

Next thing I find myself out of work and at a bit of a loose end. It was just a casual job working in an architect's office, but he had designs on a younger woman and went back to the drawing board. I've never had a career. It just never seemed worth the hassle when there was so much to do at home. There were lots more under-employed women like me when we were young in the seventies – and back then men didn't need any help with paying the mortgage. It was a sacrifice we young wives made for our men, having no status, intellectual stimulus or money – there was no daytime television or home computing then either. I make cushions and jam. My friends who have careers never make jam and they buy their cushions from Jean Paul Gaultier.

Almost all my friends are graduates and they just assume I am the same but lazy. I can hold my own in conversation and they never guess I didn't go to university. No-one has ever commented on my lack of experience in drinking men under the table because maturity and motherhood has taken from them that important under-graduate skill and levelled the playing field. I like to know things so I used to do evening classes or distance learning courses, and to make a bit of pocket money I delivered catalogues or phone directories, worked in shops or offices, or cleaned other people's houses. (That's always seemed a lot more attractive than cleaning my own.) In any case it has always suited Windy to have a nearly full-time carer and it means I have time for the WI projects. But since the children left home I am a bit bored. There's only so much room in the house for cushions and jam.

My brush with the dustpan of parish life has swept a fluffy seed of an idea into my head. There's an election coming up for district and parish councils. If Jim can do it so can I, so I take myself down to the parish clerk's office and ask how to apply. I try to get her on my side; open her mind to new possibilities. It's a lost cause. Her mind is as tightly shut as a baby's fist around something lethal it found on the floor.

"There's always more going on in Bumford Sock," I say. Bumford Sock is our next door parish. "They seem to have a lot more facilities and more pride in the place too." She looks at me with total disinterest. "They've got a nice website as well. It's got mug-shots of the councillors. Some of them are even under 50." There isn't a flicker of interest, no change in her glazed gloominess at all. I don't know how she does it.

"I've come to get a form to apply to be a councillor at the next election," I say cheerily.

"We don't have elections in Fartlebury Magna." She barely looks up from her dot-to-dot puzzle. "That's not the way we do things. If you want to be co-opted best thing is to talk to the chairman."

That raises the stakes, and my hackles. In the interests of democracy I determine to make sure there's an election. I know there hasn't been one as long as we have lived here, so that must be at least 30 years. I trot off home and make a couple of posters on the computer. They say *Fartlebury Magna Needs You!* and more politely, *Please Consider Standing for Election as a Parish Councillor in May.*

The 21-seat council already has eight vacant seats. The thirteen councillors in office at the moment are definitely an unlucky number. I realise that I need to find at least ten new people and even then there wouldn't be much of an election as the empty seats would just suck up the new blood like super tampons. We need a whole gang of recruits to stage a coup. In Fartlebury Magna there are always plenty of people who think they could do as well as the current council. Consequently, the village is full of well-meaning, nice ex-councillors

because anyone nice and normal soon gives up swimming against the tide (and against Fishface and his shoal of piranhas). It's just too difficult on your own to resist the rush of effluent when the sewer gates open at the monthly meetings. I have to find enough revolutionaries and I know the revolting people I find need to be willing to stand up and be counted and then sit down and work as a team.

Windy has seen my posters. I know he is not very impressed with my computer skills. He says he doesn't particularly want to come on the council, but if I don't get ten new people he will relent and make up the numbers. He helps me put up the posters but in deference to his shyness we go after dark.

A few days later the phone rings and a male voice I don't recognise says, "Are you behind the fly-posting asking people to consider becoming a councillor?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"You want to watch out. It's illegal to put up election posters without putting your name on them."

"They're not election posters."

"Yes they are. They're promoting an election. They're asking people to stand for the council."

"That's not like asking people to vote for someone, is it." I say it as a statement, not a question.

"I'm just telling you the law. It will cost thousands to hold an election. People don't like the council wasting money unnecessarily. Watch out or the Fartlebury bods will bury you."

"Who am I speaking to?" Click. Thoughts tear through my mind slamming little brain doors behind them. One thought is about the self-styled vigilantes and their baseball bats.

I ring the Electoral Services Officer at County Hall: "What if I want to draw attention to the fact that there hasn't been an election here for more than 30 years? Can I put up posters?"

"You can put up election posters on private land. If you put them on lamp-posts or anywhere else without permission of the landowner that would be fly-posting."

"They aren't election posters. They are just to try to get people to stand as councillors so we can have an election here. The parish council should be trying to get new recruits themselves, but they don't. They never do."

"You would need to put your name and address on the bottom, and '*published and printed by...*' otherwise you could be breaking the law. Election regulations are very strong. It isn't a civil matter. It's a police matter."

I quake in my Crocs.

"Thanks," I say. I will have to face up. I will have to go public and come out as a campaigner. In the meantime I need a flying start to whip round and take the posters down before I get into trouble. I get my bike out of the shed.

Of course I should have realised that there was really no rush to comply. The tribal elders aren't likely to do anything. Half of them are on their last legs, or not even on their legs at all – two of them ride right into the village hall on their mobility scooters scattering the other councillors with cries of "*Mind your backs!*" One or two of them leave their zimmer frames behind their chairs. Their dander isn't yet up because they haven't even

noticed the posters, but it's going to be. Oh yes. It really is. I'm going to have to watch my back.

My next set of posters comes clean. I write them in blood. Well, I pretend to. I find a cool, in fact chilling font and red text. *Fartlebury Magna Needs New Blood. Let's Give the Council a Transfusion.* At the bottom I put in a minuscule font size *Katie Miller, Fartlebury Usurpers Committee, 20 Church Street, Fartlebury Magna.*

Because I am going to have to watch my back more closely – and every other part of my anatomy, I put them up in even darker, but cheekier places, like the parish council noticeboards. They change the posters advertising last year's car boot sale so rarely that I think it might be weeks before they notice. I hope people will like the acronym. I like it a lot. Everything needs an acronym these days.

I ask Jim if he would mind if we put a poster up in his front garden. Jim lives in one of the very few remaining unaltered cottages on the High Street. It's a bit ramshackle but it has its original woodwork (in original natural wood now that the paint has completely flaked off). It has a typical Corsetshire steep roof with terracotta tiles and no gutters. It is fancifully named Greenhill Cottage. As there are no hills round here, green or otherwise, I ask Jim how his house got its name. "Ooh ah," he ponders. "Mebbe there was an 'ill once. My cottage is as old as the 'ills, my gramfer told me." Jim was born in the little cottage, as were most of his bullocks. No wonder he seems as old as the hills too. But he is generous enough not to mind my request, or not to understand, and we put up a prominent sign right on the High Street. Now all I need to do is pray for success.

There are half a dozen churches in Fartlebury Magna but 'the church' tends to mean the parish church, high in every sense, and mighty. It's dedicated to St John the Evangelist, but everyone just calls it St John's: I assume that's because half of them can't spell it even if they can get their speech impediments round it.

The parish council has a historic tie to the parish church, not just all over the country, but even here in Fartlebury Magna. A hundred and twenty years ago Fartlebury Magna Parish Council was formed from the 'Vestry' – a group of the great and good men of the parish - and, of course, they actually, literally, were all men in those days. There tend to be no councillors in Fartlebury Magna who are 'great' or 'good' now. But back in the day, councillors were, in the main, farmers – so-called 'gentlemen farmers' - plus the Vicar and schoolmaster. There are no gentlemen farmers left in Fartlebury Magna. Only far-from-gentlemen farmers. Like the ones that PC Bigg-Toze told me about. Like me, our beat officer just loves a bit of gossip.

The story goes that when Foot and Mouth disease was ravaging the country's livestock in 2001, farmers up and down the country (and side to side) were keeping warm by rubbing their hands in glee as they anticipated the compensation payouts. (Not all of them, of course; some were keeping warm by standing within five miles of the DEFRA infernos for sanitary disposal of livestock, or to be totally accurate, deadstock.) Anyway, at that time Fartlebury Magna Parish Council, fearing economic collapse, or bubonic plague, or thinking it was the same as BSE and they might stagger on their way to milk the cows, decided to blockade the village and not allow vehicles to travel along the High Street. One of the four farmers still on

the council, Phil Jenkins, following in his fathers' and grandfathers' perishing wellies, said it was a risk to his stock having vehicles drive into Fartlebury Magna, spreading disease, so he and his mates took some bales of straw and blocked the road. I can imagine Phil's excitement. On the rare occasions that he gets animated, one of his eyebrows twitches wildly and threatens to fly right off his face, instead of clinging on like a hairy caterpillar as it usually does. I expect old Jim helped them out. He gets the odd idea hopping from neuron to neuron through his cider-pickled grey matter. There's not much to get in its way in there, under the rural thatch.

PC Bigg-Toze told me it was like a re-enactment of the Three Little Pigs with farmers huffing and puffing to get huge bales of straw into place to create a road-block at each end of the High Street. He said to Phil Jenkins, "What's up, Phil? You can't block off the road, you know." And Phil told him they were worried about Foot 'n' Mouth. Bigg-Toze was obviously very proud of his reply, and grinned from sticky-out ear to sticky-out ear when he told me that he said: "You've put your foot in your mouth, Phil." He could have had them for breach of the peace as well as obstructing the highway, but it's too much paperwork.

"Anyway," he tells me later, "You have to make allowance. They're a different breed – farmers."

"Yes, a rare breed," I think to myself, "sadly, not yet endangered."