

# SPECTACULA

## **Jaime Reynolds examines Liberal wins against the odds at general elections.**

In June 2001 Liberal Democrats celebrated the capture of Guildford, a seat that had been in Conservative possession for more than ninety years. It was the party's first win in Surrey since 1906. But, although it was a remarkable result, it was not an entirely unexpected one. The party had come to within 8.3 per cent of victory in 1997 and, with a strong local government base and local issues working in their favour, a win was definitely on the cards in 2001; it duly came with a swing of 4.8 per cent. Guildford was an impressive Lib Dem victory, but not by historical standards a spectacular one.



# AR VICTORIES

**W**hat should count as a *spectacular victory*? A good working definition would be a seat that is won against the odds and beyond normal psephological expectations: in other words those cases where the Liberal vote leaps 10 or 15 per cent and the opponent's vote plunges dramatically. To qualify, the Liberal should come from at least 10 per cent behind, and in the really spectacular cases 20 per cent or more.

Over the years the Liberals have made a speciality of such wins in by-elections. The first modern one was in 1958 at Torrington when they won a seat that they had not even contested at the previous two general elections. The most famous and sensational victory was at Orpington in 1962, a rock-solid Tory seat (majority 34.4 per cent), which Eric Lubbock won with a massive swing of 26.8 per cent. Many other by-election triumphs have followed: Sutton & Cheam in 1972, Bermondsey in 1983, Eastbourne in 1990, Newbury and Christchurch in 1993, Romsey in 2000 and most recently Brent East and Leicester South, to name but a few. The special circumstances of by-elections – the media attention, the opportunity to concentrate resources, and the availability of large numbers of protest votes – all make for excitement and unpredictability. In fact, by-election upsets have become a regular feature in recent decades,

although lately there has been a sharp decline in their frequency as the average age and mortality rate of MPs fall and party managers strive to avoid resignations and departures from politics between general elections.

Spectacular victories in general elections are less common and, with the focus on the national contest between the parties, usually attract less attention. They are, however, important – especially for the Liberals who in all general elections since the 1920s have fought on a narrower front than the other two parties, in the sense that there have been relatively few marginal seats where the Liberals have been an obvious challenger to the incumbent party. Following the general election of 2001, for example, there are just fifteen Conservative and four Labour seats with a majority of less than 10 per cent over a Liberal Democrat. This means that, to advance significantly at the next general election, the party needs to win not only its target seats but also some others that appear to be 'off the map'. By-elections and the defections of Labour and Conservative MPs are only likely to help at the margins. For the Liberal Democrats to break through from their present fifty-five MPs to, say, a hundred, they would have to win all the marginals within their range and some thirty more in seats where they are currently over 10 per cent behind the incumbent. In short they need to win spectacular victories; Guildford-type victories,

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however welcome and creditable, will not be enough.

Historically – as one might expect – such spectacular victories by Liberals at general elections are uncommon. Looking back into electoral pre-history as it were, before universal suffrage, when the Liberals were competing for government, it was not unusual for large numbers of seats to change hands at general elections on swings of more than 5 per cent. The Liberals won a host of them from the Tories in their triumph at the 1906 general election. However, in more modern times and in the context of the three-party contests that are now the norm, the numbers drop dramatically.

The elections of the inter-war period were complicated by both volatility in voting patterns and by shifting pacts and alliances between the parties at local and national level. Most of them were, in any case, disastrous for the Liberals, and victories, let alone spectacular victories, were few and far between. Nevertheless the two best Liberal general election performances of the period, 1923 and 1929, provide some examples that are worth a closer look.

At the general election of 1923 the Liberals gained eighty seats.<sup>1</sup> Some of their wins were regarded at the time as freakish. In Hemel Hempstead, a Liberal, nominated at the last moment, ousted Baldwin's chief lieutenant, J. C. C. Davidson, overturning a Conservative majority of 34.8 per cent in a seat that the

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Liberals had not contested since 1910 and where they had no constituency organisation.<sup>2</sup> Liverpool Wavertree, which the Liberals had not contested in 1922 and where they had to contend with strong Labour opposition in 1923, was an even more extraordinary gain from the Tories.<sup>3</sup>

However, nine Liberal gains in 1923, in seats that were fought by all three parties in both 1922 and 1923 and where the Liberal overturned a majority of over 10 per cent, are more comparable with modern elections. The most impressive was perhaps Manchester Rusholme where Charles Masterman<sup>4</sup> finally re-entered parliament with a 15 per cent swing, overturning a Tory majority of 21.8 per cent to defeat Jeremy Thorpe's father, the Conservative incumbent. Masterman, whose ministerial career had been wrecked in 1914 by his defeat in a by-election and failure in several subsequent attempts to re-enter the Commons, exclaimed to his wife as they heard the result: 'We've won, my dear, and I thought we were never going to again.'<sup>5</sup> A slightly larger Conservative majority (23.2 per cent) was demolished by a Liberal in the Isle of Ely with a 12.5 per cent swing. Among the more amazing victories was Gateshead, where the Liberal jumped from third place, 18.9 per cent behind Labour, to win the seat; the Liberal vote increased from 25 per cent to 43 per cent. Victories from third place were also won in Middlesbrough East, Bosworth and Nuneaton.

Of course the key factor in these seismic electoral shifts was the potency of the free trade cause at the 1923 election. It is clear that free-trade Conservatives abstained or transferred *en masse* to the Liberals in many commercial constituencies. In Wavertree and Gateshead the Tory vote almost halved. Elsewhere, such as in Luton, the Labour vote collapsed as free traders rallied behind the Liberals.

In the 1924 election these Liberal gains were reversed in simi-

larly spectacular fashion as the voters polarised between the outgoing Labour Government and the Conservative Opposition. All the spectacular gains of 1923 were lost. In Rusholme, Masterman was ousted with a 14.6 per cent swing to the Tories. In Wavertree and Gateshead the Liberals fell back to third place, losing more than half of their 1923 votes.

The 1929 general election brought a new crop of spectacular wins, mostly in rural constituencies. The most sensational was Ashford, a seat that had remained Tory even in 1906. The Liberal candidate, a Nonconformist minister and campaigner against tithe collection, the Reverend Roderick Kedward, overturned a Conservative majority of 38.6 per cent with a swing of 21 per cent, increasing the Liberal vote from 22 per cent to 46 per cent. This was a victory almost on the scale of that in nearby Orpington three decades later. The seat returned to the Conservative fold in 1931 and has remained a Tory seat ever since. It is unclear how far the tithe issue helped Kedward's victory in 1929, though the Tories certainly tried to use his support for non-payment against him in 1931.<sup>6</sup>

Other spectacular Liberal victories were secured at Eye, Dorset East and Hereford, where Conservative majorities above 20 per cent were overturned. In all three the popularity of the candidate seems to have played a part. Edgar Granville<sup>7</sup> won Eye in Suffolk with a swing of 13.7 per cent and was to hold the seat until 1951. Alec Glassey<sup>8</sup> gained Dorset East with a 10.6 per cent swing. In Hereford, despite the intervention of a Labour candidate, the 23-year-old Frank Owen<sup>9</sup> won with a 12.6 per cent swing.

Luton, which had been a spectacular gain in 1923 and a bad defeat in 1924, was again won in spectacular style in 1929 by Leslie Burgin with a 9.8 per cent swing. Two safe Tory seats were gained in Manchester with swings of 8 per cent. There were also wins in Dumfriesshire (Conservative majority 15.4 per cent, swing

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12.2 per cent), Flintshire (Conservative majority 11.9 per cent, swing 10 per cent) and Huntingdonshire (Conservative majority 13.8 per cent, swing 8.7 per cent, Labour intervention).

Such dramatic surges in the Liberal vote show clearly that there was still considerable vitality in the party in the 1920s, particularly in commercial and exporting seats loyal to free trade and in rural seats hit by the agricultural depression. The force with which the Liberals were able to bounce back in these areas suggests that the party was perhaps not as doomed electorally after the First World War as many historians have concluded.

The Liberals' definitive electoral collapse occurred after 1929, and it was to be thirty years before the Liberals even came close to another spectacular gain at a general election.<sup>10</sup> That was in 1959 when Jeremy Thorpe toppled a Conservative majority of 14.6 per cent to win North Devon with a swing of 7.8 per cent. He had raised the Liberal vote from 19 per cent in 1951, to 32 per cent in 1955 and to 43 per cent in 1959.

In 1964 Peter Bessell achieved a near-spectacular success in Bodmin, having raised the Liberal vote by 10.3 per cent between 1955 and 1959 and a further 10.3 per cent between 1959 and 1964. However, the Tory majority had been eroded to 7.7 per cent by the time of Bessell's breakthrough. Like North Devon, this gain owed much to a charismatic candidate, highly professional Liberal organisation and effective campaigning on local issues.<sup>11</sup>

Effective targeting of seats in the Scottish Highlands produced several spectacular gains in the mid-1960s. In 1964 Alastair MacKenzie<sup>12</sup> defeated the National Liberal and Conservative MP who had represented Ross & Cromarty since 1945. Mackenzie jumped from third place, making up a 23.5 per cent deficit to win with a 13.1 per cent swing. In neighbouring Inverness, Russell Johnston overturned a Conservative majority of 11.9 per cent with an 8.7 per

cent swing, while George Mackie captured Caithness & Sutherland, a seat that the Liberals had last fought in 1955 when they had gathered only 14.5 per cent of the vote.<sup>13</sup> At the 1966 general election in Aberdeenshire West, James Davidson<sup>14</sup> overcame a 13.2 per cent Conservative majority, winning with a 8.4 per cent swing. Davidson had laid the foundation for this victory in 1964 when he won 33 per cent of the votes in a seat that the Liberals had not contested in 1959.

The other spectacular win in 1966 was suburban Cheadle, captured from the Conservatives (majority 11.9 per cent) by Dr Michael Winstanley with a swing of 6.4 per cent. Like North Devon, Bodmin and Aberdeenshire West, the relentless build-up was as spectacular as the victory itself. The Liberals got 15.6 per cent of the votes in 1955, 25.9 per cent in 1959, 34.8 per cent in 1964 and 42.3 per cent in 1966. This was the only seat faintly resembling Orpington that the Liberals picked up during the 1960s 'Orpington revival'. Winstanley actually pushed his vote up further to 44.3 per cent in 1970, when he lost the seat.

The next spectacular Liberal victory was one of the most stunning ever. Stephen Ross's win in the Isle of Wight in February 1974 was in the same league as Ashford in 1929 and Orpington in 1962. With a swing of 20.6 per cent he overcame a deficit of more than 30 per cent from third place to win. The Liberal vote jumped from just under 13,000 (22.2 per cent) in 1970 to nearly 35,000 (50.2 per cent) in 1974. The involvement of the Conservative incumbent in a local development scandal was believed to have influenced the result, but Ross had increased his vote against the trend in 1966 and 1970 and clearly had a large personal vote.<sup>15</sup>

The next crop of spectacular gains came at the general election of 1983.<sup>16</sup> The youthful Charles Kennedy defeated a Tory minister to gain Ross, Cromarty & Skye for the SDP, overturning a defi-

cit of 28.5 per cent with a swing of 16.7 per cent. The comparison here is with the Liberal who stood in 1979 and came fourth. This win was a unique example of a gain from fourth place at the previous election, although, as we have seen, there was a significant Liberal tradition in the seat. In Yeovil Paddy Ashdown overturned a Conservative majority of 17.4 per cent with an 11.8 per cent swing. The third gain that year was exceptional. Michael Meadowcroft demolished a Labour majority of 22.5 per cent to win Leeds West with a 13.5 per cent swing. This was one of the very rare spectacular Liberal gains from Labour, comparable only with Gateshead in 1923 and Chesterfield in 2001.

1987 saw another spectacular Scottish Highland gain in Argyll. Ray Michie gained the seat with a swing of 7.5 per cent, overcoming a Conservative majority of 11.1 per cent.

There were no big wins in 1992, but a bumper harvest of fourteen in the Tory debacle of 1997. In three seats in south-west London, Lib Dems overtook Conservative majorities of more than 20 per cent: Kingston & Surbiton (27.1 per cent), Sutton & Cheam (21.3 per cent), and Twickenham (20.3 per cent). Sheffield Hallam (Conservative majority 19 per cent) was captured with a massive 18.6 per cent swing, to become the first seat held by the Liberals in South Yorkshire since the early 1920s.<sup>17</sup> Other historically remarkable gains in this group were Harrogate & Knaresborough, Winchester, and Lewes – all almost unbrokenly Tory since the 1880s.<sup>18</sup> The five Lib Dem gains in south-west London were also a historical breakthrough in an area which had been securely Tory since the 1880s and where, until the 1970s, the Liberals had always been very weak.<sup>19</sup> Malcolm Bruce's retention of Gordon by nearly 7000 votes surprised some commentators, as boundary changes had given the Tories an advantage estimated at well over 20 per cent

there, although this estimate has been questioned.<sup>20</sup>

There are some obvious common factors in these wins. Clearly the quality of candidates, both in terms of charisma and organisational ability, has often been a key factor in these victories. It is no accident that later leaders of the party – Jeremy Thorpe, Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy – started their Commons careers with spectacular gains. Many other victors – from Alec Glassey, Edgar Granville and Frank Owen in the 1920s to Michael Winstanley, Stephen Ross and Michael Meadowcroft more recently – built their victories on significant personal votes.

Secondly, many of the victories have been in areas of traditional Liberal strength, notably the Scottish Highlands where electoral volatility is greater and personalities count for more than in most parts of the country. Liberal successes in local government elections have also paved the way for wins in a number of cases. Stephen Ross's win in Isle of Wight undoubtedly owed something to this, and Michael Meadowcroft's victory in Leeds West in 1983 was preceded by fifteen years of build-up in local elections.<sup>21</sup> This was clearly also a factor in a number of the 1997 gains.

Liberal breakthroughs on anything like a broad front have been limited to landslide elections such as 1923, 1929 and 1997 (but not 1945) when there has been a major collapse in the Conservative vote. Collapses in the Labour vote have not benefited the Liberal cause. Even in 1983, when the Alliance achieved its best general election performance and the Labour Party its worst since 1931, only one spectacular gain (Leeds West) was made from Labour. Indeed most Liberal gains of any kind have been made in elections when the pendulum has swung away from the Conservatives.

Even in landslide elections the number of such results is not great. At more normal general elections there have only been a handful. Voting patterns in Britain

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have been remarkably constant most of the time; it is very exceptional for seats with a majority of over 20 per cent to change hands.

Large swings might become more common if traditional party allegiances continue to weaken and changes in turnout impact differentially on the parties. Party splits and pacts could also result in big voting shifts. All these factors were evident in the volatile elections of the interwar period. In 1923 the Liberals undoubtedly benefited from large-scale abstention by the Tories and from local alliances with Labour in some areas and the Tories in others. In 1924 and 1931 the Liberals were devastated as the Tories voted in force and many Liberal supporters voted tactically for the Conservatives to keep Labour out. It is conceivable that strong performances at the next election by fringe parties such as UKIP or Respect might damage Conservative and Labour prospects, but as the example of the Birmingham Hodge Hill by-election showed it is far from clear that the Lib Dems would necessarily be the beneficiary. A big swing to the Lib Dems in seats with large numbers of student or Moslem voters could also produce some unexpected wins, but the numbers of such seats are limited.

The lesson of history points up the dilemma for the Liberal Democrats noted in much of the comment on the Brent East and Leicester South by-election results. They are in clear striking distance of further gains in a relatively small number of seats, the great majority of which are Conservative-held. It would take a disintegration of the Tories' heartland to deliver many more of these seats to the Lib Dems, and of course the Tory heartland is already much eroded.

Labour will be defending more than twice as many seats as the Conservatives at the next election and will be hard pressed to hold on to the sweeping gains they made in 1997. Yet there are no historical precedents for the Liberals prospering in such a

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situation. Hence the Lib Dem dilemma. Should they focus on continuing to erode what remains of Tory England, should they aim to break through into the Labour heartlands, or can they find a way to advance on both fronts?

History warns that spectacular wins are likely to play only a small part in resolving this dilemma. The key to the advance of the Lib Dems in the next decade will be how far they can establish themselves as serious contenders in a much broader range of constituencies, including in currently Labour-held seats. The most important result for the Lib Dems at the next election will not only be how many seats they gain, but how many marginals they create. It is in this way that they will alter the electoral arithmetic and start to win large numbers of seats without having to rely on spectacular gains.<sup>22</sup>

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- 1 They also lost thirty-eight, making a net gain of forty-two.
- 2 In fact there was clearly a substantial latent Liberal vote in the constituency (the Liberal almost won in 1929 as well). See C. Cook, *The Age of Alignment: Electoral Politics in Britain 1922–29* (Macmillan London 1975), p. 172–73.
- 3 The Liberals also gained Liverpool West Derby from the Conservatives, a seat they had not fought since before 1918 in a straight fight. Other remarkable straight-fight gains included Edinburgh North (swing 17.5 per cent), Stoke Newington (swing 16.5 per cent), Hackney North (swing 14.8 per cent), Nottingham East (swing 13.1 per cent), Manchester Exchange (swing 11.8 per cent) and Devizes (swing 11.1 per cent).
- 4 Charles Masterman (1873–1927): writer and politician; an Anglo-Catholic; Financial Secretary to the Treasury 1912–14, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster 1914–15.
- 5 T. Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914–1935* (Collins London 1966), pp. 258–59.
- 6 Rev. R. M. Kedward (1881–1937): a Kent farmer and Wesleyan minister, superintendent of the South London Mission 1918–37; MP for West Bermondsey 1923–24 and Ashford 1929–

31. Kedward stood in 1931 as a Liberal National, one of only three Liberal National MPs to face Tory opposition. He later rejoined the Liberals and contested Ashford at a by-election in 1933. He was president of the National Tithe-payers' Association, 1932–37; see Carol Twinch, *Tithe War: 1918–39 The Countryside in Revolt* (Media Associates Norwich 2001)

- 7 Edgar Granville (1898–1998): Liberal MP for Eye 1929–51 (sat as National Liberal/Independent 1931–45); joined Labour Party 1952 and stood as Labour candidate for Eye in 1955 and 1959, gathering most of ex-Liberal vote; Labour peer 1967.
- 8 Alec Glassey (1887–1970): a leading Congregationalist figure and active West Country Liberal.
- 9 Frank Owen (1905–75): journalist and biographer of Lloyd George; stood as anti-National (Lloyd George) Liberal 1931; narrowly defeated as Liberal candidate in Hereford in mid-1950s.
- 10 Colne Valley in 1931 is a partial exception to this. E. L. Mallalieu gained the seat from Labour in a three-cornered contest with a swing of 16.2 per cent. Mallalieu had been third in 1929, 24.6 per cent behind the Labour candidate, Philip Snowden. However the result in this constituency was complicated by Snowden's rejection of the Labour Party and retirement as MP and a dispute over the succession between a Conservative and National Labour candidate. Mallalieu emerged as the main beneficiary of the huge national swing to the National Government.
- 11 G. Tregida, *The Liberal Party in South-west Britain since 1918* (University of Exeter Press Exeter 2000), p. 190; D. Brack (ed.), *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* (1998) – 'Peter Bessell'.
- 12 Alastair MacKenzie (1903–70): farmer; member Ross-shire County Council 1935–55; MP for Ross & Cromarty 1964–70.
- 13 Mackie was assisted in 1964 by a split in the Conservative vote. In 1964 he lost to a new Labour candidate, Robert MacLennan.
- 14 James Davidson (1927–): farmer, Russian interpreter, assistant naval attaché Moscow and Helsinki 1952–54; retired as MP 1970.
- 15 D. Butler and D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of February 1974* (Macmillan London 1974), p. 334.
- 16 Boundary changes between 1979–83.
- 17 The last Liberal seat in Sheffield was lost in 1923. Penistone was held from 1922–24.
- 18 Winchester had been Tory since the 1880s, apart from a Labour win in 1945. Harrogate also except for a single Liberal win in 1906. Part of Lewes, in the pre-1918 Eastbourne constituency, had gone Liberal in 1906, but the rest had been Tory since the 1880s.
- 19 Sutton & Cheam was Liberal from 1972–74. Twickenham partly corre-

sponds to the pre-1918 Brentford constituency won by the Liberals in 1906. Labour won Spelthorne, Wimbledon and Mitcham in 1945, including parts of the modern Twickenham, Sutton & Cheam and Carshalton & Wallingford constituencies.

20 Local Liberal Democrats disputed the calculation by Thrasher and Rallings based on vote shares in council elections. Their ballot box tallies suggested that at least one ward provided more Lib Dem voters to Gordon than the

Thrasher and Rallings split assumed. See further <http://www.electiondata.telegraph.co.uk/pcon276.htm>

21 M. Meadowcroft, 'The Alliance: Parties and Leaders', *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 18, Spring 1998, p. 22.

22 I recommend Martin Baxter's general election predictor (<http://www.financialcalculus.co.uk/election/index.html>) for any readers who want to explore the current electoral arithmetic further.

# NEWS

## Jo Grimond honoured in St Andrews

On 27 July 2004, Jim Wallace MSP, Deputy First Minister and Leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, unveiled a memorial plaque at the birthplace of Jo Grimond, the former Liberal Party Leader and Mr Wallace's predecessor as MP for Orkney and Shetland. Jo Grimond was born at No. 8 Abbotsford Crescent, St Andrews (now part of the University of St Andrews), almost ninety-one years before, on 29 July 1913.

As Jim Wallace said, 'Jo Grimond was the Leader of the Liberal Party between 1956 and 1976, a period of sweeping changes in British society and in the world at large. Jo's intelligent, eloquent and good-humoured contributions to the big debates of these times earned him an immense public respect among people of all political opinions.

His passionate advocacy of many progressive ideas – Scottish Home Rule, international-

ism, of individual freedom and empowerment, to name but a few – earned him the well-deserved sobriquet of 'Radical Jo'. He succeeded in reviving the intellectual basis and the electoral prospects of a much-weakened post-war Liberal Party. Attracted by the persuasive force of his personality and arguments, very many talented new supporters rallied to the cause of modern Liberalism.

The Liberal Democrats and the country owe much to Jo Grimond, who sadly did not live to see the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament for which he had campaigned for so long, and the return of his party to government. The major shift in the party's fortunes over recent years is down to the hard work and commitment of the many, but no-one should doubt that the catalyst for the enduring revival of the party's fortunes was the energetic and inspiring leadership of Jo Grimond.'

The cost of the memorial plaque was met by generous donations from a number of Jo Grimond's friends, colleagues and contemporaries from across the United Kingdom, and also from a younger generation to whom he remains an inspiration.

**From left: Iain Smith MSP ; Jo Grimond's children, Magnus, Johnny and Grizelda; Dr Brian Lang, Principal of St Andrews University; and Jim Wallace MSP.**

