

Latest Homes Magazine, Brighton
November 23 2005

.....

COUNCIL LEADER KEN BODFISH TELLS BILL SMITH HOW HE PLANS TO TAKE THE ~
CITY FORWARD AND ABOUT HIS PROBLEM WITH GREENS AND 'MOANERS'

Can you tell us something about your background?

I went to school in South London, first a comprehensive called Eltham Green, its only claim to fame being that Boy George went there. I was the first kid from there to go to university, Leicester, and from there to Manchester to do a post-grad Certificate in Education. I lectured at a hard-nosed technical college in Manchester, where the best groups I ever taught were called Blo 1 and Blo 2, which stood for brake-lining ops 1 and 2 - teaching them about liberal studies on Friday at 4pm was quite difficult!

Why did you come to Brighton?

I moved to be with my partner in 1979 and that's it.

Did you have to fight to become leader?

Yes, politics isn't easy, there's quite a few people who can do the job.
You just have to convince your mates you're the one.

What's your greatest achievement?

Turning Brighton and Hove into a unitary city with a vision of economic prosperity, sustainability and social inclusiveness.

Do you support business? Some say you don't give enough grants to growing businesses.

Our role is to facilitate, to provide the right climate for business to thrive in the city. I meet with business people all the time. We have a positive attitude to solving transport issues, about maximum land use within the city and we liaise with business leaders. We are a very pro-business city, as witnessed by the number of companies who want to move here. As for grants for business, the days of handouts are long gone. There's also the Economic Partnership, which businesspeople - like yourselves - can be involved with or not. It's essentially your decision but it's there and we're happy to work with businesses and do provide financial support to the Economic Partnership, the City Centre Business Forum etc. The critical thing is that we try to create the climate for business to grow.

Do you want Brighton to grow with tourists and culture to, say, the size of Barcelona?

The one problem with Barcelona is people don't feel safe there. We already have a young vibrant city but the economy must be sustainable, which is why we must get to grips with the King Alfred, the station site and the football stadium. I've been a very long supporter of the King Alfred scheme. We chose Gehry and as a consequence we had Jim Ayres, who did the bridge at Gateshead, working down the road with Andrew Goodall at the Marina and we very sorry that the planning committee threw out that important development. It's very important that we get a sustainable community in place before the next decade, particularly meeting our housing needs. There are 700 houses at the King Alfred, something like 350 to 400 will be affordable. We've got to get houses

and flats on the market which are below the entry level of the housing market at the moment.

Do you think the Conservatives will get back in locally, following gains in recent years?

I don't think they are popular locally and they'll never get a majority in Brighton and Hove. I just hope the public realises only the Labour Party in Brighton and Hove can move this city forward. The Greens were adamantly opposed to the stadium at Falmer and are a very negative influence in general terms. They oppose everything in order to gain votes and they are not consistent at all. It's interesting to look at Birmingham and Leeds. In Birmingham the business community can't get on with the Conservative administration and in Leeds people say the Liberal Democrat-controlled authority can't take decisions.

Blair or Brown?

I don't have a vote!

Cameron or Davis?

From the Labour Party point of view we'd like Davis as he'd be a disaster for the Conservative Party.

Transport: aren't Labour seen as anti-car?

With growing car ownership these days all political parties realise we need to limit the use of cars. In Brighton and Hove, by improving the bus services, we've actually stopped the growth in car ownership in the city. We can never go back to the old days, you dig out old photos of only 25 years ago where everybody could park outside their house and that's not possible now!

Isn't it a bit us and them, what with councillors getting free parking at Kings House?

I needed a car today as I've just done an interview on local radio and after this I have to get to Gatwick. In a sense I'm an essential worker.

I agree that we couldn't go back but there's nothing wrong in having a car. Should we invest more money in small cars, maybe electric cars?

I'm a multi-modal person: walking, cycling, buses, taxis, cars, trains, planes. I use all these forms of transport, whichever is more appropriate at the time. I'm a cyclist and I go out cycling most weekends but I'm not going to cycle to Sainsbury's if I've got three bags of shopping.

What's your single biggest ambition for Brighton and Hove?

Improving prosperity, improving sustainability and making it generally inclusive. We can do that. We've got the Greens who say they want environmental sustainability but don't want economic growth - you've actually got to match them - and the Conservatives who are not involved historically in being socially inclusive. I believe that we are rounded in our approach.

What about the Lib Dems?

In this city they've been generally supportive of what we are trying to do. There's a north-south divide. In the north, Liberals take from Labour but in the south it's from Conservatives. The Conservatives are also split down the middle between those who have a vision for the city and those who are very parochial in their perspective. I could name you Conservatives who have a vision for the city and I know that some Conservatives

actually favour the King Alfred proposals, but they are very divided.
The Greens, on the whole, with one exception, are very negative people.

What is your reaction to the 'yes' decision on the football stadium at Falmer?

Terrific, because it's not just a football stadium, it's a community stadium. The club, for example, works with handicapped kids, they do a lot of work in the community.

Brighton is painted as a drugs capital. What is being done?

An enormous amount. We're developing a proposal about police raids on crack houses. One of the difficulties has always been what you do with the victims. You've got to do something about the kids who've been stuffed by being in the crack house and what we are now doing is moving in to make sure they are provided with rehabilitation. Not just leaving them to be taken over by another drug baron a few weeks later.

What are the best and worst parts of your job?

The best are when you achieve positive results. Like when we got the stadium accepted, when we get the King Alfred through, when we get decisions on taking the city forward. I'm proud of the work with the Jubilee Library, the Festival, the Arts and Sustainability Commissions. I do get fed up with the moaners and with some of the abuse my colleagues have received over wheelie bins, for instance. I get fed up with that little gang of people who attend every meeting of the council and shout as if they're representative of the city.

They are not! Nobody in their right mind apart from councillors would attend council meetings as often as they do. There is a small group of people who attend more meetings than I do and they write more letters to The Argus, which are printed and they are not the voice of the city. All those people writing in objections to the King Alfred scheme are not the city! I also get fed up with the press, which can be more interested in knocking copy than supporting copy. I'm very happy to be criticised legitimately or argued with. There are always legitimate differences of opinion about the way you do things. Let's have a proper debate about it not a yah-boo debate.

If you want to reply to anything Ken Bodfish has said in this extraordinarily frank interview, get typing and we'll get printing!

-