

Amanda Walker – Douglas East

Political Questions (2016)

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

I really believe we need more female representation and I think I would make a strong candidate as I have knowledge and skills that equip me for the role, not least a degree in Politics. I also think my age is relevant as I have gained a lot of life experience and I have spent many years in my professional capacity working with families and children facing difficulties. I am experienced in managing budgets and as a parent I have made difficult choices and am not afraid to do so at National level.

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

Clearly it is essential to balance the budget and grow the Economy. I would favour minimal Government intervention but feel the Government has a duty to provide a regulatory framework that engenders confidence in our jurisdiction.

I am very keen to develop Education and training to develop our workforce and to give our citizens personal as well as professional fulfilment.

I am concerned about the Environment and feel this is a particular issue for an Island Nation. In terms of building development I would favour brown field sites where possible and the re-development of our historic buildings

where practical and where a useful onward purpose can be found. I think planning needs attention to ensure that decisions are considered in terms of need, purpose and impact.

Housing is a key priority, especially the rental sector where far too many of our people are in poor quality accommodation, especially the low paid. I am encouraged by the Passivhaus development in Castletown as this is environmentally positive and will help households with high energy costs. I had a free University Education and was able to leave University with the deposit for my first house saved. I fear that bright, able students without the cushion of wealthy parents will not be able to access University education. There are courses available on Island but they do not meet the needs and aspirations of all of our students and economy of scale means they will not be extended to do so. Partnerships with other Universities might be one way forward or scholarships and incentives. It is no longer true that University fees are a worthwhile investment and many students will find them a crushing burden, a burden which could stop some of our brightest and best taking up places they have won.

Tourism needs to be supported and realistic. We have niche markets and

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

can develop more but we will never be a mass market destination again.

Public sector pensions are not suitable to be viewed as one issue, it is far more complex and we can not hope to grow our economy if we are unable to recruit Nurses, Doctors and teachers as the Isle of Man offers worse conditions than the UK, many areas of the UK are far cheaper to live in.

Douglas East has a number of issues that need to be addressed. The Promenade scheme being the most obvious and here I would favour a solution that made the surface smoother, retained the trams and retained parking. A single track with passing places and alteration of obvious "pinch points" such as outside the Rutland Hotel. I would be reluctant to lose parking spaces as I feel Strand Street is already suffering and the loss of further parking can only be negative. I would seek to ensure that legislation was advanced to improve conditions of both tenure and the fabric of lettings to ensure higher standards; this would protect responsible landlords as well as vulnerable tenants.

There are many buildings and sites in East Douglas that are eyesores and need urgent attention. Planning needs to recognise the financial burden of

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

bringing these landmark buildings back to life and we must apply economic reason as well as sentiment to their future use.

Our schools and Health facilities need continued investment but that is not specific to East Douglas.

Many issues cross between Council and Government responsibility and I would aim to build partnerships and symbiotic relations here rather than duplication, this would be one way to shrink government.

The response has been variable. I think we have some aspects to be proud of but there are other areas where from the outside it appears money may have been squandered. It is difficult to assess without access to the full information. I seek to be elected so that I can gain access to the facts and figures and make informed decisions based on analysis and evaluation of the real situations. We can never hope to meet all of our desirable aims and objectives but I think we could do better and I would like the chance to prove it. I think our economy is in relatively good shape but I am concerned that there has been a drive to blame the public sector for many of the problems. The pension issue is far more complex than it is being

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

presented as and I am not aware of any private sector businesses where all employees are expected to agree to exactly the same terms and conditions. If we are to grow the economy and attract people to live here we have to maintain the quality of life that brought me and people like me to this beautiful island.

Education, especially funding for higher Education. Housing and the provision of affordable housing and secure rental for vulnerable people. The Manx economy will not face different problems to the world economy but we do need to diversify as we have additional costs to consider. Areas such as scientific and intellectual commerce are areas I think we could encourage as our unique environment and natural assets make us a good choice for these areas. Reform of government is also important and while it might not ignite the electorate it is important to consider the recommendations of Lord Lisvane.

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

I intend to meet all of the challenges that government faces by researching thoroughly and making decisions based on facts and best possible advice. I will make my voting behaviour clear and

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

transparent and will be answerable to my electors. I will of course use my analytical and evaluative skills to try to ensure I make decisions that will benefit the greatest number of my voters. I think that we have to look at the big picture of what needs to be done and then clearly identify priorities and draw up a framework and timetable to implement policy. There must always be an element of contingency budget as things happen such as the adverse weather we have experienced. Flood damage repair and road surfacing are not election winning issues but they are essential works. I am not elected solely to represent East Douglas but also have a wider obligation to act in the best interest of the whole island. I firmly believe that it is our duty in government to protect the most vulnerable as the economically comfortable are well placed to look after themselves. I believe in supporting and giving "hand-ups" rather than "hand-outs".

I do not think a one size fits all solution is tenable for the reasons I have already outlined. This is a very complex issue and needs the interests of all parties to be considered and I think it needs to have two distinct tiers; pension provision for new entrants and a degree of honouring

commitments already made to existing workers. We have to have a system that is fair and reasonable, not just to the recipients but also to those paying in. I am not an economist but I am aware the huge costs are not sustainable and that we need to do something creative around pensions but we must not act in haste and lose the very workers we have difficulty in attracting to our schools and hospitals in particular. The real figures involved need to be scrutinised and decisions made that protect both future pensioners and the public from unsustainable liability. It is hard to be precise when so much of the data is not in the public domain but balance and ensuring we have a sustainable solution that is as attractive as possible is the only way forward.

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

There are far more things for families to do, developments like Ape Man and Exit Strategy, the work of the Children's Centre with Out to Play, Manx National Heritage sites and their outreach. Noa's Bakehouse and the Market Hall have brought re-generation and lively cultural events to the Capital and there are new ventures popping up around the Island showing our entrepreneurial and creative industries are thriving providing not only employment opportunities but

also enriching our communities with exciting new things to do. Silly Moos and the developments at Glen Whylin are also positive signs.

Enterprise is to be encouraged and I do support the establishment of funds to attract business to the island but want to ensure that we can still foster smaller start-ups and encourage and support their development. Small companies often grow into big companies but they equally founder in the early years without guidance and mentoring. I have seen first-hand the work of JA and DED in developing entrepreneurial skills in our young people. I think we have some dynamism in Douglas in particular and I hope that is here to stay. We have a very good mix of places to eat on the island and many of these are family friendly.

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

The state of some of our roads is a concern.

There is quite noticeable disparity between our school buildings and whilst I salute the building of new schools some of our older buildings need attention. Douglas schools have had significant investment and I would like to see building projects for both Castle Rushen and QE2 both of whom have facilities that are in dire need of upgrade. I think investment in the fabric of our schools is

a better way to employ our construction industry rather than the continued development of green field sites, these developments are often slow to sell.

Affordable housing has moved beyond the reach of many of our citizens and this is why I want to protect tenants in private rentals as this is no longer a short term situation but rather a lifetime reality for "generation rent". Deflation of housing costs is not the answer as this will cause many who have managed to get onto the housing ladder to experience the horror of negative equity.

The Summerland site has made no progress, nor has the Lord Street site and the Castle Mona has been added to the list of decaying and under-used buildings that should really be an asset.

Our demographic has swerved even further towards the older citizens and we have seen building projects aimed at Health Care of the Elderly, many of these isolate our older citizens in specialist communities; I would like to see more mixed development where the elderly are integrated with wider communities and not separated, I think there is much to be gained from sharing the skills and talents of all ages. I am particularly interested in same site nursery and elderly provision as I feel these two groups have much to gain from shared space. The elderly can enjoy watching

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

the children and can read with them, many children have little contact with their own elder relatives. I feel this is a more natural and less isolating setting and a reflection of our family orientated society. Parents are often balancing care for children and elder relatives and this type of setting should be an option, I am not suggesting it replace all elderly facilities but rather that it would increase choice and could be an innovative model.

No. We are diversifying and trying to become more so. Financial services, e.gaming etc. are niche markets that employ large numbers of workers but there are other sectors and we are still a tourist destination and we have a film industry. I see more and more small start-ups and the island developing as a Creative Hub as being a way forward, we have so much talent, richness of culture and a beautiful environment that can attract creative industries to the island. The buzz around the Market Hall this Summer and the success of young creatives is an encouraging sign. I think our government is aware of the dangers of over reliance on a small number of sectors and is active in encouraging diversity.

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

As I have already eluded I think the key is to encourage small start-ups in a wide range of businesses rather than trying to attract corporates. We need to retain the corporates that we have and the talent pools we have as a result may well bring expansion if we can equip our workers to meet the needs of our commercial sector.

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

I think we are probably too small for full independence but I do think we should seek to preserve our unique heritage and I am a supporter of the Manx language. I think our language and culture is a potential huge draw for the tourist market if targeted, the Lorient Festival is a good example of making connections and promoting the island. I would also like to see our national collection of Art partnered with galleries across to widen awareness and bring more allied works to the island. We have a growing number of small and commercial galleries on the island and this is an area of investment for many people.

If you are, in which areas?

I want to see co-operation and the development of beneficial links. I think independence would come at too high

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

a cost and we are simply not big enough for this to be viable.

Yes. I think we need to consider the reforms outlined by Lord Lisvane and debate them carefully. I especially think we need to consider the future role of the Bishop as I do not think the role is fit for 21st Century purpose when we have a far more diverse range of religions and Atheism and Humanism are also both popular.

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

I think we could consider National lists of candidates rather than local election of candidates. The 24 individuals with the highest share of the vote would be elected and they could then choose the cabinet and chief minister as they had been mandated by the whole electorate.

Who should have the responsibility of electing the Chief Minister?

The current system is flawed but I think it could not be replaced immediately and in the long term I would actually favour a direct election for chief minister with candidates outlining their attributes and qualities for the job and being elected alongside the 24 MHKs.

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

No. I would like to see greater regulation to guarantee services but not Nationalisation. These services have to be commercially viable and we must partner where necessary but not fully control.

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

I would strongly favour the investigation of these as an option but their positioning would need to be scrutinised to ensure the environmental impact visually was minimised and that they did not disrupt fishing, shipping or unique wildlife.

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

Yes. I think this is particularly true of housing where I think there are a significant number of households where there is no longer a need for social housing as incomes have risen way beyond the point at which housing was allocated. I think we are a small enough community to ensure that our workers are always better off working and I would like benefits to reflect this. I am in favour of a living wage and in circumstances where wage costs are prohibitive for small enterprises then I think government subsidies are justified. The squeezed middle, those people who work long hours in low paid jobs are essential to our economy and they need

If you are, in which areas?

the support of the wider community. There are cases of genuine need and where benefits will be long term and these should not be subjected to harsh scrutiny but annual review that includes social services to give professional support to our vulnerable citizens. I want a fair society where we can balance the books and target support at those most in need.

I think Health and Education should be free for all at the point of delivery and when in need of those services. I would include free University Education for exceptional students, looking at a point's tariff and sliding scale of grant support. Our students do not currently have student loans and it is hard for many to contemplate study without family support and sacrifice. I had my University Education free and I would like to extend that to as many of our brightest and best as possible. I totally agree with Alan Bell's suggestion that we waive fees for those who return to the island but I would go further and have fees paid for those who agree to return for a specified period of time. We would need to debate this and look at the implications to put numbers on the scheme and sadly I do not think it can be universal, we need realism as well as compassion from government.