

## Grimond

We are reproducing, in this edition of the *Journal*, an article by Jo Grimond MP which was first published in *Liberator* magazine in October 1970. Introduction by Mark Egan.

# Jo Grimond: An Essay on Power

FIRST ELECTED AS MP for Orkney & Shetland in 1950, Jo Grimond had led the Liberal Party from 1956 to 1967. Under his tenure the Liberals experienced a significant revival, reversing decades of seemingly irreversible decline. Not only did the party increase its parliamentary representation (a little), by winning the Orpington by-election in 1962 the Liberals showed they had the potential to win seats in areas with little or no previous tradition of support for the party. There was also a dramatic resurgence in local government and in party membership, with Grimond's media-friendly image and fresh perspective inspiring a generation of new recruits to Liberalism.

However, by 1970 the Liberal revival was receding into the distance as the party recovered from an electoral catastrophe as bad as any it had ever suffered. Grimond was returned to Parliament with a comfortable majority but he sat alongside just five colleagues, none of whom had anything approaching a safe seat. Grimond had stood down as party leader after the 1966 election, as Labour's victory with a majority of 98 ended any prospect of a 'realignment of the left' whereby Liberals and like-minded progressives could reshape the British political system. Grimond's successor, Jeremy Thorpe, was a divisive figure who survived an attempt to remove him in 1968 and made little impact with the public before the election in June 1970.

Grimond was an Old Etonian, Oxford-educated and a barrister, and his wife, Laura Bonham Carter, was a granddaughter of Asquith. Despite this background, firmly rooted in the British establishment, his political thinking was genuinely radical, as this article demonstrates. Published shortly after the 1970 election, it does not deal with the party's strategic challenges or the development of 'community politics' as an alternative strategy for securing and exercising power. Instead, it picks up on a number of themes which Grimond developed throughout the 1970s, culminating in his book *The Common Welfare* in 1978. Chief amongst these was his contempt for bureaucracy as an enemy of democracy, stifling new thinking and pursuing its own hidden, self-serving aims under the guise of a democratic mandate. Grimond was also passionate about developing people as rounded citizens, not as units in the economic machine: 'There must be activities and not passivities. They must be things people want to do on their own and not merely the encouragement of activities which the state considers praiseworthy.'

Grimond's prose rambles but is never dull. The ideas come thick and fast and can seem unfocused but they spark fresh thought and new ideas. It is not hard to see how he drew people to the Liberal Party, but the limitations of his approach are clear also. He is long on diagnosis but short on prescription. When he does make a

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proposal for change it can be perplexing – what exactly would a government-sponsored counter-government do?

Having left the party leadership, Grimond increasingly ploughed his own furrow. At one point he toyed with joining the Scottish Nationalists; he had no truck with community politics, categorising it as simply the mobilisation of grievance; and had little time for Social Democrats, whom he regarded as the principal enthusiasts for government bureaucracy. While Thorpe and, later, David Steel, grappled with the practical problems of increasing Liberal representation in Parliament, Grimond flew

a flag for the broad church which the party had become, embracing a wide range of thinking and traditions largely ignored by the other parties. The Liberal Party was never at ease with the ‘beard and sandals’ label often applied by the media to its activist base, but in many ways the party’s acceptance of diversity and debate was a strength which enriched British politics. That was also a part of Jo Grimond’s legacy.

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## Power to the People

‘Power to the People’. It is an old revolutionary slogan. It is the perpetual inarticulate outburst of the people against their rulers. It is a populist, mystical, muddled shout. The people cannot have power. If they could possibly achieve it they would have to surrender it. The people today are not even sure who they are. A hundred and fifty years ago they were the wage-earners, the peasants, the small farmers and the very small shop-keepers. These were the people without power and therefore without the corruption which goes with power. ‘We are the people of England and we have not spoken yet.’ These were the members of an oppressed class. And it was a class. These were the revolutionary potential who had bitter grievances against their rulers and the ruling system. These were the sleeping giants to be romanticised by all sorts of revolutionaries and reformers from Marx to Belloc. But power can no longer be personified. This ‘class’ no longer exists. Nor are the modern wielders of power easily identified. They are certainly not the big landlord, nor the bloated capitalist, nor the shareholders of modern industry.

Is ‘Power to the People’ then a meaningless, purposeless slogan? I think not. But it needs to be re-considered. And foremost in

the reconsideration it is important not to refine away its essential truth. It is a slogan of protest. It comes from the discontented. When it is most genuine, it is most incoherent for the very reason that it is the demand of the unorganised. Thus, though it may be led, focused and guided, it cannot be artificially implanted. It requires a certain element of faith and trust.

Populism supposes that certain down-to-earth simple virtues rest in the populace. If this rather mystical attitude can be accepted then it is possible to accept the movements which well up from below. Again the Liberal Party has preached participation for fifty years. Yet when the demand for participation sprang to life it was caught on the hop. It looked to participation in industry on orderly lines based on ownership and board membership. It was taken aback when students began to demand participation in the running of the Universities. We now have some of the leaders of the Labour Party, who have been in the van of cliché-ridden worship of bureaucracy and size for size’s sake, talking about participation. This is not power for or from the people. The essential populist feature of power to the people raises three questions which I want briefly to discuss.



Jo Grimond (1913–93)

First, is it in a modern society necessary? Is it compatible with modern technocratic society? The answer is unquestionably 'yes'.

It has sometimes been argued that you must choose between democracy and efficiency. Though it is by co-operation and dialogue between the two that progress can be made.

The great mistakes of our civilisation are made by the bureaucratic mind and I don't only mean the civil service. The worship of size, the colossal waste, the abuse of surplus value, the alienation of industrial society, the gross inefficiency of many professions, notably architects, the faceless battering of the mass media, the insistence of production for production's sake, regardless of the utility of the product or who is to gain from it and the ultimate utter disaster of the communist systems, notably in Russia, bear the print of bureaucracy, of the slavery to technocracy, of what has been called systemic fascism.

The opportunity of objection and protest which is the minimum power which is required to keep any government efficient is too limited in today's world. The institutions of democratic government do not enable a quick enough response to be made to wrong decisions.

So both in the positive direction of active participation in decision making and in the negative field of effective protest we need to strengthen the democracy against the bureaucratic outlook.

What we need democracy for therefore is not so much now to give effect to the will of the majority so that we can avoid civil war; nor is it simply that human beings may be considered to have a right to play some part in their own communities, though both these reasons are still valid. It is that without the participation of an educated, original and active public we shall not get the services we want, we will not get the right decisions on particular matters which affect us and we shall not get the initiatives which make life so attractive.

What we want to ensure is that where there is a desire for democratic participation it is not thwarted. It has been thwarted to some extent in all industrial societies. In Northern Ireland the Catholic minority are a threatened minority within another minority which feel threatened and excluded. Our modern state with all its services fails to enlist the loyalty and enthusiasm of so many of its citizens because it fails to offer them a positive outlet for their political and social energies.

The second question is how far power to the people can be satisfied by better democratic arrangements within the orbit of established government and how far it depends on organised opposition.

It was, and indeed is, one of the great advantages of the party system that it supplied the motive pressure in politics. But can it be said to do so any longer? Only I think to a limited extent. To begin with the growth of democracies has created a new power. Pressures working

in secret within the bureaucratic structure of industry. Professional organisations and the civil service looking to the furtherance of their own interests and pursued by men and women who have been indoctrinated by particular training to play particular roles.

What the Conservative and Labour Parties, the Republicans or the Democrats, may decide at their conferences or proclaim in their manifestos meet formidable and undemocratic forces operating outside the parties. Further, fewer people in Britain feel committed to the party ideology. Fewer people feel that they are represented by party representatives right across the whole spectrum of politics. The parties themselves too have fallen under the influence of apparatchiks and retain loyalties more through office and patronage than from political enthusiasm. People interested in politics are interested in this subject, in this issue or that, rather than in orthodox Conservatism, democratic Socialism or Liberalism.

As for action outside the conventional party structure it has been astonishingly successful. The 1970 Springbok cricket tour in England was stopped by a group of people without money and led by a young man of 20 or so. Community projects, art labs, demonstrations, straight community work is quite widespread in the USA and Britain. But two questions remain unanswered. How far can it or should it go without some unifying philosophy and unifying framework? So far it lacks what Mill called that 'centre of resistance round which the moral and social elements may cluster themselves'. Secondly, how is it to be financed? Is it no longer possible for the people to oppose the establishment because the force at the disposal of the establishment is too strong? And, if so, would it be possible to create a counter balance on behalf of the people without it becoming itself orthodox and bureaucratic? For, successful as protest has been considering the obstacles, and enterprising as are the spontaneous projects around us, yet the weight of a faceless

industrial system presses heavier and heavier. As we gain greater control over our bodies and environment this process could become quite disastrous. If we can decide what climate we shall have and what children we can breed, as a greater and greater variety of technically sophisticated machines become available. what we choose will become very important. 'The people', that ultimate repository of hope and wisdom may itself disappear. We shall have only people produced for certain purposes and those purposes will be decided by blind bureaucratic forces slavishly serving what is technically possible.

If we are to extend the process of civilisation it seems to me that we must advance in three directions. First, we must educate people to examine, criticise and choose. At present we are in danger of turning out a great many people with skills and expectations. These are inevitably not commensurate with the jobs to be done. So we educate a layer of people whose talents will be wasted because they are not taught to apply them outside the disciplines in which they have been brought up. Secondly, we must have relevant information, put before us in a form which makes choice possible. Thirdly we must accept the normal methods of making a living are boring and exhausting (as they always have been) and attempt to come to terms with this ancient fact in various ways, both by the use of machines for some purposes and the active encouragement of other activities. There must be activities and not passivities. They must be things which people want to do on their own and not merely the encouragement of activities which the state considers praiseworthy.

The third point which concerns me in all these discussions about power to the people is where the individual comes in. It is notorious that a general meeting can be most oppressive towards individuals and small groups. It is not the people but those who can command and sway them who often end by taking the

decisions. A feature of all change and improvement is that instead of expanding the privileges of the few or dealing with the deprivation of the many, it creates new problems and desires. It was at one time thought that the savagery of mobs was due to their lack of education. But education has not made the world more rational. It has certainly changed the problem. We are no longer in general in danger from mobs of the French Revolution type. But the irrationality of pressure groups and indeed of the population at large remains notable.

Apart from the desirability of reasserting the democratic outlook and devising institutions which can both be more representative and allow for more radical opposition, there is also the need to enlarge direct participation by the individual.

An obvious way of achieving this is by better distribution of wealth and increasing the amount of money available for the community to spend as it chooses. It is usually considered that in America the pendulum has swung too much in favour of individual affluence and the consumer society. But in Europe this is certainly

not the case – and I am doubtful even about the USA. What is true is that there is also a need for an enlargement of expenditure in the public sector. What has happened is that we are having the worst of both worlds. We endure both personal poverty and public indigence.

What I have been saying then, first, is that ‘power to the people’ is an old demand and one which is constantly reiterated. Today it is a demand for a more open democracy, for more power to those outside the bureaucratic circles. This demand is justified not only on the grounds that participation is valuable and an invaluable human right, but that it is essential for efficiency. It should have its positive and negative side, both are important.

The organisation of wider democracy in modern society poses new problems which need much more examination, including the problem of a counter-government perhaps even supported by the main government.

Thirdly, along with the need for better institutions, we have to look at how individuals without attaching themselves to any institution can increase their power and their scope.

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We’d like to do more, but our activities are limited by the number of people involved in running the Group. We would be enormously grateful for help with:

- Improving our website.
- Helping with our presence at Liberal Democrat conferences.
- Organising our meeting programme.
- Commissioning articles, and locating pictures, for the *Journal of Liberal History*

If you’d like to be involved in any of these activities, or anything else, contact the Editor, **Duncan Brack** ([journal@liberalhistory.org.uk](mailto:journal@liberalhistory.org.uk)) – we would love to hear from you.

