

AFTER LUNCH SPEECH TO SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL 23 RD MAY 2017

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address you today. I congratulate all the councillors on your election or re-election. I understand that out of 81 councillors 29 have been elected for the first time. I wish you well in office.

Public service is essential to the functioning of a vibrant democracy. I have never stood for political office but I have worked in Government, about which I will say more in a moment.

A High Sheriff is a public office appointed by the Monarch but is non-political.

I was installed in Guildford Cathedral to the blaring of trumpets on the 21st April. An auspicious date as it was both our daughters' birthday and of course the real birth date of the Queen. As many of you will know the Cathedral is undergoing a major refurbishment and the interior was fully decked in scaffolding. This didn't blot the service but the photographs are not flattering as I, my immediate predecessor, the LL and the Under Sheriff all in our fancy uniforms look very out of place in a building site!

How did I become HS of Surrey? No ballot box but there is a proper process involving a Nominations Committee with a written constitution and a membership reflecting a good cross section of leaders and opinion formers in the County. To be HS you must own a property in the County and preferably live in the county. My complication was that our postal address is West Sussex. The Privy Council, who advise the Queen on these appointments, said Robert can't be HS of Surrey. Evidence of Council Tax payment to Waverly sorted that out although we do live very close to the Sussex border. White van delivery men do get very confused about the border area!

I hasten to say it is not like the border area between Bolivia and Brazil where in my WWF days I was threatened by illegal loggers with menacing guns; and stayed a night in very suspect lodgings where the previous night someone had been murdered in my room. A fact I fortunately only learned the next morning. The Parish of Cranleigh is safer!

Referring to WWF brings me to my connections with Surrey. I was born and brought up in Dundee in Scotland and I am very frustrated I have lost my Scottish accent. I am thinking of having elocution lessons to get it back...although that might confuse our young grand children!

We moved to Baynards in 1985 when I was working for Redland in Reigate as Finance Director of what was a FSTE company with quarries, brick and roof tile plants in the UK and over 30 countries around the world. I climbed up the greasy pole and became Chief Executive in 1991. I survived in that role for 6.4 years. I read the other day that the average tenure of chief executive is now 4 years, so I didn't do too badly.

I then had an unusual career move and became Chief Executive of WWF then based in Godalming. A great 8 years. Being chased by illegal loggers only one of many interesting and normally worthwhile experiences!

After WWF I moved into Quango land. I was chairman of the Board of the Met Office for six years. The fact that one of the few decent Saturdays weather wise in 2008 was the day of our daughter's wedding here in Surrey was entirely coincidental!

I then became Chairman of the Homes and Communities Agency. This is the Government quango that was the merger of the old English Partnerships and of the Housing Corporation. Spending was £4 to £8 billion a year of tax payers money. I served for eight years in that post and in the process reported to 8 different Housing Ministers. I know the High Sheriff term of office is only one year but I think there would be merit in Government Ministers serving a bit longer. I hasten to say that is not a political party comment.

In my role at the HCA, I became very involved in our work and funding in regeneration projects around England.

I visited many “deprived” communities how I hate that word “deprived” and prefer the term “areas that are socially and economically challenged”.

My travels took me to the west coast of Cumbria, inner Liverpool, West Hull and to Surrey. To Sheerwater and Merstham in particular.

In the last few months in preparation for the HS role, I have talked to many local politicians, council executives and charities and have been encouraged to pursue as my focus for the year the challenged areas in Surrey. David McNulty suggested we call them “Priority Places”, as they used to be named.

I want to support all the great efforts being undertaken by you as the County Council and the Boroughs. And of course, in particular the charities, churches, youth groups working in the Priority Places. You will all know where the most significant places are. Sheerwater, Merstham, Park Barn, Stanwell and Old Dean, Sandy Lane. I hope to take an interest, encourage and celebrate what is being done.

I repeat that the HS is a non political role and I will not, and indeed must not, step on any party political toes. That does not mean I cannot work with Councillors of the appropriate wards.

The role of the HS has evolved since before 1066. The history is fascinating and not all HS died natural deaths. Don't fall out with the Monarch!

Today HS are, as I said, appointed by the Queen and your prime role is on behalf of the Monarch to support the Judiciary. This I will do, in the Courts, with the Police and in the prisons of Surrey. Thereafter a HS has an open book and hence my decision to focus on the communities in the "Priority Places". I will actively support The High Sheriff Youth Awards many of which are targeted at such communities. I thank the Council for your financial support of the Youth Awards.

There is much to learn in this role. A well-known previous HS told me you must learn the words of the second verse of the National Anthem.

Do you know there are actually six verses of the Anthem As a Scotsman there is one verse I will NOT sing:

Lord grant that Marshal Wade

May by thy mighty aid

Victory bring.

May he sedition hush,

And like a torrent rush,

Rebellious Scots to crush.

God save the King!

Mr Chairman, Councillors and all here, I wish to do my best for the people of Surrey during my year and I would be grateful for your continuing advice and support.

RSN