



Stuttering in politics?! - Why not?

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Most people know that Winston Churchill was in politics. Yet, perhaps not many people know that he had a stammer. Same like the Roman emperor Claudius two millenniums ago. Other people were great philosophers and speakers like Aristotle or Demosthenes. Well, this might not be a way for all of the 60 million people who stutter world-wide, but at least it could be one way. If you want to say something, then why not just giving it a try?

And so I did in spring 2008 when I planned to candidate for the mayor position in the German city of Dresden. I had some experiences with politics through different associations and my scientific background (urban planning and cartography) as well as with the media. I have worked from time to time in a free local radio station for about four years and came in touch with newspapers and TV due to my stuttering. At the end of 2007 I realised that no candidate was really “my cup of tea”, and that there were only two ways: not to vote or to be a candidate myself. So, I decided for the latter case without much expectation since I knew that I am a “political nobody” in Dresden from a certain point of view. I had no party backing me, no lobby who would sponsor me except some 300 or 400 people I probably know in Dresden ... and their friends and their friends’ friends and so on. Apart from the three mainly political topics (transparency, basic income, decentralisation) I wanted to raise, I also added “humour” as the fourth one since I thought that the “average” Dresdener sometimes lacks a bit (self-)humour from time to time. Well, some clichés about German aren’t really that wrong ...

Some things sound simple but in practice they aren’t. To be a candidate as a non-party member one needs to find at least 240 people who would go within a 6-week period to the local town hall and who would support you with their signature. They would be registered, and this had to be done from 9-12 am or 1-3 pm with two days a week until 6 pm. If you are not unemployed or may have children and you are not really interested in politics, it is somehow almost impossible to take this pre-selection obstacle. Other things are simply more important to you. Even the person who finally came third in the elections had to “shiver” until the last day; spending about seven weeks of intensive public talks and a reasonable amount of money. I took a week holiday for making PR in the public, wrote some emails and spent a total sum of less than 50 Euros (including the costs for a homepage). In the end 95 people supported me; half of them signed the last two days. The journey to the Dresden town hall seemed to have ended before it even had started.

Nevertheless, I had wonderful experiences including talks to a lot of open-minded people (although in the minority), interviews in newspapers and a short coverage on a local TV station. I have no idea whether people really realised my stuttering (although it was mentioned in the newspaper) but I found it a good way to use the indirect method for making PR for stuttering. Raising awareness for a so-called disability might go easier if almost being unnoticed, that I had learned from PR techniques. Apart from all that there was one big effort for me, maybe even the biggest, I now think when looking back: I got rid of a certain portion of fear, which I think is the most subtle power making stuttering the problem it is or moreover seems to be.

Well, next year we will have the “super election year” here in Dresden, a city which might be also known world-wide due to its endless fights with the UNESCO for keeping a world-heritage title or not in case a certain bridge will be built in a nature protection area in Central Dresden. There will be the elections for the Dresden City Council, for the Saxon Parliament, for the German Parliament (Bundestag) and for the European Parliament. Well, I am not sure whether I shall compete with Chancellor Angela Merkel and her competitor Frank-Walter Steinmeier but why not using elections for making PR for a different purpose and losing some more fears and illusions?

PS: More information (in German only) you will find on the website www.ob-winkler.com.