

# No seat is unwinnable: how Labour activists set out to reclaim Tory strongholds and defy predictions

[Nick Mahony](#) 30 June 2017

In North London's Chipping Barnet, pop-up alliances and an emerging ecology of democratic campaigning came together to renew participatory politics.



*Labour Party activists in Chipping Barnet. Credit: Nick Mahony.*

The suburban North London constituency of Chipping Barnet has been a safe, relatively quiet, 'true-blue' Tory seat for generations. That was until June 8 2017, when Theresa Villiers' 2015 majority of over 7,500 votes was slashed to just 353.

The Labour Party's 2017 manifesto and the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn were important catalysts for Labour's unexpected success in the general election, and, in Chipping Barnet, they spurred on a group of local party members looking to write their own future, rather than follow a script.

## The campaign begins?

Soon after the snap election was called in May 2017, tensions surfaced between two groups of Labour party activists in Chipping Barnet over the issue of how to plan for the election campaign ahead.

To a group of more established members, Chipping Barnet was 'unwinnable', so it followed that the local campaign should largely consist of one round of direct mail to voters in target wards and a batch of get-out-the-vote leaflets dispatched to pre-identified supporters. At regional level, party officials had decided that Chipping

Barnet was not a 'marginal' seat, leading to Chipping Barnet being officially 'twinned' with the adjacent constituency of Enfield North and a strategy of directing members to campaign for Labour MP Joan Ryan, instead of their own candidate Emma Whysall.

A second group of activists, some of whom were already aligned with Momentum, had a different take. They wanted to approach the election as an opportunity to get as many local members as possible out on the streets campaigning.

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At the heart of this emerging alternative strategy was the idea of building the base and involving the newly enlarged membership of the party in a process of large-scale face-to-face engagement with the local public. As well as believing that such an approach could give Labour a chance of winning the election locally, this group was convinced that such a process might also help the local Labour Party start to become more democratic, member-led and successful in the local area in the future.

Following this meeting, I was one of the handful of people who pressed local officials for an open campaign meeting to which all members would be invited. We wanted to give all members the chance to take part in discussions about how Labour should campaign.

This meeting was subsequently organised and it quickly demonstrated that, beyond those already involved in Momentum and agitating for a more open approach, there was also a larger and even more mixed group of members in favour of a more energetic campaign locally, keen to discuss their own campaigning priorities and ideas for local action. Several members also enquired about whether a 'progressive alliance' strategy might be explored.

## **Social campaigning**

Within a week of this meeting, weekend street-stalls were up and running. Over the coming weeks, there were more stalls, with one set up outside the main Further Education College in the area, to encourage voter registration and to persuade students to vote Labour. Similar activities were repeated outside local schools and the main hospital during weekday afternoons.

By this point the number of local members who were involved had significantly increased and planning and communications related to these activities had largely transitioned from an ad hoc email list to a Facebook page and a WhatsApp group. These platforms opened up campaigning to Labour Party members beyond the initial group and many more local members started to get involved.

As activity continued to increase, these social media tools enabled new ideas about the campaign's coordination to be collectively discussed. At the same time, activists were also pressing local officials to help publicise these member-led activities through

the normal local party channels. This eventually happened, though members were still directed to campaign in Enfield North.

Many people continued to raise the idea of some kind of Progressive Alliance but it remained difficult to make inroads with local officials.

Undeterred, local members instead pressed the local party for more resources. Election-related material had almost run out and the group were able to negotiate 15,000 new constituency-specific leaflets. The minute these were delivered, they were immediately distributed and used to instigate conversation out on the streets, right across Chipping Barnet.

There was some canvassing happening led by local party officials, but this was dwarfed by the scale and excitement generated by the other activities that were rapidly emerging on a more ad hoc basis.

As members' contact with the public increased, so did the collective confidence of those driving these activities and the strength of members' conviction about the value and impact of what was happening.

The process of campaigning began to breed a broad alliance of progressive campaigners drawn from within the ranks of the newly enlarged local Labour Party. Those getting involved included: local anti-cuts activists, a group of women from Totteridge and Whetstone (the most affluent part of the constituency and indeed one of the most affluent parts of the country), local trades unionists, students, young parents concerned about the erosion of nursery, primary and secondary level education, nurses, doctors, teachers and older people alarmed by the prospect of further social care reform, as well as quite a few people who had re-joined the Labour Party in recent months.

## **Honk for Labour**

Fuelled almost entirely by the kind of euphoric hope that perhaps only emerges from an intense collective experience like this, the campaign in Chipping Barnet entered its final phase.

Small-scale, convivial and highly agile campaigning teams surfaced all around the constituency, almost spontaneously. Leafleting was taking place at every station and there were people moving around seamlessly, to cover gaps, apparently with only very minimal coordination.

By now an unpredictable mixture of smiles, snatched chats, deep and very lengthy conversations and heated but largely good-tempered exchanges were taking place with members of the public, on a great number of streets, on a near industrial scale.

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The campaign climaxed with an unplanned gathering of about 20 red-eyed Labour activists outside the party office. Holding aloft an enormous Labour banner, singing the Red Flag and inviting passing traffic to 'honk for Labour', this normally anonymous main road was temporarily transformed into a spectacle of camaraderie.

## What just happened?



*Momentum. Funk Dooby/Flickr. Some rights reserved.*

What happened amongst local Labour Party members in Chipping Barnet was the rapid development of a collectively invented social process of alliance building. This 'pop-up' alliance of members developed its campaign against the grain of the official local campaign. But this was not grass-roots activism, not least because it was geared to an existing election timetable, aimed at maximising the vote for our local Labour candidate Emma Whysall and therefore all about persuading as many people as possible to play their part in our current form of representative democracy.

But the campaign only took off when members started to organise it for themselves and connect what they were doing to what was going on nationally with the new Labour Party manifesto and the campaign led by Jeremy Corbyn. Most importantly of all perhaps, this local campaign was set up from the start as an endeavour that would be as participatory, directly democratic, inclusive and open as possible. This meant supporting processes of collective discussion, collaborative planning, group creativity and online coordination.

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In Chipping Barnet this approach worked, in other words, because of the desire people had to collectively invent the future, rather than do exactly what was expected of them. The Labour Party manifesto was a catalyst for this. The manifesto and the enthusiasm there was for collective forms of participatory action went hand in hand –

the policy platform offered people hope for more equitable, fulfilling and sustainable forms of social relations - and this included new and more directly democratic ways of doing politics too.

Labour didn't win the election in Chipping Barnet – the Tories won by 353 votes. And of course it wasn't just our self-organised campaigning that so dramatically reduced the Conservative majority – there were many other factors. As well as Jeremy Corbyn's leadership and the new party manifesto, these factors included: the years of neglect meted out to Barnet residents by its council and its national government and the years of door knocking, data collection and relationship building undertaken by local Labour councillors and other party activists.

The people we spoke to on the street during the campaign told us time and time again about the damage that cuts in public services were inflicting locally. In the years leading up to this election, Barnet Alliance for Public Services and other activists had already done great work to galvanise public resistance to these 'reforms', through the petitions, marches, demonstrations and other activities they had organised.

## **What next?**

Post-election, the number of people who believe Labour can win here has massively increased. The number of people that are enthusiastic about the more democratic, socialised and participatory approaches to local campaigning has definitely grown as well.

But what has been achieved here goes further than this., There are now many more people getting involved in progressive politics here, not just to get Labour into government and to reclaim the state but also to change their whole way of life. They are increasingly tired of the hierarchies and inequalities they live with and see around them; the ways that their workplaces and their country's financial system are governed; how the housing system and their neighbourhoods are run; they want to protect and improve their local environment and demand a future that is sustainable; they want better and more democratically run education, health, social care and food systems.

Long before the 2017 general election a growing number of small-scale initiatives had been experimenting with different forms of socialisation and democratisation up and down the country – in the realms of housing, energy, the arts, media, technology, food, the workplace and many other spheres. Now, after an election that has seen large numbers of people campaigning in more open, socialised, participatory and democratic ways, there is likely to be a much greater expectation for the Labour Party to be democratised too.

But such democratisation, if it happens, can't just come from the top-down. People expect to be involved in the democratisation of democracy. It will require new mediating institutions. Pre-existing democratisation projects need to be connected up with emerging alliances. These need to be scaled up and rolled out into new contexts.

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In the context of Chipping Barnet, there were no pre-existing spaces to negotiate between ‘new’ and more established campaigners; there was insufficient time for the democratic selection of our candidate; and the infrastructure needed for cooperation between members developed as we went along.

Nationally we see something developing that is more like an emerging ecology of approaches to progressive and radically democratic politics, than a top-down plan. There is no one ‘killer app’ for democratic reform or new universal progressive campaigning technique, nor should there be. Approaches to democratisation are evolving out of disparate traditions and in diverse contexts, with convergences and divergences between different newer and more long-standing sets of activities.

## **Inventing the future?**

Back in Chipping Barnet I am not the only one still recovering from the exhilaration of our campaign. Many of us briefly experienced forms of social relations that we’d never before been part of, at least in Chipping Barnet.

There will be aspects of what’s been described here that will resonate with what’s happened in other settings. The task now is to continue to open out, elaborate and extend these self-managed social processes to ever-greater numbers of people with the aim of collectively renovating the public and socialising whole ways of life. Only then, by continuing to collectively invent forms of participatory politics; deepening and extending alliances to broaden the base of support; and securing victory for a Labour-led government, will we be able to create the progressive public movement needed to realise more equal, sustainable and democratic futures.