



Thinkpiece
#83

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About Christian Wolmar

Christian Wolmar is a writer and broadcaster who has specialised in transport for the past 20 years, but also written extensively on other social issues. In 2012, he decided to try to obtain the Labour nomination for mayor. He lives in Islington with his partner Deborah Maby and has two children and three stepchildren.

About Compass

Compass is a home for those who want to build and be a part of a Good Society; one where equality, sustainability and democracy are not mere aspirations, but a living reality. We are founded on the belief that no single issue, organisation or political party can make a Good Society a reality by themselves so we have to work together to make it happen. Compass is a place where people come together to create the visions, alliances and actions to be the change we wish to see in the world.

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Wolmarforlondon, the campaign story

It started with a text message to the Evening Standard. And now the campaign to try to get the Labour nomination for London mayor has taken up three years of my life. The text was a response from an anonymous source to an article I wrote in the Standard during the run up to the 2012 mayoral election saying that the hustings between Ken and Boris were utterly devoid of inspiration or innovation.

Indeed, this reflected the feeling among Londoners as demonstrated by the 38 per cent turnout. All we heard about was Ken's unconvincing promise to cut fares and Boris's ridiculous antipathy to the Bendy Bus.

The text message suggested that if I stood for mayor, the sender would vote for me. It got me thinking. Was the mayoralty confined to the usual suspects, national politicians seeking a career move, or was it open to someone like me with considerable experience of transport, the key issue over which the mayor has control as well as a background in housing?

I decided to test the market and asked various prominent politically active people for their views – and the first was Neal Lawson of Compass who was unequivocal – ‘go for it, but start now so you can get known’. The question of whether I should attempt to do this as an independent, or go with the party I had belonged to most of my adult life – apart from a brief hiatus as a result of the Iraq War did not occupy me for long. Part of my reason for standing was to influence the Labour Party in a way that it needed to move particularly on environmental policies but also in terms of engaging with the grassroots.

The dozen or so other luminaries I asked were equally enthusiastic and consequently I wrote a piece for The Times in September 2012 just before the Labour conference saying I wanted to be mayor. I created a Twitter account and immediately got 250 followers and rather unsuccessfully tried to interest people at the Manchester conference, but then what?

Neal had suggested I had to get round the local Labour parties and I started trying to set up speaking engagements. It was not easy. Many Labour parties are still in the snail mail world and there is no coordinated publicly available list of constituency secretaries. I had gone round the Labour conference handing out a hastily designed ‘Wolmar for London’ card, helped by a chap called Robbie, but elicited little interest.

On my return from Manchester, I set my daughter, Misha, on the task and she managed to dig up a few email addresses, and my friend Ivor Gaber managed to arrange for me to speak at Muswell Hill ward on a cold night in November 2012. I spoke for nearly an hour – not a good start but I am a quick learner.

By that time I had my first couple of recruits. Owen Larter, who worked for a public affairs company, had seen my article and was interested in supporting the campaign. I ‘interviewed’ him in at the Betjeman Arms in St Pancras, one of several ‘offices’ I use in the two adjoining stations. I knew within five minutes that Owen was precisely the sort of fellow who could lead the campaign team and he started coming to my talks. The other early recruit was Michael Stock, a leadership coach who had seen me announce, at a London Cycling Campaign meeting, that I was standing as mayor.

How could we create a campaign?

It was uncharted territory. No political tyro had tried to start up a campaign within the Labour Party in this way. Michael, Owen and I had a meeting in a borrowed office space in a deserted tower block in Victoria. We began to formulate some plans and policies. We were soon joined by Stefan who had a friend expert in policing matters so we decided to make that our first policy statement. We were conscious that I would be typecast as a one trick pony, a transport expert with no other hinterland and therefore were anxious to show that I could deal with other policy areas.

That was a constant refrain. Should we emphasise expertise in transport at the risk of seeming to have no other policies or should we go for a more eclectic approach. We have ended up doing a bit of both. With Owen on board, invitations to CLP meetings came flowing in – though it was still impossible to track down some constituency secretaries. A press officer, Jonathan, came to help, and so I arrived at meetings with a couple of people in tow, which definitely impressed the audience. Kingston, Uxbridge, Deptford, West Ham – I was getting to know corners of London I had not been to previously despite a lifetime of living and working in the city. The welcome was usually warm and the questions interesting. I was improving and was developing an off the cuff speech, and was mostly prepared for the questions. My approach was to be honest with the limitations of the mayoralty and of my own knowledge, though a lifetime in journalism meant I was familiar with most issues.

The core of my policies were about transport – reducing the impact of the car, boosting cycle use, supporting public transport, opposing both Heathrow expansion and Boris’s mad island airport idea – but with a strong environmental

core, to such as campaigning for better air quality, an issue that kept on coming up at meetings, pedestrianising Oxford Street and supporting a London wide Ultra Low Emission Zone. Housing, too, was a key theme and we soon came up with a plan for a housing delivery agency to restart a social housing programme. We spent much time talking about policies and developing ideas but it was difficult to get the detail across at times. And the press totally ignored us.

There were inevitably mishaps on the way. I turned up at a huge meeting at Holborn & St Pancras expecting to be asked questions, Newsnight style, only to find they were expecting a speech. It was not one of my best. More recruits were picked up on the way, often at meetings where I was speaking. Dan Cooper, a young designer of prodigious talent, joined and gave the campaign a coherent identity. The rather spartan website was revamped and replaced by an elegant and coherent design. Tim, an event organiser, and Joe who is adept at social media, soon joined as well as Chris who took control of the Nationbuilder account, an American-based platform designed for campaigns, to which we had subscribed.

Labour Party conference

We decided to hold a fringe meeting at the 2013 Labour conference in Brighton. Not our best move. We flew in Lise Thorsen a Copenhagen councillor and spent a lovely sunny day taking her round the conference and listening to how the Social Democrats had been in control of her city for a century – uninterrupted (presumably except for German occupation) and how the council was retrofitting every home with insulation. She was great and enjoyed her day in Brighton but the Labour Party did not seem ready for us. The team found it really difficult to get people even to take our excellently designed leaflets let alone read them. And our room booked at great expense - £800 minimum for food and supposedly £1500 to the Labour Party for booking through them, but somehow they never asked us for the money – and only 35 people turned up, mainly existing campaign supporters. There was almost disaster as one of the attendees stumbled as he entered the room and the meeting was just about to start, and fell on the kind of washing line device that Dan had created for people on which people could peg the cards with their ideas on them. Fortunately, despite Dan's concern that the guy had suffered a heart attack, he was picked up and the meeting got going, though I was rather distracted, having already been disappointed by the low turnout. By coincidence, of course, another meeting featuring all the other prospective Labour mayoral candidates had been arranged at precisely the same time and attracted a full house. I had not been invited despite having campaigned for a year and being, at the time, the only declared candidate.

My London tour resumed – Croydon, Lewisham, Kensington, Edmonton – and many more. The reception generally warm, the meetings mostly quite small – I would say 20 was an average – and the questioning always the best bit. Our team, grew, too, though some people disappeared. Jonathan went off with the banners from the fringe meeting and oddly, despite supportive tweets, never reappeared. I rescued the banners 18 months later when his former flatmate found them in a cupboard. We focussed, too, on NGOs such as Clean Air for London Campaign and Generation Rent, engaging with them both to get ideas and to spread our message.

We held a much more successful event in the summer of 2014, a Saturday conference focussed on housing, policing and transport with around 100 people attending and Neal Lawson among the speakers. We played on the theme of being the only declared candidate but it was difficult to attract attention. Again, we focussed on garnering ideas and involving the grassroots of the party. The political journalists, so focused on narrow Westminster issues and beginning to sharpen their pencils for the general election, largely ignored us. Others in the Labour Party did notice and David Lammy invited me to tea, saying he would not declare his candidacy but promptly did so. He was immediately afforded far more coverage than we had ever got.

Others stuck their toe in the water but decided it was too cold. Margaret Hodge hinted at standing, made a couple of London-oriented speeches but then, advised that she would come under fire for her failings in the Islington child abuse scandal, dropped out. The field was thinning, though, with Adonis dropping out and Doreen Lawrence, who was someone's fantasy but had never expressed any interest, not featuring at all.

Owen and I met a series of senior Labour people and key NGOs and mostly the response was supportive. Len Duval, the chair of the London Labour Party, who we met every few months, made no bones about the fact that he was supporting Tessa, but liked our initiative and wanted to see us on the shortlist. Change London a community based organisation founded by David Robinson was also supportive and I contributed to its blog on ideas for London.

However, as the nomination process approached, we decided to focus more on transport as that was my strength. Dan commissioned a visualisation of what Oxford Street would look like as a walking street and we handed out the leaflets at Oxford Circus, attracting considerable attention. The visualisation was key – it showed people what it could look like as a completely different urban space. To launch the transport policy, we hired a Routemaster and went on a tour of south London handing out leaflets and getting supporters to go for part of the

ride. That too was a successful event. And all through this, there were big meals for all the volunteers every few months to boost morale. More people joined the campaign – Tom Morrison-Bell who on the press side, Millie, all too briefly, Toby the computer whizz, Zoe on rooting out those Labour parties, Eleanor and Adriana on policy - either through personal contacts or because they liked what we were doing - and of course my long suffering partner, Deborah, who has been in it since the beginning, always contributing ideas – and sometimes criticism when she felt I had missed a trick.

Building momentum

I did start getting more speaking engagements and invitations to visit – and ended up addressing 100 meetings. For example, I spoke against the Garden Bridge development, something that attracted a lot of support and talked with the impressive women trying to stop TfL demolishing the wonderful Arup designed Vauxhall bus station.

We produced a little pamphlet setting out the transport policies and Michael Stock focused on sustainability. He worked on a series of three others covering housing and local government finance, policing and health, and food. These were informed by a simple but effective concept. Everything we wanted to do for London would be based on trying to make it more affordable, liveable and sustainable. It was a very useful framework that enabled us to test any policy ideas and it has remained a key theme of the campaign.

The press, at last began to take an interest. I did an interview for ITV's political show the Late Debate and received nice coverage from Dave Hill's blog for The Guardian and the Stagers. Londonlovesbusiness did a lengthy and favourable interview. However, the mainstream media largely ignored the campaign, particularly the Evening Standard which would, at best, run our stories as three paragraphs on page 22 while giving prominence to Tessa Jowell's every sneeze. By general election time, Diane Abbott and Tessa had joined the fray but Sadiq demurred, even getting his attack dogs to ring up his potential rivals if they expressed thoughts about the mayoralty for distracting from the election campaign.

He was always going to stand as he had a team who had been working on his campaign for months before the general election, and he duly announced his intention to stand immediately after the election. And then we were straight into the nomination period. A huge CV and application had to be filled in and we were called into Labour Party HQ to have the rules explained to us. We had

to pay £500 to get the list of party members. I had not realised this would be issued straight away on receipt of the CV and the money, and that allowed the more seasoned campaigners to get a mailout to party members before we got the list.

I had, by then, the support of Lucy – grandly called head of operations – who became my only paid employee and Steve began to do some serious press work for us. We soon got out a mailing and worked out a plan for the nominations. The nomination meetings of the 73 constituency Labour parties were held between May 22 and June 9 with some most days and peaks on Wednesdays and Thursdays.

Nominations

I was somewhat complacent. Having spoken at some 40 CLPs and made quite a few contacts, I thought the nominations would roll in from places where I had been. They did not. The rules required that each constituency nominated a woman and one other. Since Diane and Tessa were the only two women, that almost guaranteed they would get the five required to reach the long list which would then qualify them for a joint meeting of the National Executive Committee and London Labour Region would interview.

The first meetings were held almost as soon as the starting gun was fired. In particular, the one at Peckham was held on the Friday night after applications went in which gave us no time to prepare. The meeting had not even been advertised seven days in advance as required by the rules. Our designer, Dan, alerted by an email, went along only to be wrongly refused access because supposedly his payments were in arrears when in fact they were in order. It was a bit of a disillusioning experience for a somewhat reluctant recruit to Labour. Tessa's former constituency in Dulwich, too, quickly nominated her and did not even use the second nomination.

We had a few early hopes. The Cities of London and Westminster where I had been well received and we had support in the room was the first, but as we sat in the pub after a meeting waiting for the result, the news was bad. It was a packed meeting and Lammy had organised and duly got the second nomination. Oddly, we got thrown out of the pub because we had asked for the music to be turned down. The incredibly rude barmaid had refused our request and then called the manager who showed us the door, a first for most of us. Orpington, the following day was our next big hope – a small constituency with a supportive secretary but again we hit the buffers, losing 17 – 13. Islington South, next door to my own Islington North, was another one where we had hopes but

was lost badly to Sadiq.

At our WolmarforLondon meeting we had already realised that drastic action was called for. We needed not only to have someone in the room battling for us, but also we needed to prepare the ground through phonebanking. A session was hastily arranged at my house for the following Sunday. Meanwhile there was one of those Super Thursdays with a series of nomination meetings, notably both Hackney constituencies. It was another of those anxious evenings waiting for news and following Twitter. Joe, our own Twitterer, was in the room in South but reported that it was a very crowded meeting with 80 people there and despite speeches for us, there were well organised groups for the other candidates too. He was soon reporting that we had lost.

The low point

I was sitting at home with Deborah, mobile devices of all kinds around us, and she started berating me for wasting three years of my life on this campaign – ‘we are going to get Nul points’ she shouted, having recently watched the scoring on Eurovision Song Contest. I looked at my Twitter field – ‘we’ve got one, we’ve got Lewisham Deptford!’ I had spoken there ages ago but we had not really worked it at all. However, a guy called Paul and his partner Edith who we had met briefly on our bus tour round south London had turned the mood of the meeting around. He reported that initially all the speeches were in favour of Sadiq and Tessa but when he pointed out that they already had enough nominations, the meeting agreed to consider supporting other candidates. Diane was chosen as the woman and Paul successfully supported my nomination. It was to be the turning point of the whole campaign.

There was more good news, too, as that night we got a big gun, too. Hackney North, Diane’s constituency. We had prepared the ground somewhat with Vincent Stops, a councillor who had long been instrumental in boosting cycle use and public transport in Hackney, agreeing to propose me, supported by Peter Snell, another councillor. Diane, of course, was nominated at the meeting which was attended by 100 people but thanks to Vincent and several other people proposing me, we won the second nomination easily, seeing off Tessa for the second nomination by 68 votes to 45.

Two in the bag, but the possibilities were beginning to run out. There was a lull but then a series of crucial ones. Bexleyheath & Crayford and Twickenham on the Monday, Sutton & Cheam and Kensington on the Tuesday. We had worked all these and indeed had launched our transport strategy in a bus in Bexleyheath where the excellent local candidate, Stefano Borella had been very sup-

portive. In Twickenham, a local doctor, Paul, was proposing me and again I had spoken there to a warm reception. We phone banked both over the weekend and our hopes were high – but we lost both, Bexleyheath to Gareth Thomas on a close vote but in Twickenham we were swamped by Sadiq who had clearly organised a big turn out.

Kensington became ever more vital and we hoped for Sutton & Cheam, a very small constituency where I had canvassed a couple of times and met the local candidate, Emily Brothers, who is blind and Transgender. We phonebanked both and Michael Stock was able to nominate us in Kensington and it proved an easy win. Through a visit and subsequent campaigning at the election, we had got to know key people in the constituency such as Emma Dent Coad, the former leader of the opposition and the candidate Rob Abouharb. Others key figures in the room supported the nomination and we won on the first ballot.

However, that night we lost Sutton by an agonising one second preference vote, as I tied with Sadiq 6 all on the first ballot, then lost 9 – 7 when the other four votes were counted. The problem was that we did not have a clear advocate in the room. I realised then that there were three conditions necessary to win a nomination. We needed a strong supporter in the room ready to speak and able to explain that Tessa etc had enough nominations and did not need more. We needed, too, to have a couple of key people in the constituency on our side, and we needed to phonebank. With all those ducks lined up, we had a very good chance.

Our biggest disappointment was losing Islington North, my home constituency. Obviously I had talked to lots of people and we even had our very own QC, Gordon Nardell, to speak for us in the room. Kat Fletcher, my local councillor, agreed to propose me and made an excellent speech with Gordon backing her. There were nearly 200 people in the room, and the vote for the second nomination, after Tessa had surprisingly won the first, was fairly equally divided between Sadiq, who was just in the lead, and Diane and I who tied in second place. However, because she had one more third preference vote (we tied on second ones, too), I was eliminated and most of my votes went to Sadiq. Had it been the other way around, according to my friends who were telling, I would have won as Diane's second preferences would have gone to me. That was gut-wrenching but the team was determined that we would not lose.

I then decided to pin point a couple of constituencies that looked winnable. The first obvious one was Chelsea and Fulham, which adjoined Kensington. The numbers were small, around 250, and clearly easily able to be phonebanked (I reckon one person can get through about 50 numbers in an hour as half are

out or wrongly listed, and of the rest some people are not going to the meeting, leaving just a few conversations. One heart-warming point was that virtually no one was ever rude to any of our phonebankers, helped by the fact we were all clearly amateurs who did not talk as if we were reading from a script. I looked down the list of members and saw that an old contact of mine from the housing world, Brendan Bird was a member. So was his wife and his twin brother. I rang him and he readily agreed to promote the cause. We phonebanked, found several favourable people and won easily, 14 to 6.

One more to go. Chipping Barnet was being held on the Sunday and again I was fortunate to have met a guy called Oliver on the campaign trail who was willing to put my name forward. He also told me the names of the key people in the constituency and fortunately one of them, councillor Tim Roberts, agreed to support me.

Tessa's people were ready to suggest the second vote should go to us, possibly out of kindness but also because that reduced the number of nominations Sadiq was receiving. A lot of phonebanking ensued and I even popped up there to say hello to Oliver, and it was job done – we got the nomination and we were home and dry.

And we ended up with six. Two of the team, Eleanor and Simon, happened to live in Richmond Park ward and backed by phonebanking and the support of some key people in the constituency, we won that easily too.

The nervousness was not over, though. Rumours started appearing in the Standard that there would only be three or four people on the short list. A series of frantic phone calls to our contacts in the Labour Party ensued, and clearly there was someone on the NEC or high up in London Labour who had put this about. In the event, it was a false alarm. Booted and suited, I trotted along to the interview at London Labour HQ conducted by three people from the NEC and three from London Labour. They were reasonably soft and I only struggled with the question about what campaigns I had run for the Labour Party. Most of my campaigning has been for NGOs and charities, apart from a failed stint as agent for a ward by-election in Islington some 30 years ago. An anxious couple of hours ensued, until the call came through. I had got on the short list. Nearly three years of campaigning had not been wasted.

Nevertheless, there was still a feeling that we were very much been treated as somewhat unwelcome guests by parts of the party. There were a series of niggling errors from the Labour Party office. First, they spelt my name wrong in a mail out to all members announcing the shortlist. The extra o in my name means

that a Google search does not feature my WolmarforLondon website and I had a furious row with the then London regional officer, Alan Olive, to send out a fresh email. It was only when I threatened to go to his boss, that he relented, but he did not announce that the error was being corrected, so many CLPs used the original mailing to alert their members. Then at the end of the process, they got the number of nominations wrong in their press release and this time it was a Guardian journalist who refused to make the correction even though I told him they had got it wrong. And fortunately Deborah is a great proofreader for she noticed that the draft of the 250 word statement to go with the ballot papers had a 'Titter' address. I am sure all the other candidates suffered from the same mishaps.

The hustings are now in full swing, overshadowed greatly by the leadership election. Although Tessa Jowell is seen as the front runner, there are no reliable polls and the evidence on the ground is that this is a very open contest. Certainly at the hustings, there is support for all the candidates and there is rarely a clear winner.

How has all this been paid for? We deliberately eschewed trying to get a big donation from a 'high net worth' individual and instead regularly asked for donations. We raised £3,000 through crowdsourcing to produce material in the run up to the nomination process and our regular requests for donations through Twitter which brought in another £5,000. The campaign, though, will have cost around double that which have been met from my own savings, a small price to pay for creating a completely new approach to a campaign within the Labour Party.

There's been lots of innovation and use of social media. Joe has proved a genius at working how to boost Twitter follower numbers, and increased them tenfold from 600 to around 6,000 before the ballot opened. We had a series of #askwolmar sessions on Twitter which proved popular and garnered in lots of followers and also held a Reddit AMA session. We created an app thanks to a start up company called CliqStart. We used Twitter intensively, building up a large following but found Facebook less flexible and useful. Our designer, Dan, created a ASCII tweet attracted more retweets than anything we had done

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..and even elicited an article in Prospect's online magazine about our innovative use of social media.

What we've learnt

Wolmarforlondon has shown two things. First, that it is possible to start up a campaign within the Labour Party with small resources as long as there is a clear vision and that there are people prepared to put the time in. So much is possible today that would not have been feasible even a decade ago. Twitter, Facebook and email have replaced much costlier means of communication. However, it is worth noting that the leaflets and pamphlets we have produced have been very well received and it is noticeable that people still like getting something tangible.

Secondly, that there is the appetite out there for such initiatives. During the nomination process, it became clear that we had made a mark and that all kinds of people in the party or on its fringes had heard of the campaign and liked what we were doing. Yet, throughout, we have struggled to achieve media coverage. There's been several good interviews online and some news stories, but even established leftwing writers have ignored our efforts. We don't seem to fit in the Westminster narrative even given the Corbyn phenomenon.

Yet, in a way, the campaign has won already. The ideas developed over the past three years are far more sophisticated and detailed than those offered by the other candidates and consequently they have been quick to copy the ideas whether it is the one hour bus fare, the creation of a housing delivery authority, extending the congestion charge or pedestrianising Oxford Street. The environmental emphasis of the campaign has been copied, too, and the other candidates are talking about air pollution and the effects of cars in central London in a way that they certainly never did when Labour was in power during the noughties.

Winning, though, remains the target. The campaign tactic has been to extend the franchise since Labour supporters, paying just £3, are entitled to vote. Their

numbers have already been increased by the attraction of Jeremy Corbyn on the ballot for the leadership. We have targeted cyclists since I am a lifelong cyclist and have cycled 2,500 miles in the course of this campaign. Our idea has been to print 60,000 'spoke cards' to give to cyclists and put on their parked bikes, outlining briefly the cycling policies and informing them how to sign on as supporters. One damp Sunday July night, about 30 of us put spoke cards on all 10,000 Boris bikes, earning a reprimand from Transport for London who told us to 'decease' this activity. Even if just one in 20 did so, it would be a decisive contribution in an electorate that will probably number around 70,000 and a turnout of at best 50 per cent.

You can help me win – sign up to the campaign by going to www.wolmarforlondon.co.uk and if you are not a Labour Party member but want to register as a supporter go to www.wolmarforlondon.co.uk/vote or join simply by texting Labour to 78555 – it will cost £3 but will give you a vote in the leadership and deputy leadership elections too.



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