



TRIDENT TIMES

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"POLICIES" - WHAT POLICIES ?

Before the elections last year I wrote that party manifestos were not worth the paper they were written on, but even I didn't realise how true that was going to turn out. However, I have no doubt that eleven million people voted on the Conservative policies to reduce immigration, stand up against the EU directives, abolish the Human Rights Act and replace it with a Bill of Rights, use a bit of common sense on Green policies, reduce Quangos, reform the fiddling of expenses, seriously consider nuclear power before all the lights go out and not to swamp us with useless and expensive windmills and finally, to be tough on crime. We accepted that we were in a difficult financial situation and have accepted the necessary cuts. However, we did not reckon on upping the foreign aid to £12billion. We have seen more u-turns than the learner drivers who practice that skill in our road!

With Ken Clarke in charge of justice, one begins to wonder what that word means. It certainly doesn't apply to the victims of crime. It appears that it is too costly to send someone to prison and it also might offend their human rights. As an aside to that, fines totalling £1.5billion remain uncollected and offenders assets have never been seized. Yet, if you don't pay your council tax the bailiffs are soon knocking on your door.

We have 11,000 foreigners locked up, but, if just one in ten were deported the saving would be £50million. We shell out £60,000 a day to pay legal aid for prisoners bringing Court actions after they have been locked up which costs £22million so they seem to continue to rob us when they have been banged up. There is no wonder that re-offending is the order of the day because they seem to have a softer time inside than out. They even have an annual survey costing £½million asking them about their quality of life!

I haven't tried it yet, but I am quietly mulling over in my mind that prison might be a better proposition than a care home because the cells are kitted out with TVs

with extra stations, computers, play stations and all the little extras to promote my good behaviour and having someone to look in on me to check that I am alright. In addition to all that, I would be able to keep my house and have no bills to pay!

Let's not forget the Judges who interpret and place the Human Rights Act above all else. Their expenses last year were £30million for travel and hotel costs. Oh, and they also get huge pensions for which they don't pay a penny. If they contributed just 6% of their salaries towards their pensions, like nurses and other public employees it would save £15million.

So, there you are Mr Clarke, there's a fair amount of savings you can make simply by doing your job properly instead of taking the easy option and downgrading the crimes of burglary, rape, and violence, or any other stupid idea you seem to come up with. You are supposed to be a "Conservative Big Beast" but on crime you are a pussycat and you have lost your nine lives.

"Yes", I know it's a Coalition Government, but does the tail really have to wag the dog?

DUTY TO INVOLVE

There is currently a statutory duty on all local authorities to consult with “representatives of local persons” on the exercise of their functions. It is called “duty to involve, consult and inform”. The Government is planning to remove this duty as part of its review of statutory duties and guidance on consultation and instead they are proposing new guidance (not as strong as a duty) to consult a wide range of local persons or groups.

The removal of this “duty” could affect a considerable amount of the work that we do and possibly a restriction on the speakers who attend our meetings. We have always been very strong on consultation and being able to research our questions and our local authority has always been very helpful in this and we have a good relationship. Whether this change in the Act will change this important co-operation is yet to be seen. If it does it will be a retrograde step and strongly opposed.

Over the years our members have become interested and informed on how their Council works, its strengths and its weaknesses, how their money is spent and why. We have become very involved with the system and we have freely consulted with them on numerous topics and raised objections when necessary and pressed our points. If the “duty to involve, consult and inform” is abolished or weakened in any way then it could be in direct opposition to that wonderful slogan “The Big Society”.

Open Government involving us, consulting us and informing us is surely what it is all about, although not necessarily in that order, sometimes it informs us before consulting us and then ignores our input. As with most loosely put together Acts, or Guidance, I am sure this will be interpreted differently by Authority Officers across the country as is the Health & Safety Act, Planning Law and the Human Rights Act by the Judiciary.

The Government should think again before abolishing this duty.

CARE HOMES

I found our last meeting with the Assistant Director of Adult Social Services quite interesting. I was surprised to learn that North Somerset Council no longer inspects local care and nursing homes twice a year and that this job has now been taken over by the “Care Quality Commission” who seem to be a “reactive” organisation rather than “proactive”. They don’t carry out inspections until the complaints come rolling in and, as we have seen recently, some of those have been ignored with appalling results.

There definitely needs to be a rethink on the effectiveness of the Commission. Although two visits a year by North Somerset Council Inspectors might not sound enough, at least they were local and proactive and easy to contact if there were doubts.

What is beginning to surface now is that some big companies, who have made large profits in the past, are now finding it difficult to survive. It is big business and the elderly and vulnerable are being used in this gamble of complex financial engineering as some of these companies become unstuck in the economic downturn. This can, and does, cause havoc with the lives of elderly people who, having sold their homes to pay the massive charges made by these care and nursing homes, find that they are subject to buy-outs, buy-ins and outsourcing deals.

With one large company closing a number of homes this does not bode well for residents. Older people need security, not to be shunted around like gambling chips, whilst the dealers walk away with millions of pounds.

Moving from familiar surroundings can be fatal for some older people, these deals should be condemned and regulations put in place and enforced to ensure that this sort of wheeler dealing does not rob the elderly of their savings, security and their lives.

PENSIONERS STRIKE !!!

Local Authority pensions, which have been described by every economist in the country as “unsustainable”, is the focus of proposed Union strike action. The Union feels that upping the employees’ contribution by 3p in the pound and making their members work a little longer before they receive what is considered to be the best pension deal in the country is a worthwhile reason to cause havoc to an already disenchanted public.

IF ANYONE HAS AS GOOD REASON TO STRIKE THEN IT IS THE PENSIONER” We receive the lowest pension in Europe, it has been downgraded from RPI to CPI, pensioner inflation levels are higher than stated, reduction in winter fuel allowance, pathetic interest rates on savings and having sell our home to pay for care. Although we haven’t got a Union to fight our battles, we should seriously consider taking “strike” action by withholding certain payments. The powers that be eventually realised the folly of increasing council tax and the disruption pensioners caused by constantly banging the drum!

Our “strike” could be similar, let me explain. North Somerset Council is the same as any other Council in the country. We all contribute to our public employees’ pension fund through our council tax. In 2009/10 (figures not yet out for 2010/11) North Somerset council tax payments contributed £15million to our employees’

fund. Our employees pay 6% of their earnings to the fund whilst we (the council tax payer) contribute 19.1% of their salary to the fund - hence the £15million. If we divide that by the council tax base rate of 76,033 (the number of Band D equivalent houses) the answer is £197.28, which is added to your council tax bill to pay for their pension.

At the moment employees pay 6p in the pound towards their pension, whilst we (the council tax payer) contribute more than three times that amount - 19p in every pound of their salary on top of their salary. I consider this to be totally unsustainable and this amount will increase year on year taking more and more money out of stretched services or increasing council tax. **IF, HOWEVER, WE ONLY PAY 6% TO EQUAL THE EMPLOYEES’ CONTRIBUTION TO THE PENSION FUND WE WOULD SAVE AT LEAST £100 ON OUR COUNCIL TAX BILLS.**

So, our “strike” action would be to deduct £100 from our council tax bills. As pensioners, we have very little weight individually, but, collectively, we outnumber all the Unions put together.

This sounds a fair deal to me, but let me have your thoughts. It is about time we had a say because the amount we pay towards their pension outstrips our annual pension increase!

OUR NEXT MEETING

The speaker at our next meeting on Wednesday, 6th July, will be Sharon Stanley. “Parliament and Your Community” is the subject which will cover various routes for community members to engage with Parliament and a route we might be able to take to get our views heard. Sharon will be coming down from London, so I hope the meeting will be well attended and that we will all find it useful to know how the system works.

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DATE OF NEXT MEETING:

WEDNESDAY 6th JULY – 2.00 pm

UNITED REFORMED CHURCH HALL

Waterloo Street, Weston-super-Mare

GUEST SPEAKER:

SHARON STANLEY

Parliamentary Outreach

TOPIC:

“PARLIAMENT & YOUR COMMUNITY”

“OH, MY LORD”

The House of Lords seems to get bigger every day and they will want an extension if they all turn up, but it does seem to have become a dumping ground for “past it” politicians and “wannabe” Lords. I’m not against the second House but it does appear to be getting like an off shoot of the Chelsea Pensioners with pay. It seems that many sign the book, get their £300 a day and then go home or to their hotel. Maybe, no, definitely, it needs sorting out. There appears to be as much fiddling in the Lords as there was (is) in the House of Commons. £300 a day seems a bit expensive for a quick kip. Lord Prescott was having a snooze last time I saw him on the television.

They may be unelected Lords but they still have a duty of responsibility if they are taking our money. I’d love to see their “Statement of Accounts” but then they do have a huge influence and probably no newspaper would have the courage to investigate them.

Recently a Peer, due to be sentenced next month for fiddling expenses, blew the gaff by saying he was only doing what 500 to 600 other Lords were doing. The House of Lords has 789 members and, in expenses alone, claimed £17.2million. That is about £22,000 a head and they do not even have to submit receipts for their claims.

Another Peer has just received twelve months in prison for claiming bogus travelling costs of £11,277 from Oxford whilst he did, in fact, live in London. I am sure there are many honest, hardworking Lords, but it remains a gravy train of huge proportions. Although the House is often packed in the bars and restaurants, very few filter into the Chamber to make a contribution to the political life of the nation.

No wonder they don’t want the House of Lords reformed, it seems to be a jolly good club!

Whilst I’m having this splat about those who govern us, I might as well bleat on about the EU members – what about their fiddles, I’m sure there must be some. What an incentive that must be to the members, when the EU Commission can’t get its accounts signed off for sixteen years on the trot,

PLEASE can someone provide us with some figures because we would like to know just how much we are being robbed?

Maybe we would not have to lose vital services, or does the EU qualify for our foreign aid, or is that in addition to the £12billion it seems that money grows on trees but for some reason it doesn’t in my garden!