

General Election Guide

April 2005

If you are passionate about Free Tibet Campaign's mission, but do not know what the main political parties are saying about it, or you enjoy taking action and lobbying your MP, then this guide is for you.

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Take action!
3. Identifying election candidates
4. Dos and Don'ts for campaigning in an election period
5. Asking your candidates questions
6. Suggested questions
7. Where can you ask your questions?
8. Organising your own hustings
9. Six steps to making your hustings a success
10. After the election



1. Introduction

The General Election, to be held on 5 May 2005, provides Free Tibet Campaign supporters with an excellent opportunity to raise awareness of Tibet amongst politicians. We need to ensure political parties and local candidates learn of our ongoing campaign to free Tibet - even those not elected on this occasion may well become MPs in the future.

This is an opportunity to highlight our aims; that a UK Government of any political persuasion will promote an unequivocal policy for the Tibetans' right to determine their own future, to end China's occupation of Tibet and ensure the Tibetans' fundamental human rights are respected. In the run-up to the General Election, candidates and political parties will be eager to show that they are listening to voters; i.e. listening to you! Thus, you can establish a relationship and dialogue on the issue of Tibet with your future MP.

2. Take action!

Action can be undertaken individually or, if you know other Tibet supporters in your area or have a local group, you can get together to plan and divide the work to lobby as many candidates in your constituency as you have time for. If you are working on your own, concentrate on the candidate most likely to be elected (if there is a clear favourite) and, if you have time, his/her nearest rival. A sympathetic response from a rival candidate may persuade your likely future Member of Parliament to reconsider his or her views!

3. Identifying election candidates

Parliament has now been dissolved. During the election period, your current MP loses his or her status and becomes equal to all the other candidates standing for election. To find out who your local candidates are, try contacting your local parties' branch offices or the parties' websites. The websites and phone numbers of the three main parties are listed below. BBC online has links to all the parties:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/basics/default.stm

The Conservative Party:	www.conservatives.com	tel. 020 7222 9000
The Labour Party:	www.labour.org.uk	tel. 08705 900 200
The Liberal Democrat Party:	www.libdems.org.uk	tel. 020 7222 7999

Another good strategy is to use a search engine (such as Google) and type "[name of your constituency]" and "parliamentary candidates". Your local authority election office should also be able to provide a list of candidates. To find the name and contact details for your local authority, look in the telephone directory or visit www.upmystreet.co.uk (enter your postcode where directed and click 'Go', then click on 'Contacting your council' from the list on the left of the page).

4. Dos and Don'ts for campaigning in an election period

As a campaigner, you need to be aware of the rules about campaigning during an election period. Free Tibet Campaign is a non-party political organisation, so it is important to distinguish between what you are doing in public forums as a supporter of Free Tibet Campaign, and what you are doing in private forums, which is entirely your own business! The key things to remember are:

Don't give the impression of supporting or disparaging one particular candidate or political party, when you are acting as a supporter of Free Tibet Campaign, as this could be interpreted as 'leading the reader' into voting for one party over another.

Don't undertake public campaigning with a single candidate (e.g. public meetings with only one candidate invited, etc) as a supporter of Free Tibet Campaign.

Do write to candidates as an individual constituent, not as a member of Free Tibet Campaign (candidates are more concerned about individuals rather than lobby organisations prior to an election).

After the election, **do** use successful candidates' statements, made before the election, to hold them to account!

5. Asking your candidates questions

An election is an important opportunity to ask your local candidates what their party's policies are on Tibet and China's occupation and a range of related issues. The following section has a series of suggested questions you could ask.

6. Suggested questions

- What are your party's policies on Tibet's future political status?
Do you support an end to China's occupation in Tibet, which currently leads to repression of fundamental freedoms and cultural, religious and ethnic rights?
What action would your party take that differs from that of the present government in order to secure an end to the occupation?
- If elected/re-elected, would you press the UK Government to take an unequivocal position on Tibet's status, as well as its human rights policies vis-a-vis China?
Would you expect the UK Government to promote such a policy within Inter-Governmental Organisations such as the EU, the UN Security Council and the UN Commission on Human Rights?
What are your party's policies on this?
- If elected/re-elected, would you demand that the UK Government lobbies the EU to maintain the arms embargo on China?
What are your party's policies on this?
- What avenues should the UK Government be pursuing through its trade relationship with China to ensure that progress on human rights and Tibet is made?
- If elected/re-elected, will you join the All Party Parliamentary Group for Tibet, and may Free Tibet Campaign send you regular updates about the campaign?

7. Where can you ask your questions?

When candidates come to your door

Candidates may come knocking on your door, drumming up support from constituents. You might like to give them one of your back issues of *Free Tibet* or a postcard of Tibet/the Dalai Lama, if you have one. Candidates should be able to answer your questions themselves. If your visitor is someone canvassing on behalf of a candidate, it is still worth asking your questions. They may not be able to answer, but they can feed it back to the candidate who should get back to you with an answer.

On radio phone-ins

Local and national radio stations often hold phone-ins around election time. If they ask for questions from the audience, why not give them a ring?

In a letter

Write to your candidates and ask what their policies are on Tibet. If you are not happy with their answer, write back to them.

In a letter to the local press

Write to your local paper to put across the Free Tibet Campaign point of view.

Arranging individual meetings

You may prefer to arrange a one to one meeting when the outcome of the election is known. This is an important opportunity to establish a relationship with your elected MP, so prepare your questions well and think about taking something that might trigger their interest, such as a magazine, book or postcard.

At local hustings

A hustings is a public meeting where election candidates address constituents. It is a chance for you to quiz candidates on their views and find out what actions they would take if elected as your MP. Free Tibet Campaign encourages you to attend local hustings and ask candidates questions on the issue of Tibet, or organise local hustings yourself and invite candidates to attend.

Hustings are often held in churches, community centres and other public places. Check your library, local paper or church notice board for information about hustings taking place locally.

8. Organising your own hustings

This requires a lot of work, but is something you might consider if you have a local group, or you can team up with other organisations or groups, such as Amnesty International local groups. Legally, you do not have to invite all the candidates in your area to your hustings. However, it is considered good practice to invite all candidates where possible.

More importantly, you need to be aware that if you choose to only invite some candidates, election law considers that you have made a 'contribution' to their electoral campaign. (Don't worry; the obligation would be on the candidates themselves to declare this as an election expense. All you need to know is that you must tell the candidates if you have invited them on a selective basis. This would give them the choice whether to incur the expense or not. If you go down this route, expect to provide candidates with an estimate of the cost of the hustings - this could include venue hire, poster and flyer advertisements, tea and coffee, etc.)

9. Six steps to making your hustings a success

- Invite the candidates to your hustings as early as possible, as they all have extremely busy diaries during the election period.
- Try to send them briefing materials about the issues the hustings will address (contact Free Tibet Campaign if you require materials).
- Arrange for the meeting to be chaired by someone who is seen as fair and impartial. They need to be very firm, to control both the length of time that candidates speak for and ensuring that constituents stick to asking questions, not making statements.

- Be clear with the candidates about how long they will be expected to speak for, how long the question and answer period will be and what time the meeting will finish.
- Remember to ensure someone will meet and greet the participants, that water is provided for the speakers, that there is PA system if the hall is large and many people are expected to attend, and that a follow-up thank you letter is sent to the speakers.
- Advertise widely to get as many people along as possible, perhaps through posters or flyers in public places, or through local newsletters.

10. After the election

Stay in touch

Following the General Election stay in touch with your elected MP. You may want to send him/her a congratulatory note and remind them to help promote and safeguard Tibetan rights. Ask them if they are interested in joining the All Party Parliamentary Group for Tibet, and if they are interested in receiving regular updates from Free Tibet Campaign. (Please let us know if they are interested.) Then contact your elected MP when you have major concerns about Tibet.

One to one meeting

Arrange a one to one meeting with your elected MP. This is an important opportunity to establish a relationship, so prepare your questions well and think about taking something that might trigger their interest, such as a magazine, book or postcard.

Send us significant statements

Please send relevant responses of your elected candidate, plus details of significantly sympathetic responses - if any - from non-elected candidates, to Free Tibet Campaign. You can email responses to campaigns@freetibet.org or write to Free Tibet Campaign, 28 Charles Square, London N1 6HT.

Hold them to account

Keep a copy of the successful candidate's statements, made before the election, so that you can hold them to account in the future.

You can keep abreast of major issues and obtain advice on lobbying your MP through *Free Tibet*, the quarterly magazine of Free Tibet Campaign, and more regularly through the Urgent Campaign Scheme. To join Free Tibet Campaign and/or the Urgent Campaign Scheme go the relevant web page below, email mail@freetibet.org or call 020 7324 4605.

Join Free Tibet Campaign

www.freetibet.org/membership/join.html

Join the Urgent Campaign Scheme

www.freetibet.org/campaigns/urgent.html

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