**Why I joined the Conservatives- by Leon Spence CC**

As a lifelong Labour voter, and some time Labour councillor, I did something today which for many years I thought that I would never do.

I joined the Conservative Party.

For me it is the logical end to a journey which I have been on for a number years.

I want to explain as best as I can what has brought me to making that journey, that crossing of the great political divide.

It can be summed up in three words: decency, principles and self.

**Decency**

Back in early June 2013 I had been the leader of the Labour group at North West Leicestershire District Council for just over two years. One day I received a letter in the post from, Richard Blunt, my opposite number on the Conservative benches who happened to be the Leader of the Council, about the sensitive planning policy of making provision for travellers, a serious problem facing the district.

Without disclosing too much information because of a lack of local plan the district council had been losing appeal after appeal once planning decisions had been adjudicated by the inspectorate.

The Council leader was understandably concerned about this state of affairs but also acutely conscious of the fallout if his group were to positively address the problem. I was conscious of the need for the Tory administration to move towards resolving the issue, something that would have been difficult for them without cross party support, and together we agreed that the mature, grown up thing to do for the good of the district was to work together.

I stipulated that given the potential repercussions I wanted my minority group to have equal standing with the Tory administration in a working party we were looking at establishing to work towards resolution on an evidence based basis. To his eternal credit Richard agreed and said he would take our plans back to his group.

On Monday 17th June 2013 I received notification from the Leader that his Conservative group had agreed to our plans, a big concession from them given the natural suspicion between the two parties. All I had to do was deliver the agreement of my group.

But I couldn’t do it. An hour of fierce debate which swayed between ‘it’s the right thing to do for our district’ and ‘let the Tories hang, we will benefit at the ballot box’ eventually came down narrowly on the side of putting perceived electoral advantage over the residents of North West Leicestershire.

I was disgusted that local Labour politicians who purported to be working for their communities would seek to cynically manipulate big issues for a few votes.

The facts stood for themselves, the Tories hadn’t taken such a cynical approach. They had reached out for unity to deal with a difficult issue, Labour had turned their backs.

I resigned as leader of my group on the spot. Of course there was the usual story of ‘work commitments’ but the truth is that was the night I had seen the difference between politicking and decency demonstrated to me perfectly.

**Principles**

When you become involved in local politics you realise, comparatively, how little power you actually have.

You are bound by the legislation created by higher powers (in particular when they tell you there are things that you MUST do), you are bound by the simple fact that you can’t spend more money than you collect and you are inextricably tied to one simple rule: we govern by consensus and whatever we do must ultimately be acceptable to us, the general public.

I have said time and time again that the easiest thing in the world is to be against things. Evoking that truism that ‘we oppose in poetry, we govern in prose’ running even the smallest of parish councils is constantly a battle of what you want to do versus what you can do.

When Theresa May took to the steps of Downing Street last July she gave a masterclass in that tough balancing act.

She spoke about the steps to improving social justice that had been achieved under the previous government. Indeed, Roman Catholic Cardinal Vincent Nicholls highlighted the work Mrs May had done personally on human trafficking in his comments on the Prime Minister taking office.

Mrs May spoke passionately about the challenges facing the impoverished right here in Britain.

As a white, working-class boy myself, a boy who went to state school and didn’t go to university I was physically taken aback that the plight of the generations that followed mine in the kind of area that I represent would become, perhaps for the first time, a priority for our government.

Mrs May was speaking to me.

If it takes miles to change the course of a super tanker, just think how much more is needed to change the course of a country.

In that speech on the steps of Downing Street I knew that keeping the country on track, both fiscally or socially, wouldn’t be easy. Change is often glacial, but I heard that the priorities and direction were the right ones for Britain and for the first time as a Labour voter I thought that a Tory, Mrs May, was the right person to steer the ship.

**Self**

I’m not going to lie. I’ve joined the Conservative Party because I am a little selfish too.

I want the best for me and the best for my family and I believe that now the Conservatives are the best placed to deliver that.

There’s been a lot of talk about the ‘just about managing’ and, to an extent, that includes me.

My wife and I work hard. We want a nice house. We want to take our children on holiday once a year. We want to be able to choose to pay for them to do extra-curricular stuff. There’s nothing wrong with that, it’s no more than millions of others up and down the country want.

But it’s been tough over these past few years, it’s been tough for others too.

As a County Councillor I know only too well how difficult finances are at the minute. My own council has determined to increase council tax by 4%. Leicestershire residents will find it tough and I know no one in the Conservative group is taking delight from such an increase.

It shows the difference between the Conservatives who understand the difficulty for working families and Labour who called for an even steeper rise.

It’s the difference between struggling to pay more because you know ultimately it is necessary and that increasing council tax is a last resort and struggling to pay more simply because the council has the power. It seems to me the difference between Tory and Labour right now is an understanding of the lives of those who are ‘just about managing’.

But it goes deeper. I’m passionate that our National Health Service remains free at the point of use, I’m sorry but as long as that continues I’m not wedded as to who delivers it.

I care about men and women who have to use public transport to get to work, I’m not bothered about artificially created politically motivated strikes aimed that hurt them and are little more than stunts aimed at ‘bringing down the government’.

I want to be a member of a political party who understands ordinary working men and women. When I joined I fervently believe that that was Labour. It isn’t any longer.

There is only one party and one leader that have the gravitas, the decency and the principle to make the country stronger for me and my family.

That party is the Conservatives. That leader is Theresa May.