

INDEPENDENTS FOR EAST HERTS

Jim Thornton

CHGRL

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Have you ever thought you could do a better job than our elected politicians?

Have you ever wondered how you could get elected?

Have you ever been put off doing anything about this, because you have no idea how to begin, and would not have a clue what to do if you actually did get elected?

This book will tell you how to go about getting elected, what happens next, and why you are unlikely to be able to change the world over night. However, a motto of local politicians is that Mountains can always be Climbed One Step at a Time.

Although the examples I write about come from East Herts, a District Council area in the home counties just north of London, I know from talking to colleagues around the country that the issues we face are pretty much the same everywhere.

I was trained by the Conservative Party, but have come to see the merits of being an Independent Councillor in local government. I think there is also a good argument for a group of Independents in the House of Commons, doing the excellent work that the cross-benchers do in the Lords.

“But how can I get involved in real live politics?” you ask.

Let me tell you a story

1

The Art of the Possible

The note was passed to me along the row, and I looked to see who had written it. The Council Chamber was packed full of Conservative Councillors, almost a full house for this important Group Meeting. Mike was looking straight at me, so it must be his note. *“Are you going to propose a vote of no confidence in the Leader?”*

I thought hard. We had won the first vote, but I did not think we would win this one, so this was the defining moment: go down gloriously, or live to fight another day?

Mike wrote for the Financial Times, among other things, and was bright and ambitious. He had been working alongside the Back Bench Committee during the scandal that was developing.

Next to me was Duncan, larger than life, an excellent elected Councillor on Town, District and County Councils, a finger in every pie. He had a colourful past, doing property work with the person *Private Eye* calls ‘Changi Jim’ Slater, back in the golden days of the seventies and eighties. He loved to stir things up, and I really enjoyed working with him. When I was allowed to set up the Back Bench Committee I made it a condition that we had a new chairman each year. Duncan succeeded me, but enjoyed it so much we could not get him to hand over to anyone else. I was now the Secretary and did the administration.

Somebody was droning on, and now Duncan was prodding me: *“What are we going to do?”* he hissed.

The Leader of the Council was in the chair, and his Cabinet of Portfolio Holders sat close to him to protect him from the mob. We were the mob, the ordinary elected Councillors, the Back Benchers, the ones who had no specific job to do and were expected to support the Party Leadership, right or wrong.

The *Hertfordshire Mercury* had headlined their front page with "WE'VE WON!" on 2 December 2005. They had spent £30,000 of their own money to get the High Court to lift large parts of an injunction from the Council to stop the publication of a Report.

Although the Report and investigation had cost the tax-payer £120,000, we as ordinary Councillors were not allowed to read it. Now we could, thanks to the *Mercury*. Bullying, sexual harassment, in-fighting between officers, wasted money, it was all there in the released Report.

The previous weekend I had met at my house with Duncan and Jim, the elder statesman of the Conservative Group. We wanted to find a face-saving way for the Leader to resign. Jim had read chemistry at Oxford, had probably the best brain on the Council, and was the only Councillor who read all the Council Papers.

We had agreed a proposal, and Jim reluctantly agreed to phone the Leader. Jim told me it was one of the hardest phone calls of his life, but he told me we had a deal.

But when we came to the meeting, it was clear we did not have a deal. The Leader refused to leave the Council Chamber to allow us to have a discussion without him. I had no alternative but to propose a motion that the Leader leave the meeting. We won by 21 votes to about 14, and that was the turning point. The Leader knew that the game was up, and with bad grace he left the room, leaving his Cabinet to defend him.

The Report had found evidence to support union claims of a 'culture of bullying, blame and fear', and it was clear that the Leader had not been straight with his Party, the Councillors or

the media. However, political parties defend their own, unless it is incest or paedophilia, and even then there is a hesitation. The unforgivable sin is disloyalty, and for that it is outer darkness and no Christmas Card from the MP.

The choice was: either make him go now, or ask him to stand for re-election in a few months time in March 2006. The Leader had stitched up the Constitution so we could not get rid of him until May 2007. While I thought he had handled the whole thing appallingly and if he had any sense of honour or shame he should have resigned, in politics you have to deal with the art of the possible.

I chose the route I thought we could win, and proposed the re-election option. And this is one of the hardest lessons in politics: *you sometimes have to choose between winning a bit or losing the lot.* While losing may sometimes be morally satisfactory, your voters elected you to win benefits for them, not lose them on issues of personal principle.

We did win the vote to make him stand for re-election, but a month later the County Conservative Party forced him to resign anyway. The tragedy was that a majority of my colleagues refused to apologise to the electorate for what had happened. They elected the Deputy Leader as Leader, and carried on with the same team, and business as usual.

I was not going to defend such behaviour to the voters. I decided I would stand at the next election in 2007 as an Independent. I made the Conservatives throw me out, rather than make it easy by resigning, so members would know important issues of principle were involved. I appealed to David Cameron, but his office said it was a local issue, and he could not get involved.

I was on my own with no party organisation to support me. How easy would it be, on my own, as an Independent?

How does anyone get started in politics from scratch?