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County & Commons



When it comes to our beloved Hertfordshire countryside, it has a staunch defender in the form of North East Hertfordshire MP Oliver Heald who has had a busy 2008, as Rebecca Sparkes discovers

The past year has been a difficult one for politicians. America may have been swept with Obama-fever but governments around the world wrestled with financial crises. Closer to home, the credit crunch took its toll, but Westminster commentators filled column inches with expenses embarrassment thanks to the MPs' 'John Lewis List' and summer holiday intrigue.

Oliver Heald, MP for North East Hertfordshire, represents the county's largest constituency, incorporating Letchworth Garden City, Baldock, Royston and Buntingford as well as rural areas in between, and his job was as tough as any. The spotlight of scandal may never have shined upon Oliver, but among the many of 2008's repercussions was the local effect of Iceland's banking collapse.

'Hertfordshire was forced by Government rules to invest in a wide range of banks and the Icelandic banks had good credit ratings. The county

council has £28million in Icelandic banks and Hertfordshire Police Authority has £3million,' he wrote in one of his regular blogs. 'Local residents should not suffer as a result of this extraordinary economic situation.'

Oliver is a keen blogger. He was one of the first MPs to have a website that allows email feedback for constituents and is only one of the methods he employs to stay in touch with such a diverse community.

Our precious scenery

Oliver and his wife live in Royston and are regular visitors to The Broadway, Letchworth's newly expanded Art Deco Cinema. A commuter himself, Oliver helped secure the extra regular train service between London Kings Cross, stopping only at Letchworth and Royston.

Meeting Oliver at one of his surgeries, his understanding of townspeople is matched by a dedication to the countryside. First elected to Parliament

in 1992, he has kept a watchful eye on threats to the landscape ever since. Oliver talks about his love for the county's 'precious scenery' and points out, 'The skyline of Weston Hills was protected at great cost with a tunnel when the Baldock by-pass was built, because this end of the Chiltern Hills is so important in landscape terms. There are not even pylons on this ridge.'

And 2009 will still see him keeping a watchful eye on more threats to the Hertfordshire countryside. In the Commons he has voiced opposition to increasing numbers of planning applications to build wind farms across the region. Proposals for three wind turbines in the conservation area on Weston Hills concern him greatly.

Exactng standards

On national issues, Oliver's is a formidable voice in Parliament. The political watchers' website



Oliver meets members of WARD (Weston Against Rural Destruction), the campaign group set up to fight the erection of the Weston Wind Turbines. From left, county councillor Tony Hunter, Oliver, Tony Ainsworth and Jackie Rickford from WARD. **Right** Oliver in Parliament

'theyworkforyou.com' gave him an impressive 'above average amongst MPs' rating for his appearances in debates and written questions to ministers in 2008. He is also recorded as a prompt respondent to a 'high' number of messages from constituents.

In Westminster, Oliver sits on the Work and Pensions Select Committee. In March 2008, he was elected to The Committee on Standards in Public Life, initially established to deal with concerns about unethical conduct amongst MPs, including accepting financial incentives for tabling Parliamentary questions. Today, the committee's membership is not confined to politicians, and advises the government on ethical standards in all areas of public life across the country.

Oliver sees it as a tremendous privilege to serve on these two bodies and his enthusiasm remained constant when results of the Committee Standards in Public Life's annual survey were

published in November, showing respect for MPs had hit a new low.

He says, 'It is depressing that more of the public think that standards of behaviour have fallen. I am determined to see an improvement in both standards and public perceptions. MPs connecting with the public is key to this.'

Improving communication

Oliver believes changes begin locally. 'As a constituency MP, I am always trying to improve communication with constituents and have always believed that on occasions there is no substitute for a face-to-face meeting or picking up the telephone.'

A qualified barrister specialising in employment and family law, Oliver is a regular speaker in Parliamentary Work and Pension debates. Again, he refers to local projects and cites Hertfordshire's Woolgrove School as a shining example of how barriers to employment such as

literacy and numeracy problems are addressed at an early age.

It was as a young lawyer, in Bermondsey, where Oliver first saw the importance of local support projects. Running a football team of youngsters suffering all the problems of inner city deprivation, he found it 'remarkable how training for a purposeful activity helped them all'.

More recently, he offers support and funding advice to sports clubs including a basketball team on Letchworth's Jackman's Estate. He cannot forget, he says, his early experiences in Bermondsey.

Whatever challenges 2009 brings, in threats to our countryside or questioning standards, it is clear that Oliver will be more than happy to take up the mantle to protect his beloved Hertfordshire.



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