

# THE 1908 HASTINGS

## Hastings Bye-Election.

A MEETING in support of  
Mr. R. V.

# HARCOURT

THE  
Liberal and Free Trade Candidate,

After the 1867 Franchise Act, and the emergence of mass politics, by-elections became a frequent source of analysis and – with the support of the popular press – a subject of interest even

approaching that of major sporting events. David Butler makes this point in his study of by-elections (essentially post-1918) to emphasise the national factor: ‘there was nothing to compete with

by-elections as indicators of how the political tide was flowing’.<sup>1</sup> Equally interestingly, Jaime Reynolds has referred, in this *Journal*, to the ‘Spectacular Victories’ achieved in more modern

times, after 1958, by sizeable swings in the region of ten to twenty per cent to the Liberals, whilst ‘the opponents’ [vote share] plunges dramatically’.<sup>2</sup> **Ian Ivatt** analyses the Hastings by-election of 1908.

# INGS BY-ELECTION

**H**ISTORIANS OF Edwardian politics have spent much time analysing the dry bones of by-elections in their period, though they have given more attention to those that cast light on the relative strengths of the Liberal and Labour Parties than to those that point to the relative fortunes of Liberals and Unionists. One of the latter was the by-election at Hastings on 3 March 1908, the first such contest to be fought since the introduction of the Liberal government's 1908 legislative programme.

The ancient town of Hastings, one of Henry Pelling's 'fashionable watering places', and a non-industrialised borough<sup>3</sup> does not fit neatly with the general trend in Edwardian politics, having fallen to the Liberals in 1900 and then been won by the Unionists, against the flow, amidst the landslide Liberal victory in 1906. Hastings itself represented a social mixture of those living off their own means, those engaged in the hotel trade and ordinary working men, these last invariably involved in the building and property repair sectors. Electorally, the parliamentary borough had had mixed fortunes since 1885, the seat being shared between the Unionists and Liberals. Liberals had the personal allure of the influential Lord Brassey to aid them, a member of the Hastings elite noted for his local activities and generosity.<sup>4</sup>

The 1908 by-election saw a lower turnout than at the

previous (1906) election and at the subsequent 1910 elections, but at 91.6 per cent it was quite in keeping with the generally high turnouts at Edwardian elections, and certainly high enough to make the result of psephological interest. In his study of regional political consciousness, Trevor Hopper records policy quarrels between the Hastings 'Labourists and the Liberalists', following, in part, a national trend, although no Labour candidate entered the fray.<sup>5</sup> Not so unexpectedly, Hastings retained its Unionist majority in 1908, at an enhanced level, for a number of reasons, and these are the subject of this article.

It is important to remember that whilst by-elections reflect public opinion at the time, either for or against the government of the day, it would be wrong to assume that any such local results would, multiplied many times over all constituencies, be representative of a nationwide outcome. Voting behaviour is simply not that consistent. Undoubtedly, national considerations play a part, and in the Hastings case none more so than the vexed question of Free Trade or Tariff Reform. Unionist hopes were buoyed up by the theory that, had the case for Tariff Reform been promoted fully at the South Leeds by-election only a month before, the seat might have gone the Unionist way. Unusually, this had been a three-cornered fight with Labour included, and the Liberals retained the seat by a mere whisker, at 41.7 per cent of the total poll, whilst the

Unionists achieved 38.9 per cent, and the Labour candidate 19.4 per cent. However, at Hastings, there were other factors at work, which I shall consider later.

Historically, Liberal strength in the county of Sussex had always been weak, with the previously-mentioned Hastings seat as the sole victory in 1900, followed by an unexpected Liberal win at the nearby Rye by-election in 1903. The 1906 general election, with its huge swing away from Unionism to Liberalism, changed all that. Liberal victories took place at East Grinstead, Eastbourne and the two Brighton seats. Thus, while the Liberals held one solitary seat in 1900, gaining that of the by-election victory at Rye<sup>6</sup> in 1903, in 1906 they gained four new seats, holding half of the possible total of eight (Rye, along with Hastings, returning to the Unionist fold in 1906). With both seats at Portsmouth also gained in 1906, plus the Isle of Wight, the transformation in Liberal representation on this part of the south coast looked almost miraculous.

Liberal aspirations after 1906 were, in the main, blunted by a more unified Conservative/Unionist group, greatly buoyed up by their successes in the November 1906 municipal elections, and they were separately thwarted by the connivance of Unionist members of the Commons in the Lords' non-acceptance of the government's flagship bills on education and licensing. Furthermore, at least outside Parliament, there was

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little enthusiasm for abolishing the plural voting system – always an arguably unhelpful factor in Liberal electoral calculations.

A new underlying strength, in the shape of a vigorous approach to Tariff Reform, at least by early 1908, was beginning to be evident in the Unionist ranks. Conversely, the Liberals hoped for successful new legislation that year, especially pertaining to licensing and education. Furthermore, as Blewett records, when referring to the national liquor trade interest, which campaigned wrathfully and indefatigably against Liberal-imposed licensing changes, mobilisation of the brewery interests undoubtedly aided the Unionist electoral recovery in 1908. Hastings had no breweries but Brighton, a few miles along the coastline to the west, did. Blewett also comments on opposition to the Liberals' Licensing Bill being 'formidable and skilfully organised' and notes how it could 'doubtless cause the loss of many votes, even seats to the [Liberal] government'.<sup>7</sup> This strength was to grow throughout the year and was reflected in by-elections. In January 1908, the Mid Devon seat at Ashburton, Liberal since 1885, fell to the jubilant Unionists, their man, Morrison-Bell, being a dedicated Tariff Reformer. Eve, the resigning Liberal, who was appointed to the High Court, had held the seat since January 1904, with a near-59 per cent share of the poll. Now the Unionist share grew by ten per cent, with the Liberal tally falling away by the same margin.<sup>8</sup>

In March 1908, the Liberals suffered a further blow, losing Peckham, which had been gained by Clarke for the Liberals in 1906. This was a seat the Unionists would always have expected to retain, but a huge swing to the Liberals of in excess of twenty per cent in the landslide year of 1906 had wrested it from their grasp; the 1906 turnout had been well up on 1900, and the eligible electorate was larger. In

the subsequent by-election, the tables were turned, with a return swing to the Unionists of almost virtual parity.

In the same month, Hastings was involved in a similar contest, although here, as already stated, in 1906 the seat had been won by the Unionists, much against the run of play. Nevertheless, local Liberals considered their chances good in what was, effectively, a marginal borough seat. The Brassey family interest still counted for something, and the 1906 Unionist majority was, after all, only 413 votes. Hastings was undoubtedly 'never an obscure town', as was implied in one local newspaper;<sup>9</sup> yet neither was it terribly prosperous. There were two Liberal clubs in or around the town, so on the surface there was some semblance of a local Liberal organisation.

Hastings Liberals were, as they vociferously claimed, quite unprepared for the sudden resignation on 'health grounds' of the sitting Unionist, Harvey Du Cros, a descendent of a notable Huguenot family. Hastings Unionists speedily adopted his son Arthur, a local man (albeit born in Dublin in 1871), as their candidate. Du Cros's earlier connections with the candidature of Bow & Bromley were tidily relinquished. The Liberals had no one ready and waiting in the wings; no local candidates were forthcoming, meaning that the net had to be cast further afield to attract Sir Robert Vernon Harcourt (1878–1962), son of the late Sir William Harcourt, from London. One possible personal reason for Harcourt's candidature could have been his relative, Susan Harcourt, whose life had been commemorated by a brass plaque in the elaborate Hastings Gothic church of Holy Trinity, built between 1851 and 1859. Susan apparently entertained a great many people from Nuneham, the Harcourt family seat in Oxfordshire.<sup>10</sup>

Save for their shared privileged upbringing, these sons of

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famous figures could not have been more different. Arthur Du Cros, an avid Tariff Reformer, was reported in the local Hastings press as expressing hopes that 'fiscal reform and preference in practical effect would be secured for the benefit of this country'. He optimistically viewed the suggested discord between Mr Chamberlain and Mr Balfour 'as only apparent – the men were [in reality] together'.<sup>11</sup> Du Cros pointedly asserted at meetings that the 'free import system had hopelessly broken down', a view he felt was evidenced by his business life, being the managing director of Dunlop Pneumatic Tyres, and a director of other rubber companies both in England and abroad. In his election meetings and literature, he proposed that increased expenditure on old age pensions could be funded by a change to tariffs, underlined by the appealing slogan, 'A vote for tariff reform is a vote for the Briton'.<sup>12</sup>

Arthur Philip Du Cros, a married man with two girls and a boy, held first-class Conservative electoral assets. He had won no less than thirteen amateur cycling championships, successfully competing in both France and Germany. He was an expert motorist and had reportedly driven over 100,000 miles throughout Europe, besides being a keen shot with a rifle. Most importantly, he owned a property at St Leonards-on-Sea, adjacent to Hastings, and was often seen on the local golf links. Local press articles referred to Du Cros as a man 'endowed with a unique experience, combined with youth and energy'. Moreover, he had seen service in the Army both before and during the South African War. He was commissioned into the Warwickshire Regiment, taking part in General Roberts' general advance and in several engagements. He particularly interested himself in musketry, having obtained the necessary certificates of proficiency,

including the title of ‘Instructor to the Battalion’.<sup>13</sup> In brief, he was described in the region’s newspaper as ‘an ideal candidate of the type which the country particularly needs at this important juncture’.<sup>14</sup>

Sir Robert Harcourt, by comparison, did not have such a history of ‘derring-do’. In his boyhood, his family had spent time with the Roseberys, and correspondence from that time reveals ‘affectionate and playful allusions’<sup>15</sup> between the two groups. As a sixteen-year-old, he had listened, in the House of Commons, with his half-brother Lewis (LouLou) Harcourt, to their father’s 1894 Budget speech, including its controversial Death Duty clauses.<sup>16</sup> He was Cambridge-educated and had spent some time in the East End of London, observing social conditions. From 1900, he spent five years in the diplomatic section of the Foreign Office. He resigned to join the staff of the progressive newspaper, *The Tribune*, assuming the twin roles of parliamentary correspondent and drama critic. He was the author of several plays.<sup>17</sup> During the Hastings campaign, he was seemingly silent over the question of Ireland. He was obliged to suffer jeers of ‘Liberal carpet-bagger’<sup>18</sup> from fringe Unionist elements, who ignored his marked Liberal pedigree.

Harcourt’s policy, depicted on his election posters, was to emphasise the success of Free Trade (some Liberals believed Tariff Reform was a system that ground out millionaires at one end and paupers at the other), since 1908 was already starting to look as if it would be a year of strong economic performance. His radical preferences reflected a desire to get both the reintroduced Education Bill and the Licensing Bill through Parliament, although his priority argument, much to Unionist annoyance, was to give his support to the case for broadening the basis of taxation, the issue of

Death Duties being quickly condemned by Du Cros as taxation beyond the grave.

The electoral battle swiftly moved into what would be a short and sharp contest. Already, in the run-up to the writ for the by-elections and beyond, Liberal rallies and gatherings in East Sussex had tended to debate educational reform, army economies and old age pensions. The Unionists, especially in nearby Lewes, favoured discussions on the merits of Tariff Reform, with a supportive selection of letters in the countywide press such as the *Uckfield Weekly* and the *West Sussex County Times and Standard* pointing to the special local circumstances of the hop industry.

Lewes, an ever-popular political venue, was chosen by the Liberals for a Mid Sussex pre-election rally. The Under-Secretary for War, the Earl of Portsmouth, was present, as was Sussex-based Sydney Buxton, the Postmaster-General. The proceedings focused upon the merits of the Liberal Education Bill, the new licensing provisions (Harcourt’s father, Sir William, had been a formidable temperance reformer), support for the new Territorial Army scheme and claims of a strong Navy. The two latter issues were of special significance to those voters on or near the Channel coast, with their fears of invasion. The main attack on the Unionist Tariff Reform idea centred upon the Liberal ditty, ‘Stamp, stamp, stamp upon Protection’, by courtesy of the invited Liberal choir, conducted by a Mr Sole. The Unionist campaign concentrated on countering Liberal assertions that Tariff Reform meant taxes on food, a potentially more serious contribution!<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately for the Liberals, some London suffragettes arrived in Hastings to sully the campaign by urging voters *not* to vote Liberal. Local opinion in the drink trade steadily hardened, following the national trend, with anti-Licensing Bill

meetings throughout the county quickly emerging to counter effectively any Nonconformist support for the measure. Overall, the real grievance felt by Hastings Liberals was the speed with which the Unionists adopted their candidate and started campaigning. The Liberal part-time agent described it as being ‘like a bolt out of the blue’, yet Liberal attempts to gain potential votes by suggesting an ungentlemanly ‘springing’ of the contest upon them appear, when the votes were counted, to have been less than fruitful.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, the Tariff Reform League, Hastings Branch, was making headway in the harbour quarter (the subject of some exquisite paintings by Turner) by showing local fishermen the contrast between French tax dues imposed upon English fish and Britain’s Free Trade policy. At one point, a crowd of boys made a nuisance of themselves by throwing stones from the beach on to the iron roof of the Fish Packing Shed, effecting considerable disruption at one meeting. Also, there were local newspaper reports of junior Conservatives in a bout of fisticuffs (apparently roused by the chant of ‘Harcourt, Harcourt’) with radical members of Hastings Baptist Chapel, with the ‘Progressives’ supposedly attempting to seize the Conservative Association’s election banner! In any event, the capture failed but one of the banner poles was broken in the mêlée. ‘Heads were punched, and a President of one of the district Conservative Associations was roughly mauled, having his shirt front torn out and his umbrella smashed.’<sup>21</sup>

As already intimated by Trevor Hopper, all was not well between the Hastings Liberal and Radical groups, local press reports indicating that the Liberal Party ‘had no more sympathy with the cause of Labour than the Tories had’. The ongoing issue of labour representation and the increasing socialist tendencies of some trade unionists

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were to cause disagreements, if not actual lost Liberal votes. The *Hastings and St Leonards Weekly Mail and Times*, published each Saturday, endeavoured to redress the balance by portraying the Liberals as a caring party for working men, having a column in their weekly edition entitled 'Work and Wages' to report on such items as work for the unemployed, rates of pay, the Distress Committee and the provision of free school meals. This last issue entailed a petition by 'Hastings Townsmen [to] call upon the Town Council to make Application [under the School Meals Act] for the Provision of Meals'. The other local newspaper, the *Hastings & St Leonards Observer*, ran separate articles under the heading of 'hungry children', and this publicity eventually led to a grant of £100 from Hastings Council. The Social Democratic Party (the name adopted by the Social Democratic Federation in 1907) managed to garner the accolades for this, describing their success as down to the efforts of their 'little band of socialists'. Once more, there was no specific credit for local Hastings Liberals. The Hastings Wesleyan Minister, the Rev. T. Jamieson, moreover, in the light of a weakened local Trades Council, expressed the standard radical sentiment that 'The great gulf between the rich men and the poor men was a disgrace and something which wanted setting right'.<sup>22</sup> Superficially, elements of radicalism now appeared to be in place in a frenetic by-election with a host of meetings and well-known speakers in attendance.

Polling day itself was drab and grey; it rained in the evening. These were the weather conditions the Liberals feared most, since some supporters might prefer to stay at home after working all day. Amidst the anticipated bustle and excitement, the Liberals pointed to the extensive use of cars and wagons (supplied by Du Cros with his extensive motoring industry connections) to convey

Unionist voters, as against the considerably meagre Liberal transport fleet. As *The Times* put it,<sup>23</sup> there was 'an imposing procession of Unionist motor cars' and the 'Liberals were not so well equipped in this respect'. Nevertheless, one supportive Member of Parliament brought some Liberal voters all the way from Buckinghamshire in his motor car.

Even up to polling day, local Tariff Reformers paraded a donkey in the streets as an electoral ploy, with boards bearing an intended insult, 'My brothers and sisters vote for Free Trade'. County press reports emphasised the fact that there were 'too many Conservatives and Tariff Reformers in the town'. The Liberal equestrian response centred on a local carrier's cart whose horse bore 'on each flank a card saying – vote for Harcourt and no tax on my oats'.<sup>24</sup>

The electorate was slightly lower than in 1906 – 8,707 as compared to 8,758, out of a total population of 61,145 as recorded in the 1911 census, as opposed to 65,545 recorded in the 1901 census. The result of the by-election of 3 March 1908 dashed Liberal hopes; their share of the vote declined to 43.6 per cent (from 47.5 per cent in 1906), the lowest proportion since before 1885. In terms of actual votes, the Liberal total fell by 458 and the Unionist tally rose by 147. According to press articles, everyone was relieved that the short, sharp, contest was over; in general it was accepted as a 'courteous and straightforward fight without rancour',<sup>25</sup> thus turning a blind eye to the underlying Lib-Lab local differences. Du Cros complimented Harcourt's fight, after the count, as 'strenuous and straightforward'.<sup>26</sup>

Liberals, reluctantly accepting the cost of little or no preparation, sought reassuring reasons for failure. True, the outvoter or plural voter system<sup>27</sup> had worked against them, with duplicate votes, invariably considered Unionist, being garnered from residents in

other part of Sussex, Hampshire, Kent, and even Brussels in Belgium. One such vote was secured from a voter just about to board a ship. Suffragettes were believed to have added to Liberal misery. The unsuccessful Liberal candidate, Harcourt, contended that the defeat could be attributed to Liberal abstentions at the poll; unfavourable local conditions; an inadequate and unprepared local organisation; neglect of registration procedure, resulting in a loss of lodger votes, usually regarded as mostly Liberal; and the heavy odds of competing against an entrenched local man. In particular, he voiced his belief that 'the Licensing Bill of 1908 had a damaging effect upon Liberal prospects'.<sup>28</sup> Both the *Sussex Express*, a weekly Saturday countywide edition, and *The Times*<sup>29</sup> seemed to be in agreement that the Unionist victory was 'first and foremost [due] to Tariff Reform and particularly to the colonial preference side of the question.' Du Cros considered the election was won on these grounds before the Licensing Bill had any impact. Harcourt, as indicated, tended to suggest the importance of these issues in the reverse order. Either view represents an interesting cross-section of how opinion was moving, at least in the east of Sussex, between 1906 and the end of 1909.

Selecting a candidate from London rather than locally appears to have been a contributing factor to Liberal defeat. Harcourt's stress on the Licensing Bill was a definite drawback to the Edwardian working man, frustrated by the alcohol ban in Liberal clubs, however much it pleased Nonconformists. The Du Cros family were, additionally, well known for their largesse in the borough, funding secondary-school treats, giving blankets to the poor and providing jobs for local workmen. This undoubtedly provided electoral appeal for lower income voters. In the election campaign itself, Du Cros had his motor vehicle

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decked out in the chosen Unionist colours of blue and white, with his three children holding placards, marked 'Vote for our Daddy' – all practical yet emotive stuff. The Unionist strategy of using motor cars helped their cause tremendously. The incorrect printing of green on the Liberal election posters, by an out-of-town printer, may also have affected morale.<sup>30</sup>

Quite possibly, the most immediate reasons for the Liberal failure were the suddenness of the contest and the effects of plural voting (highlighted by Jon Lawrence's studies, for example). Liberals believed, not without some justification, that the duplication of votes by 'outsiders' was hugely telling.

Just to rub salt in the wound, in the Manchester North West by-election of April 1908, caused by Winston Churchill's seeking re-election as a Cabinet member, the Unionists upset a 1906 Liberal majority of over 1,200 votes to capture the seat by a margin of 429 votes.<sup>31</sup> The key question arose – did these by-election defeats reflect an inevitable, even irreversible, drift away from the Liberal Party by the electors after the peak of success in 1906? Were they thus rejecting the New Liberalism? Were the losses likely to increase and become serious enough to cast doubt over a continuation of Liberal government after the next general election? As Peter Rowland observes, the entire parliamentary session (including by-elections) of 1908 'had witnessed a growing sense of frustration, impatience and bewilderment'.<sup>32</sup> In the event, the by-elections were significant, but not sufficient to deprive the Liberals of office in the general elections of 1910.

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- 1 C. Cook & J. Ramsden (eds.), *By-elections in British Politics* (London: Macmillan Press, 1973) – see the introduction by David Butler, pp.1–2.
- 2 Jaime Reynolds, 'Spectacular Victories', *Journal of Liberal History* 44 (Autumn 2004, pp. 5–9).
- 3 Hastings and adjacent Fairlight were the favoured retreats of some of the Pre-Raphaelite painters of the previous century; one of them, Rossetti, married Elizabeth Siddal at St Clements Church, Hastings in May 1860.
- 4 Henry Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections 1885–1910* (London: Macmillan Press, 1967), p. 50.
- 5 Trevor Hopper, *Transformation of Political Consciousness of South East England 1880–1914*, PhD Thesis, University of Brighton, 1997, p. 37. Additionally, Hopper records 'an extremely bitter and muddled phase in the labour movement in Hastings [1900–10]' p. 39.
- 6 As Henry Pelling suggests in his *Social Geography* (p. 75), the Rye area was weaker in Conservatism essentially due to a higher level of Nonconformity in this Sussex East division. The Unionist candidate E. Boyle, conceivably lost votes due to his dogmatic stand over Church of England ritualism.
- 7 Neil Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People, the General Elections 1910* (London: Macmillan Press, 1972), p. 50.
- 8 Electoral results – see F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1885–1918* (London: Macmillan Press, 1974), p. 255.
- 9 *Hastings & St Leonards Observer*, 8 February 1908.
- 10 Arthur Mee, *The Kings England – Sussex* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1937 (original), reprint 1978), p. 101.
- 11 *Hastings & St. Leonards Observer*, 29 February 1908. Earlier, following the 'Valentine' letters exchange of February 1906, Chamberlain was effectively to demand that Balfour commit the Unionists more fully to Tariff Reform. Richard Rempel, *Unionists Divided*, (Newton Abbot, Devon: David & Charles, 1972), p. 166.
- 12 For the full election address, see the reproduced summary pamphlet contained in this article.
- 13 *Hastings & St Leonards Observer*, 29 February 1908.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Patrick Jackson, *Harcourt and Son* (New Jersey (USA): Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), p. 93.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 227.
- 17 *Hastings & St Leonards Observer*, 29 February 1908.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Sussex Express*, 7 March 1908.
- 20 *Hastings & St Leonards Observer*, 29 February 1908.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 All extracts from Trevor Hopper's Thesis, pp. 39, 43 and 44 (as per *Hastings & St Leonards Observer*, 8 February 1908).
- 23 *The Times*, 4 March 1908.
- 24 *Hastings & St Leonards Observer*, 29 February 1908.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 7 March 1908.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 According to Jon Lawrence in *Speaking for the People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 'some towns [were] dominated by outsiders ... such as Croydon or fashionable resorts such as Hastings, Brighton, and Bath'. On p. 243, the footnote also adds that the local population in Hastings in around 1911 was 43 per cent, thus meaning they were in a minority of the whole, i.e. outsiders made up the balance of 57 per cent.
- 28 *Hastings & St Leonards Observer*, 29 February 1908, and 7 March 1908. As regards the 'suddenness' of the by-election claims, Unionists countered by indicating that the Liberals knew of Harvey Du Cros's pending retirement and that his son, Arthur, would be adopted in his place, in mid-1907.
- 29 *Sussex Express*, 15 February 1908, 22 February 1908 and 7 March 1908 editions; *The Times*, 4 March 1908.
- 30 *Hastings & St Leonards Observer*, 29 February 1908.
- 31 F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results*, p. 151.
- 32 Peter Rowland, *The Last Liberal Governments, The Promised Land, 1905–1910* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1968), pp. 213ff.