

Young Liberals

The 'Red Guard' Era

Peter Hellyer argues that foreign policy issues had a crucial role to play in the growth of the Young Liberals in the 1960s and '70s.

I was interested to read in Newsletter 14 (March 1997) the article by Ruth Fox on 'Young Liberal Influence and its Effects, 1970–74'. While I would not disagree with many of her conclusions, I do, however, query her starting point, and, in particular, her statement that: 'The Young Liberals were first catapulted on to the national stage in 1970 through their involvement in the "Stop The Seventy Tour" of the South African cricket team'.

The phenomenon of a radical and large Young Liberal Movement, including both the National League of Young Liberals and the Union of Liberal Students, which, incidentally, she fails to mention, began to emerge significantly earlier, as might be deduced from the printing with the paper of a *Guardian* cartoon from the 1966 Brighton Assembly, showing the 'Red Guards,' led by George Kiloh, then NLYL Chairman, assaulting a barricade defended by Grimond, Thorpe and others of the parliamentary party. By summer 1970, the YLs were already well in the public eye, partly because of the skills of Kiloh and others, such as Terry Lacey, Phil Kelly, and Louis Eaks, in attracting press attention. Good copy for the tabloid press could always be guaranteed.

There are also a number of factual errors. STST, for example, did not commence sabotage of cricket grounds in January 1970; that began in the summer. In the winter of 1969–70, when STST began, with YL support, it was the rugby grounds that attracted attention. The conflict between the YLs and the party leadership over the Israel/Palestine issue began not after the 1970 general election but in 1968, sparked off by a letter written to the journal *Free Palestine* by a YL officer.

Quite apart from the question of precisely when the YLs began 'to be catapulted on to the national stage' (and, as a participant, I would

argue for 1966, rather than for 1970), I also believe that Ruth Fox underestimates the importance of foreign policy issues in the growth of the YLs.

When the 'Red Guards' first came to public attention at the 1966 Brighton Assembly, a key factor was YL sponsorship of an anti-NATO resolution. Over the next few years, a number of foreign policy issues came to the fore, not just inside the Liberal Party but also in the country at large, of which the most significant were the question of how to end the UDI by Ian Smith in Rhodesia, this issue linking up with the broader topic of opposition to apartheid, and growing American involvement in the Vietnam war.

On both these issues, the Wilson government adopted policies that were perceived as being either insufficiently radical, or pro-American, or both. Opposition to government policy on these issues was seen by many young people as a way of expressing their own dissatisfaction with government.

At the same time, the Labour Party Young Socialists, then controlled by the forerunners of Militant, and other groups such as the International Marxist Group and International Socialism were often perceived as being radical, but steeped in an unfamiliar – dare I say boring? – Marxist rhetoric. Perhaps, too, they often were simply not 'fun.'

The Young Liberals, on the other hand, not only offered radical policies, but 'fun' as well, being closer to the 'flower power' culture of the so-called hippies, and adopting a far less puritanical approach than the various Trotskyist groups to the 1960s sexual revolution and the widespread availability for the first time of cannabis. Those groups viewed the most popular of the YL lapel badges, 'Make Love Not War,' with distaste, but thousands were sold to non-YLs.

Although the YLs may have had an image that was lacking in 'seriousness,' that was by

no means unattractive. Still under the label of the Liberal Party, and therefore less susceptible to the smear of being called communist at a time when Cold War rhetoric still had a powerful hold, rebellious youth could be rebellious and still remain to some extent within conventional political norms, including campaigning in local and parliamentary elections.

The YLs (both NLYL and ULS) gained substantial experience in working with single-issue campaigns, such as those on Southern Africa and Vietnam. They were, for example, granted representation as an organisation on the National Council of the Anti-Apartheid Movement from around 1967, with individual YLs subsequently being elected for several years to the AAM Executive. YL officers were also on the organising committees for the major anti-Vietnam War demonstrations in London in March and October 1968, both of which were attended by many YLs.

In contrast, contrary to Ruth Fox's suggestion, the YLs played a relatively small part in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, although opposed to nuclear weapons. One reason, in part at least, was the feeling that CND was too uncritical of the Soviet Union. During the summer of 1968, a number of YL Executive members and other leading activists had experienced Soviet bloc repression at first hand, first at a World Youth Festival in Bulgaria, and then in Czechoslovakia during the 21 August Soviet invasion – convincing evidence of the need to oppose the Soviet bloc as firmly as the United States, and a policy distinguishing them from the various Marxist groups, in particular the Young Communists.

By the late 1960s, the YLs were able to take a lead in starting 'Stop The Seventy Tour', a lead welcomed by Anti-Apartheid, more concerned with staying inside the law. Had the YLs not already achieved recognition in previous years as a campaigning force on Southern Africa and other foreign policy issues, the lead taken by Eaks and Hain (as well as others who were not YLs), on



Young Liberals as the press saw them: the cover of the *Guardian* report on the Liberal Assembly, 1966.

STST would have attracted neither media interest nor the support it so quickly gathered.

While Kiloh, Lacey, Eaks, Phil Kelly (and, I would claim, myself) may have been particularly involved in foreign policy issues, there were other strands of YL thought that were more involved in developing the community politics approach. Among NLYL and ULS leaders in the late 1960s were people like Tony Greaves and Gordon Lishman (like Lacey and Kelly, both officers both of ULS and NLYL), David Penhaligon and Howard Legg, who developed the combination of a radical YL approach and involvement in community politics out of which many of the changes that so revolutionised the party in the later 1970s grew, and which Ruth Fox well describes.

Finally, while YL activism on foreign policy issues may have given the movement a major boost in the late 1960s, many of those most involved moved on either to join the Labour Party, as did Kiloh, Lacey, Kelly and later Hain, or to leave party politics altogether, as did Eaks. (I think I was something of an exception, although scarcely typical, since, apart from returning for every general election but one since 1970, I have been resident abroad for most of the last 25 years.)

Many of those who were more preoccupied with community politics, however, have stayed the course within the party, spreading that approach throughout the party. That is perhaps why Ruth Fox has overlooked the role of foreign policy issues in the growth of NLYL and ULS.

Peter Hellyer is a journalist living in Abu Dhabi; he was International Vice Chairman of the NLYL from 1967 to 1969.

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