

HOW THE WARD WAS WON

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This paper sets out some thoughts for Labour party colleagues on local activism and related election campaigning, based on the successful Labour campaign in Bickerstaffe Ward, West Lancashire, in the May 2007 District elections.
- 1.2 It is safe to say that the relatively small campaign team behind this success was 'chuffed to bits' to win the election, and it would be easy for the paper to become overly triumphalist, and to make claims that 'all local campaigns should be run like this'. This is clearly not the case, not least because the ward and area in which the campaign took place have several features uncommon to many of the wards and areas that Labour will seek to win in the next few years. In fact the campaign followed, in its principles of repeated voter contact and engagement, the general campaigning guidance issued from the Labour party centrally and regionally, and all the paper does is set out how these principles were 'operationalised' in one small area, in a manner flexible enough to meet the particular needs.
- 1.3 Having said that, we do believe that some specific lessons might be learned from what we managed to achieve, and in defence of this it is worth setting out briefly the 'scale' of the win in Bickerstaffe Ward, not least to establish some credibility, especially in the minds of those who do not know the area. This can be summarised in the following terms:
 - A Labour victory (502 votes to 438) in a 'safe rural Tory' (single member) seat never before held by Labour;
 - A local Labour victory at a time when the Labour vote nationally is at a relatively low ebb, and in an election that nationally saw the loss of 500 Labour-held seats;
 - A turnout of 53%, the highest in the District and in the top ten highest in the North West;
 - A 44% increase in the Labour vote since the last time the seat was contested in 2003 (347 to 502);
 - A five-fold increase in the Labour vote from the 'core Labour' vote in 1999, the last year in which the ward was contested by a paper candidate (from 72 to 502 but taking into account the enlarged ward from 2002);
 - A Labour victory won by a small (but dedicated) team of 4 Labour activists working from January onwards, with occasional leafleting support from the wider activist base and late support from 'locals' not in the party, thus not drawing too much resource away from other marginal seats in need of significant defence in these elections.

2 CONTEXT

2.1 Bickerstaffe Ward has the following distinguishing features, many of which set it apart from other wards that Labour may target in future years (but which may also potentially identify other more similar wards, not regarded as 'winnable' to date, as targets for Labour):

- A small, single member ward in terms of electorate (just 1,750) though large geographically (around 8 miles across at its broadest point) with a small number of housing areas but no more than 80-90 houses in each, and a significant percentage of the electorate in scattered groups of one to four houses;
- Consequently, no real 'centre' for the whole Ward, reflected in the Ward being made up of three parishes;
- Traditionally a farming community, but with significant changes in the last 20 years, with a lot of incomers to the area, mostly working in towns and cities surrounding the area (which has a motorway junction in the middle of it);
- A Labour candidate already reasonably well-known in the area, initially as a result of active school governorship (and parent at the school), but more recently because of the regular newsletter he has written and distributed (see below), who also stood unsuccessfully in 2002 (all out elections because of boundary changes) and in 2003.

3 ISSUES AND REFLECTIONS

Combining action and information – the Bickerstaffe Record

- 3.1 The first obvious point to make is that, although the actual campaign can be regarded as relatively short (with house to house calls from mid-January onwards), the real development work that set the base for the campaign was much longer, and included two unsuccessful campaigns (in 2002 and 2003). The development work was, to all intents and purposes, a 'single hander' on the part of the eventual candidate (who always assumed that he would be selected to fight the seat because of a lack of any clear alternative).
- 3.2 The bedrock of the long development phase was a local newsletter, the Bickerstaffe Record (see www.bickerstafferecord.org.uk for the online version), first published and distributed in late 2001 and then (more or less) quarterly. This was the key mechanism for establishing the local candidate's profile, to the extent that we were able to use 'The Man with the Bickerstaffe Record' as the election campaign 'strapline'. There are a number of (learning) points to be made about how the Bickerstaffe Record developed, and indeed took on a life of its own, over time.

Growth over time

- 3.3 The newsletter started small, and grew over time. Initially it was a two page A4 newsletter, with very short articles (8 or 9 in each edition). It is now eight pages, printed on A3 paper, with a view to going to twelve pages soon. The growth has been organic. Initially it was actually a struggle to find enough 'copy' for the two pages, but as time went on readers started to suggest things that might be covered, and in later years have also contributed articles (e.g. on local environmental matters, 'adverts' for local charities). What has become clear from speaking to resident readers is that what goes in the newsletter doesn't have to be 'our' news; just being told what is going on locally is appreciated, and the news becomes 'ours' more by osmosis than by explicit claim. Increasingly the Bickerstaffe Record has become seen as the local *newspaper*, albeit only a quarterly one, rather than a *leaflet* aimed at promoting a particular message.
- 3.4 With this style in place, we have found that the readership (i.e. those who actually read it rather than throw it in the bin) has become much greater than would be expected for a more 'traditional' leaflet, (in which we report only on what Labour has been up to and attacks the opposition in equal measure). It has also, however, increased the readership of those articles, (steadily increasing as percentage of the whole over time), which *do* mention what Labour has been doing for the community, and has increasingly 'dropped in' the name of the candidate-to-be. Further, a style has been created in which the actions of the Tory-run council can be criticised, but only ever in the context of what local Labour is doing about it.
- 3.5 The other, related, key dimension in the growth of the Bickerstaffe Record is that producing and distributing it has created opportunities for local activism. As readers feed back about what might go into a next edition, so key concerns of groups of residents have been drawn out and led onto specific action and campaigns, which of course were then reported on in subsequent editions. Of particular importance here have been campaigns (petition and letter-based) for

speed and HGV limits on certain roads, the emerging importance of which enabled the candidate to attend, with relevance, the West Lancashire Road Issues Group (in fact sponsored by the Tory Council as a 'leftover' from Agenda 21), and subsequently become its chairperson.

- 3.6 As another example, it was a call from a resident in response to a small article about Parish Council power increases that led to a campaign to form a new Parish Council, which in itself afforded opportunities to 'lead from the front', and to report on that leadership.
- 3.7 In time this organic growth of issues/coverage enabled the newsletter to devote at least a page to each identified 'section' of the overall ward (usually defined by its Parish name).
- 3.8 The important point here is not that this activity was undertaken, but that it was the newsletter that came first, and created directly the opportunities for that action. In this respect, the campaign went against accepted Labour party guidance, which is to the effect that doorstep 'engagement' and voter identification is more important than leafleting. In some ways, our 'long' campaign (and indeed the actual campaign period) was very newsletter/leaflet-based, but was successful because people actually, over time, started to read the newsletters. In our view, this order of things allowed for a much more 'natural' approach to the doorstep than we tend to get with 'classic' Voter ID work, or indeed cold 'survey of needs and problems' work, since people we met on the doorstep already had a point of reference. Increasingly during the campaign this was reflected in canvassers introducing themselves along the lines of "I'm calling on behalf of Paul, the Labour candidate..... the one who does the Bickerstaffe Record...", as this created recognition and then engagement.

Quantity not quality

- 3.9 There was an intention to produce the Record quarterly, but because of 'other pressures' in life this did not always work out, and for a couple of years at least there were four or five month gaps between newsletters on occasion. Importantly for us, absolutely nobody picked up on this. What became clear was that residents appreciated getting a newsletter (reasonably) regularly, which 'gave news' in the way set out above without (as many people suggested) 'being too political'. In many ways, the act of delivering the newsletter – making people feel informed – was as important as what was actually in the newsletter, within reason. This appreciation was, we think, tied to the fact that it was the candidate who personally delivered (by bicycle) most of the newsletters (one ward round would take about three weekends to do, given the size of the ward and the scattered housing). Many residents could see the candidate-to-be coming from a distance away (in a rural area with big drives and wide open spaces), and the fact that he not only rides a very old bike but has distinctive, prematurely white hair became part of the overall recognition factor that election leaflets later played on. This delivery style also allowed for casual engagement with people in gardens etc., and on many occasions residents noted that it was nice not to be 'left out' because they didn't live near other people. Indeed, there was considerable surprise on more than one occasion that a Labour leaflet was being delivered to a farm, in keeping with our ethos of 'no no-go areas' (see below).

- 3.10 We also discovered, not purposely but because we didn't have the resource or skill to do otherwise, that a 'low-tech' newsletter was just as effective as a properly desktop published one. The Record has remained in 'word', and carried no pictures until recently, when we felt it necessary to get the candidate's picture in it a few times. Somewhat contrary to accepted Labour party guidance, we found that the obviously 'low-tech' style, without pictures was actually an attraction for readers – presumably because such a style was less linked to 'spin'.

What people want

- 3.11 As noted above, one thing residents of Bickerstaffe Ward really seemed to appreciate was being given information, in the form of the Bickerstaffe Record.
- 3.12 Beyond that, our experience is that most residents simply want to be able to live their lives in peace, quiet and safety, and in a pleasant environment. Thus, while the Bickerstaffe Record has covered a lot of issues over its five years, including 'developmental' stories around the school, the music festival, the new Parish Council etc., the real 'vote winning' issues covered and acted upon have been road speeds, HGV disturbances, noise and disturbances from industrial estates, litter, overgrown footpaths, and road maintenance. None of this is very 'sexy', but the fact that we a) covered them in the Record; b) could provide evidence that we were seeking to act upon them (often by writing to the Labour MP and asking her to forward on a 'draft' to the District or County, then ensuring that residents got copies of relevant correspondence), all acted in our favour come the election.
- 3.13 In many ways the key to success is that the candidate was able to portray himself as a 'quasi-councillor' or 'councillor-in-waiting', to the extent that by the time of the election campaign there was some confusion on the part of residents as to who actually WAS the sitting councillor (of course a relatively inactive Tory councillor helped, but the opportunity that her inactivity presented still needed to be exploited).

Voter ID and local knowledge

- 3.14 The 'prescribed' method for campaigning is to undertake extensive voter identification (voter ID) work in the months and years before an election, using the Labour contact software to enter the data, be in a position by the time of the 'short' campaign simply to focus on those voters, and ensure that as many as possible get out to vote. In this method, voter ID (asking which party someone on the doorstep/telephone normally tends towards, and may vote in the next election) should not be conflated with canvassing (asking those ID'd as pro-Labour or at least undecided to vote for the candidate at hand).
- 3.15 The Bickerstaffe campaign did not follow the 'textbook' on this. Formal voter identification was indeed fused with canvassing, and was mostly done at a relatively late stage, from mid-January 2007 onwards (although a few houses had been voter ID'd by telephone before the 2005 election and that data was available on Labour contact).
- 3.16 There were two main reasons for this different approach. First, the relationship between party identification and a willingness to vote for this Labour candidate at

this election was not automatic. On the one hand there were many people who said they would vote for the candidate, but not for Labour in any other election (the personal vote). On the other hand, there were (less) people who said they would vote for the candidate if he were standing for any party other than Labour (often allied to Iraq, sometimes more generally to the national leadership). Reliance on 'classic' voter ID would not have unearthed a big enough vote in this area to win the election.

- 3.17 Second, and perhaps more importantly, *informal* voter ID had been undertaken by the candidate for the four years prior to the election. There was no set process for this, but every opportunity was taken to get some kind of impression of how the household might vote – whether calling at a house on an issue or simply from the doorstep reaction when delivering the Bickerstaffe Record (in the last year the candidate knocked on many doors while delivering the Record, not to ask specific questions but to establish polite face/name recognition).
- 3.18 While record keeping of this (perceptual) data was not as good as it might have been, the ward is small enough for the candidate to use existing data, notes taken during 'informal ID' or his memory/local knowledge to be able to give other canvassers a reasonable on-the-spot assessment of what reception they might receive on each doorstep, and in some case which doors might be best avoided (this being important both in terms of 'not waking up the Tories' and maintaining a growing 'feelgood factor', which in turn led to more and longer canvassing outings by the small team of regular canvassers). What was noteworthy, to both doorstep canvassers and then to phone canvassers at the tail-end of the campaign, was that this form of ID was actually quite accurate, and that in general where a positive reception was predicted, that is what we got.
- 3.19 We did not therefore use the Labour Contact software as much as we might in a 'regular' campaign. This does have drawbacks in terms of the appropriateness of some of the data for subsequent elections, especially the general, although as far as possible we made notes to indicate 'core Labour' as opposed to 'Labour for the candidate only' votes. Where we did use the power of the Labour contact software, however, was near the end of the election campaign, in order to refine as far as possible our repeat canvass and knock up sheets. This was important because we knew that in election week itself some of the team would be pulled back into other wards in the District in need of defence, and that on election day in particular it would simply be impossible – given the size of the Ward – for the remaining canvassers to get round all the identified voters (there was never going to be enough resource to staff the polling stations in the traditional manner and mark off voters in that way).
- 3.20 The solution to this was to reduce the number of houses to visit by using marked register data from previous elections, held in Labour contact, to mark off only those residents who a) had been identified as pro-Labour, *and* b) had voted previously, in whatever election, *but* c) had NOT voted in one or more of the local elections held in 2002 and 2003. In addition we also included pro-Labour residents who had moved in after 2003 and on whom therefore we held no data on whether they were voters or not. The rationale was, having first established the professed pro-Labour vote, to exclude at either end of the 'spectrum' both those who were unlikely to vote in a local election if they'd never voted before, and those who would most

likely vote anyway (whichever way) because they clearly always voted. There were also further refinements around identifying these criteria by household rather than by individual, which meant that the number to cover expanded somewhat. This software task was technically difficult with what is sometimes not very user-friendly software, and depended upon the particular skills of a very helpful and committed member from elsewhere in the District.

- 3.21 The result was that the houses deemed to need a doorstep call/phone call was approximately halved, although in practice canvassers did call at other pro-Labour houses in passing, since, having travelled a long way to get to one house it seemed senseless not to call at a pro-Labour house next door/a few yards away, on a 'just in case basis'. In addition, the system did fall apart a bit in the relative chaos of election day, when there simply weren't the resources to staff a traditional 'committee room', and where decisions about where to go next had to be made on the hoof, and with a sometimes limited knowledge of the local geography (given that only the candidate really knew *all* the locations of all the houses, and how to get there).
- 3.22 These limitations notwithstanding, our view was that this additional selection of target households did work well, especially in terms of setting up manageable lists for our (single) phone canvasser, who reported that the data held on voters on her target list was largely accurate and easy to work with.

No 'no go' houses

- 3.23 This is a fairly obvious point, but one worth making. We knew from the outset that there were no real 'core Labour' areas, and that our geographical coverage would need to be widespread for the campaign. Of course this was backed by the fact that the newsletter had been delivered to almost ALL houses and farms for the last five years. Thus there were no areas we did not go to, however small the group or however isolated (or however 'posh looking').
- 3.24 Moreover, what became clear as we canvassed the more isolated houses in particular was that some people genuinely appreciated the fact that we had called, and a good number said that they would vote Labour *because* we had bothered to call (on occasion the first ever canvass of their house, especially in a small area that was put into the ward from another rural ward just before the election), though such a sentiment was backed by the recognition of the candidate, through the Bickerstaffe Record (we delivered a back copy and then election copies to the new area of housing).

Using the press

- 3.25 The standard campaigning message is that all opportunities to raise the profile of the party, and especially the candidate in the local press should be seized. In the Bickerstaffe campaign this was not done, and there were no press releases or calls to the press of any kind. This was for three reasons.
- 3.26 First, the local press – as in many areas – is distinctly hostile to the Labour party, and could not be trusted to provide accurate information on any story sent to it; we knew that the journalists would most likely seek to twist any story against us.

- 3.27 Second, while local 'politicos' like to read the press in detail, the reality in Bickerstaffe was that very few people actually read beyond the front page of the 'freebie' Champion, or bought its rival, the Advertiser. It simply wasn't worth the time resource trying to get in the local press, when other activities were more profitable, especially given the risks involved on having stories twisted.
- 3.28 Third, the Bickerstaffe Record in effect became our local newspaper (see above).
- 3.29 Fourth, although it may be revisionist to suggest that this reason was consciously thought through at the time we decided not to engage with the local press, avoiding wider publicity helped us to dip under the 'Tory radar'. Our feeling from doorstep conversations, as the Tory campaign belatedly got going in old-fashioned 'short campaign' mode, was that the Tories were genuinely surprised to find the level of support for Labour that they did find, and that this soon brought about an element of panic in their ranks (and considerable canvassing effort when they realised there was a real election fight on). Avoiding the press was also assisted by the fact that the Bickerstaffe Record tended not to devote whole articles to 'Tory bashing', confining its criticisms to specific sections in wider articles dealing with broader information (see above).

The Tory vote

- 3.30 It is worth noting that, even with considerable canvassing time spent by the Tories, as well as targeted mailings and the odd 'scare story', the Tories were not able to get their vote (438) above the level they had achieved in 2003 (452). This does suggest that, at least without a candidate with a decent personal vote (even though they chose a local farmer with plenty of farming history and contacts), there is actually quite a low limit (about 25% of the electorate) to the possible Tory vote. While the situation may not be the same everywhere, this may be encouraging in general.

Election leaflets

- 3.31 There were four election leaflets/newsletters for the main campaign. Three of these were editions of the Bickerstaffe Record, in keeping with the recognition factor. In two of these there was a continuation of 'ordinary' news in addition to election material, with a stress on our understanding that 'real life doesn't stop for elections'. The other leaflet was a District-wide manifesto leaflet, though care was taken in the Record that preceded that to announce the impending arrival of a different looking leaflet.
- 3.32 In general, all leaflets were well received, according to doorstep conversations. One feature that distinguished them from previous Bickerstaffe Records was that we introduced some low-key humour, mostly mild fun at the expense of the candidate's 'odd' appearance (he had of course written the text himself). This insertion of humour at what, for the party, was the most serious bit of the whole thing, was commented favourably upon by a number of residents, as was the clear personal manifesto - set alongside and aimed as complementary to the District manifesto.

3.33 We also delivered a targeted direct mail letter to identified pro-Labour, taking care to insert one paragraph covering our achievements and intentions as they related to the *very local* area or road of the recipient. Interestingly, post-election discussions with residents have *not* suggested that this was a productive step in the campaign, with most feedback focused on the good reception of the newsletters. The reasons for this are unclear, but it might be that the 'direct mail' letter is now increasingly recognised as a piece of electoral 'spin', and therefore more likely to be disregarded. Having said that, there is no evidence that the direct mail did any harm (although a few people confirmed that the Tories' eve of poll direct mail, warning against voting Labour, did in fact reinforce their intention to vote Labour (these few people being non-core Labour, who had decided to vote for the candidate in spite of the party, and were therefore down in the Tory ID as pro-Tory voters).

Concluding comments

3.33 That, in essence, is the story of how we won Bickerstaffe Ward, and gave a few people a surprise along the way (not least the Tory candidate, who in his first election leaflet stated how much he was looking forward to taking over from his retiring predecessor, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he needed to win an election first).

3.34 As a group we are proud of what we achieved in this small patch. To suggest that this is some kind of winning formula for other wards would, of course, be presumptuous; indeed it would be illogical to do so, given our insistence on the importance of local knowledge and local flexibility to different situations.

3.35 Having said that, we do think there are learning points for other Labour campaigners to be gleaned from our experience, and which might be adapted to other local circumstances. In so doing, we would anticipate two main objections.

3.36 First, there is the fact that Bickerstaffe Ward is much smaller than most electoral wards, and that therefore local knowledge is much easier to glean. This is certainly true, but on the other hand it is important to stress simply that the time spent getting between houses in a rural ward like Bickerstaffe is time that, in other more compact areas, might be spent visiting houses. As an indication, a normal leaflet delivery rate in an urban area of West Lancashire is around 200-300. In Bickerstaffe it averages out at about 80-100 per hour overall a whole Ward round.

3.37 Second, and perhaps more crucially, people will argue that the timescale for this win are unrealistic in many Wards, where elections are fought annually or bi-annually, and in areas where the next election is the crucial one in deciding who has power on the Council. Here again, we acknowledge this reality. However, although it is clearly impossible to prove, our gut feeling is that, even if the election had been called two years into the four year period, we would have stood a chance of winning, because by then the Bickerstaffe Record had started to become recognised and read; the last two years were really about consolidation.

3.38 Anyway, that's our story. Make of it what you will. Good luck with the campaign.

