

Book Review: The revival of British Liberalism: from Grimond to Clegg

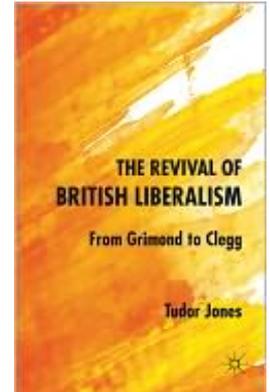
[Carl Packman](#) reviews Tudor Jones's detailed composition of the history of the liberals.

The revival of British Liberalism: from Grimond to Clegg. Tudor Jones. [Palgrave](#). May 2011.

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It should go without saying that this book is relevant to the UK's current political landscape. For my lifetime, the Liberal Democrats were at best a quiet protest party for the bleeding hearts in the South West of England, and at worst a grouping speaking to themselves, able to make promises nobody will ever ask them to substantiate upon ([tuition fees](#) being one case in point). Now the liberals are encountering their first direct input of the country since Churchill's wartime coalition, dealing with the challenges that follow.

Tudor Jones, a senior lecturer in Political Studies at Coventry University, has carefully pieced together a history of British Liberalism's political representatives, in their varied, but always related, forms, in order that we can properly situate the Clegg-led Liberal Democrats today, from its past under Jo Grimond in the 50s and 60s.



As Jones has no trouble in exploring, two main challenges have consistently occupied the liberals/Liberal Democrats: how best to maintain political independence and how best to ensure no sectional interests are given primacy in their policies. Both Labour and Conservative, as liberals through the years have contested, have had a conservatives core, expressed in their subservience to vested interest (namely big business or trade unions), which could only be countered with their brand of real, non-socialist, progressive politics. Though, electoral success did not follow purity of principle.

The Liberal party diagnosed the problem as lacking an understanding of where their core support came from, and what ideas would be important to them. How they planned to rectify it was by developing a dedicated research department, headed up by a man called Harry Cowie, who would guarantee his party's place in the world of political ideas and policy. After the infamous Orpington by-election in 1962, known as the start of the liberal revival – the party had posited its target voters, but other strategic problems would soon emerge.

Though there were to be some promising successes in local elections, namely Eastbourne in the sixties, disparity between grassroots activists and advocates of the – to coin a phrase – parliamentary road to liberalism appeared. What came later further trivialised the political wing of British liberalism. After much commotion, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the liberals formed an alliance in 1981. Further, liberals were having to re-position their politics in light of Margaret Thatcher's economic policies, lest support of a free market (which is in a liberal's DNA) became "guilty by association".

After what became known as the "unhappy marriage of convenience" of the alliance, the Social and Liberal Democrats (later the Liberal Democrats) would be born on the 3rd of March, 1988, enjoying little success, and giving rise to few new ideas in the early days. Leader Paddy Ashdown would preside over fewer votes than his recent predecessors, and then Blair turned up to, in Paddy's own words, fill "the space I have been aiming at for the last seven years". Though this allegiance broke after Blair took the country to Iraq, the Lib Dems, now under the leadership of Charles Kennedy, a vocal opponent, were able to stand in distinction to Labour again, reminding the country how damaging their years in office had been – which is where Nick Clegg has picked up from today, sharing the same bed with the Conservative Party in government.

Jones' book provides us with a very detailed composition of the history of the liberals. It remains neutral throughout, does not digress from the subject, unpacks ideas with aplomb and without appealing to convoluted explanations, and is keen to address marginal internal voices as the ones we could name off of the tops of our heads. It's a splendid volume which I think could see a re-print in the years to come when Clegg's deputy leadership of the country comes to a conclusive close.

Carl Packman is a health researcher, writer and blogger. Read more about Carl on our [reviewers page](#).

