

Organising to win

How seats defied the national swing

Sue Hamilton and John Mann MP

with a foreword by

Rt Hon Douglas Alexander MP

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Preface

Michael J Leahy OBE
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In May 2010 Labour held seats that were expected to fall to the Conservatives. Eight of the 90 Tory target seats stayed red. The Liberal Democrats held on to another 11.

Labour activists, through their hard work and determination, denied the Tories a majority. Key to that was the work of excellent candidates, committed volunteers and well worked strategies. This pamphlet looks at the very different models that can work for a campaign.

Both Progress and Community are proud to have helped – in our own small ways – with a number of these winning campaigns. Progress through its campaign days saw first-hand Gisela Stuart's winning strategy. Both Nick Smith and John Mann are Community supported MPs; Community's long-term relationship with these candidates, the local parties and seats reinforced each others' message and strategy and led to a successful partnership. All unions in London worked together with the anti-fascists at Searchlight to help local campaigners defeat the BNP and wipe them from the council in Barking and Dagenham.

This election proved the old adage – 'never disbelieve that a small group of people can change the world; it's the only thing that ever has'. What seems

self-evident, however, is that Labour cannot continue to rely on its current activist base; this must be expanded. The number of new members, the commitment of existing activists and the timescale a fixed-term parliament provides means we must take time and invest in training a new generation of organisers – both paid and volunteer.

The next election will be about Labour defying its own history. On every occasion bar one when we

leave government we lose the next election even more heavily – everyone knows we did worse in 1983 than 1979. We must change this historical reality. To help win in 2015, we should learn from those who defied the national swing in 2010. Let's hope we can continue in this vein because getting a Labour government back must be our focus.

“ To help win in 2015, we should learn from those who defied the national swing in 2010 ”



Foreword: beating the odds – local lessons for Labour

Rt Hon Douglas Alexander MP
2010 general election coordinator

Labour began this general election against the odds. After more than a decade in government and following the worst global financial crisis in six decades we began our campaign with a largely hostile media and against a backdrop of headlines about MPs' expenses.

While the result was not what we hoped, among the heavy losses were those glowing victories that bucked the trend and outperformed the expectations of our opponents, the national press and even some within our own party. This important pamphlet highlights a few of those seats where we managed to beat the odds, and is designed to generate discussion around local campaign techniques in the hope that we can better understand the fundamentals of a winning strategy.

In seats such as Blaenau Gwent, Birmingham Edgbaston and Bassetlaw hard working, well respected candidates defended the Labour brand, enthused voters and put Labour on the side of local people. In Dagenham and Rainham the local team built on a movement to decimate the BNP while in Wirral South organised campaigning and effective targeting sent a new Labour MP to Westminster. These seats highlight not only that money is no substitute for committed and dedicated activism, but the case studies of their campaigns give an important insight into how a successful local strategy can overcome even challenging national trends.

While there is no single blueprint for the perfect campaign, no one-size-fits-all strategy, however, there is good practice to share and adapt. In

each of the case studies examined in this pamphlet, the candidates and campaigns demonstrated an empathy with their constituents and through various methods the Labour team rooted themselves in the community. Given the collapse in trust in the political class and the largely hostile media we faced in the recent election, our candidates recognised that they would have to take their message directly to the voters.

In this election, more so than in previous campaigns, the bar of credibility and authenticity was set high and some traditional methods of campaigning were unequal to the task of securing victory in a changed landscape. In a network age we understood better than the Tories that this was a word of mouth election; that the conversations we would have with voters on the doorstep, in the high street, over the telephone or online would spread our message more effectively than the most expensive advertising campaign. Across the country our volunteers and candidates took our message directly to the voters, engaging in almost half a million conversations with voters each week in the short campaign.

“These seats highlight that money is no substitute for committed and dedicated activism”

The powerful effects of direct engagement with the electorate are illustrated throughout the campaign stories in this pamphlet. Whether through high visibility campaigning in busy public areas, daily doorstep canvassing sessions, direct mail surveys or new media resources, each of these campaigns established a constant dialogue with their voters. Utilising community networks and listening to local activists allowed each campaign to demonstrate a depth of understanding about local concerns and frame their message to address these issues and make the Labour team synonymous with the local community.

Each of the campaigns discussed generated an enthusiasm which transcended the party membership. Our candidates reached out to

community organisations and activists making them part of the campaign, establishing a network of volunteers and increasing the local party membership.

They developed a sense of belonging to a common endeavour that we must harness across the country. Our activist base is our strongest foundation on which to build for the future, and mobilising our members and activists within the local community is crucial. A key insight of this pamphlet is that our party structures must evolve to be more inclusive, to ensure that those who share our unity of purpose feel inspired to take our message to the electorate. We now have the tools of new technology to empower and mobilise our supporters, to make them not only part of the campaign but leaders in delivering a localised strategy.

This pamphlet reminds us that when we work hard and pull together we can win seats against the odds. It is this unity of purpose, drive and determination which can inspire us towards victory in the coming elections in 2011.

As the words on our party card remind us: 'by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone.'

Organising to win

After every election defeat comes a time of reflection, when the policies and the architects of the defeat are blamed or exonerated. The fallout from the 2010 defeat has been contained within the leadership debate. So far, there has been little attention paid to the day-to-day experience of campaign activists and candidates whose efforts produced results that were better (or worse) than the statistics predicted. There is learning still to be harvested. This collection of case studies starts the discussion by pointing to what works and what doesn't and why.

The inside story of some of these successful campaigns confirms that the mechanics of how to win and how to win well do vary. Edgbaston won by mobilising community organisers, Wirral South by sophisticated data analysis driving the precise targeting of Labour wobblers and 'don't knows'. In a different situation, Blaenau Gwent was retaken from the Independents by making it easy for the voters of the Valleys to return home. Bassetlaw's campaign built on the credibility accrued over the last decade by the sitting MP. Dagenham and Rainham won after a mass campaign mobilising anti-fascists from across London.

Although we know there is no blueprint for a winning campaign, the case studies confirm that there are winning ways which travel across boundaries. A consistent feature is that there is no substitute for a well run campaign that is strategically and tactically savvy and which instils belief in the campaign activists that winning or losing might be the result of their own efforts. These case studies show that to beat the odds probably needs

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good management and leadership plus excellence in one or two pieces of the campaign flat-pack.

A campaign is a self-assembly pack of a thousand possible pieces – finding which are the right pieces and their right order relies on the skills and knowledge of the local activists. And even then, when a model campaign has been put together and perfectly executed, victory doesn't always follow. Labour lost seats like Broxtowe where the contact rate was high and the candidate had a good reputation. It isn't always possible to buck the trend.

Interpreting the case studies lends support to the idea that the Labour party needs an organising academy, partly for new young activists, partly for voluntary organisers and partly for elected representatives. There are lessons to be learned from each winning campaign, top tips and excellence to be shared and issues to be discussed. The case studies show that activists want to talk about running campaigns.

The academy needs to scour the country, the party, the unions and its affiliates, and the world for best practice, to develop existing good ideas and for honest evaluation of what works and what doesn't. The academy needs to become 'home-base' for those party activists who know how to campaign and want to share their knowledge and learn from each other.

Wirral South

Mixed incumbency

When sitting Labour MP Ben Chapman announced his intention to stand down in late summer 2009, the chances of the party holding on to Wirral South were not so rosy. The seat looked likely to fall, needing only a swing of about 4.7 per cent. During that summer, Labour polled at about 25 per cent and Wirral South looked set to turn blue. The seat was target seat 87 – one the Conservatives needed to win to secure an overall majority.

Labour's victory, by 531 votes, is the result of hard, purposeful work and brave decision-making by a small team of people who battled against both the political and the natural elements. It is also the story of a seat which historically had been underworked but where the relationship between party and electorate was rescued by precise targeting and a candidate with local credibility.

The selection conference took place in December 2009, which left only four months of campaigning time before the election, and it turned out that at least two of those months would be blighted by the very cold and snowy winter. Alison McGovern was selected to fight the seat from an all-women shortlist. She was an ideal candidate. At 29, Alison was young enough to still have pals who grew up with her in the constituency and went with her to Wirral Girls' Grammar School. Her family had been union activists for at least three generations. Her dad works on the railway and her mum works for the NHS as a speech therapy assistant. Her grandad had been involved in the local folk scene and wrote *In My Liverpool Home*.

Alison was known to the local party during her school days, before she went off to university in London. In fact, she had been a volunteer in Ben's office. She knew the party, the party knew her. They were comfortable

Alison was young enough to have friends she grew up with still living in the constituency



together and the electorate would be able to see a real and local connection. Alison was a local woman who had done well. It didn't matter that she had lived away for a decade – that's what happens, people move away to take the opportunities opened up to them by the efforts of the Labour movement. In London she had served her time as a deputy leader of the Labour group of councillors in Southwark.

Alison's maiden speech described Ben Chapman as an 'amiable man', but his reputation was tarnished during the expenses scandal. And there were only two Labour councillors in the constituency. Apart from Bebington ward, which elected two fantastically active councillors, the party had not put up a big fight in recent council elections. There were Liberal Democrat councillors in wards with a social make-up to suggest that, shown the proper respect, the voters would make them Labour wards; that is, respect coupled with effort, good candidates and a convincing narrative. If the truth is to be told, then the regional office thought the seat was lost – they had more apparently winnable seats to concentrate on. Despite the strong Liberal Democrat presence on the council, the parliamentary opposition was the Tory Jeff Clarke. He thought he would win. The mood music was bad for Labour.

Despite the poor showing in council elections, the CLP had money and an internal life. It was primarily run by retired members with good social networks and a history of daytime activities. Members quickly responded to Alison's campaign with a launch party and fundraising dinner. Jenny Dodd took over as the agent and Christina Muspratt as the campaign manager.

Voter identification began in earnest as soon after Christmas as seemed decent. The last highly energetic voter identification campaign was run by the regional party in the byelection of 1997. The data had been topped up in subsequent elections. Alison's team inherited a contact rate of 49 per cent. It was soon obvious that this data was a lifesaver to the small campaign team. Wirral South has a very stable population. The 13-year-old data proved remarkably robust.

At the same time, the community networks were activated. Street stalls began in January, despite the dreadful weather. In the heartlands a visual presence was created as posters and stickers were distributed. Some sixth formers were ready to join the campaign – which was a breath of fresh air to a constituency with few active youth members. Alison's mother's book group were delighted to know the candidate, the street meetings her gran organised were well attended. It was the same among her dad's fellow quiz regulars at the Octel Club. The extended networks of party members heard the call. People wanted Alison to win because she was one of them and she spoke to them. And just as important as Alison herself fitting the bill, Merseysiders know all about the importance of keeping out the Tories. They remember the last Tory government and the devastation it brought to their families and communities. Alison's campaign pledge to protect surestart and double the number of apprenticeships on Merseyside hit the button. The buzz was starting.

In January and February the campaign team hit the doorstep and the phones. Alison led each and every doorstep canvassing session – starting at 4pm in the heartlands of Eastham and Bromborough and finishing up

at about 7pm as the middle-class families of Clatterbridge and Heswall sat down to supper. The party had 211 members, but only about 20 were able to be active during the campaign. On a good night, four or five people were

working. Stalwarts like Ivy Olsson hit the phones during the day for hours at a time, and Bob Smith was on top of inputting the information at the current volume of returns.

The early returns were positive – it was clear that the seat was far

from lost. In fact, the new figures were slightly more positive than the historical records. A few new members joined via the national office. At the same time it was clear the machine was not strong enough to mount a full canvass. Pulling together teams for envelope stuffing over lunch was not the problem – it was finding the right number of people who were able to work in the evenings and weekends. As a stopgap response, Alison's personal network and the National Communications Centre (NCC) kicked in to break the back of the sheer volume of calls that needed to be made. Over 1,000 people were contacted by Alison's Camberwell pals and another 1,000 by the NCC. The regional office began to allocate resources as it became apparent that the seat might stay Labour. The campaign team earned itself a 5,000 target direct mail from the national party as a reward for exceeding its stretch target. By the end of the campaign, the local party managed to speak to another 10,000 voters.

By early March, with 3,000 contacts since January, the Tories were scoring 42 per cent to Labour's 39 per cent, with 11 per cent still undecided. What's more, in the most recent contacts, Tory support seemed to be down slightly and they were not taking from Labour's historic supporters. The number of switchers from Labour to Tory was too small to worry about and, despite their strength on the council, the Liberal Democrats were nowhere to be seen. This election would be decided by the 'don't knows'.

“ The campaign team earned itself a 5,000 target direct mail from the national party as a reward for exceeding its stretch target ”

And, by March, an odd pattern was starting to show, not a statistical pattern but a feeling. There was very little evidence of Tory activity outside Heswall, the traditionally Tory ward, and the swing ward of Clatterbridge. Possibly the opposition's canvass returns were showing the same as Labour's – no switchers and it was all about the 'don't knows'. Perhaps the Tory strategy was to work on their own 'don't knows' – and there were enough in the swing ward to eat up the campaign's time. Perhaps the Tory vote was wobbly too. Another explanation was that the Tories were not well organised and we were not seeing precise targeting, but a campaign team that did not like to leave its comfort zone. This interpretation had credibility because it was also possible that Jeff Clarke was not all that popular with his party. He was labelled 'flip-flop Jeff' because first he was a Tory and then he stood twice as a parliamentary candidate for the Liberal Democrats before returning to the Tories just before his selection for Wirral South.

All about the 'don't knows'

Core to the campaign team was an economist trained in data analysis and fantastically knowledgeable about the capacities of ContactCreator and Mosaic. His interpretation of the returns steered the campaign through the crucial final 12 weeks.

The voter ID returns and the limited capacity of the team demanded harsh decisions. The team had to get out to the 'don't knows' and convince them. But it was not possible to substantially increase the campaign team's workload, which was already at bursting point. Selection had to be made. Trusting the data, the campaign decided not to concentrate on:

- a. All those who had not voted since 2001. There was not the time to convince them to vote, let alone vote Labour.
- b. All those who showed a consistent pattern of voting Labour in the 2001 and 2005 elections. They had to be left to their own good sense. The team decided this group would not even be knocked up.

The campaign team decided to target:

- a. Natural Labour wards where the ‘don’t knows’ seemed to be Labour wobblers.
- b. Those parts of more affluent neighbourhoods where public sector workers lived and were showing a leaning towards Labour.

Within these categories further, more sophisticated data analysis revealed where campaign time would be most efficiently spent. The wards and polling districts which were turning up most Labour voters for the least number of contacts among the ‘don’t knows’ were identified. This led to greater effort on core areas than in the past – often areas where Labour hadn’t been active enough and were represented by Liberal Democrat councillors.

With the canvass priorities zooming down on tight demographics, Alison’s time was focused on where it would count the most. She spent hours and hours speaking to the voters who were identified as wavering Labour voters and ‘don’t knows’. As polling day approached, the targeted canvassing seemed to be paying off. Labour wobblers were firming up. They remembered the reality of a Tory government and found Alison convincing.

The final push

A fortnight before the vote, the team worked out how to make best use of resources on polling day. Forty people had committed to help and the team reckoned that number would be limited to speaking to between 6-8,000 people on the day. To find which 6-8,000 to knock up, the team tested a sample of the ‘don’t knows’.

Based on previously recorded self-identified strength of support for Labour, they found that categories of the critical ‘don’t knows’ were coming back. This clarified the situation. ‘Don’t knows’ with the right profile were

to be knocked up. It was also decided to knock up Labour waverers, Labour with imperfect voting records, and 'uncontacted' in households with other Labour people. Those who voted Labour in 2001 and 2005 were left to their own devices – after all, if this category were not voting under their own volition then the chances of winning the seat were very low indeed.

During the last week, the final voter ID returns showed that the older, more affluent people living in pleasant neighbourhoods made up of interwar semis were also returning to Labour, and so were the younger families. Those on estates were becoming more confident about voting Labour.

Data collection closed on the Tuesday night and walk cards were prepared. The key polling stations were staffed from 7-9am before the first knock up at 10am. The voters did come out and fortunately enough voted Labour for Alison to win. Voters in the Liberal Democrat wards that the campaign team thought could be won to Labour came out for Alison. And hers was not the only victory of the night: in Bromborough, Irene Williams increased the total of Labour councillors in the constituency to three. There had been no real independent campaign for Irene – she threw her lot in with the general election campaign and won.

The election result was a tiny numerical victory, but a big one for the constituency party. It has grown by 30, members have been energised and relationships with voters and civil society rekindled. The national swing was 5.7 to the Tories. In Wirral South they needed 4.7 per cent to win, but were held to 4 per cent. That is enough to cheer up any honest party. The victory told an important story: where the relationship between party and voters is dislocated then it can be pulled back by a short, sharp and precise campaign, provided the message and the candidate are right. The campaign also shows the importance of effort – if the voters are respected then there are Liberal Democrat wards in the constituency that are likely to turn Labour in the near future – and that was true even before the Liberal Democrats' probably-suicidal pact with Cameron.

Dagenham and Rainham

In May 2010 the Dagenham and Rainham constituency posed Labour a unique challenge. Jon Cruddas was to fight the seat which replaced his former Dagenham seat and the formerly Conservative Hornchurch seat. It is made up of six wards in the London borough of Barking and Dagenham (LBBD) and three wards in Tory-controlled Havering (LBH). Jon was up against a consolidated BNP vote and a strong Tory challenger backed by Lord Ashcroft's cash. The boundary changes meant almost half the electorate were new.

There was a real and justified fear that Jon could lose the seat. The Labour vote threatened to be squeezed by the upwardly mobile or aspirational residents voting Tory, some of the white working-class vote haemorrhaging to the BNP and others staying at home. There was a real fear that recent incomers were not going to register to vote and that the west Africans would follow the lead of pastors and vote for the Christian People's party. It was a far cry from the time when Labour was so dominant in the area that it barely needed to canvass. As a first time candidate in 2001 Jon polled 57 per cent of the vote. In the neighbouring constituency Margaret Hodge polled 74 per cent. By the time of the 2008 London assembly elections, both the BNP and the Conservatives polled more votes than Labour. The BNP were the official opposition on the council.

The BNP declared their time had come. It was the first opportunity the BNP had to really establish themselves as a leading party. They expected to take overall control of the council and to win at least one of the two parliamentary seats in the borough. The BNP voters were largely disaffected Labour – white working-class people who felt the certainties of their life were slipping away.

The battle for control of the council would be fought out in six 'target'

wards. Whoever won in these wards – Labour or BNP – would become the largest party. Three of these six target wards were in the seat Jon fought. Barking and Dagenham as a whole had been dubbed in the press as the ‘race hate capital’ of England. The council and the Westminster elections were dominated by the need to defeat the BNP.

The seat is in the heart of the Thames Gateway. Go 11 miles east of central London and there it is. For 60 years, the men and women of Dagenham worked on the lines at Ford. The old Ford works site stretches for four miles along the south of the constituency. Dagenham residents generally live on vast estates built in the Homes for Heroes schemes for families who left the East End slums after the first world war, or who moved east in the 1940s. Becontree remains the largest such estate in Europe. There are very few tower blocks and the housing was built to a high standard with gardens. It had long been a very stable community where three generations of a family live within shouting distance of each other. It is the 11th most deprived local authority in England. Fourteen out of 17 wards are ranked within the 20 per cent most deprived in England.

People in LBBDD have never been wealthy, but they had a regular wage and could once count on at least one certainty: a home provided by the council. The lack of affordable housing, reflected across London, is the biggest change in local politics and local life. The truth is that since the Conservative government’s Right to Buy scheme began in the 1980s, the number of homes provided by the council has declined - from 26,969 in 1990 to 19,303 today. Many of the former council houses have been sold on as buy-to-lets. At the same time, the population of the borough is growing rapidly and set for further growth. Dagenham has become an attractive destination not just for immigrants, but for people across the capital pushed eastwards by rising house prices. There are 11,695 families on the housing list in LBBDD. Part of the population growth is attributable to a rapid rise in the proportion of black and minority ethnic residents. In 1991, only 6.8 per cent of the borough’s population was non-white and is

“The council and the Westminster elections are dominated by the need to defeat the BNP”

now estimated to be approximately 23 per cent. The population growth has meant a shift in how public services are delivered. The BNP has been quick to reframe these

changes as evidence of better treatment for non-white people in LBBDD.

In the public discourse, the housing shortage has become an issue of race and local anger has been directed at the incomers. Many accept the BNP's line that immigrants are the cause of the housing shortage. In 2006, the BNP published two leaflets that claimed 'various Labour councils are giving Africans grants of up to £50,000 to buy houses under a scheme known as "Africans for Essex"'. It wasn't true, but the BNP won council seats. On the doorstep, canvassers found most local issues, not just housing, were interpreted through a racial prism that blames black and eastern European immigrants for all the troubles in the area. For instance, it wasn't 'kids fighting in the play ground' it was 'African kids fighting'; voters assured canvassers their child is the only white kid in the class, a blatant untruth. The canvassing experience reminds the teams that once racist scapegoating becomes the acceptable way of understanding social and political problems, it takes over: it becomes an all-purpose explanation and all the harder to break down.

It was against this backdrop that Labour planned its election campaign and so too did the anti-fascist campaign Hope Not Hate, run by Searchlight. Together they ensured that the BNP lost its entire holding of 12 council seats and the parliamentary candidates scored badly too. The BNP were wiped out by good long-term campaigning. The efficient Labour machine started to provide answers to the genuine problems faced by the residents.

Labour decided early on to assume the general and local elections would be on the same day. Dagenham and Rainham Labour adopted a 'Team Labour' approach that included all candidates on materials whenever possible. The manifesto spoke to the local people – and its credibility grew

when the council started to build new houses. This was a very political fight – good organising was essential, but so too was winning the battle of ideas. Labour had to give an answer to people’s real concerns and it had to be strong enough to overpower the BNP’s racist explanation.

The key policy issues were developed in consultation with local people. The key six pledges for the manifesto were:

- Freeze council tax
- Build more homes
- Ban boozy streets and keep police threatened by Boris’ cuts
- Invest in education as a priority
- Celebrate civic occasions – bringing a sense of pride to LBBDD, opposing the negative approach of the BNP to LBBDD
- Preserve older people’s clubs

While this was going on, Hope Not Hate marshalled the energies of anti-fascists from across London and beyond. There was not a pro-Labour campaign – it was an anti-fascist campaign. Hope not Hate drove a voter registration campaign with the faith groups while Labour campaigned to show that the Christian People’s party were anti-immigration and a vote for them would be a wasted vote. Almost 700 Hope Not Hate volunteers distributed 130,000 leaflets aimed at exposing the BNP’s lies and shortcomings. They explained that much BNP propaganda was based on lies and underneath they are Holocaust-denying fascists.

The first organisational challenge for the Labour team was to raise the overall contact rate. While there was a reasonable amount of older data from a number of council byelections, there was not enough new data being collected.

A door-to-door petition aimed at stopping the building of a proposed prison in the area acted as an excellent vehicle for data collection. The campaign harvested complete and accurate data sets well over a year

The 'I've voted Labour poster' gave a sense of momentum to the campaign in the final days



before the election began. A rolling programme of direct mails formed a significant part of the campaign, providing an ongoing dialogue with both the old and new electorate. Over the 18 months before polling day, over 200,000 targeted and personalised letters were distributed. This was on top of four canvassing sessions per week across the constituency and distribution of leaflets with an easy to use return mechanism.

This steady rate of contact meant that by polling day the average Labour supporter had been contacted roughly 20 times in the previous 18 months. During the short campaign, candidate recognition was high. There were very few reports of voters complaining that we were only knocking on doors because there was an election looming.

The operation in Dagenham and Rainham relied on a 'tight-loose' style of campaigning. All the messaging, branding and target pools of voters were controlled from the campaign HQ (tight), while the canvassing was largely completed by the councillors/candidates and their own teams (loose). Trade unions provided a lot of the activists on the ground, adopting a ward and getting to grips with the local issues. Over 100 took part in a GMB day of action, delivering two wards and canvassing two-thirds of the same two wards. A lot of the success in identifying Labour promises, distributing materials and knocking up on the day was down to the support of the unions.

To ensure that canvassing was completed, regular email updates were sent to ward action teams. Canvass returns were verified against the returns from direct mails and leaflets to ensure accuracy. They were accurate. In contrast, phone canvassing undertaken by the National Communication Centre without any local knowledge led to a spike in people identifying as ‘against’, ‘don’t know’, or ‘not voting’.

The plan for the final six weeks of campaigning was for there to be regular contact between the candidate and voters. Postal voters received a letter with clear instructions on how to fill out their ballot papers (not easy with two local elections and one lead borough for the general election), and with a poster to put up in the window showing that household had already voted Labour. This eased election day knocking up and gave a sense of momentum to the campaign in the final days.

Polling day saw the fruition of months of hard work. GOTV was coordinated from three committee rooms and two cars that served as mobile rooms. The polling stations were largely left to themselves while the campaign team started knocking up the promises from 8am. There were two polling district-specific leaflets for election day, following an ‘attack’ eve-of-poll leaflet. More than 100 people were knocking up on the day.

Jon won because people wanted answers to the problems of their everyday lives and Labour offered the best answers. Most people did not prefer a racial interpretation – but, until the campaign got started, that was the only explanation on offer. Labour won by demonstrating that in Dagenham and Rainham it was on your side. At the same time, Hope Not Hate’s work exposed the lies of the fascists. Under this dual attack the organisation of the BNP fell apart and the Tories were unable to match the genuine community ties of the Labour activists. The local Labour party was able to efficiently campaign, with a clear message and purpose. Labour showed they had listened to the problems faced primarily by the white working-class and had a proper response to make.

Birmingham Edgbaston

State of the seat

Well respected Conservative candidate and local councillor Deirdre Alden needed only a 2 per cent swing to take Birmingham Edgbaston from Labour's three-time winner, Gisela Stuart. On the eve of the election, the national opinion polls put Edgbaston firmly in the hands of the Tories. The electorate would have to buck the national swing to stay Labour – and bucking trends is not something the seat is known for.

Birmingham Edgbaston is a classic New Labour seat. Before 1997, the seat had never had a Labour MP and by 2008 there were no Labour councillors. Slight boundary changes were regarded as unfavourable to Labour.

However, the widely tipped Conservative victory did not happen. Instead of the necessary 2 per cent swing, the Tory candidate managed only 0.47 per cent. Gisela's vote held up and Alden fell short by more than 1,000 votes. Gisela was returned for a fourth time.

The secret of why Labour won is partly contained within that last fact.

The success was built on a combination of factors. Gisela was well respected locally and had a reputation as a straight talker who got things done for local people. She was unmaligned by the expenses scandal. In addition, she worked hand in glove with her constituency party who had developed a creative approach to campaigning that built upon excellent community networks.

Sizing up the problem

There was nothing inevitable about this victory. In summer 2008, the opinion polls showed Labour scoring between 25 and 28 per cent, the lowest in over 25 years. If the figures remained constant, then Edgbaston

was as good as lost for Labour and Gisela. Even the optimistic assessment by Caroline Badley, the Edgbaston campaign manager, that they could win from up to four points behind in the national polls seemed founded on a large dose of faith, rather than reality.

If Labour was to win in Edgbaston then at least some of the voters who had deserted Labour in 2005 because of the Iraq war would need to be won back. Traditional working-class Labour voters (and it became clear as early as 2008 that this demographic was going away from Labour very strongly), and swing voters who had voted for Thatcher in the 1980s but Labour since 1997, needed to be retained.

Tempting though it was to accept that the dreadful national trend inevitably made them losers and conclude time was better spent propping up neighbouring, less marginal seats, the inner circle of the campaign team decided to stay and fight. They decided to stay because it was better to go down fighting than to give up; it was always possible that Labour's national popularity would rise and, even if that were not the case, not every seat is won or lost in line with the national figures. A quality candidate with a quality campaign can buck the trend. Perhaps Edgbaston and Gisela would prove to be one of these quirks that every election throws up.

“ The campaign team decided on the strapline for Gisela, 'I'm Labour, my values are Labour but I think for myself' ”

The candidate: Gisela Stuart

There were good reasons for thinking this might be so. Gisela Stuart had earned her reputation for being an independent-minded, intelligent, hard working MP who stuck up for local people. As a result of assiduous constituency casework, a lot of people valued Gisela's expertise and commitment. Gisela spent hours each day answering emails personally

and, over the years, she and her office staff had helped out many families. Even died-in-the-wool Tories admitted that Gisela was a good MP for the area. She had a good relationship with her constituency party, who respected her even when they disagreed with her.

Gisela also had a high profile. She had been able to campaign effectively on a number of prominent local issues, such as supporting the development of a new swimming pool in Harborne, fighting developments in the Moor Pool estate, advocating for residents on a multitude of planning issues and hundreds of smaller highways issues. Gisela and her team also sent out waves of surveys on the big political issues (for example immigration and expenses) to ask constituents for their view as part of a regular mailing cycle. These were often well received – people were particularly responsive to the survey on immigration.

Marshalling resources and getting organised

Edgbaston Labour party was already an active campaigning party, albeit with unremarkable membership figures. In late 2008, even back-of-fag-packet calculations showed that a strategy to buck the national trend by even 2 or 3 per cent needed more volunteers than the party currently had. The constituency had to step up a gear.

2008 was also the year of the US presidential elections and the birth of Barack Obama's movement for change. In the US, volunteers and activists were coming out of the woodwork in droves. Campaign manager Caroline Badley researched some of the techniques that had been used to expand the volunteer base and set about trying to get them to work in a British context. By the end of 2008 the constituency had an activist recruitment programme up and running

The campaign team began prioritising outreach, nurturing volunteers and potential volunteers through an open, proactive and welcoming structure. Caroline Badley explained the strategy:



The Tory candidate managed a swing of only 0.47 per cent. Gisela's vote held up

‘The key to involving the new activists was to make sure everyone who wanted to help was encouraged to join in and take responsibility. There was a great spirit of cooperation. The local community activists were also our eyes and ears – we knew the local issues through the conversation with them on the phone and over the envelope-stuffing table.’

Time and time again these new volunteers and activists came to the team to let them know of problems in their area or down their road so that Gisela was able to get involved quickly and effectively. The campaign had a living, vibrant presence. When knocking doors or phoning voters it was unusual for people not to know of something that Gisela and her team had done locally.

These volunteers came from all walks of life – some have since joined the party but most have not, although they attend socials and policy events.

Short campaign: January 2010 onwards

From the end of 2009, the campaign stepped up another gear. A Christmas social and an envelope stuffing-session was held (and well attended) between Christmas and New Year for activists: voter ID sessions took place during the dark winter evenings and the number of mailings increased.

Gisela and her campaign team also honed the campaign messages which would be used over the following five months. Mindful of the popularity of Gisela – and the poor showing in the polls of the national party – the campaign team decided on the strapline for Gisela:

‘I’m Labour, my values are Labour but I think for myself’

Gisela also conducted her own local manifesto consultation, which dovetailed with the Labour party’s manifesto. At no time did Gisela attack Labour, but where she did disagree with the party she made that known. Gisela’s election address had both Labour and Gisela pledges on it.

As a consequence of this approach, the campaign team opted to produce all material locally, including direct mail. In the last few weeks direct mail was produced as events unfolded, allowing the campaign team to respond to national events, such as Cleggmania.

When the result came in it was harder to say who was more shocked – the Labour campaign team or their Tory opposition. What is clear, however, is that the combination of a high-profile, hard working, effective MP and a constituency party rooted in its local community were key to Gisela Stuart’s election victory in 2010.

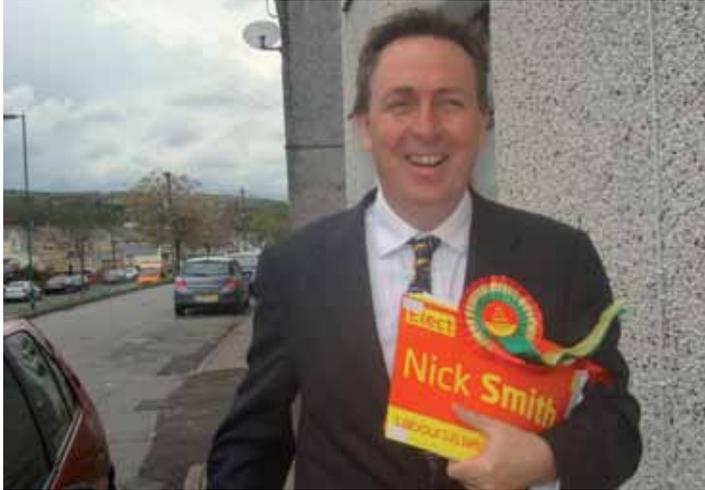
Blaenau Gwent

In 2005, Labour crashed up against the memory of Nye Bevan and the legend of Michael Foot when Independent candidate Peter Law took what had been Labour's safest seat. To lose this Valleys seat was unthinkable. Built around the pit and the steel industries, the towns of Tredegar, Ebbw Vale and Abertillery were the cradle of the British working class and its labour movement. Holding the area for Labour, and preferably with a strong and passionate spokesman, is part of Labour's collective legend – and losing hit the local party very hard.

The Conservative party and the Liberal Democrats have always been very weak in the Valleys. Neither has won 10 per cent of the vote since 1987 and the Conservatives have never achieved even one-eighth of the total votes cast. But because of a disastrous own goal – the imposition of an all-women shortlist – Labour defector and assembly member Peter Law stood and won as an Independent candidate. Law overturned a 19,313 (60 per cent) Labour majority with a significant 9,121 (25 per cent) majority. In the byelection following Law's death in 2005, the Independents held on and Law's former agent Dai Davies won. And as if that was not bad enough, the council has been held by the Independents since 2008.

In late 2007 Nick Smith was selected as the Labour nominee because he was the ideal candidate. He'd grown up locally in Tredegar, went to the comprehensive school and had a strong family network in the Valleys. His family were former colliers and steelworkers and he was endorsed by the mining and steel unions, in particular Community – the Union for Life, formerly the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, which has strong links with the locality. Nick shared the Valleys' history and values. In 2010 Nick won back the seat with a 29.2 per cent swing from the Independents: one

Hearing Nick talk in his local accent about everyday issues was the way to win



of only four seats Labour gained. Even so, at the time of the selection many in the demoralised and badly hurt local party did not think Labour would win the seat at the next general election.

Following the selection, Nick held a string of tea time and breakfast meetings in his kitchen to kickstart the campaign and show the party members that the game was on. New members were quickly incorporated into the campaign team. It was more or less open house: everyone was invited. There was always plenty to eat and drink and people's local knowledge was genuinely highly prized. Together, the constituency officers and the new activists very quickly sized up the situation and the enormity of the task before them. At these campaign meetings the team worked out a winning strategy and carried it out.

The campaign team realised they were not fighting a normal election. The voters who had deserted Labour en masse needed to be convinced to return – en masse. The popular sentiment towards Labour needed to be changed. This electorate needed to know that Labour had returned to them before they would return to voting Labour. On bread and butter issues like jobs, pensions, child tax credits and the minimum wage, Labour needed

to show they understood and shared the values of the Valleys. When that trust was re-established and Nick was accepted as a credible candidate then Labour would win.

With the strategic task understood, the campaign planning moved on. The plan was to win back hearts and minds and the aim was to change the political mood. There was no need for sophisticated voter analysis. It was not a matter of identifying enough Labour promises and then knocking up. The seat is more or less mono-cultural and it is more or less all working class. Everyone was to be reached and convinced the time is right to trust Labour again.

On the plus side, they had over two and a half years to win back the trust and there were active councillors too. The deputy leader of the Labour group proved himself a skilled communicator, with a real eye for design, producing great-looking leaflets. The leader of the Labour group set a high standard for others to follow: he led the campaigning on the streets across the borough. Similarly, the AM candidate never missed a beat. Crucially, the campaign agent was a strong and able woman who had deep community networks and a strong, trusting relationship with the candidate (they'd travelled together on the school bus when they were youngsters). This was a strong leadership team.

On the negative side, many party members were getting on a bit and the self-inflicted defeats had not encouraged the next generation to join up. The campaign team was short handed.

The campaign team decided that contact with Nick himself was the best way to change the mood. Meeting the candidate, and hearing him talk in his local accent about everyday issues, was the way to win. Partly through choice, and partly because they were short of activists, the campaign team decided not to canvass or concentrate on telephone contact but to take to the streets and restore Labour's standing as a valued and routine component of daily life. They wanted to generate visible evidence that Labour was back in business.

This was to be done in two ways. First, the campaign was to go where voters go. There would be stalls in the very busy markets and street-sweeps where groups of members descend on a neighbourhood and encourage the residents to come out and talk. The purpose of these public showings was to talk with a lot of people in a short space of time, hear what they had to say and give Nick the chance to explain his story. The similarities between Nick's concerns and the residents' concerns would become apparent. The voters would soon see that Nick could listen and was genuinely interested in their opinions and concerns. Nick would give quality time to listen to voters and their concerns and point to real examples of where he had shown community leadership.

The second campaign prong was to get out to community organisations where voters congregated and felt at home. Although the party machine was badly bruised after three straight defeats, party members and lapsed members still knew their way around politics and community life. Many were active in civil society, particularly in their faith groups, choirs and sports clubs. Formerly active party members were pleased to be asked to help and pleased to see that Labour was back. They opened doors for Nick and spoke for him in the heart of the community.

Without realising how important it would prove to be, a Nick Smith for Blaenau Gwent Facebook account was opened and soon it became clear that a local woman with social marketing experience was a godsend to the campaign. Lots more local women turned out to be Facebook savvy. They used it to organise their extended family and were quick to give it a new function. They used Facebook as a campaign billboard and passed on the latest campaign news to the men in their families. On the street-sweeps, the campaign team were often surprised to be greeted by people who knew where they had last been and what had been said to whom. Voters followed the campaign team on Facebook and recognised people and places in the photos and short videos. Facebook users enjoyed

the immediacy of the contact and liked having the Labour candidate among their cyber friends.

The campaign team grew from a handful to 40. Half were reactivated party members, half were newcomers. The growth mirrored the change in mood. The informal networks were in gear and the word was out: Nick was the real deal. The mood was starting to change.

The highlight of the short campaign was a visit by Alan Johnson. He spent a few hours in the very busy Asda café meeting the voters. Then the photos were posted on Facebook. This generated positive local media coverage. People took to him. Alan might have a London accent but it is not a voice that comes from afar. Alan sounds like what he is. He is a very smart working-class man with the right values to connect with an electorate who feared a Tory victory and a rerun of the Thatcher years.

The opposition

The sitting MP had not done a good job for his constituency. In one of his four parliamentary years Dai Davies spoke for only 78 minutes and his greatest concern seemed to be nuclear issues. Of course it is right that an MP has special interests and fights on the issues that matter most to him. To pursue them at the expense of the issues that affect each and every family, every day of their lives is not only wrong but electoral suicide. Twenty per cent of the parliamentary questions he asked were about nuclear matters! When this was pointed out in the Western Mail, just as the campaign began, the skids were under the Independent's campaign.

The Independents' management of the local council did not help them either. A well run council is a plus for general election candidates and a

“ Women activists used Facebook as a campaign billboard and passed on the latest campaign news to the men in their families ”

badly run council is a real hindrance. The council had made a right mess of things.

Their biggest error was a total failure to clear the streets of snow in the winter of 2009. In two weeks, 2,000 people joined the Facebook group Salt Our Streets (SOS Blaenau Gwent) which was coordinated by local campaigner Nick Smith! This followed on from an earlier, crazy decision to turn off the streetlights between midnight and 6am, which left people feeling unsafe. 'Turn on the Lights!' had been a successful Facebook campaign group too. New activists were developed through these campaigns. Picking up and driving these issues confirmed the electorate's view that Nick had his head screwed on and understood what matters.

Nick Smith MP and Labour now have a majority of over 10,000. Winning back the seat was the reward for a two-and-a-half year campaign to re-energise the local party and reconnect it with the values held by this sophisticated electorate. It was all about rebuilding the relationship between party and voters and rekindling trust. The national mood helped too. No matter how alienated voters were from the party they felt had deserted them, they could see that the Tories were coming. They knew a vote for an Independent missed the point. They were pleased Labour made it easy to return home.

Bassetlaw

John Mann is returned as Bassetlaw's MP for the third time in June 2010. Labour's majority is increased despite unfavourable boundary changes and the national trend. The good result is attributed to the campaign team's detailed knowledge of the constituency and to their methods of campaigning. Their style generates a good quality conversation between party and voters and ensures that John is respected as an MP who fights for Bassetlaw. He is known to speak his mind even when it is likely to make him unpopular in powerful places. As a result, people are curious. They want to meet him. The 2010 short campaign is launched from the platform of a nine-year incumbency which rests on these principles.

Managing the boundary change

The boundary changes make a big impact on Bassetlaw, the most northern of the Nottinghamshire seats where the Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Yorkshire coalfields meet. The Boundary Commission swaps Warsop, a Labour voting former mining village, for 10,000 voters in Retford. Retford twice returned the Tory Patrick Mercer to parliament and has been electing Tory councillors since 2001. Bassetlaw is a huge, rural constituency where 10 miles separate Retford from Worksop – an old industrial town where the relationship between party and voter is now well developed.

There is a lot of difference between life in Retford and in Worksop. Worksop faces towards Sheffield, Retford towards Lincoln. They are distinct communities with little crossover. The towns have different newspapers and many of the local issues are different. Both are predominantly working class but Retford is the more affluent with its East Coast mainline station and pretty commuter-cum-farming villages. An automatic carryover of popularity from Worksop to Retford cannot be assumed. In the run up

to the general election, John is well known in Retford but the relationship is weak. Many people think he already is their MP and perhaps implicitly they assume that he is not a good MP as he has done nothing to help them, their family or their neighbourhood.

The state of the Retford party is another cause for alarm. It is not in good shape. There is very little relationship between the party and Retford voters. In the county council elections in 2009 the Tories won most of the votes. In retrospect, the boundary change is unlikely to unseat John but it is enough to cause a second glance and an anxious look over the shoulder. A reasonable outside observer, who can read beyond the statistics, would predict John Mann's successful return but with a much reduced majority. The county election results were enough to convince Lord Ashcroft to invest some of his millions in the constituency.

The same outside observer would see that neighbouring constituencies such as Sherwood, Don Valley and Derbyshire North East have very similar demographics, but while Bassetlaw increases its majority at the general election, Sherwood goes to the Tories and the others return their MPs with much reduced majorities. These results reflect the national voting trends and make the Bassetlaw result much more significant. Similar populations are voting Labour in Bassetlaw but not in neighbouring communities.

The long campaign

From the moment he is reselected in 2006, John sees the MP's role as championing progressive and just concerns against a pretty incompetent Tory council and against the iniquities that mar daily life in poor working-class areas. The job of the MP is to be at the heart of community life, set the agenda on bread and butter issues and draw the political conclusions.

Early on in the parliament John developed a booklet for local people on antisocial behaviour – this proved extremely popular, not least with the police. It provided people blighted with antisocial behaviour hope for

a solution. Through the kind support of Community – the Union for Life, John was able to make these available widely. In 2009, based on the same idea, John developed a booklet, ‘All parents and grandparents need to know about drugs and alcohol’. Again Community’s support meant this could be provided, particularly to people in Retford.

Over the decade hundreds of very local issues have fired up neighbourhoods but have had little constituency-wide significance. John Mann supports them – making connections with the local press, making representations to the right authorities, talking people through the problem. On top of these there are three constituency-wide campaigns which establish Mann as a positive force on the local landscape.

The first of the three campaigns is an excellent example of connecting case work to wider issues and outgoing campaigns. John realises something is amiss in the administration of the miners’ medical claims when more than a handful of constituents present concerns over the handling of their industrial injury compensation claims. Investigations reveal that solicitors working for the NUM and for the UDM are illegally charging fees from the claimants. Claimants feel themselves to be about £500 down on each award. Typically an award is between £7,000 and £30,000 dependent on level of disability. £500 is a big chunk to lose.

When John Mann brings together the UDM and NUM in the Coalfield Health Campaign to protest against the overcharging of miners, he establishes himself as a popular local figure. The status of his office as a campaign hub is confirmed. Many, many more cases of overcharging come forward. Bassetlaw miners split apart during the miners’ strike in the 1980s and the bitterness lives on in some areas. It’s hard to be on strike for a year and to forgive the neighbours who break that strike. Bringing together members of the two unions is a tremendous boost to Labour’s credibility.

And John’s personal ratings rise too because he speaks out, is seen fighting on TV, attracts national newspaper coverage and positive local reporting. He helps thousands of people sort out their claims and in return,

they, their family and their neighbours respect John. The method of work which connects casework to campaigns is tested and proven: John repeats the formula over a whole raft of issues.

The quality of information held about the constituency grows in tandem with John's credibility. The knowledge-base grows exponentially in 2003 when the second constituency-wide campaign takes shape. Management at Bassetlaw Hospital try to push through the closure of its A&E department. Unison and John work with the *Worksop Guardian* to keep it open. All households are mailed with a ballot paper and the local paper carries a ballot slip. There are 36,200 returns. It seems that everyone who lives in Bassetlaw knows that life will be less safe and more difficult to manage if the nearest casualty department is 20 miles away in Doncaster. John is seen to lobby health ministers and to exert extreme pressure on the hospital authorities. The campaign is won, and seen to be won, with John Mann leading and channelling public anger. It becomes clear that the campaign drive comes from Bassetlaw people and John tops it off by talking to the people who make the decisions. It's a powerful combination.

Significantly, the response rate is far in excess of the marketing world's expectations of such a campaign tactic. A non-political marketing campaign would hope for a 10 per cent return. This return rate saw over 55 per cent of those affected by the proposed closure participate in the ballot. There is a few weeks hard labour for a couple of student members of the party who input the data from the ballot into a database. Now John Mann knows who is interested in local affairs as well as who supports the Coalfield Health Campaign.

The third campaign which helps people in their daily life, enhances John's local standing and generates local knowledge is about council house repairs and the government's Decent Homes initiative. Under the Freedom of Information Act, John Mann requests the addresses of all 7,000 council properties. All tenants are written to asking how the Decent Homes initiative has affected them, telling them their rights and letting



The short campaign is the culmination of nine years of outgoing activity which responds to the needs of constituents

them know that John Mann will represent their interests with the powers that be. At the same time they are asked if they will be voting Labour at the general election. This survey generates a huge amount of casework and significantly increases the voter ID contact rate. It takes the student members 10 days to input the data.

Behind the public campaigns, the conversation with young people is generated through running parliamentary summer schools for high-achieving school students in the summer after GCSEs. For the last four years a total of 160 students spend five days in London finding out how politics work. They love the experience and as a consequence many are more than happy to be involved in local politics. They form the consultation group for the Myplace bid for a new youth centre and they are an informal youth committee guiding John on their priorities for Bassetlaw. A couple of graduates of the summer school become core volunteers in the office. One young man is offered work experience at the Bank of England because he impresses their senior staff with smart questions. Some go on to support the Conservatives – and that is fine too. The young people sharpen up their ideas by arguing with each other.

A weekly column in the *Workshop Guardian* and regular TV appearances help build up John's profile. The expenses scandal, which dents many sitting MPs' re-election hopes, enhances John's credibility. He is outspoken and upfront and his view reflects the concerns of the public – too many MPs seem willing to use the system to their personal advantage and this is hugely damaging to politics. The profile John gains from speaking his mind serves him well in Retford – especially with the middle-class voters. They tell the canvass teams they saw John on TV and he seems honest.

In local leaflets, John would talk about migration. The headline 'Migrant workers: the big issue that the politicians hide away from' gives him permission to talk about real concerns, reassert an anti-racist message to the community and be seen again as being outspoken. This willingness to go up against the political establishment, in the minds of his electorate, pays dividends.

The election campaign: starts early in Retford!

When the boundary changes are confirmed, John Mann sets to work in Retford. His short pamphlet, *My vision for Retford*, is well received in the local paper. John meets voters in their own homes following leaflet drops. At the suggestion of a village GP, the elderly and rural communities are mobilised to keep dispensing surgeries in the villages and resist the government's proposal to transfer them to town. Seven thousand voters reply to the petition. Again, the Department of Health is knocked back and John's respect grows among the more middle-class villagers. It is a similar story with the campaign to save the free six-weekly bulky refuse collection which the Tory-controlled district council wants to cut. John joins with residents in the campaign to save it. And 6,000 middle-class voters join a campaign to retain Bassetlaw PCT's boundaries when the government proposes to merge it with Nottinghamshire PCT. They know how bureaucracies work and fear Bassetlaw will lose out in a bigger agency.

Canvass teams are later told John did a good job arguing for Bassetlaw against senior ministers – people who could enhance or destroy John’s personal prospects.

The Retford local party begins to revive. There are plenty of people who should be asked to join the party, but there is a problem: £39.00 is too much to ask many people to pay.

The short campaign

The short campaign is the culmination of nine years of outgoing activity which responds to the needs of constituents. The three mass campaigns have generated profile and information. Involvement in hundreds of small, neighbourhood issues has generated intimate local knowledge. It is now time to put the knowledge of the constituency into practice. At the start of the short campaign there are only 8,000 entries in ContactCreator.

The priorities for the short campaign are to identify Labour promises, secure the postal votes and target Tories. But not just any Tory – nor even just working-class Tories. The targets are middle-aged Tories who remember Thatcher or Tories who are likely to be public sector workers and aware of the campaigns, especially the A & E campaign. Face-to-face contact with John wins over voters and again and again John turns a Tory. It takes time to win them over. But this is a two-way fight so each Tory convert is worth two votes. There is no time allocated to canvass the commuter villages. The headline slogan reminds people: ‘John Mann fights for Bassetlaw’.

Telephone canvassing is no substitute for door knocking so canvass teams set out three times a day. There are many reasons for taking to the streets rather than using the phone. First, many Labour voters have mobiles rather than landlines and it is hard to track down their numbers. Second, Labour pensioners do not like to be called after tea. And finally, it is easier to be fobbed off over the phone. Face to face contact generates better quality information. However, all the people whose phone numbers

were collected from the campaigns are rung up because peer telephone canvassing is different to cold calling. The reaction is warmer where the caller even tangentially knows the voter. ContactCreator swells from 13 per cent to 40 per cent of voters. The list of phone numbers grows – they will be rung on election day.

While the canvassing gets underway, the campaign team catches on to the role Facebook plays in local life. The women use it to organise their families. It has become the preferred way to discuss, pass on information

and get sorted. John's Facebook page quickly grows to 2,500 friends and it becomes a useful campaign tool – a great way to spread the word. Time after time, canvass teams are told where they have been the day before – their family

and friends told them via Facebook. They see the pictures and the homemade films. Campaign activists share their top tips and election stories on the page. It is lively and generates a feeling of belonging. Funny or interesting things happen in election campaigns and activists want to know about them. The most absurd story in Bassetlaw is the case of Josie's parrot. Josie is a councillor with a parrot sharing her home. Josie specialises in telephone canvassing on the campaign mobile from her front room – where the parrot lives. That parrot learns the canvasser's mantra – 'Vote Labour, Vote John Mann'.

The canvassing identifies 1,000 postal voters. All Labour postal voters are encouraged to vote at the earliest opportunity.

Polling day

When polling day arrives, Labour has no postal votes to chase down – that job is done. The 40-strong campaign team concentrates on the other promises. Forty people is not enough to run a full polling day campaign

“The short campaign is the culmination of nine years of outgoing activity which responds to the needs of constituents”

– Harworth, a pit village with a traditionally high turnout, is left to only three people to knock up. Most people are focused in the areas with high voter ID records.

The first knock up is at 10am and the pensioners have already voted. They form queues stretching outside the door in polling stations in Langold. In key areas, numbers are taken at polling stations. The knock-up teams welcome the excuse for a sit down as they strike off the names from their calling sheets and are pleased to have fewer bells to ring. The teams return to HQ every now and then for sandwiches and cakes to keep them going from 7am to close of play.

At the count, the Tory still thinks he is going to win. The Liberal Democrats are not so much interested in the local result as in the overall picture. They expect a good night and come to the count all dressed up and settle down in front of the TV screens with a drink and a smug look. They soon start to look shellshocked and bewildered as Liberal Democrat hopeful after Liberal Democrat hopeful loses. Back at the counting tables it is possible to guess the size of Labour's vote. One of the first tables to finish is a Tory ward in Worksop where better off public sector workers live in neat 1970s-built detached houses with two cars on the drive. The Tory vote is perhaps 100 more than Labour's. If the Tories are to win the seat then they should be more than a few hundred ahead in this ward. They are not. Game over.

The 2010 campaign attracts 30 new members to the party. There are plenty more people who should be asked to join, but this will be an expensive exercise.

Conclusion

The campaign flat-pack

Like all modelling, the categorisation of campaigns we use below is a simplification. Most campaigns had elements of each model. But the models are constructed to highlight the specialism of each constituency. Without excellence in at least one aspect of campaigning, it is likely the seat would have been lost. These specialisms should be shared, the learning generalised and campaign activists encouraged to talk through their good and bad experiences. Every campaign tells a story and each story tells us something about winning and losing.

1. The sophisticated data analysis model and the dash for the line

Wirral South was a triumph for a tight campaign team with only a short time to introduce the candidate to the voters. Alison McGovern was not selected until December 2009. She won because she was a good candidate with local roots - a message voters wanted to hear and because her campaign team knew how to make best use of the voter ID returns. It is impossible to know for sure but Alison probably would not have held the seat for Labour without her team having the confidence and know-how to make hard decisions at critical times. The campaign was steered by an economist with excellent data-handling skills and plenty of election experience. He was able to dissect and rebuild the data analysis programmes to suit local conditions and from there be able to understand the voting intentions of the Mosaic groups as they differed by polling district. In a shorthanded campaign this knowledge, and the confidence to trust it, was invaluable. It meant the campaign could concentrate their efforts on precise target groups and generate maximum returns for the minimum of effort. By polling day their analysis concluded there were approximately 18 types of

voter and they knew which sections of wobblers were returning to Labour and needed to be knocked up and who were best left alone. The team excelled in managing campaign data. Activists made ContactCreator and Mosaic perform somersaults.

2. The mood-changing model

Nick Smith won back Blaenau Gwent from the Independents by doing what he set out to do: changing the mood of the electorate. The team knew the voters would return to Labour when they put up the evidence that Labour had returned to them. The campaign was designed to show that Nick was a Labour candidate who shared the values of the Valleys. His campaign did not use sophisticated voter ID, and there was no canvassing. Instead market stalls, Facebook and street-sweeps got the message over. Nick and his team excelled in knowing what needed to be done and doing it. Mobilising networks to ensure Nick met as many voters as possible was their way to change popular opinion.

3. The mass campaigning model

The new seat of Dagenham and Rainham was won by Jon Cruddas, a very popular MP with a good record of speaking up for his constituents. He had represented two-thirds of the new constituency in his former seat. Team Labour in Dagenham rolled the Westminster campaign into the council campaign. This generated mass activity both for Labour and against the BNP, who threatened to take control of the council.

The team excelled in mobilising volunteers and partnership working with Hope Not Hate. In turn, Hope Not Hate excelled in exposing the BNP as a fascistic, Holocaust-denying organisation which peddled pernicious snake oil instead of real answers to local problems.

4. The building on incumbency model

In Edgbaston Gisela Stuart and her team excelled in managing volunteers and mobilising community networks to reinforce what the constituents already

knew – that Gisela was an honest, strong, independent-minded woman: ‘I’m Labour, my values are Labour but I think for myself. Through assiduous case work and vigorous debate Labour won against all the odds. Bassetlaw kept the campaign simple. They prioritised straightforward canvassing on the doorstep which built on the long campaign that had started the moment John Mann was selected in 2001. For nearly a decade

they specialised in responding to both individual- and community-level concerns and in plain speaking. Their campaign slogan – ‘John Mann fights for Bassetlaw’ rang true to voters especially the

“Through assiduous casework and vigorous debate Labour won against all the odds”

36,000 with recent campaigning contact with the MP and his office. In Bassetlaw doorknocking identified the Labour promises, and the Tories too. In a two-way fight each Tory turned is worth two votes. Time after time, after a discussion on the doorstep with the candidate Tory voters changed their mind and said they would vote for John Mann even though they disapproved of either the party or the party leadership.

Bassetlaw excelled in the quality of conversation between the MP’s office and the voters. People could see the MP responding to local concerns by leading campaigns that were directly relevant to their lives.

Raising the standard of the short campaign

1. Sharing knowledge

Local campaign managers are passionate about politics. They want to get better at it. There are tricks of the trade which seasoned campaigners are keen to debate. They are free from professional jealousy and want to share their knowledge and insights. They want to find out how other people have produced good results and they want a voice in how the national party supports local campaigns. They want to help newcomers to the art of campaign management.

Labour party regional officers are well respected people but they cannot substitute for the free exchange of views and tips between the seasoned campaigners who work on the ground. Under the umbrella of an activists' academy, a forum for campaign managers to clarify their technical and organisational insights would raise the quality of campaigns. This should be either open access, or more or less open access, and designed to encourage participation.

Examples of the type of issue in play are:

- The use of Facebook. Facebook was important in Blaenau Gwent and Bassetlaw. In Wirral South and Dagenham it hardly featured.
- The relative value of telephone versus face-to-face canvassing. For sure, telephone canvassing is more efficient and can be done by an out of constituency party machine but some organisers find a real difference in the integrity of the data. Face-to-face conversation produced more reliable data and better allowed candidates to set about convincing the voter. This was important in Bassetlaw and in Dagenham. The 'needs must' approach in Wirral South meant much more contact was over the phone.
- There are a dozen or more technical issues which campaign organisers want to debate – smaller matters like the best time for the first knock-up, the pros and cons of taking numbers, how to follow up voters keen enough to display a Labour poster and so on.

2. Volunteer management and motivating existing party members

Edgbaston and Dagenham and Rainham have proved themselves first rate at finding volunteers and bringing in them into planning and activity. Apart from recognition that volunteers need to be treated with respect and newcomers made to feel especially welcome, the party seems to be have no established volunteer management practice. There is a literature on volunteer management in sectors other than politics which local party managers might find helpful.

The case studies threw up a common problem too. Not all councillors were leading the election campaign or even particularly active. Examples of this situation have been removed from the case studies to avoid embarrassment. The party needs to consider how best to instil very basic expectations and pattern of behaviour in its representatives: for instance, that the councillors are partly responsible for getting out the vote in their ward and that wherever the situation allows councillors should take polling day off work and put in a full shift.

3. Election materials and all-year-round leaflets

The value of centrally produced leaflets is disputed. Wirral South relied upon dropping local copy and photos into centrally-produced templates. Dagenham and Bassetlaw didn't bother and used only their own materials. The party as a whole is not sold on their quality. A space online for CLPs to upload their better leaflets for others to adapt would probably be welcome.

4. Accumulating constituency knowledge

The management of information is critical during the short campaign. Wirral South showed what can be done by people who understand statistics. Bassetlaw showed what can be done with long-term data accumulation collected from all kinds of contact. Both campaigns knew their constituents very well. Bassetlaw knew them by name, Wirral South by precise demographic interrogation. Without a thorough knowledge of the electorate the short campaign is a less resource-effective exercise.

Raising the standard of the long campaign

Seasoned campaigners are keen to stress that while good organisation is essential it isn't necessarily good enough. The political message has to be convincing – not just rhetorically plausible but robust enough to be measured against the voters' living experience. Voters can spot an empty shirt or a self-serving politician. Often an MP with the right

attitude was summed up as ‘caring’ about the constituency. ‘Caring’ is a slippery concept. It includes prompt attention to casework and a good, approachable and palpably honest manner. It includes being seen to take the lead on local issues. And, it seems, requires incumbents to be seen to fight for the area against his or her own party even when that jeopardises personal betterment. The candidate, incumbent or newcomer, needs to be understood as rooted in the community and not using it as a ticket for an MP’s lifestyle. For incumbent MPs the long campaign started the day after the last election. All their constituency work is a contribution to the next election campaign. This is not a cynical operation – it is about the quality of conversation between candidate and voters. And it is about the way an MP’s work programme is shaped.

In Bassetlaw the MP’s office is geared to drawing out the lessons of case work and relating politically to these often intimate and personal concerns. So, for instance, a pattern of complaints about the fees charged by solicitors in miners’ industrial injury compensation claims resulted in a high-profile campaign which made the front pages of Sunday papers and the national news. It is the same story in Edgbaston where connections with neighbourhood concerns created a network of community activists who campaigned for Gisela Stuart.

Retaining member engagement

Developing an internal party culture which values knowing how to recruit and retain members is urgently needed because there are very few people in the party. And there are even fewer young people involved in the constituency parties. Analysis of the 2008 party membership figures tell us that despite exceptions, usually where the CLP has been convulsed by a selection battle that drew in hundreds of new members, most parties have membership figures of about 250. Those CLPS with a higher membership figure did better in the 2010 election than smaller parties.

The level of engagement of the members is not great. Only about 20 per

cent voted in the NEC elections of 2008. Many were not involved during the 2010 general election. Not even all councillors consider it part of their role to fully commit to election campaigns. In these case studies there were about 40 party members who were committed to regular and intense activity in most campaigns. But where the party opened its doors and encouraged new people to take part – like in Edgbaston and Dagenham – then people responded. In Dagenham people responded in droves because they saw that a fight to stop the BNP taking control of a London borough is a different order of proposition to Labour losing to Tories or Liberal Democrats.

The question of young members is a pressing one too. Labour's youth organisations have long been the production line for lifelong members and representatives. Historically they have been active campaigning units which go out and recruit new party members. Labour's youth organisations are at their best when there has been a crusade – something to fight over and mobilise around. And they have also been successful when they provide social activities that the older party members would rather not be involved in.

The next phase of internal discussion should work out how to make the party an attractive or congenial place to be. This will not just happen by a change in this or that structure – vital though it may be. It is a cultural matter. Members need to be supported to come together and swap their ideas. Where there are fields of expertise in parties – perhaps in election campaigning or in recruitment or in running public campaigns – then the learning should be shared. It's a similar situation with party representatives on public bodies, for instance, school governors. Horrified by the Tories' proposals for reshaping education governors would probably welcome the chance to come together and swap ideas about how best to defend their schools. The party will be stronger the greater the ties between members and across boundaries.

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