BY-ELECTIONS IN BRITISH POLITICS

1832–1914

T. G. Otte and Paul Readman (eds)

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Edited by

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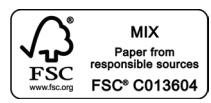

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Preface and Acknowledgements

'A seat in Parliament without a contest
does not drop into every young man's mouth.'
Anthony Trollope, *The Prime Minister*[1]

By-elections occupy an important place in modern British political history. Between the Great Reform Act and the end of the First World War, in excess of 2,600 such contests took place in Britain. They were an important and prominent feature of Victorian and Edwardian politics. And yet, despite their high visibility in the historical record, students of the period have paid scant attention to them. Little is know about these contests, a deficiency that this collection of essays seeks to remedy.

The seriousness with which contemporaries took by-elections alone is sufficient reason for historians to take them seriously, too. Not to do so would mean to neglect a key aspect of British political life and experience. The study of by-elections, moreover, can furnish the scholar with heuristic tools for the interpretation of important and sometimes controversial issues, many of which are staple features of historical debate.

However, if uncontested constituencies did not normally drop into the mouths of aspiring parliamentarians in the nineteenth century, so a study of by-election contests requires some careful preparation and much 'pressing of the flesh' of the historical record. Asserting the wider, though hitherto largely ignored, significance of by-elections for Victorian and Edwardian politics is one thing, to prove their significance quite another. It would have been tempting to opt for a broadly thematic approach that examined a number of selected aspects over a longer period of time. Such an approach has obvious attractions, not least that of simplicity. But it also contains a number of pitfalls, some of them significant ones. Not the least of these is the danger that the underlying selection criteria may predetermine the findings of the individual studies brought together here. On careful reflection, we therefore concluded that a strictly thematic approach was likely to purchase neatness of organisation at the price of a more comprehensive appreciation of the complexity of by-elections and their role in the political life of the Victorian and Edwardian periods. A judicious mixture of themed and chronological chapters, by contrast, seemed to offer a much more realistic prospect of securing such a comprehensive picture

1 A. Trollope, *The Prime Minister* (1876), book I, ch. 29.

of by-elections. In this manner, it has proved possible to filter out the constant factors from what were otherwise variable, context- or time-specific elements in the by-elections of the period before the First World War. This pragmatic approach is more appropriate to the nature of by-elections. Election agents at the time and their political masters understood by-elections as unique political events within a particular local context but with wider ramifications for politics at a regional and increasingly a national level. In the same manner, the contributions to this volume treat by-elections as unique phenomena that provide an important prism through which various assumptions about the politics of Victorian and Edwardian Britain can be viewed. Thus, it will be possible to identify a series of changes as they emerged over time, and to establish how they related to the wider developments in political culture or in the daily business of party politics. Guided by such pragmatic considerations, we have eschewed issuing an 'editorial manifesto'.

In our pursuit of now long-distant electoral battles we have incurred a number of debts of gratitude. Not the least of these is to our fellow by-election *aficionados*. Whether justified or not, working with academics is often said to be as challenging as herding cats. If that is so, we must have been extremely fortunate, for we have had a committed and enthusiastic team of collaborators. They tackled their tasks with an efficiency, energy and professionalism that might have come straight out of the rule book of Joe Chamberlain's 'Birmingham caucus' electioneering machine.

Special thanks are also due to Peter Sowden, the commissioning editor at Boydell & Brewer, for his constant and critical support for this project from its early inception through to the finished product. We are indebted to King's College London for placing its facilities at our disposal to hold a workshop half-way through the research phase. Without this opportunity the process of putting together this volume would have been more complex, and certainly a good deal less enjoyable.

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TGO and PR
January 2012

Abbreviations

ACLL	*Anti-Corn Law League*
AH	*Agricultural History*
AHR	*American Historical Review*
BIHR	*Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*
BL	British Library
BLOIOC	British Library, Oriental and India Office Collection
Bodl.	Bodleian Library, Oxford
BUL	Birmingham University Library
BULSC	Bristol University Library, Special Collections
CAB	Cabinet Papers, The National Archive, Kew
CAJ	*Conservative Agents' Journal*
CBH	*Contemporary British History*
CJH	*Canadian Journal of History*
CKS	Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone
CR	*Contemporary Review*
CSH	*Cultural and Social History*
DBTB	B. Harrison, ed., *Dictionary of British Temperance Biography* (Coventry and Warwick, 1973)
DD	J.R. Vincent, ed., *A Selection from the Diaries of Edward Henry Stanley, 15th Earl of Derby (1826–93) between September 1869 and March 1878* (London, 1994)
DLH	K. Gildart and D. Howell, eds, *Dictionary of Labour Biography* (13 vols, London, 2010)
EHR	*English Historical Review*
ES	*Electoral Studies*
FCH	*Family and Community History*
FR	*Fortnightly Review*
GD	M.R.D. Foot (cont. H.C.G. Matthew), ed., *The Gladstone Diaries* (14 vols, Oxford, 1968–94)
GGC	A. Ramm, ed., *The Political Correspondence of Mr. Gladstone and Lord Granville 1876–1886* (2 vols, Oxford, 1962)
GHD	N.E. Johnson, ed., *The Diary of Gathorne Hardy, Later Lord Cranbrook, 1866–1892* (Oxford, 1981)
GMCRO	Greater Manchester County Record Office
GRO	Gloucestershire Record Office, Gloucester
HH	Hatfield House
HJ	*Historical Journal*

HR	*Historical Research*
HRO	Herefordshire Record Office, Hereford
IHS	*Irish Historical Studies*
IRLH	*International Review of Labour History*
JBS	*Journal of British Studies*
JEcclH	*Journal of Ecclesiastical History*
JLH	*Journal of Liberal History*
JMH	*Journal of Modern History*
JRUSI	*Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*
LAS	Lincolnshire Archives Service, Lincoln
LHR	*Labour History Review*
LRC	A.C. Howe, ed., *The Letters of Richard Cobden*, i, *1815–1847* (Oxford, 2007)
LRO	Liverpool Record Office
LSQ	*Legislative Studies Quarterly*
MCL	Manchester Central Library
NC	*Nineteenth Century*
NLF	National Liberal Federation
NLS	National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh
NR	*National Review*
ODNB	*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*
PA	*Parliamentary Affairs*
ParlA	Parliamentary Archive
PH	*Parliamentary History*
PLG	*Primrose League Gazette*
PMG	*Pall Mall Gazette*
P&P	*Past & Present*
PP	Parliamentary Papers
PSQ	*Political Science Quarterly*
RSCHS	Records of the Scottish Church History Society
SA	Sheffield Archives
SANHS	Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society
SBR	*Southwark and Bermondsey Recorder and South London Gazette*
SH	*Social History*
SHR	*Scottish Historical Review*
SRO	Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich
TCBH	*Twentieth Century British History*
TGSI	*Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*
TNA	The National Archives (Public Record Office), Kew
VS	*Victorian Studies*
WCA	Westminster City Archives
WHR	*Welsh History Review*
WSRO	West Sussex Record Office, Chichester
WYAS	West Yorkshire Archive Services, Leeds

Introduction

T.G. Otte and Paul Readman

"'Ah", said Mr. Pickwick, "do they seem devoted to their party, Sam?"
"Never seen such dewotion in my life, Sir."
"Energetic, eh?", said Mr. Pickwick.
"Uncommon", replied Sam.'
Charles Dickens, Pickwick Papers[1]

Students of Victorian and Edwardian electoral politics are confronted with a paradox. For all the energetic exertions of the parties and their agents at parliamentary by-elections, and for all the importance contemporaries attached to such contests, they have rarely left their mark on the scholarly literature. On the contrary, the historical study of British electoral politics is concentrated on general elections. There are obvious reasons for this. General elections decide the fate of governments and determine the overall balance of parties in parliament. They are national events; and they are treated as milestones in the narratives of political history, as attested in the titles of innumerable books. Important as they are, however, general elections do not comprise anything like the totality of British electoral behaviour. Britons cast their parliamentary ballot on other occasions, at by-elections triggered by the death, resignation or retirement of sitting MPs, and they do so often. Just quite how often is frequently overlooked by historians. While some literature exists on twentieth-century by-elections, most notably Chris Cook and John Ramsden's collection of essays,[2] far less has been published on the Victorian and Edwardian periods. This is not to say they have been ignored entirely, but coverage is uneven at best. Nothing like a comprehensive treatment exists, and – with the exception of a suggestive but underexploited article by J.P.D. Dunbabin – no attempt has been made to examine trends in by-elections over longer periods of time.[3] Some contests have been subjected to locally-focused examinations, many by amateur historians, but the findings of these often valuable studies are rarely very well connected to the wider political context and often buried in the journals of local history societies. By-elections have also featured in work on pressure groups, two notable examples

1 C. Dickens, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (London, 1863), 127.
2 C. Cook and J. Ramsden, eds, *By-elections in British Politics* (London, 1973; 2nd edn, 1998).
3 J.P.D. Dunbabin, 'Parliamentary Elections in Great Britain, 1868–1900: A Psephological Note', *EHR* 81 (1966), 82–99.

being the Anti-Corn Law League (ACLL) and the suffragettes. Here, however, the focus has been not so much on electoral politics as on by-elections as indicators of the strength and significance of the groups in question, and the fortunes of the causes they promoted. According to Martin Pugh, for example, suffragette opposition to Liberal candidates at Edwardian by-elections retarded rather than advanced the struggle for female enfranchisement.[4] Finally, and perhaps most importantly, by-elections have featured in work on the rise of Labour, being used heuristically as a means of addressing the much-debated issue of the relative strength of the Liberal and Labour parties on the eve of the First World War.[5]

* * *

The neglect of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century by-elections is astonishing on several counts. For one thing, in the eighty years between 1918 and 1997, the period covered by the second edition of Cook and Ramsden's volume, 929 by-elections took place; in the eighty years prior to the end of the Great War, there were over 2,600 such contests. Such was their frequency, indeed, that the composition of the House of Commons could change very significantly over the course of the lifetime of a single parliament: in the years separating the general elections of 1852 and 1857, for example, one-third of all seats were subject to by-elections. They were thus a prominent, indeed permanent, feature of political life, and they provided a central forum for public debate and partisanship. For one observer in the 1880s, every by-election was 'the very apotheosis of talk', with 'each local struggle' being fought as 'a combat decisive of the Empire's fate', the numbers of meetings and speeches being such that a 'political oratorical pandemonium' prevailed.[6] And as Dickens's Mr Pickwick was able to witness on his visit to the fictitious borough of Eatanswill, during such contests constituencies were thrown into 'a perpetual fever of excitement. Everything was conducted on the most liberal and delightful scale. Exciseable articles were remarkably cheap at all the public houses; and spring vans paraded the streets for the accommodation of voters who were seized with any

4 For the electoral strategy of the ACLL, see N. McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League, 1838–1846* (2nd edn, London, 1968), esp. ch. 4. For the electoral strategy of the suffragettes, see M. Pugh, *The March of the Women: A Revisionist Analysis of the Campaign for Women's Suffrage 1866–1914* (2000), esp. ch. 9. D.A. Hamer, *The Politics of Electoral Pressure* (Hassocks, 1977) is invaluable for detailed information on Victorian pressure groups and their involvement in electoral politics.

5 See R. McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party 1910–1924* (Oxford, 1974); R. Douglas, 'Labour in Decline, 1910–14', in K.D. Brown, ed., *Essays in Anti-Labour History* (London, 1974), 105–25; P.F. Clarke, 'The Electoral Position of the Liberal and Labour Parties, 1910–1914', *EHR* 90 (1975), 828–36. For a recent re-examination of the subject, see I. Packer, 'Contested Grounds: Trends in British By-elections, 1911–1914', *CBH* 25 (2011), 157–73.

6 H. Jephson, 'A By-election Contest', *Time* 18 (June 1888), 678, 683. By the late nineteenth century, the speechifying at by-elections could reach epic proportions. In the Barnsley contest of 1897, the Independent Labour Party held about two hundred meetings over the course of their campaign: D. Rubinstein, 'The Independent Labour Party and the Yorkshire Miners: The Barnsley By-election of 1897', *IRLH* 23 (1978), 127.

temporary dizziness in the head – an epidemic which prevailed among the electors ... to an alarming extent.'[7]

Constituency parties applied themselves to canvassing and propagandising with a gusto often exceeding that seen at a general election, local organisers straining every sinew for the cause, and armies of party canvassers working '[e]very nook and corner of the constituency'. Indeed, the aim was to generate a sense of expectation and excitement among the constituents. As *The Times* reported of the contest at Hereford City in 1893, '[o]ld residents say they do not remember the electors ever being roused to such a pitch of excitement'.[8] These efforts could be taken to extremes: the president of the York Conservative Association, Sir Joseph Terry, for instance, died of a heart attack after overexerting himself at the city's by-election in January 1898.[9] Polling day often resembled a boisterous carnival, as *The Times* observed of the 1908 Peckham by-election: 'The whole of Peckham itself presented the appearance of a huge fair. Processions forced their way through the streets amid the cheers and groans of party adherents, together with the blare of musical instruments, while red [Conservative] and blue [Liberal] lights burned freely.'[10] Unsurprisingly, perhaps, as Philip Salmon reminds us in his essay, turnout was often relatively high, sometimes higher than at general elections.[11]

Party agents, in fact, went to considerable lengths to turn by-elections into 'events', to an extent that has not been fully appreciated by historians. These events were replete with all manner of popular entertainment, designed to appeal to a mass audience. The efforts of party activists in that direction became more sophisticated and imaginative as time wore on. In the late Victorian period they included 'eye-catching' initiatives such as 'Home Rule vans' and 'Union Jack vans', such as those deployed by the two parties in North Buckinghamshire in 1889, or the Conservative cyclists carrying placards calling on voters to cast their ballot for the Unionist candidate in the contest in the Walworth division of Newington in 1895. In a similar vein, the 'parade of the big and little loaf' attracted much attention at the South Herefordshire by-election in 1908.[12] But other less overtly political forms of entertainment were laid on as well. At the contest in Wisbech in 1891, Mrs Brand, the wife of the Liberal candidate, gave an open-air solo performance of 'an election song'. In addition, a 'numerous band of ladies were engaged to fetch the voters', though how far they went in emulating the

7 Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*, 133.

8 Quotes from *Times*, 11 Aug. 1893.

9 T.A.B. Corley, 'Terry, Joseph (1793–1850) [also including Sir Joseph Terry (1828–1898)] *ODNB* online edn, 2004.

10 *Times*, 25 Mar. 1908.

11 See also the figures for 1898 in T.G. Otte, '"Avenge England's Dishonour": By-elections, Parliament and the Politics of Foreign Policy in 1898', *EHR* 121 (2006), 385–428.

12 *Times*, 8 Oct. 1889, 13 May 1895, 1 Feb. 1908.

Duchess of Devonshire in their efforts to procure votes was not reported.[13] In the 1895 Walworth contest, the Conservatives laid on 'an imposing four-in-hand demonstration', with the carriages provided by such London Tory luminaries as the furniture-mogul Sir Blundell Maples. Their Liberal Unionist allies aided the campaign with an 'outdoor lantern display of pictures', which Liberal campaigners countered with a lantern show of their own, illustrating the brutality of Irish landlords.[14] Such visual forms of entertainment became more prominent in the Edwardian era. At the Manchester North West by-election in April 1908, for instance, '[c]inematographers and lantern shows on a large scale ... [were] pressed into service'.[15] Such events were meant to complement the stump rhetoric and platform promises that were the staple of electoral contests, but that, perhaps, were not sufficient to mobilise the constituents.

Such was the level of excitement, indeed, that contests were frequently portrayed as analogous to sporting events,[16] and as with sporting events, bets were often placed on the results. One notable example of this was the Stoke by-election of 1875 discussed in Antony Taylor's essay, a contest during which a great deal of money was gambled on the fortunes of the maverick candidate Dr Edward Kenealy.[17] Betting on the outcome of by-elections was not confined to the constituencies in question, however. The celebrated Stoke contest was one case in point; the Manchester and Liverpool elections of 1880 were two others.[18] This was a function of the fact – much emphasised in the essays which follow – that by-elections were more than merely local affairs, of interest only to the communities in which they took place.

The coverage of by-elections in the national newspaper press reflected this wider significance. *The Times*, for instance, devoted over twenty-one columns and seven leading articles to the Liverpool by-election alone.[19] A further indication of the wider significance of by-elections to national politics is given by the attention accorded them by politicians. The letters, journals and diaries of numerous politicians contain many references to by-elections, and attestations as to their importance. Lewis Harcourt's journal is one example, Gladstone's correspondence

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13 *Times*, 20 and 24 July 1891. The Hon. Arthur Brand, son of the former Speaker, Viscount Hampden, won the seat.

14 *Times*, 10 and 13 May 1895.

15 *Times*, 22 Apr. 1908.

16 As noted by D. Butler, 'By-elections and Their Interpretation', in Cook and Ramsden, eds, *By-elections*, 1.

17 M. Roe, *Kenealy and the Tichborne Case* (Melbourne, 1974), 79. Exhausted on polling day at the Plymouth by-election of 1880, the Conservative candidate Edward Clarke retired to the billiard room of his hotel and found a stranger there with whom to have a game. 'As we played he said, "I wish I knew who was going to win this election; I was offered 3 to 1 just now against Clarke' (Sir E. Clarke, *The Story of My life* (London, 1918), 186).

18 The odds offered by bookmakers on the Manchester election, at 5/1, drew comment from Granville: see his letter to Gladstone, 28 Jan. 1880, *GGC* i, 110. For betting at Liverpool, see J.P. Rossi, 'Home Rule and the Liverpool By-election of 1880', *IHS* 19 (1974), 162.

19 Rossi, 'Home Rule', 158, 162.

with Granville another.[20] The diary of the prominent Conservative politician and Cabinet minister Gathorne Hardy was especially replete with commentary on by-elections, describing various contests in such terms as 'a great triumph' (Southwark, 1880), 'a distinct blow to the Government' (Salisbury, 1882), 'a real victory' (Windsor, 1890), 'a good slap in the face' for Gladstone (Bassetlaw, 1890), 'of good augury for London' (Hackney, 1892), and so on.[21]

Politicians were interested in by-elections because they mattered; they were not sideshows but central to the very stuff of parliamentary politics. As Angus Hawkins shows in his essay, part of this centrality derived from their connection with ministerial appointments, a by-election being required on an MP's first appointment to a Cabinet post.[22] This requirement had a material impact on the composition of governments. It demonstrates how the high politics of Cabinet government were connected to electoral politics. Prime ministers could find their freedom of action constrained by constituency-level considerations when it came to government reshuffles, since there was often significant risk in promoting to Cabinet rank an MP whose seat was held on a marginal majority.[23] This consideration certainly affected Gladstone in the later years of his 1868–74 administration, and was a factor behind the ministry running out of steam. Indeed, it may have been the decisive consideration in Gladstone's eventual decision to dissolve parliament.[24] Ministerial by-elections also offered useful opportunities for the opposition to challenge governments and their policy, particularly policy associated with the ministers in question. Gladstone's re-election for Oxford University in January 1853 was turned into a *cause célèbre* by Conservatives seeking revenge for his demolition of Disraeli's Budget in 1852, a parliamentary performance that had also caused Lord Derby's government to fall. C.F.G. Masterman's ill-fated candidatures in Bethnal Green and Ipswich in 1914 were turned into referenda on the policy of National Insurance, a policy with which he was closely associated.[25] Such contests, predictably, drew

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20 P. Jackson, ed., *Loulou: Selected Extracts from the Journals of Lewis Harcourt (1880–1895)* (Cranbury, NJ, 2006).

21 *GHD*, 436, 508, 763, 785, 823.

22 For general discussion of ministerial by-elections, and the debates leading to their abolition, see John Cannon and W.A. Speck, 'Re-election on Taking Office', *BIHR* 51 (1978), 206–9, and M. Pugh, '"Queen Anne is dead": The Abolition of Ministerial By-elections, 1867–1926', *PH* 21 (2002), 351–66.

23 Even quite minor appointments could prove problematic. As MP for Denbigh Burghs in 1882, Sir Robert Cunliffe 'was spoken of as a possible candidate for office when a "small berth" (as a groom-in-waiting) became vacant in 1882, but was not appointed, perhaps because it was not certain he could hold his seat in the consequent by-election': M. Cragoe, 'Cunliffe, Sir Robert Alfred, fifth baronet (1839–1905)', *ODNB*.

24 J.P. Parry, *Democracy and Religion 1867–1875* (Cambridge, 1986), 382–3.

25 Massingham to Masterman (private), 31 July 1911, Masterman MSS, BUL, reflecting on the adverse impact of the National Insurance policy on the Liberals' electoral fortunes after Masterman's narrow victory at West Ham; *Times*, 14 Feb. and 25 May 1914; L. Masterman, *C.F.G. Masterman* (London, 1939), 196–9, 263–4; F.M. Mason, 'Charles Masterman and National Health Insurance', *Albion* 10 (1978), 54–75. National Insurance was the dominant factor in a string of by-election defeats for the Liberals in those years, e.g. at Somerset South (Sept. 1911), Ayrshire North (Dec. 1911), Midlothian (Sept. 1912), Newmarket (May 1913), and Reading (Nov. 1913).

wide attention, were closely fought, and, as Hawkins suggests, served to harden the progressively partisan alignment of British politics as the Victorian period wore on. The intensity of political debate at these by-elections, indeed, helped to crystallise party political divides.

Here, too, extremes were not uncommon. Contests not infrequently escalated into physical violence, words being followed by fists. Mid-Victorian Norwich, for instance, was notorious for its rough electoral contests. So much so that, during the by-election in July 1870, the dean of the cathedral held a special service to preach 'on the moral atmosphere of contested election' in which he condemned 'virulent party spirit'.[26] Such exalted clerical exhortations were to no avail, however, and the 'fine city' reverted to type. There was 'a near-approach to a riot in the market place' on at least one occasion during the campaign after a Liberal-supporting Nonconformist minister was hit in the face. Polling day itself was accompanied by brawls and street-fights: 'The conduct of the lower classes seems to have been turbulent and bad.' Ten people suffered serious injuries, two of them losing an eye.[27] At the 1889 contest in North Buckinghamshire the secretary of the Conservative constituency association was 'knocked down and assaulted by a gang of roughs'.[28] West Country constituencies more especially enjoyed a dubious reputation in this respect. Hooliganism and rowdy behaviour were reported at Ashburton in Devon and at Yeovil in 1908 and 1911, as indeed they had been in earlier contests.[29] And in Gloucestershire, with its many 'closed' villages, elections tended to deepen 'the feeling between rival villages ... into hostility, and ... a little spark would soon set village against village'. In the Cirencester by-election in October 1892, for instance, the appearance of a canvasser for the rival party was treated as an insult on more than one occasion, and elicited a violent response.[30]

To return to the wider political significance of by-elections, it was not just through ministerial appointments that such contests exerted an important influence on the course of national politics. Although they were in some ways not national events at all, being confined to single constituencies rather than the whole country, they were far less local than is often supposed, particularly as time went on. Local men were generally preferred as candidates, especially in the early to mid-Victorian period: in the judgement of Richard Cobden and his associates in the Anti-Corn Law League (ACLL), for example, the League's electoral campaign was impeded by the difficulties it encountered in finding suitable local candidates

26 *Times*, 4 July 1870.
27 *Times*, 12 and 16 July 1870.
28 *Times*, 7 Oct. 1889.
29 *Times*, 17 Jan. 1908 and 23 Nov. 1911.
30 *Times*, 8 Oct. 1892; see also J.H. Gibbs, *A Cotswold Village, or Country Life and Pursuits in Gloucestershire* (3rd edn, London, 1912), 24–5.

to stand in borough contests.[31] The preference for local candidates was not specific to contests of the mid-1840s, nor was it confined to English seats. As Gordon Pentland observes in his chapter, a 'Londonised Scotsman', such as Augustine Birrell, still found Scottish constituencies a sticky wicket in the late 1880s.[32]

The preference for local candidates was nevertheless far less well-entrenched by the later Victorian and Edwardian periods. As Kathryn Rix describes, the by then increasingly professionalised party organisations and their agents approached a typical by-election as an integral element of a countrywide effort supported by regional and national networks, funds from party headquarters, centrally-produced propaganda, and trained activists imported into the constituency for the duration of the campaign. The now more intensive focus on by-elections by the rival party organisations reflected the utility of such contests as means of honing and testing electoral tactics, appeals and machinery in an increasingly competitive, democratic political culture.[33] Following the establishment of the National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations (1867) and the Conservative Central Office (1870), Disraeli took a keen interest in how the new party machinery functioned in constituency contests. As reported by Harold Gorst, son of J.E. Gorst, who had established the party's Central Office, '[w]hen a bye-election was won [Disraeli] was satisfied that everything had been in order, and the successful result furnished him with sufficient proof that such was the case. But he gave instructions that whenever a bye-election was lost, he was to be fully informed of the cause of defeat; and this was invariably done.'[34] Other party leaders were similarly appreciative of the utility of by-elections as a means of evaluating campaigning methods. Reflecting on the Liberal defeat in Disraeli's old Buckinghamshire constituency in 1876 – a contest described by Geoffrey Hicks in his essay – Gladstone came to see the limits of appeals based solely on exploitation of the 'virtuous passion' induced by the Bulgarian atrocities, recommending to Granville that the party rely 'less on meetings and speeches' than canvassing and organisation.[35] Four years later, he drew the moral from the by-election defeat at Southwark that the organisational set-up in that constituency was defective, being 'a counterfeit of [Joseph Chamberlain's] Birmingham organisation' and thus in need of reform.[36] Even so, the 'Birmingham Caucus'

31 Commenting on the 1844 Huntingdon election, for instance, Cobden's view was that unless a local man were found the ACLL would have no chance at all and their candidate would be placed in a 'ludicrous' position: *LRC* i, 360.

32 *Scotsman*, 3 July 1889.

33 It was through by-election campaigning that Francis Schnadhorst 'revolutionized' – as Arnold Morley described it – the electioneering of the Liberal Central Association in the later 1880s: E. Taylor, 'Schnadhorst, Francis (1840–1900)', *ODNB*, and B. McGill, 'Francis Schnadhorst and Liberal Party Organization', *JMH* 34 (1962), 29.

34 H.E. Gorst, *The Earl of Beaconsfield* (London, 1900), 130.

35 Gladstone to Granville, 16 Sept. 1876, *GGC* i, 8.

36 Gladstone to Granville, 18 Feb. 1880, *GGC* i, 113.

and, more especially, the electoral practices honed in the Chamberlainite fiefdom, were soon regarded as a kind of gold standard of professional electioneering. As *The Times* noted favourably, the Unionist agent at the Norwich by-election in early 1904, G.P. Warren, 'had a Birmingham training before he came to Norwich', and was therefore 'up-to-date in his methods'.[37]

The attention accorded to by-elections by central party leaders and organisers reflected their perceived significance in national politics. In turn, this helped to ensure that they were in fact important to national politics. But this was not the only way in which by-election contests interrelated with the metropolitan and national context. The locally-focused nature of much work on by-elections might suggest that they represented the quintessence of the 'politics of place', perhaps even that their frequency assisted in maintaining what much recent scholarship has come to see as the distinctly local character of Victorian and Edwardian politics.[38] But in fact by-elections provide especially telling instances of the intersection of the local and the national, and so demonstrate the utility of what Chris Williams has called 'an analytical framework that sees movements, mediation and influence proceeding along a two-way street' connecting the local with the national.[39]

The role of pressure groups at by-elections provides further illustration of this interrelationship, and indeed of the importance of constituency contests to wider themes and issues in British politics more generally. Throughout the period covered by this book, by-elections provided reformers and activists of various kinds with a crucial means of transmitting their message to the national public. As the temperance campaigner W.S. Caine of the United Kingdom Alliance observed in 1893, they 'are always valuable to any great agitation', there being 'no opportunity like a bye-election for bringing any political principle before the country'.[40] In this respect they were preferable by far to general elections, as activist groups could concentrate their often considerable resources on one constituency at a time, rather than spreading their effort over the country as a whole. Thus, they could hope to make their issues dominate by-election contests, secure in the knowledge that the reportage in the national press would generate wider publicity for their causes and so amplify their message.

Furthermore, in concentrating their efforts on regular by-elections rather than the much less frequent general elections, pressure groups could also ensure that their concerns were kept more consistently before the electorate and hence more

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37 *Times*, 13 Jan. 1904; for some of the background see also S. Cherry, *Doing Different? Politics and the Labour Movement in Norwich, 1880–1914* (Norwich, 1989), 70–2.

38 For interpretations emphasising the politics of place, see esp. D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900–1918* (Cambridge, 1990), and J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 1998).

39 C. Williams, '"One Damn Election after Another": Politics and the Local Dimension', *FCH* 5 (2002), 117–18.

40 *Alliance News*, 27 Oct. 1893, cited in Hamer, *Politics of Electoral Pressure*, 20.

prominently visible to the public eye – and all the more so if some of the candidatures they backed were successful. This was recognised by the ACLL, the pioneers of Victorian pressure group electoral strategy (and arguably of electoral organisation generally).[41] Writing to Cobden in October 1842, Colonel Thomas Perronet Thompson pointed out that, 'On an average I think there is a vacancy in the House of Commons about once a fortnight (or six-and-twenty in the year); so that if the League could reckon upon one-thirteenth of the boroughs as under their influence, they might calculate on putting a man in, every six months. And where they were put, they would probably stick. Which seems more hopeful than pushing them to boroughs for the chance of succeeding six years hence.'[42]

The ACLL's example was followed by other groups, many connected with religious nonconformity and political Liberalism and radicalism. The extension of the franchise to borough householders in 1867 gave a fillip to activism, with a number of important groups being established in the 1870s. Examples include Caine's UK Alliance, which called on its supporters to oppose or abstain from voting for candidates who refused to back temperance legislation, and the National Education League, which campaigned for non-denominational schooling.[43] Another notable example, also from the 1870s, was Josephine Butler's campaign for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, legislation which had provided for the compulsory medical inspection and detention of prostitutes – and suspected prostitutes – working in garrison and port towns. At considerable personal risk, Butler and her associates intervened in by-elections, opposing Liberal candidates who supported the Acts, holding meetings and distributing propaganda often in the face of mob violence and intimidation.[44] This intervention had a significant effect on electoral outcomes, and had wider political consequences. In particular, the defeat of the Liberal minister Henry Storks at Colchester in November 1870 – for Butler 'a turning-point in the history of our crusade' – was largely due to Repealer activism.[45] The result was an important factor in prompting Gladstone's government to rethink its policy on the issue. 'When popular feeling is excited', the premier reflected in the aftermath of the defeat at Colchester, 'due allowances for executive difficulties are refused.'[46]

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41 Aside from contesting by-elections in highly organised fashion and sending leaders such as Cobden to speak in the constituencies, the ACLL sent out packages of propaganda to registered electors and initiated an extremely active campaign of registration activity – the intention being to build up secure bases of committed and declared supporters at local level. See H.D. Jordan, 'The Political Methods of the Anti-Corn Law League', *PSQ* 42 (1927), 58–76; *LRC* i, 212–13, 341 and 343; R.K. Huch, 'The Anti-Corn Law League and the Salisbury Election of November 1843', *CJH* 7 (1971), 247–56; McCord, *Anti-Corn Law League*, 155–62.

42 Perronet Thompson to Cobden, 12 Oct. 1842, as quoted in Hamer, *Politics of Electoral Pressure*, 67.

43 Hamer, *Politics of Electoral Pressure*, 91–121, 165–304.

44 G.W. and L.A. Johnson, eds, *Josephine E. Butler* (Bristol, 1909), 102.

45 J.E. Butler, *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade* (London, 1896), 32, 42–54.

46 Gladstone to Bruce [Home Secretary], 3 Dec. 1870, *GD* v, 412.

Anti-Home Rule and affiliated groupings invariably played a prominent role in the 1880s and 1890s. At the Spalding by-election in the summer of 1887, for instance, the Primrose League mobilised its two local Habitations, with close to 2,000 members, in support of the Unionist candidate.[47] At Hereford in 1893, both the League and the British Empire Defence Association threw their organisational weight and canvassing manpower behind the Unionist cause, this time with more success than in the Lincolnshire contest six years previously.[48] As described in Readman and Blaxill's essay, however, the apogee of pressure group activism was reached in the Edwardian period, which saw the intervention in by-elections of a bewildering array of groups and campaigners, from the Tariff Reform League to the Navy League, and from the suffragettes to the Northern Counties Education League.[49]

Some of these organisations were associated with quite advanced political radicalism and socialism. Indeed the role by-elections played in the development of the political Left in Britain is worthy of some comment. From the time of the Chartists, radicals and socialists saw by-elections as important avenues of political action and proselytising, their thinking in this regard being analogous to that of single-issue pressure groups.[50] As Antony Taylor shows, mid-Victorian radicals recognised by-elections as a key means of challenging not only the political status quo but also the claim of Liberalism to be the standard-bearer of progress. These radicals were often inspired by older ideological languages, their candidatures being discordant with the current scholarly emphasis on a linear progression from Gladstonian Liberalism and Victorian radicalism to the emerging Labour movement. In this way the study of by-elections helps throw into sharper relief the complex and variegated nature of the radicalism that underpinned the early twentieth-century realignment of British party politics.

At the constituency level, the beginnings of this realignment can be traced to the electoral campaigning of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) from the late nineteenth century, and in the Edwardian period the Labour Representation Committee and Labour party. In this realignment by-elections played an important part, candidatures such as Keir Hardie's in Mid-Lanarkshire in April 1888 being landmarks – even if, in many cases, the by-election was unsuccessfully contested. Aside from Mid-Lanarkshire, which was probably more important in Labour's own narrative of its struggle into the political light than in its substantive effect on politics at the time (Hardie only got 617 votes),[51] a good example is

47 *Times*, 18 and 29 June 1887.

48 *Times*, 8 and 10 Aug. 1893.

49 See also *Times*, 22 Sept. 1908 and 1 Mar. 1912, for the roles of the Northern Counties Education League at the by-election in Newcastle (1908) and of the Tariff Reform League at the contest in Manchester South (1912).

50 Chartists tended to focus as much on general elections, but ten official Chartists stood at by-elections between 1841 and 1860: M. Chase, '"Labour's Candidates": Chartist Challenges at the Parliamentary Polls, 1839–1860', *LHR* 74 (2009), 64–89.

51 K.O. Morgan, 'Hardie, (James) Keir (1856–1915)', *ODNB*.

provided by the Barnsley election of 1897. Here, the ILP undertook to put up a candidate, but ran into opposition from the still Liberal-aligned local trade unions, who backed a traditional 'Lib-Lab' man. The divisive and bitter contest that ensued resulted in easy victory for the Liberals, an outcome that convinced the ILP that only by working with trade unions would any electoral success be forthcoming. In turn, it led to a policy – endorsed by Hardie the following year – of securing an alliance between the party and non-socialist unions, which set the party on a path away from doctrinaire socialism and towards Labour representation.[52] In this way, therefore, a single by-election was a significant factor in shifting the ideological trajectory of the Labour party.

By-elections affected the course of political change in other ways too. Perhaps most obviously, their loss could place pressure on government majorities, sometimes to the extent of contributing to a change of administration and the calling of a general election. This certainly applied to the Liberal governments of 1892–95. Successive reverses at the polls demoralised the already fractious ruling party. Defeat in the solidly Liberal Forfarshire constituency at the end of 1894 was a 'knock-down blow' to the party.[53] And after the disastrous Evesham election of January 1895, Sir William Harcourt admitted to Edward Hamilton that 'it was "actum est" with the Government'.[54] In this way by-election reverses also laid the ground for its Commons defeat in June 1895 over cordite supplies for the army, thus bringing about the collapse of Rosebery's ill-starred administration.

In general, by-elections were judged to be useful indicators of the fluctuating fortunes of the parties. As Herbert Gladstone later reflected on his long spell of managing the Liberals' party machinery: 'Election forecasts can only be made with appropriate accuracy on two sets of data – the results of by-elections; the character as well as the number of volunteers for candidature. If by-elections show definitely favourable results, and if good candidates offer to stand in sufficient numbers to fight all constituencies worth attack, a decisive victory can be anticipated.'[55] Naturally, politicians did not prove to be infallible in their forecasts. In 1885, for example, G.O. Trevelyan confidently extrapolated from by-election contests a Liberal majority of forty at the forthcoming general election, only to discover that his party fell short of an overall majority by about that same number.[56] Even so, by-elections were the only reliable means available for gauging the swing of the

52 Rubinstein, 'Barnsley By-election', 102–34; also Cherry, *Labour Movement in Norwich*, 75–86.

53 *Times*, 20 Nov. 1894.

54 D.R. Brooks, ed., *The Destruction of Lord Rosebery: From the Diary of Sir Edward Walter Hamilton, 1894–1895* (London, 1986), 210; see also Haldane to Rosebery, 24 Apr. 1895, Rosebery MSS, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, MS 10029, blaming Gladstone's 'policy of sop-throwing' before 1892 for the demise of Liberalism in the country.

55 [H.] Viscount Gladstone, *After Thirty Years* (London, 1928), 160; see also J.H. Linforth, *Leaves from an Agent's Diary* (Leeds, 1911), 1–8.

56 His forecast was Liberals 319, Conservatives 231, Parnellites 84: note by Trevelyan, 24 Sept. 1885. This framed note is on display in the library at the Trevelyan home at Wallington, Northumberland.

pendulum of public opinion. Thus, when, in February 1904, the Conservatives lost the hitherto unassailable St Albans division of Hertfordshire, it was widely seen as the 'first great breach in the wall of the Unionist Government'.[57] The subsequent 'steady stream of Liberal victories means something', concluded *The Times*, notoriously reluctant to admit the predictive qualities of by-elections: 'Every indication goes to show that the pendulum will have its way.'[58] In the same vein, defeat at Manchester South in March 1912 forced Asquith and his ministers to contemplate their own political mortality: 'very serious affair, worse to follow. [...] Cab[inet] must consider very carefully. 7th y[ea]r of existence – g[rea]t measures (? Losing moral authority – clinging to office).'[59]

By-elections also influenced the timing of government resignations. The end of Disraeli's 1874–80 administration was one case in point. Its decision to dissolve parliament was almost certainly influenced by Conservative victories at Southwark and Liverpool in February 1880.[60] Southwark seems to have had a particular impact. As Viscount Cross recalled, 'I remember well the Prime Minister striking his hand upon the table, in the middle of a Cabinet meeting, in triumph when he received a telegram announcing the victory of Mr. (afterwards Sir Edward) Clarke for Southwark.'[61] Clarke himself was personally congratulated by the premier on 'a brilliant campaign brilliantly fought',[62] and the decision to dissolve was taken just a few days after he took his seat in the Commons. As it turned out, Disraeli's judgement was at error. Although Southwark and Liverpool had been victories, in the latter case the Conservatives' share of the vote had fallen. This point was not lost on that most astute reader of the electoral runes, Gladstone, who reassured Granville that

> The true position of the Government is indicated by the *proportion* of a voting constituency who support it. In 1874 a voting body of 37000 gave them (I think) a majority of 3500. Had that voting body sunk to one half, or 18500, they would have stood just as well with a majority of 1750. But instead of this it *rose* to 50,000, with this their majority ought to have risen to 4700. But as it was 2200 the Liberals improved not be 1000 but by 2500 (on the same numbers).

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57 Morley speech at St Albans, *Times*, 26 Mar. 1904. The Conservatives' John Vicary Gibbs, a junior Admiralty minister, had to seek re-election after it transpired that his family's banking firm had benefited from a government contract.

58 *Times*, 15 Oct. 1905, commenting on the Liberal victory in the Barkston Ash division of Yorkshire East Riding.

59 Harcourt note on Cabinet meeting, 6 Mar. 1912, Harcourt MSS, Bodl., Ms. Harcourt dep. 442.

60 P. Smith, *Disraelian Conservatism and Social Reform* (London, 1967), 309–10; R. Blake, *Disraeli* (London, 1966), 703–4.

61 R.A. Cross, *A Political History* (privately printed, 1903), 63. Disraeli also telegrammed the Queen on receipt of the news, telling her that he was 'greatly rejoiced at the great victory at Southwark. It shows what the feeling of the country is': Blake, *Disraeli*, 703.

62 Clarke, *Story of My Life*, 164–5.

> I do not know whether this will be to you a glass of toddie – I hope it may – or a wet blanket.[63]

Among the other political decisions of consequence for the course of politics that by-elections influenced was Robert Peel's declaration in support of Corn Law Repeal, a moment of deep and lasting significance. As Boyd Hilton and others have shown, Peel's conviction that the Corn Laws had to go was rooted in his personal ideology.[64] But a factor in his decision was his desire to avoid confrontation between town and country, and as D.A. Hamer has pointed out, '[b]y far the most striking evidence available to him to lead him to the conclusion that such a confrontation was imminent was the electoral strategy of the [Anti-Corn Law] League' – a strategy which from summer 1844 was focused on by-elections in large urban constituencies.[65] At a rather different level, but again related to fiscal policy, the establishment of the Fair Trade movement in the 1880s was influenced by the results of by-elections. The return of William Farrer Ecroyd as MP for Preston in 1881, on a large majority, was especially important, convincing some Conservatives that industrial towns were becoming more sympathetic to protection and that therefore it was a viable policy. Following three further candidatures by tariff-supporting Conservatives, an organised Fair Trade movement was got underway.[66]

While Fair Trade won over some backbenchers in the 1880s, it did not command the support of the party leadership, which remained reluctant to challenge the fiscal status quo until Joseph Chamberlain's Tariff Reform campaign got going in 1903. One reason for their reluctance was electoral success, and as Matthew Roberts argues in his essay, this success owed more to a positive appeal than is sometimes suggested. Far from constituting victory by default, as E.H.H. Green once claimed,[67] the late Victorian electoral hegemony of the Conservatives and Liberal Unionists was due in significant part to the articulation of a platform ideology of 'positive Unionism', one increasingly visible at by-elections from 1892 onwards. Furthermore, as Roberts goes on to demonstrate, the evidence for the Conservative vote being inversely correlated with turnout (success coming when political participation was relatively low) is weak. This finding, at variance with the interpretations of Green, James Cornford and others, supports recent revisionist analysis, but extends its reach to include by-elections, which have hitherto been

63 Gladstone to Granville, 10 Feb. 1880, *GGC* i, 112.

64 See, e.g., B. Hilton, 'Peel: A Reappraisal', *HJ* 22 (1979), 585–614.

65 Hamer, *Politics of Electoral Pressure*, 86; McCord, *Anti-Corn Law League*, 142, 153–62.

66 B.H. Brown, *The Tariff Reform Movement in Great Britain 1881–1895* (New York, 1943), 25–7, 58–9.

67 E.H.H. Green, *The Crisis of Conservatism: The Politics, Economics and Ideology of the British Conservative Party, 1880–1914* (London, 1995), esp. 126–7; E.H.H. Green, 'Radical Conservatism: The Electoral Genesis of Tariff Reform', *HJ* 28 (1985), esp. 679–80.

neglected on all sides of the debate.[68] It also goes further by suggesting that in by-elections in working-class seats, Conservative candidates tended to do better on higher turnouts, thus suggesting that popular Unionism was perhaps a more dynamic force than has been allowed even in scholarship that has emphasised its importance. In understanding the political changes and realignments of the later Victorian period, therefore, by-elections provide useful insights.

But arguably the most important way in which by-elections affected political change across the whole period, however, is in promoting political partisanship. As Philip Salmon shows in his essay, in the years after 1832 the number of by-elections and, more importantly, of contested by-elections increased substantially. They therefore provide further support for the argument that the Great Reform Act raised levels of political participation very significantly, even if its effects on popular enfranchisement have often been exaggerated.[69] This step-change in levels of participation went hand-in-hand with an increase in political partisanship, as by-elections in multi-member constituencies forced voters – assuming they decided not to abstain – to abandon habits of split-voting and plump for one candidate. And as Salmon shows using pollbook analysis, the practice of partisanship at the polls – once learnt at by-elections – was typically carried over into behaviour at general elections, so solidifying party divisions and acting as important agents of political modernisation.

One of the implications of Salmon's essay is that ideology mattered at by-elections, as electors faced with a single vote in a multi-member constituency were effectively compelled to make a partisan choice (rather than, as they could at general elections, split their votes between candidates of different parties). An important corollary to this is that national issues mattered at by-elections – more evidence that they were far from being local affairs dominated by local concerns or indeed local personalities. Even in the politics of by-elections, national issues loomed large, and did so in the early Victorian as well as late Victorian and

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68 For the view that Conservative electoral success owed much to 'tight registers and low polls', see J.P. Cornford, 'The Transformation of Conservatism in the Late Nineteenth Century', *VS* 7 (1963), 35–77; Green, 'Radical Conservatism', 677, 679–80; P.T. Marsh, *The Discipline of Popular Government: Lord Salisbury's Domestic Statecraft, 1881–1902* (Hassocks, 1978), esp. 195–6, 207; R. Shannon, *The Age of Salisbury, 1881–1902* (London, 1996), 313. For revisionist analyses, see J. Lawrence and J. Elliot, 'Parliamentary Election Results Reconsidered: An Analysis of Borough Elections, 1885–1910', in E.H.H. Green, ed., *An Age of Transition: British Politics, 1880–1914* (Edinburgh, 1997), 18–28; P. Readman, 'The 1895 General Election and Political Change in Late Victorian Britain', *HJ* 42 (1999), esp. 487–90; M. Roberts, '"Villa Toryism" and Popular Conservatism in Leeds, 1885–1902', *HJ* 49 (2006), esp. 230–2; A. Windscheffel, *Popular Conservatism in Imperial London, 1868–1906* (Woodbridge, 2007).

69 J.A. Phillips, 'Popular Politics in Unreformed England', *JMH* 52 (1980), 599–625; J.A. Phillips, *Electoral Behavior in Unreformed England* (Princeton, NJ, 1982); F. O'Gorman, 'The Unreformed Electorate of Hanoverian England: The Mid-Eighteenth Century to the Reform Act of 1832', *SH* 11 (1986), 33–52; F. O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons and Parties: The Unreformed Electorate of Hanoverian England, 1734–1832* (Oxford, 1989). But cf. D. Beales, 'The Electorate before and after 1832: The Right to Vote, and the Opportunity', *PH* 11 (1992), 139–50.

Edwardian periods. Pollbook analysis, as used by Salmon, is extremely helpful in demonstrating this for the years before 1872 and the advent of the secret ballot. For example, as Michael Turner has shown in an article on the Sunderland by-election of 1845, which was contested by an ACLL-backed candidate, the pollbooks reveal that both the Free Trade and the protectionist side drew votes from all occupational groups, suggesting that ideology was as important as economic interest in determining their political allegiances.[70] Perhaps more tellingly still, another case study by J.R. Fisher found that in Nottinghamshire by-elections in 1846 and 1851, only a minority of votes came from parishes where electors were unanimously or near-unanimously in favour of one candidate. In both contests, candidates from the landed class were beaten: even in the most aristocratic county in England, it seems that by-elections turned on issues rather than influence, and did so well before the Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884–85.[71]

Some of the issues that were at play in by-elections are explored in essays in this volume. T.G. Otte and Geoffrey Hicks show that foreign policy impinged on by-election contests quite as much as it did at general elections. In doing so, they provide further evidence of the linkages between national affairs and the politics of place. More specifically, they also demonstrate the interrelationship between foreign and domestic policy: even at by-elections, foreign policy was not hermetically sealed off from the cut-and-thrust of popular politics – quite the contrary.[72] This challenges those scholars who hold that foreign policy was somehow disconnected from the domestic political scene, a challenge that is made stronger by the fact that it proceeds from the analysis of constituency contests that might be seen as normatively more local in character than those occurring at general elections.[73]

As Hicks's detailed examination of the by-elections during the 1874–80 parliament in the context of the high politics more especially of the ruling Conservatives emphasises, by-elections are a useful political weather gauge for the historian. Such contests were a meaningful, if not the only meaningful, measure of public opinion in that period. The electoral troubles that beset Disraeli's 1874–80 government predated the Bulgarian Atrocities agitation which so energised their Liberal opponents, as Hicks shows. If anything, the contests between 1876, when the 'atrocitarian' clamour for an ethical foreign policy reached its climax, and Disraeli's Berlin apotheosis in 1878 suggest that the Bulgarian campaign generated little more than a superficial excitement, one, indeed, that soon subsided. To that extent,

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70 M.J. Turner, 'Reform Politics and the Sunderland By-election of 1845', *Northern History* 38 (2001), 83–106.

71 J.R. Fisher, 'Issues and Influence: Two By-elections in South Nottinghamshire in the Mid-Nineteenth Century', *HJ* 24 (1981), 155–65.

72 As Granville reported in the wake of the December 1879 Sheffield by-election, which the Liberals had lost, 'there was one word fatal to us ... It was "Constantinople"!!!': to Gladstone, 18 Dec. 1879, *GGC* i, 104.

73 For recent research exploring the interconnections between foreign and domestic policy, see W. Mulligan and B. Simms, eds, *The Primacy of Foreign Policy in British History, 1660–2000* (Basingstoke, 2010).

the agitation in the summer of 1876 may not be the accurate indicator of the state of public feeling that historians have tended to take it to be. That it acted as a catalyst, exacerbating the government's electoral difficulties, is beyond doubt. What is less evident is that Gladstone's and his acolytes' 'Bulgarianising' tactics created them. The trend against the government was apparent before the summer of 1876, and the pendulum never swung back in its favour. It is true that public opinion oscillated considerably between the opposing poles of the debate about Britain's correct foreign policy. But, as Hicks demonstrates, the government seems to have benefited from it, at any rate in the short term. Ultimately, the Conservative recovery on the back of a more forceful, Beaconsfieldian foreign and imperial policy faltered, correlative with the irruption of Jingo patriotism in 1877–78. Thus, Hicks concludes, the depressed state of British agriculture, the state of the country's economy in general, and 'the hated "Empress Bill"' were perhaps more important as factors behind the government's difficulties than the excitement generated by the Eastern Question.

There was, however, another significant dimension to by-elections. As the Cabinet's alarm over the Buckinghamshire election underlines, by-elections were acquiring a key role in those years as the electoral process evolved from the corrupt practices of the eighteenth century to recognisably modern campaigns. New techniques were developed to assess the opinions of the newly-expanded electorate, to mobilise it effectively, and by-elections were a useful vehicle for doing so.

While domestic and external politics were more intimately connected than is often accepted by historians of the Victorian and Edwardian periods, the argument should not be pushed too far. Neither sphere of politics exerted any kind of 'primacy' over the other. As Otte's chapter shows, the relationship between them was fluid, and the dynamic that characterised it variable. Foreign policy issues had considerable resonance with voters at certain times. They had thus the potential to affect popular electoral politics at crucial junctures of British politics. Indeed, when the public was 'stirred', as was the case during the crises in the Near East in 1876–77 or in East Asia in 1898, concerns about Britain's standing abroad not only influenced the outcome of by-election contests, they also generated sufficient pressure to influence Cabinet decision-making.[74] Even so, as Otte argues in the context of the 1877 Salford election, by-elections rarely offered incontrovertible evidence of the 'swing of the pendulum' in one direction or the other.

It is noteworthy, indeed, that foreign policy issues resonated in different ways at different times. To an extent this reflected the shifts in Britain's international position. Thus, as the mid-Victorian, non-interventionist foreign policy consensus slowly fragmented around 1870, issues of military preparedness moved up the political agenda. In the wake of the nearly world war in 1877–78 the notion of a patriotic and quasi-bellicose foreign policy proved attractive first to the Conservatives, and

74 See also Otte, '"Avenge's England's Dishonour"', 385–428.

eventually to Liberal politicians, too. As the chapters by Hicks and Otte underline, Disraeli's spirited foray into the field of international diplomacy yielded no lasting electoral benefits for the Conservatives. Indeed, by the later 1880s, Liberals had adapted their campaigning tactics in by-elections so that they embraced patriotic rhetoric at the expense of more radical domestic platforms.

One complicating factor for the parties and their agents lay in the fact that issues of foreign policy played well with some sections of the electorate, while others remained deaf to the siren song of 'Empire'. Imperial and patriotic rhetoric, as Otte argues with reference to the contests at Southwark and Liverpool in 1880 and later metropolitan ones, proved particularly successful in the boroughs. Even so, it is clear that the broader political context was decisive. In the absence of perceived foreign complications, as was the case in the Kennington by-election in 1889, the metropolitan electorate, otherwise more receptive to the 'imperial idea', was little swayed by it on this occasion. An imperial platform was far less attractive to voters in the shires, by contrast, as Admiral Tryon's defeat at Spalding or the Buckingham by-election in October 1889 showed. The contests examined here, indeed, suggest a curious parallel between the 'unpatriotic' attitude of the French peasant of this period and the reluctance of the British agricultural labourer or smallholder to embrace the 'imperial idea'.[75]

Intriguingly, foreign policy questions played a far less prominent role in the decade before 1914. Issues of domestic legislation and reform dominated the thinking of both parties. It proved practically impossible, as Otte argues, for the Liberals to turn Sir Edward Grey's diplomatic successes abroad in the years after 1912 to domestic advantage. Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the existence of the Labour party was a considerable encumbrance for the Asquith government in both its domestic and external dealings.

As for domestic political issues, one of the most prominent throughout the whole period was the land question. Ian Packer's sensitive analysis of this thorny issue and its role at by-elections strikes a note of caution, while also demonstrating the close symbiosis between high and low politics.[76] As he makes clear, by-election results – such as that at Spalding in 1887 – had a significant influence on the formulation and timing of Liberal and Conservative land policy between the 1880s and 1914. Yet this influence should not be exaggerated. Typically by-elections helped to 'push a party down a path it was already starting to take', as with the Unionists and allotment policy in the later 1880s, or else they provided evidence that policy should be prioritised. Hence, for example, the return of the radical land-taxer E.G. Hemmerde for north-west Norfolk in May 1912 helped convince Lloyd George

75 E. Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (London, 1979 (pb)), 330–8 and *passim*.

76 For the importance of the land question generally, see M. Cragoe and P. Readman, eds, *The Land Question in Britain, 1750–1950* (Basingstoke, 2010).

that a new initiative on the land question was needed. In this way by-elections could prompt policy decisions, even if – as Packer also shows – they did not often act to constrain initiatives once launched (thus poor by-election results in rural England after the Liberals' 1907 Smallholding Act did not divert them from their course given the depth of their ideological commitment to agrarian reform).

Appreciation of the connections between high and low politics at by-elections does not of course imply that particular, constituency-specific issues did not also play a role in the contests. But the close relationship between by-election campaigns and the preoccupations of national politics is striking. While Dunbabin's diachronic analysis of by-election trends is suggestive of this relationship,[77] historians have been slow to acknowledge this. Yet, to a large extent – as many of the essays in this book demonstrate – the issues debated in by-election campaigns correlated with those in question on the national political scene. As Readman and Blaxill show, for example, the by-elections of the Edwardian era typically featured issues, controversies and legislation concurrently prevalent in parliamentary and extra-parliamentary politics, be it the 1903 Education Act, the Tariff Reform controversy, or the furore over National Insurance. And as Otte argues, contemporary concerns about the unsettled state of international politics and Britain's beleaguered position in Asia were the dominant issue in the by-elections in 1898.[78]

An Edwardian by-election that had wider ramifications – Bermondsey in 1909 – is the subject of Phillips Payson O'Brien's essay. This case study gives a good sense of how individual by-elections were intimately connected to the ebb and flow of national politics, Lloyd George's famous Limehouse speech being a key factor in determining the issues over which the contest in question was fought. As O'Brien shows, before Limehouse, Conservative electoral appeals had been centred on the navy and Tariff Reform, while afterwards – as illustrated by Bermondsey – there was more of a focus on the threat of the 'socialism' that Lloyd George's platform rhetoric seemed to presage. This focus lasted, reflecting a wider Conservative ideological repositioning that would persist and strengthen in party discourse after the First World War and on throughout the twentieth century.[79]

The relationship between by-elections and the larger currents of national politics helps to explain why they were used so extensively in the practice of 'political meteorology'. As Matthew Roberts argues, this quasi-scientific, quantitative analysis of electoral statistics, seen by contemporaries as an important means of evaluating the relative strength of parties and predicting the likely outcome of future general elections, emerged from around the 1870s on. Among leading politicians, Gladstone was an early exponent of the art. He set out some of his analyses in a series of

77 Dunbabin, 'Parliamentary Elections'.

78 See also Otte, '"Avenge England's Dishonour"', 385–428.

79 For a classic discussion of this repositioning, see R. McKibbin, 'Class and Conventional Wisdom: The Conservative Party and the "Public" in Inter-War Britain', in his *Ideologies of Class* (Oxford, 1990), 259–93