

ONE YEAR OF THE CANDIDLIST: AN APPRAISAL

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My Candidlist project is now just over a year old. Its purpose when started was to help make Europhilia within the Conservative Party "the love that dare not speak its name"; and it has succeeded in doing this. More generally, it is one of the most important political uses of the Internet anywhere in the world so far, and is easily its most important use in England. This being so, I think it worthwhile to explain how the project began and to describe the nature and extent of its success.

An Uncertain Start

I would like to say that I set the Candidlist up all by myself, and that I always knew what I was doing. The truth is that not even the name was my own idea. In late September 1999, I was approached by a friend who had spent his adult life despairing over the Conservative Party. He and some of his Conservative friends thought it would be useful to list Conservative candidates on the Internet according to their known or probable views on European integration. Called the "Candidlist" — he was most particular about the name — this might help squeeze the remaining Europhiles out of the Party. It would make knowledge gathered over many years, but so far confined within a small circle of the informed, available to selection committees. I was asked to publish the

list because I knew a lot about the Internet and because of my known contempt for the Conservative leadership.

During the next few weeks, I assembled the first draft of the Candidlist. I relied on an old copy of the official list of approved candidates, on listings published in *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph* before the last election, and on the private knowledge of my friend and his contacts. I divided candidates into "sceptics", "Europhiles", and "don't knows" — these last being those candidates who could be trusted to follow the Party line whatever it might be, or about whom nothing was known. I wrote a General Introduction and uploaded everything to the web site on Sunday the 3rd October 1999, just as the delegates were assembling in Blackpool for the Party conference. My friend printed a few hundred leaflets and had these handed out to delegates as they went into the Winter Gardens.

The effect was greater than we had expected. Roland Watson at *The Times* published a most helpful article on Monday the 4th. This plus the leaflets made the Candidlist immediately notorious. Cable and Wireless had fitted some Internet terminals in the Winter Gardens. I am told that these were crowded for days, as delegates lined up to check how their candidate was classified. The hit counter showed a thousand visits that week.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

None of us had much idea what to do after the conference was over. I knew that the Candidlist was defective in its first draft. Candidates were missed off, or misclassified, or had their names misspelt; and so, all through the conference week, I continued improving the listings. Then Conservative activists I had never met — some of them now good friends — began sending me information about candidates. Within days, I found myself holding a mass of detail about candidates that even my friend did not necessarily have. And then candidates themselves began contacting me to explain their views or ask for reclassifications.

Enter Ian Bruce

Looking back, the next step seems obvious. At the time, I was simply watching the relevant mailbox in my Internet software fill up with e-mails that I had not expected and did not know how to use. Within a few days, however, came what in a more religious age might have been thought a sign from Heaven.

On Monday the 11th October, Ian Bruce MP sent me an e-mail. I believe he has the smallest majority in Parliament. I know for sure he was not pleased to see himself classified as a Europhile. He could have done what others on the list were doing — that is, send me a polite e-mail pointing out my mistake. I would then have apologised and made a silent correction. Instead, he sent an e-mail starting with the words:

I hope you are very rich. Would you please let me both have a note of your postal address and where you would like me to serve court papers on you.

I was surprised, both by the concentrated fury of this opening and by the near illiteracy shown elsewhere in his e-mail. I sent him an emollient reply, but his next e-mail was even more threatening: “I am getting the feeling” he said, “this may not be a civil matter for very much longer”. Mr Bruce spent the next six weeks telling various people, including those listening to *The World at One*, how he was going to sue me for libel and collect “substantial damages”.

He never did sue, and is now out of time. His whole response was ill-considered, serving only to draw more attention to the Candidlist and bring him into ridicule with everyone I spoke to. But he did secure himself a footnote in the history of Internet activism. I decided to publish our correspondence unedited on the Candidlist web site, with a link from his name. This would let his constituents know that I had made a mistake and had corrected it, and would let them decide for themselves on his fitness to represent them in Parliament. Once I had done this for Mr Bruce, I decided to do it for everyone.

The Candidlist Test

Before I could do this properly, though, I needed a better standard of classification than I had initially given. I had left this vague, assuming it would be needed only to explain classifications that rested on other grounds. But if I was to deal efficiently and fairly with several dozen e-

mailed requests for reclassification — some of these very cleverly written, and most from people I did not know — I would need some explicit criterion. I would need something that purely in itself could justify or explain a classification. After some thought, I arrived at these questions to ask of candidates:

- 1) If elected or re-elected to Parliament, would you oppose our joining the Eurozone even if joining were to be recommended by the Party leadership?
- 2) If elected or re-elected to Parliament and required to choose between accepting the supremacy of European Union law in this country and leaving the European Union, would you vote for British withdrawal?

Answering yes to both these questions would earn a “sceptic” classification. Accepting the Party line would usually earn a “don’t know” classification. Being able to do neither might earn a Europhile classification. Armed with my “Candidlist Test”, I set about classifying every candidate who wrote to me.

This let me transform the Candidlist from a bare listing to something like a directory of candidates. My questions, plus the growing volume of correspondence around them, gave it a great and often fascinating depth. Some journalists have accused me of “McCarthyism”, others of running a modern equivalent of the Spanish Inquisition. Though entertaining, these accusations are misplaced. If I were basing classifications on secret criteria, and denying any right of reply, the accusations would be true, and Candidlist would be less useful because of it. But from the first, I have encouraged candidates to write at length, and have published their letters in full. They have the chance to say whatever they like about European integration, and, if they want, about the Candidlist as well. The fuller his correspondence, the easier it becomes to see the merits or demerits of a candidate.

I know that Conservative Central Office has urged people not to pay attention to me. It might as well have asked people not to open their eyes in the morning. Selection committees all over the country were soon downloading and printing the Candidlist every week and using it to decide which candidates to shortlist and which to reject out of hand. In some cases, they were approaching me with discreet requests for information on candidates. The hit counter began to record an average of six thousand visits a month. The lavish coverage it attracted in the old media was useful, but no longer essential. In its own right, Candidlist was becoming an omnipresent fact in Conservative politics; and it was increasingly hard for candidates to ignore me. Whatever they might think of me, they have had to deal with me. And the more they did deal with me, the more useful the Candidlist became to selection committees.

Setting a Firm Standard

Reasonably firm evidence of my success can be seen in the October 2000 issue of *The European Journal*. This carries an article by Allister Heath about the Candidlist. He analyses the entries according to how I have classi-

fied candidates and according to how winnable are the seats for which they have been selected. He finds that in the 170 most winnable seats, 46 per cent of candidates are Eurosceptics, and a further 47.5 per cent can be presumed to follow the mildly sceptical Party line on Europe. Only 6.5 per cent of candidates are Europhiles.

Allister Heath concludes:

After the next general election, a new generation of radical Euro-realists will take seats in Parliament. A greater proportion of Conservative MPs than ever before will oppose the euro and seek to renegotiate many aspects of Britain's membership of the EU. In doing so, they will reflect the growing scepticism of the Conservative Party's grass roots. The Europhile minority in the Conservative party has been warned: it will be reduced to an isolated rump in the next Parliament.

Apart simply from thinking the Candidlist worth analysing, he shows my achievement in two ways. First, he implies that I have helped achieve this 46 per cent figure. And I have. In a few cases, I have done this by direct recommendation in favour of or against candidates. More often, I have done it by giving activists a useful place to go looking for the candidates they happen to want. Sometimes, I have so disheartened non-sceptical candidates merely by listing them, that they have become less active in looking for seats. I will not exaggerate this side of my achievement. The revolution that Allister Heath describes would have happened whether or not I started the Candidlist. But I have done something to help it along.

Second, and more important, however, I have introduced clarity into the Conservative debate on Europe. Mr Heath worked hard on his analysis, but it would have been much harder if he had not been able to know with fair certainty what a candidate meant in calling himself a Eurosceptic. What makes his 46 per cent figure so newsworthy is that it is composed of people who have answered yes to both of my questions. It would have been virtually worthless if composed of people who called themselves sceptic on whatever definition they pleased to adopt.

This is probably why the Conservative leadership so dislikes me. If I had just gone about in the past year making life hard for obvious Europhiles and supporting those candidates broadly described as sceptics, I might at best have been an annoyance. As a maker and enforcer of definitions, I have made immense trouble for the leadership. I have shown beyond reasonable doubt that 46 per cent of Party candidates most likely to win seats go considerably beyond the Party line on Europe; and I am helping to pressure the leadership into moving towards a more sceptical line than it wants. This is one of the reasons why *The Daily Telegraph*, alone among the broadsheet newspapers, has consistently refused to publish news stories about the Candidlist — even when this refusal has opened its journalists to accusations of unprofessional conduct. It is certainly the reason why Central Office went to extreme lengths earlier this year to have a

BBC *Panorama* documentary about me first delayed and then cancelled.

But the Conservative Party is not my only target. I have what I think a commendable dislike of exaggerating what I have achieved. I have no such reluctance to say what my ambitions are. I want to use the Candidlist to help bring English politics back under democratic control.

Democratic Accountability

It is currently impossible to get a straight answer from either of the two main parties about its intentions with regard to Europe. It is not easy, I grant, to get anything definite from them with regard to any other issue. But Europe is the big issue. Our whole future depends on how it is settled. And both parties have taken cover behind a cloud of ambiguities. Anyone who has studied the official pronouncements on Europe made during the past three years by the Conservative and Labour parties will find nothing definite about their intentions. They are divided by their rhetoric, but united in their unwillingness to tell us what they plan to do. The Tories have their “in-not-ruled-by” formula, Labour its five “economic tests”. These seem and, of course, are designed to imply intentions without stating any. If we want to know more, we have to turn to a mass of unattributed and contradictory explanations released via the media. I believe that Mr Hague has reserved the freedom to take us into the Euro in the Parliament after next, and that Mr Blair has sort of promised not to take us in during the next Parliament. But I might be wrong. Your guess is as good as mine.

This is a disgrace. I know there are pressures on both party leaders not to state any clear intentions. Each is worried about a party split, or a loss of votes, or the anger of the Europhile special interests and as Europhilia is almost universal within the media, very big business, and most of the professions, this is something to worry about. But it is an excuse rather than a justification to appeal to such worries. If the party leaders cannot lead on the issue of Europe, they should make way for others who can. We live in a democracy where two parties compete for supremacy in the House of Commons. If this competition is to have any meaning, the parties have a duty to explain to the people what they intend to do in office. They cannot be required to make fully detailed and binding commitments. No politician can sensibly promise that, if elected, he will — regardless of circumstances — cut income tax by five pence or double old age pensions, or whatever. But he should clearly explain what he wants to do and how to do it, and also try to sketch out some of the circumstances in which he might decide not to do it after all. That gives the people a choice and makes voting a meaningful activity. Today, democracy as we have known it in this country since the 1830s has been suspended. On the most important issue of our day, we do not know what the two main parties really intend. We are left with a choice between two glossy personalities and between their differing rhetorical nuances.

I want Candidlist to help disperse the cloud of ambiguity on Europe. This cannot be done by putting direct pressure on the party leaders. They cannot be approached by ordinary people, and in any event have no wish to change a system that is to their personal advantage. But local parties are open to pressure.

Last August, I extended the Candidlist to the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties. I added further lists of names to the web site, and sent nearly 700 letters to every person on the Labour Party's list of approved candidates. In each letter, I asked the Candidlist questions and enclosed a stamped and addressed envelope for ease of reply. The response was so poor that I suspect candidates were ordered not to reply. But for this extension to work, it is not necessary that candidates should reply, only that they should have been contacted and given the chance to reply. I do not hope to have the same effect on the selection of Labour candidates as I have had on Conservative. Most candidates have been selected, and the selection process is far less democratic than in the Conservative Party. But I am now looking forward to the next general election.

There seem to be several million people in this country who are prepared to vote for Eurosceptic candidates regardless of party. I am preparing the Candidlist to serve these people. When the election comes, they will be able to know who the most sceptical candidate is in each constituency. If this is the Conservative candidate, they will vote Conservative, and if Labour, they will vote Labour. If neither, they will vote for someone else. Though they may have been forbidden to, I believe that Eurosceptical Labour candidates will find it in their interest to contact me, so they can be properly classified. They have started already to do so, but I expect the current trickle to widen to a flood in the next six months.

This will have one of two results. It may increase the chances that Eurosceptical candidates of both parties will be elected. If so, there will be a strong crossbench bloc of Eurosceptics. The immediate effect will be to confuse party politics, though in the longer term, it will help realign the parties so that they really are divided by Europe. Or it may frighten those Conservative associations that have already selected non-sceptical candidates. In several cases already, I have been approached by Conservatives worried that their candidate is facing a more Eurosceptical Labour candidate. As well as selected, candidates can also be deselected and replaced. Allister Heath's 46 per cent is not an unalterable fact of life. There will be an election next May at the earliest, and perhaps next October. That leaves plenty of time for unhappy activists to set to work on finding better candidates. The effect of this really will be the political cleansing of the Tory Party and the restoration of party politics.

An Independent Resource

I must emphasise here that if I incline at all to the Conservative Party, it is only on condition that it remodels itself as the party of national independence — and prefer-

ably with a strong libertarian bias to social as well as to economic issues. Otherwise, I am indifferent to its prospects at the next election. The Candidlist does not serve to advance the interests of any political party on that party's own terms. It is an independent initiative.

Though my friend is still supporting me with information and occasional advice, his Conservative friends ran away from me last February. In issue 39 of *Free Life Commentary*, I explained that the election of a Conservative Government led by William Hague might not be the surest way to get out of the European Union. Indeed, I said that his winning the next election might be a disaster, bearing in mind how he would probably sell out to the Europhile interests once in office, and how the patriotic movement would then probably fall apart into Tory loyalists and die hards. I had my views quoted at length in another of Mr Watson's articles for *The Times*. This caused an explosion of outrage and terror among the Conservative friends. One of them had apparently been going about boasting that he was the "grey eminence" behind the Candidlist, and even that I was merely an instrument of his will. I do not know what personal embarrassment the *Times* article caused him. But within hours of its publication, he was screaming orders down the telephone to my friend that the project should be aborted.

A supposedly free market Conservative should not need telling that anyone who wants to call the tune should at least consider paying the piper. The Candidlist continued, and has gained credibility through its evident independence of any control from outside.

I do not know if I can succeed in any of my wider ambitions. Even so, that I can state them without sounding completely mad is evidence of my success so far. The Candidlist is a one man operation. It exists only as a web page. Excepting the mailshot of last August to the Labour candidates — for which I raised money by a public appeal — its direct financial cost has been just over 250. It is astonishing what can be achieved via the Internet. I do not think even millions of pounds spent via the old media could have approached the effect that the Candidlist has had. But a well-maintained web page never goes out of print, or out of date, and is never far out of reach to anyone who wants to inspect it. These facts have allowed me to help significantly in one peaceful revolution and seriously to contemplate another.

I have no doubt that someone else will excel my achievement on the Internet. After all, I began the Candidlist without any planning and made it succeed by accident. There are many more intelligent and better focussed people in this world than I; and if the Candidlist is still seen after another year as the ultimate in British Internet activism, I shall be surprised and even disappointed. But I think I can justly be proud that I have been the first in this country and one of the first in the world to use the Internet to something like its full political potential.