

Article for Surrey Advertiser 12th May 2006

## Toilet Humour

I have been watching with amusement the letters being written by council officials and local councillors criticising the Surrey Advertiser for a story comparing the refurbishment of a public toilet to the original cost of refurbishing the Civic Hall. I thought it was quite good journalism, not something you would normally accuse the Surrey Advertiser of, and it even made me laugh. But it is the reaction of some of the local politicians that made me laugh the most. Now, I am not particularly defensive of the Surrey Advertiser and nor am I interested in local politicians, but I do know this. Rule Number One: A public figure, especially an elected one, does not under any circumstances fall out with journalists. Even people who don't work in laboratories would realise that. It is not science.

It is the political equivalent of screaming abuse at the girl at the check in desk when you find you are not sitting next to your partner on a long haul flight. She will apologise profusely, smile sweetly, issue new tickets and in two hours time you will realise you are on separate planes, going to different countries. Do not fall out with the one person who can help you achieve what you want to achieve. So for a politician to criticise a journalist reveals something of a problem to me. Inexperience and naivety. If not then it must be arrogance. Even John Prescott doesn't criticise newspapers and how much more naive or arrogant do you need to be than him.

That's what makes me laugh. Not because I am particularly interested in local politics, but I am quietly confident these particular people will not be in their positions come the next local election. You see, as a local councillor only very few people inside your ward know who you are, the vast majority have no idea. Outside your ward nobody has ever heard of you but all of these people buy the local paper and listen to the local radio.

And that means come the next election the person you upset at the newspaper will have spent two years making sure everybody does know who you are after all, and for the wrong reasons as far as you are concerned. And that means you are certain to be on the wrong plane then.

At least I hope so, because I would like to see some experience around that particular table and some effective work done.