



A tale of two Tories

By trying to parachute an ex-Liberal cabinet minister called Winston Churchill into a safe seat, the Conservatives split a local party and set off one of the most rancorous by-elections in history. A hundred years later, **Lord Lexden** tells a tale of fighting, dirty tricks and flying turnips

It was a question that everyone in political life wanted to discuss during the first weeks of March 100 years ago. They spoke of little else as a by-election campaign proceeded in the Westminster Abbey parliamentary constituency. "Everyone here is agog about the Westminster election," one senior Conservative told his wife. Winston Churchill was one of the candidates. In the first editions of the newspapers after votes had been cast on 19 March, he was hailed as the victor.

The constituency, created in 1918, stretched from Pimlico in the west to the Strand in the east, with Oxford Street marking its northern boundary. Tories abounded, filling most of the grand mansions of Belgravia and fine houses elsewhere, and rejoicing in the presence of royal palaces and the institutions of government in their midst.

These sedate supporters of the Tory Party were, however, disinclined to dirty their hands with the rough business of electioneering. Billboards, leaflets, rallies were not for them. Such tasks fell to the deferential shopkeepers who served them, to the market traders of Covent Garden, to the petit bourgeoisie of Soho and to the denizens of theatreland in and around Drury Lane, who always rallied in some number to the Tory cause. There were not many left-wing luvvies in 1924.

While possessing some of the best housing in the country, the constituency also had some of the very worst. Foul slums, known as the Devil's Acre, lay within half a mile of the Houses of Parliament. Lord Shaftesbury, the famous 19th-century philanthropist, had constantly exhorted MPs to make the short journey to visit the scenes of abject misery. Few bothered.

The grinding poverty which others ignored gave the Labour Party a significant presence in this right-wing stronghold in 1924. The Liberals were of little consequence, trailing hopelessly behind the other two parties in this by-election, one of the most remarkable of the period.

“Churchill made it absolutely plain that he would not call himself a Conservative”

had been in office just over a month, following an indecisive general election. In a restless hung parliament, the balance of power lay with the Liberals, led by Herbert Asquith in an uneasy association with David Lloyd George. They used their votes to put Labour into office, gaining no concessions in return, a rather surprising feature of this deadlocked parliament.

For their part, the Tories under Stanley Baldwin accepted the Labour government with reasonably good grace, having lost their majority at the general election. It was obvious that Labour was in no position to launch a red revolution in Britain, even if it had wanted to. As they settled into their new roles, prime minister Ramsay MacDonald's ministers gave no sign that they minded in the slight-



est that they lacked the power to impose socialism on the country. That did not stop Churchill sounding the alarm in order to aid his career. He never did anything by halves. The alarm rang loudly. There was a red menace abroad, he warned, even if its full danger had not yet become apparent. The Labour government, he thundered, wanted to “undermine the commercial and business activities of the country”. He called “the enthronement in office of a socialist

government a national misfortune such as has usually befallen great states only on the morrow of defeat in war”. No one should be in any doubt about the threat posed by “the apparition of this socialist monstrosity”.

Churchill, then aged 49, was desperate to get out of the political wilderness, where he had languished for well over a year. As an ex-Liberal cabinet minister, he had been thrown out of his safe Dundee seat at the general election of November 1922, going down to another defeat as a Liberal in Leicester West in December 1923. (“From marmalade to ladies' underclothing,” Baldwin joked, referring to products prominently associated with the two constituencies.)

There was no place in the Liberal Party for the virulent anti-socialism which Churchill began to preach at the start of 1924 to revive his fortunes. His policy U-turn meant that he needed a new political home. He made urgent overtures to the Tory Party, which he had abandoned 20 years earlier when he had been one of its rising stars.

Though not all his colleagues agreed (some could not stand the sight of the turncoat), Baldwin was rather pleased to hear of this potential “re-ratting”, in Churchill's well-known phrase, especially as the renegade said that he could get some 30 to 50 Liberal MPs to follow his example. Churchill was assured by the Tory leader that a safe seat would be found for him at the next general election. Some arrangement to bring over restive Liberal MPs might be possible in due course. Churchill must be patient.

Patience was not a virtue that this re-ratting politician possessed. Many rank-and-file Tories in the constituencies, delighting in Churchill's fierce anti-socialist rhetoric, saw no reason why he should be kept waiting. This view was prominent among members of the Westminster Abbey Constitutional Association, as the local Tory organisation was known. They invited Churchill to come and address them when the death in late February of their sitting member, Brigadier-General John Nicholson DSO – an undistinguished parliamentarian who had had a majority of over 11,000 at the last contested election in 1922 – precipitated what was to become a momentous by-election. With unseemly haste, Churchill announced that he would fight the by-election on 22 February, the day after Nicholson's death.

Churchill made it absolutely plain that he would not call himself a Conservative. Surprisingly, that did not worry Conservative Central Office which said he should be adopted, completely contrary to normal practice, on his own terms. Despite his earlier reluctance to move hastily, Baldwin did not demur. On 23 February Churchill wrote to tell his wife that “at Baldwin's suggestion I had a long talk with him yesterday of the friendliest character”.

Conservative Central Office was “working tooth and nail to secure me the support of the local association... Of course if I stood as a Conservative it would almost certainly be a walk over”. But he wanted the votes of “moderate Liberals” in the constituency as well, a not unreasonable hope even though he had burned his boats with the Liberal Party leadership, but a totally unnecessary aspiration in a constituency of 40,000 electors where the Liberals had never polled more than just over 3,000 votes. Nevertheless,

it was as an independent and anti-socialist that he would stand.

All this careful planning was in vain. The local association would not have him. Its members, who loved a quarrel, had fallen out over the choice of candidates at previous elections. This time they split completely.

On 3 March, Otho Nicholson, nephew of the former member with a family fortune based on gin, was adopted as the official Conservative candidate. The runner-up, John (later Sir John) Gatti, a senior local councillor and prominent theatre manager with a wide range of business interests, marched off with his supporters, who included the association chairman, to form a rival band of Tories to campaign for Churchill. Their candidate pledged “to



work effectively with the Conservative Party in resistance to the rapid advance of socialism”.

Nicholson should withdraw, Churchill told Baldwin on 7 March, or at least be disowned by Central Office. “I am sure that you do not wish to be compelled by technicalities to fire upon reinforcements I am bringing to your aid. Act now with decision, and we shall be able to work together in the national interest.” He adopted the arrogant tone of a man expecting to be obeyed.

Decisive action was impossible. Leading figures in the party

copied the example of the Westminster Tories, and took sides for and against Churchill. “I am afraid that turbulent, pushing busybody Winston is going to split our party,” William Bridgeman, recently home secretary, complained. “I can't understand how anyone can want him or put any faith in a man who changes sides just when he thinks it is to his own personal advantage to do so.”

Others rushed to welcome him. Lord Wargrave, a former Tory MP, hailed him as “the most brilliant recruit”. Philip Sassoon, a future junior minister, told him: “I am so glad you are standing. You are bound to get in.” By 10 March, support for Churchill was being organised in all nine wards of the constituency by Conservative MPs.

Baldwin felt that he could do no more than stop members of his shadow cabinet making the divisions worse. All invitations to speak either for Nicholson or Churchill must be resisted, he decreed. The official candidate did not even receive a letter of support from his leader. An exasperated ex-cabinet minister, Leo Amery, furious about Churchill's attempt “to create disruption in our party for his own ends”, wrote to Nicholson on 14 March. Churchill was incensed when the letter appeared in the press. Amery's “public action against me” had broken Baldwin's “self-denying policy”. He retaliated with a much bigger gun. A letter to Churchill from Arthur Balfour, the former Tory leader, went to the newspapers. It said: “Your absence from the House of Commons at such a time is greatly to be deplored.”



Baldwin despaired. “We had succeeded up to that moment in keeping our differences out of the papers, and now the enemy have had a glorious time.” He added that “the issue is very open”. Some were prepared for the very worst. Lord Derby, former war secretary, feared that Churchill “may so split our vote that the socialist will get in”.

That prospect was beyond the wildest dreams of the clever, impressive Labour candidate, Fenner Brockway, writer, pacifist, and ardent advocate of the socialism against which Churchill ranted. He explained: “When I was invited to contest the seat, I asked what was the chance of success. I was told none. My purpose was not to gain the seat, but to take up Mr Churchill's challenge to socialism.” This he did most effectively, aided by a series of articles in the Labour-supporting *Daily Herald* on “wealthy Westminster's housing scandals”, and vigorous canvassing, which included the servants working in the royal palaces. Brockway nearly tripled the Labour vote, taking it to within 2,000 of Churchill's total – a fine achievement which heartened MacDonald's government.

In the end, the issue was simple: could Churchill win enough Tory voters to beat the official Tory candidate into second place? He threw himself into the battle to get them with characteristic zest. By his own later account, people flocked to his standard from all quarters: “Dukes, jockeys, prize-fighters, courtiers, actors and businessmen, all developed a keen partisanship. The chorus girls of Daly's Theatre sat up all night addressing envelopes and dispatching the election address.”

1924 Winston Churchill (right) out campaigning in the Westminster Abbey constituency



It recalled a bygone age when elections were fought with no holds barred. *The Times* described it as “the most remarkable election known in Westminster since the Ballot Act [of 1872] did away with the hustings”. On 20 March, the day after polling, it reported that “visitors from the continent arriving at Victoria may have been misled into thinking that a carnival rather than an election was in progress. Cars, decorated with heather, balloons, streamers and

huge rosettes toured the streets; cheering children rode round in lorries and young men motored through the residential districts shouting appeals through megaphones to people in upper flats.”

Churchill was pelted with turnips in Covent Garden. At an election meet-

ing off the Strand he “buttoned his coat and remained with arms folded for five minutes while the audience booed and cheered”. Rowdiness sometimes led to fighting on the streets. Brendan Bracken, Churchill’s hero-worshipping man of mystery from an Irish republican family who was put in charge of the campaign, got caught up in it and was stabbed, an incident recorded by Churchill’s faithful detective, Inspector WH Thompson.

Were there dirty tricks? Labour thought so. An article in the *Socialist Standard* of April 1924 gave the (slightly far-fetched) details.

“A prominent Labour supporter observed that Churchill ‘wept unashamedly’”

“During the closing days of the campaign, the newspapers reported that a motor-car, carrying the Labour Party placard, persistently followed Mr Churchill’s car, and whenever he attempted to speak drowned his voice with motor horns, rattles and shouting. The incident must have swung some hundreds of votes to Mr Churchill, as the ‘waverers’ in both Liberal and Tory camps would vote for him under these conditions, because he was not getting fair play. The Labour Party stated that the car was not officially connected with them, despite its labels. The suspicion arises that the hooligan car was run by Mr Churchill or his supporters.”

As the last votes were being counted, someone told Churchill: “You’re in by a hundred.” This got to the press, which put out reports of victory. They were replaced by news of a narrow defeat when the result was officially declared; 8,144 had voted for Churchill; 8,187 for Nicholson. He had lost by 43 votes. A prominent Labour supporter observed that Churchill “wept unashamedly”, which rather shocked him; it was the first time he had ever seen a man cry in public.

How regrettable it was, Lord Crawford, a former Conservative cabinet minister, reflected, that “the local association preferred the nonentity” as their candidate and turned down Churchill. “What will his future be? I have no hesitation in saying that our party ought to find him a good place at any early election.” It did so. Eight months later he was MP for the safe seat of Epping – and Baldwin’s new chancellor of the Exchequer. 🇬🇧

1924 Epping election

