



Speech to Conservative Party Conference

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Getting the Conservative message across in an age of cynicism

Chaired by Andrew MacKay MP - Vice Chairman in charge of Candidates.

Electoral analysis by Lewis Baston, Electoral Society.

Presentation by George Freeman and James Bethell (PPC Tooting 2005)

Thank you Lewis for a really excellent description of the nature and extent of modern political disillusionment.

Before having a look at what we learnt from our study of the campaigns which more than doubled the national swing in the last (2005) General Election, we thought it important to remind ourselves what the people we are all here for – constituents – have to say. We have made a short film made up of interviews with members of the public. All of the people you are about to see in this short video are people we came across in our own constituencies who felt strongly enough about the issue of cynicism to give us their time. Some are Conservatives, some aren't. The views they express are their own.

[see film – click on link on website – 'Positive Politics: Campaigning in an Age of Cynicism']

So, 8 people saying things that all of you will have heard many times in your own constituencies. One central message: people have lost trust in politics and politicians.

It really hit me shortly after I was selected and out canvassing one Saturday morning, bounding up people's paths flushed with the honour of being a PPC. Knocking on doors and asking people what I could DO for them to improve their neighbourhood. A man came to his door in grey underpants and a string vest. "What can you do for me ?" he asked. "Just tell the truth" And with that he quietly closed the door.

But, what is the truth about local campaigning? Can the PPC on the ground make a difference ?



POSITIVE POLITICS!

The conventional wisdom is that General Election campaigns are won in London via the national media campaign and the role of the local candidate and local campaign is principally to repeat the national message, find and 'get out the vote'. Convention says that the local candidate and local campaigns count for under 1% of the result.

I used to believe that, until I started hearing the feedback from campaigns like those in Romford in 01 where Andrew Rosindell MP bucked the trend with an inspiring gain with an explicitly local and personal campaign. And feedback from the 50 MPs and PPCs we spoke to this summer who achieved more than double the national swing in May about the importance of local campaigning.

Whilst no-one is suggesting that all of these swings are accounted for by local campaigning, (nor that swing is the best measure of effective campaigning) it is striking when you go through all the campaign literature how many of these MPs and PPCs were adopting an explicitly local and personal approach.

Two big messages came through loud and clear:

- Yes it is much harder – in some seats impossible - to find 18000 committed Conservatives and mobilise them in the traditional way.
- But the prize for candidates who break through the cynicism and directly challenge the stereotypes appear to be a doubling of the national result.

As Lewis described, what seems to be happening is that the unprecedented levels of disillusionment we see actually create an opportunity.

Many of you may be thinking that being POSITIVE LOCAL PERSONAL and VISIBLE is such obvious common sense that it doesn't need saying. Every MP knows it. A lot of effective candidates know it too.

We think it needs saying for two reasons:

1. Firstly, because we believe this approach to campaigning is particularly necessary and effective where Conservative PPCs are challenging incumbent MPs in our target seats, and



POSITIVE POLITICS!

has potentially profound implications for how we plan, fund, recruit and organise especially in the tough urban marginals where we have so much ground to regain.

2. Secondly, because we think there may be important implications for the national campaign from what has been shown to work so effectively on the ground.

Lets take a quick look at what candidates are telling us this approach means:

BE POSITIVE.

Yes, of course this means:

- Avoiding attacking your MP opponent
- Avoiding the easy way of starting every speech and article with an attack on our opponents
- Over-stating how bad things are

All of which the public are telling us quite unambiguously they loathe.

But much more than that it means

- Explicitly acknowledging voters disappointment at the state of politics and the collapse of respect for politicians
- Articulating a positive programme for dealing with it
- Being optimistic about the possibility of solving local and national problems
- Aiming to inspire people by sharing our own excitement about politics

Candidates supplied a great many ideas for ways of doing this including

- forming 'Young Democracy' clubs to help encourage the next generation,
- positive local manifestos (eg: 'How we can make [constituency] safer')
- campaigns explicitly targeting disillusionment (eg: 'Positive Politics')
- combining political and charitable fundraising

It goes without saying that this can't be done without a strong personal element to our campaigning.



POSITIVE POLITICS!

BE PERSONAL

Yes, of course this means making a point of

- listening to every constituent
- being very polite and personable even (especially) with those we disagree with
- taking the trouble to respond personally to every call, email and letter, (especially if they are not Conservatives)

But much more than that it means

- Demonstrating real personal commitment to an issue – especially powerful if it is not obviously linked to any immediate election.
- Tackling the widespread cynicism about politicians' motives ('they're all in it for themselves') by explicitly explaining our own personal motivation

I had my own experience of this when meeting a local Addiction Treatment Centre and realising as the patients talked of their own very personal battle with drink and drugs and family breakdown that my own strong feelings about the irresponsibility of this Government's policies on the family, drink and drugs were a direct result of growing up with divorce and alcoholism as a child. Sound corny ? Well it wasn't. I choked getting a very personal story out and 20 hardened drug addicts left reminded that Conservatives are human too.

BE LOCAL

Yes, of course this is about

- Being active on neighbourhood issues within the constituency
- Maintaining a high local media profile
- Localising every national policy story and statistic to make it relevant locally
- Stressing that Conservatives believe in the small, voluntary and diverse rather than the big, professional and uniform

But it's also about.....

- Seeking to make a real difference through long term commitment to a project. Getting away from high impact media stunts to actually doing something to improve a neighbourhood. (It was striking how many of the PPCs and MPs in May with the biggest results had been leading a big local campaign for more than 3 years before the election.)



POSITIVE POLITICS!

- Leading one local campaign rather than jumping on lots of bandwagons
- Making explicit an ambition to be a 'constituency MP', and not being afraid to demonstrate that as the MP we will always put the constituency before the party even if this means disagreeing with our own party colleagues on a local council on an issue, as popular longstanding MPs always have. (Some candidates in Labour seats told us that they deliberately sought out a campaign where they could stand shoulder to shoulder with local residents in opposition to a local council (even if a conservative council).
- Most powerfully, 'being local' was articulated by a number of PPCs as meaning articulating a well thought through and coherent plan for dealing with the most widely recognised local constituency issues.

BE VISIBLE

Yes, this means

- Tons of literature and photographs of local campaigning
- Spending every hour of the campaign on the road
- High visibility

but more than that it also means:

- Deliberately going into NO GO areas where people do not expect Conservatives – challenging the cynical assumption that politicians are only interested in votes and that Conservatives are for the privileged.
- Being seen working in neighbourhoods when there isn't an election on

As many of you will know better than me, this is not easy. Winning and holding marginal seats never was.

But it was very clear from our survey this summer that this is the approach taken by both those new MPs who won seats against the backdrop of a disappointing national swing, and those PPCs like many of you here today who achieved such excellent swings with so little traditional campaigning infrastructure.



POSITIVE POLITICS!

But there is something else too. This style of campaigning, whilst challenging, is also

- More fulfilling and rewarding for the candidate
- More attractive to volunteers - especially younger people who are drawn to this sort of 'direct action' campaigning
- Easier to raise money for from local sponsors. (Which is easier in today's politics for a PPC in a Labour marginal: to raise £5,000 from Conservative supporters for the party or to raise £15,000 from local businesses for a local initiative or campaign like a community crime campaign that will improve the local neighbourhood?)

Positive Local Personal Visible

What we are talking about here is a potentially significant change in the way Conservatives campaign.

- Changing the electoral priority from 'locate and mobilise the Conservative vote' to 'reach out to connect with the majority of voters who now support No Party'.
- Changing the purpose of the local campaign from being the mouthpiece of the national media campaign (ie: repeating the national soundbite) to a powerful local illustration of Conservative motive, ideas, initiative, talent and relevance.
- Changing the role of the PPC - less 'travelling salesman - more Jamie Oliver'.

In essence, elevating the importance of real neighbourhood campaigning in our party from being a primarily tactical and political activity around election times to being a constant expression of what our party stands - our belief in a society held together by the faith, compassion, energy and activism of Burke's 'little platoons'. Yes, being Positive, Local, Personal and Visible are important lessons from May 2005 in how Conservative PPCs can increase their campaign impact in marginal seats.

But they may also hold one of the keys to renewing our party's belief in itself as a force for hope, change and trust in a troubled world.

Which is, after all, what we all came into politics to achieve.

George Freeman.