

Thoughts of an ex-councillor

by Les Masters

Soon after I was elected to our parish council in 1990 a very sobering thought occurred to me. For the first time in my life I was in a position to help COMPEL other people to cough up money, specifically my fellow residents.

Since I was the local newsagent and subpostmaster, I regularly met large numbers of them, so I was exercised to make sure I could justify to them whatever expenditure the nine of us agreed. There was definitely no hiding place or scope for a spending spree with other people's money.

This thought is doubly relevant nowadays. For some years, governments have limited the extent to which larger councils can increase their council tax, but there is no such curb on parish councils, so they really should make sure they do not abuse this freedom.

Parish councils are different in another way, the means by which they are filled-or not. Every four years the council is dissolved and the stage set for elections. There is, quite rightly, no party system, nominations being for individuals. In all my time in Bleadon since 1987, there has never been a full slate of nominations, resulting in all the nominees becoming councillors without a vote being held.

There have been some by-elections (mine included) but the vast majority of vacancies have been filled by co-option, which saves the cost of elections but has its drawbacks. One obvious risk is that councillors will choose cronies. Dissidents, however capable and public-spirited, are unlikely to be recruited. Another problem is procedure. During my nine years on the council we made a good number of

co-options, always in closed meetings.

On principle I would never have discussed fellow residents in public. By the same token I would never consent to being interviewed by fellow residents, in public or in private, but I would submit to the decision of the electorate. The costs of an election are not exorbitant, especially set alongside some of our council's expenditure in recent years. I really hope we have well over the nine nominations this year so that the council reflects the wishes of the people of Bleadon.

Many readers will be well aware that Bleadon's council tax is among the highest in North Somerset parishes. Part of this is due to two commitments that most parishes do not have. About 40 years ago our churchyard was closed for burials. Normally when that happens, responsibility for the upkeep of the churchyard goes to the district council, but the then-parish council decided to take it on. Much more recently North Somerset Council stopped funding the public toilet on the edge of our car park, and rather than let it close the parish council decided to provide the funding for it. I present these facts without comment.

My final thought is that it is important to understand what parish councils can and cannot do. If a problem is the responsibility of the district council go direct to it. The parish council is not a stepping stone. Let me give two simple examples. Just after Christmas a pothole started to develop in Bleadon Road near Chestnut Lane. It grew rapidly to the extent that a local driver burst a tyre. North Somerset were informed online and the hole was filled within a couple of days. We regularly have problems with blocked gullies, and several times over the years I have reported them in the same way, always with satisfactory results.

