

Notes from the campaign trail

*With thanks to our regular readers for their patience, the CIB website is now back in action again after a month's hiatus during the campaign for the European elections. Our website editor **Dr Anna Bailey** stood as a candidate for the **Brexit Party** in the East Midlands, and reports back from the campaign trail.*

Margaret Thatcher famously said, 'You may have to fight a battle more than once to win it.' That's pretty much what this European election campaign felt like. A battle – one which by rights we had already won – but were having to fight all over again.

It was frustrating having to fight an election campaign that should not even have been taking place. Theresa May stated over one hundred times that we would leave the EU on 29 March 2019. But that promise now lay in tatters, just the latest in a long line of promises broken by the prime minister.

Yet incredibly, while us Brexiteers have every reason to feel negative, out of our shared sense of betrayal has arisen an incredibly positive, upbeat new political movement in the form of the Brexit Party, which has enthused, energised and mobilised volunteers up and down the country.

As a political scientist I am more used to analysing politics than participating it. Indeed, the more I studied politics, the more certain I became that I wanted no involvement in it myself. But when the Brexit Party announced that it was inviting applications for candidates to stand in the European elections, I immediately felt that I should put my name forward. I strongly believed that our very democracy was under threat, and that I should do whatever I could to defend it.

Strikingly, this was also the main motivation for almost all of the other Brexit Party candidates I met. We were a diverse lot, covering a huge variety of professions, social backgrounds and ethnic groups – a fact conveniently ignored by those who disgustingly try to brand us ‘racist’ or ‘fascist’. Most of us had never dreamt of standing as a candidate in a national election before. But we had all been motivated by a sense of duty that we couldn’t just stand by and watch while career politicians rode roughshod over our democracy.

The thing that struck me most about the campaign was its positivity, something that other candidates also commented on. We did not need to badmouth our opponents – the public was already thoroughly disgusted with the traditional parties. Our platform was simple and positive: to implement the result of the 2016 referendum to leave the EU, and to begin the process of shaking up our political system by breaking the existing cartel of career politicians.

To say that there was an appetite for change among the public would be a huge understatement. Even we were overwhelmed by the response. People flocked to our stalls to express their support. I’ve lost count of the number of times we were *thanked* for standing as candidates. My fellow East Midlands candidate Annunziata Rees-Mogg assured me that this was not a normal occurrence when standing for election!

A phrase that many people used when thanking us was ‘putting your head above the parapet’. I heard it countless times, and it struck me as sad that simply advocating implementing the result of a democratic referendum should be considered as ‘putting one’s head above the parapet’. And yet, thanks to the intolerance and abuse from an unpleasant minority of Remainers, this is exactly how it is.

Many people I spoke to expressed their wholehearted support for us, yet felt unable to display a poster or car sticker for fear of abuse or vandalism (‘a brick through the window’ was a

common fear). No wonder there are so many 'secret Brexiteers' (see this excellent article by new Brexit Party MEP Claire Fox) grateful that someone is prepared to represent them. And as another Brexit Party MEP, Martin Daubney explains, some of our supposedly 'mainstream' politicians who should know better are fuelling this problem by describing Brexiteers as 'racists' and 'fascists'.

Sadly, I have already experienced the shocking, repulsive behaviour that such slurs encourage. Just a few days ago while canvassing in a small team, we were subjected to a raging torrent of threats and abuse from a man who screamed that we were 'fascists' and threatened to 'slit our throats'. Our current politics is broken in more ways than one.

Results night on Sunday 26 May brought a spectacular result for us in the East Midlands. As number five (out of five) on the list I'd known all along that I could not get elected; I was just grateful to be able to play my part in standing up for democracy. We were fairly confident of getting two out of five elected. Three out of five was a distant possibility, but would require an unprecedented collapse in both the Conservative and Labour votes. Amazingly, that's exactly what happened. The Brexit Party took 38 percent of the votes in the region, with the Lib Dems a distant second on 17 percent.

The battle is still far from won. But the cause is re-energised. The number of volunteers helping to man our stalls and hand out leaflets snowballed throughout the campaign. In Peterborough on Saturday, I met ordinary men and women from all walks of life, who had travelled from all over the country to canvass for our by-election candidate Mike Greene. For the first time in a long time, us Brexiteers now have a positive, meaningful way we can channel our energies and 'do our bit'. After three years of powerlessness descending into hopelessness, we are re-empowered. And it feels fantastic.