

Guildford Civic Hall - An open letter to Surrey Advertiser from Albert Jack - 9th May 2006

I have learned a few things in the last week or so that have troubled me. I have spoken about this to my advisers and my publicity agent appointed by Penguin Books and they have all told me, to a woman, not to get involved. 'We have a big three years coming up and you don't need to be getting involved in local politics. Look at the big picture' they told me, 'you have to go to America this year to promote your books and then Japan and probably back to South Africa again. Think about the columns you have contributed to the Sunday Times and Sunday Telegraph over the last eighteen months and we are going to try and have you appear in Arena or GQ this year, not to mention all the TV and Radio work we have lined up for you. Why would you bother with Guildford?', they said. 'Well', I replied, 'it is because I am bothered. Very bothered.' However, I did promise them I would not get involved. So here I am, not contributing to the debate and I am relying on you all not to tell tales on me.

Last week I was lucky enough to be invited to sit on the panel of an open music forum created by Peter Gordon, the Programme Director of the excellent 96.4 The Eagle and with help from the Surrey Advertiser. Other panel members included businessmen such as Michel Harper and Tony Scott. The respected journalist David Rose and Ian Edwards from the Academy of Contemporary Music were also with us and so too were prominent Guildford Borough Council officers Chris Bunting and our all powerful and fearless Chief Executive Andrew Hodges. I learnt a lot during that evening, but came away with the troubling belief that you, my dear neighbours in Guildford, have chosen to leave the big decisions about our beautiful town to Captain Mainwaring.

Anywhere I have been and in every conversation I have had, both publicly and privately, never have I heard such small-minded arrogance as was apparent on that evening. It was a shock. And it is all your fault. It would have been my fault too but I was away when all this election business went on so you can't blame me, but it could have been my fault too because I would have displayed the usual apathy many of us feel, most of the time, towards local politics and, I imagine, would have taken absolutely no notice of any of them. As far as national politics is concerned I have always felt the last person to go into the House of Commons with the right intentions was Guy Fawkes. And that is the problem. Because the activists, the passionate people in Guildford, are almost all bitter bullies from what I have seen so far, who demand their own way and then become extremely offensive if we don't capitulate. I know about this. I have just seen it all for myself and I am going to tell you what has happened.

When I returned from Africa last year I gave an interview to the Surrey Advertiser during which I expressed my love for my hometown and how I felt the ongoing arguments between Michel Harper and the Council Executive to be unfortunate. All I ever read about is how Harper is costing this town millions with his business activities and planning rows with the council. I expressed some sympathy and support for Harper and he was nice enough to write to me, via the local newspaper, thanking me and inviting me to lunch. And then my telephone melted and my shirt exploded. 'Don't get involved with Harper', I was warned. 'He has always got an agenda, he will use you,' blah blah blah.

But I remember meeting Harper once when we were both ushers at Paul Rickard's wedding (the owner of Seymour's Estate Agents in the High Street) twelve years ago. I asked Paul for an opinion but he told me he hadn't seen Michel for a while, although 'I know he gets a bad press.' And the last thing I need as a professional writer is bad press. My publisher (Penguin Books) would pull my fingernails off if I wilfully did anything as stupid as that, and then I would have to write with my elbows for a while. So I didn't go to lunch and thought no more of it until last week when we joined the forum panel together. During that afternoon I had been warned. 'There is going to be a problem tonight, phone calls are going around that Harper will try to hijack the meeting and you may not want to be involved after all.' Hijack the meeting? Well he doesn't scare me, unless he carries a gun, so I had to go along and find out about this man and listen to what he has to say. And that was where it all started.

Like all of you all now, I was then expecting a bun fight. I thought he was going to come out with all his guns blazing and, if that happened, I already had my clever counter tactics worked out. Without a word I was going to get up, go home and watch AC Milan and Barcelona on TV. And then apologise to my good friend Peter Gordon for leaving his forum, but he would have understood. And then it all began. Harper walked into the hospitality room and, with a friendly smile, said hello to everybody and shook the hands of the council representatives. Once we were up on the platform, confronted with around 200 other members of the public, I say 'other' because we are all members of the public, I listened to Michel Harper articulate and outline his ideas and then I saw an extraordinary thing. Captain Mainwaring, leader of the council, launched into him at every possible opportunity. I was close by and whenever Harper spoke I could hear our council leader muttering obscenities under his breath like a classroom bully, and so too could the other panel members because we all spoke about it later. At one point I actually had to ask him to stop behaving in such a hostile way. I was amazed at the bitterness and diatribe from our elected leaders, or should I say *your* elected leaders because I take no responsibility for them personally on the grounds of my own laziness and apathy. Until now that is.

Every single word I heard was about blaming somebody else, usually Harper, for the problem with our Civic Hall, or Fawltly Towers as I shall now call it. Harper, we were told, has cost this town millions with his objections to the planning proposals submitted by the council.

Mainwaring and his assistant revealed to me in the Green Room, before Harper arrived, that it might be as much as nine million pounds. I have since learned that the Civic Hall planning debate has cost nearer £800,000, but I don't believe that either now, not unless GBC have Rumpole of the Bailey working for them. I don't know the true figure but, more importantly, nor do they. The executive of our council were banding figures around both privately and publicly all night long, but when pressed for an exact figure none of them could give us one. 'Ok,' we said, 'how about an educated estimate', still nothing. And we trust this lot? When I say to you 'I don't believe it,' what I mean is that, based on my new experience, I will never believe another word of what our ruling Junta tells me, and I will only believe half of what I actually see for myself in the future. That is how suspicious I now am.

During the meeting, by the way, the Council thought they had it covered with well placed stooges in the audience jeering Harper every time he spoke and who stared at him menacingly throughout. One of them even made the mistake of implying to me, before hand, that 'we are not worried about Harper tonight, we have made arrangements to have that covered - if you know what I mean'. He said it under his breath and from the corner of his mouth, like a character from the Lavender Hill Mob. And remember this - he said that to me, of all people, a complete stranger to him. As a socialist and reasonably intelligent man I can assure you all that when he added 'if you know what I mean' that I knew exactly what he meant. He meant our elected representatives had made arrangements to discredit a local citizen in a public meeting. And they had done. From where I sat, up on the platform, I could clearly see all of them. By the way, I should politely inform the man in the front row, directly opposite me, who stared at Michel with such spite and hatred throughout the whole evening, that if you had treated me in that manner I would have offered you outside and into the carpark within five minutes, let alone the three hours Harper had to put up with you.

And then came a key moment. Harper explained that his lawyers had written one letter questioning the legalities of the original planning application relating to the Civic Hall. I was waiting for the abuse to follow but Mainwaring sat silent. He didn't pick Harper up on that, or question it or deny it, and for me that is the key thing, because it sounds like it may be true. And if it is true then you, I and everybody else in Guildford, who have been lied to, should thank Harper for not being as lazy and apathetic as we are. Because we all have a civic right and responsibility to call our council into question over issues of concern and it would appear only one of us, so far, can be bothered, Michel Harper.

And if one solitary letter from him, who let's face it, is only a small town nightclub owner, can send a building contractor the size of Taylor Woodrow running for cover then I smell a rat. In fact, based on what I have seen and heard for myself, I can smell a pack of rats.

I also heard that evening what Guildford University has to say, when they brought up the idea of having a Civic Hall on their land by the A3. But they don't want to contribute to paying for it, they want us to do that and so it will never happen. In fact the University has become so detached from this town they no longer matter. One of them spoke eloquently, but for far too long, about young bands and business 'coming to us with proposals for making facilities available for live music'. What does 'go to them with a proposal' mean? Do they mean me, or do they mean a 16-year-old musician who just wants somewhere to play, but whose only experience of a proposal was after his dad knocked his mum up on Park Barn in 1990? Nobody will be going to them with any proposals except for me, and here it is. I propose you come round my house and clear away these three million alcopop bottles and scotch egg wrappers that your eastern European students leave outside my gate every weekend. How's that for a proposal? Because that's the only real effect the University has on we the people living in this town. That and the fact we can't get served in local pubs for six hours, because of the queue, and then have to listen to music on the dukebox sounding like somebody is banging on their lawnmower with a hammer, whilst the neighbours are shouting at them over the garden fence.

The only way anything is going to change for the better in Guildford is for the businessmen among you to pick up the reins and show an interest, because it won't be improved by our elected leaders, that I promise you. They are too powerful and complacent. I sat on the platform watching local councillors in the audience shaking their heads in defeat as Mainwaring spoke about nothing at all and then blamed Harper. But they didn't say anything. That's the worrying part because they can't; everybody I have asked has told me he is too powerful. Even our local MP Anne Milton, who is lovely by the way, won't be able to touch him. In Guildford we have Zimbabwean politics. This Council can do, and say, whatever they want to and the rest of us are expected to fall silent. And then, I imagine, that too will somehow become Michel Harper's fault. Because, it appears, if you raise a simple question of concern you will get what Harper got. Abused all over town for the last five years and a smear campaign. And I, for one, am not having any of that anymore.

But this is not all about ranting and raving, I actually have a suggestion, one put forward by our MP Anne Milton. That is for an officially recognised advisory panel to be set up and represent music and the Arts in Guildford. They would then work with the people at the council who work for, and are paid their wages by, you and me. The panel would have to include Michel Harper, Tony Scott, Peter Gordon and anybody else with any proper experience.

I like this idea because it will mean Captain Mainwaring, Private Pike and Corporal Jones will all have to listen to, and work with, serious local businessmen like Scott and Harper, with myself and Peter Gordon throwing custard pies every now and then from the sidelines. And this will be a good thing. The reason I would have Tony Scott on the panel is because, in my view, he has to run the new Civic Hall when we finally get it back. Nobody seems to have looked beyond this current planning row to consider the future before, but it occurs to me we should all insist that the man who has been responsible for bringing some of the best bands in the world, covering all genres, to Guildford over the last fifteen years is the only person who can run and promote Guildford Civic Hall properly. But, for all I know, Tony Scott may not want to do it and I have thought of that. In which case I shall have electrodes placed on his testicles and we can all spend a weekend playing with the switch until he signs a contract agreeing to promote the new Guildford Civic Hall. And if that fails then we should take him over to Stoke Park and have him shot. Sorry Tony, but you and your Guilfest team are the only people for the job. I just don't see how we can move forward here without you and I call on you publicly to become involved - somehow.

But I now have a personal decision to make. Do I stay and fight with you or do I move to Slough? Because I have recently heard what other plans this lot have for Guildford and it includes knocking down the whole area beside North Street (behind the old Post Office) and turning it into a giant glass domed pedestrian shopping centre. Dear God. Why can't they show some imagination here and build a huge London, or even Italian, style square bordered by beautiful traditional English houses, with a bandstand and a fountain in the middle. Maybe we can move the market there, it would only be a few yards from where it is now. The houses would be worth £1.5 million each, the car park could go underneath and there can also be another live music venue for 500 people down there too. This way none of us will hear that bloke with the lawnmower anymore and everybody is happy. Or suggest something else with any imagination. Why have another characterless waste of your money for louts and students to loiter with intent around like a new glass domed shopping centre? If the planners manage to get away with this then you can all come to Slough with me, because Guildford is far more expensive than Slough, but in ten years time it will look much the same.

Albert Jack - Guildford. May 2006