

INTERVIEW

CHRIS KELLY JNR

Has the road transport industry finally found the right person to represent them politically?

Kelly's heroes

Chris Kelly Jnr wants to champion road transport in Parliament. Has the former Keltruck man got what it takes to make your voice heard?

Words: Christopher Walton

MENTION THE NAME Chris Kelly in the road transport industry and most people will tell you he's the chairman of West Bromwich-based Scania dealer Keltruck. Well, his son hasn't done too badly either – Chris Kelly (Jnr) is now MP for Dudley South.

CM caught up with the junior Kelly just eight weeks after he had been elected to the House of Commons and the two hours we managed to snatch with him were a lesson in how difficult it is for lobbyists and interest groups to attract the attention of an MP.

Kelly says: "I think the Road Haulage Association [RHA] wrote to me, but for anyone who wrote to me in the first few weeks it was just a waste of time. We are literally snowed under with no staff, no office and induction meetings."

Representing the industry

But don't be disheartened. Kelly has set out his intention to represent the interests of all road transport businesses and improve the profile of the industry among fellow MPs. In his first eight weeks he has joined the All-Party Parliamentary Motor Group and a fellow All-Party Group on Highway Maintenance.

As a former Keltruck employee, and given his parentage, the interests of the industry are very clearly in his blood.

"I really think that freight and road transport does not punch its weight," he explains. "The industry must be more



▲ Family affair: Chris Kelly Jnr (left) and Chris Kelly Snr (right)

effective with its lobbying. It has always been an issue."

How could the industry change the way it influences national debates?

"I would like to see things like opinion-editorials in major national publications about how vital our industry is to the economy as a whole. Virtually every story in the national

STORY OF A SEAT

Kelly is part of the new wave Conservative of MPs who came close to winning and the seat itself tells the story of British politics in the past 15 years.

The constituency used to be Dudley West (before some gerrymandering in 1997 created Dudley South) and was a typical Conservative stronghold.

John Blackburn was its MP from 1979 until

his death in 1994. The subsequent by-election was Tony Blair's first test at the polls after he became leader of the Labour Party and Ian Pearson was Dudley South's MP until he stepped down in 2010. Kelly won the 2010 election with 43% of the vote, while his nearest competitor, Labour's Rachel Harris, garnered 33% of the vote. It was a swing of 9.5% from Labour to the Conservatives.

press about the industry [is negative].

"There has been an anti-motoring agenda and when you challenge that you can expect a fight.

"You get to hear their side every time in the national media rather than our side of the argument. But to be better in the national media you have to find the next generation of industry champions."

In addition, Kelly would like the industry to improve its education of the public and get more people, from MPs to school children, inside the cab of an HGV, so they can realise what an impressive piece of machinery it is.

"We need to introduce people to the very skilled job of driving an HGV, so they can have more respect for the job. They need to realise this is what delivers their pint of milk or loaf of bread to Tesco."

Forget quangos

He also delivers a warning for every tax-funded body out there: "I do not think that quangos are the answer," Kelly insists.

"If there is tax payers' money being used I would want to look very carefully at what it is being used for."

This reflects the new Conservatives attempts to cut the public deficit through spending reductions. Kelly makes no apology for towing the party line. He is, after all, a born and bred Conservative. "We have been totally up front with the



public about the size of the deficit. We said we would have an emergency Budget after 50 days and we did and we are doing exactly what we said we would do. But there will be people who do not recognise the scale of the problem and a lot are sitting on the other side of the commons..."

What encouraged Kelly to go into politics? "It sounds awfully cheesy, but it is a privilege to represent an area I have always called home.

"I could have gone to a safe seat in the Home Counties, but I wanted to represent Dudley South because I am a Black Country boy," he explains.

"I never wanted to be an MP for any party other than the Conservatives. I am extremely driven by my principles and I am driven by the business beliefs that my dad has given me – that hard work should give rewards.

"We need to give more money to people to spend on their priorities. People can spend money more effectively on themselves because they know what

to spend it on."

There is a long road ahead for this coalition government, and it will take some time for the electorate to be persuaded totally by its ideologies and policies as its mandate for change was not wholeheartedly embraced in May.

Backing the Conservatives

Unsurprisingly, Kelly is quite dismissive about the effectiveness of the previous Labour government claiming they did "untold damage to the country".

He describes Tony Blair as a "one-off phenomenon" who had the ability to bring those with more conservative values around to the Labour cause: "Dudley South has always been Conservative until Tony Blair arrived, but we knew that Brown would not appeal to the people of Dudley South."

Outside of fighting the corner for the road transport industry Kelly says his dream job would be to work with the man that Blair thoroughly trounced in the 2001 election – William Hague. "He

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is a fantastic foreign secretary," he gushes. "If I got the chance to go on a charm offensive with him, banging the drum for British business abroad; that would be a dream job for me."

But, let's not forget, the Conservatives don't hold all the cards in this government: they have to work with their LibDem coalition partners.

It would be harsh to say that Kelly is disappointed with this state of affairs and admits that the agenda will be different.

"We had to make compromises but the price was a strong and stable government.

"We had to come to an agreement; we could not have a situation where the party that came second and third formed a government with an unelected prime-minister."

The shake-up meant that some senior Cabinet positions had to accommodate Liberal Democrats, a situation that resulted in Philip Hammond becoming the Secretary of State for Transport, instead of taking the role of Chief Secretary to the Treasury which he shadowed while in opposition.

With former transport boss Peter Carroll losing his bid to become a LibDem MP, it is up to Kelly to deliver the road transport agenda. ■



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