

Voters balk when faced with making uninformed choices; Columnist.

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I WAS back visiting the North East with my family last week to attend a conference at my old department. And it was a chance sight of Fenwick's Christmas window that brought back all kinds of happy childhood memories for me.

Every year as a young boy, my Grandma would take me into town on our Christmas shopping day. As well as visiting Santa Claus in a local store, we would patiently wait our turn in line to see the festive display. Grandma was a real traditionalist and we could never visit the window with her before December. And because that visit marked the start of the fun of Christmas - parties, carol concerts and presents - I always tried to make sure I avoided Fenwick in the month before Advent started.

And although the advent candles have not yet been lit for 2012, there were already long queues at Fenwick's window when I walked past on Thursday evening.

The queue was a real cross-section of modern Newcastle, with people from all ages, all backgrounds and all walks of life.

Everyone stood patiently in line for their turn to walk past the window displays. People behaved well because they really wanted to be there and enjoy the window just as I had three decades ago.

Fenwick's window was so busy because it means so much to people. At a time when rampant commercialism is everywhere, the display harks back to an earlier and simpler age.

No doubt Fenwick managers are aware of its commercial value. But the whole scene adds to the Christmas atmosphere of Northumberland Street in an open and inclusive way. I had to contrast Fenwick's long queues with their almost complete absence at Thursday's local elections. These elections were for an entirely new set of positions - the Police and Crime Commissioners.

Less than one in six of us bothered to cast our vote, something which clearly casts doubt on the democratic legitimacy of the posts.

Opinions were divided as to why voters stayed at home in their masses. The British public is famously sceptical to any kind of constitutional innovation, even where they later warm to it.

Wales' Assembly Government is now so popular as to be able to press at Westminster for new tax raising powers. But let's not forget, the original referendum was only won by a hair's breadth majority.

In the North East, less than a decade ago, we rejected by four to one the idea of a new elected assembly that could be sheltering us now from the Coalition's policy foolishness.

But it's not just that PCCs are new - they are completely unknown. While rushing through the legislation, the Coalition seemingly panicked over public hostility to election costs.

They blocked anything that might have raised interest in the vote or candidates, whether broadcasts or mailings. And, faced with making an uninformed choice, five in six of us refused that unpalatable

option.

In a democracy, offering your voters meaningless choices is a sign of holding your voters in contempt. Perhaps the Coalition think their best chance of winning a majority next time lies in encouraging all their opponents' supporters to stay at home.

But the Coalition should take no comfort from this incidental apathy. Fenwick's window shows that we don't mind a queue when we care strongly about the issues at stake.

And as the omnishambles that is this coalition lurches from damaging policy to damaging U-turn, it is clear that the stakes at the next election could not be higher for us here in the North East.

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