

NOT PLAYING

THE YOUNG LIBERALS AND ANTI-APARTHEID



Catherine Ellis and Matthew Redding explore the Young Liberals' contribution to anti-apartheid campaigns and sporting boycotts in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

THE YLs played a major role in protests against apartheid, particularly in the Stop the Seventy Tour (STST), whose goal was to prevent an all-white South African cricket team from touring in Britain in the summer of 1970. STST was the most important campaign in the Young Liberals' history and is often claimed as the most successful protest movement in post-war Britain. As Peter Hain, a prominent Young Liberal

and the leader of STST, observed as he reflected on a lifetime of anti-apartheid activism, 'The Stop the Seventy Tour was not about sport – it was the first step towards making apartheid unacceptable to the world'.¹

Despite the significance of STST and the importance of Young Liberals within it, the YLs have attracted much less academic attention than other British youth organisations of this period, and anti-apartheid campaigning has tended to be

NG GAMES

APARTHEID CAMPAIGNS, 1968 – 70

overshadowed by other contemporary protest movements, particularly against nuclear proliferation and the Vietnam War. This article attempts to redress the balance by examining the Young Liberals' contribution to international efforts to end racial segregation in South Africa.²

Campaigns against apartheid in the late 1960s took place against a background of anxiety about the results of Harold Macmillan's 'wind of change' sweeping across Africa, Britain's colonial legacy, and the integration of Commonwealth immigrants into British society. The same period was marked by the rising profile of teenagers and young people, whose political and social activities frequently disturbed their elders and challenged established mores.

These anxieties collided in anti-apartheid protests, which pitted radical young activists against 'white', 'imperial' sports run by a coterie of often elderly, upper-middle-class men. The struggle against apartheid thus exposed contemporary tensions around race, empire, social class, and age. An examination of the YLs' role in British anti-apartheid campaigns demonstrates the importance of Young Liberal contributions to the transnational struggle against South African race laws. More broadly, it further develops our understanding of relations between the Liberal Party and its youth wing, and contributes

to a growing body of research on youth in British politics and political responses to youth culture in a period of high-profile student sit-ins and youth-led single-issue campaigns.

The Young Liberals

The National League of Young Liberals (NLYL) originated in Birmingham in 1903 as the League of British Young Liberals, inspired by Giuseppe Mazzini's Young Italy Movement. The League spread rapidly through the Midlands and the North-West while a separate League of Young Liberals was formed in London. The two groups amalgamated in 1908.³

The NLYL grew to become the most influential, yet least studied, youth wing of Britain's major political parties, their significance often overshadowed by the Young Conservatives' extensive social activities and the Young Socialists' flirtation with Trotskyism. The Young Liberals developed their highest public profile in the 1960s and early 1970s, when they campaigned on issues as diverse as trade union policy, education reform, the Middle East, apartheid, and Britain's role in NATO. Indeed, Young Liberal activism was described by sociologists Philip Abrams and Alan Little in 1965 as 'the most striking and only truly distinctive aspect of political participation of youth in contemporary Britain'.⁴

The YLs wanted to attract young people disillusioned by 'the hypocrisy and dishonesty of the big parties', and also sought to address what they saw as a lack of leadership and radicalism in the 'senior' Liberal Party.⁵ The YLs were represented on local and national Liberal councils, and they pressed for greater radicalism in foreign and domestic affairs through the writing of their New Orbits Group and the presentation of often combative resolutions at Liberal Assemblies and NLYL conferences. The YLs received significant credit for their role in the Liberals' 1962 by-election victory in the previously safe Conservative seat of Orpington, as well as local electoral successes through their 'community politics' initiatives in the early 1970s.

Like Britain's other political parties in this period, the Liberal Party tried to harness the dynamism of young people. While the Young Conservatives' primarily social function ensured that relations with the Conservative Party were fairly smooth, Labour was considerably more troubled by the Young Socialists' slide to the militant left. The Liberals tried to present themselves as the 'party of youth' through initiatives such as the *Charter for Youth* (1964), which promised reforms in education and vocational training, community initiatives, and a reduction in the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen. Relations between the YLs and the 'senior' party were

Left: Stop The Seventy Tour protesters outside Lord's, March 1970

often tense, however, particularly over matters of defence and foreign affairs. The Young Liberals and the Liberal Party were usually in broad agreement on major issues, but they differed over the degree of radicalism and the methods of campaigning, especially the preference of some YLs for direct action, which intensified in the late 1960s. By 1969, the party's Annual Report noted that, even as the YLs' membership was declining, there was 'new militancy' in the organisation, 'with particular emphasis on campaigns of civil disobedience', specifically protests against international tours by all-white South African tennis and cricket teams.⁶

Liberals and apartheid

British colonial governments bore considerable responsibility for introducing racial segregation to southern Africa beginning in the late eighteenth century, when a sense of white superiority over the native black population was encouraged to unite white British and Afrikaner settlers. At the same time, apartheid offended against traditional liberal principles of individual freedom and human rights, exemplified most clearly in the liberal humanitarianism that inspired nineteenth-century campaigns to abolish slavery. Looking back from the 1960s, the Liberal Party claimed a proud history of opposition to racial segregation in southern Africa. Herbert Asquith's Liberal government had granted independence to the Union of South Africa in 1910, which gave Liberals a sense of 'special responsibility' toward the region. Liberal information papers claimed that the party had expressed concern about the 'colour bar' from 1906 onwards, and Liberal politicians consistently criticised the failure of later British governments to honour their commitments to improve political rights for black and coloured South Africans.⁷

Liberal condemnation intensified as the policy of apartheid, literally meaning 'apartness', was codified following the Afrikaner National Party's victory in South Africa in 1948. The Liberal Party officially denounced apartheid in 1949 and 1950 and supported black African interests against colonial European pressure throughout

the 1950s, including support for the international boycott of South African goods that began in 1959. Liberal MPs strongly condemned the Sharpeville Massacre in March 1960, in which white South African troops opened fire on black protestors, and called for South Africa to be refused readmission to the Commonwealth in 1961. The Liberal policy statement, *Partners in a New Britain* (1963), stated that Britain 'must not compromise with apartheid', and the party both encouraged successive British governments to support an embargo on the sale of arms to South Africa, and offered support to persecuted South African Liberals such as Randolph Vigne. Beyond South Africa, Ian Smith's unilateral declaration of Rhodesian independence from Britain was also a focus of concern for Liberals. The 1966 Brighton Assembly included an emergency motion calling for 'an unambiguous pronouncement that independence will not be granted to any Rhodesian government unless it is based on universal adult suffrage'. At the same Assembly, MP (and later party leader) Jeremy Thorpe's speech advocating the bombing of railway lines into Rhodesia earned him the nickname 'Bomber' Thorpe.

Apartheid was firmly entrenched in all aspects of South African life, but it was particularly visible internationally through racial segregation in sports. In 1957, the South African Minister for the Interior, while denying that the government was interfering in sport, required that 'Whites and non-Whites should organise their sporting activities separately; that there should be no inter-racial competitions within our borders; and that the mixing of races in teams to take part in competitions within the Union and abroad should be avoided'.⁸

Both domestic and international pressure mounted against such measures. In 1958, the South African Sports Association was formed to coordinate and advocate on behalf of non-white athletes. In 1961, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) banned South Africa, and the following year the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee (SANROC) was formed to press the International Olympic Committee to expel South Africa unless black athletes



Anti-Apartheid Movement poster, 1969/70

were permitted on South African Olympic teams. South Africa was subsequently banned from competing in the 1964 and 1968 Olympics, and was officially expelled from the Olympic movement in 1970. Lingering international ambivalence towards apartheid was apparent, however, through the fact that a white South African delegate continued to sit on the International Olympic Committee.

Despite many other restrictions on its sporting activities, South Africa remained active in international cricket and rugby, and these two sports became the focus of anti-apartheid protests in the late 1960s. Both cricket and rugby were 'imperial' games, spread and transfused into local cultures through British rule. For the most part, international rugby and cricket competition was confined to 'white' Commonwealth countries: the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. Consequently, South African interests were protected by an imperial 'old boy network' committed to keeping politics out of sports and maintaining traditional sporting ties.

Earlier protests against all-white South African cricket teams touring England in 1960 and 1965 were dismissed as 'feeble' by the Secretary of the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) and had virtually no impact on the sport; however, in 1968 the

South African government refused to allow the English cricket team to tour its own country because the team included a coloured (former South African) player named Basil D'Oliveira. The 'D'Oliveira Affair' focused wider public attention on apartheid in sport and initiated an international protest movement that eventually resulted in South Africa's exclusion from international test match cricket for more than two decades.⁹

In response to D'Oliveira's exclusion, the Liberals passed a resolution at their 1968 Assembly calling on the MCC and other English cricketing authorities to cut all ties with South Africa. At the same time, student protest and grassroots activism were on the rise, and the Young Liberals eagerly took up the cause.

Young Liberals and anti-apartheid campaigns

The Young Liberals' involvement in the anti-apartheid movement grew naturally out of the Liberal Party's long-standing opposition to racial segregation in South Africa, but it was characterised by its own distinct methods and identity.

For the YLs in the 1960s, opposition to apartheid became a litmus test for the 'libertarian socialism' and radicalism that many YLs espoused. The YLs had already established their credibility through direct action campaigns and protests against the Vietnam War and Ian Smith's rule in Rhodesia, as well as earlier anti-apartheid demonstrations, and thus they were well placed to take a leading role as momentum built against apartheid in sport. Furthermore, other radical youth organisations such as Trotskyists and Maoists were more engaged in anti-Vietnam demonstrations than apartheid protests, leaving the field open to the YLs.

Building on earlier Liberal protests against the situation in Rhodesia, Peter Hellyer, the NLYL International Vice-Chairman, spoke to a resolution on southern Africa at the 1967 Liberal Assembly. He urged the Liberal Party to 'show that we are in tune with the present day world' by rejecting 'fascist' white regimes and supporting the 'wind of change' blowing across Africa. But Hellyer insisted that supporting a resolution was not

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enough – mouthing 'pious sentiments' was no better than the 'cowardly hypocrisy' of Harold Wilson's Labour government that supported British business interests in Africa at the expense of human rights. Liberals must follow the YL example and take real action.

Early in 1968, the YLs formed a South Africa Commission and their involvement in the anti-apartheid movement gained momentum. The focal point of their campaigning was South Africa's participation in international sports competitions, and their protests took place principally through the Stop the Seventy Tour (STST) committee led by Peter Hain. Hain was the son of white anti-apartheid and South African Liberal Party activists who had fled to London in 1966 after one of their friends was executed by the South African government. Upon arrival in England at the age of sixteen, Hain found the Young Liberals a 'vibrant, irreverent force for radicalism' and quickly joined – although first he had to set up a YL branch in his local constituency. He became a member of the YL executive and the Liberal Party's national executive, as well as Vice-Chairman of the South Africa Commission. Both he and Hellyer also served on the executive of the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), a major London-based protest group with strong Liberal and Labour Party support.

Building on their earlier speeches, rallies and demonstrations, YL anti-apartheid activity intensified in early 1969. In response to news that an all-white South African cricket team would tour in Britain the following year, Hain and other YLs decided that the AAM's 'legitimate' protest methods were inadequate. In January, Hain submitted a resolution to the YLs' South Africa Commission pledging 'to take direct action to prevent scheduled matches from taking place unless the 1970 tour is cancelled'. The resolution was sent to the MCC and other clubs, where it met with considerable hostility. For example, Wilfred Wooller, a hard-liner within the Cricket Council, told anti-apartheid campaigners that he had 'no sympathy with your cause in any way shape or form, and regard you as an utter nuisance'. Hain later claimed rather cheekily that

Wooller was 'our greatest ally ... [e]very time he speaks up we get a thousand more supporters'.¹⁰ During the International Cricket Conference at Lord's in June, the YLs also released a letter signed by their Chairman, Louis Eaks, warning that a campaign of civil disobedience would go ahead if the 1970 tour were not cancelled.

In collaboration with SANROC, groups of YLs began to disrupt cricket matches in the summer of 1969, starting with a private South African cricket tour sponsored by Wilf Isaacs, a Johannesburg cricket enthusiast. At the first match in Basildon, ten YLs protested on the pitch until they were dragged off by police, a scene repeated in disruptions at every match for the rest of the tour. Protestors invaded the pitches and at least one cricket pitch was dug up. A Davis Cup tennis match was also interrupted when Hain and three other YLs ran onto the courts and were arrested. In a private prosecution later brought against him by barrister Francis Bennion, Hain was found guilty of conspiracy for disrupting the Davis Cup match but was acquitted on three other charges related to the cricket tour.

The Liberal Party supported the YLs' efforts in their early stages. Arguing that the cricket tour would be 'an affront to black South African sportsmen, and to Britain's coloured community, and in addition, an outright capitulation to racialism', in July 1969 the Liberal Council called for the 1970 cricket tour to be cancelled and offered support for 'the initiative taken by various individuals, including Young Liberals, in mobilising opposition to the tour'.¹¹

Soon afterwards, STST was formed as a broad-based direct action coordinating committee to bring together opponents of apartheid in sport. Hain was STST's first Press Officer and subsequently became chairman of the organisation. Although STST was formed in response to rugby and cricket tours, Hain emphasised that its goal was much more ambitious, to make apartheid 'unacceptable to the world'.¹²

The YLs' choice of direct action for their anti-apartheid protests was an explicit rejection of the 'bridge-building' approach (most often put forward by conservative business



interests) that argued that trade connections and the pressures of free-market capitalism, as well as exposure to successful multi-racial societies such as Britain, would encourage South Africa to give up apartheid. The YLs rejected that position entirely, insisting that the only way to compel change was to isolate South Africa completely through direct actions such as boycotts, 'militant political resistance' and 'guerrilla struggle'.¹³ Such tactics also had the advantage of producing attention-grabbing images, a point that was not lost on the YLs in an increasingly televisual age. During protests against the rugby tour, for example, newspapers carried images of the Springboks retreating behind barbed-wire fences.

STST was inspired by the 'Committee of 100', a militant offshoot of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) that used direct action in its protests, as well as the anti-Vietnam War and American Civil Rights movements that politicised many young people across the industrialised world. While single-issue campaigns often took the support of young people away from mainstream political parties, the Liberals tried to become an 'umbrella organisation' that encouraged single-issue pressure groups to work together with the Liberal Party, and the Young Liberals became an attractive outlet for young people looking to change the system. This was part of the Young Liberals' efforts to bring politics back to the grassroots and establish a 'coalition of radicals', an area in which they had some success.

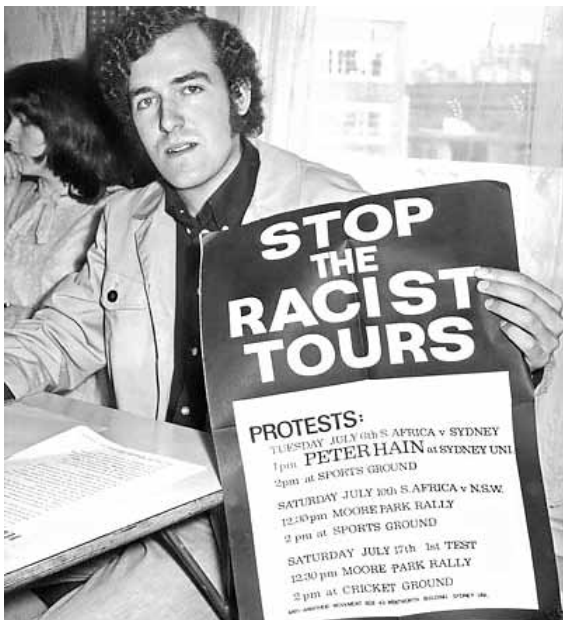
The initial focus of STST was the cricket tour, but the South African rugby team was scheduled to come to England before the cricketers in the winter of 1969–70 (their first appearance in England since 1960–61, and only the sixth since 1906). STST therefore decided to target the rugby tour as a dry run for the cricket tour the following summer. At a press conference, Hain warned British sporting authorities that 'their complicity in apartheid sport will no longer be tolerated', and one week later the Liberal Party called for the rugby tour to be cancelled.

The rugby tour went ahead but was met with sustained protests. Hain claimed that the

twenty-five-match tour attracted over 50,000 demonstrators who faced over 20,000 police officers. The first match (at Oxford) was cancelled on the recommendation of the local police, two others were moved to new venues, and some 400 people were arrested. STST distributed thousands of posters and leaflets featuring their slogan, 'Don't Play with Apartheid'. Although the type of direct action espoused by STST and the YLs was supposed to be peaceful, if highly disruptive, violence did break out, including serious clashes in Swansea in which STST demonstrators were savagely beaten by local rugby players hired by the police. The scale of the protests so demoralised the South African players that they voted to go home. They were required to continue, but at the end of the tour the Springbok manager, Corrie Bornman, confessed that 'The last three months have been an ordeal to which I would never again subject young sportsmen'.¹⁴

The rugby tour was the 'perfect spring-board' for STST's protests against the cricket tour, which was due to start in May 1970. From Hain's perspective, direct action, previously relatively untried, was evolving into a natural part of the protests: 'the movement had grown out of a campaign of demonstrations and consequently was already geared to action'.¹⁵ In late November 1969, while the rugby tour continued, anti-apartheid groups including the Young Liberals, STST, and SANROC sent a petition and letters to the MCC threatening to disrupt summer cricket matches along the same lines, including mass demonstrations and pitch invasions, if the tour were not called off. The Liberal Party, together with one hundred Liberal and Labour MPs, also demanded the cancellation of the tour and pledged to join in protests. The Labour Minister of Sport, Denis Howell, echoed that view on television, criticising South Africa's reaction to D'Oliveira the previous year and stating that he had 'no time for any sport based on racial considerations'.¹⁶

Meanwhile, the tone of protests against the cricket tour became increasingly violent and the role of the Young Liberals attracted increasing attention, to the growing dismay of the 'senior' Liberal Party. In early January 1970, weedkiller



was sprayed on the Worcester cricket grounds ‘as a warning of things to come’. Two weeks later, on the night of 19 January, fourteen of the seventeen grounds that were to host the tour were simultaneously raided. Many pitches were painted with anti-apartheid slogans, some were dug up, and weedkiller was sprayed on the Warwickshire ground. These actions had a ‘phenomenal impact’, according to Hain:

Everyone had been caught by surprise and the widespread strength of the movement had been strikingly demonstrated in one night. More than this, the fear at the back of the cricket authorities’ minds, and probably at the back of most people’s minds, had suddenly been realised: the image of the cricket tour collapsing amidst a series of torn pitches and weedkiller was conjured, and began to crystallise.¹⁷

Responsibility for the raids was unclear until journalists asked Eaks, the Chairman of the YLs, for a comment and he claimed to have been involved along with ‘some Young Liberals’. Although the YLs had not organised the vandalism, the press quickly associated the organisation with the incident, which exacerbated existing tensions between the Liberal Party and Young Liberals over the use of direct action.

In response to his support for the attacks on the cricket grounds, the Liberal Party executive passed a vote of censure against Eaks in February 1970. YLs, led by Hain, reacted angrily, questioning the right of an ‘arrogant’ party executive to ‘interfere’ in YL affairs, and pledging full support for their chairman. Two months later, however, Eaks was voted out at the annual YL conference, replaced by Tony Greaves. The following year, Hain was elected YL Chairman, largely on the strength of his leadership in the anti-apartheid campaigns.

While the protests galvanised the anti-apartheid movement, they also strengthened the resolve of those who wished to see the cricket tour go on. The gulf between the Young Liberals’ perspective and that of their opponents was clear when the Cricket Council called for

a crusade to defend ‘civilised pursuits’ against ‘the great unwashed’. Cricket administrators branded AAM campaigners ‘a minority who seeks to impose their views by violent demonstrations’, and they argued for ‘the rights of the individual to play and watch cricket’.¹⁸

But no effective or coordinated opposition group ever emerged. Among large-scale organisations in Britain, only the Conservative Party remained mostly silent against apartheid; indeed, in the early 1980s, the Young Conservatives still produced ‘Hang Nelson Mandela’ badges. STST put political parties in a very difficult situation, particularly after the Prime Minister, Wilson, announced that a general election would be held on 18 June 1970. Although the Conservatives wanted the cricket tour to go on and tried to use the STST protests to smear both Labour and the Liberals, none of the parties wanted to campaign in the midst of what was likely to be a very tense summer.

Protests intensified through the early months of 1970 as tour preparations continued in a siege-like atmosphere complete with barbed wire, guard dogs, and heavy security. After the rugby tour protests, many British sports journalists and radio hosts announced they would not cover the cricket tour. The Queen also said she would neither attend matches nor invite the South African team to Buckingham Palace. The tour came under even more pressure when African and Caribbean countries declared they would boycott the Commonwealth Games to be held in Edinburgh in July. Wilson’s government debated whether it should intervene and cancel the tour as the prospect of an all-white Commonwealth Games ‘raised implications which went well beyond the sphere of sport’. The Home Secretary, James Callaghan, shied away from direct political intervention but hoped the high cost of policing the matches would encourage the Cricket Council ‘to reconsider the desirability of proceeding’ on its own.¹⁹

Conclusion

The Cricket Council finally cancelled the South African cricket tour on 22 May 1970, following

a meeting with Callaghan. The extensive media coverage generated by groups such as STST had mobilised existing opponents of apartheid and galvanised thousands of others to join in international boycotts and protest movements. As a consequence, South Africa became increasingly isolated in the early 1970s, banned from the Davis Cup and international competition in weight lifting, squash, wrestling, gymnastics, and athletics, in addition to the Olympics and the Commonwealth Games. New Zealand’s cricket authorities also cut off all communication with South African cricket authorities, and in 1971 the South African rugby tour to Australia was met by protests very similar to those that had accompanied matches in Britain two years earlier. South Africa’s cricketers pressed their government to avoid complete exclusion from international competition by choosing a team strictly on ‘merit’, but Prime Minister B.J. Vorster would not concede. Facing the threat of more protests, Australian cricket authorities then cancelled the planned Springbok tour to Australia in 1971–72, and South Africa was effectively removed from international sports for the next twenty years.

The Young Liberals’ commitment to ending apartheid continued. Building on the success of STST, leading YLs such as Greaves, Hain, and Gordon Lishman produced a *Radical Manifesto* for the 1970 election. This manifesto promised to ‘project an alternative concept of society’ based on the fundamental liberal values of ‘love, reason, and freedom’, including commitment to ‘a multi-racial Britain in a multi-racial world’. Accordingly, the YLs called for the immediate repeal of the 1968 Commonwealth Immigration Act because it denied some British citizens the right to enter Britain, and they condemned British governments for basing foreign policy on pragmatism rather than principle. They pledged to continue their support for ‘the spontaneous moral protest of youth’ against nuclear arms, the Vietnam War, apartheid in sports, and white supremacy.

At their 1970 conference, the YLs passed a motion reaffirming their belief that ‘international capitalism’ was shoring up apartheid. They emphasised their support for

Left, from top:
Peter Hain, May
1970
Peter Hain, June
1971
Peter Hain
arrested in
Downing Street,
1969

‘participatory and socially just societies’ and called on the Young Liberal Movement to fight ‘southern African racialism and oppression’ through various means, particularly the use of ‘militant non-violent direct action’ against South African sports tours. The YLs also demanded a ‘detailed investigation’ to uncover South African financial interests among Liberal Party members, and pressed the Liberal Party to require that members who refused to give up such interests must resign their membership. On a community level, the YLs encouraged their members to take action against local firms with South African connections.

The 1970 election was disastrous for the Liberals: the party lost seven of its thirteen MPs and saw its proportion of the vote fall to 13.5 per cent. The YLs’ leading role in anti-apartheid activities ensured that the Young Liberals were the most publicised aspect of the Liberal Party during the election campaign. Many senior party members blamed the poor election results on the YLs’ direct action tactics, although other commentators looked to more systemic weaknesses in the party’s leadership and policy-making. Nonetheless, the momentum developed by the YLs within the party over the previous eighteen months was evident at the 1970 Liberal Assembly, where delegates passed a YL resolution that established ‘community politics’ as the guiding principle of party activism until the mid-1970s.

While debate continues over the role of international protests and direct action in bringing apartheid to an end in the early 1990s, the YLs’ leading role in STST provided the youth organisation with an unprecedented level of unity and public profile and connected them to larger contemporary debates around human rights, imperial and colonial issues, and radical political activism. The Stop the Seventy Tour solidified the Young Liberals’ position on the extra-parliamentary left and reinforced their radical credentials. STST also remained a touchstone for the Young Liberal Movement in forums such as their newspaper, the *Liberator*, through the 1970s, and provided inspiration for a new ‘Stop the Apartheid Rugby Tour’ (SART) organisation in 1973, in which

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youth groups including the YLs, the National Union of Students, the Young Communists, and the Labour Party Young Socialists tried (unsuccessfully) to stop the British Lions from playing in South Africa in 1974.

For the Liberal Party, the Young Liberals’ anti-apartheid activities provided an effective, if not unproblematic, response to the attraction of single-issue campaigns for young people in the late 1960s. For the YLs, STST built on their existing credibility in protest campaigns, and fitted well with their distinctive amalgam of mainstream political activity, grassroots ‘community politics’, and a commitment to direct action to achieve real change. Like other political youth organisations, the YLs were rarely ideologically coherent but they were deeply committed to racial equality and the eradication of racial segregation in South Africa. When it came to apartheid, the Young Liberals were not playing games.

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