

## **Islington South & Finsbury Constituency Labour Party**

### **Chair's report to the AGM, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2007**

This is my 3<sup>rd</sup> (and last) annual report to the constituency and it marks a period of change and challenge for Labour in Islington South and Finsbury. Since March last year, we have won a majority of Council seats in the constituency's eight wards. We have consolidated the election of Emily as our MP. And we have placed the constituency party on a more solid financial and organisational footing.

#### **Election results**

We made some impressive gains at the polls on May 4th 2006. The background political environment a year ago was pretty dreadful and Labour lost hundreds of Council seats across the country and lost control of many Councils in London. But in Islington South & Finsbury, we gained a majority of seats winning 13 of the 24 councillors in the south. We took all three seats in Caledonian, Holloway, Barnsbury and St Peter's plus one seat in St Mary's. This was the first time since 1990 that we have won seats back from the Lib Dems and, along the way, we ousted their leader and deputy leader in St Peter's and Barnsbury respectively.

As a result, the Lib Dems saw their majority of 24 reduced to zero with the Council delicately balanced at 23 Labour, 1 Green and 24 Lib Dems. Across the Borough, we actually took more votes than the Lib Dems but, guess what, on this occasion proportionality did them a tiny favour. Not shame-faced by coming second, the Lib Dems chose to retain control over the Council's Executive but their grip on power merely rests on a Mayor's casting vote. It is clear this is not a sustainable basis to run the Council in the period to 2010 and we await the first by-election opportunity to decisively wrest control.

Why did we do well – especially when Labour lost badly in neighbouring Boroughs? Overall, we ran a carefully targeted but superbly unified campaign with extremely hard working candidates and a small team of very dedicated supporters. The investments that we have made in the constituency party's facilities and premises worked well for us and the impact of having Team Emily behind the campaign was probably the one biggest single success factor. I cannot under-state just how valuable and unique are the energy and resources that come with a newly elected MP and her staff. We also had a great manifesto which was converted into salient and effective campaign messages and our commitments meant that we mobilised an important constituency of voters who previously had been quite lukewarm in their support: put simply, we won it on the estates. It's also fair to say that although we "won" the Lib Dems also "lost". They seriously over-estimated their popularity – and made a tactical blunder in trying to win all of Islington North. They failed to defend their seats in the south and we took advantage of this error. We had some great candidates in their "safe" wards and there is no doubt that sentiment had swung away from the Lib Dems in St Peter's and Barnsbury. I rather doubt they could have held these wards no matter how much time they might have spent there.

#### **Future prospects**

In this constituency, we won the 2005 general election by a whisker. But I am quite certain we will re-elect Emily with a comfortable margin at the next contest. Incumbency has some real advantages – and I have no doubt that Emily's personal record between now and then will be good for thousands of people who were doubters at the 2005 election. Emily has demonstrated a political adroitness and commitment to issues that matter to Islington voters. She has voted against the Government to defend key civil liberties and against nuclear weapons whilst promoting flagship ideas such as letting housing association tenants sack their landlords if they under-perform.

As a result, we should be safe locally. We ought to be safe nationally too. But everything has gone catastrophically wrong. We have a good story to tell: a stable economy, low inflation, and steady growth in jobs, earnings and living standards; of massive investment in healthcare, education and children's services. Yet, the Government's political support has evaporated. There is a good reason unfortunately and it's the political programme of Tony Blair and the coterie of people around him.

#### **What went wrong?**

During the 70s and 80s the Wilson/Callaghan Government was frequently accused of "betrayal". This attitude fuelled the catastrophic civil war that put Labour out of power for a generation. Today the word "disappointment" comes immediately to mind when describing the Labour government led by Tony Blair. I hope it does not sink the Government that Gordon Brown will shortly lead. "Betrayal" turned many thousands of angry people into Labour activists during the 1980s. But the disappointment of the last few years has had the opposite effect – bleeding the party of its members and supporters. In

Islington South we have done our best to buck that trend. Having Chris and Emily certainly helped. So too has the determination to defeat the Liberals. But we have lost several hundred members and, over the last 3 years, I have clocked up scores of messages from people who have quit the Party feeling bitterly let-down.

In the next few months we have to play our own small part in the revival of this Party's fortunes. In my opinion, when Tony Blair finally quits he will have outstayed his time. We are mired in controversy and disgrace whilst it is a miracle that our position in the polls is not even worse.

When the "New Labour" project was conceived, Tony Blair and others saw it was important to widen Labour's appeal. Yes, we needed to be a Party that spoke to aspiration and which balanced social justice with economic efficiency. It was no good just appealing to a dwindling "smokestack" electorate, we also had to galvanise the middle class electorate without which Labour has never been elected to power. Labour's appeal became wider but it also became more shallow. Our heartland vote is now disenchanted and the "swing" vote has deserted us. It is not just the progressive middle classes who are outraged by the mess of Iraq, the assaults on civil liberty or the idiocy of renewing a Cold War nuclear deterrent. And our working class supporters feel less secure despite everything that appears to have given them greater financial certainty.

Labour nationally has now acquired a toxic reputation of arrogance and authoritarianism. Remember how we won in 1997? The Tories were sunk by a complete mood change that turned into an electoral tidal wave. There's a damn serious risk the same thing is going to happen to us if we do not fundamentally restate our core political beliefs, reshape our political message and recapture the faith of this country's progressive, fair minded majority.

### **Finally**

It has been a privilege to chair this CLP over the last three years. The typical tenure of my predecessors was rather longer than this but the combined pressure of election to the Council and becoming a father means that I need to scale back some commitments. I particularly want to thank a number of people who have worked incredibly hard to move the constituency party forward over the last couple of years: the two vice chairs, Claudia Webbe and Rowena Champion, CLP secretary Dan Neidle and Treasurer Ian McLaughlin. We have also had the immense energy and enthusiasm of John Greenshields who has transformed the running of our office, campaigns and underpinned the essential tie-ins to Emily's team.

We have come along way in the last 3 years. The most recent period has seen us score spectacular political wins locally and consolidated Emily's position as our MP. We have also achieved a level of financial stability and made huge improvements in our organisational capacity. Logistically, we are now the best organised and equipped political party in this Borough.

However, the vitality and success of our party depends on its members. If we want to maintain a decent, socially progressive politics in this Borough, we have to renew and reinvigorate our membership. Perhaps I am being sentimental and hanker after times when this CLP had a membership over a thousand strong and its meetings and social occasions were important and decisive events. Our current situation is neither unique to south Islington nor to Labour generally. There is a widespread distrust of political parties and a diminished confidence in the probity or effectiveness of political processes and institutions.

However, we have to engage with party members on a regular and consistent basis and to really reinvigorate the local party. The key elements to our future success will be fourfold: using our Councillors to keep the party and community in lock-step; reinforcing the political leadership that Emily gives us; exerting our influence to reform and refocus the Party on issues that matter and solutions that resonate with public opinion; and listening to our voters and reflecting their concerns in what the Council Labour Group does and what Emily promotes at a national level.

In the next year, we are going to do all these things. And the outcome we aim for? We are going to help re-elect Mayor Livingstone and Jennette Arnold and topple a tired and complacent Lib Dem rump from the Town Hall. And see a newly confident and responsive party reassert its leadership in Parliament and Government.

PAUL CONVERY  
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