

WHY SOUTHGATE IS A REASONABLE RESULT FOR THE GOVERNMENT

There have been five by-elections in Conservative-held seats in this Parliament. The pattern in each has been strikingly similar. All five seats have had majorities between 12,000 and 15,500; all showed a reduced Conservative vote; all showed a substantial swing to the Alliance; all showed a terrible Labour performance. This pattern has repeated itself from Penrith only six weeks after the Election to Southgate 18 months after the Election. The deduction from this is that the pattern of voting in Southgate has nothing to do with the presumed popularity or unpopularity of the Government at any one time since exactly the same pattern occurred when a time with the Government was very ~~un~~popular. *e at Penrith* It is merely a normal pattern of voting in a safe Government seat with nothing at stake for the voters.

Logically, since the pattern of voting in each by-election has been similar so has the result. Portsmouth, with an Alliance majority of about 1,000, was the worst result; Southgate with a Government majority of 4,700 was the best. Factors which may have influenced the Southgate result on the favourable side include:

- (i) a very good Conservative candidate;
- (ii) a popular former Member;
- (iii) a still-functioning Party machine

Factors which may have influenced the Portsmouth result on the unfavourable side, which were not present in Southgate include:

- (i) a contentious selection procedure in which a local candidate was turned down;

- (ii) a good local Alliance candidate;

- (iii) a practically moribund local Party machine.

In addition, the safety margin in Portsmouth was lower than that at Southgate with only a 12,000 majority to defend.

All this tends to confirm the points made in my previous note to you about by-election results. Regardless of the success or popularity of the Government, governing parties have been losing by-elections for years. After all, this Government won a record majority in 1983 after a Parliament in which they had lost four out of seven Conservative-held seats and came within a whisker of losing a fifth. That is the good news. The bad news is that in a Conservative-held seat with a majority of 15,000 or less, it is in serious danger of being lost in a by-election simply on the normal by-election voting pattern.