

Individual study tour to the United Kingdom by Nationals' delegate Greg Pierce

Executive Summary

My individual study tour aimed to investigate the policies of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat political parties in the United Kingdom relating to running candidates in elections at all levels of Government. I proposed to study the benefits and pitfalls of such an approach and examine how their policies have been determined in the context of:

- 1) Party Branding
- 2) Campaigning
- 3) Political strategy
- 4) Party structure and membership
- 5) Electoral funding
- 6) Candidate career development
- 7) Policy and political issue management – internally and externally
- 8) Multi media coverage
- 9) Constituent response

During my tour I met with 10 people who were either connected with political parties or had a professional interest in United Kingdom politics.

Those people were.

- Jonathan Evans. The Westminster Member for Cardiff North. Former Member of the European Parliament.
- Phillippa Broom: Conservative Party Councillor at Spelthorne Borough Council. International Officer of the Conservative Party based at Conservative headquarters.
- Simon Day: Head of Compliance Conservative Party
- Alan Mabbutt: Conservative Councillor Association Head of Local Government
- Dr Darren Lilleker: Senior Lecturer in Media Studies at Bournemouth University. Author of academic papers on local campaigning and political communication in United Kingdom at local and general elections.
- Julian Brazier: Conservative Party MP for Canterbury and Whitstable.
- Adrian Masters. Political Editor ITV Wales
- Derek McKay: Scottish National Party Member for Renfrewshire North and West. Cabinet Secretary for the Parliament Business and Government Strategy. Chairman of the Scottish National Party
- Damian Collins: Conservative Party MP for Folkestone and Hythe
- Joel Charles: Conservative Party Councillor at Harlow Council. Adviser to the Julia Brazier the Member for Canterbury.

The key points which were raised during interviews with the above people were the following:

1. The significance of voluntary voting in the United Kingdom and the first past the post voting system
2. The history behind political parties standing candidates at the local government level.
3. How all mainstream political parties believe it is essential that the party has representation at all levels of government in the United Kingdom.
4. The levels of government that this includes are:
 - a) Westminster Government which is responsible for all of the United Kingdom
 - b) The Scottish Parliament (SP), Welsh Assembly (WA) and Northern Ireland which decides how much of the funding from Westminster is spent.
 - c) The European Parliament
 - d) The complex structure of local government which varies from councils which are responsible for education, crime and social policy through to councils which are only responsible for “roads and rubbish” and the community councils which take care of community amenities.
5. Discussions about the structure and campaign techniques of the Conservative Party in the context of my study proposal and the issues which affect election outcomes. The Liberal Democrats initially committed to meet with me, however circumstances meant I was unable to secure an interview Paul Spelling the Liberal Democrats International Officer. Regardless, that did not prevent me from discussing my research with other interviewees about the Liberal Democrats. I also took the opportunity to meet the Chair of the Scottish National Party and discuss issues listed above.
6. I discussed how the Conservative Party and the SNP have improved the overall brand of their parties by strengthening their presence at the local government and WA and SP level.
7. Both the parties which I met with have similar campaign techniques in developing candidates, communicating with constituents and maximising positive voter turnout.
8. Public funding for political parties

My visit to the United Kingdom provided an insight into a complex democratic system which perpetually challenges all political parties to remain relevant to different constituencies across all levels of Government.

The primary aim of my trip was to understand the reasons for a political party's involvement in all levels of Government and what were the benefits and pitfalls. I was particularly interested in when and how political parties became entrenched in local government and how this influenced the way the Party approaches political campaigning.

I focused on the Conservative Party but also met with the Scottish National Party which has enjoyed increased electoral success in recent times.

Issues which I discussed during my meeting included Party branding, campaign techniques, party structure, electoral funding, candidate development and media management.

In the first instance it was important I understood the structure of Government in the UK. Alan Mabbutt from the Conservative Party and Conservative MPs Jonathan Evans MP and Julian Brazier MP provided a good background on the different levels of government across the UK and the importance of the performance of the Parliamentary Party leader in Westminster.

The most powerful Government authority is the national government where the House of Commons and the House of Lords determine the overarching rule of law and the appropriation of the majority of government expenditure.

However, it is not as simple as that.

Since 1999 Scotland and Wales have had devolution where their own local parliament has been formed through the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly. Members of both the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly are elected separately from Westminster.

Devolution has provided these two nations with the restricted powers to make their own laws and to determine how they wish to allocate funds. The Scottish Parliament also has powers which have not been extended to the Welsh Assembly such as the ability to raise additional revenue in their jurisdiction and more control over some of the government services.

Funding for Scotland and Wales is provided in the form of the block grants from Westminster to the SP and WA who then determine how it will be spent.

The next level of government below the SP and WA is local government. Local government in the UK is a web of different types of councils which have varying responsibilities.

Responsibilities differ across the different of the types of councils and this can influence how a political party approaches specific election campaigns.

The different classifications can be broken down into five levels.

Unitary and Metropolitan authorities: These are responsible for all power delegated to local government. They include education, housing, social

services, highway, street lighting, licencing, refuse collection, environment and planning matters, recreational amenities.

Country Councils: These are responsible for education, social services, libraries, roads, street lighting, the fire service, planning and consumer protection.

District Councils: These are responsible for refuse collection, housing, licencing, planning, supporting voluntary organisations, recreational activities, environment, car parking and markets.

Parish and town councils: These are community based councils which can be responsible for a community of 100 residents or in some cases over 50,000.

London boroughs: Are very similar to Unitary authorities but transfer some of their powers to the Greater London Authority which has responsibilities to the Greater London Authority which has responsibilities for police and the fire service over the 32 London Boroughs.

The type of council which is responsible in each local area varies but what distinguishes this structure from Australia's system of Government are the additional responsibilities which larger councils have in delivering vital government services.

This has a major influence on the reason political parties have a strong presence at all levels of the domestic political landscape. Having the numbers at a council can provide many opportunities to improve the Party brand in local communities and highlight the shortfalls of their political opponents.

The other consideration which political parties in the United Kingdom have to contend with is the European Parliament. Given the increasing impact of laws passed by the European Parliament it is important that political parties maximise their representation in the European Parliament.

Conservative Party Jonathan Evans MP has been a MP in the House of Commons on two separate occasions. Despite losing his seat in 1997 he was elected as a Conservative Party Member for the European Parliament for Wales in 1999. Standing as a Conservative Party candidate assisted in his European Parliament campaign and highlighted how important a strong Party brand across different levels of government was important to giving talented and highly regarded candidates the opportunity represent their Party. Mr Evans stepped down from his MUP role to successful stand for the seat of Cardiff North at the 2010 general election.

In the UK all major political parties accept the importance of standing candidates at all levels of government. But it was not always the case and the Conservative Party experienced substantial political pain before it adopting such a strategy.

The rise of the political parties in all levels of government dates back to 1972 when changes to the Local Government Act saw the creation of significantly more large councils.

As Alan Mabbutt highlighted, the creation of larger authorities gave councils increased powers and raised the profile and political significance of local government. Today many local authorities have billion dollar budgets.

Alan noted that upon the creation of larger councils the Labour Party immediately began campaigning on Party tickets to secure power at the local level.

Labour recognised the importance of being the decision makers who had control over education and other vital services which were so important to local communities.

When the changes were introduced Conservative Party members were, at first, hesitant to run a party ticket in local government elections. Instead Conservative Party members preferred to run as independents.

But it soon became clear that Labour and the Liberal Social Democratic Alliance (later to become the Liberal Democrats) councillors were voting as a block and exercising significant power in major local government jurisdictions.

Labour and Liberal Democrats councillors were also using their council positions as a platform to stand for election at the national level.

As a result there was a steady erosion of Parliamentary representation for the Conservative Party in Westminster. The need for the Conservative Party to change became clear when the Liberal Democrats secured major swings at the at the 1995 local government elections.

It was clear the Party could no longer sit back and just view itself as a party of Westminster.

As Alan Mabbutt noted, ratepayers claimed the Conservative Party was invisible at the local level and they only heard from the Party at general election time. This was because the Conservative candidates were not on a party ticket.

From 1995 onwards the Conservative Party commenced standing candidates at all levels of government. There were just 4000 local Conservative councillors in the UK at the time. Today there are more than 9,000 across all levels of local government and the Conservatives are the largest party in local government.

The creation of the larger regional councils was an important event, not the least because of the power which was entrusted in the local authorities. They had so much more power and were responsible for the delivery of so many more services.

From a political perspective this provided the political parties with additional opportunities to attract more candidates, develop their brand in local areas and mobilise their membership.

As Alan Mabbutt, Jonathan Evans MP, Julian Brazier MP, Damian Collins MP and Cr Joel Charles highlighted to me, initiatives which were implemented after 1995 took a while to have an impact time.

Never the less the measures which were announced in 1995 have contributed to rebuilding the Party brand at the local level and, more recently, at the national level.

The first initiative was the formation of the Conservative Councillor's Association. This was established to build a new local brand within the Conservative Party Brand and aimed to provide Conservative councillor candidates with the support of the party in their campaigns for election.

The CCA provided guidance of how prospective candidates should build their profile, communicate with the community and understand the issues which were concerning constituents.

There was also assistance with websites and fundraising and guidance about increasing both the candidates and the Party. They also produce a quarterly magazine *Input* which is the national voice for Conservatives in local government.

This also benefited the party in other ways. As local candidates and their volunteers campaign teams introduced themselves to individual households the opportunity arose to record the details about constituents and feed that data back through party head office.

Over time this information proved invaluable in not only understanding what issues were of concern, but it enabled the party to communicate with those people about what the Conservative Party was committed to as far as addressing those issues.

Regardless of whether that information was gathered in the context of a council, Welsh Assembly, Scottish Parliament or Westminster election all the information could be utilised for any existing or future campaigns across any level of government.

The Conservative Councillor's Association has therefore been an essential arm of the Conservative Party in identifying and harvesting candidates to secure electoral success. But the increased mobilisation of the Party membership has flow on benefits for candidates who stand at the general election and for the European Parliament.

It provides the opportunity for party strategists to communicate with constituents on the issues which are important to the voter.

Effectively communicating with constituents and increasing the Party vote in the UK is challenging on two fronts – identifying those who are supporters or swinging voters and ensuring they vote for you on polling day.

As all MPs noted voting is not compulsory in the UK. Voter turnout at a general election is about 60 per cent of the population. At a local government election it is around half that figure.

In the UK there is also a first past the post voting system. Therefore many candidates are elected with less than 50 per cent of the vote.

When you factor in that 40 percent of population will not vote at a general election and around 65 percent will not vote at a local government election it is understandable why the Conservative Party is so focussed on identifying their supporters and swinging voters and encouraging them to make their vote count.

The Conservative Party has a strategy in place which aims to secure “pledges” – that being the constituent has indicated they support their party and they are likely to vote on polling day.

Pledges provide the party with an indication about how they may perform at any election in any geographical location. However, while the aim is to secure enough pledges to ensure victory only 60 percent of those pledges are expected to convert into votes.

As Alan Mabbutt, Jonathan Evans MP, Julian Brazier MP, Damian Collins MP, Cr Phillipa Broom and Cr Joel Charles noted the Party rightly invests substantial resources targeting people who say they vote Conservative but who may not actually attend a booth on polling day.

These people are identified in a number of ways. The Conservative Party uses demographic data provided in a software program called Mosaic.

Mosaic provides important demographic details of the type of households in geographical areas across the UK.

While it provides comprehensive profiles of suburbs across the UK, the Party is constantly doorknocking, surveying, telephone canvassing, attending markets and other community events.

Every communication with a constituent or household aims to raise the Party profile. But just as importantly the information which is garnered from these communications is fed back into the Party’s own database and cross referenced with Mosaic.

All candidate, MP or councillor material can then be used to directly communicate a message which is relevant to the constituent. This is an important factor in converting their support base into votes.

Conservative headquarters also produce a monthly magazine *Constituency First* which aims to give MPs and prospective candidates a forum to share ideas and remain in touch with all matters relating to being a political representative.

Another key component in building the party brand for the Conservatives is the Association of Conservative Clubs (ACC).

ACC's provide a place for like minded people from the conservative side of politics to meet, socialise and discuss issues. They also are active in raising funds for the local community as well as supporting local candidates.

Jonathan Evans MP is the Chairman of the Association of Conservative Clubs and he commented on the importance of the clubs in a number of areas. The clubs do raise funds to support Conservative Party candidates but they also provide a place where like minded people can to socialise and discuss how to progress the Conservative brand. The ACC also donates to community causes. It's grassroots and invaluable to the Party.

All Conservative MPs I spoke with recognised the importance of the clubs in maintaining the Party's local profile and giving Conservative supporters a social place of their own.

The local Conservative Associations are also a vital part of the Party architecture. The CA is responsible for local preselections, local fundraising, organising campaigns, and ensuring the local membership is active and maintains a strong local presence.

The Conservative Associations also works closely with Party HQ to ensure all the funding declaration requirements are adhered to. As Simon Day pointed out the declaration obligations of Parties vary according to whether the funds are donated to a local campaign or whether they were directed to head office.

The laws can be complex for new candidates. For example at the local level there are restrictions on who you can accept donations of more than 500 GBP from and all donations over 1500 GBP have to be reported.

In head office the threshold is 7,500 GBP. Identifying who can donate and how much be donated before it is reported it is essential and there is little doubt that a well organised Conservative Association with the support of Party headquarters can ensure no illegal donations are made. Despite quite stringent restricts on who can donate it was pointed out that there is no taxpayer funded payments to political parties based on the election results. The only exception is that the party in Opposition in the House of Commons does receive funding to enable them to fulfil their duties as the Opposition. There are also grants which political parties can apply for but these have to be used for policy development.

The absence of any public funding means that Parties have to rely on private donations in order to fund their campaigns. That requires the Party to be active at both the local and national level.

The ACC, the CCA and the Conservative Associations are therefore all important organisations within the Conservative Party structure. Without them there is no local connection between the Party and the community and local fundraising would not exist.

But whilst these local activities are essential, political campaign management is now centralised through Party headquarters.

The Conservative Party headquarters in London is resourced to ensure the Party remains in touch with the political landscape right across the UK. Whilst the Party also has offices in both Wales and Scotland, London HQ maintains a constant focus on how the Party brand and the elected representatives are performing. They are also constantly updating the constituent data bases as information is forwarded.

This is important because every year there will be some form of election which the Party will contest. That's because there is no uniform system of when elections are held for the respective government jurisdictions.

A general election is held once every four or five years. When general elections are held some councils also hold their elections. Other councils have a rolling election schedule where one third of councillors are put to the vote every year for three years whilst in the fourth year there are no elections.

Elections in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are held every four years. The European Parliament elections are held every five years.

With the management of election campaigns very centralised this means the Conservative Party head office is constantly in campaign mode. The Party places a high priority on securing every possible council seat, let alone a seat in the Parliament.

Ensuring that all candidates have the necessary support to execute successful campaigns is fundamental to the day to day operations of Party headquarters.

Party HQ will be responsible for producing direct mail and advertising. They will also closely monitor voting trends in specific geographical locations, particularly in marginal seats. Campaign managers are appointed in the key seats.

The Party will often use the profile of incumbent MPs to boost the profile of council, Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament candidates who reside in the same area.

This is not always the case though. If the Party brand is suffering at the national level, the Party may place an increased emphasis on the local candidates. Quite often the strong local profile of candidates at council elections can lead to a different outcome than the general election. As discussed with Alan Mabbutt and Damian Collins in 2006 Labour only lost 17 seats in Westminster but they lost 320 council seats.

Regardless, it is the resources and focus of Party HQ (in consultation with the local campaign team) which determines what strategy should be adopted in each local area in order to maximise the vote. In some cases the decisions of Party HQ do not necessarily agree with the thoughts of the candidates and party membership. There is the constant question whether centralised management is the most effective way to run a campaign.

As a lecturer in media studies and political communication Dr Darren Lilleker has conducted substantial research into the way UK elections campaigns are managed in the modern era.

He has watched the evolution of marginal seat campaigning and he has conducted substantial research into the relevance locally focussed and managed campaigns.

Whilst he shares the views of other interviewees that centralised managed campaigns can deliver success he does believe good local candidates can achieve political representation through strong locally managed campaigns.

He highlighted some case studies he has researched where a Liberal Democrat candidate and a Labour candidate in two seats in Dorset successfully built up a local profile. The Liberal Democrat started in local government, became the mayor and then successfully became a Member of Parliament through strong community based campaigning.

The Labor candidate targeted a conservative seat where the Conservative Member of Parliament was deemed to be out of touch with the community. Although the Labour candidate did not live in the electorate the Labour candidate campaigned on local issues over a two year period.

He attended markets, publicly voiced his concerns on local issues and ignored all the Party generated material. The local focus worked and he was elected to Westminster.

These are just two examples which Dr Lilleker uses to assert that the centrally orchestrated campaign is not necessarily what serves political parties well.

When I discussed the important role of Party HQ in their successful campaigns all councillors and Members of Parliament acknowledged the need to run active local campaigns on issues which mattered to their constituencies

However they also accepted the support of Party headquarters was a key part of their success.

Cr Joel Charles made the point that Conservative Party head office helped develop a campaign strategy and produce and distribute material in the council ward he was seeking to represent. Volunteers were also available to help out.

As a young up and coming politician Cr Charles believed it would have been extremely difficult for him to win his seat if he did not have the support of the Party and the strong brand recognition of the Conservatives in the seat he contested. The support of the Party was therefore crucial to career development of Cr Charles.

Cr Phillippa Broom also commented how Party support had assisted her election to the local council.

Damian Collins MP pursued a different path before he was elected to Parliament. Mr Collins had a strong background within the Party having been the Chair of the Conservative Association at Oxford University, then working at the Conservative Research Department. He was active in the conservative think tank The Bow Group.

He developed a strong local profile as the President of the local Chamber of Commerce, Chairman of a local youth project and also the Chairman of a local campaign to restore a Road to Remembrance in the town of Folkestone.

All these positions provided an invaluable connection with his local community. But the Conservative Party has a strong brand in the seat of the Folkestone and Hythe which did assist Mr Collins when he was elected to Parliament in 2010.

Despite the differing views about the impact of a centralised campaign management, what is clear is the importance of the Parliamentary leader in delivering increased political representation at all levels of government.

Indeed all people I met with acknowledged that the outcome of any election, whether it local or Parliamentary, was quite often a barometer on how the Party was perceived in Westminster.

A strong leader in Westminster can lead to increase voter turnout and a better result at the ballot box. There will always be core Party support but a strong national leader can ensure you have the numbers in a local authority

From a Conservative Party perspective David Cameron has sought to reinvent the Conservative Party through reforms which aimed to increase the number of candidates who are women, people with disabilities or from ethnic minority groups.

In difficult economic times he is regarded as a strong performer. At the May 2011 local government elections many questioned whether the Party would

suffer as a result of some of the difficult decisions the Prime Minister had made.

However, it was the Liberal Democrats who suffered a disastrous net loss of more 745 council seats. The loss of so many seats was attributed to the performance of the Parliamentary leader of the Liberal Democrats Nick Clegg who many felt had betrayed the constituency on a number of policy matters.

In forming a Coalition Government with the Conservatives Mr Clegg abandoned a number of his policy commitments which was viewed as a breach of faith the Liberal Democrats core constituency.

The Conservative Party increased the amount of councillors and whilst local issues played a role, the result was considered by many as an endorsement of David Cameron's leadership. It is however worth noting that the Conservatives did not perform well in this year's Scottish Parliament elections where Conservative brand is suffering against a tide of support for Scotland's Independence.

The Scottish National Party has used this issue to gain majority control in the Scottish Parliament and also increase their representation at the local government level.

As Derek McKay MP detailed the Party has similar campaign techniques in place as have been noted above with the Conservatives. But the party's membership base is increasing significantly and the Party is preparing to convert that into extra seats at the local government elections.

The Conservative Party brand in Scotland is so tarnished that the Scottish arm of the Party has considered changing its name.

While Mr McKay made the point that the SNP had to prove to the people that it good deliver good government, he said the Conservative Party would struggle to regain its previous profile in the Scotland until it at least acknowledged the issue of Independence.

This highlights how important the Parliamentary leadership team to the fortunes of party political representatives at every level of government.

It can be a two edge sword however. When you have 9000 Conservative Party councillors plus parliamentary representatives right across the nation it is not uncommon for political representatives to embarrass their leader or undermine the Party brand.

As Adrian Masters from ITV and Dr Lilleker pointed out the media is quick to seize on Party divisions and anything that may challenge the authority of the Leader or the Party.

It is therefore important that all political representatives are disciplined in their actions and their commentary. That doesn't mean different points of view can't

be discussed but it is important that they are couched in a way that does not become an issue of leadership.

Dr Lilleker spoke in some depth about media landscape in the UK and how difficult it was for candidates to establish a profile through “free media” ie press releases, photo opportunities etc.

He said there is very little opportunity to get television or radio exposure and most local newspapers are not interested in the political spin. Indeed Dr Lilleker makes the point the only time a candidate is likely get substantial free media exposure is when they have done something wrong – not when there is a positive story to tell.

And while most MPs have a website and some, such as Damian Collins, use Twitter and other social media the reality is that these mediums allow you to keep in touch but they are yet to prove major vote changes at the local level.

Many candidates therefore have to rely on the distribution of their own material and their community connections in order to develop a profile.

That makes the support of a political party so beneficial. Volunteer support, fundraising, assistance with brochures and advertising all come part of the package when you are a Party candidate. And of course you get the corporate knowledge of head office.

Overall my visit proved very useful in understanding the dynamics of political campaigning in the UK and the how political parties aspire to maximising their representation at all levels of government.