

POWER STRUGGLE IN THE KINGDOM BY-ELECTION: CAMPAIGN FOR VOTES BY-

Scottish Political Editor Paul Hutcheon

A24-YEAR-OLD schoolteacher who lives in Dunfermline, Jennifer has never had so much contact with politicians. In the past fortnight she has received leaflets from all the major parties, taken phone calls from campaign teams and watched the media follow candidates down the High Street.

"It's like an invasion, " she said. The Dunfermline and West Fife byelection, triggered by the death of Labour MP Rachel Squire, has led residents of the town to feel besieged. Not a day passes without a stampede for votes, or another promise being made in a bid for loyalty at the ballot box on Thursday. For the past few weeks, Dunfermline has been the centre of Britain's political universe.

The town is unused to being showered with so many promises. The Labour camp, in a botched attempt to set the agenda, backed a new Forth road bridge and insisted plans for a rise in the toll to pounds-4 had been dumped. Opposition parties matched Labour on the issue, while also offering sweeteners on schools and hospitals that they would never get a chance to implement. A full-scale bidding war, played out with taxpayers' money, had broken out in the kingdom.

The invasion of politicians reached its peak on Thursday when the party big beasts electioneered in Dunfermline. Former Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy made his first public appearance since standing down last month, a visit one wag described as an "open-air Alcoholics Anonymous" meeting. David Cameron, looking more pop star than Tory leader, was mobbed for autographs. This left Gordon Brown and Alex Salmond, perhaps Scotland's two most recognisable politicians, looking like political leftovers for a hungry public.

But the by-election is less about Fife and more about the ambitions of the UK politicians who pressed the flesh last week. The Dunfermline and West Fife campaign, far from centring round the needs of voters, has acted as a laboratory for each party's political experiments.

In particular, the by-election has served as a taste of future battles between Brown and Cameron, who expect to face each other at the next general election. In this context, Labour's campaign bears the stamp of the Chancellor and his henchman, Alistair Darling: the choice of a loyal and unspectacular candidate in Catherine Stihler; the importance put on the "message" of economic opportunity; and an obsession with keeping the media out of the campaign.

But this has been far from Brown's best campaign, which Labour insiders attribute to his fear of Cameron making inroads in the seat. His tolls intervention - where he trod on the toes of Scottish ministers by ruling out a pounds-4 charge - was more about taking control of the byelection than keeping Jack McConnell in check. And his "announcement" of a Harvard-style business school in Fife was merely seen as a ham-fisted attempt to soften the blow of job losses at computer firm Lexmark in Rosyth. The most gaffefree politician in Britain has led a surprisingly paranoid and edgy campaign.

By contrast, Thursday's poll is an opportunity for Cameron, not a threat. Starting on just 10-per cent, he can market-test his new brand of touchy-feely politics in Dunfermline and make a strong claim that his party is changing.

This was evident in the choice of candidate. Instead of picking a white male with a double-barrelled surname to tour the local farms, the Tories picked Carrie Ruxton, whose selection shows the party now sees unmarried motherhood as a CV plus point rather than a social evil. Fife, it seems, is the unlikely launchpad for Cameronian conservatism.

"Carrie is a real person and not distant from the public, which we have perhaps been prone to in the past, " said the shadow Scottish secretary, David Mundell. "Ours has also been a very positive campaign, where we have run on the

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Brown hints at £30m Fife business school



Mr Brown (left) and Scottish Secretary Alistair Darling with Labour candidate Catherine Stihler.

By Lars Niven

CHANCELLOR GORDON BROWN revealed yesterday at the launch of Labour's campaign for the Dunfermline and West Fife by-election that Dunfermline could become home to a £30 million school for high-flying business trainees.

The Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath MP said Fife would bid for the project, which is to be designed along the lines of Harvard Business School in America.

Labour also pledged there would be no £4 toll on the Forth road bridge as they unveiled their by-election candidate Catherine Stihler, one of the party's euro-MPs.

Meanwhile Nationalists disclosed details of a leaked document which they said showed the Liberal Democrats had "thrown in the towel" in the crucial by-election.

The document, purportedly a minute of a meeting of Scottish Liberal Democrat MSPs, said the Lib-Dems should aim to "not slip behind the SNP" in the February 9 contest.

Mr Brown insisted that Dunfermline was an ideal location for the proposed business school, an idea put forward by a private company to train would-be business leaders from around the world.

"If this goes ahead it puts Dunfermline, Fife and Scotland on the international map for business and executive education in a way we haven't seen before," he said.

"It would be a first for Scotland, a first for Fife and a first for Dunfermline."

He added the project had the potential to create 400 jobs in the area.

"We believe there is a commercial interest in investing in it," he said.



Community in shock: Page 11

"Any job losses brings great uncertainty for staff and their families and we will ensure that help and support will be offered to those affected through the PACE (Partnership Action for Continuing Employment) team to help secure future employment."

Scottish Enterprise also pledged their support for shell-shocked employees after meeting senior Lexmark officials on Tuesday afternoon.

Scottish Enterprise Fife chief executive Joe Noble said, "Our primary focus and concern at this time is with the employees to ensure appropriate alternative employment and re-training opportunities are made available."

And yesterday (Wednesday), Deputy First Minister Nicol Stephen asked the local enterprise company to set up a 'rapid-reaction team' to support the workforce.

In 2002, the Executive paid £275,000 to Lexmark in regional support assistance to safeguard at least 53 jobs at the plant and keep it open until April 2008.

Company bosses will now sit down with the Executive to work out and settle any outstanding debts.

The Admiralty Road site will continue to operate until the factory closes at the end of the year and the last remaining jobs are axed.

Bosses are set to enter discussions with agents over the next few months to find a suitable buyer for the building who will make use of the high-spec equipment.

Dunfermline West MSP Scott Barrie will meet local enterprise bosses on Friday to discuss the future of the building.

He said, "It's a landmark building and it will be a very visible factory when it closes later this year. We wouldn't want to leave it

my is very diverse and we are more able than other areas in Scotland to get these people re-employed."

He added, "It is the ruthlessness that surprises you. There was no prior warning and no indication that Lexmark was in trouble. Lexmark Rosyth is not the problem, the problem is people looking at balance sheets in America."

Finally, Councillor Callaghan pledged to campaign to bring more jobs back to Rosyth, starting with "downstream work" for the new aircraft carrier contract at Rosyth Dockyard.

The 700 job losses in Rosyth are part of a worldwide restructuring plan by Lexmark which will see more than 1300 jobs scrapped or transferred to different locations.

Around 300 new posts will be created at the company's headquarters in Kentucky, US, but job losses are expected at other plants as part of the streamlining.

Representatives of trade union Amicus met Lexmark staff before Christmas as part of a recruitment drive after employees' job fears were reported in the Press.

The union's regional organiser, Rab Sherry, said he was "gutted" for the 700 workers who lost their jobs.

He added, "Once again it's our friends from over the pond - they come and set up a factory and take the grants and tell them they are here for the duration."

"They are making decisions that affect over 500 families who are now sitting there with their main wage disappearing through the floor."

QUOTES

'We truly regret the loss of jobs in this community'

- ALAN SPEIRS, LEXMARK



'Once again it's our friends from over the pond'

- RAB SHERRY, AMICUS



Chancellor hints at £30m business school for city

CHANCELLOR Gordon Brown has revealed that a £30 million elite institution for the training of high-flying executives could be built in Dunfermline.

He announced that the city was favourite to be given Scotland's own version of Harvard Business School which would create 400 jobs.

Speaking on Monday at Baidridgeburn Institute, Mr Brown said, "We believe this could now move very quickly as there is a commercial interest in investing in it. "Executives from all over the country would come to Dunfermline to be trained and Scotland would be the host of this first executive training college."

The Chancellor said Fife would bid for the proposed new college and it is understood work could begin this year with a view to opening in 2008.

Mr Brown said, "It would be a first

for Scotland, a first for Fife and a first for Dunfermline.

"If this goes ahead it puts Dunfermline, Fife and Scotland on the international map for business and executive education in a way we haven't seen before."

Private finance will fund the project but Mr Brown said he expected it would also attract investment from the USA and Europe.

It is envisaged that a 100-bed residential campus would be built but possible locations in Dunfermline have not been divulged.

A spokesman for Lauder College welcomed the idea but said they knew nothing about the project and could not comment until the proposals were more definite.

Dunfermline is thought to be the preferred site because it is in the central belt and in easy reach of universities such as St Andrews, Stirling, Edinburgh and Dundee.

By-election countdown

THE date for the Dunfermline and West Fife parliamentary by-election has been confirmed as 9th February with polling stations open from 7am-10pm.

Prospective candidates have until 4pm today (Thursday) to lodge their nomination papers at Fife House.

Polling stations will be the same as at last year's general election with three exceptions.

Since Blacklaw Primary School has been demolished voters in Brucefield should attend St Leonards Church, off Woodmill Road, while those in the Blacklaw polling district should use the Tryst Centre in Abbeyview.

Kingseat Community Centre has also replaced the church hall as a polling station.

Turn to page 8 for a full page of by-election news.

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"Executives from all over the country would come to Dunfermline to be trained and Scotland would host this first executive training college.

Catherine Stihler will fight to succeed Rachel Squire, who died earlier this month after a long battle against cancer.

Mrs Stihler said moves by the Forth Estuary Transport Authority to increase the toll to £4 at peak periods in a bid to cut traffic congestion had been blocked.

Speaking at the campaign launch she added, "Good transport links are vital if the economy of Dunfermline and west Fife is to grow.

"The current Forth road bridge exceeds its capacity almost every day. Now that moves to have a £4 toll have been seen off, we must address our long-term needs for a new crossing.

"A new bridge is vital. To minimise the environmental impact, and to stop it becoming as congested as the first road bridge, it must have radical solutions, such as dedicated public transport lanes to supplement the £66 million Labour has already spent improving connections and services for Fife's travelling public."

When asked who had blocked the charge Scottish Secretary Alistair Darling told reporters, "The Labour Party.

"Everybody has made it very clear there is no case for the £4 toll on this bridge. It just won't happen.

"The key thing now is to campaign for a second bridge because of the fact that the existing bridge is not going to last as long as people thought."

Chancellor Gordon Brown, who was also there, added, "There will be no £4 toll. Jack McConnell and I have discussed this on a number of occasions and we are totally in agreement...it will be the wrong thing for the economy of Fife.

"It's dead in the water."

Mrs Stihler, who was a close friend of Ms Squire, said it was a difficult time for all those who knew the late MP before paying tribute to her.

"It is tragic that Rachel is no longer here to carry on her work, but that work cannot be allowed to die with her," she added.

"We must continue her legacy, not just for her memory, but for the sake of the people of Dunfermline and west Fife, to whom she dedicated her life."

The Chancellor highlighted the fact that unemployment in the area was now at its lowest level for 30 years.

He also revealed that 400 apprentices would be taken on at Rosyth Dockyard, the first of whom would begin their training this summer.

FETA's plan to raise the toll looks like dominating the by-election campaign.

Lib-Dem candidate Willie Rennie challenged Mrs Stihler to back his petition opposing any rise.

He said she could make her position clear simply by signing the petition.

"If she is not going to join local people in backing the established Lib-Dem campaign urging a rethink then she must explain why," he added. "FETA is clearly under pressure as a result of our campaign.

"We need to build on this momentum and really drive home the message that local people are simply not prepared to put up with this increase."

Tory hopeful Carrie Ruxton said Labour appeared unable to say whether there would be any toll increase.

She said, "First four Labour councillors, backed by two Lib Dem councillors, vote for a £4 toll, then the First Minister ducks the issue only for Gordon Brown to spread confusion.

"Finally, Labour refuses to say how high they do plan to hike the charge.

"The people deserve an answer."

Meanwhile, the SNP revealed details of a leaked minute they say came from a meeting of the Scottish Lib-Dems in the House of Commons last week.

It states their campaign aim is to "not slip behind SNP" in Dunfermline and West Fife.

The minute was placed on the letter board of the House of Commons for Mr Salmond with a typed note, which said, "This will be of use."

The Lib-Dems came second in last year's General Election.

Speaking in Dunfermline Mr Salmond said, "The Liberal Democrats have thrown in the towel in Dunfermline and West Fife.

"This leaked minute confirms that they have given up hope of winning and that their sole concern is falling behind the SNP in Dunfermline.

"It is clear even the Liberal Democrats view the SNP as the main challenger to Labour in Dunfermline.

"They can only act as spoilers, stopping the SNP from unseating Labour. In contrast to the Liberals our aim is to beat Labour."

The document has sparked a hunt within the Lib Dems to find out who leaked it to Mr Salmond.