

Local Government Elections 2012 – John Knox LibDem candidate for Liberton/Gilmerton



THE ROAD TO 3 MAY 2012

by John Knox prospective LibDem Councillor for
Liberton/Gilmerton Ward

They appear as neat names on the electoral register but when you see them, they come in all shapes and sizes, all states of dress and undress, all moods, all stages of wakefulness and sobriety, surrounded by all kinds of dogs and children and standing in doorways varying from the Soviet to the Spanish. These are my 33,000 potential voters in the Liberton/Gilmerton ward. I have from now till 3 May 2012 to persuade them to vote for me.

The trouble is I am a Liberal Democrat, and we are not very popular in Scotland at the moment – hovering just above the abyss at between 7 and 10 per cent – according to the last few opinion polls. The reason for this is all too clear to me as I ring the doorbells. “You’ve put the Tories in power,” they spit out. It’s as simple as that.

Never mind that many Lib Dem foot soldiers like me didn’t agree with the Coalition in the first place. Never mind that we have tamed the Tories – raised the income tax threshold, insisted on a top tax rate of 50 per cent, squeezed a billion pounds out of George Osborne to combat youth unemployment and raised the state pension by £5.30 week, the largest ever increase.

The unfortunate fact is that the local council elections this year are going to be overshadowed by UK and national issues...the state of the economy, welfare reform, the SNP's independence referendum. The issue that has been raised with me most often on the doorstep – totally unprompted – is independence. “Are you for or against the Union?” one woman asked me straight out. “Liberal Democrats are in favour of the Union,” I replied. “Then you have my vote,” she said. I should have pointed out that other parties are also in favour of the Union, and I still feel slightly guilty that I didn't. But only slightly.

Strangely enough, other issues are far behind in my voters' minds. Next came litter and rubbish, then the state of the health service, then prices, then bankers bonuses, then pot holes, speed bumps, uncut trees, bus shelters, dog mess, derelict buildings. Only one person so far has mentioned the trams. This is in the 22 streets I have so far visited, out of 630, in this township-sized ward.

It is as well that I ignore the results of random surveys and opinion polls. Political analysis on the doorstep is not easy, particularly in January and February when the spring seems as far away as election day. All I am trying to do is meet the voters face to face, say “Hallo” and get a feeling for how they live and what is bothering them. It's an attempt to get away from virtual politics – as seen on TV – and get down to real politics – as seen on the streets of Edinburgh. It's called keeping in touch, it's a habit all too easily lost at Westminster and Holyrood.

Most public services are, after all, provided locally and I would like to see councils given more power over their schools, care services (especially when they border on health services), roads, bus services, dustbin collections, parks, playing fields, swimming pools, libraries, theatres etc. etc. And I would like to see them have more power over how they raise the funds to pay for such common services. Too much is

dictated from the centre. Devolution was never supposed to stop at the expensive doors of Holyrood.

Over the past five years the SNP/Liberal Democrat-led administration at Edinburgh City Council has done its best in trying circumstances. Costs have been held down, particularly wages, to try to keep job losses and service cuts to a minimum. There have been some good results...school attainment levels are up, crime is down (21 per cent), the roads are slightly cleaner and in better repair, recycling has increased from 21 per cent to 35 per cent and council houses are being built again to ease the housing shortage.

Regrets, there have been a few. We were let down by the £100,000-a-year experts at Transport Initiatives Edinburgh who, in my view, nearly ruined the tram project. But at least the Liberal Democrats have struck with it, unlike Labour and the SNP who found themselves in the crazy position of voting for the tram line to end at Haymarket. And, as public sector projects go, the doubling of the cost and the timescale is not unusual.

There is less excuse for the 15.8 per cent of school leavers who were unemployed but seeking work in 2009/10, the worst rate in Scotland. The situation has improved slightly since then (down from 538 to 394) but clearly there is a lot to do on this front. The Edinburgh Guarantee scheme will help – providing 50 apprenticeships and 80 work placements – but, ultimately, it is up to the UK government to reflate the economy and encourage the private sector to start creating more jobs.

Hopefully, the voters will judge us candidates not on the past but on what we will try to do for Edinburgh in the future. I want to see the council managing its way through the Age of Austerity imposed on us by keeping as many jobs and services as possible. I would like to see workers co-operatives take over services like street cleaning, dustbin collection and

home-care. We should encourage our city to grow by finishing off the tram network, building new houses on brownfield sites, and dealing with our waste by more recycling.

And another thing: let's take better planning decisions...saying "No" to ugly buildings (like the security hut at Holyrood) and "No" to tat-selling tenants on the Royal Mile and "Yes" to exciting projects like a hovercraft ferry over the Forth.

There is so much more I could say...but it's cold standing on this doorstep. And no doubt other candidates, of all shapes and sizes, will soon be chapping on your door.

Remember us all on 3 May...

John Knox has lived in Edinburgh for 30 years. He brought up his family in Newington and now lives in the Inch. He's a retired journalist, having worked for BBC Scotland for 27 years. He's a volunteer with the Scottish Wildlife Trust and the Craigmillar Woods Action Group. His hobbies include hill-walking, music and reading books by Bill Bryson.