

16th. November 2011.

The Passing of a True Campaigner.

On 6th. November 2011, Ernie Walker lost his long battle against cancer. Our thoughts and prayers are for his wife, Joyce, his extended family and his many friends.

Ernie Walker was the consummate professional. He spent a working lifetime in a series of senior management posts within the NHS in Scotland and in England.

In 2005 he became involved in the campaign to stop the downgrade of St. John's Hospital. An intransigent Labour Government had allowed an out of control health board to rip services out of St. John's, centralising them in Edinburgh, and all with an utter contempt for the people of West Lothian. As political priorities began to taint the original campaign, Ernie led a break-away group supported by our other recently lost campaigner, Marion MacKay, and their dedicated supporters.

In 2007, Ernie and the others in the group took the decision to field candidates in both the local Council and Holyrood elections. That single decision changed the face of Scottish politics far beyond the wildest dreams of the Stop the Downgrade Campaign, or SDC as it was more commonly known. And never one to lead from the back, Ernie agreed to stand in the Holyrood election in the Livingston constituency.

The first issue the SDC had to address was the establishment of a political party. After many long hours of discussion and debate, the Action to Save St. John's Hospital Party was born. The next task was to find "willing volunteers" to fight the Council elections. After some convincing and cajoling, 6 candidates were found, and a creditable 3 were elected. So changed the Labour stronghold in West Lothian.

But what was significantly more important was Ernie's contribution. Despite debilitating illness, Ernie took up the fight for Holyrood. He wasn't simply a stalking horse candidate. Ernie went to hustings, and, together with supporters, spent hours outside public buildings and supermarkets handing out leaflets, and speaking to the public.

Few people stand for election in the hope of not getting elected, but Ernie was a pragmatist. He realised that he had an uphill struggle, just as he did with his illness. But he met both with equal measure of good cheer and gritty determination; and at times, a little annoyance! But Ernie calculated that public sentiment was with him, and at the very least he would dent the majority of the sitting MSP whose party had sat back and allowed the decimation of services at St. John's.

And how right he was! Ernie polled a staggering 2814 votes, beating the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats into 4th and 5th places respectively. But the impact of the vote for Ernie was felt most by the sitting Labour Party MSP whose support was slashed to 12,289. This allowed Angela Constance to win the seat for the SNP with 13,159 votes. Ms. Constance majority of 870 votes was in sharp contrast to the 3670 Labour majority in 2003, and Ernie's involvement undoubtedly contributed to the turnaround in Livingston.

The Livingston result gave the SNP a 1 seat majority in the Scottish Parliament, and they went on to form a minority administration at Holyrood. Earlier this year, the SNP consolidated their 2007 victory by winning an overall majority in the Scottish Parliament, confounding the electoral system that was supposed to prevent such a result.

We as a group have much to thank Ernie for. We believe also that his courageous decision in 2007 to stand for the Scottish Parliament has helped to provide the platform to shape Scotland's future for the better. Ernie was confident when we set off on this path that the SNP in Government would start to deliver on our aspirations of a local health service for all, and free at the point of delivery. These values resonate strongly with the people of West Lothian and we would remind the SNP that they have promises to keep!

In 1993, Ernie was quoted in the national media as saying "being nice is hard work". No-one needed to work less at being nice than him. Ernie Walker showed, through word and deed, that with a steely determination in the face of considerable adversity, change for the better can be achieved. And he did it all with a smile. We hope that his legacy will be honoured by those whose political futures have been aided by his hard work and commitment.