Who can beat Boris?
By Steve Hart

As the contest for the London Labour mayoralty has developed, several themes have emerged. Real differences of approach have become clear – on whether to campaign against cuts or accommodate, on privatisation, on social housing, and the Freedom Pass and means testing, which all contribute to assessments of the strategic vision for London of the candidates, and their capability to implement their visions.

Electing a Labour candidate as one of the most powerful politicians in Britain – with the largest single mandate of any political figure in the country - will be really important to winning the next general election and leading the battle to defend Londoners against the destruction of our public services and public transport, which by 2012 will be well underway.

The Oona King campaign suggests three points. She implies that no politician returns to an office they have previously lost, she and her campaign team frequently imply or suggest that Ken is too old, and she suggests that Ken cannot win outer London, while she can.

On the first, that is simply ahistorical, forgetting such famous examples as Harold Wilson who returned as Prime Minister in 1974 after losing in 1970, to Ted Heath who himself lost in 1966. Winston Churchill returned in 1951 after losing in 1945 and 1950. Bill Clinton won back the Governorship of Arkansas in 1983 having lost it in 1981. More recently and more locally, Labour leaders like Ann John in Brent have led their groups back to power four years after defeat.

The age issue is, of course, put with a degree of subtlety but is both offensive and wrong. Mayor Bloomberg was re-elected for a third term in New York at 67 last November, having had the city's two-term limit overturned. There are countless examples of leaders in their field, in politics and beyond, who have been the same age or older than Ken Livingstone. Churchill was 65 when he became Prime Minister in 1940. Mandela was 75 when elected President of South Africa.

 A candidate with forward-looking modern and progressive policies, with vision and inspiration, makes a reasonable prospect – whichever age they are.

Oona King is clear on the more significant question - "Who can beat Boris .. I believe the answer is me". The suggestion is that Ken lost badly last time in outer London (and that Oona King is the answer).

In fact, all the evidence demonstrates that Ken Livingstone is a considerable asset for Labour in London, consistently out-performing Labour elsewhere. On the other hand the evidence for Oona King's performance is not encouraging.

This article will survey some of the evidence - comparing with some general demographic/electoral trends, and then suggest some campaigning priorities which flow from the evidence.

Firstly, the evidence for Oona King. Put bluntly, she lost one of Labour's safest seats, Bethnal Green and Bow, a traditional stronghold, on a fairly good night for Labour. In 2001, she received a 50.4% share with 19,380 votes. By 2005, her share fell to 34%, losing 4,402 votes, polling 14,978; and she lost to George Galloway.

Compare this with Ken Livingstone in 2008, on a lower poll, on a terrible day for Labour overall, who polled 37,630 first preference votes in Tower Hamlets and an estimated 25,470 votes in the wards of the Bethnal Green and Bow constituency. There is certainly no electoral evidence to suggest that Oona King can buck difficult trends. The numbers speak for themselves. There is no other evidence relating to Oona King.

Analysis of Ken's performance is more complicated but provides a clearer case for electability. His 2000 and 2004 campaigns can both reasonably be described as triumphs, where he mobilised far beyond the usual Labour constituency. In the case of the first he took on and defeated all three main party machines. In 2004 he secured a victory for Labour ahead of the national situation.

In 2008, he lost. It can't be explained away – the London electorate determined that Ken, the Labour candidate, was not to be Mayor. A serious blow – which needs to be accurately analysed and fully understood in order that we campaign better and more effectively so that the Labour Mayoral candidate can win in 2012.

The central issue of analysis is to try and establish what differences there are between Ken's performance and Labour's performance if any, and to distinguish between different demographic voting trends, different geographic voting trends and any Ken-specific factors.

The 2008 election took place on a very bad night for Labour – in the aftermath of the 10p tax fiasco, and when Labour was at its worst in the polls. The YouGov poll for May 7-9th showed

Labour's worst result since 1997 (Labour 23%, Tory 49%, Libdems 17%) with a Tory lead of 26%. It was one of the worst nights of local election results since before the second world war, with Labour polling 24% in local government. A night of extraordinary bad losses for Labour, with across the board declines, but clearly catastrophic declines for some demographics.

On this terrible night for Labour Ken Livingstone actually increased his first preference votes from 685,541 in 2004, to 893,877 in 2008. This was not simply a consequence of a higher poll. He actually increased his share of first preference votes by 1.3% from 35.7 per cent to 37 per cent (the London wide Labour member vote increased by 0.32 per cent to 27.12 per cent, which was 10 per cent behind Ken's vote).

On that night, Ken's was a remarkable overall performance in a poll which increased turnout from 37% to 45%.

Boris Johnson was able to dramatically increase the Conservative mayoral share from 28.24% to 43% with his vote increasing from 542,00 to 1,043,761. Boris and Ken together increased the turnout with a closely fought contest; and Boris successfully aggregated right-wing opposition to Ken, with, for example, a 6% reduction in the UKIP vote.

Any reasonable interpretation of these results would suggest that on virtually any other Thursday of the last five years, Ken would have been likely to win. Ken's share was higher than Labour achieved on General Election night in London – when the national results had Labour 10 per cent better than in 2008. On this alone, it is clear than Ken was outperforming Labour by a wide margin and also that, to a lesser extent, London Labour outperformed the rest of the country.

To emphasise this point, in 2010, London Labour Parliamentary candidates won 1,245,637 votes on a turnout of 64.6%. *When the 2008 turnout of 45.33% is applied, this equates to a notional vote of 874,066 – 19,811, less than Ken's actual first preference vote on a night when there was a 26% Tory poll lead as compared to the General election.* Surely proof-positive that Ken outperforms Labour generally, that there is an important Ken premium.

Detailed examination of the 2008 results also suggests that Ken's mayoral vote out-performed the rest of Labour. Londoners get three votes – the Mayor, a vote for the party list, and a vote for the Assembly constituency candidate. Comparison of the three demonstrates clearly that Ken Livingstone's first preferences were invariably considerably higher than both the other votes. The Labour List total vote was 74.4 per cent of Ken's first-preference vote, while the London Assembly constituency vote was 75.3 per cent of

Ken's. Importantly, this comparison varies little between inner and outer London. The inner London Labour List vote was 72.9% of Ken's, while in outer London it was 76%. The Assembly figures were 75.4% and 75.2% respectively. No significant evidence of any significant anti-Ken factor in outer London, and clear evidence that Ken very significantly out-performs both the Labour List vote, and the London Assembly members' vote. Ken polled about 25% more than other Labour candidates in both inner and outer London – the Ken premium. (Note: Ealing and Barking & Dagenham, both sometimes cited by some as problems areas for Ken, were included in outer London for this exercise).

These London-wide figures hide some really significant local figures. For example in the outer London boroughs of Kingston and Richmond, Ken got 33,998 votes. Two years later, in a much higher poll and with a better general polling position, the three Labour General election candidates polled 12,899 votes between them.   Explanations can be given, but the facts speak for themselves – Ken succeeded in persuading large numbers of voters in these outer London boroughs to vote for him, while on other occasions the LibDems won the votes.

In Havering, a borough where Labour has suffered serious setbacks since the heady days of 1997 (when all three Parliamentary constituencies were Labour) and where the BNP made worrying progress in 2008, with the BNP Mayoral candidate getting more votes than in neighbouring - but more reported - Barking, Ken's performance was almost exactly in line with Labour's in 2010. Excluding three wards which moved into the Dagenham and Rainham constituency, the Havering Parliamentary Labour vote, adjusted for to 2008 turnout levels, was a notional 13,675, whereas Ken got 13,013 votes in the same wards at first preference – and to labour the point, on a much worse night for Labour. So contrary to received wisdom, Ken' s performance in outer London Havering was in line with Labour's more generally.

Similar calculations in Merton, show a turnout-adjusted Parliamentary vote of 23,650 as compared to the actual Ken vote of 25,700. In this case, Labour has campaigned well recently, including the efforts of Siobhain McDonagh MP, not a stalwart of the Left, but the general Labour vote is still behind the Ken 2008 vote here.

Bromley is often cited as an area of difficulty for Ken. In 2008, in the three Parliamentary constituencies wholly in the borough, Ken received 19,196 votes (this figure may overstate slightly because of postal votes which cannot be accurately attributed to wards). In the Parliamentary election in 2010, without adjustment for turnout, Labour won 18,588 votes.

To be balanced, Bexley does show a different picture - with turn-out adjustments, Ken's vote was 12,959, compared to 21,535 on the adjusted 2010 vote; but these figures still show

Ken's vote as ahead of the national trend – anywhere else than London in 2008, a lower Ken Livingstone vote would have been expected.

While slaying myths, another ready for slaughter relates to turnout. The conventional wisdom is that Ken was beaten by a massive increase in turnout in the outer London boroughs, with Bromley and Bexley often mentioned. Reality is more complex. London-wide turnout in 2004 was 36.95%. In 2008, it was 45.33%, an increase of 8.38%. There were variations around this from different parts of London – but Bexley and Bromley only increased by 8.43% very close to the city-wide average. By contrast, in London North East, a labour stronghold, turnout increased by 9.99%, Lambeth & Southwark by 8.83% in Labour held Enfield & Haringey by 9.95% and Barnet & Camden by 9.5%. Havering & Redbridge was below par with a 6.55% increase.   Croydon and Sutton were high at 11.33%, while the most striking increase was in West Central where turnout increased by 13.32%, no doubt some in Kensington and Chelsea opposing the Western Congestion Zone – but hardly outer-Londoners.

Amongst the detail of the results, are very clear indications that Ken is able to transcend party and continue to appeal to a wider group who see him as relatively independent-minded. This is particularly notable in areas of high LibDem votes, probably especially those areas with high numbers of young urban professionals (mosaic group E to the anoraks). So in my own constituency of Hornsey and Wood Green, currently held by Lynne Featherstone, Ken achieved 49.5 per cent of the vote in 2008, where Karen Jennings for Labour, after a very good campaign in the general election, secured 34%. At ward level, this is even more pronounced. In Muswell Hill ward, one of the LibDems' safest council seats in the country, Ken won 1,858 votes to the LibDems' 581; in Stroud Green ward 2,266 to 505, a seat won convincingly at the Council elections by the LibDems. Ken, because of his history, independent politics and attitude on Iraq, race, civil liberties and other matters has been a unique and strong electoral asset in such LibDem areas.   Some commentators look at how Ken lost – but a more pertinent question is how he did so well. A candidate with less appeal to these voters would not have even got close to Boris Johnson.

So, we know that Ken increased his share of the vote by 1.3%, his number of votes by 208,336. We know that he did better than Labour at the subsequent general election, in share and votes in most of London. We know that Ken's performance was better than the Labour list and constituency Assembly votes on that night; and much better than the opinion poll national results and council results from the rest of the country on that night. And we know that he attracts votes in areas that other Labour politicians cannot reach.

The evidence that Ken is a substantial electoral asset across London is substantial, whereas the only evidence regarding Oona is that she has lost a safe seat; and nothing whatsoever suggests that Ken's rival for the nomination is an asset in any other part of London.

But Labour does have a big problem. Labour has lost millions of votes. Only ten Labour MPs in the South-east, Eastern region and South West – London is surrounded by a sea of blue. In spite of London Labour bucking the general trend , in part because of Ken's contribution, there is no wall around the Greater London Authority boundary – the edge of London is bound to be trending towards those areas beyond London's borders. Even if Labour in London in 2008 and 2010 did better than the rest of the country, even if the cuts repel many LibDem voters and mobilise others, Labour has to work hard to change and organise so as to win back the lost millions.

Liam Byrne has written an interesting pamphlet which highlights that C1s and C2s have particularly lost confidence in Labour. The description is good - though the prescription seems to be more of the same. He says, "The 2010 election has punched a serious hole in the bedrock of our coalition – those 'blue-collar' workers employed in a range of modern jobs from retail and logistics to routine manufacturing. Often known in the jargon as the C2s, they make up a fifth of Britain's voters. Historically, they overwhelmingly voted Labour. Yet in 2010, our support fell a full 20 per cent, down from 43 per cent to just 23 per cent – its biggest ever fall". He points out that the Tories now have a lead of 16 per cent in both C2s and C1s. In London, this is also reflected in Labour's decline in outer London with its higher concentrations of these social groups. At the national low-point in 2008 areas with higher concentrations of these traditional working class voters were precisely the areas that nationally, and in London were worst for Labour. As has been shown, Ken's better performance reflected his ability to compensate by winning larger numbers from other social groups.

Some in the Labour Party obsess about winning middle England and the swing voters. Or they repeat the mantra that Labour can't win with the core vote alone. But, as both the General election and the London election show, Labour can't win without the core vote either. The real point is that Labour in London can only win with an alliance – of traditional core voters, the new core voters of London especially from ethnic minorities, and others from the progressive majority who may be LibDem inclined (or perhaps were LibDem would be more appropriate), green, and committed to equalities. Ken has proven skilled in building this alliance, reaching into middle London, ironically far better than right-wing Labour. He has succeeded in first preferences, but, crucially, has built the relationship and respect with both

London's greens and LibDems which is very important for the second preference vote – so important with such electoral systems.

Working class and middle class people alike, many of them members of my union used to look to Labour to provide security, decent wages and housing. Neo-liberalism has produced precarity in employment in non-unionised and low paid jobs, and insecurity in housing – amplified by economic crisis and the prospect of possible unemployment. The challenge for Labour is to demonstrate a convincing vision for the future which gives some security for the working class and middle class Londoners living in uncertainty and fear. Ken and Labour will have to fight hard and organise hard especially in some of the outer London boroughs to win back these Labour voters. It will continue to require some policies and campaigns specific to these areas, as well as a London vision for the future that is radical and credible. Ken is well placed to win this battle of hearts and minds. He is a big candidate, with big policies – see for example his economic policy for London.

Defeating Boris will be really important for London and as the first big step towards for ousting the ConDem coalition. Who is best-placed to beat Boris? The evidence is clear – Ken Livingstone.

- *Steve Hart is Secretary of Unite the Union, London and Eastern Region and vice-chair of Ken Livingstone's mayoral campaign. He writes here in a personal capacity.*