

# Lessons from the Marginals

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# INTRODUCTION

## Jesse Norman MP

If the Conservative party is to win the 2015 General Election, it will need to hold a large number of marginal seats, and take more besides. As the 2010 election showed, the old laws of politics are breaking down. Seats which would normally have gone with the national swing somehow failed to do so; others swung like never before. As electronic media proliferate, trust and turnout decline and a new and far more politically eclectic generation comes to the fore, fresh thinking is needed.

This collection gathers together essays from five members of the 2010 parliamentary intake: Robert Halfon, Nicola Blackwood, Richard Harrington, Martin Vickers and Jesse Norman. Together, they span a wide range of constituencies won at that election: North and South, urban and rural, taken from Labour and the Liberal Democrats, first time round or at the second or even third attempt.

These seats are diverse, with diverse populations and challenges; and it is interesting to see how their different challenges are addressed in different specific ways. But what is actually remarkable is the consistency of the underlying themes to be found here. They point to a quite different approach to campaigning: accountable, energetic, personal, informal, independent-minded, rather non-partisan, and focused on social action. This is One Nation campaigning at its best.

The Conservative party has significantly lifted its game in recent years as a campaigning organisation. As we enter a world of variable political geometry, the question arises as to how a consistent national message, branding and campaigning orthodoxy can be blended with new ideas and new approaches developed on the ground. These essays have much to offer such a debate.

*Jesse Norman*



## HARLOW

### Robert Halfon MP

#### The Lessons of Harlow

My experiences as a candidate over ten years and then as an MP in Harlow and three general elections have led me to formulate five basic rules about the most effective kind of campaigning. They are:

1. There is no such thing as “not natural Tory territory”
2. Voters care about real issues, not Westminster Village issues
3. Community is everything
4. Using social media is not optional ...
5. ... but it cannot replace street politics.

I will explain these points in more detail below. But first we need to understand Harlow better as a constituency.

#### *Pre-1997*

The constituency of Harlow is based around the Harlow new town (built in the 1940s and 1950s), and several villages: Hastingwood, Matching, Nazeing, Roydon, and Sheering. The new town has a high proportion of social housing (33%): the highest in the east of England. Very few other constituencies both have as much social housing and have consistently voted Conservative, the exceptions perhaps being a small number of seats in the M25 belt. Harlow became a Conservative seat in 1983, during the heyday of Thatcherism, and was lost to the Labour landslide in 1997. The Labour candidate in 1997—Bill Rammell—won with a majority of 10,514.

#### *1997-2010*

When I was first selected as the Harlow PPC in December 1999, the Conservative Association had seen its income fall to less than £6,000 a year, with no office or agent. Due to the kindness and commitment of the Chairman, the office was based in his home. However, over the next ten years we slowly established a campaign office, with printing equipment and computers. For 10 years, we made major efforts in fund-raising, leafleting and canvassing. **By 2001, Labour’s majority was cut by half to 5,228. In 2005, it fell to just 97 votes. Finally, the seat was won in 2010 with a majority of 4,925.**

*Labour Party opposition:* The campaign has always been fought against an active and committed local Labour Party, with a high level of trade union support and mutual aid. The Eastern Region headquarters for the Labour Party are based in Harlow, with professional telephone

banks, computers, and high-quality printers. Labour have always treated Harlow as a target seat. In the last week of the 2001 campaign Messrs Blair, Brown and Prescott visited Harlow. In 2005 and 2010, the MP received every possible support from Labour HQ. In the 2012 local election campaign, the picture remained the same, with almost the entire Labour Shadow Cabinet visiting Harlow. Ed Miliband himself came three times.

### **1. There is no such thing as “not Natural Tory territory”**

The first rule is that population caricatures do not easily apply to Harlow. Voter targeting databases can have serious pitfalls, because they can stereotype large chunks of voters. In a town like Harlow, voters will tend to swing from one party to the next, depending on a number of key issues, such as whether the Government of the day is improving their standard of living, whether public services are working, and whether they see the MP as independent and community-minded.

Policies that support aspiration are incredibly important, and can have a huge effect on voting patterns. For example, around one third of Harlow families purchased their Council house in the “Right-To-Buy” scheme in the 1980s, and thereafter many become Conservative voters because they saw Conservatism as a route to a better life. In 1979, the Harlow District Council owned 21,000 dwellings, or two-thirds of the town. Thanks to Mrs Thatcher’s “Right to Buy” this fell to below 10,000, or just one third of households. Although we lost a small number of Council seats in Harlow this year, the Conservative vote share remained high at around 40%. Labour have been winning seats only where they are able to attract former Liberal Democrat voters.

What does this mean in practice, in terms of campaigning on the ground? First, there is no such thing as a “no go” area. You should spend as much time campaigning in the most challenged estates as you do in leafy wards with new housing—if not more. For example, in one Harlow ward we have spent a huge amount of time on issues such as crime and housing, and rightly so. Even though Conservatives have had electoral setbacks there in recent years, Staple Tye ward still has one Conservative Councillor and County Councillor. Harlow Council figures show that it is probably the most deprived ward in the town. In particular, it has suffered from high crime and unemployment, and low levels of literacy in the last 15 years. Despite this, it elected Conservative Councillors in 2007, 2008, and 2010.

This is because tribal politics is changing. The block vote is diminishing. Voters are behaving more like consumers, willing to change their allegiance at short notice. Politics for the most part has become a set of individual and often micro causes, ranging from the price of petrol to whether or not the MP helps with individual housing cases and getting highways repaired. These issues are not aligned to mainstream political parties. As the American sociologist Robert Putnam has stated, the last 40 years have seen a steady decline in voter turnout and in membership of political parties. At the same time, however, there has been a rise in alternative forms of participation such as petitions, letter writing, demonstrations, and charitable giving to single-issue campaigns. You cannot simply assume a household is a “Conservative” or “Labour” one, even if it has voted in one direction for 15 years.

This gives the idea of “targeting” a new meaning. In Harlow, we learned that blanketing leaflets to every house in a whole estate or ward works best. Of course, there will be some who believe that blanket leaflets will just “wake up Opposition voters” and are a waste of resources. But my argument—based on evidence over the years—is that many people change their voting intentions not just from election to election, but from year to year, month to month, and even day by day. Blanket leaflets therefore are more likely to persuade voters in your favour. A “core vote” strategy of targeting just individual houses can miss thousands of possible voters.

This has also influenced the kind of literature and adverts that we put out. Our content is focused on micro community issues, with a non-political look and message. Adverts are regularly taken out in local newspapers, parish and local magazines. They may perhaps include the odd piece of national news, but they are mostly concerned with what local Conservatives are doing to help improve the town and villages—whether campaigning for a new university technical school, or for a new motorway junction on the M11.

It’s important not to be too partisan. Being strongly party political can be quite damaging. Our opponents have passion and convictions too, and we should respect that. However tempting it may be, it is better not to rise to the bait of slanging matches on the Internet, or in the letters pages of the local paper. Having said that, this doesn’t mean that you should roll over like a pussycat and let your opponents throw anything at you. The occasional argy-bargy does no harm, as long as it is respectful, and rises above “Westminster” party politics, which is guaranteed to turn the voter off completely.

The consumer market is a good allegory. Look at allegiance to one brand of ketchup, for example. Many years ago, families might buy just one brand of tomato ketchup—Heinz, let’s say. But there is now a range of products, of different flavours and prices, jostling for position on supermarket shelves. Choice and change have become the watchwords for retailers: they have to become the watchword for MPs too.

## **2. Voters care about real issues, not Westminster Village issues.**

I try to concentrate my work in Parliament on two key themes that matter to Harlow people: the cost of living, and social mobility and jobs. Translated into more concrete language, these become Petrol Prices and Apprenticeships:

### *Petrol Prices*

One advantage of emails is that you see what matters to people. My campaign for cheaper petrol was not by some grand design, but because of grassroots pressure from residents. People would literally stop me in the street and talk about the cost of filling up the family car. This issue filled my post-bag and email inbox. Clearly, I had to respond to my constituents, to ensure that their concerns were reflected.

The objective was to bring together parts of the media, pressure groups, and Parliamentarians in a single push for lower fuel costs. The Sun newspaper was approached, because they were already running a well-known “Keep it Down” campaign, along with the FairFuelUK pressure group. We started to co-ordinate our efforts.

Over the course of 18 months, we tried all the various routes to get an issue on the Government's radar in Parliament—Westminster Hall debates, Parliamentary Questions, letters, e-petitions, an APPG, emails... We even pushed a taxi cab up Whitehall with activists. In time, we even founded our own website [www.PetrolPromise.com](http://www.PetrolPromise.com) to look at the oil market side of the issue.

The campaign has achieved some real successes, as the Government has now cut fuel duty and frozen it for more than two years. It is an example of how one can work on an issue that really matters to people, and that even backbenchers can have a small influence on Government policy.

### *Apprenticeships*

Another big issue in Harlow is social mobility: in short, the problems that people face in terms of low skills and unemployment. Meeting community groups as a candidate and MP led me to work very closely with charities, Harlow College, and local schools on issues like literacy and skills. At the same time, I pushed hard nationally and locally for more recognition for apprenticeships.

In Parliament, this meant focusing my maiden speech on the issue of apprenticeships; hiring a genuine apprentice in my office; setting up the Parliamentary Academy—a charitable project that has helped 10 other MPs and CCHQ to hire apprentices; and founding an “Apprentice Card” with the NUS. This card gives apprentices the same rights and discounts as University students. This combination of national and local activity helped me to demonstrate a commitment to tackling skills and literacy in the Harlow constituency. Like petrol, there was no pre-meditated ambition to campaign on this—it came from local pressure, and demand from Harlow people to see something done. I have also started a town-wide literacy project—Reading with Rob—visiting Primary Schools to read children's books, and handing out certificates for reading.

It's important to remember that Parliament is by no means a toothless chamber even for backbenchers. It can make a real difference to individual constituents. Don't listen to those who say that backbenchers don't have any influence. The Commons is an effective forum for raising concerns and issues—albeit in a limited way—which are then picked up by local and national media. Meeting people in surgeries for example, is a way to learn about worries which you can raise in the House of Commons, whether through Parliamentary questions, debates or Early Day Motions (EDMs).

By bringing people's concerns to Parliament in this way, you show you are listening to what he or her has said—and that you are asking for action on their behalf. For example, you can welcome benefit reforms, while still expressing serious worry at how the French company ATOS are testing and retesting those who get disability benefit. By doing this, constituents will see that you have real compassion and care for how those reforms are being implemented. These kinds of examples show that you can be an activist MP at all levels—communicating your message, and getting things done for local people.



### **3. Community is everything**

The third rule is that community is everything. Some people say that “community” is a naff word, a catch-all phrase. I do not agree. Of course it is true that there has been some confusion about the Big Society, but people absolutely understand its three main components: building social capital, creating people power and backing social entrepreneurs. Harlow is an unusual place: although it is a large town, it operates in many ways like a large village. There is a huge amount of social capital, be it through residents’ forums, churches and faith groups, voluntary charities, sporting clubs, and other neighbourhood activity.

What does this mean in practice for campaigning? In Harlow, residents care very much whether their political representatives are involved in the community. Being “involved” is not just an occasional visit with a photo opportunity, but—where possible—multiple meetings, engagement with their problems—both online and face-to-face—and of course social action.

This has led me to make nearly 500 visits or meetings with community groups in the last two years, and to send proactive letters to faith groups, for example, when there is an issue in Parliament that affects them. Every September, I commit to a week of social action, working for a range of community groups, and helping to publicise their work—both on social media and in Parliament. As an MP this can be one of the most rewarding and fulfilling parts of one’s job.

### **4. Using social media is not optional**

To continue the consumer example I mentioned earlier: if a family went shopping in a supermarket and it only sold its own-brand products, it is unlikely that they would shop there again. In the same way, we as politicians have to understand that people want to use social media. They want to engage with it, and they expect politicians to be engaged with it. It’s no good saying: “I don’t use Twitter,” or “I don’t like Facebook.” That’s not good enough. If a third of the adults in Harlow are on Facebook, and thousands of others on Twitter, then the MP must be as well. Constituents are customers: I need to do my best to provide them with the service that they want, in the way that they want it. There is one key caveat, though: when people send casework on Twitter, you have to direct them to a surgery or sending a full email with more details!

MPs should not see social media as a burden. It does not suffer from an editor’s controlling influence, it can be continually updated, and it allows you to get your message across to tens of thousands of people while paying virtually nothing. Twitter provides an invaluable way of learning about micro community campaigns, which otherwise might be missed. Also, if you work hard for a constituent or a local cause, sometimes they tweet or “retweet” something positive about you online. This can have an enormous impact, as it is effectively a “Thank You” endorsement of what you have done. Of course, the opposite can also be the case.

To build a strong social media presence, I have done three things in Harlow:

- First of all, I have established a Facebook campaign page. It is now read by around 1,500 people a week.
- Second, I am very active on Twitter, talking about local issues.
- Third, I blog most days on community issues, with the odd piece of national or international news as well. Blog traffic has grown steadily over the last four years, and it now gets roughly 8,000 unique views a month—although it is hard to place exactly how many are from the constituency. These blog posts are also linked to my Twitter and Facebook accounts, sparking debates and messages from local people.

Over the last two years, social media has grown from a small experiment into my principal shop window. There is now a huge amount of interaction with constituents online.

*A final point: stop complaining about 38 Degrees*

This section would not be complete without a brief mention of emails. MPs of all parties often moan about 38 Degrees and their automated campaigning emails, but actually they are invaluable, because they give a database of constituents and show you what they care about. Don't confuse constituents who sign up to 38 Degrees, with the often very different political views of those who established the website.

## **5. ... But social media cannot replace street politics**

Of course, there is a serious BUT. What I'm about to say may seem to contradict Rule Four. But what is the biggest paradox of modern campaigning? It is that despite all the millions of pounds spent on the latest internet polling techniques, advanced focus group modelling, and definitive mail-shot targeting, old fashioned campaigning is still essential. Social media is important, but it is no substitute for street politics. Politics is not a science, and it should not be treated as such. There are no guaranteed laws of behaviour and therefore the pure science of political campaigning will only have a limited degree of success — unless it is buttressed by a deep understanding of the most important ingredient — the building up of human relationships.

*Canvassing isn't everything*

What is street politics all about? Some people love canvassing, and say that three hours on a Friday evening or a Saturday morning is best spent knocking on doors. But what if you are disturbing families in the middle of breakfast, dinner, or watching TV? Also, they know that you are only there to ask for one thing, even if you dress it up with a load of flannel. By contrast, you can really make a difference with a stall in the town centre, an open surgery, or standing outside a corner-shop on a local issue.

Street-stalls for example help you to catch people when they are out; and they show that you are working on a non-party political issue, which unites people. You can also meet hundreds of people in a morning, especially at events like school-fetes and church-fetes, which MPs attend anyway simply by doing their job and supporting community activities.

Although most people now accept community-based or street politics as common sense, it is much easier said than done. It requires hours of time and painstaking commitment. It is done over years rather than months. As MP and as candidate in Harlow I spent many years holding open surgeries in the town centre, visiting corner-shops and small firms, and bringing large groups of residents and school-children to Parliament.

Partly, I had to look for alternatives to canvassing because of my difficulties with my legs. During election time, in the very early mornings and evenings—during rush-hour—it meant standing with a “Vote Conservative” sign in key areas by Harlow roads. The response from this was quite extraordinary. In the last few weeks of the campaign, it led to hundreds of emails of support. Also, if you are in the same place over a number of days, you gradually build up a relationship with the drivers as they go past. A motorist who started off with “V” signs by the end of the campaign actually got out to shake my hand.

Why are these kinds of things important? Because people want you to prove that you’re a street fighter: that you’re a local person, who is prepared to wake up early in the morning at 6am every day, sun or rain, and get your message out to residents. Voters like candidates who fight for things. Even Gordon Brown won grudging respect from many voters, because he fought literally to the very end.

So my five rules really amount to two fundamental principles:

- Constant activity, on all fronts.
- Relevance to local people.

This is the irreducible core of any campaign. Human relationships, and a level of emotional intelligence, are a prerequisite to ensuring that voters don’t see you as just another politician.



## **OXFORD WEST AND ABINGDON**

### **Nicola Blackwood MP**

When I was selected as the candidate in Oxford West & Abingdon in 2006 it seemed like an all but unwinnable Liberal Democrat seat, with a well-known local MP who had a majority of over 5,500. Of the many people who have come up and congratulated me on the win since then, many have failed to hide their amazement. At the count, the “how on earth did you do that?” texts outnumbered the “knew you’d do it” texts by at least three to one.

After that, though, the myths started to develop. Some even seem to imagine we had some magical (and apparently super secret) anti-Lib Dem strategy that gave us our 6.9% swing and could deliver an equally magical Conservative majority in 2015—but which for some reason we didn’t see fit to share with other seats at the last election. But the truth is that during the years leading up to the General Election we simply did all the things everybody knows you have to do to win an election – and then we had some luck.

Overall, our success had eight key ingredients:

1. Create local profile through early selection
2. Win the right to be heard
3. Build relationships face-to-face
4. Unsettle people’s prejudices
5. Focus on social action
6. Recruit, train, deliver
7. Start from the bottom up
8. Enjoy yourself!

#### **1. Create local profile through early selection**

Crucially, the Association selected early and at an open primary, so I was the candidate for four years, and with a democratic mandate. Early selection meant we had time to learn lessons about what worked specifically in Oxford West & Abingdon before the General Election, rather than during it. I was local anyway, so I knew the constituency well. But no matter how local you are, being the MP is something else entirely. So those years were the vital apprenticeship which allowed me get straight down to it in Westminster as the new representative of my constituency.

But the four-year campaign didn't just get the candidate ready. It also meant that in the run up to the election we more than doubled our helpers (yes, by actually asking people personally to help), gathered tens of thousands of voting intentions (no short cut – just knocking on lots of doors), and delivered over a million pieces of literature. Throughout, I focused in leaflets on local issues—but also on quality and spelling. It is not an exaggeration that you can lose an Oxford voter over a misplaced apostrophe!

We also made strenuous efforts to build strong relationships with neighbouring constituencies. Although spending so much time out of the constituency felt like a gamble at the time, I attended a lot of neighbouring branch events and executives making the case for mutual aid and defending our local campaigning capability; and it paid off as we received huge support from them at both locals and the General Election. I owe my seat to the over six hundred volunteers who came from across Oxfordshire and beyond. But they didn't come because they got an instruction from CCHQ or an email from my chairman or my agent; they came because we took the time to develop a direct relationship with them and to make a credible case that investing time and energy in Oxford West & Abingdon was worth the fight. And we, and they, were right.

But, of course, none of this is in the past tense. With one of smallest majorities in the House – a miss-a-heart-beat-every-time-I-say-it 176 votes – every single vote, every single canvass session, poster, leaflet and every single pound counts. 2015 may seem a long way away, but if I learnt anything from 2010 it was that long term candidates who had campaigned consistently were the ones who voters learnt to trust.

## **2. Win the right to be heard**

Good campaigning is not rocket science. Winning elections is about convincing enough people you are the right person to do the job. It should be simple in principle, providing you have a clear message. But the reality is very different. First voters have to hear you, listen to you, believe you. And that is where all political parties currently face a barrier of Himalayan proportions.

No one trusts a word politicians say anymore. They don't even hear them. Anonymous comments left on blog threads, Wikipedia, even school gate rumour are generally considered more trustworthy than the average politician. Everyone is willing to believe the worst of them. I think it was Lyndon B. Johnson who said: "If one morning I walked on water across the Potomac River, the headline that afternoon would read: PRESIDENT CAN'T SWIM."

On General Election poll day I was knocking up in one of my villages at about 5pm. The dawn raid and lack of sleep during the week were really starting to bite so I'm sure that I wasn't at my most engaging, but this lady was ANGRY. All politicians were liars and thieves and she was certainly not going to encourage any of us by voting. I was about to give up when her dog shot out from behind her like a rocket and bit down on my leg as hard as he could. Eventually, the lady persuaded the dog to release me, after which she said, "My dear, what's your name? I'll go and vote for you now...!"

What persuaded her to vote for me? Not a party allegiance, not a clever policy or pledge, but because between her dog and my leg, we had briefly bonded. I had stopped for a moment being the enemy in the form of a ‘politician’ and become an actual human being who could be accepted and even voted for.

But canine interventions apart, the evidence is clear. A ComRes poll conducted between 29 June and 1 July 2012 found a rabid nexus of distrust with respondents expecting 77% of politicians to lie and just 10% to tell the truth. They also expected 74% of journalists to be similarly untrustworthy and just 13% to be honest, 78% of bankers to be liars with again just 10% honest. Business leaders fared slightly better, with 59% expected to lie and 19% to tell the truth.

So far, so obvious. “Public don’t trust politicians” is never going to make the front page, but the numbers in this poll show that the breadth and depth of public disillusionment is reaching crisis levels. We now have a whole generation of voters who developed their political consciousness during thirteen years of increasingly blatant betrayal, spin and manipulation by a PR-driven New Labour Government until they completely lost faith in their politicians—and our democracy.

Obviously, it’s not only Labour. But the Blair-Campbell years, and perhaps in particular the Iraq War debacle, have to stand out as the near-term Rubicon moment in which public trust in politicians and media manipulation reached its nadir. We are all – every politician, every activist, every party and every voter – we are all now living with the consequences of that. But democracy – and campaigning – only works when parties, politicians and the voters take an active part in the process.

### **3. Build relationships face-to-face**

The only way you combat distrust on this scale is to build relationships. That doesn’t happen at one remove, it happens face to face. And CCHQ notwithstanding, people don’t build relationships with a political party—they build them with other people. They build them with a local party activist or Chairman or CF member or simply a neighbour who votes Conservative. And most of all they build them with their MP or candidate.

At the last local elections one of my councillors, Maurice Billington, got the largest majority on Cherwell District Council, at a time when Conservatives up and down the country were getting hammered at the polls. Maurice is the local councillor for Kidlington, and a local businessman who has lived in Kidlington his entire life. When I walk down the High Street with him we can barely go four steps without someone calling out his name, without a shopkeeper greeting him or a police officer waving to him. He is the most active, engaged councilor I have ever come across. He goes on drugs raids with the local police, he hands out sandbags when there’s a flood alert, he regularly tackles Thames Water over drainage problems, his weekly surgery is going down to the Market on the High Street for the whole of Saturday morning.

Everyone in the village knows him and knows who to call if they have a problem and knows who to invite to their public meetings and their flower shows and their civic events. That’s why they

vote for him and why they keep voting for him even if they might not choose to vote for another Conservative candidate. In a Liberal Democrat marginal seat that is a big deal. But I think this sort of campaigning will become increasingly important in all sorts of demographics and across all sorts of voting preferences.

We live now in an age of personal peer-to-peer references. I wouldn't dream of booking a hotel or going to a restaurant or even renting a film without first finding an online review. If I find someone else somewhere who can limit the risk for me in spending £2.99 to rent a film, why on earth would I pursue a riskier strategy when deciding who I want to run my country? We have become accustomed to de-risking our lives in every respect and we want our politics to be like that too. And the rockier the economy gets the more pronounced that tendency becomes. The problem is we haven't worked out an effective system of political reference points that people can trust. At a constituency level, then, it's going to have to be the "Maurice" solution.

There is simply no substitute for face-to-face reputation- and relationship-building between the candidate and local activists, and the local community. What you establish then is a network of real people in the constituency who have met you and know you. And if you stand up to the test, they will be confident enough in you to recommend you to others as a good bet on polling day, based on their personal experience.

#### **4. Unsettle people's prejudices**

With a network established, you can move on to hard canvassing, and the visits to charities, businesses and schools that make up the campaigning week. But new approaches are always important. You have to surprise people out of their prejudices about politicians. When they start to see you as an individual, not just "a politician", then that is the beginning of them hearing and listening and hopefully learning to trust you.

Even a trip to the supermarket can confound people's prejudices. Not long after my election I was standing in line at my local supermarket when I realised I was getting the "hard stare" from the lady in line behind me. It was a Sunday afternoon, and I was on my way up to Westminster, but I squared my shoulders for the anticipated onslaught, smiled sweetly and said "Hello".

She replied rather sternly, "Are you our MP"?

"Yes".

"Well, I'm a Liberal Democrat. But it's nice to see our local MP doing normal things like a normal person."

I'm not exactly sure how she expected me to get my shopping—possibly delivered in a coffin by Dracula wearing a blue rosette? But clearly this chance, completely non-political meeting was far more effective than a leaflet would have been, even if the occasion was rather spoiled by the young man at the checkout who gave me a loud and cheerful lecture about the perfidy of Nick Clegg and Liberal Democrats. Still, I like to hope she found the whole episode quite funny in the end.

Again: that's because it wasn't a "political" situation. Everyone expects their MP to canvass them, or give a political speech, or engage in a hustings—and these still have their place. But an

effective MP or candidate should always be looking out for more novel forms of campaigning too. You only need to look at the websites of a few marginal MPs to see that this is not theory—it's a survival technique.

So we have started doing “MP Supermarket Surgeries” which are essentially glorified street stalls but in your local supermarket. They are held inside, and so great for winter campaigning. No-one expects to see a local politician in the supermarket and that gives rise to a positive response. Finally, with the agreement of the management of the supermarket you can work a perfect system where a few helpers hand out leaflets at the entrance to the supermarket so people can think about what they want to say to you as they do their shopping, then the check out staff remind people you are there as they go through the tills and finally you set up your stall near the exit so people wheel their trolleys past you on the way out.

My experience has been this has a significantly more positive effect than a standard street stall because it is easier to ensure that everyone who comes through the supermarket that morning or afternoon knows you're there.

## **5. Focus on social action**

There is no silver bullet. Each candidate and each constituency and association will have a different set of local circumstances and skills, and these will make different kinds of innovative campaigns work for them. But my own experience from Oxford West & Abingdon, and as Vice Chairman of the Conservative Party, is that social action is another great way to build credibility and relationships. But it must be done right, not as a PR stunt but as a genuinely local community project. If it is, it can be incredibly rewarding.

Social action is not about getting votes; or really anything that most people would consider “politics” or “campaigning”. So if you're running a short campaign or are only interested in directly racking up the votes, then this approach is not for you. But then, building up relationships and reputations in a constituency is a long term strategy anyway. In my view it is the only really effective way to generate genuine trust with a community and establish stable majorities in unstable marginal seats.

There are those who resist social action in the belief that it's just some trendy metro-cool idea dreamt up by 24-year-olds over iced chai lattes. Others relent a little saying it may work but only in liberal, southern middle class areas. But nothing could be further from the truth. Social action is part of our party's DNA that goes back for generations: our members have always played active roles in their communities as school governors, charity trustees, scout masters and volunteers of all kinds.

Not only that: Social action waned under New Labour's onslaught of Big Government. So a renewed Conservative focus on social action is not just good for the country, but good for our Party. The more we as members engage with local communities, the more we develop our understanding of local policy priorities and strengthen local relationships.



In Oxford West & Abingdon, I have led a team every year since 2009 to take part in a city-wide spring clean organized by the civic society – it is called OxClean and worth a google search as one of the most effective litter pick projects I have ever come across. Over 100 community groups now take part, and one of my executive officers is actually a key organizer in the city-wide project. But the reason that I lead a specific “Oxford West & Abingdon Conservatives” team to take part every year (this year will be our fifth) is to show that we are a committed part of the local community as a group as well as individually.

This project does not involve a lot of organization – we are taking part in a wider project – all we need to do is identify a location that needs a clean up, register it with the project website, and they provide pick up sticks and bin bags and organize rubbish collection at the end of the day. You do need to make sure you bring some gardening gloves though. But even though this is a relatively simple project it sends a important message: it shows long term commitment to the community and the local environment and frankly our wellington boots tell that story an awful lot more effectively than any speeches could. What’s more it’s clear that in different ways more and more constituencies are finding this on the ground.

There are now hundreds of local social action projects being run up and down the country. Projects have included everything from one day litter picks, to toy collections to provide Christmas presents for children in domestic abuse refuges, to mentoring schemes, to long term job clubs and one off or recurrent job fairs. In every case, the successful projects have been those where the interests and skills of the volunteers are matched to an achievable local need.

## **6. Recruit, train, deliver**

Another key lesson is the importance of taking the time to identify the right people to help you run your social action project at the outset and to build your core team.

It’s the foundation of any successful team: you need to find people who are excited enough about the idea of the project to commit to it even when it becomes inconvenient and real life inevitably rears its ugly head. Not only that; you need to assemble the right set of skills, via a group of reasonably compatible personalities (you don’t want to become a part time mediator!) and you need to ensure that your team have enough time to give to get the project off the ground and deliver it effectively.

The best team will be made up of people who have really bought into the project. While a stalwart Party organiser (you know the one who does delivery and canvassing and data entry and branch events and...) might be cajoled into taking on additional responsibilities, think about whether the project goes with the grain of that person’s skills and priorities and whether that person is already overloaded with commitments. Every small task is an opportunity to put someone to work and build up your team a little further.

On the other hand, there may be other members who have never considered social action before and may lack confidence in their abilities. They may need to be coached– but with coaching this might be just the opportunity they were looking for to get involved. Again, that way you can widen your activist base, rather than increasing the burden on existing volunteers when you

start a new project. Obviously this isn't always possible, but given the unusual and much less party-political nature of Social Action, you are much more likely to draw in new volunteers who may perhaps be nervous of overtly political campaigning.

One of the recent projects the CCHQ Social Action Team suggested to Associations as a good project for areas with higher crime rates was the Safer Streets Campaign (there's a campaign pack available). Designed to set up zones where people can feel protected from crime and intimidation activists simply go round either a High Street or a neighbourhood and get that community to commit to offer safe harbour to any individual who feels threatened while they call the police. The project pack comes with transfer stickers which can be placed in shop or house windows declaring the 'Safer Street Zone' and is an effective but also simple way of starting to reclaim problem streets by working with local residents and making them feel there is action they can take that is within their reach.

This project, however, is not unique to us. It is a simplified version of the City Safe campaign run by London Citizens – and that campaign came about when a young boy called Jimmy Mizen was murdered in 2008. This prompted his parents to take action and set up the first CitySafe Haven in London there are now over 100 in London and the campaign has the backing of Major Boris Johnson and the Met.

There is no question whatsoever that there will be people in your communities and your Association who have very personal reasons for being passionate about certain social problems. Not only will they be motivated to want to set up a project with you but they will also know, from their own experience, what is needed to address those problems. And finally, it is people who have been touched by these problems who most need to feel that something can be done.

One final note: once you have identified your team, it is worth taking time at the planning stage of the project to really work out what their motivations are. Knowing the objectives of your team members at the start means you can take them into account when designing your project; that way, you are much less likely to lose team members along the way.

## **7. Start from the bottom up**

Social action is first and foremost about working with a community, so it is no use sitting in a room a coming up with your solution for that community and then going out and trying to impose it on them – that will achieve exactly none of the purposes of Social Action.

If you want to build trust with a local community, you have to engage with them on their terms. However you choose to do it—via leaflet survey, public meeting, door to door survey, meet with local charities, community groups, faith groups, whatever—the whole point is to work with the community to identify a need that fits with the set of skills and capacity available to you. Be aware, though, that many groups and communities may be initially suspicious of your motives. There wouldn't be any need to build trust if it was there already, so you may well have to work quite hard at the outset to establish your credibility if you want to develop genuine local partnerships in the community. You may even need to do some parts of the project solo, to demonstrate your good intentions.

Before I was elected there was a proposal to move the local probation centre to the end of a residential street. Now obviously a probation centre has to go somewhere and local residents are rarely going to be happy about it but in this instance there were some very valid reasons why the proposal was inappropriate and the locals were up in arms about it and set up a campaign group to oppose it. The area was represented by Labour councillors and very hostile to the Conservatives but, as it happened, I got wind of the campaign and attended one of their early meetings in support — as did the sitting Lib Dem MP. I got a very frosty welcome indeed — I don't think anyone thought I was there for any reason other than political expediency. But they had regular meetings and I kept going as did the Labour councillors and the Lib Dem ones and my mother and a few local Conservative activists.

And slowly, incrementally the atmosphere began to thaw. I did some practical things to help — although frankly this was one of the most organised campaign groups I had ever come across and they didn't really need any help from anyone. Nevertheless, by the end of several months of this, when eventually the probation centre went somewhere else, and I didn't try and take personal credit or make any kind of political capital out of it, I was sort of one of them in a place where all the polling would have told me I never should have been. My mother even won the grand raffle prize at the celebration event.

Now this is not a strictly “Social Action” story but it is an example of long term, patient relationship building with a community. It shows just how much work can be needed to overcome deep-seated suspicion. I will never know precisely what the impact of my sticking with that campaign was locally but I can say without a shadow of a doubt that leafleting and canvassing in that area would have had no impact whatsoever.

But social action projects have an element of risk. It is all too easy to go out into the community and make vain promises to people who already think you can't be trusted and who are likely to have already been let down by all manner of political and government officialdom. If you are not going to make matters even worse, then you had better deliver. This means not biting off more than you can chew: make an honest appraisal of your capacity, start small and only promise what you know you can achieve. It is easy where there is a lot of need to get carried away by compassion and promise the earth—but there's nothing compassionate about giving people false hope and then letting them down.

As I've said prejudice can crumble in the face of the simplest project: a supermarket surgery, a litter pick, or a safer streets campaign. A wonderful project run by Nick de Bois MP, among others, is a variation of the Job Club—a Job Fair at which those with openings and expertise in getting people into work are bought together for a day with those who are looking for jobs. You need to do get the local schools and FE colleges and Job Centre on board to do this properly, but it is a very effective stand alone project that shows you are doing your bit to try and help those struggling in the current economic climate. A Job Club almost requires full time volunteers or staff to run it responsibly for those who rely on it to try and find work but although a Jobs Fair should not be taken on lightly either, it is considerably more manageable and can be targeted to specific age groups or areas to focus it even more.

These projects could really change a local resident's mind about politics and Conservatives without putting unreasonable levels of demand on your activists or risking trying to pull off a project that you don't have the resources for.

The way to make Social Action really work — and to give communities back the hope that they can challenge some of the social problems in their area — is to make promises you know you can achieve, no matter how small they may seem, and then stick with them until you deliver. It's the delivery that matters most. So you must make sure that you keep people in the community well informed of what you promise to do, how you are progressing and tell them when you have delivered. Communications can be very simple but they need to be clear and getting them right will go a long way to building trust with the local community. If people don't know what you're doing they will assume you're doing nothing. Remember, you represent in that community not just "Conservatives" but "politicians" and people's faith in our democracy has been damaged enough already by perceptions of "politicians failing to deliver"—they don't need any more evidence.

## **8. Enjoy yourself!**

Social action projects and deep community engagement don't just make a difference—they are also great fun. They give a tangible sense of achievement and they also offer those who aren't natural canvassers or deliverers the chance to do something practical in their community with a group of other volunteers who also want to give something back.

At the Conservative Party Conference 2011 in Manchester, we ran a whole Social Action Zone. But our main project, a collaboration with Calibre Audio Library to record stories for a listening library for the visually impaired, really caught the imagination of the delegates. Although we built three special recording studios inside the conference centre and had technicians recording all day every day of Conference we were completely overwhelmed and there were delegates (not just Party members, but journalists and lobbyists too) queuing up for the chance to record a story for someone who had lost their sight. We recorded over 400 stories and at this year's Conference had a selection for people to listen to in the Social Action Zone so delegates could see (and hear!) what they achieved the year before.

Just recording a story is so simple anyone can do it, no matter what their age or mobility, but for those who have lost their sight it can make a real difference. In different parts of the country there are talking newspaper projects and listening library charities that local members could team up with if they wanted to but the message was that social action can be as big and complicated or as simple and straightforward as you want, and still have an impact.

Campaigning in a marginal seat can feel overwhelming, especially when you don't have a full delivery network or even a vaguely reliable set of voting intention data, and you have no idea how you're going to raise enough to pay for the next leaflet. But just think about that trust barrier. You can spend all your time raising money to pay for the best leaflets in the world and delivering them with a flawless network and then blanket canvassing. But it won't matter if no one hears, no one listens, no one believes you.

My favourite quote ever is not a particularly erudite one (not good for an Oxford MP) – it’s from *The West Wing* when Leo Megarry, the President’s Chief of Staff, intones “Never let the urgent crowd out the important.” I’m not saying you abandon or ignore or even scale back the rest of your campaign strategy. Clearly that’s bonkers. What I am saying is that all of those campaigning activities are currently bashing straight into a great big edifice of public disillusionment and distrust and we’ve got to try and do something to break it down.

Social action isn’t the only answer and it won’t work in every situation but it has proved to be one arrow that can pierce the rhino hide of public indifference when it comes to restoring faith in local politicians and building lasting relationships with hard to reach communities. And that is neither a fluffy PR exercise nor a waste of resources. It may just be the way to get people to start trusting the democratic process again. And win or lose, that’s a legacy worth having.



## **WATFORD**

### **Richard Harrington MP**

When I was selected as the PPC for Watford at the end of 2008, the party locally had no money, no organisation, and no volunteers. The local Conservative brand seemed irrevocably tarnished; particularly so, as the previous candidate had just been expelled from the party, having suffered from mental illness and received a suspended prison sentence. The Party came third in the 2005 General Election. It was clear that we needed a significant boost locally in order to stand a chance in Watford.

I have been a businessman for thirty-odd years, and constituency politics is like a business in some respects. The normal disciplines required are the same: product, marketing and distribution. Indeed I am often asked by local A-level students whether being a candidate and MP is more like being self employed or an employee. The nearest I can come up with, is that of being a franchisee. The Party and its leadership manufacture the basic product i.e. its policies, and the candidate has a licence to distribute it in that particular constituency. The manufacturer stipulates the rules i.e. logo, menu etc., but the candidate has to communicate it and distribute it street by street to a level that the manufacturer can't, using the best media and advertising tools available.

Everything I did as a candidate flowed from this “McDonald’s” analogy. That includes setting up a shop front showroom, regular advertising, a distribution machine with volunteers covering the whole constituency, as well as communications via local events and campaigns, every day of every week of every month.

#### **The way forward**

Following my election I have been working to keep and improve this “brand”, and to redefine the conventional wisdom as to what an MP can and should do. Often that means leaving the national policy matters for others to do and trying to put my efforts into things relevant to all my constituents, irrespective of their politics. I am paid by the taxpayer to perform a public role and I believe it is important to include opposition politicians in everything relevant, and not to demonise or exclude them, as my Labour predecessor had done.

To do this and to build enough support for the next election I have focussed on the following key principles:

1. Regular communication with constituents, listening to their views and framing the Conservative message
2. Maintaining a role as a community figure, linked to key constituency people and groups as well as running local projects for the benefit of the whole town
3. Being accessible
4. Increasing engagement with young people and minority or disenfranchised groups
5. Acting as a bridge between the constituency and the Government.

Below I outline the ways in which I try to embed these principles in the work I do, and how I present myself locally.

### **Communication with constituents**

- Sending a fortnightly E-Bulletin to over 5,000 constituents
- Placing a front-page advert on the local newspaper weekly to advertise surgeries and public meetings

Every fortnight I send out an E-Bulletin which includes the big national and local issues from the past fortnight, as well as information about any visits I have made or meetings I have had. The purpose of this is twofold: first, people get to see how I am spending my time and learn about any issues that are going to affect them, as well as seeing my stance on particular subjects. I also include links to articles I may have written on political or national forums.

But the E-Bulletin also works as an ongoing channel of discussion between myself and individual constituents. Most times that I send out the Bulletin I will receive a large number of responses from people who will say “your email reminded me that I have been thinking about X or Y”. This keeps me better informed, and it helps to show that I am always available and willing to discuss any issue.

These E-Bulletins are also useful in outlining my stance on single issues, to let people know what I think or which way I will be voting on the more controversial issues. I believe that people have the right to know and welcome this openness. For example, before the recent vote on electing the House of Lords many people had contacted me individually. But as I planned to rebel, I felt that people were owed a public explanation of what I would be doing, and why. So I sent out an E-Bulletin explaining my decision and welcoming discussion on this. Even if people did not agree with my stance they did appreciate being informed.

Everybody who emails me, anybody I meet or anyone who visits Parliament has their email address added to the distribution list. People are of course easily able to unsubscribe but this rarely happens. It can also be a useful way to promote other community projects, work of local charities etc. I also hold a weekly advert space on the front of the local paper advertising surgeries and public meetings, with my contact details. This is a constant reminder that people can contact me and that I am here to help. All communication is of course neutrally branded, reflective of my role as the MP rather than as the member of a political party.

## **Public engagement**

- Regular public meetings throughout my constituency

I hold regular Public Meetings in the constituency inviting all constituents to come and ask me about any local or national issues. I first started these meetings during my campaign at a time when confidence in politicians generally was at an all-time low, to make me more accessible and accountable to local people. I hold the meetings on a regular basis at different locations around the constituency. The number of attendees can differ significantly at each one but I feel it is very important to maintain this programme.

They help to show a regular presence throughout Watford, and offer a chance to have discussions on policy in a public forum, in a different set-up to individual surgery appointments. The meetings are publicised across the town and at each meeting I present a report on what I have been doing recently including my voting record, expenses, number of surgeries etc. I have a member of staff attend the meetings with me so that they can follow up on any individual or general issues.

On occasion I have held subject specific meetings, such as one on Europe. I have found it particularly useful to convey my opinions face-to-face and hear other people's views. Constituents seem to welcome this opportunity and tend to leave more satisfied with my position than if I had merely emailed them.

These meetings are crucial in affording greater transparency in what I do and what I stand for - as well as for me to hear more about local issues and concerns.

## **Watford projects**

- Creating and running projects that benefit the whole town and transcend politics or campaigning

I believe that it is the job of an MP, as funded by the taxpayer, to learn the needs of our constituents and do all in our power to help, whether this be individual surgery cases, or issues that affect people or groups across the constituency. Thus in Watford I have run the following projects:

- Hosting two Jobs Fairs, with a combined record of over 8,000 attendees with more than 700 people getting jobs
- An Apprenticeship Fair encouraging local businesses to start an Apprentice scheme
- Holding a “Big Idea” competition inviting all residents to submit an idea for improving the town, with the chance to win £1,000 and work with me to make their idea a reality. It has been important to take practical action to address local issues and use contacts made within the constituency to help with this.



I decided to hold Jobs Fairs after seeing high unemployment figures alongside local companies struggling to recruit. Working with partners such as the Job Centre and local Further Education College, the Fairs were a great success. Whilst this was very much a community project, running it from my office meant that people understood that their MP was taking practical action locally and was helping to boost employment to help individuals and companies.

These projects are driven by listening to the needs of constituents. For example the Big Idea competition was established after people feeling that they had little say in new projects for the town. For this competition, again working with local partners, I am trying to get as great a community involvement as possible, across the political spectrum. For my Apprenticeship Fair, I invited local companies to a reception to learn more about the benefits of hiring an apprentice, where I was able to share positive Government measures to help local companies, and potential apprentices they could, in turn, hire.

### **Key constituency contacts**

- Establish positive working relationships with key local people and organisations
- Act as a lynchpin between these organisations so that they can assist each other

I think it is crucial to create and maintain strong links with key constituency groups and leaders such as prominent charities, hospital chiefs and head teachers. These relationships are crucial in bridging the gap between the constituency and Government. It is also important that these leaders see you to be working efficiently and effectively, on their behalf and with others.

For example, I have regular meetings and substantial correspondence with Job Centre Plus. They provide me with monthly briefings to go with unemployment figures and assist with Jobs Fairs. I raise any issues or concerns that they have with DWP and help them to build links with local businesses.

Regular meetings allow me to gather real time information about how national policy is working locally to feed back to the Government and where necessary to take pre-emptive or quick action to deal with any problems. Similarly, it allows me to bring organisations together to help each other. Recently a local addiction charity needed computers to help train their clients to get back to work, I put them in touch with a local IT company who provided computers and eventually actually hired one of their clients.

### **Work Experience Programme and engaging young people**

Since 2009, over 150 local young people have taken part in Work Experience Programmes which I have run. These have been great experience for the young people themselves, and very good for their CVs. But they have also hugely helped me to communicate with my constituents.

- They have reached 1000s of constituents outside of election time
- Each two-week programme is the equivalent of a full canvass of two wards

- Holding a young people's political seminar focusing on issues and engagement

I ran the first programme during the election campaign, to engage young people in politics and give them a chance to gain experience and skills within a political setting. Since the election the focus has switched to learning about the political process and gathering information on local issues.

To remedy a lack of volunteers outside of election time, the programme means that people are contacted on my behalf on a more regular basis. The young people involved carry out a number of different tasks such as door to door and telephone surveys. Working in groups, they win team points and prizes for information gathered, as well as having outings such as visiting CCHQ and Parliament, holding debates and hearing from speakers. The programme is run by my association agent but it is not party political and it attracts young people from across the political spectrum. Many residents who have been contacted by the students tell me that they are pleased to see young people more involved in politics.

In addition I recently held a seminar for young people interested in politics to discuss the ways they can become engaged outside of politics lessons in schools. I will be working with the group on some cross party projects including a young people's politics website.

### **Engaging with minority groups**

- Holding specific meetings with minority groups
- Organising events aimed at certain communities dealing with matters relevant to them, such as diabetes, public health, as well as specialised surgeries

Community leaders are invaluable in representing the concerns and needs of people in their community and relaying anything that you can do to assist them. But key minority groups often report that they feel ignored - apart from at election time when they are courted frequently.

There are a number of such groups in Watford, both ethnic and interest groups, whom I have actively worked with and helped with problems specific to their needs as well as on issues of wider engagement. For example, I recently organised a Muslim Community Health Day in a local Community Centre. Alongside medical staff offering advice, I held an advice surgery and gave a talk, where I was able to reach people that would otherwise not consider visiting their MP.

I have also been working with other overlooked groups such as my local Disability forum. By attending their regular meetings I have been able not only to hear about their experiences of Government policy, but to meet with them in an environment that they feel comfortable with and raise certain issues with DWP that led to some changes to local provisions.

Regular and ongoing engagement throughout the full Parliamentary term is necessary to both help them and to establish yourself as somebody interested in their needs and able to help.

## **Political messaging**

- Working with local politicians from all parties
- Highlighting national policy and decisions that will impact local area

In light of the political situation in Watford I have found it crucial to forge good relationships with people from all parties and work together in the interest of local people. Although our responsibilities are different I have forged an effective relationship with the directly-elected Lib Dem Mayor, presenting a united front on both good and bad news. Constituents are tired of political argy-bargy—we need to show that the good of the town takes precedence over political point-scoring.

Nationally, I have found it helpful to relay news of key policy decisions to constituents, ideally showing the impact it will have on their lives and the local area, and without the jargon too often found in Westminster. For example, on Budget Day my first priority is to send a special E-Bulletin showing the measures that are likely to have an impact on people and invite them to discuss these measures. Where there is positive news from the Government it is helpful to be at the forefront of delivering this; but it is important to be available to answer questions about events or news at other times as well.

When a constituent has written about a particular issue, even if it was right at the beginning of the Parliament, if there is any further development on this issue I will email them again to let them know. For example, over the last two years I have received many hundreds of emails about fuel prices; every time there is an announcement I will email everybody that has written in. This helps show that both the Government and I have been listening, and that I have taken their concerns seriously.

## **Business and industry**

- Engage with businesses of all kinds and sizes
- Act as a contact between different businesses and organisations
- Use role to grow local industries and encourage local investment

With so many small and large businesses in Watford, and given my own business background, I find a great deal of my time is spent visiting or working with local businesses.

I have been keen to meet with as many small businesses as possible to assist with any problems and encourage them to grow, increasing local employment and boosting the local economy. Part of this has also been working with the local Chamber of Commerce and other groups to help existing businesses and invite new ones to start or relocate to the area.

I also work to ensure that local businesses can make the most of any Government initiatives or funding that they may be liable for. Engaging with large local employers is very helpful; meeting with their employees and encouraging them to get involved in community projects, which in turn helps them. This relationship has been useful in finding companies to support the Watford Projects that I run as well as helping other groups across the town.

For example, a local charitable umbrella organisation were looking to run an entrepreneurs' scheme for local school children but did not have the contacts to approach businesses to help with the scheme. Using the contacts I had made I was able to get lots of companies signed up, creating lasting positive relationships between all the groups.

In a town with no current major industry I have been working with the larger and new companies to try and establish a stronger industrial base and create centres of excellence. I have been fortunate that during my time as MP a large international company has moved to the area. I have been doing all I can to build on this and encourage related companies to start up. By these means I have built upon my experience of business to show that I understand the needs of local companies and that I am here to help them grow.

## **Conclusion**

There is no one silver bullet to ensure re-election and there are many factors that will determine the next election. However, whilst the Government works to prove they are the right party to lead the country, MPs must work to show people they are the right person to re-elect.

It is the responsibility of MPs to shape people's perception of politics and the Conservative party in their area. MPs must be seen to be accessible, through hosting public meetings, regular correspondence and meeting with as many different groups as possible, throughout the whole Parliament.

Working with key constituency groups and individuals and by listening to the needs and concerns of local people it is imperative that MPs are seen to be taking practical action to rectify issues and bring the communities together. Quite often you will have the right contacts and information to join two groups together so that they can help each other. Bridging the gap between Government policy and its manifestation in practice is an important part of a MP's job and is incredibly useful for both sides. Local organisations welcome the opportunity to have their concerns and experiences heard and Ministers appreciate having real-time information.

Every constituency is different, and each MP will need to prioritise what will work best for them and their local area. But I believe the key principles described here are applicable across the board. When the next election comes, whether or not we have televised debates, we cannot rely on the Prime Minister alone to convince our constituents to vote Conservative. We must show that we ourselves have served them well, and would do so once again.



## CLEETHORPES

### Martin Vickers MP

My campaign experience goes back to 1974; the year of two General Elections. I joined the party in Grimsby soon after the first of them; the February poll, when Edward Heath asked “Who governs Britain?”, and the electorate decided that whoever it was it wasn’t going to be Mr Heath. Very soon afterwards I was delivering my first leaflets ahead of the October election.

Labour has always been the main opposition. The LibDems have also been a factor, polling between five and eight thousand in elections since 1997. But UKIP has grown significantly; it polled 894 in 2001 rising to 3,194 in 2010. The electorate can be described as broadly working class with an above average number employed in the public sector. The average wage hovers around £20,000.

Arguably the area has never fully recovered from the decline of Grimsby’s fishing industry in the late 1970s and early ‘80s. However, a major revival of the area is possible if the offshore renewable energy sector is able to realise its full potential. That potential has been recognised by the Government, which has designated two Enterprise Zones—one pan-Humber, the other on Grimsby Docks.

Having become more and more involved with the Young Conservatives in both Grimsby and Cleethorpes, my first outing as a candidate was in a December 1976 council by-election. It was a very safe Labour ward that had temporarily been taken over by the Liberals, and needless to say I lost by a considerable margin. But having been bitten by the political bug I was eventually elected at the fourth attempt, becoming a Councillor in May 1980 and, with a five-year break courtesy of the electorate, I continued until 2011.

The town of Cleethorpes was part of the Louth constituency; it then became Brigg and Cleethorpes which the Tories held from 1983 until 1997. New boundaries resulted in the almost certain defeat that was expected being by an even larger margin than would have been the case, and Labour secured a majority of 9,176. This fell to 5,620 in 2001. In 2005 I was selected in the January, and the election followed in May. Labour held on with a 2,642 majority. Finally Cleethorpes fell to the Conservatives in 2010 with a majority of 4,298.

#### **Lesson 1: Persistence pays off.**

In February 1977 the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Crosland died; he was also Grimsby’s MP. The subsequent by-election brought many of the big names to town including Ted Heath,

Shirley Williams, Michael Foot and many others. These were no fleeting visits—knock on a few doors, a photo-call and gone—but proper public meetings, open to all, not just supporters but opponents, many of whom were hecklers. For a Young Conservative like me, this was exciting stuff.

**Lesson 2: Enjoy your politics—don't let the endless frustrations sap your enthusiasm. There will also be highlights, and moments to savour.**

During those early campaigns I learned a great deal about the basics of how to approach people and how to handle the difficult ones. Much has changed, but it has been and will I think always be true that contact between candidate and voters is what matters; not only to deliver policy messages but to build up a relationship between the two. The methods may change but the aim remains the same.

Perhaps it's because I began my campaigning in the 1970s and through into the '80s I remain of the firm belief that nothing can replace personal contact. Of course I make use of a website, Facebook and the like—but give me a live audience anytime. Facebook and Tweets can reach thousands of people but it takes a conscious decision by the recipient to decide that he or she wants to read the latest comment from a politician. Just a knock at the door, however, will give an opportunity to introduce yourself to the householder, if nothing more. Of course they might be irritated if you interrupt EastEnders but, if nothing else, they will remember that you bothered to call—almost always a plus point. Of course it's only possible to reach a tiny proportion of voters on a one-to-one basis but the question has to be asked “Is meeting say three or four per cent of constituents more productive than a Tweet read by eight or ten per cent?” You have to do both.

Another of my favourite campaigning methods is to set up a street stall on one of the busy shopping streets and it's always a good idea to have a petition to sign. If you choose Europe or crime you're certain to find a willing passer-by who is happy to sign. This provides an ideal way of engaging voters in conversation. Make sure the petition form has a column for their email address and follow up the initial contact with a personal greeting.

**Lesson 3: Use every available method to reach voters.**

Between 1994 and 2010 I worked for Edward Leigh MP, as his constituency agent and secretary of the Gainsborough Conservative Association. Having spent the previous twenty years campaigning in the urban setting of Grimsby and Cleethorpes, I had to adapt to the very different demands of a constituency that was predominantly rural but where demographic change was gradually making it much more a suburb of Grimsby and Lincoln.

Perhaps the greatest challenge during my time as an agent was the 1997 election. Though Gainsborough is rightly regarded as a “safe seat”, much depends on an equality of votes between Labour and the Lib Dems. Perhaps there's a message here for those who hope for a collapse in support for the Lib Dems; even a safe seat can become vulnerable to a moderately resurgent Labour Party, when combined with the very real threat from UKIP and an uncertain outcome for the Lib Dems.

Polling day in 1997 also served to emphasize that it is the economy in its broadest sense that will, almost always, determine the outcome. We were trounced nationally, but on the very same day we regained control of Lincolnshire County Council from a Lib/Lab coalition with a campaign focussed almost entirely on the level of council tax and the increased level of borrowing. Winning Cleethorpes in 2010 was always going to be a huge challenge. Despite the very evident mood of electors that they were determined to remove Gordon Brown's administration, I never felt a real surge of enthusiasm for the Tories and the eventual outcome came as no real surprise.

North East Lincolnshire Council is Labour controlled. Though there is an in-built Labour majority it saw a successful Conservative/Liberal coalition in control from 2003 until 2009 at which point the Tories mistimed their departure from the coalition. At the first elections to the unitary authority in 1995 only two Conservatives were victorious, rising to eleven in 1999. When the Conservatives reached agreement with the LibDems ahead of the 2003 elections, the tactics resulted in Labour dropping from 22 members to five. That 2003 campaign was focused entirely on Labour's budgetary failings.

#### **Lesson 4: It's the economy, stupid**

When selected just weeks before the 2005 election, I took the view that, as an agent, if I were to become too involved with the behind-the-scenes organisation I would very soon be consumed by it. So I trusted that all would be reasonably well and embarked on a packed few weeks of meeting as many voters as possible, whilst keeping an eye on how Edward Leigh's campaign was going.

My second campaign was very different. I was selected in November 2006, via a semi-open primary. The meeting was advertised in the local press and any member of the public who claimed to be a Conservative supporter could register, attend and vote. Early selection makes a huge difference and this is a much more open method, which I believe should be used for all selections. Ever since then I have focused hard on local issues and local organization.

I was the local candidate, having been born in Cleethorpes. Local candidates have more advantages than disadvantages. It's a great help just to be able to relate to people who know the local geography. When a voter complains about a local issue it's always better if you possibly can to say something that shows you know the area - such as "Ah yes, I know where you mean— just round the corner from where the Number 10 bus stops, isn't it?" If you're a local candidate, capitalise on it. As the MP, use your local knowledge wherever you can. That leads to:

#### **Lesson 5: Play to your strengths, minimize your weaknesses.**

Any campaign must focus on both the candidate and policy. Remember that the issues consuming the political classes are rarely noticed by the majority, unless you can relate them to the daily life of the average household. This seems to apply even more to the under-45s who are, understandably, consumed by building a career, caring for a young family and ensuring their children receive a decent education and perhaps the most challenging responsibility—balancing the household budget.

That said, don't assume they relate it to what's happening in government. Ask the majority of average parents who the education secretary is and how his policies impact on the schooling their offspring receive and you will receive a blank look. Always talk about the local school, the head teacher and the school's performance. Always get to know local head teachers, chairmen of governors and how local schools fared in the latest league tables. Make sure you build a working relationship with the local police commander, those who run the various health trusts and the principal social landlords. But don't spend too much time meeting them; every minute spent with them is one less available for meeting constituents.

### **Lesson 6: Know the people who make the place tick**

When a major local issue emerges, make sure you are seen to engage with the concerned residents; but remember that you only have influence, not the power to change things. So be careful not to raise expectations. Make a realistic assessment of the likely outcome and then persuade people that this is a good compromise. If the outcome is as you expect, you will receive the credit.

### **Lesson 7: Local campaign groups matter so get to know them**

Be prepared to go against your party policy, when it's an issue that is clearly seen as damaging to your constituency. If I were to walk the streets of Cleethorpes proclaiming the virtues of the Common Fisheries Policy, I wouldn't be guaranteed to win many friends.

UKIP have exploited this. They fight every local election and this year gained Scartho ward on North East Lincolnshire Council—the Grimsby ward that I represented for over twenty years. Their support is not just as a result of the recent upsurge in anti-European feelings but stems from the Common Market negotiations of the 1970s when the fishing industry was sacrificed for what we were told was the “greater good.” They are not in a forgiving mood.

But remember that most voters will form their voting intention as a result of fleeting glimpses of the party leader on TV news bulletins, which will set the general direction of travel. This is particularly important because we can't win with the votes of only the convinced Conservatives. Others may feel that we are heading in their direction, and a bit of persuasion from the local candidate may just persuade them.

### **Lesson 8: Don't restrict your campaigning to the safe areas. It's the 50-50 areas that need more effort**

Building working relationships with the local media is vitally important. The local press and radio stations are the most important. I was given some very good advice by a long-standing politician: “As a candidate, if you appear in the Grimsby Telegraph it's usually good news. If it's the Daily Telegraph it's usually bad news.” I find radio phone-ins an ideal opportunity to bring out “the real me”, as questions are often more personal than policy-related. But as many politicians have discovered to their cost, including Margaret Thatcher, a member of the public can sometimes expose weaknesses more effectively than a Paxman or Dimbleby.



## **Lesson 9: Build a working relationship with all sections of the media**

Unless a candidate is particularly fortunate, he or she will find the local Conservative Association has limited resources both of willing volunteers and finance. This is in no way a criticism of those hard-working individuals that form the backbone of our local party branches but a reality. These days sadly only a tiny number of the electorate feel inclined to join a political party and even less actually to go out and campaign. So search out helpers you can rely on from whatever source.

## **Lesson 10: Build up an inner core of helpers, develop a real team spirit, and they'll go the extra mile for you**

One of key roles for a member of the campaign team will be to build up a distribution network to ensure that your leaflets find their way into as many homes as possible. I mentioned earlier what maybe of great concern in one village is of no interest to residents in the next.

For any leaflet to be really effective it must do two things. The first is to register the candidate's name and party with the householder in the short walk from the letterbox to waste bin. Secondly, it must speak to the interested voter about an issue that they can see really affects them. Don't talk to them about changes to the structure of the NHS but how the changes are going to improve local services. Unless your delivery network is capable of delivering the whole constituency within around four weeks, divide up the area so that they can be delivered in smaller batches.

## **Lesson 11: All politics is local. All politics is local. All politics is local**

I ensure that I deliver all but the remotest parts of the constituency at least once a year—but not with same leaflet. By dividing it up it can be made more relevant to each locality and, importantly, it can be up to date.

Remember that hardly anyone reads the manifesto and the tone of the campaign is set by the leadership. It's clear that voters now put more emphasis on identifying with the messenger and if, like me, you represent or seek to represent a northern marginal, then that is becoming more difficult. This leads me finally to lesson 12...

## **Lesson 12: Remember you are the face of the Conservative Party in the constituency. Take every opportunity to be seen to speak for the local community but don't be in people's faces too much**

As Conservatives, we do our best to represent everyone in our constituencies. But remember that it is generally the quietly patriotic, understated people who make the difference, and whom we tend to like, admire and identify with. To win at the ballot box every candidate must win their trust.



## HEREFORD AND SOUTH HEREFORDSHIRE Jesse Norman MP

There is no job description for a political candidate, or for an MP: you have to create or evolve one for yourself. In principle, there are three levels: community champion, constituency representative in Westminster, and participant in the national political debate.

In a marginal constituency, all of them matter. Local people want a community champion, who can take a lead on crucial local issues, focus minds and bring people together. But that's not enough if the MP can't also make the case to Ministers, because very often it's Ministers who will take the relevant decision. And that decision won't go the right way if the policy is the wrong one in the first place. So the paradox is that a really good MP in a marginal seat must not only be highly plugged in to local issues, people and concerns—he or she also needs to spend a lot of time on the bits that most local voters won't ever know much about. But the constituency itself is always the starting point.

Here, then, are nine short recommendations from one marginal constituency: six do's and three don'ts. Many of them are fairly obvious, but tend to get lost in the current welter of political jargon and fake science. The Do's are:

1. Know your patch
2. Have a vision
3. Pull people together
4. Do good things
5. Focus on your casework
6. Reach out

The Don'ts are:

- a. Don't be negative
- b. Don't be party political
- c. Don't patronise the voters

But before we get to the Do's and Don'ts, I want to suggest that there is one absolutely fundamental rule in politics: **Be yourself**. This is for three reasons, one bad and two good. The first is that we live in a world of electronic media and spin. What matter now are authenticity and legitimacy. Authenticity: is this person who they claim to be? Is this a real person, or a mouthpiece? And legitimacy: do they have the right to say what they say? Do they really, by

background or experience or commitment, know what they're talking about? Be yourself, and you will be authentic—that's half the battle already won.

The second reason is just this: being yourself is a lot more fun, because you can pour your passions into your politics. In my own case, I started to play the trumpet some years ago (yes, I know, politicians blowing their own trumpet... enough said). I am madly enthusiastic, if barely competent. But I now know enough about music to be closely involved in efforts to protect and build up music provision in the county. I am a keen cyclist, so it's very fulfilling to be able to support the new non-motorised sustainable Greenway which will in many years' time link Hereford and Ross-on-Wye. You get the idea.

And the third reason is that your constituents will respect you. They know they're getting the real deal. I found this out to my amazement after the Bill to create an elected House of Lords was defeated. I had dimly seen this as just a Westminster issue: of great constitutional importance, yes, but not likely to be of interest to my constituents. I was completely wrong; after dozens of emails, texts and unsolicited encounters in the street I realised that local people had been following events closely, and that they overwhelmingly agreed with the stand I had taken. But most of all, what they liked, regardless of the issue or their own political affiliation, was having an MP who had stood up for his views.

OK, now let's start with the Don'ts:

#### **a. Don't be negative**

The conventional wisdom is that negative campaigning works. It may hurt you, but it hurts your opponent more. Whether or not it is true—and I confess it's not my style and I would be hopeless at it—my advice is don't do it, either as a candidate or as the MP.

When I got selected in 2006 for Hereford and South Herefordshire, I made it publicly very clear that I would not be campaigning negatively or making any personal attacks on any of the other candidates. By contrast even with the endorsement and support of the outgoing MP, the Liberal Democrat candidate fought a relentlessly negative and personal campaign. I periodically rebutted her claims in the local press, where I could. In the week before election day, her dishonest party literature was exposed in the national press. Not only that: three prominent local LibDems—including two councillors and a former parliamentary candidate—declared their support for me on the front page of the local newspaper. It was completely unexpected, and it made a huge difference. You can't bank on it, but good things happen if you aren't negative.

#### **b. Don't be political**

It's a truism that, once elected, the MP becomes the representative of all the people in his or her constituency, not just those who voted for them. The vast majority of normal people are not really interested in political parties as such. They want an MP who is friendly, available and delivering what is needed, not someone who is constantly making political points. By the same token, it is very important to treat local politicians and party members of every political stripe with respect.

### **c. Don't patronise the voters**

Read the standard campaign guides, and they will say that you have to repeat the same message, ideally in the same words, many times over for it to get through; and that it's only when people get grumpy that you know it's getting through. My own view is almost the exact opposite. Of course no-one will notice if you keep changing what you say. But here's a thing: voters are not stupid. So it's never a good idea to patronise them; you need to engage with them, and above all make the argument. That was why I did an Annual Report in my constituency last year—a detailed 20-page explanation of what I had been doing and why I thought it was important. I think it may be the first of its kind.

And here are my five Do's:

#### **1. Know your patch**

Edmund Burke said that the wise ruler governs “with the temper of the people”. Being an MP is a far cry from governing, but the same point applies. In every constituency, but a hundred times more in a marginal one, you need to know your patch and the people in it. In my constituency, there are huge differences between the needs and interests of Hereford city, Ross-on-Wye, the rural areas and the villages; but also great overlaps. MPs have the priceless privilege of being able to see and perhaps help with every aspect of their constituency—but only if they take an interest. For me recently that's meant promoting a local film about young farmers; supporting local energy-efficient housing and raising money for several local disability charities, among many other things.

#### **2. Have a vision**

Local people want leadership from their MP. That means having a vision: something which they can follow and get excited about, something on which to focus their and your activity, something which you can use to create hope even in difficult economic times.

In my case the vision is extremely simple. From the Black Mountains to the lower Wye valley, Herefordshire is absolutely gorgeous. But it is not on the national radar screen, it does very badly in funding for public services, and incomes and business activity are low. So the long term key is to improve communications through fast broadband; to raise funding for public services to a fair level; to lure new business investment through an Enterprise Zone; to open up Hereford itself with an eastern link road; and to establish a University College of Herefordshire. Nothing too demanding, then! But we're making progress: so far we have won one of the first broadband pilots, and have secured an Enterprise Zone. Now we just need to make the rest happen.

#### **3. Pull people together**

You won't achieve much on your own, however; you need to be able to rely on others, and to pull people together. For me that means organising informal groups, for example to do litter picks and clean up various areas in Hereford and Ross. I also have small but superb core of volunteers in my Conservative Association. Together we have been instrumental in setting

up local groups to build support for fast rural broadband, to revitalise our villages using the powers conferred in Localism Act, and—working across politics and political parties—to set a common plan for the county called Herefordshire 2020. We have just run a young people’s forum which has started to generate some great ideas for future projects. And for its part Herefordshire Council has played an important role in supporting these activities and trying to take them forward.

#### **4. Do good things**

The great US President Teddy Roosevelt called political office the “bully pulpit”—that is, a terrific place from which to make yourself heard. That pulpit gives MPs enormous scope to do good things in their constituencies, especially in marginal ones.

Many years before entering Parliament I ran an educational charity working behind the Iron Curtain, and as an MP I place a huge amount of emphasis on volunteering and charitable work. For example, before my election in 2010 I organised a big charitable dinner locally which ended up directly and indirectly raising over £20,000 towards a plan to turn a local community hall into a theatre for young people. The project was completed last year, and has been a superb community resource in a disadvantaged part of Hereford.

Earlier this year, I was able to help a residents’ group take control of the Whitehouse, a local pub which is being converted into a community centre—indeed, I typed out their original bid letter two years ago! With my support a local Tree Forum has been able to plant a set of new trees on a key approach road to the city. And we have just completed a second year of a fantastic Marvellous Maths course aimed at 8-9 year-olds who have difficulty with maths. That’s a very important age, and with schools’ focus often on the end of Key Stage Two, it tends to get overlooked.

#### **5. Focus on your casework**

Constituency casework is a vital and rather under-appreciated part of being a good MP. It’s especially important for Conservatives, perhaps, given the other parties’ unrelenting desire to present all Tories as innately selfish and out-of-touch. My staff and I handle about 600 cases a year, and our approach is wherever possible not to move paper on, but to try to solve the problem. My recent cases have included everything from sorting out unpaid benefit and single farm payment claims, to lobbying for the release of a local man wrongly detained in Afghanistan.

Solving casework problems is often no easy task, given the thicket of regulation and lack of common sense, transparency and accountability that exist at the moment in many parts of central and local government. But it reaches many of the least well-off people whom MPs rarely see. And it is intensely rewarding: for example, I think of the couple who came to see me at a surgery, with a two-year-old daughter who had severe muscular cramps and was increasingly unable to walk; and the wonderful letter of thanks they wrote after we had got the problem sorted with the hospital.

## **6. Reach out**

Almost everyone lives in a self-created bubble: family, friends, work... that's as it should be. But not if you are an MP, and especially in a marginal seat. You need to be continuously reaching out to new people, new ideas and new causes. For me that's recently meant supporting food banks and homeless charities. Goodness knows what's next. According to the conventional political wisdom it makes little sense, since often the most marginalised people won't vote at all. But that's hardly the point. And sometimes they do.



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