Staffordshire South East: Government prepares for thirty-fifth successive poll defeat

By-election takes Major to brink of minority rule

By Andrew Pierce, political correspondent

won their surprise general election victory in 1992 party leaders knew that deaths were likely to whittle away their 21seat overall majority. Few considered the possibility that defections would effectively wipe it out.

John Major might have expected to soldier on with a Christchurch, one of the Toworking majority until the last practical date for an election, May 1, 1997, despite the death of seven of his MPs since the election. But the prospect of minority government has become a reality because of the defections of Alan Howarth to Labour and Emma Nicholson to the Liberal Democrats and Peter Thurnham's resignation of the Tory whip.

If, as expected, the Tories lose the Staffordshire South East by-election today, it will be the thirty-fifth successive defeat since their last byelection victory, in February 1989. Within a year of Mr . Major's general-election triumph, questions were asked about his leadership when the party was crushed in the

Newbury by-election. Judith Chaplin, previously Mr Major's political secretary, had won the seat with a 22,000 majority at the general election. But she died in February 1993 and at the by-election the Liberal Democrats swept in by a margin of 12,300.

Robert Adley, MP for ries' ten safest seats, died a week later. Robert Hayward, a former Tory MP and confidant of Mr Major, was picked to fight the seat. Mr Hayward, a psephologist whose figures were used by Conservative Central Office in the run-up to the 1992 election, badly miscalculated in Christchurch. The Tories' 23,000 majority vanished and Diana Maddock took the seat for the Liberal Democrats with a 16,433 ma-

jority on a 35 per cent swing. Worse was to come. Stephen Milligan, one of the brightest members of the 1992 intake, was found dead in his London home, dressed in suspenders and stockings. His death was at the peak of the back-tobasics crisis. His 17,700 major-

ity in Eastleigh, Hampshire, was overturned by the Liberal Democrats' David Chidgey, who gained a 9,239 majority.

The death in October 1994 of John Blackburn, Tory MP for Dudley West, gave the new Labour leader, Tony Blair, a chance to test his electoral appeal. He was not disappointed. His party captured the seat on December 10 with a 20,000 majority. The 29 per cent swing was the biggest from Tory to Labour since 1935. The victory, in the crucial West Midlands election battleground, finished a dismal year for Mr Major.

Sir Nicholas Fairbairn, the colourful former Solicitor-General for Scotland, died in February 1995 after a long illness. His majority in Perth had been a vulnerable 2,094 and the Scottish National Party prevailed over Labour with a 7,000 majority while the Conservatives trailed in

Geoffrey Dickens, one of the most outspoken MPs, died after a long illness last July. His 6,200 majority in Little-

DECLINE OF THE TORY MAJORITY February 1993: December 1995: Judith Chaplin, Emma Nicholson Alan Howarth MP for Newbury, defects to Liberal defects to dies. Liberal Labour Democrats Democrats win by-election May 1993: Robert Adley, October 1994: Christchurch, John Blackburn, dies. Liberal MP for Dudley Democrats West, dies. Labour wins Peter Thurnham, Littleborough and MP for Bolton North Saddleworth, dies. East, resigns whip. December 1995: Liberal Democrat Majority down to Sir David Lightbown, two if he votes with MP for Staffordshire the Opposition South East, dies 1993

borough and Saddleworth disappeared with a 12 per cent swing to the Liberal Democrats. The Tories were once again pushed into third.

The most telling blows to Mr Major's authority came in October 1995 when Alan Howarth crossed the floor to Labour, enraging party officials in his Stratford-on-Avon constituency where he had a 22,900 majority. Emma Nicholson, one of the most high-Commons, dismayed the Tory

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high command when she moved to the Liberal Democrats in December.

The defections dealt another shattering end-of-year blow to the Prime Minister. His misery was compounded soon after with the death of Sir David Lightbown, the Staffordshire South East MP. In February this year Peter Thurnham, the member for Bolton North East, resigned the whip, reducing the Tory majority to two. Mr Thurnham, who has a major-summer recess. Mr Major 7,192.

ity of 185, was aggrieved at being overlooked for a safer

Using standard mortality tables and the age and profile of Tory MPs, up to four more are expected to die this year. Research by the actuaries Lane, Clark and Peacock has indicated that there are likely to be two further deaths by mid-summer. With the Tory by-election record, the party could find itself with a minority of three by the end of the

can, however, draw comfort from the experience of the 1974-79 Labour Government, which lost its majority of three in 1976. The Government was defeated no fewer than 42 times before the loss of a vote

☐ General election 1992: D.L. Lightbown (C) 29,180; B. Jenkins (Lab) 21,988; N. Penlington (Lib Dem) 5,540; majority

of confidence sealed the fate of

the Callaghan administration

Business PR for the economy

BY PHILIP WEBSTER

LEADING industrialists are financing a £100,000 campaign organised by two Tory strategists to spread the message that the British economy is a success story.

A dozen business leaders have clubbed together to fund the publication of 50,000 copies of a slick brochure containing favourable comments from overseas commentators and political leaders about the state of Britain.

The men behind the venture are Sir Tim Bell, chairman of Lowe Bell Communications, the public relations company, and Peter Gummer, chairman of Shandwick. Both are closely involved in planning the next general election campaign.

Among the backers are Lord Hanson, chairman of Hanson, Sir David Lees, chairman of GKN, Sir Colin Marshall, chairman of British Airways, Dieter Bock, chief executive of Lonrho, and Sir Stanley Kalms, chairman of Dixons.

The brochure is being sent out with a letter from John Major, who writes: "These snapshots of Britain from around the globe build up a consistent picture of a strong, successful and modern economy which is forging ahead."

THE KEY ISSUES: WHICH PARTY IS BEST? Liberal Democrats Law & Order (52%) Environment (31%) Taxation (30%) Housing (30%) Northern Ireland (22%) Public transport (19%) Trade unions (9%) Base: 987 British adults

Tories trail on main issues tor general election

By Peter Riddell

LABOUR has the best policies on ten of the 14 most important issues for the next general election, according to a MORI poll for *The Times*.

The poll shows that Labour is well ahead on economic and social issues, which voters regard as most important for their votes. The Tories are ahead only on foreign policy questions such as Europe and defence, which are placed lower down the list.

People were shown a list of issues and asked which they regarded as most important for their votes. Health care is mentioned by 68 per cent, followed by education and unemployment, a couple of points behind. Law and order is mentioned by more than 50 per cent, the economy by nearly 40 per cent and pensions by 34 per cent, Europe comes tenth, regarded as important in deciding votes by less than 25 per cent of those interviewed. Trade unions come bottom of the list, mentioned by less than 10

per cent. Of the issues singled out by people as being the most important — health, education and unemployment — Labour has a huge lead over the Tories as the party with the best policies. The gap is much narrower on law and order, the economy and

taxation. The four issues in which Labour is not in the lead are Europe, Northern Ireland and defence, in which the Tories are in the lead, and the environment, in which the Liberal Democrats are seen to have the best policies.

Tory strategists will regard

their small lead on Europe — 31 per cent to 26 per cent — as a vindication of their recent tilt in a sceptic direction and of ministers' strong assertion of national interests. However, the gap is a narrow one and the issue is given a fairly low priority. Defence and Northern Ireland also remain strong issues for the Tories but are seen as low in

On most issues, it is the middle-aged who have the strongest preference for Labour's policies.

It is also revealing that Labour is now well ahead with regard to trade unions, ' an area of importance and strength to the Tories during

Indeed, Tony Blair is currently telling American business in New York that Labour is seeking to build on Thatcherism, not trying to Thatcher Government did two things right: it revived a spirit of enterprise and created a legal framework for the

operations of trade unions. The Tories must either ' increase the salience of the defence and Northern Ireland issues to more voters, or turn the tide of public opinion on those in which Labour leads. Nearly 50 per cent of ' the electorate decide which party to vote for mainly on their perception of the parties' stance on issues of importance to them.

☐ MORI interviewed 987 adults at 71 ward sampling points between March 22 and 25. Interviews were conducted face to face in homes.



Riddell, peter. "Tones trail on main issues for general election." Times, 11 Apr. 1996, p. 10. The Times Digital Archive, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IF0501163083/TTDA?u= west85252&sid=TTDA&xid=6dd3bad3. Accessed 19 July 2020.