

12 **THE MARCH MEETING** **13th MARCH, 2000**

Reported by Michael Hinton

Richard Bowditch, Director of Finance and Technical Support at the DDC, spoke about the proposed introduction of the cabinet system into local government. Official implementation of the system depends upon the Local Government Bill at present passing through Parliament, but many local authorities are experimenting with one of the three options likely to be on offer.

The arguments for change are that the procedures of local government have remained basically unchanged for a century; that local government elections attract only a low turnout of voters; that in many areas a single party dominates local politics, and may be out of touch with the electorate at large; and that councillors and officers tend to be male, middle-aged, middle class and white - alternatively described as 'smarmy gits in suits'. Other countries make use of mayors or city managers with wide powers. There is a need for local government to be more efficient, transparent and accountable.

Arguments against change are that councillors actually do know their locality and what electors think; and that the proposed system will give undue influence to vociferous minorities. The likelihood is however that the government will proceed with the new system.

The three main options are for a directly elected mayor assisted by a cabinet, a leader with a cabinet, or a directly elected mayor assisted by a central manager. The mayors will combine civic and political responsibilities and the job may well prove to be a full-time one.

Locally the system experimentally adopted is of a leader, a deputy and six cabinet members, each responsible for an area of policy. All are drawn from the governing party. There are two scrutiny

committees, chaired by members of the chief opposition party, and a standing committee charged with the oversight of councillors' behaviour. The body of councillors will serve on the scrutiny committees and represent the views of the public; there will be much less committee work. The whole system is provisional and at present all decisions have to go back to the Policy and Services Committee. It is anticipated that the Local Government Act will come into full operation in the middle of 2001.

Mr Bowditch commented that the role of the scrutiny committees will be crucial, and that their chairmen will need expert help drawn from outside the DDC itself. He envisaged the employment of consultants to peruse and criticise cabinet proposals, and the appointment of paid assistants - young people at the beginning of a political career. In all likelihood some use will be made of modern technology, perhaps by introducing internet voting. It was intended that the new system should be more sensitive to public opinion, and should make considerable use of polls and focus groups.

It was noted by members during the question and answer session which followed that the proposed changes were in machinery. It does not appear that local government will be afforded more money or more powers. The proof of this pudding will lie entirely in the eating.

After the interval Lorraine Sencicle spoke on Dickens in Dover. She sought to demonstrate that *A Tale of Two Cities* was partly based on material which Dickens had acquired during his stays in the town.

When Mrs Sencicle read the novel she was struck with some resemblances to characters she had described in her book *Banking on Dover*. John Minet Fector was a prominent Dover banker, and the name appeared to be echoed in the Manette family in the novel. Similarly Jarvis Lorry shared part of his name with George Jarvis, a close friend of Fector's, and John Minet Fector's son took the name Laurie.

Investigating further Mrs Sencicle discovered that Dickens stayed in Dover on several occasions, notably for several weeks in 1856. On that occasion he lodged in the Ship Hotel. During his stay he read a book about some-one being guillotined, and he would have been very aware of the fortifications taking place because of strained relations with France. The rooms in which he stayed were in an annexe to the hotel, and had formerly been the house of Laurie, the son of John Minet Fector.

The building of Customs House on the other side of the hotel had been financed by John Minet Fector and it seems likely that Dickens would have learned about the family. He would have learned, in

particular, that John Minet Fector was aristocratic, well educated and popular, but had eventually been tried for treason. Mrs. Sencicle argued that Charles Darnay in the novel was almost certainly based on Fector. Substantiating her general argument, she pointed to several references to Dover in the novel and to an article in *Household Words* which was clearly based on the town.

Mrs. Sencicle concluded by saying that her thesis had sufficiently convinced others for it to be published by the Dickens Fellowship and other learned societies. Her address was illustrated with delightful pictures of old Dover and she is to be congratulated on an ingenious piece of detective work.

A VISIT TO LOSELEY PARK

Reported by Tessa George

