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# “The most astonishing election result since the war”? Re-examining the Leyton by-election of 1965

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# “The most astonishing election result since the war”? Re-examining the Leyton by-election of 1965

Marc Collinson 

## ABSTRACT

Historic studies of 1960s British election contests often considered the national political dynamics the major determinant in any poll result. This article carefully evaluates how far a combination of political, social, economic, cultural, and environmental factors might have determined the outcome in a specific contest. It considers how they interacted and demonstrates that such an approach can help scholars evaluate the result, and consider the significance, of the Leyton contest of January 1965. While other scholars have noted the significance of Leyton, no comprehensive study exists despite abundant and accessible source material. Alongside addressing this gap in the literature, this article suggests that Leyton-specific issues, such as the town’s larger than usual population of retired residents, was more influential than supposed problems associated with the Labour Party’s candidate, Patrick Gordon Walker, and his previous defeat at the Smethwick constituency.

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**KEYWORDS** Leyton; by-elections; British politics

## Introduction

On 21 January 1965, Labour candidate Patrick Gordon Walker lost the Leyton by-election in what one commentator dubbed “the most astonishing election result since the war.”<sup>1</sup> Only months before, his predecessor as Labour Member of Parliament (MP), Reginald Sorensen, had secured a majority of 7,926 votes in the General Election. In the by-election, Gordon Walker lost by 205 votes. Now, the parliamentary majority of Harold Wilson’s recently elected Labour Government had narrowed from four to two, with significant implications for its ability to deliver on its program. Furthermore, when compared to Labour’s more effective performance in the concurrent Nuneaton by-election, where

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<sup>1</sup>Victoria County History, “Leyton: Parliamentary Representation,” in W.R. Powell, ed., *A History of the County of Essex: Volume 6* (London: Victoria County History, 1973), 214.

Minister of Technology and union leader Frank Cousins was elected by a comfortable (though reduced) majority, the Leyton by-election represented an apparent blunder.<sup>2</sup> This article seeks to explore what happened, and how this can help us understand the significance of local factors in a British by-election.

Previous studies of the Leyton contest have not appreciated Leyton as a specific place within the enormous London conurbation. Understanding the result as a reality of “London politics,” rather than something more localized, obscures key factors. As historian Robert Colls observed, London localities can be “the most provincial places in England,” with their own, unique political cultures, especially when they border other counties and are affected by a mix of influences.<sup>3</sup> Earlier studies sought merely to interpret by-elections from a national perspective.<sup>4</sup> More recently, researchers have attempted to place these parliamentary phenomena within their local and national contexts.<sup>5</sup> Historians more focused on national politics have often ignored localized political cultures and socio-economic factors, such as constituency demography.<sup>6</sup> Considerations of place and “the local” within politics has received less attention.<sup>7</sup> Whether this is because the study of local political history, especially those of elections, can “often highlight differences of view” in attempts to write a more consensual community history is open to debate.<sup>8</sup> However, the role of the local electorate as an active audience, receptive to carefully articulated political appeals, provides a more fruitful avenue.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Geoffrey Goodman, *The Awkward Warrior: Frank Cousins, His Life and Adventures* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1979), 418.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Colls, “London Local Histories,” *The London Journal* 23, no. 2 (1998): 82–85; and Marc Collinson, “Inevitable Results and Political Myths? Ilford North’s 1978 By-Election,” *Parliamentary History* 41, no. 2 (2022): 323–41.

<sup>4</sup>Chris Cook and John Ramsden, eds., *By-Elections in British Politics* (London: Routledge, 1997); and Richard Ramsay, *A Guide to Post-War Scottish By-Elections to the UK Parliament* (Rothersthorpe, UK: Paragon, 2011).

<sup>5</sup>For example: Thomas A.W. Stewart, “By-Elections and Political Change in a Local Context: The Case of the 1973 Dundee East By-Election and the SNP,” *Parliamentary History* 38, no. 2 (2019): 262–64.

<sup>6</sup>Duncan Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900–1918* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 12–15, 78; and Steven Fielding, “Looking for the New Political History,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 42, no. 3 (2007): 515–17.

<sup>7</sup>Christopher Dyer, Andrew Hopper, Evelyn Lord, and Nigel Tringham, “Introduction: Local History in the Twenty-First Century,” in Christopher Dyer, Andrew Hopper, Evelyn Lord, and Nigel Tringham, eds., *New Directions in Local History Since Hoskins* (Hatfield, UK: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2011), 5–7; Paul Seward, “Local History in the History of Parliament,” *The Local Historian* 32, no. 3 (2002): 173; and Christopher Dyer, “Conclusion,” in Christopher Dyer, ed., *Changing Approaches to Local History: Warwickshire History and its Historians* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 2022), 293.

<sup>8</sup>Roger Ottewill, “Researching Local Political History,” *The Local Historian* 46, no. 3 (2016): 217.

<sup>9</sup>Collinson, “Inevitable Results,” 328–31; and Marc Collinson, “A ‘Fertile Ground for Poisonous Doctrines’? Understanding Far-Right Electoral Appeal in the South Pennine Textile Belt, c.1967–1979,” *Contemporary British History* 34, no. 2 (2020): 273–98.

How voters engaged with both local and non-local concerns, and how politicians interpreted them, remains central to understanding the result at Leyton. That Labour's Leyton candidate was the constituency-less Patrick Gordon Walker, who had been appointed as Foreign Secretary despite being defeated in a racially charged campaign at Smethwick, was significant. At Smethwick, the process of postwar deindustrialization and arrival of commonwealth migrants had been conflated and politicized by a local Conservative candidate.<sup>10</sup> The British press then assumed that the Leyton result, only months after Gordon Walker's defeat at Smethwick, marked the clear arrival of race in UK parliamentary politics.<sup>11</sup> But there is reason to be wary of this assumption, and Leyton's demography and local concerns have never received more than cursory attention.<sup>12</sup>

To explore these local dynamics, this article will make use of the rich and voluminous personal and political papers of local MP Reginald Sorensen and Prime Minister Harold Wilson, alongside further archival material and contemporary local and national newspapers.<sup>13</sup> Notably, it draws upon letters between key actors and those written between members of the public and the local MP or Prime Minister. Here, as with more public forms of letter writing, electors "give rich and detailed explanations for what they believe and why they believe it."<sup>14</sup> These help us to better understand key issues among political actors, as well as popular concerns in the constituency. First, though, this article discusses the electoral history and political dynamics of the Leyton constituency, considering how the Wilson's government's freezing of a promised pension increase played out in a constituency with a large, retired population, alongside environmental factors including the weather. It then contextualizes the replacement of MP Reginald Sorensen and how it led to accusations of "carpetbagging."<sup>15</sup> The article then evaluates Patrick Gordon Walker as a prospective MP and the salience of immigration as a political issue in Leyton, then discusses the by-election's wider impact.

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<sup>10</sup>Marc Collinson, "Commonwealth Immigration, Policymaking, and the Labour Party, c.1960–1980" (PhD diss., Bangor University, 2018), 111–16.

<sup>11</sup>Shamit Saggar, "Ethnic and Racial Politics and the Electoral Map," in S. Saggar, ed., *Race and British Electoral Politics* (London: Routledge, 2004), 289.

<sup>12</sup>Paul Foot, *Immigration and Race in British Politics* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1965), 64; and David McKie, "By-Elections of the Wilson Government," in Chris Cook and John Ramsden, eds., *By-Elections in British Politics* (London: Routledge, 1997), 180–81.

<sup>13</sup>Sorensen's papers are held at the Parliamentary Archives, London. Wilson's are held at the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

<sup>14</sup>Christopher Cooper, H. Gibbs Knotts, and Moshe Haspel, "The Content of Political Participation: Letters to the Editor and the People Who Write Them," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 42, no. 1 (2009): 131.

<sup>15</sup>For a clear definition of Carpetbagger or Carpetbagging, see: *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2022 edition, s. v. "Carpetbagger."

## Local factors: history, issues, and environment

When considering any British parliamentary constituency, it is important to get a sense of its political history and geography to better understand the realities and interests that often shaped by-election results. While lower turnout in a by-election was not unusual, the fact that between October 1964 and January 1965, voter turnout dropped from 70.2 to 57.7 per cent, might have proved decisive.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it is important to consider the significance of several factors that might help explain this. Alongside this important aspect of Leyton's political history, such as the nature of the seat and who had previously represented it, we must consider the significance of any town-specific demographic and environmental issues, and any interlinkage.

Since the late nineteenth century, Leyton had been a hub of the service industry, especially for the railways.<sup>17</sup> As with many comparable towns on the London periphery, Leyton had developed at a fast rate between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. This is evident in the fact that a large proportion of its housing stock was constructed between 1870 and 1910, with another housing construction boom in the period after World War II.<sup>18</sup> Rapid industrial development and population growth had complicated political implications.

In 1918, the Representation of the People Act created two Leyton constituencies (East and West) from the predecessor Walthamstow seat, which had historically elected both Liberal and Tory MPs. As historian Duncan Tanner observed, while Leyton East was a “blossoming outer London working class seat,” this did not mean the town was a natural Labour-supporting area.<sup>19</sup> Previously, Labour Party organization in eastern Leyton was “painfully inadequate.”<sup>20</sup> Though Leyton East was briefly represented by Britain's first Communist MP, Cecil Malone was elected as a Coalition Liberal and then changed party, so this did not reflect the views of local voters. By the time Reginald Sorensen (Leyton West MP 1929–1931, then

<sup>16</sup>F.W.S. Craig, ed., *British Parliamentary Election Statistics, 1918–1968* (Glasgow: Political Reference Publications, 1968), 35.

<sup>17</sup>Victoria County History, “Leyton: Economic History, Marshes and Forests,” in W.R. Powell, ed., *A History of the County of Essex: Volume 6* (London: Victoria County History, 1973), 197–205; Lionel King, “World Without Colour,” in Leyton & Leytonstone Historical Society, ed., *Looking Back, A Compendium of Articles* (London: Leyton & Leytonstone Historical Society, 2013), 7; and Royal Commission on Local Government in Greater London (RCLGGL), *Royal Commission on Local Government in Greater London, 1957–60: Report, Cmnd. 1164* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1960), 28.

<sup>18</sup>Victoria County History, “Leyton: Introduction,” in W.R. Powell, ed., *A History of the County of Essex: Volume 6* (London: Victoria County History, 1973), 174–75; and Victoria County History, “Leyton: Local Government After 1836,” in W.R. Powell, ed., *A History of the County of Essex: Volume 6* (London: Victoria County History, 1973), 205–14.

<sup>19</sup>Victoria County History, “Leyton: Local Government After 1836,” 205–14; Tanner, *Political Change*, 400.

<sup>20</sup>Tanner, *Political Change*, 400.

from 1935) was elected in the (now reorganized) Leyton seat in 1950, it had fluctuated between Conservative and Labour members throughout the interwar years, following national trends at key elections in 1931 and 1945. This reflected the nascent Labour Party's limited success in local government.

In the interwar period, Labour's progress in local government was slow and uneven.<sup>21</sup> In the 1920s, increased competition between Labour and the local ratepayer's association (representing more conservative interests) ensured a more lively political atmosphere.<sup>22</sup> As with many British towns, the development of local government and municipal improvements were often encouraged by civic pride and the necessary modernization of often-rudimentary social infrastructure and poor environment that was representative of Victorian settlements.<sup>23</sup> Into the postwar era, the combination of issues of "smog" created by a mix of "domestic and industrial chimneys," a naturally occurring layer of cold air over London, and increased lead-laden motor vehicle fumes affected the local environment and residents' quality of life.<sup>24</sup> These environmental factors, rather than diehard commitment to socialist ideals, often informed political choice.

Furthermore, nationwide political changes linked to the Labour Party's replacement of the Liberal Party altered the choices available to voters, as the latter party only stood candidates sporadically after 1945. Although nationwide UK politics stabilized behind an apparent two-party system, in Leyton the Liberals remained a consistent if irregular force. Between 1950 and 1965, their candidates often secured between four and eight thousand votes when they participated, as they did in 1950, 1955, 1964, and 1965.<sup>25</sup> Local Liberal activities also gained some coverage in the borough press.<sup>26</sup> While there was more of a Liberal survival than a "Liberal revival" in Leyton, the 1965 by-election allowed a party that had secured 16 per cent of the vote four months earlier an opportunity to affect the result. Together with low turnout, which was not unusual in a by-election, a strong Liberal performance had potential to explain the seeming disappearance of Labour's reasonable majority in

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<sup>21</sup>Dan Weinbren, "Building Communities, Constructing Identities: The Rise of the Labour Party in London," *The London Journal* 23, no. 1 (1998): 44–45, 54; and "Leyton: Parliamentary Representation," 214.

<sup>22</sup>"Leyton: Local Government After 1836," 205–14.

<sup>23</sup>David Boote, *Leyton Town Hall: Victorian and Edwardian Community Pride: Occasional Paper no. 3* (London: Leyton & Leytonstone Historical Society, 2006), 1–15.

<sup>24</sup>King, "World Without Colour," 5.

<sup>25</sup>F.W.S. Craig, ed., *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1950–1970* (Chichester: Political Reference Publications, 1971), 191.

<sup>26</sup>Reporter, "Holding Country to Ransom," *Walthamstow Guardian*, October 2, 1964, 45; and Reporter, "Leyton Candidate at East Liberals Bazaar," *Walthamstow Guardian*, December 18, 1964, 15.

October. However, more likely was the presence of a pertinent demographic detail.

In his later published diaries, the new Labour Government's housing minister Richard Crossman pointed to the fact that "a quarter of ... [Leyton's] population is old age pensioners."<sup>27</sup> At the 1961 census, those over 60 accounted for 18,873 constituents, or 26.8 per cent of those over 20 living the Municipal Borough of Leyton.<sup>28</sup> After 1950, this borough had the same boundaries as the Parliamentary constituency.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, in the Nuneaton constituency, which had a by-election on the same day, over-60s accounted for 20.4 per cent of those over 20 in 1961.<sup>30</sup> Within the local area, demographic change, and policies designed to ameliorate its impact (like construction of old people's homes), were widely covered in the local press.<sup>31</sup> This was significant as the Labour Government had implemented two policies that emphasized parliamentary priorities but might anger pensioners. In its manifesto, Labour had promised to increase pensions to bring them back above "the level of need."<sup>32</sup> However, due to financial issues, the Government froze this rise until 29 March 1965. Unsurprisingly, economic concerns trumped social ones, and the delay until after winter caused discontent with this demographic.<sup>33</sup> Correspondence directed to Reginald Sorensen contained details of the hardship it caused to pensioners in the constituency.<sup>34</sup> Significantly, the Conservative candidate had also noticed this.

In his election material, Ronald Buxton used this issue as a primary line of attack. He contrasted the delay in pay to pensioners with MPs' immediate pay rise.<sup>35</sup> Buxton's own record vis-à-vis pensioners was mixed, having

<sup>27</sup>Richard Crossman, *Diaries of a Cabinet Minister, I: Minister of Housing* (London: Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape, 1977), 134.

<sup>28</sup>GB Historical GIS/University of Portsmouth, "Leyton MB/UD through Time: Population Statistics, Age and Sex Structure to age 85 and Up," A Vision of Britain through Time, [http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10135655/cube/AGESEX\\_85UP](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10135655/cube/AGESEX_85UP) (accessed February 6, 2023).

<sup>29</sup>Boundary Commission for England, *Initial Report of the Boundary Commission for England, 1947–8: Cmnd. 7260* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1947), 19.

<sup>30</sup>The Nuneaton Constituency included Bedworth Urban District. See: Boundary Commission for England, *First Periodical Report of the Boundary Commission for England: Cmnd. 9311* (London: HMSO, 1954), 59; GB Historical GIS/University of Portsmouth, "Nuneaton MB/UD Through Time," A Vision of Britain through Time, <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10026969> (accessed February 6, 2023); and GB Historical GIS/University of Portsmouth, "Bedworth UD Through Time," A Vision of Britain through Time, <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10108706> (accessed February 6, 2023).

<sup>31</sup>Reporter, "More Pensioners as Town Loses its Young People," *Walthamstow Guardian*, October 16, 1964, 1; and Reporter, "Ready for Old Folk," *Walthamstow Guardian*, October 23, 1964, 38.

<sup>32</sup>Labour Party, "1964 Labour Manifesto: The New Britain," Labour Manifestos website, <http://labourmanifesto.com/1964/1964-labour-manifesto.shtml> (accessed February 6, 2023).

<sup>33</sup>Reginald Sorensen, "Patrick Gordon Walker Election Material," SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archive, London.

<sup>34</sup>Reginald Sorensen, "Letter to 'a Constituent,'" February 1, 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>35</sup>Reginald Sorensen, "Ronald Buxton Election Material," SOR 149/A, Parliamentary Archive, London.



promised to “stand up for the old folk” when he had challenged Reginald Sorensen in the 1964 election, but also having been rebuked for suggesting the Labour candidate was “too old.”<sup>36</sup> In reality, the focus on retired voters had little to do with questions of agism; it was, instead, part of Buxton’s carefully cultivated reputation as a “local” candidate.<sup>37</sup> Labour official Wilfred Young spotted the potential of this grievance early in the campaign and enlisted Sorensen’s help to address Conservative appeals to the pensioner vote.<sup>38</sup> As the *Guardian* newspaper observed, Buxton was an experienced candidate who demonstrated “a mixture of professionalism and ingeniousness.” Both he and Liberal candidate Alistair McKay quickly politicized the unfortunately timed (and concurrent) pension freeze and MP pay raise.<sup>39</sup> As Sorensen later told the Prime Minister, while many pensioners understood the reason for the delay, he was not surprised that some had listened to “Tory Liberal propaganda,” and either changed their vote or not voted at all.<sup>40</sup> But even the bad impression made by the pension freeze and the MP pay raise may not offer a full explanation, for there was an environmental factor in play as well.

Holding a winter election was always a risky proposition, especially after the experience of the difficult winter of 1962/3, with its weeks-long snowstorm with deep drifts.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the preceding campaign, adverse weather affected the conduct of the by-election. Conservative Cabinet Minister Quentin Hogg was forced to wear “unfashionable button boots” and a hat “against the rain.”<sup>42</sup> Less than 48 hours before the by-election, London was hit by a “giant quick-as-flash blizzard” that, together with high winds, “brought chaos to the roads and air services.”<sup>43</sup> National and London press suggested this eventuality had a direct potential impact at Leyton, even if Patrick Gordon Walker won.<sup>44</sup> For those “one in four” Leyton voters who were also pensioners, many of whom supported the Labour

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<sup>36</sup>Ronald Buxton, “Letter to Lord Sorensen,” February 9, 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archive, London; and Reporter, “Mr Sorensen is too Old says Tory Candidate,” *Walthamstow Guardian*, October 2, 1964, 45.

<sup>37</sup>Editorial, “Don’t let Leyton Lose Identity,” *Walthamstow Guardian*, October 9, 1964, 20.

<sup>38</sup>Wilfred Young, “Letter to Reginald Sorensen,” December 17, 1964, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>39</sup>Tony Geraghty, “The Honest Man of Leyton Ahead on Integrity?” *The Guardian*, January 13, 1965, 2.

<sup>40</sup>Reginald Sorensen, “Lord Sorensen’s Report on the By-election for the Prime Minister,” SOR/152/D, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>41</sup>Juliet Nicholson, *Frostquake: The Frozen Winter of 1962 and How Britain Emerged a Different Country* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2021).

<sup>42</sup>Michael F. King, “Button Booted Hogg Kicks Out at Leyton,” *Evening Standard*, January 16, 1965, 8.

<sup>43</sup>Staff Reporter, “Blizzard Raging – Trains Warning,” *Evening Standard*, January 20, 1965, 1.

<sup>44</sup>Robert Carvel, “The First Ballot Box Verdict on Wilson,” *Evening Standard*, January 21, 1965, 16; and Political Correspondent, “Gordon Walker Set to Win,” *Daily Mail*, January 21, 1965, 5.

candidate, it was another reason to not take part in the town's fourth election in 12 months.<sup>45</sup>

The persistence of the Liberal Party in Leyton; pensioners and MP pay raises; bad weather; the circumstances certainly turned against the Labour candidate in January 1965. Before we chalk Buxton's 205-vote victory up to just these local conditions, though, we have to recall that the very fact that the by-election was happening at all was due in large part to the political decisions made by the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, and officials at Transport House (the often-used metonym for Labour Party headquarters), who wanted to retain Patrick Gordon Walker's services as Foreign Secretary.

### **Party-political factors: accusations of "carpetbagging"**

By-elections had long been used to fill vacant parliamentary seats in a politically useful way.<sup>46</sup> In fact, before 1919 it was compulsory for a newly appointed minister to fight a by-election in their constituency, a practice only completely abolished in 1926.<sup>47</sup> How a by-election was managed, and the appearance of a by-election being "used" to serve party-political agendas had the potential to affect what Jon Lawrence, discussing the pre-1914 period, defined as a politician or party's "claim to represent" a specific electorate. As Lawrence highlighted, "because parties do not simply represent, in some unmediated sense, the interests of their constituents, their claim to represent is always problematic" and constantly renegotiated.<sup>48</sup> More importantly, it was the appearance of representativeness, which any blatant party-political management clearly undermined, that played an important role in an MP's right to speak for their electors.

This issue was clearly in play when Nuneaton MP Frank Bowles and Leyton MP Reginald Sorensen were asked to accept a peerage to be replaced by a newly appointed Cabinet Minister. How Leyton voters interpreted this action, which both contemporary Conservative minister Quentin Hogg and later historian Randall Hansen have described as "carpetbagging," had potential to affect the outcome of the by-election.<sup>49</sup> How any new MP was received, therefore, was defined by circumstances outside their control, but Patrick Gordon Walker also had to contend with a popular predecessor.

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<sup>45</sup>Michael F. King, "The Snow May Cost Walker Votes," *Evening Standard*, January 20, 1965, 17.

<sup>46</sup>Collinson, "Inevitable Results," 328–31.

<sup>47</sup>Martin Pugh, "'Queen Anne is Dead: The Abolition of Ministerial By-Elections, 1867–1926," *Parliamentary History* 21, no. 3 (2002): 351–66.

<sup>48</sup>Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 267.

<sup>49</sup>Staff Reporter, "A Return Visit by Hogg," *The Observer*, January 17, 1965, 3; and Randall Hansen, *Citizenship and Immigration in Post-War Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 133.

Reginald Sorensen represented part or all of Leyton in Parliament between 1929 and 1965, with a short break during the first term of the National Government between 1931 and 1935.<sup>50</sup> He was a popular and local-serving MP who, excepting some discontent at his longevity by a local trade union branch in 1964, retained the support of most Labour activists and a majority of voters.<sup>51</sup> Sorensen had a clear “claim to represent” Leyton, based on his record, and the *Walthamstow Guardian* observed that he had doubled his majority to almost 7,926 in 1964.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, he had long-campaigned on internationalist, non-local issues linked to colonial liberation and nuclear disarmament, and had strong links with independent Commonwealth governments.<sup>53</sup> While similar MPs, like his frequent political collaborator (and brother-in-law) Fenner Brockway, often had difficult relationships with their electorates, Sorensen did not.<sup>54</sup> That Sorensen had elicited local loyalty, despite maintaining a profile as a rebellious and internationalist back-bencher, was testament to his local popularity.

However, Leyton’s longstanding loyalty to a Labour candidate, together with its proximity to the center of government, made the constituency an obvious choice for Labour party officials searching for a new seat for the recently appointed and constituency-less Foreign Secretary, Patrick Gordon Walker.<sup>55</sup> After the latter’s defeat at Smethwick, Wilson telegraphed Gordon Walker that the nation knew “why you lost and all honor to you. All your colleagues look forward to your early return to the House of Commons.”<sup>56</sup> To emphasize that support, the committed anti-racialist Wilson appointed him to the Foreign Office despite the lack of a seat in Parliament.<sup>57</sup> Gordon Walker’s perceived experience as a Cabinet Minister and opposition spokesman, alongside his standing among members of Labour’s Gaitskellite faction, meant Wilson felt it necessary to keep all parts of the party well-represented with his Cabinet.<sup>58</sup> However, while this

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<sup>50</sup>David Rubenstein, *The Labour Party and British Society, 1880–2005* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press 2006), 127.

<sup>51</sup>Peter Kelly [Leyton CLP Secretary], “Letter to Reginald Sorensen,” April 30, 1964, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>52</sup>Reporter, “No Change at Leyton,” *Walthamstow Guardian*, October 23, 1964, 1.

<sup>53</sup>Reginald Sorensen, “Telegrams of Congratulations to Reginald Sorensen,” October 18–21, 1964, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>54</sup>Anthony Meyer, *Stand Up and be Counted* (London: William Heinemann, 1990), 40–43; and Wilfred Young, “Letter to Reginald Sorensen,” October 16, 1964, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>55</sup>Our Correspondent, “Foreign Secretary Offered Seat,” *The Times*, November 14, 1964, 8.

<sup>56</sup>Harold Wilson, “Telegram to Patrick Gordon Walker,” October 16, 1964, GNWR/1/16, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge.

<sup>57</sup>Political Correspondent, “Mr. Wilson Picks New Men for His Team,” *The Times*, October 19, 1964, 12.

<sup>58</sup>For more on his time as Commonwealth Relations Secretary, see Patrick Gordon Walker, *Political Diaries 1932–1971*, ed. Robert Pearce (London: Historian’s Press, 1991), 187.

offered a neat and practical solution to a difficult political crisis, the decision inflamed previously non-existent opposition in Leyton itself.

Reginald Sorensen was “uncomfortable” with the scheme and when party officials first suggested the plan, he exclaimed “Heavens above! God Forbid!”<sup>59</sup> Despite his initial disagreement, Sorensen then accepted a lifetime peerage and appointment as a junior minister out of party loyalty.<sup>60</sup> Voters were less willing to accept this enforced return to the ballot box, and while a concerted Labour press campaign suggested that Sorensen was supportive, much press coverage suggested otherwise.<sup>61</sup> As Leyton Council Labour group’s secretary Dick Drew observed, throughout canvassing, many voters expressed concern and required reassurance that Sorensen had not been “bundled upstairs [to the House of Lords]” against his will.<sup>62</sup> Whether this interpretation was a fair reflection of events was less significant than the fact that this story gained purchase among many voters in Leyton.

Labour’s orchestration of a by-election to keep a Minister despite his having been recently defeated at the ballot box was not only unpopular in Leyton, but it also created a political issue that opponents weaponized. Liberal Party candidate Alistair McKay, who had stood at the recent General Election, covered his election material with phrases including “refuse outside politics,” “vote for the man who knows Leyton—the man Leyton knows,” and to elect “our local man.”<sup>63</sup> His campaign literature advised electors to reject “the stranglehold of party politics” by refusing outside politicians.<sup>64</sup> After all, many constituents wrote to Sorensen about this issue, with letters that are filled with references to this popular perception of him being “taken away” and “sent upstairs.”<sup>65</sup> The perceived manipulation of the democratic process by the Prime Minister to secure a House of Commons constituency for his ministerial choices destroyed any potential goodwill Leyton voters possessed for the new candidate.

Some of Harold Wilson’s closest supporters felt the by-election was unnecessary and damaged the new government’s reputation. Cabinet minister Anthony Wedgewood-Benn told a shocked Peter Shore, MP and close Wilson advisor, that the cause of defeat was Labour’s “crude manipulation of

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<sup>59</sup>Reginald Sorensen, “Letter to Wilfred Young,” December 3, 1964, Reginald Sorensen papers SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London; and McKie, “By-Elections of the Wilson Government,” 180.

<sup>60</sup>Patrick Gordon Walker, “Letter to Reginald Sorensen,” January 1, 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>61</sup>Reporter, “Lords-Commons,” *Walthamstow Guardian*, November 20, 1964, 1; and Editorial, “Poor thanks to Leyton Voters,” *Walthamstow Guardian*, November 20, 1964, 14.

<sup>62</sup>Dick Drew, “Letter to ‘Comrade,’” January 3, 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>63</sup>Reginald Sorensen, “Alistair McKay Election Material,” No date, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup>Rev. R Taylor, “Letter to Lord Sorensen,” January 22, 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

the honours list.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, the left-wing internationalist Philip Noel-Baker told Sorensen that he was “sad” that the Leyton MP had had to “sacrifice” himself, which brought “calamity” and threatened both Labour’s standing and its slim parliamentary majority.<sup>67</sup> The word “sacrifice” was used by a number of Sorensen’s correspondents, and the view seems to have had wide acceptance among the former MP’s friends and admirers.<sup>68</sup> That these interpretations abounded in private correspondence and diaries lends credence to their veracity, yet many within the party also informed the Prime Minister of his tactical failure.

In the aftermath of the election, Sorensen compiled a report for Wilson and the party. He blamed several factors for the loss, but pointedly suggested that changing MPs was the most significant.<sup>69</sup> He offered a similar analysis in his unpublished autobiography.<sup>70</sup> When interviewed by Peter Le Marchand on the BBC’s *Tonight* TV show, Sorensen suggested that popular acceptance of the idea that he was forced into the House of Lords had gained traction with the electorate.<sup>71</sup> While the objectivity of Sorensen to evaluate the events might be questioned, both Harold Wilson and Patrick Gordon Walker endorsed his conclusions in private correspondence.<sup>72</sup> Even the Labour Party’s veteran national organizer, Sara Barker, admitted to Sorensen that the party machine was made into a “great bogey that had ruthlessly compelled Leyton to take Patrick [Gordon Walker].”<sup>73</sup> While this did not amount to a full acknowledgement, it demonstrated the state of Labour Party thinking, which concurred with Sorensen’s analysis.

Leyton’s voters had elected Sorensen, and therefore played a part in electing Wilson’s new government. Yet the voters’ will then appeared to have been ignored, with the Prime Minister’s ministerial choices prioritized over Leyton’s choice of representative. That, for party-political reasons, the

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<sup>66</sup>Tony Benn, *The Benn Diaries, 1940–1990*, ed. Ruth Winstone (London: Cornerstone, 1996), 122.

<sup>67</sup>Philip Noel-Baker, “Letter to Lord Sorensen,” January 22, 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid; F.H. Blackburn, “Letter to Lord Sorensen,” January 22, 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London; and D. Pym, “Letter to Lord Sorensen,” January 22, 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>69</sup>Reginald Sorensen, “Lord Sorensen’s Report on the By-Election for the Prime Minister,” 1965, SOR/154/D, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>70</sup>Reginald Sorensen, “A Backbencher’s Pilgrimage,” 1968, SOR/230, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>71</sup>Reginald Sorensen, “Transcript of Lord Sorensen’s,” *Tonight Interview*, January 22, 1965, SOR/152/C, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>72</sup>Patrick Gordon Walker, “Letter to Lord Sorensen,” February 2, 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London; and Harold Wilson, “Letter to Lord Sorensen,” February 4, 1965, SOR/152/D, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>73</sup>Sara Barker, “Letter to Lord Sorensen,” January 29, 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London; and Marc Collinson, “Barker, Sara Elizabeth (Dame),” in Keith Gildart and David Howell, eds., *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, Vol. XV (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 4–14.

Prime Minister had ennobled a popular local MP to make space for a politician of his choice, was as self-defeating as it was unnecessary. While this may seem an abstract issue to shape the outcome of a by-election contest, it was a point that Labour's political opponents could and did weaponize. Furthermore, how far opponents used Patrick Gordon Walker's previous electoral defeat to undermine his candidature at Leyton deserves consideration.

### **Personality factor: Patrick Gordon Walker as Labour candidate**

The 1965 by-election contest did not start with a negative atmosphere. When asked, Labour's candidate, Patrick Gordon Walker, observed that his previous defeat at the West Midlands constituency of Smethwick, which many commentators suggested was caused by local concerns over postwar immigration, was not a problem.<sup>74</sup> When asked by the *Birmingham Post*, published in the city closest to Smethwick, whether he feared a political intervention by Conservative activists from his former constituency, he said that this was "one of the least of my worries."<sup>75</sup> Yet, in other ways, the Foreign Secretary's linkage to the result at Smethwick ensured it played a role as it undermined his credibility as a candidate. Furthermore, the national context in this by-election, where a loss could halve the government's parliamentary majority, limiting its ability to legislate, added heightened significance to the contest.

In postwar British politics, the relationship between politicians and voters remained important. As David Thackeray and Richard Toye have argued, political actors used promises "made through charisma and image-making" tools, such as manifestos, election addresses, and newspaper coverage, to articulate their agenda to voters through sophisticated appeals.<sup>76</sup> However, such relationships took time to build, and it was unlikely that a candidate would be able to do so in the few weeks available to Labour's candidate at Leyton. Furthermore, Gordon Walker had failed to be reelected in his constituency of nineteen years. This raised an important question: if Smethwick had not reelected him based on this service, why should the voters of Leyton elect him now? This gave rise to questions among Leyton voters about his previous defeat.

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<sup>74</sup>Collinson, "Commonwealth Immigration," 111–16.

<sup>75</sup>Correspondent, "No Race Issue Here, Says Mr Walker," *Birmingham Post*, December 7, 1964, 7.

<sup>76</sup>David Thackeray and Richard Toye, "Introduction," in David Thackeray and Richard Toye, eds., *Electoral Pledges in Britain Since 1918: The Politics of Promises* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 3.

At Smethwick, Patrick Gordon Walker's leaflets and the election addresses distributed in support of his candidacy showed he ineffectively engaged with localized, bread-and-butter issues. Labour was asking voters to elect a well-connected Foreign Secretary-designate, not a local representative.<sup>77</sup> The criticism would follow him to Leyton. Again, the Foreign Secretary's expertise and priorities were, in Labour's election literature, presented to voters as the key attributes of his candidacy. Yet, as one critical voter observed, while Gordon Walker knew much of foreign affairs, "that is no help" to constituents in poverty.<sup>78</sup> In a recent biography, Gordon Walker's son, Alan, has observed how before the 1964 election, his father had spent more time on his foreign affairs brief than in Smethwick.<sup>79</sup> It was notable, therefore, that Patrick Gordon-Walker's Leyton election material sought to address this. It emphasized his answering "countless letters whilst MP for Smethwick and his willingness to contact ministers by telephone 'personally' when things were necessary."<sup>80</sup> Despite all efforts, in the words of party organizer Sara Barker, the "most damaging smear was that Gordon Walker had been a bad MP" with the wrong priorities.<sup>81</sup> In the short run-up to the by-election, there was little time to change voters' minds.

Once the by-election began, concerns about the Labour candidate grew. Various observers criticized his "dreary performances," with one noting a tendency to "harangue half-empty street corners from the back of a furniture van."<sup>82</sup> Alan Gordon Walker has noted how Labour's candidate (his father) "was not good at public speaking and . . . talking to the man of the street," and suffered from appearing to give off "lofty disdain." Patrick Gordon Walker often appeared "solemn" and "sad" in photographs.<sup>83</sup> Author Vera Brittain, a regular Reginald Sorensen correspondent, described Labour's candidate as having a "rather dour and taciturn personality."<sup>84</sup> This made him a bad candidate, even if it made him a "great Foreign Secretary," as surely a "Foreign Secretary couldn't and shouldn't be expected to have the qualities of a pop-singer."<sup>85</sup> In the age of the telegenic Harold Wilson,

<sup>77</sup>Ernest Lowry, "Gordon Walker for Smethwick," 1964, 0569 (1) (uncatalogued), Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester.

<sup>78</sup>Constituent, "Letter to Lord Sorensen," February 1, 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>79</sup>Alan Gordon Walker, *Patrick Gordon Walker: A Political and Family History* (London: Umbria Press, 2022), 100.

<sup>80</sup>Reginald Sorensen, "Patrick Gordon Walker Election Material," 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archive, London.

<sup>81</sup>Barker, "Letter to Lord Sorensen," January 29, 1965; and Sorensen, "Report on the By-Election," 1965.

<sup>82</sup>Rubenstein, *Labour Party and British Society*, 127; Crossman, *Minister of Housing*, 128, 134; and McKie, "By-Elections of the Wilson Government," 180.

<sup>83</sup>Gordon Walker, *Political and Family History*, 104.

<sup>84</sup>Vera Brittain, "Letter to Lord Sorensen," January 24, 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*



Gordon Walker was perhaps a more traditional politician. While the Labour Party tried to address it, they were unsuccessful.

Organizationally, the greatest difficulty was in ensuring the Foreign Secretary could both fulfil his official duties and campaign for election. As a Transport House spokesperson informed the press, to allow Gordon Walker to engage with affairs of state and fight a “full by-election campaign,” it was arranged with Leyton’s Town Clerk that a Foreign Office satellite office be established in the town hall.<sup>86</sup> It was fitted with a secured space for government documentation and a scrambler phone.<sup>87</sup> From the faded grandeur of Leyton’s town hall, which *Guardian* journalist Tony Geraghty described as “a sooty outpost of the Whitehall Empire,” Gordon Walker was an active participant in a methodical street by street campaign.<sup>88</sup>

Other candidates were equally motivated in opposition to his political and foreign policy views. As a loyal member of Labour’s moderate Gaitskellite faction, Patrick Gordon Walker was not popular with the left of his own party. Privately, he believed that Labour’s problems originated from its socialist policy platform and over-reliance on “a working class that no longer exists.”<sup>89</sup> Likewise, prevailing Cold War “realism” influenced his views on international affairs and he opposed left-wing stances such as unilateral disarmament. That his predecessor, Reginald Sorensen was categorized as one of Labour’s most left-wing parliamentarians in the 1955–1959 Parliament, did not necessarily impact the election, but it did impact who stood.<sup>90</sup> At Leyton in 1965, in contrast to the general election only months earlier, one of the two independent candidates in the by-election stood in opposition to the Foreign Secretary’s stance on the atomic bomb.<sup>91</sup>

George Delf was a committed socialist activist who believed that pro-nuclear weapons Foreign Secretary should not stand unopposed. Writing to Reginald Sorensen, he explained that the more “inflexible amongst us ... [are] for making a firm stand against Labour’s addiction with hydrogen bomb socialism.”<sup>92</sup> While minor political candidates can, at times, receive too much attention, the reaction they receive from the local press or voters can help us appreciate the weakness of the main candidates. Different political opponents realized that there were aspects of Gordon Walker’s career and views that might damage his appeal with voters. Yet, locally, an

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<sup>86</sup>The Town Clerk is the apolitical senior official of the local authority.

<sup>87</sup>Tony Geraghty, “The Foreign Office Sets Up Shop in Leyton Town Hall,” *Guardian*, December 31, 3.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.* For more about the Town Hall, see: Boote, *Leyton Town Hall*, 1–15.

<sup>89</sup>Gordon Walker, *Political Diaries 1932–1971*, 257.

<sup>90</sup>S.E. Finer, H.B. Berrington, and D.J. Bartholomew, *Backbench Opinion in the House of Commons, 1955–1959* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1961), 58.

<sup>91</sup>George Delf, “Letter to Lord Sorensen,” January 24, 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>92</sup>*Ibid.*



international focus had never been a problem before. Sorensen was a committed and knowledgeable internationalist, known for advocating causes without direct impact on his own electorate. It seems unlikely that Walker's interests in foreign policy, surely the greatest strength of a sitting Foreign Secretary, was the most significant weakness for his candidacy at Leyton, but it was a point that dampened his reception there, even among the Labour electorate.

Labour knew from the experience at Smethwick that any perception of ineffectiveness might be damaging to Gordon Walker's campaign. Walker's emphasis on his experience as a local MP in his election material demonstrated their awareness of that.<sup>93</sup> However, despite these attempts to market Gordon Walker as an approachable and conscientious member, lack of time deprived the party of any meaningful opportunity to build up their candidate's profile with a new image. As one constituent observed, they felt "sorry for Transport House inflicting a further humiliation on [Gordon Walker]."<sup>94</sup> Labour's attempt to assuage these concerns were unsuccessful. It had removed a popular local MP, replaced him with a damaged candidate, and pushed ahead too quickly. This only served to reduce a fragile parliamentary majority still further.

### The Smethwick factor: migration and Leyton

In his first parliamentary speech as Britain's Head of Government, alongside themes expected from a newly-appointed premier, such as government reorganizations and ministerial appointments, Harold Wilson gave what Tony Benn called the first "prime ministerial disapproval of racism in Parliamentary politics."<sup>95</sup> In front of a full House of Commons, Wilson controversially labeled Peter Griffiths a "Parliamentary leper."<sup>96</sup> Parliamentary colleagues were concerned about how this might play with Labour voters, as well as party sympathizers, activists, and swing voters, many of whom were divided on the issue.<sup>97</sup> Reflecting on this issue later, Sorensen noted that migration was an unusual political issue, where different

<sup>93</sup>Sorensen, "Report on the By-Election," 1965.

<sup>94</sup>Constituent, "Letter to Lord Sorensen," February 1, 1965.

<sup>95</sup>Tony Benn, *Out of the Wilderness: Diaries, 1963–1967*, ed. Ruth Winstone (London: Cornerstone, 1987), 308.

<sup>96</sup>*Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>97</sup>Harold Wilson, "General Correspondence L," September 1964–February 1965, MS Wilson c. 80, Bodleian Library, Oxford; Voter, "Letter to Harold Wilson," November 4, 1964, MS Wilson c. 80, Bodleian Library, Oxford; Stoke Newington Activist, "Letter to Harold Wilson," November 9, 1964, MS Wilson c. 80, Bodleian Library, Oxford; Smethwick voter, "Letter to Harold Wilson," November 4, 1964, MS Wilson c. 80, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

party “wings” often disagreed more with their own party supporters than with MPs in other parties.<sup>98</sup>

Local concerns about the impact of migration were much discussed by officials within the Labour Party at its Transport House headquarters and in the constituency. In the aftermath of the by-election, party organizer Sara Barker observed that “immigration was a much deeper current than some people think,” while Sorensen received letters decrying his making way for a man who had lost for his support for increased migration which would reshape British society.<sup>99</sup> However, how far this affected the decisions of voters in Leyton itself, rather than the national political and press debates inspired by the Smethwick result, was more pertinent. Smethwick cast a long shadow. It led to accusations that Gordon Walker “had brought it [the migration issue] to Leyton ‘on his boots,’” which the Labour candidate denied as soon as the campaign began.<sup>100</sup>

During the by-election, the activities of another independent candidate, Jeremiah Lynch of the UK and Dominion Party, helped to connect Leyton to Smethwick. Lynch had spent some of his childhood in Leyton but had become an active trade unionist and local Labour Party activist in the Midlands.<sup>101</sup> His election literature presents the views of a seemingly mainstream Labour voter. However, he also favored forced repatriation, a referendum on whether Britain should become a “multi-racial country or not,” and suggested that an English-language Pakistani newspaper told migrants to vote Labour to facilitate a “takeover” of the country.<sup>102</sup> The stand on migration was buttressed with commentary on automation’s impact on working-class jobs and criticism of Labour treating voters as “a safe seat, not as intelligent electors.”<sup>103</sup> But Lynch’s approach appealed to few in Leyton, and he received only 157 voters, one more than George Delf, with both independents together taking a total of 0.8 per cent of the vote.<sup>104</sup>

More significant than Lynch’s marginal candidacy is the contrast with how the issue of migration was handled by the Conservative candidate, Ronald Buxton. Initially, he commented in general terms about migration policy and his belief that local authorities must prioritize residents over

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<sup>98</sup>Reginald Sorensen, “A Backbencher’s Pilgrimage,” 1968, 62.

<sup>99</sup>Barker, “Letter to Lord Sorensen,” January 29, 1965; Sorensen, “Report on the By-election,” 1965; Retired Union Official, “Letter to Reginald Sorensen,” November 17, 1964, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>100</sup>Sorensen, “Report on the By-Election,” 1965; and Ivan Yates, “Signs of Race Hate in Leyton,” *Observer*, December 6, 1964, 3.

<sup>101</sup>Reginald Sorensen, “Jeremiah Lynch Election Material,” January 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>102</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup>Craig, *Election Results, 1950–1970*, 191

“immigrants” when they allocated authority-owned housing.<sup>105</sup> However, considering the atmosphere created by the Smethwick result, Buxton’s comments were mild and appeared more focused on discouraging anti-migrant candidates’ standing.<sup>106</sup> The *Guardian* newspaper estimated that there were around 2,000–3,000 nonwhite Leyton residents, and there were few localized problems beyond occasional instances linked to housing safety and crime.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, Buxton expressed embarrassment about reports of Conservative canvasser using racial tropes when talking to voters, and the distribution of a “racialist fly sheet” to some houses.<sup>108</sup> Buxton was also clear he did not expect that Peter Griffiths, who defeated Gordon Walker at Smethwick, would be “going on a platform here.”<sup>109</sup> Therefore, how the Conservative candidate engaged with migration was crucial, and determined the focus of the by-election.

Ronald Buxton was a savvy campaigner and was aware that migration had never been a critical concern in the constituency. After all, Sorensen had been elected eight times, normally with solid majorities, despite being an active anti-imperialist and the first MP to present a private members bill that sought to outlaw racial discrimination as early as 1950.<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, Leyton Borough Labour Party had also submitted a resolution that condemned racial discrimination to a Labour Party committee discussing that issue in 1956.<sup>111</sup> By the 1964 election, the local newspaper, the *Walthamstow Guardian*, had echoed Reginald Sorensen’s public concerns that the issue of migration caught the political, journalistic, and academic imagination, even though it appeared to have little local purchase.<sup>112</sup> Such studies gave migration greater pertinence and purchase among election commentators looking for a pre-defined issue.

The problematization of what journalist Paul Foot called “racial politics,” together with the specter of the Smethwick-tarnished Patrick Gordon Walker contesting Leyton, attracted another type of political activist to the

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<sup>105</sup>Staff Reporter, “Gordon Walker’s New Race Problem,” *Observer*, November 15, 1964, 1; and David Steel, *No Entry: The Background and Implications of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, 1968* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1969), 90–91.

<sup>106</sup>Reporter, “Gordon Walker’s New Race Problem,” 1.

<sup>107</sup>Staff Reporter, “Tory ‘Embarrassed’ by Racialist Sheet,” *Guardian*, January 7, 1965, 2; Reporter, “Leyton Warns on Old Oil Stoves Peril,” *Walthamstow Guardian*, November 6, 1964, 20; and Reporter, “West Indian Wounded,” *Walthamstow Guardian*, November 6, 1964, 1.

<sup>108</sup>Staff Reporter, “Tory ‘Embarrassed’ by Racialist Sheet,” *Guardian*, January 7, 1965, 2.

<sup>109</sup>Geraghty, “Foreign Office Sets Up Shop,” 3.

<sup>110</sup>Collinson, “Commonwealth Immigration,” 59–62.

<sup>111</sup>Labour Party, “Commonwealth Sub-Committee Minutes,” May 8, 1956, LP/CSC/55/23, Labour History Archives and Study Centre, Manchester.

<sup>112</sup>Editorial, “Don’t Let Them Smear Leyton,” *Walthamstow Guardian*, November 20, 1964, 20; Reporter, “Labour and Racialism,” *Walthamstow Guardian*, November 20, 1964, 14; and Reporter, “Immigration: ‘I Hope Colour Will Not Become a Party Issue,’” *Walthamstow Guardian*, November 20, 1964, 38.

constituency.<sup>113</sup> During the contest, groups on the extreme right sought to use the election as an opportunity to gain media exposure. They succeeded in attracting press coverage from both newspapers and BBC Television.<sup>114</sup> Using Leyton as an opportunity to publicize their views, these groups delivered a variety of election ephemera to people's homes during the campaign. Tony Benn noted that, at a later dinner party, Patrick Gordon Walker's wife showed him "a copy of the filthy Nazi propaganda cards ... distributed at Leyton."<sup>115</sup> Far right activists also daubed swastikas over the Foreign Secretary's campaign headquarters.<sup>116</sup> These extremist groups not only distributed election ephemera and painted slogans, but also organized and engaged in visible and sustained activities to disrupt election events in the meeting halls, as well as on the streets, of the constituency.

Several neo-fascists groups campaigned in the by-election. Colins Jordan's National Socialist Movement, alongside "the Mosleyites and Empire loyalists, raided Patrick Gordon Walker's first and last press conference."<sup>117</sup> At the first, Jordan was punched by the Defence Secretary, Denis Healey, after he rushed up on the stage, and footage was shown on the BBC's *Panorama* current affairs TV show.<sup>118</sup> Activists, including Jordan, stormed meetings and demanded Gordon Walker's wife go "back to Jamaica" (where she was born) and claimed that migrants would vote for Gordon Walker while wearing monkey costumes.<sup>119</sup> Like many fringe candidates who involve themselves in by-elections, they gained more traction with the press than the electorate. While such groups might often gain more headlines than votes (especially as they did not stand a candidate at Leyton), their activities shaped popular perceptions of the contest and the assumptions of the national press and politicians.

Campaigners belonging to the Christian Socialist Movement offered to arrange a rally supporting Gordon Walker's candidacy after hearing that far right groups had planned events.<sup>120</sup> Yet Labour's Regional Organizer,

<sup>113</sup>Foot, *Immigration and Race*; and Yates, "Race Hate in Leyton," 3.

<sup>114</sup>For example, see: Geraghty, "Foreign Office Sets Up Shop," 3; Tony Geraghty, "Interference by the BBC, but Not Improper," *Guardian*, January 14, 1964, 3; and BBC Panorama, "I Don't Think There's any Bad Feeling in Leyton at the Moment," *BBC YouTube Channel*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23JqSNPqtFY&t=96s> (accessed February 17, 2023).

<sup>115</sup>Benn, *Out of the Wilderness*, 234.

<sup>116</sup>"Foreign Secretary opens his by-Election campaign," January 1, 1965, *Alamy Website*, <https://www.alamy.com/jan-01-1965-foreign-secretary-opens-his-by-election-campaign-the-rt-image69414245.html> (accessed February 17, 2023).

<sup>117</sup>McKie, "By-Elections of the Wilson Government," 181; Sorensen, "Report on the By-Election," 1965; BBC Panorama, "Far Right Video Collection," *BBC website*, [http://news.bb.co.uk/panorama/hi/front\\_page/newsid\\_8320000/8320170.stm](http://news.bb.co.uk/panorama/hi/front_page/newsid_8320000/8320170.stm) (assessed July 29 2015).

<sup>118</sup>BBC Panorama, "I Don't Think there's Any Bad Feeling in Leyton at the Moment," *BBC YouTube Channel*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23JqSNPqtFY&t=96s> (accessed February 17, 2023).

<sup>119</sup>Gordon Walker, *Political and Family History*, 104.

<sup>120</sup>Horace Wilkinson, "Letter to Wilfred Young," December 1, 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

Wilfred Young, opposed this as he thought any anti-racist event might inflame local racial tensions, and the party would not fund or support such an endeavor.<sup>121</sup> However, Labour's concern ran contrary to the realities of the contest. None of the candidates stood on anti-migrant platforms except for the marginal Lynch, who was as much of an incomer as Gordon Walker. While this may have informed political willingness to oppose the race issue through open support for public activism, in private correspondence, the Prime Minister's Office were more forthright.

Prime Minister Harold Wilson's private office received and responded to two-folders worth of correspondence from the members of the public following the Leyton by-election.<sup>122</sup> Correspondents represented a broad geographic and demographic public, and they advanced a range of agendas and interpretations. Notably, many authors who saw migration as the cause of defeat did not live in Leyton or have clear links to the constituency. Furthermore, responses from the Prime Minister's Political Office, led by his personal political secretary, Marcia Williams, based in Downing Street, were forthright.<sup>123</sup> Signed by the Prime Minister's "personal & political secretary," these retorts addressed the key issue (especially if it was migration) head on. One restated the government's agenda, introduced an attached memorandum on party policy, and then stated, "I am sure you ... realise (sic) that very many people from overseas also took part in the two world wars," as the writer had mentioned Dunkirk.<sup>124</sup> Others were given more brusque treatment.<sup>125</sup> Through a review of these responses to popular correspondence, it becomes clear that senior government officials did not believe migration was the major cause of the defeat.

Clearly, policymakers considered migration a major nationwide political issue but did not believe it had significant prevalence on the Leyton result. Beyond Gordon Walker's unfortunate Smethwick links and the presence of neo-Nazi groups, there is limited evidence that the issue of migration was a major issue for the electorate.<sup>126</sup> It was an example of a nationalization of

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<sup>121</sup>Wilfred Young, "Letter to Reginald Sorensen," December 7, 1964, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

<sup>122</sup>Harold Wilson, "By-Election: Leyton, 1965," 1965, MS. Wilson c. 1477/1-2, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

<sup>123</sup>Wilson's Political Office dealt with more "political" matters that got around civil service impartiality requirements. See: George Jones, *The Power of the Prime Minister: 50 years on* (London: The Constitution Society, 2016), 18,30.

<sup>124</sup>Marcia Williams, "Letter to Mrs Fogg," February 9, 1965, MS. Wilson c. 1477/1, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

<sup>125</sup>Marcia Williams, "Letter to Mr Coldrey," February 9, 1965, MS. Wilson c. 1477/1, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

<sup>126</sup>I.J. Miller, "Letter to Lord Sorensen," January 6, 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London.

constituency politics, with the concerns of politicians and the national press used to explain fundamentally localized issues.

## Result and aftermath

When the result came through after the count, it was a shock. Patrick Gordon Walker had again lost his seat, this time by 205 votes. Although Frank Cousins held Nuneaton, the loss of Leyton cut Labour's majority from four to two (though the election of a Conservative as Speaker of the Commons raised this back to three).<sup>127</sup> Gordon Walker's son, Alan, later commented that his father's career was "in ruins . . . there was no way back now," and that two consecutive election defeats had affected both his parents' mental health.<sup>128</sup> Though Patrick Gordon Walker called the result a "grave upset," and was "sure Leyton will be won back again next time," it was widely agreed that his career "died at Leyton."<sup>129</sup> In fact, Leyton returned Gordon Walker to the House of Commons in the 1966 election, with a majority larger than Sorensen's in 1964, though this likely owed much to the Wilson Government's increased national share of the vote. Though he then briefly served Education Secretary, Gordon Walker never again held comparable influence within the Government.

While the result at Leyton did not affect the government's approach to migration, the defeat affected how Harold Wilson operated in Government. Leyton and Nuneaton were Wilson's first ballot box tests, and the mixed result diminished the Prime Minister's willingness to risk more of the seats that provided his precious parliamentary majority.<sup>130</sup> One party official noted that it "was a blessing in disguise really. The Prime Minister was becoming just a technician. Leyton forced him to remember what it was to become a political leader."<sup>131</sup> Throughout Wilson's 1964–70 term, voters increasingly used by-elections to express discontent with the government and perhaps the wider political system.<sup>132</sup> Leyton, at the least, made this Prime Minister more cautious in his use of by-elections.

<sup>127</sup>Walter Terry, "Gordon Walker Beaten," *Daily Mail*, January 22, 1965, 1.

<sup>128</sup>Gordon Walker, *Political and Family History*, 104, 107–111.

<sup>129</sup>Patrick Gordon Walker, "Letter to Lord Sorensen," January 30, 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London; *Labour Report: South Kensington Labour party journal*, February 1965, PP/LAB/8, Nuffield College Archives, Oxford.

<sup>130</sup>Robert Carvel, "The First Ballot Box Verdict on Wilson," *Evening Standard*, January 21, 1965, 16; Editorial, "Double Shock," *Evening Standard*, January 22, 1965, 6; and Sunday Times Reporters, "The Leyton Shadow on Labour in 3 by-Elections," *Sunday Times*, January 31, 1965, 18.

<sup>131</sup>David Butler and Anthony King, *The British General Election of 1966* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 25.

<sup>132</sup>McKie, "By-Elections of the Wilson Government," 263.

However, Leyton did not stay in the national discourse long, Sir Winston Churchill's death on January 24<sup>th</sup> soon came to dominate the media's attention.<sup>133</sup> Churchill's health had featured heavily in press coverage throughout the by-election, as the mortally-ill Churchill had, to 1964, been the MP in neighboring Woodford.<sup>134</sup> Yet, some suggested the election had wider implications for the Wilson Government. The American journalist George Sherman, writing in the *Washington Evening Star*, noted that "post-Leyton ... the result [that] shocked the Government out of its euphoria," the top "political parlor game ... is guessing the date of the next general election."<sup>135</sup> Later that year, the same article was used as evidence by New York Senator Jacob Javits to support his serious concerns, expressed on the US Senate floor, about Britain's viability as an ally.<sup>136</sup> Many of these national and international reactions, alongside the issues of race and Prime Ministerial maneuvering, have led commentators to misconstrue Leyton as an election about national political issues, especially race and migration, and to do so at the cost of the more local and immediate concerns at play in the contest.

## Conclusion

Although the Leyton by-election was an unusual contest, examining the factors that shaped it and how political actors and the press interpreted the result allows us to better understand the changing importance of the by-election in postwar Britain. There are few comparable contests, so drawing clear conclusions to underpin a theory of by-elections is impractical. Leyton had, to repeat Robert Coll's observation, its own local history and peculiarities.<sup>137</sup> Notably, its demographic composition, with a significant pensioner population at a time the government had frozen a promised pension increase, potentially weakened the Labour party's appeal. Simultaneously, Labour's imposition of a candidate through political maneuvering, to ensure the return of Patrick Gordon Walker to Cabinet, complicated an already challenging political situation.

One thing was clear: there was a no "Smethwick effect." Despite Peter Griffith's success at Smethwick, no one, except a minor candidate

<sup>133</sup>Peter Le Marchant, "Letter to Lord Sorensen from Peter Le Marchant," January 25, 1965, SOR/149/A, Parliamentary Archives, London; Editorial, "Recalling His Finest Hour," *Walthamstow Guardian*, January 29, 1965, 1; and Editorial, "Above All Others HE Stood Alone," *Walthamstow Guardian*, January 29, 1965, 18.

<sup>134</sup>Reporter, "Peaceful Night for Sir Winston," *Evening Standard*, January 16, 1965, 1; and Reporter, "Churchill: The Restlessness Has Ceased," *Evening Standard*, January 20, 1965, 1.

<sup>135</sup>George Sherman, "Crisis in Britain – Top Game: Vote Guessing," *Washington Evening Star*, February 11, 1965.

<sup>136</sup>"Congressional Record – Senate," August 12, 1965, 11, part 15 (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1965), 20175–85.

<sup>137</sup>Colls, "London Local Histories," 82–85.

and some Neo-Nazis, sought to politicize migration at Leyton. Their limited share of the vote, and Conservative unwillingness to utilize the issue, emphasized the local unpopularity of this specific policy. Smethwick's only impact was that it damaged Patrick Gordon Walker's political reputation. His last-minute transfer to Leyton and role as a cabinet minister involved him in unpopular economic decisions. This allowed locally based Conservative and Liberal candidates to brand him a carpetbagger and his party and government as institutions that did not look after the constituency's pensioners. Yet, the fact that the combined votes of the minor anti-migration and anti-nuclear could have made the difference between a narrow defeat or victory for Gordon Walker shows how narrow Ronald Buxton's victory was. This was an unnecessary electoral contest, scheduled in the cold depths of winter, in a constituency that was now less inclined to support the party it had elected with a generous majority only four months earlier.

The events of January 1965 made Labour wary of using a by-election to rearrange the composition of the parliamentary party. While other factors were important, the blatant politicking of the Wilson Government undermined the willingness of even Labour voters to support Patrick Gordon Walker. If anything were "astonishing" about Leyton, it was that a modern government would so blatantly misuse the democratic process, undermining Labour's long-built "claim to represent" the town. It rightly became a parable for governments seeking to manipulate electoral processes for party-political ends. It suggested, in short, how misuse of by-elections could undermine the workings of representative government.

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