

HIGHBURY COMMUNITY NEWS

Issue No 8 May 1998

HOW WILL YOU VOTE ON 7th MAY IN THE COUNCIL ELEC- TIONS?

National newspapers like to tell their readers how to vote. We can't do that, because we aim to represent all our members, and we know there are almost as many shades of political opinion in these parts as there are voters. Besides, the HCA committee could never agree. Even in that small group, opinion varies from the moderate Right to the immoderate Left, with most shades in between, not to mention those suspected of anarchist leanings and total, philosophical indifference! What we can do, and have done here, is to provide some basic facts, and a very general commentary. Given our daft first-past-the-post system (*bias showing here, surely - ed.*), it helps to know if your favoured candidates stand any chance of being elected, or even whether there is any point in finding out where the polling-station is. Of course, past performance, as they say of share prices, is not a reliable guide to the future - but it is all we have; apart from canvassing returns - and the parties are keeping those to themselves.

The Highbury Hustings - An unofficial view

The HCA local election forum in Christ Church, Highbury Grove on 22nd April attracted a record crowd for an event of this nature. Over 150 people filled the Church to hear candidates from four parties promote their cause and answer questions. The event was sponsored by the Hi & I and organised and promoted by the HCA. Many thanks to the twenty noble volunteers who undertook a large leaflet drop in Highbury, Gillespie, Quadrant and Mildmay Wards; also to John Littlewood for the use of the Church. Maybe it was the leaflets, or maybe it was the promise of free wine afterwards that drew the crowds. Some would say the party at the end of the evening was the best part by far, but even the political bit had its moments.

Oliver Judge, Tory candidate in Quadrant and prospective inheritor of Clive Blackwood's mantle, took the first turn, always the hardest in a political debate as there is a good chance the audience may be listening. He was egged on by a bevy of fresh faced young men in the front row and in sharply tailored grey, City suits. These turned out to be fellow candidates. Oliver's message was simple. Things would be better under the Tories; they were not good under Labour, so they would definitely be better under the Tories. Labour's housing policy was a disgrace, and their financial mismanagement did not bear thinking about. This much we could all follow and, to judge by the applause quite a number of us agreed; but it never did quite emerge precisely why things would be better. Oliver seemed to have read deeply in the big, blue book of political aphorisms, but to have missed most of the bits that deal with particular issues. He may have a few things to learn about political oratory, but at least he fingered some of the major causes of dissatisfaction with the last twenty seven years of one party rule. If he was hoping to learn about public speaking from his opponents, he must have been sorely disappointed.

Laura Willoughby, also from Quadrant, spoke next, to put the Liberal Democrat case. The audience may have been expecting to hear from Dave Barnes, as the sitting Councillor, but the leader, Steve Hitchens, who was watching proceedings closely from the middle of the audience, presumably felt more confident in promoting his youngest protege. Her major point was schools and how bad they were. Unlike the first speaker, where she saw a problem, she had an answer more specific than a change of government. The answer to bad schools was to recruit better teachers, particularly better head teachers; but she admitted that this was proving very difficult, especially where she was herself a Governor. A problem and an answer, and from somebody with practical experience. The audience was encouraged. The answer even seemed a plausible one. She seemed to have learned her lines on the "Arsenal Question" by heart, and spoke them with conviction. "The Club and the residents must sit down together, iron out their differences and reach a compromise." Any confidence that her party might have a grasp of reality in this area rapidly vanished. A worse thought followed close behind. They actually knew they were talking nonsense and thought it was the safest thing to do.

Chris Ashby, standing in Highbury, came next for the Green party. He chose to talk about himself, how he had lived in the borough for twenty years, how he worked his allotment, voted Green all the time, how he attended the Crime Panel, how misguided he had been to get involved in Labour's Neighbourhood Forums, which had proved an expensive sham. A politician admitting to making mistakes! A candidate not afraid to say he had always believed in the same things, some of them deeply unfashionable! A man prepared to characterise the motor car, dis-

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Election Outlook for the Borough

Labour has been in power continuously since 1971. For the first eight years they held every seat. In 1978 the number of seats was reduced from 60 to the present 52, and the Conservatives gained two of them. In 1982 the Conservatives lost both their seats, and the Liberal Democrats gained one. In 1986 the Liberal Democrats took 16, but in 1990 their numbers were reduced to three again. The Conservatives had to wait for a seat until the Quadrant bye-election of 1992, when Clive Blackwood took 53% of the poll on a turnout of 35%.

Last time around, in 1994, Labour took 39 seats, the Liberal Democrats 12 and the Conservatives held on to the seat in Quadrant. The Liberal Democrats have gained more seats in bye-elections, notably in Sussex Ward, previously safe Labour territory.

This year, the Liberal Democrats claim they have a good chance of unseating Labour. They see their support coming largely from discontented Council tenants rather than from any demographic changes; and they are strongest in the South of the Borough where they hold most of their present seats. Certainly that is where they are putting in their canvassing effort. Most of the other Liberal Democrats, as with the majority of the Conservatives throughout the Borough, are "paper candidates", there only for show, and would be deeply disturbed to find themselves elected. The Greens are fielding more candidates than ever before, with at least one in every Ward, and a full slate in favoured areas.

Labour's strength is in the North, but unlike the opposition, canvassing is mostly up to the Ward parties, not targeted on particular seats.

If, as widely predicted, the final result between the two major parties is close, what happens in the middle of the Borough could prove decisive.

One thing is certain. Even if Labour hold on to power easily, as they claim they will, it will be a very different sort of Council, with many of the old-time tenants' representatives and radicals and

half the sitting Councillors replaced by untried, mostly "New-Labour" candidates. Socialism, (for those of us who remember what it was) seems bound to take a knock.

HIGHBURY PROSPECTS WARD BY WARD

Gillespie Ward

Gillespie is solid Labour. If they lose here, Labour are in serious trouble. One of the sitting Councillors, Richard Greening is standing again, with Nigel Mason, ally of MP Jeremy Corbyn.

Electors worried about the Arsenal expansion have a difficult choice. Greening and Mason have come out strongly against various aspects of the expansion scheme, but since the Labour leadership obviously favours the Club's plans over the community interest, some punters may be reluctant to endorse the party, even though they agree with what the Labour candidates for the Ward are saying. Since nobody seems sure what the Tories and Lib Dems think about Arsenal, that only leaves the Greens - and there is only one of those.

Highbury Ward

The contest in Highbury is between Labour and the Greens. Labour has opted for three new candidates. A wise move probably, as the outgoing Councillors did not arouse much enthusiasm, even amongst the party faithful. Two of the Labour candidates are new to politics and new to the area. The third, Maureen Leigh, currently sits for Highview, the most northerly Ward in the borough.

Highbury is a large Ward, effectively divided by the railway, predominately Labour to the North, with Green Party support concentrated in the South. Two of their three candidates, Chris Ashby and Pat Tuson, are well-known at grass-roots level after two decades of dedicated slog in the interests of their local community. Persistence has paid off in terms of a rising vote; and with

the distraction of independent candidates removed, the Greens have strong and realistic hopes of a break-through this time.

Mildmay Ward

The Conservatives are the runners-up to Labour in Mildmay, but the gap between them and Labour seems too large for a change in the outcome, given the state of the national parties. Jennette Arnold, deselected in Gillespie Ward, has found a perch here and joins the long-serving Pat Haynes for Labour.

Quadrant Ward

Quadrant, currently split between Conservatives and Liberal Democrats is the most complicated and least predictable of the four "Highbury" Wards. Clive Blackwood, the well-respected Conservative member since 1992, has moved on. He had a large personal vote, and his six year tenure should give the Tories a headstart. Lib Dem member, Dave Barnes, was elected on the Labour ticket, but switched parties. An effective, tough debater much reviled by former colleagues and perhaps not fully trusted by his new ones, and one of the few life-long Islingtonians in this election, he should be able to count on the votes of grateful constituents. He is joined by the Liberal Democrats' youngest candidate, Laura Willoughby, who impressed many when she spoke for the party at the Highbury hustings. On personal form, they could expect to do well, but may not have the back-up needed to get their party into the running.

Labour is trying hard here and seems the best organised of the three parties. They must be hoping for a three way split to let them in. ☒

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the inevitable party of government in Islington; and that probably includes more people than are actually going to vote Labour.

It had been a long half hour, but not half so long as the hour of questions that followed. It was not that the questions were boring. On the contrary they were varied; and many of them were articulate and informed. More articulate and better informed on the whole than the replies. Dave Barnes, the Quadrant Councillor, made an effective and worrying intervention on the Council's proposals to lease a 15 year cleansing contract to an inexperienced firm. The failings of Islington's schools were further probed. Money was discussed at length, even fireworks on the Fields and the Arsenal got a look in; and clearly a great many people had more questions they would have liked answered.

The problem was the politicians. Until question time they had seemed quite distinct. Different policies, different personalities, different styles. By the end of the questions, it became clear that they had one deadly quality in common; a near total inability to give a straight answer to anything; and when they did answer, there was an uneasy sense that maybe there were crossed fingers under the table. In this, at least, they all seemed thoroughly professional. ☐

REPORT ON HCA AGM HELD ON 2ND APRIL, 1998

Held in Central Library, Fieldway Crescent, we approved the Accounts, amended the Constitution, heard an overview of HCA's activities and listened to David Conn's fascinating explanation of why football has changed so much in the last 10 years. Jeremy Corbyn MP stayed for an hour out of an already busy evening and brought his son, a keen AFC fan. Thanks to Annie, Brenda, Susannah and the other members who brought and served the wine, which helped to turn the AGM into a party.

We also elected a new Committee:

- Charlotte Cornwell - Secretary
- Mark Duffill - Treasurer
- Chris Ashby
- George Arabanos
- Anna Banks
- Patricia Borlenghi
- Alison Carmichael
- Celestine Randall
- Robert Scott
- Angela Sinclair
- Margot Sreberny
- Sarah Threlfall
- Roger Wright
- Margot Young

Committee contacts:

Membership Secretary354 1413
 Treasurer.....704 8876
 General Information.....359 5731

EATING OUT IN ISLINGTON

Islington has been a centre for entertainment and eating out for years. If you have never focused on the displays and activities of Islington's own Museum before, take a walk down to **268 Upper Street** for the summer Exhibition on Eating Out in Islington. Journey through time from the trestle tables of the Middle Ages to the Pleasure Gardens of the 19th century, and on to our present day restaurants. Workshops during half-term holiday to be announced! **Opens Saturday, 16th May 1998.**

Volunteers staff and research the exhibitions, which are often based on themes of interest to Islington. Islington Museum Tel: 354 9442

Arsenal Latest

Planning application for expansion now scheduled for early November, according to Peter Kelsall, the Project manager, speaking at latest Progress Review Group meeting

New Members

- ◆ We have over 500 members now and are
- ◆ welcoming more every month and at
- ◆ every event we hold. Contact Roger
- ◆ Wright on 354 1413.

Highbury Community Association

The HCA represents residents and businesses, on all aspects of living and working in Highbury, Stoke Newington and Finsbury Park.