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White and Red Ken

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Candidates in the run up to the elections for the Mayor of London have started to try and win the votes of the 50 or so thousand Poles that are eligible to vote in the elections set for the 1 May, 2008.

John Beauchamp reports

London is home to over an estimated half a million Poles, and some will be eligible to vote in the elections for Mayor of London next year. The Polish electorate numbers 1% of the total voting population, and the current Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, has already been out with the Polish community trying pierogi, Polish dumplings, and Polish pork cutlets, the revered kotlet schabowy. George Matlock is the editor-in-chief of Orla FM, the first Polish station to broadcast on FM in the UK:

"Well he has actually made a very bold and new move. Recently, he invited, in July, members of the Polish community, both the community leaders and also Polonian media, who attended an event held at City Hall, which is where the Greater London Authority is homed in central London. The idea was to try and tell the Polish community that he acknowledges their growing status within the capital. He actually mentioned that the Polish community is now numbered the tenth largest ethnic group within the cosmopolitan area of London. He had in the vicinity about two hundred major people from the Polish community."

With such a huge Polish migration living within the boundaries of Greater London, differences between the Poles are also apparent. There have been several migrations to London, starting from the beginning of the Second World War, throughout the Communist era, and now the so-called third wave, which is the economic migration to the UK since Poland's entry into the EU in 2004. It is not that apparent whether these Poles have any political awareness of London life, and so the question is, will Poles vote in these elections or will they be spoiling their ballots? Andrzej Morawicz is from the Ognisko Polskie Polish club in London:

"I think the Poles who have been settled here for a number of years. Obviously the ones who have put down

their roots, obviously there is a political awareness because it affects their lives. They've been here for fifty, sixty, forty, thirty-or-so years. The new wave of immigration, whether they have a political awareness I'm not at all sure. I should think perhaps they do acquire this political awareness. People even in Poland have a tendency not to vote at general elections: it's not a high percentage, I think it's a lower percentage than in the UK, so as far as the political awareness is concerned, I would have my doubts."

Ken Livingstone, the present Mayor of London, has already been concentrating on informing Poles in the London area about his work in the city. Other candidates will have a lot of work to catch up with Mr. Livingstone's progress as far as the Polish community is concerned. The major contender Boris Johnson, of the British Conservative Party, was not available for an interview: his campaign for the Mayor of London starts on Monday, and it remains to be seen whether he'll be appealing to the Polish community by eating pierogi or drinking a shot of vodka.

George Matlock gives his view:

"It's very low key at the moment. I think that the main problem we have is that people start preparing for next year's mayoral election in London, there is a currently a process under way which involves the opposition getting their campaign together. Unlike Ken Livingstone, who has the advantage of being of being Mayor now for a number of years, he has, obviously, only to look at who to start campaigning to, whereas the opposition is still formulating who's going to be its front runner. I think the problem is that that is still coming together and it will remain to see how the opposition will win over what an important and credible Polish vote."

Even though the vote is still some way in the future, campaigns are starting up very soon, and as Ken Livingstone woos the Polish vote, time will tell if other politicians running for Mayor will be willing to get that extra 1% from Polish voters.

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