Local Election Manifesto

A Liberal Commentary on New Labour proposals for reforming local government:

Throwing the baby out with the bath water

by **Cllr Fran Oborski** (Wyre Forest)

Liberals believe that, in trying to deal with the corruption and malpractice which is rife in Labour Council groups in big cities up and down the country, this Government's strategy for re-organising local government is in danger of throwing the democratic baby out with the corruption bath water.

Liberals wonder how New Labour can possibly imagine that corruption and graft will be diminished by:

a. giving enormous power to directly elected mayors, council leaders or council cabinets;
b. directing that council cabinet meetings be held in secret;
c. rewarding elite groups of councillors with huge cash allowances.

Liberals believe that in a democracy, the voices of all elected members must be given equal weight. Some tightening up of the present committee system might well be justified but there is no excuse for the wholesale destruction of democracy which these proposals will entail.

Liberal councillors will refuse to be bound by excessive demands for secrecy. On hung councils, we will seek to ensure that systems are put in place which encourage power sharing.

Liberals believe that each council should be left to decide on its own committee structure. Central government should get on with doing its own job and stop meddling in local councils. The best way to increase participation in local democracy would be to restore spending powers to local government, so that voters are actually able to choose between political parties who would be offering a choice of real services in their local manifestos.

However, we do welcome efforts to make voting easier. We believe that anyone should be able to have a postal vote without the need to provide medical or business reasons. Similarly, in these days of high technology, it

should be possible to deal with applications for postal votes up to 72 hours before the day of the election.

It is the obvious contempt in which local councils are held by both Labour and Conservative Governments which have led to low voter turnout. Liberals look with envy at the much more powerful local councils in the rest of Europe. We believe we have much to learn from them.

A summary of our Local Policies

Finance
Liberals would replace the Council Tax with a local income tax and a local rate based on land values. Performance Review Units and importing of best practice would ensure quality services, best value for money and consequently acceptable levels of local taxation.

Housing
Liberals oppose the depletion of council housing stock by both Labour and Conservative Governments. Liberals envisage an enhanced role for local councils in the provision of rented housing, sheltered accommodation and housing advice centres.

Education
Liberal education policy seeks to maximise self-fulfilment of every individual. Liberal philosophy opposes centralised directives such as the national curriculum and promotes comprehensive systems of education and small, community based schools sharing resources with neighbouring schools as appropriate. Increased and sustained investment in teachers, buildings and equipment will inevitably require extra funding.

Libraries
Liberals oppose library closures, recognising that public lending libraries are an invaluable source of learning, information and pleasure to the local communities they serve. Internet access and maintaining an up to date stock of reference material such as maps, directories and encyclopaedias would be our priority.

Arts Leisure and Heritage
Grants combined with low-cost access to public buildings for theatre, local Theatre, music, poetry and arts groups provide best value for money. Sport would be likewise supported through community-based facilities and amateur clubs. Local heritage would be sustained with vibrant museum and archive services, restoration grants and projects to protect traditional skills.

Environmental Services
Liberals deplore the continuing loss of open spaces, parkland and wildlife

areas and we would act to reverse this trend. All council functions would be subject to a "Green Audit" and incorporate programmes of repair, restoration, reclamation and recycling and a review of energy consumption.

Planning
Liberals would encourage the integration of industry, commerce, shopping and housing, in an effort to reduce needless commuting. We would halt the wholesale destruction of our architectural heritage, preferring rehabilitation of existing buildings for residential use, shops, small businesses and workshops.

Emergency Services
Liberals have long campaigned to reinforce community involvement and accountability of both police, fire brigade and ambulance services, deploying them in such a way as to be perceived by the community as being different components of one benign and local emergency service. We oppose centralisation and consequent diminution of these services.

Social Services
Care in the Community is a liberal concept but it must be properly funded and should enhance, not replace, individual and community effort. We would spend more on qualified social workers who deliver services on the ground and would spend less on needless layers of management. We would prioritise the welfare of children.

Transport
We would spend less on new roads and more on improving existing highways, which would be of benefit to all road users, including cyclists and pedestrians. We would institute a properly co-ordinated and well advertised network of buses, together with improvement of local rail routes. Liberals champion the concept of free local public transport.

Economic Development
All councils should take a lead in bringing together local sources of finance and expertise to develop the local economy. Liberals support local enterprise agencies to provide counselling for new and existing businesses, training courses and a "one-stop" shop for business enquiries. Liberals also favour Local Exchange Trading Systems and support day centres for the unemployed