

The Liberal Performance in 1945

As I read the paper by Peter Joyce on *The Liberal Party and the 1945 General Election* and the response by Mark Egan (LDHG Newsletter 9, December 1995), my psephological hackles rose. Tony Greaves' response (same issue) did not make assumptions (instead it asked intelligent questions), but Joyce's section on 'The Performance of the Liberal Party in the Election' merely assessed the performance by describing the outcome in a few seats while Egan summed up 1945 as a 'grim defeat'. That may be a fair reflection of how the results seemed to Party activists with over-high expectations (in an era when opinion polls did not provide a benchmark); but if we are to assess the impact of the Liberal Party's strategy and campaigning in 1945, we must grapple with the problem of finding a more accurate measure of how the voters reacted to it.

Problem it is. The Party fought less than half the seats in 1945, having fought barely a quarter in 1935. The Conservatives and Labour Parties fought almost all the seats at each election, but at each left a few unfought and – hardly surprisingly – in these few the behaviour of Tory or Labour voters without a candidate at one or both elections had a massive effect on the number of Liberal votes recorded. Almost all of the constituencies to which Joyce fall into this unusual category.

Elsewhere (i.e. in most of the country), the results did not fit the pattern Joyce describes and Egan assumes. In some seats the Liberal vote fell; in others it rose. So far as I know no-one has analysed why the pattern was so inconsistent. There has been no other election since 1922 in which the Liberal performance was so variable and as at the time psephology was in its infancy, the rather special character of the Liberal vote in 1945 seems to have escaped attention.

For those who think the 1945 Liberal campaign failed, contemplate the following figures:

	1935	1945
<i>London suburbs:</i>		
Bromley	12.5%	20.9%
Croydon	8.7% (S)	18.8% (N)
Hendon	7.5%	17.7% *
Chislehurst	9.3%	12.8% *
Uxbridge	8.6%	14.4%
Wood Green	13.1%	21.9%
<i>Provincial suburbs:</i>		
Manchester Withington	16.3%	19.7%
Stourbridge	22.2%	25.2%
<i>Other growth points:</i>		
Blackpool	16.5%	20.6% *
Reading	5.0%	12.6%
(* average of two seats, 1935 seat having been divided)		

By and large what seems to have happened in 1945 was that the traditional Liberal support in rural areas, the Celtic fringe and half a dozen urban seats with a strong personal vote for a sitting MP ebbed away; in most of the country support rose a bit; while in the areas in which there had been the greatest population growth in the inter-war period the Liberal vote

rose most. But since the vast majority of seats did not have a three-cornered fight in both 1935 and 1945, it is not easy to establish this as the pattern.

Moving forward, it is clear that, wherever the pattern of contests allows a comparison, the Liberal vote dropped in 1950 and again in 1951; rose in 1955 and 1959, but not up to the 1945 level; briefly surpassed the 1945 level in 1964, but fell below it again in 1966 and 1970. On that basis the popular response to the Party's 1945 campaign was greater than at six out of seven of the elections from 1950 to 1970.

More interestingly, the growth areas listed above presage the sort of places in which the Grimond-era revival was to be strongest. Orpington man (as she was called in that sexist period) erupted in Eric Lubbock's byelection victory in 1962; Orpington as a constituency was created in 1945, with the division of the fast-growing 1935 Chislehurst seat into two. Blackpool, in 1958, was the first significant local council captured by the Liberals in that period.

It would appear that the 1945 Liberal election campaign was notably successful in its appeal to voters in suburban growth areas and may indeed have laid the seeds for the Party's revival a decade later. That hardly makes it simply a failure. Arguably, as the only election in three decades when there was a significant increase in the willingness of people to vote Liberal in a substantial number of constituencies, it deserves to be regarded as the Party's most successful election campaign between 1929 and 1959.

Certainly the impact of the campaign requires more psephological research and more careful assessment.

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