

Were you up for Twigg?

The 1997 General Election's defining TV moment was Michael Portillo's defeat in Enfield Southgate by Stephen Twigg. Eight years later the tables were turned with the largest swing from Labour to Conservatives of 8.7%.

Many people have asked me the secret of our success, given that such a swing nationwide would have returned the Conservatives to government. I emphasise 'our' because it was a team effort – assisted by Michael Howard's disciplined leadership, a professional national campaign and above all hard work on the ground. As Stephen Twigg himself conceded, 'the local association got its act together.'

No doubt in a public document it would be inappropriate to record all our secrets, but the reality is of course that there is no silver bullet to victory. If there were the copyright on this paper would already have been auctioned on eBay. The question that concerns me, and I believe the Party, is not so much Enfield Southgate's result and whether the electorate was up for Twigg, but rather whether voters were up for politics at all.

THE PROBLEM

Voter apathy is a pressing concern to everyone involved in British politics. Turnout in General Elections has fallen significantly in the past 15 years, from an average 77% in 1992 to only 62% in 2005. The recent Power Inquiry concluded that most voters are turned off mainstream politics for several reasons:

- They do not feel that the processes of formal democracy offer them enough influence over political decisions.
- The main political parties are widely perceived to be too similar and lacking in principle_
- The electoral system is widely perceived as leading to unequal and wasted votes_
- Political parties and elections require citizens to commit to too broad a range of policies_
- Many people feel they lack information or knowledge about formal politics.

It is all too easy to blame voters for this decline in interest. Politicians are increasingly seen as remote by the people they represent and this is not solely the result of apathy on the part of the electorate. People who do not vote cannot be readily branded as disinterested in how their country, county or borough is run. Apathy is in part the fault of politicians failing to offer the sort of effective and meaningful representation their constituents want.

So what is effective and meaningful representation? I believe that the role of a Member of Parliament and the expectations of the public have changed significantly in recent years. Politics has become increasingly localised with people wanting to see real change on their doorstep. At the same time the local community's ability to have an influence in their area has diminished as power has become more centralised in the hands of Whitehall. Much of the sense of disillusion surrounding politics derives from a feeling of powerlessness. Disenchanted voters need to be shown that politics can work, that the people elected to represent them can make a difference to their lives.

One way in which this feeling of powerlessness has manifested itself most strongly in Enfield Southgate is in the issue of mobile phone masts. Many constituents are frustrated that the first wave of masts was built with comparatively little public consultation or consideration for their local health or environmental concerns. Their protests have grown louder with the third generation phone upgrade which has ushered in another wave of mast building more densely spread than the first. Phone masts appearing on constituents' doorsteps has vividly brought home their lack of control over their local area.

The thirst for local empowerment, commonly known as localism, can only be quenched by fundamental policy changes shifting power and responsibilities toward local institutions – be they elected or voluntary. A Member of Parliament, or indeed a candidate, can take up the banner of localism both in terms of pressing for changes in national policy and championing local interests.

GO LOCAL

The main lesson we learnt in Enfield Southgate was the need to go local. This goes far beyond selecting a candidate who lives and works in the constituency – although these credentials help. A thoroughly local approach requires a candidate who can offer genuine conviction and concern for the area they represent. The electorate can no longer be relied upon for traditional ties or loyalty to a single party. They are more often than not turned off by party politics or even politics generally. They want someone who can affect real change and influence life in the constituency for the better.

In 2001 one of our best results was in Romford where Andrew Rosindell bucked the national trend and regained the seat from Labour. Andrew's success was no doubt formed from a proven track record over a number of years as a local champion. I recognised this point and similarly was able to lean on my position as a local councillor of 11 years in Enfield Southgate. I was well placed to voice constituents' concerns about their locality and act as a focal point for campaigns on highly localised issues.

Local campaigning is not to simply brainstorm a few issues that appear to crop up often in the local papers and campaign on them, but to offer local residents genuine representation which they can see affects real change in their area. A candidate can

only offer this sort of help to his electors if he/she shares in their constituents' concerns. Compassion is an oft used word these days in politics. We can draw up policies and talk about 'Compassionate Conservatism' until we are whatever shade of blue we would like to be in the face. However, unless we are true to the meaning of compassion, literally to 'suffer with' we will fall short. The candidate needs to be able to identify with the constituents so that they can stand alongside them on relevant issues. For example, I think it important that I am seen to be part of the community I purport to serve. If my constituents see me using the local facilities, the hospital, sending my children to local schools, getting involved with youth work projects and serving on the council, they see someone who understands their concerns. Such concerns maybe constituency wide or specific to one street.

BE POSITIVE

We need to think, and more significantly, act outside the box of people's perceptions of politicians, Conservative politicians in particular. Given the growing disinterest and cynicism in politics, a local campaign has to go deeper than turning up on a doorstep or delivering a leaflet extolling the virtue of living locally. Our activism needs to be less political and more community based. Such a campaign should be positive, with less of the negatives about opponents and more of the positives about what the candidate is doing in the area. It is not so much about making promises before election time, but delivering local changes. Plainly this takes time and any impact can only come about after hard work long before a formal election campaign.

Nowhere is the need for and the impact of a positive local campaign greater than in the deprived areas of our constituencies. These areas have been most let down by the present Government and feel most acutely the effect of failing public services, the impact of family breakdown and social disorder. They are also likely to be the areas that traditionally, Conservatives have not been seen in and provide fertile ground for active, local campaigning.

The Ladderswood Way Estate in my own constituency has the dubious distinction of being the home to some of the failed tube bombers of 21st July 2005. The area has a long history of crime and anti-social behaviour and seems an unlikely place for a Conservative MP to work closely with his constituents. Yet this is where some of the most important constituency work is being done. For example, I have worked with local parents and young people to get a youth project off the ground. Far from being disengaged, the people of Ladderswood are keen to work with their MP to improve their area so that they can affect real changes to their lives. Supporting voluntary groups, charities and associations is hardly new to the Conservative Party; it is the natural territory of our Party, which has a proud heritage of helping what Edmund Burke called the 'little platoons' of society.

VALUES

Voter apathy has also increased due to a perceived lack of conviction amongst politicians. Interestingly, much of the feedback I received following the election,

particularly from first-time Conservative voters, expressed appreciation of my stance on positive values – supporting families, marriage and concern for the vulnerable.

During my campaign in Enfield Southgate I was clear about my values and where they came from, namely my Christian commitment. I gave the electorate some positive reasons to go to the ballot box. I believe that we underestimate the electorate's desire for their representatives to be clear about the values they hold. We can be so keen to water down anything which may alienate one group in society that we throw out the baby with the bathwater. We need to be more ready to say what motivates us to be in politics and the convictions we hold. We cannot expect the electorate simply to come out and vote as a matter of habit or duty; we need to work harder at giving positive reasons why they should be supporting a particular candidate.

BIG SWINGERS

During my first weeks Parliament there was natural interest in how we achieved such a big swing in Enfield Southgate. My question though was whether the factors I have identified in this paper were shared by other new MPs who also achieved large swings. I met up with two other 'big swingers', Grant Shapps and Stewart Jackson, who were asking a similar question. Interestingly, despite having never met before being elected, the methods and themes of our respective campaigns had many similarities. We therefore decided to ask questions of other MPs with large swings to see if there were wider lessons to be learnt for the Party. We interviewed the 10 sitting Conservative MPs with the highest swings and 56 more Conservative MPs (randomly computer selected to provide a 'control'). The analysis went beyond the anecdotal and was based upon an objective statistical approach. It revealed a common thread amongst those who achieved at least double the national average swing. The factors which contributed to our Party's biggest swingers were as follows:

1. Early selection & previous candidate experience
2. Long term campaign approach
3. Extreme localism
4. Living in constituency
5. Centre of community issues
6. Person over party
7. Professional campaign support
8. High level of candidate name recognition
9. Better funded campaigns (from selection)
10. Positive campaigning
11. Voters respond to compelling "proof" of hard work
12. Targeting areas not traditionally Conservative heartlands
13. Anti-politics "politics" – acting out of the box
14. Weaker opponents

CONCLUSIONS

With politicians crowding the centre ground in order to woo the electorate, the bigger picture is in danger of being missed; the temptation to resort to focus groups and dumb-down policies into attractive and presentable packages is strong. However, polls and surveys consistently point out that the growing political group is the disengaged and apathetic. The challenge for the Conservative Party is to tackle this problem root and branch.

In policy and practice, we need to be highly localised, reversing the loss of control people feel in their everyday lives. We need to be ready to stand up for local values, to repair the broken society precipitated by New Labour to incorporate our heritage of Disraeli and Shaftesbury in being on the side of the poor and the vulnerable whilst resonating with our modern compassionate Conservative approach.

It should be a priority for all selectors to pick candidates early in the electoral cycle who will champion their local community and work to restore principle to politics. We need candidates with a purpose beyond electoral success and power, who wish to serve the local community and use the unique opportunities open to an MP to make a real difference in the area they hope to represent.

The victory in Enfield Southgate in 2005 can hopefully be regarded not just as a symbol of Conservative recovery but as a restoration of trust and belief that politics can make a difference to the lives of ordinary people.

David Burrowes MP
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