

# Young Liberal Influence and its Effects, 1970-74

*Young Liberals provided the Liberal Party with activists, candidates and radical ideas. Ruth Fox examines the YL record of the early 1970s.*

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The years 1970–74 were among the most successful and controversial in the history of the National League of Young Liberals (NLYL). Condemned as ‘Red Guards’ in the late 1960s, the YLs in these years, while maintaining their radical image, achieved a level of political potency unmatched by the youth section of a political party of any shade in the years both before and after. In these years, although they were at loggerheads with the party’s parliamentary leadership, they were still able to exercise considerable influence on the direction of the party, through the mediums of community politics, direct action campaigning, and byelection successes. In so far as there was a Liberal revival in 1972–73, the YLs were partially responsible for it.

The reasons for joining the NLYL were diverse. Some had been attracted by the ideas and integrity of Jo Grimond, others because of their disillusionment with the Labour Government of 1964–70. The Liberal activist visiting constituents on the doorstep also had an impact, while for others steeped in liberal tradition, the party was their natural home.<sup>1</sup> The ideological direction of the movement in these years lacked uniformity. Many described themselves as ‘libertarian socialists’ which was an amalgam of various strands of political thought: from socialism they took their egalitarianism and analysis of capitalism; from syndicalism their understanding of worker control; from anarchism their libertarian perspective and commitment to direct action campaigning; and from pacifism their commitment to non-violence.<sup>2</sup>

## *Direct Action*

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 prominent role played by YLs Peter Hain and Louis Eaks guaranteed considerable publicity for the movement. Radical direct action politics, as embodied in this campaign, heralded an innovative development in political activity: the building of political networks between single issue pressure groups and the Liberal Party. It was seen as an extension of the Grimond idea of the party as an ‘umbrella’ under whose shade such single issue groups would find a conducive environment in which to flourish, and which would enable

the Liberal Party to construct a wide political base for electoral success. The YLs cultivated links with the emergent pressure groups of the period, particularly non-partisan organisations such as the National Council for Civil Liberties, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and Friends of the Earth. Their campaigns were often run in conjunction with these groups, who provided factual information and resources to supplement YL efforts.

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Such direct action campaigns contributed to the split with the party leadership in these years, which went beyond the inevitable differences to be expected resulting from differing levels of political experience and age disparities. Following the disappointment of the 1970 general election result, the leadership argued that the notorious activities of the NLYL had alienated floating voters who might naturally have turned to the Liberals as an alternative. The YLs thus became an easy but unsatisfactory scapegoat for the failing of others. Jeremy Thorpe had denounced the YLs as hooligans for their sabotage of cricket grounds in January 1970, and relations did not improve following the election when YL leader Louis Eaks, rejecting the party’s traditional pro-Israeli stance, spoke in support of the Palestinian cause and accused the Israelis of practising Zionist apartheid.

The next few years were marred by the existence of the Terrell Report. The work of a three-man commission appointed by Thorpe in 1971, it was an assessment of the relationship between the YLs and the main party. Many theories abound as to why Thorpe established the Commission, the general consensus being that it was set up as a ‘lawyers’ cabal’ to try and remove both Eaks and Hain from their positions within the YL movement. Thorpe’s determination to prevent Hain becoming Chairman of the NLYL had been clear earlier in the year, when a covert operation run from his office was uncovered, revealing an

attempt to rig the leadership election in favour of Thorpe's preferred candidate, Chris Green, by organising an increase in affiliations from YL branches in North Devon, who would then be eligible to vote in the YL elections. A subsequent party enquiry discovered that some of these affiliations came from members' cats!

The Commission was initially welcomed by YLs angered by the leadership's smear tactics. They objected, however, to the Commission reporting to the leader rather than the National Executive, and were scathing of accusations suggesting that some of

their members were communists. They condemned the Commission as an illiberal McCarthyite witch hunt in which charges were made without corroborative evidence. Terrell's conclusions concerned how to bring the NLYL under greater control at the centre and how to bring individual YLs under greater control at the constituency level. The independence of the NLYL was guaranteed by the party's constitution, and any change required a two-

thirds majority vote at the assembly. Given the low turn-out at assemblies, and the high proportion of YLs who made up that attendance, it would have been difficult for the leadership to guarantee victory on such changes. Publication and distribution of the report was suppressed.

### YLs and Community Politics

The election of Tony Greaves as the new chairman of the YLs to replace Eaks in 1970 assuaged some concerns among the party leadership, but it also signalled the beginning of new problems, for Greaves was one of the chief exponents of 'community politics.' While the YLs were not its sole architect, they were at the forefront of the fight to ensure it became the party's main strategic focus, and it was their amendment at the 1970 Assembly that committed the party to 'help organise people in communities to take and use power'. The YLs were represented on all the major organs of the party, but it was through the assembly that they exercised most influence. Throughout the 1970s they constituted the single largest voting block in the party,

numbering on average one in four delegates. Well organised, they caucused late into the night discussing strategy and preparing voting slates for the following day's events. This combination of numerical advantage, and superior tactics and organisation ensured they were well placed to push their agenda and get resolutions passed.

The NLYL amendment at the 1970 Assembly proposed a shift away from a concentration on parliamentary achievement in greater favour of municipal politics. Others in the party also favoured a change of direction, with John

Pardoe promoting the 'broad front strategy' of fighting every seat at the next election. While the YLs did want to fight every seat, they believed that Pardoe's idea represented a 'politics as usual' approach on a greater scale. They were proposing a much greater diversification in political activity.

In the early years the YLs and the party did have some success, although not all byelection victories between 1970 and 1974 were fought on a community politics

basis. One of the most striking results was achieved at Sutton and Cheam in December 1972 (see page 13). The new Liberal MP, Graham Tope, was a Young Liberal who fought the middle class Surrey seat with a community politics approach. Assisted by the increasingly experienced byelection bandwagon of Trevor Jones, and staffed by numerous YL activists, the campaign was remarkable both for its organisation and outcome, achieving a swing of over 30% away from the Conservatives in the Liberals' favour. When people began to speak of a new Liberal revival between 1972 and 1973, following five byelection successes, the YLs and community politics practitioners took substantial credit. At the local level, outstanding results were also achieved, especially in Liverpool, where the Liberals went from one councillor in 1970 to become the single largest party in 1973, overcoming the long-term socialist dominance of the city.

Ultimately, however, the YL strategy did not prove a credible political alternative for the party, as it did not establish solutions in the long term for the issues with which the electorate were most concerned, such as



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

unemployment and poverty. A local approach was too piecemeal to achieve this. The 1975 Wainwright Report on the organisation of the party acknowledged that such an approach required a prolonged campaigning effort that the party was organisationally incapable of sustaining.<sup>3</sup> Other difficulties were encountered as a result of the problems inherent in the strategy. The first dilemma lay in how adequately to define a 'community', and how to deal with the fact that communities are not automatically benign. The second obstacle was how to overcome political apathy if individuals were to play a constructive role in community decision-making. Such problems meant that the strategy was never fully implemented as the YLs would have liked.

### *Young Liberal Policy*

In their policy-making role YLs proudly promoted themselves as far more radical than the party elders. In reality an examination of their policy programme shows that with only nine exceptions the YLs subscribed to the same ideas as the mainstream party. Only in the areas of disarmament and defence, Palestine, the abolition of head teachers, the 100-day limit on prosecutions, the free legal aid service, the Invest-as-you-Earn community fund, and trade union and incomes policy were there any differences in these years. A number of themes can also be discerned; the promotion of a participatory democracy and 'community' interests, an aversion to bureaucracy and limitations on individual freedoms, and the importance of ecological factors in all areas of life.

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Their programme as a whole however lacked consistency and coherence. Avowedly internationalist, they displayed protectionist tendencies in their support of import controls to protect British jobs, and their commitment to increased democratic participation did not sit easily with their opposition to referendums, proportional representation and coalition government. In many areas of policy in these years, the YLs were ahead of their time, such as environmental politics, gay rights, and support for the withdrawal of military forces from Northern Ireland. Devoid of responsibility, they could often say what others in the party were thinking but unwilling to articulate aloud.

Paradoxically, the YL experience in these years was that the Liberal Party, which had the least political influence in the country, offered its younger members greater influence

than any other party. They were the constituency activists, the parliamentary candidates, and the 'shock troops' of the byelection campaigns that lifted party spirits after the 1970 debacle.

Their greatest assertion of influence within the party remained the mobilisation of the rank and file in support of their community politics strategy at the 1970 Assembly, an achievement unsurpassed by any other political youth group. Their successes, however, only served to heighten the differences with the party leadership. The radicals were unconvinced of the potency of parliamentary politics, and the parliamentarians simply did not understand municipal politics, as few of their constituencies had a strong Liberal local council base.

The party's failure to make significant gains during the 1974 general elections, coupled with the debate that arose in the party over the prospect of coalition agreements as a result of the Thorpe-Heath talks in February 1974, meant that the YLs were distanced from the main sphere of Liberal activity in the years that followed, as the party's concentration returned to national rather than local politics. Municipal politics further assisted the decline of the YL movement, when individuals, increasingly drawn into the minutiae of local council issues, became able to devote less time to the NLYL. Instead they looked to the ALC as a more suitable focus for their activities, and it was this organisation that replaced the YLs as the radical arm of the party in the later 1970s and early 1980s.

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#### **Notes:**

- 1 Reasons for joining, as expressed in interviews with the author, by Graham Tope, Peter Hain and Steve Attack.
- 2 *Scarborough Perspectives* (YLM Publications, 1971), p. 5.
- 3 The Wainwright Report 1972-75: memorandum from John Spiller, retiring agent for North Cornwall, undated, p. 13.

### **Archive Sources**

*The Liberal Democrat History Group is aiming to develop and publish a guide to archive sources for students of the history of the Liberal Democrats and its predecessors.*

*Liberal Democrat archives are stored in the LSE Library, which also contains much Liberal Party material; SDP archives are kept at Essex University.*

*We would like to hear from anyone knowing the whereabouts of any relevant archive material, including the records of local and regional parties, internal groups and so on.*

*Please write to Duncan Brack at the address on the back page.*