

Democratically Yours



(successor to 'Sunnyside Up' - newsletter from Norman Cutting)

Personal views on the political happenings in Town, Borough and Westminster

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Issue

♣ Read this bit before throwing away ♣

Those of you who live between Hall Park and Kings Road, will be familiar with my old publication, 'Sunnyside Up' which, as an Independent Councillor between the years of 1995 and 1999, I produced to give you information on what goes on in *our* local government. You will remember it came out roughly three to four times a year (depending on how much time I had) and told you how it was, rather than how 'they' preferred you to think it was. If you were (are?) unfortunate and receiving my effort for the first time, then you are in a bit of a surprise.

(see web page:

<http://www.normcall.plus.com/norm/page3.htm>)

The face of politics in the town changed forever in May 1995 when the 'cosy' system was shaken up by a group of independent residents actually getting your attention. As expected, several fell by the wayside and by 1999, you all thought that although the idea was right, just did not want to return to the old way, hence the Liberal-Democrats possibly offered a better way. But now we know better, don't we?

The National situation

The current Labour government is doing its best not to increase income tax (as it promised), but like all good economists, have somehow managed to find even more creative ways to relieve us of our hard earned cash to pour into bottomless pits. We all know that public transport is a shambles, the National Health Service isn't and our police force spends so much time preparing the paperwork, that criminal have worked out that the chances of actually being apprehended are remote.

The Borough situation

In the interests of 'efficiency', the government decided that the 'Westminster model' of a small cabinet making most of the decisions coupled with those decisions being 'scrutinised' by another small group should be imposed on local authorities. Planning and licensing are not currently included in the new system, but changes are afoot. Once again, in the interests of efficiency, democracy draws the short straw and cannot be squared with the notion of devolving decision making to local areas. This move,

will soon to applied to building developments, by shifting decision making to the Eastern Development Agency based in Cambridge (or somewhere!). If you thought the existing system was weighted in favour of developers as it is an enabling process, believe me, you ain't seen nothing yet!

The Town situation

Out of 15 Councillors, 10 are Lib-dems and 5 are Conservative. The Lib-dems changed the system when they took over (again - in the interests of speeding up decision making), and introduced a system of 'working groups' which somehow do not have a program of meetings (so you can attend), and the agendas together with the minutes are only available if you ask. However, as you do not know when they meet, you do not know when to ask if minutes are available and only the recommendations are reported at the Standing Committee meetings.

Parking & Congestion

The 'consultation exercise' really was a bit of a fiasco.

Once again our beloved government issued an edict which meant that local councils had to go through the process of reducing car usage. Grants were made available to meet part of the costs (again - why fully fund something?) and the result was the wonderful compromise that usually come of these things.

Berkhamsted will have little meters along the High Street and you buy parking time in 12 minute dollops. I can only imagine that a time & motion man (remember those?) has been hard at work.

To ensure money raised goes to help the Borough in general, parking will be 'decriminalised' and coupled with the announcement that the Police will not provide traffic wardens after 2004, wardens will be paid by the council and money raised goes to the council.

Just remember, it is illegal to park on any part of the footpath. It is also illegal to block the free passage of vehicles along the highway; indeed, you do not actually have a right to park a vehicle on the highway.

You have been warned!!

Go on, what do you think of it so far?
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Money Matters

Around this time of the year, all the local Councils have their 'funding requests' centrally collected by the Borough Council. The largest sum is always the County Council requirement. They are responsible for education, highways, social services, law and order, amongst other things. The Borough Council share is much smaller, but as they are responsible for locally operated facilities such as leisure, planning and refuse collection. The Town Council also has a requirement which, although much smaller, ensures that money is actually raised to be spent on improving the life of residents. For example, the Town Council provides financial support to several Berkhamsted based organisations, part funding of improving British Waterways footpaths, ensuring customers going to Waitrose get a better view of the rear of the High Street shops and, of course, the best Christmas lighting display within the Borough (outside Hemel) by supporting the CVS who actually organise the popular 'switch on' evening.

The reason why your Council Tax has risen so much over the past few years is largely due to central government carrying out its' promise of devolving more power locally. On the other hand, funding has not followed this devolution and coupled with having to meet greatly increased re-cycling standards (without adequate funding, of course) means that local Tax goes up without local representation.

Privatisation or not

Under ideal conditions, we all would like public services to be provided by the public sector. However, in the real world either funding is provided out of local Taxes or we persuade an outside organisation to find a few bob to provide the service to the Councils and recipients satisfaction. In return, the outside organisation gets a contract to carry out a service for a fixed term and fixed price. The advantage to the taxpayer is that the capital costs are spread over a longer period and someone else carries out the day to day to day to day logistics. Advocates of the theory, put forward the argument that private management takes the risk, which ensures everything, is done in the most efficient manner. HmMMMM!

The system has both advantages and disadvantages, but providing the contract is correctly drawn up and supervision adequate, then the PPP, as it is known, benefits everyone.

Pounds, Shillings and Ounces

It now appears that Brussels could overturn any laws made by our national government. Earlier last year, it became apparent that although we are not full members of the Common Market, the affect is such that we are but a short step from being controlled by the un-elected 'commission' whether we want it or not. The Germans are making arrangements with the French to ensure that their own economy does not drag down the value of the Euro any more than necessary.

They already limit the rate of VAT that any British government can impose, our government is adhering to many directives, although being selectively ignored or interpreted by those across the water, frequently to our disadvantage. Even the refugee situation is selective. As you know, the Dublin agreement says refugees have to request asylum in the first country that they arrive in. I am still trying to work out why refugees fleeing in fear of their lives from France and Germany and having to come to the safe haven of Britain. These countries are the very ones that the pro-Europeans would have us join. I will leave you to provide the answers!

Youth facilities

Over the years, young people have got a raw deal from both the Town and Borough Councils, although strictly speaking, the responsibility is that of the County Council.

The Borough Council has allocated £30,000 for young persons facilities in the town however, while Tring get on with it, our Town Council is still messing about trying to organise a spot for a skate boarding area - meanwhile the kids already have found suitable spots including Manor Street, REX steps and the bund by the Hall Park Garage. I seem to recall in my youth that George Street had a very popular area as was the moor and Easts meadow

Young people are our future, and our town is woefully short of things for them to do. This situation has gone on for years and as we enter the 21st century, the Local Councils really must get their act together and bring the sort of activities our young deserve, to the town.

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