

Steve Charters

Mark Smulian finds out how a former councillor has made the journey from a radical local government ‘experiment’ in London’s east end to French champagne country.

Plenty of people would no doubt like the sound of Steve Charters’ job – professor of the management of champagne. He holds this unusual academic post at Reims Management School, in France, having become a wine academic while living in Australia.

But Steve was once part of one of the most radical experiments ever carried out in UK local government when, nearly 25 years before the current vogue for localism, the London Borough of Tower Hamlets’ functions were devolved to neighbourhoods.

The route from his native Wiltshire to east London, Australia and the champagne country was one of chances and opportunities, but has given him two interesting careers, in politics and wine.

As a politically-aware teenager, Steve became involved in the old Liberal party through his aunt Maggie Clay, at one time chief executive of the Association of Liberal Councillors and a councillor in Leeds, and later Stockport, until her death last spring.

He read history at Oxford then moved to London to qualify as a solicitor, and sought his aunt’s advice where he might involve himself with an active group of inner city liberals. She suggested Tower Hamlets. In 1982 Steve won at his first attempt in a ward that had been Labour-held for decades.

Four years later the party took control of the borough on a platform of devolving services and budgets to seven neighbourhoods, each of which was to be run by the councillors concerned, thus leaving some controlled by the Labour opposition.

“We rewrote the entire standing orders at our first meeting in control”

He recalls: “I chaired the policy and resources committee, which was one of the few central committees left. It allocated money among the neighbourhoods and dealt with really big policy issues like London Docklands, and I later chaired one of the neighbourhood councils.

“I think the idea for decentralisation came from a belief that Tower Hamlets had been better when it was the three old boroughs before the 1964 reorganisation, and that coincided with the growing belief among liberal community politicians that power should be pushed down to local level.

“By 1986 we had really thought the whole thing through and knew what we wanted to do, and amazed everyone by rewriting the entire standing orders at our first meeting in control.”

Steve concedes it is hard to know what influence this experiment might have had on subsequent thinking about localism. Labour scrapped the neighbourhoods when it regained control in 1994 and no-one has since attempted devolution on the same scale.

“I think within Tower Hamlets it gave people the idea that they really could take part in exercising local power, but in the national debate it was assumed that when the Lib Dems lost in 1994 it was because the decentralisation experiment failed, when in fact it was more to do with demographic change,” he says.

He stood down in 1990 but worked part-time for the Lib Dem group as political advisor, and it was during this period that he gained a basic qualification in wine “just for interest”.

Steve and his partner had applied successfully for residence in Australia, where she had previously lived, and went there in 1994 “for a lifestyle change, the experience of living in another country, nothing to do with politics or work”, he says.

On arrival he began working in a wine shop in Sydney, which was “fun but not very intellectually challenging, so I started studying for Master of Wine”, a demanding course that includes the production, marketing and tasting of wine. He passed, slightly to his own surprise, and with a first child due had to find work.

A call from an acquaintance took him and his family across Australia to Perth where he began to teach the business of wine. “I found I enjoyed being a wine academic and did a PhD in public attitudes towards wine, how people engage with it as a product,” he says.

Four years ago the family decided to return to Europe when his present job came up, and he now teaches masters’ level business students about the champagne industry in what he admits is still less than perfect French.

Steve is long out of active politics, and says he has enjoyed the experience of being able to observe Australian and French political life without the constraint of party loyalty.

He concludes: “I still support the Lib Dems, but I find the more MPs they get the more they seem nationally to become a respectable establishment organisation, and it would be good to see some of the old radical attitudes about the distribution of power come back.”

