

MPs defections: a good career move which tends to form part of a wider political trend

By Democratic Audit UK

*Douglas Carswell has defected from the Conservatives to the United Kingdom Independence Party. He has taken the unusual step of opting to trigger a by-election, in effect asking the voters of his Clacton constituency permission for his decision. **Alun Wyburn-Powell** argues that MPs who defect tend to enjoy an enhanced career, and that their defection usually forms part of a wider trend – in this case the shift of voters from Conservative to UKIP.*



Will the Road to Clacton Pier be a rocky one for the Prime Minister? (Credit: Carol, CC BY NC SA 2.0)

Douglas Carswell has defected from the Conservative Party to UKIP and is resigning his seat at Clacton, with the intention of standing under his new party colours in the resulting by-election. How unusual is his move and what happened to the other MPs who tried the same tactic?

Despite the inevitable calls to resign, most defectors do not. There is no legal obligation on them to do so. However, a majority of the defectors who have resigned and re-contested their seats did win their by-elections. In the last 100 years there have been five other similar situations where MPs have resigned their seats on defecting from one party to another. Douglas Carswell is the only one to do so on defecting to, or from, the Conservatives.

Joseph Kenworthy defected from the Liberals to Labour in 1926. He held his seat at Hull Central in the resulting by-election and again at the 1929 general election, but was defeated in 1931. In 1934 he went to the House of Lords when he inherited a peerage. Kenworthy was lucky when he caused the by-election, in that there had been no Labour candidate in place in the constituency. Carswell has a bit of a problem in that there was a UKIP candidate in place in Clacton. The same problem confronted William Wedgwood Benn, when he defected from the Liberals to Labour in 1927. He resigned his seat at Leith, but did not stand again in the by-election as there was already a Labour candidate in place.

Instead, Benn was elected as the Labour MP for Aberdeen North in 1928. He held his new seat in 1929, but lost it

in 1931. Benn returned to the Commons at a by-election in 1937 at Gorton and went to the Lords as Viscount Stansgate in 1942. William Jowitt defected from the Liberals to Labour just after the 1929 general election. He resigned his seat at Preston (a two-member constituency where a Liberal and a Labour candidate usually ran in harness) and forced a by-election. He won his seat back under his new party colours, but at the following election, in 1931, he was defeated, standing for a different seat as a National Labour candidate. Jowitt returned to the Commons in 1939 and eventually ended up as an Earl.

Dick Taverne resigned as the Labour MP for Lincoln after falling out with his constituency association and stood successfully in the resulting by-election in 1973, as an Independent Democratic Labour candidate. He held the seat in the February 1974 election, but was defeated in the October election. He joined the SDP when it was formed and eventually became a Liberal Democrat life peer. Bruce Douglas-Mann, Labour MP for Mitcham and Morden, was the only one among the 29 sitting MPs (28 Labour and 1 Conservative) who defected to the SDP and who resigned his seat at and re-contested it. He lost the by-election. He died in 2000, without returning to either House of Parliament.

These defections were all part of significant political trends. Kenworthy, Benn and Jowitt were part of a wave of defections from the Liberal Party after the First World War. Taverne's move presaged the formation of the SDP and Douglas-Mann was one of the later SDP converts. Carswell's move is also part of a wider trend in defections – from the Conservatives to UKIP, reflected in the transfer of many local councillors around the country. Whether the trend accelerates, or declines, may well depend on the outcome of the Clacton by-election, where a significant amount of pro- and anti-UKIP tactical voting is likely to take place.

So, the pattern has been that resigning defectors, on average, do win their by-elections, but that their tenure has generally only been short afterwards – the longest-serving, Kenworthy, sitting for five more consecutive years. Most of the defectors who resigned their seats ended up in the Lords. This fits with the general pattern that, overall, defection tends to be a career-enhancing move. As a group, defectors tend to be richer, reach higher positions, stay in parliament longer and be more likely to get a peerage, than their loyalist colleagues.

If history proves to be a guide to the future, Douglas Carswell could look forward to a by-election victory, a few years in the seat for his new party and then to becoming a 'Clacton Peer'.

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