

The Challenge For Conservatives in Britain's Inner Cities

Damian Hind's speech at Conservative Spring conference, Manchester ICC, 2006

Good morning Ladies & Gentlemen.

In 2005 it was my privilege to be our parliamentary candidate in Stretford & Urmston, a couple of miles from here. It's a wonderful part of the country, and also home to a certain football club you may have heard of, whose home is the Theatre of Dreams, Old Trafford.

These days of course Man U are mostly concerned with snapping at the ankles of Chelsea at the top of the premiership. But there's been a fierce local rivalry between them and a different blue team for much longer. They're both big clubs with a proud tradition and a long history in this city. But of late the red team have been out-shining their blue rivals.

So too in politics. But the blue team fights on. Our team has a hard core of very dedicated followers, and you just know that one day, with a run of good results, and just a bit of luck, one day we will win the league. We have the right players. And now we have the best player-manager. But it's not enough. To get people flooding back through the turnstiles, to get back on a winning streak, we need to change what happens on the pitch. We need to change the way we play the game.

Today in many parts of Manchester, and other cities, we are just not seen as relevant. It's not that people look at our policies but decide not to vote for us. We're not even in the reckoning. In the mid-70s we won more than half the vote for Manchester City Council; now, out of 96 councillors, we have just... actually, we have none at all.

That's something that, with a lot of hard work, we can change on 4th May. But however well we do in the local elections, we will still have a mountain to climb.

Such a mountain in fact that you might ask: is it worth it? Does it matter?

Yes it does matter. You can't claim to be a serious party of national government if you have hardly any representation in vast swathes of urban Britain.

And there's another reason, too. As democratic politicians, it's our duty.

Just across the way there is G-Mex. In its heyday, from the late 1870s, it was one of Europe's grandest railway stations. By the late 1970s, when I moved here as a boy, it was an ugly, crumbling NCP car park. Around it was a mix of wasteland and derelict old factories and mills. The resident population of the city centre was just a few hundred people.

Look at it now. There has been a fantastic transformation in the city centre of Manchester.

That transformation, let us not forget, was begun under a Conservative government. And, let's be honest, it has continued since. But in the transformation too many people, in the doughnut ring around the centre, and in some of the outlying estates, have been quite simply left behind.

These are the people, most of all, that need us to be back in the city. They deserve better than they get from Labour. They deserve a real choice.

Under David Cameron's leadership, we have a great opportunity to change people's perceptions of our party. But to really get back to the city, we will need to do more.

First, let's be honest. We have an image problem. Before people will vote for us, first we must show that, as well as being committed to our principles, we are also normal, nice. Luckily, we are. But a lot of people here don't know that. Leaflets are all very well, but to change the way people see us, there is no substitute for getting out there and knocking on their doors. Not just at election time. In Stretford & Urmston, the door-knocking we did a year or more before polling day was far more productive – people were pleasantly surprised to be asked their opinion, and they then talked to others about it.

Then, we need to show more that we understand and that we care. We must demonstrate we value the richness and diversity of modern Britain; and show empathy with the reality of life in the inner city. We need to talk not only about crime, drug abuse and social dysfunction – but about the root causes of these terrible problems. Throughout Britain, Conservatives give a massive amount of time to community groups, and everyone's time is very precious. Now, I think, we need to re-allocate our time a bit, and get stuck in with groups in more urban areas outside our own ward or constituency. Not because it will win us votes. It won't. But it will help us understand these communities better; and by understanding, our party will again become relevant.

The third thing I think we need to do more is in getting across how our compassionate but practical policies will make a real difference to people's lives in the cities just as in the shires.

Actually, we had some great policies in 2005 on things like affordable housing and expanding drug re-hab – but sometimes we managed to hide them pretty well.

We can also show how we make a difference by campaigning on practical things on a city-wide level as well as locally. In 2004 in Manchester, for example, we could have done much more on the cancellation of the Metrolink expansion, when the Labour government betrayed and dismayed this city – and its 25 Labour MPs.

Canvassing recently for the local elections, we were knocking on doors and saying 'Now that David Cameron is leader, are you more likely to vote Conservative?'. It was very encouraging that a number of people said yes. And of course, there were some nos too. You're never going to persuade everyone. But the scary bit was that we actually met a few people who didn't know there had been a change of leadership in the Conservative party. Not everyone reads the paper or watches the TV news.

Yes, it is a mountain we must climb. And we need patience and stamina, because it will take time. In the short term it may be frustrating.

But we have to stick with it. Because it's the right thing to do. Because the people of Manchester, the people of Liverpool, the people of Glasgow and of Newcastle; they deserve better. They need us to be back in the city.

Damian Hinds
Parliamentary candidate (Conservative) – East Hants
damian@damianhinds.info