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13th February 2013

## DORCHESTER: ‘We are just voting fodder!’

Mayor condemns ‘cabinet system’ at district level

by Philip Evans

DORCHESTER mayor **Andy Canning** has condemned decision making process at district council level, referring to all non-cabinet members as “voting fodder” who have no influence at all.

Councillor Canning, a Liberal Democrat councillor representing Dorchester on West Dorset District Council, made his comments at a Lib Dem democracy meeting at Lyme Regis on Saturday.

Councillor Canning, who also sits on Dorchester Town Council, outlined how the district council was run by seven members of the Conservative controlled authority, led by council leader Robert Gould, and how many decisions went through on a show of hands with little or no discussion.

He explained that the cabinet system was adopted after legislation brought in by the former Labour Government so that there would be more transparency and accountability at a local level.

But he went on to explain that this process had in effect “killed local democracy” with opposition members not being able to deal effectively with constituents’ complaints.

Councillor Canning said this system surprised and angered West Dorset residents who attended council meetings to listen to controversial issues when important decisions were made without any debate.

He also maintained that the system caused “a surprising amount of antagonism” among members.

Councillor Canning said: “There is a surprising degree of animosity among members.

“The political landscape in West Dorset is quite antagonistic and there have been some fairly big battles in recent times.

“There is an all-party executive of seven, a group of people who make the decisions but do not bow to pressure and that’s what government wants.

“Often this proves to be the death of democracy as it’s impossible for the public to have any influence over what decisions are taken.

“If they (the cabinet) make the right decisions, no problem. But if they make decisions which are not popular, there is no method of challenging these decisions.

“The only method of doing so is to replace them at the next election.

“So many people do not vote on what’s going on locally, they vote on the basis of the national view at Westminster.

“As opposition councillors we have nothing to do apart from oppose things.

“It seems that members of the majority party who are not on the executive do not have any influence either.

“It’s quite spooky when all hands go up but they haven’t said anything. We are just voting fodder with no influence on decisions.”

Councillor Canning was one of a number of speakers lined up by the Lyme Regis and Marshwood Liberal Democrats with a brief to talk on the work of the district council.

He also spoke about the council’s financial situation, referring to West Dorset being one of the richest local authorities in the country with £54 million in the bank.

### Sharing staff costs with Weymouth

He said the district had been able to maintain frontline services despite a cut in government funding because of savings achieved by sharing staff costs with Weymouth and Portland Borough Council which amounted to £1.5 million.

Councillor Canning also expressed concern about the number of new houses, an increase of 20 per cent, being earmarked for West Dorset, saying: “Lyme is not getting many but quite a few others are getting considerable developments and causing great anxiety.”

He was concerned that there was a “presumption in favour of development” which he thought was “strange in a rural area” and expressed fears that new developments were being “steamrollered through with no concern for the environment”.

Further comment on the cabinet system came this weekend from another Dorchester councillor, the independent Alistair Chisholm, speaking at the protest rally into council and NHS cuts when he criticised WDDC for spending almost £10 million on new offices rather than affordable housing and protecting services.

Councillor Chisholm said: "It (the new offices) stands here today as testimony to the dangers inherent in the cabinet system of governance - a one-party, one view system currently practised by both the district and county councils, a system that by its very nature stifles debate and discussion and undermined the very foundation of democracy.

"Until we introduce, or re-introduce a system which allows for free expression of different views and encourages open debate on those different views, local decision making will be the poorer as will the communities that the council claims to serve."

Other speakers at the Lyme Regis meeting on Saturday included Dorset's new Police and Crime Commissioner, Martyn Underhill, who was accompanied by the county's recently appointed Chief Constable, Debbie Simpson.

Mr Underhill told a packed gathering of all political persuasions that the additional funding he had secured by increasing the police precept by £3.51 would provide 12 additional policeman and the recruitment of 250 additional Special Constables across the county, 100 of which would be utilised in rural areas and which would benefit West Dorset.

Also on the panel of speakers was Dilip Chakrabarti, representing Virgin Care (who have just taken over the running of the Lyme Regis Medical Centre), Lyme Regis GP Dr Forbes Watson (chairman of the NHS Dorset Clinical Community Group) and long-serving Dorchester county councillor Trevor Jones, who gave an overview of the work of the county council.

**PICTURE: Dorchester Mayor Andy Canning - "Non-cabinet members have no influence over the decision making process"**



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