

REPORT

Whatever Happened to 'Orpington Man'?

Liberal Democrat History Group meeting at the National Liberal Club, 23 January 2012, with Dr Mark Egan and Professor Dennis Kavanagh. Chair: Duncan Brack
Report by **Dr Emily Robinson**

THIS YEAR, 2012, is the fiftieth anniversary of Eric Lubbock's victory in the 1962 Orpington by-election. The History Group marked the occasion with a meeting at the National Liberal Club, which asked 'whatever happened to "Orpington man"?' – that much-discussed new kind of voter who was expected to change the party's electoral fortunes. The speakers were Dr Mark Egan and Professor Dennis Kavanagh.

Mark Egan, the author of *Coming into Focus: the transformation of the Liberal Party, 1945–64*, began by noting that although we are now familiar with enormous anti-government swings in by-elections, Orpington was perhaps the first example of this, with a swing to the Liberals of over 26 per cent. Yet, the expected breakthrough did not happen. The Liberals did not gain the thirty or forty seats which would have allowed them to hold the balance of power, and to bring about Grimond's desired 'realignment of the left.' So, he asked, what went wrong?

Egan set the Orpington result in context, with a brief examination of the Liberals' increasingly poor performance in both general and by-elections after 1945. This tale of decline was broken by their strong second place in the 1954 Inverness by-election, followed by similar results in Hereford in 1956, Rochdale in 1958 and eventually by a narrow victory in Torrington, also in 1958.

The Liberal revival was, then, 'in full swing' by the Orpington by-election in March 1962. In this solidly Conservative suburban constituency, the Liberals had been steadily improving their performance since losing their deposit at a 1955 by-election. In 1959 the party managed to win 21 per cent of the vote – a result that put them

just behind Labour in third place. The candidate at the time, Jack Galloway, predicted that the Liberal vote would double at the next election. As Egan commented, 'this prediction sounded unrealistic at the time but turned out to be an under-statement.'

Egan credited this improvement to increased local activity, and particularly the efforts of the local party secretary, Mrs Musket. Much of this activity focused on ward committees and local election contests. At the 1959 local elections the Liberals outpolled Labour for the first time, in 1962 they outpolled the Conservatives and took control of the council.

By the time of the by-election, the 'thoughtful, dogged and very likeable' Eric Lubbock had replaced Galloway as Liberal candidate. The party had also sent five professional agents to Orpington. Despite the party headquarters burning down on the eve of the election, Lubbock exceeded all expectations, turning a 14,000 Conservative majority into a majority of 7,855 for the Liberals. Orpington had become a safe Liberal seat. This was such a shock that the Liberal Party commissioned two internal reports on the reasons for the success!

While the leadership focused on national factors, such as the seemingly more 'modern' outlook of the Liberals in comparison with the Conservatives, the local party insisted on the importance of the seven years of organising and hard work which had preceded the victory. Egan quoted one local member who spoke of 'faith, hope and canvassing – and the greatest of these is canvassing.'

Meanwhile, Grimond – 'a visionary, an ideas man, bored by organisational detail and with no interest in local politics' – viewed the result as heralding a Liberal

revival, based on the votes of a new class of young middle-class professionals. This was a sudden, seminal breakthrough, not the start of a long hard slog to win seats one-by-one.

'So was Grimond wrong?', Egan asked. 'Yes and no.' In 1963 the electoral tide turned against the Liberals, leaving them with double the number of MPs than in 1959 but fewer than during the Second World War. To compound this lack of electoral breakthrough, Grimond's hopes for realignment were 'shattered' by the size of Labour's majority in 1966.

That said, Egan noted the improved Liberal performances in the Home Counties and in suburbs of Manchester in 1964. This supported Grimond's intuition that the Liberals were beginning to gain the votes of opponents to the Conservatives in areas where Labour was weak. Grimond had also identified a new trend in British politics – the increasing number of voters who did not identify with either the Conservatives or Labour. This was the reality of 'Orpington Man'. However, his vote would not come to the Liberals as of right – it would have to be worked for, election by election. As Egan concluded:

Fast forward fifty years and Orpington Man might vote for Clegg, Cameron or Blair. Or Green in local elections, or UKIP in European elections. Orpington Man might choose not to vote at all. Orpington signalled that British politics was changing, but not in a way which would sweep the Liberals back to power.

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Dennis Kavanagh, now Emeritus Professor and a distinguished author on political science, was an undergraduate at the time of the Orpington by-election. He recalled how extraordinary the result seemed and reflected on the panic that it instilled in the Conservatives – as revealed by Harold Macmillan's *Diaries*. It was the fear that the Liberals were about to sweep the country, heightened by the Profumo affair, that inspired Macmillan's 'Night of the Long Knives'.

Kavanagh felt that the idea of 'Orpington Man' was a rather crude combination of PR and lazy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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In further search of 'Orpington Man'

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

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

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

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

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