

Stranger than fiction

He's an author and an award-winning screenwriter, so what's he doing taking flak in south London? Jonathan Myerson on why he decided to become a Lambeth councillor

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The man is screaming at me, vitriolically, determinedly. "You fucking nonce, that's what you are," he shouts. "You're a batty nonce. I know your type, nonce, nonce, fucking nonce." His finger jabs at me, his lip curls.

I don't need this, I think. I really don't need this. I don't have to be here. I could be at the British Library, skimming through 18th-century pamphlets, researching my latest novel. I could be in a cafe chatting to other writers. I could even be in Los Angeles, soaking up the atmosphere, being chauffeured between studios.

Instead, I'm standing in a council block on Larkhall Rise, fronting down a mentally unwell tenant who has been making life a misery for his neighbours for the past two months. And the man certainly isn't asking for my help. So how on earth did I - novelist, screenwriter and father of three, with a life that was comfortably busy enough - end up last year as councillor for Clapham Town ward in Lambeth, south London?

Of course, no one in their right mind would ever seek to be an elected councillor in order to gain power, prestige or even a restful life. Occasionally, I get emails or phone calls telling me I'm one of those "typical power-obsessed politicians", telling me "all you local politicians are just interested in yourself", and usually ending "that's why I never vote any more".

Well, Mr No Vote, if I was genuinely power hungry, I could get the buzz so much more easily. Serving as a local councillor is a long route to minor satisfaction. And power, as a local councillor? Get real.

Of course, it would be deeply disingenuous to suggest I do not get some sort of kick out of it. I suppose I do like the sound of my own voice. But I also passionately believe that clear speaking is something that is in short supply and, right or wrong, something that I feel I can offer. And, yes, I do like being the one in charge of meetings, helping people reach a consensus, creating progress.

Writers are supposed to be solipsistic creatures, engaged only on a single-minded campaign to serve their own creative egos. And, all right, I relish the idea of being (I presume) the only Bafta-winning, Oscar-nominated councillor in the country (Glenda Jackson MP never did local, did she?). But none of that gets you out of bed on a wet and windy Sunday morning to shove leaflets through grimy letterboxes or shake hands door-to-door.

You can't do this if you aren't interested in helping people, in making change for the better. When a street gets renamed and cleared of rubbish - allowing a constituent who uses a wheelchair to get home without pain and hassle - then you do feel it's been somehow worth it.

For me, it began about 10 years ago, when I put myself forward to become a JP. I realised then that if I didn't volunteer, I couldn't complain about the calibre of people who did. Then I became a governor of my local primary school. Same principle.

Somehow, councillor seemed like the logical next step. It meant I had to surrender one of my favourite political dreams: in my ideal world, I would sever the link between the national political parties and local politics. I would love to be able to vote for the Lambeth Higher Tax

For Schools party or the More Green Spaces For Lambeth party. But it's never going to happen, so, at Christmas 2001, I took the plunge.

Five months later, I was on my way to the town hall for the count. My friend and political adviser (and now constituent), the writer John O'Farrell, came with me. I remember asking him: "How could you stand in Wandsworth, where there was no chance of Labour ever gaining power?" For me, the attraction was largely the certainty that this was a Labour stronghold, that I would be joining the administration. I don't remember John's answer, but eight hours later Labour lost Lambeth after (give or take the odd hung council) 31 years. Had my arrival somehow precipitated this?

At first, I was horrified. My re-elected colleagues were shellshocked. But I very quickly became more sanguine: I came to realise that most of a councillor's work is utterly non-partisan anyway. My ward returned two Labour councillors and a Conservative. I despise him (it's personal and it's mutual), but I work with him. There's no choice: Lambeth is a struggling borough, carrying a debt of almost £1bn.

Against this onslaught of financial neediness, there is no room for grand designs, no hope for big vision politics. It's about repairing the leaky boat with anything that comes to hand. If an estate needs a tenants' association, we build one together; if traffic calming is required, no one makes a political issue of it. Councillors of all parties know that unless we all pull together, we all sink.

Sure, the political side of me would like to see (Britain's only) Tory-Liberal Democrat alliance flounder in a bankruptcy crisis. But the local community leader in me would hate to see the human cost of such a crisis. No one would gain in the end - not even the next Labour administration.

Not that all my constituents would notice such a catastrophe. I must serve one of the strangest wards in the country. Clapham Town features street after street of £1m houses and £500,000 flats, yet 60% of my constituents live in social housing. My surgeries are a weird mix of genuinely needy people seeking help for various crises, and far-from-needy people seeking relief from a parking ticket for a car that cost more than most of my constituents' annual wage. I hope I treat them all equally. I'm sure I do. It's just that seeking to restore someone's benefits or housing or schooling always seems that little bit more interesting.

After serving in our "shadow cabinet" for the first year, I had to give it up, had to acknowledge that meetings three or four nights a week were too much. I remember a retiring councillor saying that she didn't think you could have a job, a partner and kids and also serve on the executive. I now know what she meant. Very few councillors in Lambeth have children. In fact, if I look round the council chamber, very few are my age (43): most are either coming up to 30 or over 50. Only five of my 29 fellow Labour councillors have school-age children.

Of course, there's one quick solution: pay us. If councillors were paid a decent wage (instead of the miserly £8,500 we are allowed) then we could begin to organise our lives, meet all these competing demands. I also passionately believe I could do it so much better if I didn't have to squeeze it all so tightly around job and family. I hate it that I sometimes lose track of issues and casework, or can't carry things through as vigorously as I would want. If, say, I could devote just three days a week to council work, I know I could vastly improve council performance. Well, I can dream, can't I?

So now, settled into the task after 18 months, I find I derive my most genuine satisfaction from the chance to act as advocate for people who have neither the words nor the chutzpah to fight the system themselves. And why shouldn't it be me who helps them? I was lucky enough to be conveyor-belted through private school and Oxford and I've come out with the articulacy and self-confidence to handle negotiation, and, yes, I think it's my job to give some of this back.

I have never forgotten the sneering Socialist Worker party candidate campaigning alongside me on Clapham High Street, jeering at me because I knew nothing of what it's like to live in a council block. She was right, I don't - well, not first hand - but it's precisely because I don't live in a council block that I feel I have a duty to be out there fighting for those who do and who need my support.

Epilogue: Months later, after phone calls, emails, letters, doctors and police visits, the problem of the mentally ill tenant remained as bad as ever. I had achieved nothing. Then he acquired a dog, and there's been no trouble since.

Jonathan Myerson, novelist and screenwriter, has written radio and stage plays, and for television. His animated film of The Canterbury Tales was nominated for an Oscar and won a Bafta and four Emmy awards.