

Earning trust and crossing bridges

Robert Courts MP talks defence, small independent businesses, and social care with Sam Bennett...



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“It’s another U-turn,” an audience member says during the first Question Time that follows Philip Hammond’s Spring Budget announcement, in which the Conservative Party appear to go back on their manifesto pledge: “We will commit to no increases in VAT, National Insurance contributions or Income Tax.”

The audience member keeps going, “This is the reason we have such disconnect in the country between people and politicians. We cannot trust what [politicians] are saying; there’s pledges and then they get changed, and people get sick of it.”

The Monday after this view is aired from Sunderland across the country, I phone Robert Court’s office at Westminster. It’s 11am, and the Conservative MP for Witney and West Oxfordshire tells me he’ll be there working until 11pm at the earliest. He cannot really pinpoint when the mistrust of our politicians we see today began, but states that “people have always been sceptical about their rulers”, defining this to be “in many ways quite a healthy thing.”

“What all MPs need to do is earn trust,” he says, having only been in his current job since October 2016. “And I will be out there listening to people every day, working on the issues that matter to them and being around to help them. I hope that way to earn people’s trust – for myself, even if not for politicians in general.”

He took over his position from David Cameron. “The key thing is to ensure that you set your own priorities and that you are your own man,” he says, as we discuss how hard an act the former prime minister is to follow, “and that you campaign, argue and work for the things that matter to you and your constituents. It’s very important to set your own path, rather than be defined by your predecessor.”

So what issues are on this path? About ten days prior to speaking with me, Robert had been at RAF Brize Norton (visiting 99 and 70 Squadrons). Defence, he tells me, is one of his main interests in parliament. “The subject matters greatly to me,” the Bladon resident resumes. “So I’m very involved with it and, of course, the defence industry, which is so important to the technical, high-skilled jobs that there are in Carterton and Eynsham in particular, but also around the whole of West Oxfordshire.” Linking in with this is what the MP, a supporter of charities such as Combat Stress and Help for Heroes, wants to do for our service veterans. “I want very much to help them,” he says. “Defence and veterans’ care is at the very heart of what I hope to achieve in parliament.”

It was also roughly ten days before our interview that Mr Courts was elected chairman of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Small and Micro Businesses. He’s a member of The Federation of Small Businesses, “and indeed as a self-employed barrister I was a small business of a sort myself.” Robert calls those in the areas he represents lucky to have “excellent, thriving local small businesses.”

Some might wonder, however, what with chain stores appearing all over the place and pretty much everything available online, whether many of the “wonderful small shops and businesses” the MP champions can survive much longer.

“I think what we need to do is ensure that in our town centres we have the right mixture of competitive rates, transport, and footfall, to ensure that all businesses thrive,” he says. We need, he believes, to make the likes of Carterton, Burford, Woodstock, Chipping Norton and Witney “destinations people want to go to. We need people to visit, and that will help all businesses.”

The small businesses in West Oxfordshire are also a large part of what he says in answer to my question on how Budget 2017 affects his constituency specifically. “Business rates are based on property valuation,” he says. “Because we’ve got a very thriving economy in West Oxfordshire, property prices go up, so the data upon which the business rates are assessed is out of date. At some point the data needs to be brought up to date. Now, that will mean there are some rises, some people will pay more, some people will pay less. I’ve been very clear in making sure that I am fighting for the interests of West Oxfordshire businesses,” he goes on, saying the government has taken note of these interests; hence the introduction of £300 million worth of discretionary relief to help the businesses “hardest hit” by the revaluation.

The budget sees an investment in technical education as well, through the introduction of new T-levels, which Robert recognises as “the most significant overhaul of post-16 education since the construction of A-levels.” It will make sure, he claims, that teenagers from West Oxfordshire “can look forward to potentially working for very high-tech, world-beating companies in their local area.”

In other zones of the budget, £2 billion over three years will supposedly go towards social care in this country, hopefully addressing what Robert calls the “challenges arising out of an aging population.” He says, “It’s great that everyone is living longer, but it also means as people get older they have more conditions. There are more drugs available to treat them, which again is great, but that does cost money. The government has brought in this fund to assist with that, and a green paper to look at sustainable funding for social care over the longer term. That’s another two measures I’m very pleased about.”

Before I allow him to tackle the remaining 12 hours of his working day, I have one more question for Robert; he suggests one of the advantages he has over his predecessor is that he isn’t the prime minister, he says his attention can be completely “constituency orientated.” But would he ever lead our country?

“Perhaps, one day, it’s a long way away to think about anything like that. My focus at the moment is entirely on Witney and West Oxfordshire – we’ll cross bridges one at a time.”



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