

# **Liberals, Labour and Leicester – The 1913 By-Election in Local and National Perspective**

*by John Pasiiecznik*

One of Leicester's most dramatic election battles took place in June 1913 when the Liberals, Conservatives and British Socialist Party fought a by-election in the borough. Most attention was focused on the fledgling Labour Party which did not contest the seat. Voting on June 27th took place amid accusations of treachery aimed mostly at Labour Party Secretary, Ramsey MacDonald — who held the second Leicester seat — and who was a member of the Labour Party National Executive Committee which decided not to run a candidate.

As this article reveals, Labour was in a dilemma. Following the national *Lib-Lab Pact* of 1903, the Liberals agreed not to put up a second candidate in Leicester which enabled future Labour Party Leader Ramsey MacDonald to become an MP. But ten years on should Labour still adhere to the pact? If the second seat was contested, the agreement would end; if Labour did not fight, the party could not claim to be truly independent of all other parties. The singular events of the by-election in the double-member seat of Leicester forms part of the city's rich political history.

Leicester was a Radical stronghold in Victorian Britain. The Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 ushered in Whig supremacy. The transfer of power was total and long-lasting. Except for the 1861 by-election, the Whigs (later the Liberals) won every seat in the double-member constituency in a general or by-election from 1837 to 1895.

Between 1885-1910, Leicester had the lowest Conservative vote in general elections of any East Midlands town or city. 'Liberalism enjoyed a total and unchanging supremacy in Leicester between 1836 and 1914', wrote Jack Simmons.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this included religious non-conformity, and the dominant boot and shoe and hosiery trades whose employees adhered to Gladstonian Liberalism. Around the turn of the century, though, Liberalism was spurned by small groups of local people.

During the weak Liberal Government of 1892-95, the Independent Labour Party was formed (1893) and the Leicester Independent Labour Party was established in 1894. It hoped that with the spread of socialist ideas, improved communications, increased literacy, an extended franchise and more effective trade unionism, it would have more influence.

Independent Labour Party candidates in Leicester polled more than 4,000 votes in the 1894 by-election and 1895 general election. The Leicester Independent Labour Party (ILP) grew remarkably quickly — from 54 members at its inception, to 225 in 1898 and 800 in 1912 making it the second largest branch in the country after Bradford. The figure increased to 2,300 in 1918. Most ILP candidates at local and national level were working class in origin which was in stark contrast to the Liberals. When the Leicester Labour Representation Committee (formed nationally in 1900) was set in 1902, the ILP formed the largest group and continued — as nationally — to be 'independent'. The ILP continued

to sponsor candidates in Leicester after the local Labour Party branch was set up (shortly after the party nationally was founded in 1906). The National Union of Boot & Shoe Operatives was one of the first unions to affiliate to the Labour Representation Committee, and local footwear operatives were 'strongly socialist' in outlook according to Keir Hardie one of the ILP founder members. The Leicester Trades Council, which supported Ramsey MacDonald in Leicester in the 1900 general election, became known as the 'local parliament of Labour'. MacDonald was an efficient organiser, and his ILP-sponsored candidature saw him gain 4,000 votes in 1900, beating one of the Liberals which was a notable achievement considering the favourable circumstances for the Tory government during the 'Khaki Election'. Liberals in Leicester were irked, as the appearance of an ILP candidate allowed the Conservatives to capture their first Leicester seat for nearly 40 years. MacDonald was involved in the purchase of the *Leicester Pioneer* newspaper which became the official organ of the Leicester Labour Representation Committee (LRC) and was popular with the working classes due to the social activities it laid on.

After his unsuccessful attempt in Leicester, MacDonald was convinced that a party to the left of the Liberals had little hope of improving its parliamentary position unless it formed a pact, even though critics said that the LRC would lose its separate identity and purpose.

A *Lib-Lab* entente was concluded after secret negotiations between MacDonald and Jesse Herbert, private secretary to the Liberal Chief Whip, Herbert Gladstone, in September 1903. This would allow the LRC to have at least 17 straight fights with Conservatives. (The *Lib-Lab* pact was called 'an act of unforgiveable electoral generosity' by a future Liberal leader Jeremy Thorpe<sup>2</sup>). After the pact, the Liberals agreed to select just one candidate in Leicester in 1906 which led to MacDonald and the Liberal Henry Broadhurst being elected.

The general election resulted in a massive Liberal victory. Twenty nine LRC candidates were successful. After the second election of 1910, Labour MPs increased to 42, with the Liberals still in government. Between 1910 and the Leicester by-election, Labour fought nine by-elections and came bottom every time. Due to a disagreement between Labour and the Liberals at Hanley in 1912, where Labour had not expected a Liberal to stand, the Conservatives won on a minority vote as they did on several other occasions. The *Lib-Lab* pact worked in Leicester between 1906-1910, but there was agitation for a second Labour candidate well before the bitter events of June 1913.

MacDonald could consider himself extremely unfortunate that a vacancy occurred in his own constituency. By 1913 the Labour member for Leicester was one of the two most important individuals in the party. In 1911 he was elected Chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party, and in a speech in Leicester on May 13th 1913 he said that soon there would be only two parties, one representing socialism and the other materialism. A by-election occurred after the resignation of sitting Liberal MP Eliot Crawshay-Williams who was elected with MacDonald in 1910. Crawshay-Williams' affair with the wife of Liberal MP Hubert Carr-Gomm was made public, and he resigned. Leicester was plunged into its third by-election in less than 20 years. The campaign would be short as the by-election date on June 27th was announced just a fortnight previously on June 13th. Liberal leaders nationally recommended barrister Gordon Hewart, and this was carried unanimously by the Leicester Liberal Association. Alured Wilshire was the Conservative candidate. He finished bottom of the poll in Leicester in the second 1910 election with 22.3% of votes cast. The Tories were not confident as they had had just two successes since 1832.

On June 15th, the Leicester ILP Executive instructed ILP delegates to vote for ILPer and Leicester Labour Party Chairman, George Banton, as candidate. Unlike many other constituencies, the ILP sponsored candidates in Leicester. The local Labour Party voted

overwhelmingly to contest the seat, and anger was vented at the *Lib-Lab* pact as during the second 1910 election, MacDonald should have been the senior member, local Labour activists claimed. 'We have no grievance against the way in which the Liberal Party has acted but we feel we have the right to manifest our independence. We resent the idea that we are bound to the Liberal Party. We are struggling to emphasise that we are independent.'<sup>3</sup> Banton said. Local Tories were pleased, but Liberals were dismayed. The *Leicester Daily Post* commented:

We are loathe to believe that the Labour Party which gained its present seat by Liberal co-operation is to make a grab at the second seat as well.

The paper warned:

If they [the Tories] could win the seat, it would be such a crushing blow to the government that it would scarcely survive.<sup>4</sup>

Both the Labour Party National Executive Committee (NEC) and ILP National Administrative Council (NAC) had to agree a nomination. MacDonald, like the NEC, was reluctant to contest the seat. He had said that 'it would be a mistake to fight'<sup>5</sup> as the party would lose, and this would be difficult to explain to the country. NAC member Arthur Henderson admitted that no other by-election had engaged the attention of the NEC as much as the present one. The NAC, with Hardie as chairman, was also reluctant to fight as it would be costly. When the NAC's treasurer Benson told local activists, he 'was subjected to a long and determined heckling in which much feeling was displayed.'<sup>6</sup> The NAC would only sanction Banton's candidature if the NEC contributed 75% of the costs and the local party 25%. The latter agreed to put up £100 which was 'belated and quite inadequate'<sup>7</sup> according to Benson. Henderson opposed fighting for electoral and strategic reasons, and reminded delegates that if the seat was contested 'it would be difficult or impossible not to fight both at a general election'.<sup>8</sup> The Tories would win on a minority vote and a general election 'would be brought appreciably nearer and Labour were not ready for one'.<sup>9</sup> MacDonald's seat would be in danger in the future if the vacancy was contested, he added. NEC minutes record that 'Henderson was subjected to many angry interruptions when giving reasons against a contest.'<sup>10</sup> After the four hour meeting, delegates voted 63-9 to contest the seat, but on June 19th the NEC, including MacDonald, quashed any hopes of a Labour candidate standing by voting decisively 10-1 not to contest the seat.

Following the decision, Henderson said he was 'quite frankly, rocked', and thought that the episode 'had been a most dreadful shambles'.<sup>11</sup> The two biggest critics were ILPers Hardie and Fenner Brockway. Hardie said that pact was not binding and felt that 'a great mistake was made in not contesting'.<sup>12</sup> With MacDonald himself saying a Labour candidate could obtain 8,000 votes, the seat could be won and the government 'would have resigned as a consequence'.<sup>13</sup> Hardie welcomed a general election. Not only were Labour not contesting, they did not support the British Socialist Party candidate (see below), and this meant Labour 'despised' the working class and now stood outside that class. He urged ILPers not to allow their identity to be merged with Labour. Brockway, a lifelong MacDonald critic, and editor of the *Labour Leader* newspaper, wrote that when the by-election was announced the local Labour movement was 'pulsating with life and eager to come to grips with the forces of capitalism'.<sup>14</sup> But the NEC's decision undermined rank and file enthusiasm, and proved that Labour was satisfied with Liberalism and tied to the Liberals. 'Leicester should have fanned the flame of fire of socialism. Instead it will, I'm afraid, tend to quench it',<sup>15</sup> Brockway wrote. He added that Labour was just as much despised as the Liberals. Evidence suggests that the NAC scuttled Banton's candidature by refusing to finance it, but the corollary of this is that if MacDonald died or resigned

it also could not afford to fight the seat. After 1910 the Leicester ILP also opposed a fight and made no preparation but when the announcement was made 'members were caught up by the election fever'.<sup>16</sup> So the Leicester Labour Party (including ILPers) decided to fight after the by-election was announced, but this gave the NAC the excuse to say it too had too little time to raise sufficient money. The NAC blamed the local Labour Party for the delay and misunderstanding when it was the NAC who ultimately shirked responsibility.

It seemed like a fight between the Liberals and Conservatives, but when news of the NEC's decision filtered through from London, the local branch of the small British Socialist Party convened a meeting and nominated Edward Hartley, a Bradford born engineer, to stand as 'the Socialist and Labour candidate'. The former ILPer had finished bottom in three previous elections including Newcastle in 1908 where, again, Labour did not run a candidate due to the *Lib-Lab* pact. The British Socialist Party resolved to 'Smash MacDonaldism and stand for socialism'.<sup>17</sup>

Hewart supported largely outdated Liberal policies which carried just enough political weight before 1914. He was an old-fashioned Radical supporting Gladstone and Cobden. An 'uncompromising free trader',<sup>18</sup> Hewart believed this tenet was the foundation of Leicester's prosperity. Tory food taxes would affect our health, and tariff reforms meant 'taxed leather, yarn and machinery and raw material' which would bring 'smaller produced, less employment and less wages for Leicester men'.<sup>19</sup> Hewart was not in tune with New Liberalism which favoured state intervention and spending on social services. The 1914-18 war showed the bankrupt nature of his policies. But before franchise reform, working class voters had no alternative to the Liberals. The main worry for local Liberals was that the working class might vote Tory to show their disapproval of the goings-on. Hewart was supported by the Leicester United Irish League which claimed 1,500 voters of Irish descent. A Labour paper *The Leicester Pioneer* supported Hewart lest the working class voted for Hartley. Commenting on Liberal reforms it said that the 'policitical and industrial freedom, and social well-being and prosperity that the working class enjoy is due, directly or indirectly, to the Liberals'.<sup>20</sup> Hartley opened the BSP campaign in storming fashion: 'What was the government's remedy for the women's question? The Cat-and-Mouse Bill! The government had introduced the methods of the bloody Czar. They heard of Tonypandy! They had heard of Featherstone! Who sent the soldiers to shoot down the workers! The Liberals!'<sup>21</sup> When he stood in a three-cornered contest in Bradford in 1906, the Liberals said he would let a Tory in. 'Which Tory do you mean?'<sup>22</sup> he replied, and the same applied to Leicester. Hewart was a lawyer and, according to Hartley, 'Lawyers had always been the jackals of the master class.'<sup>23</sup> BSP policies were not extreme *per se*, but its rhetoric was. By seeking to 'smash MacDonaldism', voters would be alienated. Hartley's views were more up to date than Hewart's, but he presented them in an alien, unBritish manner. However, the *Pioneer* commented that 'the demand to hear the socialist candidate was great'.<sup>24</sup> One local organisation the Church Socialist League, which was quite strong in Leicester, supported Hartley. Socialists and ILPers such as H. Hyndham and George Lansbury supported Hartley. Lansbury was angry at MacDonald's inaction in parliament. He said: 'Hartley has been chosen, supported and financed by working men, who had suffered a 30% increase in the cost of living under the Liberals.'<sup>25</sup> He strongly urged a vote for Hartley. Five local ILPers including vice-president Councillor Wilford supported Hartley. Wilford mocked the view that Labour was dependent on the Liberals as the *Mercury* and *Post* had both implored Labour voters to vote Liberal. It seemed as if the Liberals were dependent, he added.

The Conservative Wilshere was heckled at several meetings. He was uncommitted on

some issues such as the vote for women. Seeing what was happening in the campaign, Wilshire said a vote for him was a vote for purity in politics. Local Tories were confident that even with a BSP rather than a Labour candidate they would win on a minority vote.

MacDonald was under pressure later in the campaign. The BSP even wrote to him on notepaper headed 'Leicester Bye-election Committee 1913' asking him to speak in support of Hartley. MacDonald received another blow when deposed Labour candidate Banton wrote to the *Times* announcing that he would vote for Hartley and urged Labour voters to do likewise. ILP Treasurer Benson told MacDonald that his resignation was inevitable. In a Liberal and Labour-held double-member seat, the Labour MP is an object of suspicion 'for unless two Labour candidates [are run] you cannot prove that you do not hold your seat by favour of the Liberals. This is a serious handicap for the leader of an independent party.'<sup>26</sup> Leicester ILP Secretary Walter Borrett admitted that it was 'impossible to gauge the loss of confidence which the National Executive [Committee] or local officers may have sustained.'<sup>27</sup> The ILP had built up a strong local organisation but now 'we are threatened with resignations [and] if the BSP secure a large following, our hopes of recovery are most remote.'<sup>28</sup> MacDonald replied carefully: 'What this by-election is to answer is whether the [Labour] movement had a mind and will of its own'.<sup>29</sup> This was taken to mean that Labour voters should have enough sense not to vote for the BSP. If 'voting shows that Mr Hartley has the support of Labour electors...you will have to find someone else to fill my shoes' (Macdonald Papers (6/133)).<sup>30</sup> In an unsent letter MacDonald criticised those 'whose passion is misleading them into thoughtless and reckless support' for Hartley (MacDonald Papers 6/133).<sup>31</sup> Non-Labour newspapers made capital from the argument. The *Pall Mall Gazette* said the main question to be decided in Leicester 'is whether there is such a thing as a real Labour Party or whether the name merely covers 'an organised hypocrisy''<sup>32</sup> The *Post* said that when the BSP announced it wished to 'smash MacDonaldism' 'it is clear that the [Labour] Party is face to face with the greatest peril in its history.'<sup>33</sup> It is felt that MacDonald was partly to blame for the bitterness in Leicester. His ambiguous statements committed him to controversy. During the campaign he spent very little time in the borough, and he seemed nonchalant in his approach as he concluded two letters saying that he was going to spend the afternoon playing golf at Walton Heath. MacDonald virtually 'censured' the Leicester Labour Party, and typically turned the issue into a personal one — it was a question of individuals' loyalty to the Labour Party Secretary.

Just before polling day, Labour was embarrassed by a conversation between two MPs which was turned into a bogus 'manifesto' warning that MacDonald would resign if Labour voters chose Hartley in large numbers. Labour MP and ILPer George Roberts told Sir Maurice Levy, Junior Liberal Whip and Loughborough MP, that MacDonald was reported to have told a Leicester Labour Party deputation that if the by-election result 'showed a want of confidence' in him, he would consider his position. MacDonald was supposed to have allowed a statement to be read out at a Leicester Labour Party meeting on June 25th which Roberts attended. Levy immediately contacted Sir Tudor Walters, Liberal agent in Leicester, and MacDonald's statement was turned into a 'manifesto' and read out at a Liberal by-election meeting. Walters claimed that the NEC approved the statement. It read:

The action of the Leicester [Labour] Party is regarded as such a grave violation of national party discipline and such a graceless disregard of...MacDonald's position as will inevitably lead to a considerable disruption of party forces and must impel MacDonald to sever his connection with Leicester. Already other constituencies are open to him, therefore his party career is assured. Every Labour voter who is concerned to preserve party discipline, and who agrees to the desirability of retaining

MacDonald in Leicester should not give encouragement to the candidature of Hartley which is not recognised by the official Labour Party.<sup>34</sup>

The bogus manifesto led to uproar. MacDonald dismissed it as 'all nonsense' as neither the Labour Party nor the NEC had met on the day in question. He had no knowledge of the statement, but the damage was done. *The Post* said that the 'ruse was worth several thousand votes to the Liberals as people paraded with placards announcing: 'Every vote for Hartley is a vote against MacDonald.'<sup>35</sup> It is generally agreed that Levy had used an informal House of Commons conversation in an improper manner. It would have caused little damage if it had not been 'completely transformed somewhere in Leicester'.<sup>36</sup> Levy was criticised by Liberal colleagues.

An NEC meeting after the by-election on July 15th exonerated Roberts and blamed the Liberals. Two ILPers Hardie and Clynes wanted an investigation but this was defeated. At the 1914 ILP Conference, delegates were surprised that no investigation had taken place as Roberts had wanted 'to influence the situation in favour of the Liberals'<sup>37</sup> (ILP Conference Report 1914). Roberts, in fact, may have had ulterior motives as his Norwich seat was also a double-member, and if the Liberals had lost in Leicester on a minority vote, the party could have fielded two candidates in all double-member seats, threatening Roberts's position. Following publication of the manifesto, five ILP branches withheld affiliation fees. The manifesto undoubtedly affected Hartley's chances.

In the event, the result of the Leicester by-election, June 27th 1913 (one vacancy) was as follows:

	Votes	% of Votes Cast
G. Hewart (Lib).....	10,863	47.8
A. Wilshere (Con).....	9,279	40.8
E. Hartley (BSP).....	2,580	11.4
Liberal hold		Majority 1,584

The turnout of 84.2% was far higher than Leicester's two recent by-elections in 1894 and 1906. It was higher than the 81% average since 1885, and just slightly below the December 1910 figure. The Liberals majority was cut by over 4,000, but considering the party had been in office for seven and a half years, its vote held up well. Wilshere only improved his vote by 1,732 which must have been a disappointment. Leicester was not fertile Tory territory but with 1,600 new electors on the register plus the probable protest vote, the Tories should have been looking for a major upset. Leicester had gone much as predicted and the result was similar to other by-elections after 1910 which showed a swing against the government but not enough to lose it the seat. Local Liberals were delighted with the result. *The Post* said the most significant fact was 'the latest smashing defeat of Mr Hartley.'<sup>38</sup> Hartley's vote was poor, and both the manifesto and MacDonald's warnings proved decisive. Hartley said afterwards: 'My daughter said to me before I left home, 'I hope you get in Dad', and I replied that if I did, lass, it would be a bigger miracle than feeding the five thousand. We had no brass and they had plenty.'<sup>39</sup> The BSP leadership blamed the manifesto, and lack of Labour Party support, in a seat where they were fighting 'two Tories'. MacDonald 'the villain', was criticised. If Labour was as favourably disposed to the BSP as to the Liberals, Hartley would have won, the BSP asserted. The BSP newspaper *Justice* was buoyant though, and claimed that Hartley's vote signalled a rejection of the *Lib-Lab* agreement, and would 'leave its mark on the future of British Socialism'.<sup>40</sup> In the future there would be three parties: 'Capitalist, Labour and Socialist'.<sup>41</sup>

After the by-election, anger which had been simmering just below the surface began to boil over. At the 1914 Labour Conference, six months after the by-election, delegates

criticised the *Lib-Lab* pact and MacDonald's actions behind the scenes. T.F. Richards representing the Leicester Boot & Shoe Operatives was proud that Leicester had one of the best organised Labour constituencies. He felt that Labour should have contested the seat because it had a chance of winning. After the NEC's decision, six members left the local branch. D. McCarthy from the Leicester Labour Party understood the NEC's decision, but said that it did not take account of local feeling. MacDonald's seat was in no danger. Labour would make little headway if it did not fight seats such as this. McCarthy blamed the NAC for its financial inefficiency, and said the Leicester working class could have raised enough money. He concluded that the NEC and NAC exhibited a lack of courage and originality. ILPer H. Dubery defended the NAC which he claimed did not take MacDonald's position and possible Liberal retaliation into account when making its decision. The final speaker, Arthur Henderson, answered a question from Banton by saying that there was no rule prohibiting the NEC from endorsing a second Labour candidate in a double-member seat. But he added that Labour would not contest a second vacancy where a Labour MP already had one of the seats. Henderson asserted that the NEC did take local opinion into account. He had visited Leicester and felt that Labour would not win. The Leicester Labour Party wanted to move quicker than was practicable at the time. 'There was no possibility of building a successful party if local opinion only had to decide such a far-reaching and important question',<sup>42</sup> Henderson said. The BSP was not affiliated to the Labour Party, and thus it had no influence on the activities of the former. Mr Conley, of the Clothiers Operatives, said MacDonald's position was so strong that he would have defeated the Liberals in a future general election. He asserted that when the NEC considered the position 'it paid more attention to the MP for Leicester than to the views of the people in Leicester carrying on the work.'<sup>43</sup> But the vetoed Labour candidate Banton, who was at the centre of the storm, wanted the issue 'to be closed', and said there was no 'ill-will left behind in Leicester at all.'<sup>44</sup> The NEC resolution on Leicester was carried without a vote, but on the debate on Labour parliamentary policy before the by-election, no ILPers supported the platform.

The *Labour Leader* newspaper said that the *Lib-Lab* agreement 'did not bind either party in the future.'<sup>45</sup> In Leicester, Labour and the Liberals had fought for some time in municipal elections and 'under those circumstances, there was no obligation upon the Labour Party to refrain from fighting when the Liberal member resigned.'<sup>46</sup> After the by-election MacDonald wrote that 'the sole justification for intervening was a tolerable certainty of victory and in Leicester this did not exist.'<sup>47</sup> MacDonald asked the NAC to consider his position when making their decision, but otherwise he remained silent during the campaign apart from attacking the BSP.

The 1913 Leicester by-election conformed to the pre-war trend with the Liberals retaining the seat but with a reduced majority. Labour confusion arose partly because the ILP had always sponsored candidates in the borough, and also because the individual with most to lose — Ramsey MacDonald — was a leading Labour MP but who was not directly involved in proceedings. The Independent Labour Party National Administrative Council can be blamed for the confusion. It criticised the local Labour Party for slowness when the NAC suffered from a lack of courage and money. Taking into account the NAC's stance and MacDonald's vulnerability, the NEC had a relatively straightforward task in vetoing the Labour candidature.

Nationally, it would be difficult to find electoral, rather than ideological, reasons why the Liberals could be said to have been declining before 1914. Ideologically, Liberal Imperialism and *laissez-faire* policies, were becoming increasingly irrelevant. Liberalism was incoherent, inflexible and lacked a cutting edge. Liberal Party organisation was also

stagnating. New Liberalism came to terms with the modern state, but MPs who adhered to it did not have a great deal of influence in the party. Electorally, though, the outlook seemed rosy. The government's achievements in the two 1910 general elections have been underestimated. Liberal historians say with some justification that the party would have done well in a hypothetical 1915 general election. As P. Clarke wrote: 'By 1914 the Liberal Party had everything against it — except the people.'<sup>48</sup> To suggest that Labour would replace the Liberals 'as the main anti-Conservative Party... would have seemed absurd, not only to most Liberals but to most Labour men as well' (Marquand).<sup>49</sup> Psephologist David Butler wrote that 'the myth of Labour's forward march from 1900 receives no support from an examination of by-elections after 1910.'<sup>50</sup> But even electorally, the Liberals were never going to be in such a strong position. This was because of the franchise. It seems incredible to note, but only 29.7% of the total adult population of Britain could vote before 1914. Of the 29.7%, 63.3% (but nearer to 59.0% due to plural voting) were men. This was extremely low. The Liberals prevaricated over franchise reform, and one perhaps begins to see why. As long as Labour appealed to people who could not vote, its progress was bound to be very slow. Without a genuinely democratic pre-war franchise, Labour's growth before 1914 was impeded by electoral not ideological factors. After franchise reform in 1918, much of the new electorate voted Labour (they probably would have done so anyway due to the Great War) and in the early 1920s Labour could treat Liberal offers of a new pact with contempt. Labour went for the Liberal Party's throats and contested hopeless rural seats, for example.

Ramsey MacDonald was an extremely astute politician. He realised that in 1913 the time was not ripe for an attack on the Liberals in Leicester as electorally the government was strong. Labour needed to co-operative with the government and adhere to the pact which gave the fledgling party a crucial base of over 30 seats it could win. What seemed like Liberal strength and Labour disunity in Leicester in June 1913 was a Liberal swansong and a Labour leadership playing a waiting game which it would win.

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