

# MIKE OLLEY



## Don't mess with Mr Very Firm...

**D**RAMATIC and explosive actions are becoming commonplace for Birmingham city council leader John Cotton.

He was off on holiday earlier this month when council officers stripped him and all councillors of any supremacy to implement financial powers.

And only a few months previously, Cllr Cotton was thrust into the post of leader in the first eruption to hit the local authority.

Now I've known Cllr Cotton for 25 years or so, so let me call him John. He's a gentle, friendly and level-headed sort of fellow, always greeting you with a pleasant smile and a kind exchange of words.

John is a nice guy. And yet as Birmingham's leader, is that enough to run the city in such desperate times? In short, no. But let's be clear: John is no one-dimensional character. He has another side.

I had a few drinks and a pleasant evening out with him recently, and I saw a serious, harsher version. A Mr Very Firm would be a polite way to put it.

John cares about the disparity of those with, and those without. He cares about our city, keeping the beat and base of economic regeneration going.

He cares about the role the council can play in making all lives better.

We chatted about a local hero of ours, Sir Richard Knowles, a great previous city leader.

Yet Sir Richard, or Dick as we all knew him, didn't face the massive cuts in controllable spend that John's now facing.



Sale pending...? The Library of Birmingham and right, Mayor Andy Street in his hi-vis



Yes, Dick was largely responsible for the NEC, the ICC and other great economic regeneration schemes. These brought about employment, economic revival and pride to our city. But that was in a land of relative plenty.

John faces a central government that doesn't believe in spending too much money on public services. John has to provide much the same frontline provision as Dick, yet with massively reduced budgets.

I'm a strong believer in things happening in threes, and so now I'm looking for the third big blast. I can see this as a massive explosion charged and implemented by our political class, brought together to save the city. I've a good idea what it

might be, so watch this space to see who become their next victims.

■ **EXPLOSIONS** aside, the strong likelihood is that Birmingham will have to sell off treasures to balance its books. The Library of Birmingham, the Museum and Art Gallery, Aston Hall and Sarehole Mill have all been mentioned, as has the city's stake in Birmingham Airport.

I'm not so sure that these public-facing and serving buildings and businesses should go. What about all the art the city owns, hundreds of millions of pounds worth of pieces, such as the rare Pre-Raphaelites, most of which are never on display, buried in the council's underground silos. They'd never be missed...

■ **GOOD** old elected Mayor Andy Street, he does so love to don a hard hat and hi-vis jacket for photo calls. Could the constant high-vis glow be the secret of his seemingly eternal youthful looks?

Seriously: in such a hard hat and high-vis jacket recently, Mayor Andy signed a deal to buy hundreds of tonnes of steel off Midlands steel company Marcegaglia, to be used for the rails on his Metro tram extensions.

Accuse me of being out of touch, but I thought politicians stopped prioritising buying British years ago. Seemingly not Mayor Andy. I feel I owe Andy a hug on behalf of the West Midlands.

Not only did he find a steel manufacturer in our region (who knew we had one?).

He is actually putting his money behind them, for our benefit.

Let's hope his embrace of local manufacturing starts a trend with all in the public sector and in all sectors. It would do no harm for our local job prospects, our local economy and our local pride.

■ **Mike Olley** served on Birmingham City Council from 1991 to 2005, when he was made an Alderman.

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