

A cross in the right box can move mountains

Local elections are not only a judgment on how local communities are doing but an indication of the popularity of Parliament.

Although there has been little evidence in this area that the BNP threat - Labour's current concern - will have any material input, next week's result will offer evidence on Mr Blair's standing and there will be clues on whether David Cameron's greener caring policies have caught the public imagination or if the execution of Charles Kennedy has done permanent harm.

When the Conservatives took over in Richmond upon Thames four years ago they broke a Lib Dem 18-year run.

Prior to that the Conservatives had held sway in the old boroughs for as long as anyone could remember and were represented in Parliament by high profile MPs like Jeremy Hanley, Sir Anthony Royle and Toby Jessel.

It is on the cards that Labour's lack of representation in Richmond upon Thames

is set to continue in May but this will have minimal impact on the tussle between the Conservative and Lib Dem giants. What will be more telling is if Mr Cameron's tactics capture voters' hearts as this must be one of the most environmentally conscious corners of the metropolis.

It is significant that Matt Cranfield-Acheson, who is standing for the Lib Dems in North Richmond Ward, is a Conservative defector and that his former colleague and ex Mayor, Douglas Orchard, has gone in the opposite direction by standing in South Twickenham as an independent with UKIP sympathies.

Hounslow has been dominated by the Labour Party with substantial majorities since the 70s.

Signs of nationalistic racism which emerged in Ilkeston through Phil Andrew and his cronies faded away when they created the successful Ilkeston Community Association and appeared to abandon their xenophobic tendencies and concentrate on

genuine home grown grievances.

It is unlikely that the two National Front candidates standing in Feltham will cause a significant upset, but the breakaway group - which has the backing of John Connelly, a former Labour leader - fielding 16 candidates under the banner of Hounslow Independent Alliance could upset an apple cart or two.

Thirty years ago Hounslow was returning Conservative MPs to Parliament and had control of the boroughs. Some of their MPs, like Barney Hayhoe, held high office. Dudley Smith was a senior executive and journalist with the then influential Sunday Express.

The character of the western end has changed radically in the last two decades and the Asian vote is now a decisive factor. The result will be an indication if support is filtering from what has been a consistently loyal sector.

There is a lot of cynicism about local

democracy and the increasing apathy is defended with jibes about politicians being self-seeking and corrupt. But as the viewpoint column in this newspaper reminded readers recently - many buses were sacrificed to ensure that adults have the right to vote.

It is unfair to suggest that everyone who seeks public office is doing so to feather their own nest or boost inflated ego. The vast majority genuinely want to ensure we live in a just, fair and efficient society.

Certainly the reputations of Tony Abou and Serge Lourie in this respect are impeccable.

Simultaneously Hounslow leaders, Conservative Peter Thompson, Labour Colin Elze and Lib Dem Ray Fischer have shown consistent beneficence.

It is the wild cards and fringe parties who emphasise the true value of a democracy and viewpoint has highlighted the valuable contribution the late Richard Meacock

made to the local political scene - providing a master class on how the public can keep politicians on their toes.

His passion over the resurrection of Richmond ice rink was inspirational. The Lib Dem's failure to prevent its closure or to get a replacement rink constructed was the blackest hour.

Local elections should be about local issues and the rink was - and is - for it served both Hounslow and Richmond upon Thames boroughs and provided a much needed outlet for youthful energies which can otherwise turn to violence and vandalism.

The defectors and single issue fanatics make local politics colourful and interesting.

They remind us that low taxation, clean roads and better schools are not the only things that matter to local communities and that a cross in the right box can move mountains - or sometimes defrost crucial decisions that have been evasively put on ice.