

ERIC LUBBOCK AND THE ORPINGTON MOMENT

by Michael Meadowcroft



THE DEATH OF Eric, Lord Avebury, on 14 February 2016, at the age of 87, ended the direct link with a remarkable moment in political history. Eric, even though he had been ‘Avebury’ for forty-five years, was always better known, particularly by Liberals, as ‘Lubbock’.

From time to time, by demonstrating vividly the public mood, by-elections have had a political importance well beyond their immediate notoriety. The Newport by-election of October 1922 brought down Lloyd George’s coalition government and precipitated an immediate general election; the East Fulham by-election of October 1933 saw a Labour gain on a huge swing and is often put forward as demonstrating a pacific mood amongst the voters and thus delaying rearmament; and the Oxford and Bridgwater by-elections of October and November 1938 respectively, soon after the Munich settlement, in which opposition to Neville Chamberlain’s Conservative government

The declaration of the result at Orpington; left, Peter Goldman, centre, Eric Lubbock

coalesced around ‘Progressive Independent’ candidates who achieved significant increases in the anti-government vote, suggested that the electorate was disillusioned with appeasement. Individual by-elections post-Orpington did not have the same immediate effect, but Dick Taverne’s March 1973 victory in Lincoln as ‘Democratic Labour’ indicated the latent support for the political position taken up a decade later by the SDP, just as the by-elections in Warrington, Crosby and Glasgow Hillhead in 1981 and 1982 breathed life into that latter cause, albeit only temporarily.

Orpington, on 14 March 1962, was a remarkable and highly influential by-election.¹ It was a contributory cause of Harold MacMillan’s ‘night of the long knives’ four months later, when he sacked seven members of his Cabinet. There were a number of reasons for its contemporary impact. First, was the scale of the switch of votes – the Liberals went from third place and 21 per cent at the previous general election, in 1959, to first place and

53 per cent at the by-election. Second, it was the Liberals, a party with just six MPs at the time, who won, rather than Labour, the official opposition (Labour in fact lost 10 per cent of its 1959 vote). Third, Orpington was a solid and traditional Tory fief which that party believed it could regard as a seat it would never lose and whose electors could therefore be permanently relied upon to send whichever candidate the party chose. This attitude proved fatal.

The embedded traditionalism of the constituency was epitomised by its long-serving Member Sir Waldron Smithers, a typical ‘knight of the shires’, who represented Orpington from 1924 until his death in 1954, in effect following his father who had been the MP from 1918 to 1922. On Sir Waldron’s death in 1955 a local lawyer, Donald Sumner, was easily returned at the by-election (with no Liberal candidate). Sumner sat until October 1961 when he was appointed a County Court Judge. Fatally, the Conservatives left the seat vacant for four

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months – a decision exploited by the Liberal Party who declared it as a typically arrogant decision from a party which believed it owned the seat.

It was also a mistake to believe that the demographic makeup of the constituency was the same as in Sir Waldron Smithers' heyday. With the increase in commuting and the arrival of a new young professional class it had gradually become a much more mixed community. One aspect of this which helped in the media coverage was that many journalists had bought homes in the district because there were trains from Waterloo, Charing Cross and London Bridge almost up to midnight. This newer type of resident was tailor-made for the Grimond-led Liberal Party whose opinion poll rating had almost trebled, from 6 per cent to 16 per cent, in the three years from March 1959 to March 1962, and the influx of sharp, bright younger men and women into the party provided a professional and ambitious set of officers and candidates, underpinned by a number of older and more experienced organisers. The local party had gone down the route of fighting, and winning, council seats and the Conservatives should have been alarmed by the fact that at the May 1961 Orpington Urban District Council elections – the last before the by-election – the Liberals had topped the aggregate vote (on a turnout around half that of parliamentary elections.)

Liberal Party headquarters had planned closely with the constituency party and were determined to import its best agents and to ensure all necessary finance was available. There was, however, an immediate and delicate problem. The adopted candidate was Jack Galloway. He was an excellent speaker and campaigner and had polled relatively well at the 1959 election, but he was not only known as a womaniser but – the rumours had it – he had contracted a bigamous marriage. The press were on to the story and on one occasion two reporters burst into Jack's hotel bedroom and he fled via the window. Understandably Jack was keen to fight the by-election but the party realised that it would be too much of a risk. Eventually Galloway agreed to 'retire' and, at short notice, a new candidate had to be found. Orpington Liberals

had always been very shrewd and pragmatic and had chosen local election candidates on the basis of who was likely to win, rather than who had seniority, and the same considerations were applied to the by-election, with the selection of Eric Lubbock. As it happened, the delay in calling the by-election was now helpful to the Liberals in enabling Eric to get up to speed and refocusing the organisation for a rather different campaign.

Eric Lubbock had exactly the right background: he was by profession an engineer and had historic Liberal and even aristocratic connections. This was a mixture that appealed to both the new professionals and the older Kentish folk. He had only been a member of the Liberal Party for three years and had been elected almost immediately for his home village of Downe – electorally a tiny ward with only one councillor. Although determined to carry out all the promotional tasks that are part and parcel of being a candidate, he was rather shy and far from being the capable and shrewd politician that he later became. Eric was never a charismatic speaker and in 1962 he was hesitant rather than articulate. The decision was made by the party managers to keep Eric off all three-party television programmes and a variety of excuses were used to explain this. It had no noticeable effect on the result.

The decision to keep Eric away from debating directly with the other candidates was also determined by the fact that the Conservatives had selected precisely the wrong kind of candidate. Believing that the electors of Orpington would vote for any Conservative candidate they had chosen a Central Office high flyer, Peter Goldman. A brilliant intellectual and writer, he had no local connections and came over as rather cold and remote. For instance, he didn't knock on doors but sat in a large car which cruised along a street whilst his canvassers asked voters whether they would like to come out and meet Mr Goldman! It is possible that, quite illegitimately, he lost some support on the twin grounds of being Jewish but having converted to the Church of England. Goldman himself, probably wisely, confronted this openly himself at the beginning of the campaign.

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The Liberal Party had agreed to second its Local Government Officer, Pratap Chitnis, to Orpington to act as agent. I arrived at HQ in February 1962 as his assistant, whereupon he decamped forthwith to Orpington and never returned to his old job! Pratap was a superb organiser and had built on the excellent local voluntary organisation with a highly professional team, bringing in three full-time agents: Michael Key from North Dorset, Dennis Minnis from Birmingham and Noel Penstone from Torrington. Excellent professionally designed literature poured into the constituency and party workers arrived in their hundreds to ensure that all the delivering and canvassing was completed on time. On the afternoon of the eve-of-poll the *Daily Mail* called Pratap and informed him that an opinion poll would be appearing in the following morning's paper showing the Liberals narrowly ahead. Pratap immediately ordered 9,000 copies and these were delivered on the council estates and given out to commuters as they arrived to catch their morning trains at local stations. The cost of the campaign was immense, and Pratap told me that he overspent the legal limit by three times! The opinion poll and the flood of Liberal workers on the doorstep ensured a major tactical vote away from Labour. It was this that gave Eric Lubbock his huge majority as opposed to a comfortable win.

The by-election was an immense psychological and electoral boost to the party. The national opinion polls for a brief moment showed the Liberals top and at the local elections two months later, Liberal candidates around the country gained seats never before won, often with minimal effort. Later parliamentary by-elections, however, were not in seats with sufficient organisational or representational basis to enable another startling success – although in the light of later techniques which, for instance, enabled Sutton & Cheam to be gained in December 1972, some of them could and should have been won. The one that should have been won in any case was Colne Valley in March 1963; had there been a more aggressive campaign a gain might well have been possible. Such a victory would then have catalysed the

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May 1963 local elections and the party would have stayed in three-party contention. As it was, the Orpington effect slowly dissipated and by 1970 the party was in deep electoral trouble. Even Orpington was narrowly lost, although Eric Lubbock slightly increased his vote. His cousin, the 3rd Baron Avebury, died in 1971 and, as his heir, Eric had to make the difficult choice of accepting a role in a House of Lords whose basis he strongly disagreed with or disclaiming the peerage and hoping to come back into the Commons at some indefinite future date. He decided that it was better to continue with his parliamentary work and he used his seat in the Lords for forty-five years to espouse many civil rights and human rights causes.

On his election for Orpington Eric Lubbock immediately dropped into the parliamentary routine and was appointed Chief Whip in 1963. He was a superb 'fixer' and did the job exceptionally well for seven long years. In January 1967, when Jo Grimond retired, Lubbock made a quixotic bid for the leadership, on the basis of 'anyone but Jeremy Thorpe', but he did not have the personality for such a task and he only secured the support of two of the nine MPs who were not candidates – Richard Wainwright and Michael Winstanley.

Eric increasingly demonstrated that he was an instinctive Liberal and took on many unfashionable causes, such as gypsies' rights, even when his health began to decline in later years. At one time it seemed that whatever country I turned up in on a pro-democracy mission he would be there making forceful representations on behalf of some ill-treated minority. Thrust into the limelight by the chance of a historic election, he carved out a political career and earned the respect of colleagues on all sides of the political spectrum.

Michael Meadowcroft was Liberal MP for Leeds West, 1983–87.

1 The two key published essays on the by-election are: Donald Newby, 'The Orpington Story', *New Outlook*, March 1963, and, Ken Young, 'Orpington and the "Liberal Revival"', in Chris Cook and John Ramsden (eds), *By-elections in British Politics* (UCL Press, 1997).

Liberal leaders and leadership

Conference fringe meeting, 20 September 2015, with Simon Hughes and Paul Tyler; chair: Lynne Featherstone

Report by **Douglas Oliver**

THE LIBERAL DEMOCRAT History Group convened for its fringe event at the autumn Federal Conference in Bournemouth to launch and discuss its new book, *British Liberal Leaders: Leaders of the Liberal Party, SDP and Liberal Democrats since 1828*. With the party at its lowest ebb for many years, following the disastrous electoral showing in May 2015, and with Tim Farron's narrow leadership win in July, the question of effective political leadership and positioning was at the forefront of most delegates' minds. As well as hoping that the book might offer the new leader tips on the effective performance of his difficult role, the History Group felt that the principles of Farron's forebears might act as signposts for the party's future philosophical direction.

Lynne Featherstone, former MP for Hornsey and Wood Green, as well as former head of Norman Lamb and Chris Huhne's unsuccessful leadership campaigns, chaired the discussion and opened by musing upon the 'madness' of any one person actively seeking the role. After a decade in Westminster, the former coalition minister (in both DfID and the Home Office) reflected on the immense personal commitment that any leading political role demands – and all the more so for the person tasked with leading a party in the centre ground of British politics.

She was joined on the panel by two former Liberal parliamentary veterans who had first come to the party before merger with the SDP, and had met and worked with a wide range of party leaders from Jo Grimond right through to Nick Clegg and now Tim Farron. Simon Hughes was famously elected in the Bermondsey by-election in the spring of 1983 – benefitting from the largest-ever political swing in a Westminster election, as the Labour

vote collapsed in association with the hard left – and first served alongside David Steel. Paul Tyler was first elected for Bodmin in 1974, during the colourful period of Jeremy Thorpe's leadership, serving for only a few months before losing during that year's second general election, but subsequently returning to parliament in 1992 as Tory fortunes faded in Cornwall.

Simon began his discussion with praise for a 'fantastic book which had lots of insights, and would provide a competitive edge for any internal party quiz!' Organising his limited time, Hughes chose to focus on the three leaders who were before his era but had shaped him the most politically, as well as on those contemporaries he had worked directly with, and by examining the parallels he sought to draw lessons for the present.

His first lesson was that Liberal leaders had a strong tendency to be resilient and energetic. From Gladstone onward, it was notable that party leaders had great staying power in parliament, and not merely as leader. The Grand Old Man was an MP for an epic sixty-three years, and David Lloyd George for his own half century in different eras; but even more-recent leaders like Kennedy and Ashdown were in Westminster for relatively long stints before and after they were leader. Despite variable personalities, outlooks and political contexts, there was, Hughes argued, a hidden steel that linked these leaders – and that was a tendency for hard work and stringency.

Hughes went on to conclude that a strong sense of political positioning and direction was critical to any party leader. Hughes said that in his view – which he accepted not all in the party shared – the party had 'performed best' when it stood from the centre-left, rather than the centre-right. Furthermore, Hughes

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