



409

MAY
2016

LONDON'S NEW MAYOR CARRIES A MESSAGE OF TOLERANCE

Francis Ghilès, Associate Senior Researcher, CIDOB

The election of Sadiq Khan to be the first Muslim mayor of London is a resounding victory for the Labour Party and a humiliation for the Prime Minister David Cameron whose candidate Zac Goldsmith's campaign, focused on attempts to link Mr Khan to Islamist extremists, utterly failed. The smear campaign was strongly denounced by senior Conservatives and the candidate's own sister whose first husband was Pakistani. At a time of growing fear of terrorism, demonization of Islam by many politicians and media and chaos in the Middle East, the electorate of London delivered a strong message of tolerance. Nor does Mr Khan's election brings much comfort to the leader of the Labour Party Jeremy Corbyn particularly over the latter's handling of allegations of anti-Semitism within Labour ranks.

During the eight years he has been at City Hall the outgoing mayor of London, Boris Johnson has presided over an extraordinary boom that has, arguably, seen London develop from one of the most important cities in Europe to one of the most important cities in the world. A building boom had added many new skyscrapers to the skyline and transport infrastructure has improved remarkably – not least the building of the new west east Cross rail line. Security is now good, despite terrorist threats. The huge melting pot that London has become means that over one third of its residents were born outside Britain. As housing prices have soared however, affordable housing has become ever scarcer, a major blot on the mayor's record. Another enduring legacy of the Johnson years will be cycling, which the outgoing mayor has championed – a substantial network of cycle superhighways has caused uproar from motorists but ensures that bikes have started to outnumber cars on some central London roads in the morning rush hour.

London's mayoral race may well have fallen short in many way – critics argue that the Labour party's Sadiq Khan and the Conservative party's Zac Goldsmith both lack a big political idea or a definitive achievement in their career. Mr Goldsmith is the scion of vast wealth, his late father Sir James Goldsmith, an exuberant swash-buckling capitalist whose private life style was as exuberant as his deals were exotic. Mr Khan rose from the immigrant working class to a legal career and a seat in parliament. The conservative candidate is a "green" politician and member of parliament from the very residential borough of Richmond upon Thames, one of London more beautiful areas. The Labour candidate hails from the East End, the

poorer part of London which is fast being gentrified, a process speeded up by the huge improvement in infrastructure in the now disused Docklands which accompanied the 2012 Olympic Games. The latter is pro-Europe, the former in favour of Brexit.

London needs a third runway at Heathrow airport but both candidates are opposed to it. The housing shortage desperately demands some construction on the greenbelt surrounding the city but both candidates oppose openness, markets and change, the very characteristics which have attracted so many foreigners to London in recent years and which are grist to any modern city. There is however a difference between the two candidates campaigns. Mr Khan's might have been lightweight but Mr Goldsmith's displayed a darker underbelly as his minders higher up in the Conservative party insistently linked his opponent with Islamist radicals. The Labour lead in the polls was further boosted by the impression Mr Goldsmith gave that he did not really want the job – hardly the right background music when campaigning across a vibrant city, bursting with artistic, economic and building activity. The contrast with Mr Khan who backslaps relentlessly was very striking.

Customised leaflets addressed to Hindu, Sikh and Tamil voters mentioned sensitive subjects such as Narendra Modi, India's nationalist prime minister, a 1984 battle over a Sikh temple in India that left hundreds dead and the Sri Lankan civil war. Other Conservative party leaflets claim Mr Khan would impose a wealth tax on family jewellery, apparently based on the assumption that Indian families hold vast amounts of jewellery. Such leaflets hark back to a kind of colonial era of dividing the Asian community, namely Hindus and Muslims which hardly sits comfortably with attitudes in London in 2016.

The "row" over anti-Semitism kicked up by the right wing press and the prime minister's adviser Lynton Crosby who is a past master in negative campaigning and smear did little to cut Sadiq Khan's 20 lead. The new mayor had himself attacked comments by Ken Livingstone, the former Labour London mayor, that Zionism enjoyed Adolf Hitler's support as "disgusting". He insisted throughout his campaign that his focus would be on bringing communities together and promoting tolerance – something he has demonstrated by voting for gay marriage – he earned a fatwa threatening to kill him for that vote.

By their vote, Londoners have shown that a candidate's religion is not what determines their vote – the irony of Zac Goldsmith who is Jewish pointing repeatedly to his opponent's Muslim faith was not lost on the electorate. At one point Mr Khan tweeted to him **Hey @ZacGoldsmith. There is no need to keep pointing at me & shouting 'he's a Muslim'. I put it on my own leaflets.** He does not drink and when he joined the Privy Council, which advises the Queen, he asked to be sworn in using copy of the Koran rather than a Bible. When his copy of the Koran was handed back to him by a Buckingham Palace official after the ceremony, he suggested the palace might keep it for the next occasion when it was needed. A nice touch of British humour which augur's well for the future of London.