

Unparished area poses Horsham's West Lothian question

IT WAS Tam Dalyell, MP for West Lothian, who first asked why Scottish MPs should be allowed a say on issues affecting England which in Scotland had been devolved to the Scottish Parliament?

Despite the manifest absurdity of this situation his question has never been satisfactorily answered.

This week Horsham District Council's scrutiny committee was due to consider the special town tax levied only on households in the unparished area of Horsham town.

The case for the town tax is that there are some services provided by parishes in the



by **John Steele**
of the
Horsham
Society

rest of the district, and paid for through the separate parish element of the council tax, which in Horsham are provided by the district council.

This is unfair, some say, because for example the cost of allotments provided by a parish council are met entirely by the tax payers of that parish while the cost of allotments in Horsham are shared by all tax payers in

the district.

In other words those living in the parishes are paying twice. On the face of it that sounds a persuasive reason to even things up with a special town tax. But in reality it is not quite as simple as it sounds.

The Horsham Society has long argued that much of the expenditure incurred by the council, on what at first sight seem services for the town, is in fact for the benefit of the district as a whole.

The town is the economic, leisure and cultural focal point for the whole area. The district depends for its services on Horsham remaining a prosperous and

successful town because a third of all the council tax is paid by Horsham residents.

Take the bandstands for example. These are very popular with local residents and visitors and undoubtedly play a part in attracting shoppers to Horsham. Likewise our splendid park and floral displays; and of course our Christmas lights.

Over the years there has been much debate about which items and what proportion of costs should be covered by the town tax. The net has gradually widened and when it has suited the administration to tear up the rules they have done so with no hint of shame.

Until this year the council decided that Horsham Town Hall was partly a town resource and a contribution to the running costs was charged to the town tax. No sooner had it been decided to let it as a restaurant it was declared to be a district-wide asset and the council refused to allocate a share of the expected income to offset the town tax.

So here we have our own West Lothian question. Decisions on parish expenditure are taken by local parish councillors, whereas the same decisions in respect of Horsham are taken by the cabinet, not one member of which represents

the unparished area.

For how long are we prepared to put up with a situation where decisions directly affecting the town tax are taken by councillors representing parishes to whom the very same decisions have been devolved?

The Horsham Society is concerned about the past, present and future of the town. It seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces. Membership is open to anyone who shares these concerns. For more information, visit www.horshamsociety.org or to join telephone 01403 263870.