Disaggregating the electoral roll: Electioneering and the politics of self knowledge

ALEXANDER THOMAS T. SMITH

Following their 'wipe-out' at the 1997 General Election, Scottish Conservatives worked from the assumption that they had endured their own 'crisis' in representation. The material consequences of this 'crisis' entailed losses of financial and other resources, knowledge and political legitimacy. This article describes how some Conservative activists addressed this 'crisis' in the period leading to the 2003 local Government and Scottish Parliament elections. Their efforts to render the secret ballot transparent in order to discern the voting intentions of potential supporters both demonstrated and reflected their efforts to manage this crisis. Despite legal constraints, they constructed an imaginary of thousands of local voters' preferences through a variety of discursive instruments, which allowed Party activists to disaggregate the electoral roll in order to apprehend a new whole – the Conservative electoral base. This, in turn, enabled a Conservative politics of self-knowledge, as a form of empowerment for these activists.

❖ Key words activism, documents, knowledge, secret ballot, Scotland/
UK

Introduction

In this article, I explore a set of documents as technologies available to Party activists attempting to forecast the political allegiances of voters in an election by secret ballot. I focus on Conservative activists in Dumfries and Galloway, who operate at the geographical and institutional periphery of Scotland following the 1997 General Election when the Conservative Party was spectacularly defeated. In their subsequent campaign for local Government and Scottish Parliament elections held on 1 May 2003, these activists faced the challenge of building up a detailed database of potential supporters. These

supporters could then be ‘targeted’ for mobilisation on Polling Day. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Scotland between September 2001 and June 2003, I examine how these Party activists addressed this challenge through their interactions with a range of discursive materials. Their engagement with documents in the aftermath of catastrophic failure constitutes an ‘ethnographic window’¹ through which to analyse how the instrumental possibilities of such discursive artefacts are enacted in practice and contributed to the making of a local Conservative politics of self-knowledge.

Grounded in the day-to-day micro-practices constitutive of electioneering, this article describes a dossier of documents (cf. Hetherington, this issue) – the survey, the canvas return and the target letter – that the local Conservative Party’s Core Campaign Team deployed in their attempts to locate and target their supporters. This team met every Monday morning during the four months leading up to Polling Day and was responsible for formulating campaign strategy and coordinating the Party’s activists and efforts across the region. I had unprecedented access to their meetings, which were held at 8.30am in the Conservative Party office in Castle Street, Dumfries. Scotland’s (then) only Conservative MP Peter Duncan chaired the team, which also included two locally based Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) – Alex Fergusson and David Mundell – Conservative Council Leader Allan Wright and three Party professionals². This group developed plans to canvas and survey local voters. Their efforts to do so reminded me of an argument Bertrand et al. articulate in the introduction to their recent volume on ‘cultures of voting’ (2007) in which they resist equating the secret ballot with the free expression of individual political choice. However, while they urge scholars to disaggregate the technology of the secret ballot to understand how ‘several different, sometimes separable and even contradictory traits ... can be reassembled in variable socio-historical circumstances’ (Bertrand et al. 2007:2-3), members of the Core Campaign Team sought to disaggregate the electoral roll³ to identify the political allegiances of thousands of local voters. These senior Conservatives hoped to render the electoral register transparent⁴, breaking up one whole – the Parliamentary constituency – to apprehend and then mobilise at least one of its component parts – the Conservative electoral base⁵. As I will demonstrate, however, the knowledge that senior Conservatives generated about their base was unstable; the new, Conservative whole threatened to disintegrate into smaller, less useful parts if Party strategists failed to take preventative action.

The documents described in this article were deployed within various legal constraints as set down primarily in the Representation of the People Act 1945 [1983] and the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. This legislation restricts campaign finance and the use of Parliamentary resources in elections. However, the legislation also seeks to protect the integrity of the secret ballot as both a universal and individual political act. I argue that the documents considered here might therefore be prosthetic in function, extending the Conservative campaign within (and potentially

around) this legal framework while feeding a Conservative politics of self-knowledge⁶. In the process, they provided a means for senior Conservatives to attempt to rebuild politically towards electoral recovery. Through their engagement with documents Conservative activists built a sense of prospective momentum in their knowledge making⁷, an experience that was particularly empowering and reassuring for a political Party working from the margins of local and Scottish politics.

Following Alfred Gell (1992), I therefore approach documents as technologies capable of enchanting those who work with them. My argument complements that of Abigail Sellen and Richard Harper (2002), who have explored how the material properties of paper afford uses to documents that help render them vital to office life⁸. In my analysis, I draw particularly on Jeanette Edwards (1993, 2000), Hirokazu Miyazaki (2003, 2004), Annelise Riles (2000, 2004, 2006) and Marilyn Strathern (1991, 1992, 1995) in exploring how Conservative activists interacted with documents. I start with an overview of the local Conservative Party in Dumfries and Galloway to convey a sense of the predicament they faced at the time I commenced my fieldwork in September 2001.

A Conservative Free Scotland

A large, rural local Authority in southwest Scotland, Dumfries and Galloway encompasses approximately 148,000 residents and has long been considered a Conservative stronghold North of the English border. The seat was lost to the Labour Party at the 1997 General Election after Sir (then Lord) Hector Monro, who had represented the Dumfries constituency since 1964, retired. In neighbouring Galloway and Upper Nithsdale, the Scottish National Party (SNP) defeated the incumbent Conservative MP. Across Scotland, the Conservative Party failed to win a single Parliamentary constituency⁹.

According to local Conservatives, this election was followed by ‘dark days’, a time during which the Party’s local infrastructure disintegrated and record keeping fell into disarray. No one could tell me for certain how many people were paid-up Party members in either constituency or whether many of these individuals could be called upon to assist with campaigns and other Party activities. Local office-bearer and staff’s estimates of Conservative Party membership ranged between 400-700 in the Dumfries constituency and 700-900 for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale¹⁰. Beyond each Association’s respective Executive and Management Committees, the majority of branches – roughly twenty in each constituency – had ceased to organise regular activities. The Party’s cash flow was of much concern to Party strategists, as was the high level of staff turnover in the Associations’ offices in Dumfries and Castle Douglas¹¹. Only the Dumfries Conservative Ladies Lunch Club kept going during these traumatic times¹².

In a referendum on devolution held later that same year, Dumfries and Galloway was one of only two local Authorities to narrowly reject a second question to give the new Scottish Parliament tax-varying powers¹³. The idea

that local electors might share with the Scottish Conservatives their scepticism of devolution gave the latter cause to hope for electoral recovery. Yet, in elections held before the new Parliament opened on 1 July 1999, Conservatives failed to regain either the Dumfries constituency or Galloway and Upper Nithsdale¹⁴. The two unsuccessful Conservative candidates for those seats – David Mundell and Alex Fergusson respectively¹⁵ – were subsequently elected via Proportional Representation to the Scottish Parliament through the South of Scotland Regional List¹⁶. But in local elections also held that year, Conservative representation quadrupled from two to eight Councillors¹⁷ and they later added a ninth to their tally in an unexpected by-election win in the Solway Border Ward. At the 2001 General Election, local Conservatives then gained a seat at Westminster when Peter Duncan won Galloway and Upper Nithsdale by just 74 votes to become Scotland's only Conservative MP¹⁸.

This partial electoral success to some extent helped local Conservatives to deal with their own 'crisis' in representation¹⁹. However, they found that they were unable to rely on much assistance from Scottish Conservative Central Office (SCCO) in Edinburgh, which now oversaw a fragmented political Party. Conservatives in southwest Scotland thus resorted to improvising in their political activism²⁰ and turned to bureaucracy and documents to address this 'crisis'²¹. As instruments of knowledge creation and modernity, documents have grown as an object of ethnographic interest in recent years (e.g. Harper 1998, Riles 2006). For Conservative activists, however, the documents I discuss in this article constituted 'new' and 'vital' additions to their discursive armoury. Some of these documents – namely, surveys and canvas returns – were used to generate data for Blue Chip, a database of local voters drawn from the electoral register. As I will argue, their engagement with such discursive tools served to invest Conservative efforts with prospective momentum and a reassuring sense of getting organised. Below, I first discuss the Local Opinion Survey, which was central to their efforts to quickly and efficiently determine the voting intentions of local people across the region.

Disaggregating the electoral roll

Their use of this survey in generating knowledge about the Conservative electoral base foregrounds it as a prosthetic means by which senior Conservatives attempted to reach 'out' to their supporters. This construction of a body of Conservative (self) knowledge also rendered the Conservative electoral base external to the Party. Through the Local Opinion Survey, however, Conservative strategists anticipated such a fledgling Conservative whole. I will later describe how senior Conservatives imagined this whole as somehow unstable, the threat of its disintegration ever present. Before they could apprehend the Conservative electoral base as a whole, however, local Conservatives had to first extend the reach of their claim to representativeness²², as I now discuss.

As they began preparations for the 2003 local Government and Scottish Parliament elections, key Conservative strategists sought to improve the reliability of canvas data the Party had collected from the mid-1990s onwards. Files of such information from the 1992 General Election, which the Conservative Party had won, could not be found and were, thus, not available to activists. One Conservative strategist told me he doubted the hypothetical value of this data given that it would have been a decade out of date. To build up a new database of canvassed voters, several surveys had already been distributed throughout the region by January 2003 while several more were planned for the months leading up to Polling Day. The Local Opinion Survey I describe here was organised by David Mundell MSP, the Scottish Conservative candidate for the Dumfries constituency, which he was contesting for the second time. The survey was scheduled for delivery via Royal Mail in February 2003. It sought the views of local householders on a series of generic issues including crime, proposals to close rural schools and priorities on roads maintenance. A Freepost envelope was enclosed with the survey which encouraged potential respondents to return the survey to the Conservative Party's Castle Street office in Dumfries without incurring any costs for postage. Senior Conservatives anticipated that these surveys would be returned during March-April 2003, giving them an opportunity to input data to Blue Chip. In practice, this proved a time-consuming and labour-intensive exercise for those Conservative activists involved.

I now consider the physical form of the Local Opinion Survey, which bore similarities to other discursive exercises, such as a Government census, polling or quantitative research in the social sciences. Like some of these other artefacts²³, the survey enabled explicit instrumental possibilities when considered together with the covering letter on the back of which it was printed. The letter was authored by Mr Mundell and was addressed personally to a member of a local household. The identities of those who chose to respond to the survey could easily be discerned by turning it over to checking the name of the addressee in the top left-hand corner of the letter. Given that two of the survey questions concerned the former and current voting intentions of the respondent, this was actually the point of the survey: it was explicitly designed to identify Conservative voters and other potential supporters. Understood as a discursive instrument, the Local Opinion Survey could, in fact, be reduced to these two questions alone. Senior Conservative strategists thus often viewed the survey purely in these terms; all other information it generated was considered excess.

The covering letter from Mr Mundell was primed for a response from sympathetic readers. His letter was sub-titled '2003 Scottish Parliament and Council Elections' and outlined a series of issues on which he claimed his Conservative colleagues in the Scottish Parliament had been campaigning for local people. The letter noted:

'From our previous surveys we know many people are concerned about the priorities of the new Scottish Parliament. Local people are

particularly concerned about the Central Belt bias of the Parliament and the lack of attention it pays to rural areas like Dumfries and Galloway. Conservatives in the Scottish Parliament have consistently spoken out on important local issues such as jobs, the future of Chapelcross [nuclear power station], the state of local roads, the difficulty in recruiting medical staff and dentists to the area, farming after Foot and Mouth Disease, and [the] future of services in rural areas more generally. However, we would appreciate hearing your views on the issues that you believe are the most important to you and your family.'

Mr Mundell's listing of the 'issues' highlighted during previous contact with 'local people' enables him to give voice to a set of interests thought to make up a (coveted) whole: the Parliamentary constituency. This constitutes a claim to representative-ness, suggesting that the act of listening²⁴ to 'local opinion' empowers Mr Mundell's claim to knowledge about the local area and its people. However, foregrounding a Conservative paper trail generated through previous surveys is a further reminder of the 'responsiveness' of the aspiring representative. Mr Mundell thus inverts his claim to representative-ness, reminding local people of their past contact with local Conservatives before asking them (again) for their views. Such a claim serves to invite local people to extend a proprietary claim to Mr Mundell as 'our' representative (cf. Smith 2006, Edwards and Strathern 1999:149-150). Senior Conservatives who assumed that Conservative voters would already identify with Mr Mundell hoped this letter would be a further incentive for their support. The letter sought to connect the Conservative candidate with his potential supporters 'out there.'

The Local Opinion Survey and its covering letter therefore extend the reach of the local Party's campaign. However, the claim local Conservatives make to representative-ness could only be asserted partially²⁵, as becomes apparent in the next paragraph:

'Our feedback is that local people are also very disappointed by the performance of the current Council Administration. The Conservative Group is the Opposition on this Council and is well placed to lead the Council after this year's elections. The Conservative Group's aim is to deliver quality services, while keeping Council tax under control. Instead the Rainbow Alliance of Labour, SNP, Liberal Democrats and Independents that control the current Council Administration are getting involved in the disastrous projects such as the nonsensical school closure programme. Again your thoughts on the Council issues most important to you would be greatly appreciated.'

This paragraph reveals several anxieties that senior Conservatives shared. In particular, members of the Core Campaign Team considered it vital to distance Conservative representatives from the Council Administration, which

was run by an anti-Conservative ‘Rainbow Alliance’ of Independent, Labour, Liberal Democrat and SNP members. One Party strategist noted that the Conservative Group on the Council was reluctant to criticise their opponents. In his view, they remained sensitive to the grouping of every single other councillor in order to exclude them from the Administration following the 1999 local Government elections. The strategist explained to me that failing to define themselves as the Conservative Opposition on Dumfries and Galloway Council meant that local people might perceive them as similar to candidates from other political Parties. This, he feared, could potentially weaken later efforts to mobilise their supporters to back Conservative candidates. In addition, senior Conservatives would come to worry that the ‘loyalties’ of some supporters might be ‘divided’ between local Conservatives and other high-profile candidates with whom they might be implicated through the myriad associations and networks to which activists and others belong in small, rural communities (cf. Cohen 1982, Lovell 1998). In other words, some Conservative voters might make a proprietary claim to a non-Conservative candidate in the upcoming elections. I discuss later how in Council Wards where Conservative candidates challenged Independent incumbents, some Conservative strategists considered this question particularly problematic and sought to directly address these concerns through the target letter. Before they could embark on such an exercise, however, Conservative activists needed to process the information they were receiving from the Local Opinion Survey. I now examine this survey further to explore some of the logistical difficulties that local activists encountered as they sought to consolidate the voting data they were gathering.

Inputting the data

As noted, the survey was designed to solicit information about voting intentions that could later be put to instrumental ends. In the weeks following the delivery of the Local Opinion Survey to households in the Dumfries constituency, thousands were returned in the enclosed Freepost envelope. The overwhelming majority of respondents pledged to vote for the Conservative Party, which suggested that the primary purpose of the survey to identify Conservative voters in particular had been realised. This rendered the Local Opinion Survey one of the most effective instruments in the local Party’s discursive armoury. During March and April 2003, Conservative activists added to the Blue Chip database of local electors the names of hundreds of previously unknown supporters. Furthermore, they confirmed the voting intentions of those already listed as ‘pledged’ Conservative voters.

However, the idea that the Local Opinion Survey might have been explicitly crafted as a political tool was not generally obvious. Some recipients condemned it for not achieving other ends. A literary scholar residing at that time in Dumfries complained to me that the survey she received was not objective as the identities of potential respondents could easily be ascertained, therefore removing anonymity from the survey results. She did not realise

that this was the point of the survey and, thus, considered it a failure for its incapability of generating a 'robust', statistical view of local opinion. Some Party activists shared her view. I witnessed a heated discussion between one member of the Core Campaign Team and an elderly volunteer who had spent several hours adding data to Blue Chip. Asserting the survey to be a waste of time, the latter noted that she was being asked to process voting intentions to the exclusion of all other data and expressed frustration about the significant amount of information Party strategists were discarding in the process. The volunteer said that the views of local householders about the importance of a range of local and Scottish Parliament issues, which they were asked to rank in the survey's first two questions, should also be noted on Blue Chip. The Conservative strategist with whom she argued thought this irrelevant and potentially wasteful of limited time and resources. In his view, the Party simply lacked sufficient technical and volunteer support to process this additional information, which he felt had to be viewed as superfluous to the primary exercise of inputting voting intentions²⁶.

Not everyone who responded to the Local Opinion Survey expressed support for the Scottish Conservatives. Those who refused to declare their voting intentions and asked to be removed from the Party's mailing list were widely considered to have other political allegiances. The surveyors would classify these households on Blue Chip with an 'A' for being 'against' the Scottish Conservatives. Senior Conservatives generally considered any indication of voting intentions useful, however, as a declared Labour voter could be removed from future mailings, which would help the Party conserve money and time²⁷ for more targeted campaigning activity. Furthermore, Conservative strategists had incorporated into Mr Mundell's letter another means for identifying anti-Conservative voters that proved very effective. Several dozen surveys were sent back to Castle Street in the Freepost envelope with the names and addresses torn off from the top, left-hand corner of the covering letter. For senior strategists, it was self-evident that anti-Conservative activists trying to waste the local Conservative Party's resources had returned these surveys, which were sometimes covered in graffiti. To discern the identities of such antagonists, Conservative activists relied on an inconspicuous eight-digit number printed to the right of Mr Mundell's signature at the bottom of the letter. This constituted the electoral registration number of the voter to whom the letter had been individually addressed. Once matched to the electoral roll, the name and address of the survey respondent could easily be determined. A Party volunteer would then mark that individual's voting intentions on Blue Chip with an 'A', therefore removing them from future mailings.

Firming up the whole

Senior Conservatives, through their careful cultivation of information obtained through the Local Opinion Survey, constructed much of this data as

lacking stability. One means of double-checking and verifying the information they were receiving was through canvassing, which was conducted either in person ‘door-to-door’ or on the telephone. However, Conservative efforts to canvas in this way proved problematic. For reasons that I now consider, Party volunteers were often reluctant to help as canvassers. This had a disabling effect, rendering the Conservative campaign exclusive and curtailing its reach as local activists (self) imposed limits.

Elderly Conservatives were particularly reluctant to canvas in Council estates and urban areas that they considered ‘rough’ or ‘unsafe’ – political territory they usually argued remained immune to the ‘attractions’ of Scottish Conservatism. A powerful argument for many Conservative activists lay in the form of their still-fresh memories of the 1997 General Election, which had been very discouraging for many of them. One of the few to go ‘door-stepping’ in that campaign told me how she had found the experience very stressful, having been spat on and verbally abused one evening whilst canvassing a Council estate; she refused to help with such efforts in 2003. Members of the Core Campaign Team also failed to convince many activists to assist with telephone canvassing, even after offering reimbursements to volunteers willing to telephone people from their own home²⁸. Many Conservatives considered the idea of ‘cold calling’ strangers and asking them how they intended to vote distasteful. Conservative campaign strategists had little choice but to deploy paid office staff to this task.

To counter such attitudes of class-based exclusivity amongst their supporters and encourage them to help with the Party’s canvassing effort, local Conservative strategists called upon one of their colleagues from nearby South Ayrshire to address an activist training day held in February 2003 at the Aberdour Hotel in Dumfries. They drafted in Murray Tosh MSP, an approachable Conservative with years of campaigning experience in local elections. In a presentation to an audience of around 40 activists, he outlined tactics canvassers could use on the doorstep to discern the voting intentions of even the most hostile of householders²⁹. He then explained how it was both ‘easy’ and ‘important’ to use a standard alphabetical code for listing such intentions as volunteers could then process this information on Blue Chip more efficiently³⁰. To further streamline this process, he emphasised the need for the prompt return of canvas forms to Castle Street to facilitate the use of the most accurate figures to ‘get out the vote’ (GOTV) on Polling Day. But he also cautioned his audience against making too many assumptions about who constituted a Conservative voter and where they might live. ‘I know some Conservatives who decide that a resident is a supporter if they live in a posh house or have a Mercedes sitting in the driveway,’ he observed. ‘But some of the rudest people I have ever met live in *big hooses* [big houses] and vote Conservative and some of the nicest are the folks you’ll meet going door-to-door in the Council schemes.’

I was struck by Mr Tosh’s comments, which were delivered as if no members of his audience lived in a big house or drove an expensive vehicle. But what they revealed was a set of assumptions, perhaps borne of his

canvassing experiences, about the prejudices of Conservative voters. Many senior Conservatives I met shared these assumptions. The idea that their supporters might shut themselves off in large estates and respond with hostility to strangers knocking on their door seemed especially evocative to these particular Conservatives. Such an image served to underscore the need for the Local Opinion Survey discussed earlier, which was designed to reach out to Conservative voters, overcoming obstacles to communication that were sometimes erected by local Conservatives themselves. Nevertheless, relying on members of staff, a handful of committed office-bearers and activists as well as individual Council candidates, Party strategists were able to deploy a reasonably expansive network of canvassers across Dumfries and Galloway. Armed with a clipboard listing the names and addresses of local residents – with printed notes on their voting history attached, if available – small groups of usually 2-6 canvassers would move methodically through a handful of streets, knocking on doors and interrogating householders about their voting intentions in the forthcoming elections. Double-checking the data already gleaned from the Local Opinion Survey in the process, the senior Conservatives were reassured of the effectiveness of their information gathering efforts as they saw the Conservative vote ‘firm up’ along the way.

However, no amount of checking and crosschecking addressed a couple of simple flaws that had been overlooked when Party strategists developed their canvas and survey methodology to render their supporters visible through the electoral roll. For instance, canvassers rarely differentiated between the voting intentions of the local householders they quizzed, often assuming that a Conservative voter would support Conservative candidates in both the local Government and Scottish Parliament elections. Senior strategists later realised that they could therefore not be sure Conservative supporters would refrain from splitting their votes between different Parties, particularly if they had a personal connection with a rival candidate. Conservative voters in Council Wards represented by Independent incumbents were thought to pose a particular problem given that many believed Independents were ‘closet’ Conservatives and were therefore tempted to vote for them. This problem was complicated even more when the Castle Street office received Local Opinion Surveys from households in which more than one adult lived but to which only one survey had been sent. Party strategists came to realise that they could not rely on assumptions. For example, it was not given that a husband and wife would vote identically in the coming elections. More perplexingly for senior Conservatives, the identity of the individual who had filled out the survey on behalf of such households could not always be ascertained³¹.

Mobilisation

Having amassed the names and addresses of thousands of ‘pledged’ and sometimes ‘probable’ supporters, senior Conservatives focused on another problematic: how to mobilise Conservative voters to turnout on Polling Day

and support Conservative candidates. As the election approached, members of the Core Campaign Team sought to achieve this outcome through a series of 'GOTV' or target letters. There were many different examples and versions of these letters, most of them distributed in the final week of April. At least 10,000 target letters had been distributed in the Dumfries constituency by the end of the campaign, each pledged supporter receiving several different versions to constantly remind them of the importance of voting. In this way, a concern with continuously checking and re-gathering voting data came to be replaced with the need to cultivate, prime and reinforce the (Conservative) whole and mobilise it on Polling Day. To this end, some letters had been posted much earlier. In February 2003, for instance, a target letter had been sent to those who had already pledged support to the Scottish Conservatives as part of a campaign to maximise the number of committed Conservative voters registered for postal ballots. The idea behind this campaign was to mobilise as many pledged Conservatives before the election as possible³². This would then allow for personnel and other resources to be concentrated on targeting the remainder of the Conservative electoral base on Polling Day and increasing turnout from Conservative voters. In that letter, the popular Conservative 'grandee' and former MP for Dumfries Lord Monro argued that Conservatives needed to vote in the Scottish Parliament elections:

'I voted No-No in [the devolution referendum of] 1997 and have seen nothing to change my mind. However the Parliament is not going to go away and the only way to change it is to have more Conservatives in it. The only way to do that is to vote Conservative in next year's elections. Not voting will simply allow more Labour, Liberal and SNP members to be elected with their left-wing anti-rural agenda. We will just get much more of what we have seen over the past three and a half years. I urge all local Conservatives to ensure they vote.'

Throughout the first few months of 2003, senior Conservatives reinforced this message repeatedly to Conservative audiences through leaflets, letters and speeches³³. Highlighting this message betrayed lingering doubts Party strategists shared about the willingness of their supporters to participate in an election for an institution most of them had opposed in the 1997 devolution referendum. But by April 2003, most senior Conservatives felt that, despite the views of a recalcitrant minority as expressed through the Local Opinion Survey, their supporters had come to accept the importance of voting in the coming elections. One Conservative MSP told me an encouraging sign that local Conservatives had reconciled themselves to the Scottish Parliament was the large number of volunteers from the Dumfries Ladies Lunch Club, who had enthusiastically come into Castle Street to help with the stuffing and sorting of thousands of documents (including the Local Opinion Survey) during the campaign. Knowing that many of these predominantly elderly women had opposed devolution a few years previously, this Conservative MSP said that he had been 'genuinely touched' by their support. Members of

the Dumfries Ladies Lunch Club, it seemed, had extended a proprietary claim to their Party's campaign in the local Government and Scottish Parliament elections even if they did not support the latter institution or view it as representative of their interests.

Pulling rank

A greater cause for anxiety amongst senior Conservatives, however, was how to encourage Conservative voters to support the Party's candidates in the local Council elections. As I have already noted, this was a particularly pressing tactical problem when Conservative candidates stood against Independent incumbents thought to possess conservative views. Many Conservatives had voted Independent in previous Council elections³⁴. Party strategists therefore drafted a target letter from well-known local Conservatives to endorse candidates engaged in such contests. In so doing, they hoped to mobilise a network of Conservative names and, by association, local knowledge and political capital to reinforce support for the Party's candidates amongst the Conservative electoral base.

For example, Conservative voters in the Moffat Ward received several target letters from David Mundell MSP, Lord Monro and then the Scottish Conservative Leader in the Scottish Parliament David McLetchie MSP. These letters were sometimes designed to appeal to Conservative voters on a more personal level, dispensing with the formal professionalism many might have associated with earlier Party documents like the Local Opinion Survey. Indeed, the letter from David Mundell MSP that encouraged local supporters to vote for the Conservative candidate Safa Ash-Kuri was typewritten on yellow paper. This rendered it distinctive from the many items distributed previously in the campaign and conveyed a sense that Mr Mundell had penned it at his home in Moffat before hand delivering it to local households. To emphasise this local (personal) connection, he used his residential address in the top right-hand corner of the letter. This further marked it out from official Party correspondence, displacing Mr Mundell's earlier identity as Conservative representative for a more 'personal' voice.

Mr Mundell began his letter by talking about Safa Ash-Kuri's 'solid experience in business' and described the local Conservative Party as being 'very fortunate' to have found a candidate with 'the expertise and the common sense' that the Council 'clearly lacks'. But the letter was written with a specific 'threat' in mind – that posed by the Independent councillor:

'... [It] is particularly important that Conservative supporters vote Conservative in the Council elections. Our local 'Independent' Councillor voted against Conservative proposals that would have kept Beattock Primary open and guaranteed Moffat Academy's future as an all-through school. Independent Councillors claim to be non political yet they have formed themselves into a party group on the Council and vote together as a party in coalition with Labour and the

SNP. Accordingly, I can assure you that voting Independent is not the equivalent of voting Conservative. If you want both an excellent local Councillor, well qualified to fight for the needs of our communities and to change the Council, vote Conservative, vote for Safa Ash-Kuri in the Council elections on 1st May.'

The Independent Councillor posed a threat to Conservative candidates largely because many of the Party's supporters believed that they were closet Conservatives. In Moffat – a Council Ward that was widely considered a 'natural' Conservative seat – local supporters often reported that the Independent incumbent Billy Lockhart privately told them that he, too, was conservative. Embedded in the community and bound through kin-based and other networks with the Conservative voter base, Councillor Lockhart also enjoyed the support of several local Party members who actively campaigned for him against the Conservative challenger. This further blurred the boundary between Conservative and non-aligned Councillor. Senior Conservatives therefore tried to discursively 'pull rank' against a web of local associations and interconnections between their supporters and rival (Independent) candidates and urged them to back the Party's endorsed candidate. In part, this was attempted by highlighting Councillor Lockhart's association with anti-Conservative political groups in the Administration, which served to symbolically sever his own networks (cf. Strathern 1995) amongst some Conservative supporters. Accusing Independents of voting 'with Labour and the SNP', the letter drew a strong association between Councillor Lockhart and the other groups that made up the Rainbow Alliance Administration. By associating with the Independent councillor, some Conservative activists in Moffat also risked becoming complicit in the Administration's legacy, which Party strategists condemned as a 'record of failure'.

Mr Mundell's letter also seeks to both consolidate and mobilise Conservative electoral support for Mr Ash-Kuri by implicating him in a wider social network of his own. Mr Ash-Kuri – a retired oil company executive – had recently moved to Moffat, joining the Conservative Party campaign only four weeks before Polling Day. Senior Conservatives reasonably assumed that he might not be as well known as his Independent opponent. By endorsing him, Mr Mundell and the well-respected Lord Monro brought their own names, political capital and, by association, local knowledge and networks to doubly reinforce Mr Ash-Kuri's candidacy amongst the Conservative electoral base. In this way, they constructed him as a worthy representative deserving of their support. Mr Mundell and other senior Conservatives sought to extend their own proprietary claim to Mr Ash-Kuri that they hoped the Conservative electoral base in Moffat would in turn mimic. In effect, this constituted a claim of ownership over 'our' candidate, similar to the kinds of proprietary claims that I have detailed elsewhere (Smith 2006, see also Edwards 1993, 2000, Edwards and Strathern 1999). Indeed, senior Conservatives were very explicit about their reasons for generating such associations. In the last couple of

weeks before Polling Day, one Conservative MSP explained to me that he felt he could 'deliver' a number of Council Wards to Conservative candidates through such personal backing. This individual treated the target letter as an extension of his own, albeit partial, claim to representative-ness, reaching out to encompass Conservative candidates running in the local Government elections. A discursive tool charged with the power to 'pull rank' and realign local (political) relationships, the target letter was therefore thought to be able to cumulatively generate electoral and social effects. Senior Conservatives hoped that such effects might last beyond Polling Day.

Conclusion: the politics of self-knowledge

Daily producing thousands of canvas returns, letters and leaflets began to take its toll on the Party's limited office and volunteer resources as Election Day approached. Staff members were unable to keep up with escalating demands from activists and candidates for reliable, up-to-date information. In response, they concentrated on processing as many of the voting intentions gleaned from the Local Opinion Survey as possible. At the same time, the focus of Conservative activists narrowed on GOTV materials as they sought to mobilise their electoral base. Telephoning Conservative 'pledges' in order to 'get out the vote' on Polling Day, volunteers checked the accuracy of the canvas data recorded on Blue Chip yet again as they chatted with their supporters. During such conversations, Party activists placed emphasis on the importance of voting Conservative 'three times': twice for the Scottish Parliament, to which representatives might be elected via two different voting systems, and once for the local Council. Through these and other strategies, Conservative activists made efforts to discipline and maximise the turnout of their electoral base. In the process, they encountered the limits of their self-knowledge.

Mr Mundell lost the Dumfries constituency by roughly 1000 votes to the Labour incumbent Dr Elaine Murray³⁵. However, an apparently strong turnout from local Conservatives contributed to his re-election to the Scottish Parliament through the South of Scotland Regional List. Meanwhile, most incumbent Councillors were re-elected across Dumfries and Galloway although Safa Ash-Kuri achieved a rare victory for the Scottish Conservatives by winning the Moffat Ward. Senior Conservatives generally considered the election a 'success'. Post election, they checked again the veracity of Blue Chip data with the publication of the so-called 'marked' electoral register, a list of eligible voters in the constituency on which the names of those who voted are identified against those who 'stayed at home'. This publication provided Party professionals with an opportunity to compare the actual turnout of their pledged vote to the projections that had informed their earlier GOTV campaign. Accordingly, they found that a handful of supporters who had said that they would vote in the election had not done so. Generally, senior Conservatives were encouraged that the overwhelming majority of the people they had sought to mobilise had, in fact, voted on Polling Day. 'There

might have been another 500 votes we could have squeezed out of the Dumfries constituency,' one Conservative strategist explained to me afterwards, 'but I am convinced we did everything that we could.'

Party strategists became more optimistic about their electoral future following the 2003 elections. For the first time since the 1997 General Election, they felt able to extract a list of pledged Conservative voters from Blue Chip and with some confidence apprehend and gaze upon a 'reassuring whole': the Conservative electoral base. On its own, the base was not a large enough part of a greater whole – the Dumfries constituency – to ensure that a Conservative candidate would be elected first-past-the-post for the Scottish Parliament. However, these senior Conservatives could now quantify and 'see' it, convinced of the reliability of the voting data they had accumulated through the Local Opinion Survey and their wider canvassing effort. That whole was nevertheless unstable; the need to constantly 'target' it underscored the potential for the whole to disintegrate into Conservative and non-Conservative parts in the Council elections.

Strategists had to act to safeguard against this disintegration, which meant that the task of re-gathering voter information was never complete. Their attention to detail was required in maintaining Blue Chip vis-à-vis the threat of further disaggregation. This threat and actions against it imbued the Conservative campaign with a sense of prospective momentum borne of vigilance. Local Party strategists had generated this sense through their breakdown of the electoral roll and subsequent cultivation of a solid, new (Conservative) whole. Reflecting on their efforts after the election, they found in such methods and organisation a retrospective sense of having made progress from their disastrous result at the 1997 General Election. They now imagined a future in which they could embellish their knowledge of themselves and the Conservative electoral base 'out there' through additional canvassing and surveys. In the continuous cultivation and updating of such data, Conservative activists anticipated a day when they would be able to successfully mobilise their pledged vote, persuade 'probable' supporters to back them and reclaim at least one Parliamentary constituency lost in 1997 – Dumfries.

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Biographical Note

Alexander Smith is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in Sociology at the University of Birmingham. He has a PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of Edinburgh. He subsequently held an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellowship with this university prior to taking up the Sociological Review Fellowship at Keele University. His monograph, *Conservative Party electioneering after devolution: banal activism in rural Scotland*, is forthcoming with Manchester University Press in 2010.

Notes

¹ I borrow this metaphor from Jeanette Edwards (1993:43).

² I refer to members of the Core Campaign Team, which numbered seven people, as ‘senior Conservatives’, ‘key Party strategists’ or ‘professionals’. I deliberately use such references to protect the identities of those Team members who provided me with comments and data cited in this article. Conservative ‘activists’ refer to a much larger network of candidates, Party office-bearers and volunteers, who assisted with the campaign.

³ The local Authority updates the electoral roll each year and publishes a version in electronic form, a copy of which political Parties and other interests can purchase. The activities of Conservative strategists described here could be said to mirror the work of Council officials, whose maintenance of the electoral roll requires constant attention.

⁴ For more on transparency, see Levine (2004).

⁵ For more on parts and wholes, see Strathern (1992).

⁶ I borrow this term from a recent ethnography of Fijian knowledge practices (Miyazaki 2004:50-67).

⁷ Miyazaki’s exploration of the importance of building prospective momentum in knowledge making informs my usage of his term here (cf. Miyazaki 2003).

⁸ By exploring similar practices in a Western liberal democratic setting, this article also echoes the concerns of a recent study (Coles 2007) of bureaucratic practice amongst international aid workers charged with democracy making in post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina. Indeed, Scottish politics could provide an important resource for the anthropology of democracy (see, for instance, Greenhouse 1998, Paley 2001, West 2005). After all, many scholars now consider Scotland one of the world’s foremost laboratories of constitutional reform and electoral experimentation since the opening of the nation’s ‘new’ Parliament in 1999 (cf. Bogdanor 1999, Devine 1999, Hassan and Warhurst 2002, Hearn 2000, Hutchison 2001, McCrone 1998 and Paterson 1994).

⁹ The destruction of the Scottish Conservatives came after years of decline for which there were several contributing factors impossible to cover here in detail. One was no doubt their stubborn opposition to devolution during the 1990s (cf. Seawright 1999).

¹⁰ At that time, the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party (SCUP) was divided into ‘Associations’ that covered most of Scotland’s 72 Parliamentary constituencies. Two of the largest were the Dumfries Conservative Constituency Association (DCCA) and Galloway and Upper Nithsdale. Branch returns kept by the local Party Associations often contained the names and addresses of former members who had not paid their subscriptions (‘subs’) in many years. These individuals were usually treated as if they were still Party members.

¹¹ With approximately 36,000 residents, Dumfries is the largest town and administrative capital of the region. Castle Douglas is located 18 miles to the west and is a smaller community of some 3,700 residents. Local Conservatives later opened Parliamentary offices 15 miles north of Dumfries in Thornhill and 75 miles to the west in the larger port town of Stranraer. Dumfries remained the main 'centre' of Conservative Party planning and operations across the region, sometimes to the mirth of activists based in Galloway.

¹² The Dumfries Conservative Ladies Lunch Club held a series of well-attended lunches with guest speakers throughout the year. It became the subject of much mythology within local Conservative Party circles when it continued to organise meetings while the local Party's network of branches and grassroots activists collapsed around it, thus setting a positive example for other activists to follow.

¹³ Along with the Orkney Islands, Dumfries and Galloway was one of only two local Authorities that failed to back a Scottish Parliament with tax-varying powers in the 1997 referendum.

¹⁴ For more on the 1999 Scottish Parliament elections, see Morgan 1999.

¹⁵ David Mundell was a BT executive who grew up in Dumfriesshire while Alex Fergusson farmed in neighbouring Ayrshire and had been born in Galloway. Now MP for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale, the former has become Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland while the latter is currently Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament.

¹⁶ Members of the Scottish Parliament are elected either First-Past-The-Post in one-member constituencies or via Proportional Representation through the additional-member Regional List (for more, see Lundberg 2007).

¹⁷ At the same time, the number of Councillors across the region was reduced to 47 from over 70.

¹⁸ For more on the 2001 General Election, see Butler and Kavanagh 2002.

¹⁹ Of course, social anthropologists will be familiar with a similar knowledge 'crisis' closer to home: that which the 'post-modern' or 'reflexive' turn precipitated in ethnographic authority, representation and writing during the 1980s (cf. Clifford 1988, Clifford & Marcus 1986).

²⁰ For more on improvisation in politics, see Levine 2004.

²¹ As Riles (2004) has noted, bureaucracy is geared towards addressing the limits of knowledge.

²² I borrow this term from Verdery (1993) who has written about the 'politics of representative-ness' in post-socialist Romania.

²³ In the colonial past, for example, the census was used as an instrument of Governmental control (cf. Cohn 1987, 1996).

²⁴ For more on the relationship between listening and reading, see Fabian 2001.

²⁵ For more on partial connections, see Strathern 1991.

²⁶ Although the Castle Street office possessed several desktop computers, Blue Chip could only be accessed through one machine with limited memory on its hard drive. Unable to run several applications at the same time, the computer often 'crashed' while volunteers were inputting data to Blue Chip. This further exacerbated the problem local Conservatives faced when they tried to process too much information electronically.

²⁷ A self-identifying supporter of a rival Party could sometimes be 'targeted' in a campaign to solicit tactical votes. Although I do not discuss this here, the Core Campaign Team made a fledgling effort to mobilise such potential support.

²⁸ Only one Conservative supporter – a woman from the small town of Annan, 15 miles southeast of Dumfries – volunteered for this task.

²⁹ When confronted with someone who had expressed hostility on the doorstep, some Conservative canvassers would ask: 'So I take it you will be voting Labour again?' This was a surprisingly effective tactic in 'flushing out' Labour supporters, who would almost always identify themselves in response, and Nationalist voters, who would react to the idea of voting Labour with disgust.

³⁰ Conservative canvassers were encouraged to record the political allegiances of local householders using the following alphabetical code: C for Conservative; S for Labour; L for Liberal (Democrat); A for Against; T for Labour waiverer; P for Probable Conservative; I for Independent/Other; N for (Scottish) Nationalist; Z for Nationalist waiverer; W for Won't Vote; M for Liberal (Democrat) waiverer.

³¹ Rightly or wrongly, Conservative volunteers would normally assume that a husband had completed a Local Opinion Survey on behalf of a married couple.

³² The Conservative campaign was very successful in persuading Conservative voters to apply for postal ballots. This contributed to the Dumfries constituency seeing the highest number of postal votes registered in the 2003 elections (Burnside et al. 2003).

³³ Speeches were delivered to Conservative Party audiences including the Dumfries Ladies Lunch Club and the Dumfries Burgh Branch, which organised a series of 'political suppers'. Guest speakers included Peter Duncan MP, Alex Fergusson MSP, David Mundell MSP, Lord Monro and Murray Tosh MSP.

³⁴ The endurance of Independent councillors harked back to a tradition of electing 'non-aligned' representatives – so-called 'Colonels' juntas' – that dominated county politics in Dumfries and Galloway throughout the twentieth century (McCulloch 2000:517). In 2003, I witnessed an argument in which a senior Party strategist tried to explain to two Conservative Councillors that running Conservative candidates against Independent incumbents – and then convincing Conservative voters to support them – was essential to 'trying to change the political culture' of the region.

³⁵ The Conservative Party increased its vote in Dumfries by almost 10% – the largest swing to the Conservatives in any constituency in Scotland (Burnside et al. 2003). However, this result can be explained almost entirely by a collapse in support for the local SNP and Liberal Democrats.

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Alexander Smith
Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in Sociology
School of Government and Society
The University of Birmingham, Edgbaston B15 2TT
Email: a.t.t.smith@bham.ac.uk