

Research and 'The UK in a Changing Europe'.

The author is indebted to his colleagues on the BBC local election psephology team, Patrick English,

Stephen Fisher, Rob Ford, Eilidh Macfarlane, and Jonathan Mellon for their support in analysis, and to the Britain Elects website for making its collection of the 2022

local election results freely available. Responsibility for the views expressed here lies with the author.

Reports

The 1992 General Election

Evening meeting, 31 January 2022, with Alison Holmes and Dennis Kavanagh. Chair: Lord Foster.
Report by **Gianni Sarra**

THE MEETING'S CHAIR, Don Foster, had of course a unique connection to the talk's topic. His victory in Bath, over Conservative Party Chair Chris Patten, was one of the better results for the party in the 1992 vote. The election overall was summed up by Lord Foster rather aptly: 'Paddy Ashdown won the campaign, Neil Kinnock won the polls, John Major won in the end'. Despite Ashdown's personal popularity buoying the party and serving as a major asset, and polls predicting the Tories being returned to the opposition benches, the Conservatives ultimately returned to power with a surprising, albeit reduced, majority.

The first speaker, Dr Alison Holmes, was able to give a rather unique 'inside outsider' perspective. She began her comments by remembering

absent friends, including Paddy Ashdown and Richard Holme, who led the 1992 manifesto. Holmes had been working in Ashdown's office when Des Wilson, who was to run the campaign, appointed her to serve as the campaign coordinator. Appointed in December 1990, she acknowledged that, as a '26-year-old Yank' who had been in the country for less than three years, she was a somewhat unconventional choice on the surface.

Three themes animated the campaign. First was the time itself. There was a new zeitgeist, giving a dramatic backdrop to everything that was being done. This included, most dramatically, foreign affairs. The world was in turmoil and upheaval, but liberals saw hope for a potentially radical shift in global politics in the light of this. Thus, there

was a global tone that coloured everything about the Lib Dem campaign. The second theme was that every campaign fights the lingering battles of the last campaign through the prism of the new election. For the Liberal Democrats, this meant navigating the wounds of a painful 1987 campaign and a difficult merger between the Liberals and Social Democrats. The third was that the 1992 election occurred amid a seismic shift in the fundamentals of political campaigning. Technologies were adapting, as was the culture. Spin, professionalisation of politics, the 'Americanisation' of politics; these were all things the party had to adapt to.

The scars of the 1987 election were still felt. It had been a messy campaign, bitter and acrimonious, with many candidates refusing to return to the fray. This had been followed by an even messier merger process, mixed with relaunches and renamings, and some awful polling and election results. As Tim Clement-Jones put it, at one point the party was within the margin of error of not existing in the opinion polls. It was perhaps a blessing in disguise that the party had

Report: the 1992 general election

no documentation from 1987 remaining, and that many of the key figures in the 1992 campaign, Dr Holmes included, had no stake in many of those battles. Thankfully by the time the next general election rolled about, the party had recovered from these depths with wins in the Eastbourne and Ribble Valley by-elections. The party needed to both build on this work but also recover from the mistakes.

How did the party adapt to these circumstances? Des Wilson was driven by three things: loyalty to Paddy; a sense of responsibility and even embarrassment for the discordant and antagonistic 1987 campaign (as chair of the election committee, the impossible task of managing the tensions between the two Davids in that year cast a shadow over everything he did); and a love for the thrill of campaign strategising. There were three key goals underpinning the strategy for 1992: survival; build and develop for the future; and 20 per cent of the vote and twenty seats. Everything had this developmental focus to it, Wilson wanting to avoid blowing a precious opportunity like the party had in 1987.

Targeting was rigorous and methodical, despite some resistance in the party since such a strategy went against egalitarian impulses. Each seat was given a level, to sum up its importance to the party. New initiatives for diversity and accessibility were set up,

regional media coordinators were brought on and trained earlier, and Welsh and Scottish liaisons were brought inside the team. This heavy targeting was integrated into the party's policy platform too. There was no point in trying to sell something nationally if it wouldn't sell locally. The party produced, throughout the parliament, substantial policy works, such as *Shaping Tomorrow Starting Today* and *Changing Britain for Good*, integrated with these campaigning priorities. To hammer home these issues, the party made heavy use of press conference packages and mini-campaigns focused on the Five Es: education, economy, environment, Europe, electoral reform. The last one in particular was tackled head-on by the party with the 'My Vote' campaign. Many in the party had concerns about emphasising electoral reform, as it led to discussions about how Lib Dem votes might lead to a hung parliament, yet Wilson wanted the party to adopt the messaging that a vote could be *for* something, rather than merely against it.

The party also adapted well to the changes in news media. The night team, an innovation of the 1987 campaign, evolved into a twenty-four-hour news monitoring team, especially adept at defending the party's share of news coverage. The party's political broadcasts had been in production for almost two years. This often paid off. The party's local election

broadcast in 1991 received higher viewing figures than their rivals. Similarly, though both the Tories and Labour also attempted high-profile road events based around their leaders, Paddy's 'challenge tour' and his unique visit to Europe were effective deployments of his charisma. Not even the news of an extramarital affair five years prior, and the resulting jokes about 'Paddy Pants-down', took this advantage away.

This, arguably, all paid off. The party survived in 1992, and had, perhaps even more importantly, built the necessary foundations for their breakthrough success in 1997. The party had been given a place to stand.

The second speaker, Dennis Kavanagh, emeritus professor of politics at the University of Liverpool and co-author of *The British General Election of 1992*, provided a broader overview of the campaign. Change, he observed, is quite rare in general elections. The pendulum tends to shift quite slowly, and most elections result in a 'confirmation' of what is already underway. Ultimately, despite some signs of change, 1992 proved to be such an election. There was, especially after the removal of Thatcher and the dumping of the poll tax, growing economic optimism. This allowed the Tories to effectively utilise fears about then-shadow chancellor John Smith implementing tax rises were he to enter Number 11, and allowed the Tories to scare wavering Con-Lib floating

voters with the fear of letting Labour in.

Thus, the ingredients were set for an upset Conservative victory, in a dreadful election for the opinion pollsters. One thing didn't sway the election, however. 'It Wasn't *The Sun* Wot Won It', Professor Kavanagh contended, despite the newspaper's post-election claims of playing such a crucial role with its anti-Kinnock headlines, noting there was no sign of a bigger switch among *Sun* readers than anyone else. Still, it was a tight election. An extra half a percent swing against the Tories would have deprived them of their majority. Two things could have boosted the Lib Dems in particular. One was that, though tactical voting did help win seats such as Bath, it was still a relatively small force, and it was only in 1997 when it began delivering big results. Similarly, a more presidential-style election, such as with leader debates, would have allowed the party to make better use of Paddy's popularity.

Ultimately, though, it might well have been a blessing in disguise to lose the election. The economic downturn and Maastricht chaos was coming, and it was, Professor Kavanagh argued, best for both Labour and the Lib Dems to lose such an election. It was especially good for the Liberal Democrats, for both their long-term development and the credibility of coalition governments. Professor Kavanagh also

emphasised the importance of the Scottish dimension in prospects for the Liberal Democrats – nearly half of the seats in 1992 were Scottish.

Also in attendance were former MPs who won seats in the 1992 election. Lord Foster emphasised the centrality of the 'Labour cannot win here' message in his race, as well as the 'almost cartoon-like' contrast his own approachable campaign had with Chris Patten's more elusive and distanced approach. Paul Tyler, who won North Cornwall, noted that the local ground war allowed his team to exploit the national air war. Like Foster, Tyler was helped by his opponent's attitude to

constituency affairs. His opponent, Gerry Neale, didn't want to be a 'parish pump politician' and was hurt by the central government sitting on an inquiry into local water pollution.

Nick Harvey, who won North Devon, noted many candidates who won in 1997 had been on track to win in '92, but were hurt by last-minute events such as the backlash to John Smith's shadow budget and some mistaken final week strategy calls.

Gianni Sarra is a PhD candidate at King's College London, working on issues of political ethics and liberal political theory, and is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group executive.

Reviews

A life of public service

Stephen Hart, *James Chuter Ede: Humane Reformer and Politician – Liberal and Labour traditions* (Pen and Sword Books, 2021)

Review by **Robert Ingham**

THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT OF 1945–51 included titans of twentieth-century British politics. Attlee, Bevin, Morrison, Cripps, Bevan – the names still resonate. James Chuter Ede is now largely forgotten, but he served as home secretary

throughout the entire period. He was the longest serving home secretary since Viscount Sidmouth in the early nineteenth century. In modern times, only Theresa May ran him close.

Inevitably, most of this well researched book – the first ever