

including, most recently, the chapter on the Cardiganshire byelection, 1921, in Iain Dale (ed.), *British By-Elections*

1769–2025: *The 88 By-Election Campaigns That Shaped Our Politics* (Politicos, 2025).

By-elections in the Great War

John Leston, *Battles at the Ballot: The Politicians, Idealists & Cranks of Britain's First World War By-Elections* (Haythorpe Books, 2025)

Review by Vernon Bogdanor

Today we are accustomed to relying on opinion polls to assess the political weather. But Gallup, the first survey company, did not establish operations in Britain until 1937. Before that, all too many politicians and journalists prided themselves on their intuitive understanding of what the public wanted. But real evidence is available in the form of by-election results.

During the First World War, by-elections were of particular significance, because the party whips had negotiated an electoral as well as a political truce. This meant that, whenever a vacancy arose, the incumbent party would not have to face opposition from candidates of other parties. So, in 89 of the 118 vacancies that arose between 1914 and 1918 in Britain, excluding Ireland, there was no contest. But in the other 29, independent candidates entered the race. Only three such intruders actually won by-elections, and turnouts were generally very low.

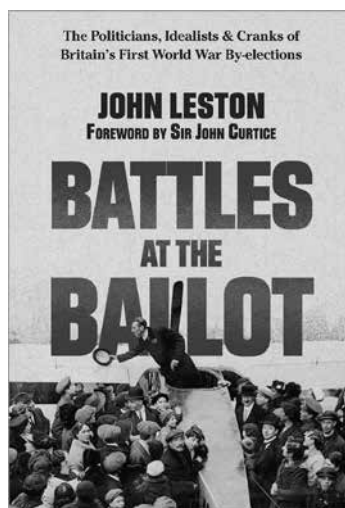
Nevertheless, as Sir John Curtice writes in his introduction, 'these contests provided vital feedback to government about the public mood – much as by-elections do today'. John Leston has put students of the First World War in his debt for his incisive analysis of these by-elections.

The contests were fought under a severely restricted franchise. Not only were women excluded but so also were around 40 per cent of the men, who failed to meet the complex qualifications for securing the vote, complexities which I sought to analyse in my book, *The Strange Survival of Liberal Britain*.¹

Most historians agree that the various franchise restrictions did not serve to exclude the organised working class. Indeed, one estimate suggests that, before 1914, working class voters comprised up to 76 per cent of the electorate.² So there are certainly lessons to be learnt from the various war-time contests, even though the peculiar circumstances of

the electoral truce attracted a number of mavericks and rogues, having little connection with the major parties. Most notable amongst the rogues were Horatio Bottomley and Pemberton Billing.

Bottomley, the editor of the patriotic magazine, *John Bull*, had been Liberal MP for South Hackney from 1906 to 1912, when he had been forced to resign his seat because of bankruptcy. After the murder of the Archduke in 1914, he wrote, 'To hell with Serbia', but rapidly changed tack when he saw which way the wind was blowing and became a star turn on recruiting platforms, denouncing those with German-sounding names as 'alien Huns'. He found by-elections irresistible, and, although he did not fight one himself, he promoted a series of hard-line pro-war candidates, almost all of whom were unsuccessful. But his hold over popular opinion was such that Lloyd George sought to make use of his talents in encouraging enlistment. There were even rumours that the former bankrupt might be offered a post in the government. In the December 1918 general election, held a month after the end of the war, he was returned as an Independent MP for his old constituency, Hackney South, with 80 per cent of the vote. But, in 1922, he was expelled from the Commons after being convicted of fraudulent conversion. Sentenced to seven years penal servitude, he



spent his first year in Wormwood Scrubs working on mailbags. 'Sewing?' one visitor asked him – 'No, reaping,' Bottomley replied.

Pemberton Billing, a pilot who had bombed a Zeppelin base at Friedrichshafen, campaigned and won the East Hertfordshire by-election in March 1916 on the issue of the inadequacy of Britain's air defences. He became 'the member for the air', but was said to have wider interests – not only 'fast aircraft' but also, 'fast boats, fast cars and fast women'. The interest in fast women, however, did not prevent him from establishing, in July 1917, a Vigilante Society whose motto was 'Purify politicians, pulverise profiteers, petrify Huns'. He achieved notoriety when he claimed knowledge of a 'Black Book' according to which Germany was blackmailing 47,000 prominent 'perverts' in the higher reaches of British society. Amongst them were apparently Mr and Mrs Asquith and Mr Justice Darling,

who was to try a libel case against Billing brought by one of those accused, a case which, remarkably, Billing won.

But, as John Leston shows, even the rogues 'provided vital feedback to government about the public mood' at a time when the political truce meant that parliamentary debate was muffled. The by-elections highlighted matters which might not otherwise have been aired. Until early 1917, the main issues raised were conscription and defences against Zeppelin raids. The outcomes helped to legitimise compulsory military service and improvement of air defences, perhaps also the founding of the RAF in 1918. A subsidiary concern was 'teetotal fanaticism', the draconian restrictions on alcohol which Lloyd George, true to his Nonconformist heritage, had imposed. 'If you ILL TREAT your wife', one poster complained, 'you are fined five shillings or seven days. If you TREAT her you are fined £100 and six months in prison'.

After the introduction of conscription in May 1916, pro-war candidates largely disappeared, their place being taken by candidates seeking peace by negotiation. None were successful and most secured only a derisory vote.

One conclusion that stands out starkly from *Battles at the Ballot* is that the public, far from being war weary, wanted it fought

more intensively, indeed more ruthlessly. More particularly, the by-elections showed that the working class had little sympathy with the pacifistic views of the left-wing Independent Labour Party (ILP), or its leaders, Keir Hardie or Ramsay MacDonald. Nor were they particularly enamoured of the official representatives of 'patriotic' Labour, led by Arthur Henderson, who supported the war, but were opposed to conscription. In the November 1915 by-election in Merthyr Boroughs, Keir Hardie's old seat, a 'patriotic' Labour candidate calling for conscription defeated the official Labour candidate, a moderate supporter of the war, with 63 per cent of the vote. Patriotism indeed was to prove a unifying force in Britain not only during the war but for much of the twentieth century. It was indeed a political force which the Left sometimes underestimated to its electoral detriment.

The by-elections provided clues to the likely development of politics after the war. Under the electoral truce, Conservatives were to prove more willing to support Liberals than Liberals were to support Conservatives, especially after the Liberal split of December 1916. Asquithian Liberals disapproved of Lloyd George's methods, which seemed too close to those of the Conservatives, and which, so they believed, were undermining liberal values. They were

A Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting

Women for Liberty

The women who built Liberalism and the party

From the earliest days of Liberalism to more recent history, women have helped to shape Liberalism and the Liberal Party, SDP and Liberal Democrats.

Marking the publication of the History Group's new booklet, *Women for Liberty*, join **Wendy Chamberlain MP**, **Baroness Lynne Featherstone** and **Jo Swinson** to reflect on the legacy and their own experiences, in discussion with **Duncan Brack** (Editor, *Journal of Liberal History*), and **Donna Harris** (Chair, Lib Dem Women). Hosted jointly with Liberal Democrat Women.

1300 – 1430, Saturday 19 September

Charlotte Room, Grand Hotel, 97–99 King's Road, Brighton BN1 2FW

This is a fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrats' autumn conference, but you do not need to be attending conference to be able to participate in the meeting. We are not offering online access, but a recording of the meeting will be made available on our website soon afterwards.

therefore hesitant to support Conservative candidates, while those Liberals who were coming to favour peace by negotiation were becoming less inclined to accept official advice from their party to support Conservatives. Many came to find a home in the Labour Party.

The Labour split between the ILP and 'patriotic' Labour was more easily healed than the Liberal one between Asquithians and supporters of Lloyd George, even though the Liberal split was largely based on personalities while the Labour split was

based on an important policy difference. The Liberals, in consequence, came to be condemned to the role of third party, while in 1922 Labour was to become the official opposition.

John Leston is a former Liberal Democrat councillor and retired owner of a market research company; *Battles at the Ballot* is his first book, based in large part on intensive research into local newspapers. The results are fascinating and constitute an important contribution to our knowledge of the First World War. The book is beautifully

written – although it is a pity that it lacks an index, while the footnotes are sometimes inadequate. Still, these are minor quibbles. For, although John Leston is not a professional historian, no professional historian interested in the First World War can afford to ignore *Battles at the Ballot*. ■

Vernon Bogdanor is Professor of Government, King's College, London.

- 1 Vernon Bogdanor, *The Strange Survival of Liberal Britain* (Biteback 2022).
- 2 Duncan Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900–1918* (Cambridge University Press 1990), p. 119 fn.