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Kris Hopkins: Why Tories need the Muslim vote

The following is the text of an article written by Kris Hopkins, the Conservative Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for Keighley and Ilkley, which appears in this morning's edition of the Yorkshire Post.

PEOPLE want a credible alternative to Labour, and in recent times, the Conservative Party has, under the guidance of David Cameron, finally demonstrated its hunger to govern and lead this great nation once again.

After a decade in opposition, we now have a leader who has the vision to bring together the necessary blend of people to succeed. A coalition of like-minded individuals joining forces to achieve a shared aim – to rid the country of this Labour Government.

On only two occasions in my lifetime have I witnessed a nationwide passion for politics manifest itself during a General Election campaign. Both in 1979 and 1997, the country set out en masse for the polling stations with a clear and widely shared purpose. Voters knew what they wanted and, through the ballot box, the message they sent was unequivocal.

Those involved in local government across our region will tell you that such passionate use of the democratic instrument is often the norm at May council elections.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in communities with a significant proportion of residents with their origins in Kashmir.

Hustings are generally held in packed halls, the atmosphere electric.

Speaker after speaker, listened to intently, quizzed and challenged. Barracked, laughed at, cheered, given a standing ovation, sometimes walked out on. It is all there.

Perhaps seen by some as old fashioned, what these gatherings undoubtedly amount to is the congregation of people – predominantly male, admittedly – who love politics and desperately want change.

Yes, they do talk about Kashmir, Iraq and Palestine. But, in my experience, their greater interest is in what the respective manifestoes say about educating their kids, crime on the streets, drugs, health care and getting a job. In other words, the same things that the rest of us are concerned about.

Although there have been many Conservative successes at local elections in Yorkshire over the last 10 years, it is a fact that Labour has done much better than my party in securing the so-called Muslim vote at General Elections.

But after a decade of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown's false promises, and with a revived Tory Party gaining confidence and securing its place in the centre ground of British politics, now is the time for Conservatives to do more to seek the trust and support from Muslim members of the community.

For too long, differing cultures within that community have been the focus of the political debate.

That is not to understate the importance of identity or ignore the tensions between differing sections

of our community that diversity can bring.

But now is the time to shift the debate away from points of difference towards areas of commonality.

The "Muslim Community" is not one homogeneous group, and my party's campaigns need to reflect this. Unsurprisingly, young people in this country – whether they are Muslim or white – have many common demands: a good education, jobs, a sense of purpose and respect for their identity.

But, to my mind, it works both ways. For these quite proper goals to be achieved, both groups of individuals must demonstrate a willingness to be ambitious, to aspire and to respect others to the same level that they demand respect for themselves.

Whether it is changing the lives of young people for the better, caring for the elderly, creating safe places for our kids to play, addressing domestic violence, protecting our environment, defeating poverty, promoting business or debating immigration – it should be one message to all sections of our community.

A large part of the British Kashmiri community lives in a swathe of land from Derby up to West Yorkshire and into East Lancashire, the very areas in which Conservatives must do better if we are to form the next Government.

As with the environmental agenda which David Cameron has almost single-handedly driven into the heart of mainstream domestic politics, successful engagement with Muslim voters on other key issues such education, the NHS and the importance of the family, is vital if we are to succeed.

Conservative strategists wrongly concluded in advance of the 2005 General Election that the Government's stance on the Iraq war would lead to British Muslims not supporting Labour.

Taking particular groups of voters for granted in this way will not deliver electoral success. Instead, engaging, understanding, creating trust between Conservatives and the people, thereby enabling a two-way challenge on delivery, is clearly a better way forward.

Commonality – working together to solve problems, developing a shared understanding, recognising our shared values and having the confidence to challenge each other free from fear – is the key to unlocking a future shared by all.

From now until polling day, Conservatives have the opportunity to demonstrate that we have a vision of one great nation for all its people.

Only if we are successful in that task can we realistically expect to have the chance to form this country's next government.

ENDS