



Wapping Town Council Meeting – 8th September 2010

1. Why am I standing for Mayor as a Liberal Democrat?

My name is John Griffiths. I have lived in Tower Hamlets for the last 15 years – over a third of my lifetime

In my day job I am a company Director – having set up my own regeneration company, Rocket Science, along with 3 others in 2001. We currently employ 15 people, from offices in London and Edinburgh.

I am proud to call myself a Liberal. The Party has a distinguished record of social reform and public service. Liberals also have a proud record of protecting the interests of the individual, different communities and have a healthy scepticism of big government – something I will come back to.

Over ninety years before New Labour, it was the New Liberals - shocked by the injustices of the Edwardian Age - who laid the foundations of the welfare state – introducing state pensions, free school meals and social housing.

More recently it was a Liberal Council in Tower Hamlets, way ahead of its time, which genuinely empowered local residents in giving “power to the neighbourhoods” (the Hamlets of the Tower).

As Councillor for Bethnal Green North, I devoted a lot of time to chairing the Local Area Partnership – supporting a wide range of grass roots projects;

I also organised and led the ultimately successful campaign to stop the Labour Party's plans to demolish York Hall. I am extremely proud of the fact that this remains a well used sports and leisure facility at the heart of our community. // I was also the spokesman for the Party on regeneration, at a time when we helped to expose a level of fraud in the Council that led to criminal prosecutions of both officers and sitting Labour Councillors.

This taught me the dangers of unchecked power getting into the wrong hands and the lack of accountability of many Council officers and members for the spending of public money. Your money!

2. So, why is the election of a Mayor of Tower Hamlets so important?

The position of directly elected Mayor is a relatively new phenomenon in local government in the UK – only since 2000 (Local Government Act) has it been available as one of a number of different models for running Local Councils.

There is now an increasing number of Mayors up and down the country – including three in London (Hackney, Newham and Lewisham).

The Lib Dems' position has been rather ambivalent. The concentration of executive powers in the hands of one individual goes against our belief in decentralisation, widening democratic participation and local accountability.

At the same time, we have always said that it should be up to local people on a case-by-case basis – if in a referendum people vote for the Mayoral system, then Lib Dems accept that decision and work with it – as we have done very successfully in Councils like Watford and Bedford.

Given the result of the Tower Hamlets referendum in May in favour of a Mayoral system, we are keen to make it work, but in a way that complements Liberal values and principles.

The Mayor's primary role will be to ensure that resources come into the borough to tackle the housing crisis (23,000 on the housing

waiting list), invest in our schools and over-stretched health services, and create employment for local people.

Our aim must be to narrow the gap between rich and poor, which despite 13 years of Labour's profligate public spending (in the Town Hall and Whitehall), has got wider.

In the wrong hands, an all-powerful Mayor (think George Galloway or Lutfur Rahman) would only exaggerate the worst of the Council's recent tendencies – further centralizing power and diluting the accountability for critical decisions over the allocation of hard-pressed resources.

However, we also need to face the facts . . . the practicalities! A Lib Dem Mayor would be running a Council dominated by the Labour Party (41 Lab; Tory 1; LD; 1 Respect).

As Mayor, I would look to build consensus and encourage cross-community involvement in the political process.

This means devolving responsibility and resources to those bodies and communities best placed to make use of them, including parish councils or neighbourhood committees, health boards, local schools, as well as tenants/residents' associations.

It also means appointing a cabinet that brings together a representative group of the most talented of our councillors.

This election is a golden opportunity to recreate Tower Hamlets as a borough of different neighbourhoods and communities – each one special in its own way; each one different, and the same time introduce a necessary check on the power of an executive Mayor.

THANK YOU.

Handing Power Back to You

Respect for History

- The Hamlets of the Tower – go back to the Doomesday Book of 1080s
- The LB of Tower Hamlets was only created in 1964 . . . previously smaller borough councils were part of the London County Council (Shoreditch, Bethnal Green, Stepney, Bow, Wapping)

Learning lessons of past arrangements

- The neighbourhoods – who remembers them? Fondly? They weren't the panacea . . . what worked well, what worked less well?
- Not a case of one-size fits all . . . what might work for Wapping may be anathema to Bow or to Stepney

Opportunities

- Breaking down power blocks
- Putting a break on centralised authority and state control
- Reconnecting Councillors with their wards/communities
- Complementing the Big Society
- Engaging local people and genuinely giving them a say . . .

How would it work?

- Local consultations and referenda
- Costs? – possibility of a levy on the Council Tax (less than £1 pw per household); possibility to acquire assets/land; potential to levy tax on local business
- Partnership – complement the work of other Councils in London (GLA; TH; local council)
- Staff – a local neighbourhood manager and a very small team.
- Services – parks/green spaces; leisure facilities; local youth projects/clubs for the elderly; policing/community safety; infrastructure/amenities (including war memorials)
- Roles – consultative/right to be heard on planning/ consent required on building and transport schemes; right to be involved in Council partnerships