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| **A virtual interview with Olivia Blake, MP by Cathy Rhodes** |



The first time I met our Hallam MP Olivia Blake on June 30th was at a virtual lobby in the Climate Coalition’s campaign ‘The Time is Now’ for a Green Recovery. St John’s was well represented in the call to MPs to put people, climate and nature at the heart of the UK’s recovery from coronavirus. I was struck during the meeting that our training session to engage MPs on these issues was not needed. An online search of Olivia’s recent contributions in Parliament includes numerous questions and speeches on green topics including recycling, rivers, pesticides, peat fires, fine particle air pollution, the exportation of plastic and other waste, and biodiversity. She broke parliamentary convention to use her maiden speech as an MP to highlight the urgency of tackling the climate emergency. One of her passions is public transport (she referred to her husband’s Dad being a train driver!) and improved transport links for Sheffield to address the climate crisis. Alongside [Louise Haigh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise_Haigh), she has launched a campaign to reopen railway stations along the Sheaf Valley line.

On the proposed merger of the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Olivia spoke in Parliament of ‘ensuring that funding is available for sustainable and green investment to support the countries that will be put most at risk from our own pollution and the climate justice that needs to emerge.’ She said ‘…The concerns of my constituents who have been in touch to express their frustration and confusion over this decision are valid. As a city of sanctuary, we are an internationalist city.’

I thought it would be good to spend time talking to her further about environmental issues for an article for ‘Inspire.’ I also wanted to make a link with her with my Diocesan Environment Officer hat on, so we met on 3rd September on Zoom and the photo is above to prove it! I started by asking Olivia about her background and she told me her grandmother, born 100 years ago, was one of the first woman obstetricians in England (a job close to my heart!). Her grandfather Frank Parsons established the first artificial kidney unit in the UK and in 1956 pioneered kidney dialysis in Leeds, the first outside London. Olivia grew up in Otley near Leeds with this strong background in public service, and after studying at the University of Sheffield, became a biomedical scientist researcher at the dental school. She was elected as local councillor to the Walkley Ward in 2014-2016 and was Deputy Leader of Sheffield Council in 2017. During her time there she held leadership roles in health services and finance, and was on the Board of a local mental health trust. She is one of only 103 MPs with a Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths and Medicine background (16% of the total).

Olivia then went forward for selection as a Labour party candidate with the ambition to be a good representative. With her understanding of local government and the NHS, she feels this helped her win the Hallam seat in 2019. The high numbers of local people with a public service ethos, and her ‘fantastic’ campaign team helped her to buck the national trend. Olivia feels her focus on moral responsibility, social justice, the environment and our public services chimed with feeling in our constituency, and she was very pleased to be elected.

I asked Olivia how she reflects on her time as an MP so far, and she spoke of how welcoming the staff were in the House of Commons. This helped her to acclimatise to the ‘unwritten rules’ and ethos in Parliament such as not using the word ‘you’. She describes herself as ‘not afraid of hard work’ and was deeply aware that she was there to represent people. She has a extra roles on the Public Accounts Committee and as a Parliamentary Private Secretary jointly to the Shadow Secretaries of State for Scotland, and Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. I asked about her experience of becoming an MP at the time of the pandemic. She spoke of the acute needs of her constituents, especially relating to the economy and education, and food access was a massive issue. It was a ‘whirlwind’ in term of case work as thousands of people contacted her. She paid tribute to her staff for their work since lockdown, as together they helped over 6000 people.

On 10th September Olivia wrote on her website in support of the Climate and Ecological Emergency Bill (on line at ceebill.uk) stating: ‘To limit global warming and its disastrous impacts, we need to decarbonise rapidly. Climate change is not an issue for the future—we already face its effects in the here and now.’ She is campaigning for her party’s 2030 net-zero carbon emissions target, 20 years earlier than the current government’s target of 2050. I am struck by how this reflects the recent General Synod amended Motion for our Church of England to aim for net zero by 2030, 15 years earlier than the original motion.

After our conversation I felt that regardless of political affiliation, we are fortunate to have an MP who is visible, not afraid to speak out and who has a deep understanding of the urgency of the crisis facing God’s Creation. I would like to finish with some words from Olivia’s speech in early July: *‘We know that we are not out of the woods yet and we may be facing further hardship as a result of coronavirus. The medium to long-term impacts could be felt for generations. We need the Government to forge a path from which we can emerge with greater opportunities and a greener economy*…*I may have taken my lab coat off, but I hope I have given some food for thought.’*