Reports

From Midlothian to Direct Mail: Parliamentary and political campaigning in the 19th and 20th centuries

Fringe meeting, March 2001 with Professor Michael Rush (Exeter University) and Graham (Lord) Tope

Report by **Neil Stockley**

The History Group's pre-general election campaign fringe meeting was about… general election campaigns.

Our first contributor, Professor Michael Rush of Exeter University, used the Great Reform Act of 1832, rather than Gladstone's Midlothian campaign, as his starting point. He described how the techniques of campaigning developed in line with major changes to the electoral system during the nineteenth century.

Immediately before the passage of the Great Reform Act, the House of Commons had 658 members, one fewer than today, and they were elected using the first-past-the-post system, just as MPs are now. The first major difference from the current day was that only half a million men were eligible to vote, a total that increased by around 800,000 in 1832. Until 1885, many constituencies were represented by two MPs; some, indeed, had three or four. The number of eligible voters in each varied considerably, from one (or even none) to 20,000. Ballots were open. As a result, election campaigns were entirely local affairs, typified by tawdry episodes of bribery and corruption.

As the franchise widened, to 2.4 million electors in 1868 and 5 million six years later, campaigns changed. Public meetings became more important for candidates and voters alike – and they were also more boisterous and unruly! The Great Reform Act introduced the registration of electors, which led to the establishment of local party organisations. The local parties assumed control of candidate selections and (whatever some members of the St Helens South Constituency Labour Party might say) still hold it today.

But Professor Rush did not try to draw a perfectly straight line from the election campaigns of the early nineteenth century to those of today. For example, while the advent of the secret ballot made corrupt practices more difficult, they did not stop them altogether. After all, the industrial revolution had created a new class of manufacturers who were keen to spend considerable sums of money on their favoured candidates.

Furthermore, over half the electorate did not have the opportunity to vote in all the general elections from 1832–68. At least a quarter of all seats were not contested until 1865; in one election, sixty per cent of constituencies were uncontested! As Professor Rush explained, there were powerful disincentives to standing for the House of Commons. Individual candidates, rather than their parties, paid the campaign expenses, as well as assisting their local organisations and paying subscriptions to local charities. All the candidates in a constituency shared the expense of running the election and maintaining the electoral register. They also faced the costs arising from any election petitions, of which there more than 1,000 between 1832 and 1885. According to one estimate, between 1867 and 1883, the average local expenses for a county candidate were around £50,000 per annum (in today's values) and, for a borough candidate, the figure was around £25,000. And successful candidates would have to pay their parliamentary expenses and their personal living expenses when in London.

The parties would sometimes make deals so as to avoid elections. For instance, in two-member constituencies, they would agree to contest one seat each. And in safe seats the deals were struck within the parties, with, for example, a more moderate Whigs balanced by a radical.

Still, Professor Rush showed how by the end of the nineteenth century, British politics had become 'nationalised'. National campaigns began with Gladstone's mass public meetings in 1865 and 1868, which culminated in his Midlothian campaigns of 1879 and 1880. Disraeli, Joseph Chamberlain and Lord Salisbury all addressed huge public rallies at various times in the latter part of the century. The Conservatives held the first national party conference in 1867. The modern party system can also be traced from around this time, when it was obvious that voters would choose candidates from two big national parties. By 1874, it was clear that those parties would be the Liberals and the Conservatives. The first national party manifesto, setting out a programme for government, was the Liberals' Newcastle Programme of 1891.

Professor Rush argued that from 1867 to around 1890, politics and elections were a 'spectator sport', with men attending political meetings, discussing politics and following events by reading national newspapers. With the exception of the 1885 election, when just six per cent of seats were not contested, he did not give figures for the number of seats fought during this period, but he implied that people were more likely to have the opportunity to vote. Political interest started to fall away

during the 1890s, partly because of the rise of organised sport. But the basis of modern politics – and campaigning – was now firmly established.

Lord (Graham) Tope, standing in at late notice for an unavoidably absent Bill Rodgers, told a personal story of late twentieth century campaigning. In December 1972, he won the Sutton & Cheam by-election for the Liberals. Lord Tope credited his upset victory to Sir Trevor Jones – 'Jones the vote' – who literally turned up on his doorstep one day, determined to prove that the campaigning techniques he had pioneered in Liverpool could work anywhere. The Jones style was, of course, founded on *Focus* leaflets that highlighted local issues and community concerns. 'They were done with Letraset, usually wonky, printed on the offset litho in Trevor's building in Liverpool [and] delivered by never more than twenty people, mostly from outside the constituency, who would deliver for eight, ten hours a day … that went on for month after month after month,' he recalled.

Lord Tope said that after Sutton & Cheam, the party used *Focus* everywhere, and was certain that this greatly assisted the Liberal revival of 1972–73. He also argued that it changed fundamentally the way the party fought elections, both local and national. In the longer term, he said, *Focus* campaigns helped to lift the Liberals' base level of support all over the country.

All of this seemed to be a total departure from Professor Rush's topic. Yet both contributions served to highlight basic tensions in the history of election campaigns. Professor Rush traced the development of national campaigns; Graham Tope recounted a breakthrough in local campaigning based on community concerns. Professor Rush explained how national parties had emerged; Graham Tope remembered being left to his own devices by the Liberal Party Organisation until two weeks before polling day, when a privately funded opinion poll showed that he might well win. Professor Rush suggested that a rich political culture evolved in the latter part of the nineteenth century; Graham Tope feared that *Focus* leaflets may now have 'dumbed down' Liberals' and Liberal Democrats' communication with the electorate, giving too little serious discussion of the party's philosophy and policies.

There was not enough time to show how Liberal and Liberal Democrat general election campaigns evolved since the 1970s. We have seen more effective and disciplined national efforts, more sophisticated polling and the advent of direct mail and, now, email campaigns. But in their very different ways Professor Rush and Lord Tope both demonstrated how candidates and parties will adapt their campaigning techniques to what they understand of the needs and demands of their electorates, the opportunities provided by new technologies and the limits of the law. In the end, what counts is what seems to work.

Letters to the Editor

John Meadowcroft

In their letters in reply to my article on community politics (*Journal* 28), Richard Ingham (Letters, *Journal* 30) and David Rebak (Letters, *Journal* 29) both make some interesting and valid points with regard to the contribution of different individuals to the development of community politics. I fear, however, that they have both missed the essential point of my article, which was not to assess the contribution of different individuals or groups of individuals to the development of community politics, but to ask how did the Liberal Party come to adopt the strategy of community politics in 1970?

The three reasons I propose remain, I believe, valid. First, the tradition of social liberalism that was very much alive in Liberal thinking at the time. Second, the electoral efficacy of local campaigning on local issues, as demonstrated by the party's growing presence in local government. Third, the role of the Young Liberal activists who, of course, wrote and proposed the amendment to party strategy and tactics passed at the 1970 assembly.

Finally, I feel compelled to also point out, in answer to one of Robert Ingham's specific points, that the fact that Liberals did not wish to 'politicise' local elections in areas where the party already had Parliamentary representation in the 1950s and '60s is probably illustrative of my argument rather than indicative of its weakness.

David Rebak

Without Michael Meadowcroft's encyclopaedic knowledge and always available help and encouragement, Liberal councillors in the 1960s would barely have been able to do our jobs at all. So it is with reluctance that I correct his letter in *Journal* 30 (spring 2001).

Frank Liberal Davis didn't join the Labour Party. He was elected as a Conservative. And the 'Grumble' sheet was invented by Frank's agent Mr Satin.

The radical end to which Michael refers was precisely what I, and quite a few others, had in mind when we encouraged groups of people to act together to obtain local reforms or improvements.

The following are good examples of how 'empowering the people' was encouraged by me and other Bushey Liberals: