



Election '97

Equal opportunities

✘ **Building's survey of marginal constituencies concludes with Colchester, scene of a three-way fight that is too close to call. Elaine Knutt polls the opinions of local industry professionals.**

✘ **Housebuilder Ricky Rogers, Labour candidate for Salisbury, is the subject of our third election snapshot on page 30.**

Photographs by
Julian Anderson.



Colchester: a constituency at the crossroads

STEVENAGE AND EDGBASTON, THE first two stops on *Building's* pre-election construction tour, were Conservative marginals targeted by Labour hopefuls. But the third stop, Colchester, is a political no man's land. A new constituency carved out of two defunct seats, Colchester is now the scene of a three-way struggle among the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

Geographically in Tory Essex, politically in the Liberal Democrats' local government heartland and with a popular local candidate flying the flag for New Labour, the quiet county town and neat surrounding villages have more than their fair share of undecided voters.

Local contractors and consultants are also divided. All of them are hoping for an economic climate that will foster investment and growth without risking boom-and-bust; and each one mentions how previous Labour administrations benefited the industry. But, despite similar starting-points, construction voters have reached different conclusions as to which party will deliver the best policies for construction.

Representatives of two neighbouring contracting companies take directly opposing views. Tiptree-based TJ Evers has a £7-8m annual turnover, a mixed

private and public sector client base and a belief that "the industry needs a change of government", according to director and company secretary Tony Howe-Smith. Down the road in the village of Birch, the views of Richard Hayden, the new business manager of £35m-a-year commercial and retail contractor Huttons, chime closely with the Tories' "new Labour, new danger" slogan.

Taking a common-sense approach Howe-Smith is placing his faith in a Labour government's ability to boost public sector investment, principally through the release of capital receipts for social housing. The increased spending power of housing associations would improve TJ Evers' order book, which has suffered from cuts to the Housing Corporation budget, Howe-Smith says. It would also help to soak up the industry's excess capacity that he believes is still keeping prices and margins depressed. Drip-feeding the capital receipts could be achieved, he says, without "a scenario where inflation is allowed to run away. The Labour leaders have learned from their mistakes, I think they'll take a common-sense approach."

Howe-Smith is therefore "saying yes to Labour. I've seen the industry go downhill under the Conservatives, and

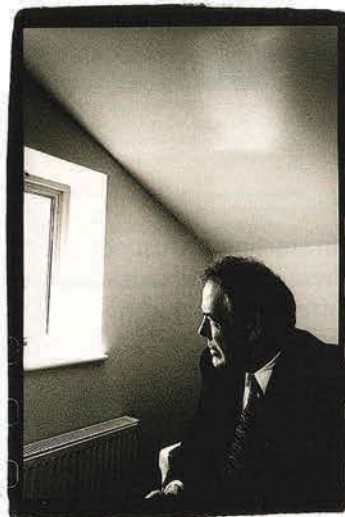


I've seen the industry go downhill under the Conservatives, and feel we're going to get more of a shot in the arm from Labour

TONY HOWE-SMITH, COMPANY SECRETARY, TJ EVERS

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RICHARD HAYDEN, NEW BUSINESS MANAGER, HUTTONS



feel we're going to get more of a shot in the arm from Labour." He is hoping that Labour government would introduce training initiatives, and a £5m minimum threshold for PFI projects that would prevent schemes under this value disappearing out of TJ Evers' reach.

Hayden, on the other hand, represents a company with less spare capacity and a corresponding fear that a higher-spending Labour government would over-stimulate the construction industry. "Putting half a billion pounds into housing would clearly be a boost to the industry, but we'd be worried about the inflationary side-effects," he notes.

Another concern at Huttons relates to Labour's manifesto pledge to introduce the statutory right to charge interest on late payments. Rather than offering protection to construction's smaller players, Hayden says that such a move would be a "sledgehammer to crack a nut. When there are differences of view, they generally get resolved. The danger with Labour's policy is that everyone will take entrenched positions, which will lead to more litigation."

Although Hayden says he is disillusioned by the Tory Party and its multiple "banana skins", ballot-day will still see him "instinctively, but reluctantly" putting a cross by the Conservative candidate. The Liberal Democrats hold no attractions for him: he says a vote for them would be a "giant leap over a cliff" for the construction industry.

Decision-makers

Voting intentions are not so clear among Colchester's consultants. Trevor Sparkes, partner of civil and structural engineer Maddocks Lusher Matthews, says his wish-list for the next government is for "inflation to be restrained, interest rates held and investment encouraged". However, Sparkes says he has not made up his mind which way to vote, citing economic and European policy as plus points for the Conservatives, the LibDems' 1p on tax for education policy as "one I agree with", and Labour's release of capital receipts as a boon to the industry.

Overall, Sparkes says he is "starting to suspect there won't be much difference between Labour and the Conservatives". The same sceptical viewpoint is taken up by undecided voter Ian Mosley, a director of 40-strong, commercially based architect Stanley Bragg Partnership. Mosley argues that although the ▶

► parties stress their different economic styles, the winner on polling day will find itself subject to macroeconomic factors and business cycles beyond its control.

However, Mosley admits to some concern that a Labour government would bring with it an increase in interest rates, which would dampen investors' enthusiasm for construction projects. There is also some Euroscepticism in his comments that associated practices in Germany and France have experienced "difficulties" with the social chapter and the working time directive.

Sparkes is concerned about the low profile of infrastructure and transport policies in all the manifestos, and Mosley is worried that none of the parties has a planning strategy that will foster urban regeneration, "urgently required in towns like Colchester that have had their industrial hearts ripped out".

Still making up his mind

A third floating voter is QS Ian Harvey, partner of the 15-strong Dunbar Smith Partnership. Harvey says he is torn between the Conservatives, with their "good grasp" on the economy, and the "idealistic" policies of the Liberal Democrats, including their tax incentives for developing on brownfield land.

Harvey has ruled out Labour on the grounds that any short-term boost it might bring the industry would be followed by inflation – "all Qs want to avoid tender price inflation" – and "a nasty tax shock". He echoes a criticism of Labour's policy on capital receipts mentioned by Hayden and Sparkes. "How will it be phased? Will it be used for new schemes, or refurbishment? There's so much information that hasn't been forthcoming," says Harvey.

Another consultant frustrated with Labour's policies, but for a different reason, is architect John Duell, partner of Hurley Porte and Duell. He describes himself as an idealist socialist of the old school: "I've always been a believer in taxing the well-off to fund projects for the less well-off." New Labour's pledge against raising taxes and its decision to adopt the Conservatives' spending plans have led Duell to "disillusionment".

For a practice based largely on social housing and "foyer" projects for young homeless people, Labour's policy on capital receipts is "very encouraging", but Duell regrets that housing policy appears to have slipped down Labour's agenda.

In this three-way marginal, "philosophically" Labour Duell will be watching the local polls and may decide on a tactical vote for the Liberal Democrats. With just one week until polling day, his fellow consultants will be weighing the odds and the policies before they cast their ballots. The construction vote in Colchester is still up for grabs.



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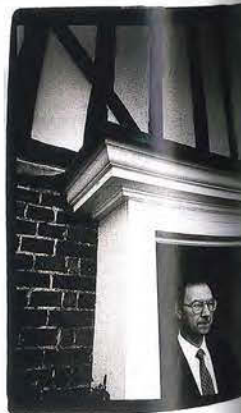
JOHN DUELL, ARCHITECT, HURLEY PORTE AND DUELL



Quantity surveyor Ian Harvey of Dunbar Smith Partnership; concerned about inflation

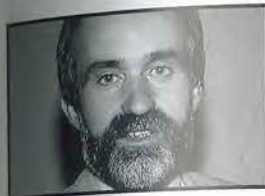
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TREVOR SPARKES, ENGINEER, MADDOCKS LUSHER MATTHEWS



Essex men

One of these men is destined to become the first-ever MP for the new seat of Colchester. Here, they set out their views on construction.



Rod Green, Labour candidate

Regeneration and development

We need to see more urban regeneration programmes for commercial, industrial and residential building on brownfield sites. At the same time, we need to resist more greenfield and out-of-town development, which is damaging the centres of historic towns such as Colchester.

Training

Education and training are at the heart of Labour's programme. The windfall tax will provide jobs and training opportunities in every sector of the construction industry, from electricians and plumbers to carpenters and roofers.

Capital receipts

The phased release of capital receipts will provide funds to build new homes, which are urgently needed in an area such as Colchester and will also create new jobs in the construction industry.



Bob Russell, Liberal Democrat candidate

Urban regeneration and development

I'm very enthused about urban renewal and the regeneration of brownfield sites for the social cohesion it brings. But we have to acknowledge that we will need to see more greenfield site development when you consider that the population of Colchester has increased by 50% in the past 30 years. It's a question of striking the right balance.

Training

We propose life-long training schemes across all professions, industries and crafts. We acknowledge that people may have a number of different jobs through their lifetimes and therefore retraining should be available at every stage.

The private finance initiative

The PFI is an accountant's dream and everybody else's nightmare. It's geared towards the profit motive rather than the requirements of the community. Surely the role of government is that the infrastructure needed for education and training is paid for through taxation.

Phased release of capital receipts

We will use this to start building. Once you start building, a hell of a lot flows from that.



Stephan Shakespeare, Conservative candidate

The best possible support we can offer the construction industry is a stable and growing economy and a flexible labour market. It is prosperity that helps the industry and that is best entrusted to a Conservative government.

Factfile Colchester

Location: Near Essex's southern coast, 80 km north-east of central London.

Marginal status: Projections for the new seat based on the last election suggest that the Conservatives have a small lead. The Liberal Democrats need a 4% swing and view Colchester as their 14th target.

Labour's schoolteacher candidate is also expected to make a good showing.

Type of constituency: The town, with its location near the sea, is considered one of the more desirable residential areas in Essex. But in terms of development, it is in danger of losing out to Braintree and Stansted. Some local

people are hoping that an upgrade of the A120 will reverse this trend, while others are opposed to the scheme.

Construction activity: The town's largest prospective scheme is the £130m PFI redevelopment of Colchester barracks. The largest local client is Essex University.