

28 APRIL 2003

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

CABINET

Minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet held at Appletree Court, Lyndhurst on Monday, 28 April 2003.

p Cllr M J Kendal (Chairman)
p Cllr T M Russell (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:

e P C Greenfield
p J D Heron
p Mrs M D Holding

Councillors:

p B Rickman
p C A Wise
p P R Woods

In Attendance:

Councillors:

F J Bright
Mrs L C Ford
Mrs M Humber

Councillors:

B M F Pemberton
D N Scott
M H Thierry

Officers Attending:

D Yates, C Malyon, Ms J Bateman, Mrs J Griffiths and J Mascall.

The Cabinet met concurrently with the General Purposes and Licensing Committee for consideration of the financial implications arising from the proposed changes to the Council's Pay and Reward Strategy.

158. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN FOR THE MEETING.

RESOLVED:

That Cllr Kendal be elected Chairman of the Joint meeting.

159. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

No declarations of interest were made by members in connection with any agenda item.

160. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION.

No issues were raised during the public participation period.

161. PAY PANEL NEGOTIATIONS (REPORT A).

The Cabinet met concurrently with the General Purposes and Licensing Committee and considered the financial implications of the proposed changes to the Council's Pay and Reward Strategy and Pay Structure.

Members noted comments from the Employer side of the Pay Panel detailing further changes to the overall proposals together with the Employee side comments on all the proposals.

There were three main additional changes. For those employees in receipt of Luncheon vouchers it was now proposed that employees could either opt to continue to receive them for 24 months or to take an immediate alternative lump sum payment. Whilst the two options equated financially, additional tax would be payable on a lump sum payment.

In terms of changes to salary bandings it was now proposed that all existing employees on band 3 could remain on that band until they reached the top. New employees would be placed on the new banding structure.

Members noted that there was understandable concern from the Employee side in relation to weekly paid employees moving to monthly paid. It was proposed that more time should be spent to ease the transition for those employees and that this proposal would not therefore form part of the current package. Members agreed that as soon as practicable any new employees' contracts would specify monthly pay.

Members paid tribute to the helpfulness and constructive approach of the Employee side at all stages of the negotiations.

RECOMMENDED:

That the financial implications of the proposed package as set out above be approved and that a supplementary estimate in the sum of £66,000 be agreed for 2003/2004 to be funded from the Council's reserves.

The Joint meeting then terminated and the Cabinet re-convened separately for consideration of the remainder of their agenda.

Cllr Kendal in the Chair.

162. 'YOUR REGION – YOUR CHOICE' – WHITE PAPER (REGIONAL ASSEMBLIES (PREPARATION) BILL).

The Government had made some amendments to the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill and, as a consequence, had extended the deadline for responses to 15 May, 2003.

The Cabinet noted the following comments from Hansard made by Lord Greaves in response to his change of view on the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill.

"It is with very great regret that I say that the reason I have done so is that I cannot support the amendments tabled by my noble friend today. There has been some vigorous discussion about the matter. My view turned out to be a minority one within our team in this House and in the House of Commons. With considerable regret, therefore, I have withdrawn from the team on this Bill.

I live and am politically active in a two-tier area, so perhaps I look at life from a perspective different from that of those from London and metropolitan areas – or some of them anyhow. I declare that as an interest. Like my noble friend, I shall refer to other amendments that are part of a package negotiated between members of my party and the Government. The meaning of the amendments moved by my noble friend can be understood only by looking at them in the context of the package.

The crunch is whether people in areas that are to have referendums on regional assemblies, as proposed by the Government, have the democratic option to decide for themselves and not be told by the Minister, 10 Downing Street or anyone else that two-tier local government is not allowed. I would hardly wish to refer to the proposal as regional government, as the proposals are such feeble affairs. We debated that issue vigorously in Committee. It is the issue on which, I believe, the negotiated deal sells the pass.

In Committee, when I spoke from the Front Bench on behalf of my party, I responded to some fairly vigorous comments by the Minister. The noble Lord, Lord Rooker, said:

"If this measure is decoupled, there will not be a referendum because there will not be a Bill. We shall take it away. That is the price to be paid. It is as simple as that ... If you want to kill the Bill, carry on."

Later the Minister referred to those words as being his 'mantra'. Throughout the three days of Committee stage he kept saying that it was the mantra and that was that. On behalf – I thought – of my own party, I said:

"We now have threats, bluster and blackmail from the Minister – not rational argument."

I added:

"The Minister's attitude is not acceptable ... We are being threatened that if we do what we believe is right, the Government will take their bat and ball home. If it comes to that, do not blame us. The responsibility would clearly rest with the Government. It is arrogance of the highest order."

Later I said that the Minister was browbeating us:

"The Liberal Democrats will not be brow-beaten in every instance. If he is saying that if your Lordships' House stands firm on such issues he will not get legislation, then we might as well all pack up and go home."

I repeat those words at some length because I believed then that I was speaking on behalf of my party. After I spoke, I was not given an indication that I had not been speaking on behalf of my party. But I believe that my party has, regrettably, now agreed to be blackmailed, bullied and browbeaten.

Even if a compromise on the Bill were necessary at the end of the process, it was wholly wrong not to test the opinion of the House, at the very least, on those important issues and to negotiate from strength on that basis instead of having the negotiations that took place. I blame Ed Davey and my colleagues in the House of Commons, and I am happy to stand up in public and say that. I believe that in my part of the world, and in other parts of the world too, Liberal Democrats will believe that they have been let down on this issue by their parliamentary representatives. In the press statement which the party put out, Ed Davey is quoted as saying:

“These concessions prevent the absurd situation whereby voters unaffected by local government reform would effectively be imposing changes on voters elsewhere in the region.”

That is not true. The amendments do not prevent that. All that they do is give those voters a choice. If they believe that unitary government is some form of hell, it gives them a choice of two kinds of hell. That is not the kind of choice that we should be giving sensible and rational voters – certainly not in my part of the world.

I am merely quoting what has been put out in a press statement by my party, and explaining why I find myself very troubled indeed not to be able to support what my party is saying on this issue. The press statement continues:

“The Governments’ original proposal of only one ballot question meant a ‘Yes’ vote in the regional referendum would automatically have led to unitary government, as proposed by the Boundary Committee for England.”

That is still the case and nothing has changed.

Finally, the press statement says that this, “significantly improves the chances of referendums on regional assemblies actually being won.”

I do not think that the situation in the North West is any different. It will make it much more difficult in one important respect for any referendum in the North West to be won. There is already a united Conservative Party that will be campaigning against it. The Labour Party in the North West is already split, and will not be campaigning for the referendum in any united way. I had hoped that the Liberal Democrats would be. I have no doubt that the Liberal Democrats in the North West will be split down the middle on this proposal.”

The Cabinet fully supported the comments and agreed that a letter should be sent to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister setting out the Council’s views.

RESOLVED:

This Council requests the Government to note its opposition to the proposals for an elected regional assembly in the South East of England, but should it proceed with the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill it should allow the Boundary Committee to include a status quo option in any referendum, thereby providing a real public choice.

CHAIRMAN

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