Action to Save St. John's Hospital.

THERE'S A WHIFF OF AN ELECTION IN THE AIR.....

The Holyrood elections are upon us once again, and it scarcely seems like four years since the last significant threat to global warming. The increase in hot air above Scotland is stifling, and already 2011 looks like it will rival previous years.

As our national politicians take to the stage to persuade us that they know what's in our best interests, in West Lothian one of the key political issues is yet again being ignored by certain mainstream parties. **ST. JOHN'S HOSPITAL at HOWDEN.**

As sound bite after tantalising sound bite trips blithely off their tongues, we see another campaign taking shape that wants to re-write history. So let's remember the facts. It is a fact that under Labour, who at the time controlled West Lothian Council, the Holyrood and Westminster Parliaments, St. John's Hospital was reduced to a shadow of its former self between 2003 and 2007. The rot only stopped after they were thrown from power, and the reconstruction of services was only begun after they were put out to pasture.

True, they will say that locally MSPs and Labour Councillors opposed their national leaders, only for their appeals to fall on deaf ears. But how credible is that? Our party, which stood six candidates at the local elections in 2007 had three Councillors elected. And as a result of our influence with the SNP Government, we were able to secure undertakings that the downgrade of St. John's would stop, and that significant investment would take place. So the whole Labour Party machine couldn't do in years what three first time Councillors did in a matter of months? Either we seriously underestimated our abilities (not likely, some might say), or the Labour Party's impotence was in fact incompetence. Think "toeing the party line, while feeding the public another", and you're spot on.

To be fair, our relationship with the SNP has not been the smoothest, and we have criticised them where we thought it reasonable. In 2008 Nicola Sturgeon gave the clearest undertaking that St. John's Hospital's future as an acute emergency hospital was secured. On the other hand, she also said that the hospital had not been downgraded. Perhaps in the first flushes of Governmental power, she was already listening too much to the Civil Servants. It seemed a "Yes, Minister" moment that did not bode well, and to we less experienced in the ethereal world of politics, a missed opportunity to give her predecessors a bloody nose. Thankfully she quickly got to grips with the real problems, and since then has been a significant force for good for the NHS in Scotland.

So what of the future? If the current campaigning is anything to go by, the opposition to the SNP led by Labour, want to steal the best of their policies. Yet for four years we have listened to diatribes the length and breadth of the country opposing those same policies. And not just at national level. Motion after tedious motion has been raised at Councils throughout Scotland criticising everything the SNP Government has sought to achieve. They are rarely successful, which is perhaps a welcome reflection of the evolving political landscape in Scotland.

What is clear is that the NHS battle lines are again being drawn in the West of Scotland, where disproportionate attention seems to be paid to hospitals there. A repeat of 2007? In campaigning terms, certainly; in terms of results, we shall have to wait and see. But to forget the lessons at St. John's could allow those responsible for its downgrade prior to 2007 to re-write history once again. And that would be a travesty.

Recently Ian Gray has given "an absolute guarantee" that the A & E departments at Monklands and Ayr hospitals will not be closed if he is in power. In 2007 Labour accused the SNP and us of putting popularity before patients following their plans to inflict closures-including, rather ironically, Monklands and Ayr. We well remember the comment by Andy Kerr that any move to save healthcare provision was a "con" and "a sell-out". In August 2006 he said that the closure of Monkands was "in the best interests of patients", and as recently as 2010, he was still defending the closure decision. What breathtaking hypocrisy. We also recall how in the last 4 years the local Labour Party, despite their "it wisnae us" approach, have NEVER offered any help or assistance in the restoration of services to St. John's. Their only clear talent is, and some may say always has been, to make it up as they go along.

Even now their election brochures (printed outwith West Lothian) make no reference to our local hospital and services. They do claim credit for a health centre at Murieston which was in fact a temporary structure of port-a-cabins some 6 years ago, and remains temporary today. Shouldn't the Labour candidate who argued for "permanency" now offer an apology to the people of West Lothian? Perhaps they should be forgiven not knowing the difference. After all, they're still trying to reconcile the temporary nature of political office, with their self-serving belief that they have a "right" to govern. And there are a growing number of them seeking to hold more than one office to make sure they hold on to something. Well, nothing like tax payer funded insurance!

As the Sir Humphreys get ready to beat new Ministers into shape, sorry, educate them in the complexities of office, let's hope whoever has the health portfolio can be trusted to continue the achievements of the last four years. The NHS remains a barometer of how we function as a society, and since 2007, a great deal has been improved. But much remains to be done.

When you cast your vote, let the recent history of St. John's guide where you put your "X".

Action to Save St. John's Hospital Party.