

How did the Lib Dems buck the trend?

Why did a Conservative administration – which had proved itself proficient and effective and steered clear of controversy and scandal – lose after just one term in power while those around were making dramatic gains?

According to the new council leader, Cllr Serge Lourie, victory was owed to those who failed to vote in 2002 coming out this time. The poll rose from 39.8 per cent to 51 per cent – which was the highest in London and probably the highest in the country.

"And they did so because they felt they were being ruled by an arrogant council who did not ask their opinions or involve them enough in decision making"

Cllr Lourie, now 60 years old, once a staunch member of the Labour Party, also credits the election campaign organiser, Michael Wilson (now representing Twickenham's Riverside Ward) with the

extraordinary success.

"He ran an amazing, energetic campaign and we are very grateful to him".

"In many ways Tony Arbour and Geoffrey Samuel were running an efficient borough", he admits. "The trouble was their councillors were not close enough to the ground and in consequence, people felt that they were not being listened to."

Serge is of Russian extraction but has spent most of his life in this corner of London. He was born and educated in Chiswick. He had a traumatic childhood as his father, aunt and grandmother were killed in a car crash in France when he was four years old – an accident that also left his mother, now 84, suffering severe and permanent injuries.

Serge and his brother who also survived were none the less well cared for and given a good education. He finished up at Oxford where he studied politics and philosophy. It

was there that he met his wife Julia while he was president of the UNA and she was secretary. Four decades later they are still together with a son and a daughter and many happy memories.

Serge qualified as a chartered accountant, but his passion was always politics and he joined the Labour Party, becoming a councillor in Paddington.

He went on to be the youngest member of the GLC, "with one Kenneth Livingstone in second place". As the years passed he felt, like many others, the party was moving too far to the left and he joined the SDP.

The family moved to Kew in 1976 because they felt their children would get a better education (they have always been supporters of the state system) and grew to love the place and Serge found himself elected as leader of the SDP in Kew in 1982.

He now devotes about 60 hours a week to his job as council leader and considers that his party is meeting the challenges of the moment. Five of the current Lib Dem councillors are under 35 and he is satisfied that gives the authority a good balanced view on the needs of the community.

"I have been a councillor more than half my life so I should know what I am doing", he points out. "We have good councillors who are dedicated to serving their ward well and will work hard to ensure we deliver good services."

His council has three main objectives – to increase the programme of recycling to embrace plastic collection, to raise the standards of secondary education and to look to ways of improving facilities for teenagers and young people.

The plastic collection will take about a year to organise, he points out. This should

mean that virtually all rubbish collected will be recycled, as tins, bottles and food waste are already collected separately.

Richmond has excellent primary schools but the secondary sector leaves a lot to be desired, he thinks. They will be consulting with educationalists and head teachers and staff to see how things can be improved.

They are also aware of the needs of teenagers and are embarking on a programme of consultation to see how they can provide more for the borough's young people.

The Lib Dem's birth in consultation and grassroots endeavour have stood them in good stead since the eighties, so it is hardly surprising that a wise old dog like the present leader – who at three score years still lists running marathons among his hobbies – sees this as the key to success in the future.