

A billboard, a bill and bucking a charter

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During the first week of February, Chris Huhne, Liberal Democrat MP for Eastleigh in Hampshire, vacated his parliamentary seat after unexpectedly pleading guilty to a driving offense. Within hours, a by-election was called for February 28, just three weeks down the road. As Eastleigh had been a marginal seat fought between the Lib Dems and Tories in the 2010 ballot, we decided to use the by-election to test drive our still-developing strategy for targeting marginal seats in 2015, the year of the next general election. The challenge for us was the killer timescale.

Frantic exchanges followed between the directors of ICBP and we sought the input of our media relations advisors (Champollion). By February 12, we had decided to proceed on two fronts: billboard and newspaper advertising in the constituency. We had only 72 hours in which to create artwork and get it to the billboard production company – busy hours during which we came up with, amended and finally agreed on the message, image and layout that could provide the greatest impact. Then followed a week of logistical planning determining the best available high-traffic location, getting police and city approval for staging a media event at a busy roundabout, seeking Advertising Standards Agency clearance for the billboard artwork, and drumming up media interest. We also submitted a halfpage ad to the *Southern Daily Echo* for publication the day prior to polling day.

On February 25, the billboard was ceremonially unveiled in Eastleigh at the bustling 'Spitfire Roundabout' close to Southampton International Airport and railway station. Brian Leggett, ICBP's UK-based director, did the honours and was greatly in demand by journalists and photographers keen to get pictures and quotes (one way or another, during all the flurry of the

preceding week our Champollion team had found time to give Brian some training in press relations in preparation for the event).

The subsequent media coverage of our provocative billboard was excellent, garnering us precious headlines in Britain. It very quickly captured the attention of the Lib Dems, who, clearly upset by our message, contacted us within 24 hours to register a 'technical' complaint: the billboard did not include ICBP's address – that's when we learned that the Advertising Standards Agency, when asked to review the artwork, had overlooked the fact that an ad like ours needed to include our organization's address. We agreed to take down the billboard, removing it the day before polling day.

The results of the by-election proved interesting, with the Lib Dems, though managing to hold on to the seat, slipping from having won about half of the vote in 2010 to less than one-third in 2013 and their majority dropping by almost 55 percent. The Tories ceded second place to the UK Independence Party.

It was a most productive exercise in the campaign for pension parity. Besides achieving hard-to-come-by headlines, we gained practical experience we can apply in the lead-up to the general election and we have shown Britain's political parties that we will not hesitate to hold them to account in the court of public opinion.

