

SOUTHWARK DEMOCRACY COMMISSION

POST ASSEMBLY FOCUS GROUP 2

17 AUGUST 2010

SOUTHWARK TOWN HALL

SULTANA (S)

We left after half an hour. We couldn't see what was going on. Our attention started going downhill.

FATIMA (F)

We were just left sitting there while they (councillors) were having their own little debate.

S

The bit about Elephant & Castle was interesting because we know about the regeneration stuff. Apart from that ... was it about finance or something? We just left.

LILLIAN BARTHOLEMEW (LB)

I found some of it interesting but what I couldn't understand was that these were people supposed to be running my community, Southwark, and at one point there was a little gathering in the corner whispering. And I thought, "This is democratic?"

Some of the behaviour I would equate with a child. It wasn't the job that they were supposed to be doing. I felt disappointed by that. But then again we couldn't see what was going on downstairs and that was a drawback. There was just a voice.

There didn't seem to be any attempt to teamwork and I would have thought that's what it's about really.

In my area we have three councillors and I could only hear one of them. Where were the other two? And if they weren't there, what are they doing on my behalf? If I could see them I could have tackled them afterwards and say, "Well, why didn't you say something?"

I don't know if I could call myself qualified to take part. I could point out things that I didn't agree with.

And as for the childish behaviour on the part of some of them, I thought, "Grow up! Get a life!" Maybe if I could tell them to grow up and get a life it would help.

CHARLIE CHERRILL (CC)

It's the councillors that create the interest. But very few of them know the meaning of standing orders. They don't know the rules of debate. They don't understand what a point of order really is. That's why you get the childish behaviour. They need training about how to conduct themselves in a meeting, any meeting.

MADELEINE KEKWICK (MK)

What I couldn't take was the mockery. They seemed to love mocking everybody. They were mocking Simon Hughes. They were mocking Harriet Harman. They were mocking people who weren't there. Mock people when they are there and they can answer.

Half of the time we couldn't see so we had no idea who was talking. But they were behaving like bullies in a primary school. I used to think that councillors need respect. But after this meeting I thought, "Good God! What can these people ever do for me?"

CC

I honestly think there is a need to look at councillors and to get the public interested in the council but I don't think you'll do that by going to the assembly to start with. They should start with community councils. You need to start from the bottom up, not the top down.

I think the community should elect the community council chairman, and it shouldn't be a politician. And they ought to have the prime say on the agenda.

The important thing to remember is that we elect councillors and I wouldn't like anybody else to come in and say they're going to make decisions. It's the council that should make decisions, provided they make them in the right way.

MK

But instead of making decisions they were trying to gain a point on the other party. You would think they would work together for the good of the public but no, they were trying to score from the opposite side.

CC

I think there's a difference between conflict and point-scoring. We can argue with each other here but I don't think we need to score cheap points and I'm afraid that's what a lot of councillors are trying to do. And so much time is wasted. But everyone feels that they have to have their say. You could have a motion before the council that everybody agrees with, but we've all got to say how we agree with it.

S

When we went to the meeting we didn't know what the topics were. We heard something about the Heygate (Estate) and how they were going to break it down, and I live near there so that interested me. We see some of the changes and we know about the regeneration, so that made us interested. It was good to know who made the decision.

It would be nice to have a say too, but in that environment you couldn't do it if you wanted to. Anyway, we couldn't really say anything about the Heygate because it's happening, isn't it? But it was sad to hear that people had lived there for 40 years and they had to move out.

The discussion then moved to the quality of debate at council assembly.

CC

If Peter John (the council leader) were to say that every cabinet decision would go to the full council for a debate - that would be very different. There are technical reasons why we can't really participate at the moment and until they're sorted out we're going to have to battle away.

Also, every scrutiny that takes place, their report and recommendations should go to full council, and they don't necessarily go to full council.

Sultana then explained to the meeting that a community resource centre at 1 Martin House on The Rockingham Estate is faced with closure as the council staff who currently work there with the Bengali Community Development Project (BCDP) are being re-located to 160 Tooley Street.

S

If I thought it would make a difference I would take something like that to the council assembly.

CC

That's the kind of thing that could be added to the agenda at a community council meeting and then the community council should be able to take it to the full council meeting.

Then there's question time where councillors can ask a cabinet member a question and they have to answer it. Then they can have a supplementary question. But why should that be restricted simply to councillors? Why shouldn't one of you be able to raise that question about the closure (of the community resource centre) at a council assembly? And you could come to the meeting and hear the answer of the cabinet member and ask a supplementary question as well.

You'd have to do it in an orderly way. You couldn't have every councillor and community council asking half a dozen questions. You'd have to say that Walworth can ask two this time, then Camberwell, and go on like that. Why restrict it to councillors?

It's all about knowing what's going on, looking at your councillor, and if he doesn't match up to what you think he should do, then you vote him out of office.

And I come back to community councils. We need to get people to come to those meetings to talk about the local issues. There's no such thing as a simple borough-wide problem. Every borough-wide problem has local issues involved. Every community council can discuss their local problems and come to a decision. Then they come to their councillors and say, "We want this on the agenda" (of the community council meeting). You've got to really make your councillor work. Make them earn the exorbitant fees they're being paid.

This would involve the community and get more people to attend. Then the community council can begin to bring pressure on the assembly, making them do their job.

At the moment councillors run the community councils. The councillors should be there to listen to the community, so that they can reflect their views.

ROSE WHELAN (RW)

They're there for the people who elected them.

CC

This would enhance the role of councillors, because they would begin to go to the assembly knowing that they had the support of their constituents. So instead of moaning that they never have any say because they're a backbencher they would have a real say in the assembly.