



Battle for Metrolink intensifies

RIGHT: Simon Hughes, Lib Dem shadow minister for Home Affairs, with ex-councillor Qassim Afzal. MI3206b04



THE BATTLE to save the Metrolink stepped up a gear this week, with both major opposition parties pledging to get the tram system back on track.

The Tories accused the government of letting Manchester down badly over much-needed new tramlines to East Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale and South Manchester - putting Labour under huge pressure in one of their Northern strongholds, ahead of next year's general election.

Conservative leader Michael Howard said earlier this week: "This is an important project to improve the quality of life for local people.

"The Conservatives will look at imaginative ways to see how we can

put right Labour's failure to deliver."

And during a visit to Cheetham on Monday, senior Liberal Democrat MP Simon Hughes suggested that Labour's refusal to fund the Metrolink extension could cost them five seats across Greater Manchester.

Standing on the Woodlands Road station platform with Liberal Democrat Federal Executive member Qassim Afzal, he said: "The Government's decision will be seen as a betrayal by local people in Manchester Central, Gorton, Withington, Olham East, Saddleworth and Rochdale.

"As the party in second place we are most likely to benefit."

Mr Afzal added: "The decision to send the money to London, increasing

the already widening poverty gap, is unacceptable and proves the government does not have Manchester's interests at heart."

Manchester Liberal Democrat Group Leader Simon Ashley added: "If the government do not perform a U-turn on this issue it will cost Labour dear in Greater Manchester.

"The government are playing with fire with this one."

Local MP Tony Lloyd said: "I raised the issue in Parliament, and can honestly say that all Manchester MPs are dismayed by the decision to pull the funding for this vital extension.

"In the past, the government have backed us on this issue, and we will fight to get that backing again."