

Value for money

‘When the time came I went down to canvass, and spent, I think, the most wretched fortnight of my manhood.’ As an unsuccessful candidate myself, I sympathise with this heartfelt epitaph passed by Anthony Trollope on his 1868 attempt to win a Parliamentary seat, but what went wrong and why did it scar his subsequent writing?

After an unsure start in life, Anthony Trollope had built a successful career in the Post Office – he claimed responsibility for the invention of the post box. For a while, he combined the civil service with writing, but success as an author allowed him to retire from official life. His first novel made only £48, but in 1862 he was paid more than £3,000 for *Orley Farm* and continued to make substantial sums for his regular output of one to two novels a year throughout the 1860s. His most famous works, the *Barssetshire Chronicles*, were published in the period 1855–67, and the *Palliser* series, which capture so much of the atmosphere of mid-Victorian politics, was published between 1864 and 1880.

From his youth Trollope had nurtured a dream – ‘I have always thought that to sit in the British Parliament should be the highest object of ambition to every educated Englishman’. Political authors are no novelty, as Disraeli’s well-known success illustrates, but fewer realise that Thackeray stood unsuccessfully for the Liberals in Oxford (City) and that Dickens was tempted by an invitation to stand for the party. Trollope’s ambitions were not unusual.

Trollope had hoped for a safe Liberal seat in Essex but, beaten at the selection stage, he went on a mission to the US for the Post Office. While he was away, Disraeli secured a dissolution for the first election on the franchise recently broadened by the second Reform Act, through which he hoped to ‘dish the Whigs’. As might be expected, by the time Trollope returned, his choice of constituency was limited. He settled on Beverley, a two-member borough in Yorkshire, which had grown rapidly in the Industrial Revolution. Between 1801 and 1861, its population had increased from 5,401 to 10,808, while its electorate increased from 1,011 in 1832 to 2,672 in 1868. Beverley was one of only eight constituencies in the

country where artisans were a majority of the electorate. Trollope was joined by the Hon. Marmaduke Maxwell, the eldest son of Lord Herries, a Scottish peer with a recently restored title who was a substantial Yorkshire landowner. His Conservative opponents were Sir Henry Edwards, a local businessman and MP since 1857, and Captain Edward Kennard, ‘a young man of fortune in quest of a seat’.

‘My political ideas were leather and prunella’

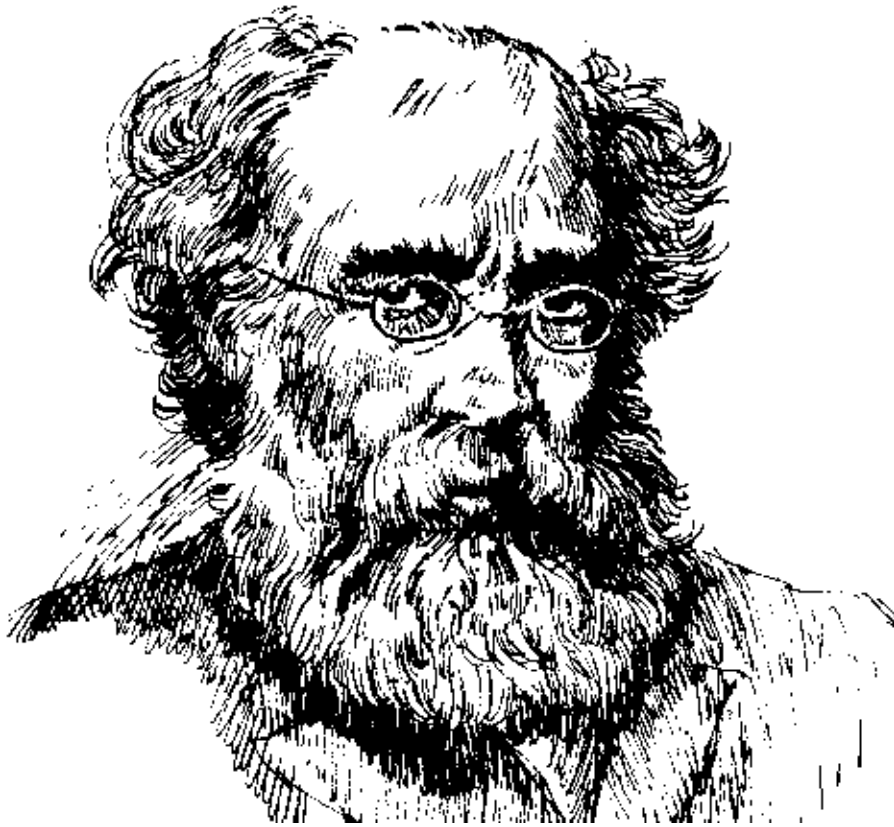
When Trollope arrived on 30 October, his agent cheerfully greeted him, ‘You don’t expect to get in!’ An optimist, like all candidates, Trollope responded that while not ‘sanguine,’ nevertheless he was ‘disposed to hope for the best’. The campaign began in earnest. As Trollope recalls in *An Autobiography*, ‘In the first place, I was subject to a bitter tyranny from grinding vulgar tyrants. They were doing what they could, or said that they were doing so, to secure me a seat in Parliament, and I was to be in their hands for at any rate the period of my candidature.’ Well, that is one way to describe your campaign team.

From morning to evening every day I was taken round the lanes and byeways of that uninteresting town, canvassing every voter, exposed to the rain, up to my knees in slush, and utterly unable to assume that air of triumphant joy with which a jolly, successful candidate should be invested ... At night, every night, I had to speak somewhere, – which was bad; and to listen to the speaking of others, – which was much worse.

His disdain was not universally shared and campaign meetings collected audiences of up to 4,000 in an area with a population of around 11,000 and an electorate of 2,672.

Trollope’s election address, dated 28 October 1868, was published in the *Beverley Recorder* on 14 November. It contained three key pledges:

- Loyalty to the leader, Gladstone. (Liberal disunity had put a minority Tory government into power in 1866.)



- Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland. (This was the issue Gladstone had used to reunite the party. As Trollope said, 'The Protestant Church as it now stands established in Ireland means the ascendancy of the rich over the poor, of the great over the little, of the high over the low'.)
- Free universal education. 'I am of opinion that every poor man should have brought within his reach the means of educating his children, and that those means should be provided by the State.' This more radical proposal took many years to achieve, but a start was made with the 1870 Education Act.

Trollope feared that his messages were unpalatable to local Liberals. 'But perhaps my strongest sense of discomfort arose from the conviction that my political ideas were leather and prunella to the men whose votes I was soliciting.' In particular, the local working men wanted the secret ballot, which Trollope rejected as 'unworthy of a great people' while the nonconformists wanted more control over the sale of alcohol; Trollope preferred 'moral teaching and education'. He was probably

unduly modest about his oratory, as the local paper recorded the cheers that greeted his attack on an Irish Church that 'looks upon the state as its support'. Certainly the Conservatives offered only weak opposition on the platform, with Sir Henry Edwards reduced to calling Gladstone not just a Roman Catholic but, worse, a Jesuit – accusations so heinous (and so erroneous) that he was still embarrassed by them months later. The Conservatives offered the Liberals a deal. If they withdrew Trollope's candidacy, the Conservatives would ask Kennard to step down, guaranteeing each party a seat and saving both sides' election expenses. Trollope's supporters refused.

'They haven't won fair'

Under the law, fully supported by Trollope, voters discharged 'their duty openly' at the hustings. Open voting had many advantages for party workers – there were no modern inconveniences such as inaccurate box sampling at the count and waiting for the outcome, while 'knocking up' could be correctly targeted and canvassing records properly maintained. For voters, the picture was more mixed. Voting for

the wrong side might bring brickbats from the crowd and tended to lay the voter open to intimidation, either immediate and physical or more subtle (as when an employer later gave an employee notice). Voting for the right side could, and frequently did, bring immediate financial benefit with the scale of the bribery adjusted to the closeness of the anticipated result. For those requiring extra courage or anaesthetic, drink was frequently and plentifully available at the candidates' expense.

At the final public meeting, the straw poll had favoured the Liberals. This was a strong indicator of popular sentiment, but was not always reliable since nothing prevented non-electors from participating. The local newspaper records that at 9 a.m. on 17 November (election day) the Liberals led, but by 11 a.m. the parties were neck and neck. By noon the Conservatives had begun to pull ahead. The final results were:

Sir Henry Edwards (Con)	1,132
<i>Elected</i>	
Captain Edward Kennard (Con)	986
<i>Elected</i>	
Hon. Marmaduke Maxwell (Lib)	895
Mr. Anthony Trollope (Lib)	740

The mayor's attempts to declare the results were drowned out by cries of 'bribery' and 'They haven't won fair' from the 5,000 strong crowd while 'half bricks and other missiles were thrown with great force towards the Conservative side of the hustings'. Protective barricades were pulled down and an attempt was made to destroy the hustings. According to the *Hull News*, Liberal sympathisers 'forced an entrance into [the] Tory committee room and took possession of a money bag and some documents.' As Dickens' description of the Eatanswill election in *Pickwick Papers* suggests, Beverley's was not unusual for an early nineteenth century election and positively tame by contemporary Irish standards. However by 1868 customs were changing and a bribery petition was instigated.

'They meant to carry both events'

Trollope's *Autobiography* draws a discreet veil over the proceedings at this point



At the rear of the hustings, the candidate arrives. Gladstone at Greenwich.

but what had happened? Reports in *The Times* suggest, that, while corruption preceded the arrival of Sir Henry Edwards and tainted both parties, Sir Henry's team, led by Mr Wreghitt, a draper, introduced both system and efficiency. Naturally, as Chairman of the Beverley Waggon Company, Sir Henry expected loyalty from his staff. The other senior managers were Conservative councillors and were accused of 'having actively intervened in promoting the system of bribery which prevailed'. Three workmen were dismissed for voting Liberal.

Secondly, the Conservatives set out to capture all the borough's major sources of patronage. Even the election of churchwardens was perverted for party purposes to control the dispersion of their funds. Sir Henry was a member of the United Ancient Order of Druids, though his subscription was paid by Mr. Wreghitt. He enjoyed a reputation for generosity to local charities, though that was commonplace when MPs were drawn from among the wealthy and there was little or no state welfare.

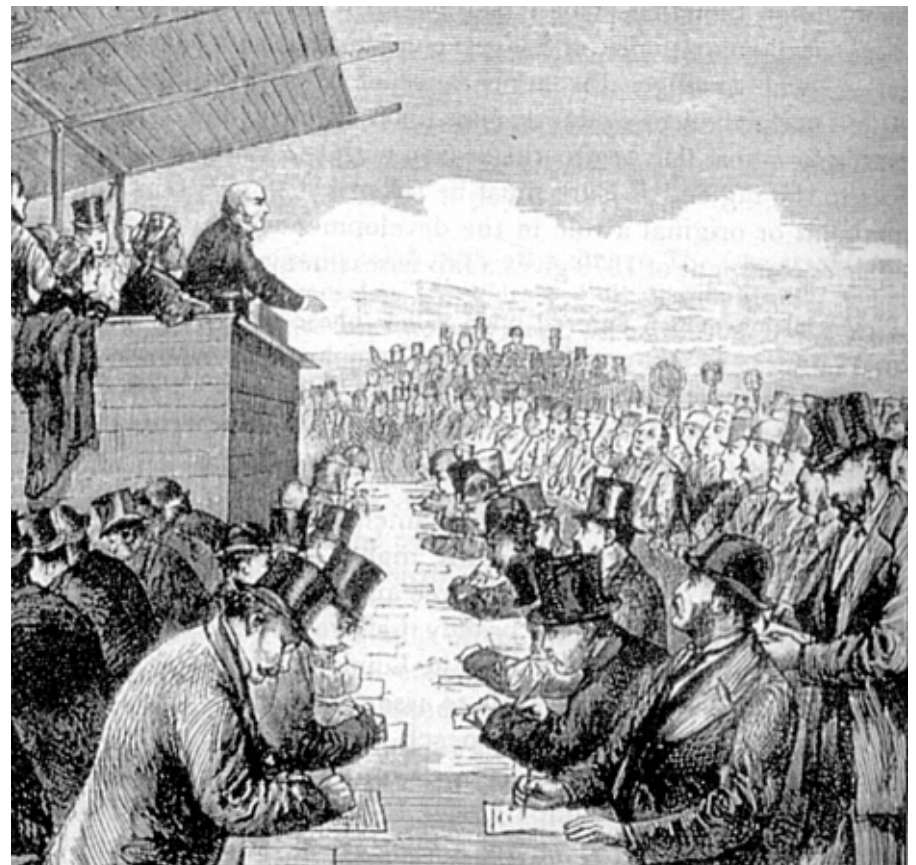
More important, from its prominence in the petitioner's case, was the patronage arising from an 1836 Act regulating Beverley's pastures. Initially, the twelve 'pasture masters' elected by 'pasture freemen' were divided between the parties, but through Wreghitt's ministrations the masterships all came under Conservative sway. Freemen were entitled to vote at parliamentary elections without other property qualifications and

claim on the charitable funds administered by the masters. Consequently, there was little surprise that that loyal Conservatives had their freemen fees paid from party funds and received money from a charity established in 1854 under the will of a Mr. Walker. Walker's bounty was to compensate poor freemen for the death of their sheep or pigs but to freemen voting the right way money was paid without evidence of the loss of livestock while

little compensation was paid to freemen known to back the 'Yellows'. There was even less surprise that the thirty-one tradesmen and twenty-two workers supplying the pasture masters overwhelmingly backed the Tories.

Finally, there was the town council. Recognising the changing climate, it appears that the Conservatives did not bribe directly during the general election but concentrated on the earlier municipal election fought on 2 November. Wreghitt set up base in the *Golden Ball* using Mr Watson, an auctioneer, as paymaster. Their plan was to pay twice the going rate in the expectation that the venal voters supported them at both elections. In the face of such Conservative generosity, the Liberals withdrew from the council contest. As an example, the inquiry heard that Mr. Vernon, a Conservative canvasser, promised Thomas Duffill, a worker at the Grove Hill Manure Works, 15 shillings (75p) despite the fact that the Tories were already 200–300 votes ahead, because they 'meant to carry 'both events' on that day'. Duffill rushed off to the *Golden Ball*, as he feared 'all the money would be gone'.

Gladstone speaks to the crowd at Greenwich. Note the table of pressmen at the front.



Other voters were offered as little as 10 shillings (50p) or as much as 17s 6d (87p). Ten shillings could easily represent a week's wage or more at that time. In total the Conservatives had £800 available on 2 November. Evidence given to the judge and reported in *The Times* suggested that a normal council election cost around £130 and that the most previously paid for a contested election had been £300.

'A great success'

The judge found that, in total, around 1,000 men had been bribed. This justified voiding the election. Subsequently a parliamentary commission was established in 1869 which took up the long history of bribery in the seat. Beverley had an unusual record of being contested in all but five elections between 1722 and 1831. All the elections between 1832 and 1868 were contested, but Beverley never returned the same pair of MPs twice running. It is suggested that this was because of the cost of the inducements, which were paid by both sides according to a well-established tariff. Between 1807 and 1857, there had

been five legal petitions seeking to overturn the election results. One of these even alleged impropriety by a returning officer and another succeeded in unseating E. A. Glover, who stood as a Liberal Conservative (usually called a free trade Conservative or Peelite). It was the subsequent by-election in 1857 that brought Captain Edwards to the constituency. As was inevitable, once all the facts were widely known, the constituency was disenfranchised.

But 'no corrupt practices had been proved to have been committed with the knowledge' of the Conservative candidates, who, of course, remained gentlemen. Sir Henry Edwards returned to Halifax to resume the chairmanship of the bench of magistrates and, in 1874, Kennard, by then Lieutenant Colonel, won Lymington for the Conservatives. In October, Trollope's jovial agent had concluded his initial conversation by saying 'Oh no! You won't get in. I don't suppose you really expect it. But there is a fine career open to you. You will spend £1,000, and lose the election. Then you will petition, and spend another £1,000. You will throw out the elected

members. There will be a commission, and the borough will be disenfranchised. For a beginner such as you are, that will be a great success.'

Trollope only paid £400; he did not fund the petition, but drew little satisfaction from the prophesied success. He never put himself forward again but took his revenge in his barely disguised descriptions of Beverley and its electoral process in two subsequent novels, *Ralph the Heir* and *Phineas Redux*.

Tony Little is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group and stood for Hayes and Harlington in the general elections of 1992 and 1997.

Further reading:

J. Halperin, *Trollope and Politics* (Macmillan, 1977).

H. J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management, Politics in the Time of Disraeli and Gladstone* (Longmans, 1959).

The Times, 10–12 March 1869.

A. Trollope *An Autobiography* (1883; available as an Oxford Paperback).

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery ...

We all know that all political parties indulge in stealing each other's policies from time to time – indeed, the party's opponents might allege that Liberal Democrats have become quite accomplished at it over the years! But now it's the Conservatives' turn. So impressed have the Tories apparently been by the activities of the LDHG that they are forming a Conservative History Group.

Its aims are the same as those of the LDHG – to promote discussion and knowledge about the history of the party. In addition to holding speaker meetings and debates, the CHG will also be publishing a Conservative History Journal, initially twice a year.

There may also be proposals to hold joint events with the Liberal Democrat History Group, and indeed, the Labour History Group, which has also recently been formed. The first of these is expected to be in May 2003, on the subject of 'The Fall of the Lloyd George Coalition'.

The driving force behind the CHG is Iain Dale, the owner of Politico's, who has just been added to the Conservatives' approved list of Parliamentary candidates. He says: 'Politico's has had a long association with the LDHG and I have admired its activities, albeit from over the political fence. It is odd that a Tory equivalent has never been formed, so I wanted to

right an historical wrong! The reaction so far has been highly encouraging and if current recruitment is any guide, we expect to have well over 100 members by the end of the year. I am delighted that Keith Simpson MP has agreed to be the inaugural chairman. We have lots of ideas for exciting events over the next twelve months and I hope to welcome many friends from the LDHG to them.'

If you are interested in joining the Conservative History Group, please email:

register@conservativehistory.org.uk
or visit:

www.conservativehistory.org.uk