

Lawrie Hooper – Ramsey

Political Questions (2016)

Why do you want to be a member of the House of Keys?

The Island is facing some significant challenges and I firmly believe that I have the right set of skills to make a real contribution to overcoming them.

Although in Ramsey we have been lucky to have had some dedicated and committed MHK's over the years (even if I may not agree with their policies I respect their commitment) I feel let down by some other of our previous members. I am not comfortable leaving my future, and the future of the Island that is my home to others.

If you were elected, what would your priorities be on a national level?

This isn't an easy question to answer because we are facing a multitude of challenges, all of which are "high priority", but if I were to identify the top four:

- 1) The first priority has to be working out a way to address the public sector pension deficit. If this is not dealt with quickly and fairly then it could cripple Government spending and devastate front line services.
- 2) We need to address the Island's housing need, to make sure private

sector and public sector rents are fair and Government schemes to assist first time buyers are accessible.

- 3) The NHS. Spending is out of control, there are already identified problems with staff recruitment and we all know services are under an unacceptable amount of pressure – something needs to be done, and the West Midlands Quality review that was undertaken is a step in the right direction. I would like to see a comprehensive independent review of our health service to identify where improvements could be made, as well as to highlight the areas of good practice already existing.
- 4) With the UK voting to leave the EU the Island needs to make sure it is heard loud and clear in any negotiations that now take place. We need to make sure our interests are protected and that we don't get overlooked in the years to come. The Island needs to be positioned as a great place to do business in the new "post EU" UK.

Many people will argue that "growing the economy" is the most important priority,

If you were elected, what would your priorities be on a constituency level?

but what they don't tell you is that it's not Government that does this. Government can help create an environment where private business and enterprising people can create jobs and grow the economy, but it is these hard working people that are the driving force behind economic growth.

We currently have a good environment that helps businesses thrive and Government can help by mostly getting out of their way. We need to take a careful look at the level of regulation to make sure it's not stifling business, and to make sure the regulation is doing the job it is supposed to do.

Critically, we need to look at ways of making finance and banking services for businesses more accessible.

Ramsey has already had significant investment through the regeneration schemes, whilst not perfect, the town centre is greatly improved as a result.

While talking about the Town centre, now that the Post Office has moved out of the Courthouse a new use needs to be identified for this iconic building and quickly. It cannot be left empty and unused and my preference would be for

the Department of Home Affairs (the building owner) to enter into talks with Ramsey Commissioners and the people of the town to find a sensible and community focused use for this building which is at the heart of the Town.

Looking at a wider scope, I'd like to see more services devolved to a local level so that the Town Hall can become a "one stop shop" for people to access all sorts of Government services.

Housing administration should be reformed so that the Department of Infrastructure no longer administers any public sector housing, this should be the responsibility of local authorities – and so should operating the northern civic amenity site. I would also continue to fight against any rent rises in Commissioners houses until a fair system of means testing has been brought in.

How well do you think the present administration has handled the major challenges of the past five years?

For the most part, badly. Whilst a lot of the outcomes have been generally in the right direction the way in which the present administration has gone about addressing the challenges has been very poor. A lot of decisions seem to have been rushed through, or made behind closed doors, and a large number have then been challenged, forcing the

government to change its mind.

We've seen issues with the tender process (For example, the Post Office and Children's Services), the "ultra vires" Sefton bailout, the shambles over Tynwald Members paying for their pensions (and their parking!), a hospital in crisis and we still don't have any real answers over the Media Development Fund. More recently the deplorable issues surrounding Dependability Limited and fitness to work assessments have been completely unacceptable.

We've had The Policy and Reform Minister resign over "inadequate reform", the DED Minister resign over Sefton, Health Minister narrowly survived a "no confidence" vote only to be replaced 5 months down the line. A Treasury Member was sacked for not supporting higher tuition fees and an Education Minister was sacked for voting against the "Pinewood deal". The Chair of the Post Office was removed because he didn't agree with the corporatisation of services, and the Deputy Chair resigned over the shenanigans with Ramsey Post Office.

I'd say a lot of the positive outcomes over the past five years have been as a result of backbench MHK's taking a stand and pressuring Government into doing the

right thing.

Set against these bad choices some issues have been handled well. The economy has been growing, the Island is still positioning itself well to grow into niche markets like e-gaming and FinTech. Taxes are still low and with the increased personal allowances more people are being taken out of tax altogether.

We're now seeing some movement towards devolving responsibility to local authorities, steps towards reform of Tynwald and the introduction of more initiatives to help grow the economy and attract businesses to the Island.

So there has been progress, but not as much nor as fast as we may have liked.

What are the main political and social issues facing the Isle of Man in the next five years?

- 1) The most critical is addressing the Public Sector Pensions deficit, and the longer term liability.
- 2) The UK leaving the EU will undoubtedly impact on the Isle of Man and we need to ensure we have a place at the negotiating table.
- 3) There is a real need to reform the way Tynwald operates, to improve governance and the way the Island is perceived as a jurisdiction.

How would you deal with the challenges referred to in the previous answer?

- 4) We need to balance the budget - this underpins everything else that the next administration will be trying to achieve.
- 5) The high cost of utilities needs to be addressed

There isn't a simple answer to any of the challenges that we're facing.

- 1) For pensions, see below.
- 2) The Island needs to be continuously involved with the UK during its negotiations with the EU. We also need to be willing to consider all the potential ways forward and not be railroaded down a single path.
- 3) Lord Lisvane's report is an excellent starting point for the reform of Tynwald and these recommendations need to be implemented quickly.
- 4) There needs to continue to be a process of devolving responsibilities to local authorities as well as reducing the overall size of Government. The most difficult parts of the process of rebalancing are protecting frontline services and continuing investment in the Island's infrastructure.

We need to set up a Tax and

How would you deal with the issue of public sector pension reform and the public sector pension deficit?

Welfare Commission to independently look at the benefits Government provides, as well as the way we pay for them through rates and taxes. National infrastructure, like sewerage, should be funded by our central taxes, not the "toilet tax"

- 5) Our utility companies should be properly regulated by an independent regulator – we need to make sure that no one on the Island is living in fuel poverty by ensuring the utility prices are fair, the only way to do this is through independent regulation.

This is a horrendously complex issue and not one that can be resolved overnight. Whatever happens there will have to be changes that will impact on both the taxpayer and the civil service – we are going to have to share the burden between us all.

I have thought out a draft proposal for some steps that could be taken to address the long term liability and have published this on my website. It's a bit long to reproduce here but it can be read at www.lhooperiom.com/2016-general-

[election/public-sector-pensions](#)

At this stage it's very much a conceptual piece of work and needs consultation with both the unions and the public – as well as a lot more detailed work before being taken any further.

What has changed in the past five years for Isle of Man residents for the better? (Please give examples)

Unemployment has fallen and the economy has continued to grow at a steady rate.

For Ramsey, the regeneration of the Town has helped rejuvenate the high street.

We've been through 5 years of Government cutbacks and reductions in the quality of service Government is providing. This means not a lot has got better for people.

What has changed in the past five years for Isle of Man residents for the worse? (Please give examples)

There have been a lot of cutbacks and a lot of services provided by Government are under increasing pressure, resulting in worse delivery. The main impact of these cutbacks has been increased charges for a wide variety of Government services.

Public sector rents have increased in the region of 40% over the last five years. While I agree the rents were too low and they needed to be increased to make

sure our housing is sustainable, there is absolutely no way these sort of increases should have been brought in without first introducing a fair system of means testing to protect those who can't afford the increased rents.

Aside from the government cutbacks it also seems that the cost of living has risen and wages have not kept pace with these increases.

A lot of people have been directly impacted by the fitness to work assessments, and this whole process has been a disgrace from its inception.

Is the Isle of Man too reliant on any one sector of its economy?

I don't believe so. Whilst the Finance and E-gaming sectors still contribute significantly the Island's economy has become significantly more diverse.

Diversification is a process that will need to continue to ensure we have robust and healthy economy.

If you feel it is, how would you further diversify the Manx economy?

We need to engage with the banking sector to make banking more accessible to businesses. Over the last few years we've seen it get harder and harder for new businesses to get bank accounts on the Island and this has had a negative

Are you in favour of increased independence from the United Kingdom?

knock on effect on our economy.

I agree with the new £50m development fund – as long as it is managed fairly. This should help the DED get out there and encourage more businesses and industries to set up on the Island.

This depends on what you mean.

Do I favour reviewing the VAT sharing agreement to make sure it's fair to us? Yes

Do I support engaging in direct negotiations with the EU to make sure we get a good deal out of Brexit?

Yes

Do I believe we should be working closer with other dependencies, like the Channel Islands?

Yes

But do I think we need to separate ourselves from the UK completely?

No

If you are, in which areas?

See above.

Are you in favour of parliamentary reform in the Isle of Man?

Yes.

If you are, which aspects of the parliamentary system would you change?

The Lisvane report hits the nail square on the head.

MLC's should not be Ministers of Departmental Members.

Scrutiny Committees should have stronger powers to monitor Government, and their Members should be of equal importance to Ministers / Departmental Members.

I've written a full piece on where I stand on parliamentary reform in this context – have a read at:

www.lhooperiom.com/2016/07/09/lisvane-report-where-i-stand/

Who should have the responsibility of electing the Chief Minister?

Here I am torn. I would not like to see the Chief Minister become some sort of “President” role with an “All Island Mandate”, but equally I do believe the public should have a say in the election of the Chief Minister.

My preference remains for a party system whereby the Party's Manifesto (their “Programme for Government”) is available before the election - giving people the chance to vote for the type of Chief Minister they want.

Are you in favour of the nationalisation of air and/or sea services to and from the Isle of Man?

No.

Government has a long track record of failing at the things it's supposed to be good at. I can't imagine a situation where I'd put Government in charge of operating our key transport links - areas where it has no experience at all.

The "User Agreement" system is fine in principle, committing a private company to meet strict terms and conditions – but the current agreement is extremely poor.

We need to get a new Sea Services Agreement, after public tender, that is fair to the public, with lower fares and lower freight costs, and where control of the sea links rests with Government and not a private company.

The air links operate quite well, for such a small Island we have a lot of destinations to fly to.

Are you in favour of renewable energy projects in Manx territorial waters?

Yes. Renewable energy projects could reduce our energy costs, and would also make us less reliant on imported fuels. Far out to sea, where they don't directly impact on our countryside is the best place for wind turbines!.

Are you in favour of an increase in means testing for financial support and/or services provided by Government?

Yes – Means testing is misunderstood by a lot of people.

It's not about taking money away from people, but instead it's about identifying who needs help and then making sure they get it.


Means testing should not be used as a money saving scheme. If there are fewer people claiming a particular benefit then the money paid to each individual claimant could be increased.

If you are, in which areas?

The only area that should not be means tested is the NHS. Medical services should be free at the point of use – so no charging for Doctors appointments!

Aside from this, I'd be supportive of nearly all welfare and government benefits being means tested. Income support, public sector housing, free TV licences, bus passes - the list is endless.

Not every area should have the same limits – so someone who is entitled to a free bus pass might not qualify for Commissioners housing – because their needs might be different.



There should always be an independent appeals process, and there should also be access to emergency funding – if your circumstances rapidly change then you shouldn't have to wait to be means tested before you can claim benefits.

The last thing to note is that means testing shouldn't be a cliff edge. People are complicated, and so benefits should tailor off as you get higher up the scale rather than just stopping abruptly when you hit a particular point.