

# The New Orbits Group, 1958 – c.1962

THE NEW ORBITS Group has been little recognised in the histories of the modern Liberal Party. In two, otherwise relatively comprehensive, accounts – David Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party* (2004), and Roy Douglas, *Liberals: A History of the Liberal Party* (2005) – no reference is made to the group. Arthur Cyr, in his *Liberal Politics in Britain* (1988), gives it a sentence: ‘It was during this period (late 1950s/early 1960s) that the New Orbits Group, a discussion club of younger Liberal Party activists, began publishing periodic essays to promote thought and controversy.’ At least he gave the group a mention, even though his description was in error: it was not ‘a club’, being run under the joint auspices of the Young Liberals and Student Liberals. The two chairs of these integral parts of the Liberal Party were co-vice chairs of the group, while Frank Ware was selected a ‘neutral’ chair between the two youth organisations. In its first four years, the group played a not insignificant role within the Liberal Party, which merits being more fully recorded.

The 1950s were a woeful time for the party. It was reduced to five MPs, two of whom, Donald Wade in Huddersfield West and Arthur Holt in Bolton East, held their seats by courtesy of a Lib-Con pact in both towns. The most promising likely future leader, Frank Byers, had lost his seat in Dorset in 1951 and the party continued to be led by the ageing and heavy-drinking Clement Davies. The only lively parts of the party were the Radical Reform Group, led by Desmond (later Lord) Banks and Manuela Sykes (who regularly contested Dingle Foot, the Labour MP for Ipswich). The RRG met in her Covent Garden café after closing hours; she later joined the Labour Party.

The other radically vibrant element was to be found among the younger members of the party. In those days, Liberal youth was divided between two organisations: the National League of Young Liberals (NLYL) and the Union of University Liberal Societies (UULS). Despite this formal division, many young graduates joined the NLYL which at the time had its main territorial strength in the north-west of England. Griff (later Lord) Evans was its chairman who was succeeded in turn by Barbara Burwell and then Timothy Joyce. The UULS’ main strength derived from Cambridge University and included such luminaries as George Watson, Richard Moore and Derrick Mirfin. Watson, who became secretary of the

Unservile State Group (an intellectual group of Liberals not formally attached to the party), was an English don at St John’s and author of a couple of books on Liberalism. Moore became an adviser to Jeremy Thorpe while the latter was leader, and Mirfin became secretary-general of the UK branch of Liberal International; both contested many general elections.

I had joined the LSE Liberal Society in 1955, becoming first its chair and subsequently chair of UULS in 1958. I contrived to change the title of UULS to the Union of Liberal Students (ULS) as I thought a rather loose confederal organisation would make less impact than a more unitary one. I had succeeded Roger Straker, a scion of the well-known stationery and printing family firm. He later gained a senior HR director’s position with London Transport. In turn, I was succeeded by David (later Lord) Lea, also from Cambridge, who later joined the Labour Party and rose to become assistant general secretary of the TUC.

At that time chairs of both NLYL and ULS were ex-officio members of the Liberal Party executive. Joining it in 1958, at the age of 20, I was the youngest member, Barbara Burwell being ten years older; the next youngest was Richard Wainwright then aged 40. I found membership of the executive a rapidly maturing experience! NLYL and ULS worked closely together by means of a joint political committee (JPC), which had been formed in 1957.

The major precipitating event for the formation of the group was the Liberal Party conference of 1958, held in Torquay. It was an organisational fiasco and it was this which prompted the JPC to attempt remedial action. Jo Grimond, the new-ish leader of the Liberal Party made an excellent speech, but it was overshadowed by the quite disastrous chairmanship of Sir Arthur Comyns Carr, QC. A distinguished lawyer and a very active Liberal, he had contested no less than eleven parliamentary seats, with a brief sojourn as an MP for a year between 1923 and 1924. He had been one of the leading prosecutors at the Japanese War Crimes tribunals after the Second World War. By 1958, however, he was 76 years old and long past his prime. Nevertheless, he still behaved in ways that had stood him in good stead throughout his career. He eschewed the use of a microphone, believing that his voice was resonant enough to be heard throughout the large hall – it was not. Appearing Emperor Hirohito-like, he wore a wing-collared shirt, black jacket and striped

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trousers and thus hardly presented the modern face of Liberalism which Grimond was trying to promote.

1958 was exactly one year before the next general election was due. The one cause for optimism had been the election of Mark Bonham-Carter in the Torrington by-election. The JPC was galvanised into taking a new initiative in the wake of Torrington, but even more by the disastrous handling of the 1958 Torquay Assembly.

It set up study groups amongst NLYL branches and university societies during the autumn of 1958. The results of these were analysed and summarised and brought together in a substantial booklet of some seventy pages called *New Orbits*. I had suggested the title as it reflected the main event of the time, which was the successful Soviet sputnik circumnavigation of the globe that was soon to lead to Yuri Gagarin's first human venture into space. The title sought, in a more modest way, to capture a similar sense of experiment and excitement within the Liberal Party.

The pamphlet was presented for discussion and endorsement to what we called the Operation Manifesto Congress in Manchester on 18 and 19 April 1959, just five months before the general election in the following September.

Manchester was a resounding success. It attracted many Young and Student Liberals and, indeed, was addressed by Jo Grimond himself. Anthony Howard, then a junior reporter and editorial leader writer at the *Manchester Guardian*, was sent to cover the Congress. An ardent Labour supporter and not in any sense a natural Liberal (he was later to become editor of the *New Statesman*), he nevertheless wrote an admiring leader and report of the congress in the newspaper, then editorially committed to the aims of the Liberal Party.

The New Orbits Group was the name given to the old JPC. Its senior participants comprised a very talented group. It included Tony Miller, Tony Stowell, Tony Lloyd, James Crossley, Griff Evans, Barbara Burwell, Frank Ware and Ronnie Fraser. Undoubtedly, the finest mind was that of Timothy Joyce, who was completing his PhD in the Moral Sciences at Cambridge. He later became a very successful businessman in the field of market research. He ultimately became chief executive of J. Walter Thompson, selling the firm at a high price and buying it back at a low one, thereby making a personal fortune. He had suffered from polio as a child which contributed to his all too premature death. Frank Ware, at the time, was the youthful head of the Liberal Party research department where he was assisted by James Crossley (who also died prematurely) and Peter Landell-Mills, who later founded a successful agricultural economics international consultancy firm. Another member was Sarah Myers, had been very active in the UULS while at Oxford and later became a journalist on the *Times Educational Supplement*.

A number of quite original policy papers were published as pamphlets in the subsequent next two years. The first was called *High Time for Radicals* and was a collective essay by eight leading members of the New Orbits Group; again, I had suggested the title. It touched on a number of themes, both of a policy kind and about how to improve the professionalism of the party itself. Its sub-title, 'A Discussion on the Future of the Left', indicated that the group sought to be left of centre in its orientation. There followed some ten pamphlets on a wide variety of subjects, including: the Central African Federation; the role of trade and aid in the world, to which John Williamson



Jo Grimond (Leader of the Liberal Party, 1956–67) with Eric Lubbock, winner of the Orpington by-election in 1962

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contributed (he was to become a leading international economist); *5 Year Plan* by Frank Ware; *New Unions for Old*, dealing with the reform of the trade union movement, written by Roger Cuss, Maurice Gent (later a BBC correspondent) and myself (later a university vice-chancellor); as well as *Teaching – A Proposal for an Institute of Teachers*, long before the idea such an institute became fashionable and it was created.

If Timothy Joyce and Frank Ware provided much of the intellectual stimulus, Barbara Burwell provided the group's organisational leadership. The group formally continued until 1968, but the founders left as they moved on in their separate careers.

What did the New Orbits Group achieve? It contributed to the modernisation of the party under Grimond and showed that the party was capable of imaginative policy-making across a broad range of the public agenda. Its main achievement lay in the recruitment of exceptional young talented activists, which galvanised the younger wing of the party over a longer period of time. The New Orbits Group was followed by what became known as 'the Red Guard' which had its origins in Manchester University and attracted the likes of Lawrence Friedman, then a student there. He later became Professor Sir Lawrence Friedman, FBA, and official historian of the Falklands War, who also sat on the official inquiry into the invasion of Iraq. Tony Greaves from Oxford, was also a member of this group and became chair of ULS; he later worked for the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors and is now a life peer.

The tradition of dissent continued in the Young Liberals especially while Peter Hain was its chairman. He was a student of mine at Queen Mary College, London where simultaneously he was leading the successful *Stop the Seventy Tour* campaign, designed to prevent the South African

cricket team coming to Britain. He later became Labour MP for Neath, a cabinet minister and then a life peer. The JPC was a portent in the formation of the Young Liberals, which now represents both university students and young Liberal democrats within the Lib Dems.

The advent of the New Orbits Group straddled two eras: that of an older order in the party, with its very heavy intellectual and organisational baggage, and an emerging, rather fragile new one. Sir Arthur Comyns-Carr personified the older element, together with the Rt Hon. H. Graham White. The latter had been MP for Birkenhead from 1920 to 1924 and again from 1929 to 1945. He had had a year in office as assistant postmaster general from 1931 to 1932, the lowest ministerial rank but one which accorded him a Privy Councillorship. Like Comyns-Carr, he was born in the 1880s and both died in 1965.

The members of the New Orbits Group were aware of the residual influence of these older luminaries, which possibly accounted for the 'Young Fogey' character of the group. This was intentional so as to appear reformist rather than revolutionary and thus not gratuitously upset the older generation. But they were very alive to the need for radical new departures if the Liberal Party was to survive and flourish. And these new departures took root: seen as contributing to Eric Lubbock's famous Orpington parliamentary by-election victory, the new order within the Liberal Party became firmly established.

*Trevor Smith (Professor Lord Smith of Clifton) was an academic who taught at the universities of Exeter, Hull, York and Queen Mary, London. He ended his career as Vice-Chancellor of Ulster University. From 1970 to 2006 he was closely associated with the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, which was the main source of income for the Liberal Party. Knighted in 1996, he became a Liberal Democrat life peer the following year.*

## Corrigenda

### *Journal of Liberal History* 93 (winter 2016–17) – 'Trevor Jones (1927–2016): An Appreciation'

p. 4 Trevor Jones was first elected as a councillor in 1968, not 1970. In 1962 another Liberal councillor, Joe Wilmington, was elected alongside Cyril Carr.

### *Journal of Liberal History* 93 (winter 2016–17) – Letters to the Editor: 'Liberal Clubs' (Michael Steed)

p. 17 In fact there were six (not five) constituencies in Great Britain where Labour never once overtook the Liberal vote; the seat not mentioned was Bodmin, which, like the others, had a tiny industrial working-class vote.

### *Journal of Liberal History* 93 (winter 2016–17) – Report: the legacy of Roy Jenkins

p. 39 David Owen was Foreign Secretary, not Home Secretary

### *Journal of Liberal History* 94 (spring 2017) – Churchill Archives Centre

p. 33: Leslie Hore-Belisha was never a Conservative MP. MP for Devonport 1923–45, he was elected on three occasions as a Liberal (1923, 1924, 1929), then twice as a Liberal National (1931, 1935). He sat finally as a 'National' member, under which label he lost his seat in 1945.

### *Journal of Liberal History* 94 (spring 2017) – Reviews: Kirkup, *The Lib-Lab Pact*

p. 35: the two references to the 1970 election at the top of the page should be to the February 1974 election.