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17 May 2018

Dear Sakina, Claudia, Janet and Brenda,

Congratulations on being shortlisted for the Lewisham East by-election. I am so proud to have been selected as the Women's Equality Party candidate. My party was founded to broaden representation and not only to make change directly but to challenge and encourage other parties to do better. It is encouraging to see this strategy bear fruit in Lewisham, where this looks set to be a race between progressive women.

I am an activist who never imagined myself as a politician, and certainly never expected to be a candidate for Parliament but seeing the impact of government policies I felt I had to put myself forward. Austerity is ripping the heart out of Lewisham's communities and women and minority groups are on the front line. The #MeToo movement has exposed the scale of violence and harassment against us, and all across the country women are learning that they are paid less because they are valued less. Lewisham voted overwhelmingly for Remain because we know that Brexit will exacerbate all of these issues unless we forge a new path that puts people before politics.

Some people will say that progressive women shouldn't stand against each other. I disagree. I think democracy is stronger when voters are given choice. There can never be too many of us making ourselves visible and amplifying the causes we so passionately believe in – it's up to us to set an example to girls and young women as well as boys and young men in Lewisham.

Equal representation is a core objective of the Women's Equality Party. One reason it is so hard to achieve is the broken first-past-the-post voting system, which excludes women and minority perspectives. I think that electoral reform is long overdue and it saddens me that the Labour leadership opposes the kind of reform that could deliver a progressive government. In its absence, WE are looking for other ways to open up the system to change. That's why I'm writing to you with a proposal that I am also extending to other progressive candidates for this seat.

The Women's Equality Party has not only worked in progressive alliances at previous elections but proposes in some circumstances to run joint candidacies. WE exist to highlight and dismantle the structural, economic and cultural barriers that hold women back and so everybody else. The party was created because none of the existing parties consistently prioritise women's needs or put forward the policies required to tackle inequality.

This is true institutionally but I also recognise that individuals in other parties share our values. So I wanted to reach out to you to discuss the possibility of a joint ticket, based on you prioritising the following policies in your election manifesto:

- Universal free childcare from the end of parental leave to the start of school, so that families can make real choices about how to balance work and life.

- A single rate of pension tax relief at 25p per pound to stop women retiring into poverty and to increase the benefits of saving for 90% of workers;
- Full decriminalisation of abortion so that women are never prosecuted for terminating a pregnancy;
- Pound for pound investment in social and physical infrastructure, and an assessment of how all spending decisions will impact different groups;
- Fully equal system of nine months parental leave at 90% of pay, to tackle the economic inequality between men and women that has been highlighted by the gender pay gap;
- Access to specialist support and advocacy services in every community for women and girls who experience male violence and abuse, funded via three-year rolling grants.
- An end to the demand for women's bodies through the introduction of a sex buyer's law.

As the Women's Equality Party candidate, I believe that these issues are vital and should be on the ballot paper on 14 June. They could transform not only Lewisham, but the whole of our economy and society. If you are prepared to accept them - and to state publicly that you will promote and vote for these policies in Parliament - then I would be happy to discuss options.

One more Labour MP won't break the political stalemate. But a joint Women's Equality Party and Labour MP could give the government the wake up call it needs.

I love Lewisham. It is my home and I want to see it make history on 14 June by electing an MP who will put equality first. Because equality is better for everyone.

Yours sincerely,

Mandu Reid

Women's Equality Party candidate for Lewisham East