

Laurence Robertson MP

Member of parliament for Tewkesbury



Laurence Robertson M.P. VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER 12th July 2010

This week, the government launched a White Paper on the National Health Service aimed at modernising it, improving it and turning it into a patient-led organisation. White Papers basically set out the government's objectives for a particular department but, at the same time, invite comments and suggestions about the delivery of new policies

Virtually everyone recognises the work and value of the NHS. It provides care free at the point of service for everyone, regardless of their financial standing. This is its great strength, and the government will not only preserve that principle but also enhance it.

That's not to say that the NHS cannot be improved, however. Some of the faults of the NHS include the post code lottery for treatments which exist, the inconsistent level of some services, poorer survival rates from some diseases than international competitors, vital drugs are developed and not prescribed, there are too many hospital-acquired infections and the NHS is rather expensive service to run.

In spite of the last point, the government has pledged to increase spending on the NHS year on year. But it is also pledging to tackle the other problems which exist so that people who are dependent on the service receive the best possible care from it.

The government is looking to provide patients and GPs, for example, with more power and control over their treatments and budgets so that the mostly excellent service provided by the NHS becomes even more widespread. It is also seeking to ensure that when, for example, cancer drugs are developed they are actually prescribed to patients who need them.

For far too long, some politicians, mainly in the Labour Party, have seen the NHS as some sacred cow and have accused people who wish to improve it as wanting to abolish it. The opposite is actually true - the real enemies of the NHS are those who wish to do nothing to improve it.

Now is the time to start to say "The NHS is great, so let's make it even better." It is important to do this because, by and large, it is poorer people who are more reliant on the NHS because they have fewer choices than people who are better off.

The government is asking for comments to be sent in by 5th October to White Paper Team, Room 601, dept of Health, 79 Whitehall, London SW1A 2NS or to NHSWhitepaper@dh.gsi.gov.uk

Laurence Robertson MP

Member of parliament for Tewkesbury



View from Westminster **5th July 2010**

Last week, I received a letter from the office of the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government telling me that he had rejected the appeal by Robert Hitchins to build 1,750 houses to the West of Innsworth Lane and North of the A40.

I was very pleased by this announcement because I and many others had been campaigning against this application and subsequent appeal. We felt that building on this land would represent an unnecessary intrusion into the Green Belt and that it would create unacceptable levels of traffic movement in the area. The Secretary of State agreed with these points.

So while being pleased by the decision taken by Eric Pickles, I was also pleased by the reasons he gave for his decision. The new government said it would protect the Green Belt and, in his decision, Eric said that the Green Belt would be harmed by building in this area so rejected the appeal.

The decision also represents a move in the direction of localism, though, and developers should now see that appeals taken to the Secretary of State won't be guaranteed success. I and many others, including people in the government, believe that such decisions are best taken locally, by people who are elected by the rest of us to take those decisions.

Such is the reason behind the scrapping of the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS). Under this scheme, unelected, unknown people who were supposed to represent the "South West" set housing numbers and defined certain areas where houses should be built. We had no way of holding such people to account and, again, I'm very pleased that the new government stuck to its pledge to scrap the whole RSS process.

Last week, I held a reception in the Commons designed to promote the area, encouraging people to visit as tourists and also to bring their businesses here. So I am actively promoting growth and development. But matching housing requirements to that growth requires understanding and careful planning, as does deciding the exact location for that housing. Copying the predictions used in the past would be wrong.

There are difficult decisions to take in the future regarding housing. But this particular decision was the right one, partly because of the reasons given for deciding it in that way.

Laurence Robertson MP

Member of parliament for Tewkesbury



Laurence Robertson's
VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER
28th June 2010

In this column I usually write about the most important event in the last or the coming week. However, I couldn't bear to write about England's exiting from the World Cup so I thought I'd write about last week's budget.

The new government has, of course, inherited a dreadful economy from the last government. The same was true when we last took government in 1979 and it is something of a recurring theme that Conservative governments do have to set the economy on the right track again.

Serious action is, therefore, necessary. If we didn't start to reduce the deficit a number of dangerous things would happen. To start with, the government would need to continue to borrow money and the debt interest would grow even larger. This is money which could otherwise be spent on hospitals and schools.

Gradually, it would become more difficult for the government to borrow money and the interest rate it would have to pay for that money would therefore increase. This, in turn, would put an upward pressure on interest rates. This would help savers but not borrowers such as people who have mortgages or businesses.

The other option, to print money, was tried by the last government under the euphemism "quantitative easing". That's okay for a while, but if we had continued to print money in large quantities then the currency would have become devalued and very high inflation would have resulted, as happened in Germany many years ago and Zimbabwe more recently. If only life were that easy.

So, we're stuck with having to take corrective action to put the economy right and last week's budget made a start towards that. In the Autumn, spending plans will be announced which will be a further step along that way. It isn't easy, and some people will inevitably, but sadly, lose out. However, the priority is to protect the vulnerable while at the same time helping businesses to recover so that they can create jobs and produce the growth in the economy which is so badly needed.

That's the Chancellor's strategy – to control, and hopefully reduce, government spending while at the same time taking measures which will help boost the recovery so that people get back to work and government revenues increase. In doing so, the deficit will be largely reduced. It's just a shame about England's deficit against Germany last Sunday.

Laurence Robertson MP

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Laurence Robertson's View from Westminster 21st June 2010

Last week the Saville Report into the events of Bloody Sunday, 30th January 1972, was published to the House of Commons. It took ten years to compile, ran to 5,000 pages and cost £192 million to produce.

Due to my becoming Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee I was given prior sighting of the report. This meant being locked up in the Cabinet Office for six hours without a telephone, before being driven back to the Commons for the Prime Minister's statement.

As you will know, Lord Saville said that there was no justification for the soldiers to have opened fire on the civilians, who were judged to have been unarmed.

As the Prime Minister said, the killings were very wrong. Beneath the headlines, though, the report also acknowledged that Londonderry was a dangerous place in 1972. Indeed, two soldiers had been killed just a couple of days earlier. And a couple of years ago, I was told by the police in Londonderry that I should only go into the Bogside Inn if I didn't say anything. That's now, so how bad was it then during the worst year of the Troubles?

Lord Saville also said that, on the day, the soldiers had been badly led. And he said that it was probable that the now Deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland, Martin McGuinness, held a Thompson sub-machine gun on the day.

The question now arises about what should happen next. Will this report enable the families concerned to draw a line under the past or will they seek prosecutions? If the latter course is followed, will there be an equivalence drawn with the early release given to terrorists on both sides of the divide?

It isn't an easy question to deal with. But all sides in the Commons feel that the Prime Minister has made a good job of it so far.

Laurence Robertson MP

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Laurence Robertson's VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER 14th June 2010

As if we had not had enough election excitement in early May, there were further elections held in Westminster last week as democracy began its march forward in the Commons.

To start with, on Tuesday, we elected the Deputy Speakers, when in the past they had been appointed. Given that the Speaker is a Conservative, we could elect one further Conservative and two Labour Deputies. I didn't agree with the rigged system of election in that one of the Deputies had to be a woman – I'd happily vote for a woman but I believe in meritocracy – but was pleased we were voting on the matter.

Then, on Wednesday, we elected Chairmen of Select Committees, which, again, had previously been appointed. I was very pleased indeed to be elected – unopposed, as it happened - to be Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee.

This is a senior role and I am very much looking forward to the job. I haven't sat on a Select Committee for nine years as I was on the Front Bench during that time, for five years as a Shadow Minister for Northern Ireland. And it looks as if I will hit the ground running as, by the time this article appears, the Saville Report will have been published.

This Report, which took ten years to compile at a cost of £192 million, is the results of an inquiry into the events on what became known as Bloody Sunday in Londonderry when thirteen people (a fourteenth died later) were shot dead by paratroopers during a civil rights march.

As the new Chairman of the Select Committee, I was given an advance sighting of the report, though at 5,000 pages long it is hard to take much in immediately. There will be a full day's debate held in October in the Commons and it may well be that the Select Committee might wish to look into the matter as well.

On the slightly lighter side, I was also elected Joint Chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Racing & Bloodstock and also on Ethiopia, both of which are important and happen to be interests of mine. And in addition to these committees, I will, of course, be playing my part in scrutinising legislation, asking questions and all the other Parliamentary activities. In addition, I have been offered a better office – offices, in fact – and so will unexpectedly be moving my Westminster activities to rather bigger premises.

Locally, my team and I have delivered information leaflets throughout Bishop's Cleeve and we hope to do the same in Churchdown in the coming days. I like to try to stay in touch with my constituents and look forward to continuing to do so.

Laurence Robertson MP

Member of parliament for Tewkesbury



Laurence Robertson's View from Westminster 7th June 2010

One of the Conservative Party's pre-election manifesto pledges was to scrap the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) and return the responsibility for housing numbers and sites to local councils.

The Conservative Party was the only one making such a clear pledge and I'm pleased that the new government has indeed confirmed that the RSS is to go.

I've been campaigning against the RSS proposals to build thousands of extra houses round here for a number of years. It wasn't just the numbers I protested against, though, but the whole practice of allowing unelected people in the South West region to decide how many houses we need in this area and where they should go. I believe that locally elected people should take those decisions.

So what will replace the RSS system? At the moment, we don't know exactly but I will be working to ensure that those taking future decisions about housing are made fully aware of the strength of feeling which exists against building in flood risk areas, which has been one of my main concerns all along. The new decisions will, though, indeed be taken by people elected by those who will be affected by house building.

However it works in practice and detail, for now, though the new government has made a good start in this respect. The Conservative Party said it would scrap the RSS if it came to power and within just weeks of doing so it has arranged to do exactly that.

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Laurence Robertson's View from Westminster 1st June 2010

Normally, Parliament would be on recess this week but I'm pleased that, because we haven't been back long, we are sitting for two days this week.

We will be holding further debates on the contents of the Queen's Speech this week and before continuing the debate and voting on it early next week.

The Queen's Speech sets out the government's legislative programme for the session of Parliament which begins as the Sovereign opens Parliament and ends when it prorogues in advance of the next Queen's Speech.

Following shortly will be the Budget, which will take place on 22nd June when the government's fiscal programme will be detailed.

For me, one of the most important changes featured in the Queen's Speech I am looking forward to is the scrapping of the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) and the handing back of housing plans to local councils.

The main objective of the Budget will, of course, be to reduce the deficit and I hope that the problem will be tackled by constraining government spending rather than by increasing taxes, which would risk stalling the recovery.

So, there's much going on, both locally and nationally and I look forward to playing my part in everything!

Laurence Robertson MP

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Laurence Robertson's VIEW FROM WESTMINSTER 17th May 2010

The political events of last week will remain in the memory for a long time to come and probably for ever. They culminated in the formation of a coalition government between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats, led by David Cameron as Prime Minister.

Inevitably, the arrangement will require compromise on both sides in order to make it work but it will hopefully provide some much-needed stability in the government after a period of uncertainty. Certainly, the economy requires stabilising and then encouraging.

Many people are, of course, concerned about what happens next with particular regard to their jobs. Public sector workers are understandably worried about the effects any cuts would have on them and businesses are concerned about any measures which will be taken which would have an adverse effect on their trading.

All these concerns are understandable and legitimate. The problem is that the country has been living on high, debt-fuelled spending for too long and the day of reckoning has finally caught up with us. Inevitably, some changes will have to be made.

In my view, the best thing the new government can do is to encourage businesses, boost enterprise and make it as easy as possible for businesses to make money. That way, we create more jobs in the private sector, some of which could be taken by people now in the public sector, and the businesses themselves will pay more tax out of their increased profits, which helps reduce the deficit and which would continue to fund public services.

Already, David Cameron has said that he believes that the deficit will have to be reduced mainly by curbing spending rather than by increasing taxes. I believe that to be the right approach, because increasing taxes would only serve to stifle any recovery.

This week in Parliament, we will elect a new Speaker (this will have been performed by the time this article appears) and will be swearing in all Members of Parliament. Next week, we will have the Queen's Speech on Tuesday, followed by a few days' debate on the measures announced.

After that, it's down to the business of rescuing the economy and generally running the country.

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View from Westminster **11th May 2010**

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