
[Manchester Question Time organised by Total Politics, 11 February 2010](#)

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Event reviewed by [Simon Belt](#)

I've been to a wide variety of meetings about politics in my time, and this one at the City Inn Hotel in Manchester appealed because it was being organised by Total Politics as a Question Time event ahead of the forthcoming general election. This was my first Total Politics event, and first ever event at the City Inn - they asked for £400 for a room for 20-30 people for the Manchester Salon last year, and spending money on the room ahead of the travel costs of quality speakers isn't what I do. The format was a traditional three way head to head between Labour (**Tony Lloyd MP**, Manchester Central), Conservatives (**Graham Brady MP**, Altrincham & Sale West) and Liberal (

Mark Hunter MP

, Cheadle) with the fourth panel member being

David Ottewell

, chief reporter at Manchester Evening News.

Shane Greer

, executive editor of Total Politics chaired the event.

Arriving at the City Inn, for the Question time we were greeted with free flowing wine or beer and delightful canapes with a 70's theme served by a large number of very attentive and well organised staff - City Inn were out to impress and were definitely on the ball. Prepared by the invitation reminder, I came armed with a couple of questions to ask but had to find the question sheet on which they had to be written down before going into the discussion, and thankfully was stood by the person who had the pile of written questions so I got to know where they were being collected. That aspect of behind the scenes question collation without encouraging anyone on the night to write them seemed to miss the chance to engage the audience and encourage the widest scope of questions. More alarming was the fact that the pile of questions weren't actually being looked through or read by anyone ahead of starting the Question Time, which came across like going through the motions of 'involvement' in the way 'listening' councils ask you what colour you'd like 'telling' *No Alcohol Here* signs to be.

Starting quite late, we filed in to the long room where the City Inn manager welcomed us, and then Shane Greer introduced the panel with charm and strangely apologised for the 70's canapes (I can only think because it was too evocative of a period of real politics) and promised better ones and more drinks after the Question Time. As if we needed any more clues that this wasn't total politics as we may have known it, the rather reverential tone and layout of the room



for us to admire the speakers was compounded by the Channel 4 style continuously changing mood lighting behind the speakers - no doubt to keep us involved or awake.

Right on cue, Shane selects the first question on, wake up now the lights have created a new political landscape of total politics, yes, whether the investigation into the way MPs claimed their expenses was a waste of money. How to set the tone of total politics, not. To his credit Graham Brady just said that the claiming of expenses was a way of boosting salaries endorsed by the infrastructure of parliament and it would just have been better to be open and honest about paying MPs more. As if we weren't far enough from having some total politics as it was, both Mark Hunter and Tony Lloyd then went on to say that they as politicians didn't want to have the responsibility for deciding on MPs salaries or expenses themselves and would like someone else to do it for them. What? And Tony prefaced the abdication of deciding his own future by saying that he believed the political process was the most efficient way of changing the world, and yet he'd prefer some unelected technocrat to decide on his own pay because he doesn't trust himself to make the right decision. And they wonder why people don't trust politicians.

The next selected question on whether taxing bank to bank transactions could help deal with climate change began to irritate some of those who felt somewhat alienated from the political process in general and in this rather anodyne meeting, with questions being shouted out and attempts to highlight the all male platform as the problem of it being dull. Alas, it was all a little thrashing about in the dark, literally, but clearly there is a frustration with the way in which we are all being disenfranchised - the public and politicians alike. Although total politics and these Question Time formats are responding to this depoliticisation, the overly posh approach that emphasises style over substance and rather desperately seeks reassurance through self-flagellation isn't going to solve it. Alas it will need some real politics and a sharp and critically honest assertion of self interest and how best we can achieve it.

For instance, after the dull Question Time format with managerially focussed questions could be replaced with a more focussed and critical assessment of the process of what's happening to the democratic process today. The naughty but nice mini burger canapes we were served after the Question Time with yet more free booze is as good a place to start as any. The naughty but nice mini burger, yes, nice partly because it's flavoursome but also nice because it naughtily kicks against the all encompassing encroachment on what we're allowed to eat by an increasingly narrow and managerial politics that thinks it should decide what and when we can and cannot put in our mouths. The [Junk food: myth and metaphor](#) discussion organised by the Manchester Salon in February is a case in point, critically assessing self interest as citizens in deciding our own future. [Th](#)

[e immigration debate](#)

in March will open up a discussion that's been closed down by politicians too scared of their own shadow, and attempt to pose a positive case for open borders and doesn't blame the public for nationalist rhetoric or racism.

As the next election campaign gears up to be narrower and more timid than any other, the Manchester Salon is lining up a series of [critical discussions](#) that aim to get to the heart of why politics is in decline and totally transform it. To join the Manchester Salon mailing list, click on this [Contact Us](#) link and suggest the topics you feel passionate about and want to have opened up to a more critical debate.