



## Hints for Creative Hustings

In the run up to the general election many people will want to go to, or even run, one of those events known as 'hustings' when they are introduced to their prospective parliamentary candidates. These notes are designed to encourage people not only to run hustings for themselves, but to do so with an eye to the opportunities and pitfalls in the process. Don't feel constrained to follow every idea here, but we hope you find these of interest.

### Thinking about what we are trying to do?

People come to hustings with all sorts of intentions.

- Some will want to influence the candidates with their questions.
- Others may want to get to know the prospective candidates as people
- Or to sound them out on issues
- Some will be going to the event to clarify their own political views

Many people who attend hustings report a fair degree of satisfaction with the event as it is traditionally carried out. But there may yet be improvements that can be made. In a world where we can all too easily feel manipulated by the media, where 'lonely and disconnected citizens' are everywhere and many no longer vote, it is vital that an event like a hustings be run in such a way as to encourage a proper sense of public participation. Likewise people today may be quite clear about 'having their say' in the world, but are less good at listening. For these reasons I suggest paying particular attention to two further aims.

- Build a sense of participation among those who attend
- Encourage a process of self-reflection and vision

### The difficulties of conventional methods:

Anyone who has been to hustings before will be aware of the pitfalls:

- Certain people with strong agendas dominate the questions
- People are fearful of speaking in public and either keep quiet or speak with greater aggression because of their fear
- People are frustrated at not taking part and become angry
- People are not confident in the leadership of the event and become nervous
- Candidates are reduced to petty bickering or 'grandstanding' without proper reference to the electorate in the room

The ideas here are designed to overcome some of these problems. Of course there is no such thing as perfection here, but we hope that these notes will help.

### Things that you have to do – the basics

- All major parties need to be present, and all candidates invited (the organisers may want to think through their attitude to parties such as the BNP prior to making invitations, some of the major parties may refuse to take the stand with these candidates)
- Equal time allocation to each candidate and same questions to each
- Firm and efficient organisation

## So how do we do it?

### Practical preliminaries:

Gather a small team together to plan the event. Your aim is to imagine it in process, recognise the pitfalls and build in strategies that work toward your main purposes.

There are three essential practical tasks that have to be done at an early stage..

Fix day and time.

Book venue.

Get commitment from candidates.

And one preliminary strategic question.

How are you going to get people to attend?

Candidates will assess your ability to get people there when they decide whether or not to come. They will also want to know that it will be run well.

Find candidates through the web and email or phone. Main party sites are [www.labour.org.uk](http://www.labour.org.uk) with email info from [candidates@newlabour.org.uk](mailto:candidates@newlabour.org.uk)

[www.libdems.org.uk](http://www.libdems.org.uk)

[www.conservatives.com](http://www.conservatives.com)

If you are going to do things in an unusual way, it is also vital that you appoint a chair/facilitator at an early stage and involve them in the process.

You will also need a separate timekeeper equipped with some suitable device, lights, sound, bell, klaxon! A warning sign 30 secs before the final signal makes this process less abrasive.

Think about what is possible in your chosen venue, particularly in terms of participation. What microphones might be needed and how people will move around the building. I am going to suggest two models. Model One is suitable for a situation where the people speak for themselves throughout. Model Two is particularly designed for large numbers of people or inconvenient buildings where public interaction and movement is more difficult.

So let's imagine the process...

### Introducing the candidates

Whichever model you opt for there is going to be a moment when the candidates are introduced to the people. I suggest doing this *by inviting them to speak for 3 min each on why they decided to enter politics*. This will have the effect of tapping into their personal stories. It will reveal where their deepest commitments come from and possibly do more than anything else to appeal to the people in terms of their overall character and trustworthiness.

Likewise at the end of the evening it is customary to invite a closing statement from each candidate. I suggest asking a vision question at this point along the lines. *What do you think are the key characteristics of a society that is functioning well? (3 min each)*

Candidates could be given warning of both these set questions prior to the event.

How you do the main part of the meeting will vary.

### **Model One –**

(suitable for situations where the people in the main body can make themselves heard eg it is a small gathering, less than 70 people, or the facilitator with a microphone repeats back what people say from the floor, or you have several roving mics available and people to distribute them)

- Invite the candidates to introduce themselves as above
- Invite the main body of people to move their chairs into groups of four/five, and then ask each group to discuss their chief concerns about society and the world. *This gets everyone involved and allows the people not the politicians to set the agenda for the meeting.* Allow this to run for about 5mins max then....
- Ask each group to develop at least two questions that they would like to ask the candidates. Give them just two more minutes to do this.
- The facilitator then selects one group to begin and lead off with a question.
- The facilitator notes the theme of the first question and invites other questions on the same general topic from other groups before anyone responds. Up to say max of 3 or 4 questions. *This increases the sense of participation, more people are involved in asking.*
- Candidates are invited to reply to all these questions at once (max say 3mins per candidate)
- Another group is selected and the process repeated
- After this pattern has developed the facilitator invites a group to volunteer an originating question in a different area from those previously covered. Eg if they have all been about domestic policies like education, health etc then the facilitator could request something of local concern, then in another round might focus on topics of international interest such as the environment, terrorism, or trade justice. If a faith community is hosting the event then there could be one round of questions on issues of particular religious or faith concern.
- One interesting alternative is to occasionally allow very brief comments from the floor in response to the politicians This might be done just two or three times during the evening. Taking several comments at once. *This gives a sense of 2 way conversation and will be particularly appreciated by those who have come to influence their prospective MP.*
- End the meeting with the vision question so as to complete everything one and a half hours after it started. Publicise this end time and stick to it

## Model Two –

(suitable for situations where numbers are very large and there are likely to be audibility or movement problems)

- Invite the candidates to attend fifteen minutes after the main body of people. Have someone ready to meet and greet candidates in a separate room. Prepare the main room with sets of cards and a pencil in every 3<sup>rd</sup> place.
- Before the candidates arrive invite people to turn round in groups of four or five and then ask each group to discuss their chief concerns about society and the world. *This gets everyone involved and allows the people not the politicians to set the agenda for the meeting.* Allow this to run for about 5mins max then....
- Invite each group to formulate questions and write them, one question per card. They are given 3-4 minutes to decide these questions. Then they pass the cards to a collection point.
- The candidates arrive and launch into their introduction as suggested.
- Meanwhile in another room a small panel of three people sort the cards. This panel should be fair minded and reasonably politically aware people. The cards could be sorted roughly into types of question eg international, UK, local, special interest or on themes like environment, trade, education, health etc. They then present one set of questions, say on health, to the facilitator who reads them out. These questions should be selected because they can be expected to evoke an interesting response and possibly explore different sides of a related issue. 3 or 4 questions can be asked at once if necessary - but there is no merit in using questions that cover the same ground. The candidates are invited to respond, taking these questions together for 3 mins each.
- This process can then be repeated for questions on a different theme
- During the evening the people can at any time respond to what is being said by writing a comment on other cards that are present by their seat. These comments are passed along throughout the evening to collection points. Again these are seen by the panel, who may select a few particularly apt or thoughtful comments and present them to the facilitator at various points through the evening. So for example, at the end of a round of responses, prior to asking the next questions, the facilitator could read out a few comments from the floor on what has taken place up to that point. *This will give a sense of conversation. People will feel empowered as they pass their cards in and encouraged when appropriate comments are read out.*
- End the meeting with the vision question so as to complete everything one and a half hours after it started. Publicise this end time and stick to it

Please let us know how it goes! Agora is very keen that we should share good practice in this area. Send your experience to [enquiries@agoraspace.org](mailto:enquiries@agoraspace.org)