

LOCAL GOVERNMENT POLICY

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**NO MORE BIG
BROTHER**

Paul Corrigan

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NO MORE BIG BROTHER

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2. The power of it?

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WHAT WENT WRONG ?

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The contemporary crisis in the relationship between the British people and their government is not new. It has its roots in the post-war welfare state. Massive institutions were created to bring about change and local government played an essential role. Big government constructed a particular relationship with the people whose lives it was improving. It did things to and for people, and by the 1970s many people did not like that. A serious crisis emerged which others have seen as a fiscal matter, but is more basic than that. It is about the relationship between government and people and the legitimacy of one infringing the other's liberty.

Margaret Thatcher understood this and, faced with the detached complacency of the left, started a prolonged attack on the way government works. Since then, hundreds of Parliamentary Acts have changed the structure of government.

However, history shows that the social democratic state, 'old Labour' in late 90s parlance, was the chief cause of our problems with the public- not Thatcherism. Since we caused this, we can overcome it.

The way local government had treated the public merited unpopularity. As early as 1975, the first of twenty years of cuts, this was becoming obvious. Slogans such as 'save our schools', or 'save our social services' usually elicited a puzzled response from the public of 'Excuse me but whose schools?'. It appeared to the parents and students who used them that schools belonged to headteachers. By this stage most public sector institutions had lost touch with sections of the public they served. Their style of organisation was at best disorientant and at worst arrogant. People individually and in larger groups began to withdraw agreement, consent and legitimacy from institutions graced with the name 'public'.

My argument is harsh and carries a serious charge: that it was not Thatcherism that separated the public from 'their institutions', it was the activities of those institutions.

It is true that government attacks have shaken up bureaucracy and Labour councillors. Local government is now less monolithic and reflects a wider set of relationships between local people and institutions.

Conservative reforms have had four main themes that have succeeded in fracturing the monolithic Town hall. First, they have restricted budgets through crude rate capping. Each year, they have forced local government to examine their budgets. I welcome this attention. However, the fact that local authorities can now claim they are not in control of their budgets has meant they are let off the hook. If a local authority spends just within the cap they can blame central government whilst remaining inefficient.

Second, to strip powers away from local government they have created a quango state. This approach has meant local authorities which, say, wanted to influence post school education, have been forced to create partnerships with Further and Higher education. However, if a local authority has chosen not to, it can sit back and blame the Government for removing control.

Third, they have empowered schools through Local Management. They have not, however, developed this model for other services, with little housing being controlled locally and even less social services. Their trust of local citizens only goes as far as using them to separate services from government, not to giving greater influence over the state itself.

Fourth, and most importantly, the Conservatives have used the market. They understood the problems of the old bureaucratic social democratic state and its separation from civil society. The market is a vital aspect of the way civil society is organised. It develops outside government and has a dynamic which modernises production and distribution of goods and services. Using the market to undermine old bureaucratic local government is wise. In those services where the market is well developed, tendering has succeeded in breaking down old fashioned practices. It has been welcomed by new local government. Importantly though, some markets are slow to develop and tendering here has failed to break down bureaucracy. For markets to be successful they need first to exist.

In some cases creating ghost markets has been profoundly inappropriate. Public institutions end up pretending they are no longer 'really' public. Instead they pretend to be a company, owned by a Trust. That pretence is wrapped up in the language of the marketplace, making the distance between company and public acceptable. Thus many universities now pretend they are market insti-

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tutions, but depend totally on the state for about 80% of their income. Calling yourself a business doesn't make it so. Playing shops with local government is a sham. We do it because we are frightened of the more radical approach to ending alienation from the public.

The four main tools of attempted Conservative reform then have been central government restriction, the development of quangos, a limited and successful decentralisation to services and a powerful use of civil society's market.

The second and third of these have been incomplete but useful. Yet, they have failed to reform local government because, in Tory ideology, the authoritarian state has triumphed over civil society. Consequently, Conservative national government have failed to empower local people. Attacks from central government have not succeeded in tipping the balance in favour of reformed local government. Local people do not feel they own local government and therefore the crisis of legitimacy remains.

This strikes at the heart of radical left politics. Another decade of failure will lead to hatred of government. This we cannot afford. A new approach to local government is badly needed.

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THE BATTLE OF IDEAS
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For the last 15 years, in local government, the most important political and organisational conflict has been a guerrilla war within our institutions. Of course 18 years of conflict with Conservative governments has not helped. But leaving that destruction aside, the battle has been between new and old visions of local government. This is now coming to a head at the time when we may have a new Labour government. They will come to power to face local government where much has changed but too much has stayed the same.

Old local government will look to the new power in Westminster to enact its model of governance. They believe that, in the new millennium, the local government of the 60s and 70s will best recreate the connection with the people. They see local government power plus money as the solution to the social problems of their locality. For them, local government that has more money and more power will solve more problems. A spiral of compulsions, directives, instructions and regulations spew out of old local government town halls to the great satisfaction of senior councillors and chief officers. The more they tell people what to do the better they feel they are governing. The bigger their departments, committees and budgets the more they feel they are achieving.

They are not only wrong. They fail to realise the central contradiction of local government. The more power they think they bring into the fortress of their town halls, the less power they have to develop society beyond its walls. The more they seek control, the less influence they have. The more money they bring into their banks, the less they can tap the massive resources of local association and action. The bigger they and their offices are, the more sullen and angry are the people outside. In the modern world, government in the locality will never have the power that local civil society has - however many instructions it regurgitates.

Old local government may be wrong, but it has a lot of adherence within council chambers and even more so within the chief officer ranks. Directors of

education long for local management of schools to end, directors of social services want to get care back from the community and directors of environment crave for an end to this troublesome business with the market. Leaders hunger to lead and committee chairs to expand their budgets. They await the end of the Tories so they can build a bridge to the past.

But the battle of ideas in local government has also seen a different strategy emerge. This has not been constructed by government legislation, though some important intended and unintended consequences of that have emerged. It has not been constructed by ideas from think tanks, though ideas have always been useful. It has emerged from political and organisational struggle; politicians winning and losing motions and debates; chief officers' reforms succeeding and failing and front line staff tussling to open up their relationship with the public.

New local government recognises that the more direct power government has to tell people what to do, the worse will be our relationship with them. It realises that in a modern society nearly all resources and power resides outside of the town hall. However much council tax we raise there are thousands of times that amount of resources in people's lives and actions outside of our balance sheets. The same is true with power. People work very hard in their lives to make changes to their family environment and their neighbourhoods.

Local government can only influence society by gaining trust. This allows us to use power and resources to develop change. People don't trust local government if it tells them what to do. A local council that spends 5 days a week instructing people how to live, will not on the sixth day be welcomed as a partner. Try going to a chamber of commerce and asking for an urban regeneration partnership if its members have been told by planning officers they can't change their windows to allow light into their factory.

New local government is developing straightforward political principles. First, recognising there is more power in local civil society than in the town hall. Second, realising that its main relationship with local people is through the services it organises and that this relationship must be reformed. Third, acknowledging the importance of complete openness and honesty with the public. Fourth, being restless in developing real partnerships with local institutions -partnerships it does not control.

Creating new local government will bring conflict and setbacks. However, even now old local government has been forced to stop imagining it is the organisation which 'runs' service delivery. Instead it organises relationships with the public, some of which involve transforming service delivery, most of which are simply communicating information. New local government has begun to shift the terrain on which the battle of ideas takes place. This provides the basis on which new citizenry can develop.

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CHANGING OUR VIEW OF THE STATE

All modern politics revolves around the relationship between state and civil society. In the past few years there have been significant discussions about 'a new deal for local government', but the political necessity is for a new deal for local people. This is more than semantics. We spend far too much time, in all forms of government, looking at structures, and far too little at our relationship with the people we serve.

Logically we can all recognise that schools do not guarantee education. Education depends on the hard work of pupils and in turn on the active support of parents. As an adult educator, it is clear to me that without pupils working hard, nothing really happens. Education does not happen without the active involvement of civil society and the enormous resources that exist within families to ensure students learn.

The same was true with housing. Only two decades ago local authority tenants had very few rights. Housing, like schools, were provided by councils, but the relationship included little activity from tenants. A housing committee measured success by the number of 'housing starts'. Churning out flats provided homes. We never spent any time considering that only the efforts of people who lived in them turned hard cold flats into soft warm homes.

As a consequence there are local authority tenants who turn up to landlords expecting them to change their light bulbs. We created that dependency and now, alongside the tenants, we suffer for it. This dependency, like most such relationships, has led to anger. An alienated public which ends up hating government. This is not socialism.

This alienation goes beyond our institutions. It is a part of our wider public experience, and any attempt to solve it, must involve social change outside institutions. The public have been excluded from involvement in services for so long it will be very difficult to recreate a relationship with them. New thinking is needed.

Beyond citizenship

A lot of intellectual and practical work has focused on local democracy. Most of the work has taken place within the framework of citizenship, and the belief that people should feel this is an important part of their lives. People should be involved in politics, in public life.

New local government recognises that simple representative democracy - voting and then carrying out a single manifesto - is insufficient.

Citizenship in Britain is rooted in past experiences rather than recent and modern ones. The radicalism of the 18th century is expressed through a 19th century electoral system, and will have little impact in the 21st century. The demise of the public meeting, the lack of involvement in political parties are all signs that people want different forms of participation.

I have been talking this through with Councillors for some time. Many are depressed that citizens do not come out to meetings and discuss their role. But when I point out what a weird group of people we are going to an evening meeting, everyone recognises how out of touch that activity is when compared to the lives of the people they represent.

John Stewart's imaginative work on how local government can act for its citizenry has provided important conceptual and practical advice. He wrote recently :

"The future of local government depends upon the strength of local democracy... It is at its strongest when there is a vibrant local democracy in which people are involved..... All is not well with representative democracy in local government. If turnouts in local elections are regarded as a measure of the performance of representative democracy, then performance is low although possibly slightly improving" (*Innovation in Democratic Practice*, Stewart, 1995).

The Commission for Local Democracy (CLD) has created a body of work that considers innovative forms of democratic participation. The CLD's final report concludes :

"A lively citizenry takes part in the election of its representatives, questions its leaders, challenges their decisions. The habit of democracy requires those living in a particular community to participate in the institutions by which they are governed and the services by which their lives are enhanced, It is the purpose of democratic reform to encourage these habits" (*Taking Charge: the Rebirth of Local Democracy*, CLD, 1995).

Their work is aimed at encouraging the habit of democracy and the experience of citizenry. For over a decade my own borough of Islington has been heavily involved in this process. Neighbourhood Forums have a say in running their

Neighbourhood Offices. Citizens have a right to express their views and influence the actions of the Council in small neighbourhoods. In some places the Forums have a committee structure which replicates much of local government. But in none does it involve the population.

Intellectuals studying the experience have not been short of innovations for bringing citizens into a more active relationship with government. We have developed some reforms ourselves : increasing voter registration, asking citizens their opinions in local polling, and developing consultation through citizens' juries and decentralisation. We have not been short of realistic techniques for involving citizens. What we have been short of is citizens.

A new understanding

Each reform has its place, each will engage some people. But the level of alienation of citizens from government goes much deeper. The main problem is that people are so dissatisfied they are unwilling to spend more of their lives as citizens than they have to. If new local government is to re-engage the public it must understand this alienation.

The public has changed. There have always been sharp differences in experience within the population, but at various stages of national development, it has been possible to exclude some groups from 'the public'. So Morrison's London County Council served the public of the aspirant working class, but was less concerned with serving the petite bourgeoisie, and really had no interest in fostering the life styles of the lower working classes.

The public we serve must exclude no one. People do, however, have different experiences. The differences between gender experiences are profound. Language is a deep historical expression of cultural difference. There are 108 languages spoken in Islington's schools. Cultures are the core of people's lives, the differences within a locality make the place interesting, but also ensure there isn't a stereotypical 'public'.

In the past uniformity was accepted. Today this is seen as 'old fashioned'. It has been replaced by a celebration of the differences between individuals; replaced by a belief that history is finished and in any case was not really up to us to make. Any new government must recognise this difference.

People feel less inclined to involve themselves in any activity which transcends their own families' experiences. People celebrated their individual experiences not the collectives.

In the last few years new local government has come to terms with this. We now need to learn how to reconstruct the public's collective experiences.

THE SERVICE DEMOCRACY

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A debate is raging about how to describe and treat the public. For old Labour it is important to retain state vocabulary when describing the public. They see the word 'public' itself as a good descriptor, 'citizen' even better.

But these words lack contemporary appeal. Being 'the same' as everyone else is not attractive. Images of uniformity symbolise past experiences of public sector institutions. For example, when my friend has a home help, I would like that relationship to be special to her and not the same as everyone else's. I would also like it to be different from when I go for a swim. I want to be treated as an individual and I want each service to be treated differently.

The fact that these are all local government services is not a helpful or attractive concept. A different framework is needed.

The Quality movement

Within this context a movement for higher quality services has taken place. The quality movement, like any other, is an arena where different ideologies clash. It can be treated purely as a technique - new organisation and forms to be filled in. Under these circumstances it fails to rebuild the relationship between people and government.

But this is not always the case. Starting in 1990 a number of local authorities recognised that work was needed not only to improve the quality of services, but to change their relationship with the public. Within the Labour Party, this was organised through the local government unit at Head Office.

It was important, not only to improve services but to ensure they reflect people's individual lives. To achieve this, the public needed to be involved. But to involve the public they needed to feel they could influence government.

Hence, if the user of a service did not think they were getting quality service, then they weren't. It was no longer sufficient to claim the service was 'professionally validated', so even if you thought the service was bad it was in fact good. The individual consumer judged his or her own experience, no longer a generic consumer called 'the public' but a specific consumer - an individual. The individual is in charge of the relationship.

By November 1995, over 90% of local authorities surveyed (Local Government Management Board, *Quality Survey*, 1995) had some form of quality initiative. As with all change this has not affected everything. But it has had a more profound effect upon local government than all the analyses of the Citizen State put together. There are two reasons why.

First, the experience of consumption is ubiquitous. Most people act as consumers hundreds of times a week. Many of these consumption experiences involve choice - choice of meat, choice of washing powder and choice of supermarket. Other consumption experiences don't contain choice - only one train service on one line, one local post office and one gas company. But although these experiences may differ consumption is one of the main things we do every day after every day.

Second, local government consumption takes place more often than the experience of being a citizen. From the arrival of rubbish collectors in the morning, through thinking about school for the kids, walking down a litter free street to the aerobic class, walking down that same street in the evening worrying about missing street lights. We relentlessly consume local authority services.

If they are good services we may not notice. If they are bad, you can bet we notice. Compared to ballot box vote or public consultation, consumption is dominant over any wider collective practice. Now it may be that people should experience going for a swim as citizens, but they don't. It is experienced as going for a swim.

The experiences are fundamentally different. Consumption is frequent and important. Citizenship is infrequent and shallow. To paraphrase the Commission for Local Democracy : citizenry has yet to be built into a habit, whilst consumption is a raging addiction.

Consumer empowerment has had a more profound impact upon the relationship between state and civil society than citizenship. Those who believe they have a right to the lid being put back on their rubbish bin have begun to construct a different relationship with the state.

But such a change will not, by itself, reunite the public. To achieve that we must turn improved consumption into being part of a wider project.

Real power

The citizen's charter movement has failed to achieve this transformation. It celebrates the abstraction that exists between a distanced government and its people. Producing an intangible Charter has no basis in our experience of services. Even angry rail passengers desperate to 'get at someone' are unsure who they get at.

New local government realised that the experience of the local consumer is crucial. Local government is in a position to radically improve that experience.

Each local service should develop a quality guarantee. This should be matched by each service provider. Within schools a home - school contract may generate a weekly homework diary. Each contract and diary is different from another. It therefore reflects the individual experience of students. The contract is however guaranteed by the school. It recognises individual and organisational needs.

Each guarantee is discussed and generated with the consumer. The content is highly differentiated, but the form is constant.

Equally, the guarantee on its own does not improve service delivery -that needs the hard work and co-operation of staff delivering the service. The guarantee must promise something people want - a clean pool, their rubbish bin lid put back on, appointments kept, the phone answered. The service must be organised around that promise.

This process works because the relationship is individual, even if the organisation is corporate. For a large organisation the number of specific guarantees involved can be a problem. In Islington, a family living in council accommodation with two children looking after an elderly parent at home can have as many as twenty different guarantees. In the past, important documents from the Council were kept on the mantelpiece - anyone who keeps all the guarantees Islington provides, now has the big mantelpiece problem.

If you engage with many other public and private services you could have a hundred of these charters and guarantees. But each reflects a real relationship with an institution - that can only be good.

Corporate image and reality

Through consumption new local government has re-engaged with alienated individuals, absorbing their experiences into government and using that to change services. They are involved in its further development over time. This means that potentially across the country, many thousands of people experience a sliver of empowerment. For most though these are fragmented experiences.

Alienation from government is also about fragmentation. To overcome this the experience of individuals needs to be linked with state institutions, and other individuals. The local pool and rubbish collection may feel different but they are organised by the same institution - even if one of them is being carried out by private contractors. Both are provided by public money and by an organisation that has direct citizen relationships. Equally, both are provided to your next door neighbour on the same basis as to yourself. They are different services but they are also part of a wider experience.

What we need is a common thread. The organisation providing the service must ensure, that logos, styles of printing, and methods of communicating have a uniform brand image. The provision of a wide number of individually distinct experiences of consumption alongside a strong central theme is the nature of the modern organisation.

We may differentiate service delivery but it must be represented as a single and simple organisation. The swimming pool provided by a contracted company, the education provided by a locally managed school, the social service by a voluntary organisation and the council tax bills sent by the directly employed officers, are all provided through the powers of a single organisation. And all involve public money.

New local government must challenge this awful fragmentation. But to achieve this it must build partnerships beyond the boundaries of its own services and look at the whole of the local area.

Champion of the people

Every year London local authorities carry out opinion poll research on what their residents think about their activities. Every year it becomes clear that about half of the population think local government runs the health service and the police - and by and large they feel we do a pretty good job. For many people, the complex differentiation of state bodies that means so much to politicians, is impenetrable.

Obtaining a public service is more important than which bit of government produces it. A government committed to decreasing the alienation of its citizens needs to build on this. Focusing on location rather than provider will help. All national services take place in a locality. Local government can be the building block for other services. Local coalitions of service providers, bringing real services and charter monitoring under one roof.

A new Labour Government should empower local government to act as an organiser for all the public charters and guarantees in its area. For example the local authority as public advocate could collate and publish all performance indicators. This would include local railways stations and the reliability of the trains, the police force, the health service, the benefits agency as well as local authority services. Every local authority would act as a focus for consumption relationships and would have the responsibility to communicate this information to the public.

CONCLUSION : SHOULD NEW LABOUR CARE ?

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I believe a new Labour government should enter the battle of ideas in local government. But why should it use its energy in this area ?

New Labour may see local government as irredeemably linked to the past, as a theme park of mayors' chains, inefficiency and producer politics. Given their commitment to devolution and the importance of Europe, it may seem a tier of government too far. I have two reasons why this should not be the case.

First, new Labour's project needs something between the individual and the nation state. Communitarianism is an important recognition of the way modern society needs to construct relationships between individual and nation.

A modern political movement recognises there will be much more geographical, economic and social movement in people's lives. If they are to overcome the alienation this produces there will have to be interim experiences such as community. New Labour's vision is distinct from the atomised society the far right advocate because it recognises the existence of collective experiences. It differs from old Labour because it believes the state cannot enforce collectivism.

The national government New Labour will take over is not well equipped to create new forms of relationship. Central government is firmly wedded to 18th century secrecy, and 19th century law and economics. If New Labour wants to help individuals find forms of community relationship, it is hard to see how Whitehall will easily achieve this. The experiences of partnership and openness that characterise new local government offer a much better vehicle through which individuals can begin to create a better community. New local government can bring together the community with a tier of government.

The second reason why new local government will be important for New Labour in Whitehall is the style of government they both want to create. New Labour will want to create simple government. A form of power and administration that is much easier for citizens and businesses to work with. They will want to create a one stop shop that brings together different services- an experience that has been tried and tested for a decade in local government. New Labour will want simple government to work across different institutions of government including health, benefits agencies, police and local government. Again new local government has created the partnerships to achieve this quickly.

When New Labour arrives in Whitehall it will need models of government that work. New local government will be ready and waiting to share knowledge and to devolve even more government power to the people.

£5 **NO MORE BIG BROTHER**

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Local government effects what we do everyday. From when we have the rubbish collected in the morning to when we walk past street lights at night. It can be either a positive enabling force or a debilitating inefficient drain. Big brother or business partner.

This pamphlet, the first in a new Fabian series, argues that local government should abandon its old statist ways and become instead a peoples champion - watching over the provision of services and reengaging with people as individuals. Paul Corrigan, head of quality for Islington Council, says that the left's obsession with citizenship should be sidelined in favour of a recognition that local government will engage with people as consumers.

Putting his case in a striking and forthright way, he argues that the Thatcher reforms of local government identified the problem but were too crude to solve it. Instead, new Labour should change the nature of local government from service provider to service watchdog.

The arguments in this pamphlet are both engaging and contemporary. It raises vital issues not just for local government but for the left as a whole. It is a must for anyone who is serious about creating a modern state.

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The Fabian Society brings together those who wish to relate democratic socialism to practical plans for building a better society in a changing world. It is affiliated to the Labour Party, and anyone who is eligible for membership of the Labour Party can join; others may become associate members.

For details of Fabian membership, publications and activities, write to:
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THE HISTORY OF THE

ROYAL SOCIETY OF LONDON

FROM ITS INSTITUTION IN 1660 TO THE PRESENT TIME

BY JOHN VAUGHAN, ESQ.

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