

# The reluctant politician

A year ago, our writer stood for local election – and won by a landslide. But there was a catch: now he had to be a councillor.

By **Matthew Engel**

On the Monday after my by-election win, I presented myself at Plough Lane, the headquarters of Herefordshire Council. I was greeted by John Coleman from Democratic Services, who was to supervise my entry into this new world. He had the air of a top-class butler. He addressed me as Councillor Engel; I was to call him John.

John and his team sat me down, put me at ease and, Councillor Engel-ing me the while, gave me glimpses of my immediate future. Having turned up in midterm, I was a novelty. The Conservative cabinet members, whose candidate I had seen off handsomely, all shook my hand; I had private audiences with the leader and chief executive; at my first full council meeting I was given a non-partisan welcoming round of applause. With one trivial exception, everyone was charming.

I had never remotely thought about joining the council, but, as I wrote in these pages last Christmas, I was drafted in to stand for election after two untimely deaths, the sitting councillor and his designated successor. Now, here I was, the newly elected Independent member for the 16 parishes of Golden Valley South, a lightly populated, stunningly beautiful chunk of mountain and meadows twice the size of Leeds.

There is no job description for an elected politician, which I seem to have become. You can be bone idle or hyperactive; spend hours sitting on obscure committees or spurn them. There is a code of conduct for councillors but no provision in there for expulsion. All you have to do is turn up for one official meeting every six months – you don't even have to stay long – and avoid being banned from public office by law. As readers of "Rotten Boroughs" in *Private Eye* will know, that is a high bar. Otherwise, only death or the voters (come 2027) can boot me out.

However, they have ways of making you conform, certainly at first. My first job was induction, a box-ticking exercise in which different council officers talk

through their specialist subjects. Until that was completed, some of my salary – officially the “allowance” – was docked. And they don’t allow much.

The phony deference from the unelected to the elected, a convention in local government (which can lapse between consenting adults in private), has greater irony than in, say, Whitehall because the pay scales are so skewed. Never mind that Sue Gray briefly earned more than the Prime Minister. Herefordshire’s chief executive, Paul Walker, earned £164,000 in 2023-24, which is by no means out of line nationally. The council leader, his boss, was on just under £33,000 for a full-time double-plus job – low but not abnormal.

Anyway, I got through the induction and was given my full allowance, a bit more than the state pension. And one year on, when the next by-election became necessary, I was asked if I had any suggestions for improving the induction process. I avoided saying I could remember almost nothing about it. I did say I thought new councillors should be given a glossary of obscure council terms. And, boy, is that needed.

Anyone who has followed British politics assiduously could turn up in Westminster and understand almost everything that is going on in the Commons chamber. I served time on the parish council, where all but the clerk is amateur, and plain English is obligatory. But at this level they speak a variant of English: a word-soup of abbreviations and acronyms – the S151 officer, an S106 agreement, the MO or an LSP, the LADO, the DWP system, CHYM, an NDP, DPD, or LD1. Since there is no one to interpret this to the public except the local democracy reporter, not long out of university and underpaid even by local newspaper standards, councillors and officers in practice talk among themselves.

I was at sea – not helped by being forced to use a clunky council computer requiring a log-in with 34 keystrokes, designed to ensure that the Kremlin never finds out how many potholes there are in my parishes. Then it harrumphs for a while before reluctantly granting me admission. When I called a grumpy office techie to ask for help for the third day running, I said hopefully: “I can’t be the worst, can I?” “Can I be frank? You are,” he snarled. (He was the exception.) Used to the simplicity of firing off letters on Gmail rather than Outlook, I still take three times as long to navigate the bloody thing’s complexity.

Slowly, though, I adapted to my new life. I shaved before going out to the village shops and made sure I said good morning to everyone. I had my first successes: a

resident asked me for a replacement grit box and it was duly delivered. Welsh Water imposed a three-day closure on a much-used road with elaborate detours, when the work actually needed three hours. I believe my complaint saw them fined £80; the boardroom must have shuddered. By thunder, what power a councillor wields. But the local rule of thumb for motorists round here now is: "If it says 'road closed', it isn't. If it doesn't say that, it might be."

The decline of local government can be dated back almost entirely to the Attlee government, when Herbert Morrison lost the argument in the cabinet with Aneurin Bevan about whether the new health service would be national or local. The same fate awaited the utilities. State education was controlled entirely by councils until the 1960s, when Tony Crosland banished the grammar schools. Herefordshire still handles the funds for education but has almost no control over educating the pupils – though it is allowed to coordinate such details as admissions, holiday dates and school buses. "It's the reverse of the prerogative of the harlot," sighed one colleague. "Responsibility without power."

In the 1970s the old, largely self-governing county boroughs were abolished and the counties were reconfigured from historic entities, some dating back more than a millennium, to meaningless Whitehall creations. Herefordshire became an adjunct of much larger Worcestershire.

In the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher abolished councils that tried to thwart her, most famously Ken Livingstone's GLC in London. She also introduced rate-capping before her fatal dalliance with the poll tax. When Labour returned to power in 1997, Tony Blair was committed to devolution of power for Scotland, Wales and London, but tried (and failed) to have the last two led by his favourites.

And then came the Tories again, who embarked on a 14-year torture campaign, which in Herefordshire meant roughly halving the staff headcount. From Downing Street, whomever is resident there, this is wholly logical. British voters habitually use council elections to punish the sitting government, so that soon after each general election local authorities quickly become hotbeds of opposition. Therefore they must be emasculated. The last government took that to extremes. It got to the point where Herefordshire did not have enough staff to monitor what its own contractors were doing. The trend now is to bring more powers back in-house.

Herefordshire, a unitary authority, is now obliged to spend around 70 per cent of its income on two items, both of which are of interest to only a small minority at any given time: adult care and children's care. It suits successive governments to have these funded locally rather than nationally, so it can shift the blame. "It costs £2,000 a week to keep people in nursing homes," said a former cabinet member. "We'd be better off sending them all off on a round-the-world cruise."

Before I agreed to stand, I knew very well that local government in England had the least autonomy of any mature democracy. But I didn't know the extent to which the whole system of local government is used as Westminster's skivvy.

Herefordshire Council's HQ is a repurposed modern office block. It is a pleasant building, adorned with murals of Herefordshire scenes. Private meeting spaces are known by local place names (though it was perhaps a mistake to christen the cabinet room "Madley"). There is a decent canteen in the atrium, which lends itself to non-partisan chats. But the open-plan offices upstairs are never full and the room used for council meetings is long, thin and totally unsuitable for a debating chamber. Though in my first year we have not had a genuine debate. Elsewhere, politics has been in turmoil. Here, I arrived in time for the calm before... I dunno, maybe complete stasis.

There is now a progressive majority even in this backwater. But it is only theoretical. The total of 28 Liberal Democrats, Greens and Independents for Herefordshire (my lot, who have a working relationship and electoral pact with the Greens), plus a solitary Labour man, clearly outnumber the 21 Tories. There are also three other Independents.

But the Lib Dems have propped up a Conservative cabinet from the outside: a) because they have similar pro-car positions on the still non-existent Hereford bypass; and b) because, well, the Judean People's Front cannot possibly work with the People's Front of Judea. The Lib Dems sit at the furthest end of the room from the Greenies and our Indies, as if to avoid fisticuffs. But the general tone of discussion is polite, more Lords than Commons.

It helps that the Tory leader, Jonathan Lester, is an emollient man; he is also skilled enough to swerve difficult questions. There are other talents in the room. Ellie Chowns, the former Green leader on the council, was deservedly upped to the Commons by North Herefordshire in July, but some of those left behind could also hold their own in parliament.

The rest of us trundle anonymously. Did a councillor ever feature as the hero on stage, screen or TV? The only fictional councillor I can recall came from the pen of Peter Simple, the much-missed *Telegraph* columnist, who invented Alderman Jabez Foodbotham, “the 25-stone, iron-watch-chained, crag-visaged, grim-booted Lord Mayor of Bradford and perpetual chairman of the Bradford City Tramways and Fine Arts Committee”. He was later rendered obsolete by the emergence of the real-life lookalike Bradford councillor Eric Pickles.

In late-Victorian times, local government was at the forefront of modernising Britain and civic pride reached its pinnacle. Its reputation has been fading ever since.

Planning committees became a byword for corruption. But my observation of the current planning committee suggests a genuine attempt to make the right decision, despite sometimes being subtly pressurised to make the wrong one by the fear of a poor little council being taken to an expensive inquiry by a mighty corporation.

But moral hazard can still easily rear its head. “If a middle-ranked official is dealing with a big company, it’s very easy to be flattered and told that you’re just the sort of bright person we want in our thriving business,” said one ex-councillor.

Herefordshire, with a very fragile council tax base derived from statistics 34 years out of date, prides itself in not being subject to another bit of jargon: S114 – bankruptcy. Last December I got my first insight into why: I was invited to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the return of Herefordshire Council after its short-lived annexation by Worcestershire. The Foodbotham in me looked forward to a slap-up meal. The menu comprised tea, coffee and shop-bought mince pies. Through gritted teeth, I applauded the frugality.

But loss of councillors’ perks is the least of my problems. It’s the sheer grinding frustration about not being able to get things done. Queries, from the public, parishes, ward members like me and sometimes cabinet members, often go unacknowledged, never mind answered. I don’t blame the officers. The blame lies in London.

I did manage to get someone from Highways to come out to my ward, where new estates had replaced the fields, increasing the commuter traffic on a road that simultaneously narrowed, climbed a hill and did an S-bend. He agreed with me

that “slow” signs on the verge and on the surface would improve things. There was only one snag, he said. “No money.” Officers can act in an emergency – they have just promised me a new footbridge after its Attlee-era predecessor was wrecked by Storm Bert. But you almost hear their minds whirring about what project would get lost instead.

Herefordshire’s frugality wins it high marks in Whitehall. But the empty desks in the building tell a tale. Recruitment is difficult in a rural county and several senior officers are “interims”, sometimes working from distant homes on a consultancy basis, and travelling to Hereford only when essential. It wouldn’t surprise me much to have a Teams meeting with someone WFH – working from Hawaii. (Well, some of those tropical backdrops on the screen might be real.) Even the chief executive commutes from Lancashire. The local government careers ladder is more of a winding trail these days. The ambitious seek more fertile pastures and you can argue the benefits either way. Does clinical detachment when running a county beat knowing the patient’s medical history?

As a councillor, I knew I could never match the wisdom and know-how of Peter Jinman, my late predecessor as the ward member, nor the organisational skills and zest of my friend Toby Murcott, who died mid-campaign – the event that brought me out of hiding.

But with much help from outraged neighbours and country-lovers, I summoned enough eloquence to persuade the planning committee to reject a scheme for a grossly inappropriate new home up the mountainside that divides the little-known and stunning Olchon Valley from the Welsh border. This project received stubborn support from the paid planners, but their view did not prevail.

There are things I still want to do. I would love to get the Olchon Valley and other places in my beautiful ward the statutory protection they deserve. “Forget it,” said a wise colleague. “It’s like pushing a pea uphill.” I am trying to fulfil Jinman’s dream of getting our railway station back after 76 years’ absence. The trains still hurtle by; other countries could get some to stop in a matter of weeks, especially because it is opposite a sawmill that could erect a couple of platforms in no time. In England, the pea analogy applies. I also want to stop Google giving country lanes new names of its own devising and dumping them on the baffled populace. I want us to have the homes we need, not second homes in treasured wilderness, but affordable homes for the young and, indeed, old. And I would like the Labour

Party to provide a proper solution to the local government crisis. But from where I sit it looks like it's getting worse.

In October my group leader threw me a bone and sent me as the Herefordshire Independents' representative at the Local Government Association conference in Harrogate. Not quite as wild as the party conferences I attended in the rare old times, but interesting enough in a nerdy kind of way. In one discussion on housing, a very junior new minister, the peer Sharon Taylor, ex-leader of Stevenage Council, announced without explanation: "We will reform planning committees." Hardly anyone else noticed.

After being ignored during questions, I barged through the throng to ask her what that meant. "Oh, planning officers will do more," she said grandly before she moved on. I never got to ask what the hell the innermost workings of local councils had to do with central government, or why elected councillors should be bounced out in favour of their unelected officials. In practice, only a tiny percentage of cases ever reach committee, the most significant and/or controversial. And it is one of the very few ways in which local democracy can actually make a difference.

The keynote speaker was Angela Rayner, who told everyone how much she loved local government and that the English Devolution Bill would prove that. She has already decreed that councillors must be allowed to vote by proxy. Why? The Commons doesn't. What's it to do with her? Can't councils even decide how to run their meetings?

Seen from here, Labour's devolution seems like the very opposite. The most likely outcome seems to be to have something like "a mayor of the Marches" for Herefordshire and Shropshire. This character will be empowered to negotiate with the government for funds. It is almost 90 miles from my ward to the north of Shropshire (which really is near bankrupt), which will have nearly 70 per cent of the voters, and Herefordshire will be back to subservience, as it was when eaten by Worcestershire.

All politics is local, said the sagacious US congressman Tip O'Neill. Not in this benighted country. Labour is still fiddling around with boundaries, ignoring the retrogressive anomalies of council tax and doing damn-all to rectify the 14 disgraceful years.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I've just got to nip off to a meeting at the other end of twice-the-size-of-Leeds.

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