

# Sir Richard Body RIP

*The death has been announced at the age of 90 of Sir Richard Body, Conservative MP for Billericay between 1955 and 1959 and then Holland with Boston (later Boston and Skegness) between 1966 and 2001. He was a long-serving Co-President of the Campaign for an Independent Britain and in 1994 he famously resigned the Conservative whip in solidarity with eight fellow Tory MPs who had the whip suspended after abstaining on a Commons vote on the European Communities (Finance) Bill, which would increase the UK's contribution to the EU. He is remembered here by **Dr Lee Rotherham**.*

*This tribute first appeared on Brexit Central and is reproduced with kind permission.*

Sir Richard Body was a thoughtful, courteous, courageous and engaging parliamentary veteran who played a long and significant role in the Eurosceptic movement. He also had a thoroughly disarming manner. After spotting a vacant spot on the European battlefield, he would identify a strategic hill and predict its significance; then, after a pause, he would lean forward: "Now," he would say with a very perceptible twinkle in his eye, "I do think there's something we could be doing here." And having identified a minuscule budget to achieve the task (Euroscepticism in those days was a shoestring affair), a surprise flanking manoeuvre would take place that no one else had considered, the critical importance of which might only be fully revealed several years later.

Sir Richard was an independently-minded Quaker, and what used to be called an old school shire Tory. His unhurried pre-24 hour news cycle style could be problematic to media monsters: on being invited to Downing Street to follow the other whipless rebels back into the party, the Whips' Office jumped the gun and released a statement that took the action as

granted. But Sir Richard had resigned on principle, and in defence of the interests of his constituents. The presumption was dangerous and for some hours the Downing Street press office had to embarrassingly hold a wobbly line of their own making while Sir Richard reflected on whether the commitment made by the Prime Minister over fisheries policy was sufficiently robust.

By that stage he was an extremely experienced parliamentarian. I recall once being taken aback in the late 1990s, when discussing certain developments: "This," he observed, "reminds me of the mood in the House at the time of Suez." As such anecdotes (some lately happily captured by the Parliament archivists) remind us, he had by then been on the green benches long enough almost to be in the running to be Father of the House. However, a necessary stint in the private sector (MPs were not well remunerated in those days) generated a break in that service, and he was to observe that he considered himself extraordinarily lucky to have been given a second opportunity. His was, incidentally, the first seat to be announced by live television coverage by a field camera unit. The result came through unexpectedly early and the candidate had retired for a nap in the interim: an unknown force pulled him out of slumber and encouraged him to dash off into the main hall – thus narrowly avoiding the embarrassment of being literally caught napping on camera...

His four decades of parliamentary service did not see him rise to ministerial rank, though he did serve as Chairman of the Agriculture Select Committee. He was a long-standing campaigner on a number of avant-garde environmental and rural issues, amongst them animal welfare, the overuse of antibiotics, and aggressive farm gangmasters. It was not just EU issues that led to an overlap of interests with the Goldsmith 'green Eurosceptics'.

The most intriguing aspect of his career was perhaps the fact that he started out as a very, very early pro-European.

Visitors to his constituency home would even be shown the 'Ted Heath chair' on which the future Prime Minister had sat during a visit. The reason why there weren't more pieces of such nomenclatured furniture, however, lay in a visit that Sir Richard made to Brussels. Over lunch, his interlocutors, believing they were speaking with a convinced integrationist, felt that they could confide fully in their visitor on the scale of their ambition, caveating it with an "Of course, we cannot reveal this in public, because the public would oppose it."

The deep deceit involved and anti-democratic nature of the project drove him into opposing it. As the programme became clearer over the years, it also revealed itself to be far from the model of accountable, devolved government that he himself supported. For Sir Richard, if federalism were an ideal for any state, it required the balances and parity of scale involved in the Swiss model; political unification on a continental scale, by contrast, meant abandoning the lessons learned from the Renaissance, where humanity had leapt through competition between small states each proud of their achievements and cityscapes, and where a free market urban competitiveness drove innovation and social progress. Strikingly, his Euroscepticism was unusually internationalist in outlook. His links with Scandinavian Eurosceptics was particularly important, and fostered valuable wider co-operation between campaigners.

Sir Richard's long campaign saw him play a central leadership role during the 1975 EEC referendum. Amongst other actions, it is also worth recalling his commissioning Professor Patrick Minford's early cost-benefit analysis of EU membership. Quite aside from the significance of this audit in its own right (acknowledged indeed in Margaret Thatcher's *Statecraft*), it perspicaciously included a further commentary by a leading Japanese economist. On top of that it also added a brief introduction by several prominent businessmen. Sir Richard

predicted the need to bring business leaders openly onto the Eurosceptic campaign trail, and signatories indeed subsequently set up Business for Sterling and, in turn, Business for Britain.

His biggest battle was over fishing, and standing up for the livelihoods of his constituents in the port of Boston. When eight Conservative colleagues voted against the Government over an increase in the EU budget, and John Major removed their whip, Body voluntarily followed them: the money, after all, meant upgrading the Spanish fishing fleet while paying for British boats to be scrapped. Sir Richard supported Save Britain's Fish at a time when party policy on fisheries was, to say the least, shallow. The extent to which it is less so today is in part down to his support of a cause that had shamefully for so long been considered politically on the periphery and indeed expendable; he, for example, commissioned a legal review by a QC that confirmed beyond doubt the UK's default sovereign standing over the 200-mile limit. The fact that Conservatives Against a Federal Europe (CAFE) included fisheries as a commitment was effectively down to him – indeed, the move by the Whipless Eight to take over and reinvigorate CAFE in 1996 and turn it into the party's largest grassroots organisation was at his recommendation.

His early support for Margaret Thatcher as a potential leadership candidate (notwithstanding the fact that she was apparently at the outset quite a shaky speaker!) has been recorded. Less well recalled was his engagement with key proto-Thatcherite think-tanks in the 1970s. In due course he set up his own Centre for European Studies and long co-operated with the late John Coleman in such projects as New European Publications and the New European journal (still going today, and certainly not to be confused with the anti-Brexit rag of the same name). In his own writings, he published books that, amongst other things, supported English devolution, predicted the development of tablets and scanned

payments technologies and set out a loose style of European arrangement (Europe of Many Circles) that might still in future years inform debate about a post-EU Europe. He achieved all of this despite a much-hampered eyesight, that when encountered at his desk lent him the air of a jeweller hard engaged on his task.

Coming soon after the passing of Sir Teddy Taylor, the Eurosceptic movement has been hit by the sad loss of another great Brexit pathfinder and pioneer. My thoughts are with his family.