The Lessons of Orpington

__Mark Egan__ analyses the importance of the byelection result for the Liberal Party.

In the article above, Lord Avebury presents his personal reflections on his triumph at the 1962 Orpington byelection. The result was staggering, more so then in an era when byelection upsets were relatively infrequent. A Conservative majority of 14,760 was transformed into a resounding Liberal advantage of 7,855 votes. It was only the second Liberal byelection gain since 1929. More importantly, Orpington could not conceivably be considered as traditional Liberal territory. The Orpington byelection represented a completely new phenomenon in Liberal politics.

Immediately following the byelection, its message seemed clear. No Tory seat in the country could be considered safe from the resurgent Liberals; the political landscape was about to be destroyed by an electoral earthquake. In the light of Orpington, all subsequent byelections during that parliament and the 1964 general election were disappointments. Political realignment failed to occur. The Liberal Party failed to make the sweeping gains Orpington suggested were possible. After 1964, Liberal activists resigned themselves to the realisation that lasting political success could not be achieved overnight, if at all.

The real lessons of the Orpington byelection were set out immediately after the byelection by Donald Newby, in his excellent pamphlet *The Orpington Story.* Most commentators at the time of Orpington failed to spot the true nature of the Liberals' success. Both the Conservative and Liberal Parties commissioned surveys to try and explain the result. Jo Grimond was astute enough to note that the byelection was won because of 'seven years' hard work in the constituency'. This was the main lesson of Orpington. Determined hard work to build up a constituency organisation which could match the Tories' efforts, allied to consistent local government success, finally led to a Parliamentary breakthrough which was sustained through three different election campaigns.

Prior to 1955, Orpington Liberal Association was typical of dozens of Liberal organisations across the south of England. The Liberal Association survived because a hard core of committed Liberals felt it was worthwhile to keep meeting to hear Liberal speakers and to raise money for the occasional general election contest. Politically, the Conservatives dominated every aspect of the town's life. The Orpington Conservative Association could count on 10,000 members; the Liberals could boast less than 200. The Labour Party were satisfied with their ability to win a couple of council wards and hold a respectable second place in general elections. Everyone knew that Labour could never challenge the Tory hegemony in Orpington, or indeed in dozens of similar constituencies across the south of England. But how could the desperately weak Liberals hope to take on the Tory establishment?

The first steps towards Liberal victory were taken in 1956, when the Liberal Association decided to form ward committees and contest local elections. This would seem an obvious step to the modern day Liberal Democrat, but in the 1950s many Liberals argued that party politics should be kept out of local government. Whatever the merits of this argument, the Liberal involvement in Orpington's council elections had a number of beneficial effects on the strength of the Liberal cause in the town. First, the Liberal intervention attracted a great deal of local publicity. The Liberals produced a manifesto for Orpington Urban District which was dissected in the local press. Liberal candidates were forced to respond to the attacks of their political opponents. For the first time in years the town was moved by political debate.

Secondly, the Liberal Association was forced to find new sources of income in order to fund the council candidates' campaigns. Regular Liberal socials were commenced. These efforts brought new members into the Liberal Association and this in turn helped the ward committees find new election helpers. Thirdly, the Liberals needed to adopt an electoral strategy which would maximise their chances of success. Financially unable to fight all of the wards in the district, the Liberals targeted the wards in which their most prominent activists lived and worked, and fought under a slogan of 'Labour can't win!'. Labour were unable to win any wards outside their two citadels – Poverest and St. Mary Cray. The Liberals exploited this weakness mercilessly and by 1962 Labour were unable to win even in these areas.

The Liberals in Orpington discovered that hard work bred success and that success bred further success. The Liberals won their first council seats in 1959. In 1961 the Liberals outpolled the Tories for the first time in local elections – a full ten months before the byelection. After the byelection, at the 1962 local elections, the Liberals won control of Orpington Urban District Council. Each election triumph strengthened the ward organisations, brought new members into the Liberal Association, and enhanced the party's electoral credibility. All of these factors were to prove crucial at the 1962 byelection.

Another factor often overlooked was the importance of prominent local politicians in pushing Liberal organisations forward. Men like Cyril Carr in Liverpool, John Sargent in Southend and George Suggett in Newbury were crucial in their localities. They instigated the reorganisation of their Liberal associations; they publicised

Liberal policies and ideals in their towns; they stood for election and attracted like-minded acquaintances into the Liberal Party. Orpington Liberal Association was blessed with a number of excellent local politicians who were a credit to the party. Donald Newby, chair of the Orpington Liberal Association in the late 1950s, was a brilliant innovator responsible for instigating the association's social programme. He later went on to edit the 'Penny Liberal' and the Liberal magazine *New Outlook*. Alfred Howard stood as Liberal candidate in Orpington at the 1955 general election and stood for the council for four successive years before gaining a seat in 1959. He later became vice-chairman of the council. Christine Parker acted for two years as an unpaid, full-time agent and was credited by Newby with inventing the shuttleworth knocking-up system in Orpington two years before other Liberal associations adopted it. Without these activists, and others beside, the Orpington byelection would have had a different outcome.

It was not by chance that the revival of Liberalism in Orpington coincided both with Jo Grimond's election as Liberal Party leader and with the Suez crisis. Newby mentions both events in his account of the byelection victory. Grimond's qualities are also assessed elsewhere in this newsletter and it would be foolish to suggest that national factors did not influence the result. The Tory government was tired and discredited; the Tory candidate was ill-suited to the rigours of the byelection circus; Liberal workers poured into the constituency, as they had done at many byelections since the mid-1950s.

Grimond's role was crucial in being able to attract into the Liberal Party a substantial body of intellectual and practical politicians. Grimond oversaw the reinvention of Liberal policy. In 1962 the party published eight reports into Liberal policy, each report written by experts in their field, including Michael Fogarty, Brian Keith-Lucas and Richard Lamb. The party benefited from the positive media coverage generated by this renewal and this helped to bring more members and activists into the party. Grimond was also able to attract key electioneers into the Liberal fold. Two in particular, Pratap Chitnis and Dominic le Foe, were heavily involved in the Orpington byelection. However, if the reinvigoration of the Liberal Party is over-emphasised one must explain why it failed to win more byelections during the 1959–64 parliament and why it failed to win more seats at the 1964 election. The Orpington byelection was not an illustration of how much Grimond had changed the Liberal Party but of how well Liberal activists could change the party themselves, by working over a period of years to overcome the party's weaknesses and challenge the Tory dominance of a particular locality.

The Orpington byelection bequeathed a substantial legacy to the Liberal Party. First, it was assumed that the Liberals were now able to appeal to a particular stratum of society – the 'new' middle class. The myth of 'Orpington man', the young professional newly established in an emerging industry,

dogged the Liberal Party throughout the 1960s. The 1964 election campaign was fought on the premise that this new, young group would swing to the Liberal Party, delivering gains in several suburban constituencies. This did not happen. Rather, the Liberals' gains in 1964 and 1966 were primarily in the Scottish Highlands.

Secondly, the importance of byelections to the Liberals' electoral strategy also became firmly entrenched in the party's psyche. Byelections brought media attention and allowed the Liberals to compete on a level playing field with the other parties. However, the Liberals gained just two more seats at byelections during the 1960s – Roxburghshire in 1965 and Birmingham Ladywood in 1969. The former was an area of traditional Liberal strength and had been represented by a Liberal MP as recently as 1951. Local government success provided the firm basis for victory in the latter. It was not fully understood for several years that byelections themselves did not necessarily benefit the party. What counted for more was the slow, steady build-up of local party strength, allied to local government success. By the 1970s the Liberals' byelection team was as effective as any political organisation in the country. Even so, the Liberal Party won only six byelections during the decade.

The question remains, if Orpington showed that local government success can be translated into parliamentary success, why did so few areas with strong Liberal associations and Liberal councils return Liberal MPs? It was often reported that where Liberal candidates did well in local elections, voters told them that they would vote Liberal locally but not nationally. This suggests that the Liberal Party struggled to overcome its lack of electoral credibility under the first past the post system. Liberal parliamentary candidates faced two obstacles which local Liberal candidates could normally avoid. Effective leaflet delivery and canvassing requires a far more extensive political organisation across a constituency than across a ward. In parliamentary constituencies it was common for some wards to experience an intensive Liberal campaign effort, but for other wards to received nothing bar an election address. Secondly, in general elections voters help to select a government. After 1945 it was usual for too few Liberal candidates to stand to enable a Liberal government to be formed, even if all of them were to be elected. Furthermore, the Liberals' modest poll ratings and their existing number of MPs suggested that even when a full slate of candidates was adopted the Liberals had no chance. The 'wasted vote' argument is thus far more effective at a national than a local level, where it is relatively easy to field a full slate of candidates and where the issue at stake – control of the council – is perceived by the electorate to be less vital.

Orpington was a watershed in the Liberal Party's history because, as Newby noted at the time, local activists had it within their power gradually to build up their own strength again and start winning elections. The road from Orpington has been littered with disappointment, but the lessons of the byelection are still relevant today.