

# The OCTOBER MEETING

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THE FIRST MEETING OF THE AUTUMN took place on 19th October at St. Mary's Parish Centre. There were two speakers, Lesley Cumberland and Terry Sutton. Derek Leach has written a report of the first part of the evening and Terry Sutton has provided us with a summary of his talk. Our new Chairwoman, Jeremy Cope, in the chair for the first time since taking office, was delighted to welcome both speakers and, later, to thank them for their contributions. In the interval there were refreshments and a raffle.

## THE NEXT LOCAL GOVERNMENT SHAKE UP *A talk by Lesley Cumberland*

REPORTED BY DEREK LEACH

Our speaker was Lesley Gordon better known to Dorsetians as Lesley Cumberland who gave 32 years service to the Town and District before retiring 15 months ago. Lesley was Deputy Town Clerk when as part of the 1974 reorganisation she was appointed Director of Law and Administration (and later Property) of Dover District Council.

She told how, as a newly arrived solicitor for the Town Council, she had forgotten to go to her first committee meeting but had turned up for the second and was congratulated but was asked to take her coat off next time!

Her initial reaction to Jack's invitation to speak on this subject was how boring it would be for the audience and this had set her thinking about why local government had this boring image. She remembered a Daily Telegraph article entitled "Local government used to be important". In the 1970's and 80's this newspaper had been the scourge of local government and on one occasion had asked why rate demands had gone up 25% in 3 years. A Town Clerk had responded by asking why the price of the Telegraph had gone up 25% over the same period!

Why is local government boring? Until the 70's central government matched income from the rates and local councils largely had control over their finances. Now government dictates what can be spent (with local councils limited to deciding how to live within a fixed budget).

Secondly, unlike central government, local

government is not a single entity. Not only are there 3 tiers of local government - County, District and Town or Parish - but there is a diversity of provision which the public finds very confusing. As a mother of teenage children Lesley wanted local services that educated her children (County Council was the provider), streets that were safe (County Council), sensitive town planning and development (District Council), decent town roads (District Council acting as agent for County Council) and for her elderly relative adequate hospital services (not local government at all but Health Authorities or Trusts). Lesley confessed that even she had had to ask sometimes who was responsible for what.

Thirdly, party politics matter at national level but at local level there were not many party issues - just issues - although that did not stop the politicians adopting a party line on them!

Finally, there was the lack of media coverage. The national press carries lots of information and comment about national government but there is very little in the local press about local government. Both the press and the public find it boring. This manifests itself at the ballot box where a poll of only 40 to 50% is achieved for local elections compared with 60 to 70% in Scandinavia. This could be a sign of electorate contentment but was more likely to be a reflection of indifference and irrelevance for many. The present

6 government is taking it as one of the signs that the democratic process is failing locally and hence the need for change.

Lesley thought it strange that a single MP representing 60,000 people is responsible through Parliament for taking thousands of pounds from each of these people in tax; on the other hand 6 or 7 County Councillors covering the same 60,000 people in the Dover District are responsible through KCC for taking only hundreds of pounds from each household; whilst 56 District Councillors between them are responsible for taking a mere 160 pounds (in Council Tax) from the same 60,000 people. Apparently nobody bothers County Councillors but District Councillors who spend far less of our money are contacted much more by the public. Lesley's conclusion was that we were too democratised at local level with too many councillors.

Whilst she accepted that some people had to take decisions on behalf of the community she felt - from personal experience - that the present committee system - with up to 18 councillors per committee - was a misuse of resources. Councillors spend hours sitting through committee meetings waiting for the one item that interests them. Some rarely speak during their four year spells and are little more than voting fodder. It may well be time to move on from amateurs, no matter how enthusiastic. In her view councillors had three tasks:

- to set the policy of the Council;
- to act as watchdogs to ensure services were provided at the right price; and
- to act as a link between the Council and the voters.

If these were done well then there was no need for councillors to be involved in other matters.

A series of consultation papers had been issued by the government and the Dover Society had submitted its views. Now a White Paper has been issued. Amongst other things it proposes directly elected mayors with a cabinet selected from councillors or alternatively a cabinet of councillors with a leader elected by the cabinet. Another possibility is the mayor installing his own

chief executive (who could easily disappear when the mayor changed) Whilst councillors would still be elected for 4 years, half would retire every 2 years which would have the potential for a mayor to have a hostile council similar to the US President with a hostile Senate. A radical proposal is that local consultation would be mandatory - not just with local organisations like the Dover Society, but directly with the electorate.

Lesley then gave her own controversial radical vision of a possible way forward drawing upon her long experience. She would do away with both County and District Councils. In their place there would be a number of regional governments; one for the South East of England - and local councils covering a much bigger area; one for East Kent based upon Canterbury. Town and Parish Councils would be retained.

As an example of how this would affect the present Dover District Council Lesley's East Kent Council would have only about 15 councillors representing the present Dover District instead of the current 56 District councillors. They would need to be more professional, better trained and paid for their efforts. Some would be executive councillors (the thinkers and planners) with the remainder backbenchers acting as watchdogs. All of them would be available to the electors who wished to pursue queries and complaints. With so few covering a large area consultation would be essential although it is a thorny problem to decide how to consult effectively with the electorate.

Any local government officers or councillors, dismayed at this prospect, need not worry since the next Boundary Commission will not be due for another ten years or so!

There were questions from the floor, from Jack Woolford, Terry Sutton, Harry Dyer and Lillian Kay. In proposing the vote of thanks, John Gerrard said that he could identify with some of the sentiments expressed about the present system and the need for a smaller, more effective group of local decision makers and that he had been fascinated by Lesley's different view forward, which had been far from boring.