UK Politics 1836–1908* (Austin Macauley Publishers (2019)

Review by **Malcolm Baines**

ISTILL VIVIDLY REMEMBER finding the last major biography of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, by John Wilson, in a library surplus sale in Shrewsbury on my way to help in the Brecon and Radnor by-election. Alexander Waugh has spent much of his life putting together another biography: one which is in many ways a potpourri of Campbell-Bannerman’s life, combined with digressions into Scottish life, politics and history, looking back at one point even as far as the year 641. This range is in many ways the great charm of the book and it helps when reading it to have a wide range of historical and indeed cultural interests, otherwise the reader could rapidly find the constant digressions both distracting and irritating.

The other great strength of the book is the amount of information that it contains. Lists of Liberal cabinet members and the posts they held pepper the pages; whilst if you want to know who the other parliamentarians were who attended Glasgow High School (Campbell-Bannerman’s alma mater) then Table 29 in Appendix 6 is the place to look.

It is especially interesting, in the case of such a personal book, to understand Waugh’s motivation in writing it. He has helpfully appended a personal prologue and traces his interest back to an article he saw as a pupil in the Glasgow High School magazine in June 1948, 100 years after Campbell-Bannerman was the head boy of the third form. A number of the great

