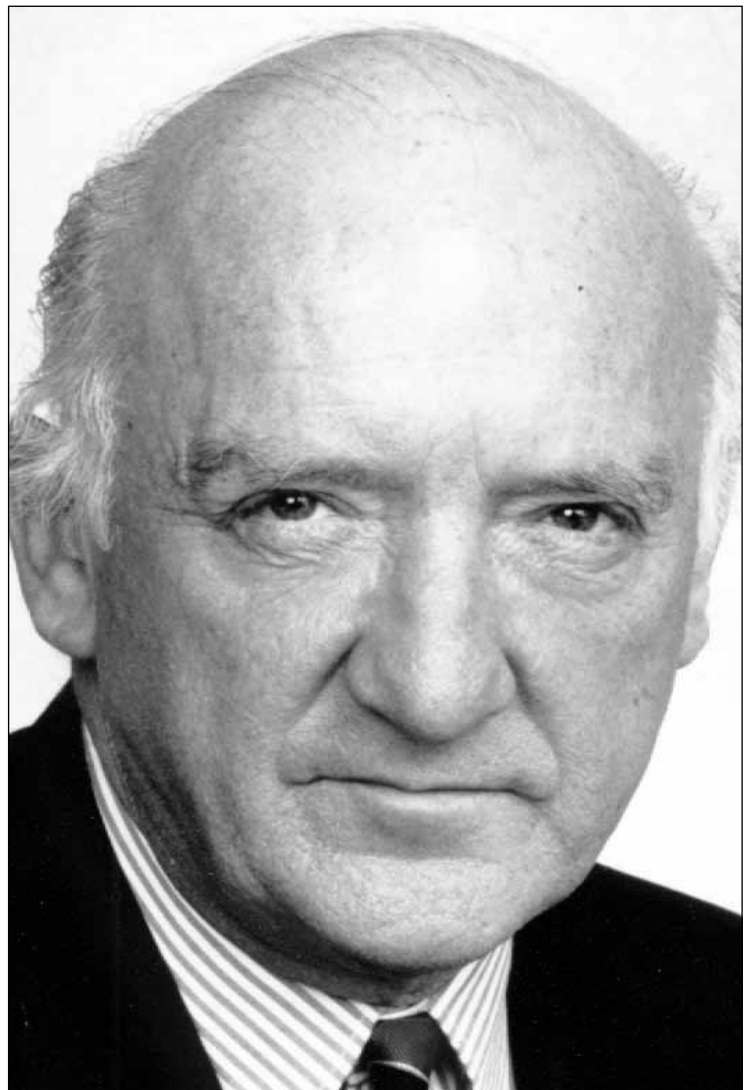


# RUSSELL J

## A PASSIONATE AND ARTICULA

Lord Russell-  
Johnston, 1932–2008,  
was a passionate and  
articulate exponent  
of Liberalism who  
helped keep that cause  
alive in Scotland  
throughout the 1960s,  
1970s and 1980s and  
who throughout  
his political career  
expounded liberal  
values in the cause of  
home rule for Scotland,  
international human  
rights, and the creation  
of a federal Europe.  
**Ross Finnie** examines  
the contribution to  
Scottish, British and  
European Liberalism of  
Russell Johnston.



# JOHNSTON

## THE EXPONENT OF LIBERALISM

**D**AVID RUSSELL Johnston, known affectionately as 'Russell' to friend and foe alike, was the son of David Knox Johnston, a customs officer serving on Skye, and Margaret Russell who gave birth in an Edinburgh hospital. He was brought up on Skye and educated at Carbost Public School and Portree High School. After graduating MA (Hons) in history from the University of Edinburgh he did National Service, being commissioned into the Intelligence Corps and rising to become second-in-command of the British Intelligence Unit in Berlin. After National Service he returned to Edinburgh to take a teaching degree at Moray House College of Education and became a history teacher at Liberton secondary school near Edinburgh in 1961.

Johnston had a facility for languages being bilingual in English and Gaelic; he was later to become fluent in French and Italian. At both school and university, he displayed a talent for debating and was a member of the teams that won the Scotsman debating prize in 1956 and 1957 and the *Observer* Mace in 1961. Johnston joined the Liberal Party whilst at university, because he agreed with the writings of the Yorkshire Liberal Elliot Dodds,

and was sufficiently motivated to revive the University Liberal Club, becoming its President. Given his commitment to liberalism, his skills as a debater and public orator, and his combination of an engaging personality and pawky sense of humour, it was no surprise when he was adopted as the Liberal candidate for Inverness in 1961. Johnston's potential had been spotted by Jo Grimond, then the leader of the party, who, in turn, informed the party's winnable seats committee, chaired by Jeremy Thorpe MP. The committee enabled Johnston to concentrate on winning the election when in 1963 it organised the funding for a research post with the Scottish Liberal Party enabling him to quit his teaching job.<sup>1</sup>

Johnston's predecessor in Inverness had been John Bannerman, the man he regarded as his political mentor. Bannerman had built up the Inverness seat since 1950. In 1961, however, as chairman of the Scottish party and one of its most charismatic figures, Bannerman decided to fight the Paisley by-election<sup>2</sup> and took 41.4 per cent of the vote to come just 1,654 votes behind Labour. Having come so close, Bannerman then decided to fight Paisley again in the 1964 general election, but a 7.5 per cent swing back to Labour kept him in second place.

Johnston, on the other hand, secured a swing of 6.9 per cent to defeat the sitting Tory MP Neil Mclean by 2,136 votes and become the Member of Parliament for Inverness. Johnston had not only built on Bannerman's work in terms of party membership and organisation but also on the need for a coherent campaign in the Scottish Highlands. This centred on the idea of a Highland Development Board, which Johnston developed further in the pamphlet *Highland Development*.<sup>3</sup> The strategy elected not only Johnston in Inverness, but also George Mackie in Caithness and Sutherland and Alasdair Mackenzie in Ross and Cromarty, making Grimond no longer the sole Scottish Liberal MP.

Johnston served at Westminster continuously for thirty-three years, successfully defending his seat in eight consecutive elections. He served nineteen years for Inverness and, after boundary changes which saw the seat lose Johnston's native Skye, fourteen years for Inverness, Nairn and Lochaber (1964–87 as a Liberal; 1987–92 as a Liberal Democrat). Throughout, Johnston attended diligently to constituents' concerns and campaigned vigorously against what he saw as the social and economic neglect of the Highlands. Increasingly, however,

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he paid less and less attention to the state of his local party and its capacity to fight elections and, as his attention turned more towards Europe, he became vulnerable to the charge made by his opponents: 'Russell's in Brussels'. The combination of these factors meant that, with the exception of the election in 1983, when the Liberals and the Social Democrat Party ('SDP') contested the election as the Alliance, Johnston's share of the vote never got above 40 per cent and in his last contest, in 1992, it dropped to only 26 per cent, the lowest percentage share by a winning candidate in the election, leaving him with a majority of only 458 after three recounts.

The year after Johnston was first elected, he was joined at Westminster by David Steel, following the latter's by-election victory in Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles. After Grimond stepped down as leader in 1967, Johnston and Steel went on to dominate the party in Scotland for the next three decades. Although they did not always agree, and Steel went on to become leader of the party, both, in their different ways, played a major part in developing the party in the UK from being a disparate body of just ten MPs in 1965, to presenting a more coherent political force, as the Liberal Democrats, with twenty-six MPs, by the time they both retired from Parliament in 1997.

Whilst being part of a small parliamentary team almost guaranteed a portfolio, nevertheless Johnston's talents were always recognised and he was a front-bench spokesperson throughout his parliamentary career. His first portfolio was education (1964–66), and he then moved on to Northern Ireland (1966–70), foreign affairs (1970–75, 1979–85), Scottish affairs (1970–73, 1975–83, 1985–88), defence (1983–88), and, for the Liberal Democrats, foreign and commonwealth affairs (1988–94), European community affairs (1988–94), East–West relations (1992–94), and central and eastern Europe (1994–97). In addition, Johnston was a member of the Parliamentary Committee for Privileges from 1988 to 1992. Throughout his parliamentary career, Johnston took a particular interest in the rights of the blind, serving as parliamentary spokesman for the Scottish National Federation for the Welfare of the Blind from 1967 to 1997 and

as parliamentary representative for the Royal National Institute for the Blind from 1977 to 1997.

Johnston served on the executive of the Scottish Liberal Party and then the Scottish Liberal Democrats for thirty-three years from 1961 to 1994. He became vice-chairman in 1965 and chairman in 1970. He was elected to the new position of leader of the Scottish party in 1974 and was president from 1988 to 1994. He also sought and held office at a UK level. In 1976, on the resignation of Thorpe, who had been leader of the UK party since 1967, Johnston sought the UK leadership, but only John Pardoe, who was also standing, was prepared to nominate him. Johnston then backed Pardoe against Steel who was elected. Following the merger with the SDP, Johnston was elected unopposed as deputy leader of the Social and Liberal Democrats in each of the years 1988 to 1992.

Having been attracted to the Liberal Party by the writings of Elliot Dodds, and being an accomplished orator and lucid writer, Johnston spent much of his time articulating the principles of Liberalism in which he so passionately believed. In 1972 he wrote and published a pamphlet, *To Be a Liberal*,<sup>4</sup> which stands comparison with many excellent treatises on Liberalism published before and after. For some time, the Scottish party sent a copy to anyone exhibiting an interest in liberalism, and many prominent members of the Scottish party in the 1990s, such as Jim Wallace (MP for Orkney and Shetland 1983–2001, MSP for Orkney 1999–2007, leader of the Scottish party 1993–2005) attest to having joined the party after reading Johnston's pamphlet.

The pamphlet sets out a broad canvas of liberal thinking and its application and relevance to current affairs. Many passages from the pamphlet appear in Johnston's later speeches and writings but the following quotations on the primacy of the individual and on the need for government to occur at the most appropriate level represent themes that recurred as he pursued not only home rule, but also international human rights and European federalism.

Because Liberalism is about the individual, it makes the assumption that if we concentrate on

him, justice for the group, of which he is a part, will follow logically. While the converse is untrue. In this it is fundamentally set apart from philosophies like Communism, Socialism and Nationalism, which start from this converse, seek to better the group and believe that this will lead, in time, to the improvement of the individual's lot.<sup>5</sup>

It [Liberalism] is a philosophy of distributivism, of decentralisation and devolution. In Government, the Liberal looks for solutions which, at one and the same time, will facilitate co-operation over the widest field – hence his enthusiasm for the European Community and the United Nations – and at the same time involve individuals to the fullest extent in regulating their own communities by creating federal institutions which recognise national aspirations, by strengthening local government and decentralising the maximum degree of power possible to the smallest unit possible.<sup>6</sup>

From before he was adopted as a parliamentary candidate through to the early 1980s, Johnston undertook a wide range of speaking engagements throughout the UK at which he demonstrated his oratorical skills and, invariably, moved his audience to understand why liberalism mattered. He also addressed public meetings during general elections and by-elections, which was much appreciated, by candidates, party workers and the public. Johnston's annual conference speeches were inspirational (and, incidentally, almost always contained a reference to his mentor Bannerman). Based on his elegantly crafted script and delivered in classical oratorical style, they took on a legendary quality and became as eagerly awaited at Federal assemblies (of the Scottish, English and Welsh parties) as at Scottish conferences. The two published volumes of Johnston's speeches are not only a splendid commentary on contemporary politics from a Scottish perspective but also a significant record of the Scottish contribution to Liberal thinking and confirm Johnston's constancy of approach in an ever-changing political landscape. Perhaps his best remembered quotation is the epithet with which he closed

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his 1971 conference speech: 'To be a Liberal and to know it is enough.'<sup>7</sup>

After the election of 1966, Johnston's clear understanding of Scottish affairs saw him appointed as a member of the Royal Commission on Local Government in Scotland which reported in 1969.<sup>8</sup> Comprising five out of the twelve members of the parliamentary party, the Scots were a dominant force and their failure to agree on whether or not to have an electoral pact with the Scottish Nationalists was described by Steel as: 'the running sore of the 1966–70 parliament.'<sup>9</sup> That running sore provided the second of two examples of Johnston never being afraid to speak his mind and never cavilling at taking on the establishment. First, in 1968, prior to the Federal assembly in Edinburgh, Johnston denounced Grimond as a 'dilettante revolutionary' for questioning the role of democracy<sup>10</sup> and later criticised him during his speech to the Assembly. As Grimond's biographer, Michael McManus, observed: 'to attack Grimond once might be regarded as a mistake but to do so twice was wanton iconoclasm.'<sup>11</sup> Second, Johnston clashed with Grimond again over nationalism, and when, in 1969, Grimond called for cooperation with the Nationalists, this drew a tart response from Johnston to the effect that nationalist parties are far from liberal.<sup>12</sup> Johnston effectively won that argument because, whilst cooperation with the Nationalists was raised again, it never became a serious proposition. Referring to his clashes with Grimond, at the Scottish conference in June 1976, Johnston paid Grimond a fulsome tribute adding mischievously: 'You and I have not always agreed, but then it's not reasonable for you to expect to be right all the time!'<sup>13</sup>

Johnston, however, was not opposed to all forms of cooperation between political parties: quite the reverse. He made this clear, for example, in 1970 at the meeting of the parliamentary party to consider Prime Minister Ted Heath's offer of a coalition. The majority not only rejected the offer but stated it was quite wrong ever to consider collaboration of that kind with another party. Johnston supported Grimond and Steel in the view that it was nonsense for a party that believed in proportional representation not to be willing, in principle,

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to work with others in the right circumstances.<sup>14</sup>

Johnston was a passionate Scot. He was a fluent Gaelic speaker who each year attended the premier Gaelic festival, the Royal National Mod. He was an enthusiast for shinty (a Scottish variation of hurling) serving as vice chief of the sport's governing body, the Camanachd Association, from 1987 to 1990. He wore his kilt with skean dhu with pride on all major occasions, including while delivering his maiden speech in the House of Commons, despite the rule forbidding the carrying of offensive weapons, and, as leader, when delivering his annual speech to the Scottish conference. But he was not a nationalist.

Johnston drew a distinction between three concepts: the nation as the symbolic community which gives your feeling of identity; nationalism as an emotional commitment to the nation becoming a nation state; and the nation state as a political formation which rules over a given territory defined by its borders. He stated, for example: 'The recognition of national identity is a basic part of the whole liberal ethos as spelt out by Gladstone and Asquith and Sinclair and McCormick and Bannerman.'<sup>15</sup> And again: 'My criticism of the SNP has ... concentrated on the concept and the fact that I as a Liberal, pledged to a person based philosophy, while able not only to accept but advance devolutionary and federal structures, found the exclusivity of nationalism unacceptable.'<sup>16</sup>

Two years after entering parliament, and two years off the half century of the introduction of the Bill for Scottish Self-Government by Asquith's Liberal administration in 1914, Johnston introduced, on St Andrews Day 1966, a Scottish Self-Government Bill.<sup>17</sup> The bill proposed the devolution of powers to a single-chamber parliament, to be called the Scots Parliament, with a Scottish Treasury and powers to levy and collect all taxes in Scotland other than the duties of customs and excise. The bill fell when the government whips objected to it at second reading.

Given his frequent references to the unfairness of the UK's first-past-the-post electoral system, the one glaring omission from Johnston's bill was any reference

to proportional representation. Despite the defeat of his bill, Johnston remained a consistent and persistent advocate for home rule and, in 1972, he reaffirmed his conviction, adding proportional representation to his argument. 'I am certain that the Scots, given a fair electoral system and the opportunity to consider their future as a nation ... would opt for a form of self-government.'<sup>18</sup> That statement was made in anticipation of the publication of the Kilbrandon Commission's proposals on the constitution which reported in 1973.<sup>19</sup> After a lengthy delay, the Labour government introduced in 1976 an unwieldy and complex bill which combined two different schemes for Scottish and Welsh Assemblies. It progressed very slowly through its committee stage and finally fell in February 1977.

Johnston showed his willingness to cooperate with other parties when, in March 1977, he supported Steel's package of measures which was to form the basis of the agreement that became known as the Lib-Lab pact. Johnston believed that, with the country facing a serious economic crisis with inflation verging on 20 per cent, the nation needed not only proposals for economic recovery but also the will of political parties to cooperate.<sup>20</sup> He also supported the measures in the package for direct elections to the European Parliament, and for devolution for Scotland and Wales, with the possibility of all of these elections being by proportional representation. At the meeting of the parliamentary party to discuss the continuation of the pact, following the defeat of the proposal for proportional representation for elections to the European Parliament, Johnston again supported Steel in the vote, which Steel won by six votes to four with two abstentions and with one member absent.<sup>21</sup>

During the pact, Johnston was appointed by Steel to lead the Liberal team of negotiators on the drafting of a Scottish Assembly Bill. Johnston was credited by Steel as having 'done a very workmanlike reconstruction of the devolution package'<sup>22</sup> that had been originally produced and stoutly defended by Labour's John Smith. The Scotland and Wales Bills that followed became acts in 1978. The acts provided for referenda to be held but with a threshold requiring

40 per cent of the registered electorate to vote in favour of the proposition before it could be introduced. In the referenda held on 1 March 1979, the Scots voted in favour by a narrow majority but it represented only 33 per cent of those entitled to vote, thus failing the 40 per cent test, whereas the Welsh voted against by 80 per cent.

Johnston continued to argue the case for home rule, but there was no appetite for such a measure within the Conservative governments led by Margaret Thatcher and John Major. Johnston had laid the ground, however, and in 1989, one year after he stepped down as Scottish leader, the Scottish Constitutional Convention was established chaired jointly by Steel and the former Labour Scottish Minister Lord Harry Ewing. The Convention, which reported in 1995, produced the blueprint for a Scottish Parliament, but, by the time the Labour government passed the Scotland Act 1998, Johnston had left the House of Commons.

Although Johnston went on to become one of the most powerful advocates for merger with the SDP, when cooperation with the SDP was first mooted he was sceptical. He had often commented upon what he described as the two Labour parties: the social democrats and the tribunitives glued together by the chance of office.<sup>23</sup> Johnston had also long seen merit in talking to members of the social democrat wing of the Labour party such as Shirley Williams, whom he described in 1979 as 'a Liberal',<sup>24</sup> and Roy Jenkins, to whom he gave fulsome praise for his contribution in securing a 'Yes' vote in the 1975 European referendum,<sup>25</sup> but he could not forget that, for the chance of office, both had voted against the legislation that allowed the UK to join the European Community in 1972. Johnston, therefore, made his position clear: 'Of course, I'm in favour of co-operation but I'm not selling the great Liberal tradition ... for a mish-mash of unsalted social democratic porridge.'<sup>26</sup>

Johnston's concerns were answered by Steel and Jenkins (leader of the SDP) making it clear, at the outset, that any form of cooperation was to be on the basis of a statement of principles. Johnston was therefore happy to lead the negotiations with the SDP

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in Scotland and on 12 September 1981 he moved the resolution for the formation on the Alliance in Scotland<sup>27</sup> that presaged the passing of a similar motion at the Federal assembly in Llandudno. The SDP then approved arrangements for an Alliance and, by October, guidelines had been agreed for dividing up constituencies between the parties. Johnston led for the Liberals in Scotland but he found the SDP's formulaic approach very difficult as he believed the determining factor should be: 'who will achieve the best result for the Alliance.'<sup>28</sup> Despite this very different approach, Johnston persevered and agreement was reached, but not always in accordance with Johnston's preference.

In the immediate aftermath of Jenkins's by-election victory in Hillhead in March 1982, Johnston spoke about the kind of approach and the kind of programme the Alliance was putting before the electorate, describing it as being within the framework of Liberalism and the Liberal Party because 'the Alliance was coming together with such a minimum of ideological difficulty.'<sup>29</sup> Johnston campaigned with renewed vigour in the 1983 general election in which the Alliance gained 25.4 per cent of the vote but managed to take only 3.5 per cent of the seats. Following the election, Johnston was amongst the first of the Liberal MPs to advocate a full merger with the SDP but got little support from within the party and the new leader of the SDP, David Owen, had set his face against such a move.

When Steel called for a merger between the two parties, shortly after the 1987 general election, Johnston swiftly and enthusiastically supported the call but with the caveat that the merged party should be called the Liberal Democrat Party. Merger was agreed in September and Steel summed up the conference at Harrogate thus: 'the Assembly voted overwhelmingly for a new political party in a spirit typified by an inspirational speech by Russell Johnston.'<sup>30</sup>

Johnston was first given responsibility for the foreign affairs portfolio in 1970 and, whilst he spoke knowledgeably on all aspects of international affairs, he took a particular interest in promoting liberty, democracy, human rights, and international cooperation.

His judgement, however, was not always sound. Following two visits to Greece in 1968 as a guest of the military government to see the conditions in which political prisoners were held, he exonerated the colonels, describing them as 'officers and gentlemen', which infuriated Amnesty International amongst others.<sup>31</sup>

Johnston defended the resistance to Iran's theocratic regime for three decades having become deeply concerned about the suppression of human rights and democracy in Iran following Ayatollah Khomeini's appointment as the country's religious and political leader in 1979. In 1982, along with six other Liberal MPs, he wrote a letter to Massoud Rajavi, president of the National Council of Resistance of Iran and leader of the People's Mojahedin of Iran ('PMOI') to declare their support and that of their party for the Iranian's people's resistance.<sup>32</sup> In 2006, Johnston joined Lord Alton of Liverpool and others to mount an eventually successful legal challenge to the UK government over its ban on Iran's main democratic opposition group, the PMOI.<sup>33</sup>

Johnston was quietly sympathetic to the Palestinians and made several visits to the Middle East, including one in 1980, when, as foreign affairs spokesman, he was part of Steel's team that carried out an extensive visit to the region lasting over a fortnight. The report of the delegation had a material effect on shifting the perception of the party as being uninterested in the Arab side of the problem and an uncritical supporter of the state of Israel to a more balanced position supporting the right of Israel to exist within internationally recognised and secure borders but as part of a solution that involved the creation of a Palestinian homeland.<sup>34</sup>

Johnston's acute antennae for foreign affairs often identified crucial issues in advance of other MPs. One example was in 1991, when the Yugoslav tanks were rolling into Ljubljana, the Slovenian capital. He already had questions on the order paper to the Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, and was quickly able to ask the government to assuage his fears on the trouble that lay ahead in the event of a possible break up of the Yugoslav federation.<sup>35</sup> In 1992, he accompanied Paddy Ashdown,



then leader of the Liberal Democrats, throughout the Balkans and was filmed at Manjaca a prison camp, which was alleged to have breached human rights, and where emaciated victims were found.<sup>36</sup> In 1993, he beseeched Radovan Karadzic, the Bosnian Serb leader, to accept the Cyrus Vance/David Owen settlement and warned Karadzic of the dire consequences if he refused. His warnings proved to be all too accurate.<sup>37</sup>

Johnston's enthusiasm for the devolution of power as expressed through self-government at home was matched by his enthusiasm for the development of cooperation between the regions and nations of Europe. 'What the Liberal seeks is a sensitive and fair chain of government from the individual up to the broadest practical level, which one day will be world government.'<sup>38</sup> Johnston believed that the solution to dealing with the remote and sensitive parts of Europe might be: 'in the end a con-federal answer, indeed an answer perhaps through the European Parliament based not on the existing states of Europe but on the regions and nations within them.'<sup>39</sup> 'Europe des Regions', as he put it.<sup>40</sup>

After the UK's accession to the EU in 1973, Johnston volunteered to become a member of the UK Delegation to the European Assembly from 1973–75 and, after a break of nine months, from 1976–79. He was desperately keen to become a directly elected member of the European Parliament and stood for the Highlands and Islands constituency in the 1979 election. He was hugely disappointed when he lost by the narrow margin of 3,882 votes to the Nationalist, Winnie Ewing who had come to prominence in 1967 with a famous by-election victory in Hamilton, then the second safest Labour-held seat in Scotland. During the election campaign, Johnston had faced two major problems. First, his passionate belief in a federal Europe with members of the European parliament acting together on shared political objectives rather than on the basis of narrow nationalism was not only ahead of its time but also it did not resonate with the electorate. Second, he was thought by his constituents to be overstretching himself and his failure to declare whether he would relinquish his Westminster seat, if successful, was said to have counted against him.

His disappointment in 1979 was nothing compared to the devastation he felt in 1984 when he was heavily defeated by Ewing by 16,277 votes. By then, however, Ewing had positioned herself as Scotland's voice in Europe and earned herself the sobriquet 'Madame Ecosse'. Despite Johnston declaring he would relinquish his Westminster seat, Highland voters were clear: they had sent Johnston to represent them at Westminster in 1983 with his biggest ever majority and, in 1984 with a swing of nearly 8 per cent to the Nationalists, mostly from the Conservatives, they returned Ewing to represent them in Europe.

There were a number of factors that contributed to Johnston's sense of devastation in defeat. There was a sense of hurt that, as a proud Highlander, he had again been rejected by his ain folk. This was compounded by the fact that the winner was not a Highlander and was a member of the Nationalist party that had campaigned for a 'No' vote in the 1975 European referendum. Perhaps above all else, however, having become increasingly disillusioned about his own and the party's prospects at Westminster, Johnston had come to believe that his political future lay in the European Parliament.

Determined to pursue his interest in European affairs, Johnston turned to the Parliamentary Assemblies of the Council of Europe and of the Western European Union. Johnston found a particular resonance with the fact that the Council of Europe had been established with the express purpose of promoting human rights and democracy and achieving greater unity amongst its members. Johnston became a member of the UK delegation to both assemblies in 1984–85 and again from 1987 until his death.

Johnston was a very active member of the Council of Europe. He was heavily engaged in the Council's programmes of assistance to states that were either former members of the Soviet Union or part of the former Yugoslavia. He was part of numerous delegations and visits, including to Poland, preparatory to its full membership of the European Union in 2004, to Armenia and Azerbaijan as they prepared for membership of the Council of Europe in 2001, and to Macedonia

prior to its joining the Council in 1995. With one of the conditions of membership of the Council being respect for human rights, Johnston also took part in investigations into a number of allegations of possible breaches of human rights. These included denial of freedom of expression in Greece in 1999; progress towards the human rights of Croatian Serbs in 2001; and into Chechen victims of human rights abuses in 2002. As part of the process of members of the European Council having to establish a pluralistic democracy, Johnston also frequently acted as an observer of the conduct of parliamentary elections such as in Albania in 1997, Armenia and the Russian Federation in 2003 and Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2006.<sup>41</sup>

Within the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, he led the Liberal Democratic and Reformers' Group from 1994 to 1999 and was chairman of the Committee for Culture and Education from 1996 to 1999. Within the Parliamentary Assembly of the Western European Union he was a member of the Defence Committee and was twice its vice chairman: first from 1984 to 1986 and again from 2002 until his death.

In recognition of his outstanding contribution to its work for nearly fifteen years, Johnston was elected president of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe from 1999 to 2002. The presidency was probably the pinnacle of his political career. Johnston described how, having had no opportunity to serve in government he found being 'projected on to an international world where one represented an Assembly – covering forty one states and 800 million people – an especially vivid and wonderful experience.'<sup>42</sup>

Johnston was made a Knight Commander in 1985 and, when he retired from the House of Commons in 1997, he was created a life peer changing his surname by deed poll to Russell-Johnston and taking the title Lord Russell-Johnston of Minginish in Highland. Johnston was also awarded Grand Cross Orders by Austria, Romania and San Marino and an Order of Merit from Albania.

Johnston was regarded with great affection by all those who came in contact with him, especially those

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who worked for him in the party, at Westminster and in Europe. He was regarded as a genial colleague with a delightful sense of humour. He was always accessible, an engaging conversationalist who was keen to socialise, to share a measure (or more) of Scotch whisky or to join you for a meal accompanied by a glass of fine wine.

Johnston married Joan Graham Menzies in 1967 and they had three sons: Graham, David and Andrew. When Johnston was writing speeches or articles he displayed a consistently logical approach but this was in stark contrast to his personal life where he conspired to lead a totally chaotic life style: constantly travelling; generously agreeing to speaking engagements; and, as a consequence, committing to near impossible schedules. His family life suffered greatly not just from this but also from his passionate and, at times, obsessive pursuit of European affairs, with the result that he had been estranged from his wife Joan for over a decade prior to his death, although they remained close. He was an avid reader, a skilled photographer and a compulsive writer of postcards – to the delight of the very many recipients who were kept abreast of his worldwide travels, but a scant consolation to his family. For every post card he wrote, he retained a copy thus amassing a remarkable record of his itinerant life style.

Johnston collapsed and died on the eve of his seventy-sixth birthday, in a street in Paris, which had become his favourite city. He had been diagnosed earlier in the year with cancer of the bone marrow, for which he was receiving chemotherapy, but had continued to work on human rights issues for the Council of Europe. Following his death, Nick Clegg, leader of the Liberal Democrats, paid this tribute: ‘Lord Russell-Johnston was an institution in his own right. A long-standing MP in the Highlands, a liberal to his fingertips ... but above all a committed lifelong pro-European. Just last week on the last occasion I saw him he was pressing me on the latest European issues of the day. He will be sorely missed, not only by his friends, family and colleagues in the UK but by all those countless people whose lives he touched throughout Europe.’<sup>33</sup>

Two memorial services were held in honour of Johnston. The

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first was organised by the Iranian Resistance movement at its headquarters in Paris and the second by his family, friends and former constituents in St Andrews Cathedral, Inverness. In Paris, tributes were led by Maryam Rajavi, president elect of the national Council of Resistance of Iran. In her address Maryam Rajavi described Lord Russell-Johnston as ‘a man fighting for justice and a great ally ... a symbol who represented (Britain’s) enduring values.’<sup>34</sup> In Inverness, his friend and former parliamentary colleague and former party leader, David Steel concluded his warm tribute by quoting from the Introduction to Johnston’s first volume of speeches.

Language can sometimes be inadequate to represent feeling, but for me Liberalism is a Positive Balance. It is a centre in the sense that people of Liberal disposition are motivated always to seek to bridge differences between people, rather than simply to pick and condemn one group outright for intransigence or stupidity or malice. How to reconcile free men and women with each other, without force, that is the aim of the Liberal. How to build a society that is law abiding and caring, thrustful yet protective, creative yet respectful, tolerant yet responsible, just yet kind, dispassionate yet compassionate. In the translation of the Latin, Liber: free and generous. The perpetual search for ways of reconciling order with understanding, stricture with sympathy, hope with reality.

It is a profoundly radical approach-going to the root of all problems – in a society which regards kindness as boring, compassion as weak, fairness as foolish.

And it is difficult. And it is complicated. And it does not appeal to the self-interested or the self-righteous or the simplistic or the militant.

A credo with a valid claim to provide the basic rules for human society cannot be other than complex and full of is and buts and perhaps-es.<sup>35</sup>

Steel aptly and succinctly summed up this quotation as: ‘Quintessentially Russell’.

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- 3 Russell Johnston, *Highland Development* (Scottish Liberal Party, 1964).
- 4 Russell Johnston, *To be a Liberal* (Scottish Liberal Party, 1972).
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Russell Johnston, *Scottish Liberal Party Conference Speeches 1971–1978* (Bookmag, 1979), p. 17.
- 8 Royal Commission on Local Government in Scotland 1966–1969, Chairman The Rt Hon. Lord Wheatly, Cmnd 4150 HMSO, 1969.
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# REPORTS

## Lords reform 1911–2011

Conference fringe meeting, 11 March 2011, with Lord Norton and Lord Marks; chair: Baroness Scott  
Report by Mark Pack

ONE HUNDRED years on from the 1911 Parliament Act, the Liberal Democrat History Group's Sheffield conference meeting looked at the history of Lords reform – what has happened in the intervening 100 years and is major reform now really just round the corner?

Ably chaired by former Liberal Democrat President Baroness Ros Scott, the meeting started with her recounting how her own personal experiences of the House of Lords were a reflection of how often Lords reform had been promised imminently but never quite arrived. When Baroness Scott was made a peer in 1999, Charles Kennedy – then Liberal Democrat leader – said to her that, since the Labour government was fully committed to Lords reform, she would not be there for long. Twelve years on, there she still is.

Philip Norton (Lord Norton of Louth), a Conservative peer and renowned constitutionalist, provided the historical background

to current Lords reform debates. He pointed out that, although the ostensible stimulus for the Parliament Act was the rejection of the 1909 People's Budget, this was in fact only an immediate trigger and that there were two causes rooted more deeply in history. The first dated back to the days of Pitt the Younger, who secured the creation of a large number of new peers, giving the chamber a Tory (and later Conservative) majority. This gave the Lords a partisan dominance that was a problem when there were Liberal prime ministers. Second, the Great Reform Act and then, more importantly, the 1867 Reform Act introduced a level of popular involvement in elections that raised an expectation that parliament overall should be elected by the public. Norton quoted a prophetic warning by Lord Shaftesbury, during the 1867 Reform Act debates, who had said that it would have an impact on the Lords, because 'in the presence of this great democratic power, and the advance of this great democratic

wave, it passes my comprehension to understand how a hereditary house like this [the Lords] can hold its own'.

The mounting difference between an unelected Lords and a Commons elected on an increasingly broad franchise, compounded by the frequent rejection of Liberal measures by a Tory-dominated Lords, resulted in a Liberal resolution to 'mend or end' the upper chamber. Lords reform featured in the Newcastle Programme of 1891, and in 1907 a Cabinet committee was created by the Liberal government to look at Lords reform. All this predated the 1909 People's Budget and so showed, Norton said, that the famous crisis it triggered was not the underlying reason for Lords reform.

However, Norton did believe that nature of the immediate events of the 1909 crisis was important in shaping the Lords reform that took place. Asquith initially favoured the notion that, if the Lords blocked legislation, this would be resolved by a conference (or conciliation committee) made up of all MPs and a smaller number of Lords. However, this was rejected, and instead the Lords were given the ability to delay rather than reject – and then solely for non-money bills and only for two parliamentary sessions.

Norton also pointed out that the Liberal Party's failure to win a strong mandate in the two 1910 elections in some ways assisted the passage of Lords reform, because it made them dependent on Irish Nationalist MPs who – with memories of home rule legislation – were much keener on Lords reform than many Liberals. The Nationalists demanded Lords reform in return for support for the Liberal Budget.

In considering the nature of the reform, the Liberal Cabinet decided that it did not wish to change the composition of the Lords, for fear that this would strengthen the mandate of the Lords in any future disputes (something with shades of later controversies). It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that Lords reform moved from the issue of the powers of the Lords to that of its composition, with the concomitant and continuing controversy over whether such reform would strengthen the Lords and therefore impede further reform. Hence it was a

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