

# Election 2010

## Local politicians come to UMSU to woo student voters

**Tom Batchelor**

The University of Manchester Students' Union (UMSU) welcomed its own debates last week as the Virgin Voter campaign brought together candidates from the relevant parties for a Q&A session, though there was a notable absence of the Labour party.

Jobs in the north West, involvement in the European Union, a ban on the burkha and constitutional reform were all raised in the debate, but student issues dominated the discussion.

The event, co-chaired by the Politics Society and the Debating Union, allowed each panellist a short opening statement before it was opened to the floor for questions.

John Leech, the Liberal Democrat incumbent in Manchester Withington, appeared to emerge from the session as the most credible candidate, relying on his experience in Parliament to answer

questions confidently where other panellists faltered.

Alongside him was current student and Green Party candidate, Gayle O'Donovan, standing in Manchester Central; Chris Green, the Conservative hopeful for Withington; Bob Gutfreund-Walmsley, the candidate UKIP is fielding for Withington; and Karen Reissmann, the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition's candidate for Manchester Gorton.

O'Donovan referred to the Tory, Labour and Lib Dem parties as three brands of baked beans, but conceded, with a nod to Leech and a laugh from the audience, that "some baked beans are better than others."

Green, the Conservative hopeful, appeared shaky and unsure of his own manifesto. Leech's assistant was overheard offering to print out a copy of the Tory manifesto for him.

All the other candidates, including UKIP's Gutfreund-Walmsley, claimed to support a cap or complete abolition of tuition fees, a platform which has won the Liberal Democrats much of the student vote in the past.

Kate Little, UMSU's Academic Affairs Officer, asked the panel to pledge their support for the NUS' campaign to pressure MPs to vote against any

increase in fees. However Leech stressed that the proposal was "too conservative" and that the NUS should push for free higher education. "A pledge from Labour or the Conservatives is not worth the paper it's written on," he said.

UKIP's candidate, Gutfreund-Walmsley, attracted taunts from the audience when he claimed the organisation "Friends of the Earth is often enemy of the people", prompting a bemused look from the Green Party hopeful.

And in an embarrassing admission from Gutfreund-Walmsley, the candidate was forced to declare he hadn't properly read his own manifesto. "I've read it; it's only 150 pages long," a student questioning the panel shouted.

It was clear from the claps and jeers of those watching that the candidates left of centre were the most appealing to a majority of the student audience.

Protestors from the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) group handed out leaflets and demanded an equal platform for The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and their candidate Robert Skelton, who was excluded from the debate.

The SEP stand on a platform of no cuts to jobs or services and an end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The ISSE, the student movement of the SEP declared: "The decision to exclude Skelton is an attack on the democratic rights of the SEP and of the entire student body."

They called for students to attend the Q&A session and demand the decision be overturned, but there was no mention of the issue once the meeting had started.

## ...But Labour leave them in the lurch

**Girish Gupta**  
News Editor



The elephant in the room hosting the Union's election hustings last week was the lack of not just a Labour parliamentary candidate, but the no-show from the party's Michael Amesbury, a Fallowfield councillor who had been named on posters.

Speaking to Labour parliamentary candidate for Withington Lucy Powell the previous week about her own lack of attendance, she had cited "diary commitments" which she refused to go into. At the time she promoted Tony Lloyd, Labour MP for Manchester Central, who she confirmed would be attending in her stead.

"You couldn't have a better replacement for me than Tony Lloyd. He'll be fantastic as a Labour representative," Powell had said the previous week. Lloyd did not attend last Monday.

Later, posters put up around the Union promised not Lloyd but Amesbury at the debate. This was confirmed by Laura Williams, University of Manchester Students' Union Campaigns Officer.

"I didn't know that Amesbury wasn't turning up," Williams told *Student Direct: Mancunion* after the event. "There was absolutely no reason why he shouldn't have turned up. I was told by Michael Joslin [who works for Labour as an organiser and as a campaigns assistant to Powell] that we were going to have Amesbury. That went on the poster and he just didn't show up on the day."

"I thought they'd be in touch with me but I've heard nothing at all."

When *Student Direct: Mancunion* contacted Amesbury to ask about his no-show, the councillor was not even aware that he was meant to be in attendance. "I have never said I was going because I couldn't go because I was elsewhere actually doing some casework in Fallowfield, which is something I'd pre-arranged some time ago," Amesbury said.

The councillor was angry that his name had been put up on posters without his knowledge. Williams again confirmed that it was Labour organiser Michael Joslin who had authorised Amesbury's name to be printed on the posters. Joslin has stated that that's not the case, according to Amesbury who appears unsure of who is to blame.

"This is like the politics of a poorly organised sixth-form," Amesbury told *Student Direct: Mancunion*, apparently talking not about the organisation of his own party but that of the Students' Union.

Angry that his name would be appearing in the story, the Labour councillor repeatedly threatened legal action against this paper. "If my name appears in this story, believe me, I will come down on you like a ton of bricks. I really will. I'm saying this in no uncertain terms, and if you want to try me, try me."

Jonathan Ridge, head of the Politics Society, who co-organised the event as part of the Virgin Voters campaign - aimed at getting students to the ballot box - was disappointed by Labour's lack of representation at the debate.

"It shows a lack of respect," he said. "It's kind of saying, 'We value the student vote so much that we're not even going to bother coming to their major hustings event,' which was a fairly big thing."

A number of heated phone

calls between organisers of the event and Labour's Withington offices are thought to have taken place.

"I heard that there was disquiet between certain members of the Labour hierarchy and people chairing the event. Every other party managed to respect that we were going to be impartial. Obviously Labour didn't trust us to do this."

"Even the Conservatives and UKIP sent along people whose views they knew were not going to be in line with the majority of the students. They're not stupid; they knew that but they sent them along anyway. They were happy to come along anyway and stick to their guns knowing they weren't going to get any cheers. They still came along."

Withington Lib Dem MP John Leech said after the Monday event: "I'm just surprised, frankly. The student vote is really, really important in Withington, in Gorton and across the whole country there are swathes of seats where the student vote can actually make the difference between someone winning or losing so I'm amazed that Labour haven't sent somebody to get their message across."

"I know that Labour don't have a very good message to give to students but even so you would have thought that someone would have come to defend their policy. I don't think the Tories have a strong message to students but at least Chris [Green, Conservative] had the guts to come and face a fairly hostile audience."

"We were told that Lucy was coming, then it was Tony Lloyd, then it was Amesbury. You would have thought that they could have found one parliamentary candidate from Greater Manchester to answer questions from students."



**AFTER YOUR VOTE...**  
Green party candidate Gayle O'Donovan

## Withington MP joins student pub crawl

**Girish Gupta & Danijela Topalovic**

Students on last week's general election pub crawl were joined by Lib Dem MP John Leech as they drank their way through Font, Baa Bar, Orange Grove and on to Red Rum in Fallowfield, all in aid of RAG Week.

The MP for the marginal constituency of Manchester Withington spent two hours talking to both Lib Dem supporters and surprised

drinkers on topics from Gordon Brown's now infamous recording in which he calls Gillian Duffy a bigot to Lib Dem policies on Trident to a girl whose parents worked for BAE Systems.

"The pub crawl was a great opportunity to raise much needed cash for local causes and to show that students are still interested in politics," said Catherine Sargent, incoming chair of RAG. "The money raised is testament to how engaged the students were with helping RAG and with

spreading the message of their campaigns.

"It was brilliant that John Leech was able to show how important students are to his campaign and his constituency. Seeing him out with students demonstrated that when politics is involved with student life, students want to be involved."

Second year Lucinda Thompson was impressed to have had the opportunity to speak to the MP. "Leech was very approachable. That's the first MP I've seen actually face to face on the

street campaigning. That was really valuable.

"The student electorate is a huge proportion of South Manchester's voters so I was surprised he was the only candidate present."

The Conservative and Labour candidates were also invited to the pub crawl but declined.

The Conservatives won the night in terms of money raised. The blue bucket ended the night filled with £72, while the Lib Dems' raised £56, with Labour coming in third place with just £22.

**ENGAGING...**  
A Fallowfield drinker quizzes John Leech

