

POST ASSEMBLY FOCUS GROUP

Southwark Town Hall

14 JULY 2010

Edited transcript of comments

(SI)

Too long.

I came a bit late and couldn't follow what was going on. It took me a long time to catch up.

If something was going to be discussed affecting life on my street I would have come just for that part.

(EN)

I liked hearing the debate and the arguments from both sides. I really liked getting that rich perspective rather than just reading about it in Southwark News.

(TH)

I thought it was just a replication of national party politics, with people just taking their party position rather than focusing on the issues that might affect people. You felt the votes were almost pre-ordained, just because of which party was in power.

I was shocked to hear that people had been moved out of the Heygate Estate for three years and nothing had happened, and that the impact on people had been so dramatic and traumatic. And that it was all stuck in a kind of political process.

(OK)

I thought it was nice to see what was happening behind the scenes. The real life effect was quite good. But we were just there to watch and couldn't get involved, to voice our own opinions. And I think it would have been nice to see the whole speakers. When someone is talking to me I like to see their body language, because body language speaks a lot.

(T)

I think the whole thing was just politics. They were just talking at each other. I didn't see any debate there. Everybody wanted to say how good they were.

And wanted to ridicule the other instead of being constructive and thinking about the people, not their jobs. Instead of recognizing their mistakes and learning from their mistakes.

They were just thinking about spinning and this is what I saw really. I really didn't see dialogue.

And even if there was a problem and I wanted to participate, I couldn't. So there was no democracy. There was no outlet for the population.

(AC)

What increased my enjoyment was that there was one motion where they all voted together – for this democracy investigation to go ahead. And I was really glad to be part of it.

And I thought they should really work very hard for some consensus before coming before the public. Not just perform their pre-ordained roles as members of parties.

Local politics is not the same as the house. It's just duplicating, replicating what goes on in the house.

EN

But I wonder how much of that is really following the party line, because outside that room, in their own communities, they will engender change because they are genuinely passionate about their communities.

There is a little bit of a performance going on. Behind the scenes they will work together.

AC

But that performance would have been better if everybody coming in was at least given a motion paper. Some people had stacks of papers and some of us had no papers at all. Even a list of motions. We didn't know what they were talking about half the time.

(M)

There were also assumptions that we would know what was going to be talked about. And how things are organized. Very simple basic stuff. And for me the language was a bit of a barrier.

TH

On the papers, I did look on the website and they were available. But for environmental reasons I didn't want to print 70 pages.

M

What was good was that there were so many people there (in the gallery) and I hope they had a look and saw that.

(JB)

But then they kicked us out when it really mattered.

TH

But that was one of the most entertaining bits because I thought, "they've messed up here".

OK

I thought it was quite shocking. They spoke quite passionately and yet they were still willing to cover up a few confidential things, because we were there. I couldn't understand what that was all about.

(OV)

It was confidential. That's why it wasn't explained.

EN

It would have been good to introduce that at the beginning and say that if anything confidential comes up this is what would constitute a breach.

AC

I think the website needs to be more user-friendly. Have more pictures on it and simple language. To find out what the agenda was for this meeting you had to trawl through loads of stuff.

SI

I think the difference between this and the community council meeting is that there you can speak but here you can't. There you can ask for something to be on the agenda or for a planning official or someone like that to come and speak. And there's not so much time wasted debating what the political leaders' want.

EN

The other thing that was missing for me was the voluntary sector. They're completely not on the agenda. And small businesses. I wondered why the

heck they weren't there. Especially when they were debating the emergency budget.

AC

The public gallery is not helpful to co-operation between the council and the public. The way that it's set up, with the pillars that you can't see round. You can't see the people who are talking. And then the height too. I think the whole thing should be turned around and the public should be put where the Mayor is and the Mayor can be in the gallery. The people who want to participate should all be together on the floor. And all those huge chairs and stuff, which is taking up an awful lot of space, should be removed. What's the point of it? The point seems to be to have the Mayor raised up above everybody else but he actually participates less than most people. Therefore he doesn't need all that space.

M

I think it's important to make clear what the purpose of the assembly is. Because if it's about informing people and you can't speak, then that would be alright if I'm told that beforehand.

TH

There's something that's happened in Estonia where they've really made a big effort to put government online. So if there's going to be a debate about the Heygate Estate there should be emails to people living there to let them know that the assembly is going to be talking about that. Then they can go online and the increased transparency kind of reduces corruption and increases local participation.

It's not difficult to make a web broadcast. And if things are automatically available people don't have to come all the way here. They can just go online and have a look.

JB

But you also have to make sure that everyone has a computer and can do that.

TH

That's what they did in Estonia. They made sure everyone had the right to broadband access. It's better to have someone watching online than nobody knows about it at all.

EN

I wonder if surgeries could also be made a bit more interesting. More of a two way information exchange, where you're not only bringing your personal

problems but also your local community issues. And I think it would also encourage more people to take part if they knew that outcomes are going to be acted upon, so that you're not just going there to get information like an information junkie. You also know that they're going to feed back to you at a further meeting. More interactive and inclusive.

SI

The (assembly) meetings start too early and they go on too long. They should also think about having them at weekends.

T

They should also listen to each other. For example, when the [Liberal Democrat Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny] replied to something the [Labour Cabinet member for Regeneration] had said, the other one just left. You don't leave at that moment when the other one is answering to your question.

JB

To me it was like they were just reading from a script.

AC

They (assembly meetings) should also be on Facebook. And online debates.

OK

I think they were more interested in winning points over each other rather than touching base on the issue and how it should be tackled. It was all manifestos, things they were willing to do, but they didn't really say how they were going to tackle it. All they kept saying was "regeneration" but I didn't know what they were going to regenerate.

I found those little screens helpful but I only saw them after a while. The ones with their names and counting down three minutes.

AC

It might also be good to have two parts to the meeting. One formal part and then you break into groups according to what you're interested in. To express your opinion on the spot because there's so much paper coming through your door.

EN

I love Southwark and there's always so much going on. So many forums, groups, community councils. All doing wonderful work. Lots of information going through them. But they're often separate entities and they don't all

interrelate into one big nerve centre. So there's something for me about this process not being just another one.

For me it has to be about galvanising people to be participants in the community in which they live and to be stakeholders, and to challenge, and debate. I can see so much potential for community dialogue.

TH

If you could have theme-based meetings. For example, on schools, housing, environmental issues. I think that would engage people more, rather than a hodge podge of a meeting that covers a little bit of everything.

EN

I'm really into glamorous events where people tell decision-makers how it really is and Southwark doesn't really have that. And it doesn't really cost a lot of money. It's just a case of organization and doing it. Have a panel made up of top ministers and politicians. Or something even more creative than that. Something where the public can really go and not sit on that layered thing, but everyone is equalized on one level. Do something quite glamorous in Southwark and put it on the map!

T

Have a party. Social gatherings are great for engaging with people. You don't need to spend a lot of money. Just throw a party where people are happy! You can talk about politics at a party, where people are informal. It's much better than being up there (in the gallery) and hidden.

OK

I've been wondering about this whole thing and what you could call it. And I thought of "meeting point".