

Simon and Southwark, Bermondsey

How it all began

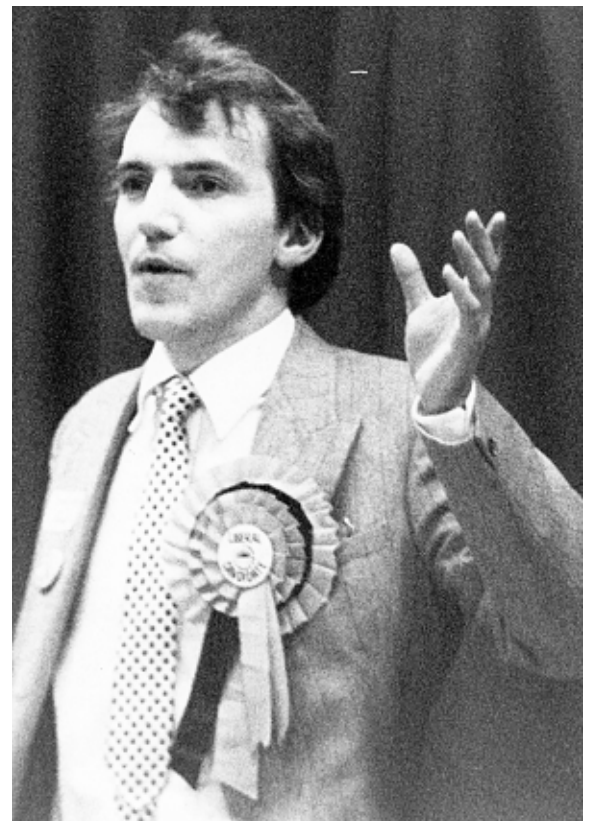
By 1980 I had for some time occupied the (voluntary) post of Head of Fund Raising at Liberal Party Organisation HQ. I had been quite ill and, during my lengthy convalescence, in August the then Secretary General of the party, Wyn Hugh Jones, asked me whether I had some time on my hands to do a research job for him.

Hugh Jones was of the opinion that Bob Mellish, the Labour MP for Bermondsey, wanted to be appointed to head the London Docklands Development Corporation. If this happened, Mellish would have to resign and a by-election would be called. Hugh wanted me to spend some time in the constituency in order to assess the political situation in great detail. With that information he would decide whether to support a campaign to try to win a by-election, or only have a 'paper' candidate. At the previous general election, in 1979, Liberal support in Bermondsey had been, to put it mildly, very poor – 6.8%.

I think I then spent approximately ten days in Bermondsey. I spoke to many people quite indiscriminately: in queues at bus stops, in labour exchanges, and unemployed groups on street corners. I knocked on doors in a wide range of streets and tower blocks. I spoke to people in pubs and parks. Wherever I could find someone who was willing to stop and chat for a few moments, I asked questions. What was good about living in Bermondsey? What was bad? How efficient was the local council, Southwark Borough? Did they think the council was honest or dishonest? Was the council's housing policy effective? What were their job prospects? What were the youth clubs like? What did they think of their MP? And so on.

I carried a clipboard with me – most people seemed to think that carrying a clipboard gave me

some sort of authority to ask questions – and made copious notes. I was astonished at some of the replies. The general consensus was that the council was corrupt or inefficient, and a minority thought both. Although most voters were sympathetic to Labour their current opinion of Mellish was not high. A significant number had heard that he wanted the Docklands Development job and were not at all pleased. Life in inner-city London was hard and miserable. In Bermondsey more than ten percent were unemployed, and the proportion was increasing. Many people lived and worked in almost Dickensian conditions.



For an MP to desert them for a plum well-paid job did not go down well at all. I must emphasise that at no time did I attempt to influence an opinion given. I asked questions, and supplementaries, as objectively as possible.

I also found a very weak constituency Liberal association. If I remember correctly there were about six members, one of whom had been the parliamentary candidate. I was not over-impressed. I then prepared a lengthy report listing all the data I had collected, including all the pros and cons, and gave it to Hugh Jones. He nearly fell off his chair when he read the conclusion. Unfortunately I never kept a copy. But in essence my opinion was Bermondsey could be won if:

1. The right work was done and, most importantly, started straight away.
2. The right candidate could be found to fight the coming Greater London Council election and continue to fight the by-election.
3. There were about eighteen months to two years before a by-election was called.

Hugh asked me whether I would present the report to David Steel. I agreed and an urgent meeting was arranged in the leader's office. Clement Freud MP, the party's By-election Committee chair, was present. David was courteous and offered me a cup of

tea while he and Clement read my report. Steel's reaction was one of surprise and of extreme doubt, but Freud suggested that David should take account of the fact that I had won more elections than I had lost – albeit at local level only.

Steel then asked me whether I would put my money where my mouth was. I replied that I was not a rich man and had not the sort of money to finance a campaign. I did, however, say that I was ready to go to Bermondsey every day and do my damndest to get an organisation going which could win a by-election. I made only one condition: I asked Steel to find £500 and give it me as pump-priming money to start the campaign going. We discussed the matter in great detail for about an hour. In the end he agreed and the money was forthcoming a little later.

To begin with I worked with the local members. I needed local knowledge and what scant records they had. I bought a Gestetner duplicator, stencils, paper and ink. I found a local office room. I had my own typewriter. I started canvassing in the Four Squares Estate on Drummond Road. My policy was that as soon as I found a problem – they were very easy to find – I reported it to the council and demanded action. I then printed and circulated a brief 'action taken' report to the residents in the



vicinity of the problem. Frequently a family member in the household where the problem was found would do the delivery for me. During canvassing, whenever I found a deliverer in a street or a tower block, I left that area and went to the next street or tower block looking for more problems and more deliverers. Quite a few deliverers became members.

I discovered that a man called Ron Tindall, then living in Stamford Hill, had been the Liberal agent at the last general election. Ron turned out to be a most likeable chap and we got on very well. He was Bermondsey-born, a dedicated Liberal and trade unionist and his father had been a local Labour councillor. His local knowledge was invaluable. When I first spoke to him he was reluctant to come back to Bermondsey to help, as he was totally disillusioned with the ineffectual local Liberals. Fortunately for me he became most enthusiastic once I told him what I had been able to achieve in a few short weeks. He joined me, and a little while later he agreed to move back to Bermondsey to live. Once he arrived things began to move more quickly and my weekly reports to Hugh Jones began to be quite optimistic.

After about three months of hectic work we had an effective delivery system in three wards – I think they were Rotherhithe, Riverside and Bricklayers – with about eighty members. I then phoned Hugh Jones and begged him to look for an activist who would be a

Cleaning up the town hall – Simon Hughes in the 1982 local elections.



suitable choice to be selected as a candidate by the expanded membership. A few days later he told me about a young barrister recently returned from working in Brussels and living just a few yards outside the constituency. He remarked that 'if you and he get on then the sparks will surely fly'. He arranged for the three of us to have lunch on a Tuesday at the National Liberal Club. The barrister was Simon Hughes.

I took to Simon immediately. His credentials were impeccable. He was a life-long Liberal, already heavily involved with a youth club just off the Old Kent Road, full of energy, determination and what we used to call in the army, 'fixity of purpose'. I like to think he took to me as well. After lunch Hugh left us. Simon and I sat talking about Bermondsey and the potential for a win for another two hours. He had considerable legal commitments through his chambers but, as we parted, he said he would let me know his decision whether to join me or not in two or three days.

He phoned me on the Friday morning and said: 'Yes. I'm with you - I'll start on Monday'. I answered, saying 'Why not start tonight? I've got canvass cards already pasted up for the Four Squares. I'll pick you up from your chambers at six o'clock and we'll start canvassing tonight'. He replied: 'You're a devil for work - but OK'. And so the campaign really did get under way. Simon was an excellent candidate. He put



David Steel and Simon Hughes in front of the 'Simon' pub in Bermondsey.

in hours and hours of dedicated work and the voters of Bermondsey were clearly impressed by his vitality, integrity and dedication to achieving improvements in their living and working conditions. As he started so has he carried on during all these years.

At the GLC elections the following May he shot the Liberal vote up from 3% (1977) to 16% (1981) and rose from third to second place. He created an optimistic feel among the membership and, by the quality of his organisational and leadership skills, obtained the loyalty of thousands of voters. After his by-election win in February 1983, he also became the inspiration behind the first bridgehead win at a ward by-election, when Ron Tindall became the first

modern Liberal on Southwark Borough Council.

Gradually I was happy to be able to work myself out of the job of being 'the father of Bermondsey', as younger and fitter local members took over. Apart from winning and holding my own council seat, Simon's win in February 1983 at the by-election caused by Bob Mellish's resignation was one of the most pleasurable and satisfying experiences of my political career.

David Rebak joined the Liberal Party in 1963, and has been a councillor, parliamentary candidate and founder member of the Association of Liberal Councillors. He is currently nursing the Enfield Southgate constituency to health.

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