



February 2013

Protests aren't what they used to be

The Chartist Mural Protest in John Frost Square

This is no way to run a protest! I was invited on Facebook to a demo on an issue close to me heart. The person who invited me did not turn up on time and no one seem prepared to make a speech to explain the grievance.

The Newport Chartist mural was the brainchild of Newport Council during the years 1972 to 1984 when I was a City Councillor. The artist used the faces of local officials as models for the soldiers and Chartists of 1839. I am especially fond of the one of Cefni Barnett who was the museum curator in the seventies. The mural is rightly loved by Newportonians.

In 2007 there was a threat to demolish it as part of the Modus re-development. Strong protests were made to preserve or relocate the work. Modus were removed by the Conservative led Council in 2009 so the immediate threat disappeared. Exactly a year ago the Tory/Lib Dem Council invited suggestions for the possibility of replacing the work if threatened by new developments.

Moving it would it prohibitively expensive. It could cost four times the council's budget. Four alternatives are suggested. The best is probably to re-create it in ceramics in a new indoor location. Few sensible arguments are possible to this practical pragmatic approach. Leaving it in place in its dark, windswept, deserted canyon is not the best idea.

Many of people who joined the demo are familiar faces. They are respected campaigners for green and other major issues. Others are not. A number of serial anti-Council and anti-Labour protesters were there. They seemed to be out to blame Newport Council. That's a hard argument to sustain. Speaking in John Frost Square in the shadow of the Chartist Tower alongside the Chartist mural I recalled how Newport Council had long honoured the memory of the Chartists.

On November 4th every year a commemoration is held in the cemetery of Newport Cathedral. A week's events recall the history, We annually re-dedicate ourselves to the Chartist ideals. Chartism is at the core of Newport's DNA.

Several minutes after the time when the demo was advertised to begin there was no sign of anyone trying to speak. I asked if anyone could explain what the NEW threat is that justifies the protest. A year-old press story from the BBC website seems to be the source. Fighting the bitter cold, I tried to make a few points.

No area in the whole of the UK had done more to honour the memory of the Chartists and advance their ideals than Newport. To suggest that the Council would do anything to dis-respect that memory is non-sense on stilts. As an MP I have no locus in these decisions or any power or influence over them. Those who are serious about contributing to practical alternatives should take their views to the council. I hope they do.