

BREAD AND BUTTER VOTE



HERE is a man I know who used to drive me barmy. He was in the habit of calling round at about 11.30 at night, to give me an update on the street lighting which was defective, and on pavements which were in a dangerous state of disrepair. I was, at the time, his local councilor and (unfortunately) lived opposite his local pub.

Despite all my best endeavors, I could never persuade him to call in with his list of complaints on the way to the pub, rather than from it, after closing time. Often I was dog tired, having only just got back from meetings with tenants or community groups in the area. Frequently our exchanges were somewhat brusque.

At one point I told him bluntly that I was not going to start sorting his complaints out at that hour of the night. I was his councillor, not his butler. And I was going to bed!

"Listen mate," he replied, "just remember this. I voted for you in the election. I've a right to have my problems treated seriously." It was the timing of this claim not the principle behind it that we disagreed on. But ever since, I've had a grudging admiration of his attitude towards democracy and accountability.

It wasn't a question of whether he had voted for me or not. What mattered was that he had voted. He had exercised his civic responsibilities and (as the successful candidate in the process) he expected me to fulfill mine.

BUT what about the other side of the coin? Who votes in an election is a matter of open, public record. The records say nothing of 'how' you voted, just whether you took part. Such information can be invaluable because it is often the case that those who set out to give you the hardest time for doing (or not doing) something as their councillor or MP then turn out not to have voted in the first place. It allows me to ask questions about whether democracy is simply a form of piggy-back, or whether there are responsibilities as well as rights which fall upon us all.

Today is my last day as a local councillor. Tomorrow you will have a new county council with a new mandate for the four years ahead. Perhaps I can be allowed a few dispassionate observations about what it all means.

Local government is the backbone of political democracy in Britain. We weaken it at our peril. Already it is stretched to the limit by Government restrictions and extra duties. Worse than that, it is frequently derided and undermined by central Government.

We love to breath fire about 'council junkets', 'inefficiency' and 'waste', but ignore the fact that we treat our local councilors poorly. I have met few councilors who haven't lost out financially, in job prospects and in family pressures from taking their council work seriously. Love them or hate them, the best councilors do a job for society that is miserably undervalued.

They also deliver services; bread and butter activities which really do affect our everyday lives. Getting a home help, or meals on wheels, matters. So too, does having a library, a youth club, police on the beat, a decent fire service, a nursery, training schemes that go somewhere, a grant to go to college, pavements without pot holes.

Council policies get scrutinised by the Press, challenged in the council chamber and chased up by the public wherever councilors show themselves. Long may this be so.

TONY BENN is fond of telling people of his five questions for democracy. "When you meet someone in authority," he says, "ask them this: 'What authority do you have? Where did you get it from? What do you do with it? In whose interests does this work?' And finally. 'How do we get rid of you?'"

This last question is the most important of all. It is the difference between patronage and democracy. It is the toehold we have on influencing change rather than passively accepting it.

Today is a "how do we get rid of you?" day. It is a day when you can enthusiastically vote for or against different political parties; when the man who used to pester me in the dead of night can vote for another candidate whose life he can plague.

The only requirement is that you get there and cast your vote before closing time. Not a lot to ask, but an awful lot to lose.

So go on. Pop out for a quick one while you can. It is a right still denied to more than half the planet. And they're open until 9pm. "Last orders (for democracy), please!"