

THE COHEN REPORT

NEWCASTLE CENTRAL GENERAL ELECTION 1983

Newcastle Central CLP

Newcastle Central Constituency Labour Party General Election Campaign 1983.

Introduction

On June 9th. the Campaign Headquarters grew more confident of a Labour victory as the day went on, culminating at 10pm in a forecast Labour majority of 2,000-4,000.

It is not the purpose of this report to explain what went wrong with that forecast, although this is covered, but to record the many successes of the campaign, comment on the weaknesses that became apparent during its course and make recommendations for the future.

Pre-election activity

In the twelve months running up to the election the Party increased both the quality and frequency of regular newsletters distributed to electors in the new constituency.

Following the selection of Nigel Todd as Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for the old Newcastle North C.L.P., an arrangement was entered into with N.U.P.E. which enabled the three branches from the old constituency; namely Wingrove, Moorside and Jesmond to have a newsletter printed by N.U.P.E., approximately once every two months, for the cost of the paper alone.

After the 1982 local election in Blakelaw, which resulted in a Liberal victory, the ward Party put out an approximately bi-monthly newsletter, about half of which have been printed and the rest duplicated. Soon after selecting the local government candidate in the autumn of 1982 Kenton branch switched from delivering a duplicated newsletter to a printed one.

Towards the end of 1982 Fenham branch started to distribute a duplicated newsletter whilst in South Gosforth the Party continued to deliver the Gosforth Labour Party Newsletter. Thus by the beginning of 1983 all seven wards in the new constituency were distributing a regular newsletter, most of which were printed.

During the campaign for the County by-election in Wingrove on March 3rd. 1983 several new techniques were tried including the extensive use of day time canvassing and the delivery of a large number of single issue leaflets with only 200-250 words each. The success of these methods was seen, when just one week after the Bermondsey by-election, the local Party overhauled the Liberals, coming from a poor third place to very nearly win the seat for the first time ever.

These techniques, refined during the local elections, two months later, formed the basis of the General Election Campaign.

Preparation

The old Newcastle North constituency was one of the most marginal in the country and had been designated by Trade Unions for a Labour Victory. (T.U.L.V.) as one of the target constituencies for special help. In addition to the help from T.U.L.V. an arrangement with N.U.P.E. was entered into which, in addition to printing newsletters, included the loan of premises for the campaign and secondment of an officer to act as agent. With the redrawing of Parliamentary boundaries this arrangement as well as the candidacy were brought into question.

In the four days between the election being called and the new constituency's inaugural meeting the arrangements with N.U.P.E. were confirmed, quotes for printing obtained and preparations for an introductory leaflet to go to the printers on the Friday morning were made on the assumption that if the Party decided to have a full selection process, whoever was selected would be happy to accept these preparations.

In the event Nigel Todd was selected on the Thursday night, the copy for the leaflet was with the printer on the Friday morning and the Campaign Headquarters were operating fully by Friday afternoon.

The Campaign Committee

Two early decisions were made. Firstly that it would be a very 'high profile' campaign using every method available to put the candidate's name before the public. Secondly to enable this it was necessary for the agent to have a readily accessible method of consulting the Party organisation and a reliable system of delegating work.

On the Saturday morning after the selection and every Saturday during the election a meeting was held with members from each ward to discuss both the organisation and political content of the campaign with the agent. At the same time he appointed several officers with whom specific issues could be discussed and work delegated to.

The value of the Saturday meetings can best be demonstrated by two examples. At the first meeting both Fenham and Blakelaw members expressed the desire to have two committee rooms, with each taking responsibility for part of their ward instead of dealing with them as single units. At the same time the agent was able to ensure there would be no problems for the Moorside committee room to look after the part of Wingrove on its side of the General Hospital rather than be bound by local government boundaries.

At the second Saturday meeting Party members were able to compare notes on the campaign for the first time and it was realised there was a general groundswell amongst the electorate against the Party's policy on defence as they understood it.

This led to a leaflet on defence being prepared, printed and distributed by the following weekend, two days after it became an issue in the election nationally. This early recognition of ~~a~~ feelings amongst the electorate and the prompt response to ^{them} was probably one of the more important factors in holding the Party's share of the vote against the national slide to the Alliance.

Campaign Officers

During the election the agent appointed various campaign officers. These included a Candidate's Officer, Finance Officer, Canvassing Officer, Publicity Officer, Press Officer, Postal Votes Officer, Meetings Officer, Transport Officer, Student Organiser and Polling Officer. For the most part he discussed any issues that arose either from the Campaign Committee or more generally with the relevant officer and then delegated any necessary tasks. However towards the end of the campaign the agent also held a brief discussion on the points raised in the Campaign Committee with the candidate and two or three of the officers on either the Saturday or Sunday afternoon.

Candidate's Officer

Although there was originally some doubt in the value of such an officer, when appointed the Candidate's officer proved to be invaluable not only in ensuring that the candidate was always where he should be but also to make sure that at no time did he appear to have been abandoned by the Party to get on with it himself. As well as this the candidate was never left to brood on any setback, real or imagined, without his officer being there to cheer him up.

Finance Officer

Although the responsibility for election finance is ultimately the Agents, the appointment of a Finance Officer is to be recommended. Overstating election expenses is a recurrent nightmare for any agent and having someone maintaining a "running total" is very comforting.

Canvassing Officer

Appointed part way through the campaign the Canvassing officer obtained daily returns of the canvassing from each committee room on forms P, Q and R from the National Party's campaign pack. Initially the task was seen mainly as one of ensuring that the figures were compiled on a regular basis, obtaining an aggregate for the constituency and indentifying those areas which were in need of help with canvassing. This latter part of the job was done particularly well.

It is true to say that there was never an occasion when the agent was unable to direct outside volunteers to a committee room in need of help. Also as the result of this monitoring the agent recognised the need for and was able to arrange the canvassing of one of the polling districts in South Gosforth by members from Jesmond.

Unfortunately partly as a result of the late appointment of the Canvassing officer, the fact that nobody had a detailed knowledge of the constituency as a

/as a whole

