

# Minute Item 51

## APPENDIX 2

Liberal Democrat Leader - Budget Speech - 20 February 2017

Chairman,

I wanted to start on a point of agreement. It's to express my thanks and appreciation to all the officers and staff of the Council for all the hard work they have undertaken during the year. I am sure other members will have experienced what I have done. Whenever I have referred something to them, whether it is a housing issue, a waste collection problem or a problem with my I.T. equipment, I have always been impressed by a very professional, responsive and courteous response.

I am more aware than most that this has been a difficult and challenging time for the workforce and I of course include, in my thanks, recognition to those who are no longer with the Council.

And now to the budget. Chairman, I have only two main issues with the budget that you have produced this year....

It's all the things you are doing,

And it's all the things you are not doing!

So let's remind ourselves of what you are setting out to achieve in your budget setting process.

First of all, I hope at least some members will agree with me that it's a crazy system, a Tory system, that says a referendum is needed if you want to raise the council tax beyond a set limit. We all know that referendums are expensive and some of us don't like the outcomes, but the worst thing about this particular Tory straight jacket is that it takes away local accountability for deciding what people are prepared to pay for the services that are delivered locally.

The experience has been, up and down the country, that local authorities have not held referendums, they have restricted council tax increases, often within a tissue thickness of what they can get away with and sacrificed public services.

If the government really understood devolution it would give the freedom for Councils to determine council tax rates and the accountability for their decisions would come from the ballot box – not central control of a type that Karl Marx would be proud of!

As if this was not bad enough, you Conservatives are exercising rigid, inflexible, control over a few thousand pounds worth of council tax, whilst at the same time, taking out a £30 million loan of public money.

£30 million Chairman.... spending taxpayer's money without a referendum, without even asking them whether they thought this was a wise idea. It's your cunning plan, designed to save public services. It's an unnecessary risk with no Plan B if the investments don't perform as you hope they will. Is this prudent? I don't think so. Is it a more secure way of making sure that we have public services in 5 years, ten years or 50 years time? I don't think so.

The best way to secure public services is to raise council tax to the levels people are prepared to pay. We don't want to be operating on a wing and prayer, hoping that investments will perform well so that we can collect household waste. I can't believe that all members support this and I hope they aren't keeping quiet in order not to rock the boat and put party interests above what's right for the residents of the New Forest.

I touched on devolution. Sometimes I express opinions, hoping that I am going to be wrong. Sadly that rarely happens. I seem to be a bit of a mystic meg.

When you Conservatives started the ball rolling, talking up the possibilities of devolution, I stood in this Chamber and encouraged you not to spend time, effort and money into this enterprise. I knew, for example, that what was being proposed was not devolution – as most people would understand it – it was really about a local government reorganisation, carving up Hampshire and creating a new tier of government, with an elected Mayor.

I said, did I not, that there was no appetite amongst the public for these proposals and I directly opposed all of the effort and expense, again taxpayer's money being spent on the issue. It's been calculated that the total expenditure by all local authorities in Hampshire, dealing with the devolution issue amounts to £500,000. That's £500,000 of taxpayer's money .... and where has it got us ? All it seems to have achieved is bad feelings between different authorities, just at a time when we owe it to the public to be working ever more closely together.

I deeply regret that it has taken so much the valuable time of our Chief Executive and his Senior management team. I want him to be entirely focused on doing the best he can for the residents of the New Forest. I have heard it said that devolution in Hampshire is a dead duck, I think it's more like a dead albatross hanging across the neck of Tory Council leaders and I won't easily allow you to forget it.

Now another thing... beach huts. 2016 will go down in history as the year in which you managed to surpass yourselves with your national fame, including a mention in Private Eye's Rotten Boroughs Section, the £300,000 loss of taxpayer's money on the slippery floors case. I honestly thought that that was going to be the high water mark of Tory stupidity, but you have proved me wrong.

Where and when, pray tell me, was the provision of swanky new beach huts, costing £1.2 million more than they need to, elevated to a council corporate priority?

How on earth, did you get yourselves sucked into approving and signing off such a scheme? Are there any members who think that spending over a million pounds on beach huts is more important than keeping our recycling facilities, for example. You have decided to close no less than 80 mini recycling sites that benefit people from all over the District, in order to save a few thousand pounds whilst spending all this money on beach huts.

It's priceless, it's also beyond my understanding that you have sought to justify the expenditure on the basis that it's a coastal flooding protection scheme. You have demonstrated that you have the same level of judgement as King Canute!

So.... that's some of the things you have achieved... now let's look at what you aren't doing

Still another year with no action to help those people who have lost a bus service. Other District and Boroughs recognise the importance of providing a subsidy to keep bus services running, not this one. Who suffers the most, older and more vulnerable people, many of whom used to enjoy an Age Concern luncheon club before you take the funding for that away.

Recycling – where are the initiatives aimed at improving recycling rates in the District. Your performance is dismal. The actions you have taken are all going in the opposite direction, making it more difficult for people to recycle. It will mean your rates will go down further and there will be increased instances of fly-tipping all around the area, including in our much loved National Park.

Housing – another year of pathetic performance providing any realistic scale of affordable housing in the area. It comes to something when we ask the Comms team here to make a big thing of the District delivering a handful of council houses. We still have a waiting list of some 5000 people. We still have far too many people in Bed and Breakfast accommodation. We still have too many people in housing that does not meet their needs. It a consistent record of failure.

And thank goodness for the National Park Authority. Your latest money saving wheeze, withdrawing funding for the Visitor Information Service to 130,000 tourists who visit the centre each year would have been a disaster. I am so pleased that despite being put into this position and not having the benefit of all the hundreds of thousands of pounds of car park income that the District Council enjoys, the Park Authority responded positively and rescued the situation. I think we owe them a debt of gratitude.

Last year, was the year that the District Council washed its' hands, shirking responsibility for running a tourism service. It begs the question.... what next?

If you have the inclination to withdraw from direct delivery of services and contracting things out to the commercial or the third sector, then it's perfectly possible to do so. But how long before people start asking what's the point of even having a District Council.

I am very pleased that you picked up a theme I first introduced a few years ago, looking at whether we really need so many Councillors, especially having downsized the workforce so much. The sensible things that Tories do are often those that were first suggested by the Lib Dems. We are a small group, at the moment, but thank goodness we are here, as an effective opposition. It needs someone to highlight your gross inadequacies and misjudgements.

No budget today from the Lib Dems, but our time will come!