

**Councillor Nick McLean, Leader of the Conservative Group**

Thank you Madam Mayor – I may have been born in New Zealand but Merton is my home – and I care passionately about the community I live in and represent in Cannon Hill.

I am a new Leader, elected in 2018 and the past is behind. Indeed, I make the Leader of the Liberal Democrats look practically establishment.

I am grateful for the courtesies extended to me by Officers and Members from across the Chamber as I embark on this challenge.

Madam Mayor – I did not enter politics to manage lives – I want to make lives better. I do not believe in excessive managerialism and top down bureaucracy – I am resentful of the words tax and ban.

I believe politicians must strive to create an environment where an individual is able to take decisions for themselves and their families,

where family, friends and the community are the support network;

- and the state the safety net.

I am a democrat – it does not matter how you vote, but that your vote matters. I have strong values – Conservative values.

- Opportunity for all;
- In life you should be rewarded for the endeavour you put in;
- And you never pull one person up by pulling another one down.

I reject the politics of envy and class warfare...I believe in aspiration and helping people get on in life – and what's more I am proud of it.

Madam Mayor, Local Government authorities across the UK are facing budgetary restraints. But let us be reminded why those difficult decisions have been necessary – in 2008 the then Labour Government crashed the economy.

Once again a Labour Government had run out of other people's money to spend. Contrast that with the jobs miracle under this Conservative Government

- 32.6 million people in work
- And soon, for each and every one of those people in work, one of the highest minimum wages in the world.

We understand that a dynamic business environment is essential to the vibrancy and growth of the borough – creating the opportunity for the new start-up or budding entrepreneur to succeed – championing business hubs so that residents can work

and live close by – removing the need to travel, reducing air pollution and creating a better work life balance – a sustainable future for Merton.

Conservatives creating jobs for residents of Merton.

For the many – not the few.

Madam Mayor, there is a common theme when it comes to Labour and money – that is mismanagement – and Merton Labour are no different.

This administration has now tottered into its ninth year

- nine years of failing adequately to prepare for grant reductions;
- nine years of failing to maximise innovation and efficiency;
- nine years of failing to make the right decisions for Merton.

And Madam Mayor – it has become quite apparent that without the high quality guidance from the Senior Officer team then things could be so much worse.

Rather than step-up to the challenges this Administration showed a lack of political courage. That is why the Council now faces budgetary headwinds in the years ahead.

For too long Merton Labour have hidden behind and misrepresented the Conservative's deficit reduction programme – refusing to take responsibility for their own budget decisions.

On this side of the Chamber we are all instinctively drawn to living within our means.

Low tax and low spend.

Merton Labour on the other hand are low tax and over spend.

And not only do they run down our finances, they also seem determined to run down our borough.

Madam Mayor, after the Merton hall disgrace you would think that Merton Labour would cease the cultural vandalism – but no they were at it again.

Fortunately, a Conservative led scrutiny revolt stopped the mothballing of Morden Park House – an historic building and the only registry office in the borough.

And when they were asked at Cabinet why it was removed, Cllr Allison mumbled that 'the business case has not been made,' well if it hadn't been made then why did they include it on the first place?

I am a small businessman – not a past spokesman for small business – and I know what 'business-like' really means – and that is not the actions of a business like council.

And Madam Mayor whilst we will support some of the Liberal Democrat amendments in particular tonight we will not support their second amendment the Merton Wellbeing Innovation Fund as the business case has simply not been made – have they been taking advice from Cllr Allison?

The contempt with which Merton Labour seem to hold the Borough's much-loved historic buildings is only matched by the contempt they seem to have for its residents.

This Labour Administration constantly seeks to abdicate responsibility and attempt to shift the blame – well it will not go unchallenged in this chamber anymore.

The deficit we have today has been caused by this administration's financial mismanagement.

Yes Local Government is being asked to do more, with less.

But as countless other local authorities take steps to manage this, this hard-hearted Labour administration tries to balance the books on the back of our children – what a disgrace.

Madam Mayor – our amendment puts the children of Merton first,

It commits £20,000 to improve our air quality around local schools;

Ensures Little Leagues are free at the point of use;

Allows Merton Music Foundation to continue to operate.

Takes genuine steps to improve the air that we breathe – instead of using air quality as an excuse for a stealth tax on those in our borough who don't vote Labour.

Last week I visited Cricket Green School in Mitcham – a fantastic school and rightly held in high esteem by this Council.

The children had recently finished planting new trees – trees which are desperately needed in this area of high pollution.

Today, I visited, with Nigel Benbow, Merton Abbey School – another excellent school – and again located in an area of high pollution.

Now think of the good we could do for Merton's future and the wellbeing of our children if we have this £20,000 to allow local schools to plant trees – it is a ground-breaking policy that should not be kept in the shade. It puts our children first and helps us all.

Last Saturday, along with Cllr David Dean, I met with Little League volunteers and organisers at the Prince Georges Fields to discuss the challenges that they now face because of Cllr Alambritis' indefensible decision to start charging for pitch use – a policy he said he would not do.

Now I appreciate that it is a difficult time for him to talk football.

But just because his beloved Fulham seem destined for the drop.

There is no need to relegate the sporting chances of our Borough.

Which is why we are determined to reverse this policy.

But Merton Labour's desire to end things that local children benefit from and enjoy does not stop there.

Madam Mayor – Merton Music Foundation provide high quality musical education for children throughout the London Borough of Merton.

By cutting their budget, this Labour administration is depriving children of all socio-economic backgrounds the opportunity of an enriched musical experience.

I ask colleagues opposite to think of this, and change their tune.

Madam Mayor – we are also seeking to remove Labour's misguided tax on parked cars – a discriminatory tax that will not improve air quality in this Borough.

Under this Labour Administration there exists an unacceptable and shameful 9 years of healthy living gap between people living in the most and least deprived areas of Merton.

To reduce this gap smarter policies are needed – like Low Emission bus zones as introduced on Putney High Street which has led to a reduction in Nitrogen Dioxide of 87%.

Madam Mayor – if this Council does not pass this amendment, they will be endorsing worse air quality and shutting out children from the pleasure of music and the opportunity to play football with their friends.

It is in the Borough's best interest to have happy, healthy children, with a rounded education who are not learning in schools surrounded by pollution. Conservatives are passionate about equality, protecting the less well off and on the side of young people in Merton

Our amendment puts our children first – we are giving this Council the chance to do the right thing – to change the Administration's mind, so; Councillors – vote with your conscience – and for this amendment, which I so move.

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