

**Laurence Robertson's  
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER  
28<sup>th</sup> December 2009**

A journalist telephoned me the other day and asked me which New Year's resolutions I would be making. I replied that, as I usually only adhere to them until 2nd January, I probably won't bother again this year. So we then discussed the things I would like to see happen in this country and across the world during 2010.

In this country, I would like to see a return to what I call honest money. Throughout the last few years, the economy has been built on debt - personal and government - and this now has to end. We have to reduce the massive government deficit, encourage banks and building societies to start lending again but to do so responsibly and we have to ensure that the government, too, lives within its means.

On local issues, I will be attempting to strengthen the Floods & Water Management Bill, which comes before the Commons in January, so that my constituency might, at least to some extent, be better protected from the dangers of flooding in the future. And, linked to that, I will continue my fight against the plans to build thousands of houses across my constituency, as it should be recognised as a flood risk area and therefore not built on.

There are so many problems across the world which I hope we will make progress on. Climate change is the most obvious one. But I also hope that progress in the fight against terrorism can be made in Afghanistan and that, as soon as possible, our troops can come home. And I hope that we can persuade states such as North Korea and Iran that nuclear proliferation flies in the face of world peace and stability and that there is a better way forward for them. Human rights, too, need improving, in countries such as China, where an opposition campaigner has just been jailed for 11 years.

World poverty must continue to be tackled. Because of the efforts being made at Copenhagen, the world seems to have forgotten that East Africa continues to suffer from the drought and that emergency aid might well be needed by countries such as Ethiopia early in the New Year. And the continuing growth in world population presents further problems in this respect.

When we consider problems of such magnitude it is easy to become depressed about the world's prospects. But as I wrote in my article last week, Christmas offers hope and so too does the New Year. So, no New Year's resolutions from me this year, other than a determination that I will continue to work as hard as possible for my constituents and my country. And to enable me to do so, I pray for good health for my family, friends and myself. And I wish you, too, good health and a peaceful New Year.

***Laurence Robertson's***  
**VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER**  
**15th December 2009**

Last week, along with many MPs, I presented a small petition to Parliament on behalf of 25 constituents who were concerned about recommendations in the Badman Report regarding the provision of home education.

I believe that almost all children are better off being educated in schools, where they can develop friendships and become accustomed to sharing, competition and other essential ingredients of life. But I also accept that, for some children, school is just too much and that they need educating in a different way, and some parents are concerned that the Badman recommendations will be too bureaucratic to allow this to happen.

In the last few days we have also seen the government partially, but insufficiently, backtrack on its proposals to vet all adults who come into regular contact with the same group of children. Again, of course, children have to be safe and their wellbeing should be of paramount importance. But, once more, many people felt that such tight restrictions would deter many people from volunteering to help in schools, which would result in a loss of manpower for schools and would therefore end up depriving children of a number of activities.

These examples, plus so many others, demonstrate how important it is to strike the right balance between protecting the vulnerable but also holding back from restricting the freedoms of law-abiding citizens. The state has to protect people, sometimes from themselves, but it shouldn't go too far as the nanny state is not exactly loved by everyone.

I have three (step) grandchildren, all at vulnerable ages, and I would, of course, do anything in my power to protect them. But I remember when they attended school in California, where they lived for five years. On arrival at school their teachers would often hug them as a welcome in the mornings. That just doesn't happen here. Yet I don't believe that those teachers who hugged the school children are any more likely to abuse them than teachers who are prohibited from doing so.

I'm not, of course, suggesting that America has got everything right in this respect and that we have got everything wrong – far from it. But I do think that we have to be careful that we don't over-burden people with rules and regulations which only serve to restrict people's freedoms but don't actually protect the vulnerable from the real bad people in society. And I think that, at the moment, most people would feel that we are not striking the right balance.

**Laurence Robertson's**  
**VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER**  
**8<sup>th</sup> December 2009**

There's a lot of political activity going on in what is the penultimate week of this term of Parliament before the Christmas recess, two of which are very big and important.

In Copenhagen, the countries of the world gather to discuss climate change and will try to reach agreement, to follow on from Kyoto, on cutting emissions. As they meet, the debate rages on about the extent to which human behaviour is actually causing the problem.

Also, this week, the UK government is making proposals which may see constraints being put on public spending and perhaps pay and profits. The Pre-Budget Report will be made after this article has gone to press so I don't know its details yet.

Why do I mention these events in the same article? Well, because I believe them to be linked. It is important that we have a vibrant, competitive economy which creates prosperity and, in doing so, jobs. But I also believe that it will take a lot of money to tackle the threat of climate change and any damage done to our economy will impede our ability to bring about the necessary changes.

Greenhouse gases are mainly produced through energy production and transport. Yet the technologies which are available – which have been available for years – can solve the problem but they are not, as yet, being utilised. For example, in this country we produce only 5% of our electricity from renewable sources. If we include nuclear production, we could say that we produce about 20% of our electricity from zero carbon sources.

But if we had started to use renewable energy – solar, hydro, wind, thermal etc - earlier, and had been serious about it, and if we had made plans for the building of new nuclear reactors to replace those which we knew would have to be decommissioned, those figures would be so much higher, and our carbon emissions so much lower as a result.

In transport, too, we should be further on than we are. Shortly after Kyoto, in 1998, I was in Detroit looking at the efforts the Americans were making to develop clean cars. So the technology was there all those years ago, yet very few clean cars are on the road.

So why isn't this technology being used? Partly through a lack of real political will and partly because setting up new arrangements for power production and transport will be expensive - thus the need for the vibrant economy which I spoke about earlier. So the message from Copenhagen should not be about stopping people from doing things, but about making sure we do those things cleanly.

**Laurence Robertson's  
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER  
1<sup>st</sup> December 2009**

This week, on Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> December, the Lisbon Treaty came into force. In spite of there being much speculation about whether there would be a referendum on the treaty in this country or not, the introduction of the treaty has gone virtually unnoticed.

There was, of course, a referendum in Ireland on the treaty and, in June 2008, the Irish voted no to ratifying it. But in typical EU style, the Irish were asked to reconsider and, more recently, voted yes in a second referendum.

There have, though, been many questions asked about why we in the UK were denied a referendum when the Labour government had promised one before the last General Election. The excuse they came up with was that the actual treaty was different from the "constitutional" treaty which was being proposed at that time. That is nonsense – there is a transfer of power from national parliaments to the EU and that, in my view, should always give rise to a referendum.

David Cameron said that a Conservative government would hold a referendum, but of course that could only happen if the treaty had not actually been ratified by all countries involved. There would be no point in holding a referendum on a treaty which was already in place and taking effect and, indeed, to do so would be to mislead the electorate.

However, what the Conservative Party believes does need to happen is for there to be a thorough review of the powers which now rest with the EU with a view to bringing some of those powers back to the UK. In other words, we are not just concerned about the Lisbon treaty, but all the treaties which have been enacted and which have taken powers away from this country. We are also clear that there should be no further powers transferred to the EU without the British people giving their consent to such a transfer in a referendum.

I believe that such moves are essential if we are to try to re-connect the British people with the political process. Far too many decisions are made, and laws enacted, which people have had no say in. This is principally happening because of the EU but also because of the quango state which we have built. This disconnect is the real reason why people are disillusioned with the political process and it is therefore something we must address.

So, this week has marked a further step in the wrong direction. It creates a further disconnect between people and decision-making. In a democracy, this is unacceptable. And it is a step which must be reversed.

***Laurence Robertson's***  
**VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER**  
**24th November 2009**

I've spent quite a bit of time recently discussing waste and energy matters as these issues are very live at the moment and will continue to be for some time to come.

Waste might not be the most exciting subject on earth. It probably isn't the topic of conversation over many family breakfast tables. But the generation of waste is something we all contribute to and handling and disposing of it has become a big problem.

To start with, we produce far too much unnecessary waste. Excessive packaging contributes to this. Manufacturers, in attempts to make their products appear more attractive, wrap them in all manner of fancy packaging, some of which requires a pair of scissors or a knife to release the original product from. Food waste, too, is far too prevalent, as is other waste.

The matter is coming to a head because of the government's Europe-inspired landfill tax, which is increasing at a rate which makes disposing of waste in that way so much more expensive. Sensibly, then, Gloucestershire County Council, which is responsible for disposing of the domestic waste we create (the Borough Councils are responsible for collecting it), is reviewing its waste strategy and has set a target of achieving levels of increase of recycling and composting of 60% by 2020. To help attain this ambitious target, it has secured a Private Finance Initiative credit of £92 million, to be used to support such projects.

I recently visited Grundons in Bishop's Cleeve, which deals with commercial waste, as well as companies which, in various ways, recycle waste. Other companies use this waste to create electricity, which is also a big issue given the increasing price of power and fears about the security of supply. I have also had discussions with the Environment Agency about these issues.

Turning waste into electricity can be a controversial subject with no-one wanting an incinerator built close to where they live. But straight-forward incineration isn't the only way in which waste can be dealt with as there are other complicated and technical ways of processing waste which, in turn, make the use of that waste when creating electricity much more productive and greener.

Dealing with waste, reducing emissions, securing energy supplies and generally preserving our way of life while, at the same time, protecting the planet are very big challenges indeed. Some compromises will be necessary if we are to achieve all these things. A lot of money will also need to be spent on these projects, because we have gone far too far down the wrong roads to protect the earth on the cheap.

Add these challenges to those of providing medicines for all who need them, pensions at a time when we are living very much longer than we used to, balancing budgets through credit crunches, and a whole host of other requirements, make the challenges of modern life so much different to how they used to be.

**Laurence Robertson's**  
**VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER**  
**17<sup>th</sup> November 2009**

Parliament prorogued on Thursday last week in advance of the Queen's Speech, which is to take place on Wednesday. Normally, I would be in attendance to hear about the government's legislative programme for the forthcoming year, but I am presently on a brief trip to Ghana.

I have taken the opportunity to travel to that country at the request of some business people who are members of the Conservative Africa Business Group, which I chair. The Group has been in existence for over fifty years and is basically made up of people who are very experienced in doing business in that continent, and I am there with them to try to open a few political doors.

I have travelled to Ethiopia three times, and hope to go there again soon, Rwanda, Kenya and Egypt in Africa, but have never previously been to Ghana. As I write this article, I am preparing to go in the hope that I can do a little bit to help with trade in that country.

Trade is the way forward for Africa. I sometimes receive letters saying that these countries should be allowed to be protectionist and that globalisation is wrong, but that is a bit like saying breathing or eating is wrong – globalisation is inevitable, and all countries need to embrace its opportunities.

What is wrong is the European Union's protectionist policies, and these have to change in order to help Africa to advance. The last thing which is needed is retaliation in Africa against these policies. I have visited companies in Africa, such as those which grow flowers and export them to this country, and the workers in those factories are far better off because of the existence of the companies. What is needed is not trade barriers but more companies like them.

So while I'm in Ghana I'll be closely watching what is announced in the Queen's Speech to see if there will be any measures announced which will help such countries to make this progress, but I doubt I will see it. The government is far too concerned about its "image" or "reputation" in the European Union to do the right thing.

It's over twenty years ago that Ronald Reagan famously said about the Berlin wall "Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall" and when the people did tear the wall down it led to millions of people obtaining their freedom. What Gordon Brown should be saying this week to the EU is to tear down the protectionist wall which exists around Europe, so that millions of people around the world can not only achieve their political and economic freedoms but can also preserve their lives.

Such action is worth taking on humanitarian grounds. But it would also afford opportunities to British companies, as well.

***Laurence Robertson's***  
**VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER**  
**10<sup>th</sup> November 2009**

Once again this year, I was proud to take part in the Remembrance Day commemorations. This year I attended the service at Tewkesbury. Last year, I went to Bishop's Cleeve and, before that, Churchdown and Winchcombe.

I'm only sorry that I cannot also attend all the smaller services which are held in villages throughout my constituency, as I am that I cannot also be at the one in London at the same time. All are put together with skill and dedication.

The weather in Tewkesbury on Sunday morning was terrible. I can remember cold and wind on Remembrance Sunday but not rain. Many people, including young children representing their particular brigade or unit, became soaked as they marched through, and stood in, the town. But they never flinched.

Canon Paul Williams conducted the service inside and outside the magnificent Abbey. Such services perhaps mean different things to different people. There are those who will have lost family members in the Great War of 1914-18 and indeed those who fought in the Second World War of 1939-45, as well as those who were bereaved at that time. And it is also right that those who fought in, and were bereaved by, more recent conflicts, including the on-going war in Afghanistan, should be recognised and remembered.

It was said that the Great War - the First World War - was the war to end all wars. Sadly, tragically, this was not the case and the world was at war again in 1939. And now, conflicts continue, presently as a result of terrorist activity which all civilised nations wish to stamp out. How we best do that is a matter of opinion, but I pay tribute to our brave men and women who are attempting to do just that in Afghanistan.

I once attended a Remembrance Day service, many years ago and not in this area, where the preacher said that, once the conflict had begun, it was difficult to distinguish between the aggressors and the oppressed. How wrong he was. Germany was the aggressor in 1939 and the terrorists are the aggressors now. It is their doing that people were murdered in London in July 2005, and in America in September 2001, and it is their doing that our people are dying in Afghanistan now. If we lose sight of that fact we lose all values.

Having attended many of these services in remembrance of those who have fallen, I always feel that the greatest tribute we can pay to them is to build a peaceful, free and just world in their memory. The on-going events in Afghanistan demonstrate that we still have some way to go.

**Laurence Robertson's  
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER  
3<sup>rd</sup> November 2009**

Twenty years ago, Margaret Thatcher made the famous assertion that "Advisors advise and Ministers decide" after her economics advisor, Sir Alan Walters, had been attacked for having too much influence on government economic policy and he subsequently resigned.

This week, another advisor, Professor David Nutt, has been in the news following his dismissal by the Home Secretary, Alan Johnson, as the government's chief drugs advisor. On this occasion, it was the government itself who felt that an advisor was straying too far into politics.

I raised a point with regard to Professor Nutt in the House of Commons myself a while ago. On that occasion, he had said that taking Cannabis was less risky than horse riding, or words to that effect. I felt that that was a particularly stupid thing to say, as one activity is a respected, disciplined sport and the other an illegal activity which causes all sorts of problems.

Indeed, as Alan Johnson himself said, there are thousands of young people in each constituency in danger of being drawn into drug-taking and this kind of comparison is very unhelpful. I do, therefore, think he was right to dismiss Professor Nutt, for this and for other unhelpful, and perhaps inaccurate, remarks he seems to have made.

That said, the government has been all over the place on its policy towards Cannabis. A previous drugs advisor, Keith Halliwell, was dismissed after making very sensible remarks about Cannabis. The government then downgraded Cannabis from a Class B to a Class C drug, against his advice, sending a totally wrong message to young people, many of whom thought it had been legalised. Then, in the opposite direction, the government upgraded the classification of the drug, again against their new advisor's advice.

It's a chaotic situation and the government should be giving a clearer steer on this issue. As far as I'm concerned, taking Cannabis is dangerous in itself and also leads people onto even stronger drugs. This drug taking then causes its takers to commit crime as they seek to obtain money to buy even more drugs. So for this reason and others, drug taking is not the same thing as drinking or smoking. It has much worse, and uncontrollable, effects and we should always strive to make that clear.

Parliament isn't just about passing laws – it's about sending messages. And the message on drugs has to go out clearly that taking drugs is wrong, it's dangerous, it destroys lives and it's illegal.

**Laurence Robertson's  
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER  
27<sup>th</sup> October 2009**

Last week, the viewing figures for the BBC's *Question Time* programme rose from about 2 million to about 8 million, according to the Corporation's figures. In my view, this wasn't because of the appearance of BNP leader Nick Griffin but because of all the controversy surrounding it.

The BBC's decision to invite Mr Griffin to take part in the programme was criticised by many, including Cabinet Member Peter Hain. And on the night, there were loud and angry protests outside the BBC studios against his appearance.

I am not one of those politicians who have an active dislike of the BBC, but I did feel that they handled this situation badly. It seemed to me that, having invited Mr Griffin to appear, they felt they couldn't back down, following criticism of their decision, but were persuaded that they should give him a rough time once he was on the programme. As a result, the audience was hostile, the other panellists were highly charged and even the normally professional presenter, David Dimbleby, was, in my view, somewhat short of his best.

As a result, Mr Griffin, whom I did not find to be particularly perceptive or articulate, won some sympathy votes if not from the audience itself certainly outside. That was unfortunate because, while he will have found some people who agreed with some of his views as expressed, his previous denial of the holocaust and his whites-only policy within his own Party does, to me, remove his credibility as a serious politician.

Another problem arising from the BBC's handling of the issue was that the subjects themselves – immigration, Europe, the Lisbon Treaty, the National Debt, the postal strike – were not properly discussed, and one of the reasons why some people turn away from the mainstream political parties and vote BNP is that they feel that the larger parties do not properly, fully or effectively address these issues. I therefore think that the BBC has something to learn from this process in this respect.

Additionally, mainstream politicians need to – and be allowed to - properly address the issues which concern people. It is quite possible to discuss immigration without being racist and without being concerned about the colour of someone's skin. It is perfectly possible to want the UK to control its own destiny, minus interference from the European Union, without being xenophobic. And it's totally acceptable to promote Christianity without being, for example, anti-Islamic.

But I also hope that voters will see beyond some of Mr Griffin's words which they may have agreed with and realise that he dodged questions, avoided many of the points put to him and skirted round some of the more crucial issues as good as any mainstream politician has ever done. For that reason, as well as many others, he is not worth voting for.

**\* *There was no "View from Westminster" for 20<sup>th</sup> October 2009 due to commitments in Northern Ireland.***

**Laurence Robertson's  
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER  
13<sup>th</sup> October 2009**

It's been a busy time. I used the recess to pay many visits to schools, businesses and other organisations around my constituency during the summer months. Work in Parliament is obviously very important, but it is equally important to have a good feel for what is happening locally.

Following this, I spent most of last week in Manchester at the Conservative Party conference where, again, I had a busy time, holding many meetings and attending events. I did used to enjoy attending conferences by the seaside but it worked well in Manchester.

Of course, my working time isn't totally filled with meetings, as there is much correspondence to deal with, but I feel that the meetings I hold with various people and organisations, and the visits I make, might be of interest to my constituents so I have been posting a brief diary of my activities on my web-site, which can be found at [www.laurencerobertsonmp.com](http://www.laurencerobertsonmp.com)

Then this week Parliament resumed after the recess, only to be engulfed in the expenses issue again as Sir Thomas Legg, who had conducted an examination of some claims over the last five years, wrote to MPs with his assessments.

The letters were delayed in their arrival and the mood in Westminster was a mixture of apprehension and activity. And the contents of some of the letters were surprising, for example one MP being told that his Additional Costs Allowance claims had been thoroughly examined etc when in fact he had never made any claims. And on it went.

Some other MPs have been asked to pay money back – although I personally have not been asked to make repayments - on the basis of rules and standards which Sir Thomas Legg appears to have drawn up himself, when, in fact, his remit was to judge claims against the rules and standards which existed at the time. However, I fully recognise that the whole issue needs sorting, and quickly. There are two other reviews taking place at the moment which will make recommendations with regard to salaries and allowances for the future, and the sooner the better.

Just months from a General Election, it is vitally important that we return to the issues which are affecting people each and every day of their lives. The economy, Afghanistan, housing, the NHS...there are so many issues which need discussing, and I look forward to these discussions, and to making more visits in my constituency similar to those I undertook during the recess.

***\* There will be no "View from Westminster on 6<sup>th</sup> October as Laurence is attending the Conservative Party Conference in Manchester***

***Laurence Robertson's  
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER  
29<sup>th</sup> September 2009***

I have just returned from spending a long weekend away in New York City which is a place I have not been to since 1994 when I had the privilege – and experienced the pain – of running in the New York City marathon.

I was younger, fitter and slimmer in those days. It was the sixth marathon I had entered but I hadn't attempted one for ten years. Nevertheless, I struggled round the course at about half way in the field and managed to raise £10,000 for the charity I was working for at the time.

We ran through all five of the boroughs and it interested me to see how different they were. Manhattan is the obvious visitor-attraction and is the place which appears on most of the pictures taken of New York, which usually feature the Statue of Liberty with the Lower Manhattan sky-line as the backdrop.

It was interesting to return to the City, though very sad to see Ground Zero – the site of what was the World Trade Centre. Overall, though, I would say the City has changed a little and that was confirmed by a number of people I spoke to there. Over the years, crime has been dramatically reduced in the City, largely through a zero-tolerance policy towards crime and an active police presence throughout.

In the past, it was ill advised to use the subway – our underground equivalent – at night, though this time I used it frequently and completely without incident. Central Park was also thought to be unsafe, although, again, it demonstrated none of its old problems on my visit, although I only ventured there during the day. And, although I largely stuck to Manhattan during my short stay, the streets seemed relatively safe.

These changes, of course, have been welcomed. But New Yorkers still refer to the "old New York", which, although it's difficult to imagine, was perhaps even more vibrant, with somewhat colourful characters seemingly occupying every pavement, or walkway. That said, the City seemed vibrant enough to me, with Times Square – a sort of match for our Piccadilly Circus – teeming with people to the extent that, later in the evening, taxis were difficult to get. And there was no shortage of people willing to engage in conversation, usually in attempts to get you to buy something – theatre tickets, open-top bus rides, jewellery or whatever.

Manhattan is quite expensive for many things, especially given the 1-1.6 pound-dollar exchange rate, although that is probably the more enduring rate than the 2-1 we enjoyed a while ago. Some of the main hotels might be luxurious but many have very small rooms, although their location within walking distance of Times Square tends to be their selling point. The ones without location are probably less expensive. The secret is probably to obtain cheap flights and book the hotel as part of the deal.

I'm privileged to live quite a large part of my life in London and, to me, our capital is the greatest place I have even experienced, although I have a great fondness for our countryside. But New York City, well, that is something special as well.

***Laurence Robertson's***  
**VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER**  
**22<sup>nd</sup> September 2009**

Often referred to as the "silly season", and sometimes with good reason, the Party Conference season has begun. Well, actually, it began with the TUC Conference just over a week ago, when the Prime Minister finally conceded that cuts would be needed in order to rescue the British economy.

This week it's the Liberal Democrat's conference, followed by the Labour Conference then the Conservative Conference. Ours starts on Monday 5<sup>th</sup> October and will be held in Manchester for the first time. Last year, we held it in Birmingham but previously we have always gone to the seaside, most recently alternating between Blackpool and Bournemouth and, before that, holding it in Brighton sometimes.

Of course, Brighton has bad memories for the Conservative Party because it was there in 1984 when the IRA blew up the Grand Hotel during conference week, murdering five people and causing serious injuries to many others. Norman Tebbit's wife has never walked since and her injuries serve as a tragic reminder to the results of terrorist activities.

There are, however, many enjoyable times had at party Conferences and I have attended every Conference since 1983 – apart from that one in Brighton in 1984, strangely – and will be attending this year. I was born and lived in the North West for 33 years, so had an affection for Blackpool and do prefer conferences by the sea, but I will be in Manchester.

I have a heavy diary for the conference week already. There are obviously the debates which take place in the main hall, but there are far more activities going on outside the hall. For example, there are many fringe meetings, receptions and other get-togethers which keep many of us busy. I have arranged meetings with, for example, representatives of Sue Ryder, British Wind energy Association, the Nuclear Industry, an airport, a bookmakers, General Dynamics, the casino industry, the Irish Ambassador and others. I am also to chair a meeting on flooding.

In the meantime, I am continuing to use the recess to get around my constituency as much as possible. Last week, I visited some schools and businesses, spent time on my Police Service Parliamentary Scheme, made presentations to school children on behalf of Tesco's and did quite a few other things. Also, I have started to post brief diary notes on my website, which can be found at [www.laurencerobertsonmp.com](http://www.laurencerobertsonmp.com) for anyone who would like to look it up.

This week, I will be spending some in London as well as in Tewkesbury, while at the same time keeping my eye on the "silly season" happenings!

***Laurence Robertson's***  
**VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER**  
**15<sup>th</sup> September 2009**

Last Friday marked the 8<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attacks on New York and other parts of America when thousands of people were murdered in the terrorist attacks which became known as 9/11.

Given this tragic anniversary, it seemed to be such desperate stupidity that, just a few days earlier, a 600lb bomb had been planted in Forkhill in the South Armagh area of Northern Ireland. It was, thankfully, disabled by experts before the perpetrators of the crime had the chance to kill police officers, as was their aim, as well as civilians.

Two days after the bomb had been disabled, I visited the very lane in Forkhill where the bomb had been planted, as part of my work as Shadow Minister for Northern Ireland. It is a very quiet country lane whose only significance is that it is often used by police officers, thus the planting of the bomb there. The bomb was larger than the one which was exploded in Omagh in August 1998, which killed 29 people, making it the worst atrocity of the Troubles.

My visit to South Armagh had actually been planned in advance of the bomb being found, so it was, in that sense, coincidental. As well as visiting the bomb site, I also went to Crossmaglen, which is another border town and is often referred to as "bandit country" and one or two other areas. I spoke at a school and held meetings with two victims' support groups, who are doing their best against difficult odds and a tragic, sad history.

The security situation in Northern Ireland is, of course, incomparably better than it was some years ago. But things are, sadly and worrying, bubbling under a little. The dissident republicans, who seem to have splintered a number of times, and who are made up of both experienced and new violators, are carrying on "the war" and are determined to cause terror and chaos in the Province. There is more going on in Northern Ireland than is being reported in the English media.

The power-sharing principles on which the Northern Ireland Assembly is founded have, to an extent, brought about political stability. But the arrangement does not provide for a system of dynamic government. The fact that decisions have to be taken on a cross-community basis means that few decisions are actually taken, which is frustrating for the people who are trying to make progress in the community. I hope that the gridlock which is being experienced at the moment will not lead to political unrest.

There has, then been great progress made over the last few years in Northern Ireland. But more needs to be done to cement the relatively stable political arrangements and to rid Northern Ireland once and for all of the violent disposition of a tiny but dangerous minority of the population there.

***Laurence Robertson's***  
**VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER**  
**7<sup>th</sup> September 2009**

Last week, I drove down to Exeter to attend the first sitting of the South West Regional Grand Committee. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have had Grand Committees – talking shops, in reality – for many years and the government decided that each region of England should have one as well.

Every MP in the South West “region” is a member of the committee and is therefore entitled to attend. The Minister, for the South West Jim Knight, was present to answer questions and make a speech. The quorum for the meeting is 17 and there were between 16 and 20 MPs present at any time, making it technically inquorate for a few minutes every so often. If only 16 had actually been in the building we would have presumably called off the whole meeting, rendering all the costs of holding the event a complete waste of money.

I asked questions on travellers and rail and road travel (separate issues) and others asked about other issues. But the Minister for the South West has no executive powers. In other words, he cannot decide on, for example, health or education matters – he must refer those issues to the relevant Secretaries of State. So the best he could do was to make sympathetic noises from time to time. That’s what I mean by saying that such committees are just talking shops.

The whole meeting last two-and-a-half hours. Questions took 45 minutes, leaving just 105 minutes for the debate on unemployment. Very few MPs were able to get in to speak due to the shortage of time. And even if they had, the Minister, as I say, cannot promise anything. So really, what was the point?

The Labour government, supported by the Liberal Democrats, believe in regionalisation and regional government. The Conservative Party does not. We voted against setting up these talking shops and will scrap the Regional Assemblies if and when returned to power. They are all an expensive waste of money.

The issue also begs the question “what is a region?” Even the Minister himself admitted, unprovoked by me, that Tewkesbury is as close to the Scottish border as it is to Lands End, so exactly what affinity do we have with such parts of this so-called region? None whatsoever, as far as I can see. Decisions might as well be made in London as in Exeter, or, preferably, where appropriate, in the local councils.

The public doesn’t need more committees setting up or more politicians. They need issues to be addressed and problems to be solved. Setting up regional committees is just a cop-out from real responsibility and decision making.

***Laurence Robertson's***  
**VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER**  
**1<sup>st</sup> September 2009**

It's been a few days of visiting fetes for me recently. I started on Saturday morning when I was asked to open the one at Northway which had been organised by the Northway Residents on Saturday.

I then called at the Tewkesbury Hospital fete, which is a well established event, and, although I couldn't stay long, I had the pleasure of meeting a number of people there.

And then on Bank Holiday Monday, I attended the fete held at Twyning, which is, again, a well established event. This time, there were probably more people in attendance than usual and the weather, by and large, behaved itself.

In between these fetes, I held my own large-scale barbecue, to which I invited a number of local people to attend. Again, the weather just about held, although it was hard to believe it was still August at that point. So much for the barbeque summer which some weather people seemed to be predicting as we all struggled through a cold winter!

During the last week, I have also had the chance to visit a number of companies in the constituency and to discuss various issues with them. I have also spent two days on my Police Service Parliamentary Scheme. On the first day, I spent time on traffic policing and learning about the number plate recognition system, which alerts the police to cars which, for one reason or another, should not be on the road. I also spent time with the accident unit.

On the second day with the police, I learnt about the firearms unit and the dogs section, which work closely together. Both were tremendously interesting and I learnt a huge amount in the day I was with these units, as I did with the traffic unit.

I also spent another day in London during the last week. As a Shadow Minister for Northern Ireland, I attended a meeting with our Front Bench team to discuss policies for after the General Election, should we form the next government. Our main priorities for Northern Ireland are to cement the relative peace and political stability and also to help stimulate the economy, which is currently too dependent on the state.

All these activities add up to a very interesting week and I look forward to carrying out more of the same, or at least similar, over the next few weeks of recess. And as I've said before, constituents can still write to me at the House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA during this time.

**Laurence Robertson's  
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER  
24<sup>th</sup> August 2009**

The decision taken by the Scottish Justice Minister to release the only man convicted of the Lockerbie bombing has raised a storm of controversy these last few days.

Abdul Baset Ali al-Megrahi was convicted on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2001 at a specially convened Scottish court sitting in the Netherlands of the murder of 270 people in the bombing of the Pan Am flight from London to New York on 21<sup>st</sup> December 1988. He has, therefore, only served eight years of his sentence before being released by Kenny MacAskill on "compassionate" grounds.

Under the 1998 devolution settlement (I made my maiden speech in the Commons the previous year against such a devolution arrangement) the Scottish Minister is allowed to take such a decision. However, the decision to allow al-Megrahi to leave the UK is taken by the Westminster government.

The release of someone who has served around eleven days as punishment for each of the lives he took has been condemned up and down the country, and indeed over the water in the United States. The point has been made that, while he can return home to his family, albeit for a short period of time, his victims were never given that chance. If compassion was necessary, couldn't he have been accommodated in some appropriate establishment in Scotland?

The release has also given rise to a number of other questions. Was the UK government in talks with the Libyan government about his matter? Was any deal done? Why was the Libyan government so welcoming of this convicted mass murderer when he returned? Why were Scottish flags flown as he returned home? And why has our own UK government, especially the Prime Minister, been so silent about this issue and their role in it?

I have had no involvement with anyone in this case but I have met very many relatives and friends of victims of terrorism in Northern Ireland. Those people don't want retribution but they do want to see justice carried out. And it hurts them so badly to see those who have murdered their loved ones living as free men and women. There must therefore be hundreds of people feeling similar pain over the release of this man.

Some people claim that it was right to release a man with only months to live. As a Christian, I believe in forgiveness, but am guided by the words of the Prayer Book which refers to forgiveness being granted to those who *truly repent*. I'm not aware that al-Megrahi has repented in any way, and this persuades me that the memories of those innocent people murdered, along with the pain of those they left behind, should come before this supposed compassionate act by the Scottish Minister.

***Laurence Robertson's***  
**VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER**  
**18<sup>th</sup> August 2009**

When I was in Virginia last week it became obvious to me just how big a debate the Americans are having over health care, as President Obama proposes his reforms. It's a very interesting and emotive subject, although it's not a new debate. They were interested to hear from me about our NHS, although the President isn't proposing a replica. He is proposing a sort of state-funded insurance system.

America spends about double the amount we spend, as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product, on health care, and, while their outcomes are not twice as good as ours, they are, by and large, significantly better than ours in areas such as cancer and heart attack survival rates.

There is a myth that there are large numbers of people in America who cannot access health treatment. It simply isn't true that their paramedic-equivalents let people die on the streets if an injured person can't demonstrate his wealth or show his health insurance card. My own step-daughter lived in America for five years and was treated as an urgent case on at least two occasions without being means tested first. But there are two levels of health care in America, one for the insured and one for the uninsured, and the debate in America has led to a debate taking place in this country about our NHS.

I am proud of the ethos of our NHS – treatment for everyone, free at the point of service – and am glad it's there. But being proud of it shouldn't mean that we cannot seek to improve it, because, in some ways, it fails too many people. For example, I am presently suffering from a back problem, as I frequently do. I need to see a consultant, but could not do so on the NHS for a number of weeks, when the pain will most likely have disappeared, for a while at least. So, for me, and for many others with a similar problem, there isn't actually treatment available through the NHS at the time when it's needed. There is also varying levels of treatment available in different parts of the country and there is the existence of life-saving drugs which are developed but not prescribed.

However, to make these observations about the NHS is not to decry its worth or to suggest that it should be dismantled. Far from it. People who wish to reform and improve the NHS will be its saviour. Those who treat it as a sacred cow, which should never be changed, are the ones who pose the danger to it. They should realise that the NHS doesn't let down rich people or those who know how to get themselves to the front of a queue – on the occasions the NHS fails, it is poorer, less confident, people it lets down. That's why we must improve it.

So there is much America can learn from our health care system. And we should accept that there are things we can learn from theirs.

***Laurence Robertson's***  
**VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER**  
**10<sup>th</sup> August 2009**

Every so often, I use this column to give an account of what is happening in Northern Ireland, as it remains my Front Bench duty for the Conservative Party.

Northern Ireland today is unrecognisable from how it was a few years ago. The last report by the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) has reaffirmed that, although some of its individual members are involved in violence and criminality, the Provisional IRA remains on an "exclusively political path".

There are strains and tensions within the Loyalist paramilitary groups as well, as individuals follow their own paths. However, these groups are, to an extent, moving slowly in the right direction, but they do need to rid themselves of their weapons and make more progress towards achieving full and lasting peace.

However, the Province is experiencing some difficulties. The most immediate was outlined in the recent IMC report, and is an issue I raised in the House of Commons a few weeks ago, that dissident Republicans – especially the Real IRA and the Continuity IRA – have been active and have the killing of police officers as their objective. INLA continues to plan and perpetrate a number of serious crimes and is believed to have been responsible for one paramilitary murder recently.

There are political difficulties, too. The Assembly was re-instated 18 months ago, when Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams famously sat down together, and the former became First Minister and Martin McGuinness became Deputy First Minister. Since then, Peter Robinson has taken the top job.

However, the Executive (similar to the Cabinet) in Northern Ireland has not met since June. The problem is that Sinn Fein is refusing to officially meet because the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) will not agree to the devolving of policing and justice. Almost everything else has been devolved from Westminster to Belfast, but not these functions. The DUP say the time is not yet right for such a move.

So we have a stand-off, which, if maintained, could bring the Assembly down. I held a meeting with a government Minister the other week, and will be meeting with the Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland later this week, to see what can be done.

So while things are enormously better than they were in Northern Ireland, we must do all that we can to ensure that they do not slip back.

***Laurence Robertson's***  
**VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER**  
**27<sup>th</sup> July 2009**

Last week, the 59 year old Tom Watson led the Open Golf Championship at Turnberry for quite a while and very nearly won it. He had a putt of about nine feet for the title, but missed the putt and lost in the play off.

The American golfer, who started the competition as a 1,500-1 outsider, had a hip replacement operation 18 months ago and had allowed 26 years to pass since he last won the Open. The fairytale finish was denied him by his fellow American, Stewart Cink, but what a performance by Watson.

This year's lighting up of the Open by a senior player follows on from last year when Australian Greg Norman had led the field, only to narrowly fail at the end. That, too, was an Open to remember.

Last Saturday, I played in a charity cricket match on my local village green in aid of Cancer Research UK, and, at 51, I realise, from my continuing aches and pains, that I should not have gone at it like an 18-year-old. However, it does seem strange, and very wasteful, to write people off when they get past a certain age either in sport, in the workplace or in life generally.

Older people have so much experience to offer and can often be very reliable. Usually, people over a certain age have got over the usual minor ailments which prevent them from going to work each day and can contribute so much to businesses, charities and other organisations. It is folly, therefore, to write them off.

It also makes no economic sense as a country to write older people off, either. A hundred years ago, life expectancy was around 47 on average but now it has risen to around 77 and many people live well into their 80s and even their 90s. So it simply isn't viable to retire at 50 any more or even 60 or 65 – the pension systems, whether they be state or private, simply will not be able to finance such an arrangement.

Of course, if people wish to retire early and have made adequate private provision, then good luck to them. That is not the state's concern. But many of us will have to work longer if we are to avoid poverty in our old age and I hope that employers will realise the potential they can unlock by allowing us to do so.

We therefore need a change of culture so that we celebrate, rather than marginalise, older people in all walks of life. Of course, very few of us could match the achievements of Tom Watson, but we can do a good job in other ways, nevertheless.

***Laurence Ropbertson's***  
**VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER**  
**14<sup>th</sup> July 2009**

The further killings of British servicemen in Afghanistan during the last couple of weeks has led to questions being asked about the provision of equipment, and particularly helicopters, to our front line troops and about the war in its entirety.

I narrowly missed going to Afghanistan recently due to diary pressures but I would have liked to have seen for myself the situation there and what our troops are having to endure. The very high temperature, of around 45 degrees at the moment, is just one of the problems.

Fighting such a war is always difficult. In Iraq, there was an obvious enemy in Saddam Hussein and his regime, but, after his overthrow, it became a matter of the containment of the insurgents and terrorists. In Afghanistan, there is the Taliban, which is the stated enemy, but there are rogue elements which are difficult to identify and to counter.

According to the Foreign Office, the problem is that the country descended into its present chaos from the time of the overthrow of the King, Zahir Shah in 1973, although there were, of course, many problems in the country before then. The Soviet army, which had long had an influence in the country, invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 and stayed for ten years. It was this invasion in 1979 which led to the American boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics, and the retaliation by the Soviet Union in 1984 at the Los Angeles Games.

The problem, however, is that the country, or at least large parts of it, have become ungovernable and this has provided a space for terrorists to operate in, leading to the attack on New York on 9<sup>th</sup> September 2001. So, yes, the war against the Taliban goes on, but the aim is to re-establish government, backed up by an effective home grown army, in that country, so that it can operate as a self-governing independent country.

Is it our job to do that? Along with many other countries, I believe it is, as we are just as susceptible to terrorist attacks as anyone, and have, indeed, experienced them. To continue the Olympics theme, just the day after we were awarded the 2012 Games in 2005 we were hit by terrorist attacks in London. Yes, I would very much like our troops to come home. But they are doing a vital job and I believe it would be dangerous, overall, for them to pull out now.

I have spoken to people who have served there and, terrible though it is, they believe that they are making progress. But they also believe that we are in for the long haul. And if we are to complete the job and eventually withdraw from the country, we must ensure that our brave men and women who are serving there are backed up by the appropriate equipment in sufficient quantities.

I deeply regret the loss of life caused by this conflict. And I pay tribute to those who have or are serving there. They are not only serving their country but also the cause of world peace.