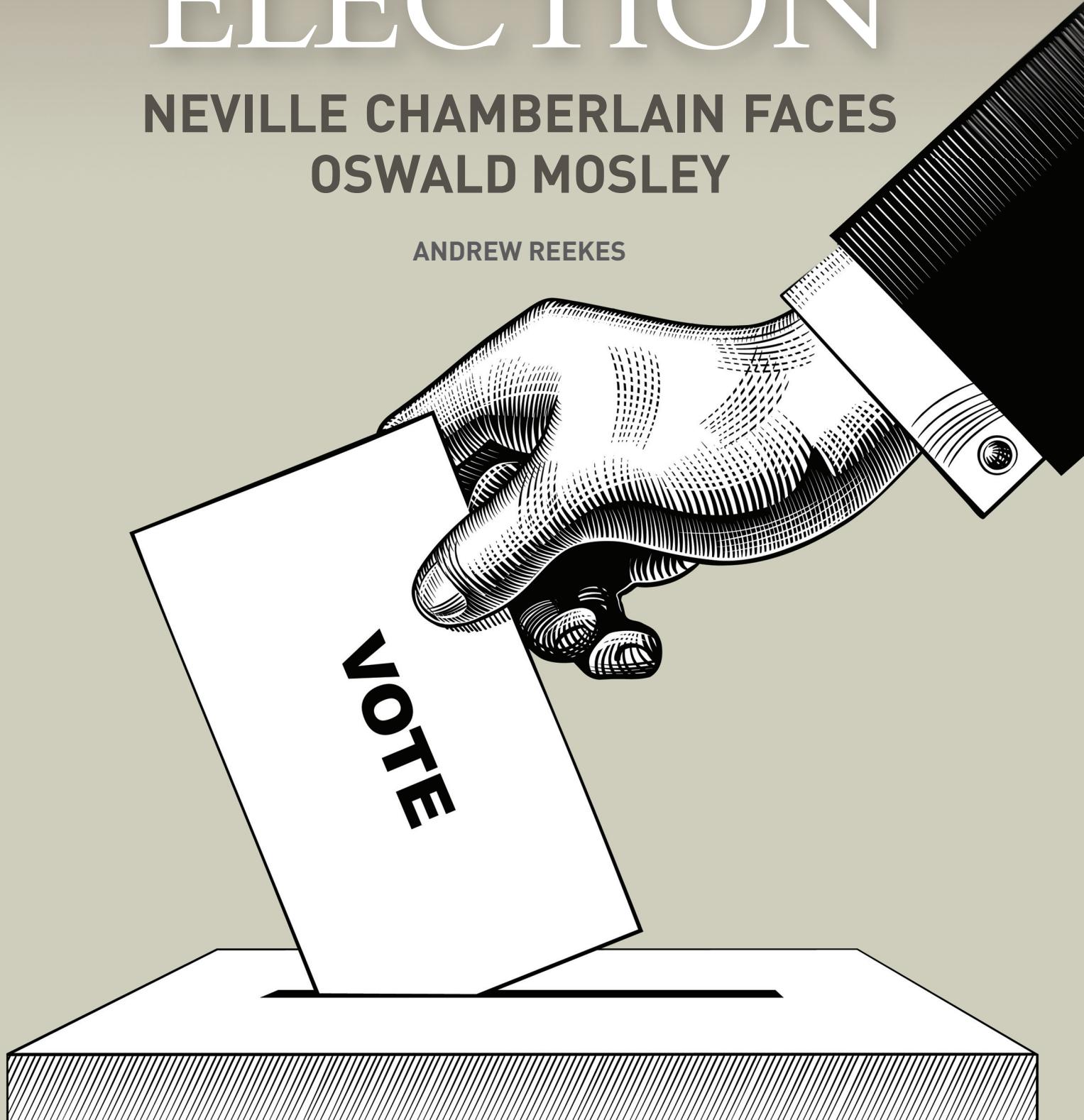


THE 1924 LADYWOOD ELECTION

NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN FACES
OSWALD MOSLEY

ANDREW REEKES



The 1924 Ladywood Election: Neville Chamberlain faces Oswald Mosley

At the end of the General Election prompted by the collapse of Britain's first – short-lived – Labour Government in October 1924, *The Times* thought the 'counting of the votes in the Ladywood division of Birmingham was the most dramatic event of the evening of election day'. Across the course of the three-week campaign the attention of the national press had been drawn to events in Birmingham, and especially to Ladywood, where the sitting Unionist MP, Neville Chamberlain, faced a belligerent and charismatic opponent, the new recruit to the Labour Party, Oswald Mosley. In the event Mosley came perilously close to unseating one of the Unionist's senior and most important figures.

Conservative optimism for the Ladywood Election

At first sight a tight contest in Ladywood, running to several recounts, seems an unlikely event, because there was a strong national swing to the Conservative (Unionist) party; the eventual election result on October 31st reflected this, for it won 405 seats to Labour's 146 (with the Liberals collapsing to 39 seats). Birmingham should have been a cakewalk for a party which had an iron hold on the city; only twenty years earlier the influence of the great Joseph Chamberlain had ensured Birmingham Unionists swept the board, winning all the local constituencies in the 1906 General Election, most with substantial majorities. At the same time, in the country at large the party was submerged in a Liberal flood tide. Joseph Chamberlain in truth exerted such an influence that not since his entering Parliament in 1876 did his party ever lose a Birmingham seat. Many still believed he had made Birmingham impregnable, including *The Times* political correspondent who reported at the start of the 1924 election campaign that a prominent member of the Labour Party 'told me that, in his view, Labour would not succeed in winning a single Birmingham division, for there was no-one sufficiently big to succeed'. The *Birmingham Daily Post* gave a local assessment which reflected the partiality of much of the city's press: 'neither is there any doubt that all the light and heavy artillery of the forces of Socialism and Communism will thunder in vain against these Unionist fortresses'.

Neville Chamberlain shared that optimism. He confidently expected to defeat Robert Dunstan, his tough Labour opponent. He had beaten him before, in the General Election of 1923. Now, with Dunstan embroiled in controversy after press scrutiny of his Communist party affiliation, victory should be easier still. Accusations

of sympathy for Bolshevism had tainted the outgoing Labour government and would continue to haunt the party throughout this campaign. Chamberlain was then buoyed by the news that Dunstan had been forced to stand down; 'My people are cock-a-hoop as they think it will be difficult to find anyone who will command so many votes', he wrote to his sister Hilda. Still, certain factors had given him pause; months earlier he had confided to his other sister Ida: 'If I were defeated, I would be very pleased to step gratefully into Edgbaston next door', a safe middle class seat. That he should consider doing so was a reflection of the fact that Ladywood, an overwhelmingly working-class constituency in central Birmingham, was suffering the national scourge of unemployment in the midst of a post-war depression, albeit to a lesser extent than those textile, mining and shipbuilding constituencies in the North. And as his electoral opponent would point out, the Rent Act of 1923 (entirely Neville Chamberlain's work) was controversial, raising rents for working men and 'giving the power to landlords to pitch tenants into the street'. So, Ladywood seemed fertile ground for socialism.

Mosley throws his hat in the ring

What rendered Chamberlain the more vulnerable was the news that Oswald Mosley had been selected by the Labour constituency party to be their Ladywood candidate in place of Dunstan. Privately, Neville veered between the bullish and the distinctly uneasy. On the one hand he wrote to his step-mother, Mary Chamberlain, that 'although the socialists are boasting freely that they would win Ladywood, certainly probably (sic) several other Birmingham seats, I shall be very disappointed if we don't hold everything and I don't increase my majority'. Yet he was nervous enough to write to Ida that, with the news of Mosley's candidature, 'I always seem to

The 1924 Ladywood Election: Neville Chamberlain faces Oswald Mosley



Ladywood's sitting MP representing the Chamberlain tradition.

come in for the hardest fighting (though) it is difficult to believe he could win in Ladywood'. Why the nervousness?

Oswald Mosley was indeed a formidable opponent. He had proved a star turn as a Conservative MP in 1918, a brilliant speaker and a well-connected, handsome, dashing and refreshingly youthful figure of huge promise. Soon enough though his distaste for his government's employment of Black and Tan violence in Ireland, and his disappointment at the paucity of its ideas for tackling unemployment, radicalised him and – abandoning the party – he underwent a conversion to socialism, joining the Labour Party. Ladywood would be his first outing in Labour colours; he was a headline signing who would naturally attract much media attention, both because he had crossed the floor of the House but also because he was wealthy and heir to a baronetcy, and a society beau. The Labour Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald was similarly star-struck, endorsing him enthusiastically in a letter to the Ladywood electors – 'We need Mosley in the House; he is one of our most brilliant young men'.

Mosley's decision to contest Ladywood was not a random one; instead it was made with great deliberation. The *Birmingham Daily Post* opined that 'it is common knowledge that one of the darling ambitions of the socialists is to get a wedge into this great stronghold of Unionism and that their bête noir is the Chamberlain family'. Oswald Mosley explained later in his autobiography *My Life*: 'I wanted to give some striking service to the party which had so well received me. The Chamberlains and their machine had ruled Birmingham for sixty years, first as Liberal-Radicals then as Conservative-Unionists. Their party machine at the time was probably the strongest in the country. We had six weeks to smash it'.

Chamberlain pushed back on the Defensive

Once the campaign was underway Mosley fought hard, Chamberlain calling him a 'dirty dog' for his tactics. Mosley showed Chamberlain little respect, for example dubbing him 'the landlord's hireling'; letters from ordinary voters published in the *Birmingham Daily Post* after the campaign expressed both outrage that at rallies he had called Chamberlain 'an old dud', and sympathy with Neville who had endured 'this sort of personal vilification'. Even if Mosley praised Annie Chamberlain, Neville's wife ('she worked magnificently on the other side in the street canvass'), he was consistently critical of Chamberlain – 'when it came to demagogery he was not in the ring; he had no appeal to the masses'. 'At the count he sat huddled in the corner either exercising iron self-control, or in a state of near collapse'. It may indeed be true that Neville was not a good campaigner; even his brother Austen wrote (to his wife, Ivy): 'It his coldness which kills... I had not realised how it affects people'.

If he was not warm and intuitive Chamberlain certainly worked hard and, if aware of criticisms, he was not deterred, for he told Mary Chamberlain that he 'had made

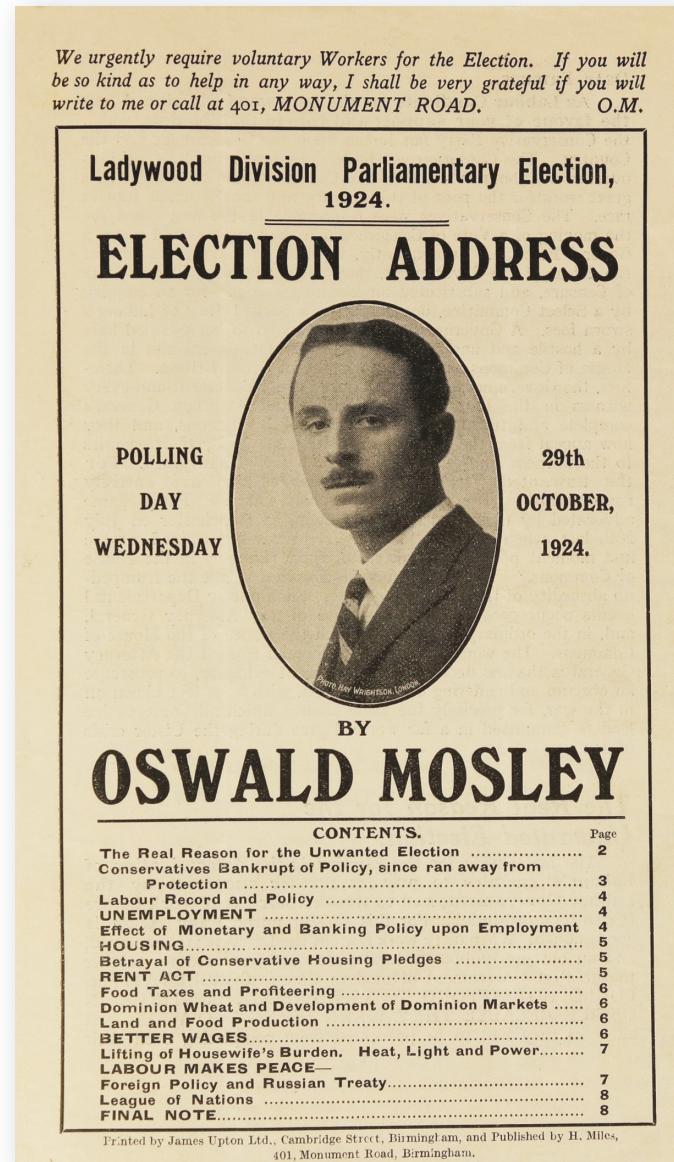
The 1924 Ladywood Election: Neville Chamberlain faces Oswald Mosley

fourteen speeches this week, three outside Birmingham, where meetings were all packed and intensely enthusiastic'. He dinned into his audiences the same message of the recklessness of Labour's loan to Bolshevik Russia ('the Labour Government are completely under the thumb of the Communists'), the imprudence of its repeal of the McKenna (food import) duties, and its impotence in the face of unemployment. Instead – predictably for a son of Joseph Chamberlain – he advocated tariffs on imported goods, with a preference for those from the Empire (Imperial Preference). Furthermore, an acknowledged expert on housing, he proposed another tranche of subsidised house building, to fulfil the promise of a 'land fit for heroes' made by politicians to those who fought in the Great War. He vowed to encourage Lord Weir's experiments with prefabricated steel and concrete houses. With reference to his opponents, he repeatedly, and strongly, deplored Labour's talk of class war, instead arguing that stable government and good administration from the Unionists could right the economy and improve society.

The Zinoviev letter raises Chamberlain's hopes

His hopes of re-election were boosted during the campaign by the publication in the *Daily Mail* of the Zinoviev letter, purportedly written by the Head of Comintern in Soviet Russia, encouraging British communists to engage in seditious activities. 'If I am not expecting a large majority it should certainly be larger than before, after the explosion of this bomb', Neville wrote to Ida in late October, days before election day. 'Never do I recollect such a sensation during an election', he continued. Although later proved a forgery, at the time the Zinoviev letter unquestionably damaged the Labour Party; that it does not appear to have done so in Ladywood was largely because Mosley was campaigning so effectively.

Where Chamberlain and Labour's critics deprecated the Labour Government's record in office, Mosley loudly trumpeted it, celebrating its halving of food taxes, Wheatley's 'colossal housing scheme' (which invested in public housing), and the bringing of 'peace to Europe'. He developed a rather tendentious conspiracy theory in his election address to voters in the Ladywood division, to explain Labour's fall: 'the real reason for this election is the determination of Labour's enemies to prevent its further successes and to wreck its great work before it can be completed. The Conservatives could not afford to let



Oswald Mosley robustly defends Labour's record.

'Labour continue in office because they were doing so well'. Looking to the future he undertook to cure unemployment, to nationalise the banks, the mines and the railways, and to raise real wages, 'to save our land and to wipe away the disgrace of intolerable wrongs and unbearable suffering'; the 'positive remedy for that suffering was Socialism'.

Mosley – an appealing and brilliant campaigner

A recitation of his policy promises does scant justice to the excitement and energy Mosley brought to the campaign. He came to Birmingham with an established reputation as a brilliant performer: Leslie Hore-Belisha, a senior Conservative, recorded his impressions of Mosley the

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platform orator at this time, ‘dark, aquiline, flashing: tall, thin, assured; defiance in his eye, contempt in his forward chin’. He was a master of both the polished and the savage phrase; in his opening Labour Party meeting of the Ladywood campaign Mosley had scorned the ‘notorious Birmingham caucus whose wooden effigies of greatness had been set up like images’, and it was his business ‘to shatter the citadel to its foundation’. The left-leaning Birmingham Town Crier reflected on Mosley’s effect on potential voters in the city: ‘None of us who went through that fight with him will ever forget it. His power over his audience was amazing, and his eloquence made even hardened Pressmen gasp in astonishment’. Force of personality steadily recruited disciples to the Mosley cause, and he exulted in the visible signs that he was gaining on Chamberlain: ‘It was a joyous day when in the courtyards running back from the streets in the Birmingham slums we saw the blue window cards coming down and the red going up’. Furthermore, he was greatly helped by his wife Lady Cynthia who proved a formidable operator in her own right, as might be expected of a daughter of Lord Curzon, former Viceroy of India, and of someone who had espoused strong socialistic views long before her husband’s conversion to the cause. She would later go on to be one of the first women MPs, representing Stoke-on-Trent for Labour in 1929.

Together Oswald and Cynthia Mosley proved an alluring couple; many working people in Birmingham succumbed to their charm for, as the historian Martin Pugh puts it: ‘a link with powerful, wealthy and glamorous men and women appealed strongly to those who endured humdrum and deprived lives’. The Oswald Mosley papers at the University of Birmingham contain letters from the public to Cynthia in October 1924 which illustrate that mixture of deference and gratitude the Mosleys often inspired: one citizen wrote ‘it is very noble-minded of you both to forego high social life and to come into the slums of this city, and to try and raise the workers from their unjust social position into which capitalism has forced them’.

Mosley faces media hostility

However, their wealth and connections goaded enemies in a largely Unionist local Press. Mosley was incensed by a story circulated by the *Birmingham Mail*, and then repeated by the *Birmingham Daily Post*, to the effect that Oswald and Cynthia had been noted retreating during

the campaign to a London hotel, wearing their most expensive and elegant clothes, and generally enjoying the high life. The implication was that they were only playing at socialist politics, and that they were not serious about this campaign. Mosley denied the story vigorously, enraged especially by the attack on his wife: ‘no-one attacks a woman except a whipped cur’. Although the matter was eventually settled quietly with the *Mail*, what the incident highlighted was the fact that many observers remained uncomfortable with, and suspicious of, Mosley’s speedy leftwards trajectory, from a rich, society milieu into the company of horny-handed socialists. Most of Birmingham’s newspapers were consistently hostile and would remain so a few years later, when Mosley fought neighbouring Smethwick in a by-election.

Election night and a close-run contest

That hostility could not stop Mosley’s inexorable advance across the duration of campaign and on polling day voting was desperately close. Election night saw several thousands gather at the Town Hall where votes in eight of the twelve Birmingham constituencies would be counted. By midnight the Town Hall balconies were crowded with Labour supporters, one of whom, Lady Cynthia Mosley, featured prominently in an appropriately vivid red hat, clutching a large bouquet of red roses. They sensed that in Ladywood there might be a real surprise; other results were announced by the Lord Mayor, the returning officer, around midnight but there was still no result for Ladywood, so tight was it. The first count had Chamberlain in by seven, then Mosley with a majority of two. Chamberlain immediately asked for a recount; it was alleged that this time Labour votes disappeared through nefarious Unionist activity, Mosley recalling in *My Life*: ‘uproar with men fighting in the crowded public gallery and people pointing to the floor as they bellowed ‘That one’s got ‘em in his pocket’. Only after this recount was Neville Chamberlain declared the winner at 4am, with a majority of 77.

Despite defeat Oswald Mosley celebrated; he was buoyed up by the news that at last Birmingham’s Unionist fortress had been breached, with Sir Herbert Austin’s defeat in the Kings Norton division at the hands of Labour’s Robert Dennison. For the first time Labour had gained one of Birmingham’s twelve seats. But even more, Mosley revelled in the fright he had given to Neville Chamberlain. ‘A downpour of rain washed the lifeless body of the last of the Chamberlains back to

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Mary Evans / SZ Photo / Scherl

Sir Oswald and Lady Cynthia Mosley meet the electorate.

'Westminster', he said. He had in fact broken the spell of the Chamberlain's invulnerability in Birmingham. Neville knew it and thereafter hastened to accept the offer to stand in the safe Edgbaston constituency next time round. Others drew lessons from the contest. His sister Hilda, so often a sage commentator on her brothers' affairs, concluded that the vote had held up in previous Birmingham elections because 'Tariff Reform is such a rallying cry; the less full-blooded call this time round weakened our position'. Logic therefore dictated a renewed attempt by Neville and Austen to get the Unionists to adopt Joseph Chamberlain's, indeed Birmingham's own, patent economic prescription, that of tariffs. The *Birmingham Daily Post* – another to conduct a post-mortem – believed that the arrival of a Liberal candidate to fight Chamberlain and Mosley split the anti-Socialist vote and damaged Neville's prospects. It also argued that 'these results (the whole of Birmingham) suggest that a real intensification of educational work by the Unionist party is needed'. In other words, the party, Neville included, had complacently allowed its opponents to make the running and needed to promote its policies more vigorously.

The aftermath

By the time the next Ladywood election came along in 1929 both of the candidates from 1924 had abandoned the field of battle – Neville for the safety of Edgbaston,

and Mosley for his successful foray into Smethwick, where he won a spectacular by-election victory in 1926. In 1929 Labour secured an extremely narrow victory in Ladywood by 11 votes, but two years later the Unionists regained the seat as nationally Labour collapsed in the wake of the global financial crisis. By then Oswald Mosley had proved his critics right, abandoning what he perceived to be a sclerotic Labour Party to create his own New Party, an avowedly populist organisation expressing Mosley's own preference for dramatic action in desperate times.

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