

Jo Grimond Centenary Weekend

Orkney, May 18th-19th

This was a weekend several months in the planning. In the autumn of 2012 some of us in the Scottish Liberal Club in Edinburgh (mostly veterans of the Grimond generation) wondered how the Club might contribute to commemorating the centenary of Jo's birth on July 29th 2013. Our suggestion was for a lecture or short conference to be held in Orkney the following summer.

Contact was made with the three Northern Isles parliamentarians, all of whom welcomed the initiative, whilst advising that the busy schedule of events on the islands made a May date preferable to that of the actual centenary. We then made contact with the local party who were delighted with the suggestion and the marvellous Constituency organiser, Ruth Williams, got things moving very rapidly.

Both their organisation of the events and their welcome to a horde of visitors from the mainland could not have been bettered. The weekend had been well publicised in party circles and an indication of the success of the venture was the attendance at the Saturday evening dinner when 50 locals sat down with 70 from the rest of the UK, including 20 from Edinburgh. Amongst those making the long journey was Catherine Fisher, Jo's long-serving secretary at Westminster, who, at 93, took part in all the weekend's activities.

On the Saturday afternoon, the official part of the weekend began in Finstown, close to the Grimond family home. Following a soup and sandwich lunch at the venue (the Firth Kirk), Lord Steel of Aikwood delivered a superb address, outlining Jo's life and career in politics and his significance for our party today. David suggested five legacies which Jo Grimond left us – his devotion to his constituency, his success in dragging the Liberal Party back from the brink of oblivion, his rejection of postwar British imperialism in favour of a more modern form of politics, his unwavering support for Scottish Home Rule and, finally, his own engaging personality.

The address – often moving, sometimes humorous in recalling anecdotes about Jo, reminded many of us why we had come together in Orkney and reinforced our beliefs. This was followed by a lively panel discussion, chaired by Liam McArthur MSP and involving David Steel, (Lord) Jim Wallace, Willie Rennie MSP and Baroness Jane Bonham Carter, with plenty of contributions from the floor.

For the evening celebrations, we made our way to the Pickaquoy Centre in Kirkwall, where an excellent dinner was followed by speeches from Alistair Carmichael MP and the principal guest, DPM Nick Clegg. In his speech, Nick stressed the continuity of the party from Grimond to the present day and also powerfully reminded us that the Lib Dems are and will remain a European party. The dinner was also attended by Jo's three surviving children, Johnny, Magnus and Gelda.

On the Sunday – a second day of sunshine and blue skies – there was a coach tour of the Orkney mainland, with an excellent local guide, which included a stop at Skara Brae, followed by a visit to the Grimond house, the Old Manse above Finstown, where we were entertained to drinks and snacks and a tour of the house and garden by the Grimond family.

The weekend came to an official close with a superb lunch at another Old Manse - this time at Evie, the home of Alistair Carmichael, the piece de resistance being a gigantic fish pie, cooked by the MP himself.