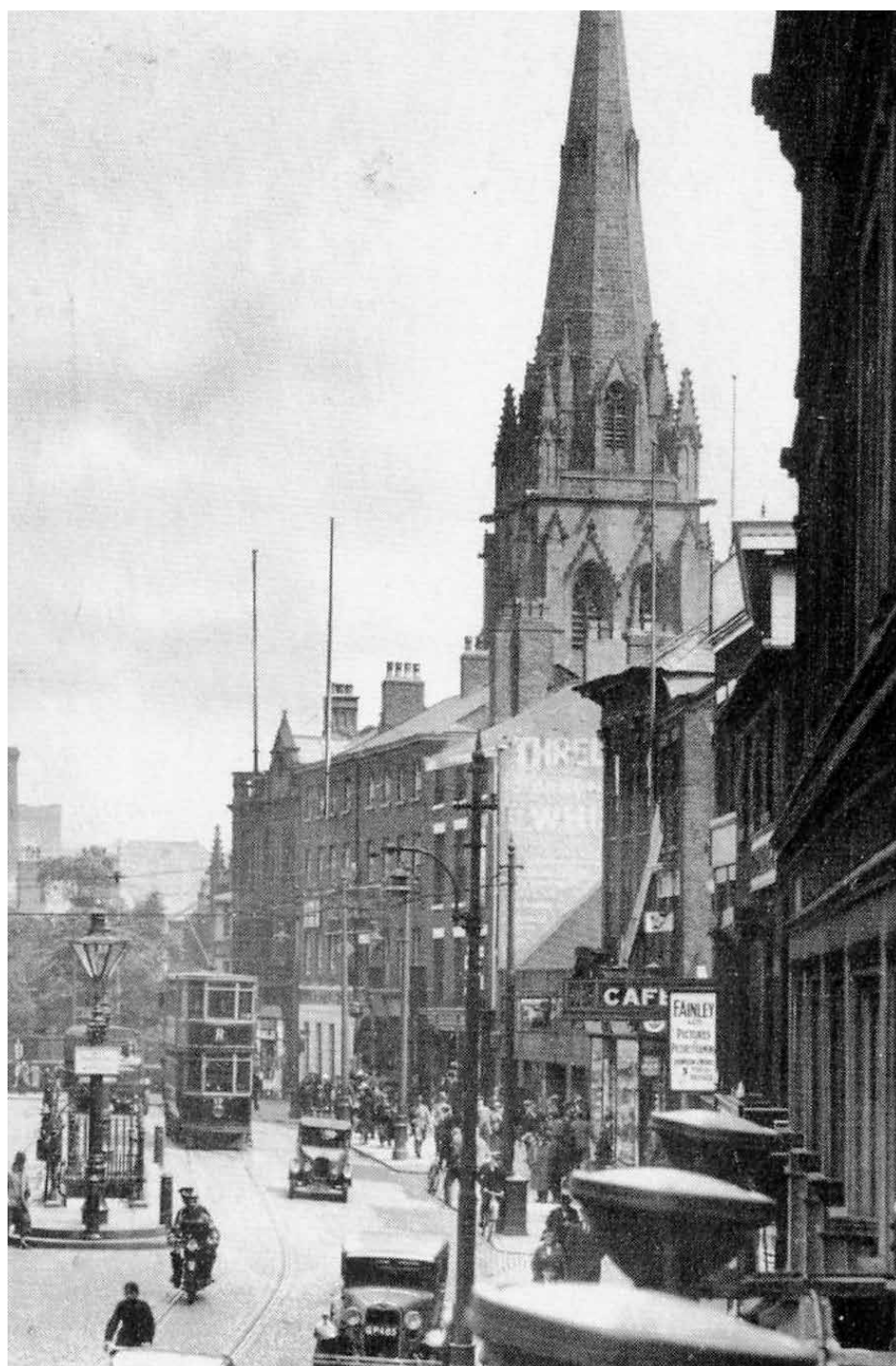


# THE 1936 PRESTON

The conduct of by-elections is one of many taxing problems confronting a coalition government. Governments fight by-elections in defence of policies they are already pursuing or are committed to pursuing in the present parliament. Granted that there is, or at least should be, only one set of coalition government policies, there is a strong argument for putting up just one coalition candidate at any by-election. Yet this approach too can cause problems. **David Dutton** examines the tensions generated between the Liberal Nationals and the Conservatives in the Preston by-election of November 1936.



# ON BY-ELECTION

ON THE EVIDENCE available so far, the present Conservative–Liberal Democrat government appears to have concluded that its component parties should both fight by-election contests rather than uniting behind a single candidate. Such a strategy is no doubt designed to emphasise that the parties to the coalition remain separate entities and that they will resume their independent identities in time for the next general election, anticipated in 2015. It is also a gesture towards the autonomy of local constituency parties whose role in the selection of a parliamentary candidate is one of the few tangible rewards for a continuous and largely unsung round of fundraising activities and delivered party leaflets.<sup>1</sup> Yet there is a potential problem here. Unlike general elections, by-elections are not fought on the basis of the future policies that a particular party will pursue, if elected, in the next parliament. Governments fight by-elections in defence of policies they are already pursuing or are committed to pursuing in the present parliament. Granted that there is, or at least should be, only one set of coalition government policies, the voters at by-elections could, in theory, be presented with two identical sets of policies by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties.

In the wartime governments of the twentieth century the argument of patriotic necessity offered ample justification for the avoidance of by-election contests, even before the coalitions of May 1915 and May 1940 were formed. But in the century's longest period of peacetime coalition, the National Government that took office in August 1931, no such imperative existed

and a large number of by-elections took place. In these the chief problem facing the partners to the coalition was often the decision over which contributing party should contest the by-election on the government's behalf. The doctrine that the incumbent party should have a presumed right to stand generally applied, though there were exceptions as, for example, when it was judged urgently necessary to find a seat for Malcolm MacDonald, son of the former Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, representing the National Labour Party, after he had gone down to defeat at Bassetlaw in the general election of 1935.<sup>2</sup> Such a doctrine, however, had the disadvantage of entrenching the existing imbalance between the component parts of the coalition. The by-election that took place in Preston in November 1936 highlights the problems that could arise and the resulting tensions between the governing parties.

After the general election of November 1935 it was plausible to suggest that the National Government, constructed four years earlier as an emergency measure to save the currency and balance the national budget, was developing into something permanent. Two general elections had resulted in popular endorsements by the electorate that were unmatched in scale in the whole of the twentieth century. As John Simon, the leader of the larger of the non-Conservative components of the government, noted in his diary, 'the conception of a National Government corresponded with the outlook of ordinary citizens, who had come to believe that the best way out of our difficulties was by way of cooperation rather than of

conflict'.<sup>3</sup> In the months that followed the 1935 election, moreover, Simon's Liberal National faction, once easily dismissed as a group of self-serving MPs representing no more than their own personal interests, took on more and more of the attributes of a traditional political party. Some of this development was already ongoing. As Simon noted, 'I have been very busy with the Liberal National organisation, which is now greatly strengthened both as regards personnel and funds'.<sup>4</sup> Such activity was now intensified. A monthly journal, the *Liberal National Magazine*, made its first appearance in March 1936, designed to propagate the party's ideas and policies, while strenuous efforts were made to build up a national and regional infrastructure to cover the whole of Great Britain. The *Liberal National Magazine* carried monthly reports of the political and social activities of these local bodies. The work of consolidation culminated in the holding of a first Liberal National Convention in June 1936, attended by more than 700 delegates. By the end of the year the Liberal National Organisation had taken over additional office space in Old Queen Street. 'We shall then be in a better position', noted the *Liberal National Magazine*, 'to deal with the rapidly expanding work arising out of the development of our organisation throughout the country'.<sup>5</sup>

Yet a major problem remained. Though the non-Conservative elements were relatively well represented within the government – in the reconstructed Cabinet the Liberal Nationals held four posts<sup>6</sup> and the National Labour group three<sup>7</sup> – the balance of strength within the House of Commons

Preston in the  
1930s

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was overwhelmingly weighted towards the Tories. In the new parliament 388 Conservatives sat alongside 35 Liberal Nationals and just 8 National Labour MPs. But doing anything about this imbalance was no easy matter, not least because Conservative party managers could readily take refuge behind the autonomy of their local party associations. A National Co-ordinating Committee had been set up in March 1933, one of whose tasks was to find more opportunities for representatives of the two minor parties within the government. But it had few tangible achievements to its name, not least because it tended to draw back when confronted by the accusation that it was 'giving away' Conservative seats. Conservative criticism of its activities was voiced at the meeting of the party's National Union Central Council in March 1934. It was always possible that the future electoral tide would swing even more favourably towards the government, allowing Liberal National and National Labour candidates to pick up additional seats in constituencies they were already contesting. In practice, however, the election of each new Liberal National or National Labour MP would probably require an act of self-denial on the part of a well-established local Conservative organisation.

Not surprisingly, the existing imbalance was a source of ongoing concern and both a cause and a symptom of the feeling – probably universal in coalitions – that the interests and opinions of the minor partners were receiving insufficient attention within the government as a whole. The Liberal National case was underpinned by the notion of the 'Liberal vote'. The fortunes of the Liberal Party itself were in patent and probably irreversible decline; but Liberal ideas were believed to remain firmly embedded within the British electorate. The 'Liberal vote' was impossible accurately to calculate and was frequently exaggerated,<sup>8</sup> but it did seem clear that the existence of a coalition enabled the government to attract substantial numbers of voters who would have been beyond the reach of the Conservatives standing alone. In the general elections of 1931 and 1935 the government had secured 67.2 and 53.5 per cent of the total vote

respectively. As recently as 1929 the Liberal Party had attracted as much as 23.6 per cent of those who went to the polls. By 1935, however, the independent Liberal vote had dropped to just 6.6 per cent. It seemed reasonable to argue that at least some of these missing Liberals were now supporting not just Liberal National candidates but also, because of their electoral partnership with the Simonite group, the Conservatives themselves.

The first prominent figure to speak out publicly on behalf of the National Government's junior partners was Earl de la Warr, National Labour Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Board of Education in Stanley Baldwin's administration.<sup>9</sup> Speaking to the first Area Conference organised by the National Labour Party in Birmingham in May 1936, de la Warr declared that there were millions of men and women who were determined not to hand the country over to Attlee's Labour Party, but equally determined not to vote for a purely Conservative government. He called for the creation of a strong, fighting centre group, which would be more than a mere coalition of the supporters of the government – "fighting" because of its realism, and "centre" because it abhorred equally complacency on the Right and irresponsibility on the Left'. The supporters of National Labour should cling to the idealism that had taken them into the Labour Party and develop the realism that had taken them out of it.<sup>10</sup> De la Warr's call was taken up by Robert Bernays, Liberal MP for Bristol North, who was at the time involved in negotiations that would soon take him into the Liberal National Party. In a letter to *The Times* Bernays argued that what was needed was 'some definite and coherent group determined to work, within the ranks of the Government's supporters, for a continuance of a searching programme of social reform and the support of Mr Eden [Foreign Secretary] in the maintenance of the greatest possible measure of collective security'. Bernays complained of a lack of organisation and leadership. 'Working in isolation as we do, we are not able to exercise our rightful influence in shaping the programme and policy of the government.' As a result, the need for an effective association

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of the left-wing supporters of the National Government was becoming more imperative with every passing month. Otherwise, right-wing Conservatives would be able to argue that the Liberal Nationals and the National Labour group did not stand for a sufficiently definite policy and that their influence was therefore negative and their electoral usefulness doubtful. Bernays called for weekly meetings of the Liberal National and National Labour groups to decide upon a common line and an agreed spokesman on all important issues of government business. 'A really powerful group', he judged, 'would revolutionize the viewpoint of our Conservative colleagues' and perhaps ultimately attract the adherence of moderate Tories and independent Liberals. Action was urgent. With Baldwin's retirement believed to be imminent, Bernays warned that his successor might well try to take the government to the right.<sup>11</sup>

Bernays's letter gave rise to a lively debate in the correspondence columns of *The Times*. The newspaper itself applauded his ideas to the extent that it recognised the importance of the National Government pursuing radical social policies, but it dismissed Bernays's fears about the future direction of the National Government, insisting that the Conservative right wing had already been marginalised.<sup>12</sup> Robert Boothby, the maverick Tory MP for East Aberdeenshire, did nothing to lessen the minor parties' anxiety, inviting Liberal National and National Labour members to 'drop their present obsolete and fairly ridiculous political affiliations' and join the 'only modern Liberal party', the Conservatives.<sup>13</sup> But at least one correspondent got to the heart of the vulnerability of the two minor parties – the paucity of their parliamentary representation. 'As I see it', wrote John Worthington,

The Conservative Party at the last General Election would not surrender its title to any seats that it could hope to win; and now that its candidates have been returned with the help of National votes, Mr Boothby and some of his friends are assessing the minority groups not by the value of their support

in the constituencies but by their numerical weakness in the House.<sup>14</sup>

It was against this background that a parliamentary vacancy occurred in Preston when the sitting Conservative MP, William Kirkpatrick, resigned upon his appointment as Representative in China of the Export Credits Guarantee Department.<sup>15</sup> For two reasons the resulting by-election, scheduled for 25 November 1936, offered a clear opportunity to do something to redress the interparty imbalance within the National Government. On the one hand, Preston was a two-member constituency. Although single-member constituencies had been the norm since the redistribution of seats in 1885, two-member constituencies were not finally eliminated until 1950. Fifteen such constituencies remained at the end of the First World War and offered an obvious and visible chance for coalition parties to display their cooperation and partnership to the electorate. Thus the two-member seats of Norwich and Southampton had offered a joint Conservative–Liberal National ticket at both the general elections of 1931 and 1935, while Oldham and Sunderland, having fielded two Tories in 1931, both conceded one seat to the Liberal Nationals in 1935. The second factor was that a reasonably strong Liberal tradition clearly persisted in Preston. Liberal candidates had taken one of the Preston seats at each of the general elections of 1922, 1923 and 1929. Significantly, however, and unusually, these Liberal successes had been achieved in tandem with Labour candidates. There was, therefore, apart from 1931 itself, little recent tradition of Liberal–Conservative cooperation upon which to build.

The *Lancashire Daily Post* reported the situation at the end of October 1936. The ‘interesting question of the moment’, it suggested, was whether it would be possible for an agreement to be reached between the Conservatives and ‘those Liberals who support the National Government’ to run a Liberal National candidate. Informal discussions were known to have taken place between the local leaders of the two parties, but ‘so far as can be ascertained there seems

at present to be some doubt as to whether such an understanding can be arrived at’. Meeting on 19 October, the Emergency Committee of the Preston Conservative Association considered ‘certain names’, but eventually agreed to postpone their decision.<sup>16</sup> Their Liberal National counterparts clearly saw this delay as an opportunity to seize the initiative themselves. They believed that the case for a Liberal National candidate was compelling. According to Levi Collison, leader of the Preston Liberal Nationals and once Liberal MP for Penrith, ‘We have consistently and wholeheartedly supported the National Government since the crisis of 1931. It was only with our help that the two Conservative National candidates secured election. We consider we are entitled to select the candidate. We have been expecting this opportunity would come along and we are ready with a good man.’<sup>17</sup>

The identity of that ‘good man’ soon became known. On the evening of 20 October the Liberal Nationals decided to invite Sir John Barlow to address them with a view to his adoption as ‘National’ candidate at the by-election.<sup>18</sup> Barlow was in some ways an ideal choice. A member of a well-known Lancashire family, he was engaged in the cotton industry upon which Preston was still largely dependent. But he was not a Conservative. With what turned out to be misplaced confidence, Collison declared that ‘we have been promised the full backing of the Liberal National Organisation in London’. Meanwhile, the Preston Conservative Association declined, for the time being, to comment on the situation that had arisen.<sup>19</sup>

A public dispute between the component parts of the National Government could only work to the advantage of Labour and, if they decided to put forward a candidate of their own, the independent Liberals. Douglas Hacking, newly appointed Conservative Party chairman, speaking in neighbouring Leyland, called for unity between the National parties. ‘They are not yet ready’, he suggested, ‘to have differences of opinion.’<sup>20</sup> The possibility of the sort of compromise that Hacking hoped for seemed to have increased when it was announced that a joint meeting of the executives of the Preston

Conservative Party and the Preston Liberal National Association had been arranged for 26 October. Collison insisted that there was no split between his party and the Conservatives. ‘We are all activated by the desire to retain the seat for the National Government and the discussions between the two sides are of the friendliest character.’<sup>21</sup> The official report of the joint meeting spoke of a ‘frank and open discussion’. First accounts suggested that proceedings had been adjourned until such time as Barlow came to Preston and addressed both associations. ‘This seems to show’, suggested the *Liverpool Daily Post* ‘that there is hope of a united front against the Socialist nominee.’<sup>22</sup> It soon emerged, however, that, at the adjournment of the joint meeting, the Conservative Emergency Committee had gone into private session and decided that they would not in fact be inviting Barlow to address them. ‘I am greatly disappointed at the decision’, commented Collison, ‘and that feeling I know is shared by every member of my executive.’<sup>23</sup>

Now it was the turn of the Preston Conservatives to take unilateral action. Sir Norman Seddon Brown, chairman of the Preston Conservative Association, announced that a meeting of the Conservative Council would be held in the near future at which a National candidate would be recommended for adoption. Invitations would be sent to the Liberal Nationals to send representatives to the adoption meeting. Collison quickly made it known that it was ‘not likely’ that Liberal Nationals would attend such a meeting. He ‘could not say’ whether they would go ahead with a candidate of their own. Meanwhile, however, rumours grew that the orthodox Liberal Party in Preston would come forward with their own candidate in the hope of attracting the support of those Liberals and Liberal Nationals who had backed the Conservatives at the general election.<sup>24</sup>

By the end of October it was clear that the Conservatives intended to nominate Captain Edward Cobb. Born in the Falkland Islands and educated at Sandhurst, Cobb had served with distinction in the First World War before becoming a member of the London County Council in 1925. There he had interested himself mainly in

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questions of education and slum clearance, serving for a time as chairman of the Council's Education Committee. An experienced platform speaker and wholehearted supporter of the National Government, he had no obvious connection with Preston apart from serving on the London County Council alongside Adrian Moreing, now the other sitting Conservative MP for Preston.<sup>25</sup>

Feelings ran high among the Liberal Nationals of Preston that they had to make a stand. The outcome, suggested one activist, would provide an acid test not only of the honesty of the Conservatives' professions of good faith and goodwill towards their Liberal allies, but also of the ability of those allies to stand up for their reasonable rights. If the Tories succeeded in enforcing their will, this would mean that 'never under any circumstances' could the small number of Liberal National MPs be increased.<sup>26</sup> Collison moved quickly to dispel the idea that the nomination of Sir John Barlow had been designed to bounce the Conservatives into submission. There had, he insisted, been no intention to embarrass the Tories by putting a Liberal National into the field. Indeed, several meetings had been held between the leaders of the two parties to discuss the possibility of Barlow's candidature, and it was not until the idea was brought before the Conservatives' Emergency Committee, when they 'refused absolutely to consider any candidate but a Tory', that Barlow's name was first published and then only to the Executive Committee of the Liberal Nationals. According to Collison, ever since the general election the Liberal Nationals had been encouraged to believe that, in the event of a vacancy, the Tories would look favourably upon a Liberal National candidate in recognition of the loyal support given to Conservative candidates at both the general elections of 1931 and 1935. 'We do not think it unreasonable on our part', he concluded, 'to ask that Sir John Barlow should be the National candidate in this by-election.'<sup>27</sup> With Cobb duly adopted, there was now a grave danger, Collison predicted, that the seat would be lost. In that situation the blame would lie not with the Liberal Nationals but with 'those who have allowed themselves to

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be influenced by a few extremists who are least able to judge what is best in the interests of the National Government in this by-election'.<sup>28</sup> In response Seddon Brown merely insisted that the Conservative choice had been determined solely by the need to select a candidate capable of holding the seat. That being the case, 'the preference for Captain Cobb was inevitable'.<sup>29</sup>

As Cobb opened his campaign, rifts among the Liberal Nationals became apparent. No Liberal Nationals signed Cobb's nomination papers, but one member of the local party's executive, Councillor J. J. Ward, appeared on the platform at Cobb's first election meeting and spoke on his behalf. Meanwhile it was announced that the Liberal National chief whip, Sir James Blindell, would be making an early appearance in the constituency to support the Conservative candidate.<sup>30</sup> At the same time Barlow finally withdrew from the contest 'because of the inadvisability of splitting the National vote'. He did, however, put on record his view that, granted the support given by 'Preston Liberals' to the two Conservative candidates in both the general elections of 1931 and 1935, it was 'very unfortunate that you should receive such unsympathetic treatment at the present time'.<sup>31</sup> Such actions by the Conservatives 'cannot enthuse would-be Liberal supporters'.<sup>32</sup>

Prior to his appearance in the constituency, Blindell met Preston Liberal National leaders in Manchester. He denied, however, that the meeting had been used to try to persuade him not to speak in the by-election campaign. Yet the absence of Liberal National officials when the chief whip delivered his speech in Preston on 10 November did not go unnoticed and offered an ironic commentary on his plea to maintain a spirit of cooperation between the parties to ensure that the National Government continued for many years to come. Blindell declared that that cooperation could be extended by giving the smaller parties a larger representation in the House of Commons, but had to admit that, notwithstanding the 'utmost measure of goodwill' prevailing between the Conservative and Liberal National organisations, it had not proved possible to utilise the by-election to achieve

this object. Offering an assurance that, by the time of the next general election, 'an extended list' of Liberal Nationals would be seeking the endorsement of the electorate, he insisted that the immediate need was for Conservative, Liberal National and National Labour supporters to unite behind Cobb to ensure that a candidate supporting the National Government was returned to parliament.<sup>33</sup>

If Blindell's visit had been designed to draw a line under the spat between Liberal Nationals and Conservatives in Preston, it evidently failed. After a meeting on 17 November, the Liberal National executive announced that it had been unanimously agreed that the party would take no public part in the by-election. The only advice they were prepared to give to the 'Liberals of Preston' was to act according to their own judgement. The official statement of the meeting continued:

We consider that we have not, as Liberals, had a fair deal ... It did not seem unreasonable on our part to ask that we might on this occasion, in a double-barrelled seat, have the opportunity of nominating a Liberal National and more especially when we had offered to us the services of so able a man as Sir John Barlow, who has spent all his life in the cotton trade, and who would have made an admirable member for a constituency dependent on the cotton trade and whose only disqualification was that he was not a Tory.

The Conservatives had sacrificed a 'unique opportunity' of making the government 'more National'. In the whole of the North-West area, consisting of Lancashire, Westmorland, Cheshire and the High Peak division of Derbyshire, Liberal Nationals held just two seats out of a total of eighty-three. 'We do not question for a moment the wisdom of the National Government, but we consider that if we are expected to continue supporting the Government as Liberals we ought to have more adequate representation in the House of Commons.'<sup>34</sup> The freedom in which Liberals in the constituency were thus left was emphasised when the mainstream party, which had by now

decided not to field a candidate, also declared that it would give no guidance to its supporters on how to vote.<sup>35</sup>

These developments created considerable uncertainty over the outcome of the by-election itself. As one newspaper put it on polling day, 'guessing at the verdict is rendered especially difficult, mainly because the Liberal force is an unknown quantity, both as to actual strength and as to the direction in which it will be exerted'.<sup>36</sup> The 'Liberal vote' in Preston was variously estimated at anything between 3,000 and 10,000 votes and, while both the Conservative and Labour candidates expressed confidence that they would pick up the majority of it, the *Liverpool Daily Post* suspected that 'a big proportion' would opt for Labour, 'if only "in revenge" for the rejection of a Liberal National nominee in this by-election'.<sup>37</sup>

In the circumstances the result was something of an anti-climax with Cobb holding on to the seat for the government with a narrow but clear majority of 1,605 votes over F. G. Bowles, the Labour candidate.<sup>38</sup> Significantly, Miss Florence White of Bradford, standing as a single-issue Independent candidate in support of spinsters' pensions, secured as many as 3,221 votes, enough to determine the outcome of the contest. The result was a clear disappointment for Labour. 'The truth is', suggested the *Liverpool Post*, that Labour was 'in a very weak state in the country just now ... It is distracted and divided and therefore is making no progress. It looks, in short, as if it has reached its ultimate strength'.<sup>39</sup> But the result was also a blow for the Liberal Nationals. The Preston party must have hoped that their abstention from the campaign would lead to clear evidence of their crucial value to the government. This wish had not been fulfilled. The implications of this went way beyond Preston. Those Conservatives who had always been uneasy about the 'coalition' which the National Government involved could now argue that their party was fully capable of securing a parliamentary majority on its own. The Liberal National hierarchy in London had had no alternative but to disown their Preston colleagues. They knew that a serious rift with

the Conservatives involved the possibility of electoral annihilation that could not be risked. Simon himself sent Cobb an eve-of-poll message of support. Yet he too must have hoped that the Preston result would emphasise the indispensability of his party, no matter what its strength in the House of Commons. And the whole episode was grist to the mill of the mainstream Liberal Party. Writing in the *Westminster Newsletter*, Ramsay Muir claimed that the Liberal Nationals had been 'brutally turned down' by the Conservatives and now knew – or ought to know – 'what treatment they may expect from their masters'.<sup>40</sup>

Liberal Nationals were unlikely to let the issue of their under-representation in the House of Commons drop. Bernays returned to the question at the beginning of 1937. If the National Government were to be other than a 'fraud on the electorate', he insisted, a separate Liberal National identity must be preserved. For this to be guaranteed a change in the present imbalance of forces in the Commons was a prerequisite:

The two-member constituencies afford an obvious opportunity to increase Liberal representation and a chance was lost of increasing Liberal representation at the recent Preston by-election. I realise the difficulty of persuading local Conservative associations to make any sacrifice in Party representation, but a plain and unequivocal recommendation by the Leader of the Conservative Party on occasion, when the Liberal Nationals have obvious claims to the seat, would be unlikely to be ignored.

But, Bernays argued, the Liberal Nationals themselves could not escape a share of the responsibility for their present inadequate representation. They should be far more ready than they were to take on hopeless contests. Their claim to the Preston seat would have been much stronger had they been willing to fight the earlier by-election at Clay Cross where the government had faced a Labour majority of 15,000.<sup>41</sup>

William Mabane, Liberal National MP for Huddersfield, took up the same theme a few

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weeks later. In an article in the *Liberal National Magazine* he argued that interparty cooperation would only be real if, in appropriate constituencies, the banner of the National Government was carried by Liberals and not by Conservatives. So far, Conservatives had paid lip service to this idea, but done little about it.<sup>42</sup> Later that year, at the conference of the Scottish Liberal Nationals in Peebles, considerable discussion arose over a resolution moved by the chairman of the Edinburgh Area Council on the subject of the party's representation in parliament. It declared that the number of Liberal National members was in no way proportionate to the volume of Liberal supporters of the National Government throughout the country and requested that measures be taken to ensure the return of an increased number of MPs. Significantly, from the platform, Lord Hutchison, chairman of the Liberal National Council, suggested that more progress might be made by winning new seats rather than taking over existing government seats from the Conservatives.<sup>43</sup>

Over the remaining years before the outbreak of the Second World War (or, to put it another way, before the anticipated date of the next general election), it appeared that some progress was being made. The *Liberal National Magazine* reported that Liberal National candidates had been selected to fight a number of constituencies at the next general election, none of which had been contested by the party in 1935. The list included Manchester (Clayton), Chesterfield, Dewsbury, Doncaster, Gower, Hackney South, Hanley, Motherwell, Sheffield (Hillsborough), South Shields and Swansea East. But the degree of Conservative concession involved in this exercise was very limited. Two of these seats had been contested by National Labour candidates in 1935 and a third by a 'National' candidate without further qualification; in a fourth the Labour Party had not been opposed. The remaining seven had previously fielded a Conservative, but in none of the eleven seats had the government candidate been successful. In other words, it would probably require a stronger overall performance by the National Government at the next general

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election compared to 1935 for the Liberal Nationals to secure any increase in their parliamentary representation. Granted that the earlier contest had itself produced a government majority of 248, this was inherently unlikely.

Fighting hopeless seats as a preliminary to laying claim to more promising constituencies had, of course, been part of Bernays's suggested strategy. But it meant postponing any adjustment to the Conservative–Liberal National parliamentary imbalance into the indefinite future. Securing Liberal National nominations at the expense of local Conservative parties which believed they had themselves a reasonable prospect of electoral success was never going to be easy. The Tory MP, Cuthbert Headlam, who had captured the marginal seat of Barnard Castle in Co. Durham from Labour in 1924, lost it in 1929 and won it back again in 1931, recorded a meeting with the Conservative chief whip, David Margesson:

I had 'an interview' with David Margesson in the evening and talked to him about his 'Co-ordinating' committee (the body which gives away seats to the Nat. Lab. and Lib. Nat. candidates) – I told him exactly what would be the effect of giving away seats in Durham. He was civil enough and appeared to understand me, even admitting that he had wished he had consulted me before playing the fool.<sup>44</sup>

When the next general election, postponed by six years of war, was finally held in 1945, many of these pre-war arrangements were honoured and Liberal National candidates duly went into battle. In the face, however, of a marked pro-Labour swing, none was successful. By that time, of course, the National Government itself was a thing of the past, at least in the sense that it had been conceived in 1931, and the electorate was ready decisively to reject that government's mantra

that the Labour Party was unfit to govern.

*David Dutton's History of the Liberal Party since 1900 (Palgrave Macmillan) is scheduled for publication at the end of 2012. His book Liberals in Schism: A History of the National Liberal Party (I.B. Tauris) is to be re-issued in paperback at around the same time.*

- 1 I am grateful to Professor Vernon Bogdanor for this insight.
- 2 In 1935 Sir Ian Macpherson, Liberal National MP for Ross and Cromarty, was elevated to the peerage as Baron Strathcarron. In the resulting by-election Malcolm MacDonald was elected as National Labour MP, despite the intervention of Winston Churchill's son, Randolph, as an 'Independent Conservative'. B. Roberts, *Randolph: a Study of Churchill's Son* (London, 1984), pp. 152–6; E. A. Cameron, "'Rival foundlings': the Ross and Cromarty by-election, 10 February 1936", *Historical Research* 81, 213 (2008), pp. 507–30.
- 3 Bodleian Library, Oxford, Simon MSS 7, diary 5 Dec. 1935.
- 4 *Ibid.*, diary 22 Oct. 1935.
- 5 *Liberal National Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 1, Nov. 1936.
- 6 John Simon (Home Secretary), Walter Runciman (President of the Board of Trade), Godfrey Collins (Scottish Secretary) and Ernest Brown (Minister of Labour).
- 7 Ramsay MacDonald (Lord President of the Council), Malcolm MacDonald (Dominions Secretary) and Jimmy Thomas (Colonial Secretary).
- 8 When Lord Hutchison suggested that Liberal Nationals might be attracting as many as four million votes to the government's total, his calculations were ridiculed by Archibald Sinclair, the new leader of the Liberal Party. *Liberal Magazine*, vol. XLIV, no. 513, June 1936.
- 9 Herbrand Edward Dundonald Brassey Sackville, 9<sup>th</sup> Earl de la Warr (1900–76), Lord Privy Seal (1937–8), President of the Board of Education (1938–40), First Commissioner of Works (1940), Postmaster-General (1951–5).

- 10 *The Times*, 18 May 1936.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 20 May 1936.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*, 27 May 1936.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 30 May 1936.
- 15 The result of the 1935 general election was as follows: A. C. Moreing (Con.) 37,219; W. M. Kirkpatrick (Con.) 36,797; R. A. Lyster (Lab.) 32,225; R. L. Reiss (Lab.) 31,827.
- 16 *Lancashire Daily Post*, 20 Oct. 1936.
- 17 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 21 Oct. 1936.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 22 Oct. 1936.
- 19 *Lancashire Daily Post*, 21 Oct. 1936.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*, 23 Oct. 1936.
- 22 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 27 Oct. 1936.
- 23 *Lancashire Daily Post*, 27 Oct. 1936.
- 24 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 28 Oct. 1936.
- 25 *Manchester Guardian*, 31 Oct. 1936.
- 26 *Lancashire Daily Post*, 2 Nov. 1936, letter from Frederick Hindle.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 3 Nov. 1936.
- 28 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 4 Nov. 1936.
- 29 *Manchester Guardian*, 5 Nov. 1936.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 7 Nov. 1936.
- 31 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 10 Nov. 1936.
- 32 Letter from Barlow to Colli-son, published in *Liverpool Daily Post*, 10 Nov. 1936. Barlow's troubled relationship with the Liberal National Party continued. In 1943 he was passed over as candidate for a by-election at Eddisbury in Cheshire when local Tory farmers succeeded in championing the claims of Thomas Peacock. The latter stood as a Liberal National, but was not known to have had any previous association with the party. Peacock lost the seat to the Common Wealth candidate, John Loverseed. Barlow did succeed in recapturing Eddisbury for the Liberal Nationals in the general election of 1945, only to see the constituency disappear as a result of boundary changes in 1950. Perhaps sensing that life was easier as a Tory, Barlow was elected as Conservative MP for Middleton and Prestwich at the general election of 1951 and evolved into an archetypal 'knight of the shire'. He held the seat until defeated in the general election of 1966.
- 33 *Manchester Guardian*, 11 Nov. 1936.
- 34 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 18 Nov. 1936.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 20 Nov. 1936.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 25 Nov. 1936.
- 37 *The Times*, 20 Nov. 1936; *Liverpool Daily Post*, 23 and 25 Nov. 1936.
- 38 The full result was E. C. Cobb (Con.) 32,575; F. G. Bowles (Lab.) 30,970; Miss F. White (Independent) 3,221. Cobb represented Preston until standing down at the general election of 1945, at which he unsuccessfully contested Eton and Slough. At Moreing's death in 1940 he protested, to no avail, against the nomination of Winston Churchill's son, Randolph, as Conservative candidate. Churchill was duly elected, unopposed, under the terms of the wartime electoral truce, but Cobb threatened to stand down at the next general election. The two men clashed openly in September 1942 after Churchill publicly criticised the Conservative Party. Cobb now made it clear that he would not run in harness with someone who had been disloyal to the party, but he had in fact already agreed to resign his seat because he lived too far from Preston to give his constituency the attention it merited. Roberts, *Churchill*, pp. 193, 233–4.
- 39 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 26 Nov. 1936.
- 40 *Manchester Guardian*, 10 Dec. 1936.
- 41 *Liberal National Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 3, Jan. 1937.
- 42 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, no. 5, April 1937.
- 43 *Dumfries and Galloway Standard and Advertiser*, 6 Oct. 1937.
- 44 S. Ball (ed.), *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Baldwin and MacDonald: the Headlam Diaries 1921–1935* (Historians' Press, 1992), p. 330.