

CORRECT CRONOLOGY OF THE FOUNDING OF THE GREEN PARTY, known at the time as PEOPLE -Europe's first Green Party.

As remembered by Michael Benfield (MB), Freda Sanders (FS), Lesley Whittaker (LW) and Tony Whittaker (TW), the original Gang of Four, and Dennis Nightingale-Smith. Collected by David Taylor (0458-272161) at Green Party 21st birthday, Southport March 4th 1994 and subsequently.

During the summer and autumn of 1972 Herbert Ingersoll directors, including Bob Richlie the Personel Director, discussed ecological and economic decline at the Napton Bridge Inn, near Coventry. Key issues were built-in obsolescence, population and pollution. Lunch time sessions were attended by MB and TW.

TW had read The Silent Spring by Rachel Carson and been very disturbed by it. Paul Erlich's article on World Population Growth, in Playboy Magazine (summer '72) purchased by LW, was however TW's catalyst. TW lent LW's copy of Playboy magazine to BR. Erlich's article had a similarly profound effect on him and prompted him to call a meeting. Herbert Ingersoll had gone into receivership and life was traumatic for Bob and the other Ingersoll people.

13/10/72 The first meeting, of what became known as The Club of Thirteen, was held on October 13th 1972 in the Boardroom of Herbert Ingersoll in Daventry. There were thirteen people present, including a number of the representatives from Cork Gully & Co., the Receivers. MB and FS did not attend this meeting.

A second meeting was held in the canteen. LW & TW invited FS and MB to attend. They remained involved thereafter during the club's short life.

The Club of Thirteen was a discussion group and had no political intention, The four founders were already in established regular professional and occasional social contact. The Club was however incidental in causing the 'founding four' to agree that a new political party was necessary to address the issues which were being discussed. The other Thirteen Club members wanted to remain informed and in contact but did not wish to take part in overt political actions. Bob Richlie withdrew almost immediately. Graham Cles (the accountant at Herbert Ingersoll) remained on the fringe, lent covert support, and attended, the public 'launch' meeting.

13/12/72 The decision to start a new political party was taken by the founding four at TW's office, 69 Hertford Street, Coventry on December 13th 1972. The Four (TW, LW, FS, MB) decided to forget the Thirteen Club and start a political party. MB claims the decision came about as a result of his proposal. This was the start of PEOPLE.

13/1/73 Meeting at Bob Richlie's house

31/1/73 Advert placed in Coventry Evening Telegraph for a meeting at MB's office, a Coventry estate agent showroom.

24/2/73 7.30pm 53 people attended. OFFICIAL PUBLIC LAUNCH OF PEOPLE. Freda did the tea. Attended by Noel Newsome OBE, chair of local Conservation Society and Dennis Nightingale-Smith. FS was elected treasurer, TW chairman, LW secretary and MB 'lord high everything else'.

The first house paper of PEOPLE was called "Alliance...of interests". It ran for six years, between '73 and '78 and was edited and published by MB. TW has no memory of 'Alliance'.

8/9/72 D N-S attended Movement for Survival Conference. 300 attended (Teddy Goldsmith should have list of attendees) including Shirley Williams and London Anti-Fluoridation Campaign.

Several weeks later he heard Tony Whittaker interviewed on the BBC Home Service. TW discussed the need for a new ecological political party -PEOPLE (TW cannot remember doing this interview). D N-S wrote to TW immediately via the BBC to see if he had heard of the Movement for Survival which he had not. Simultaneously he wrote to Teddy Goldsmith to see if he had heard of PEOPLE which he hadn't. D N-S organised a meeting at his house (Greenways, Malvern Hills, Worcs.) where the 'Gang of Four', guided by Elizabeth Davenport, met Teddy Goldsmith.

The February '74 Election was fought without a manifesto. 'The Blueprint for Survival' was promoted as a useful guide to the party's position. Teddy Goldsmith volunteered to write the party's first manifesto in time for the first annual conference of PEOPLE in Coventry in the summer '74. Teddy languished on holiday in Italy and no draft appeared. Lesley closed her practice down for four days. With the 100% help of her secretary she drafted the whole of the manifesto from start to finish. This was circulated. Some 150 amendments were received. The 'Manifesto for Survival' became the party's first formal manifesto and remained in force through the October '74 Election and until the substantial re-writing organised by Peter Allen which was adopted at the smaller 1975 Conference, also in Coventry.

NOTES

1) TW was a solicitor. LW was know as Miss Hill at the time. She was TW's Articled Clerk and later Assistant Solicitor. They became partners in 1974. TW left his first wife and three daughters for Lesley in 1969. This caused considerable family eruptions and was at least a 9 day talking point in Coventry High Society.

2) MB & TW met at an old boys dinner in 1964/5; their business association commenced immediately afterwards. TW and MB attended the same school, Warwick School, a minor public school founded in 954AD. It is claimed to be either the second or third oldest school in Britain, founded by Edward the Confessor.

3) In those days people did not discuss the issues which PEOPLE raised. They were regarded as 'weirdos'.

MB "setting up PEOPLE was totally anti-establishment." "Our business was dependent upon our being perceived as acceptable." "We were turncoats to our class and professional people didn't wish to associate with us." "The local press did their best to pillory us."

TW "True, the Coventry Evening Telegraph did seem to wage a campaign against Michael in respect of certain business practices of his. However, without blaming the press at all, I do think my involvement with PEOPLE did prove prejudicial to my professional reputation and therefore practice. Other people proved very sympathetic and supportive. It was in so many ways a weird period of my life, with of course very far-reaching consequences, by no means all for the good."

4) TW & MB both gave over between one quarter and one third of their office effort to launching PEOPLE. MB employed two people on PEOPLE. LW had her legal secretary working full time on PEOPLE. TW " Lesley only had her secretary working full time on PEOPLE on occasions, as did I. I believe the staff to have been less than 100% enthusiastic about this aspect of their work.

5) MB's business interests throughout the period included building contracting, residential development, property investment, estate agency, insurance brokerage, advertising agency. From 1959 MB used to pick up hitch-hikers (students & servicemen) and discuss environmental, population and related concerns with them. This was linked with contemporaneous discussions with his late father-in-law, George Cheswick(1), about the same issues and the ultimate need for a new political party to address these. Similar discussions with his own father were less in-depth and, based on his father's own experiences(2), encouraged mainstream activity. MB's conviction of the necessity for and promotion of the idea of a new party stems from these.

1. George Cheswick was, paradoxically, a successful industrialist -Cheswick & Wright Silencers- and a life-long card carrying member of the British Communist Party. He had had 21 jobs by the time he was 21, been a master gunner in WW1, and visited Russia in the mid 1930's.

2. Kenneth Bertram Benfield stood for Council election as a member of the new Progressive Party immediately after WW2. When it became defunct he changed parties to become a Conservative Councillor for Coventry, ultimately the City's Lord Mayor and local Conservative Party President. K.B.Benfield was a developer and builder. Although unpopular in many circles he became Lord Mayor of Coventry twice -a rare if not unique distinction.

6) TW's father, Arthur Whittaker, was a Blackpool lad, the son of a Post Office clerk and a girl from Surrey(1). George Cheswick lived and operated in Blackpool. Arthur was apprenticed either at a garage owned by George Cheswick's father, or at a garage next door to Cheswick & Wright. Arthur did business with Cheswick and Wright while he was General Manager and Deputy Chairman of Jaguar Cars, over a period of 40 years. TW's mother, born and bred in Bolton was living with her retired baker and confectioner father when she met TW's father.

1) A girl with 'some pretensions of good family' who married beneath her having met TW's grandfather on the Eiffel Tower when so far as her family were concerned she was staying with friends and should have been almost anywhere other than in Paris.

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November 16, 1994

Mr David Taylor
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Dear David,

Thanks for sending me the "Correct chronology of the founding of the Green Party", as seen by the founders. I don't remember going to a meeting in 1972 at Dennis Nightingale-Smith's house. Maybe my memory is just failing me, but I have absolutely no recollection of this meeting whatsoever. As far as I can remember, I first learnt of People when Tony Whittaker called me in Cornwall three or four weeks before the first election of 1974. He told me that he and a few colleagues had started a new political party, largely inspired by "A Blueprint for Survival", and that I had to join this party and stand at the forthcoming election. Needless to say I could not say no. I found an agent, Dr Michael Ash, a most eccentric figure who lived on the north coast of Cornwall, and we set off together for Suffolk so that I could stand for the Eye constituency, much of which was once part of the Stowmarket division of Suffolk, for which my father was the Conservative M.P. from 1910 to 1919. I can't remember meeting the founders of the party before the election, though I may have done.

With regards to the manifesto, Lesley is quite right. I was supposed to write it when in Italy, where I had a house at the time - and never did. She had to do it herself very quickly, at the last minute. She managed to do this, and very well indeed at that. It was in fact a veritable tour de force. If I didn't produce the manifesto it was not because I was languishing in the sun on holiday. I tried very hard to write the manifesto, but found that I was singularly untalented as a manifesto writer. I should have never accepted the job.

Very sorry to have missed the reunion party at Dennis's. I planned to go, but at the last minute found I had to be in Paris earlier than I expected. If there is to be another reunion party I should certainly love to attend.

With best regards,


Edward Goldsmith

cc Lesley and Tony Whittaker