



Rt Hon Alun Michael MP

Annual Report 2011/12

In 2010, at the time of the General Election, I set out my political priorities and summarised them in a 5-point "pledge card". I take those promises very seriously, so in this Annual Report I spell out what I have been doing to deliver on the pledges - even as an Opposition MP. It's only a snapshot and can't reflect all my work (casework, caucuses, research, international work, community links, speeches etc) but it can show part of the picture, with a focus on priorities and delivery.
Alun Michael

In tough times it's vital to cut crime

High among my five key election pledges to voters last year was my promise to continue working hard to cut crime – nationally and locally.

I have been very active as a member of the Home Affairs Select Committee so I brought the committee to Cardiff for a seminar in which we heard from the Chief Constable and examined the way the Welsh Government has worked vigorously with the Youth Justice Board to drive down offending by young people.

We also looked at violent crime and the work of Professor Jon Shepherd in Cardiff. He's an A&E specialist who realised that measuring crime by what people report is not dependable.

Asking how many people go to hospital for treatment after a violent incident is more accurate – and enables police to tackle real issues. That's why violent crime has fallen by 40% and why Cardiff is doing far better than comparable cities. It saves money for the NHS and saves people from becoming victims.

I also took our Chief Constable, Peter Vaughan, to meet the Police Minister to explain the pressure on our police in dealing with capital city issues – like the day when they had to cope with an international rugby game (Wales v South Africa), the West Indies at Sophia Gardens, a major concert in Leckwith and marches by the far right group, the English Defence League, and Unite Against Fascism all on the same day. The police coped admirably – but it stretches resources more than for equivalent cities and I have asked the Minister to consider a premium to Cardiff to cover such costs.

We need to keep up the pressure on tackling crime in South Wales and that's hard when we're threatened with a cut of 395 Police Officers – 1 in 8 – with a similar cut in back room staff whose work is often vital for the front-line officers. But in hard times it is even more important to focus on cutting crime and the fear of crime. We owe it to the victims and the vulnerable.



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Rt Hon Alun Michael MP



Let's value each other and listen to each other

The death of Sheikh Said has left everyone in Cardiff the poorer for his passing - but much richer for the memory of a wise Muslim leader, a thoughtful religious teacher and a wonderful human being. His father died in an Atlantic convoy, and after his early years in the North-East of England Sheikh Said spent most of his life in Cardiff. He was universally admired as a man of the people, with a gentle but incisive sense of humour and enormous understanding of what makes people tick.

Speaking with an understanding of Butetown which few could surpass, he told us that "in the Docks, we all celebrate each other's festivals because we all enjoy a good party". But behind that seemingly casual remark is an understanding that sharing time together brings understanding and mutual respect and that celebrating the good things of life together is the strongest defence against the bad things of life.

He was proud to say "I'm a Labour man through and through" and gave strong support to me throughout the past 25 years and more recently to Vaughan Gething. But his support was that of a critical friend, not someone who could be taken for granted. When he disagreed with the Labour Government he told us so with vigour and clarity and with the confidence that we would listen to him with respect. And he was equally strong in arguing that everybody in a democratic society must argue their case in an atmosphere of mutual respect, rather than making anger an excuse for violence or hatred.

Sheikh Said showed how principles and values can strengthen a community when applied with tolerance and respect. Through his years of leadership in Butetown, Sheikh Said showed the path of humane leadership for us all. After his years of service, and the patient bearing of his burden of illness, may he rest in peace.

Press needs tough but independent regulation

Few Parliamentary hearings have been as dramatic as those in which our most senior police officers have been on the stand (in parallel with examination of the Murdochs) over the phone-hacking scandal, which led to the News of the World closing down. Revelations that Milly Dowler's phone had been hacked, and intrusion into the grief of bereaved families of soldiers, outraged MPs and the public alike. Almost uniquely, the Speaker called us back from recess for an emergency debate in conjunction with a police investigation.

In June I said, "The Press Complaints Commission is well meaning but, frankly, it is a joke. The public and journalists deserve better... The Press Complaints Commission clearly has neither the will nor the capacity to change things." I believe that regulation of the press and media by government agencies could endanger press independence, which would be a massive mistake, but we do need a genuinely independent body which is robust and effective and has the legal powers to investigate and enforce.

Perhaps the inquiry by Lord Justice Leveson will recommend such a body, but I suspect that his report will shy away from tackling this big issue, and will propose incremental changes which will do almost nothing to solve the problem.

As a former journalist myself, I know that few people enter the profession with the ambition to rake muck and intrude on private grief but the culture and environment of journalism today is not healthy. We need to protect the independence and enhance the professionalism of individual journalists in a free press and media where everyone is expected to do their work legally, honestly, professionally, without fear or favour. That can't be done under the present arrangements.



The Internet - benefits and challenges

When I visit schools in the constituency, I see the integral role the Internet plays in the lives of children. They can find an incredible range of information with the click of a mouse, but they have also become vulnerable to bullying and fraud. We cannot "leave it to the geeks" to solve this issue, which is why I have raised Internet issues in Parliament and begun work with experts to make the Internet safer. I'm delighted that several local primary schools have entered the IT competition that we promote as MPs. We've had two winners in three years.

I have also chaired the Nominet Internet Awards since they began five years ago and each year, the winners get better. This year, we praised a Welsh success : eCrime Wales, a Welsh Assembly initiative in partnership with the police. eCrime Wales has shown the UK and the world that partnership is the best way to make the Internet a safe tool for learning, business and communication – and even though it's worldwide, you CAN do things locally through partnership.

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Parliamentarian of the Year

This year I was chosen as “Parliamentarian of the Year” by the Inland Waterways Association. Britain’s canals form a vital part of our national heritage, and I have long advocated taking them out of a Government Department (Defra) and giving control to the public through a sort of “National Trust for the Waterways”. The idea was supported by Huw Irranca Davies as Waterways Minister and that work goes on. I’m now optimistic that the new body will come into being with the support of the present Minister, Richard Benyon.

Co-operation takes many forms. I have a meeting with the Transport Minister to discuss the “People’s Rail” idea – making the managers accountable to the travellers. Developments led by Huw Lewis AM on Co-operative Housing are being watched with interest by Jack Dromey MP, now the Shadow Housing Minister. And I’m pleased we are getting such a positive response to changing relationships with the workforce and with the public through the “Co-operative Council” concept. I predict that the 21st Century is going to be the century of co-operation.

Victory for local solidarity!

Working with a superb team of local volunteers, we have won the battle to save Rumney Recreation Ground. The Council wanted to build a school on our superb “village green” but a four-year battle was fought by a united team : the RREEL campaign group, local councillors, Assembly Members (initially Lorraine Barrett and then our new AM Vaughan Gething) and the whole local community. At times we feared that we couldn’t win because there was such determination by Cardiff Council (led by LibDems supported by Plaid Cymru) to press ahead. Local people felt that they were being ignored especially after the campaign forced the council to run a referendum in which 93% voted to protect Rumney Rec.

On behalf of the local team I then applied to register the Rec as a “town or village green”. Rather than back down, the council hired a specialist barrister to conduct a public inquiry costing many thousands of pounds – council tax payers’ money to fight council tax payers !

At the Public Inquiry the united local community gave excellent evidence, but still the council persisted until October when they at last backed down - saving the Rec for generations to come.

Now a new school will be based on the site of the present Rumney High School – an option that was there from the start – and the Welsh Government is providing cash to enable the project to go ahead. Now Eastern Leisure Centre, which would have been swallowed up in the council’s building plans, can be renovated too.

The new school, to serve Trowbridge and St Mellons as well as Llanrumney and Rumney, must be a school for the whole community. And I will continue to press for registration of Rumney Rec as a village green to protect it against any future attack.

Being part of that campaign has been a key part of meeting my election pledge to work hard on environmental issues. And it fits with my pledge to work with volunteers and the voluntary sector.



Why won’t they save lives?

In the summer, during a family holiday, I took time out to meet the Deputy Chief Fire Officer in Vancouver to see what they have done to save lives by installing sprinklers. In 1973 there were 40 ‘fire deaths’ in Vancouver. 37 years later in 2010, the population has doubled, yet there were only four ‘fire deaths’. That’s significant because the UK has failed to learn the lesson. Full credit to the Welsh Assembly Backbencher – Ann Jones AM – who tabled the first-ever back-bench Legislative Competence Order to require sprinklers in new dwellings in Wales. It was held up by the bureaucrats, but it is now law. As it doesn’t apply to the rest of the UK, I am trying to push through a Private Member’s Bill at Westminster. Even if the installation of a sprinkler system in all new homes becomes mandatory, it will take years for the effect to be felt - so the sooner the decision is taken the better. I’m supported by the Association of British Insurers as well as Fire Chiefs. Vancouver’s experience shows that thousands of lives can be saved if we have the will and determination to do so.

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Learning the lessons from the riots in August



As a member of the Home Affairs Select Committee, I've spent much time sifting evidence about the summer's riots in several English cities visiting the areas affected, going into prisons and taking evidence from police and others involved.

The causes are confused and varied, and these riots were very different to what we've seen in the past. Lord Scarman's report showed that the 1980s riots were fuelled by social unrest and real grievances. Further back, the Chartists and the Tolpuddle Martyrs campaigned **for** democracy and the rule of law. This year it was different. In copy-cat riots people chose different targets in differ-

ent places and many people who had jobs and professions took part in the looting out of simple greed. In prison, many told us they had "just joined in".

The apparent "trigger" event – the shooting of one individual in Tottenham – needs stringent investigation because we give powers to the police to protect us and those powers must not be misused. But police officers go into harm's way every day of the week so they must be protected against unjustified allegations, so tough questions must be asked and judgements made with care.

We didn't have riots in South Wales (though a few individuals tried to whip things up) and that's largely because of the work of community leaders, police officers and youth workers. We didn't have a fundamental breakdown in the partnership that is vital to any community.

That was consistent with the answers I got from Bill Bratton the so-called US 'Super-Cop' when he gave evidence. He stressed the need to work in partnership with local government and community agencies to prevent crime and prevent gangs forming.

But economic factors are relevant too. Research by the London School of Economics and the Guardian showed that social and economic inequality fuelled participation in the riots. We know that cuts have to be made, but cutting too far and too fast is actually increasing the amounts that the government is now borrowing. The money isn't being used to stimulate growth and recovery – it's being wasted on putting ever more people on the dole.

Your Local Labour Team

Vaughan Gething AM & Rt Hon Alun Michael MP



We regularly hold advice sessions to help constituents. If you need our help or advice please get in touch on the details below. Or email or write to us with your problem, or to tell us your views.

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HAVE RECEIVED THE PRESTIGIOUS
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