

# A radical agenda for local government

**Ed Turner**

**When Labour came to power in 1997, there were 10,608 Labour councillors.**

Notwithstanding some gains in May 2010, by that date there were only 4,808 (House of Commons, 2010).

Councillors are important for British party politics in several ways: they take substantive decisions about local public services (particularly important for deprived communities), and perform important functions in land-use planning. They also play a role in election campaigns, can be a source of party finance, and are the party's face in the community all year around, notably in areas where a party is without representation at Westminster. So the decline in the number of Labour councillors will be damaging for the party in its future election campaigns and also in its reduced ability to influence policy at a local level. As a result, reversing the trend of seat losses will without doubt be a priority for Labour in opposition.

This article argues that we need to go beyond a 'conservative' response to Labour's current situation in local government. Instead it proposes a 'radical' response, which links the quest for electoral success with a challenge to some received wisdom about local government within the party, and a changed view of local government's role.

In essence, the 'conservative' response comprises three elements. First, it states that, just as Labour lost ground during an inevitable mid-term decline in its fortunes, so we can expect the Conservative / Lib Dem government to suffer the same fate in local elections over the next four years, and for Labour to be the main beneficiary. Second, this positive outlook can be consolidated by pressing ahead with the sort of effective grassroots campaigning that led to electoral success in such places as Haringey, Barking, Liverpool and Oxford. Finally, Labour would retain its stated commitment to the 'new localism' (in current parlance, often simply 'localism'), decentralising power to local government and beyond it, while opposing spending cuts in local government, as elsewhere in the public sector. Such a view has been a familiar feature of the debates surrounding the election to the Labour leadership.

The 'radical' response shares, at least, the second element (a focus on effective campaigning), while being a bit more circumspect about the first (the 'inevitable' decline of the ConDems): as constituency results even in this general election showed, local campaign effects can undermine the applicability of a national swing, and this is even more likely in local campaigns, so a deterministic reliance upon Conservative / Lib Dem mid-term blues may be misplaced.

But the 'radical' response goes further. First, it sees a need to renew the personnel of local government, looking to attract underrepresented groups (notably those of working age, without political experience) to the scene, which could positively feed into election results. Secondly, it reassesses the critique of local government which led to a fervent

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desire to undermine its representative functions, in favour of passing power beyond the town hall, under the guise of the 'new localism'. Instead, the 'radical' response argues that community campaigning can link more closely with party activity, making Labour councillors the friends of community input into decision-making, rather than an obstacle, and it adopts a more positive stance towards parties in local government, viewing them as a useful element, not an unwelcome encumbrance. Thirdly, this approach suggests some new areas which should be subject to the further decentralisation of power; this could enhance Labour's ability in local government to provide community leadership and respond to communities' concerns, without running the risk of a 'race to the bottom' in service provision, or undermining territorial solidarity. Finally, it urges a more overtly *political*, less technocratic vision of local government's role, in which it would take on a wider range of responsibilities; this in turn promises to make councillors' role more interesting, and promote communities' engagement.

The remainder of this article is structured in four sections. The first briefly reviews changes made to local government under Labour. The second highlights some problems caused by elements of this approach, arguing that these have fed into Labour's local malaise. Based on this, the final two sections set out the 'conservative' and the 'radical' responses in greater detail, pressing the case for the radical response.

### **Labour's approach to local government, 1997-2010**

The election of a Labour government in 1997 brought about some quite significant changes both to the structure and the functions of local government (this is necessarily a summary, for a full discussion see, for instance, Wilson and Game, 2006). Further changes occurred as a result of devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but for reasons of space only England will be discussed here.

Four significant changes were introduced to the structure of local government.

- First, within councils there was a **shift to streamline governance and concentrate accountability** through the abolition of the 'committee system', whereby decisions were taken by committees involving all political groups represented, organised by subject area.

Instead, local authorities in practice chose between two options: the first was the concentration of power in the hands of an 'cabinet', normally comprising councillors of the majority party alone (with a variety of options if no party enjoyed such a majority), with each member being allocated a policy area in which to provide political leadership. Under this approach, fewer decisions were taken by the full council, thus ensuring the concentration of power in the hands of fewer councillors. The 'cabinet' would then be overseen by 'scrutiny' committees, who could oversee its actions and hold it to account. Scrutiny committees' composition reflected the party political balance, but they were intended to be beyond the power of local whips and operate along cross-party lines. The second model was that of a directly-elected mayor, who performed the 'executive' functions which were previously the domain of committees, although s/he would also receive assistance from a hand-picked cabinet. Both models involved the creation of rather more visible leadership, and a concentration of power in fewer hands.

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- Secondly, there were some **modest attempts at local government reorganisation**. In 2009, new unitary councils were created, in place of two-tier arrangements, in such places as Durham, Chester and West Cheshire, and Wiltshire. Additionally, in 2000 the Greater London Assembly was launched alongside the directly-elected mayor of London. The creation of new unitary authorities, at least until the abortive attempt to do so in Norwich and Exeter in the dying days of the Labour government in 2010, appeared to be motivated by a 'technocratic' civil service agenda rather than a desire to enhance local democracy (Leach, 2009).
- Thirdly, within councils there was **significant encouragement to decentralise minor decisions to more local forums**, comprising the councillors for the area concerned, and often involving other, co-opted representatives. Sometimes these structures were mirrored by 'Neighbourhood Action Groups', associated with the rise of neighbourhood policing, whereby local people were encouraged to have input into police priorities.
- Finally, the government encouraged the **formation of 'Local Strategic Partnerships'**, involving local government alongside other representatives (for instance from businesses, faith groups, the police, and the health authority). These would agree and attempt to deliver on a plan, often with some fiscal incentives for meeting targets to improve performance in certain areas, agreed with the local Government Office.

In terms of the substance of what local government did, however, there was rather less change. Councils gained some extra powers over liquor licensing, taking over the role previously played by local magistrates, albeit needing to exercise their powers within a tight, centrally-determined framework. Councils remained subject to a rigorous (indeed, at times onerous) inspection regime, with a few extra freedoms for those judged to be performing very well. The notion of 'accountability' since 1997 saw a shift of emphasis, from 'downward accountability' to local electors, to 'upward accountability' to such bodies as the Audit Commission and Ofsted, as agencies of central government.

Greater contestability was introduced in the area of education policy, through the Academies programme of schools operating outside Local Authority control, and in housing policy. In spite of significant internal party opposition, the Labour government gave strong incentives to transfer council housing stock to not-for-profit housing associations, to achieve the centrally-set Decent Homes Standard.

In particular, local government finance remained largely untouched, in spite of the commissioning of a major report by Sir Michael Lyons on this subject (Lyons, 2007). Councils still raise only around a quarter of their revenue through council tax, and the rate of increase has been restricted by threats of 'capping' by the centre. As a result, English local government remains a significantly less powerful and autonomous layer of political authority than its counterparts across almost all of Western Europe.

For much of the period from 1997, empowering local government was paradoxically felt to be an activity which would take power away from communities. Under the guise of 'new localism', councils were exhorted to go beyond the representative democracy experienced in the town hall, in particular by giving community groups greater sway over local decisions. The mechanism of local government elections was felt to be inadequate as a

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way of giving communities power over their destinies: councillors instead had to demonstrate they were listening to, being steered by or, ideally, devolving power to local residents' groups. There was a partial change of emphasis towards the end of the Labour government's time, with John Denham at pains to stress the significance and legitimacy of councillors, and offering them, through scrutiny committees, modest powers of oversight of other public service providers, such as utility companies and health authorities (Communities and Local Government, 2009).

**Problems with Labour's approach**

As the foregoing section illustrates, it is pretty clear that local government was regarded with at best a high degree of scepticism, and at worst abject contempt by the Labour government. New structures were imposed, mechanisms of central control were strengthened, there was insistence upon engaging other actors (be they businesses, other statutory bodies or residents' groups) in decision-making processes previously the province of elected councillors, and there was minimal extension of the statutory and financial autonomy of local government. Perhaps this flowed from the terrible reputation of much of Labour local government in the 1980s and early 1990s, which, ironically, had been reined in by stronger party control by the time New Labour came to power. These policies had at least five unwelcome sets of consequences.

*Concentration of power*

First, although the creation of 'cabinets' and 'scrutiny' committees might well have enhanced the accountability of local government and streamlined decision-making, they ran a serious risk of creating two tiers of councillor, with 'back-bench' (or, more patronisingly, 'community' councillors) enjoying responsibility for decisions taken in their names by others. Local councillors remain overwhelmingly male (68.4 per cent), white (96.6 per cent), educated to degree-level (51.1 per cent), and have an average age of 58.8 (see National Federation for Educational Research, 2009); this figure is even more extreme, according to the same data, on each count for councillors who have held a 'senior position', so the reforms will have *concentrated* power with older, white, male graduates.

On a related note, the directly elected mayor model has had an extraordinary rate of crisis and collapse, be it through the election of the local football club mascot in Hartlepool, the controversy related to the Mayor of Stoke and the decision to abolish the position, or the turmoil that occurred in Doncaster (and the subsequent election of a right-wing English Democrat). Elected mayors were an attempt to take power from political groups and concentrate it in the hands of an individual, in the interests of transparency and accountability, but all too often political groups have proven to be far better custodians of local interests than populist outsiders. Of the twelve local authorities (excluding Greater London) with an elected mayor, at least four found themselves in challenging positions: Stoke, Doncaster and Hartlepool have already been referred to; North Tyneside saw its first mayor resign after being arrested (though subsequently acquitted) in office. In Tower Hamlets, Labour's need to re-run its shortlisting for the position following a legal challenge does not bode well.

Where the mayoral model *has* worked, it has tended to be where it has been embedded in a strong majority party group (in which case, the question might be asked: what is gained from this model compared to having a capable council leader?).

*Technocracy*

Secondly, the steering of local government through centrally-set targets, and the insistence upon the formation of local partnerships, had a number of unwelcome effects. It had a tendency to try to resolve essentially *political* problems through changes to structures and 'technocratic' means (can inequality and enduring poverty really be remedied by an unelected 'partnership' without any ability to address fundamental questions about the distribution of wealth and power?). It also ran the risk of turning local politicians into local technocrats, taking them away from the concerns of electors, getting them to speak the alien language of statutory agencies and government departments, blinding them to inequalities of power, and making them representatives of their council organisations rather than their communities.

Furthermore, accountability became hopelessly blurred: who on a Local Strategic Partnership could be held responsible for a rise in teenage pregnancy, say? The answer is nobody, individually, could, nor could the partnership be challenged or sacked by local people. The illusion of inclusion might be created, but in fact it is highly questionable whether one or two unelected 'representatives' of faith groups, say, could really facilitate the meaningful inclusion of the whole community they were meant to add to the process.

*Unequal participation*

Third, the insistence upon passing power beyond elected councillors towards local people assumes this will be more representative. Yet in fact this overlooks a distinctly unequal propensity to get involved in local forums. Electoral turnout is of course lower amongst more deprived groups (Ipsos MORI, 2010), but the time, resources and confidence to turn up and speak at a public meeting are even less equally distributed. The truth is that much of the 'new localism' reflects the greater empowerment of the already powerful, articulate white middle-classes (Jordan, 2007).

*Frustrated expectations*

Fourth, encouraging local government to solve the problems of the communities it faces, after extensive consultation with local people, is only a good move if it has the power to solve these problems. Yet the relatively limited power it enjoyed (sketched above), with minimal ability to raise funds, and a very tight legislative framework, would be bound to lead to frustration and disappointment (in a few cases even fostering the rise of political extremism) if it was not equal to the challenges it was being asked to rise to.

To take but one banal example: a commonly-raised problem in many areas is the spread of badly managed houses in multiple occupation. New governance arrangements (in this case, the Police and Justice Act 2006) could prompt civic-spirited residents to issue a 'community call for action', and urge the council to deal with the problem. Yet until 2010, councils were powerless to manage the spread of these houses, and additional powers to manage them required permission from the relevant government department. So the upshot of concerned citizens or councillors listening to their communities and trying to solve the problem would be lasting disappointment.

Or to take another example: communities anxious about the spread of betting shops could do absolutely nothing about this, notwithstanding the obvious harm their concentration might cause. These examples would not involve direct costs to the council, and given local government's very limited ability to raise funds, problems requiring large sums of money would be even less likely to be resolved.

**RENEWAL** Vol 18 No. 3/4*Depoliticisation*

Finally, there was a deep-seated scepticism about passing power to local political parties and their council groups, as was demonstrated by the emphasis on the promotion of elected mayors, the ban upon partisan 'whipping' in scrutiny committees, and the insistence upon taking decisions outside representative democratic arenas in favour of partnerships or local groups.

Yet parties fulfil several important functions (see Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). Amongst other roles, parties simplify choices for voters, structuring electoral choice, and giving voters information about candidates and policies. They mobilise people to participate, through their campaigning activity and also the attachment and loyalty they generate. They recruit candidates for election (sometimes proactively seeking out interested and suitable individuals, sometimes undertaking necessary scrutiny of the suitability of volunteers, often a blend of both) and then also play a role in training candidates and councillors. In Labour's case, this might also include ongoing encouragement to remain in contact with the electorate. Parties articulate and aggregate political interests: they give voice to issues, but also tie these together into a coherent programme to give a basis for governing. They ensure responsibility for political choices, providing a mechanism for voters to reward and punish politicians for policy decisions, and a means with which to reverse policies that they do not like – and equally to foster collaboration between politicians of the same broad political persuasion, who know that they will stand and fall together. Finally, parties foster stability: 'the specific issues and leaders may well change from one campaign to the next, but the party labels remain' (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000, 10).

If we were to imagine a world without political parties in local government, it is easy to see how several of these valuable functions would fall by the wayside. For instance, without parties' role in recruitment, access to local government would be restricted to those with a great deal of enthusiasm, confidence, or funds (and probably all three). A local authority comprising apolitical local advocates each clamouring for the maximum resources for, say, an eighteenth of the municipal area would struggle indeed to develop a coherent programme for the whole area, compared to one shaped by one or two political parties. Electors would find it impossible to garner sufficient information about candidates for office, would be groping in the dark for someone whose values and views aligned with their own, and crucially would have no way of judging how likely a candidate would be to have the power to implement the manifesto on which s/he stood. If unpopular decisions were taken, and those responsible did not stand for re-election, it would be hard for the electorate to hold anyone to account – whereas such accountability is facilitated by party governance.

It would, therefore, be better to design local government structures that accepted these realities and positively shaped, rather than undermined, the influence of political parties.

**A 'conservative' response to Labour's local government malaise**

A 'conservative' Labour response to the malaise outlined above would of course only accept some of this analysis.

It would agree, of course, that having fewer Labour councillors is a bad thing for the Labour Party (in terms of campaigning and recruitment capacity as well as substantive

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influence). Nonetheless, it would be optimistic about the chances for renewal. For instance, since the election defeat much optimism has been expressed about the possibility of Labour making gains at future elections, notably at the expense of the Liberal Democrats, given the likely unpopularity of the public sector cuts. Moreover, there has been a great deal of acclaim for effective party campaigns (for instance, at the launch of his leadership bid, Ed Miliband singled out Labour's 'hard work and dedication' in Hammersmith, Birmingham Edgbaston and Westminster North for praise in defeating 'Ashcroft's millions'). So a 'conservative' view would draw the conclusion that, with this knowledge of what is needed to win elections, plus more propitious national circumstances than previously, Labour will be able to rebuild its councillor base.

Secondly, reference would be made to the need for greater 'localism'. In the run-up to the 2010 election, John Denham set out Labour's localist vision:

In our vision, powerful local government will ensure that citizens receive their entitlements to a consistently good standard of service. The aim is to move away from a system based on central direction and targets to one where citizens have enforceable rights and means of redress where these are not delivered. Wherever they live, people will have their needs assessed and met appropriately, although the way in which services are delivered may vary locally – between rural and inner-city settings, for example. This will enable us to promote innovation in approaches to service delivery, while also guaranteeing universal entitlements to a certain standard.

So beneath the surface, while all parties seem to favour localism, there are some sharp choices – as sharp as any others in politics – to be made at the next election. My vision is for strong and accountable local government that delivers better, more innovative services and increases value for money. It means a radically different role for councils in future. (Denham, 2009)

It doesn't take much unpacking of this to see that, in Denham's vision, 'localism' pertains to means rather than ends, which are nationally determined; the reference to 'accountable' local government suggests this is not inherently so, and it is the role of the centre to ensure local government is accountable. This rather technocratic vision (with local government's role being restricted to innovative delivery of central goals) doesn't suggest a great advance on the 'new localism' of the Kelly / Blears era.

Contenders in Labour's leadership election have been active in pitching for councillors' support, with David Miliband for instance stating that 'on reflection, local government did not have the prominence it should have had during our time in office. Neither Tony nor Gordon took strengthening local government seriously enough' (Miliband, 2010). Unfortunately, the examples Miliband chooses to demonstrate the way in which local government can be reinvigorated suggest a cautious approach: local councillors should, he argues, look to provide more housing, oppose cuts to the previous government's Future Jobs Fund programme, and hold utility companies to account (Miliband, 2010); each of these reflects a reiteration of the previous government's agenda, rather than any radical shift.

There is nothing manifestly wrong with this approach. After all, it is incontrovertibly true that having more Labour councillors will be good for the Labour Party, that having effective election campaigns will help achieve that aim, and that some bounce back, compared to dreadful results during the Labour government's unpopularity in 2007, 2008

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and 2009, might be expected. Additionally, recognition that political control has been rather too centralised is welcome, as is support for the slight shift towards empowering councillors under John Denham.

But this response fails to recognise some of the more serious failings of Labour's approach to local government identified above, and therefore only represents a very partial response to the problems. Hoping for good election results while only departing slightly from the structures founded on a deeply held scepticism of what local government can do is, quite simply, a woefully inadequate answer to the scale of the problems Labour local government faces.

### **Labour's local government malaise: a radical response**

A radical response to Labour's local government predicament would share the view that winning local government elections is a good thing to do, and that running effective campaigns is helpful to that aim.

However, drawing upon the arguments outlined above, there are four further, inter-related elements that can be included in a radical response.

1. There is a pressing need to **reinvigorate Labour's base of councillors**. The low proportion of councillors from minority ethnic communities, the under-representation of women, councillors' average age approaching sixty, and the overwhelming domination by middle-class professionals all stop Labour in local government looking like the communities it serves. In turn, making councillors more representative – playing a more active role in communities, being in tune with and resolving local priorities – could lead to greater electoral success.

This will require concerted action in internal party processes, ensuring Labour welcomes new and engaged activists, and encourages new people to consider getting involved in local government ('organising academies' being promoted by David Miliband, and the analogy with London Citizens pointed to by Ed Miliband, are positive moves in this regard). It will also be achieved by making the role of Labour local government candidate, and councillor, one to which those with an interest in shaping and leading their communities naturally aspire – and this links to the other ideas in this article.

2. Labour needs a far more **positive view of the role of parties in local government**.

This, in turn, will help make Labour local government an interesting place for community campaigners to be. Indeed, measures could be taken to strengthen the power of parties, for instance making council leaders and 'cabinet' members more accountable to party groups and local parties, and encouraging grassroots members to get involved in policy development. It means recognising the mistake of foisting structures upon local government that were intended to weaken the role of political groups (such as directly elected mayors, committees with a ban on party 'whipping', or the insistence upon shifting decision-making to apolitical community forums).

3. There should be a concerted effort to campaign for **greater decentralisation of power to local authorities**, so that elected councillors have a greater range of tools to respond to issues identified. This applies to the provision of local government services, but also to local government's regulatory functions.



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In the former area, it would mean giving local authorities' greater ability to raise income locally, through variation of business rates, relaxing restrictions on borrowing against future income streams (for instance, in the development of new local authority housing), and providing proper fiscal incentives for new housing. Of course, there's a tension between complete fiscal decentralisation and securing justice – Surrey will find it easier to raise extra funds than Barnsley – so Labour's starting point has to be a central funding formula where deprivation enjoys an even greater weight. Interestingly, politicians on all sides who have taken to self-defining as 'localists' rarely question local government's financial arrangements or freedoms. A mixture of anxiety about the political sensitivity of the council tax, and fear of inflating the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement, has led to this being put in the 'too difficult' box.

Yet the strengthening of local government's regulatory powers, all too often the 'Cinderella' area of responsibility, is just as crucial. Local authorities should be free to clamp down on areas of poor quality housing, for instance, without reference to strict government guidelines or controls; they should be able to intervene to secure a decent mix of housing (for instance, being able to introduce new 'use classes' to respond to a local desire for balance in retail, rather than rows of fried chicken shops or bookmakers). They should be able to intervene more effectively in local transport arrangements, rather than being held to ransom by national bus companies. These areas of policy are often a source of significant local interest, but central government has been reluctant to release them to local control, perhaps inhibited by a nervousness about overly burdensome regulation. Yet this is predicated on an assumption, firstly, that one (residual) level of regulation is appropriate nationally, and, secondly, that this should not be subject to local political contestation and determination. We should challenge both these assumptions.

4. We should seek to create **multipurpose local authorities** instead of unaccountable, technocratic partnerships or ineffective scrutiny arrangements for other statutory bodies. For instance, both Labour and the Conservatives have recently proposed directly electing police commissioners, but it's not obvious why new representatives, rather than existing councils, are needed to fulfil police authorities' role. Indeed, having numerous elections may well depress electoral turnout, leading to unrepresentative views being expressed. Equally, rather than directly electing local health boards, or appointing technocrats but forcing them to engage with local government through partnerships and occasional guest appearances at a scrutiny committee, this role could usefully be served by local councils.

Critics will of course argue that this risks making previously operational issues 'political' – but that is the very point: decisions about the allocation of healthcare and policing resources (or, for that matter, the public interface with utility companies) do indeed involve politics, quite profoundly affecting the distribution of resources and power. Giving local authorities the power to shape the operation of these bodies, within a national framework of minimum standards and safeguards of operational autonomy, would better align their goals with those expressed by local people through their elected representatives, and provide far more visible accountability of their operation.

In summary, a radical agenda for Labour's renewal in local government foresees a stronger role for local councillors, with a greater ability to respond to local communities' needs and desires than at present; and, equally, it strives to get a composition of our councillor base that can achieve this. It recognises the *political* nature of most debates affecting a

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community – from planning to policing, from licensing to litter, from healthcare to housing. And rather than dismissing political parties' involvement as unrepresentative, or treating them as one stakeholder amongst many, it puts them at the heart of decisions affecting the communities they are elected to serve.

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