Chair’s Report – Croydon Liberal Democrats

After the relative quiet of a pandemic-hit 2020, this year has been characterised by catching our collective breath and then trying to make up for lost time. The main activity of the year has been the London Assembly and Mayoral elections postponed from 2020, along with five local council by-elections on Croydon Council.

Clearly the inability to get out on the doorstep and campaign in the normal way disproportionately impacted smaller parties like ours, but it was good to see London Region pivot to phone-banking and manage to engage people across the capital to take part, in the process converting many heretofore reluctant phone bankers (including myself!) into enthusiasts and reaching a good number of the electorate. I personally enjoyed the opportunity to speak to many voters in Croydon, with whom I would not have had the opportunity to speak otherwise.

Although we were delighted to play our part in getting Hina Bokhari elected as a second Assembly Member, joining Caroline Pigeon at City Hall, it was not a great result for the Liberal Democrats across London. However, we should note that in the Croydon and Sutton constituency we did come a strong third place, one of only two constituencies in London where we came ahead of the Greens. We were also able to field candidates in all five of our local by-elections, and I would like to thank those members who stood in these elections, as well as those acting as agents for both the London Assembly and by-elections.

The most positive part of the delayed elections was the focus on helping local parties build for 2022. In Croydon we benefited from the support offered by London region in the form of literature bulk buys – leaflets were designed centrally but with sections where local content could be added in, and the cost of the literature was subsided. Although these leaflets were useful, there are some lessons learnt in Croydon and feedback to London region about suitability of London facing leaflets in all parts of the borough.

Highlights this year include a strong return to campaigning in parts of the borough in preparation for next year’s local elections. We have had a good campaign running in our target areas, with several focus leaflets and a summer survey going out in key wards. We are also picking up casework and running petitions on local issues. Social occasions have been few and far between, but we did manage to enjoy a Garden Party in early September. Our guest was Baroness Susan Kramer – who gave a very interesting talk about the current state of play in the House of Lords, although worrying to hear her take on where politics is headed. Her challenge to all of us is to stay engaged in politics in the face of the Tories attempting to do everything in their power to strengthen their ability to stay in power; and so I pass that challenge on to you now.

There have, of course, been a number of challenges this year. Clearly lockdowns impacted our ability to campaign in our usual way and the lack of opportunities for social engagement has been tough. For many of our members, COVID has meant a reassessment of priorities and several of our long standing and active members have stepped down, or will be soon moving out of the borough. We wish them all best wishes for the future.

As we look to the future, we have an excellent opportunity to push on now and do well in the local elections in 2022. We made strong progress in 2018 in CP and Old Coulsdon and we can build on this. People are fed up with Labour’s appalling financial mismanagement of Croydon borough council and recognise that there is a need for greater scrutiny and independent voices. The mayoral election has also provided the opportunity for us to get our message out widely across Croydon. We have a decent amount of campaign money due to spending very little during the COVID pandemic, but we must not be complacent about this. We need to do more to encourage diversity amongst our membership in Croydon and show people that we are the party that can represent them.

On a personal note, this will be my last Chair’s report as I have now come to the end of my three-year term. I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to making the last three years enjoyable ones where we have made a reasonable level of progress. A lot of work goes into keeping the party going locally, and I want to thank the executive committee for their support. I also want to thank all those who go out and deliver leaflets, host events, donate funds, go out knocking on doors or stand up for liberal values in their community. This is what makes the Liberal Democrat’s so special - the hard work and community engagement that we undertake as we believe that we should build to a greener, fairer, more caring Britain.

Claire Bonham

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