



Eastleigh by-election by Denis Joe

Political hacks like nothing more than a by-election and especially when that by-election is called because of a resignation – in this case the resignation of former Lib Dem cabinet minister Chris Huhne and the sordid issue of his lying to the courts over his speeding offence in 2003.

The Eastleigh by-election was bound to prove more exciting than most much of the outcome of Eastleigh was predictable. Deputy political editor of the BBC, James Landale listed thoughts on the outcome which proved entirely accurate (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21591603>). Two points that are worthy of looking at are “The Conservatives will take the flak for being in government.” and “All sides expect UKIP to do better than initially thought.”

UKIP certainly did perform well with 27.8% of the vote, pushing the Tories into third place. Much of the Friday newspaper stories went with this and there was plenty of talk about a need for the Conservatives to 'move to the right' as, it was suggested, grassroots Tories are disappointed in the governing party's occupation of the middle ground. Though it was the victors, the Lib Dems, who saw the biggest slump in support from 2010.

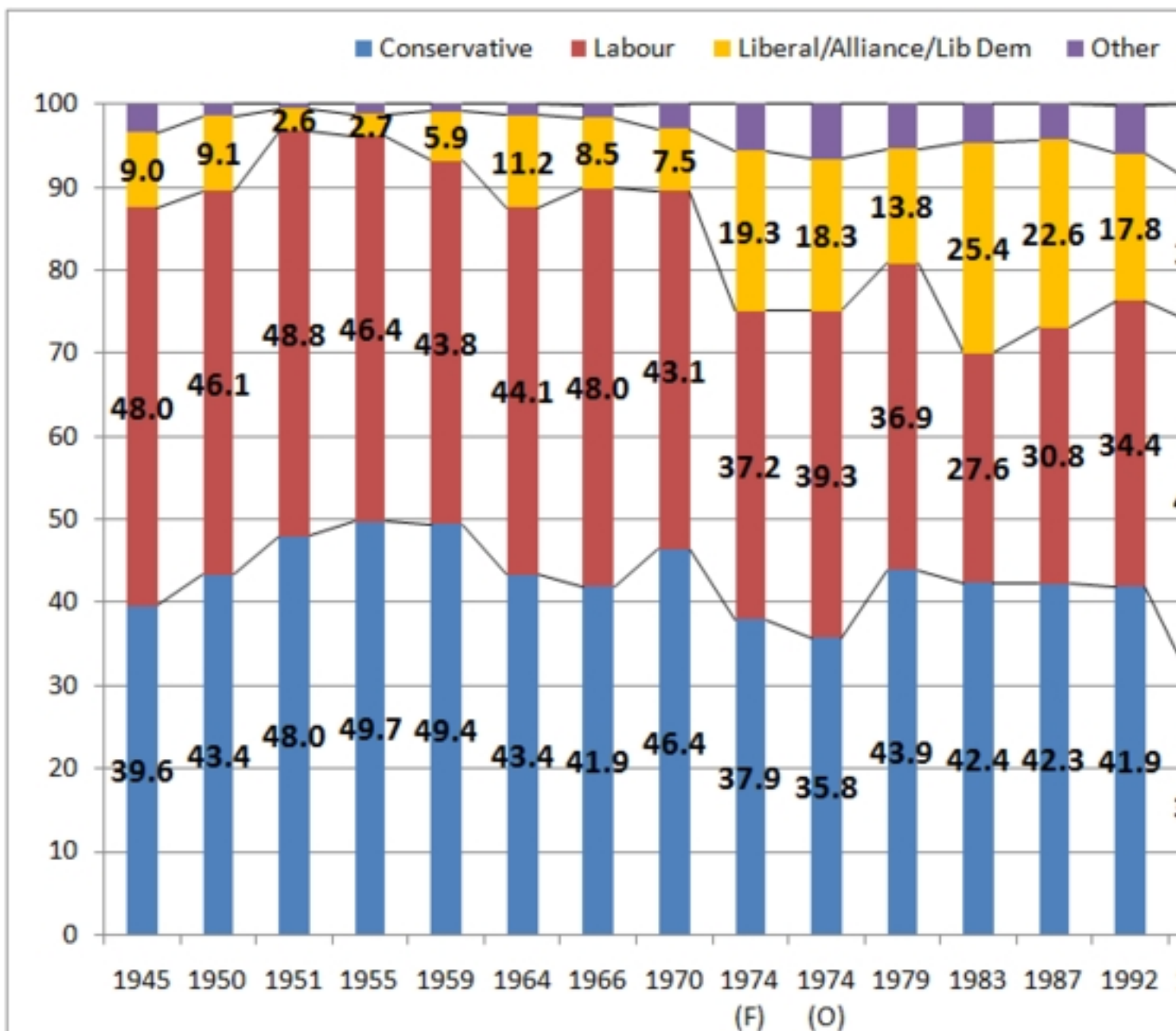
But what do UKIP stand for. Apart from a vague commitments to pull out of the EU and equally vague criticism of multiculturalism, their policies are little different from those of the other established parties who are also committed to "Rebuild Prosperity", "Protect Our Borders & Defend Our Country", "Safeguards Against Crime" and "Care And Support For All". There is very little, ideologically, that separates UKIP from the other parties who are seen as occupying the central ground.

What is noticeable about UKIP is their lack of initiative over Economic matter. The biggest issue of the day is austerity. Lip service is paid to Small Businesses and a tinkering with the tax system. They also put forward local funding and decision-making of the NHS. For a party that prides itself on free-market principles, UKIP rely on the state as much as any of the other parties.

From the reaction to the success in attracting votes it was easy to forget that UKIP didn't actually win the Eastleigh seat. The victors were the Liberal Democrats, whose share of the vote saw a greater drop than that of the Tories, which puts into question the idea that UKIP are a serious Challenge to the Conservative party, as the one trend that has continued to occur in by-election is the decrease in turnout of 17% on the 2010 figures.

The decrease suggests two things: one is that the fall in electoral turn-out seems to be in proportion to the excitement over by-elections by the media. The other is that Eastleigh is yet another example of a protest vote. This is something that the analysts have generally rejected in their excitement to see a 'real' challenge to the government and admittedly this result overshadows the party's Rotherham result in 2010. But it is no less a protest vote simply because a larger proportion of voters cast their votes for UKIP. What makes the type of protest vote, of the last couple of decades, different from previous times, is that the protest is a reflection of disillusion with politics in general and not simply a slap in the face for the governing parties. This is noticeable if we consider that electoral turnout has not really recovered in the UK, from its lowest post-war count in the 2001 election and in that period we have seen a rise in support (real or protest) for parties outside of the Establishment as the graph below illustrates. There is very little literature on local election but a perusal of historical newspaper reports suggests that it is at the local level that parties outside of the established ones gain most of their support either in council elections or by-election caused by an MP resigning or dying.

It is also interesting to look at the actual UKIP voter. A [YouGov Survey](#) found that demographic trends show UKIP supporters continue to be heavily skewed towards elderly men – 43% of their support is from over 65s, just 8% from under 35s. 66% is from men, 34% from women. Suggesting that UKIP base is one that is made up of 'traditional' voters who may not have adapted to the more apolitical climate we live in and may well be the most principled-led section of the electorate.



[Eastleigh by-election 1992: The Liberal/Alliance/Lib Dem parties are all the same'. I don't](#)