

**Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
15th November 2011**

It's always a difficult choice for me to make as to which Remembrance Day service I should attend. The main ones in my constituency are held at Tewkesbury, Winchcombe, Bishop's Cleeve and Churchdown, although there are other smaller ones held elsewhere as well.

This year I chose to attend Winchcombe. It was a lovely day and a very good service. Each and every year, people turn out to pay their respects to those who have fallen in numerous conflicts and it is always especially good to see young people taking part through the organisations which they belong to.

The selling and wearing of poppies, in support of the Royal British Legion, is, of course, a large part of the day and the lead up to it. I was personally offended to see recently that FIFA initially objected to the England team's wearing of the poppy in their recent international match with Spain. After interventions from Prince William and the Prime Minister a compromise was found, though it should never had been an issue. A similar situation almost arose when I visited government buildings in Dublin last week though that confrontation too was averted.

It would be very unfortunate indeed if the poppy should ever become seen as a political statement in any way. It clearly is not. The wearing of the poppy is a mark of respect for those who gave their lives fighting for freedom, peace and justice. It is also helpful to the Royal British Legion which attempts to support so many ex-servicemen and women.

Remembering is so very important. The Armed Forces are never sent from this country as an act of aggression. In the two world wars of the last century, and in the more recent conflicts, our brave men and women have been fighting against tyranny, terrorism and evil. Sadly, so many of them lost their lives doing so and it is they, their bravery and their sacrifice that we remember. It is because of their service that the rest of us are able to live in peace and freedom.

We also attend these services out of respect for those who are left behind – wives, husbands, children, mothers and fathers. They, too, have paid the highest possible price for the peace and freedom which we enjoy.

So, it is those who lost their lives that we remember. It is those who are bereaved that we remember. And it is the cause of those conflicts that we remember with regret. Evil should never be allowed to triumph over good, but it takes the actions of our brave service personnel to make sure that it doesn't. We will remember them.

**Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
1st November 2011**

The UK economic growth figures announced this week for the latest quarter was 0.5%. This may not sound a lot but, if extrapolated over a year, would amount to 2% which, in these difficult times, would be very good indeed.

There is turmoil in the European Union at the moment. The Greek situation is now being put to a referendum of the Greek people as it obviously involves austerity measures which will be unpopular. And Greece isn't the only country with a large debt problem. Italy has huge problems, as do Spain and Portugal, though Ireland seems to be climbing again after experiencing a period of great uncertainty.

Although the UK is not part of the Eurozone (thanks to many of us who strongly opposed such a move) we are inevitably affected by what is going on there. A high percentage of our exports go to those countries, so any fall in demand there has a negative impact on us. We have been involved in funding the International Monetary Fund, which has helped Greece, so it has affected us financially. And British banks are owed around £14.6 billion from all sorts of institutions in Greece,

As a result of the uncertainty, mainly over Greece, the stock market has seen further falls this week. This isn't just worrying for individual investors but also for pension funds, for example, which invest in shares in order to secure growth for their members. And the subsequent lowering of the value of companies creates a further downward pressure which, in turn, makes things worse.

I feel that there are two stages to this. The first one is to try to rescue the present situation, without making things worse for the future. Some argue this is best done by persuading Greece to leave the Euro, devalue its own currency and try to stabilise itself. The second stage, though, is to recognise what has brought this problem about in the first place, mainly governments spending more money than they had coming in. Every family and every business knows that you can only do this for so long. And to therefore try to ensure that it never happens again.

The budget cuts which are being announced in this country are painful for many people. Changes are being made which affect people's lives and I can understand the concerns being expressed and the fears being felt by so many people. But I do think the government is doing the right thing in trying to balance the UK's budget as quickly as possible.

To allow our deficit to continue and our debts to pile up could end with the UK's becoming the sick man of Europe, to quote an old expression, once again. Sound economic management, together with the growth which I mentioned earlier, are vital components of the way forward.

Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
19th October 2011

Tewkesbury, Cheltenham and Gloucester councils have been engaged in drawing up a "Joint Core Strategy" (JCS) which will propose building houses across those areas over the next twenty years. This week they published their proposals.

I have been opposed to the JCS process because there are six local councils in the County, not just three, and it is required of all councils to co-operate with one another. So we were not off to a good start. And matters have become worse as the detailed proposals have been made.

The people who have drawn up the JCS – very few elected councillors have been involved in the process – are predicting that the three areas need around 36,000 extra houses over the next two decades. I believe that this projection is based on flawed assumptions about the potential for growth in the economy, migration, overall population, longevity, couples splitting up etc - get these assumptions wrong and too many houses will be provided for.

As a result of this over-projecting, the JCS proposes building in flood-risk areas. In fact, the three biggest allocations in Tewkesbury Borough, Uckington and beyond, Insworth/Longford and the wider Ashchurch, are, along with Tewkesbury itself, places where people suffered the worse from the floods in 2007, causing them to live in caravans for over a year.

The Green Belt, too, is under assault from the JCS at a time when the government is saying that it should be protected. What is the point of designating land Green Belt if we just build on it when it becomes convenient to do so?

The JCS also proposes that Tewkesbury Borough takes all the overspill from Cheltenham and Gloucester, whereas the other council areas have simply drawn up their own plans to suit their own needs. Yet Tewkesbury, with its flood plain and flood risk area, has circumstances which should limit the number of houses it is expected to accommodate.

The next stage is for the three councils to vote on whether or not to put these proposals out to consultation. As I say, the process has been officer-led (as opposed to being drawn up by elected councillors) so I now hope that those councillors will get a grip on the situation, discard the JCS process and start to make sensible assumptions about future housing needs and draw up appropriate plans from there.

That's what the people they represent will want them to do.

**Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
27th September 2011**

I'm on a short trade mission to Nigeria this week and heard a comment here which really did say so much. The Africans, it seems, are worried about the European economy.

For so many years I, too, have been worried about the way the economies of Europe have been going, but I've always encouraged the helping of African countries, firstly for humanitarian reasons, but also in recognition that the better off Africa becomes the bigger the markets that will be afforded to us.

Europe, though, is also an immediate worry. Years of overspending by governments, including our own governments, together with a dangerous currency experiment called the Euro, have led us to a very difficult situation indeed. We'll do well to get through this period in tact.

Ireland was bailed out some months ago. So was Greece, but that hasn't proved to be sufficient. And Italy, Spain and Portugal stand on the edge. The challenge now is to ensure that the monetary units of those countries, whether that be the Euro or their original individual currencies, survive.

How will that be done? The solution being discussed - printing money, or quantitative easing as it's called these days - could well make matters worse, as it could threaten the value of those currencies. What is the point of sound economics, and of working hard, if we can just print money? Except it isn't that simple.

As a result of all these problems, the banks are looking fragile again. There are signs that they are reluctant to lend to each other again, which is what led to the credit crunch in the first place.

We're in for a bumpy ride and there are no easy answers. But as we start to build again, we should do so on the solid ground of sound money, less government spending, lower taxes and less harmful regulation, rather than the moving sands of big government.

**Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
20th September 2011**

Thanks to the wonders of modern technology I'm writing this article from Da Nang in Vietnam where I am taking part in a short Parliamentary visit.

While here, I am meeting politicians, diplomats, business people and others. I am trying to promote British business, including at least one business in my constituency, and tracking the aid which the British tax payers have contributed to the country.

Vietnam is an interesting country. It has a population of 90 million and its economy is growing at a healthy rate. Although a one-party, Communist state, it is, like China, allowing enterprise, to some extent, to flourish. I am hopeful that some British businesses can take advantage of that, which would in turn help the people of Vietnam.

Of course, most people remember, or have heard of, the Vietnam war of the 1960s and 70s, although the country has been torn apart by other wars and was for many years divided in two. It is now one country. Tensions still exist, though, due to China's claims to a large part of the China Sea. While here, I have visited the 'Hanoi Hilton' where, among others, American soldiers, including John McCain, the former US Presidential candidate, were held. Vietnamese prisoners were also held there by the French colonial force and, later, by the invading Japanese forces during the Second World War.

Although relations between Vietnam and America basically didn't exist after the war, they started again in 1995 and are coming along, mainly facilitated by trade. This is an encouraging sign, as is the good relationship Vietnam has with the UK, although issues around human rights exist. Trade, though, is the way forward and this will hopefully free the Vietnamese from the stranglehold of Communism and, at the same time, offer opportunities to all.

**Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
30th August 2011**

Ten years ago I made some remarks about immigration being too high in this country, and that large scale immigration had, over the years, created some problems for the UK, which is already relatively densely populated.

I received a great many letters of support at that time. Unfortunately, some of the political leaders of the day were out of touch with the views of the population and, to save an electoral storm, I apologised for any offence which may have been caused (although I don't think any was). But the issue hasn't gone away and, in fact, it is now the government's policy to limit immigration.

Last week, the latest figures showed that there had been an increase to 239,000 in net immigration for 2010. In my view, and that of the government, this figure is far too high. But the most important figure in many ways is the gross immigration figure – the number of people coming to this country, which stood at 575,000 in 2010, which has been a steady figure since 2004.

The reason the net immigration figure has risen is because fewer people left the country last year than any year since 2005. It is, therefore, difficult to control the net immigration figure without controlling the gross figure, because it is not always easy, or necessarily desirable, to get people to leave the country. And a figure of over half a million people coming to this country each year suggests that the culture of the country is gradually being changed, as well as the population being increased.

One worrying aspect of the figures published last week surrounds asylum seekers. I have worked with a number of asylum seekers in London, and some make the saddest of cases. But our generosity in this respect should not be abused. A recent study suggests that of those seeking asylum or other protection, 60% are refused, but only one third of the unsuccessful applicants are removed from the country. And, it seems, 59% of applicants make their claim only after having been detected.

I spend a lot of my time trying to help people in other countries, particularly Africa. I plan to travel to Nigeria soon for a brief visit. And, as I say above, the asylum seekers I worked with years ago were very sad cases. So this isn't about one race, one colour, or one religion being better than another. It's about the ability, or otherwise, of a crowded island to continue to take so many extra people every year; it's about preserving our British culture; and it's about avoiding the overloading of our public services.

Meeting people who were born, or who still live, abroad has been of great education and personal fulfilment for me. Meeting them has enriched my life, and I look forward to continuing to travel abroad to meet many more. But I'm also aware that unchecked immigration has caused great problems, and much resentment, for some people in this country.

**Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
23rd August 2011**

As the Parliamentary recess continues, so do the issues which MPs have to deal with every day.

It always amuses me when some people see me struggling into my office dressed in a suit, with my briefcase in one hand and a pile of papers under my other arm, and ask me "Are you enjoying your holiday, Mr Robertson?" Or someone greets me at a company works and says the same. I do gently remind them that one does not normally wear a suit or visit a factory when on holiday! Nevertheless, I cannot get my friends to refer to this time of the year as a recess – to them, it's a holiday.

However, the work continues! This week, I held meetings with police officers as well as people concerned about waste management. A few days ago, I held a meeting with the head of the Primary Care Trust to discuss the possible new hospital in Tewkesbury. And I continue to travel around the constituency to talk to people about various other things and am currently delivering leaflets in Prestbury, aimed particularly at assuring residents of my opposition to any proposals for inappropriate development in that area.

It is, in fact, frustrating when there is so much going on in this country, and across the world, that it is difficult to get responses from Ministers on all these matters because it's recess. I have long been in favour of, yes, suspending the legislative process for a few weeks, but of having a system in place which allows MPs to continue to question Ministers on matters which are of national importance, or at least are important to local people.

That said, recess does offer MPs the chance to do some of the things which it is difficult to do during term time, when Parliament is sitting, including making the local visits, and holding the kind of meetings, which I describe above. Such activities are extremely important, because we represent the interests of local people and need to find the time to speak to them.

I would, though, be the first to admit that it's not all work through recess. Last week, I took some time out and climbed Snowdon, without any real preparation, and visited Anglesey again. I also spent a few days at York races for the Ebor meeting – York is such a great city. And I had time for some golf. Racing and golf, enjoying the countryside and spending time with friends are my main outside-of-politics activities.

I am, though always anxious to return to work after not very long. I greatly enjoy the activities I mention, but I also enjoy earning them by dressing in suits, visiting businesses, and working in my office – yes, even during my "holidays"!

**Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
10th August 2011**

“Get on yer bike” Norman Tebbit growled in 1981. Except that he didn't say that, and the purposeful distortion and misrepresentation of his words only served to obscure an uncomfortable truth, that being a culture change in the UK.

During that year there were riots in many towns and cities up and down England and some people, for their own political purposes, sought to lay the blame for the riots at the door of the government because of the unemployment levels at the time. So what Norman Tebbit actually said was that there was no excuse for such mindless violence, that when his father was unemployed in the 1930s he got on his bike and looked for work – not riot.

Similarly, there's no excuse for the rioting we've seen over the last few weeks, starting in London and then spreading to other areas. The thugs who are carrying it out are bringing worsening poverty and unemployment to their areas. Mindless it therefore has to be seen as. But then thugs often have fed off the chaos which they themselves created. The IRA did this for a long time in Northern Ireland.

The destruction of people's homes and businesses is despicable. Putting people's lives at risk and frightening so many people is inexcusable. No responsible person would do such things. But then, where there's no sense there's no feeling. Given that so many of the people involved are youngsters, I am, though, left wondering where their parents are while their children are causing mayhem. But then from experience I've often seen that the parents are the reason why the youngsters are like they are in the first place. Perhaps some of the people who took part in the riots in 1981 are now those parents.

The police find themselves in a difficult position, in almost a no-win situation. If they aren't strong enough they are criticised, yet if they over-react they risk being taken to court charged with assault or perhaps manslaughter. Yet they have to risk life and limb to defend innocent people, only to be blamed when things get worse. At times like this, I believe that they need our support, as long as they stand on the side of the innocent.

Of course, unemployment and deprivation can be soul destroying and can lead people into things they otherwise would have avoided. But, like anti social behaviour which so many areas experience these days, such reactions are a relatively more modern phenomena, a result of the change in culture which Norman Tebbit referred to all those years ago. What a pity that culture remains.

**Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
26th July 2011**

Parliament is on recess now but I wish it weren't. There are so many things happening in the world that it would be useful to be in Westminster, or at least have some systems working so that MPs could question Ministers, and put forward proposals, on a daily basis.

The world has been shocked by the terrible events in Norway as around a hundred people have been senselessly murdered. For so many people, and perhaps for the entire population of that country, life will never be the same again. There will be attempts to link the murders to some concept of political extremism but the killings were simply evil.

In East Africa, the drought which has hit a number of countries in that area has led to a possible famine situation, especially in Somalia, which is an almost ungoverned and, for the time being, ungovernable, state. The prospect of children, as well as adults, dying due to a shortage of food, when there is so much wasted in the world, is dreadful.

In Libya, the military operation has been running for over four months and it is a measure of the world's problems that the activities there rarely make headline news at the moment. But it is a very risky and important attempt to prevent one of the world's evil dictators from murdering his own people. Can we leave the country while Gaddafi is still in power? It is inconceivable to me.

And then there's the crisis in Euro-land, where the Greek bailout, and the ongoing problems in Italy, Spain and Portugal threaten the very existence of that currency. Although the UK wisely didn't join in that dangerous currency experiment, we are affected by what happens in the rest of Europe, just as we are by what happens in America, and there are a few problems there as well.

It is, therefore, frustrating that MPs cannot have much of an input into any of these issues during the time of recess. Taking time away from Parliament is important as it allows MPs to make more visits and hold more meetings in their constituencies. But there should be the facility for MPs to continue to hold the government, any government, to account during the summer months.

Not that anyone can wave a magic wand and put things right overnight, of course not, but I will be pressing for a change in the system which virtually closes Parliamentary democracy down for so many weeks.

Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
19th July 2011

This week, the News International plot deepens, having already claimed the scalp of the former Chief Executive and two very senior police officers. It's all in the news. It's all high profile. As I write this article, there are droves of reporters and cameras outside Parliament.

What isn't in the news so much, for example, is the excellent work carried out by unsung heroes up and down the country, and this really came across to me last week when I visited Milestones School in my constituency at Longlevens. I've been to the school a few times but on this occasion I was attending to see the work being carried out by an organisation called Whizz-Kidz, which basically provides wheelchair training, as well as the wheelchairs themselves, to children.

They also help them, and their parents, with certain skills and approaches. For example, they try to help the parents to allow the children to do as much for themselves as they can, so that they may be able to cope better as their lives progress, especially when, perhaps, they reach the stage when their parents are not around anymore.

The children themselves were amazing. The ones I saw demonstrated the most amazing determination and spirit. They didn't complain; they just tried to get on with what was asked of them. I was greatly honoured to be asked to present badges and certificates to the children. It was a deeply humbling experience.

It was also wonderful to once again see the dedication and good humour of the staff at the school and the parents. And it was very uplifting to meet two of the members of Whizz-Kidz, in wheelchairs themselves, who spend their lives helping others who they see as being less fortunate than themselves.

Rarely do we read about such activities, nor do we often see such people on television. It's a sad and frustrating fact that so much of our media concentrates on presenting bad news stories. Whenever they do present good news stories, it's usually done during the last few seconds of a news programme.

Yet, while the fortunes of the Murdoch empire are important, they are not as important as the work I had the privilege of witnessing at Milestones School last week. What marvellous people.

**Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
12th July 2011**

The alleged actions of certain journalists who worked for the *News of the World* have caused the owners, News International, to end the life of the paper after 168 years of publications. And the actions of the few has caused many questions to be raised about Rupert Murdoch's bid to gain control of the parts of BSkyB which he doesn't already own as well, as about the real role of journalism in this country.

I believe in a free press. I have sat in front of Prime Ministers in Africa and lectured them on how they need to embrace democracy more fully by freeing up their media. I have pointed out to them the folly of their ways in trying to stop not only the publication of articles which might not be true but also of articles which are critical of their governments. I am also opposed to the granting of the so-called super-injunctions, believing that it is difficult to decide who should be protected and who should not, but also believing that the truth will eventually out anyway.

The problem, though, of course, is how to control the power which certain media magnates, as well as editors and journalists, assume. The local media, in my judgement, by and large, does a very good job. They tend to report news, as accurately as they can, whereas the national media is a completely different beast. Not only can they sometimes exaggerate, they can also report selectively and sometimes make things up completely. The tabloids tend to focus on sensationalism and on exposing private details about people. But then those newspapers sell better than those at the quality end of the market, so, at the end of the day, who is to blame for this kind of journalism?

I think most people would agree, though, that certain journalists have gone way too far by hacking into some people's personal phones. Even if the truth is eventually published, does the end really justify the means in this respect? The fact that the phones of some very vulnerable people have been hacked into would suggest that, no, it doesn't. Unfortunately, almost unbelievably, it seems that some police officers might have been caught up in the scandal as well.

The Secretary of State for media, Jeremy Hunt, is referring Rupert Murdoch's bid to the Competition Commission. The Prime Minister has announced the setting up of two inquiries into the issue. And there is a new police investigation taking place into the episode. I believe that these are the right actions to take. Journalists being investigated represents a turn-around of the usual routine, but it has to happen because of their actions. I have had many emails from people who are disgusted by what they have done.

We need to protect freedom of speech. Therefore we need to protect the freedom of the press. We do not have a proper, functioning democracy without doing so. But with freedom comes responsibility, so the challenge is to come up with a system which also protects the feelings and the rights of the innocent men, women and children of this country too. For all our sakes, it is important that we meet this challenge.

**Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
5th July 2011**

It was worrying to receive the news this weekend of the problems being experienced in East Africa with regard to drought and a subsequent food shortage. I was pleased to see our government respond so quickly with a pledge of £38 million to provide food for those in need and treatment for 329,000 malnourished children and mothers.

I am well aware of the feelings of some people that we should not be giving aid to foreign countries when we are making cuts to budgets in this country. But I'm afraid I disagree. Promoting the development of Third World countries was one of my motivations for entering Parliament in the first place. And I have served as Chairman of the All Party parliamentary Group on Ethiopia for two years now, and was Secretary for many years before that. I have visited the country four times, most recently last September.

Ethiopia is one of the worst affected countries, although there are 10 million people affected across Somalia, Djibouti and Kenya as well. Some areas have suffered their worst drought for sixty years and the United Nations now classes the situation as in crisis or emergency.

As I say, I firmly believe that we should do all we can to help. There is a difference between bringing our country's finances in order and helping starving people in Africa. This is, though, a recurring theme and we need to target our ongoing aid more carefully in the future than has been the case in the past. For example, the development of irrigation systems in those countries is vitally important, and I recently co-chaired an investment forum which was discussing trade with Africa. I also Chair another committee which is made of up people who are very experienced in carrying out business on that continent.

On hearing the news of the drought, I immediately asked the Ethiopian Ambassador to come in to the Commons for a meeting with me and perhaps some other members of our Parliamentary Group. I'm afraid that, to an extent, the government in that country is in denial. They don't want Ethiopia to be forever seen as a country where people are in dire poverty. But in order to make progress, the actual situation and the real problems have to be recognised and admitted to.

So I fully support the help our government is giving in this crisis. I also support the ongoing aid programme which we have embarked upon. But I also recognise the need for the governments in these countries to embrace change by improving their democracies, freeing up their media and doing all they can to ensure that the aid we provide not only prevents the potential famine now but also sets those countries on the road to greater and lasting prosperity in the future.

**Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
28th June 2011**

It is unfortunate that there are a number of strikes being planned for this Thursday, which could cause a great deal of disruption to many people, including school children.

The biggest cause of discontentment is the government's plans for pension changes. I have met a number of people, including union representatives and pensioners' groups, to discuss this matter. Also, I am 53 myself. I can, therefore, well understand the concerns which many people have. In your 20s you rarely think about pensions; in your 50s, you often think of little else.

The environment aside, the two biggest problems facing our country, in my view, belong to the health service and pensions, both arising because of the same piece of good news – the fact that we are living longer. Both the NHS and pensions have contributed to that welcome rise in life expectancy, but both are in danger of becoming victims of their own successes.

When the Old Age Pensions Act was introduced in 1908, it was intended that those reaching the age of 70 would receive it. In those days, though, average life expectancy was around 50. After the Second World War, this life expectancy had reached about 66. Now, life expectancy is around 79 and rising. This welcome increase presents great challenges to the NHS and our pensions system.

This is particularly so with the pensions system. Just after the war, people would start work at 14 or 15, work until they were 65 (for men) then, on average, sadly died at 66. Now, many people don't start work until they are 22 or 23, often retire early and then live to, on average, 79. So in terms of the basic state pension, there are far fewer people paying into the system as a ratio to those who are retired than there used to be.

Over that period of time there have, of course, been occupational and final salary pension schemes developed, but they are now facing the same problem. We are simply not putting enough money into them, for long enough, to cope with the fact that we are living so very much longer than we did when those pension schemes were designed.

This is why we are all going to have to be prepared to increase the amounts we pay into pension schemes and why we are going to have to work a little longer. As an example, when I was elected to the House of Commons in 1997, I paid 6% of my salary into my pension scheme; I am now required to pay 11.5% into it. It's unpalatable, I know, but the figures just don't add up anymore.

It's also a problem which should have been dealt with as it arose, instead of each government simply passing the burden onto the next one. This government has found that time is running out to fix the system. And this government, at last, is one which has the courage to address the problem.

Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
7th June 2011

Parliament resumed this week after the May recess and there is no shortage of things to do as MPs return to Westminster. There are, of course, the individual issues which constituents write in about and which are the priority.

In addition, there are some issues which I am speaking to Ministers about which might eventually result in more jobs being brought to the area, which is something I feel is very important. And there is the on-going world situation, with the problems in Libya, Yemen and Syria, and a few other places, continuing.

Interestingly, I met President Assad of Syria about four years ago when I paid a brief visit to Damascus. I remember that the country had a strange feel to it. The British Ambassador to Syria asked to meet us at the Embassy rather than at the hotel we were staying at because he felt that place might be bugged. And the previous evening, someone a colleague and I were talking to, the pianist in the hotel lobby, disappeared, then came back to tell us they had effectively been warned off speaking to us any further and the piano playing promptly ceased.

When speaking to President Assad he mused at how he was often referred to as both a ruthless dictator but, at the same time, someone who was too weak to lead the country. At that time, and the accusations linger, it was suspected that Syria had been involved in the assassination of Lebanon's former Prime Minister, Rafic Hariri in 2005. I had travelled to Syria from Lebanon so the topic was live. Ruthless dictator or too weak to run the country? I don't know, but the events in that country are worrying.

All people in positions of power, which they have attained, and cling onto, without feeling the need to consult their people by holding regular General Elections, should take note of the prevailing views across much of the world. Democracy in itself doesn't automatically lead to instant prosperity, but it's no co-incidence that the countries with the least serious overall deprivation, and the least civil unrest within their boundaries, are actually democracies. And it remains true that hardly ever do two democracies go to war with one another.

Among many other things, Winston Churchill is credited with saying "It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried". In other words, it's a terrible system, for all sorts of reasons, but it is the best one available! Certainly, it's stood us in good stead for very many decades and would greatly help those countries where their dictators are presently resisting it.

**Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
10th May 2011**

Last week saw the local elections and the referendum on a proposal to change the voting system. I congratulate all those people elected to councils and pay tribute to those who were unsuccessful for having a go. All candidates, plus all the voters who took part, were, of course, carrying out an exercise in democracy.

In 1933, Adolf Hitler passed the Enabling Act, which basically gave him the powers of a dictator and proper elections took place no more in Germany. And, of course, the Second World War and the Holocaust followed soon after. It was a terrible time for the world, and in particular Europe, and I recently paid a visit to learn more about it.

Along with a large number of students and a few other MPs, I travelled to Poland to visit the town of Oswiecim, which is better known by its German name of Auschwitz, where over a million people were murdered by the SS and the Nazi German forces. I visited a Jewish cemetery and Auschwitz 1 and Auschwitz-Birkenau and was given detailed guided tours of the areas.

In some ways, it was hard to relate what happened there. It was a bright, clear day and the birds were singing in the trees, but many of the photographs I saw, along with large amounts of hair, shoes and other items which had belonged to the victims, brought the issue to life. So too did remembering that many of those who were murdered in these camps could still be alive today.

The Nazis did, of course, try to make out that what they were doing was right, but the fact that they attempted to destroy the evidence of the crimes they were committing, by bombing their own buildings for example, demonstrates that some of them at least knew that their actions were wrong.

The world knows what went on. Some captured people were deemed fit to work and were then treated as slave labour by the Nazis. Others were told to go into buildings to shower, only to be gassed and then have their bodies burnt in the nearby incinerators. Other things the Nazis and their partners did reduced humanity to its most depraved level. I visited Rwanda in 2002 and was horrified by what I saw. This was equally appalling but different.

Churchill once said that democracy is a terrible system but it happens to be the best one. I also remember Margaret Thatcher speaking in support of democracy when she reminded us that democracies don't go to war with each other. This is why, regardless of which way people vote, or the views candidates stand on at elections, the democratic process is all important and is worth defending. I always believed that and my recent visit to Auschwitz reinforced it in me.

**Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
4th May 2011**

On 6th July 2005 London and the country celebrated the awarding of the 2012 Olympics to our great capital city and indeed to the nation. The very next day, London was devastated by terrorist bombs which killed innocent people who were going to and from work.

The bombs were, of course, the work of Osama Bin Laden, who had also orchestrated the mass murders in the United States on 11th September 2001. Very few people will therefore mourn his passing as announced on Monday. What a contrast this news was to the announcement the night before.

On Sunday, I had taken a day off and gone walking in the Brecon Beacons, and am still feeling the pain from that. I listened to the news as I collapsed into bed that night and was saddened to hear of the passing of Sir Henry Cooper, the British boxer who had come so close to beating Cassius Clay, as he then was, in 1963.

I had the privilege of meeting Henry at Cheltenham races a couple of years ago but understand that he had not been very well of recent months. Sadly, he lost his wife suddenly in 2008. But Henry came across as someone who had no bitterness but took whatever life dealt him.

In what was a non-title fight in 1963, he put Clay on the floor and only one other boxer, Joe Frazier, has ever done that. However, the blow was right at the end of Round 4 and, with the help of a little gamesmanship from his trainer, Angelo Dundee, Clay recovered just enough to end the fight in the next round as Cooper's cuts got the better of him. Clay then went on to become, as Mohammad Ali, probably one of the most famous men in the world and a three times heavyweight champion of the world.

So I went to bed sad on the Sunday but woke with hope on the Monday as I listened to the news about Bin Laden's death. It won't, of course, herald the end of terrorism nor the demise of Al Qaeda, but the American action represents a real blow to that organisation. It also says to anyone engaged in terrorism that they will be hunted down and eventually captured.

In the last few days the country has lost a great sportsman and the world has lost a terrible terrorist. A similar contrast in emotions to London being awarded the Olympics one day and then having its citizens blown up the next. So, just as we remember Henry's grace in defeat, as we go to the polls across the country this week, regardless of which way we vote, we should remember that democracy, not terrorism, is the way.

Laurence Robertson's

VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
26th April 2011

Parliament resumed this Tuesday after an unnecessarily long Easter recess, although it will be a short week followed by another short one next week.

The excitement, though, is building up for the Royal Wedding, which takes place this Friday, when Prince William marries Catherine Middleton. The British really do these things the best and it will be a great show. It's also very important constitutionally.

There has been a fair bit of talk recently about whether or not the law should be changed so that the first-born of the relevant Royal couple should take the throne as opposed to the oldest male heir. Although this is seen as being urgent, to be decided before Prince William and his wife start a family, it is also important to take time on such matters as those members of the Commonwealth who have the Queen as their head of state also need consulting on this matter.

The discussion could, of course, also lead to the question being raised about whether the Monarch should be able to be of the Roman Catholic religion or should be able to marry a Roman Catholic. This question has more far-reaching constitutional implications than the question of primogeniture.

I do, though, feel that these questions are for another day and that we should celebrate the marriage of the couple on Friday. William is second in line to the throne and really will be representing the nation as he takes his vows in Westminster Abbey, which is in itself a wonderful home to so much of our history. To take a walk round it and observe the burial sites of Kings such as Henry III and Edward III, to name just two Monarchs whose reigns were fundamentally important to our history, is awesome.

Westminster Abbey was, of course, where his mother's funeral service took place in 1997 and William's day will no doubt be tinged with some sadness as he remembers that occasion. One of my strongest memories of that time was when William, just 15 then, was talking to people in the crowd and someone shouted "God Bless you William". Whoever shouted that spoke for so many of us because he wasn't just wishing William himself well, though he undoubtedly was, but he was also recognising the importance of the Monarchy to our nation.

So I hope to see very many flags being flown on Friday. I hope to see street and village green parties being held to celebrate the occasion. And, as time passes, I hope to see William and Kate enjoy a wonderful marriage together.

Laurence Robertson's

VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
19th April 2011

It's been quite a sporting time these last few days, with Lewis Hamilton winning the Chinese Grand Prix and the London Marathon being completed in the lowest ever time, with a number of runners from Gloucestershire running in the event and raising money for charities.

To run the marathon in 2 hours, 4 minutes and 39 seconds, as Emmanuel Mutai did, is unbelievable, and the race certainly brought back painful memories for me. I entered the second London marathon in 1982. I went on the run the 25th New York City marathon in 1994, and ran four other marathons as well. I was never a good long distance runner but entered to take part in the occasions. In New York, I ran for the charity I was working for at the time and raised £10,000 for a hostel for homeless women in London; I was in such pain during the race that it was only the thought of what I was doing it for that kept me going..

This weekend, though, my focus was more on football and I attended Wembley Stadium to watch my home town team, Bolton Wanderers, be absolutely slaughtered 5-0 by Stoke City. Take nothing away from Stoke – they played a clean, attacking game and were fully deserving of their victory, and I wish them well in the final. But Bolton were absolutely terrible – it's not often you see a professional team competing at that level play so badly (apart from England in South Africa, last summer).

I like a lot of winter sports, such as National Hunt horse racing, but always feel really excited about the prospect of a summer so full of major sporting occasions: Test Match cricket, Wimbledon, the Open Golf Championship, Royal Ascot and much more. This country really does know how to put on great sporting events. And, by and large, we can compete at the highest level in most sports.

And next summer, of course, we will host the Olympics. I think that it's such an honour to be awarded the Games and I shall attempt to attend a few of the events. It's not likely that we will see the Olympics come to the UK again for very many years so we have to make the most of it.

Sport has always been an important part of my life and I believe it to be one of the best things children, or anyone for that matter, can get involved in. It involves exercise and competition, it crosses all social, racial, religious and other boundaries and is thoroughly good for people.

Do your best, play cleanly, play hard to win, but, at the end of the contest, shake hands with your opponents and look forward to the next contest. In sport, as in life!

Laurence Robertson's

VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER

12th April 2011

Parliament is on recess for the Easter break this week and next but it's a busy time. Many candidates are organising their campaigns for the local elections and there is the referendum on whether or not to change the Parliamentary voting system to take place on the same day, that being 5th May.

Recesses do give MPs time to get around their constituencies a bit more and that's what I'm doing during this week and next. It's always good, indeed essential, to keep in touch with constituents and that's what I'll be doing. And in this constituency recess also provides an opportunity as to enjoy the great diversity of this area.

The Tewkesbury constituency is indeed very diverse and also has a great deal to be proud of. It's easy to forget the world leading aspects of parts of the area. To start with the diversity, there is a great deal of farming and also much industry. The area is made of largely of countryside but also many built up areas. There is quite a bit of wealth but also some less well off areas.

There is also much going on in this constituency. We have two military bases, a number of rivers including two main ones, a small airport, an historic Abbey within a mediaeval town, a great racecourse and a high tech, cutting edge, leading industry.

In the Abbey, we have one of the great historic buildings. Its construction was started at the end of the 11th Century, it played an historic role in the War of the Roses in the 15th Century and the townsfolk got together to keep it from the clutches of Henry VIII in the 16th Century.

We also have one, if not the, greatest racecourses in the world. Prestbury Park stages the famous Cheltenham Racing Festival, at which so many horses in the country, and from Ireland, aim. The term "the horse is going to Cheltenham" doesn't just mean to the area but to the Festival.

And, of course, the jet engine was developed by Sir Frank Whittle in Brockworth and an industry grew from that. The civil and defence aerospace industry in this area is second to none. The technical skill and knowledge of so many people in this industry is amazing, and much wealth and many jobs are created for the area by this industry.

One of the most enjoyable parts about being an MP is that I deal with so very many different issues during the course of a day. It is, of course, a challenge to be able to do justice to all the different issues which come to me, but it's a great pleasure trying!

Constituents can still contact me during the recess by writing to me at 22 High Street, Tewkesbury GL20 5AL, calling 01684 291640 or at robertsonl@parliament.uk by email.

Laurence Robertson's

VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER

5th April 2011

It's strange that, sometimes in politics, those who call for more openness, transparency, fairness etc are exactly the same people who distort the truth, and this is the case regarding the campaign to change our voting system.

A referendum is to be held on 5th May on whether to change from our present system, referred to as First Past the Post because the candidate who gets the most vote wins, to the system called Alternative Vote (AV), where voters list their preferred candidates in a 1,2,3,4 etc order. And already some of those campaigning for a change to AV are distorting the truth.

The present system has stood us in good stead for two centuries or so. Some people might be disgruntled by what happens in politics (they are the world over, under any voting system) but, by and large, this country has done extremely well over all that time. The industrial revolution took root here (in my home county of Lancashire), we built the biggest empire the world has ever seen (spanning a quarter of the world's population), have stood up for justice and right in two World Wars, and have now gained a level of general prosperity which is envied by much of the world. We have room for improvement but we've got a lot right.

So why risk throwing it all away? The present voting system usually delivers a clear result, which leads to stronger government. There are exceptions, as now, but last year's General Election was the first time that one Party hadn't won a clear majority since 1974. So how would a change to AV help? It wouldn't, which is why the AV protagonists distort the truth.

Their recent leaflet says that AV will "make MPs work harder". Why's that then? MPs have to face the electorate every five years now, and many are voted out at each election. The leaflet then says that, under AV, "The only people shut out are extremists like the BNP". Wrong – in many seats, people who vote for the party which comes last, be it BNP, Monster Raving Loony etc, will get an extra vote counted, while people voting for the mainstream parties will only get one vote counted. Really, I'm not making this up.

The leaflet also says that AV will lead to "fairer votes". But how can it be fair for some people's votes to be counted twice when others will only have their votes counted once? And why should it be the case that the candidate who gets the most first preference votes might not win? In a race, the horse which crosses the line first gets the prize, not the one which comes second or third.

The unfairness of the AV system of voting is, therefore, demonstrated by the weakness and dishonesty of the arguments put forward by those promoting it. Voters on 5th May should have nothing to do with it.

Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
22nd March 2011

Over the last few days the government has involved the British Armed Forces in action to protect citizens of Libya. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 authorises this action to be taken as a means of defending the innocent people of Libya and the House of Commons supported this resolution in a vote on Monday evening by 557 votes to 13.

There is considerable sadness that such action is necessary and that, once again, our Armed Forces are engaged in such a campaign. We have, of course, been involved in Iraq for a long time and in Afghanistan for quite a bit longer – ten years, almost. And as well as the question about whether we are stretching ourselves too thinly, there is also the question about what is the actual end result which we are looking for in Libya.

In 1991, we were involved in the first Gulf War when we took action to remove Saddam Hussein and his forces from Kuwait, which he had invaded a short time before. He was removed from Kuwait but was allowed to continue as a dictator in Iraq, murdering, mutilating, raping and torturing his own people. So, in 2003, we went into Iraq again to remove him from power.

At the time of writing this article, I am seeking an answer to the question about what the coalition (of countries) is intending to do about Gaddafi. I am broadly supportive of the action being taken against his murderous aggression but I do feel that our objectives should be clear. Is Gaddafi to be removed? Or, if he is to be allowed to continue as dictator in Libya, how will we ensure that he doesn't put down his own people in the future in the way he has over the last few weeks, and over very many years as well before that?

After all, his latest round of aggression came as a response to the uprising against his rule and the calls for democracy in that country, which, in turn, was a follow-on to similar action which had been taken by people in, for example, Egypt and Bahrain. If there is a similar uprising in Libya in, say, a year's time, what will Gaddafi's response to that be? These questions are very difficult to answer, but they do need asking.

There are, of course, a number of countries involved in this action, including some Arab League members. That is to be welcomed, not only from the point of view of the contribution they will make but also because it does give further legitimacy to the initiative being taken. But the situation is fluid and it may well have changed by the time this article appears. But, for now, it is only right that the leaders taking these decisions, and the members of the Armed Forces taking the action, as well as the innocent people of Libya, should be very much in our thoughts.

Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
15th March 2011

Usually, this week in the year I write about the Cheltenham Racing Festival which is currently taking place at Prestbury Park, which is in my Tewkesbury constituency. It is an amazing event and I hope it turns out to be as successful as usual.

However, there are so many problems in the world at the moment that other issues are dominating all reporting and media. A few weeks ago, there was the earthquake in New Zealand. Then we had the uprisings in the Middle East and the situation in Libya remains very dangerous. And then we've seen the earthquake and subsequent Tsunami take place in Japan.

Of course, we in this area have not been without our problems over the years and I recently officially dug the first sod in both Prestbury and Longlevens to mark the start of flood prevention and alleviation schemes in those areas. The delivery of water and the efforts to prevent the loss of electricity was the biggest peace-time operation in the UK, and the scale of the problems in Japan, as has been quoted, represents the worst crisis since the Second World War.

With many dead, more missing and thousands displaced, the situation is terrible. Add to that the problems of keeping control of the situation at the nuclear reactors and the scene looks even worse. I don't think now is the time to begin a debate about the rights and wrongs of nuclear power installations but it is the right time for all countries to offer support, and I'm glad that the UK has been quick to do this.

Such natural events do make one wonder about what is happening with our planet. Flooding, earthquakes and severe weather have all been upon us recently and we can just hope that this is not something which will turn into a trend. With regard to earthquakes, my daughter and her family lived in Southern California for five years and there is much talk, and provision made, there in preparation to cope with the "Big One". Thankfully, this has not occurred.

So, the people of Japan and New Zealand and all those who are in danger in the Middle East should be in our thoughts and our prayers as we enjoy Cheltenham this week. With such misery around, it is good that there will also be people enjoying themselves at what is a very important event for this area, but I'm sure that most people will be mindful of what is happening elsewhere.

Sport does transcend other boundaries. And, in addition to enjoying the racing, my home town team, Bolton Wanderers, have reached the semi-final of the F A Cup. They last won the Cup a few weeks after I was born, in 1958. Will it happen again this year? Who knows!

Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
8th March 2011

It's a very busy week at Westminster with much legislation going through and a number of functions for me to personally host.

On Tuesday, I welcomed a number of members of the local Women's Institute to the Commons. They had a tour of the Palace in the morning, then had lunch and sat in the Strangers Gallery to watch proceedings in the afternoon.

On Tuesday evening, I hosted an Ethiopian Cultural Evening as part of my role as Chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Ethiopia. This annual event, as usual, was very well attended and the gathering was addressed by the Foreign Office Minister responsible for Africa, Henry Bellingham.

Then, at the time of writing, I am putting together the finishing touches to a Charity Racing Dinner I am organising in the Commons for tomorrow, Thursday, evening in aid of *Spinal Research* and the *Spinal Injuries Association*. I have sold all the tickets, which means that over 160 people will be attending, including the great and the good from racing and bookmaking. We will also be conducting an auction, which will raise most of the money for the charities. This is part of my role as Joint Chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Racing Group.

In addition, there is legislation relating to Scotland, the European Union and Welfare to deal with this week. Also, I will be chairing the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee as we continue to look at the Corporation Tax rates in the UK (28%) as compared to the Republic of Ireland (12.5%) and the impact this has on Northern Ireland.

It's all part of the week's work. I then travel back on Friday and attend an event launching the concept of new nuclear build in terms of power stations, a meeting related to the proposed new surgery for doctors in Tewkesbury, a surgery at the Village Inn, Twyning (4.30pm to 5.30pm on Friday, any constituent welcome to attend) and then a discussion about the Big Society at Tewkesbury Abbey on Friday evening.

And that's all before the weekend! I then have a few things to do on Saturday, which will include a visit to celebrate Tourism Week and then on to meet a few people in Mitton. Sunday, so far, looks free! And then next week it's the Cheltenham Racing Festival when I will be dashing back and forward from London but will be spending most of the week in my constituency!

Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
1st March 2011

It may seem strange to be suggesting that our voting system delivers clear results when we do have, in fact, a coalition government at the moment. But *normally* it does, and last year was the first time it didn't since 1974. That's not a bad record for "First Past the Post" to claim.

The scrambling round in attempts to do deals we saw by political parties last year would be the norm rather than the rare exception under a Proportional Representation (PR) system. Under such a system, a smaller party, rather than the electorate, decides who is to be the government.

In Ireland, their Single Transferable Vote system of PR has not delivered a majority of seats in the Dail (lower house of Parliament) for any political party since 1977. So, as is now happening in Ireland, the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) is decided by the parties who, after the election result is declared, enter a period of horse trading in order to form a government.

In fact, a number of European countries follow this system of election. The problem is that, under proportional representation, it is very difficult for the electorate to kick a government out of office, whereas under our own system of First Past the Post system it is very easy for them to do so. I always find it very unseemly when I read about the discussions taking place after an election in, say, Ireland, Germany or Italy, in order to enable someone to form a government. Isn't that what the election's supposed to be about?

It was, in fact, PR which enabled Hitler's National Socialist German Worker's Party (Nazi) to seize power in Germany in 1933. In the elections to the Reichstag in November 1932, the Nazi Party achieved just 33.1% of the vote, yet, largely due to the impasse which followed, President Hindenburg appointed Hitler as Chancellor in January 1933.

In Ireland, the horse trading is going on and it looks as if Fine Gael will form a coalition with the Labour Party, thus making the leader of Fine Gael, Edna Kenny, Taoiseach. He is a likeable man. I had lunch with him a few years ago when we discussed the events leading up to the bombing in Omagh in 1998, which remains the worst atrocity of the whole of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. So it's not Mr Kenny I have a problem with, it's the system which takes power away from the electorate and gives it to the political parties.

In May, our electorate will be asked if they would like to change our voting system from First Past the Post to an Alternative Vote (AV) system. AV isn't PR but it is an uncertain step in that direction and can lead to the person who comes third in the race being awarded the gold medal. Such a system would not lead to more voter satisfaction but rather the reverse. For this reason, among others, it should be rejected.

Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
22nd February 2011

Parliament is on recess this week but there's no shortage of things to do or political events to assess and react to. In particular, events in the Middle East are demanding much attention.

A couple of weeks ago, I wrote in this column about the events in Egypt and our Prime Minister has just visited and urged the military to ensure that a smooth transition of power takes place there. Since then, there have been uprisings in Libya in particular, and a number of other countries in that region as well.

Over the last few years there has been perhaps a change of heart and certainly a change of strategy followed by Libyan leader Colonel Gaddafi towards the West. There can be little doubt that, during the 1980s and perhaps earlier, Libya supplied arms to the IRA during their murderous campaign. And, of course, there was the bombing of the Pan-Am airline over Lockerbie in 1988 which killed 270 people. But Libya's approach to international relations started to change recently.

I have personally been involved in negotiations designed to persuade Libya to recognise the need for them to help the reconciliation programme in Northern Ireland, which is something they have given a very cautious acquiescence to. There is some indication that they have helped in one way or another with the United States in a similar way. They won't talk about "compensation", as that word suggests culpability, but they will talk about reconciliation.

Those talks seem to have stalled recently, though I am holding some Ministerial meetings next week to try to kick-start them. However, events are now threatening to overtake us. At the time of writing, Colonel Gaddafi and his government appears to be under siege and it seems questionable whether he will survive as leader of Libya. The brutal way in which his forces are putting down the demonstrators provides an echo of the past and, over time, will not help him.

It is important for leaders of all these countries to understand just one thing: the human spirit will not be suppressed and it is foolish to try to do so. Fail to understand that, especially in these days of mass media news and easy communication, and your position eventually will become untenable.

As I've said before, some leaders in these countries say "We don't need Western-style democracy, our people don't want it." My answer to them has always been, "How can you possibly know that when your people are not allowed to express themselves". The scenes from the Middle East demonstrate exactly that.

Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
15th February 2011

Our television screens have been dominated for the last week by the scenes in Egypt as a great many people have protested in Tahrir Square against the continued rule by Hosni Mubarak, who eventually stepped down.

I was in Egypt about twelve years ago and went to Cairo and Sharm-El-Sheikh (where Mubarak is supposed to now be) and held meetings with a number of Ministers. It became obvious during those meetings that, while democracy did exist in Egypt, it wasn't as open, free and fair as we in the West might enjoy.

Of course, a lot of countries in that region of the world are not democratic, or, if they are, it isn't what we might recognise as full democracy. I've spoken to a number of politicians in the Middle East who said that they didn't need democracy, that it is a foreign concept, that there was no call for it in their countries and the West was wrong to peddle those thoughts.

My response to them was "How do you know your people don't want democracy if they have no way of expressing their views at the ballot box?" Of course, they cannot answer that question, and, in a way, that is what the protests in Egypt have been about – an expression of views and a determination to have full democracy. The human spirit can only be suppressed for so long.

In some ways, the more difficult bit comes next – actually establishing real democracy in Egypt, and it won't be easy. As I say, there is not a great deal of experience of it in that part of the world. Iran, for example, has suffered since the overthrowing of the Shah in 1979. And Egypt has, during the time of Mubarak, been a relatively stable country in what is an unstable part of the world. Western leaders must, therefore, react in a measured way to the situation in Egypt. It is not for us to tell the Egyptian people who their leaders should be, nor the exact style of democracy which they must design and incorporate.

But now, it is important that democracy does come to the 82 million people of Egypt. My belief is that no-one has the right to govern another people without their consent. Of course, there are different forms of democracy, or put more accurately, different forms of voting systems, and we are debating ours in Parliament just this week, but fully recognised democracy is very important to a country and its people.

There are, very few, if any, examples, of two democracies going to war with one another, and that has to be the most welcome benefit which democracy brings to the world.

Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
8th February 2011

All MPs have recently received many communications with regard to the proposed transfer of some forest land from the Forestry Commission to charities and perhaps other bodies.

Such concern expressed by constituents is understandable, even if many of the communications have been generated by a central organisation! Nevertheless, I take them seriously. I own dogs and horses, and enjoy rides and walks with them, myself, so I have every sympathy with these concerns.

The government, which is, of course, made up of two parties, has published a consultation document which is very interested and does address the concerns which are being expressed. This document, together with the process for responding to the consultation, can be found on the DEFRA website. The consultation closes on 21st April and the government intends to publish the results by summer.

The Forestry Commission manages its land on behalf of the government. The extent of this land extends to 2% of the total land area of England but just 18% of England's total woodland, with the remaining amount being privately managed. The Forestry Commission is, though, the manager and regulator of its land and the government feels that these roles are best separated.

The main concern expressed is the one regarding access. The government insists that access will be protected and this is to be found in the consultation document, as are the assurances that biodiversity, for example will also be protected. In addition, any tree felling proposals would still require approval by the Forestry Commission and planning permission to build on the land would require the normal planning consent.

Last week, there was a vote in the Commons on this issue but it wasn't legislative – it was mere on an expression of views on behalf of the Opposition, mainly the Labour Party. I didn't vote against that motion, as a number of people are concerned by the proposals, but I didn't vote in favour of it either as it was party political.

Anyway, we are where we are now, and I would urge everyone who is understandably concerned about these issues to read the consultation document, which goes into far more detail, and covers a greater breadth of the subject, than is possible here. And when the actual legislation comes to the Commons, I will be carefully scrutinising it to ensure that the pledges to protect access, biodiversity and other essential parts are enshrined in law.

Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
1st February 2011

This week the House of Commons gave a Second Reading to the Health & Social Care Bill which attempts to reform and therefore improve the NHS.

Like most people, I totally depend on the NHS for my health care. I therefore have a vested interest in trying to ensure that it not only remains free at the point of service but also that it provides an excellent service.

It's unfortunate that in any discussion about improving public services the NHS always becomes a political football. Because it provides such a good service to so many people is precisely the reason why it must be subject to constant scrutiny and, where necessary, reform.

In the 1983 General Election campaign, Labour made a great play on accusing the then Conservative government of being about to privatise the NHS. Well, in eighteen years of Conservative government, it didn't happen. And it's not going to happen now. Labour really needs to catch up with itself, let alone with the rest of the world.

What do I mean by "catch up with itself"? I mean that the last Labour leader to win a General Election, Tony Blair, was determined to reform public services, and particularly the NHS, so much so that he refused to hand over power to Gordon Brown in 2004 because he wasn't convinced that Mr Brown would continue with those reforms. It's all there in Mr Blair's book, *A Journey*.

Actually, although Tony Blair (and Gordon Brown) spent an awful lot of money on the NHS (and I have no objection to that), they didn't really reform it all that much, which is why the service is still, I'm afraid, patchy – brilliant in parts, weak in other parts. What this government is attempting to do is, yes, spend more on the NHS, even in these difficult financial times, but also bring in reforms which will help ensure that money is better spent.

I have held a meeting with the Health Secretary, Andrew Lansley, to discuss these matters. I also regularly meet with local health chiefs and have held a meeting with a dozen GPs from my constituency in order to talk some of the changes through. And I remain willing to discuss the proposals with any individuals or organisations which might have concerns. But my feeling is that, while some of the changes might need explaining in a bit more detail, the reforms take us in the right direction.

The changes are necessary in order to help people who are less well off. Rich people don't need the NHS in the same way. They can also find their way to the front of a hospital waiting list quicker than others. The reforms are about ensuring that everyone has the same ability to access high quality NHS services.

Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
24th January 2011

This week the House of Commons is mainly concerned with the European Union Bill, which is continuing its passage through Parliament. The Bill is mainly intended to try to ensure that no further powers are passed from the United Kingdom to the European Union without the British people being first consulted.

The motivation for the Bill, really, is the fact that, prior to the 2005 General Election, the then Labour government promised a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty and then, when re-elected, reneged on that promise, muttering something about the actual treaty being somewhat different to the one they thought they would agree to.

Many people felt let down by this reversal of policy. By the time the coalition government came to power it was too late to hold a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty because, months before, the treaty was already established into law. But the new government was and is determined to try to ensure that there is no repeat of that situation.

Of course, one Parliament cannot bind another, so if a future government were determined to ratify an agreed EU treaty in Parliament without reference to the British people they could in theory do it. But this Bill also prevents Ministers from agreeing to certain things in the EU on a more daily basis without reference to the electorate.

Many British people are sceptical, to say the least, about the EU and for good reason. This year, as a result of the budget agreed by the outgoing Labour government, the British taxpayer will have to contribute a total of £12.6 billion to the EU budget - that's over £1.4 million every minute. And this £12.6 billion is up from £9.5 billion in 2009-10.

But it's not just about money. The Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee, which I chair, interviewed someone from the EU's Tax Commissioner's office a couple of weeks ago. It was like treading through treacle. Could we get a yes or a no answer, any guidance, any definite statements? Not a chance.

Is that what we're paying our money towards? I'm afraid it is. But I hope that this Bill will, at least, move us in the right direction in that respect. It's not everything, but it's a start.

**Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
11th January 2011**

Parliament finally returned this week after what seemed like a very long time away. The Commons actually rose for the Christmas recess on 22nd December but, given the weather conditions, many people finished the week before.

That said, it has been a busy time for many MPs in their constituencies during the break. I took the opportunity of seeing a number of constituents and to visit one or two companies. Unfortunately, because of the weather, many sporting events were called off and a large number of people, myself included, suffered from one illness or another. It felt unfair only to be recovering when it was time to come back to Parliament!

One of the highlights of the Christmas season was the BBC's broadcasting of the service from Tewkesbury Abbey on Christmas Day. I was pleased to attend this service. It was a biting cold day but I was warmed by the atmosphere in the wonderful Abbey. I felt that Canon Paul, his wife Catherine, and all the team did the Abbey, the town and the whole area proud on the day.

Back at Westminster, the pace is already hotting up. There are a number of very important Bills, relating to localism, the European Union, Parliamentary terms, the voting system, police reform and so very many more pieces of legislation which need detailed consideration. And careful management of the economy is of the utmost importance.

I am holding a number of meetings in the Commons with representatives of various organisations, including charities, businesses and individuals, covering different aspects of my work. Insurance companies, aerospace, airlines, supermarkets and bookmakers are just some of the companies I'm seeing this week alone.

In addition to playing my part in scrutinising the legislation I mention above, and holding these meetings, I am continuing my work as Chairman of the Northern Ireland Select Committee, as Joint Chairman of the All Party Racing & Bloodstock Group and in various other roles.

Central to everything we do here, though, are the people we represent and I'm pleased to say that the emails, letters and phone calls abated slightly over the few days of Christmas but are now back up to their normal levels! And more and more people are taking the opportunity of visiting Westminster, which I welcome.

So, all in all, 2011 looks like being just as busy as was 2010 and I'm looking forward to it.

**Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
4th January 2011**

I should like to start by wishing all readers a Happy New Year. I hope that 2011 turns out to be a good year for you and your families and friends.

The year 2010 certainly went out with a bang, with all the snow and freezing temperatures, especially in Gloucestershire. In Northern Ireland people lost their water supplies, which is a problem we in this area are familiar with, and a large number of people have been unwell over this period.

It was good, though, that we had a bit of recognition in this area when BBC1 covered the service at Tewkesbury Abbey on Christmas Day. I was very proud of Canon Paul and everyone who took part in the service. I think they did the Abbey, and all of us, proud and I know that many people in different parts of the country were pleased to see it.

In fact, the whole of 2010 was a year to remember. We did, of course, have a General Election which resulted in a change of government, which in turn has led to a whole host of new policies and directions. There is some nervousness as we enter 2011 but I'm confident that the government is on the right track and that the measures being taken are necessary.

Parliament resumes next Monday, the 10th, but most MPs are working and available this week. Anyone who wishes to contact me can do so by writing to me at the House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA or can email me at robertsonl@parliament.uk

My priorities for this year are to continue to try to help serve all my constituents, and to help with problems or aspirations, whether they be affecting individuals, businesses, charities or other organisations. I shall, therefore, continue to visit people locally and also host meetings at the House of Commons.

In addition, I am always welcoming people to visit the Parliament building and am pleased that an increasing number of people are choosing to do so. Tours of the building are very worthwhile, to say the least, and it is possible to arrange tickets to sit in and watch the Commons or the Lords in action. I can also arrange for people to take a tour up the Clock Tower, to see Big Ben, which, again, is very worthwhile.

So, 2011 looks like being a busy year in many ways and I look forward to seeing as many people as possible during the year. In the meantime, I should like to wish you well over the coming months.