

Islington South & Finsbury Constituency Labour Party Chair's report to the AGM, 16th March 2005

Islington South and Finsbury CLP has undergone a period of renewal and recovery in the past year – following a previous period during which morale had received some severe shocks. Yet we have undergone the last year in good spirits as we approach the General Election with a determination to win and a roster of supporters eager to campaign for that result.

Chris Smith's decision to stand down as our MP was a grave disappointment but it was also a wake-up call. Although activity and morale within the Party was quite low, the process of selecting a new candidate proved to be reinvigorating. In choosing Emily Thornberry a year ago, we picked an active local member with the personality to enthuse and the determination to succeed. Furthermore, in Emily, we chose someone with a political standpoint consistent with Chris Smith's and who can be relied on to act and speak with the independence of mind sought by Party members and voters alike.

So, we started the most recent year with a renewed enthusiasm and we have weathered the relative unpopularity of our Government. It is not unusual for a Government to encounter mid-term troubles, but we know that many long-standing Labour voters still want to be convinced that our Government has made a tangible improvement to their lives. Moreover, many of our supporters are uneasy about Tony Blair's decision to back the USA in Iraq and remain troubled by our current response to potential terrorist threats. Regretably, the upbeat spirit of 1997 has been replaced by a cynical mistrust – much of it generated by the right wing media, but some of it caused by our own Government's actions.

However, have a good story to tell: of a stable economy, low inflation, and steady growth in jobs, earnings and living standards; of massive investment in healthcare, education and children's services. In Islington especially, as a result of Government investment and reforms, we have seen a sharp improvement in many public services, excellent results amongst schools and the continued regeneration of our disadvantaged neighbourhoods. We know that overall crime has fallen and there has been a determined and effective response to the growth in anti-social behaviour. Household incomes amongst the poorest 20% of households have risen sharply as a result of the Minimum Wage and tax credits.

Furthermore, the Tories have begun to recover and now threaten a credible challenge to Labour. Their campaign is designed to appeal to the worst, most selfish instincts of their core supporters and a brutal, semi-racist campaign is now being waged. Party members know that we have a real fight on our hands and the prospect of a Tory Government is starting to have a galvanising effect.

So, over the year, the Party was in good spirits. We began to grow in our collective self-confidence and in our scale of activity and ambitions. This was reflected in the campaign we fought in June 2004 which saw results in the Constituency that outstripped our expectations. On 1st preference votes in the Mayoral contest, the percentages recorded in amongst Islington South & Finsbury voters were:

Labour - 45%
Lib Dem - 17%
Tory - 20%

The other results in June were encouraging although the Labour vote was weaker in the Euro and London list results and we beat the Lib Dems in all eight Wards for the Euro result. Only in the GLA results (List and Constituency) did the Lib Dems get slightly ahead in a handful of Wards. For the GLA Constituency, the ISFCLP vote was almost a dead heat with the Lib Dems just 12 votes behind.

| | European Parliament | GLA London list | GLA Constituency |
|---------|----------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Labour | 26% | 25% | 26% |
| Lib Dem | 22% | 24% | 26% |
| Tory | 16% | 16% | 16% |

Member morale and campaigning success has been sustained by good organisation. Our Treasurer, Ian McLaughlin, will report in more detail on our financial affairs to the AGM and our Agent and Campaign Committee chair will report on many of our organisational achievements.

Much of our funds have been ploughed-into the general election campaign. And over the year, we have been fortunate in managing our resources well. We continue to receive a healthy surplus of income from our commercial tenants at Barnsbury Street and the Communication Workers Union (CWU) has maintained is

generous financial support to the CLP. Although we decided to postpone the annual fundraising dinner at Fredericks, a number of donors have contributed some very generous support – including a total of £20,000 secured by Emily during the year. As a result we have been able to fully staff the campaign – with a Campaign Assistant recruited in November 2004 to support Emily and our Agent. In addition, Vice Chair, Joy Bailey has organised social events during the year that have also been net financial contributors to the CLP.

With full-time staff and a good number of regular volunteers, the office at Barnsbury Street is a lively, albeit slightly cramped centre for our operations. To support these activities, we beefed-up our IT capability – including installing networked broadband – and have ensured that we use the Labour Party’s voter database *Labour.Contact* as comprehensively as possible. We have also been pleased during the year to continue providing a London office base for Claude Moraes MEP – a relationship which helps the CLP in a number of different ways.

During the year, our relationship with the Italian Trade Union Centre (CGIL) was renewed and strengthened and this has provided us with practical help – like the regular use of their Canonbury Road premises for meetings – and it may yield more help during the forthcoming campaign.

We have also maintained a good, cooperative relationship with Islington North CLP with whom we produce the excellent quarterly newspaper *Islington Voice*. As we approach the 2006 municipal elections, a close and effective working relationship with the North CLP will be essential.

During the year, we agreed a development plan for the CLP which identified a number of priority areas of work. Of these, the most immediately important have been to use our members more effectively and to ensure we have good quality voter data. Vice Chair, Rowena Champion has taken the lead in making sure we address these 2 key objectives. During the year, she has built-up an excellent roster of members undertaking telephone voter ID activity up to 4 evenings per week. Combined with thorough day-time face-to-face canvassing, led by Emily, we will have identified and validated up to 12,000 voter promises by polling day.

As a result of the healthy development of the CLP, we have been recognised by the London Region as deserving significant support – partly because they understand we are a critical marginal seat but also because they have been convinced we have good organisational capability, a supportive volunteer base and an energetic candidate. Considerable material assistance, in-kind and financial has been forthcoming from the Region as a result.

All of our attention is presently focused on the General Election. That’s how it should be. The next few weeks represent a critical watershed for this CLP. If we beat-off the Lib Dem challenge, we will elect an outstanding new MP as a worthy successor to Chris. It will guarantee that we go forward against a healthy financial background. Most of all, it will ensure that, in May 2006, we are well placed to return Labour Councillors representing Wards in the south of Islington.

As such, we have agreed to try and strengthen the CLP’s community base. We have prioritised local campaigns and engaged with issues that matter very directly and very locally with groups of voters. In Canonbury, St Peters, Caledonian, Barnsbury, St Marys and Holloway, our members have played an active role in campaigning against excessive development pressures, working with local schools, campaigning for better children’s services, arguing for consensual traffic management measures, working alongside the Police to combat anti social behaviour and fighting against the divisiveness of the Lib Dems’ policies.

We have begun to encourage members to keep in close touch with local impacts of Council decisions through active attendance and monitoring of information produced by Area Committees, in particular planning, environmental and traffic management decisions; and key issues such as community safety. We still need to encourage greater participation by members on School Governors, and to support members’ involvement in residents and tenants associations. We have resolved to engage more closely with Council and housing association tenants. In particular, we have committed ourselves to rebuild trust and relationships with the diverse ethnic minorities in the constituency by working closely with faith and community groups and by campaigning against racism and xenophobia.

Our determination to reconnect with the community in which we live must be the winning formula for the future. But, for now, we simply have to win hearts and minds for Labour in the next 7 weeks.

PAUL CONVERY
March 2005