

Winston Churchill – Our Part in His Downfall

No one was more surprised than Winston Churchill when he lost the General Election in 1945. *Neil Robson* recalls an incident that symbolised the exasperation of the electorate at the time.

‘They’re killing the old man,’ the Labour candidate for Putney chuckled during the General Election of 1945. Percy Stewart was censuring the Conservatives’ decision to send off their 70-year-old leader on a series of gruelling campaign tours round the streets of London. ‘If they are not careful,’ he continued, ‘they will lose him and then what will they do?’ But the spirits in the Tory party were running high. Their trump card was the country’s charismatic victor of the Second World War, and they were convinced beyond doubt of their forthcoming success. How was it that they were so ill-prepared for their defeat at the polling stations – and why did the electorate decide so emphatically to give Labour a shot at government?

‘We can surely trust [Churchill] to finish the job, and ensure a just and lasting peace,’ wrote A. J. Hurley in the *Tooting & Balham Gazette* in the run-up to polling day. Here was the mood of the Conservative camp, triumphant and smug, paying little regard to the impact that the Labour party had been making on British voters over the years. A Labour majority had dominated the London County Council for more than a decade with obvious success. Further afield, Australia and New Zealand had left-wing governments, and many Londoners had been impressed by the Dominion servicemen they had talked to during the war. Unlike the Conservatives who were fielding older, timeworn candidates, Labour had on offer a number of outstanding politicians. Although in his sixties himself, one such star was Ernest Bevin. Flexible and moderate, he had been an impressive union leader before the war, and held the position of Minister of Labour during the conflict.

At that time, Wandsworth was as large as Cardiff with a population the size of Bristol. The Conservatives held all five of its parliamentary divisions in 1935; further east, only North Battersea was a Labour stronghold. Change was coming, however, and Labour won Wandsworth Central at a by-election in 1937. Bevin became its MP in 1940. By the summer of 1945, the country was thrilled with victory and, enlivened by hope, it was

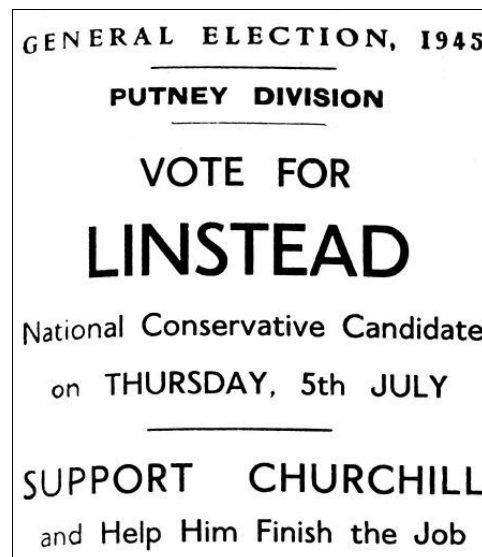


Churchill campaigning at High Wycombe during the General Election in the summer of 1945. (*Illustrated London News*)

in the frame of mind to take a risk. Such was the mood of the nation when Churchill began his drives through London during election week. Everywhere he went, he was shadowed by hecklers, whom he dubbed at Walthamstow ‘the booing party’. The papers picked up that much of the hostility focussed on the Government’s cavalier approach to the immediate housing shortage.

The weather was delightful on 4 July, the evening before election day, when Churchill set off on his journey through south-west London. He was in a supremely confident mood, but he was in for a bumpy ride. On St John’s Hill, Battersea, he was booed during a short speech when he mentioned housing issues and before the evening was over, hostile crowds in Camberwell yelled and jeered at his car. This was none the less the progress of a hero, and spectators were reportedly six deep as he travelled along East Hill, down Garratt Lane and into Tooting. It was there that a minor incident of much significance took place. Shortly after six o’clock, Churchill was standing in his car addressing a crowd at the Streatham end of Tooting Common, when a young lad threw a firework at him. It exploded within a few inches of his face, and consternation followed as several people pounced on the 17-year-old. He was an architecture student with the name of Michael Gloor le Pelly. ‘Don’t hurt the little fool,’ Churchill called out, as the youth wearing ‘flannel trousers and a flowing tie’ was led away by the police. The following day, le Pelly admitted that he had behaved recklessly, made his apologies to the magistrate and was fined £2. In the meantime, Churchill had suffered no physical harm, but he made a disastrous mistake. For in his haste to develop a cheap political point, he let fly with the remark, ‘Now you see that even in ... England, there are a few people who imitate the Nazi Youth with all their vices.’ Here was the man who had likened the Labour party earlier in the campaign to the Gestapo. Such abusive scorn towards his opponents would be his undoing.

So an electorate across the world made its choice. Three weeks of tension followed, as the boxes containing the votes of the service personnel were returned from overseas. The result was astounding. Labour swept into power with 393 seats as opposed to the Conservatives’ meagre 198. At local level, Labour gained control of the Clapham and Balham & Tooting Divisions, as well as South Battersea. Ernest Bevin secured a majority of over 5,000 in Central Wandsworth and was promptly made Foreign Secretary. The *Tooting & Balham Gazette* was stunned. ‘Let there be no mistake,’ it remarked unenthusiastically, ‘Labour is now firmly seated in the saddle, and



No change in Putney, but other divisions in Wandsworth and Battersea swung to Labour with marked enthusiasm. (*South Western Star* / Wandsworth Heritage Service)

a new era for democracy has begun.’ In contrast, a cautious confidence in Ernest Bevin’s diplomatic skills was more apparent in the *South Western Star*: ‘A world in upheaval will require all the firmness, tact and negotiating ability which he is known to possess to guide us through the difficult and dangerous times that confront us.’ The voters had shown courage and placed their hopes in an untried force. The old guard of Tories had been vanquished – a wartime commander does not necessarily make a successful peacetime governor – and the party looked set to be in the wilderness for years. In early August, the defeated Conservative candidate in Central Wandsworth sent a message of thanks to the public. He was Brigadier J. G. Smythe, a hero of the previous war. Writing from his home in Dolphin Square, Pimlico, he ended his letter with the comment, ‘I was naturally disappointed at the result, but considering the way things went all over the country, it was not perhaps too bad.’ Well, that is certainly one way of looking at the outcome.

Principal Sources

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Tooting & Balham Gazette 30 June, 7 July & 4 August 1945