

REPORT

The Suez crisis

Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting, 3 July 2006, with Professor Peter Barberis

Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

IN JULY 1956, the Egyptian President, Colonel Nasser, nationalised the company owning the Suez Canal, to the anger and frustration of the British and French governments, who were the majority shareholders. The British Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, reached a secret agreement with France and Israel to provoke hostilities through an invasion of Sinai by Israeli forces, using this as a pretext for Anglo-French military intervention in Egypt. The decision to send British troops to occupy the Canal Zone led to the downfall of Eden, affected the development of British foreign policy and represented what one historian of the Liberal Party has called a watershed for Jo Grimond and his party.¹

The fiftieth anniversary of the Suez crisis and its impact on opposition politics was the topic for the History Group meeting at the National Liberal Club on Monday 3 July, chaired by Richard Grayson.² Sadly one of our speakers had to cancel because of a domestic emergency but we welcomed Peter Barberis, Professor of Politics at Manchester Metropolitan University and author of *Liberal Lion*, the recent biography of Jo Grimond, to give us his analysis of the importance of Suez to Grimond, the Liberals and British foreign policy.

Richard Grayson introduced the subject by reminding us that historians often like to focus on the issues of the past which have a resonance in the

present day and that consequently it was no surprise that there was a renewed interest in Suez, over and above the fact of the fiftieth anniversary of the crisis, as a result of the war in Iraq.

While some would argue that this perspective distorted our view of the past, Richard felt there was a balance to be redressed. The dominant issues in British politics from the 1940s to the 1980s were economic and social, with great debates, for example, over whether particular industries should be nationalised or privatised. Although there were significant foreign policy questions, such as possible British membership of the EEC, people's positioning on politics was more likely to be dictated by their stance on economic and social issues. Looking back at the political histories of the inter-war years written in the period from 1945 to the 1980s, it is not surprising to find that they tend to emphasise how the parties were debating economic and social questions. For example looking back to the 1920s it is the General Strike rather than the Treaty of Locarno that is seen as the more defining issue for the political parties. As an historian who had written in the late 1990s about the inter-war years, Richard felt that key issues dividing the parties, and providing them with distinctive ideological positions at that time, were in fact more to do with international rather than domestic politics, especially

over the policy of appeasement. Richard therefore welcomed the theme of the meeting, examining how a foreign policy question played out in the domestic politics of the 1950s.

Peter Barberis started by questioning the proposition that is often made for Suez, that it represented a watershed for British foreign policy and the role of Britain in the world. This was too grand a claim, in Professor Barberis' view, and the best that could be said was that Suez brought home to sections of the British elite and public opinion that Britain's role in the world was a diminished one. And, despite much historical revision and re-interpretation about Suez, particularly around who knew what, when, and the role of the British government, Suez could not really be compared as an issue in British foreign policy with the reassessment which had been taking place around the policy of appeasement and the role of Neville Chamberlain in the 1930s. Historians have not yet begun to claim that the Suez adventure was justifiable.

However, one of the places in which the impact of Suez reverberated clearly at the time was within the ranks of the Liberal Party, producing divisions and posing dilemmas for Jo Grimond and the party. This was not, however, too surprising as within the Liberal tradition there are points of moral tension in the area of foreign policy going back to Gladstone and incorporating issues around the international rule of law and support for the role of supranational organisations such as the League of Nations or the United Nations. Against these internationalist ideas stand Liberal support for the self-determination of nations and the anti-colonial movement, and these competing principles were soon at play in the developing crisis over Suez, as they had been, for example, during the Boer War with

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perfectly respectable Liberal arguments on both sides.

Nasser became president of Egypt in 1954 and the British government concluded an agreement with him to withdraw all British military forces from the Canal Zone by 1956, while the canal company would continue to operate the waterway itself until 1968. Liberals were divided over both the substantive issue and the timing of withdrawal. At this time Grimond was warning the government that failure to withdraw on an early timetable ran the risk of alienating world opinion and bringing Britain before the 'court' of the United Nations. However, Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal company in July 1956 initiated a much more heated debate about what should be the nature of Britain's response, leading to a polarisation of opinion.

A stormy Liberal Party meeting took place on 31 July 1956, before any debate on the issue in Parliament. Lady Violet Bonham Carter noted in her diary that it had been a terrible meeting with many differing positions and a failure to reach any agreement with Jo Grimond taking an extreme stance in favour of going it alone and landing troops in the Canal Zone. On 2 August, the House of Commons debated the question, with the Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell making a major speech. Gaitskell did not oppose the government outright, sympathising with the dilemma it faced and denouncing Nasser's nationalisation of the canal in light of it being an international matter, not one just for the Egyptian government. Gaitskell also drew an analogy between Nasser's action and those of Hitler and Mussolini, which he may well have later regretted, but he rejected unilateral action and proposed an international solution through the UN. Liberal leader Clement Davies agreed

with the points Gaitskell made, emphasising Britain's unique position in which to broker an international resolution to the crisis.

However, events moved on swiftly. The British government decided to act against Egypt and concluded the secret agreement with France and Israel to cover an Anglo-French invasion with the main purpose of 'regime change', i.e. the removal of Nasser and his government. The next major debate in the House of Commons came on 12 and 13 September 1956. At this point the Parliamentary Liberal Party was not yet resolved to oppose the government. On the contrary all five Liberal MPs eligible to vote (Davies, Grimond, Bowen, Holt and Wade) voted with the government against an opposition motion condemning its approach (the sixth MP, Hopkin Morris, was Deputy Speaker and chaired the session). Clement Davies did, however, base his position on the need to maintain Britain's moral authority in the face of international opinion.

By the time of the Liberal Assembly in September the mood within the party was beginning to change. The President-elect, Leonard Behrens, used his address to the Assembly to launch an attack on the government's handling of the crisis. A number of motions, mostly but not all critical in varying degrees of the government, were received for debate from constituencies but it is interesting to note that requests for debates on the Friday 'foreign affairs' session included more non-Suez than Suez issues.

The position changed further during September and October, however, with further international initiatives and the realisation towards the end of October that British and French troops were in the process of mobilisation. On 30 October, while the

crisis was still under consideration by the UN Security Council, Eden announced a 12-hour ultimatum to Nasser. This represented a turning point for Liberal opinion with criticism of the government for pre-empting or ignoring the UN. This was led by Clement Davies, no longer Liberal leader but with Grimond out of the country on a pre-planned six-and-a-half week tour of the United States. Professor Barberis said he believed Grimond must have been thankful that his trip took him away from Britain during this period because by the time he returned, it had become clear which way opinion in the party was leaning and the direction in which he must take it. At the end of October 1956, however, there was still some sympathy for the government from Clement Davies along the lines that while Liberals preferred a UN-led solution, if that could not be found then Britain and France had the responsibility to act, having an accepted position in the world as 'policeman of the Middle East'. On the same day, former Liberal leader Herbert Samuel addressed a Liberal Council meeting, making an impassioned plea for intervention from a pro-Israel standpoint. At this time, of course, no one except those in the tight circle around Eden was aware of the British collusion with France and Israel.

It was the start of the British and French bombing campaign on 31 October that pushed the Liberal MPs into outright opposition to the government. Surprisingly it was Roderic Bowen (not normally a great intervener in Commons debates) who made a speech condemning military action and blaming the government for effectively frustrating UN efforts to produce a diplomatic solution. Bowen, Davies and Wade all voted against the government; Holt did not and Grimond was still out of

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the country. In the House of Lords, the Liberal leader Lord Rea announced that while the party had supported the government, albeit with increasing degrees of reluctance, they now felt that Eden had stepped over the line and Herbert Samuel became one of the first politicians to raise the question of the true importance of the Suez Canal to British or international interests against the background of Commonwealth, American and other international criticism of Anglo-French action.

By the time Grimond returned to Britain on 5 November to take up the reins as party leader, it was very clear that the direction the Liberal Party wished to take was one of outright opposition to the government. Notwithstanding this, there remained pockets of support for the government within the Liberal Party. Arthur Holt (one of two MPs holding their seats as a result of a local arrangement with the Tories) wrote a letter to his local newspaper as late as 8 November accepting that the government had no option but to take military action. Shockingly to some Liberals, Gilbert Murray³ wrote to *The Times* in support of the government's stance. It later transpired that another leading Liberal, Gladwyn Jebb,⁴ who was throughout the period of the Suez crisis British Ambassador to France, had been a strong advocate of robust joint action against Nasser within the Foreign Office, though he was not aware of the full details of the Anglo-French collusion. Interestingly, according to Professor Barberis, Jebb did not play a central role in the development of the crisis, despite his key diplomatic posting to Paris, because he was disliked and ignored by Eden. In his memoirs Jebb apparently took a critical position against the Eden government and its action over Suez.

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Commenting on one historian's analysis of the Suez crisis in relation to the Liberal Party, Professor Barberis had to disagree with Roy Douglas' conclusion that Suez redounded to the good of the party. One of the first electoral tests for the Liberals following Suez was the Carmarthen by-election of February 1957. There were special circumstances obtaining here, as this was Hopkin Morris' old seat and the local Liberal association had chosen an openly pro-Suez, pro-government candidate. His opponent was former Liberal MP Megan Lloyd George, who had defected to Labour in April 1955. Grimond felt the need to support the Liberal candidate despite his stance on Suez, although Grimond later regretted this and recorded in his memoirs that he felt it had been one of his greatest errors of judgment. According to Professor Barberis, in other by-election contests, Liberal support does not show any significant upturn until early 1958, with Rochdale (February 1958) being a very good result. It is doubtful, however, that the increased Liberal vote at Rochdale can be attributed to the party's stance on Suez. There was nevertheless some evidence from the soundings that the party itself had taken that some new members, particularly middle-class supporters, were being attracted to join as a result of its position on Suez.

What was true, however, was that Grimond and the party leadership cited Suez as an example of the failure of government policy and used it to attack the Conservative approach on a range of foreign policy questions and the failure of the Foreign Office to learn and implement the relevant lessons about Britain's new position in the world. Grimond used the example of Suez to make political capital against Conservative and Labour foreign policy virtually through-

out the period of his leadership of the Liberal Party. Only in 1966 (the year before he stepped down as leader) did Grimond, in an article in *The Guardian*, admit that it might be time to 'lay the ghost of Suez'. By the time of the Nigerian civil war (the Biafran conflict) in 1969, Grimond was prepared to denounce it as the worst episode of British foreign policy since the Second World War, even worse than Suez.

In conclusion then, Professor Barberis could not support the claim that the long-term effects of Suez for the Liberal Party represented a watershed, with a swing of support and opinion behind the party. Neither would he accept the view that Suez was a key turning point in British foreign policy itself; he felt, rather, that the effects of the crisis simply brought to the surface trends – such as Britain's diminished role in world affairs and the importance of American influence – which were already established, and made the implications of these developments clearer to public and elite opinion.

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- 1 David Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party in the Twentieth Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 187.
- 2 Lecturer in politics at Goldsmith's College, former Director of Policy for the Liberal Democrats and speechwriter for Charles Kennedy; author of *Liberals, International Relations and Appeasement: The Liberal Party, 1919–39* (Frank Cass, 2001).
- 3 George Gilbert Murray (1866–1957), Liberal parliamentary candidate, pro-Boer radical, campaigner for the establishment of a League of Nations and President of Liberal International 1947–49.
- 4 Hubert Miles Gladwyn Jebb (1900–96), diplomat and Liberal peer after 1965.