

28th April 2022

Platform

“A platform is something a candidate stands for and the voters fall for.”

Gracie Allen, How to Become President (1940)

I'm planning to attend a "hustings" in advance of the Local Council Elections in Scotland on 5th May. I may come back to election issues at other times, but, for now, I'm intrigued by the word "hustings" and I wondered where it came from.

Hustings in UK politics take various forms: out-door walkabouts and speeches, where flesh is pressed, babies are kissed, photo-ops are arranged and short, vibrant speeches delivered, usually by a single candidate; or, as in the case of the hustings I'll attend, a set event, indoors, with the candidates on a platform, each being given an opportunity to speak, then to be questioned and be open to responses "from the floor". It's a metaphorical or physical platform for those seeking election to express, and be challenged on, their views and policies. The term traces back to an Old Norse word meaning "house assembly". 1000 years ago, hustings were judicial assemblies where Anglo-Saxon kings and their followers held council and resolved civil disputes. Over time, "hustings" came to refer not only to the assembly but also to the platform where the leaders of such gatherings sat, and in due course the term was applied to the entire campaigning process. Nowadays, "on the hustings" can refer to any place along the campaign trail where a candidate makes a pitch for public office.

We're fortunate in our democracy that people can have a platform for their views. And we should be grateful that those who take such a platform can be questioned and challenged in an open and public fashion. Such freedoms are precious, should never be taken for granted and should be well used, by candidates and the electorate alike. I'm not as cynical as Grace Allen in 1940 about a "platform" of policies on which a candidate stands in the hope that the voters can be duped. For me, a platform is about freedom, openness, honesty, so those standing can be questioned about who they are, and what they will do for the good of all.

Let's be grateful for platforms. Let our hustings be well used!

A prayer for today

What "platforms" do I stand on that show what I stand for?

And what questions should I be ready to answer if challenged about my attitudes?