

war politicians, Laura carved out and adorned her own political niche. *The Times* in its obituary described her as 'one of her party's strongest hidden assets'.⁴ Former party official Sir Leonard Smith felt that she not only backed Grimond up, but that intellectually she was his equal, and had the independence and spirit of the Asquiths.⁵

Lord Holme's portrayal of the Grimonds is also interesting. When it came to policy formulation Jo Grimond was a bit of an agent provocateur, who liked to toss a hand grenade into the room and see what happened, whilst Laura Grimond was much more realistic, much more political. It was – he believed – in the genes.⁶ Grimond's marriage in a sense gave him his passport into Liberal politics. His mother-in-law was the formidable high priestess of Liberalism. She took a proprietorial interest in the Liberal Party and the political hopes that she had once entertained for herself were transferred to Grimond. Lord Esher, a contemporary and close friend, feels that he took a pretty relaxed view of politics until his marriage. 'Laura not only brought him into the Asquithian inheritance but also confronted him with her (and her mother's) stronger feelings and more concentrated ambitions.'⁷

Jim Wallace, who succeeded Grimond as MP for Orkney & Shetland upon his retirement in 1983, describes in the Foreword to the booklet how Laura's support for Jo was unswerving. In many ways, he states, Laura was the dynamo, the force which drove things on. Her single-minded determination was as inspirational as Jo's leadership and vision. As a team, they had the perfect balance. According to John Grimond, his mother was more interested in politics than was his father. Until her final illness, she would be campaigning in by-elections.

In conclusion, Orkney Liberal Democrats are to be congratulated for publishing this booklet. It is a fitting tribute to two very special people who not only made their mark upon their community but who enriched national politics.

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- 1 Bulletin, 21/8/59.
- 2 Completed questionnaire dated 10/9/94 received by author from J. P. Heppell, Liberal candidate for Shipley 1964 and 1966.
- 3 Completed questionnaire received by author from Mrs. P. Edwards MBE, Liberal candidate for Ilkeston 1964 and West Derbyshire 1966.
- 4 *The Times*, 18/2/94
- 5 Interview with the late Sir Leonard Smith, 14/2/89.
- 6 Interview with Lord Holme, 17/3/89.
- 7 Letter from Lord Esher to author, dated 3/9/93.

the Blair and Brown of the nineteenth-century Liberal Party.

That alone would have made Lord John Russell a key figure in the history of Liberalism, yet it was not his main contribution to the history of the party. That was made in the field of the history of ideas, and was done as much through writing and speaking as through his record in office. He was the man who did most to establish that the Liberal Party of the nineteenth century would inherit the ideals, the principles, and above all the inherited electoral loyalties, dating back to the first Whigs of the seventeenth century. Lord John's ancestor, William Lord Russell, had been the first Whig martyr of 1683. Lord John was steeped in his life and thinking.

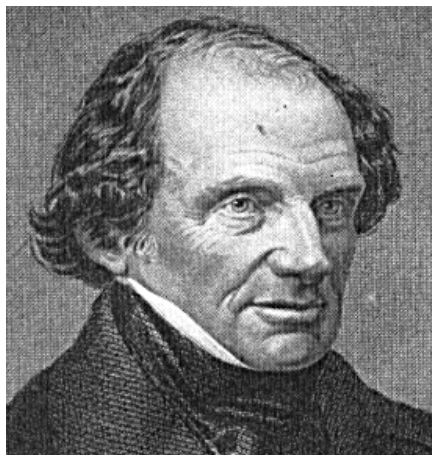
The early nineteenth century – when the succession and religious toleration were effectively dead as political disputes, and the key issue was becoming the extension of rights to a wider social circle – was one of those periods when the issues of politics are in a state of flux and party organisations are correspondingly likely to break up. The Tory party formally split, and was lucky to recover. Lord John succeeded in reformulating what E. F. Biagini has called 'the old Whig cry of equality before the law' in a way that gave it a constant daily relevance to the politics of the nineteenth century. Nothing had been more central to the principles of 1688 than the idea of government by consent. This had meant, in 1688, that Parliament should be able to determine who should be king. To Lord John, it meant that a wider circle of people should be able to decide who would be in the House of Commons. He said in 1822 that of the 513 English members, 290 were elected by 17,000 persons, and 'the votes of the House of Commons no longer imply the general assent of the realm'. This attack on electoral property would have horrified his ancestors, yet he saw correctly that it followed unquestionably from principles which they had often enunciated. He carried this belief in government by consent through into international

Liberal inheritor of the Whigs

Paul Scherer: *Lord John Russell* (Associated University Press, 1999)
Reviewed by Conrad Russell

It is not an exaggeration to say that the event which created the Liberal Party was the agreement of Russell and Palmerston, announced at Willis's Rooms in 1859, that either would serve under the other. They had long enjoyed a tempestuous relationship, resigning with a regularity which contributed very heavily

to the short life of most mid-nineteenth century governments. Their decision created a party which enjoyed unrivalled success as an election-winning machine for the next fifty years. Yet this agreement did not mark the end of their disagreements, nor even the beginning of a respect for each other. They were



affairs, protesting in 1859 at 'the disposal of the Tuscans and Modenese as if they were so many firkins of butter'.

The struggle for equal civil rights for dissenters was unfinished business. Lord John saw (at least sometimes) that this must entail the same rights for Roman Catholics, and he was responsible, after a long campaign, for securing the rights of Jews by religion to be returned to the House of Commons. He carried these concerns through into a wider concern for equality before the law. He secured a pardon for the Tolpuddle Martyrs, arguing that greater lawbreakers escaped free because of wealth and influence. He horrified his colleague Lord Melbourne by appointing tradesmen as magistrates. When Melbourne protested that they could not be impartial in disputes between employer and employee, Lord John said that Melbourne should be careful of this argument, because unkind people might say that landlord JPs could not be impartial in disputes between landlord and tenant.

It was this generalised concern for the underdog that prevented him from being a slave to *laissez-faire* economics, though he had read and been influenced by Smith and Malthus. He pushed through the Ten Hours Act limiting hours of work, because of the inequality of power which prevented equal bargaining, and he exploited the cholera epidemic to put the whole weight of Downing Street into overruling the Treasury in order to allow the construction of the London sewers. Above all, he was a consistent champion of state help for education,

without which there could not be the career open to talent which Victorian thinking demanded. He never broke free of *laissez-faire* thinking but equally he was never a dogmatic adherent of it. It was the pragmatism of the practising politician that gave him the freedom of manoeuvre needed to save the Liberal Party from ever becoming a slave to *laissez-faire*.

He was Prime Minister twice, once as a Whig and once as a Liberal. There is no sign whatever that he saw any ideological divide between his two administrations. The party's continuity through a rapidly changing world was very largely his achievement.

Yet he was often a hopeless politician. John Prest, his previous biographer, once commented that 'politics was his life-blood, yet he was totally unpolitical'. When he was eighteen he gave Lord Grey a furious scolding for his lukewarmness in the cause of reform. It is tempting to imagine that twenty years later, when Grey told him to go and draft the bill, he was handing him a coal of fire. On another occasion, he leapt up from a seat next to one duchess, rushed across the room and sat down next to another. The reason was that he was too hot beside the fire – which he explained to the duchess he joined, but not to the one he had left. In 1859, during the Italian Risorgimento, the Queen rounded on him and said: 'am I to understand you to say, Lord John, that under certain circumstances subjects may resist their lawful sovereign?' He replied roundly: 'speaking to a sovereign of the House of Hanover, Ma'am, I think I may say that I do'. His relations with the Queen had been bad enough before this. This is one of two points where I can add an oral history contribution to this book. The other is the story of an attempted rape by Palmerston at Windsor Castle. What had happened was simply that Palmerston, in the middle of the night, had mistaken the bedroom where his long-term mistress was sleeping. Somehow the story was kept away from the Queen, but in the process Palmerston was prevented from telling the true story.

In the main, this book does not

supersede Prest's biography. It is based on a thorough knowledge of Russell papers of many sorts, but is less strong in understanding the others with whom he came in daily contact, and therefore in understanding the relationships between them. Its real novelty lies in the explanation of the 1859 agreement between Russell and Palmerston, though here too it would be nice to have an equally acute analysis of Palmerston's side of the story.

The author ascribes Russell's decision to make the peace to his experience of the Aberdeen Coalition. That was an extreme example of the disorganised governments put together while the Tory party was split and the Russell – Palmerston feud prevented a proper Whig government. The Aberdeen coalition was run from the Lords. It rested on a cabinet base drawn mainly from thirty Peelite MPs supported by some 200 Whigs with Lord John as Leader of the Commons, and needing to pick up votes at random across the House to win its divisions. Decisions were almost impossible, and Lord John was left threatening resignation with such frequency that it clearly could not go on.

Lord John was not usually a dedicated political organiser, but he seems to have put a great deal of work in creating the group on which the Liberal Party was to rest. Reform, his great life-long issue, drew in radicals who knew he was the younger man. Yet in the short term, the crux of his union with Palmerston was Italy. It drew in Russell's attachment to government by consent and Palmerston's desire to annoy Austria. It created a union in cabinet between Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary which even the Queen was unable to upset. It opened up a road which looked backwards to 1688, and forward to the United Nations and international human rights. As the fruit of a short-term political manoeuvre, that is something of an achievement.

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