

The Significance of the 1927 Bosworth By-election

G H Bennett

The Bosworth by-election of 31 May 1927 was seen at the time as being the most significant by-election of the 1924-29 Parliament. *The Observer* proclaimed it 'A Turning Point in Politics', and it was seen as the most significant of six by-election victories for the Liberals during the second Baldwin government.¹ Bosworth followed a Liberal victory at Southwark North on 28 March 1927, and it would be followed with gains at Lancaster in February 1928, St Ives in March 1928, and both Eddisbury and Holland with Boston in March 1929. Liberal victory at Bosworth created a momentum within the Liberal party that was widely regarded as evidence of Liberal revival and a portent of the general election that was to follow. Bosworth seemed to herald a reversal of the apparent emergence of Conservative/Labour two-party politics. As the *Annual Register* recorded: 'The general inference to be drawn from the by-elections of this period, especially that of Bosworth, was that the Liberal party was recovering lost ground in the country'.² Some writers speculated in the aftermath of Bosworth that the Liberal party might even gain a parliamentary majority.³ Yet in the 1929 general election the re-emergence of the Liberals as a sizeable third force in British politics failed to occur. Their number of seats increased from 40 to 59. Bosworth was a false dawn for the Liberal party. Yet why was this so? Why was the significance of the Bosworth result so over-estimated?

The constituency in 1927 was remarkably diverse. The local economy was dependent on agriculture, hosiery, clothing, boots and coal. This economic diversity seemed to make the result of the by-election especially significant. It would serve as a testing ground for party policies in the aftermath of the General Strike. Labour was in the midst of drafting a new programme, and the Liberal party was defining its policy through publications such as *Coal and Power*, *Land and the Nation*, and *Towns and the Land*. Key Conservative policies, such as the Trade Disputes Bill restricting the rights of unions to pursue their industrial and political goals, would be put to the test. Indeed, the Bill received the Royal assent in the course of the campaign.

If the nature of the constituency made the by-election result significant then the atypical nature of the contest for Bosworth should have made people guarded in their assessment of the result. Throughout its electoral history the seat had been hotly contested, having been won by the Liberals in 1918, the Conservatives in 1922, the Liberals in 1923 and the Conservatives in 1924. In

the 1924 general election Captain Robert Gee V.C., M.C., had gained the seat with a majority of 358 votes. The 1924 result was especially interesting because of the closeness of the three parties:

R. Gee (Con)	10,114	34.9%
G. Ward (Lib)	9,756	33.6%
J. Minto (Lab)	9,143	31.5%
Maj	358	1.3%

The strength of Liberalism in the constituency was in contrast to the fortunes of the party elsewhere in the county. At the 1924 general election the Liberal party had not even bothered to contest Leicester East and had come bottom of the poll in the remaining five Leicestershire seats. In the three-cornered party fights that took place at Leicester South, Loughborough and Harborough the Liberal party had averaged 22.87% of the poll. In the two-cornered fights between the Liberals and Labour in Leicester West, and the Liberals and Conservatives at Melton, the Liberal vote averaged 44.95%. In Leicestershire, as elsewhere in most of England, three-cornered contests would relegate the Liberals to a poor third place. Bosworth went against that trend and thus in 1927 it could be regarded as a marginal seat by all three parties. A by-election there could theoretically be claimed as a key test of party fortunes, but the reality was rather different.

The reliability of Bosworth as an indicator of party fortunes nationally was impaired by significant local influences. A by-election had arisen there out of the strangest circumstances. In the autumn of 1926 Gee, under threat of a libel action from the RSPCA, had disappeared, to the considerable embarrassment of the Conservative whips.⁴ He later re-emerged in Western Australia where he announced his intention to settle. Gee's conduct was extraordinary and it could not fail to make an unfavourable impression on constituents. The behaviour of the sitting Member also had the effect of making the Bosworth campaign remarkably drawn out. Within the constituency party workers accurately forecasted that it was only a matter of time before Gee resigned. It was not until Friday 13 May, however, that the deputy returning officer received the writ for the by-election. From late 1926 onwards Sir William Edge, the prospective Liberal candidate and a former member for Bolton from 1916 to 1923, was actively canvassing for support. His Labour counterpart, Councillor Minto, had contested the seat in 1924, and was well known and respected as a councillor on Leicester City Council. He was similarly gearing up for a fight after Gee's departure.

In these circumstances the Bosworth Conservatives' choice of candidate was

interesting. The *Coalville Times* reported on 14 January 1927 that the local association had unanimously adopted Edward Spears, a retired brigadier-general, as its candidate. The choice of an ex-military man to replace Gee was sensible and Spears's war record was remarkable. He had been mentioned in dispatches five times, had been wounded four times, had won the Military Cross, Croix de Guerre, Etoile Noire, Grand Cross of the White Eagle of Serbia and the Czechoslovak Croix de Guerre. From 1917 to 1920 he had headed the British Military Mission to Paris. His war record was astonishingly distinguished and in 1927 this remained a valuable attribute for any aspiring parliamentary candidate. However, in other ways Spears was a less than ideal choice. From November 1922 to October 1924 he had sat as National Liberal member for Loughborough. He had been defeated in the 1924 general election and joined the Conservative party in 1925. Spears argued that anti-socialism was 'the chief plank' of his political philosophy and that the Conservative party, 'the chief opponent of Socialism, had adopted Liberal principles'.⁵ Quite how the local association came to adopt a turncoat Liberal from a neighbouring constituency is not revealed by the records deposited by the Bosworth Conservative Association in the Leicestershire Record Office. However, one has to suspect the influence on the selection process of Churchill, a friend of Spears and another former Liberal who had joined the Conservative party. In the fluid state of British party politics in the mid-1920s the general's apparent lack of consistency was not unique, nor was it necessarily damaging to his chances of re-election. Even so, it could not react well with a Bosworth electorate already scandalised by Gee's behaviour. G.W. Winterton, the prospective Labour candidate in Loughborough publicly claimed that if Spears 'thought it would help him into Parliament the General would probably be reincarnated in the future as a convinced supporter of Labour principles'.⁶ Spears's performance in the campaign was lamentable with the *Daily Herald* commenting, 'The Tory candidate cut a pathetic figure'.⁷ Cuthbert Headlam, the Conservative member for Barnard Castle, who came down to speak on Spears's behalf on 30 May at Coalville, commented in his diary for that day: 'A feebler performance I have seldom heard - he can't win'.⁸ In the circumstances the local and county press remained fairly neutral.

The neutrality of the local press ensured that the key campaign tactic adopted by Spears would not succeed. Important Conservative policies such as the Trade Disputes Act, which the opposition parties styled as an attack on Trades Unionism, could only antagonise sections of the Bosworth electorate such as the miners of Coalville. Indeed, so great was this antagonism that the campaign was marked by the threat of civil disorder. At Coalville the police resorted to posting notices that anyone convicted of disrupting a political meeting could be subject to a £100 fine and disenfranchisement for five years.⁹ The Trades Disputes Bill hung like an albatross around Spears's neck. He was aware of the

negative impact that the Act was having on his campaign but he could not try and avoid it. All three parties considered it a vote winner for themselves and it was the central theme of Baldwin's public letter of endorsement of 23 May.¹⁰ With there seemingly being no way to win back support among broad sections of the working classes, Spears concentrated on mobilising middle class support. He resorted to the tactics of 1924 and use of the 'Red Scare'. Edge, the Liberal candidate, jeered: 'Spears goes about in red-tinted spectacles seeing Bolshies behind every bush'.¹¹ With Churchill sending a letter of endorsement to Spears, expressing views that 'the socialist extremists' within the Labour party would institute a regime of 'violence' and 'terror' in Britain if the electorate gave them the chance, there was undoubtedly an attempt to portray the Labour candidate at Bosworth as the vanguard of the revolution.¹² The Labour government of 1924 having been kept in power by the Liberals, it seemed only too easy to portray them as potential accomplices of the Labour Bolsheviks. However, such tactics could only backfire: Spears's credentials as a Conservative were less than convincing; Edge had a long record of service to his country; and Minto was a respected civic figure. For a turncoat Liberal from a neighbouring constituency to attempt to portray Minto as anything other than a moderate socialist lacked all credibility.

The general's campaign tactics were helped by outside events. On 12 May Scotland Yard raided the London premises of the All-Russian Cooperative Society (ARCOS), amidst allegations that it had been a front for communist subversion. The raid led to the severing of trading relations with the Soviet Union. 'Do you love your country or Russia?' asked Joynson-Hicks, the Home Secretary, of the Bosworth electorate.¹³ However, ARCOS could not rescue Spears from the inadequacy of his tactics. As Minto noted: 'The Tory scare about Arcos is having no effect on the constituency at all: people look on it as another Zinovieff Red letter'.¹⁴

The Conservative campaign was completely outclassed by the Liberal and Labour camps. On 27 May Lloyd George began a barnstorming tour of the constituency in which he spoke at Hinckley and Coalville as well as visiting smaller places such as Sutton Cheney, Stapleton, Barwell and Earl Shilton. Labour matched him with senior figures such as Arthur Henderson and A.J. Cook, secretary of the miner's union.

The inadequacy of the Conservative campaign was evidenced by the poll on 31 May:

W. Edge (Lib)	11,981	38.2%
J. Minto (Lab)	11,710	37.3%
E. Spears (Con)	7,685	24.5%
Maj	271	0.9%

The Liberal victory might have been narrow but they were to retain control of Bosworth until the Labour landslide of 1945. For Spears and the Government the defeat was humiliating.

Bosworth was seized upon by Lloyd George and the National Press as evidence of a turn around in Liberal fortunes. 'It is an illuminating election', proclaimed the *Daily Express* on 2 June. The *Liberal Daily Chronicle* and the *Westminster Gazette* heralded Bosworth as a turning point for the Liberals.¹⁵ On 2 June Sir Herbert Samuel, head of the Liberal party organization, made a speech at Birmingham in which he argued that on top of the Liberals retaining Leith and gaining Southwark North, Bosworth was indisputable evidence of Liberal revival.¹⁶ *The Observer* on 5 June predicted that the Liberals would gain 'well over a hundred seats'. Given the seemingly terminal decline that the Liberals had entered during the First World War it was unsurprising that any hint of revival should be seized upon, no matter how dubious the evidence. Indeed, the early part of 1927 had seemed to be the absolute nadir of party fortunes. The electoral appeal of the party as evidenced by by-elections seemed to be evaporating, despite the revamping of Liberal policies by Lloyd George. The journalist and future Liberal M.P. Robert Bernays recorded in his memoirs: 'There was a time in March 1927 when the party seemed doomed to swift extinction'.¹⁷ The defection of Wedgwood Benn to the Labour party had seemed to sum up the future prospects for the Liberal party. When a vacancy had arisen in the old Liberal seat at Leith it had proved almost impossible to find a candidate to contest it on behalf of the party. Thirteen Liberal candidates had turned down the offer to fight the old Liberal seat, but the fourteenth, Ernest Brown, had managed to hold it by 111 votes on 23 March 1927. Another victory at Southwark North five days later had seemed to indicate that Liberal prospects were improving, and optimists would view Bosworth as vitally needed confirmation of this apparent trend.

However, beyond the public rhetoric at the national level there was an appreciation that the Bosworth result was not really conclusive evidence. The *Leicester Mail* could not but view with scepticism victory by 271 votes in a seat that, despite its recent volatility, had been Liberal for 38 of the preceding 42 years.¹⁸ Tactical voting was also seen as a significant factor in the Liberal victory. Even in the aftermath of victories at Lancaster and St.Ives, Lloyd George remained painfully aware that three-cornered contests would prevent the Liberals gaining a significant number of seats at the next election.¹⁹ In June 1927 J.C.C. Davidson, the Conservative Party Chairman, dismissed talk of Liberal revival as 'preposterous and fantastic'.²⁰

Davidson had a more accurate appreciation of the Bosworth result than most of his contemporaries. Bosworth had been the first of many press-constructed

dawns for the Liberal party which would subsequently be proved to be false. But Bosworth did have significance in that it restored some confidence to a party that had seemed to have no future.

1. *The Observer*, 5 June 1927.
2. *Annual Register*, 1927 (London, 1928) p.58.
3. *The New Statesman*, 11 June 1927.
4. *Daily Express*, 19 May 1927.
5. Spears to Lloyd George, 29 April 1925, Lloyd George papers (House of Lords Record Office) G/30/4/17.
6. *Coalville Times*, 21 January 1927.
7. *The Daily Herald*, 2 June 1927.
8. Ball, S., [ed.] *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Baldwin and MacDonald: The Headlam Diaries 1923-1935*, The Historians Press, London, 1992, p.122.
9. *Leicestershire Advertiser*, 28 May 1927.
10. *The Times*, 26 May 1927.
11. *Coalville Times*, 25 February 1927.
12. *The Times*, 30 May 1927.
13. *Leicester Mercury*, 28 May 1927.
14. *The Times*, 28 May 1927.
15. Summary of the National and Local Press, *Leicester Mail*, 2 June 1927.
16. *The Times*, 3 June 1927.
17. Bernays, R., *Special Correspondent*, Victor Gollancz, (London, 1934), p.12.
18. *Leicester Mail*, 3 June 1927.
19. Cook, C., *A Short History of the Liberal Party 1900-1976*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1984, p.109.
20. *The Times*, 20 June 1927.

Ed. Since this article was written a work on the life of Spears has appeared. *Under two Flags: the life of Major General Sir Edward Spears* by Max Egremont, published by Weidenfeld and Nicholson. ISBN 1 297 81347 1