By-elections in British politics

edited by

Chris Cook and John Ramsden

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Also by Chris Cook and published by UCL Press

What happened where: a guide to places and events in twentieth-century history (with Diccon Bewes)

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First published in 1997 by UCL Press

Reprinted 2003 by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London, EC4P 4EE

Routledge is an imprint of the
Taylor & Francis Group

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data are available.

ISBNs:
1-85728-534-4 HB
1-85728-535-2 PB

Typeset in Garamond by Mathematical Composition Setters Ltd, Salisbury, UK.
Printed and bound by Antony Rowe Ltd, Eastbourne

To David Butler, Emeritus Fellow, Nuffield College, Oxford

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Introduction and acknowledgements

By-Elections in British Politics has been planned as a major investigation into the diverse aspects of an important feature of British politics. By-elections, despite their real shortcomings as indicators of public opinion, continue to influence Governments more than either opinion polls or local government elections. They still arouse a relatively high level of participation among voters, and they provide excitement for newspapers and television, for politicians and historians.

In this new publication, the differing nature of by-elections has been explored through case studies, using the most appropriate avenue of approach for the analysis of each example chosen. Newport (1922) contributed to bringing down Lloyd George as Prime Minister; St. George's (1931) helped save Baldwin as Conservative Party leader; Oxford and Bridgwater (1938) provided a rare opportunity for the electorate to give their views on foreign policy at a crucial time; Orpington (1962) administered a severe jolt to Macmillan's Government. Each of these is thus examined as an individual campaign, allowing the author of these chapters to explore the relationship between national events and the way in which they were perceived locally. East Fulham (1933) has received so much comment that it became a historiographical problem, and it is treated as such. In contrast, the by-elections held during the Second World War, during the Labour Governments of 1924, 1964–70 and 1974–79, and the centre party upsurges of 1970–73 and 1981–82, require a different approach. Since in these cases the impact was cumulative rather than individual, these groups of contests have been looked at as a whole.

However, even the widest of perspectives cannot bring all of the diverse campaigns of the almost 80 years since 1918 within a uniform framework. It would be misleading to ignore the relatively unexciting and unimpressive results of the by-elections of the later 1920s or of the 1950s, but it would be inappropriate to regard them as either individually or cumulatively comparable to East Fulham, Orpington or Hillhead. We have therefore provided editorial passages to cover these periods not covered in detail in

the case study chapters, and detailed appendices which cover *all* by-elections since the First World War introduced something akin to democracy in British elections.

We also include an introductory chapter by David Butler which looks at the general issues raised by the interpretation of by-elections, and a concluding chapter by Ivor Crewe which both reviews the most recent experience and concludes that while the nature of the impact of by-elections on British politics may have changed, yet the impact is still there. These chapters frame our more narrowly-focused case studies within broader perspectives.

A quarter of a century has elapsed since the original idea for this book was first developed in discussions between a number of Fellows and students of Nuffield College in 1973. Our original volume, published by Macmillan in 1974 and long both out of print and also increasingly out of date with the passing years, owed a considerable debt to the Warden and Fellows of Nuffield. It seems appropriate to us to acknowledge that debt again, since so many of our new as well as our continuing authors went through a career-shaping experience at Nuffield. It is particularly appropriate for us to express our thanks to David Butler, the creator of psephological studies in Britain and an important influence on the work of almost all the authors in this book. We dedicate this book with respect and affection to 'D.E.B.'

Chris Cook and John Ramsden
May 1997

CHAPTER 1

By-elections and their interpretation

David Butler

In the time of Charles II, when Parliaments had no limit to their duration, by-elections were the prime sources of MP recruitment. When John Wilkes was repeatedly returned by the electors of Middlesex in 1769–70, or when Foxite support was tested at Westminster in 1783, national attention was clearly focused on the verdict of by-elections.[1] However, in pre-Reform days there were few constituencies with a broad enough, or free enough, franchise for by-elections to be given much value as pointers to popular opinion. After 1832 the situation began to change (for example, a by-election at Walsall in 1842 seems to have had some significance in the development of the Corn Law struggle), but it was not until the coming of mass politics in the second half of the nineteenth century that by-elections became a frequent source of comment. It was thought, probably incorrectly, that the deceptively favourable outcome of contests at Southwark and Sheffield in February 1880 lured Disraeli into announcing the general election which ended his rule.

Certainly, with the advent of a popular press, by-elections attracted a new degree of interest, being treated almost as major sporting events. By the end of the century the letters and diaries of politicians contain increasingly frequent observations on their outcome. Perhaps 1904 and 1905 (with seven government defeats in each year) provide the period when by-elections had most significance for British politics. They did not then bring down a government (they never have except, indirectly, in 1979),[2] but they did much to destroy its morale, as well as to preserve the uncertain unity of the opposition. Mass politics were now conducted on a national scale. As long as there were no opinion polls and only a few local elections were fought on a party basis, there was nothing to compete with by-elections as indicators of how the political tide was flowing.

However, 1918 constitutes a turning-point in electoral history, marking the biggest leap towards a universal franchise and the arrival of the Labour Party as a nationwide political force. Because the style of politics changed so abruptly at that time, it offers an appropriate moment to begin a study of the role of by-elections in modern politics.

Incidence

The incidence of by-elections has been very uneven. Since 1918 the annual average number, 15, conceals a variation between 39 in 1940 and 2 in 1966 and 1987. In fact the number of by-elections has fallen sharply. From 1919 to 1939 the annual average was 18, while from mid-1945 to mid-1970 it was 11.[3] From 1970 to 1996 it was 6. Fewer elderly MPs have stayed on to die in harness – the two septuagenarians elected to the 1992 House of Commons constituted the smallest number on record; fewer MPs have resigned in mid-Parliament for business or personal reasons; and fewer have been appointed to government posts – partly because of the end of overseas governorships and of the use of the House as a path to judicial office and partly because, recently, the increased volatility of the electorate has made governments more chary of creating vacancies even in 'safe' seats. In 1957 Mr Macmillan refrained from the customary offering of the Lord Chief Justiceship to the Attorney-General because the Attorney's seat was thought marginal. Most of the really outstanding government defeats since 1960 – Orpington, Leyton, Dudley, Sutton and Cheam, Ashfield and Ribble Valley – were in by-elections that could have been avoided.

Other causes of by-elections have disappeared. Until the passage of the Re-election of Ministers Act in 1926 the holders of certain offices had to offer themselves for re-election upon appointment; between 1919 and 1926 this caused 20 by-elections – and in two of them the incumbent was defeated.

Members of Parliament seem also to have become less prone to seek re-endorsement from their constituents over an issue of policy or a change of party: there were nine such by-elections between 1900 and 1914 and four in the inter-war years. But since the defeat of the Duchess of Atholl at Kinross and West Perthshire in 1938 the only such tests in Britain have followed the resignations of Dick Taverne at Lincoln in 1973 and of Bruce Douglas-Mann in 1982 (although it was only the intervention of the 1955 general election that prevented Sir Richard Acland from fighting a by-election at Gravesend over nuclear weapons). However, in 1986 the device was collectively invoked by the 15 Unionists in Northern Ireland who resigned in protest at the Anglo-Irish Agreement and stood for re-election to provide a referendum on the issue.

Successful election petitions, which from 1900 to 1914 resulted in 13 by-elections, have also declined. The only unseatings for electoral offences in the last 50 years were in 1922 and 1923, although in the 1950s there were three by-elections in Northern Ireland when election victors were declared ineligible (one for being a clergyman, one for being a felon and one for being a government contractor).

Table 1.1 Reasons for by-elections, 1918–70 and 1970–97.

	1919–70		1970–97	
Death	380	(48%)	98	(64%)
Resignation	242	(30%)	25	(16%)
Elevation to Peerage	110	(14%)	12	(8%)
Succession to Peerage	29	(4%)	1	(1%)
Re-election of Ministers	20	(3%)	–	
Disqualification	4	(0.5%)	–	
Seeking re-election	4	(0.5%)	16	(10%)
Expulsion	3	(0.4%)	1	(1%)
Election petition	2	(0.3%)	–	
Bankruptcy	1	(0.1%)	–	
Voting before oath	1	(0.1%)	–	
Total	796	(100%)	153	(100%)

Note: Based in part upon F. W. S. Craig, *British parliamentary election statistics 1918–70*, p. 42. The percentages exceed 100 due to rounding.

Succession to the peerage is another cause of by-elections that has diminished. Fewer heirs to titles sit in the House (18 in 1924, 2 in 1995). Moreover, since Anthony Wedgwood Benn's struggle to repudiate his viscountcy (which produced by-elections in 1961 and 1963 as well as the 1963 Peerage Act), they have been able to stay in the House by renouncing their title, like Lord Lambton in 1970.[4]

Timing

When an MP's seat falls vacant there is no statutory obligation to fill the vacancy. By convention it is left to the Whips of the former Member's party to move for a writ to be issued instructing the local returning officer to proceed.

Over the years the Whips have changed their habits and, in conjunction with party headquarters, have given more importance to timing, and to national as opposed to local considerations. In the 1920s by-elections were called more promptly after the vacancy occurred; they were held at times (in August or in Christmas week) which would now be regarded as almost impossible; they were much less consciously grouped together. Throughout the period since 1918 there are examples of by-elections taking place as soon as the vacancy occurred. However, in the 1960s, although by-elections were called in every month of the year, there was much more of a tendency, whatever the delay involved, to group them together on dates in March (after the new register on 15 February), or in May–June (after the local elections), or in October–November (after the summer holidays and party conferences and before the Christmas rush). Sometimes the timing has been

Table 1.2 By-elections, 1918–97.

	Total		Con		Lab		Lib		Other		yearly	
	Seats	changes	+	−	+	−	+	−	+	−		
1918–22	108[a]	27	4	13	14	1	5[b]	1	4	2	27	25%
1922–23	16	6	1	4	2	–	3	1	–	1	16	38%
1923–24	10	3	2	1	1	1	–	1	–	–	10	30%
1924–29	63	20	1	16	13	1	6	3	–	–	14	32%
1929–31	36	7	4	1	2	4	–	1	1	1	15	19%
1931–35	62	10	–	9	10	–	–	1	–	–	15	16%
1935–45	219	30	–	29	13	1	–	–	17	–	23	14%
1945–50	52	4	3	–	–	–	–	–	–	3	11	6%
1950–51	16	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	10	–
1951–55	48	1	1	–	–	1	–	–	–	–	13	12%
1955–59	52	6	1	4	4	–	1	1	–	1	12	12%
1959–64	62	9	2	7	6	2	1	–	–	–	15	14%
1964–66	13	2	1	1	–	1	1	–	–	–	9	15%
1966–70	38	16	12	1	–	15	1	–	–	–	9	42%
1970–74	30	9	–	5	2	3	5	–	2	1	9	30%
1974	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1	–
1974–79	30	7	6	–	–	7	1	–	–	–	6	23%
1979–83	20	7	1	4	1	1	4	–	1	2	5	35%
1983–87	31[c]	5	–	4	1	1	4	–	1	1	8	19%
1987–92	23	8	–	7	4	1	3	–	1	–	4	35%
1992–97	18	10	–	9	4	–	4	–	2	1	4	55%

[a] Up to 1918, and to a lesser extent to 1926, the number of by-elections is inflated by the necessity for Ministers to stand for re-election on appointment. In 53 such cases the returns were unopposed.
[b] In 1918–22 Opposition Liberals won 5 seats and lost 2, Coalition Liberals lost 9.
[c] This figure includes the Unionist MPs seeking re-election in January 1986.

affected by local difficulties in candidate selection and sometimes by the desire to wait for a more favourable political climate or to arrange things so that an awkward result may be masked by a better one.[5]

While the moving of a writ has normally been a routine matter, on occasions it has been moved by another party or has been opposed in protest about delays in holding the by-election or other matters. The war-time opposition used this tactic on several occasions and in the 1960s and 1970s the Liberals threatened it, notably over the six-month delays in calling the Orpington and Lincoln by-elections. The Speaker's Conference of 1973 (Cmnd. 5500) recommended that by-election writs should be moved within three months of the vacancy occurring; in 1987 this requirement may have accelerated by a day or two the announcement of the general election; since otherwise the writ for a vacancy in Cardiff North would have had to be moved. The pre-election politics of 1997 were affected by the need to call a by-election in Wirral South.

Function

By-elections are so much discussed as barometers of public opinion that it is easy to ignore their basic function – the replacement of a Member of Parliament. The replacement of Members is not trivial in scale. From 1918 to 1970, by the time each Parliament was dissolved it had on average 53 Members (8 per cent) who had come in at by-elections; the figure for 1970 to 1992 had fallen to only 20 per parliament (8 per cent). In most cases this was a routine matter: the former incumbent's party followed ordinary procedures to find a successor, usually much of the same ilk, and he was duly elected. Only 140 (18 per cent) of the 795 by-elections between 1919 and 1970 resulted in a change in party representation (see Table 1.2). But on occasion a by-election was designed to bring into the House a special person to strengthen the government – either defeated Ministers like the MacDonalds in 1936, Patrick Gordon Walker in 1965, or new talent, like Ernest Bevin and Oliver Lyttelton in 1940 or Frank Cousins in 1965. Oppositions, too, have eagerly used the first by-elections of a Parliament to bring back their more heavyweight casualties – Arthur Henderson in 1923 (and again in 1933), Arthur Greenwood in 1932, Harold Macmillan in 1945, and Anthony Barber in 1965.

By-elections serve other less noticed functions. They offer tryouts for party tactics: they have been used to test innovations in publicity, field organization and even private polling methods. They offer training-grounds for party agents: the statutory expense returns do not reveal the number of full-time officials who have come in from other constituencies to help in the campaign.[6] They provide a platform for speeches that might otherwise be less remarked, an extra opportunity for public education (as distinct from vote-gathering). They even, in the key period 1957–63, supplied an excuse for the broadcasting authorities to learn how to venture much more boldly into the field of political reporting; in the 1958 Rochdale contest Granada TV defied the government and broke the ban on television coverage while the campaign was going on. They have also provided the testing-ground for exit polls and other survey approaches.

None the less, the main interest in by-elections has undoubtedly lain in what they are thought to reveal about the state of public opinion, both in relation to specific issues and to the likely outcome of the next general election.

By-elections as indicators

The idea that a by-election in one corner of the country can reveal what voters in 658 other constituencies are thinking does, of course, imply

some important assumptions about national uniformity. Furthermore, the idea that a by-election at one point gives a key to the result of a subsequent general election implies some equally significant assumptions about the consistency of voting behaviour over time and in different situations.

The assumption of national uniformity is, of course, challenged after every by-election. Special local circumstances can almost always be found to excuse an awkward result – something in the candidate or in the organization or in the impact of a particular issue. However, it is plain that in general elections, national behaviour is remarkably uniform; in elections since 1950 three constituencies out of four have shown a swing within 2 per cent of the national average. In by-elections the variation has been appreciably greater. Even simultaneous by-elections can yield sharply different swings – as Ashfield and Grimsby showed in April 1977 – and usually it is hard to explain why. The factor that seems most regularly in evidence is the fall in turnout which tends to be much greater in safe seats and in urban seats than in marginal or rural ones. But it is also clear that in by-elections voters are more affected by special factors such as a local grievance or by the personality of the candidate. However, although a graph of by-election swings showing the movement of government popularity can look decidedly jagged, clear trends still emerge. The anti-government swings in 1960 varied between −2 per cent and 3 per cent; in 1963 they varied between 4 per cent and 14 per cent, in 1977 between 7 per cent and 20 per cent and in 1991 between nothing and 29 per cent. But on balance the difference between the average swing in 1960 (−1.7 per cent) and in 1963 (8.1 per cent) offers a reasonable indication of the Conservative slump in that period.

The impact of a by-election depends on how it is interpreted. Undoubtedly now, as always, victory or defeat makes most impact. A government may be more damaged by losing a seat on a 5 per cent swing than by suffering a 15 per cent swing yet just holding on in some safer constituency. Before psephological sophistication began to creep in during the 1950s, the focus tended to be on absolute figures – the drop in the vote for a party or the change in the majority – even when a general fall in turnout made them very misleading. Now the focus is, perhaps to excess, on the percentage swing. Dependence on one single indicator is likely to be even more deceptive in by-elections than in general elections: turnout, retained vote and presence of third candidates must be taken into consideration before any verdict on the meaning of a by-election result is offered.

But the problem is psychological as much as statistical. Election results have to be set against expectations. The Conservatives in 1962 and the Labour Party in 1969 managed to present as triumphs the fact that they had actually held on to seats which, a few years previously, they would

never have dreamed of considering vulnerable. The party managers face a pre-election dilemma. If they display optimism in order to encourage the faithful in the constituency, they court a severe verdict in the postmortem. If they discount the result in advance in order to induce pleasant surprise among observers, they may induce local defeatism and an unnecessarily bad outcome. The Conservative archives show how they faced this dilemma in South Hammersmith in 1949 and in North Hull in 1966. To some extent they are at the mercy of the press. By-elections do attract extensive, though seldom high-quality, newspaper coverage. The picture of the situation that is built up by reporters does much to condition the reaction to the final outcome. In the 1960s opinion polls also played a major role. If Gallup or a National Opinion Poll (NOP) chose to cover a by-election, the result was often discounted in advance. The fact that an NOP forecast gave no hint of the overturn in Leyton in January 1965 did much to heighten the shock of that result.

In recent years by-elections, by producing ever more extreme results, have lost much of their power to shock. Conservative and Labour governments each lost some very safe seats in the course of the 1960s and 1970s and by 1990 it seemed impossible for the party in power to hold on to any seat at all. After the 1987 election the Conservatives retained the first three seats they defended – but in each case it seemed due only to a split between Liberal and Social Democrat candidates. From then until 1997 the Government endured 15 successive by-election defeats, never indeed coming near to victory. All records were broken with the 35 per cent swing to the Liberal Democrats in Christchurch in July 1993 and with the 29 per cent swing to Labour in Dudley West in December 1994.

Whatever people may think at the time, and whatever their consequences for contemporary political strategy and morale, by-elections do offer historians (particularly those concerned with the pre-1945 pre-opinion poll era) guidance on mass reactions that is very difficult to get from any other source. In some cases a detailed look at by-election figures challenges established historical ideas. For example, the myth of Labour's forward march from 1900 onwards receives no support from an examination of the by-elections after 1910: the First World War was to transform the situation, but in July 1914 the Labour Party could look back to four by-election losses and no gains over the past four years; they came third in every seat they fought. The period before the Second World War offers another example. After the 1945 upheaval it was widely said that an anti-Conservative landslide had long been brewing and that a normal general election held in 1940 would have shown substantial Labour gains.

The by-election results run counter to this contention. Although, once the electorate had recovered from the shock of 1931, there appears to have been a very sharp swing in favour of Labour, from 1933 onwards their

support seems, if anything, to have declined. The reason for the belief that Labour was gaining ground presumably lies in the fact that between 1935 and 1939 they won 13 seats from the government. But a study of the votes cast does not suggest any trend in their favour. They might be said to have won by-elections only because they fared so ill in the 1935 general election.[7]

By-elections and general elections

It is plain that by-elections give results that go against the party in power. Between 1922 and 1997 governments gained four seats in by-elections and lost 126. Only ten of the 316 by-elections between 1955 and 1997 could be construed as showing a pro-government swing. Only three government gains have been recorded since the war. It is never safe to regard by-elections as offering a direct mirror of how the voting would go in a general election. Although the situation in the 1920s was confused, general elections, with few exceptions, have shown a government recovery compared with the by-elections of the previous year. Especially in recent years, a large proportion of the seats which changed hands in by-elections have reverted to their former allegiance. Tables 1.3 and 1.4 offer some measure of this recovery.

Table 1.3 Pro-government swing-back between by-election results and subsequent general election in the same constituencies.*

	Comparable seats			Comparable seats	
1929	5	+3.9%	1966	6	+4.8%
1935	6	+5.8%	1970	8	+4.7%
1950	3	(+3%)	1974	5	+4.0%
1951	5	+4.2%	1979	6	+1.2%
1955	6	−0.4%	1983	3	+1.6%
1959	5	+3.4%	1987	4	+5.9%
1964	12	+2.3%	1992	4	+5.9%

*The time period included varies from six to 12 months before the election. The 1950 figures involve major approximation owing to redistribution. Comparisons in 1922, 1923 and 1924 are very difficult. In four by-elections in 1922 the Labour opposition won 4.5 per cent more of the vote on average than in the November general election. In two by-elections in 1923 the Conservative Government fared decidedly better and in two decidedly worse than in the December general election. In each of five comparable by-elections in 1924 Labour fared better (in four of them decidedly better) than in the October general election. No by-election in 1931 was nearly as bad for Labour as the general election. In 1945 the Conservatives recovered ground in only one of the four seats they had defended in by-elections during the previous 12 months.

Although from 1923 to 1966 examples of the recovery at general elections of by-election losses were not numerous, they included some of the most famous by-election reverses:

1922
Leyton W.
Widnes
Wrekin
Dartford
Dover
Woolwich E.
Dudley
Kirkcaldy
Penistone
Heywood and Radcliffe
Southwark S.E.
Clayton
Leicester E.

1923
Mitcham

1929
Lancaster
N.Midlothian
Southwark N.

1931
Paddington N.

1935
Fulham E.
Wavertree
Swindon

1945
Newcastle N.
Wallasey
Skipton
Eddisbury
Motherwell

1959
Lewisham N.
Torrington
Kelvingrove

1964
S.Dorset
Brighouse and Spenborough

1966
Leyton

1970
Carmarthen
Hamilton
Pollok
Ladywood
Dudley
Acton
Swindon
Walthamstow W.
Oldham W.

1974
Bromsgrove
Sutton and Cheam
Ripon
Govan

1979
Walsall N.
Workington
Stechford
Ashfield

1983
Croydon N.W.
Crosby
Northfield

1987
Portsmouth S.
Fulham
Ryedale

1992
Govan
Vale of Glamorgan
Mid-Staffs
Monmouth
Eastbourne
Ribble Valley
Langbaurgh
Kincardine and Deeside

1997
Christchurch

It is easy to build on this pattern of slump and recovery some theory of how voters react to by-elections. They seldom feel very concerned. Usually there is very little national publicity about the contest and such as there is tends to be reserved to the last day or so, too late to build up interest on a general election scale. Even the exceptional concentration of volunteer and professional workers from outside the constituency can seldom prevent a large fall in turnout. In all but 23 of the 429 by-elections in 1945–1995, participation was below the level of the previous general election – and almost all the exceptions (for example, Torrington in 1958, Kinross and West Perthshire in 1963 or Hamilton in 1967) had special factors and had been built up by the national press. But in addition to the increase in freedom not to vote, there is also the freedom to vote differently. By-elections encourage the citizen to try his luck

Table 1.4 Subsequent result in seats changing hands in by-elections.*

	Number lost	Recovered	
1918–1922	27	13	48%
1922–1923	6	1	17%
1923–1924	3	0	
1924–1929	20	3	15%
1929–1931	7	1	14%
1931–1935	10	3	30%
1935–1945	52	5	10%
1945–1950	2	0	
1950–1951	0	0	
1951–1955	1	0	
1955–1959	5	3	60%
1959–1964	7	2	29%
1964–1966	2	1	50%
1966–1970	16	9	56%
1970–1974	9	4	44%
1974–1974	0	0	
1974–1979	7	4	57%
1979–1983	7	3	43%
1983–1987	6	3	50%
1987–1992	8	8	100%
1992–1997	9	1	11%
1918–1997	204	64	32%

* The University by-elections in 1946 and two by-elections in Bristol South-East in 1961 and 1963 are excluded from this table.

and vote for the other side although he would not dream of doing so in a general election when his vote might actually change the party in power. Leyton in 1919 and again in 1965, Dudley in 1921 and again in 1968 produced their sensational results not primarily through abstention but through a sizeable number of party loyalists voting for the other side. The same was true of the Empire Crusade and the Anti-Waste League successes of over 60 and 70 years ago and of the Nationalist and Liberal successes of recent years. In 1968, 43 per cent of Scotsmen told NOP interviewers that they would consider supporting the SNP in a by-election; when asked whether they would do so in a general election the figure fell to 20 per cent.

Such tendencies are probably sharper now than ever before. The growing volatility of the electorate makes it increasingly dangerous to apply rules of thumb learned from the past. The Conservatives, after losing Orpington in 1962 on a swing that would have cost them every other seat in Britain (save only South Kensington), came within a hair's breadth of returning to office in 1964; the Labour Government, which on a single day

in 1968 lost three seats with swings of 15, 18 and 21 per cent, managed to go into the 1970 election as odds-on favourites. The Centre victories in more recent years (Crosby 1981 – 20 per cent swing; Ryedale 1986 – 19 per cent swing; Ribble Valley 1991 – 25 per cent swing) aroused expectations which, within 18 months, were sadly nullified by a general election. Politicians have learned to become increasingly blasé about by-elections, at least until the last year of a parliament. They may offer some guide to the public mood; but who now would dare to give a figure for the likely difference between a by-election result today and what would happen in an immediate general election? It is much more necessary to hesitate before extrapolating to a general election that is two or three years off.

Conclusion

This book concentrates in the main on by-elections as political events. Newport helped to bring about the fall of Lloyd George in 1922, Westminster St George's saved Baldwin in 1931, East Fulham conditioned the whole rearmament debate of the mid-1930s, Orpington heralded and stimulated the Conservative disarray of 1962–3, and Hamilton in 1967 gave impetus to the Scottish Nationalist upsurge. Although not many others among the 994 contests from 1918 to May 1997 can claim such importance, and governments have become increasingly hardened to defeat, the explosive potential of by-elections is always there. Sudden and solid evidence of the withdrawal or return of support to a government can transform the political mood – and the Prime Minister's strategy in timing the next general election. Independents and minor parties can test whether any groundswell of sympathy exists – although usually they find it is not there. The accident of by-elections undoubtedly shaped the pattern of successive Liberal and Nationalist revivals since the 1960s. The Anti-Waste League in 1921, the Empire Crusade in 1930 and the war-time dissidents in 1942–4 used by-elections, with some measure of success, to make themselves a force to be reckoned with. In the post-1945 period, if the special case of nationalism is excluded, no such challenges have been made. Edward Martell on a People's League platform at East Ham North in 1957, Sir Piers Debenham on an anti-Market platform at South Dorset in 1962, and John Creasey calling for an all-party government at Oldham West in 1968 all just saved their deposits (when deposits were set at 12.5 per cent), but, except for Dick Taverne's triumph at Lincoln in 1973, they were the only candidates to have done so since 1945 when fighting both the major parties in an English by-election. It must be much harder today for anyone to get as far as Randolph Churchill did in 1935 when, fighting his father's battle on the India question, he won 24 per cent of the vote at Wavertree. But, as Lincoln showed, the possibility is always there. By-elections continue to supply one of the safety-valves of the British political system.

Notes

1 But the actual term by-election did not come into use until the middle of the nineteenth century.

2 But the possibility remains. For example, the shadow of by-elections hung heavily over the Labour Governments of 1950–1, 1964–6 and 1974–9 (when the majorities ranged from 6 to minus 28), while the 15 losses Labour suffered in 1966–70 were only endurable by a government which had started the Parliament with a handsome majority.

3 Of course, many of the by-elections in 1918–22 and in 1940–5 produced unopposed returns. Since 1950 there have been only three uncontested by-elections, all in Northern Ireland. The victor at Armagh in 1954 was the last MP ever to be returned unopposed.

4 Apart from Lord Lambton, the only MPs to inherit a peerage since 1960 were Viscount Hinchingbrooke (now Victor Montagu), whose father died in 1962 before renunciation was possible, and the Earl of Dalkeith who succeeded to the Dukedom of Buccleuch in 1973. By contrast to the two successions in 1961–70, there were 13 in 1931–40.

5 The grouping of by-elections is now emphasized by the fact that they are all held on Thursdays. Although one has to go back to 1931 for a general election held on another day (Tuesday), parties continued to experiment with by-election days down to the 1960s. The result in Orpington on a Thursday, 14 March 1962, may have been affected by the near-success of the Liberals in Blackpool North where voting took place a day earlier, on Wednesday. When Roxburgh voted on Wednesday, 24 March 1965, it might have provided the last parliamentary contest to be held on anything but a Thursday, had not administrative errors led to the Manchester Exchange by-election being called for Wednesday, 27 June 1973, instead of Thursday, 28 June, and the Hamilton by-election for Wednesday 31 May 1978. It is worth noting that in 1991 the Hansard Society Commission on Election Campaigns *Agenda for change* recommended a general move of polling-days from Thursday to Saturday, citing opinion survey evidence in support of the change.

6 By-election expense returns, which are hard to come by, must be far more misleading than those for general elections. In a key contest the amount of effort put in by party headquarters, including on occasion expensive market research and large numbers of paid agents, could be costed at a substantially higher value than all the local activities duly recorded in the expense return. There were growing indications that expense returns, which (given the temptations to spend and the absence since 1929 of any petition challenging overspending) are normally so surprisingly accurate, are sometimes less conscientiously compiled after by-elections and this was recognized in the Representation of the People Act of 1989 which allowed for a fourfold increase in the permitted maximum for by-elections only.

7 See D. E. Butler, *The electoral system in Britain since 1918*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1963) pp. 184–6, for a fuller discussion of this point.

CHAPTER 2

The Newport by-election and the fall of the Coalition

John Ramsden

General Election, 1918	(Electorate 40,146)	
Haslam (Coalition Liberal)	14,080	(56.4)
Bowen (Labour)	10,234	(41.0)
Thomas (Independent)	647	(2.6)
Coalition Liberal majority	3,846	Turnout 62.2%
By-election, 18 Oct 1922	(Electorate 42,645)	
Clarry (Conservative)	13,515	(40.0)
Bowen (Labour)	11,425	(33.8)
Moore (Liberal)	8,841	(26.2)
Conservative majority	2,090	Turnout 79.2%
General Election, 1922	(Electorate 42,645)	
Clarry (Conservative)	19,019	(54.3)
Bowen (Labour)	16,000	(45.7)
Conservative majority	3,019	Turnout 82.1%

Newport was the only British by-election which brought down a government – such has been claimed and widely accepted. Tom Jones noted in his diary:

> Chamberlain's effort to preserve the Coalition under the leadership of the Prime Minister defeated. Vote largely determined by Bonar Law's speech and by the victory of the Conservative candidate at the Newport by-election announced this morning, and partly by Chamberlain's clumsy, unsympathetic, and unhumorous handling of the meeting itself.[1]

Newport's influence was thus indirect: a Conservative won the by-election and this helped Conservative MPs to decide at the Carlton Club on the

same day to withdraw their support from Lloyd George's Coalition. The *National Review* gave a less moderate account in its November 1922 issue:

> Newport caused a veritable stampede among the Coalitioners of the Carlton Club, who, until that moment, had been prepared to swear that black was white or that white was black, according as they were directed by the despot of Downing Street or his deputy in the leadership of the Unionist Party... It instantly transformed the political situation.

These immediate judgements, accepted almost universally at the time, have been followed by most later commentators. In the mythology of the 1920s, Newport is inextricably bound up with the fall of Lloyd George, who never set foot in the constituency during the campaign nor issued any official statement about it. For Liberals, Newport was the Tories' excuse for breaking up the Coalition and conveniently forgetting all that they owed to L. G. and his followers. For Conservatives, Newport was the moment when Conservatism re-established its touch with the grass roots, and received clear instructions to go it alone with Bonar Law and Baldwin.[2]

All such interpretations are the same basic idea when seen from different points in the political spectrum; they all agree that Newport was a vote against the Coalition Government. But all suffer from the flaw that they are unsure of the most basic facts of the campaign itself. It has never been established whether Lynden Moore was an Independent Liberal or Coalition Liberal candidate – a fact crucial to any interpretation. On the very day of declaration, Newport was attributed a false significance which has obscured its real importance ever since. Historians have recognized its influence on the fall of Lloyd George, but have not seen that this was due to a faulty interpretation of the facts. Nor has it been seen that Newport is more valuable for general implications than for any short-term influence. (In any case, the Carlton Club meeting would probably have voted against coalition even without Newport, and Bonar Law decided to go before knowing the Newport result. Newport did not decide the vote, but probably guaranteed an overwhelming majority.) But Newport was the first election in modern circumstances which was fought by the candidates of the three modern parties, all with an apparently equal chance; in some ways it was also the last, because after 19 October 1922 the Liberals were seen to be the third party, whose success – however insubstantial or temporary – would occasion surprise. The special circumstances of the by-election made it a good test of how voters would react to the existence of three parties, and the model of behaviour established at Newport held good for the rest of the inter-war years.

The national background

The background to Newport was the background to the Lloyd George Coalition and the problems of Newport were those of the Coalition. Coalition had first come in May 1915, after nine months of war and party truce. However, it was Lloyd George as Prime Minister (from December 1916) and the prolongation of Liberal–Conservative collaboration after the war that really created internal dissension. Many were opposed to further coalition: a section of the Liberal Party broke away and remained under Asquith, but Conservative opponents of coalition watched frustratedly as their party supported Lloyd George. Loyalty was probably maintained only because of the Conservatives' current fear of Labour. Joint action, it was said, was the only way to keep Labour out of power. However, the Party Leader Austen Chamberlain and others went further, in calling for the fusion of Conservatives and Coalition Liberals into one new party. In 1920 both sides unceremoniously rejected fusion, but Chamberlain continued to preach its virtues and believed it to be inevitable. The bitter division of opinion over coalition or independence did not prevent Chamberlain's unopposed succession to the Conservative leadership in March 1921 – nominated by the same man who moved the Carlton Club resolution against him 18 months later. However, a decision could not be much longer delayed, for the life of the 1918 Parliament was running out. Before another election could be held, the Conservative Party and its leader would have to decide whether to back the Lloyd George government for another five years – perhaps for ever – or to ditch it once and for all.

The Lloyd George Coalition had a very bad record in by-elections throughout its post-war term of office, but this has been exaggerated. Its performance must always be compared with the landslide victory which it had won in 1918, and the highly fortuitous nature of that result. In 1918 the electorate was in an unusually radical mood, and yet Lloyd George and his Conservative supporters, by exploiting the patriotic moment that followed the end of the war, persuaded them to fill the House of Commons with Conservatives and Coalition Liberals. It was only to be expected that by-elections would show a great deviation from the 1918 results, not least because the election had been fought with an electoral pact, a low turnout and an inadequate register. Furthermore, the very size of the victory increased discontent inside the government, as different groups struggled for influence and as backbenchers revolted against the Whips almost at will.

Conservative votes had created an overall Conservative majority in the House of Commons, but the Prime Minister and several of the Cabinet were Liberals and much of its legislation had a distinctly Liberal flavour. Conservative activists became increasingly hostile to a government for which they were responsible but with which they seemed to have little influence. Considering all these factors, the Coalition was not doing so

badly. It had many bad results, but they were never consistently bad, indeed not consistent at all. Part of this was due to the fact that the 1918 election had produced a crop of unusual contests, unusual parties and unusual results. It would have been most surprising if by-election swings from the 1918 results had shown any regular pattern. For example, on the same day in 1920 the government lost Dartford with one of its worst results and held both seats at Stockport with one of its best. But these wild fluctuations were little comfort to a government which saw its fortunes apparently varying randomly from bad to catastrophic.

Maurice Cowling described Spen Valley (20 December 1919) as the government's worst result, and psychologically it certainly was.[3] But Spen Valley was a freak Labour win with under 40 per cent of the vote. Much worse for the government was Bromley (17 December) where Labour polled 47.5 per cent of the vote when standing for the first time, or St Albans (10 December) where Labour nearly won. Spen Valley made its impact because it was the third in this disastrous series, but particularly because Spen Valley actually changed hands. The government defeats which were the worst statistically were both defeats by Liberals in March 1919: Leyton West was lost on a swing of 24.8 per cent and Hull Central on a swing of 32.9 per cent. Labour gained Bothwell and Widnes during the summer of 1919, and government defeats at Louth (twice), Dartford, Dudley and Kirkcaldy continued into the spring of 1921. Thereafter the tide began to turn, and only in the winter of 1921–2 did Labour's fortunes temporarily revive. Government candidates were again doing quite well in the summer of 1922, holding Wolverhampton West and even gaining Hackney South, which they had failed to win in 1918.[4] A similar pattern of massive defeats in 1919 and 1920 followed by a revival in 1921 and 1922 can be detected in local government elections. It will be as well to suggest some explanations, since results over the last few years determined what contemporaries expected from Newport.

First, it might be pointed out that coalitions naturally attract bad results in elections which may influence their policy without threatening their survival. By bringing more than one group into government they create internal friction, but also push the opposition parties into temporary unity. The same thing happened to the National Government of the 1930s. Thus, in 1918–22, the Government faced one Liberal or Labour candidate in 44 by-elections and had the advantage of both Liberal and Labour candidates against them only 23 times. More important was the fact that the government could afford to lose many seats that it had won in 1918 without any serious risk of losing a general election. This view is borne out by an examination of the seats which actually changed hands. Labour gained 14 seats, only two of which were not to be regularly won by Labour in the inter-war years, and both of these (Spen Valley, and Heywood and Radcliffe) were won on a fortunate split of the vote. It is difficult to see how

a government of the Right could have shed many tears over the loss of Pontypridd. When the Coalition could come close to winning Penistone against both Liberal and Labour (March 1921) they had no real reason to worry about their performance.

This touches on the vital point: contemporary observers had no effective tools for the measurement of opinion after the result was declared. 'Swing' was far in the future, and no serious attempt was made to distinguish between different types of constituency. The political organizer who used percentages was still a pioneer. If it seems clear to us that the government should not have worried because Labour won Pontypridd, it was certainly not clear at the time. The commonest measure of electoral performance was the tradition of the constituency. Unconscious of any change which had been brought about by the rise of the Labour Party, the war, or the redistribution of 1918, the comparisons were made not with the last general election but with 1895 and 1900 – the last occasions when the Conservatives had won in peace-time. This naturally failed to take account of the rise of Labour as a party bidding for working-class votes. It is because he knows of this that the Conservative can today reconcile himself with equanimity to the loss of Pontypridd.[5]

What the by-elections of 1918–22 should have shown observers was a gradual but definite transformation of British politics. The old politics of nineteenth-century Britain were passing away although still to be seen: middle-class Liberals optimistically trying to unite radicalism with local vested interests, and a demagogic Conservatism with substantial working-class support, playing the beer issue and banging the Imperial drum. This old model of politics had been long in decline as class and economic factors began to determine voting patterns, but it was only the hostility between Liberals and Labour after the First World War that made its final death possible. As long as the Coalition survived, Asquithian Liberals and Labour had enough in common in their hostility to it to postpone the death of the old politics a little longer. Liberals and Labour usually managed to avoid fighting each other in by-elections, and both of them gained seats from the government. Labour was steadily winning a solid base of working-class support, but that support was showing distinct regional, social and occupational variations. Contemporaries stressed the support rather than the limitations and variations, and this goes far towards explaining their mistaken hopes of Newport.

Labour leaders for the first time enjoyed the electoral support which ideology told them they should enjoy, and were in an understandably euphoric mood. However, as post-war boom was followed by inter-war slump in 1921, revolutionary fervour and the industrial militancy both began to evaporate. Labour therefore began a strategy of concentration on the by-elections which it believed it should win in a campaign for power and began to ignore those seats which might have seemed possible in 1919

but were seen to be hopeless by 1921. None of the seats left uncontested were marginal, and the seats which were contested could now be given additional assistance, funds and speakers.[6] This was the background to Labour's hopes for Newport. It needed only a small turnover of votes for Labour to capture the seat; it was in South Wales, where Labour had been doing particularly well, and it was undeniably a working-class stronghold. Thus, Labour had an explanation of recent electoral trends which led them to see Newport as an inevitable gain. It was, however, only a partial explanation which ignored the regional and local variations shown by the results. As Pontypridd, so Newport – or so they expected.

The government's losses alarmed both Conservatives and Coalition Liberals, and the net effect was a fatalism which led them to expect that Labour would win Newport too. However, Conservatives were not as obsessed with working-class seats as Labour understandably was. They did not like to see Labour winning industrial and mining seats, but most of these, especially in Wales, were lost by Coalition Liberals rather than Conservatives anyway. Dudley was the only traditionally Conservative seat won by Labour, and the shock that this defeat caused was as much due to the unexpected eclipse of a Minister (Sir Arthur Griffith Boscawen) seeking routine re-election as to the result itself. More serious to most Conservatives was the loss of safe middle-class seats to right-wing Independents, such as the Anti-Waste League. This threat too was receding by 1922, after the 'Geddes axe' had made a great point of cutting government expenditure. The Conservative gain in August 1922 was Hackney South, which had been won by Horatio Bottomley in 1918. At Newport the party was defending its first working-class seat for seven months, and was fighting only its second Welsh seat in the entire Parliament. The first had been Rhondda West, where on 21 December 1920 the Conservatives had intervened in a seat where Labour had been unopposed in 1918, and scored a highly respectable 41.5 per cent of the vote in a straight fight with Labour. If the moral was that a Conservative candidate would do better than a Coalition Liberal in a Welsh industrial seat, then it had been forgotten by October 1922. Conservative gloom at a by-election in Newport was thus matched by Labour's justifiable but exaggerated confidence.

The fall of the Coalition in Newport

In 1922 Newport was a moderately large industrial town, which had expanded rapidly in the later nineteenth century. Its economic character was chiefly as a port, serving the inland Monmouthshire industrial valleys, and so relying on the prosperity of the coal, steel and heavy engineering industries. Since 1536 Monmouthshire had occupied a strangely intermediate status between England and Wales: the administrative phrase