

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FREEDOM ASSOCIATION

BY PURE CHANCE, in May 1975, on a British Airways flight from London to New York, the late Lord de L'Isle VC found himself sitting next to Norris McWhirter, who was travelling to promote a new edition of his Guinness Book of Records.

The two had a detailed discussion about the seriousness of Britain's decline since the death of Winston Churchill. Lord de L'Isle had just received a letter from Michael Ivens, asking him to consider leading a new association pledged to support individual freedom and to resist ever Bigger Government. As a result of the long flight, Ross and Norris McWhirter were invited to Lord de L'Isle's home at Penshurst Place in Kent for a further discussion. It was on the hottest day of the year, Thursday 12 June 1975. At a light lunch on a small round table that Lord de L'Isle had acquired at an auction at Chartwell, home of Sir Winston Churchill, plans were hatched to convene a meeting of fifty prominent people from politics, business, the armed services, the church and the professions at the Grosvenor House Hotel in London on Thursday 31 July. These were the original council members of what was then called the National Association for Freedom. They included figures as varied as Field Marshal Sir Gerald Templer, the constitutional expert Lord Blake and the cricketer Alec Bedser.

On Thursday 27 November 1975, Ross McWhirter, who had drawn up our fifteen point Charter of Rights and Liberties, was murdered by a gang of four IRA terrorists at his home in North London. The launch of the Association had been planned for the following Tuesday (2 December) at a hotel close to the Tower of London. It was decided to proceed regardless and Ross's twin brother attended the launch with a non-uniformed police escort. Within days, more than 10,000 people had joined the Association. *The Sunday Times* however predicted that the Association would "run into the sands" and never be heard of again!

In March 1976, on a small budget, *Freedom Today* (originally called *The Free Nation*) was launched, with the Australian born Robert Moss as its lively editor. Later in that year the Association became heavily involved in the Battle of Grunwick – a small photographic processing firm in Willesden, North West London, which was being besieged by Arthur Scargill (and his loud hailer) and 18,000 pickets, many of whom were paid from union funds. The cause of the violence in which 242 policemen were injured, was the utterly false allegation that the factory's boss, George Ward, had refused to allow his staff to be members of trades unions. At the dead of night at 2.00 a.m., a party of twelve members outsmarted the dozy night time pickets and removed from the deserted factory, 80,000 postal packages, which the Post Office unions had unlawfully "blacked". These were taken in two large lorries to a barn in Gloucestershire where a party of members, armed with £7,000 worth of stamps, quickly handled the mounds of packages and posted them all over the country. This action, privately described by Lady Thatcher as "the best thing since Entebbe", resulted in the saving of the nearly bankrupt firm of Grunwick and the retreat of Scargill and his henchmen back to Yorkshire.

Other early actions included the famous railwaymen's case, when the Association supported legal action to help the sacked Roger Webster, Noel James and Iain Young. They had been peremptorily dismissed from British Rail under their craven agreement with the three rail unions to sack anyone who declined to pay subscriptions into their coffers. The case lasted five years and eighteen days, ending with eighteen of the twenty-one judges at the Strasbourg human rights court, pronouncing that HMG were in violation of Article Eleven of the Convention they had signed in 1950 to protect the "freedom of association" of their citizens. It was a great victory and resulted in hundreds of closed shop victims being compensated by the government. Lord Tebbit soon put into place new laws which banished the tyranny of compulsory union membership.

In the years 1979-1990, Margaret Thatcher was the country's robust Prime Minister. People felt less threatened during her administrations and The Freedom Association suffered a decline in membership. However today, under the leadership of Christopher Gill, who as the MP for Ludlow was such a prominent Maastricht rebel, the Association is coming back to the fore as the electorate grows increasingly worried about what goes on in Brussels and the continuing self-governing independence of the country.

Norris McWhirter CBE

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