

by Michael Meadowcroft

Any Liberal wanting a single reference volume on the development of party policy from 1956 to the present, and its relevance to the political history of the Liberal and Liberal Democrat parties, will find this an admirable and reliable guide. Tudor Jones has applied his experience and academic skills to produce a companion volume to recent political histories of Liberalism. By spending four years reading the whole oeuvre of Liberal writing over fifty-five years, by interviewing a wide range of contributors to the policy debate - including, I need to declare, myself - and by utilising his particular speciality of political thought, he has brought a remarkable sense of order to what would otherwise be regarded as an inchoate jumble.

Tudor Jones uses the advent of Jo Grimond to the Liberal leadership as the starting point of his study not least because Jo enjoyed and welcomed ideas and debate. I recall, for instance, at my first Liberal Assembly in 1961 Jo attended a meeting at Edinburgh University. He sat on a table surrounded by a large attendance of maybe two hundred Young Liberals happily participating in a lively debate on current issues, without any sense of condescension or hierarchy on his part.

Grimond directly and indirectly sparked a whole raft of policy publications. By 1960 there was the beginnings of a formidable research department at headquarters headed by Harry Cowie, a very able but somewhat acerbic Scot in whom Grimond placed considerable trust. By the time of my arrival at headquarters in January 1962 there were also three research assistants, John Blake, Michael O'Hara and Ann Rodden, and between them they produced a high quality monthly political bulletin *Current Topics* and staffed a series of *New Directions* policy booklets, plus a set of reports on key subjects by committees which included experts from beyond the party's formal membership, drawn in by Grimond's charismatic leadership.

Grimond tells in his memoirs of arriving in the Commons in 1950 and being thrust immediately into the uncongenial role of Chief Whip and of the disparate free spirits that made up his small team. I suspect that one underlying reason for his promotion of party policy initiatives was to find a unifying corpus of policy to shift the political focus away from parliament in which Liberal representation was capricious and largely dependent on local personalities and historical party arrangements.

As Tudor Jones points out, Grimond had already been part of the group that produced the book *The Unservile State*, edited by George Watson in 1957, the publication of which led to a series of pamphlets on separate topics, and had himself published his first book in 1959 in time for that year's general election. Other groups in the party sought to take part in the flurry of ideas. The Young Liberals and the Union of Liberal Students joined together in 1959 for what they originally called "Operation Manifesto" until the party bosses convinced them that this would be confused with the party's official election manifesto. Between 1960 and 1968 it produced nineteen pamphlets. Finally the monthly publication *New Outlook* was launched at the 1961 party assembly as a semi-official publication in effect to fill the long gap caused by the demise of the *Liberal Magazine* in 1950.

As Tudor Jones points out: "These varied Liberal publications underlined the importance which Grimond attached to the formulation and communication of policy and ideas as an essential part of his attempt to restore the intellectual and political credibility of his party." Further on in the book Jones draws attention to the somewhat unpalatable fact that the later Grimond expressed support for the economic liberalism of the Institute of Economic Affairs. Grimond Liberals of the 1950s and 1960s vintages have preferred to hang on to his consistent support for community initiatives, co-ownership and a diminution of "bureaucratic blight."

Jones' great skill lies in allying the key events in the party's history to its policy development. He does this with great clarity but without apparent bias so that, for instance, his assessment of party leaders and their effectiveness enables the reader to make his or her own judgements. It rightly makes those of us who have a long involvement and, often, inside experience, take on board evidence that impinges on our prejudices! His methodology enables him, for instance, to place

the community politics strategy within a broader framework of party activity and it enables him to coin the choice phrase "Denting the Mould" for a later period. This method brings into focus the existence over the long term of a much more consistent broad body of policy than the short term battles would have indicated at the time, provoked as they often were by internal strife - such as the problems that brought into being the Liberal Commission of 1969, chaired by Donald Wade, which produced the excellent report Facing the Future.

This approach is valuable, both to historians and to those activists who understand the key importance of rooting current thinking and strategy in the experience of the past and of linking consistency with innovation. Jones is exceptionally surefooted and brings a scrupulous honesty to his assessment of party writings. Speaking for myself, I would have welcomed a critic of this calibre. All too often efforts at exposition of liberalism and at critiques of other political philosophies have seemed to attract only approbation from colleagues and otherwise to float into the ether untested. All of us benefit from debate and discussion and there is far too little of it today. And one does not have to agree with all Tudor Jones' conclusions to welcome his work.

Tudor Jones takes the party's election manifestos as his main points of reference, rightly regarding them as the definitive expression of the party's political stance at that moment in time. He ties in with this approach the semi-official books that have accompanied the manifesto at every election since 1945, and he traces the freer expression of policy that is possible between elections. The book is an excellent compendium of Liberal publishing over half a century.

Given his thorough coverage of the Ashdown years and the subsequent twists and turns, Tudor Jones can be forgiven the long gestation period for his book. It ends tantalisingly with the election of Nick Clegg as leader and as a consequence it lacks a review of the past four crucial years of a leader who speaks always of Liberals and Liberalism and whose book *The Liberal Moment* (Demos, 2009) is as good a short statement of social liberalism as has appeared in recent years. One looks forward to a second, updated, paperback edition taking us up to the coalition, which might also be more within the affordable range of such books.

The book sets liberal philosophy firmly into the party's political history and as such it is a valuable addition to the literature. I hope, probably in vain, that it will be widely read by the current Focus-obsessed generation of Liberal Democrat activists.

*"The Revival of British Liberalism - From Grimond to Clegg," by Tudor Jones, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, ISBN 978 1 4039 4428 3, £60*