

MIKE OLLEY



Phone bot needs cynical tone

As the city council prepares for robotic phone handling, **MIKE OLLEY** discusses the voices he might enjoy dealing with his local issues

WHO will be the new voice of Brum? The city council is introducing a robot to answer some of the one thousand calls it receives each working hour. That's some two million calls a year.

It's no wonder I'm still waiting for a reply from the council's chief executive, from way back in July, concerning my road cones issue.

Some have pointed out that no-one really wants to speak to a robot, but with numbers like that it's a modern-day must.

The Tory group deputy leader Cllr Ewan Mackey (Sutton Roughley) was keen to know whose voice the robot would be given. Who indeed? It seems no-one is currently in the frame.

Well, how about commissioning the dulcet tones of Professor Carl Chinn? Perhaps Jasper Carrott would go down well, or even Adil Ray? Or how about national treasure Alison Hammond, currently going down a storm in *The Great British Bake Off*?

Any of these would be wonderful. Yet for my money, it's a must role for



Brummie comic Shazia Mirza has just the voice for answering calls to the council

Shazia Mirza, our very own female Asian comic genius. She strikes just the right tone: a hint of empathy, measured with a cynical dose of "I know how you feel!"

Shazia would make any Brummie with an issue feel right at home. She might even know something about my road cones ...

■ IT'S rather sad to admit, but I watched the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) meeting in the council chamber last week – the regional body that elected mayor Andy Street looks after.

What's even sadder to confess is that I rather enjoyed it.

If you know Andy Street, you'll be aware that he's a focused individual, very affable and massively inclusive. Most people, including myself, would describe him as a nice guy.

That aspect of his personality was abundant in how he chaired the WMCA meeting, but he was also very businesslike. There were 25 items on the agenda, plus two issues of 'any other business', and he both whizzed through them all but also gave everyone a real opportunity to have their say.

The very last item was a battle between Simon Foster, the current Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC), and Mayor Andy himself.

As happens in Manchester, London and other mayoral districts, Mayor Andy (a Conservative) wants to hold the powers of the PCC for himself. That means taking them off Commissioner Simon (Labour).

Mayor Andy, no doubt helped by his chums in government, has facilitated this development, but it is

understood it won't happen until after next year's mayoral election.

Commissioner Simon is fighting back and wanted to use the WMCA meeting to raise the issue.

Clearly he gave notice to Mayor Andy, and Mayor Andy allowed it!

Many others, I suspect, would not have so consented, especially as PCC Simon was only at the meeting as an observer.

A serious dispute was therefore played out in public, bitter blows delivered and landed by both sides, but with such dignity and respect for one another.

Now that's how politics should be done. I would declare it an honourable draw, and a victory for both. PCC Simon will fight on. But I suspect Mayor Andy will eventually win.

■ ONE can only applaud those who march, with a humanitarian heart, for peace in Palestine.

The wonders of our modern world give us a front row to some unspeakable acts that demonstrate how low and depraved humanity can sink.

It is only right that people then become emotional, demanding to speak out and protest.

This last weekend in Birmingham we witnessed more calls for peace outside the surgery of Steve McCabe MP, and then an at-times ugly march that appeared to be against Shabana Mahmood MP.

I must admit I felt a little uncomfortable with the targets of the protesters' anger, in particular at how Shabana, a Muslim MP, was singled out.

She was condemned by some for abstaining from a 'ceasefire' vote in the House of Commons. But I note that no other Brummie MPs who also abstained were condemned to the same degree that Shabana was.

If people are upset about the manner that MPs voted or abstained, then by all means protest against that block of MPs together. But why, in our multicultural city, print posters and attack individuals?

In my opinion the only two politicians on the planet who can bring about a bilateral ceasefire in Palestine are President Biden and Ali Khamenei, 'supreme' leader of Iran.

Peace can only be if they act as one. Quite frankly no UK politicians, including Shabana and Steve, have a real say. Let's make any demands for peace more peaceful, please.

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

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