

The Sutton and Cheam Byelection

The Sutton and Cheam byelection was won for the Liberal Party in December 1972.

Jennifer Tankard interviews the victor, Graham (now Lord) Tope.

When and why did you join the Young Liberals ?

I joined the Sutton and Cheam Young Liberals in 1967, at the age of 23. At the time I lived in Coulsdon and was going out with a girlfriend who lived in Epsom, so the Cheam village pub that the Young Liberals met in was about half way between.

The main reason I joined was because in the mid sixties the 'Red Guards' were taking the Liberals by storm and appeared to many young people as radical and exciting. Jo Grimond, then party leader, was also influential. Grimond was admired by many young people who thought his views were different and more interesting than the other party leaders. The Young Liberals were attractive because they were far more radical than the Conservatives and far less controlled than the very centralised Labour Party. The Young Liberals were achieving key changes at Liberal Party conferences, which discussed highly emotive issues for young people such as nuclear weapons and the Vietnam war.

When was your first party conference, and what are your recollections of conferences in the sixties and seventies?

My first conference was in Edinburgh in 1968. I attended on behalf of the Sutton and Cheam Liberal Party, who contributed £10.00 towards my expenses. The Young Liberals ran an alternative fringe conference at Edinburgh which explored new ideas about developing liberalism and the Liberal Party. In the sixties, large numbers of Young Liberals attended conferences and we could get hundreds of votes together on key issues.

The 1970 Conference at Eastbourne was a key event in developing the Liberal Party. Following the bad Liberal results at the previous general election, there was considerable pressure for the party to develop a new strategy. The Young Liberals moved a resolution calling for community politics to become a key plank of Liberalism, which was adopted, although widely misunderstood by many of the party's senior politicians. Jeremy Thorpe always equated it with being a good constituency MP, rather than with a radical platform for change. But many others welcomed community politics with great enthusiasm as a new way forward for Liberalism and the party.

I had already made my name in the party by 1970. At the 1969 party conference in Brighton, I arrived on the second or third day having been freshly released from prison in Czechoslovakia. I had been arrested and detained for

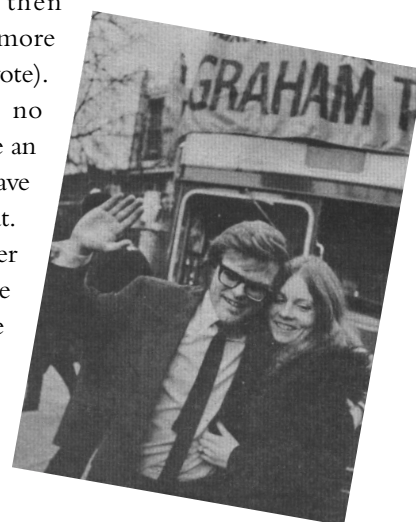
three weeks after being caught up in demonstrations to mark the anniversary of the invasion by Russia. These events received national coverage, with even national broadsheets such as the *Daily Telegraph* publishing articles in support of my release, and when I arrived in Brighton, I was hailed as a young liberating hero.

Had you always wanted to be an MP; and how were you selected for the Sutton and Cheam seat?

I had never planned a route to parliament, and became an MP by accident rather than design. I worked my way up through the Young Liberal hierarchy, becoming chair of the South Eastern Young Liberal Federation, the largest federation in the National League of Young Liberals (NLYL). I was regarded as something of a pain by the national party, and caused Jeremy Thorpe to write to Tony Greaves demanding that the NLYL get rid of me – Greaves was apparently regarded as a moderating influence on young radicals in those days! I then became Organising Vice Chairman of the NLYL; Gordon Lishman was secretary.

I always retained my involvement with the Sutton and Cheam local party. In 1970 I fought the Greater London Council (GLC) elections, managing to gain 6% of the vote, having spent most of the campaign delivering our election address. In May–June 1972, I went through a selection process and was chosen as prospective parliamentary candidate (PPC) for the Sutton and Cheam seat. I was asked to apply, and was one of several candidates. But given that in the 1970 election, Liberals in Sutton and Cheam won only 14% of the vote, the prime task of the candidate was regarded as retaining the deposit (which then required winning more than 12.5% of the vote). At the time I had no particular wish to be an MP and would not have fought any other seat.

Two months after being chosen as the PPC we knew there would be a by-election. As I had previously been selected I was the obvious choice to



fight this battle. The byelection was caused by the sitting Conservative MP being appointed as Governor to Bermuda.¹ The Conservatives assumed with such a safe seat (they had a 12,564 vote majority), there need be no concerns about holding it.

Can you tell me about the campaign and the key players and issues?

It was an extremely long campaign, lasting about 6 months. I went away on honeymoon in July 1972 and came back to find the byelection had been called to take place in December 1972.

Trevor Jones played an essential role in the campaign. He had started Focus in Liverpool, and used it to build up the party's local position and wanted an opportunity to demonstrate that his community politics techniques could be translated from Liverpool to other areas. Trevor approached me and asked if I would use his techniques and I decided that we had nothing to lose by doing so. Trevor was hugely influential in developing the campaign. The national party showed no interest at all in the byelection and in the Sutton and Cheam local party there were only about 20 activists that could be relied on to help. The Young Liberals were also extremely important and became actively involved in the campaign.

The Sutton and Cheam byelection was the first modern-style campaign run, and the first, outside Liverpool, widely to use Focus as the basis of the campaign. The first Focus went out while I was on honeymoon and was totally the work of Trevor Jones, as were all later editions of Focus until polling day. The campaign was driven by Trevor Jones, who produced all the leaflets and election material in Liverpool and then drove down on Saturdays to hand them over to the agent, Gerry Watkin. Leaflets were then delivered over the weekend. David Alton, a young Liverpool councillor, was one of the many regular weekend visitors who came to help in Sutton and Cheam.

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Local issues were the central part of the campaign. The 'Fares Fair' concessionary travel scheme for the elderly was the main issue and proved very popular with local people. The famous 'Liverpool Mattress'² also featured in some of the many Focuses that went out.

One other local issue of importance was comprehensive education, although it became more of an issue whilst I was MP, rather than during the byelection itself. The Tory Council drew up proposals to 'go comprehensive'. The Liberals were strongly in favour of comprehensive education

and, in the polarised 'grammar versus comprehensive' debate, broadly supported the Council's proposals. But it split the local Tories totally (most of the Tory councillors responsible were subsequently deselected or 'retired'). The then Secretary of State for Education, Margaret Thatcher, made some amendments to the Council's proposals, which had the (intended) effect of wrecking them. The 1974 Council elections produced a new Tory Council whose principal platform was to 'save the grammar schools' and Sutton has them to this day, although now they are all grant-maintained.

At the time we were criticised for concentrating so much on local issues, but we did raise national issues and related them to local circumstances. Most of our Focus included part of the preamble to the Liberal Party's constitution or a quote from Jo Grimond. The byelection was also the first time a 'Grumble sheet' featured in Focus.

The one other important aspect of the campaign was my promotion as a young action hero of national fame, in contrast to the Conservative candidate – Mr Neil Macfarlane, a failed Tory candidate at the previous general election. Our campaign captured the imagination of local residents, who found it exciting and different. They responded by giving me a seven and a half thousand vote majority, which remained a record swing until the Christchurch byelection in 1994.

What role did the national Liberal Party play in the campaign?

For the majority of the six-month campaign the national Liberal Party remained totally disinterested in events in Sutton and Cheam. Partly because they were more interested in Cyril Smith's campaign in Rochdale and partly because they thought Sutton and Cheam was a no-hope seat, they left Trevor and the local party to get on with it.

About twenty people came to my agent's house most weekends, from all over the country. We'd wait for Trevor to arrive from Liverpool with his Triumph Stag stuffed full of unfolded Focus and then we'd spend the weekend getting the constituency delivered. It was great fun, but I think the greatest incentive was the superb catering provided by Gerry and particularly his wife, Pauline. They were great – and it lasted for about three months!

In November 1972, the *Sutton and Cheam Advertiser* conducted a straw poll of how people would vote. Their result was that the Liberals would win with a 1,500 majority, but their disbelief in this as a possibility led them to print the story in small print and to play it down. But this straw poll confirmed the gut feeling of the campaign team and so we managed to persuade Tim (Lord) Beaumont to pay for a private opinion poll. This again predicted we would win and finally persuaded the national party, about two weeks before election day, to take some interest in what we were doing. The first national party contingent arrived 10 days before polling day and transformed the campaign, making it better organised and more sophisticated, although by then



we had already clearly won. John Spiller was one of those sent by the national party who played a key role at the end of the campaign.

The first public meeting was held one week before polling day, on my 29th birthday.

By the end of the campaign we were getting 800–900 people coming to help in Sutton and Cheam every weekend. We'd had to move out of Gerry and Pauline's house by then, of course, and rented a large empty house awaiting redevelopment. It was full to bursting at weekends (the top floor was used for helpers who stayed for the whole weekend), but I've never known anywhere feel so empty as that building on the day after polling day! By a strange irony, years later, Gerry and Pauline bought one of the flats built on that site and that was where, sadly, Gerry died a year or so ago.

A large number of people in the Liberal Party were uncomfortable with the campaign style we adopted, feeling it was flashy and too avant garde. The campaign was later described as a 'community politics' campaign, as was the Rochdale campaign. But neither were. We won Rochdale because Cyril Smith was 'Mr Rochdale'. In Sutton and Cheam we won by running an excellent marketing exercise, one which we tried to make consistent with community politics. Actual community politics were left until after we had won the campaign.

Were there any national events or issues that influenced the campaign or the result?

The Uxbridge byelection took place on the same day as Sutton and Cheam and our candidate lost his deposit. Nationally the party was at 8% in the polls, so it was not a good time for Liberalism generally.

The opposition parties did virtually nothing in the way of campaigning. The local Conservatives were split over the choice of candidate. Tag Taylor had been the local council leader who had resigned his council leadership for the candidacy but failed to be selected. Instead Neil Macfarlane, a very unremarkable candidate, was chosen. Labour chose a candidate who lived in Wimbledon and was refused time off work for the campaign, so was hardly seen during the six month period.

The big national issue at the time was UK membership of the European Common Market which took effect three weeks after polling day. There were two specifically Anti-Common Market candidates (as well as Tory and Labour

candidates who were anti), but it never became a major issue in the byelection and they only got a handful of votes. People didn't care about Europe, or immigration, which was the other national issue of the time. After the byelection, the *Sunday Times* did a poll of former Tory voters which showed that the majority of them were not liberal and were anti-Europe and anti-immigration. At the time of the byelection Liberals had no seats on the local council; they had been the main opposition on the old Sutton and Cheam Council, but failed to win any since the London Borough was created in 1964.

So how did you win the Sutton and Cheam byelection?

Yes, how did a 29 year-old Young Liberal, who was openly pro-Europe, pro-comprehensive education and with very liberal views on immigration, win a suburban constituency, where those were certainly not the prevailing views? Moreover, how was it achieved with a record swing of 33% for a party on 8% in the opinion polls, on a day when that party was losing its deposit in another byelection in another London suburb only ten miles away?

In part, of course, it was anti-government. But it had to be more than that. I had succeeded in persuading local people that I was the local 'action man' who got things done. I was shaking the Tory complacency which had always dominated the area. Those who had always felt unrecognised and ignored believed they had found a champion. Quite simply, I had convinced them that the Liberal campaign slogan 'Graham Tope is on Your Side' was actually true!

None of this really had much to do with community politics. That came after the byelection. I realised we were getting there a few months after the byelection when a couple came to the surgery (another innovation for Sutton!) about a local problem and said: 'we know it's not your way to solve it for us; we want you to help us solve it for ourselves'. They didn't know it was called 'community politics', but they did know it was about politicians working with people, not just for them.³

Graham Tope was MP for Sutton and Cheam from 1972 to 1974. He has been Leader of Sutton Council since 1986, was created a life peer in 1994 and is the Liberal Democrat spokesperson in the Lords on education. Cllr Jennifer Tankard is Head of the Leadership Office of the London Borough of Sutton and a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group committee.

Notes:

- 1 The Conservative MP, Richard Sharples, had been Minister for State at the Home Office until he was appointed Governor of Bermuda. He was assassinated in Bermuda shortly after taking up his post.
- 2 A Liberal 'urban myth', an old mattress deliberately dumped in a street so that the local Focus team could pressure the council into removing it.
- 3 25 years after the byelection, in the Sutton and Cheam constituency there are now 24 Liberal Democrat councillors and only three Tories; Labour has not won a council seat since 1974. In the last council elections in 1994, the Liberal Democrats polled over 59% of the vote, compared to 53% in the 1972 byelection.