

The making of Orpington

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Relevance

My PhD thesis challenges teleological accounts that focus on the two main parties in British postwar political history, the Conservatives and Labour, and examines one of the big political moments in the Liberal Party's postwar history, its Orpington by-election in 1962. A victory that was seen as a minor political earthquake at the time.

It also explores the relative openness of the political situation in early 1960s when a tired Tory government, beset by growing political difficulties, was clearly running out of steam – yet the main opposition party, Labour, which had suffered three successive general election defeats, was grappling with internal divisions, was slow to move with the times and did not seem to understand the speed, scale and consequences of social change in the country.

At the same time, the Liberal Party was reinventing itself as a modern, non-socialist progressive political force in southern England that sought to address contemporary issues and local concerns. It wanted to jettison the baggage of the past – when it was Britain's main progressive party and led by political titans such as Gladstone and Asquith, and its historic commitment to Free Trade – and was enjoying increasing 'under the radar' success in local council elections.

My thesis attempts to get away from a deterministic and narrow understanding of history, underlining the role of historical actors – such as the two main candidates in the Orpington by-election, Eric Lubbock and Peter Goldman – and moments that reflected the possibility of real social change, for better and worse. Britain was on the cusp of a new era, characterised by weakening class ties at a time when the country's place in the world was fast changing. Moreover the two main political parties, Conservative and

Labour, both had problems of their own, so Orpington did briefly seem as if it might be a moment which marked the shifting of the political tectonic plates.

In doing so, the thesis also addresses categories such as race – the British-Indian Pratap Chitnis, who masterminded Lubbock’s winning campaign, was among first BAME election agents in British political history; class and gender and how they impacted on the by-election; anti-Semitism, asking to what extent the Tory candidate, Peter Goldman, was the victim of such prejudice; and the media – newspaper opinion polls helped shape the outcome, and the by-election count was the first to be filmed live on television. Moreover it looks at the role of such factors in contributing to both the ‘stabilising’ and ‘changing’ of the postwar political order.

By doing all of the above, my thesis aims to provide a better, more nuanced picture of the political history of the UK that adds to public understanding of the past – a particularly valuable exercise following Brexit, with its narrow, simplistic, non-pluralist images of the past.

Target group

My thesis looks beyond the academic community, and should be of interest to all those keen to find out more about the political history of the UK and European politics during the 1960s, particularly the British Liberal Party, which later evolved into the Liberal Democrats who formed a coalition government with Britain’s Conservative Party from 2010-15.

It sheds new light on the Liberal Party’s past, and on how it rebuilt itself in the 1950s and early 1960s. While constellations are different today, there are still lessons to be learnt from a study of the party at the time: for instance, on its up-to-date methods of campaigning for the time; and the inclusiveness of its political policy choices – internationalist and pro-European.

It also casts new light on Britain's two main parties, the Conservatives and Labour. It shows how the Conservatives were considerably more alarmed by the loss of Orpington than they publicly let on at the time, and explores the continuing ambiguity of the party's relationship with Britain's Jewish community, reflected in the difficulty that Jewish Tories had in being selected as prospective parliamentary candidates. It also shows how Orpington taught Labour that it could not rely on the support of once-loyal working class supporters if another party had a better chance of beating the Tories in a particular constituency.

My thesis additionally seeks to provide interested parties with a better understanding of the British political system and its idiosyncrasies – such as by-elections, the first past the post electoral system, the strong MP-constituency link and the importance that personality can play in transcending traditional political loyalties – that impacted on the Brexit decision and subsequent negotiations.

It should also be of interest to both pollsters and students of the media for its focus on the role that opinion polls, the press and television played in political decisions at the time. Opinion polling had grown in sophistication since 1945 and my thesis considers how such polls influenced the by-election result.

Last, the by-election took place at a time when television was increasingly making its mark on the media landscape, and examines how TV and national newspaper coverage interacted to create exceptional interest in this south-east London seat that was adjacent to the prime minister Harold Macmillan's constituency. The result appeared to offer a 'mini-referendum' on the government of the day which only served to increase its importance in the eyes of the media.