

# My Conservative Home article on Mayors and Councils

The local elections were ignored by a large majority of the electorate. Whilst polls usually show enthusiasm for more devolution and more local decision making, when people are offered a chance to vote for local representatives most choose not to.

The Police and Crime Commissioners have not taken off as an idea, with many people regarding it as an unnecessary layer of government. Few of them become well known names in their regions, and most avoid undue controversy. The public want an independent police force enforcing the law without party preferences coming into it. The Commissioner has to be careful not to intervene in operational matters or seek to politicise the look and thrust of daily policing. Setting a budget, an agenda and priorities are all good things to do, but they have rarely become matters of general debate. There is no formal opposition to the Police Commissioner to highlight issues, options and differences.

The idea of elected mayors is not universally popular and some areas have rejected the proposition. Some of them decide to use the mayoralty as a platform to grandstand on national issues. Labour mayors often seek to enter the national debate talking about things they have little or no power over, and may see the mayoral pulpit as a means of enhancing their position and career prospects within their own party. When it comes to things they do have power over they normally blame the government for anything that goes wrong whilst claiming credit for anything positive that happens whether they initiated it or whether it came from government. They often have difficult relations with the Councils they need to work with.

As a former County Councillor myself I want local government to work. A good Council can make a lot of difference for the better, making wise choices over local services and the local environment whilst providing good value for money. I find too many Councils lack good political leadership capable of using the considerable financial and other resources they command to serve their public well. The Lib Dems running Wokingham Borough waste huge sums on things we do not want, pursue vendettas against local drivers, hike the car parking charges and Council tax, plead poverty and blame the government for everything that goes wrong. They often ignore the views of the public whilst spending liberally on formal consultations. Many Labour and Liberal led Councils run down local government, belittle their budgets and powers and run campaigns against the government and local Conservative MPs. They see their job as advancing their party rather than looking after the needs and the money of the people they are meant to serve.

Many Councils have spent too much money buying up properties at high prices, claiming they would make money for taxpayers,. Some of them are teetering on the edge of bankruptcy as a result, now finding the interest they have to pay on the large borrowings they took out exceeds the rentals .They did not forecast the big changes to local property markets which have led to some empty shops, lower office rents and difficulty in keeping and recruiting tenants. The private sector saw them coming and offloaded shops and fringe properties to Councils. These same Councils apparently have

plenty of money to spend on consultants, on new schemes to wreck roads and impose more cameras, lights and controls, to increase their numbers of well paid officials and maintain large office estates.

Few Councils experiment with better ways of delivering social care. Not enough spend transport money on improving junctions to make them safer and easier to use, avoiding jams and delays. Most Councils think they can keep on adding extra homes without adding road capacity, and without facilitating more cables and pipes to increase utility supplies. They often even allow delays in putting in more surgeries and school places, then have to rush to catch up.

To succeed Councils need opposition groups that concentrate on expressing the needs and preferences of the public. They need to expose what is wrong with the way the ruling group is spending all the money available with a view to improving priorities and value for money. Those Councillors leading Councils need a good working relationship with officers, need to be well informed about what is going on and need to take complaints seriously. Local government controls much of social care, education, most roads, local transport services, leisure and amenities, and the maintenance of our important public spaces. They have wide ranging planning powers to decide on how much development and where it should go.

We need a better and more honest account of how much money they spend and how much power they have. We need more focus on their options and their responsibilities. With that more people would see a good reason to go and vote. Democracy needs the voters to engage as well as the politicians. Too many are put off by parties wrongly claiming everything comes from central government.

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## [Illegal Migration Act: Northern Ireland](#)

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con):

We voted in a referendum to end the rule of EU law throughout the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland. Given the muddle that the courts are creating, is not the only way out of this an urgent, short piece of legislation that asserts beyond doubt that we control our own borders?

Tom Pursglove (Minister for Immigration):

The Government believe that we have a legal basis for this. I recognise my right hon. Friend's determination for us to get on and deliver on the Rwanda policy. That is precisely what we are doing, on the basis of the Nationality and Borders Act at this stage, but when it comes to the IMA, we believe that we have a strong legal basis, and that is why we are appealing the judgment.

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# Keeping our right to self government

The Opposition parties in Parliament would still like to surrender more powers of self government to the EU. Meanwhile there are three issues currently before Ministers which pose the same question, should we govern ourselves? Labour and Lib Dem MPs take no interest, or would like to see us give more power away in each case. I was able to highlight the view that the UK should be self governing on two of these issues on Tuesday when colleagues secured Urgent Questions to remind Ministers to avoid any ceding of power.

The first is the World Health Organisation draft Treaty. Ministers assured us they will not sacrifice our sovereignty, our power to respond to a health crisis and to run our own NHS. I urged them to publish the amendments they are seeking, because they rightly said the current Treaty takes power away from member states.

The second is the continuing influence of the courts over the government's wish to control UK borders. I and others pressed the government to put through urgent clarifying legislation given the decision of the Northern Ireland Court.

The third is Gibraltar. I have put to the Foreign and Defence Secretaries the need not to cede any power over the Gibraltar border or the RAF and naval bases. These sovereign bases are an important part of Gibraltar and of NATO defences. Foreign and Defence policy are not devolved to the Gibraltar government. I think it would be a good idea for Gibraltar to be represented by an MP in the UK Parliament to confirm the democratic structure.

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## My question on the WHO Pandemic Treaty negotiations

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con):

Will the Minister then publish the amendments that the Government are seeking? He says, rightly, that he needs a very different treaty from the one that we see on offer. He needs to persuade other nations, so he should be making a public case; we would then not be so suspicious. There must be no new legal requirement imposed on the United Kingdom.

Andrew Stephenson (Minister for Health and Secondary Care):

We do not envisage any new legal requirements being imposed on the United Kingdom, and any changes to our domestic ability to react to any future pandemic would be unacceptable and cross one of our red lines. In this urgent question and in the Westminster Hall debate, which I know my right hon.

Friend also participated in, I was as clear as I could be on the UK's red lines in these negotiations. We have been up front with both Parliament and our international partners in saying that the current text is not agreeable to us, and we are seeking significant changes if we are to reach an accord that will be signed by the United Kingdom.

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## **Will Wokingham Borough take some pride in our neighbourhood?**

When I was out about last week end doing one of my usual visits around the constituency I was saddened to see the neglect and damage being done to our environment by the Council.

I started at Shute End. There were cobwebs over the main entrance to the Borough offices. On the lefthand side glass there were two side remnants of some red poster sticking to the window where most of the poster had been ripped off. The garden borders were overgrown with weeds in front of the buildings.

As I made my way there were countless yellow diversion signs on roads. Some were badly positioned. None told you where they were diverting you from or to. The one by the Woosehill roundabout was partly missing and hanging off a rusty metal frame at a lopsided angle.

I visited California Crossroads over my boundary. The contractors are installing expensive yellow bricks, which will doubtless shift position and discolour badly where cars are driven over them. Clearly the Lib Dems are out to paint the Borough yellow in as many ways as possible.

I found several pavements where the hedgerows overhang and had not been clipped back. Road drains are often blocked causing excessive water across roads when it rains. Grass goes unmowed. The potholes grow and grow.

Why will the Council not take a pride in our place? Why will they not carry out proper maintenance?