

Politics & Analysis

Diary of a General Election News Reporter

Girish Gupta
News Editor



Two weeks ago I wrote about the general election as covered by the *Independent* and the *Times*. Coming back to Manchester, I found myself very quickly immersed in a feud between the candidates for Labour and the Lib Dems in the notoriously marginal student constituency of Withington.

The constituency is one of the most marginal seats in the UK and Labour have made it clear they intend to win it back from Lib Dem incumbent John Leech with their own Lucy Powell.

The carting out of celebrities began soon after our return after the Easter holidays. After the manager of Sainsbury's Fallowfield had voiced his concern at the throng of Labour backers and photographers congregating outside his store, Labour-supporting comedian Eddie Izzard stood on a soapbox outside it with Powell.

Izzard gave his spiel as to his reasons for supporting the party. In verse repeated to journalists throughout the day, the comedian told of how he had known Powell for about seven years when she had sparked his interest in politics.

I spoke to Izzard and Powell in the Starbucks opposite. "I don't believe the Tory party is about fairness," Izzard repeated. "I think it's more



Clockwise from right: *The Thick of It's* Malcolm Tucker, Labour Councillor Mike Amesbury and Michael Joslin

about money, and tax breaks and people who are doing well doing even better. I want everyone to have a fair chance."

I suggested to the pair that it wasn't the Tories they should be worrying about but the Lib Dems' Leech. Leech won in 2005 with a majority of 767, taking just over 40 per cent of the votes; the Conservatives took less than a tenth. However, Powell and Izzard stuck to their anti-Tory line.

I wrote this up a day or two later and also spoke to Leech's office for a quick response. The incumbent MP called me back later that day when I put Powell's words to him. "In Manchester Withington, vote Lib

Dem, get Lib Dem," he said before launching into calling the Labour party liars and accusing them of being "politically dishonest".

I re-wrote the article with Leech's comments. The following morning I heard that Powell was not attending a Students' Union debate, an important event for the Union hosted jointly by the Politics and Debating societies. I gave her office a ring on the Thursday morning and spoke to the rudest press officer I have ever dealt with. He asked why Powell not turning up to a debate was a story. I explained that it certainly was and, either way, I, as a journalist, would dictate what was and was not a story. He told me he'd get back to me before hanging up.

Not knowing my details I rang back and thankfully spoke to somebody a little more personable. She promised me a phone call or statement shortly. An hour later Powell called.

I asked initially for a response to Leech's suggestion that the Labour party were lying to voters by suggesting that a Lib Dem vote was essentially one for the Conservatives.

I then asked about Monday's debate. Powell insisted that Tony Lloyd, Labour MP for Manchester central would be in attendance.

Michael Amesbury, a Labour councillor, was instead promised by the event's organiser Laura Williams. I called Labour's office to confirm that Lloyd would be attending despite the event's organiser and its posters claiming Amesbury. They confirmed Lloyd.

Monday came and there was an empty place where Labour were meant to be sat. This gave Leech an easy ride being the only serious parliamentary candidate present. His demeanour showed it, as did his quotes afterwards.

The next day I called up Amesbury's mobile to ask why he had not attended despite his name appearing on the posters. He claimed not to know anything about the debate and was angry that his name was on the posters.

I told him I'd speak to the organisers and get back to him to let him know. Speaking to Williams, I quickly realised that the fault was not of Amesbury's office, but a member of staff in Powell's office, Michael Joslin. Apparently Joslin had confirmed with Williams that Amesbury would be attending without speaking to his office. Joslin denies this according to Amesbury, however, did not respond to my request for a statement.

I called Amesbury later essentially just to let him know he was off the hook. The fault, while Labour's, did not lie with his office. Unfortunately for him, he failed to grasp my point before launching into a tirade against me, specifically me and not the paper, he said. "If my name appears in this story, believe me, I will come down on you like a ton of bricks," he told me. "I really will. I'm saying this in no uncertain terms, and if you want to try me, try me."

Arming me with such a fantastic quote recorded on my Dictaphone, Amesbury had shot himself firmly in the foot. Rather than be on the sidelines of my story, the councillor turned himself to be the focus of it. The Lib Dems jumped on this threat to their leaflets distributed to the student-heavy Fallowfield constituency.

I noted how dirty and smearing politics is. Like I said a couple of columns ago about politics being nothing to do with policy, if councillors are smearing each other like this at such a small, local level, who knows what the Malcolm Tuckers are up to in Whitehall

CAUTION: POLITICAL LINE

Respecting the bigots

Sarah Wakefield
Political Editor



With exam pressure kicking in the topic of respect has been thrown around more than normal. If you stay overnight with a partner is it acceptable to ask their housemates who come in drunk and loud at 4am to respect your sleep, or should you respect their way of doing things in their house? If someone is stressed should you do the washing up without them asking and respect their need for uncluttered spaces, or should they respect your need to hear directly from them what they want?

Christopher Hitchens, the angrier version of Richard Dawkins, talks about having it out with the people you disagree with and 'respectfully' explaining why you think their position is wrong. Indeed, most academically minded people emphasise the importance of dialogue to get to what is right or wrong. If something is understandable, it doesn't make it right. It is understandable for people to get stressed out and shout and their friends during exam season. It is perhaps even understandable that politicians ignore those who don't agree with them as making sure their core voters go out and vote might win them the election. Yet however understandable these situations, it doesn't seem to be the right way to gain respect of these individuals, any bystanders and/or hidden microphones.

Part of the problem with respect is that there are not always clear cut boundaries. If a politician and a voter disagree what is the most respectful thing to do? In every day life "I'll respect my opinion if you respect mine" is often used as a means of defusing a difficult situation. But what if respecting their opinion has a direct, negative impact on your life? This becomes particularly poignant in politics.

There might not be respect for a politician's party policies, but the most liked local politicians are the ones who talk to those in their ward or constituency; the time they spend doing this is seen as a sign of respect. However, for a government minister, the whole country becomes something which you are representing making it difficult for us to get to know the hierarchy of a party, perhaps why the televised debates have been widely welcomed.

Voters and the media's relationships with politicians often manifest itself in satire or criticism and, if this is based on fact, it could be

seen as a sign of respect as it is informing them that what they have done or implemented is not popular. If politicians want respect for making a tough decision or having a busy diary they have to explain why certain things get prioritised and others don't and disrespectfully ignore voters they won't get voted back into office.

The idea of respect is often behind political rhetoric, including in this election. For example, when David Cameron mentioned "if you've been saving and doing the right thing", the undertone of this is "I respect your choice to do this, as it is morally correct", designed to make Cameron the chum of anyone who has been saving as they are moral vanguards in his eyes.

Respect is not just between people when it comes to voting. If you vote you send a message about having a certain level of respect for the version of democracy we have in the UK, even if you vote for a party advocating constitutional reform you still acknowledge that the form of democracy we have to express that discontent is valid. A true sign of disrespect for a flawed voting system might be mass apathy as there would be no mandate for democracy as we understand it.

However, democracy as it stands in the UK grants everyone one equal vote (some more equal than others depending on how marginal your constituency is). This means in the eyes of our political system everyone can have a say in the running of the country. Some people don't like this, as it means people, or bigots, who disagree with them get to have a say as well.

To truly respect someone else's opinion you have to let that opinion impact your life and be prepared to have your own ideas changed if you talk to them about why you think they are wrong, because they also have reasons for why you are wrong. This kind of respect is something that politicians can't do once they're standing on a manifesto. Perhaps that's the nature of politics, but their might be something which can change if respect is employed in a more substantive way.

Over the past year I've been trying to think a little harder than I normally do about why politics might be important to the way we live and what situations and people who you least expect can give insights about the way things are run. I've ended, as all students and academics seem to, with more questions than answers. This means I've often been wimpish on proposing policy or presenting something meaty for those who disagree with me to rip up, but I'll leave policy to the politicians and the answers to you.

Keep tabs on politics even though Student Direct has finished for the year:

■ www.TheyWorkForYou.com: your new-MP made a load of promises; do they keep them? Do you want to see what they say and do on your behalf?

www.HearFromYourMP.com: a constituency based online newsletter; where you can publicly respond to what your MP says to you.

www.TheStraightChoice.org: Electioneering happens throughout the year, not just once every 5 years. When they put leaflets through your door, you can scan them and put them on the web here.

www.democracyClub.org.uk: will continue (in some form) as a national independent network of election watchers. What form that takes won't be known until after the election.

<http://www.umsu.manchester.ac.uk/societies/list>: In UMSU there are plenty of societies to join and get involved with including OpenMedia, Challenging Orthodoxies Society, Politics Society, the Debating Union and plenty of campaigning groups as well