

Commons tribute by Tom Levitt MP to Sir Martin Doughty

Extract from Hansard Oct 27 2009

6.34 pm

Tom Levitt (High Peak) (Lab): I may not be the obvious Member of the House to speak about marine environments or coastal access, because we have neither coast nor marine environments in my constituency. However, High Peak is the philosophical home of the right to roam: we had the Kinder trespass in 1932 and the first open-access land designated under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, and we have more open-access land than any other constituency in England.

High Peak is the birthplace of the right to roam, but it is also the birthplace of one Sir Martin Doughty. Martin was my constituent, and he died of cancer earlier this year. I am sure that my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench would acknowledge that without him, there would have been no Marine and Coastal Access Bill. As the chair of Natural England, and of English Nature before that, Martin was largely responsible for working with various environment Ministers, including my right hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Jim Knight), my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Jonathan Shaw), the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmere (Huw Irranca-Davies) and others, to bring the measure about.

Before Martin was involved in English Nature and Natural England, he was the chair of the Peak District national park and the leader of Derbyshire county council. He was born and bred in High Peak and lived there his whole life. He lived and breathed the countryside and the natural world and explored it as often as he could with a passion and humour that was truly infectious. In the 20 years that I knew him, he was one of the kindest, most gentle and most principled people that I ever met. Everyone who came across him respected him and very soon loved him.

Martin was also a great socialist, who put principles into practice in a pragmatic, thoughtful and just way. A couple of weeks ago, 200 of us gathered on Kinder Scout on what would have been his 60th birthday. There were friends, neighbours, political allies and even some rivals, people from interest groups, Government agencies, local authority leaders and two of my colleagues, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Alun Michael) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Ms Smith), who are sitting either side of me tonight. We went not only to remember Martin, but to dedicate Kinder Scout in his memory—it was created the 223rd national nature reserve on that very day.

The ambition to create a national coastal path that is accessible to walkers, climbers and others where appropriate is sound and it is right, and it is Martin's achievement as much as that of any other individual, although he was never one to claim the limelight. I hope that my hon. Friends will consider calling all or part of it either the Doughty way or Martin's way or something in his memory.

On Kinder Scout a couple of weeks ago, we sang to Martin's memory. It will be of little surprise on the Government Benches that we sang "The Manchester Rambler". I had the great privilege of meeting the author of that song, Ewan McColl, once, many years ago, and my constituency is mentioned several times in it. Ewan McColl was the press officer for the mass trespass in 1932 and Martin Doughty's father was one of the trespassers.

Given that we are talking about the Marine and Coastal Access Bill, one verse stands out from the song—there is a prescient mention of the legislation that we are talking about. It goes:

"He"—

the gamekeeper—

"called me a louse and said 'Think of the grouse'.

Well I thought, but I still couldn't see

Why old Kinder Scout and the moors round about
Couldn't take both the poor grouse and me.

He said 'All this land is my master's'

At that I stood shaking my head,

No man has the right to own mountains

Any more than the deep ocean bed."

With that, and in the memory of Sir Martin Doughty, the founding chairman of Natural England and the moving force behind the coastal path, I congratulate Ministers on this highly significant and important piece of legislation and look forward to its enactment.

6.38 pm

Andrew George: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for High Peak (Tom Levitt) and I am certain that his tributes to Sir Martin Doughty were well deserved.