

L&L interview

Adrian
Sanders MP,
Lib Dem



housing and
local government
spokesman, wants people
to see the benefits of land
value tax. But an
atrophied Land Registry
obscures them. Interview
by Tony Vickers

ADRIAN SANDERS BROUGHT my mother, at the age of 76, into politics! In 1994 he stood for the European Parliament in the Liberal Democrat heartland of the far south-west of England and was denied victory by a maverick standing as 'Literal Democrat'. This confused thousands of voters who voted for the Literal instead of the Liberal. Not my mother however – but only because she'd met him the day before polling and remembered the name. So incensed was she when Sanders' appeal against the result failed that she joined the Lib Dems "to change a rotten system".

Sanders got his seat eventually, winning Torbay by a mere 12 votes in 1997. Within months he had signed his name to a motion at his Party's conference that helped retain site value rating (SVR) in its manifesto. Four years later, with a 6,708 majority, he found himself on the front line of a modern mini Land Campaign when the

Land Registration Bill came down from the Lords for debate just before Christmas.

Unlike 1912, when land reform was the biggest issue of the day throughout Britain, MPs of 2002 don't make themselves into household names by calling for a tax on land owners. So I was intrigued to discover what was behind the passion in his speech of 13 December on this Bill, where he explicitly linked land registration to land taxation.

I asked him why, when the Land Registry itself had, in a report to Government that very year, recommended it be required to complete its task by 2010, there had been so little fuss about a Bill that had failed to ensure that.

"This was a technical Bill, not a political one," said Sanders, "which was why it was dealt with by lawyers, rather than by politicians, who would give it a political dimension."

"Very few of us realise that there is politics in there, that it isn't just about electronic conveyancing but is really about opening up political options in relation to LVT. Unless you can see such benefits you wouldn't consider it as that important a Bill."

"As for me, I'm not surprised at all by the Government's attitude. After two centuries with nothing done about a comprehensive land register, it isn't a shock to find you may take another century. The problem is not technical at all really. If we could produce a land register of sorts using quill pens in the 19th century – and they did in 10 years – then it ought to be possible to do it in under three now, as my amendment called for."

Sanders' speech on the Bill had claimed that the issue of land registration was: "not so much legal as economic", yet he had seemed to put undue emphasis on agricultural land, an emphasis which seemed inappropriate to modern Britain.

"I agree that these things matter more in urban areas. I'm not sure we did put so much emphasis on farmland. I was talking in general about the principle of the link

between registration and land tax, rather than about farmland specifically.

"There are two things we've got to do. One is to get LVT on the agenda so that people consider it as an option and can see the benefits of it – to them personally. The other is to put in simple terms how it would work and how it would be introduced here. You could start by ignoring agricultural land altogether and concentrate on its contribution to urban regeneration in the parts of the country where demand for property is lowest."

I asked why so few of his colleagues in the Liberal Democrats campaigned for SVR, when it had as recently as 1999 been endorsed as a key element of urban policy. With the Labour Government itself now explicitly encouraging

Adrian Sanders says that what's needed for LVT to succeed is to:

- get the right soundbites
- concentrate on what LVT will achieve, not how it works
- not to miss any opportunity to influence legislation
- make it clear it's about economic justice for people and communities

property owners to contribute to the funding of Business Improvement Districts, couldn't Liberal Democrats be pushing at an open door if they pressed home their policy more widely?

"Yes, I do think that this policy of ours is a solution to many of the problems that the Government is currently facing and unable to address. LVT – not necessarily exactly as we have it in our current manifesto – addresses the feeling in many parts of the country that they are not getting a fair deal. There is a sense of helplessness which this policy could tackle. It is about reducing the inequalities between different parts of the country, especially in house prices. ►

◀ "If you introduced LVT you would expect it to influence investment decisions, away from parts of the country that are overheated, spreading out the wealth towards peripheral areas, where geography imposes natural barriers in terms of transport links."

"What about the image of the tax – and of the Henry George Foundation?" I asked. "Despite using terms like 'Smart Tax' and getting popular figures to endorse the idea, parts of the media still try to make it sound out-dated. How can we link with those who share objectives with us, on issues like sustainable land management?"

"What has 'sustainable land management' got to do with things like Pop Idol (see box, below) and life in general?" retorted Sanders. "All that people are worried about is just getting by. We may have a policy that could answer their problems but it sounds complex and is not generally understood."

"To simplify the way we explain the tax, the first thing we have to do is to put it about what it would actually achieve. We have to concentrate on the solutions it offers, instead of the rather complicated aspects of how it actually works. Although I don't personally have the soundbites, that is what we need. That's politics today."

I moved the discussion from land registration to planning policy, which is where Sanders' party's policy boffins have told its LVT campaign group ALTER it has the best chance to influence matters at present. With a recent Government Green Paper (see page 14) suggesting Development Tariffs, isn't this the time for Liberal Democrats to be putting forward something really radical, like

landowners paying for development?

"We've got to put it forward wherever we can, whether you're talking about planning or local government reform or the way we share out wealth between regions and nations," believes Sanders.

"I don't think the Government's proposed reforms are radical at all. I think [the Government] misses a wonderful opportunity to introduce the concept of third party rights of appeal [against planning approval]."

That's going to be the issue with the planning Green Paper, not necessarily the taxation of land. But it wouldn't hurt if that were the issue we can get people to talk about"

"Talking of rights," I said, "aren't we getting onto dangerous ground by bringing human rights legislation into issues of planning and property taxation?"

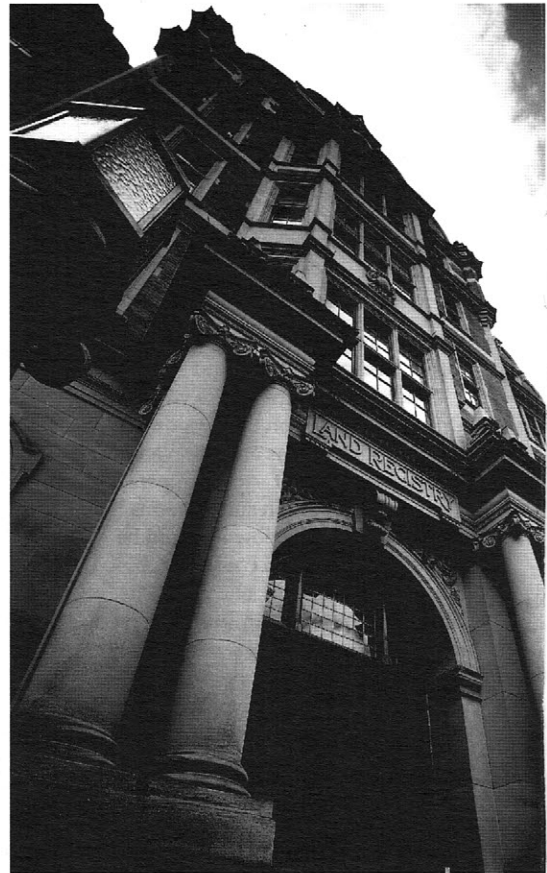
"If you're going to win the hearts and minds of people for a change in the tax system it isn't going to be through attacking their rights of either access to countryside or to land ownership."

"You've got to convince them that their kids are going to be able to afford to grow up in this country and not see inequalities in health and jobs – that all the economic opportunities aren't 100 miles down the road. That their taxes are based in some way on ability to pay and are not aggressive taxes like Council Tax."

"It's got to be a policy that really matters to everyone – for the single parent in the council estate as much as it does to his lordship in the stately manor."

Sanders seemed to think that the right to an informed

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The information held by the Land Registry is poor

role in decision making is more important, if issues relating to land – including LVT – are to reach most people.

"Today there's a great gap between the political classes and the mass of voters. I was talking only recently with a journalist about how to use new technology to help rebuild communities."

"I told him it wasn't actually going to make much difference using computers to vote. It's actually about opening up decision making and bringing government closer to the people – having them involved and informed about how the system works and how they can influence it, especially when things go wrong for them."

"I don't think we're addressing the issue enough, about how to engage people in political debate and inform them – not in my Party or in any party. Nowadays I don't think you could hold a public meeting about how we tax ourselves without it being attended by only those people who are absolutely obsessed with the issue. But that doesn't mean it isn't a very important issue."

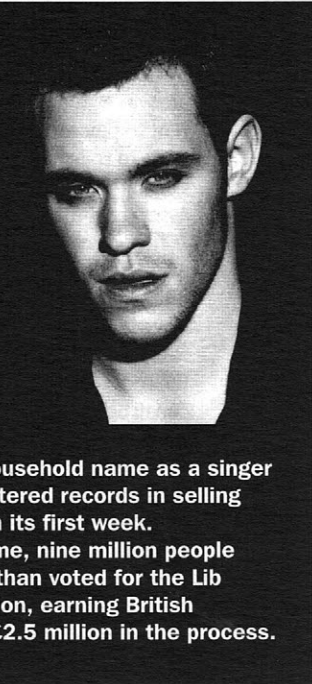
I sensed the frustration of a principled politician fighting the cobwebs surrounding a self-satisfied establishment. Did he feel LVT would come, in any form, in his time as an MP, I wondered out loud.


The Pop Idol phenomenon

Pop Idol captured the public imagination in a way political economics could only dream about.

The TV singing talent show catapulted 23-year-old Will Young (right), the show's winner, from obscurity to being a household name as a singer whose first single shattered records in selling over a million copies in its first week.

In the final programme, nine million people voted by phone, more than voted for the Lib Dems at the last election, earning British Telecom and ITV over £2.5 million in the process.





"If there wasn't a chance of achieving these ideas, there would be no point in me carrying on doing the job I do," says Sanders. "You have to be optimistic about the future. I think a lot of this is about trying to find the right form of presentation, which is actually very sad.

"You think it's all about high values and principles but you can have the best policies in the world and unless you're

communicating them in the words that people can understand then they're not going to be policies that achieve anything – the ones that get implemented.

"We do have to look very carefully at how we put this across and how we involve people in making the choices that there are. This is not just a subject for debating societies. This is real politics. This is one of the most

important issues on which our generation has to make a choice."

I was left feeling that I'd found a strong ally in the search for a just and sustainable society. The problem is not so much the politicians failing us as us failing to put ourselves in their shoes and give them what we all need – the right words with which to make our message understood.