

# Liberal History News

## Autumn 2023

### Peter Hellyer, 7 November 1947 – 2 July 2023

Peter Hellyer was one of that remarkable vintage of radical Young Liberals which flourished in the late 1960s and early 1970s. During little more than a five-year period this group played a key role in the formulation of a distinctive 'Libertarian Left' ideology which they applied to the highly charged issues of the day, including the Vietnam War, apartheid in South Africa, CND and the peace movement and the plight of the Palestinians. Since when faced with establishment intransigence they took to direct action, not least in successfully stopping the 1970 South Africa rugby tour, they provoked considerable opposition within the Liberal Party hierarchy, who felt, probably correctly, that the Young Liberals' highly publicised actions were losing the party votes and simply did not know how to cope with a youth movement that had considerable momentum, many thousands of members and constantly showed up the rigidity of Labour's Young Socialists. Also, the Young Liberals' willingness to campaign alongside others who were sometimes in far more extreme and illiberal

organisations who agreed with their stance on a specific issue, was often much too pluralistic for the party leaders.

I missed out on involvement in the contemporary Young Liberal Movement, being on the party's staff from 1962 and during the whole period. However, I was often called on to attempt to mediate but given the way that Jeremy Thorpe, then leader, mishandled the situation and even publicly attacked his own youth movement, all efforts were futile. The rift between the Liberal establishment and the Young Liberal Movement led to the appointment of a three-person Commission of Enquiry in December 1970, chaired by Stephen Terrell, a leading QC and Liberal candidate.<sup>1</sup> Possibly because there was no simple formula available to combine discipline with passion, its few conclusions came to nothing.

Peter Hellyer was a key participant throughout this period, not least as the Young Liberals' International Vice-Chairman from 1967 to 1969. Surprisingly, given his capacity for producing beautifully written English in later publications, he did not

contribute to the two books of essays published by the Young Liberal Movement in 1967 and 1971.<sup>2</sup> As a key officer, together with Louis Eaks, another officer of the movement, he visited the Soviet Union at the invitation of the Komsomol, the youth section of the Communist Party. Hellyer and Eaks insisted on varying their allotted programme to visit the tomb of Peter Kropotkin, the Russian anarchist, and, in Kiev, they asked party officials to explain the nature of Ukraine's separate national identity.

Later, key officers of the Young Liberal Movement abandoned it and, somewhat perversely given their trenchant criticisms of the 1966





Peter Hellyer, David Steel and the UAE Founding Father, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, circa 1975.

Labour government, Peter Hain, George Kiloh and (temporarily) Simon Hebditch, joined the Labour Party, or, as in Hilary Wainwright's case, left mainstream party politics altogether, or, as with Lawrie Freedman, became a knight of the realm and one of the country's top defence experts and had to steer clear of active politics. Peter Hellyer, however, remained involved with the Liberal Party and, later, the Liberal Democrats. He was as radical as the others on key issues but while they were often more impetuous he was more thoughtful, particularly on the ways and means of achieving change. His approach to politics was in fact similar to that of his Young Liberal colleague, Tony Greaves, but without the occasional irascibility of the latter.

Peter's connection with the Palestinian cause following

the 1967 Arab-Israeli War led him to a deeper involvement with the Arab world and this became his abiding interest. In Sudan he met his late wife, an Egyptian of Sudanese-Moroccan heritage, and converted to Islam. In 1975 he was part of a Liberal Party delegation to the recently independent United Arab Emirates (UAE). This visit developed into a deep relationship with the country and he wrote a considerable number of books on the archaeology, natural history and cultural history of the region. Apart from a three-year sojourn in London in the 1980s, he lived there from 1978. For some time he also ran the first English-language radio station in the UAE and was the editor of its main English-language newspaper for more than a decade. He was highly respected in the country and in 2010 he was granted

Emirati citizenship. All in all, he spent nearly five decades chronicling the history, natural beauty and modern transformation of the UAE.

Peter Hellyer had a remarkable memory and, in the midst of his many commitments in the UAE, he wrote what is as yet the most thoughtful and best analytical article on the Young Liberal Movement in that period of five years, 1966–71, of radical action and youth involvement in active politics; it was published in this *Journal* in 2010.<sup>3</sup> He also served as a member of the *Journal's* Editorial Board.

Peter never abandoned his connections with British Liberalism, and he would return to the UK for every general election, always to be involved with the campaign in the Scottish Borders alongside David Steel, his long-term colleague from their anti-apartheid days in the 1960s.

*Michael Meadowcroft*

- 1 Report of the Liberal Commission to the Right Honourable Jeremy Thorpe MP, (Stephen Terrell, John Foot, Gruffydd Evans), 1 July 1971.
- 2 *Blackpool Essays – towards a radical view of society*, ed Tony Greaves, Gunfire Publications, September 1967; *Scarborough Perspectives*, ed Bernard Greaves, Young Liberal Movement, September 1971.
- 3 'The Young Liberals and the left, 1965–70', *Journal of Liberal History* 67, Summer 2010.

### Michael Steed

Shortly before we went to press, we learned of the sad death of Michael Steed, another member of the

Editorial Board of the *Journal of Liberal History*. A full appreciation will be published in the next issue.

### Memories of a previous Uxbridge by-election

The resignation of Boris Johnson as an MP, and the ensuing by-election in July brought back memories of an earlier by-election in Uxbridge, 51 years ago.

The Conservative MP Charles Curran died in 1972, precipitating a parliamentary by-election for Uxbridge, which was held on 7 December. I was employed as a Travelling Organiser by the Liberal Party Organisation in the early 1970s and was asked by Ted Wheeler, Head of the LPO, to be the agent for the by-election. The party's main focus of attention at this time was on the Sutton & Cheam by-election, to be held on the same day, where Trevor Jones and Graham Tope had been working for several months – and where we eventually won a stunning victory. Therefore, there was not much in the way of resources to deploy to Uxbridge. Our strategy was to take support away from Labour.

The Labour candidate was Manuela Sykes who had previously been active in the Liberal Party during the 1950s and 1960s. Tim Beaumont (later Lord Beaumont) was influential in the national

Liberal hierarchy at the time. Evidently he was no fan of Ms Sykes because he said to me: 'Barry, do what you can for the Liberal vote but make sure that bitch doesn't win!' The Liberal candidate, Ian Stuart, was tailor-made to appeal to Labour voters, many of whom worked at Heathrow Airport. An active member of the Transport & General Workers Union, he was also Chairman of the London Airport Joint Shop Stewards Committee. However, this wasn't necessarily an asset in the more middle-class areas of the constituency; Michael Shersby, the Tory candidate, put in his election address that one reason to vote Conservative was that 'The Liberal candidate is a trade union shop steward'!

Like many local parties in London, the Uxbridge Liberal Association was weak, with a semblance of organisation in only one of the constituency's eight wards. The campaign was run from the front room of the Chair's house, Eileen James, and the helpers who turned out had to be directed from there. The London Liberal Party managed to arrange for 31,000 envelopes to be addressed by other London

constituencies (no computers in those days). On one occasion I looked out of the window to see David Steel, then the party's Chief Whip, assisting my father (who had driven over with piles of addressed envelopes) in trying to shunt his Ford Cortina back and forth because the clutch had broken!

A few months before, Cyril Smith had won Rochdale from Labour and he was guest speaker at the adoption meeting, which was attended by 85 people. The only vehicle available to collect him from the station was my minivan and I wasn't sure that he would fit in – he weighed 22 stone and was over 6 feet tall. But he did – I just had to ask him to move his knee so that I could change gear! My notes also record that Jeremy Thorpe addressed over 100 people at another meeting but at Russell Johnston's meeting only the caretaker and myself were present, as it rained very heavily that evening.

The final ten days of the campaign ran more smoothly, as I was given the assistance of Peter Bray from North Devon, Patrick Goldstone from North Dorset and Tony Richards from LPO, who handled the press. My report of the campaign states that over half the constituency received the Liberal election address two days before that of any other party – 'beating the Tory machine!' Our canvassing was concentrated

in the Colham, Cowley and Yiewsley wards which were producing the best returns, and on polling day we obtained 15 per cent of the vote in these areas. I reported to HQ that with the lack of resources in a four-week time frame and given that it was a marginal seat between the Conservatives and Labour, I did not expect us to save our deposit, which at that time required 12.5 per cent of the vote.

On polling day I nearly had kittens when I was informed that the previous night some of our exuberant helpers had held the candidate by his ankles to enable him to flypost from a railway bridge! The thought of him landing on his head was nightmarish. Eric Ridge, then Chairman of the London Region, was also a GP. To keep me going through polling day and into the count he gave me a massive tablet, which I could barely swallow!

In the end we increased our share of the vote from 9 per cent to 10.3 per cent, and Shersby defeated Sykes by 1,178 votes, a margin of 3.3 per cent. This was my baptism of fire in parliamentary agenting!

*Barry Standen*

## Candidates Directories published

We are pleased to make available the first comprehensive biographical index to appear of every individual who has contested a UK parliamentary election under the designation Liberal, Liberal Democrat or Social Democrat for the years 1945 to 2019. The names are organised in fourteen individual regional sections, all available on the Liberal History website at <https://liberalhistory.org.uk/resources-type/election-candidates-directory/>.

We hope this index will provide information useful to historians, scholars and party members, and as a collective tribute to the many hundreds of individuals who felt committed enough to allow their names to go forward for nomination in the cause of Liberalism.

The directories have been compiled by Lionel King, to whom the History Group, and all Liberal historians, owe an enormous debt of gratitude. Corrections to the entries, and additional information from readers, will be most welcome; email Lionel on [lionelking1964@btinternet.com](mailto:lionelking1964@btinternet.com).

# Help Liberal history!

The Liberal Democrat History Group undertakes a wide range of activities – publishing this *Journal* and our Liberal history books and booklets, organising regular speaker meetings, maintaining the Liberal history website and providing assistance with research.

We'd like to do more, but our activities are limited by the number of people involved in running the Group. We would be enormously grateful for help with:

- Improving our website.
- Helping with our presence at Liberal Democrat conferences.
- Organising our meeting programme.
- Commissioning articles, and locating pictures, for the *Journal of Liberal History*

If you'd like to be involved in any of these activities, or anything else, contact the Editor, **Duncan Brack** ([journal@liberalhistory.org.uk](mailto:journal@liberalhistory.org.uk)) – we would love to hear from you.

