

Sword attack on Cheltenham politicians: a product of social tensions in Britain

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A violent attack on two Liberal Democrat politicians by a local man in Cheltenham, England last Friday left one dead and another wounded. County Councillor Andrew Pennington and MP Nigel Jones were assaulted in their constituency advice office at 4:30 p.m. as the two prepared for a weekly public consultancy session.

Eyewitnesses report that a man brandishing a two-foot sword pushed his way into the office and attacked Pennington, who died of multiple stab wounds. The assailant, later identified as Robert Ashman, then attacked MP Nigel Jones, whose hands were badly slashed before he managed to escape. Ashman then left the office and was arrested outside a short time later. He was charged at the weekend with murder and attempted murder.

Politicians and the media have described the attack as "senseless" and "wicked". Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy said it was "an affront on the parliamentary process", the implications of which would "cause too many people to re-examine the ease of access which is fundamental in the workings of a healthy, open, accessible democracy".

Information about Ashman's personal situation indicates that this was a tragedy almost waiting to happen. Over the weekend his parents revealed that the 49-year old father of two had lost everything in the past year. His mother explained, "It's a terrible time. We still don't really know what's going on. In the last year he's lost his home, his job and his family."

According to press reports, Ashman's problems began when he lost his job as an engineer eight years ago. Government propaganda at the time was that everyone could become a "self-made" success. Encouraged by the banks, those made redundant were urged to start up a small business. Ashman transferred his pension from

his previous employers to the Lloyds TSB Bank, who gave him a £70,000 mortgage to buy a house, from which he intended to start up his own firm.

The business struggled and eventually failed, and Ashman, who had been told he was not entitled to unemployment benefits, could not keep up the mortgage repayments. In February 1998 the bank repossessed his home and the family had to move into rented accommodation. He and his wife separated. To add insult to injury neighbours report that the bank made almost £100,000 profit when it resold the house—none of which Ashman was entitled to as a mortgage defaulter.

Those who knew him say he felt he had been "done a bad turn"—going from a comfortable job and family life, with an apparently secure future, to nothing. Determined to right this injustice he had become a regular visitor at the Liberal Democrats' advice surgery in Cheltenham, where he sought help from his local MP regarding what one person described as a "difficult case". He had also sought the assistance of a local volunteer group, the Solicitors and Barristers' Watchdog, and had become known for his persistent campaign of letters and phone calls to those he either considered responsible for his plight or who might be able to help.

His efforts seemed futile. A friend was reported as saying that Robert "was a well situated man until they ejected him from his job, and then instead of leaving his pension, he took it, so he lost that as well. He was left with nothing."

It is not difficult to imagine the impact this could have on someone who has played by the rules, doing everything the politicians insist a "responsible" person should to provide for his family—only to find his life destroyed and with no apparent means of redress.

His father Geoff explained, "He's the type of person who helped everybody out, but when he needed someone there was no one there for him." Add to this the emotional stress of a family breakdown and the death of a loved one—his sister died in August this year—and Friday's attack, whilst not excusable, becomes comprehensible.

It is unlikely that information on Ashman's personal history will cause any serious debate in official circles. So many aspects of his own biography could apply to any number of people in Britain today. None of the main parties can afford a discussion on the more fundamental issues this case has raised; committed as they are to the same social agenda that propelled Robert Ashman on his downward spiral.

Although the Cheltenham incident has been described as a "one-off", there is much talk of the need for MPs to strengthen their personal security arrangements. In the final analysis, this tragic event underscores the inability of the existing political set-up to cope with the acute social tensions accumulating in Britain.



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