



LOOKING TOWARDS MAY 2018

An LCA Special Briefing from Executive Chairman, Robert Gordon Clark

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OUR FIFTH LONDON LOCAL ELECTIONS – LOOKING TOWARDS MAY 2018

We are just over a year away from the elections for the 32 London boroughs – Thursday 3 May 2018. Before then we have the elections for the City of London Corporation on 23 March 2017 and of course some important elections nationally, regionally and locally this May and in Italy, Germany, France and Holland.

These are the fifth local elections we have witnessed since we set up London Communications Agency in 1999 – 2002, 2006, 2010 and 2014.

As 2016 was the most politically disruptive year in living memory, we think these could be the most politically disruptive local elections we have faced.

This special briefing will explore why this is, what it could mean for the boroughs and the impact on all of us who work in the capital, trying to get things done between now and then. Later this Spring, we will look more closely into what this may mean for May 2018.

FIRST, A REMINDER OF WHERE WE'VE COME FROM

May 2006, when Labour was in the last throes of Blair's leadership, reeling from the Iraq war and six points behind in the polls, saw the Conservatives control 14 of 32 boroughs outright and have a hand in another five that were no overall control. Labour ran just seven councils.

In 2010 the local elections coincided with the general election and Labour bucked the national trend winning back a staggering 10 boroughs on the day the party lost control of the country.

Then in 2014, as the coalition government was limping towards the end of the fixed term, Labour won 20 of the 32, which a year later became 21

when they took control of **Tower Hamlets** – equal to the parties best ever result since the creation of the 32 boroughs in 1965.

For the last few years we have referenced London as an increasingly left-leaning city where the smaller parties struggle to keep much of a foothold and the record breaking result for Sadiq Khan last May in the Mayoral election reinforced this.

But that was before the extraordinary events of the last few months – the political climate now is very different. In the past we have tended to notice pre-election shenanigans start in earnest one year out, usually around the time of the Annual General Meetings, in this case that would be May/June 2017.

But it's January, there's 16 months to go, and there is plenty of evidence that the game is very much on. We predict this is going to be far more disruptive, for far longer, than any previous elections.

- The first sign of this, arguably, was a challenge to the leadership of Cllr Sarah Hayward in **Camden** in April 2016. Seen by some as a vote on her style of leadership more than on politics, she beat Cllr Sally Gimson by 24-17.
- Then in the autumn of 2016 Mayor John Biggs faced a challenge to his leadership of the still fragmented Labour party in **Tower Hamlets** – this despite the good progress the administration was making following the unseating of Independent Mayor Lutfer Rahman. Biggs survived, but the battle reminded everyone how tricky it is for this sensible, pragmatic politician to keep the borough on an even keel.
- Weeks later the long standing Mayor Sir Robin Wales faced a tight nomination battle in **Newham**.

After 14 years running Newham as Mayor and before that seven years as Leader, it's a borough that's 100% Labour so the opposition is frankly within the party and that's what we saw. Wales won the nomination to stand again in 2018, but only with the help of the Unions and the Fabian Society.

- In contrast to Newham, Mayor Sir Steve Bullock decided not to re-stand in **Lewisham**. Having run the borough from 1988 to 1993 and then as directly elected Mayor since 2002, this was perhaps no great surprise. He was in fact first elected 44 years ago in 1982 (as was Wales in Newham) but unlike Wales has decided that after being in charge for 19 of the past 30 years it was time to step down. A full Labour candidate selection process is due to start shortly.
- Meanwhile for the Tories, Baroness Couttie decided to step down as Leader of **Westminster** to spend more time with her ermine. The resulting

election in this most Conservative of boroughs saw Cllr Nickie Aiken win. Within weeks of this result and just before Christmas, Cllr Robert Davis announced that he would cease leading on planning – 17 years after he took the brief – as Aiken made changes to the Cabinet. Davis remains in the role of business, culture and heritage with Cllr Daniel Astaire now in charge of planning.

- The new year then started with the news that Cllr Clare Coghill had won a three way election to replace Cllr Chris Robbins as Labour leader of Waltham Forest (from May 2017) beating off two other centrist politicians. **Waltham Forest** is one of the boroughs where Momentum could be influential, as Stella Creasy MP knows only too well. Yet the election went quickly and relatively smoothly, with Christmas sandwiching the nominations and then the election.

So in less than a year we have seen three leadership challenges, three changes to the leadership (Bullock will continue until May 2018) and that does not include the election of Mayor Philip Glanville in Hackney who replaced Jules Pipe after he moved to be a Deputy Mayor at the GLA.

THE FORCES AT WORK, THE ISSUES IN PLAY

For some Labour boroughs the rise of Momentum is a concern especially in boroughs like **Haringey**, **Lambeth**, **Southwark** and **Lewisham**. Cllr Lib Peck, the leader of **Lambeth**, had a particularly uncomfortable few weeks at the hands of some local activists in the autumn over proposed closures of local libraries and estate regeneration programmes. But our research to date suggests the Momentum surge across London is fragmented and not that well organised, as Dave Hill has also noted in his regular excellent articles and [blogs](#) for the Guardian.

So whether at ward level we will witness senior politicians failing to get re-selected for May 2018 remains to be seen, but it probably will happen. However the possibility of Momentum actually running a London borough come June 2018 is unlikely.

Labour reached a high water mark in 2014, winning 20 of the 32 boroughs (which became 21 in 2015 with Tower Hamlets). It's doubtful they can go much further, even after Sadiq Khan's record win in the Mayoral election and his current high personal mandate in the polls. **Barnet** is currently held by the Conservatives with a majority of one and **Wandsworth** has seen a gradual reduction in the Tory majority in recent elections and the Assembly seat for Wandsworth and Merton went Labour in the GLA elections last May.

But with Labour polling nationally so low, one does wonder if London can buck the national trend more than it has done since 2010, even if recent by-elections in London have shown them doing well. We doubt it.

Conversely the Conservatives cannot afford to be complacent. The 'Zac double whammy' at the Mayoral election and then the parliamentary by-election in **Richmond** does not augur well and the party lacks coordinated campaigning across the capital, especially in comparison to Labour, having relied on the Boris factor for too long.

A potentially resurgent Liberal Democrat party in London is more likely to hurt the Tories in **Kingston** and **Richmond** than it will hurt Labour in say Brent, Camden and **Southwark**, where only seven years ago the Lib Dems were running these boroughs in coalitions. That said the Conservatives will be keen to make inroads again in boroughs like **Croydon**, home to Gavin Barwell MP; **Redbridge**, taken by Labour for the first time ever in 2014; and of course **Hammersmith & Fulham**, which Labour won back in 2014 in perhaps the most aggressive campaign in the capital that year.

Much of the performance of the main parties will of course come down to national issues and Brexit is likely to be chief amongst these, followed no doubt by the National Health Services. If there is the perception of Tory chaos then this will probably help the Lib Dems in **Richmond, Kingston, Sutton** and possibly even some of the central boroughs where they were present in the nineties and noughties and where the Remain vote was strong. It may also limit the Tory vote that comes out and also enable Labour to keep control of **Hammersmith & Fulham, Croydon** and **Redbridge**.

But there are always boroughs where local politics and personalities will be more important than national or London wide trends. In West London **Hounslow, Ealing** and **Hillingdon** all have leaders who for different reasons are worth watching as they come up for re-election and have all had to deal with the challenges of Heathrow runway three.

THE IMPACT OF ALL THE POLITICS ON DEVELOPMENT

With central government funding dropping dramatically, and some reticence to increase council tax the year before an election (**Hammersmith & Fulham** are freezing council tax), the boroughs are becoming even more reliant on income generated from planning permissions whether CIL, section 106, housing bonus or in due course business rate retention.

The development brief, as shown for example by Robert Davis in **Westminster**, Matthew Bennett in **Lambeth** and Alan Strickland in **Haringey** is an incredibly influential but also tough role. NIMBYISM can cost votes. 'Estate renewal' and 'regeneration' are seen by some as bad, not good news for local communities and so council administrations will be wary about taking tough decisions on these too close to May 2018.

So where in previous local elections we have tended to advise clients to get their schemes through planning by no later than the Christmas before the local elections, we do think in this case it may be wise to ensure schemes are done and dusted by the autumn of 2017 if not earlier. That means driving forward projects rapidly this year. And this year's AGMs in May will be important to track closely especially any changes to the planning committees.

As for what will happen on 3 May 2018, following the Brexit vote and Trump victory, it would be foolish to call these too early – if at all!

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We strive for balance and accuracy at all times; however, if you feel we have made a mistake, omission or have misrepresented a story or issue please alert the team by contacting Jenna using the details above.