

How did I deal with the election? A candidate's story.

Given the range of strong reactions to the campaigns and the results, I am writing today about how I responded to the national campaign and tried to run a sensible local campaign.

In the months before the election was called the question of whether we needed an early election to bring the new PM her own mandate and extend the life of Parliament well beyond the Brexit talks came up just occasionally in private meetings amongst Conservative MPs, whips and Ministers. Some wanted an early election. I always expressed the view that there was no constitutional need given the precedents of Callaghan, Major and Brown, and no pressing political need given the size of the majority. I supported the PM's view that we would not hold one.

She surprised me after Easter by calling one. I listened carefully to her statement in Downing Street and was prepared to defend her decision. I could see the obvious advantages for the government and country assuming she won an increased majority in having the new PM with her own clear mandate, and the Brexit Bill as a Manifesto bill approved by the electorate in a General Election as well as by referendum. I was also aware that there was a risk of losing, but no point in talking about that once the announcement was made. The polls and general mood made losing look fairly unlikely. I thought the period of the election was too long given the limited nature of the messages main parties wish to get out these days, and given the imminence of the Brussels talks. I worried about how the time would be filled and how the media out of boredom would try to liven up issues and messages the two main parties were not highlighting.

When Parliament broke up there was an unreal mood created by opinion polls showing a huge gap between the Labour and Conservative votes. I and other Conservative MPs went back to our constituencies saying to each other we did not believe the polls could stay like that and were bound to tighten. Some Labour MPs were saying to us they did believe the polls, and went away fearing for their jobs.

When I saw the campaign theme and materials based around strong and stable leadership I felt the need to say something more to my electors, and to remind them that the local election was still about judging a local candidate to be MP, as well as choosing a national party to govern. That meant not using the template second leaflet of the Conservative party which left far too little space to set out what an individual candidate wants to do and how they see things, but creating one of our own. I wrote about the economy, taxes, planning, transport, schools and the other leading matters that constituents had told me in emails, letters, and conversations mattered to them. I explained briefly what I was doing, what I wanted to do next and where I was seeking change.

The Conservative national campaign went well until the day of the Manifesto launch. When I read the social care and winter fuel proposals I was extremely worried. I contacted the centre and explained the dangers. I wrote a blog piece saying that I intended to consult about these proposals, stressing to people that I understood this would be a government consultation post the election, and there were clearly many important details missing from the Manifesto sketch. I promised to voice constituents' worries and concerns during the consultation if that came to pass.

It seemed to take a long time for the modification to come through, saying there would be a social care cost cap. I with others asked for details of how much, and also pressed for clarification of what would constitute healthcare available free and what would constitute social care with a charge for those with money. I also wanted a figure for what was rich enough to lose the winter fuel payment. My email box was swelled with people worried or angry about the proposals. In some cases they did not understand that under the current cross party system if you move into a care home your own home is sold and the money freed used to pay the fees, nor did all appreciate that if you stayed living in your own home Councils charged for social care all the time you have assets other than your main home. I spent time writing individual emails setting out the current system as well as what might improve it.

It also became increasingly clear during the election that Mr Corbyn's offer of so much more public spending and free offers especially to school and College students was very attractive to young voters. There was no comparable Conservative offer to young people. Telling them his whole package was unaffordable, based on corporate taxes that would not materialise on the scale envisaged and extra borrowing of Latin American proportions was not going to win over the majority, who understandably liked the idea of no student fees and written off debts. I wrote a piece on how the Labour economic policy was full of danger as well as of some good intentions.

I spent the last few days in hope that there was sufficient momentum from the early campaign and sufficient doubts about the credibility of Labour's programme to give the Conservatives a modest majority. I was well aware there was no chance of a landslide, and thought it odd the seats the Conservatives were targetting which looked far too hard to win. Near to the poll I saw the enthusiasm of young voters and sensed the pro Labour mood. It was obvious the Lib Dems were going to be badly squeezed by Labour who had the better offer for young people. Their campaign to change the Brexit decision had bombed and they were trying to get on to other issues. I wrote about the two positives I could see in what was happening – the likely rejection of a second referendum on the EU by shunning the Lib Dems, and a move away from a second Independence referendum in Scotland by improved performance of the pro Union parties there.

I had tried to get the party to run on Prosperity, not austerity. I had wanted more prominence for tax reductions for workers and savers, more messages on promoting and strengthening the recovery, more about skills, training, education and better paid jobs. I was one of those urging the promise of more money for schools in the Manifesto which we did get, but we were outbid by Labour.