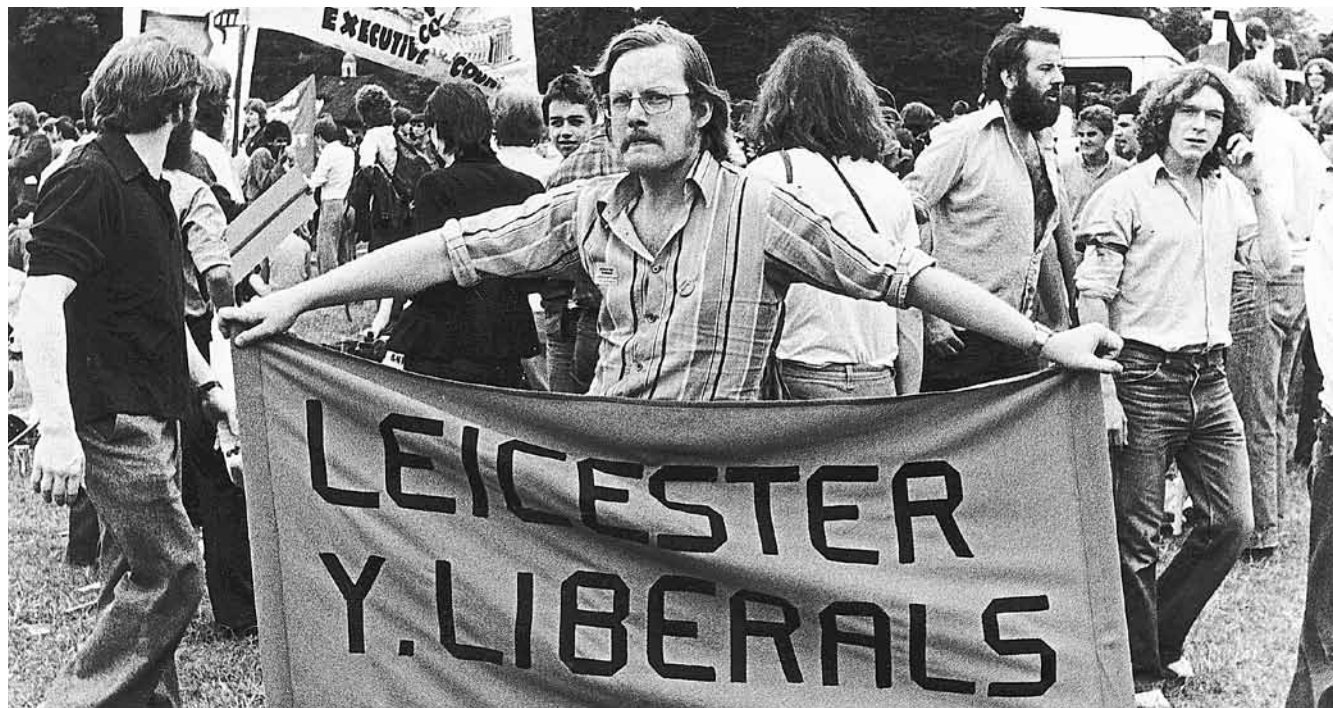


THE YOUNG LIBERALS A

Peter Hellyer reviews the relationship between the Young Liberals and the left in the 1960s.



BRITISH POLITICS today lacks a large and active political youth movement directly affiliated to one of the major parties. Forty-five or so years ago, however, there was one: the Young Liberal Movement, YLM, comprised of the National League of Young Liberals, NLYL, and the Union of Liberal Students, ULS, for a short while dubbed the 'Red Guard' by an over-excitable media. For this issue of the *Journal*, I have been asked to provide some of my own recollections of the YLM and its relationships with the 'left' in British politics. A shorter examination of some of the issues discussed can be found in a paper I published in Issue No. 17 of the *Journal*.¹

Others, who also played an active part, whether at a national or local level, will have their own memories. Their recollections and interpretations are likely to differ from mine, because, although we were all involved in what can be broadly described as the YL 'leadership', the nature of our activity differed.

With that cautionary note given, and conceding that, since I now live in the United Arab Emirates, I lack access to much research material, I present the following thoughts and recollections. My focus will be on the years of the Labour government led by Harold Wilson between 1964 and 1970, for the following reasons. First, it was during those years, mainly from 1966 to 1970, that the YLM reached its peak, claiming at its height 25,000 or so members in several hundred branches throughout the country. George Kiloh, NLYL Chairman from 1966 to 1968, outlined the attractiveness of the YLM, as he then saw it, in a book written by Jonathan Aitken, 'The Young Meteors', published in 1967:

In the past the word Liberal has always been associated with namby-pambyness, but I think we're getting away from that. It's our intention to show a far more militant approach than has ever been seen in youth politics before. Our theme is originality, irreverence,

hardness, single-mindedness – and all this adds up to our intention to capture the left in British politics ... Why am I a Liberal? – I'll never quite know, but perhaps it's because the Liberals are the only party with the slightest hope of ending the present depressing political cycle. Also, our supporters are full of ideals, and ideals capture the imagination of the young far more than the hypocrisy and dishonesty of the big parties.²

Secondly, in those years the YLM often had a somewhat testy relationship with the 'senior' party, although good relations at a personal level between many YL leaders and leaders of the party, both inside and outside parliament, always continued. At the same time, the YLM developed extra-party relationships with a wide range of other radical movements that were frequently the cause of severe strains.

Tony Greaves, Chairman of ULS at the beginning of the period and then of NLYL at the

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end, has recalled in a previous issue how the YLM decided to adopt an approach of opening up links with the left:

It all grew out of that generation of people who joined the party when it was advancing enormously. There had been Orpington (in 1962), followed by a number of near-misses ... Then Harold Wilson had become leader of the Labour Party and took over our 'time for a change' message. The Liberal vote went up in the '64 election but overall the result was disappointing ... We won more seats in the '66 election, but by that time Jo (Grimond) was exhausted, the party was running out of ideas and didn't know where it was going. A small group of us younger party members felt something must be done. We decided to get more involved in young people's campaigning with other groups, particularly the Young Communists. We also decided to try to make the Liberal Party more radical in its policies and more campaigning in its approach. That's why we started at the Brighton Assembly (in 1966) with defence and industrial democracy.³

By 1970, however, the YLM itself was heading into a decline. Tony Greaves has explained the changes as follows:

The old YL leadership that had made such an impact in the mid-1960s was now experiencing an ideological crisis. On one side of the developing split were people such as George Kiloh, Terry Lacey, Louis Eaks, Hilary Wainwright and Tony Bunyan, who saw their allegiance as fundamentally to a left-based student and youth movement and began to call themselves socialists and distance themselves from the

'senior party'... On the other side were those of us who were clear that we were radical Liberals and for whom any future in politics had to lie with the Liberal Party, however much we despaired of its electoral failures and its seeming inability to campaign effectively or at all! Such people around the old YL leadership included Michael Steed, Bernard Greaves, Gareth Wilson and Simon Hebditch... and people like Gordon Lishman and Lawry Freedman spanning the two groups.⁴

Kiloh and the others on his side of the divide left the party, several joining Labour and others confining themselves to extra-parliamentary activity, while the second group remained within the Liberal Party. Following the passing of the 'Community Politics' resolution at the 1970 Eastbourne Party Assembly, proposed on behalf of the YLM by Tony Greaves and Gordon Lishman, the focus of many YL activists turned towards working within the party structure and in local communities. Disagreements between the YLM and the party continued but collaboration, rather than an often deliberate seeking of confrontation, became increasingly the norm and the 'Red Guard' phase, which had peaked at the end of 1967, was finally over.

Thirdly, I was myself most active during these years. While remaining a Liberal (or Liberal Democrat), increasing levels of overseas work from a London base from 1970, and then a move to the UAE in 1978, has meant that my subsequent involvement in the party has been largely confined to general election campaigns, always in the Scottish Borders.

Finally, during these years, several major foreign policy issues came to the fore, on each of which the Young Liberals adopted positions that were opposed to those

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of the Labour government, but which led to the establishment of relationships both with the Labour left and the extra-parliamentary left. On one, that of Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa, the YL approach was broadly aligned with, though more radical than, the position of the party leadership, while on the others the YLs, or at least a significant part of their leadership, were often at variance with or in opposition to the rest of the party. I was primarily active in campaigns on foreign policy issues, being NLYL International Vice Chairman from 1967 to 1969, and it is with these that this article will deal, for the most part through personal recollections rather than detailed historical research.

During the last century or so, several large extra-parliamentary protest groups have emerged that have maintained links with conventional party politics. One such group was the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), founded in the late 1950s, which had become a powerful force with strong links to the Labour Party by the early 1960s, attracting over 150,000 to its annual Aldermaston marches. After the signing of the 1963 Global Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, support dwindled, while, following the election of the Labour government in 1964, some of the leading figures in CND, who were also Labour MPs, were constrained by their relationship with the government. During the 1964–1970 Labour government, moreover, the foreign policy issues that came to the fore were specific in terms of geography, rather than being general in nature, like nuclear disarmament. CND was ill equipped to respond to any of them. A brief description is necessary.

The first issue to emerge was that of white minority rule in Southern Africa. During the 1950s, the process of withdrawal from Empire gathered pace,

extending to Africa. In 1957, Ghana had been given independence, and by early 1960 Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan had concluded that decolonisation was inevitable, as he noted in his 'Wind of Change' speech to the South African parliament in February 1960.

Nigeria became independent that year, others rapidly following, including Tanganyika in 1961, Kenya in 1963, and Zambia, formerly Northern Rhodesia, on 24 October 1964, nine days after the election of the Labour government. The progress of decolonisation then came largely to a halt. South of the River Zambesi, the government of Southern Rhodesia, representing the largest white-settler community in any of the African colonies, was determined to retain power, although Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, each without significant settler communities, all became independent between 1966 and 1968.

In Angola and Mozambique, armed struggle against the Portuguese colonial authorities had commenced in 1961 and 1964 respectively. Further south, the South African government had shown its determination to hold on to power, through, for example, the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960, an event which led directly to the conversion of the small Boycott of South Africa movement into the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), a body with which many Liberals, including Jeremy Thorpe MP, were associated. The small South African Liberal Party had come under increasing harassment following Sharpeville, with many of its members being arrested or 'banned' to prevent them from attending gatherings and undertaking much other activity.

Confident of South African support, the Rhodesian government, led by Ian Smith, resisted pressure from London to move towards majority rule and issued its Unilateral Declaration of Independence on 11 November 1965. Sanctions were ineffective and a low-level insurgency commenced. Opposition to white-dominated rule in southern Africa became an important foreign policy issue for the British left, both within and outside parliament.

A second issue was that of the Vietnam War, which escalated from August 1964, with increasing involvement by the United States. An expansion of US ground forces commenced in January 1965, followed by bombing of North Vietnam in March 1965, this continuing until October 1968. The North Vietnamese 'Tet Offensive', launched in January 1968, led to an opening of talks. A programme of 'Vietnamisation' followed, with US troops being gradually withdrawn. The Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1973 and the war ended in April 1975 with the fall of Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City.

Despite American pressure, the British government refused to send troops to participate in the conflict, minded, perhaps, of lessons learned from the Malayan insurgency, which had ended in 1960, and from the Malaysia–Indonesia 'Konfrontasi' from 1962 to 1966. Supported by the Conservatives, however, it did provide some political support for the United States, this prompting widespread criticism from the left, both within and outside the Labour Party.

It was argued by the United States that if one country fell under the influence of Communism, with which movements of national liberation were assumed to be associated, then surrounding countries would follow. The Vietnam War was the major test ground of this 'domino theory'.

On the British left, the simplistic identification of independence movements with Communism was not accepted. The Non-aligned Movement had been founded in 1955, including Egypt, Yugoslavia and Commonwealth member India amongst its leading members, while, through the Movement for Colonial Freedom, which at its peak had over seventy Labour MPs as members, there was widespread support for decolonisation. The 1962 Cuban missile crisis not only prompted the further growth of CND, but also stimulated more debate on whether British interests were best served by a close alignment of foreign policy with the United States. On the left, there was further debate between the Communist Party and members of the Labour Party sympathetic

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to the Soviet Union and those, including the Young Liberals, who were more inclined to adopt the view of 'a plague on both your houses'. Within the Liberal Party, there had always been a vocal pacifist wing, and there had been much discussion during the early 1960s of the Rapacki Plan, a proposal launched by Polish Foreign Minister Adam Rapacki in 1958 calling for the denuclearisation of Poland, Czechoslovakia and both Germanies.

The third major foreign policy issue to emerge during the 1964–1970 Labour government was in the Middle East. Following its victory in the June 1967 War, Israel was no longer an embattled Jewish settler-state with a small Palestinian–Arab minority, but a clearly dominant regional military power occupying large tracts of land conquered from neighbouring Arab states.

Sympathy for Israel was strong across the political spectrum in Britain, for a variety of reasons, including the memory of the Nazi Holocaust. The Labour Party had strong relations with its Israeli counterparts, these relations extending deep into the Labour left, while many leading Liberals, including Jeremy Thorpe, were also firm supporters of Israel. As small-scale Palestinian resistance commenced, the Israeli response prompted a reassessment of the nature of the state and comparisons with the settler-states in Southern Africa. Within the Liberals and on the left, the Israel/Palestinian issue was to prove the most divisive of all foreign policy issues in the late 1960s.

It is in the context of these issues that I shall examine the relationship of the Young Liberals, myself included, with the rest of the British left during the 1964–1970 Labour government. Younger than the first wave of the YL leaders of the period, I first became an active Liberal after leaving school in December 1964. The winning Conservative in the October 1964 general election in my constituency, East Grinstead, had been elevated to the House of Lords to make way for Geoffrey Johnson-Smith, who had lost his seat in London, with a by-election set for February 1965. With several months to go before

starting studies at Sussex University, I volunteered to help the Liberal candidate, Richard Holme. The result was a creditable second place, the Liberal share of the vote rising to 31.5 per cent at the expense of Labour.

Involvement in the local YL branch followed, while during the summer I worked at Liberal Party Headquarters under Michael Meadowcroft. In September, I attended my first Party Assembly as a constituency delegate, providing me with an opportunity to establish links with the YL leadership and with others from around the country.

At the time, Sussex University was a stronghold of the Trotskyist 'Militant Tendency', then commencing its campaign to infiltrate the Labour Party. I joined the small Liberal and Radical Society although I became more active with the Brighton YL branch. An early focus of campaigning was opposition to the Rhodesian UDI, which took place within a few weeks of my arrival at university. The YLs worked closely with the local Labour Party, encouraged by South African exiles studying at the university, including Thabo Mbeki, later Nelson Mandela's successor as President of South Africa.

The Liberal Party was strongly opposed to UDI, this being emphasised by Jeremy Thorpe's speech at the 1966 Brighton Assembly, in which he advocated the use of British V-bombers to end the rebellion. The Brighton Assembly was also the occasion when, as noted by Tony Greaves (above), the Young Liberals drew the attention of the media, partly through the tabling of a resolution calling for withdrawal from NATO and adoption of a neutralist foreign policy. A similar motion had earlier been passed at the 1965 ULS conference in Manchester calling for a united non-nuclear Europe. Proposed by George Kiloh, who had become NLYL Chairman earlier in the year, the Assembly resolution was defeated after fierce argument.

Another YL resolution, proposed by Greaves and Terry Lacey, then Vice Chairman of ULS, called for 'workers' control' in industry, it, too, being defeated after a fiery debate. The views

of the YL and ULS delegates, as well as their confrontation with the leadership, attracted extensive attention from the media, which happily dubbed them the 'Red Guard,' a nickname that continued to be used until late 1967. The heady degree of publicity stimulated a growth in YL and ULS branches around the country.

Prior to the 'Bomber Thorpe' speech, the Liberal Party already had close relations with the Anti-Apartheid Movement and in 1966, David Steel, elected as an MP at the Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles by-election the previous year, became the AAM President, a post he held until 1970. These links were further developed by NLYL, which became an affiliate organisation of AAM with a representative on the AAM National Committee and, subsequently, individual YLs were elected members of the AAM National Executive.

Liberal and YL involvement in campaigning against Smith's Rhodesia and against apartheid were important in establishing the radical credentials of the party, at least on this issue. Collaboration with the Labour left followed as well as with the major southern African liberation movements, the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU), the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa, and the South West African Peoples Organisation (SWAPO) of Namibia, these becoming regular visitors to the party's annual Assemblies.

Within the party, there was broad agreement on support for AAM and the liberation movements. Indeed, in at the 1967 Blackpool Assembly, a YL resolution on southern Africa was proposed by myself and seconded by David Steel and was passed overwhelmingly, although an amendment to remove a commitment to supporting the armed struggle of the liberation movements was passed after it had been accepted from the platform, without consultation, by David Steel. This difference on the armed struggle in southern Africa was paralleled by disagreement on support for direct action in Britain itself, on this and other issues. This became particularly apparent during 1969, with the formation of the Stop the Seventy Four committee,

with which several leading London-based YLs were involved, including Louis Eaks, then NLYL Chairman, myself, Simon Hebditch and the slightly younger Peter Hain, who had moved with his parents, members of the South African Liberal Party, to Britain in 1966.

Seeking to block a planned tour by the South African all-white cricket team in the summer of 1970, STST, supported by many other groups, launched a campaign in late 1969 and early 1970 to disrupt rugby matches being played by the South African Springboks. All but one of the matches were greeted with large demonstrations, including the invasion of pitches. The exception was the match at Galashiels, in the Borders, the home of Scottish rugby, where STST responded to a request from David Steel, still AAM President and the local MP, that there should be no mass protest. Instead, he and his wife, with a few colleagues, picketed the ground, with thousands of his constituents walking past him into the game. At the June 1970 general election, several months later, the issue was still a hot topic for Liberal canvassers in the Borders and Steel's majority fell to 550, the lowest in his many years as an MP. By that time, STST's objective had been achieved – the South African cricket tour had been cancelled.

While the senior Liberal Party and the YLs (and STST) were united in their opposition both to the winter rugby tour and to the cricket tour due to follow in the summer of 1970, there was serious disagreement over whether or not that should extend to civil disobedience. In February 1970, for example, the Liberal Party Executive voted to censure Louis Eaks, still NLYL Chairman, for his public remarks supporting such disruption.

The active campaigning by both the YLs and the senior party placed the Liberals firmly on the left on the issue of southern Africa and also established the credentials of the YLs within the burgeoning but fissiparous extra-parliamentary left. Both the YLs and the party, moreover, generally shared the same goals, despite differences in tactics.

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This was not to be the case on the other two broad issues, those of the Vietnam War and the Cold War and, later, on the Arab–Israeli conflict. On these, YL initiatives had a major effect on relations with the senior party, the former causing occasional, albeit serious, concern to party chiefs, but the latter leading to open conflict.

As the escalation of the Vietnam War began in late 1964, both the YLs and the senior party quickly adopted a policy of opposition to the war. The Union of Liberal Students and the National League of Young Liberals passed anti-war resolutions at their conferences, these being followed by another resolution jointly proposed by both to the Liberal Party Council which was again passed. The party then organised a national campaign, with YL involvement, to collect signatures to an anti-war petition.

The YLM also began to develop relationships with other groups opposed to the war, or, more generally, to the United States. These included the Young Communist League, who always viewed the YLs with great suspicion, partly because the YLs, with slogans such as ‘Make Love, Not War’ and often with long hair and garb inspired by the US ‘flower power’ movement, appeared to be insufficiently serious, as well as lacking a coherent ideology. (In return, the YLs viewed the YCL as boring and under the thumb of an irrelevant party led by uncharismatic apparatchiks). Others with whom the YLs came into contact included Trotskyist bodies like the International Marxist Group (IMG), the International Socialists and the ‘Militant Tendency’ – then building up strength within the Labour Party and, in particular, the Labour Party Young Socialists – as well as Maoist groups.

In October 1967, the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, established as an umbrella campaign group in 1966 by activists associated with the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation and the IMG, organised a small demonstration outside the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square, with which the YLs were not associated. In January 1968, the launching by the North Vietnamese and their NLF allies of

the ‘Tet Offensive’ led to a much greater awareness of the conflict in Britain and the YLs joined a coordinating committee established by VSC to organise another demonstration in March.

The committee included some rather uneasy bedfellows. The Trotskyists and Maoists openly supported the North Vietnamese and the NLF. The YCL, on the other hand, following the Kremlin line, supported a negotiated peace rather than a military victory. The YLs were accepted as members of the committee partly because their credentials had been established on southern African issues and partly because of the ‘Peace in Vietnam’ policy of the senior party. However, a number of those YLs who were actively involved tended to align themselves more with the ‘Victory to the NLF’ faction than with the YCL group, whose policy was close to that of the senior Liberal Party.

The demonstration, on 17 March 1968, which attracted over 20,000 people, of whom a few hundred, at most, were YLs, was noteworthy because of violent skirmishes with the police. Talks between the United States and North Vietnam commenced in the summer of 1968, but the bombing of North Vietnam continued and a much larger demonstration took place on 27 October 1968, with the YLs again being members of the coordinating committee. Over 200,000 people took part, the vast majority of whom marched peacefully down Park Lane, although a small minority, who did not include any of the YLs participating in or watching the march, broke away and once again confronted the police outside the American Embassy. In the same month, the US bombing of North Vietnam was finally halted, US troop withdrawals began in early 1969, and the Vietnam War gradually became an issue of declining importance for the British left.

The involvement of the YLs in the anti-Vietnam War campaign had caused some embarrassment for the senior Liberal Party, partly because of their apparent identification with the ‘Victory for the NLF’ faction, in contradiction to official party policy, and partly

because of the violence associated with the two London demonstrations in 1968. There was also concern about the association of the YLs with other left-wing groups, including Communists of both Soviet and Chinese varieties as well as several Trotskyist factions, that were clearly illiberal. There were many in the senior party, and, indeed, in the YLs, who felt that this was, at best, naive. Indeed, some senior party members came to the false conclusion that the YLM had been infiltrated by ‘Communists’.

Other events during 1968, however, ensured that the YLs had few illusions about the nature of the Soviet Union. Following the YL anti-NATO resolution at the 1966 Brighton Assembly, there was a marked increase in the amount of attention being paid to the Young Liberals, both by the Young Communist League and by the embassies of the Soviet bloc in London. One result was the extension of invitations to visit the Soviet Union as guests of the Komsomol. One such visit, by Louis Eaks and myself, took place in December 1967 and January 1968. Our hosts, who had prepared a conventional programme of visits to collective farms and the like, were somewhat taken aback by our requests and questions. Thus in Moscow, we insisted on visiting the tomb of the Russian anarchist Prince Peter Kropotkin, in Kiev we asked party officials to explain the nature of the Ukraine’s separate national identity, and in the Latvian capital, Riga, we spent hours with a young artist who carefully explained the history of Latvia’s forcible annexation by the Soviet Union and the validity of its continued desire for independence.

A subsequent series of articles I wrote for *Liberal News* led to a formal letter of protest to party headquarters from the Soviet Embassy saying that my articles had ‘distorted Soviet reality’. I considered that to be a great compliment. Despite this, however, the British YCL and the Communist Party maintained relations with the YLs, and we were invited to attend the World Youth Festival in Sofia, Bulgaria, in August 1968, as were other member organisations

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of the World Federation of Liberal and Radical Youth, WFLRY, most of whom came from Western Europe.

The World Youth Festivals, which had begun in 1947, were organised by the World Federation of Democratic Youth, WFDY, and the International Union of Students, IUS, both Soviet dominated. Previous Festivals had been tightly controlled and the organisers clearly intended the Sofia event to follow the same pattern. The early part of 1968, however, had been a time of radical ferment through much of Europe.

In January, Alexander Dubcek had become First Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, launching a programme of liberalisation that became known as the 'Prague Spring', challenging Soviet control of Eastern Europe for the first time since the 1956 Hungarian uprising. In April and May, student movements in Germany and France, led by an eclectic mix of anarchists, Trotskyists and Maoists, had attracted a large following, and in France a student occupation of universities in Paris grew into a general strike that had brought the government of President Charles de Gaulle close to collapse. While the UK was little affected, a student occupation of the Hornsey College of Art in May, in which YLs were involved, provided a small degree of excitement.

European participants in the Sofia Festival included not only Soviet-style Young Communists, from both sides of the Iron Curtain, but also a melange of revolutionary Western European students, young Czechs eager to spread ferment among other Eastern European delegations, Yugoslavs keen to emphasise that they were not part of the Soviet bloc and many others, including a small, but active, group of Young Liberals, including myself and Phil Kelly and John Kelly, both from ULS. None were inclined to accept the tightly regulated programme designed by the Bulgarians and their paymasters and conflict of some kind was almost inevitable. The issue of the Vietnam War provided the opportunity. The Festival organisers announced a Day of Solidarity

with the Vietnamese people, deciding to mark this by a tree-planting ceremony. The loose alliance of radicals decided that a more forceful display of opposition to American policy would be appropriate, with over 1,000 joining a rapidly organised march to protest outside the US Embassy. When the police arrived, the demonstrators sat down in the road. As mounted police rode over the crowd, chants likening them to France's anti-riot police, the CRS, rose. Hostile to US policy though all of the demonstrators may have been, antipathy to Soviet-style Communism was equally strongly felt.

On the way home, the YL delegation visited Prague, at the invitation of the Czech Young Communists, and felt honoured to be asked to deliver a speech at the local equivalent of London's 'Speakers' Corner' in support of the newly liberal Czechoslovakia. On 21 August 1968, a week or so after the delegation returned to London, Soviet tanks rolled into the Czech capital and the Prague Spring was over. The Young Liberals were among organisations participating in protest demonstrations outside the Soviet Embassy in London and relations with the YCL were never the same again.

The YLs, though still critical of NATO and of US policy in Vietnam, became vocal critics of the Soviet Union, as did much of the rest of the British left, both within and outside the Labour Party. As the war in Vietnam wound down, with the beginning of the US withdrawal, disagreements between the YLs and the senior party on what approach to take to the Soviet bloc began to fade.

The third major foreign policy issue to come to the fore in the late 1960s was the Arab–Israeli dispute. As the Israelis, victors in the June 1967 War, consolidated control over the West Bank and Gaza, the Palestinians launched a small-scale military resistance, led by Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement. In March 1968, an Israeli foray across the River Jordan was blocked by the Jordanian army and Fatah, this leading to increasing publicity for what was still a very small and ineffective organisation.

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In early 1969, still NLYL International Vice Chairman, I attended a conference in Cairo, at which all the major African liberation movements, with whom the YLs already had good links, were present, along with representatives of Fatah and the Palestine Liberation Organisation. This was followed by a visit to Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, organised by the World Federation of Democratic Youth, still trying to engage with the YLs, despite our unruly behaviour at the World Youth Festival the previous summer. Other participants included a neo-anarchist Dutch radical and an apparatchik from East Germany's *Frei Deutsche Jugend*. Meetings with Fatah leaders, a tour of a refugee camp and a visit to a guerrilla camp were part of the programme. I returned to London convinced that the Palestinians did, indeed, have a case, and that the almost unthinking support for Israel in Britain, including within the Liberal Party, needed some re-examination. The gradually emerging evidence of close ties between Israel and the white regimes in Southern Africa was sufficient to convince some other Young Liberals, including Louis Eaks, who became the YL Chairman during the 1969 Easter conference, that we should take a closer look at the issue.

Mild expressions of disapproval of Israeli policies followed, these attracting a barrage of criticism from within the party, coupled with suggestions that any criticism of Israel was driven by an underlying anti-Semitism. YLs active in the campaign against apartheid were infuriated by the allegation and people who had begun as gentle critics were pushed to become more determined opponents of Israeli policy.

The 1970 NLYL/ULS Easter conference at Skegness, attended, for the first time, by a representative of Fatah, saw a major argument over the extent of support for the Palestinians. Louis Eaks, elected as Chairman in 1969 and seeking a second year of office, supported a resolution backing the Fatah policy of a single state in Israel/Palestine while Lawry Freedman, backed by several others, argued for support for a two-state solution. The resolution, as

passed, was somewhat confusing, calling for a single state, though without mention of Fatah, and for ceasefire lines to be respected and for the belligerent parties to enter into negotiations. It also called for the youth wings of the Israeli Liberal Party (which was allied with the extreme right-wing Zionist Herut Party, led by Menahem Begin) and the Israeli Independent Liberal party to be expelled from the World Federation of Liberal and Radical Youth unless they accepted the principle of a secular democratic state.⁵

The disagreement within the YLs over the Israel/Palestine issue was to some extent responsible for the failure of Eaks to gain re-election as Chairman and he was defeated by Tony Greaves, a *Jewish Chronicle* report on the conference being headlined ‘Young Liberals reject extreme pro-Arab’ and noting that the ‘extremist chairman’ had been replaced by ‘a more moderate anti-Zionist.’⁶

The policy adopted, however, was sufficiently critical of Israel to prompt a furious response from the senior party, in particular from Jeremy Thorpe, who had succeeded Jo Grimond as party leader in 1967. Several prominent Liberals, including some major party donors, were also Jewish, and threats were made to cut off financial support. The sister parties in Israel, fellow members of Liberal International, were not amused either.

Having adopted a pro-Palestinian policy, the YLs found themselves with a peculiar collection of allies. The Labour left was still largely pro-Israel, partly because of links with the left-leaning Mapam Party in Israel and partly because many prominent members of the Labour left were themselves Jewish or of Jewish origin. Insofar as there was a pro-Arab element within the Labour Party, it was to a large extent made up of people who had come to support broader Arab nationalism as part of the anti-colonial struggle (the British withdrawal from Aden having occurred as recently as the end of 1967). Many of these Labour ‘pro-Arabs’ were to the centre of the party on domestic issues.

On the extra-parliamentary left, the insistence of Trotskyists

and Maoists on trying to analyse in terms of class what appeared, to the YLs at least, to be a movement of resistance to military occupation was also a source of disagreement. In consequence, the YLs’ best connections were with Arab groupings, like the General Union of Palestinian Students, or with those around the newspaper *Free Palestine*, founded in 1968 and later edited by Louis Eaks for many years. YL support for the Palestinians, and the resulting strain on relations with the senior party, continued during the chairmanship of Peter Hain, who succeeded Tony Greaves in 1971.

As mentioned earlier however, by 1970 the YLM was heading into a decline, the reasons for which are perhaps worthy of further study. In terms of their involvement in the international issues cited above, with the exception of southern Africa, only a minority – probably a small minority – were associated, and the nature of these issues was, in any case, evolving. As noted in the quotation from Tony Greaves, above, an ‘ideological crisis’ had emerged within the YL leadership. This had several aspects. First, as correctly stated by Tony Greaves, there was a division between those whose views had evolved in such a way that they no longer considered themselves to be Liberals (or liberals) and those who ‘were clear that we were radical Liberals and for whom any future in politics had to lie with the Liberal Party ...’.

Another area of disagreement, partly, but not wholly, coinciding with these ideological divisions, was whether or not it was acceptable to adopt direct action or civil disobedience in pursuit of campaigns, such as that against the South African rugby tour. Many members of the senior party objected, on principle, to the breaking of the law, with a similar view being adopted in many YL branches around the country, particularly those which were closely linked to their constituency Liberal Associations.

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Another source of strain within the YL leadership was the fact that some of those who were London-based came to focus their attention primarily on single-issue campaigning, often on international issues, in contrast to many members of the leadership who were based outside London.

of the leadership who were based outside London. While branches of the Union of Liberal Students often worked closely on campus with other left-wing groups, on both international and domestic issues, branches of the Young Liberals, closely linked to, and often a major force within, local constituency associations, were more likely to undertake the bulk of their political activity, including involvement in local and parliamentary elections, within a Liberal Party framework. Through their experience of, and frustration with, the conventional campaigning techniques, the collection of views that came to characterise the ‘Community Politics’ approach were beginning to emerge. In contrast, many of the London-based leadership were often related only peripherally, if at all, to their local Liberal associations.

Moreover, throughout the heyday of the YLs, the National Executive of NLYL included representatives from the regional federations who were often uncomfortable with the ideological approach of the London-based leadership and of the leadership of ULS. Among these were David Penhaligon, representing Devon and Cornwall and later MP for Truro from 1974 to 1986, and Howard Legg, representing Wessex, who has now been a local councillor for over twenty years. Coming from rural areas where the political issues of the day were different from those in the larger towns and cities, and where often the Conservatives, rather than Labour, were the main opponents, they too were more concerned with domestic issues as well as being worried about the YLs becoming involved in law-breaking. Happy to be radical, they were never comfortable with revolutionary left-wing rhetoric.

The April 1970 NLYL conference at Skegness marked the beginning of the parting of the ways between the two separate ideological strains. Tony Greaves became Chairman, defeating Louis Eaks, with another former ULS officer, Gordon Lishman, winning election as Organising Vice Chairman, a post he had held in an acting capacity since the resignation of his predecessor a few

months earlier. Both then proposed the successful 'Community Politics' resolution at the Party Assembly later in the year. Eaks failed to obtain Assembly backing for a resolution supporting the principle of a single state in Israel/Palestine and then drifted away from the YLs to focus on the Israel/Palestine issue.

In the same year, George Kiloh joined the Labour Party, later explaining his decision as follows:

Back in '65, I remember quoting myself. I didn't want to be in the Labour Party because it was like 'an old waiting room in a station'. Semi-derelict and nothing was going anywhere. The remark made sense then. The Labour Party was like that. I joined with difficulty, but I joined because there were more people like me there. We were a minority in the party, but we were there nevertheless.⁷

Others did the same, like Terry Lacey and Phil Kelly, who went on to edit *Tribune*, the organ of the conventional Labour left, and has served intermittently since 1984 as a Labour councillor in Islington. Yet others, such as Hilary Wainwright, devoted their attention primarily to radical extra-parliamentary activity, without joining Labour, while Tony Bunyan, for several years the YLM National Organiser and now the Director of Statewatch, moved to focus on civil liberties issues. Others effectively withdrew from active political engagement.

It is worth placing on record that only a small minority of YLs focused between 1965 and 1970 on the foreign policy issues mentioned above as the major part of their political activity, particularly outside university campuses and the hothouse atmosphere of the radical extra-parliamentary left in London. For the most part, with the possible exception of southern Africa, YL branches devoted the bulk of their activity to local campaigning, developing the experience that was later to serve the party in such good stead as support for 'community politics' grew.

Although there were serious disagreements between the YLM and the senior party on aspects of these foreign policy issues, and

on other issues, wise heads in the senior party, such as Frank Byers, Tim Beaumont, Gruffydd Evans, himself a former NLYL Chairman in 1960–61, and the Head of the Liberal Party Organisation, Pratap Chitnis, ensured that, for the most part, lines of communication were kept open. Indeed, the YLs were effectively used as 'stalking horses' during an abortive attempt in the late 1960s to force Jeremy Thorpe to resign as leader. Frustrations and irritation, on both sides, did not lead, as some feared, to an open split. Instead, those YLs who felt they could no longer call themselves Liberals simply moved on elsewhere. On the role of those who remained, as practitioners of 'community politics' and as candidates, councillors and, later, parliamentarians, I am not qualified to comment.

Looking back, the Israel–Palestine conflict, which has always crossed the conventional boundaries of 'left' and 'right', has proved over the years to be the most intractable of the foreign policy issues with which the Young Liberals engaged so actively from 1965 to 1970. The Vietnam War, the 'Cold War', the Soviet bloc, Ian Smith's Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa are all fading memories, but there is still scant room for optimism in the search for peace in the Middle East, although few now doubt that a two-state solution in Israel/Palestine is the most desirable option and opposition to the policies of Israel's successive governments is now widely spread throughout the political spectrum. And the large, irreverent, often impractical and naive Young Liberal Movement of the period is now little more than an historical footnote.

Peter Hellyer is a member of the Editorial Board of the Journal of Liberal History. International Vice-Chairman of NLYL 1967–69, concurrently a member of the Executive of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and subsequently an aide to David Steel, he has worked in the United Arab Emirates for over thirty years, currently as an adviser to the Government's National Media Council. He has returned frequently to take part in election campaigns in the Scottish Borders, most recently in the 2010 general election.

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I noted at the beginning of this article that many of my former colleagues in the leadership of the YLM will have different recollections and interpretations of YL activity in the period 1965–1970. I have benefited enormously from comments made on a first draft by Tony Greaves who, rightly, raised points that I had overlooked or to which I had paid insufficient attention, including the concern felt by many members of the 'senior' party, and by other YLs, at the willingness of the Young Liberals to associate with openly illiberal organisations and to engage in breaches of the law while campaigning on foreign policy issues. He also reminded me that most YL branches took little part in the relationships with other 'left' organisations that were so much a feature of the London-based YL leadership during the period. While I would not wish to associate him in any way with my conclusions, the article is much changed and, in my view, substantially better, because of his input. David Rich of the Community Security Trust kindly shared with me the results of his research into the evolution of the debate over Israel/Palestine amongst youth and student groups from the late 1960s onwards.

- 1 P. Hellyer, 'Young Liberals – the "Red Guard" era', *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, 17, Winter 1997–1998, pp. 14, 15.
- 2 J. Aitken, *The Young Meteors* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1967), p. 120. Quoted in Craig Taylor, 'Promises, promises', *The Guardian*, 6 September 2003. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2003/sep/06/weekend.craigataylor>.
- 3 A. Slade, 'From Angry Young Man to Simmering Old Guru – Interview with Tony Greaves', *Journal of Liberal History*, 45, Winter 2004–2005, pp. 30–34.
- 4 T. Greaves, 'The Year Things Began To Change', *Liberator*, 300, pp. 12–13.
- 5 David Rich, *pers. comm.*, 4 January 2010.
- 6 *Jewish Chronicle*, 3 April 1970.
- 7 Craig Taylor, 'Promises, promises', *The Guardian*, 6 September 2003. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2003/sep/06/weekend.craigataylor>.

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