

A surfeit of Liberals:
The Eddisbury by-election of April 1943

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The Cheshire constituency of Eddisbury was an unlikely setting for one of the most stunning by-election upsets of the entire twentieth century.¹ It was a seat in which the sitting member, Richard Russell, had been returned unopposed at the last two general elections before the coming of the Second World War. It was an overwhelmingly rural constituency, thinly populated and comprising 150 small towns and villages spread over 300 square miles, with just one tiny industrial pocket around Helsby, which the Labour party had never bothered even to contest in the first four decades of its existence. It was a division overwhelmingly dominated by the agricultural interest, but one in which the farm workers' union showed no signs of activity. Yet, at the end of a by-election campaign in which at one time or another as many as seven candidates threatened, notwithstanding the prevailing wartime electoral truce, to throw their hats into the ring, the government candidate found himself defeated despite endorsement by the leaders of the three main parties within Churchill's coalition. The victor was a young socialist, with little political experience, who championed the causes of common ownership and social reform. Moreover, before the polls had closed, the defeated favourite had received a series of anonymous death threats, while the farms of several of his relatives had been subjected to the attacks of unknown arsonists. Briefly, the result at

¹ In the absence of surviving constituency papers, this assessment of the Eddisbury by-election relies heavily on accounts in the contemporary press, particularly *The Times*, the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Chester Chronicle* and the *Liverpool Daily Post*.

Eddisbury appeared to be the improbable harbinger of a political revolution.

In the 1920s Eddisbury developed into a Liberal-Conservative 'marginal'. The Conservative, Harry Barnston, was returned unopposed in 1918, 1921² and 1922, but only held on to the seat by 196 votes in the face of a challenge from the Liberal, Richard Russell, in 1923. Barnston increased his majority over Russell to 1,669 votes in 1924 but, following the sitting MP's death in February 1929, Russell captured the seat from the Conservatives in the resulting by-election with a majority of 1,292. That majority fell to just 826 in the general election three months later. Russell's Liberal credentials were impeccable. A Methodist lay-preacher, he tried unsuccessfully to introduce parliamentary legislation to ban football pools. None the less, he supported the National Government from its formation in August 1931 and was an early recruit to the ranks of the Liberal Nationals led by Sir John Simon. Until that time he had been an avowed free trader but, along with other Simonites, he gave his backing to the Conservative desire to embrace tariffs as a response to the country's worsening balance of payments situation. As a result, the prospective Conservative candidate, Major A. F. G. Renton, withdrew from the general election in November 1931, leaving Russell to be returned unopposed. This situation was repeated in 1935, a general election which, because of the onset of war against Hitler four years later, turned out to be the last for a decade.

It was Russell's death in February 1943 which precipitated the by-election under review. According to the terms of an electoral truce declared at the outbreak of hostilities by all the leading parties, it was the prerogative of the party represented by the late member to nominate a successor, freed from the opposition of the other parties. In the case of Eddisbury this meant the Liberal National group which, despite its increasingly close partnership with the Conservatives, had maintained its institutional and organisational independence. But the truce did not rule out the possibility of independent candidates nor exclude intervention by parties which had not signed up to the self-

² A by-election caused by Barnston's appointment as Comptroller of His Majesty's Household.

denying ordinance accepted by the Conservatives, Labour and the two wings of Liberalism. Indeed, it was a representative of the newly formed Common Wealth party, John Loverseed, who now proceeded, against all logical expectation, to capture the seat.

Founded in 1942 by the former Liberal MP, Sir Richard Acland, Common Wealth brought together the Forward March movement formed by Acland himself and the 1941 Committee of the playwright, J. B. Priestley. Its aim was to defy the electoral truce by contesting by-elections against 'reactionary' (usually Conservative) candidates. It preached an advanced form of socialism, which included widespread nationalisation, greater state intervention and a more active democracy.³ During the course of the war it won three by-elections, of which Eddisbury was the first, and it performed creditably in several others. Its success is generally taken as an expression of the considerable leftward shift which took place among the electorate during the war years, from which Labour, because of its participation in the electoral truce, was as yet unable to profit, and of the idealism which infused at least some imaginations about the need to create a better, fairer world when the war came to a close. Acland led by example and gave up his large estate in the West Country to the National Trust.⁴ In the longer term, however, Common Wealth resembled a political comet, briefly brightening up the night sky, but leaving no permanent mark on the horizon. In the general election of 1945 only one of twenty-three Common Wealth candidates secured election, at Chelmsford where there was no Labour candidate. And even here the successful MP subsequently joined Labour, as indeed did Acland himself.

Even allowing for the frustrations created by the electoral truce, Eddisbury was hardly the sort of constituency in which Common Wealth's socialist message was likely to prosper. Proximity to Manchester and Liverpool, where Common Wealth branches were already well established, enabled the constituency to be invaded by a plethora of activists, but the new party's appeal

³ The most comprehensive study of Common Wealth remains Angus Calder's unpublished thesis, 'The Common Wealth Party 1942-1945' (PhD, University of Sussex, 1968).

⁴ For Acland's political ideas, see his *What it will be like* (London, 1942) and *How it can be done* (London, 1943).

as a surrogate for the Labour party would have only limited attractions in a constituency which Labour itself had never yet felt inclined to contest. Even allowing for the excitement engendered by the debate on the Beveridge Report at the end of 1942, it seems likely that Common Wealth's intrinsic appeal offers only a partial explanation for the outcome of the by-election of April 1943. More intriguingly, the Eddisbury contest should be seen as illustrating the continuing problems of the Liberal party during the darkest days of its history. Attention must now return to the situation which evolved in the division following Russell's defection to the Liberal Nationals in 1931. Nationally, the split which occurred in the Liberal party's ranks at that time brought into the open fundamental but unresolved questions about its basic identity now that the predominant Liberal-Conservative contest of the pre-1914 era had been replaced by one between the Conservative and Labour parties. In practice, this meant deciding, now that they were reduced to third-party status, whether the Liberals would be more inclined to prop up a minority Conservative or a minority Labour administration.

As in most other constituencies where the sitting Liberal MP threw in his lot with the Simonites, the local party in Eddisbury was slow to react to the potentially damaging situation which now confronted it. In practice, the majority of local activists seemed ready to follow where their MP led, but a minority remained true to the mainstream Liberal creed. The former chairman of the local Liberal association, William Gibson, described what had happened in the constituency to a meeting of the Lancashire, Cheshire and North Western Liberal Federation in October 1932. The present association, he claimed, though still affiliated to the Federation, did not represent 'real Liberal opinions' in Eddisbury. Gibson had been approached by many local Liberals to organise a new association, but had so far declined to do so because such a move would be likely to create further divisions in the ranks of local Liberalism and because of uncertainty as to how the Federation would regard such an association. In fact, the Federation decided to take no action pending a decision of the National Liberal Federation (which, despite its name, was the main non-parliamentary organisation of the mainstream party) on the broader question of the position of

local Liberal associations now represented by Simonite MPs.⁵ But meetings of the Lancashire and Cheshire Federation in November 1932 and January 1933 were told that the NLF Executive had still not discussed the issue and that no action could therefore be taken.⁶

Ironically, the president of the Lancashire and Cheshire Federation, Lord Stanley of Alderley, took a prominent part in the East Fife by-election in February 1933, where for the first time since the general election of 1931 Liberal and Liberal National candidates opposed one another. Undeterred by seeing the Liberal candidate relegated to fourth place, Lord Stanley insisted that 'neither one defeat nor twenty will deter us from fighting for what we believe to be true Liberalism'. The important thing was 'to fight with every weapon at our disposal the insidious cancer of Simony which is eating into the very vitals of Liberalism'.⁷ But it was difficult to see how battle was ever going to be joined in Eddisbury. A planned meeting in Chester, designed to review the possibility of organising a Liberal association in Eddisbury which was prepared to affiliate to the Lancashire and Cheshire Federation, was not held because Gibson, despite his earlier enthusiasm, had now concluded that no good purpose would be served by organising a rival association while Russell remained MP. Indeed, it was even decided that the existing Eddisbury Liberal association (in practice the Liberal National association) should be invited to the Chester Area Conference in October 1933.⁸

In January 1934, Aubrey Herbert, who had stood as Liberal candidate in Chester in the 1929 general election, raised the issue again and it was now decided to take steps to form a new Liberal association in Eddisbury.⁹ But further delays were incurred when the local party agent suggested that the effort would be

⁵ Manchester Central Library (MCL), M390/1/8, minutes of a meeting of the Lancashire, Cheshire and North Western Liberal Federation committee, 25 Oct. 1932.

⁶ MCL, M390/1/8, committee meetings, 29 Nov. 1932, 13 Jan. 1933.

⁷ MCL, M390/1/8, Lord Stanley of Alderley to members of the Lancashire, Cheshire and North Western Liberal Federation, c. Feb. 1933.

⁸ MCL, M390/1/8, committee meetings, 28 July 1933, 22 Sept. 1933.

⁹ MCL, M390/1/8, committee meeting, 12 Jan. 1934.

wasted unless general interest in the constituency were first increased by holding a series of Liberal meetings. 'There was undoubtedly a strong anti-Russell feeling in the division but leaders who ought to be prepared to act as officers were not forthcoming'.¹⁰ In April 1934 Gibson again reported to the Lancashire and Cheshire Federation on the dissatisfaction caused by Russell's attitude towards official Liberal policy, but as Gibson himself was still not prepared to do anything to inaugurate a new Liberal association, the Federation again postponed consideration of the matter to a later date.¹¹ After this display of masterful inactivity on the part of Eddisbury Liberals, it was scarcely surprising that Russell, standing again as a Liberal National with full Conservative support, was once more returned unopposed at the general election of 1935.

Indeed, at that general election Liberal candidates challenged Liberal Nationals in only two constituencies – Oldham and Denbigh – and it was not until the following year that the mainstream party abandoned the hope that the Liberal Nationals would return to the fold and finally sought to regain the initiative from them. The decision of the National Liberal Federation to ban affiliation by any Liberal organisation which also adhered to any other political organisation was clearly designed to force local associations to decide to which branch of the movement they intended to belong.¹² In many cases, however, it was already too late. Liberals had conceded their position to Liberal Nationals by default in the years since 1931 and it would be no easy matter to make up lost ground. In Eddisbury it was not until 1938 that serious attempts were made to set up a rival Liberal association to challenge what was effectively a Liberal National association supporting Richard Russell. In the summer of that year the Liberal association in the neighbouring constituency of Chester expressed satisfaction at the progress that was being made¹³ and early in 1939, on the initiative of Major C. W. Tomkinson – Gibson

¹⁰ MCL, M390/1/8, committee meeting, 16 Mar. 1934.

¹¹ MCL, M390/1/8, committee meeting, 13 Apr. 1934.

¹² *Liberal National Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 5, 1 July 1936.

¹³ Cheshire & Chester Archives & Local Studies (CCALS), CR 159/5, minutes of a meeting of the Chester Liberal Association executive, 29 July 1938.

having now become a convert to the Liberal National ranks – it was decided to form an independent Liberal association. Once again, however, these plans were thwarted. The combination of Tomkinson's death and the outbreak of war meant that the new association had still not really come into existence by the time of Russell's death early in 1943.¹⁴

Soon after the sitting member's death, it was reported that the two sections of the Liberal party in Eddisbury had decided after a meeting in Chester to join forces in the national interest and to nominate a single candidate for the by-election.¹⁵ 'Liberal unity had been achieved in the Division' and a united general meeting of Liberals would now be held in the Central Hall, Chester on 2 March to select an appropriate candidate. The two leaders of Liberalism in the constituency, F. V. Cooke and Alderman Gibson, would send out a joint invitation to Eddisbury Liberals to attend the meeting.¹⁶ Such a development seemed entirely appropriate in the circumstances of the time. Both Liberals and Liberal Nationals had signed up to the by-election truce; members of each faction were serving side by side in Churchill's coalition government; and in any case the demands of world war served to put the arcane internal disputes of the Liberal movement into proper perspective.

Within days, however, it became clear that this outbreak of harmony in the Liberal ranks was no more than an illusion. Presenting himself as the honorary secretary of another Eddisbury Liberal association, a body of whose existence few seemed to be aware, Thomas Stevenson argued that the proclamation of Liberal reunion had been designed to create an erroneous impression in the minds of the electorate. The meeting which had taken place, he insisted, had not involved any representatives of the mainstream party but had been between rival factions of the Liberal National group. It seemed that in April 1939 a section of the Liberal National group, dissatisfied with the performance of their MP, had broken away to set up a rival association.¹⁷ In the

¹⁴ *Chester Chronicle*, 13 Feb. 1943.

¹⁵ *The Times*, 22 Feb. 1943; *Manchester Guardian*, 22 Feb. 1943.

¹⁶ *Chester Chronicle*, 27 Feb. 1943.

¹⁷ *Manchester Guardian*, 5 Mar. 1943.

light of Russell's death, however, the two factions had decided to come together in support of another Liberal National candidate. Stevenson tried to clarify what was rapidly becoming a confusing situation:

There are still many people who talk very loosely, either in ignorance or designedly, of Liberals and Liberal Nationals as forming sections of one and the same party. The result is confusion in the mind of the average elector which is only worsened by such a mischievous announcement as the one under review. The truth is that Liberals and Liberal Nationals exist as separate parties with separate headquarters organisations, each with its own party leader and backed by very different parliamentary records.

Thus, while true Liberals would observe the electoral truce and not challenge the candidate nominated by the Liberal Nationals for the by-election, it was important for everyone to recognise that the claim of Liberal reunion was completely unfounded. Furthermore, argued Stevenson, Liberal Nationals should now reconsider their claim to be the *Liberal* association in Eddisbury. 'It is surely high time that Eddisbury Liberal Nationals gave the electorate more truth, more consistency and less confusion!'¹⁸

Whether the local association openly paraded its Liberal National label or continued to masquerade as the Eddisbury Liberal association, it at least seemed clear in whose hands the nomination of a successor to the late MP lay. 'So far as the Conservative Party are concerned', declared *The Times*, 'it will be left to the Liberal Nationals to nominate a new candidate'.¹⁹ Once again, however, the reality was rather more complex. The decision on the Liberal National candidate lay with what was described as 'a reconstructed committee of the Eddisbury Liberal Association'. Because of the earlier split in the Liberal National ranks, the residual body did not consider that it had sufficient authority to select a candidate and it was for this reason that the open meeting was held on 2 March to appoint a selection committee. Four

¹⁸ *Chester Chronicle*, 6 Mar. 1943.

¹⁹ *The Times*, 9 Feb. 1943.

names came into the frame, of which three had obvious claims to serious consideration. Sir John Barlow had contested Northwich at the 1935 general election and had since risen to high office in the Liberal National hierarchy as chairman of the party's organisation in the North West; Harold Heathcote Williams had fought the Knutsford division in 1935 in the Liberal interest and enjoyed considerable support within the Eddisbury division; and Aled O. Roberts was a former Liberal MP for Wrexham (1931-35) who had transferred his allegiance to the Liberal Nationals in the late 1930s.²⁰ Yet it was the fourth contender, Thomas Peacock, who secured the nomination.

With almost indecent haste following the death of Richard Russell, a body calling itself the Parliamentary Committee of the Chester County Branch of the National Farmers' Union had passed a resolution to the effect that the seat should be represented by an agriculturist and had decided to recommend Thomas Peacock, a former president of the National Farmers' Union, to the Eddisbury Liberal National Executive. Local farmers then succeeded in packing the open meeting held on 2 March at which Peacock was formally selected. The problem, however, was that there was no clear evidence that many of those attending the meeting, let alone the candidate himself, had hitherto had any formal association with the Liberal National party. Indeed, the current edition of *Who's Who* revealed Peacock's membership of the Constitutional Club, whose rules stated that it aimed 'to provide a central and convenient club in London for all members of the Conservative and Unionist party who may be elected in accordance with the rules'.

The farmers' coup did not go unchallenged. Within twenty-four hours the executive committee of the Helsby Liberal association had resolved to promote Heathcote Williams as a rival candidate. This action was taken in response to the 'unsatisfactory constitution of the so-called Liberal selection committee which contained Conservatives and the un-Liberal action in selecting a

²⁰ Aled Roberts's troubled relationship with the Liberal and Liberal National parties in Wrexham is explored in the present author's forthcoming article, 'The rise and fall of a political party: National Liberalism in Wrexham, 1936-68'.

Conservative as Liberal National candidate'.²¹ As a life-long Liberal, declared Williams, and one who did not wish to see Eddisbury 'made into a pocket borough of the National Farmers' Union', he would 'stand independently as a Liberal – as *the* Liberal candidate'.²² Whether Williams would be presenting himself as an Independent Liberal or as an Independent Liberal National was at this stage unclear. Indeed, the average Eddisbury voter could have been forgiven for missing the significance of such a question. At all events, the disquiet aroused by Peacock's selection placed a searching question mark against the reality of the wartime electoral truce. In the words of a leading article in the *Manchester Guardian*:

Will a candidate chosen under such circumstances receive the full Government 'coupon'? If a scratch party caucus makes a choice outside its ranks, can the 'truce' be said to be maintained? Are not the other parties fully entitled to select opposing candidates and to put their full weight behind them without breaking the spirit of the national compact?²³

At the very least, it was clear that many local Liberal Nationals were not prepared to accept Peacock as one of themselves. One member of the executive committee of the Liberal Nationals' North West Area Organisation stressed that the candidate adopted must be publicly known to be a Liberal National and to have identified with the party in the past:

It is my submission that Mr Peacock does not fulfil this condition because to the best of my belief he has never been identified with the Eddisbury Liberal Association or any other Liberal National organisation in any other part of the country. In the circumstances, therefore, I do not see how Mr Peacock could claim to be a Liberal National nor claim to be a Liberal National candidate.²⁴

²¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 4 Mar. 1943.

²² *Liverpool Daily Post*, 3 Mar. 1943.

²³ *Manchester Guardian*, 5 Mar. 1943.

²⁴ *Manchester Guardian*, 27 Feb. 1943, letter from E. Sims Hilditch.

The controversy placed the national leadership of the various political parties, not least the Liberal Nationals, in a difficult situation. Peacock could claim to have been duly chosen by the local Liberal National association, notwithstanding the unusual manner in which his selection had been arrived at. To challenge his nomination would risk opening up further divisions in the ranks of the local party, while alienating Eddisbury Conservatives who had no reason to be dissatisfied with Peacock's candidature. Furthermore, there was no guarantee that the Liberal National organisation in the constituency had the resources to come up with a new nominee in the time available. On balance, the situation compelled caution and Lord Teviot, the chairman of the Liberal National Organisation in London, issued a statement accepting Peacock as the party's candidate for the forthcoming by-election. His endorsement opened the way for a formal letter of support signed by Winston Churchill, Clement Attlee, Archibald Sinclair and Ernest Brown on behalf of the Conservative, Labour, Liberal and Liberal National parties respectively.

Such high-level backing for Peacock was sufficient to quieten several potential rebels. 'Nothing now remains', declared one former critic, 'but for loyal members of the National Liberal Organisation to support the declared views of the party in London, especially as after consideration it has been decided to support the Eddisbury Committee's recommendation'.²⁵ But others were less easily assuaged. Indeed, by 9 March another candidate with impeccable Liberal National credentials had thrown his hat into the ring. Seymour Howard, a London stockbroker, had been nominated to succeed Lord Elmley in East Norfolk in 1938, when the latter was elevated to the peerage on the death of his father, Earl Beauchamp. On that occasion ill-health had compelled Howard's withdrawal. Now, however, he was intent on challenging Peacock's nomination. 'There is disagreement in the constituency regarding this gentleman's selection', he declared,

²⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, 18 Mar. 1943, letter from E. Sims Hilditch.

and it may be that the local selection committee will endeavour to choose another candidate. My position depends upon their action. If they seek to force Mr. Peacock as the official candidate, then I shall go forward as a Liberal National, in which case the Central Office would have to support me as the only Liberal National in the field.²⁶

Before long Howard was followed by the Reverend Frank Bentley, who described himself as an 'Independent Liberal' who would be standing as the 'People's candidate', S. Mortimer Holden, who proposed to put himself forward as a 'Beveridge candidate', and H. V. Davies, who offered himself as an independent Conservative. Meanwhile, Heathcote Williams refused to withdraw from the contest and secured the support of Thomas Little, who had acted as election agent for the late member, Richard Russell. Little poured scorn on Teviot's assertion that Peacock had been a staunch supporter of Russell and was the man whom the former MP had wished to succeed him. 'I worked alongside Mr. Russell in Liberal politics in Eddisbury for twenty years', declared Little, 'and was more closely associated with him in his political life than anyone else in the constituency. Certainly Mr. Peacock was never numbered among Mr. Russell's staunch supporters. Mr. Peacock was always regarded by me as a staunch Conservative'.²⁷ Belatedly, Peacock announced that he had resigned from the Constitutional Club, but his action could only place further emphasis on the strangely Damascene nature of his conversion to Liberal Nationalism.

In this way the electors of Eddisbury looked like being offered four – and possibly five – different versions of Liberalism; those offered by Peacock, Heathcote Williams, Howard and Bentley, and arguably by Mortimer Holden, whose mentor and inspiration, William Beveridge, would soon declare his allegiance to the Sinclairite Liberal party. In practice, all but Peacock and Heathcote Williams withdrew before nominations closed and it was widely recognised that the main challenge to the government came from the representative of the Common Wealth party, John

²⁶ *Liverpool Daily Post*, 9 Mar. 1943.

²⁷ *Manchester Guardian*, 12 Mar. 1943.

Loverseed. A native of Norfolk, the thirty-three-year-old Loverseed had served in the RAF for five years from 1929 to 1934 before flying for the Republican forces in the Spanish civil war. A Battle of Britain pilot with a tally of German planes to his credit, he had recently been awarded the Air Force Cross. As a national political movement, Common Wealth put forward a far more radical programme than was on offer from any of the assorted versions of Liberalism. It did, however, have a tendency, particularly at this early date in its history, to project itself in a way that suited the particular constituency in which it was campaigning. 'Your correspondence columns', noted a reporter on the *Manchester Guardian* at the end of the Eddisbury contest, 'have shown that Common Wealth is a little unsure what to make of itself'.²⁸ In this vein, even Loverseed seemed keen to exploit the deep-seated Liberalism of the Eddisbury division. The nine specific points of his election address contained no shopping list of industries to be taken into public ownership.²⁹ Indeed, he insisted that Common Wealth would not nationalise small businesses and shops. By contrast, Loverseed played up his own Liberal credentials. Conveniently, he was both a Methodist and the son of a former Liberal MP for Sudbury. At his meetings, he usually defined Common Wealth as 'twentieth-century Liberalism' or as 'the ideals of Liberalism brought up to date'.³⁰

In such circumstances, it was perhaps not surprising that there were striking similarities between the campaigns of the three candidates. Most obviously, all pledged their support for the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, though Loverseed stressed that he supported the man but not many of those, still in government, who had helped keep Churchill out of office for so long in the 1930s. Similarly, Heathcote Williams reminded the electors that he had been a supporter of Churchill in 1938, at a time when the majority of Conservatives and Liberal Nationals, bound to the cause of Neville Chamberlain, had opposed him.³¹ In addition, all three candidates wisely courted the agricultural

²⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 9 Apr. 1943.

²⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, 30 Mar. 1943.

³⁰ *Manchester Guardian*, 31 Mar. 1943.

³¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 1 Apr. 1943.

vote. There was unanimity between them on the defects of the existing system of tied cottages. All demanded new rural dwellings with adequate water supply, lighting and other services. And while Loveseed put forward the most radical plans, which would have allowed tenant and owner farmers to 'retain their own farms, [while] paying a nominal rent to the community', Peacock was able to announce that the central wages board of the Ministry of Agriculture had recommended wage increases for farm labourers coupled with a three-hour reduction in the working week.³² He was determined to 'do everything possible to place agriculture in a position to pay farm-workers equal wages to those paid in other industries'.³³ Not even in terms of the electorate's aspiration for social reform did the Common Wealth candidate possess a monopoly of virtue. Peacock managed to give the impression that his own position on the Beveridge Report was more advanced than that of the government which he supported. While he agreed that the financial aspect must be dispassionately studied, 'he would press the Government to go forward with the Beveridge proposals with confidence, courage and determination. In his opinion the nation could not afford to do without the scheme'.³⁴

The contest succeeded in attracting national attention, not least because Common Wealth's only existing MP, Sir Richard Acland, made a vain attempt in the House of Commons to have the writ for the by-election delayed on the grounds that the pre-war electoral register, upon which the constituency would be fought, had the practical effect of disenfranchising any voter under the age of twenty-five.³⁵ But in Eddisbury itself there was no doubting that it was the young warrant officer whose campaign caught the imagination of the electorate:

all over the division ... people are coming out in the dark nights to hear him and to ask shrewd questions. In one small village in the south of the division they waited until 10.30 p.m. to see him, and then collected £5 towards his expenses. At a

³² *Manchester Guardian*, 29 Mar. 1943, 3 Apr. 1943.

³³ *Manchester Guardian*, 24 Mar. 1943.

³⁴ *Manchester Guardian*, 18 Mar. 1943.

³⁵ *House of Commons debates*, 5th ser. 387, cols. 1003-5.

tiny school in Delamere Forest he had an audience of 170, several of whom had walked five miles to be present. He has crowded his meetings at Tarporley, a township one usually associates with hunting pink, point-to-point racing and high Toryism.³⁶

Acland later testified that 'of all the men I've ever seen in my life who had the power of making a first-impact appeal to groups large and small, I think Loverseed comes pretty near the top'.³⁷

The final stages of the campaign were further enlivened by reports of a series of fires on the night of 3/4 April. Three farm fires, all suspected to have been started deliberately, occurred around Chester, two of which involved relatives of Peacock and the third one of his strongest supporters. Two days later, the Liberal National candidate received twelve anonymous letters containing threats and warnings. Scrawled on the back of one of Peacock's election circulars were the words 'Prepare to meet thy God', while another anonymous correspondent asked 'Why aren't you in the war', a somewhat unfair question granted the candidate's age (fifty-five years) and the fact that as President of the NFU he had, for the first three years of the war, been engaged on full-time work with government departments.³⁸ The police determined to take no chances and Peacock's own farm was put under special protection, while officers accompanied the candidate to his remaining public meetings.

Polling took place on 7 April. In all the circumstances of an out-dated register, wartime dislocation and the shortage of motor cars and petrol to bring voters to distant polling stations, the turn-out of 54% was high, certainly higher than had been expected. The register alone probably served to reduce the potential electorate by about 15%.³⁹ When the result was declared, Common Wealth had won by just 486 votes. Loverseed polled 8,023 votes, Peacock 7,537 and Williams 2,803. It was the most

³⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, 31 Mar. 1943.

³⁷ Calder, 'Common Wealth', part 1, p. 137.

³⁸ *The Times*, 7 Apr. 1943.

³⁹ Calder, 'Common Wealth', part 1, p. 140.

startling by-election result of the war to date. But how should it be interpreted?

Writing in the *News Chronicle*, A. J. Cummings spoke for many when he described the outcome at Eddisbury as a 'flash in the pan'.⁴⁰ The special correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian* offered a more considered opinion:

It confirms the impression gathered after several days spent in the division that many electors are uneasy on three grounds. First of all, it is felt that there are in the Government too many of those who disapproved of Mr Churchill in the years before the war; secondly, that the House of Commons is at present so constituted that its fidelity to the Coalition spirit is not wholly to be relied upon; and thirdly – perhaps for these very reasons – that the Government is too vague and timid when plans for post-war social reconstruction are under review.⁴¹

In his analysis, James Chuter Ede, a junior minister in Churchill's coalition, focused on the apparent shift in the popular mood of the country. 'This is certainly an indication of a leftward trend in political feeling, especially when it is remembered that no one reaching 21 years of age since the middle of 1939 is on the register'.⁴² But the disruption and fragmentation of the ranks of the Liberal party was also a key factor and one which became more apparent with the passage of time.

By 1943, Liberals in Eddisbury could be excused for their confusion as to who and what represented the authentic and legitimate voice of British Liberalism. There, as in many other constituencies, the mainstream party had been largely side-lined by the emergence of the Liberal Nationals as a separate force in the country's politics. In Eddisbury a further complication was added by divisions among the local Liberal Nationals, compounded by the selection of a candidate who, in the view of many well-placed

⁴⁰ *News Chronicle*, 9 Apr. 1943, cited by Calder, 'Common Wealth', part 1, p. 141.

⁴¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 9 Apr. 1943.

⁴² K. Jeffreys, ed., *Labour and the wartime coalition* (London, 1987), p. 133.

observers, was not in reality a Liberal at all, Sinclairite or Simonite. 'I have the highest personal regard for Mr Peacock', recorded one MP who had transferred his own allegiance from the mainstream party to the ranks of the Liberal Nationals. 'Nonetheless, it is better that we should have candidates who have a really solid Liberal background'.⁴³ Yet beyond such internecine disputes lay a feeling, into which Loverseed had successfully tapped, that neither wing of the divided party was any longer capable of projecting the radicalism for which Liberals had once been renowned.

Once the Liberals had been replaced by Labour as one of the two great parties within the British polity, they singularly failed to stake out for themselves a viable position within the political spectrum. During the course of the Eddisbury campaign, the veteran journalist F. W. Hirst spoke up for those who believed that neither of the candidates who professed to carry the Liberal torch truly voiced the authentic creed:

As a Liberal with a natural curiosity as regards the two sections of the party which are now united in support of the Government on all, or nearly all, questions connected with the war, I should very much like to know what the Liberal candidate thinks about what one of the two sections calls 'the Liberal goal'. My own ideas on the subject may be regarded as obsolete by the 'pink' Socialists of the party, who have apparently fallen in love with a form of bureaucratic government which presents a strong family resemblance to the police states of continental Europe. I am still a Gladstonian Liberal ...⁴⁴

The importance of the 'Liberal factor' in the Eddisbury result became fully apparent at the general election of 1945, held after the defeat of Germany and the break-up of Churchill's wartime coalition. Across the country as a whole Common Wealth's twenty-three candidates failed disastrously, particularly in the face of competition from the Labour party. Of the three seats

⁴³ Kirklees District Archives, William Mabane MSS, DD/WM/1/3, Mabane to S. Hickman, 12 Apr. 1943.

⁴⁴ *Manchester Guardian*, 13 Mar. 1943.

which had been gained in wartime by-elections – Eddisbury, Skipton and Chelmsford – only the last was retained in the absence of Labour opposition. The overall picture seemed to confirm that Common Wealth had served as a temporary surrogate for the Labour party at a time when the electoral truce would otherwise have prevented the voters from registering the wartime surge to the left. In Eddisbury, however, the picture was subtly different. Loverseed had quietly transferred his allegiance to Labour in 1944 but, standing in the general election in that party's colours, was soundly beaten by the Liberal National candidate, backed by the Conservatives. The victor was the same Sir John Barlow who had been passed over in favour of Thomas Peacock in the peculiar selection process of 1943. D. M. C. Curtis, representing the Sinclairite Liberals, came in a distant third.⁴⁵ As Loverseed had secured 16% more of the poll as a Common Wealth candidate at the by-election than he did for Labour at the general election, it seems reasonable to conclude that many of his wartime supporters were not frustrated socialists but natural Liberal National voters, protesting at the *bona fides* of the candidate offered to them in Liberal National colours in 1943.⁴⁶

In the long term, however, and in line with the analysis presented above, the real losers in Eddisbury were the Liberals. The party never recovered its former strength in the constituency. Following the recommendations of the Woolton-Teviot agreement of 1947 for formal union between Conservatives and Liberal Nationals at constituency level, Eddisbury would probably have transmogrified over a period of time into the safe Conservative seat which it still is at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As it was, boundary changes resulted in the constituency's disappearance in 1948, only re-emerging in time for the general election of 1983. The divisions and confusion of Eddisbury Liberalism at the time of the wartime by-election exemplified the problems of a political movement which had lost its sense of identity and political purpose.

⁴⁵ The detailed result was as follows:

Sir J. D. Barlow (Lib. Nat.) 15,294

J. E. Loverseed (Labour) 7,392

D. M. C. Curtis (Liberal) 3,808

⁴⁶ Calder, 'Common Wealth', part 2, p. 184.