

Fighting Orpington

The stunning byelection victory of Orpington in 1962 was the high point of the first Liberal revival. Eric Lubbock (now Lord Avebury) was the candidate.

I joined the Liberal Party in 1960, soon after we came back to Orpington, where we shared my mother's house. The constituency party was small, and I very soon found myself on the executive, which used to meet at the 'Oven Door' in Green Street Green. From there it was a small step to fighting the council ward of Downe in the Orpington Urban District Council election of 1961. It had about 750 voters on the roll and it was not difficult to canvass them almost 100%. We had the advantage that my family had lived in Downe for several generations, and although the village had always returned a Tory, we took 75% of the vote.

In September 1961, the sitting Member, Donald Sumner, was appointed a County Court judge, to make way for Peter Goldman, Ian Macleod's bright young protégé at Tory Central Office, for whom Orpington seemed a natural constituency. It had returned a Tory member since time immemorial, and everyone remembered crusty old Sir Waldron Smithers, Sumner's predecessor, who was held in great affection by everyone. He used to play the organ at constituents' weddings, was seldom quite sober, and kept his mouth shut in the House.

The Liberal candidate was Jack Galloway (no relation of George, to the best of my knowledge), a Scottish engineer who travelled extensively and spoke authoritatively on Britain's policy on Thailand or Peru at every meeting of the executive. He had done respectably at the 1959 general election, beating Labour into third place by a whisker, although Sumner's majority had still been nearly 15,000. Jack had an attractive girlfriend, whose name I think was Faye, and she was seen frequently at Liberal events. They were married in the summer of 1961.

Shortly after Sumner had resigned the seat, the Liberal executive met to plan the campaign. It was at this point that Jack revealed a slight problem. He had not understood the technical terms nisi and absolute, and had married Faye before his first marriage had been properly dissolved. The judge had contented himself with a reprimand, but the first wife was threatening to attend every meeting during the campaign, and denounce Jack as a bigamist. Everybody agreed that Jack was not to blame, but there was extensive discussion about the effect of the vindictive woman heckling Jack right up to the eve of poll. It was agreed, with reluctance, that he should be asked to resign.

The government could have moved the writ at any moment, and we had to move fast. While the officers were meeting in the house of the agent, Christine Parker, she

telephoned the Chief Whip, Donald Wade, and explained the situation. She asked whether the party could suggest a well-known personality to fight the election – Mark Bonham Carter for instance, who had won Torrington at a byelection in 1958, only to lose it again at the following general election. Donald told her that an outsider would have no time to become established with the voters, and he thought that we should pick somebody local – a councillor, perhaps.

Christine's telephone was in the hall, and she and her husband John used to write telephone numbers all the way up the wall next to it. She returned to the living room of the semi-detached house in Glentrammon Road, and reported the conversation. Her eye travelled round the room until it rested on me. 'Why don't you do it, Eric?' she demanded. I explained that my employers had been fairly tolerant of my council activities, but that I was sure they wouldn't be pleased if I took weeks off for the byelection. Then others chipped in, and I was persuaded to ask the boss.

The next morning I marched in on the managing director of the Charterhouse Group, Bill Warnock, and put it to him. 'What were the figures last time?' he asked. 'Twenty-five thousand Conservative, nine and a half thousand Liberal, nine thousand Labour,' I replied. He thought for just a moment then graciously said I could have three weeks off with pay!

The weeks passed, and the writ was not moved as autumn turned to winter. We moved into the old cinema as our byelection headquarters. One Saturday night the building mysteriously burned down, and we suspected that Pratap Chitnis, who had been drafted in to run the campaign, had thrown a cigarette end into the bulging wastepaper basket. Others had different theories. 'I never thought the Tories would descend to these depths,' a passer-by told me on the High Street. We retrieved some charred Tory posters from the ruins, removed from various places by the Young Liberals the previous night. Jeremy Thorpe removed the evidence in the boot of his car, and had a bonfire a safe distance outside the constituency.

Meanwhile, Peter Goldman, the whizz-kid Tory candidate, was busy making enemies and alienating the faithful. He made it plain that he didn't intend to live in Orpington, and that he was doing the inhabitants a great favour by agreeing to become their MP. January and February were bitterly cold, and he travelled round in a well-heated caravan, in which he gave audiences to those

who could be tempted out of their houses by the Tory canvassers.

The government of Harold Macmillan was beginning to lose its way. Iain Macleod, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, announced the first ever pay pause, and the nurses as usual were the victims. They had a claim at the point of settlement when the guillotine fell, and got nothing.

As polling day approached, everybody could feel something in the air. The journalists who visited the constituency mostly sat in the 'Maxwell', a dingy pub just down the road from the station, but they couldn't help seeing that Orpington was a sea of green posters. (The change to orange happened later.) Yet only one journalist, Jeremy Hornsby of the *Daily Express*, predicted that the Tories were going to lose.

At the count, the piles of ballot papers soon made the result fairly plain long before it was announced, as the TV cameras showed. Mr Goldman's face began to show the misery of unexpected defeat, while outside the Civic Hall an excited crowd was growing. We all thought we were going to win – our canvass returns said so, and we had unswerving confidence in their accuracy – but the size of the landslide exceeded our wildest dreams. A Tory majority of 15,000 had turned into a Liberal majority of nearly 8,000,

the biggest swing in recorded history since universal adult franchise.

To many, it seemed that overnight we were on the point of recovering all the ground lost by the Party since the last Liberal government of 1915. Hopes were only slightly dampened when we narrowly missed capturing West Derbyshire a few weeks later, and Emlyn Hooson's victory

in Montgomeryshire seemed to confirm the trend. *Punch* made a Liberal cabinet out of six MPs. In practical terms, the result was a powerful demonstration of the effectiveness of tactical voting. 'Brothers, we're on our way,' George Brown told Labour voters in Orpington, but most of them realised then, and since, that the only way of defeating the Tories was for Labour and Liberal voters to support the strongest challenger. The British political system may treat any discussion of agreements between parties as unfit for polite conversation, but the lesson of Orpington may be that the people know better how to achieve the results they want.



Jo Grimond, Liberal leader at the time of the Orpington byelection.

Lord Avebury was MP for Orpington from 1962 to 1970, serving as Chief Whip from 1963. He has chaired the British Parliamentary Human Rights Group since 1976.

A Liberal Democrat History Group seminar

Liberal-Tory Pacts

– Partnership of principle or struggle for survival? –

Speaker: Dr Michael Kandiah Chair: Peter Thurnham MP

Michael Kandiah, Senior Fellow at the Institute of Contemporary British History, will speak on Liberal-Conservative relations in the 1940s and '50s.

He will look at both the national negotiations which concluded in the offer of a cabinet post to Clement Davies by Churchill in 1951, and at the local pacts in Huddersfield and Bolton, which put Liberal MPs in Parliament.

Dr Kandiah is in the process of writing a biography of Lord Woolton.

David Lloyd George Room, National Liberal Club,

1 Whitehall Place, London SW1

7.00 pm, Monday 24 March