

# Pete Curran and the Jarrow Parliamentary By-Election of 1907

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## Abstract

The ‘emergence’ of the Labour Party after 1900 as an election winning machine shocked the Edwardian establishment – not least the ability of several Labour candidates to win unlikely by-elections in North East England. Barnard Castle had already elected one of the first ever British Labour MPs in the shape of eventual Newcastle MP Arthur Henderson, while Sunderland and Gateshead nominally received ‘Labour’ MPs in the 1906 general election.

This article assesses what is arguably the most relevant and fascinating parliamentary by-election of the Edwardian era - the Jarrow by-election of 1907, won by the charismatic Pete Curran for the Labour Party against an entrenched Liberal Association. While this incredible shift in political representation shook the Tyneside, did it represent a long-term pattern of working-class victory for Labour in the North East, or simply a blip on the Liberal-dominated landscape?

For students of British political history, parliamentary by-elections are an intriguing and rich source of study. Occasionally, they provide us with a snapshot of the political feeling of the time, the nation’s pulse in the voting booth. But the historian of the British parliamentary by-election must be cautious as they are not always so indicative of the national mood. One need only look at such by-elections as Orpington in 1962, where the astonishing Liberal victory supposedly pointed to a Liberal resurgence throughout the country – but proved to be a chimera in the 1964 general election. Or the SDP victory at Glasgow Hillhead in 1982 which was seen as an indication of centre-left realignment – but failed to find a foot in the 1983 general election. By-elections still provide distorted views of political attachment – the Conservative victory at Norwich North in 2009 pointed to a large Conservative majority at a general election, but a hung parliament followed in 2010. The 1900s were no different.

The traditional character of North East Liberalism in the 1890s was marked by the institutional dominance of industrial entrepreneurs leavened by the trade unionist Lib-Lab MPs. While, by the time of the 1906 general election the influence of these industrialists was waning, it remained considerable.<sup>1</sup> Some major Liberal employers owned shipyards or mines (such as Chester-le-Street MP James Joicey) which dominated entire constituencies and consequently affected voting. The links between the politics of the employers and the Liberalism of the workforce were particularly pronounced in towns such as Jarrow – perhaps the most perfect example of Liberal/Labour disharmony in the 1900s.<sup>2</sup> The Jarrow parliamentary constituency was represented by Sir Charles Mark Palmer, Liberal MP, pioneer

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<sup>1</sup> Purdue, A. W. (1981) ‘The Liberal and Labour Parties in North East Politics 1900-14: The Struggle for Supremacy’, *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 26, pp. 9-10.

<sup>2</sup> Tanner, D. (1990) *Political Change and the Labour Party 1900-1918*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 228-229.

of Tyneside shipbuilding, and owner and founder of Palmer's Shipyard, since 1885.<sup>3</sup> He owed his almost undisturbed tenure of the constituency to his unique role in the creation of Jarrow. As early as 1902 the Jarrow Liberals believed Palmer would not seek re-election due to his failing health and offered the seat to John Wilkie, the secretary of the Shipwrights at the next general election. But the ILP<sup>4</sup> had proposed Pete Curran of the Gasworkers union to run on the 'progressive' ticket. Both men were members of the LRC<sup>5</sup> executive and a quarrel ensued. Curran was latterly adopted by a majority and without any reconciliation between the LRC and the Liberals taking place – only the recovery of the moribund Palmer prevented further bickering concerning the Liberal ticket.<sup>6</sup>

Curran's selection dispute reveals the division within the LRC between those deeply suspicious of socialism and wishing to cooperate closely with the Liberals and those ILPers who pressed for a socialist and independent political party.<sup>7</sup> It is also perhaps an example of the tensions that existed regarding the 'voice' of the Labour Party and how it should go about presenting itself. The constituencies of Jarrow and South Shields were an eclectic mix of miners, shipbuilders, engineering workers, Tory dockland wards and rural and middle class areas.<sup>8</sup> Religion played a role, with Catholics supporting Palmer in elections past. Finding a language acceptable to all these distinct groups would not be easy for Curran.<sup>9</sup> Incredibly, Curran made it repeatedly clear that he was a trade unionist and not a Socialist – an attempt to attract more Liberal support.<sup>10</sup>

By the time a general election was called in December 1905, the Jarrow Liberal Party and the LRC were determined to run candidates against each other and not unite behind a single 'progressive' candidate like so many constituencies were doing across Britain in order to defeat the Conservatives and their Liberal Unionist allies. It is important to see Palmer's decision to stand again in the context of a determined effort made by an influential group of North East Liberals to prevent Labour's progress in the region. Liberal reactions to the threat from Labour were mixed, with some men like Thomas Cairns (Liberal candidate for Newcastle upon Tyne) and J.M. Robertson (Liberal candidate for Tyneside) believing in the progressive alliance while others such as Sir Walter Runciman, the ship-owner, and James Joicey, the coal owner, steadfastly opposed any policy of making way for Labour.

But Peter Curran, an Irishman by birth, was the LRC candidate for Jarrow in the January 1906 general election – and for the first time in over twenty years, Palmer would not be unopposed for Parliament.<sup>11</sup>

Palmer triumphed by a margin of over 3,000 votes – a testament to his ability to hold the Irish vote in Jarrow.<sup>12</sup> The extent to which Curran had been supported in the 1906 poll should not be dismissed, however – the bulk of his vote may well have come from the miners of the Hebburn area of the constituency, who may have felt neglected by Palmer. Curran's

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<sup>3</sup> Pelling, H. (1968) *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain*, St. Martin's Press, London, p. 133.

<sup>4</sup> The Independent Labour Party was a political affiliation of trade unionists.

<sup>5</sup> The Labour Representation Committee was the forerunner to the Labour Party.

<sup>6</sup> Bealey, F. & Pelling, H. (1958) *Labour and Politics 1900-1906*, MacMillan & Co. Ltd., London, p. 137.

<sup>7</sup> James, D., Jowitt, T. & Laybourn, K. (1992) *The Centennial History of the Independent Labour Party*, Keele University Press, London, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> For a description of the Jarrow constituency when it was first formed, see *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 9 November 1885.

<sup>9</sup> Tanner (1990) p. 235.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 237.

<sup>11</sup> Pelling (1968) p. 134.

<sup>12</sup> One fifth of the Jarrow electorate was Irish.

performance exemplifies Jarrow as a flashpoint for Liberal/Labour conflict. The 1906 poll in Jarrow was:

Palmer (Lib)	8,047
Curran (LRC)	5,093

The result can hardly be seen as a ringing affirmation of Jarrow Liberalism. While Curran had not come close to defeating Palmer, he had nevertheless secured a large proportion of the vote. It is entirely possible that Jarrow would have continued to support Liberal candidates in the future (the prospect of an eighty-eight year-old Palmer standing for re-election in 1910 was not a possibility) if Palmer himself had not died in June 1907. This was the cause of the by-election and a nightmare scenario for the Liberals.

Although they had won the general election with a resounding majority, local factors were still a dangerous variant for any party defending a seat in a by-election. Indeed, the Jarrow by-election of 1907 would be fought under peculiarly adverse conditions for the Liberals, who adopted London journalist S. Leigh Hughes as their candidate. Pete Curran stood for the newly formed Labour Party, the result of a merger between the LRC and various other socialist groups. Notably, for the first time ever, a Conservative stood as well as a Jarrow shipbuilding worker who stood as an Irish Nationalist (the result of Catholic discontent with the government's handling of the Irish Home Rule issue).<sup>13</sup> The Unionist was a pro-Tariff Reform barrister who talked of the need to revive the 'ruined industries' of Tyneside. The Liberals faced an extra problem in this sudden by-election; due to a lack of real opposition for twenty years, their party machine had atrophied, leaving Hughes' campaign adrift. British political historian Henry Pelling<sup>14</sup> believes the extra candidates were a gift to Curran. Although an Irishman himself, he could not expect to receive many Irish votes as they would either remain with the Liberals or swing to the Irish Nationalist. Curran knew that all he had to do was retain his 1906 vote and hope that Palmer's vote would split between the Liberal, the Unionist and the Irish Nationalist. The figures show that Palmer's support from 1906 did indeed splinter as Curran and his campaigners hoped, allowing him to triumph over the second-placed Conservative by over 760 votes.<sup>15</sup> Importantly, Curran was able to retain all but 600 votes of his previous attempt; once again counting on the support of the miners of Boldon Colliery (his colours were particularly conspicuous at West Boldon).<sup>16</sup> The Conservatives did surprisingly well for a party that had not contested the constituency since its creation from the North Durham Division in 1885, probably attaining votes from the tradesmen of Jarrow and South Shields.<sup>17</sup> The Irish Nationalist was the surprise loser of the by-election. Despite the high concentration of Irish immigrants in Jarrow, he bottomed the poll with just over two thousand votes.<sup>18</sup> The lukewarm response given to Labour in the 1900s by the shipbuilding unions should also be noted. A considerable proportion of the rank and file were Tories, which does much to explain the consistently high Conservative vote in

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<sup>13</sup> James *et al.* (1992) p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> Pelling is a highly respected British political historian of the twentieth century, famous for his works on the Labour Party and his pioneering of the study of twentieth-century electoral and party politics.

<sup>15</sup> See Appendix 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 5 July 1907.

<sup>17</sup> Purdue, A. W. (1982) 'Jarrow Politics, 1885-1914: The Challenge to Liberal Hegemony', *Northern History*, Vol. 18, p.195 and Pelling (1968) p. 135.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

Sunderland and the remarkable strength of the Conservative vote in Jarrow in 1907.<sup>19</sup> The 1907 Jarrow result was:

Curran (Lab)	4,698
Rose-Innes (Con)	3,930
Hughes (Lib)	3,474
O'Hanlan (Irish Nat.)	2,122

The Liberal-leaning *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* did not see any great significance in Curran's victory, arguing that his vote had actually dropped – 'not a victory for any party, nor a defeat for any other.'<sup>20</sup> Even the *Manchester Guardian* took an interest, arguing that 'there is nothing in the result of the election to put Liberals about... The falling off in the Liberal vote is only apparent, not real.'<sup>21</sup> In January 1910 this view would be proved correct as the Jarrow Liberals overhauled their campaign machine and found a perfect candidate with which to crystallise local support in the form of Charles Mark Palmer's son, Godfrey, who marshalled the Irish vote by supporting Home Rule.<sup>22</sup>

Palmer's triumph over Curran was a crushing blow to the North East Labour movement, who had high hopes of retaining this seat in January 1910. Another significant factor in Godfrey Palmer's victory was the support he gave to naval re-armament in a shipbuilding town suffering unemployment. With the Liberal/Irish split of 1907 papered over and a strong local candidate, the Liberals consequently regained the seat from Labour's Curran in the January 1910 general election by a margin of sixty-seven votes.<sup>23</sup> By December 1910, although this seat remained a three-way marginal, Labour slipped behind the Conservative and into third place, with Palmer enjoying another small majority of 110 over the second-placed Tory.<sup>24</sup> Curran's loss is easily explicable – the considerable Irish vote of the shipbuilding constituency was awarded to Godfrey Palmer, leaving Curran reliant on a low turnout to hold the seat.<sup>25</sup>

Curran's lone 1907 victory was seen by many as having more than local significance. Along with the Socialist Victor Grayson's victory at Colne Valley three weeks later many socialists greeted the events of July with some excitement. But as Pelling points out, Curran's victory was merely the result of the division of those forces which had voted for Palmer the previous year and an analysis of the voting shows that Curran's share of the vote was actually down as compared to 1906 by five percent.<sup>26</sup> The Conservative vote was also a considerable achievement in a seat which had never been contested by either a Conservative or Liberal Unionist before.<sup>27</sup> The Jarrow parliamentary by-election of June 1907 remains of historical fascination and importance for any British political historian. Despite it being a peculiarity in Liberal-dominated Tyneside of the 1900s, it does represent a significant victory for a Labour movement clearly threatening the Liberals in their innermost keeps.

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<sup>19</sup> James *et al.* (1992) p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> Pelling (1968) p. 136.

<sup>21</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 6 July 1907.

<sup>22</sup> Blewett, N. (1972) *The Peers, The Parties and The People: The British General Elections of 1910*, MacMillan, London, p. 256.

<sup>23</sup> Purdue (1982) pp. 195-196.

<sup>24</sup> Tanner (1990) p. 240, and Labour National Executive Committee Minutes, 24 February 1910.

<sup>25</sup> Bealey & Pelling (1958) p. 272.

<sup>26</sup> James *et al.* (1992) p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> Pelling, (1968) p. 135.

So 1907 was the year of change for many in the Jarrow constituency. The Liberals lost the seat, forcing them to change and adapt their campaigning tactics. The Labour Party won a North East seat for the first time ever, ensuring change for all members concerned.

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