

# Commentary on Oldham East & Saddleworth Poll

by Lord Ashcroft, KCMG

Labour look set to hold the Oldham East & Saddleworth seat rather more comfortably than they did at the general election. For all the speculation, this by-election was always Labour's to lose.

The Liberal Democrats, Labour's closest local challengers, have lost well over half their national support since last May. The idea of the Conservatives springing to victory from third place in a Greater Manchester constituency at a time of tough spending cuts from a Tory-led government always seemed unlikely. It would take some explaining, then, were Ed Miliband to let this seat slip through his fingers.

Voting intentions are 46% Labour, 29% Lib Dems, and 15% Conservatives. Barring a substantial shift in the last few days of campaigning – which seems unlikely given that 91 per cent of Labour voters say they probably will not change their minds – we can expect a swing from the Liberal Democrats to Labour of around 8 per cent since the general election.

However as with most things in politics it is not quite as straightforward as that. The Lib Dem vote is down by just 3 points since the General Election.

This represents a much more resilient performance than the national polls would suggest, having recently put the party at record low levels of support.

This may be due in part to Elwyn Watkins, the Lib Dem candidate who was defeated in May and, having campaigned for that result to be annulled, is standing again on Thursday. (The poll asked about people's intention to vote for a named candidate, not just their party).

Nearly a third of those who voted Liberal Democrat at the general election have gone to Labour, with many of those saying the party's role in the coalition or their u-turn on tuition fees was a major factor in their decision.

However, around a third of 2010 Tory voters are intending to vote for their coalition partners.

They see Mr Watkins as more likely to stop Labour than their own candidate, Kashif Ali: only 13 per cent of those who voted Conservative at the general election think the party will win on Thursday, and a number admitted that they were planning to vote tactically, seeing the Tories as a wasted vote at this by-election.

But those switching from the Lib Dems to Labour hold the key to the result. They are by far the most damning of any voters when it comes to the coalition's performance: just 9 per cent of them say the government is doing well, compared to 16 per cent of Labour voters generally and 39 per cent of all voters in the constituency.

They are particularly exercised by spending cuts. Only 46 per cent of this group agree that the proposed cuts are "necessary and unavoidable" – well below the average for all voters (63 per cent) and lower even than among public sector workers in the seat (59 per cent).

Nearly two thirds of these Lib Dem-Labour switchers think the coalition is "instinctively hostile to public services" and using the deficit as an excuse for cuts, compared to only 47 per cent of voters overall. Only 5 per cent of this group say they may yet change their mind how to vote, making them the most determined of any group of voters.

Not all the news is good for Labour. More than three quarters of all voters, including a clear majority of those who intend to vote Labour on Thursday, think the last Labour government "must accept a large part of the blame" for Britain's economic problems; Mr Miliband is unlikely to succeed in his campaign to persuade the electorate that this idea is a "big lie" put about by the coalition.

He and Alan Johnson trail David Cameron and George Osborne by 37 to 22 per cent when it comes to trust on the economy, even in this Labour constituency.

As for whether the by-election should be happening at all, three quarters of voters in the seat (including a majority of Labour voters) think Phil Woolas "did make false statements about his opponents and this probably affected the result", so rerunning the election was the right decision. At the same time, Lib Dem voters were the only group to disagree that "what Phil Woolas was accused of was no worse than what goes on all the time in election campaigns".

The Lib Dems' likely failure to capture the seat will not be for want of effort: local voters claim to have received more leaflets, letters and phone calls, and seen more posters and street stalls, from the Liberal Democrats than the other parties – though Labour are close behind.

The opportunity was taken to ask whether people would vote differently were a single coalition candidate on offer, rather than the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats standing separately.

According to that poll, Labour would do very slightly better, and the coalition's combined total would fall from 44 per cent to just below 40 per cent.

Only 77 per cent of those intending to vote Conservative on Thursday would vote for a combined candidate, with 14 per cent saying they would not vote at all, 2 per cent going to Ukip and 4 per cent saying they would vote Labour.

Lib Dem voters were even less keen – only two thirds would vote for a combined candidate, with nearly a fifth saying they would stay at home.

There is much food for thought here for all the parties including how the Conservatives deal with these complex situations in the future.

## OLDHAM EAST & SADDLEWORTH POLL, JANUARY 2011

1,503 adults in the Oldham East & Saddleworth constituency were interviewed by telephone on 5 and 6 January 2011. Data have been weighted to be representative of all adults living in the constituency.

### 1. BY-ELECTION VOTING INTENTION

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Debbie Abrahams, the Labour candidate	46% (+14% since GE)
Elwyn Watkins, the Liberal Democrat candidate	29% (-3%)
Kashif Ali, the Conservative candidate	15% (-11%)
Others	10% (-)

**Are you fairly sure that is you're going to vote for [that party] in the by-election on January 13th, or do you think you may well change your mind between now and then?**

	ALL	Labour voters	Con voters	Lib Dem voters
I'm fairly sure that's what I'll do	87%	91%	86%	87%
I may well change my mind	11%	9%	14%	10%

### 2. REASONS FOR SWITCHING

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**What is the main reason you have decided to vote for [that party] having voted for [a different party] at the general election a few months ago?** [303 respondents saying they will vote for a different party at the by-election from the one they voted for at the general election]

Disapprove of Lib Dems role in coalition/u-turn on tuition fees	28%
Voting tactically/Conservative is wasted vote	10%
Didn't like Phil Woolas	5%
Become disillusioned with all main parties	3%
Didn't like Gordon Brown	3%
Like the Lib Dem candidate/legal stand	3%
Like the Conservative candidate	2%
Impressed with Conservatives in govt	1%
Don't Lib Dem candidate/legal appeal	1%
No answer/Don't know	44%

### 3. PERFORMANCE OF PARTY LEADERS

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Please rate the following people for their performance on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means “terrible” and 10 means “excellent”.

	ALL	Labour voters	Con voters	Lib Dem voters
David Cameron	4.61	3.35	7.38	6.25
Ed Miliband	4.40	6.47	3.37	3.74
Nick Clegg	3.96	2.92	5.39	5.95

### 4. LOCAL CAMPAIGN ACTIVITY

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We’re interested in the extent to which people locally have heard from the political parties over the last few weeks. Please can you tell me whether Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats have done each of the following:

	Labour	Conservatives	Lib Dems
Delivered leaflets or newspapers to your door	71%	57%	72%
Put up posters or billboards in your area	31%	26%	42%
Knocked on your door	21%	7%	19%
Written a personally addressed letter to you	37%	25%	57%
Set up stalls or handed out leaflets in your area	30%	23%	33%
Phoned you	19%	5%	20%
Sent you an email	2%	1%	2%

### 5. THE BY-ELECTION AND THE COURT DECISION

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As you may know, the by-election is happening because a court annulled the result of the vote in this constituency at the general election in May. This was because the judges found that Labour’s Phil Woolas, who narrowly won the election in May, had knowingly made false statements about his Liberal Democrat opponent, which may have influenced how some people voted. Please say if you agree or disagree with the following statements.

	Agree	Disagree
Phil Woolas did make false statements about his opponents and this probably affected the result, so it is right that the election is being re-run	75%	19%
The Liberal Democrat candidate, having been narrowly defeated in the general election, is just being a bad loser and should not have dragged the case through the courts, causing this by-election	40%	51%
All political parties insult their opponents and distort the policy positions of opposing candidates and what Phil Woolas was accused of was no worse than what goes on all the time in election campaigns	62%	31%
Voters are used to the rough and tumble of an election campaign, and when they reach their decision it is wrong for judges to overturn the result	48%	43%

## 6. PERFORMANCE OF THE COALITION GOVERNMENT

Please say how well or badly you think the coalition government is doing so far overall.

	ALL	Labour voters	Con voters	Lib Dem voters
Very well	4%	1%	9%	7%
Quite well	36%	15%	70%	63%
Quite badly	29%	38%	13%	17%
Very badly	27%	45%	7%	9%

## 7. THE ECONOMY, THE DEFICIT AND PUBLIC SPENDING

The coalition government is committed to a range of public spending cuts to reduce Britain's budget deficit, which has been running at more than £160 billion a year. Thinking about the government's planned cuts, please say if you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

	Agree	Disagree
However unpleasant they may be, the public spending cuts being proposed by the coalition government are necessary and unavoidable	63%	33%
The coalition government is cutting spending because it is instinctively hostile to public services and the public sector – it is just using the budget deficit as an excuse	47%	47%
The last Labour government must accept a large part of the blame for the economic problems that Britain faced at the end of its time in government	77%	20%
The Conservatives seem to be getting their way over spending cuts despite the presence of the Liberal Democrats in the coalition government	76%	15%
The coalition government is right that we needed to start cutting back on public spending to deal with the deficit, but they are cutting too deeply and too quickly	74%	22%

With our economy facing challenges in the months ahead, who do you most trust to manage the economy in the best interests of Britain David Cameron, Nick Clegg and the Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne or Ed Miliband and the Shadow Chancellor Alan Johnson?

	ALL	Labour voters	Con voters	Lib Dem voters
Cameron, Clegg & Osborne	37%	12%	85%	74%
Miliband & Johnson	22%	58%	1%	7%
Neither	28%	20%	11%	11%

## 8. BY-ELECTION RESULT EXPECTATIONS

Regardless of which Party you might vote for, which Party do you think is most likely to win the by-election in Oldham East & Saddleworth?

	ALL	Labour voters	Con voters	Lib Dem voters
Labour	42%	73%	35%	23%
Liberal Democrats	32%	12%	41%	66%
Conservatives	6%	5%	18%	2%

## 9. A LIB-CON PACT?

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If, instead of the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives standing separate candidates in next week's by-election, there was a single candidate representing both parties and standing on behalf of the coalition government, would you vote for Labour, the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition or another party – or do you think you probably wouldn't vote at all?

Labour	46%
Conservative-Lib Dem coalition	39%
Others	15%