The Revival of British Liberalism

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The Revival of British Liberalism

From Grimond to Clegg

Tudor Jones

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To the memory of my parents, Brynmor and Eilonwy

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
Chapter 1 Survival of a Creed: 1945–1956	1
Chapter 2 The Advent of Grimond: the Creed Revived: 1956–1959	7
Chapter 3 Of Progress, Realignment and Disappointed Hopes: 1959–1967	28
Chapter 4 The Rise of Community Politics in Uncertain Times: 1967–1976	52
Chapter 5 Liberalism in a Cul de Sac: 1976–1979	76
Chapter 6 Liberalism within the Alliance: Denting the Mould: 1979–1983	89
Chapter 7 Liberals, Owen and the Social Market Economy: 1983–1988	118
Chapter 8 Recovery after a Painful Infancy: 1988–1997	143
Chapter 9 Ashdown's Unfinished Project: 1997–1999	166
Chapter 10 Advance and Debate: 1999–2005	178
Chapter 11 Crisis, Consolidation and Reaffirmation: 2005–2007	202
Conclusion	217
Chronology	224
<i>Notes</i>	232
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	268
<i>Index</i>	274

Preface

This book provides an historical study of British Liberalism spanning the period from Jo Grimond's accession to the leadership of the Liberal Party in November 1956 to Nick Clegg's election as Leader of the Liberal Democrats just over 51 years later in December 2007. The book is therefore a history of Liberal ideas, as they were developed within the British Liberal Party and, later, the Liberal Democrats during that period. As such, it is concerned with organised, party Liberalism, not with philosophical liberalism or with liberal ideology conceived more broadly in cross-party terms. More precisely, perhaps, it could be said that this book is an ideological history of the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats since 1956. For its focus is on political ideas not only as they have been propounded in the writings and speeches of Liberal and Liberal Democrat politicians, thinkers and activists, but also as they have been embodied in the policies, programmes and strategies of their parties.

The text of this book was completed before the British General Election of 2010, and the subsequent formation of the Coalition Government, and with it the first direct Liberal participation in government since Churchill's wartime Coalition. That development in itself adds, I believe, increased relevance to the title of this book. It will be left to subsequent studies to assess the record of the Coalition and of Liberal Democrat ministers within it.

To a large extent the methods of the historian of political thought have been employed throughout this study – including detailed attention to such published sources as the books, pamphlets and periodicals which form, together with party policy documents and election manifestos, the main receptacles of British Liberal thought during the period under scrutiny. I have also drawn throughout upon material contained in two of the principal histories of the Liberal Party, parts of which cover the post-1945 period. These are: David Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party in the Twentieth Century*, and Chris Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party*. In addition, this study draws upon unpublished Liberal Party papers and upon my own interviews and conversations with some of the leading Liberal and Liberal Democrat protagonists in the ideological and policy debates of those years.

In researching and writing this book, I have examined, and in some cases uncovered, what I believe to be a rich and varied seam of Liberal writing since the 1950s, one, too, that in some respects has been neglected or undervalued. In quoting widely, and at times extensively, from such material I have tried to let those literary expressions of Liberal thought speak for themselves down the years. I have, however, inserted my own interweaving commentary and in places, of course, my own interpretation and analysis.

I have also quoted at length from Liberal, SDP/Liberal Alliance and Liberal Democrat statements of principles and general election manifestos in the post-1945 period. In the case of the latter, my justification for doing so is that, as Duncan Brack has pointed out, manifestos have held a particular significance for members of the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats. The reasons for this are really twofold. First, apart from their main function of conveying their parties' principles and policies to the electorate, election manifestos have also been important tools of communication *within* the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats.¹ For as the most public expressions of the parties' political philosophy, namely, Liberalism, with its set of core values and beliefs, manifestos have thus helped to unify those parties, imbuing them with a sense of identity, purpose and direction. This has been particularly important, too, in view of the fact that, unlike their major rivals, the Liberal Party and its successor have lacked a firm base in class or sectional interests. Second, because British Liberals had been out of office since the time of Churchill's wartime coalition, they could not rely on their own governmental record as a source of motivation and party unity. Policy development and debate have therefore 'offered an alternative driving force', which has consequently shaped the organisational structures of both the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats.² Election manifestos have, again, been the clearest expressions of that process. All of the above comments apply, too, of course, to the parties' periodic statements of principles, which, in the case of the Liberal Democrats, have been referred to as 'themes and values' documents.

Essentially, however, this book remains a history of Liberal ideas since the 1950s, viewed within the context of the major events and developments affecting the Liberal Party and its successor. (These are summarised in the Chronology at the end of the book.) It seeks to demonstrate a clear pattern of continuity of Liberal values, principles and themes, and also, to a large extent, of policy. It describes, too, the manner in which new and often creative ideas and policy thinking emerged during the main periods of post-war Liberal revival and subsequent Liberal Democrat recovery – notably, that is, in the late 1950s/early 1960s, the early 1970s, and after 1990.

Of the SDP/Liberal Alliance decade of the 1980s, however, it can hardly be said that its most striking achievement – in securing the largest third-party vote share in Britain since the 1920s – could be attributed to new policy thinking. There were various reasons for that deficiency, which will be explored later in this study. With regard to one half of the Alliance, I should add that this book does not focus directly on the Social Democratic Party. That ground has already been substantially covered by a previous academic study.³ Nevertheless, I do consider the writings and pronouncements of leading SDP politicians and thinkers who later became prominent figures within the Liberal Democrats. I also examine at length the concept of a

social market economy, controversial within parts of the Alliance, that was developed and promoted by David Owen during the 1980s.

Above all, I seek in this historical study to examine and elucidate the reasons for the revival since the late 1950s of Liberalism in Britain as a political philosophy. In addition, I hope to indicate why it has retained over the past half-century, in many eyes, its force, appeal and relevance as a creed, enduring into the radically changed political and economic climate of the early 21st century.

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