

SPEECH TO THE INDEPENDENTS' ASSOCIATION ANNUAL DINNER

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Thank you for inviting me to speak to you this evening. I'm really delighted to be here. I've enjoyed the meal, and I'm enjoying the company, and I know I'm going to enjoy the discussion that follows.

I have had the pleasure of meeting some of you before now on the hustings – Jack, Peter and family, Betty, and Melvyn – and in the pub afterwards for “de-briefing”.

And I think that's why I'm here now: because we pretty quickly discovered that, our political affiliations aside, we had much in common. We all care about Ashford, its future, the villages like Wye that are not just the jewel in its crown but its very crown, and the future of the villages, like Wye, around Ashford town.

But some of you may be wondering in what capacity I'm here this evening. Well, I guess I'm here in a number of guises – all of them genuine, I can assure you.

Firstly, I'm here as a resident of Ashford district, having lived here for nearly ten years now. When I arrived in Kent in 1997, from East Africa where I had been working for the British government on an aid project, I first lived in the hamlet of Hassell Street near Hastingleigh.

More recently I have lived in the conservation area of Ashford town centre, an area that owes its very existence to Betty and her late husband who fought so hard to protect it from demolition by Ashford Borough Council.

I'm also here in my capacity as Chair of Ashford Green Party. We're small in number but we're growing ... and we do have a voice.... In the Kent County Council elections last year I secured 12% of the vote in Ashford Rural East, which did not go unnoticed by Charles Findlay, the Conservative candidate - and winner.

He said to me, in a slightly surprised tone when the results were announced, “so that's where my votes went”, and if nothing else I felt I had made a respectable dent in his majority ... and anyway, at 2 o'clock in the morning it was music to my ears.

On the programme for this evening's dinner you may have noticed that I'm a policy adviser in the sustainable development group of the Department for International Development. That's my day job, and I'm really privileged to work for an organisation that puts poor people in developing countries at the

top of the agenda, and recognises the importance of their environmental and natural resources in sustaining their livelihoods.

So this is my hobby! In fact, when I stood in the last local elections in Victoria ward, Ashford, I had to seek permission to do so. As a civil servant working for central government I'm allowed to stand in local - but not general - elections.

When I got on the phone to HR to ask permission I downplayed the whole thing, saying that some people played golf for a hobby and some people do local politics. He paused and said, 'I know what I'd rather do' and I thought I'd blown it. He then said, 'I'd rather do the local politics too' and I knew I had got the approval I needed. Since then I haven't looked back, and I'm thankful that I can participate in the local democratic process in a way that many people in poor countries often cannot.

But it's because of the importance of these basic rights - to engage in local democracy and decision making – that I accepted the invitation to speak to you this evening.

And here I speak wearing all of my hats - and none.

And I'd like to share with you my dismay – in fact my total disbelief – at the erosion of democracy and the lack of participation in decision making in this borough – especially in relation to the proposed development of Wye.

I speak from my own experience as a would-be stakeholder in the Ashford's future process. Meaningful public consultation in this process is sorely lacking, it is piecemeal, it is irregular, it is token. It is unacceptably poor.

Similarly, the proposal for a science park in the village of Wye is flawed, it does not reflect the will of the people of Wye, and, for these reasons, it is bound to fail.

Firstly, it is flawed economically. It is dubious that the presence of three science parks in east Kent - in Sittingbourne, Canterbury and Wye – will attract the scale of investment needed to make the Wye project a viable enterprise. Predict and provide does not work: industrial estates in many parts of Kent have vacancies, so where is all of the private investment going to come from?

Secondly, it is flawed on social grounds. Rapid growth of the kind proposed cannot be readily absorbed, and will place unbearable strain on already overstretched health and education facilities and a creaking transport infrastructure.

We have already seen from Ashford Borough Council's approach to the development of the town and its satellite settlements, that housing development comes first, and transport and social infrastructure comes very much later – if at all.

Thirdly, it will have a devastating environmental impact on an area of outstanding natural beauty – and sites of special scientific interest.... The revelation that Imperial College will need to sell land to pay for the science park should sound very loud warning bells in the hills all around. I said before that Wye is not the jewel in the crown of Ashford, it is its crown.

Ironically, the development is described by both KCC and ABC as giving “a reality to Ashford’s emerging brand as a place of opportunity which exploits its unique connectivity and its wonderful setting”.

Does the leader of Ashford Council not realise that in signing the concordat he is signing away the “wonderful setting” of Ashford - and the natural history and heritage that could benefit the people of Wye and the district as a whole in the years to come?

There will be no garden of England once it is covered in concrete. Development on greenfield sites in Wye – and in the whole of the borough - should be resisted at all costs.

As an aside, I was in the council chamber last year for one of the sporadic public consultations on Ashford’s development. I asked the leader of the council what his vision was for Ashford’s future, in other words, what was Ashford’s unique selling point or ‘brand’?

He said to me at the time, ‘I don’t know yet, but I’m going to ask consultants to develop one. Once I’ve decided I’ll tell you’.

That to me sums up the approach of the leadership of our council. These critical decisions are made behind closed doors, without consultation, and, frankly, without much imagination ... let alone the representation of the interests of the people of Ashford and the villages that make it what it is.

At the time I resented being told that the leader held the privileged position of determining Ashford’s brand. Then, in reading about the concordat I was totally dismayed to learn that our leader’s vision is to “exploit its wonderful setting” (and exploit it it certainly will)

.... and that anything goes in a land of opportunity, a land of free for all, with weak regulation and few controls on building and development and a total disregard for this area of outstanding natural beauty: the gateway to the garden of England!

For me, that is Ashford’s brand.

Fourthly, the proposed development may be illegal. The Wye Future Group claims that Ashford Borough Council and Kent County Council did not have the power to enter into such an agreement. The group accuses ABC and KCC of having pre-judged the planning process and showing bias to a

developer in the form of Imperial College. We'll see what the outcome of this particular legal battle will be.

Lastly, the lack of consultation on the Wye Concordat completely undermines the rationale for the entire project. There has been no room for debate about the issues ... the council has made up its mind before villagers have had a chance to object ...and the concordat prejudices the benefits that could arise from the development ..

Council leaders have signed the agreement before councillors have had a chance to debate the issue or vote on them. This is a violation of democratic principles. It is a scandal.

And one thing I've learnt is that a failure to consult, the failure to bring people on board at the very earliest stage in a project as big as this, spells failure.

All this is not to say that I am totally opposed to the project. I would dearly love to see Wye College revitalised and playing a leadership role in science and technology benefit for the 21st century.

I have worked at Wye College myself, on the international distance learning programme as well as doing some face to face teaching, and I wholly support its role in providing education to thousands of students both globally and locally and in leading research in agriculture and other fields, including alternative energy sources – especially in a world where energy security is more important than ever before.

But the question is this: should the development of Imperial College's Wye Campus be at the expense of the village itself – and its natural history and heritage? Perhaps this is something that only the people of Wye can answer.

Whatever happens, our role must be to support the people of Wye in the local democratic and decision making process And on this note I'd like to wrap up my speech and share something of my own experience in fighting battles of this kind.

In the summer of 1982 I went to Tasmania to protest against the construction of the Franklin dam. As an Australian student I was in my gap year.

This dam meant lots of jobs for the boys but very little in terms of megawatts of power. This was a world heritage listed site, home to one of the world's last wild rivers and some of the most precious rainforest on earth. The dam was an anomaly to say the least.

It mobilised public opinion – internationally as well – and David Bellamy was thrown in prison on his birthday As were 1000 people over the course of a few months ... including me and my husband to be.

The battle to save the Franklin ended in Australia's high court. Four judges against three decided to stop the dam. We won! And we had made

constitutional and conservation history ... the federal govt for the first time intervened in state affairs.

From this I learnt a number of valuable lessons.

1. It is possible to win battles of this kind. The wilderness area is now a world heritage site. It is possible to make a difference ... and maybe that's why I keep on doing what I'm doing and why so many of you are involved in the local democratic process too. You want to make Ashford Borough a better place!

2. The other lesson is that the ballot box counts. Let me explain.

The Australian Labour party backed the conservation lobby in this battle, and on our backs they came to power after about 18 years of conservative rule. This is a fact.

The conservation lobby swung the last general election result in Australia, too. It is a force to be reckoned with.

And I will end on this point. Battles are won and they are lost. Elections are won and lost. Next year, the people of Wye can use the ballot box to make their voices heard, and secure the representation on Ashford council that they deserve.

The challenge for those of us gathered here this evening is to hear those voices and respond to those needs ... and to provide a real alternative to the status quo. The 2007 elections present a real opportunity for change. Let's rise to that challenge.