

THE ROLE OF THE CHIEF COMMONER IN 2002

Read by Jonathan Charkham Esq, CBE MA

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The political context

The fundamental context for all the members of the Court of Common Council and for the Officers of the Corporation in the year 2002 was that party politics did not obtrude directly. This has not always been so in history - one has only to consider the Civil War period. I do not know to this day where colleagues' party allegiance lies, or indeed if they have any. It may not be so later as the new franchise takes affect. The passage of the Bill governing the new franchise was the most significant event of the year, but the Chief Commoner had little to do with it. Power lay with the Town Clerk and the Chairman of Policy and Resources. The settlement they achieved is, with all the attendant pain of change, a modest step forward compared with what radical people might have hoped.

The debates in Parliament were not on strictly party lines but even so party politics at the national level are always in the background because of the danger that some extreme elements might try to dissolve the Corporation, seize its money and divide its functions among the adjacent Boroughs. This threat seems to have faded but there was a general feeling that one should never be too complacent and this affected many of the decisions the Corporation made in its efforts to maintain the goodwill of Whitehall and of all the surrounding Boroughs. Danegeld is too strong a word to describe the reason for our substantial investment outside the City. There was a general sense of obligation that we should use some of our resources to help adjacent Boroughs less fortunate than ourselves. Even so the need to maintain a critical mass of functions for the Corporation to execute was one of the cardinal principles of policy.

Power

There was no shortage of personal politics and the Chief Commoner was inevitably dragged into them. In 2002 these centered around the position of the Chairman of the Policy & Resources Committee, across whose desk passed all meaningful decisions. This has always been a powerful position but the year saw the most powerful incumbent of modern times coming to the end the term of office after six years. There have been some strong Chairmen before, but her pre-eminence was achieved by sheer ability backed-up by steely determination and ambition. As a minor example, it led to her requesting me not to make a speech at the Mansion House at the Local Authorities dinner on the grounds that 'this would send the wrong message' But the Lord Mayor, who had invited me to do so, insisted I did it.

The chairman acquired a near monopoly of the Corporation's contacts in the City, in the GLA, with Brussels and in the United States. Her success was widely recognised unofficially and officially, but it led as it was bound to do, to tensions within the Corporation as some members grew concerned at the concentration of power, felt themselves neglected and became resentful.

In the end an attempt to remove her through a motion to restrict the term of Office to 5 years was only averted by the incumbent's own decision to stand down. Part of the price of peace was an understanding that there would in due course be a motion before the Court to limit the term of Office of the Chairman of Policy & Resources and the Chairman of Finance to 5 years and the term of Office for all other Committees to 3 years, except City Lands where the term would be one year. The committee and the Court have now approved such a change. I mention this matter because two important facets of a Chief Commoner's work are demonstrated by it.

The first is that the Chief Commoner's single year in Office limits the powerbase (just as it does for the Lord Mayor). Between that Office and others with a 5 year term there can be no contest. It is important therefore that a Chief Commoner should not act as if such an alternative powerbase were practical even if it were desirable. If the Court of Common Council in its wisdom does wish to have another centre of gravity, the Office of Chief Commoner would need to be extended to 3 years and this would entirely change its character. As it is, the distribution of power made it essential to avoid 'I' trouble! It's a team game.

The other consequence is that as the Chief Commoner is not a power centre but does have the benefit of an august title there is some scope to use the Office as a means of smoothing difficult relationships elsewhere among the power hungry. Its very essence is discretion. To do this effectively the Chief Commoner must strain every nerve to be in contact with as wide a range of members as possible so as to gauge their feelings and understand their views. The limelight is to be avoided, and a sense of humour helps. If I had entertained any notions of folie de grandeur, they were soon dispelled. A friend told me, three months into my year, that the Corporation website still named as Chief Commoner my predecessor but one!

One of the key elements to managing this part of the business was the weekly meeting with the Town Clerk. This had the greatest possible value. Information flowed both ways. Odds and ends were gathered in. New ideas were set in train. A sense of perspective was maintained. It also provided a useful conduit for dealing with members' complaints about officers, although I am glad to say that I had virtually none of these.

In my experience individual committees are good at dealing with matters in their own patch. The machine is less good at handling matters that straddle several committees. Co-ordination in such cases is a matter for Policy and Resources, but they often seemed to miss their cue. I found myself trying with the help of the Town Clerk trying to achieve 'joined up government'. (Examples? The use of premises; licensing; restrictions on hours; planning consent; enforcement. Another example – the Barbican ponds)

Feuds and vendettas

One of the less attractive consequences of politics being personal rather than party was the occasional feud or vendetta, which whether for good or bad reason could be pursued with vigorous animosity, Governance is a fashionable word, but some creepy-crawlies can nestle under it. Members are often ambitious and there is nothing wrong with that but sometimes their disappointment can lead to trouble. Hell hath no fury like a member scorned except perhaps an Alderman scorned.

Getting on with the job

That takes me directly to another aspect of the Chief Commoner's job - to listen to members sympathetically and to try to help them where this is possible. Sometimes the officers were presented with a problem and action of another sort is called for – for instance when a member behaved oddly like turning up without warning at 2 o'clock in the morning at the Guildhall with a lady and without notice and demanding a bedroom. On the whole however there are few such incidents.

Within the Court of Common Council itself the Chief Commoner, as you all know, proposes certain votes of thanks, makes speeches of welcome and of farewell, and sadly, occasionally has to pronounce a panegyric. The Chief Commoner as Chairman of the City Lands and Bridge House Estates Committee also has to propose motions in Court and from time to time answer questions on property matters. One of the anomalies is that these are nowadays in practice decided by the Property Sub-Committee, but relevant motions to the Court stand in the name of the Chief Commoner. Some of these are complex, so it was wise to have the Chairman of the Property Sub-Committee at hand to field any awkward difficult technical questions that might arise. Actually none did.

The creation of the Property Sub-Committee some years ago stripped away from the Chief Commoner the most important duties - unless he or she happened to be a qualified surveyor or property expert. I took the view, possibly wrongly, that where one could not help should not hinder and I left the Property Sub-Committee to get on with it. It would have been open to me to go to the Property Conference in the South of France in March but I declined on the basis that numbers were limited and the place would be better filled by an expert. This decision was probably wrong too.

In 2002 the Chief Commoner had an office in the Guildhall, a secretary, a flat in the Guildhall, a car and driver. The flat was occasionally useful as a place in which to sleep, but not very often as I live in Knightsbridge, but it was hugely useful as a place in which to change and sometimes entertain. We did for instance have one or two small parties for new members as I felt one of the things we should do was to make them feel welcome. I thought that it was important to make new members feel wanted and to encourage them to participate fully. We need their talent.

The Office took an immense amount of time. One had the right to attend every Committee meeting and early in the year I tried to go to as many as I could particularly those Committees with whose work I was not familiar. The amount of reading was therefore formidable as one remained on Committees on which one had served before taking Office. There were all sorts of additional meetings on a regular basis like breakfast at The Mansion House on the day the Court of Common Council meets and lunch there later on that morning. One was invited ex officio to all the Committee dinners. This is fun and fascinating but can be quite exhausting particularly in the autumn when there is a great concentration of them and of other functions one must attend. All this is punctuated by people dropping in to the office; by meetings to open tenders from time to time; by meetings to consider applications for the use of the Guildhall; and by meetings to sanction expenditure under urgency procedures.

In the background to all this there is the relationship with The Mansion House. The Chief Commoner has frequent access to The Lord Mayor and they keep each other informed about what is going on; he or she also supports the Lord Mayor on at least one foreign visit. Moira and I went to Botswana and South Africa: a thoroughly enjoyable, always demanding, and extremely tiring 13 day expedition, in which as a relaxation we visited the main battlefields of the Zulu War including Rorke's Drift. I think it was constructive, and my background enabled me to give the Lord Mayor practical support especially on Corporate Governance issues. The whole thing was a delight because of the magic carpet treatment we received throughout - but a holiday it wasn't.

The days are not blocked solid so there is some chance to deal with other matters. During my year I found time to attend some board meetings, some meetings of the Committee of the Joint Disciplinary Scheme of the accounting profession and, in the evening, meetings of the Knightsbridge Association of which I was Chairman at the same time. This dual role was useful as I could examine our problems and policies through another set of eyes so to speak – Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea.

Add to this the occasional lectures, articles and meetings on Corporate Governments which has been my main subject for over 20 years and you can see there was not too much time to spare. We took virtually no private holidays during the year other than a week's break over Easter and 7 days at some other point. When the year ended we were pretty tired and went off to the South of France for 10 days and later to the Far East. Lord Mayor goes into purdah each year after demitting Office. I felt it right to follow the same kind of pattern although I am on the very best of terms with my successor. I just don't think it right, seemly, or fair to hang around; when the baton has been passed, one should return to the stands.

For a married person the Office is demanding because it cuts across family life. Many of the invitations are singles so the spouse is left at home. It follows from this that no wise person would undertake this Office without the spouse's blessing and sincere support. One needs it. I had it in the greatest measure possible. Those of you who know her will agree that Moira was a tower of strength throughout. Although she is not here today I want to place on public record my thanks to her. Without her unflagging support the job could never have been done properly.

Ceremonial events

To the outside world perhaps the most obvious of the Chief Commoner's duties are connected with our big ceremonial events. The Chief Commoner does, after all, chair the Hospitality Working Party which agrees the programme. It was part of my aim to make sure that City Lands, my own Committee, did not hog the role of host. Members prize highly the right to serve on a Committee that is sponsoring and running a particular occasion. Sometimes this may be in the care of a particular Committee like Finance and sometimes it may be a Committee drawn from the whole Court. Even so, City Lands often finds itself the host. The most notable event in 2002 was the luncheon given to celebrate Her Majesty the Queen's Golden Jubilee. This magnificent occasion was preceded by a drive in State, a ceremony at Temple Bar where she was received by the Lord Mayor, and a service of Thanksgiving at St. Paul's. All this involved hundreds of people in the preparations and rehearsals. Those of us at the Temple Bar ceremony

found ourselves in the City of London at 5 O'Clock on the previous Sunday morning clattering through empty streets, to be regaled with coffee at Child's Bank by the Temple Bar Memorial prior to standing in the road to get the choreography right.

By common consent the luncheon was an outstanding success. My Committee did a brilliant job in selecting the menu. The wine was outstanding; the Claret was *Leoville Barton 1989* - a last minute switch (with the help of the Barton family) from 1990 - potentially a better year but not quite ready... During the course of the occasion one had the opportunity of being presented to Her Majesty and being photographed with her.

Sometimes the decisions one makes about what not to do make a difference too. I resisted, for instance, the suggestion that things were done in Guildhall Yard during the lunch, as I predicted it could cause difficulty when people surged out and it would cause chaos if it were raining. As you will all remember the rains came 24 hours later. On this occasion and throughout the year the Chief Commoner is part of a great team and should feel that way about it. Staff in the Remembrancer's Office right across the Corporation are highly professional, one can trust them to do a first rate job. What they need and all the officers need are sensible decisions made without undue fuss and delay, a sympathetic ear when adjustments need to be made and honest appreciation when it is all over. I should add that as part of one's job one looks at the 'placements' for these major functions. At the luncheon itself the Prime Minister and Duke of Edinburgh caused some amusement by muddling their places - and had to do a swift pas de deux to put it right. Some places are more or less decided automatically, but there is plenty of scope to cause pleasure or offence. Some members are not backward in coming forward to the Remembrancer's Office to fiddle with the placements. I resisted this strenuously and told the staff there to let me know if anyone tried to bully them. I'm glad to say that this stopped.

Personal entertaining

You might also like to know about the entertaining I did in Guildhall, bearing in mind that entertaining at home was virtually impossible for the whole year. Some of my predecessors held a series of events. I decided to keep it simple. We had a lunch in the Chief Commoner's parlour for the fellow members of my Ward and of the Ward of Bassishaw. We had a lunch on the fourth floor for the Officers and Court of the Worshipful Company of Upholders. My wife had a couple of lunches on the fourth floor for friends and we had a party in the Art Gallery for personal friends not in the Corporation. All of these were at my own expense. I am licking my wounds still. Luckily I had over the years built up some reserves of wine: they have now nearly all gone. The final event, which I promoted with the Chairman of the Property Sub-Committee and the City Surveyor was a small party one evening at the Old Bailey for that Committee and for people from the property world who had been of real help to us during the year. This turned out to be much appreciated and I hope it will constitute a precedent for others to follow.

Achievements?

It is the general nature of the Chief Commoner's office that makes it interesting and indeed takes time. If you asked me to define its duties in a single sentence – I would reply in the same terms I heard when I entered the public service thirty years ago. It would be to "move the public business forward".

Finally, I suppose you might ask whether I felt I had achieved anything. I will give myself an "E" for effort. I hope I was able to help keep the show on the road. I got a number of things started and look forward to my successors to complete. I did for instance bring the City Lands Committee in during August to get the plans for the West Wing approved: that is why the work is already underway. We got the main policy lines sorted out for the North Block, but it's a long way out yet. You will now find notice of questions available as you enter for a Court meeting; and you will find the reply in the minutes. You will find three new benches in Guildhall Yard. One last thing: I stand before you today as an immediate past Chief Commoner, not as Deputy Chairman of City Lands. This is because I was able to persuade both the Committee and the Court that it was sensible to have a Deputy coming up to Office rather than one that has left Office, so that he or she can as it were hit the deck running. I hope the idea proves successful.