

Laurence Robertson MP

Member of parliament for Tewkesbury



Laurence Robertson's VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER 16th March 2010

This week is, for me, one of the best of the year as the Cheltenham Horseracing Festival takes place in my constituency at Prestbury Park. People from all over the world, and especially Ireland, will be meeting at the racecourse for what is the world's greatest National Hunt Festival.

This year has added value for me because my partner, Annie, is riding in the Ladies' Amateur Jockeys' Charity Race at 5.15pm on Thursday in aid of Cancer Research UK. She has ridden almost since birth but this is her first time as a jockey on a racecourse and she is certainly starting at the top! Each rider has to have raised at least £5,000 for the charity in order to qualify and, due to the generosity of many people, including regulars at our local pub, the Village Inn at Twynning, Annie has raised something approaching £7,000.

The top-quality races have attracted many horses for which this is the pinnacle of their careers. But the big race, the Totesport Cheltenham Gold Cup, on the Friday, has attracted the two best chasers around - Kauto Star, winner in 2009 and 2007, and Denman, winner in 2008. The race has been billed as "the decider" although both horses could possibly have another go at winning the crown next year.

The rivalry between the two horses, friendly though it is as both come from Paul Nicholls's yard, has been good for racing over the last couple of years and the build up to this year's Gold Cup is not only good for horse racing but is also good for all the local businesses which receive custom beyond that which they normally enjoy, as racegoers frequent and use the restaurants, pubs, hotels, shops, taxi companies and so on. There is a buzz in the air for the whole week.

Who will win the Gold Cup? I have made frequent predictions on this race, some right and some wrong, and making one publicly so close to a General Election might be considered to be foolhardy! But, for me, Kauto Star performed so brilliantly in his last race, whereas Denman didn't finish his, and I can't see Kauto Star being beaten, barring accidents, so he is my tip. But at 4-6, it will be hard to make money on him, and, who knows, it may be neither of the leading horses who take the cup home with them this Friday.

Whoever wins, I should like to congratulate Edward Gillespie and his team at the racecourse for continually putting on such a great show at the Festival. I hope all horses and jockey return home safely and that punters, at least from my area, return home with a bob or two in their pock

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Laurence Robertson's VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER 9th March 2010

The issue facing us when we came to Westminster on Monday was the recall to custody of Jon Venables, who was one of the murderers of Jamie Bulger. It raised a number of questions.

Venables, it seems, had broken the terms of his licence and was recalled on that basis. At this point, though, he has not actually been convicted of anything so the Justice Secretary refused to give details of what he was accused of so that he wouldn't prejudice the chances of Venables receiving a fair trial, and, indeed, of a trial taking place at all.

Such matters are always difficult. The age of criminal responsibility is ten but people are considered adults for custody purposes in terms of where they are to be detained, and for how long, when they are older. Some people feel that everyone knows right from wrong at a young age and should be accountable for their actions. So the age of responsibility is a controversial issue.

Release from prison is another controversial issue. Very many people re-offend when they leave prison, which does suggest that, for one reason or another, prison doesn't act as the corrective which it is supposed to. Or maybe some people are just meant to offend in the sense that they either don't care or know no better, and would continue to return to prison regardless of how strict the regime were to be..

And the time served by people convicted of murder is much debated. The average time served for murder is just 14 years, and, given that some people serve much longer, it mathematically follows that some don't serve very long at all. Venables was one such person. The problem with this is that the family of the victim has to relive the crime and the loss all over again when the offender is released, especially in high profile cases like this.

On the other hand, the Christian upbringing in me tells me that people deserve a second chance, and this is particularly an issue in Northern Ireland, which I spend so much time on. We all make mistakes and perhaps we all do things which we know are wrong at some point in our lives. This is true, but my teaching tells me that God forgives those who *truly* repent, which is perhaps the most important factor in all these issues.

It's all about balance. Criminals have to be treated proportionately. But people have to be deterred from committing crime and potential victims have to be protected. I think that most people would feel that, in this case, we have not struck that balance.

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Laurence Robertson's **VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER** **2nd March 2010**

Over the last few days there has been a flurry of speculation about the possibility of the Prime Minister calling a General Election to take place before the expected date of Thursday 6th May. At the time of writing, nothing has been announced so it looks as if the date will be the bookies' favourite of 6th of May when the actual poll takes place.

At that time, or whenever it is, the number of seats to be contested in the House of Commons will rise slightly from 646 to 650 as a result of boundary changes. In addition to this, the boundaries of some local seats will change as a result of decisions taken by the Boundary Commission.

In Tewkesbury, my seat loses Leckhampton, Warden Hill and Up Hatherley to the Cheltenham constituency, but gains Longlevens from Gloucester. I am well aware that some people in, for example, Longlevens, consider themselves to be part of Gloucester and, to an extent, resent being asked to vote in the Tewkesbury constituency.

I understand this feeling. I do, though, repeat that the changed arrangements are nothing to do with me, or to do with any other politician, actually, but are being made as a result of the decisions taken by the Boundary Commission, although the final recommendations for the country are approved en bloc by Parliament.

The Boundary Commission carries out regular reviews of Parliamentary constituencies and their objective, by and large, is to ensure that constituencies are roughly kept to the same size in terms of the number of electors in each one. A figure of about 72,000 is the level of electorate they aim to achieve. In the remote areas of Scotland, though, the constituencies would be larger geographically but smaller in terms of the number of electors each one contains.

The actual date of the General Election is, in effect, decided by the Prime Minister, although it is the Monarch who actually dissolves Parliament at the request of the Prime Minister. Given that the present Parliament first sat on 11th May 2005, it must be dissolved by 10th May 2010, which would mean that the very last possible date for the General Election would be 3rd June. However, it is generally accepted that the date will be set to coincide with the local elections on 6th May.

Whichever date the election is set for, it is not long away, and it promises to be a keenly contested affair!

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Laurence Robertson's **VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER** **23rd February 2010**

One of the causes of the massive government deficit which has built up is that this government has spent money like there were no tomorrow. Even when the economy was expanding, Gordon Brown as Chancellor of the Exchequer increased government spending even quicker.

The NHS, without doubt, has been one of the "beneficiaries" of this increased spending. Yet a few years ago the Primary Care Trust announced that it had a deficit and would have to reduce some services. Winchcombe Hospital was one such casualty.

Some new management was brought in and we were subsequently told that the situation had been brought under control and that the deficit had been dealt with. On 22nd January this year, a number of MPs, including me, attended a routine meeting with NHS chiefs and no alarm was raised about budget problems. Quite the reverse.

There was some surprise last week, and more than a little annoyance, then, to discover – not from the NHS but from other sources – that, as part of their need to save £27m - £30m in the next financial year, there would be a "phased closure of 150-200 beds" across the hospitals trust.

Members of the public, who pay for and depend on the NHS, could therefore be forgiven for asking the question "where has all the money gone?" That's certainly the question I'm asking. People have paid increased taxes, government spending has risen significantly, we're all going to have to pay higher taxes to tackle the deficit, and yet our most vital, front line services are being cut.

Of course, the hospital trust describes these cuts as "efficiency savings", saying that there will be "better arrangements for discharging patients" and they will be "reducing the number of people who fail to attend their outpatient appointments". Fair enough, they should be doing these things. But why does it take a financial crisis to force the trust bosses into working more efficiently? Why weren't they carrying out these changes anyway, five, ten, twenty, thirty years ago?

In Gloucestershire, there are Chairmen, Chief Executives and many administrative staff for the Primary Care Trust, the Hospitals Trust, the Mental Health Trust and the Ambulance Trust. Above a number of these trusts there is the Strategic Health Authority. Then, above all those, there is the Department of Health. Perhaps there is room for some "efficiency savings" in these empires?

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Laurence Robertson's View from Westminster 16th February 2010

Parliament is on recess this week and it gives MPs the chance to catch up on things in the constituency. I'm spending two days with the police as part of my Police Service Parliamentary Scheme, am delivering newsletters in Bishop's Cleeve, holding a few meetings and also have to travel back to London for a night as I have to attend an event at the Irish Embassy.

So, even though Parliament is not sitting, the issues remain and the General Election campaign continues, even though we don't officially know the date of the poll, and, therefore, technically, the starting pistol has not yet been fired. The smart money, however, will be on 6th May and that indeed is the bookies' favourite. That date will coincide with the local elections which will be held in many areas of the country. Locally, elections will take place in Gloucester City and Cheltenham Borough, but not in Tewkesbury Borough this year.

Things hotted up during the last few days when the Prime Minister appeared on the Piers Morgan show and allowed himself to be interviewed about personal matters. Longer ago, David Cameron allowed the television cameras into his home, and, more recently, spoke movingly about his own circumstances. Both leaders have suffered terrible tragedies in their lives when they lost children and many people in the country have been moved by their respective plights.

Such interviews do, however, provoke the question as to whether politicians are right to allow the media to explore their private lives in this way, or, put the other way round, whether they are right to speak about their private issues, depending on your viewpoint. But the fact is that politicians are human beings and are drawn from the general population, members of which have also suffered tragedies and heartache. And when the spotlight has been removed from such people, they still have to deal with their emotions and the actual issue itself.

Personally, for that reason, and on balance, I think that both Gordon Brown and David Cameron were right to express their feelings publicly over their losses and their problems if that's what they wished to do. And I suspect that some people who have suffered similar losses themselves will draw at least some comfort, or perhaps solace, from the fact that the present Prime Minister and possibly the next Prime Minister have not only suffered such losses themselves but have also shared their pain with the nation.

It's a hard call and views will differ on the issue. But I don't feel that either leader has used their personal circumstances in order to try to win votes or to win political arguments, but I do feel that they have spoken from the heart, and, after all, that's what members of the electorate have always called on politicians to do.

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Laurence Robertson's **VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER** **8th February 2010**

The three Members of Parliament who are to be taken to court for allegedly making dishonest expenses claims are, it is reported, claiming Parliamentary Privilege in order to avoid prosecution. I make no points about their cases as they will be subject to due process. However, I thought it might be interesting to discuss exactly what "Parliamentary Privilege" is meant to be.

The main shield it offers Members of Parliament is a protection from civil actions which might arise from comments they may make in the House of Commons. In other words, the normal rules of defamation would not apply to, for example, speeches made by MPs in the Chamber, just as those rules would not apply to anything said in court rooms up and down the country. Reporting on Parliament speeches and court cases is also excluded from the normal defamation rules.

In terms of Parliament, this is what is referred to as Parliamentary Privilege. The purpose of it is to allow MPs to raise matters on behalf of their constituents without fear of having a writ served on them for defamation. Similarly, in a court room, the privilege exists so that the truth of cases can be ascertained without the fear of being taken to court for defamation. Such protection does not exist if, say, an MP were to make a speech in his constituency or if he were to publish a leaflet which libelled someone. Under those circumstances, MPs would be subject to the normal rules on defamation

However, although MPs have this privilege, they are not expected to abuse it. The fact that we cannot be sued for what we say in the Chamber means that we should be more, not less, careful about what we say about someone, because that person would not have the right of redress. It should, therefore, only be used very carefully and only in the serving of our constituents or on matters of important national interest.

Another interesting point about Parliament in this respect is that the doctrine of *sub judice* prevents MPs from raising in Parliament matters which are before the courts, so as not to influence those court proceedings. This is a matter which the Speaker reminded the Commons about this week.

Sub Judice, Parliamentary Privilege...such terms and procedures are there to ensure that justice is done, and not to allow it to be avoided.

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Laurence Robertson's VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER 2nd February 2010

The Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, has agreed to appear in front of the Chilcott Inquiry into the war with Iraq before the General Election. This follows the evidence session given by the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, last week.

Mr Blair has obviously lost none of his performing skills which he tuned so finely when he was in the House of Commons. Gordon Brown doesn't share those skills, although given that he obviously wasn't the man in charge when we went to war in 2003 he perhaps won't need them.

One of the main reasons given for going to war was that Iraq was capable of launching weapons of mass destruction "within 45 minutes". Receiving that intelligence, if indeed it was intelligence rather than opinion, was a persuasive argument at the time. But it has since transpired that the real intelligence was that Iraq was capable of building or acquiring those weapons, and that's what Mr Blair said last week.

It's not quite the same thing, though, and the Inquiry should have questioned Mr Blair more persistently on that very point - when did the intelligence change from Iraq's being able to launch weapons of mass destruction in 45 minutes to having the ability to develop such weapons? I hope that they will press Gordon Brown on that very point, because it is a crucial one.

It's not the only point, though. Persuasive though I found the argument about weapons at the time, the fact that Saddam Hussein was murdering, torturing, raping and mutilating his own people was a powerful argument for regime change as well. This point is often overlooked - yes, tragically, people died from the war, but so too did people die under the previous regime. The significant improvement in the mortality rate for children since the regime change is strong evidence of a humanitarian improvement in Iraq.

It should also be remembered that Saddam Hussein had actually used destructive weapons against Iran and against his own people in the past, so, yes, he could have developed them again quite quickly. This, though, is one of the issues we now face with Iran, Iraq's former enemy. There is sore irony in that development.

Decisions which not only affect people's lives but also can end people's lives - such as over Iraq, Afghanistan and Northern Ireland - are terribly difficult to make. Did Tony Blair take those decisions on Iraq for the right reasons? That's what the Chilcott Inquiry is there to determine

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Laurence Robertson's **VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER** **26th January 2010**

Although I am a Shadow Minister for Northern Ireland, I try to resist the urge to write too much about the Province in this column as the subject may not be of the same interest to all my constituents. However, with Northern Ireland being so much in the news at the moment, I thought I would discuss the situation.

Basically, Northern Ireland had been ruled directly from Westminster since the Stormont Parliament ended in 1972. Various attempts to restore devolved government failed, but, after a shaky start, a new Assembly was set up and started to function in 2007, with the responsibility for most matters, such as health, education, roads and so on being transferred to the Assembly.

However, the responsibility for policing and criminal justice was not devolved and is still controlled from Westminster. Sinn Fein, when asking their members to support the police (they had previously not done so), promised that they would soon be in control of the function. That has not happened because the unionists say that there is insufficient confidence in the Province for those functions to be devolved as yet. As a result, the Sinn Fein leadership is under considerable pressure from their members to deliver.

One of the strengths of the Assembly – it brought the warring factions together – is also its weakness, in that it is constructed in such a way that, basically, one Party can cause it to collapse by refusing to take part. Furthermore, every decision of any note must receive majorities on both sides of the divide in the Assembly – unionist and nationalist – which means that virtually nothing is decided.

The British and Irish Prime Ministers dashed to Stormont this week in an attempt to bring Sinn Fein and the unionists together on this issue and to prevent Sinn Fein from collapsing the Assembly. At the time of writing, progress seems difficult and it is hard to predict what will happen.

Certainly, the Conservative Party has no desire for direct rule. We would rather see devolution succeed in Northern Ireland. But it is difficult to take the right decisions when the threat of collapsing the Assembly, and with the shadow of the gun, remaining. I held several Ministerial meetings last week and that is the reality of the situation.

So, when people say to me how very much better things are in Northern Ireland these days, I reply by saying, yes, so very much better, but with a good way to go yet.

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Laurence Robertson's **VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER** **17TH January 2010**

In Parliament, it seems strange debating issues which could normally be considered to be important when so very many people in Haiti have lost their lives, their loved ones or are terribly affected by the earthquake which took place there a few days ago. It puts things into perspective.

It doesn't seem five years since the Tsunami struck another part of the world, causing so very many people to lose their lives as well. I remember standing in silence in my local pub on New Year's Eve 2004 in memory of those who had perished in that disaster. It seemed wrong to be doing any celebrating at the time and the evening certainly felt very flat to me.

Events such as these, similar to the flooding in our area in 2007, while bringing out the worst in just a few, do bring out the best in most people. I well remember the spirit which people, young and old, demonstrated during the floods in, for example, their determination to ensure that everyone, especially the vulnerable, had some water delivered to them. And I'll never forget the resilience which people who were subsequently forced to live in caravans over the winter, and therefore the Christmas period, demonstrated.

Similarly, people across the world have been emotionally affected by the disaster in Haiti and they have responded. Charities have raised large amounts of money, and governments have increased their aid, in attempts to help those who have been so badly affected. But, it seems, the infrastructure in Haiti is causing difficulties in actually getting the aid there.

One of the lasting problems from such an event, as well as the terrible memories and sense of loss which people will feel, is that the place is long associated with that event. Even now, few of us, for example, would know what New Orleans is like these days. And, similarly, I think a lot of people have an image of Tewkesbury still being damaged by the flooding. Almost every day of my life, wherever I go, when people find out I'm from Tewkesbury they always ask "How are the floods?"

It's a natural enough reaction, but it is important for such places to try to move on for their own benefit. But bad though our time was in Tewkesbury in 2007 – the biggest peacetime operation ever mounted in this country – it is nothing in comparison to what people in Haiti are suffering. And the people there will find it very difficult to move on.

Indeed, in another sense, retaining memories of what has happened will always keep things in perspective. And those who have lost their loved ones will find it very difficult to move on. Their lives have been turned upside down and the tragedy will live with them forever. They deserve our prayers.

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Laurence Robertson's **VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER** **12th January 2010**

Once again, Northern Ireland has captured the headlines this week, as First Minister Peter Robinson temporarily steps down in order to help with his wife's medical problems and also to clear his name of the allegation made against him.

I wouldn't wish to comment on either of these issues as one is personal and the other will be investigated in due course. But in an interview I did on Saturday for a radio station based in the Republic of Ireland I said that there was no reason why such an isolated incident should bring the Assembly down, as had been suggested as being possible.

Prior to the discovery of this news, those of us involved in Northern Ireland had been concerned that the failure of members of the Assembly to agree on a timetable for the devolution of policing and justice to the Assembly might actually cause political problems in the Province, as might further dissident republican activity. Then this issue came up and somewhat muddied the waters.

And speaking of waters, the Committee Stage of the Flood & Water Management Bill began in the Commons last week. Although I am a Front Bench spokesman for Northern Ireland, I was asked to serve on this Bill because of my experiences in Tewkesbury.

Basically, the Bill is well intentioned but, as it presently stands, it is too weak to make any real difference. The government wants the Bill to go through before Parliament is dissolved and, in shortening the Bill for this purpose, they have weakened it.

I am concerned to try to remove the possibility of building taking place in flood risk areas. I am also concerned that we try to designate exactly which organisation is responsible for maintaining which waterway, so that we can at alleviate the effects of any heavy rainfall in the future. The Bill is deficient in these respects so I will be doing my best to try to strengthen it.

In addition, it will be necessary to try to ensure that local councils are provided with sufficient funding to draw up proper strategies and then to carry them out. Insufficient funding will cause them to draw up inadequate strategies. This is an important point and one which I have explored on the committee already.

Both these issues, in Northern Ireland and on the floods bill, will certainly keep me busy during this week and next, and, as ever, I shall work towards successful outcomes on both.

Laurence Robertson MP

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Laurence Robertson's **VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER** **4th Jan 2010**

Parliament resumed this week following the Christmas recess and it seems as if the General Election campaign has already begun, even though there could be a few months pass before it actually takes place.

Even so, there is much business to take care of which is not related to the Election. The wintry weather, which provides such a picture postcard setting for so many of us, has caused problems and these must be dealt with. And, related to another weather problem, the Floods & Water Management Bill will start to be considered in more detail this week.

I was asked to serve at the Committee Stage of the Bill, which is an unusual thing for a Front Bench spokesman in another department to be asked to do. However, I was pleased to accept as I believe that flooding, and the fear of flooding, remain big problems for my constituents and I want to do all I can to help.

As it stands, the Bill is well intentioned but, I believe, is weak, and is in danger of making the right noises but delivering little. For example, it doesn't address the problems caused by building in flood risk areas, it doesn't adequately define which organisation will be responsible for which waterway and it doesn't actually require much action beyond the necessity to produce reports and strategies. Shovels, wellington boots, waders, diggers and so forth are needed far more urgently than pieces of paper.

The Committee Stage of a Bill is the best time to propose amendments to the Bill with the aim of, in this case, strengthening it. That's why I was happy to serve at this stage. Then there are further opportunities to do so at Report Stage when the Bill returns to the Commons, as amended in Committee.

In addition, I shall soon be holding a meeting with the national Chairman and Regional Director of the Environment Agency and this Bill, and flooding problems generally, will be on the agenda. I hold regular meetings at all levels with the Environment Agency to discuss issues such as flooding and waste management and this meeting will be particularly timely. I also anticipate having to deal with some Northern Ireland business in the near future and I hope that we can manage to keep things moving in the right direction in the Province.

So, Election campaign or not, there are important, non-party political matters to deal with as we return to Westminster and already I am enjoying being immersed in them during this chilly time!