



Joseph Connolly

A monthly diary of sundry observations, brief encounters and anecdotes, local and less so, foodie and otherwise

Tulip's easy charm and a delightful smile really makes her one to watch

As I was sitting just last week in The Wells, my favourite Hampstead eating place, enjoying a typically terrific lunch in the delightful company of the Labour Member of Parliament for Hampstead and Kilburn, my initial thought was this: how does Tulip manage to look as fresh as a daisy?

Just listening to the responsibilities of one of her normal days and the hours involved left me quite utterly exhausted.

The wonderful thing is, though – she simply reels off all the things she must attend to: questions, speeches, debates and votes in the House of Commons, her local surgeries, press interviews, oh God – on and on ... as if she were talking merely about a trip to the shops.

She is immensely accepting of all the burdens, and actually appears to thrive on it all. In about a month she is due to give birth to her first child, a daughter (she wanted a daughter) ... and, as any mother will rush to tell you, that ain't no picnic either.

"I wouldn't have stood for Parliament if I didn't relish the challenge. I love the local community, and I love to take care of its interests".

So far, so glib-politico speak – but no one can be in Tulip's company for more than a minute and doubt her sincerity: she is, I am pleased to report, the real deal. And – more to the point – she is not a woman to pick at her food: not for her; playing with a salad.

We both launched right in with smoked salmon, spinach, dill and poached egg with potato, horseradish and shallot rosti – and here was merely the starter.

She absolutely loved it. "I like Greek food best," she said (blimey!), "and also Thai.

"Being pregnant, I most miss sushi.

"As soon as the baby is born, I am going to eat a huge amount of sushi". She never used to drink fizzy things, but her pregnancy has induced a craving for Coca-Cola, she told me, while gulping a Coca-Cola.

Now look: this isn't going to be an in-depth political interview,



■ Joseph Connolly meets Tulip... and discovers a link to Amsterdam

Picture: Polly Hancock

because I have neither the brains nor the inclination for that ... but there are certain factors that maybe ought to be addressed.

She had just travelled on the Tube from the House ("everyone thinks you have a car and a driver – it's just not like that") where she had put a question to the Prime Minister concerning Secretary of State Greg Clark overruling the thousands of local objections to the awful and criminal 24-storey tower block in Swiss Cottage, which now has the go-ahead.

"He waffled the answer; as usual".

Cameron's fans will call him confident, suave and statesmanlike, but Tulip can't get beyond 'smug'.

"The only good thing about him is his campaigning to remain in Europe, which I am very committed to". So she is true to Labour; obviously, but in a really rather admirable way: a leftie and a feminist who would never dream of ramming either down your throat.

She gets across her points with

conversational ease, charm and a quite delightful smile.

She happily admits to having proposed Jeremy Corbyn for the leadership without the least expectation of his winning it – she openly disagreed with Miliband's much derided 'mansion tax'. I asked her if Corbyn would be leading the party into the next General Election.

"He has a huge mandate," she said, "but ask me in two years."

Tulip is a local gal: grew up in Frogna Gardens, graduated from UCL and gained a Masters from King's.

She currently lives on Finchley Road near the JW3 Centre.

"The trouble is, it's just so noisy.

"I have double glazing and black-out curtains, but it's still difficult to sleep. Luckily I'm fine with five hours".

Ah, I say brightly – like Thatcher! No, she says quietly, not like Thatcher. I asked where she would ideally live, money no object?

"I think Keats Grove,

Downshire Hill, one of those".

Absolutely: can I come too? The next thing to attend to was a fillet of sea bass – God, she loved that as well: a joy to see her tucking in.

And, if anyone cares, I much enjoyed a chicken breast, superbly cooked. Does she cook, I wonder ...? "I find it very relaxing, if I have the time ... but I rarely do."

She and her husband Chris eat a lot of quiches, pasta and vegetables ... and then she likes to read. Poetry, mainly – and she is one of the very few people I know who not only got to the end of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, but actually enjoyed it: that's superhuman in itself.

Here's an in-depth question: has she always loved her singular forename? "I was teased at school, of course ... but I do love it now. It makes you stand out".

Indeed: were she a TV chef, she would be in no need of a surname.

Her mother called her Tulip because she happened to be in Amsterdam, so we can all be

grateful that at the time her mother wasn't standing knee-deep in Japanese Knotweed.

Personally, I like the name for its rarity: you're never going to run into a whole bunch of Tulips. Her 'surgeries' are regularly attended by sixty people, each one of whom she scrupulously talks to.

"The trouble is ... I am only an opposition back bencher; but people think you can solve all their problems. Even health problems.

"Marital problems ... it's amazing, what I'm asked."

She is tipped as 'one to watch' – a potential high-flyer ... so does she nurture vast ambitions?

"Do you mean do I want to lead the party?

"I can think of nothing worse, actually".

Well ... mebbe: but I think in a few years her answer might well be different.

Now here's a Paxman-like and incisive question: when her daughter is born (who, I conjecture, might easily be called Rose, Violet, Iris, Poppy, Lily, Primrose ... Venus Fly Trap, who's to say?) is everything going to be Barbie-pink?

"I loved Barbie when I was little. Pink, like everything else, should be a choice. But I've bought a yellow pram."

Red too obvious, maybe – blue too Tory ... so a nice, middle-of-the-road Lib-Dem pram. Now she's giving serious attention to a chocolate pot, and I'm deep into a crème brulee.

She is a serious and committed politician who is modest, genuine, light-hearted and immensely easy to talk to. On the walk back to the Village, I lost count of the number of smiling people who eagerly bounced up to her: she makes friends wherever she goes. "I love it," she said. And then this, which won my heart: "Hampstead is home".

So I think we are rather lucky to have this hard-working and unassuming young woman as our representative: maybe, who knows, she'll still be our MP when she's 80, before packing it all in and becoming King Lear. And now ... I shall take a brief rest in a darkened room: I think I might suddenly be overcome with just a touch of Tulip Fever.