

Liberal History News

Winter 2021–22

Sir Peter Ustinov

Last year, 2021, was the centenary of the birth of Sir Peter Ustinov. This is a man who made a difference. As a performer versatile enough to be an actor and an entertainer, he delighted in numerous productions on stage and screen. As a creator, he was a writer and director, who was often a force behind those numerous productions. And then there was Peter Ustinov the inspirer, an ambassador and campaigner.

As a man of social conscience and charitable disposition, he was a natural

and lifelong Liberal. He voted for the Liberal Party and then the Liberal Democrats, throughout his life. His autobiographical and other biographical appraisals record his liberalism from his precocious school years, in debates and activities. Throughout his travels, he extolled the virtues and values of Liberalism. Even in the US during the height of the McCarthy witchhunt, he noted: ‘the different meaning for that noble word “liberal,” which in America has become dissociated from its essential humanism and

sense of equity, and now apparently means a kind of embryonic commie, a nuisance who asks embarrassing and subversive questions’.

For reasons of natural individuality and cross-party unity, he never joined the party, but he openly supported it. As recently as the 1990s he described himself during an election as ‘an Ash-down man!’ ‘I have always been a Liberal, but a militant Liberal, I don’t see why the central position should be reticent, just because it is central. The position in the centre is always the most

On This Day ...

Every day the History Group’s website, Facebook page and Twitter feed carry an item of Liberal history news from the past. Below we reprint three. To see them regularly, look at www.liberalhistory.org.uk or www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup or follow us at: [LibHistoryToday](https://www.instagram.com/LibHistoryToday).

December

21 December 1905: Speaking at a great party rally at the Albert Hall Prime Minister Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman launches the Liberal campaign for the 1906 general election. In a letter to Charlotte Campbell Bannerman, the PM’s wife, Thomas Buchanan, Liberal MP for Perthshire East, wrote, ‘to say what a first rate speech Sir Henry made ... The Hall is an impossible one for the human voice. But at the beginning he got the audience ... his hearers knew that he was on the Radical Road, and they were with him and cheered him all the way. It was a great occasion for him and he fully rose to it ...’.

January

12 January 1906: The first results in the 1906 general election are announced. The first constituency to declare was Ipswich. ‘Ip Ip Ip Ipswich’ ran a placard for the radical newspaper *The Star* as the Liberals recorded their first gain. The following day Lancashire polled and out of the 56 seats declared, 29 went to the Liberals, 12 to Labour and 1 to the Nationalists, leaving the Tories with just 14. Amongst the casualties was Unionist leader Arthur Balfour, who lost at Manchester. One of the new Liberal Manchester MPs was Winston Churchill, who emerged victorious in a contest with future Tory Home Secretary William Joynson-Hicks. Speaking at the Reform Club on the day of his election Churchill declared, ‘Do protectionists think that after 60 years Manchester cannot tell truth from falsehood and has forgotten the work of Cobden and Bright or that Lancashire is asleep and would be false to her traditions? We have given the new Government a splendid send-off and the Liberal army will march on without a pause to a complete triumph.’

February

13 February 1906: The House of Commons meets for the first time following the Liberal election victory. The scale of the Liberal triumph was all too evident, with 399 Liberal MPs crowding the government benches, joined in the division lobby by 82 Irish Nationalists and 29 Labour MPs. 318 of the 670 members were elected for the first time with 157 Nonconformists – the largest number in a parliament since the time of Cromwell. Amongst the new Liberal MPs elected were future cabinet ministers Edwin Montagu, Charles Masterman, Alfred Mond and John Simon, and authors Hilaire Belloc and A.E.W. Mason. During the day MPs were sworn in and Mr Speaker Lowther was re-elected, following which the House adjourned until the King’s Speech on 19th February.

difficult to defend. The truth is often in the middle of things. It is there I look for it and never at the extremes.'

This quote reveals his political stance and his personal attitude. His centre ground was a broad one, his journey on it a progressive one, but though open to radical ideas, it was the farther extremes that he disliked intensely.

'No extreme fascinates me. I think it's all wrong because it's all so easy ... there's nothing more exhilarating for a certain clot-like mentality than the sounds of boots marching all together and you're all part of the machine ... it's the isolated voice which can't even be heard in the crowd which is the most vital of all.'

Ustinov's voice was used with great effect and with significant results in the political, social, and charitable fields. The second UNICEF Ambassador, after the great American entertainer Danny Kaye, and before the great actress Audrey Hepburn, Ustinov worked in a voluntary capacity for that organisation for several decades, in all continents. He is honoured on their website even now. It was his internationalism that was at the heart of his Liberalism. President of the World Federalist Movement, he believed the world's shared problems required, often, shared solutions. He would have had much to say and contribute during the current pandemic! Indeed many of his efforts as a Goodwill Ambassador were dealing with such, more local versions of viruses as well as hunger and poverty.

We think of the phrase a 'liberal lion', and utilise it in our language (e.g. Peter Barberis, *Liberal Lion: Jo Grimond, A Political Life* (2005)). It is certainly merited in the life and work of Sir Peter Ustinov. At Christmas time we can enjoy his performances in lighter films. He made three films for Disney; 'Blackbeard's Ghost' is perhaps the best known. But it was in the cartoon 'Robin Hood', as the voices of the lions, Prince John and Richard, that he excelled.

I have for a few years, since its early foundation, been a member and writer at the Ustinov Prejudice Awareness Forum which he inspired, and which has been formed online by his son, the



artist Igor Ustinov who, with dedication, continues his legacy. The Ustinov Prejudice Awareness Forum is part of the wider Ustinov Network that works in several countries. Sir Peter began this aspect, originally as a project to study and understand prejudice, at Durham University where he was Chancellor. As a man of multiple countries in his lineage, it was a project dear to him. I am now coordinating activities and devising new ideas and projects for the Forum, and working for them with enthusiasm in this cause. It is one worth donating to (<http://www.ustinovforum.com/articles/perforum>).

Lorenzo Cherin

History Group meeting videos

Thanks to the coronavirus pandemic, all Liberal Democrat History Group meetings since summer 2020 have been online. The video recordings of all those meetings are now available via the History Group's website (<https://liberalhistory.org.uk/resources-type/>

[ldhgmeetingrecordings/](https://liberalhistory.org.uk/resources-type/)) and Youtube channel (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOSDXWakuXKEzY_u9F7mV-A). This includes:

- General Election 2019: Disappointment for the Liberal Democrats (8 July 2020)
- Liberals with a radical programme: The post-war welfare state, Beveridge and the Liberal Party 75 years on, with Professor Pat Thane and Dr Peter Sloman (26 September 2020)
- Asquith vs Lloyd George, with David Laws and Damian Collins MP (1 February 2021)
- Back from the dead: the Liberal Party in the 1950s, with Lord William Wallace of Saltire and Mark Egan (19 March 2021)
- Liberalism in the United States, with Helena Rosenblatt and James Traub (6 July 2021)
- The two Davids: Steel versus Owen, with Sir Graham Watson and Roger Carroll (17 September 2021)

The videos are also available from the individual meeting pages in the Events section of our website.