

Points of view

Impartial press is vital for healthy local democracy



PAUL ARNOTT

Back in 2013, I was recovering from a serious dose of leukaemia aided by a bone marrow transplant courtesy of the Anthony Nolan charity. Some might say, and my wife did, that I should concentrate on getting well and leave others to battle against multiple irregularities where I live. I'd had a lucky escape, terrified my four children, and should take the hint.

But then, people of Honiton, I came to a meeting in your town.

A small group of individuals, who'd met on a march about governance across East Devon, decided to have a public meeting here. The then chairman (now our president) was a retired judge. His committee included a former senior police detective, a retired headteacher and a senior figure from Exeter University. They had a lot to be serious about, and were going about it seriously.

Astonishingly just a month before, a senior East Devon councillor had made the front pages, offering an undercover reporter from *The Daily Telegraph* help getting planning permission for cash, saying he didn't come cheap, and that though historically East Devon had been one of the hardest places to get planning permission, now it was about to become one of the easiest. This merely confirmed what thousands already suspected.

The Honiton meeting I bowled along to was understandably full of outrage, together with a hope that something would at last "be done". I got to my feet and advised them to expect that over the next two years a healthy slap of whitewash would be applied by every public body engaged in investigating the matter. I knew, from local experience, which supposedly responsible public officials would deliver this. Sure enough, 600 days later the file was closed and the chief executive of East Devon District Council forbid the council from discussing the matter further. The whole thing had been "political" he said, and he scapegoated the

Independent councillor Claire Wright.

Cut forward to June 2017, and the same Claire Wright stood as an Independent candidate for Parliament and won 21,000 votes. An astonishing result. And two years before that in 2015 that little Honiton gathering had turned into the East Devon Alliance of Independents.

At the district elections, after just three months' preparation and a fraction of the money available to the national parties, it won 10 council seats, with other Independes filling another seven. The EDA came a close second in many more. Then last year the EDA won a county seat.

This phenomenon of local people mistrusting national parties in their local governance is taking off across the south west. In Frome, Brad-

ford-upon-Avon and Buckfastleigh, new groups committed to openness, transparency and accountability in democracy have taken over councils. They have been able to sweep away cliques and rotten rule books which had spoiled their public life for decades.

In a sense, none of this is new. The novelist RL Delderfield wrote about it just after the Second World War in 1947 in a book (later filmed) called *All Over The Town*. In the month when Honiton has just acquired the brilliant new newspaper you are reading now, it's worth noting that he centred his plot at the *Sandcombe Clarion*, a fictional local paper in a thinly disguised Exmouth. It's a very funny read with two key messages. The first is that a community without an impartial local press is almost inevitably prone to corruption. The second was a plea for some kind of "independent party" only wanting to help local people and not climbing the greasy pole of national politics. Delderfield knew that both were precious – and very hard to achieve.

You might well say, as I have heard many times, "you get this everywhere" or "there's nothing you can do".

But in the last year these counsels of despair have transformed into increased involvement from many previously uncommitted local people. The issue triggering this has been the NHS and the tragi-comic "restructuring" or, as it is often called with a straight face by Conservatives in Devon, "improvements".

People realise that by losing in-patient beds at Axminster, Honiton, Ottery St Mary and Seaton in just a few years, these "improvements" are a charade. Many local people had also raised money to build these hospitals and are beginning to understand that they may well return in a decade or so and find the plots they paid for by fund-raising covered in unaffordable five-bedroom homes.

As Delderfield depicted, the worm in the apple in local government is that certain councillors always realise that in a country area the greatest asset, the gold in the fields, is land. If you can get your field re-zoned from agricultural to residential it's trips to Thailand all round and a nice new Range Rover. There are many millions of pounds involved. The other stuff comes a distant second.

That is not to say that there

are not many sincere councillors wearing the blue rosette who are not doing their best. It is unfair to tar them with the same brush.

But in East Devon we have a "cabinet" form of government, where many of this tiny clique are also county councillors and are pressing their fingers firmly into other regional pies such as the Greater Exeter Local Plan or The Heart of the South West project. Which voters have the first clue what these quangos are and who sits on them..?

So, by an accident of the rare availability of the splendid Beehive on a bank holiday in late May, it's back to Honiton for me and the gently protesting folk from the East Devon Alliance. Almost exactly five years since that first meeting we have room for a couple of hundred people to come along and see what you might just be able to do.

The job of reforming how you are governed in the place you live has hardly begun.

Paul Arnot is Chairman of the East Devon Alliance of Independents. The 'Time for a Change' People's Conference is at the Beehive in Honiton on Saturday, May 26

Count on a good walk to stay healthy

May is Walking Month and the Public Health Agency is setting everyone a challenge to count their steps and then try to do a bit more.

There are many health benefits of walking and adding a brisk pace to your step can help you feel good, reduce anxiety, help manage your weight, reduce blood pressure and help you sleep better. It is also very enjoyable and a good opportunity to socialise, which is also good for health.

Many of us don't know how many steps we take each day so tracking them is a great starting point as you can see how many you do, but also it can help you set yourself a target.

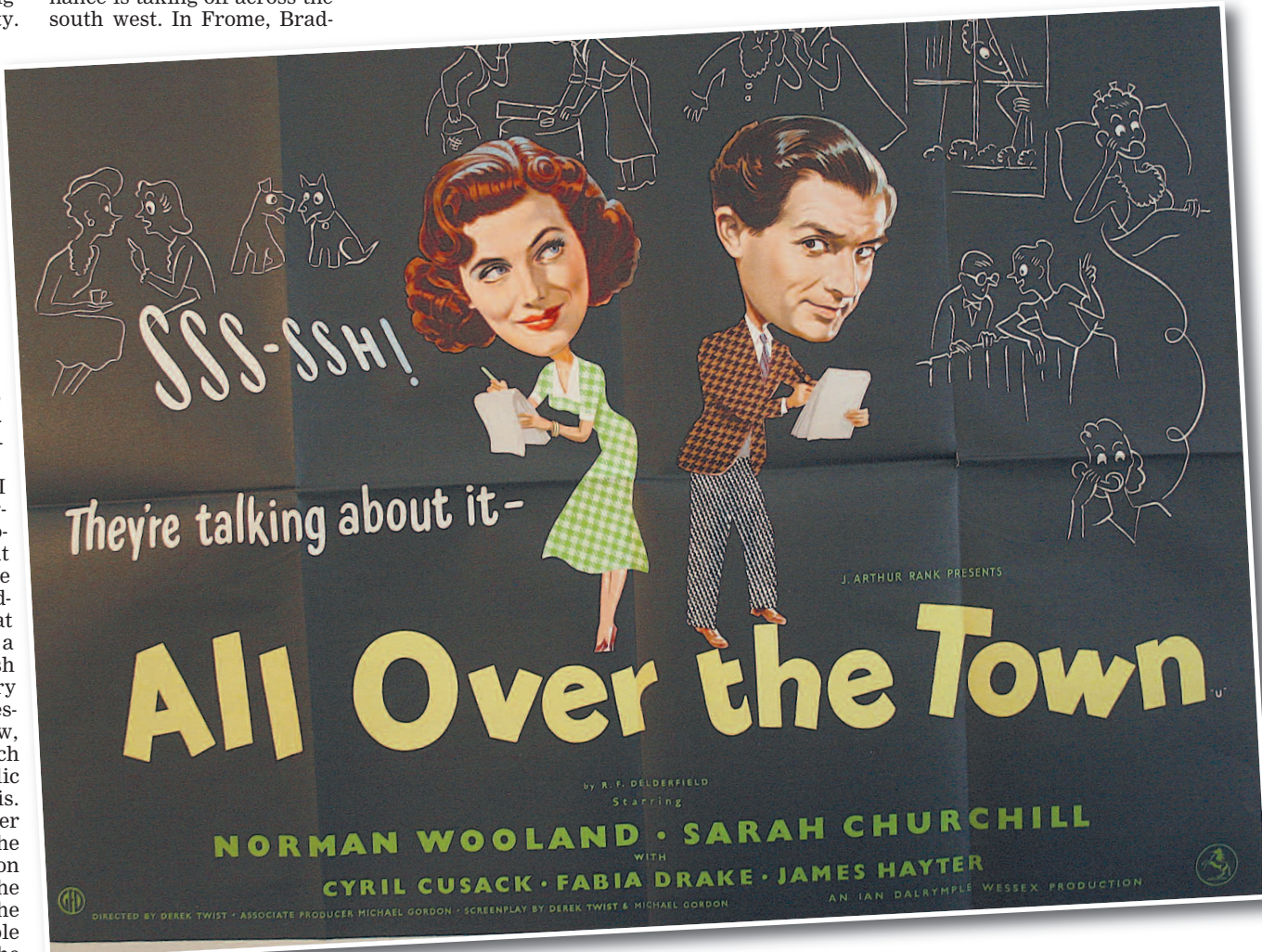
The average number of steps a person takes each day is quite low – between 3,000 to 4,000 steps – so we could all do with getting a bit more active and walking is one of the easiest activities to fit in to your daily routine.

For instance, if you have to take the car to work, you could park a bit further away from the building than normal and walk that little extra to the office. Better still use public transport. Research has shown that we are likely to be more active if we use other forms of transport.

Think about things you normally do, like driving to the shops for milk, when maybe you could walk that trip instead. You can also enjoy walking together as a family and walk with the children to school, which will encourage them from an early age to be active.

Walking groups can also be a good way to get started and it's also a great way to make friends who can keep you motivated.

Colette Brolly, the lead for physical activity at the PHA



The novelist RL Delderfield wrote about the press and local democracy in 1947 in a book – later filmed – called *All Over The Town*