

Laura Sandys MP and a pro-consumer conservatism #LittleGuyConservatism 1/6

By Tim Montgomerie

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In today's Times (£) I write about my friend Robert Halfon and what I call the little guy conservatism that he has championed as Harlow's Conservative MP:



"At the heart of his belief is a bias towards the little guy. Eighteen months ago when the Tories were considering cutting the top 50p rate of income tax, he argued on the pages of ConservativeHome that this should not be George Osborne's priority. Yes, he insisted, the Conservatives should remain the party of lower taxes but the low-paid should be at the front of the queue whenever there was room in the nation's finances. Working closely with The Sun, Rob's priority was to freeze fuel tax. In the Autumn Statement his campaign achieved success. Every motorist in the land has cause to be grateful to him when they fill up their tank. Fresh from his petrol duty triumph, Rob is now campaigning for the restoration of the 10p income tax band. He thinks that resurrecting the tax band Gordon Brown abolished would send a million-volt message that the Tories are focused on the lowest paid."

I go on to list some of Rob's other campaigns, including for a Conservative Party that is more friendly to trade union members, that promotes apprenticeships and increases the choices of poorer parents.



Rob is not the only Tory MP promoting this David vs Goliath conservatism (what Dom Raab MP has called conservatism for the underdog). A conservatism for the little guy was best expressed by Michael Howard when he was Tory leader. "No one should be over-powerful," he said, "not ministers, not trade unions, not corporations, not the European Union. Wherever we see bullying by the over-mighty, we must stand up to it. Wherever we see one group flicking two fingers to the law, we must fight back."

Words take us only so far, of course. In our sceptical age deeds are more important. This week we will be profiling some of the Conservatives who are campaigning for practical actions to help people who, at times, have to struggle hard against often complicated or unfriendly systems. Tomorrow Pete Hoskin will look at Nick Boles' aim to crack open the housing market and increase the affordability of homes. On Wednesday Harry Phibbs will profile Rob's tax campaigns. On Thursday one of the team will turn to Lord Baker's vocational education vision. On Friday Paul will look at Harriet Baldwin's campaigning for England and then, on Saturday, the series will conclude with a blog on Liz Truss' childcare reforms.

Let me begin, however, with some brief words about Laura Sandys MP. I spent a good part of last Monday afternoon with Laura, listening to her talk about the difficulties that people in her constituency are having in accessing good food, reliably efficient electronic goods and honest energy suppliers. She spoke with knowledge and passion. A former employee of Which? she is now working on a consumer empowerment agenda under the umbrella of the 2020 Conservatives Group of Tory MPs and the Legatum Institute.

She set out some of her early thinking in a piece for ConHome, early last year. Tories, she said, must think less about markets - "as if they only consisted of corporate supply chains" - and more about the consumer. She then set out the sort of action that a pro-consumer Conservative Party would pursue:

"We need to clamp down on companies that mis-sell, we must ensure that consumers have clear and transparent information about the tariffs, nutrition and services levels they are buying, and that

we deliver at the heart of our education system the life skills to support consumers to be much more resilient – from financial education through to cooking and basic household tasks."

Themes that emerge from her writing are (i) penalties for producers that mislead or hold information back; (ii) transparency so that markets are free and fair; (iii) education to empower and I'd add a (iv) mobility. Andrea Leadsom MP's recommendation that our bank account number becomes as personally portable as our mobile phone number is a practical expression of item (iv).

Laura is not unrealistic about what a consumer agenda can achieve. "No Government," she writes, "will be able to stop global price rises, but the Coalition must ensure that the consumers are protected from sharp operators, have a stronger voice in policy development and are being provided with the information that enables them to make the smart choices." ConHome will be keeping a close eye on Laura Sandys' work and reporting back on all progress.

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