

Chinese community seeks voice in British parliament

BRITAIN

Aidan Jones in London

With one hand wrapped around a microphone and the other grasping a safety rail, Joseph Wu bellows out a campaign slogan from an open-top bus as it swings into west London.

"Our community. Our vote," the ebullient Hong Kong-born radio presenter says to cheers from the busload of young British Chinese activists.

Not everyone is quite as enthusiastic and the bus, bedecked in bright yellow posters in both English and Chinese, elicits bemused looks from Sunday strollers soaking up the spring sunshine in Brook Green, a chocolate-box parish in this tranquil corner of the capital.

But Wu, who has the energy and appearance of a game-show host, is undeterred. "They have never seen Chinese people on a political campaign. That's what we are here to change," he says, laughing.

The bus has been hired for the day by the British Chinese Project, a lobby group urging Britain's estimated 400,000-strong community to register to vote in the May 6 general election. There are currently no ethnic Chinese MPs and precious few Chinese-origin local councillors in Britain's town halls, leaving the community without a voice in mainstream politics.

Tellingly, research by the Electoral Commission—which supervises the electoral system—says 30 per cent of ethnic Chinese residents are not registered to vote, compared to an average of 8 per cent to 9 per cent for other minorities.

The BC Project hopes to harness a new-found self-confidence among Britain's Chinese diaspora; crafted by the emergence of China as a world

I've never seen Chinese people high up. But we live, work and study here. By the time I am able to vote, I want to see a Chinese MP

James Zhao, 16, is determined

power and the desire of an increasingly well-educated second generation to play a wider role in British society than their parents.

Sitting on the top of the bus, 16-year-old James Zhao, whose parents are from Hong Kong, says: "I've never seen Chinese people high up in society. But we live, work and study here. By the time I am able to vote, I want to see a Chinese MP."

He may not even have to wait that long. At Brook Green, the bus opened its doors to Merlene Toh Emerson, a Singapore-born corporate lawyer and mother of three, who is standing for the centre-left Liberal Democrats in the key London marginal constituency of Hammersmith.

Britain's so-called third party, behind ruling Labour and the opposition Conservatives, received a major, unexpected, poll bounce last week after its leader, Nick Clegg, performed well in the country's first televised debate between the prime ministerial hopefuls.

Emerson hopes this new "Cleggmania" will translate into votes for her locally. She is one of a record eight ethnic Chinese candidates seeking seats in the May 6 election.

Others include, George Lee, a Hong Kong-born Conservative candidate for Holborn and St Pancras, and Philip Ling, a Liberal Democrat candidate for a constituency in Birmingham.

"China's profile has changed and

that has fed into our psyche to make us more vocal and confident about what we want," Emerson explains. "At the next election I have no doubt we will have many second-generation candidates standing. We can't be too far away from having an MP in the House of Commons."

To hasten that possibility the Electoral Commission has launched a leaflet campaign aimed at Chinese residents. Jenny Watson, chair of the commission, says the concerns of Chinese people are going unheard despite decades of immigration and community-building in Britain.

"Many Chinese people tell us they are not sure how to register to vote, what you are voting for, who holds your personal data and how our voting system works," she adds.

Politics may be a new game to many among Britain's Chinese diaspora, but there are deep roots underpinning the lack of engagement.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Chinese migrants were met with hostility and racism, handing a self-reliant community greater reason to stay apart from the mainstream.

"The memory of anti-Chinese exclusion lived on in the community," says Gregor Benton, visiting professor at the Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya and co-author of *The Chinese in Britain*.

"There were also a very small number of Chinese English-speaking intellectuals. That's the difference with Indian immigrants who had a tradition of intellectual and political engagement in Britain."

The language barrier and the fact that the Chinese are thinly spread across Britain have also left the community without the geographic voting blocs of the type which will see around a dozen MPs of South Asian origin propelled to parliament at the national polls.

"Chinese people are self-sufficient and proud; we tend to rely on our networks of friends and family first and will only turn to the state for help as a final measure," Joseph Wu, who is volunteering for the BC Project campaign, explains. "But that means that when we have problems, there is no one to speak up for us."

It was a weakness exposed in 2008 when strengthened immigration laws introduced a points-based criteria system for entry into the country.

As a result, Chinese restaurants could hire fewer chefs and waiting staff from overseas.

"These are family businesses," Wu says. "They don't make huge profits and many had to close or sack their workers to survive. There was a lot of anger and a realisation that we had to organise."

The issue galvanised efforts to politicise Britain's Chinese.

Last year Steven Cheung, now aged 20, became Britain's first Chinese-origin candidate for the European Parliament. Backed by the BC Project and a handful of prominent London businessmen, his campaign was a dry run for this year's election, allowing volunteers to gain canvassing and campaigning experience. Cheung garnered a highly respectable 5,000 votes.

"We are self-reliant but there are bigger problems, like the immigration laws, which we can only address by engaging with politicians," he says. "We have to take an active part in British society from registering to vote to becoming school governors and joining local health trusts."

Cheung says fears that opening up may also heap unwelcome attention onto the community are mislaid.

"The older generation are less engaged, but we are British and want to take part in everything," he explains.

Emerson admits her hopes of becoming one of the first Chinese MPs are slim. "I'm the dark horse in the race," she says. "I am the second daughter in an Asian family and I'm well used to fighting my corner."



James Zhao, 16, reads campaign literature in London during the British Chinese Project lobby group's push for a voice in British politics. Photo: Aidan Jones

Conservative warnings 'ludicrous'

The leader of Britain's Liberal Democrats criticised what he called "ludicrous" warnings by Conservatives yesterday of market turmoil if a May 6 election returns a hung parliament, with no party having a majority.

Support for the Liberal Democrats has jumped 10 points since their leader Nick Clegg outshone his better-known rivals - Prime Minister Gordon Brown and the Conservative David Cameron - in the first live televised debate last week.

The surge in support for Britain's perennial third party raised the chances of a coalition government and left Labour and the Conservatives grappling for ways to counter the "Clegg effect" ahead of last night's scheduled second live TV debate.

Writing in *The Guardian*, Clegg took issue with Conservative warnings that an inconclusive election result would damage Britain's recovery and force the country to seek help from the International Monetary Fund.

"Ludicrous threats are being made by David Cameron and his team ... It won't work because people don't want to be told to fall into line. People have sensed that there is a greater choice, greater freedom. This time they won't be bullied back into the politics of the past."

Reuters

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Victor Li 852 2822 0748

Victor.Li@colliers.com

Gareth Hart 852 2822 0670

Gareth.Hart@colliers.com



Joseph Wu (waving) and Steven Cheung (with microphone) get on the election trail on their campaign bus in leafy London. Photo: Aidan Jones

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