

journalism, similar to the more recent 'Mondeo Man' and 'Worcester Woman'. Whereas parties now have recourse to sophisticated analytic tools which enable them to identify particular subsets of voters on a range of characteristics, back in 1962 the categorisation was more straightforwardly geographic. Yet, the coming together of the new, young, professional middle class and the Home Counties suburbs did lay the basis for later Liberal success.

Orpington was also, according to Kavanagh, the forerunner of two now-familiar electoral phenomena: by-elections as referenda on incumbent governments, and tactical voting. These have been the ingredients of Liberal and Liberal Democrat resurgence over the past fifteen years. And they have very little to do with Jo Grimond.

In many ways, Orpington could be seen as the prototype of what has become the classic pattern of a Liberal by-election victory. It was a forced election (i.e. not caused by death), which gave the electorate a reason to punish the incumbent party. Moreover, the Conservative government was itself unpopular. There was a third-party vote (in this case Labour), which could be squeezed. The Liberals had the momentum – following good showings in Lincoln, Middlesbrough and Blackpool, they were making headlines. Finally, a positive opinion poll on the eve of the election allowed the Liberals to argue that the election should be seen as a referendum on the government. All of these factors combined to provide an excellent opportunity for tactical voting. In addition, Lubbock was a personable candidate and the local party was well organised.

Like Egan, Kavanagh pointed to the fact that, since the late 1950s, the Liberals had been building their strength in suburban seats in London and Manchester with no Liberal tradition. This was Betjeman's 'Metroland', detached from any affiliation to the established political parties. Although the party wasn't yet winning seats in these areas, it was clearly breaking out of its Celtic fringe and finding a new form of 'Liberal Man' in the suburbs. This was, Kavanagh felt, 'the germ of the breakthrough that the party has made ever since.' The surges in 1974, '83 and '87 were also particularly evident in the suburbs

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and were similarly based on reactions against unpopular governments and a divided Labour Party.

He concluded in agreement with the 'ambiguous conclusion' of Mark Egan, reminding the audience that, although the core vote of the Conservative and Labour parties declines at every election, the Liberal Democrats are not well placed to capitalise on this. Their voters are less likely to 'stick' with them from election to election, their policy positions are not well known or understood, they continue to suffer from the electoral system, which penalises parties with an even geographical spread, and their growth in support among young people is offset by the fact that this section of the electorate is least likely to vote. He pointed to the 2010 general election as evidence of this.

A lively discussion followed, with the many contributions from the audience stressing, among other things, the importance of demonstrating successful administration in local government, the vital work

that was done in local organisation, the personal appeal of Eric Lubbock and his strong roots in the local community, and the historic weakness of the party in Kent – against which the later decline of Liberal support could be seen as a reversion to type.

One audience member recalled how he had been recruited to lifelong Liberal membership by a wine and cheese evening during the Orpington by-election. He emphasised the social aspect of the election, the personal support for Lubbock and the feeling of change associated with the 'Swinging '60s'. There was a feeling of 'sheer enthusiasm' which drove the Liberals during this time. In particular, he remembered travelling by motorcade up the M6 to Derbyshire, where they were certain they were going to win.

*Dr Emily Robinson is an Advance Research Fellow at the School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham.*

## In further search of 'Orpington Man'

The evidence re-examined  
By **Michael Steed**

**B**OTH SPEAKERS at the History Group meeting's discussion of 'Orpington Man' referred to the wider pattern of Liberal voting in London and Manchester suburban constituencies before and after the 1962 by-election in Orpington itself. This note examines that wider pattern more precisely, and concludes that 'Orpington Man' should be seen as an earlier and more enduring component in the Liberal revival than has been generally recognised. The phrase captures an important element in the social changes which underpinned Liberal growth in the Grimond era and were to make a significant contribution to the party's capacity to win seats by the end of the twentieth century.

Orpington first appeared as a constituency in 1945 due to a limited localised redistribution. This added 25 seats to the Commons in

areas whose population had grown most in the inter-war period. With just 12.3 per cent of the vote, Liberal support in the new Orpington itself was unexceptional for the 1945 general election; what was unusual was that this was quite a jump compared to the 9.3 per cent who had voted Liberal in the previous general election (1935) in Chislehurst, the nearest to a predecessor constituency.

This was an exception which illustrated a rule. Although Liberal support declined generally between 1935 and 1945, the party's performance was extraordinarily uneven. For instance Orpington's new neighbours also saw big jumps in the Liberal vote: +8.4 in Bromley and +3.9 in the reduced Chislehurst. Other newly drawn constituencies in the London suburbs also swung dramatically to the Liberals. In 1935, the party had polled a mere 7.5 per cent in the country's largest

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constituency, the Hendon division of Middlesex, with 164,786 electors; its 1945 votes were 16.9 per cent and 18.5 per cent in the two new seats of Hendon North and South.

Historians have conspicuously failed to note this localised resurgence of Liberalism, simply seeing the 1945 election as part of a continuous pattern of Liberal decline; a contemporary history called it 'the Waterloo of the Liberal party'.<sup>1</sup> Overall, the Liberal Party did do badly in 1945, both losing seats and seeing its share of the vote drop in most of the seats it had fought in 1935. But most of these were in traditionally Liberal areas: the Celtic fringe, agricultural constituencies where Labour had yet to overtake it and a scatter of urban strongholds such as Birkenhead or Middlesbrough, often seaports where the party's commitment to free trade had still meant something in the 1930s. In 1945 such traditional support was still ebbing fast; yet as that tide ebbed, new support in newly built up areas emerged out of the political seabed. If we take the thirteen cases where rapid inter-war growth led to redistribution in 1945 which had had a Liberal candidate standing in 1935 (most did not), the average Liberal vote rose from 12.8 per cent to 16.2 per cent.

Such rapid-growth areas included some seaside towns, as

well as new suburban areas around Birmingham and Manchester; but most stretched out of London – poetically, John Betjeman's Metro-land. Most of these voters lived in recently built homes, developing new communities. Typically there was no local Liberal tradition. Such voters had generally spurned Liberal candidates in 1935 but responded better to the platform that the party promoted in 1945. This surely reflected the social Liberal appeal of 1945, the shift away from the party's traditional themes to its new Beveridgian message. The twelve Liberal MPs elected in 1945 were all from Wales or agricultural areas (often both); but popular Liberal support had shifted massively towards newer, urban Britain. That was most evident in the new-growth areas, but the party also gained ground dramatically in some urban constituencies where it had polled very badly in 1935, such as Reading (up from 5 per cent to 12.6 per cent) or Edinburgh Central (4.6 per cent to 11.2 per cent). The post-1945 party at Westminster was thoroughly unrepresentative of what was happening amongst Liberal voters.

However, for the moment it was a flash in the pan. A by-election in Bromley four months after the 1945 general election saw the Liberal vote cut in half, a foretaste of ten

years of bad by-election results. During this decade, the only good by-election votes were in Inverness (1954) and Rotherhithe (1946). No sign of Orpington Man there, or in either of the two general elections (1950 and 1951); the only seats gained in three-cornered fights were in Scotland. In its continued decline, the parliamentary Liberal party became the more associated with the Celtic fringe. Its pockets of local government support were mostly in Pennine towns, where another type of Liberal tradition lingered on, expressed at Westminster in the form of Liberal MPs elected through local Tory-Liberal pacts.

That makes the pattern of change at the 1955 general election all the more intriguing. David Butler noted this as the first election since 1929 when Liberal support rose, if slightly; but stressed the unevenness of the pattern.<sup>2</sup> Generally, the slight rise failed to match the loss already sustained between 1950 and 1951. Whilst a handful of striking improvements in peripheral Britain (North Cornwall, North Devon, Hereford and Inverness) did bring the party above the 1950 level, in other traditional strongholds, from Anglesey to Dorset, the party's support was ebbing lower still.

However, Butler failed to notice an area of consistent, significant

Orpington by-election, March 1962 – the result is declared; the victor, Eric Lubbock, centre



improvement which was to prove a harbinger of the future. Most constituencies with an improved by Liberal vote in 1955 had still not recovered fully the losses of 1951. But among the two dozen exceptional constituencies where the 1955 Liberal vote exceeded the 1950 level, over half were in outer suburban London or Manchester. None of these had been areas of traditional Liberal strength. Leading this group of constituencies were Twickenham (+2.4) and Orpington (+1.9); there were also small increases in nearby Carshalton and Richmond.

It is worth reflecting that this occurred before Jo Grimond made the national impact he was about to. Clement Attlee was still leading a Labour Party totally in hock to the trade-union block vote, whilst Sir Anthony Eden was brooding over an imperialist nostalgia which was shortly to lead to the disaster of Suez. 'Orpington Man' was already stirring; or rather suburban men and women (so far as hard-working party activists were concerned, probably more often women), turning instead to what most apparently well-informed political pundits considered to be a moribund political party.

Grimond became leader in autumn 1956, but already the May 1956 local elections had shown further small advances in the suburban belt, to be continued in each of the next three years. Since the Liberal Party's historic base was so low in these areas, it took it several years to begin to win more than a trickle of seats. The first in the south-east London suburbs came in Bromley in May 1957,<sup>3</sup> next door to Orpington; the first gains in Orpington Urban District itself came in May 1959. There were more gains in north London suburbs, particularly Finchley.

By then, the Grimond-led party had secured striking parliamentary by-election advances, with Rochdale and Torrington in 1958 making the national headlines. These were both pockets of traditional Liberal strength, feeding an image of the party's dependence on such areas. Observations derived from parliamentary by-elections are of course always subject to the accidents of where they occur. A more careful study of the pattern of advance in local elections in the

1956–59 period suggests that the social basis of the first Grimond revival lay more in the appeal of Grimond's new Liberalism to the sort of people who lived in the newer suburbs.

This was put to the test of the October 1959 general election. The party only gained one, peripheral, constituency: North Devon. But it made striking advances in votes in the sort of areas where 'Orpington Man' resided. The rise in its share of the vote in Cheadle (+10.3) was only a shade less than that in North Devon (+10.5), whilst Orpington itself with +8.8 was not far behind. The average Liberal vote across Britain rose only +1.8, but where we can make 1955–59 comparisons in outer London the rise was +4.8 and in southern Greater Manchester +6.8.<sup>4</sup> The local elections of 1960 and 1961 confirmed further growth in local Liberal strength in Orpington, so when the Conservatives precipitated the by-election, the seat was ready to fall like a ripe plum.

Apart from Eric Lubbock's personal achievement in holding the seat until 1970, Orpington apparently made little impact on Liberal fortunes in the immediately ensuing years. A young psephological researcher, writing immediately after the 1964 general election, clearly erred in dismissing Orpington Man so soon.<sup>5</sup> Its Manchester equivalent, Cheadle, was won by the Liberals in 1966 – really a more considerable achievement as this was at a general election, not a by-election. Cheadle was the only urban seat to be gained without the help of a by-election between 1935 and 1983, and its main successor seat, Hazel Grove, was to be held again briefly in 1974.

The long-term parliamentary impact of 'Orpington Man' was only really apparent after another generation. From 1997 onwards Liberal Democrats have held several of the suburban constituencies where their advance was prefigured in 1955–59. This produced a higher level of voting strength, activism, presence in local government and so general credibility in these constituencies which in due course enabled tactical squeezing of Labour voters. Following the 2010 general election, Liberal Democrats hold constituencies that include traditional strongholds in Scotland, Wales

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and south-west England; some by-elections gained by the fluke of vacancies, and then held by the hard work of the lucky victor; and most recently some obviously university constituencies. But amongst the 57 are 8° lying in areas that qualified for that special 1945 redistribution because of the huge growth in housing in the 1920s and 1930s.

'Orpington Man' deserves better too of political historians. Political change is not only measured through the numbers of seats won in the House of Commons. The unexpected response of women and men in Orpington-type areas in 1945 and again in 1955 showed that simple tales of Liberal decline and of the party's dependence on peripheral Britain were only part of the mid-twentieth century story. A new type of less class-bound and tradition-abiding voter had already demonstrated by their behaviour that some form of new politics was ready and waiting. From 1956 Jo Grimond was able to harness that something as the Liberal revival.

*Michael Steed, retired psephologist, lives in Canterbury, where he served as a Lib Dem councillor until May 2011. He is a veteran of by-election campaigns starting with Southend West in January 1959 and including Orpington; he was President of the Liberal Party 1978–79.*

- 1 R. B. McCallum & Alison Readman, *The British General Election of 1945* (London, 1947), p. 243.
- 2 D. E. Butler, *The British General Election of 1955* (London, 1955), p. 199–200.
- 3 Brian Taylor in Keston & Hayes ward, who is still attending Liberal Democrat conferences; his granddaughter Rebecca Taylor has just become the Liberal Democrat MEP for Yorkshire.
- 4 Calculations by the author based strictly on constituencies with three-cornered fights at both elections, thirteen in outer London and three south of Manchester.
- 5 Michael Steed, in D. E. Butler & Tony King *The British General Election of 1964* (London, 1965), p. 351.
- 6 These are four in south-west London, two on the southern side of Manchester and two on the eastern side of Birmingham; it is debatable how far the latter pair (Solihull and Yardley) belong in this group, as the growth here of Liberal electoral strength is much later – but they are similar in housing and social history.