

MIKE OLLEY



'Silence' over Gaza conflict has triggered new protest

When he spotted a new protester on the city's streets, **MIKE OLLEY** went round to have a cup of tea. He also comments on how the government's buttering up of voters shows us how close the general election might be.

HAS anyone seen the mobile lorry carrying a huge digital screen driving around Birmingham, publicly picturing, naming and shaming local councillors?

There's also a large and focused social media campaign connected to this, with more to come.

The man behind it all is Shakeel Afsal, an interesting guy.

He's currently "holding to account" a host of councillors he feels are "silent" over Israel-Gaza issues.

His assertive public action has driven some to consult the police and seek protection from Birmingham City Council. I thought I'd pop over to see Shakeel at his home.

I wasn't sure what to expect, but what I found was a bright, engaging, youthful and successful businessman. Not some nutty Hamas fundamentalist, seeking to exterminate the Jewish race. He made me a delightful cup of desi tea.

He told me he does not support terrorist organisations, but does support the rights of Palestinian people to maintain their sovereignty, within international law.

I was left with the impression that Shakeel's views are not that distant from Labour's on Israel-Gaza.

Yet he feels that local councillors "are walking back from a cohesive, peaceful community".

He told me that until they became more vocal in representing their local communities, he will continue to publicly challenge them.

If I may offer some advice to my old comrades: go and have a word with Shakeel. I found him to be a very determined guy, ultra-liberal in fact, yet someone who won't have the wool pulled over his eyes.

Also, his desi tea is a delight.

■ THE general election is getting



Pro-Palestinian supporters protest in Birmingham City Centre on October 15, 2023



The poster 'naming and shaming' Birmingham Labour councillors

closer, but how close? Soon, I say.

How do I know? Well, government is getting personal, and almost sexy. New laws that impact, interest and affect us are starting to evolve.

Take the forthcoming new law on leaseholds, for example. If the property you own and live in has a leasehold, you may well own the bricks and mortar, but you rent the land off someone else.

Increasingly big business, seeking to profit from leaseholds, has entered

the marketplace, and boy are they making some money off it! This has led to worrying additional and unavoidable costs clocking up yearly. And if you're a leaseholder on the wrong end of this, boy, does it hurt...

The Tories banged on about this four years ago, yet failed to deliver on promises to reform leasehold. But now they are championing legal changes that are expected to make it easier and cheaper for homeowners to extend their lease or buy a free-

hold, underscoring an Englishman's home as being his castle.

Most modern flats, or what we now call apartments, are leasehold, and other properties can be too, but it's difficult to know exactly how many there are in total.

That said, there are easily more than 10,000 apartments in Birmingham city centre alone, and probably just as many in nearby urban areas. This will be reflected across the UK, and so you can see how the leasehold legal changes might matter.

On that basis, the general election might not be immediately around the corner, but you can feel it drawing in...

■ ON the same subject of buttering up voters, speculation abounds over whether chancellor Jeremy Hunt will respect the triple lock formula and increase the state pension by 8.5% next April.

There are two distinct views: first, can Hunt afford to do it? Second, can he afford not to? Taxes are currently as high as the 1940s war time econ-

omy, and UK public sector debt in 2022-23 is set to be the highest ever at £2,409.4 billion, according to the latest statistics.

Tory chancellor George Osbourne introduced the triple lock in 2010, essentially a formula to keep pensions up to date with the cost of living. But its worthy notions are now looking like a royal headache for Hunt.

Ask any Conservative and they will likely say: "Hunt will." Ask a Labour supporter, and they will likely say: "Hunt won't".

I therefore asked independent pensions expert Mark Rogers, recently elected by his professional body as 'Good Egg' of the year.

Mark tells me: "Whilst the nation's finances probably can't afford it, I suspect, for reasons of political expediency, pensions will increase in accordance with the triple lock"

I'm with 'Good Egg' Mark: Hunt has to deliver, there are too many votes in it.

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

Big business, seeking to profit from leaseholds, has entered the marketplace, and boy are they making some money off it!