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Scandals, cover-ups and resignations: Is Eastleigh the by-election to reinvigorate British politics?

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A high profile political resignation following a legal scandal, allegations of sexual misconduct, two political 'partners' tearing at each other's throats, controversial candidates grabbing the headlines for the wrong reasons and the future positions of the Prime Minister and his Deputy placed under the microscope. Not the plot for an overly-dramatic BBC political satire; but rather the context in which this week's Eastleigh by-election has been played out – a by-election hailed in the media as 'one of the most important since the war'.

Triggered by the resignation of Chris Huhne, the former Liberal Democrat cabinet minister who stepped down as an MP after admitting he perverted the course of justice, the contest is being fought against the back-drop of allegations of a 'cover-up' by senior LibDems over claims of sexually inappropriate behaviour against Lord Rennard, the former Liberal Democrat chief executive and by-election strategist. Rennard vehemently denies any wrong-doing.

But aside from all the LibDem controversy, it has been widely remarked that Eastleigh is significant because it provides a crucial litmus test for the 2015 General Election. It is a 'must-win' for both Coalition partners and defeat will auger badly for the General Election prospects of each, whilst making the leadership of both more vulnerable to a future challenge. For Labour, the prospect of failing to make any significant impact does not bode well for Ed Miliband's hopes of a majority in 2015.

Many of us can recall a number of other classic by-elections: Edge Hill in 1979; Christchurch in 1993; Leicester South in 2004 to name but a few. Ironically, the man credited with masterminding these, as well as other notable Lib-Dem/SDP victories, was none other than Lord Rennard. Who could script this level of political theatre?

But, are such by-election contests really as significant as they seem at the time, or do they merely represent a transitory distraction from the otherwise dreary and largely uncompetitive electoral contests that tend to characterise the broader UK electoral scene? Whilst Eastleigh and Bradford West, dubbed then as the 'Bradford Spring' following George Galloway's impressive victory for Respect, have captured at least some of the public's imagination, it is unlikely that polls in Rotherham, Croydon North and Middlesbrough, which happened in the intervening months, remain in the memories of all but the most ardent of political geeks. We tend to remember a few high profile by-elections, like Eastleigh, but the majority fail to cause any significant long-term ripples.

The latter by-elections were actually significant for highlighting the growing popularity of UKIP, and could be said to have subsequently played a part in influencing David Cameron's announcement of an 'in-out' referendum on Europe. In that sense, such by-elections can sometimes make an impact; but whether they really shape the longer-term electoral prospects of the parties is not always clear. After all, we've been here before with the impressive, but largely unfulfilled, promise of the SDP in the 1980s and, to a lesser extent, UKIP in the Noughties. The fact is that the significance of by-elections are hard to read at the time, given that parties have a habit of batting either well above or well below their average in such contests.

Eastleigh has certainly provided all the necessary ingredients for a classic by-election; a fiercely competitive contest with a good dose of controversy. It has attracted a flurry of heightened media focus, public attention and a number of high profile visits from senior members of each party. In that sense, Eastleigh, as with Bradford West, makes our democracy appear more dynamic than it actually is. So, perhaps the real significance of these contests lie, not in the actual result, but in the fact that they temporarily re-animate an electoral and party system that has otherwise provoked increasing levels of apathy. Anecdotally, one friend, who is a keen activist for the Conservatives, told me that the campaign has 'electrified' the grass-roots of the party. Similarly, the chance to temporarily inflict a wound on the Tories has clearly invigorated the LibDem campaign. If only all UK electoral contests were this energetic, compelling and competitive. Sadly, only a few of them ever are.

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