

The Rt Hon Lord (David) Steel of Aikwood KT KBE

Lecture: the 100th anniversary of Jo Grimond's birth.

Firth Kirk, Finstown, Orkney, Sat.18th May 2013, 2p.m.

It is a trite commonplace cliché for a politician to open a discourse such as this by saying what a pleasure it is to be here and doing so. In this case the moment I received the invitation I replied saying that genuinely it would give me enormous pleasure. So before I delve into Jo Grimond's life let me explain why I owe him such a huge personal debt on two levels:

In 1961 when I had been President of the Liberal Club at Edinburgh University I persuaded Jo Grimond to stand for the office of rector and he was indeed elected. The secretary of the Club, George Inglis, and I went on a camping holiday in the highlands in my old motor car and had the temerity to travel over to Orkney to land ourselves on the Grimonds for free bed and breakfast at the Old Manse of Firth, and similarly lodge with the former rector James Robertson-Justice on our way back south at Spinningdale. Jo's rectorial address was entitled "In praise of politics" and in it he declared: "I urge all of you to become politicians, Liberals preferably, but if you can't manage that even Labour or Conservative politics are better than none. I urge you because politics are important, because politics are rewarding, but, most of all, because politics are one of the greatest, most natural and most enjoyable of human activities".

Now Jo Grimond was notoriously mean when it came to small amounts of money, preferring to eat in one of the Commons cafeteria rather than pay for dinner in the Members' dining room, but to students at Edinburgh and later as rector at Aberdeen and chancellor at Kent, he loved to put together generous dinner parties of a dozen or so for convivial discussion, and at one of these he sat me next to a fellow law student whom I knew but slightly called Judy MacGregor. I offered her a lift back to her flat afterwards. We celebrated our golden wedding last year.

My second reason for my indebtedness to him occurred two years later by which time I was prospective candidate for Edinburgh Pentlands – a seat not fought by the party for many years and where my ambition was to save my deposit. I was on graduating offered and accepted the full-time job of assistant secretary of the Scottish Liberal Party. One of tasks in that august role was to organize a pre-election tour for the Leader in the summer of 1964. So I was Jo's bag carrier (as we call them in the trade) as we travelled from hall to hall. All went well in Inverness and Caithness & Sutherland where we knew Russell Johnston and George Mackie had good chances of winning, but in Stornoway and especially Ross & Cromarty things were different. Neither Jo nor I knew the newly adopted candidate Alasdair Mackenzie. Gaelic was his first language and he was already into his sixties, was an expert on sheep but not thought to be so on politics.

The town hall in Dingwall was packed to the rafters, and Alasdair who had never addressed more than a local NFU meeting panicked and said he could not make the supporting speech, and that I should do so. I insisted that I was only there to take the collection to cover the

costs, and he spoke for about three minutes. Then Jo wowed the audience. Unfortunately I had decided we would have questions, and of course Jo answered superbly. Then a man in a loud tweed suit with a pukka voice – obviously up for the grouse shooting – got up at the back and insisted on addressing his question to the candidate: “What is the Liberal Party policy on defence?” I looked at Jo. Jo looked at me. We both looked at Alasdair, and I could see my sparkling career in the party about to disappear. Alasdair got very slowly to his feet, cleared his throat noisily, and said very slowly: “The Liber-al par-ty will de-fend Brit-ain, the common-wealth and the free world”. He sat down to tumultuous applause, and went on to win the seat and be an excellent MP. It was a model answer.

Some of you may remember my boss, the secretary of the Scottish party, Arthur Purdom, whose reaction to the good second places at by-elections we had polled in East Aberdeenshire, Galloway, and Kinross was “we need fewer brilliant second places and a few more mediocre firsts!”

Well one constituency where we had always been in well entrenched second place, and indeed fleetingly - before the boundary changes turned it into a safe Tory seat – the Liberals had won it in 1950 (the same year Jo won here) was Roxburgh, Selkirk & Peebles, but an active Labour candidate called Tam Dalyell had nearly pushed us down to third place at the 1959 general election.

The prospective Liberal candidate was a distant Asquithian relative of Laura Grimond – the Hon James Tennant of the Glen. He fell out with the local party and they parted company. In the autumn of 1963 with no candidate there and - we thought - a general election looming, Jo Grimond came into the Edinburgh HQ and rightly insisted that the seat must be fought at all costs, and if nobody else was available “young Steel you will have to go and do it”. And so to cut a long story short I did.

Alec Douglas-Home became Prime Minister and delayed the election for another year. With the help of many student friends I reduced the Tory majority in the 1964 election, and when the MP suddenly died just a few weeks later I was elected at the subsequent by-election in March 1965 bringing the total number of Liberal MP’s back into double figures – 10.

So you can see why both in my private and public life I owe Jo Grimond the most extraordinary debt and why I rejoice in this opportunity to mark the 100th anniversary of his birth.

Today I want to suggest that Jo Grimond left us and the nation five distinct legacies;

First was his deep devotion to life as a constituency MP. It might never have happened. Having been born into a well-to-do Dundee jute manufacturing family in St Andrews and educated at Eton and Oxford, then serving during the war in the Fife and Forfar Yeomanry he had moved in Liberal circles through his friendship with the Bonham-Carters and the Sinclairs.

So in 1940 when Lady Glen-Coats the prospective candidate for Orkney and Shetland decided to resign she recommended Jo Grimond as her successor. He thought it too difficult and remote, and expressed interest in standing in Banff which I doubt if he would ever have

won, but was prevailed upon to tackle Orkney and Shetland, with its substantial Liberal traditions.

I remember him on one visit to Shetland taking me to the solicitor's office in Lerwick where he had arrived in 1945, announced himself as Major Grimond intending to fight the election and asked if Mr Goodlad would agree to be his agent. "Indeed", was the response, "for which party?"

He and Laura revived the somewhat moribund Liberal organisation and he lost by just 329 votes. We won no seats at all in Scotland, five in England and seven in Wales. But he soldiered on as prospective candidate whilst being the full-time secretary of the National Trust for Scotland, and won the seat at the next election in 1950.

From then on until and indeed after his retirement as MP in 1987 it was a fully requited love affair between these islands and the Grimonds. Conventional canvassing was not his forte, and he was suspicious of outside interference promising that if material was sent from Liberal HQ he would ensure that all Liberal literature would be "seized at the ports".

His devotion to the islands shone through many of his speeches in the Commons and produced tangible results getting an amendment into the Scotland Bill; and securing the 12 mile fishery limit instead of the 6 mile one elsewhere when we joined the EEC. In 1973 he piloted through the Zetland Bill in cooperation with the Council to secure a share of oil revenues, and as far back as 1960 he was lamenting in a speech on the Crofters Bill the lack of proper development of the Highlands and Islands: "There is no other part of this country in which more stable doors have been locked after the horses have gone than in the Highlands and Islands. I do not say that these horses have bolted: nothing as dramatic as that. They have ambled out of the stable while successive Secretaries of State have leaned against the doorpost chewing straws".

I recall vividly the time he was interviewed on television and accused of just representing the celtic fringes. With a rare show of anger he turned on the interviewer and berated him telling him that the entire nation's new found wealth depended on his constituency.

Young Magnus Grimond once when asked what his father did famously replied: "he jist gangs about". But that he did with great effect, making a point of visiting even the smallest inhabited island at least once every two years. Nor should we forget the input of Laura – not just guarding the fort at election times but actively on Orkney Council and operating directly for example to rescue and preserve the little row of houses beside St Magnus Cathedral which are her monument today.

I enjoyed many visits to his constituency, not least on the weekend when he told me not to go overboard when addressing the evening Orkney supper because he intended to tell our colleagues next week of his intention to retire as Leader. Our son Graeme was four months old, and on Sunday morning we left him sitting in a plastic chair with Jo as baby sitter while we went to church with Laura. Jo was terrified, and when we returned he said: "it made some noises but I didn't know what to do".

His commitment to his constituency was something I tried to emulate in my beloved Borders with the result that we were both less than enthusiastic about the policy of the

party on electoral reform – STV in multi-member seats did not appeal to us, and we would still I believe have been better to disinter the 1930's Speaker's conference recommendation for multi-member seats in the cities, but AV in the rural areas and single burghs.

Jo's determination to put Orkney and Shetland first often clashed with the party strategists who naturally wanted him to spend more time touring the country, and indeed it must have been very difficult and tiring to combine service to the islands with party leadership. One peculiarity of his life was that he never spent money on cars, preferring to travel by tube and train. Such vehicles as he did possess always seemed rather down at heel, so much so that he regularly made the same remark when driving with me – "very smart car" even if it wasn't particularly.

Laura used to drive their car back from Orkney to London at the end of the summer recesses, and finding the Borders a half-way point on the road to London either stayed with us or her great aunt Baroness Kay Elliot. On more than one occasion she did this in an incredibly decaying mini. Jo himself used to turn up in the Commons after time at the Old Manse with his fleshy hands covered in scratches from his attention to the garden. He held the seat in ten general elections and was a perfect example of the first class constituency MP.

Jo Grimond's **second** legacy was quite simply the Liberal Party. It is difficult for a younger generation to realize how close the party came to extinction, having been in the nineteenth and early twentieth century the great reforming party of government. Yet extinct as the dinosaur it nearly became.

In the 1951 election the once great party of government polled only 2.5% of the popular vote partly because we could fight only a minority of the seats, and in that short parliament of 1950-51 when Jo was a new MP the small Liberal band had only four times out of twelve major divisions voted in unison – in other words they were just a handful of disunited hangovers from historic days and by 1956 were reduced to just five MP's – with Jo being the only one elected against both Conservative and Labour candidates. Two actually had formal pacts with the Tories in Bolton and Huddersfield which we in due course lost when the pacts ended. So that is why I say that the Party was nearly over.

When he became Leader in 1956 he began to proclaim the need for a realignment of the left, bearing in mind that the Labour Party had begun as the Labour Representation Committee within the Liberal Party but had now become too subservient to the powerful and reactionary trades unions. So it was natural that when I started to argue in 1979/80 for an alliance with the breakaway SDP Jo was a leading supporter, so much so that I decided to play the Grimond card and on the eve of our annual Assembly at Llandudno in 1981 persuaded him to come out of retirement and address what turned out to be a huge and emotional fringe meeting with me and Shirley Williams on the eve of our critical vote as a party when only 112 delegates out of 1600 voted against the formation of the Alliance. "I beg of you to seize this chance," he said, "do not get bogged down in the niceties of innumerable policies. I spent my life fighting against too much policy in the Liberal Party".

So Jo Grimond not only revived the old Liberal Party he played a crucial role in the events leading to the formation of today's Liberal Democrats.

His **third** legacy was to shake Britain out of its imperial past with policies more attuned to the realities of the second half of the twentieth century. The American Secretary of State Dean Acheson was frequently quoted as saying that Britain had lost an empire but not yet found a role. Jo was among the early fighters against imperial nostalgia. He spoke against racism at home, and against the conduct of the colonial administration in Kenya at the time of the Hola Camp massacre.

On South Africa he said of the Sharpeville massacre in 1960: "I believe something happened which has made a dividing line in history such as we sometimes see. I do not think things will ever be quite the same again.... The prime cause of all this is the attempt to impose a wholly unworkable and repugnant system – a system of race superiority".

But perhaps the most controversial and uniquely Liberal commitment was his espousal of entry into the European Economic Community and opposition to the creation of the so called independent nuclear deterrents of Polaris and Trident. In those days he did not wait for policy debates at the annual assembly – together with a small group (usually consisting of Frank Byers, Mark Bonham-Carter, Arthur Holt and Donald Wade) he would simply pronounce new ideas in the Liberal News to the astonishment of us humble readers of that much missed paper.

When the UK government stayed out of the talks leading to the Treaty of Rome the six Liberal MP's divided the House criticizing the failure to join the EEC and I think they were joined only by two or three others against the united forces of the Tories and Labour. Jo wanted us to take the lead role in a new united Europe instead of constantly – as today – being out-manoeuvred by the original powerful members. He described its creation as "the disappearance of the cloud which has lain over Europe for a thousand years – the plague of Western European wars - which has been so completely expunged that new generations do not even appreciate the boon of its dispersal; it is alone worth any petty tribulations that the EEC may inflict".

That sentiment was echoed by the late and great Sir Alastair Burnet who was presenting the ITV all-night results programme of the first European Parliament elections in 1979, at the end of which he told the remaining viewers: "35 years ago the people of Europe from the Shetlands to Sicily were at war: today the people of Europe from the Shetlands to Sicily have elected a parliament. Goodnight." It is noteworthy that David (now Lord) Hannay who was Prime Minister Ted Heath's chief negotiator on our belated entry wrote in his recent book that Britain's problems with the Common Agriculture Policy and especially the Common Fisheries Policy were because of our lack of vision – our failure to enter at the start as a founding member - as the Liberals alone had advocated.

Jo Grimond showed the same attitude to imperial pretensions on the issue of Britain acquiring an independent nuclear deterrent. He was opposed to the Polaris project and later the Trident one believing them to be "unnecessary, dangerous and expensive" and argued that they made little additional contribution to that of the West as a whole and that they were maintained for "out of date reasons of national prestige". In the 1959 election he set out the policy: "We of the Liberal Party say that Britain should not make its own nuclear

deterrent. We believe the nuclear deterrent should be held by the West on behalf of the West as a whole and not by individual countries.”

He was not a unilateralist but wanted to limit our nuclear participation to co-operation within Nato, not attempting to run our own independent deterrent: “Must we not abandon many of our ideas about sovereignty and pool much of our resources and our arms?” he asked.

For that reason he was fully supportive when David Owen and I went to discuss with President Mitterrand and Mr Chirac the possibility of reducing our deterrent jointly with that of the French, and he would have been doubtful about our present attempts to find a cheaper independent deterrent than Trident. Indeed this week’s report of the Public Account Committee questioning the capability of the Ministry of Defence budget on equipment underscores the huge savings we could have made over the decades if the Grimond policy had been pursued at the outset, and we had confined our deterrent role to providing bases for Nato operations.

My **fourth** suggested Grimond legacy was Scottish home rule as we used to call it. Jo devoted part of his maiden speech in the Commons to the subject and it was always a major part of his election addresses, though he always warned that his island constituents would be “against any parliament run by a combination of Glasgow trade unionists and Edinburgh lawyers!” He would have been very pleased at the birth of the Scottish Parliament and indeed he at one point when ex-leader and somewhat controversially within the party favoured an electoral pact with the SNP in some seats to help bring it about.

But his view of the devolution settlement would have chimed with our party attitude today to the upcoming referendum. He was not in favour of independence, but stressed the sovereignty of the Scottish people and therefore would have advocated not the top-down Westminster devolution we have, but rather the devo-plus alternative to which we should be moving once the referendum is out of the way.

This is how he put it in his 1983 book “A personal manifesto”: “I do not like the word devolution as it has come to be called. It implies that power rests at Westminster, from which centre some may be graciously devolved. I would rather begin by assuming that power should rest with the people who entrust it to their representatives to discharge the essential tasks of government. Once we accept that the Scots and the Welsh are nations, then we must accord them parliaments which have all the normal powers of government, except for those that they delegate to the United Kingdom government or the EEC.

“I find it difficult to see how, if the case for Scottish and Welsh self-government is accepted at all, any powers can be reserved to the UK government except foreign affairs, defence, and the wider issues of economic policy linked to a common currency and common trade policies. So when we consider Parliament we must think of three Parliaments and of a much restricted Westminster Parliament.”

I suggest that today his credo probably sums up the view of most Scots against the overblown, vague and unrealistic rhetoric of the independence lobby.

My **fifth** and final suggested legacy is much more imprecise – it is the personality of Jo Grimond himself. For a start he was the most engaging politician I have ever met – fantastically good company always. It has also to be admitted that at times he was delightfully imprecise and occasionally downright self contradictory. The Economist likened his style to a man thinking aloud in the company of friends. One of his attributes was a lively sense of humour with which he peppered his speeches.

Away back in 1935 in his home town of St Andrews he attended his first political meeting during a by-election in East Fife being address by the Scottish Nationalist candidate, Eric Linklater (who was later in Orkney to become a friend and supporter). This is what he wrote about it: “It was in a temperance hall which had obviously taken a good deal of trouble to live up to its name, for it was as dark and cheerless as cold tea. Eric Linklater battled valiantly against that chilly hall, but I fear that the hall won.”

When he was frustrated at the poor transport links to his constituency he underlined the point by filling in a bureaucratic form for the Commons authorities naming his nearest railway station as Bergen – which for Shetland was true. He also tried unsuccessfully to persuade them to permit him to travel to the islands by plane via Copenhagen.

In 1962 during the arguments about the terms for entry into the EEC he remarked that the preoccupation about the detailed terms “would be as if at the Reformation someone had said they were unable to make up their minds until they knew what price the monasteries were likely to fetch”.

You will recall that when Jeremy Thorpe resigned as leader the party had not yet put in place the new democratic procedure for electing a new party leader by the members instead of just the MP’s – something which incidentally we pioneered and the other parties copied. We therefore had to hold a special assembly to draft the new constitution amendments and Jo was persuaded to return as acting leader whilst we did so. John Pardoe gave him the bad news that apparently the only available venue for the Assembly at such short notice was Bellevue zoo in Manchester – highly unsuitable. “On the contrary”, responded Jo, “in the circumstances there could hardly be anywhere more appropriate”.

As he grew older he suffered from deafness, and indeed he told me that was one of the reasons he wanted to retire as leader, and I recall a dinner party at his home in Kew where he obviously could not follow the conversation round the table.

Only in his later years did he admit to infirmities, telling one journalist in 1984: “I am a little deaf, so I’ll talk anyway and let’s just hope I answer the question I think you asked me”. On another occasion when we were recording a party political broadcast I was becoming exasperated by his failure to stick to the script to which he retorted: “David, you should know that I can’t read the autocue – that’s what gives my TV talks that unmistakable air of sincerity.”

Speaking at a pre-election rally in the Barbican in 1987 just after the hero of Orpington, Lord Avebury, had announced that he intended to leave his body to the Battersea Cat and Dog home Jo said in his speech: “my only worry is that the Alliance might have lost the votes of animal lovers now that they know that the dogs of Battersea are going to have to eat Eric Lubbock”.

But it was not just his humour that endeared him to so many. His first general election campaign as leader in 1959 attracted a whole new generation of Liberals especially amongst university students. It was the first election in which television was really important and the Tories and Labour had impressive budgets for their party political broadcasts. The Liberals did not, and simply put Jo live in front of the camera. The veteran American commentator Ed Murrow gave his broadcast top marks against the expensive ones describing it “as effective as anything presented during the campaign”.

Jo was also a well-rounded and cultured individual with a particular interest in the arts – often to be seen carting his latest picture purchase on the plane to Orkney. His period as secretary of the National Trust also had its effect. When Edinburgh University set about in the late fifties destroying most of George Square to build new tower blocks he was scathing in a speech in the Scottish Grand Committee:

“I hope that an indestructible ferro-concrete monument will be put up on which will be carved the names, not only of the Secretary of State, but of the Principal of the university and the whole of the university court commemorating the deed. Presumably they are proud of pulling down George Square, and so they should be associated with its destruction”.

Jo’s political style was totally hands on. He had only one member of staff – his indefatigable secretary Kate Fisher. When he was being prevailed upon to have a political assistant – what nowadays would be called a spad – a special adviser – he was firmly resistant: “I don’t want anybody with bees in their bonnet – I have quite enough of my own”. He was eventually persuaded to take on Christopher Layton. He had been recommended as someone “who would have lots of bright stimulating ideas for your speeches” to which Jo’s response was “I have six bright stimulating ideas before breakfast – what I want is someone who will get me from A to B on time”. And Jo could be remarkably vague – memorably turning up without his passport and thus missing the chartered plane taking the party leaders to President Kennedy’s funeral.

So what would he have made of our situation today? Would he have approved of the coalition? Jo was unmistakably a politician of the left, writing this in 1958: “We carve out a niche for ourselves left of centre in the sense that we stand for personal freedom against authority, in the sense that we believe there is still too much poverty, too many slums and too much cruelty, in the sense that we want and mean to have a wide dispersal of property and power”. He would have been alarmed by this year’s report from Poverty and Social Exclusion who found that 33% of the UK population suffers from multiple deprivation, by the standards set by the public, compared to 14% in the same survey thirty years ago, and notes that 1930’s-style soup kitchens have returned to our towns and cities.

In the same year 1958 he first advocated what he called “a realignment of the left” stating his long-term objective “to become the progressive wing of politics in this country, sweeping not only Liberals but liberal socialists and liberal Tories, and make it a great movement for the shaping of a Liberal society”. That is why despite some misgivings he personally and actively supported my leadership during the Lib-Lab pact and especially the Liberal-SDP Alliance and subsequent merger.

But my answer to the question would he have approved of the coalition is decidedly “yes”. How can I be so sure? Because I recall our 14 MP’s intense discussion round the table in committee room J in the Commons basement immediately after the February 1974 election – when Ted Heath had gone to the country early on a “who rules Britain” basis and the people had decided it should not be him.

Jo, Frank Byers and I had already damped down Jeremy Thorpe’s fleeting attraction to Heath’s suggestion of a coalition, and the parliamentary party was clearly equally unimpressed by the suggestion. But Jo intervened to say he was worried by the tone of some of the arguments – that although the conditions were not right (a Con-Lib coalition would still not have had a majority) we should not as a party rule out coalition in principle even with the Tories, especially as we advocated proportional representation.

He would have been astonished but tickled if you had told him that his two successors as MP Jim Wallace and Alistair Carmichael would both be members of a coalition government though he would have been mischievously sarcastic about both of them.

That is not to say that he would have approved of all that the coalition has done. He would certainly have opposed the about turn on student fees with its inevitable loss of trust in our party among the electorate, though I recall that in 1983 he and Laura both came to my defence of the Leader’s right to a veto over items in the manifesto, a gloriously undemocratic but useful proviso which we lost in the merger process, and which might have been used to save us that campaigning embarrassment at the last election. He would have been dubious about the AV referendum and, given his utterances on the plethora of detailed policies, he would have been sceptical about the laundry lists of supposed achievements (such as amendments to the Health Bill) regularly trotted out by party headquarters but which seem not to impress the public one bit.

Why do say that? Because again his own words in 1964: “Some time we will have to change the electoral system, but not immediately, the most important thing to face is the economic situation”.

He would also argue that we should concentrate on and promote Liberal principles and values. How do I know that? Because he made exactly that point publicly during the Lib-Lab pact. What had he in mind? First and foremost co-determination in industry. He was deeply interested in that, having studied Yugoslav cooperatives even within a communist system, and the Mondragon cooperative in the Basque region of Spain which he described as “socialism without the state”. He believed fully in co-ownership of shares and worker representatives on boards. Our German Liberal colleagues used to joke with his approval that after the war we the occupying powers insisted on a new German constitution which contained a decentralized federal system of government, proportional representation, and industrial democracy, “and you are so generous you British you took not one of these three for yourselves!”

Another Liberal fundamental would be a land tax or site value rating to free up land hoarded for speculation and undeveloped, still as relevant today as it was in his.

I want to end with Jo’s own words from his last book to illustrate what he meant by Liberal values:

“The ancient Greek ideals of restraint, of economy, of serious application to the cultivation of the mind and the Christian teaching of poverty, charity in all its senses, of self-sacrifice, have given way in the West to the ideals of the barbarians. The individual is sacrificed to the rulers. Ostentation, unending demands, the glorification of material success have ousted to a great extent the older philosophies. Those Greek and Christian ideals were never realized, but it is only comparatively recently that they have been rejected even as ideals and that whole nations have come to ape the barbarians.”

Jo Grimond’s politics stemmed from the heart and mind, not from focus groups and market research.

At his overcrowded funeral in St Magnus Cathedral one of his constituents read a poem she had written:

“Lord Grimond of Firth they ca’ him.

‘Tis right that should be so,

but here in the isles where we loved him

he’ll aye be known as Jo.”

Jo Grimond was one of the last real orators in our country. It was the job of the leader to inspire and fire up his annual party audience to go out to greater endeavours. Nowadays all the party leaders are made to behave like performing seals ambling around an empty space chatting to their audience. In 1963 when the party was at a particularly low ebb he thunderously addressed the pre-election Assembly in Brighton with his most famous quote:

“In bygone days the commanders were taught that when in doubt they should march their troops towards the sound of gunfire – I intend to march my troops towards the sound of gunfire”. And so he did, and those of us who followed him and even more had the privilege of knowing him and counting him as a friend will be forever grateful.

David Steel

ENDS