

A view from the inside

Written by Chris Robertshaw MHK
Tuesday, 29 March 2011 11:58

The following are Douglas East MHK Chris Robertshaw's own notes from his talk given at PAG's 28th March 2011 public meeting "Identifying Election Issues".

I expect some of you will wish to put forward particular issues you feel strongly about so I thought a more general view gleaned from the fairly short time I have been a member of the Keys might provide another dimension to tonight's meeting.

I have called it 'a view from the inside'.

As a preface to what follows I would like to say that anyone might be forgiven for thinking that I am simply a closed minded critic with nothing good to say.

I hope nothing is further from the truth for the Isle of Man is a deeply blessed place in having its own parliament. That such a small community has the potential to so significantly decide its own fate is indeed remarkable – we have a great gift – a gift that should provide us all with an opportunity to make a difference.

For my part..... I consider I have been one of the lucky generations that has seen economic growth dominate almost my entire working life – a time during which the island has enjoyed quite unprecedented development.

I first stood in 2006 because looking ahead I expected the future to become much more challenging for those who follow us. I passionately believe it is our duty to do the best we can for them - For my children and grand children and therefore for everyone's children. To know that when the baton is handed on that we have done the best we could for them and, perhaps somewhat selfishly, that they might know that we did.

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Please consider what I now have to say both in the light of the knowledge that having our own parliament should allow us to be masters of our own destiny and that in the pursuit of that destiny only our very best efforts will be good enough in a highly competitive and fast changing world.

So, bearing this in mind, what then is the view from the inside as a new member and how will this impact upon my views as I approach the general election?

Looking around the chamber - it did not take long before it became possible to divide the majority of members into two main groups:

The first - the more recently elected members who appear pre-occupied with climbing the greasy pole – who in doing so would gain an extra £10k as a member of a department and a further £10k as a minister. I have to say I have been truly surprised and disappointed by the degree to which they have conformed, so often uncritically, to the existing system in order to achieve this.

and the second group...the well established members who are in the main ministers and who are content, again in the main, with the status quo.

It is very important to say that there are notable and worthy exceptions in both groups

Again, with notable exceptions - neither group appear to be greatly exercised by the importance of the role of parliament or the limitations placed upon it by the overwhelming control of the council of ministers with its 10 votes which, along with the dependent departmental members votes, at any given moment gives government a majority in the Keys.

It should also be carefully noted that a unanimous council of minister's vote brought to the floor of the house does not have to start out that way – it could well begin life as a split vote in the privacy of the council of ministers but the power of the chief minister to reduce a politician's pay by £20k per annum ensures profound influence and holds sway (A minister may not vote against the council on the floor of the house other than in exceptional circumstances) Also it might very well be that the members of the particular department to which a vote relates may be against - but have to vote for - or again lose their post and the £10k p.a. pay boost that goes with it.

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It is thus perfectly possible to find that there is a natural majority against a piece of legislation and yet find that it will still sail through with a solid majority. This really does breed complacency on the part of the council of ministers.

Not only does this in my view lead to less scrutiny – it also calls into question the value and meaning of policies expressed in an candidates manifesto when it is so often the case that members find it impossible to follow their natural convictions once in office. What then the value of your vote in September?

And this leads me to my second observation which took a little longer to fully recognise the importance of - namely the degree to which policy and direction emanates from the departments not the politicians, from the civil service . In turn much of this policy comes from the UK – from Westminster – why ?- because it is so much easier to cut and paste legislation from the UK to here than it is for us to start as it were from scratch. The degree to which a number of ministers are reliant upon their senior officers is quite frankly very worrying. It therefore follows that the revenue expending ministries are too reliant on UK policy. This in the absence of clear policy directives from within the Isle of Man itself.

It is perfectly true that I was suspicious of the existence of this influence prior to my election but I don't think I was quite ready to accept the degree to which it actually influences our direction of political travel.

My next observation relates to the sheer volume of legislation going through the house and whether we need most of it in the first place. OK some is important and enjoys my full support but I find I am now beginning to seriously question the volume – will this or that really make the lives of the people of the Isle of Man better or worse? I have to say to you that in some cases I am convinced the later is the case – worryingly so.

Has the whole matter of legislation, of rules and regulations, what you can and can't do, become far too intrusive in our private lives. Do we now have too much government and has it now grow to such an extent that it is becoming a self perpetuating machine that keeps churning out more of everything? I think this question is being asked more and more right across Europe and, for example, I understand the Dutch have got so fed up with it that they allow only a new law or regulation to be enacted after they have found on old one they can cancel.

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Another worry which is part of this trend is that issues which were once simply matters resulting in fines, say for example within the work place, are being redefined as criminal convictions. A feeling that you are no longer innocent until proved guilty. This has been helped along by what I believe has become an overzealous health and safety mindset and too much emphasis on political correctness.

My fourth observation grows out of my previous one – with this volume of legislation comes something both disappointing and worrying – a tendency to introduce new legislation which is similar to the laws being passed in England and Wales and is a copy of it but which is actually more stringent here, more invasive and provides even greater powers over the people than is practiced in England. Let me give you one small very recent example

There is a flood risk management bill going through the Keys at the moment. Well that's fine of course but look at the detail and compare it to the English version.

Here our Government wants a system whereby if a land owner wishes to amend say his or her field drains or ditches it will require in future a written application, possibly with plans and certainly a fee and if the applicant has not heard back from the government within 8 weeks then it should be seen as a refusal. When I looked at the English version it does not even want applications, or fees, or plans for the sort of thing we do on the Island but where it does – it says - and listen to this - If you have not heard from us within 8 weeks consider it granted. It also goes on to say that permission should always be granted unless it can be shown that there is a pressing reason why it should not be granted.

My fifth observation relates to the media. I have been frustrated for years with the lack of investigative journalism on the Island but I was again surprised at the degree to which our radio and newspaper go so far - but no further, and tend to favour ministers in their utterances as a matter of routine. Like it or not the fact that Manx Radio is so heavily (even now) underwritten by the government and that our single newspaper group is, shall we say, both comfortable in the monopoly of its position and with being more a local paper than a national one results in little substantial coverage of important or deeply contentious issues. Maybe it has not mattered too much in what might be called the easy years but I believe it is really going to matter in the years ahead.

The sixth observation I wish you to consider is that of my concerns about who will be the next Chief Minister. The next five years are going to be crucial for the well being of the Isle of Man

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and so it was not long at all after I took my seat that I started looking round the house trying to establish who of those I sat with, could in my view, step up to the mark and face the task ahead.

It appears to me that each one of the limited number of possible contenders have both strengths and weaknesses – no one for me stands out as the obvious choice. Despite this – if re-elected next September I will have to vote for one of them.

Perhaps in my desperation I will have to fall back on the words of Douglas Adams, the author of the Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy who said in his criticism of US politics.

“It is a well known fact, that those people who most want to rule people are, ipso facto, those least suited to do it....anyone who is capable of getting themselves made president should on no account be allowed to do the job”

My seventh and final observation relates to the way capital expenditure is passed. When I first encountered these capital votes I naturally assumed, as someone used to very significant levels of due diligence in the private sector, that as a new member, there was simply something I did not know or understand or that I had missed in the process. When I looked into it I found that this was not the case.

Members of Tynwald rely on the department bringing forward the particular expenditure item, the minister or chairman in that department in turn relies on his officers, who in turn rely on their consultants.

There is much I could say about this observation alone but suffice to say deep and profound changes are required in our mindset as to how government enters into capital expenditure programmes using taxpayer's funds – your money

I believe it is time to restructure our electoral process sufficient to permit a national debate on issues of national importance and that enable you to take a full and engaged part in it so that ownership can be placed with the will of the people in a mature and transparent fashion.

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To try to put right that which is wrong would require six key changes to our current procedures.

The introduction of a freedom of information act - not the watered down excuse for the one currently proposed – and in fact now possibly lost to this parliament – but we shall see.

The rebalancing of Tynwald so as to allow greater scrutiny of government process.

A greater ability for the electorate and business interests to influence policy.

A determination that government has extended its reach far enough and that it is time to ease that reach back.

That the council of ministers has allowed silo style government to become too dominant – that it has to become much more holistic in its approach.

And finally a return to the much discredited concept of 'freedom to flourish' but this time to really mean it in a practical sense not allow it to become some sort of box ticking exercise that looks good on paper.

All of these issues are brought into starker contrast as the economic uncertainties grow and the challenges ahead demand our attention.

We almost woke up and smelt the coffee in 2004/5 when we saw the 2014 business review at the then 'open' golf links hotel followed by the scope and structure of government report in 2005/6.

Very unfortunately Tynwald dozed off again after the election and forgot to wake up again until last year. After such a long sleep things are naturally still a little woozy

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As we wake up we find our government has grown too large, our bureaucracy has become self perpetuating, the number of rules and regulations has grown exponentially, our politicians are too easily lead by the civil service and the reverse of this – our politicians give no policy leadership to the civil service, there is no ability for the people to properly express their views, the parliamentary process is weak, we find there is little chance of looking to our media to raise issues of national importance and we have not yet got a firm hand on the way government spends money.

So we have a huge task ahead now to streamline government and grow the private sector if we are to become fit enough to cope with future shocks from wherever they might come – and they will come.

The island has great potential – I just hope we have the sense to reach out and grasp it and I hope that, if re-elected that the view from the inside will look somewhat different a couple of years from now.