

Putting The Local Back In Government

**A collection of essays setting out a Liberal
Democrat vision for local Government**

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Introduction

Bill le Breton & Hywel Morgan

Nearly forty years ago in *The Liberal Challenge*, sub-titled *Democracy through Participation*, Jo Grimond wrote,

“We may not be able to prove either that life has any purpose or that the will has any freedom. But these delusions, if delusions they are, lodge in the tissues of our being. We know in our bones that we sometimes can do either this or that, we are the masters for the moment at least ... If I am right, each decision cannot be made out of the blue ... if man is not at the mercy of his fate, if human society is capable of improvement or regression, then you cannot play politics off the cuff, for you must see them as edging towards or away from the sort of world you want ... In politics passion will only be generated by some vision of the sort of people we would like to be or the sort of country we admire, and passion will only turn into action if we believe that by action we can get nearer our ideal.”

Since then a great deal has happened. Liberals and, later, Social Democrats generally adopted the doctrine of Community Politics. Our campaign, in theory, became the drive ‘to help people take and use power in their communities’. More and more of our energy was concentrated in the sphere of local government. This was because in local government three forces for freedom and liberty met. The freedom generated by the services themselves – education, public safety, better housing, social services and amenities created life chances and more equal opportunity. But also the

freedom generated by the delivery of the services themselves. Not just freedom generated by the wages of those employed in service delivery, but also the freedom generated in the employment itself. This is why we campaigned for community based co-operatives and social businesses where the experience of those carrying out the services was itself liberating. And finally the freedom generated by involving people in the decisions of local government – participation in democracy and the liberating experience that occurs when people take and use power.

As Alex Wilcock explores in his article, we found that Community Politics struck a chord with the electorate and our activists began to get elected in growing numbers to Councils up and down the country. Lone Liberals found themselves, often literally, thrown out of committee meetings and denied information and the right to participate.

The intrepid few fought legal battles - John Strak recalls his battles to get access to the information he needed - and won history making court cases to establish rights of access and participation. Laws were changed to strengthen these rights.

During this time the few were becoming the many. Activists were getting others elected. These others, dropped in at the deep end, could be forgiven for not having the time to become familiar with the vision and values of community politics. And in this way, the ideas that sought to transform human society were shunted into a siding and used almost exclusively as an electoral technique to be discarded at 9.01pm on every local election night. The vision became diluted (sometimes polluted), pale and insubstantial or even unknown. In no time at all we began winning majorities in certain councils. One or two controlling groups pioneered the introduction of practical policies for decentralisation and participation based on the values

of Community Politics. They were opposed tooth and nail by opponents and alas by some in this Party.

Over the last twenty years, literally, billions of pounds have been spent on Liberal Democrat say-so. Of course, many of the services that Liberal Democrats have saved from Tory and Labour cuts and centralisation have fostered freedom. Many schools, social services and amenities exist today because of Liberal Democrat action. Each one will have gone some way in enhancing the stock of freedom. But the use of freedom does not always increase liberty. The Tories create freedom for the few to impose their economic power on the many – the freedom to act selfishly. Labour creates freedom for the few to impose their morality on others.

Of course not all councils are so enlightened as the stories in this pamphlet from Wansbeck and Broadland show and the high profile failures of some (mainly Labour) councils are what really lies behind Labours' "modernising" agenda.

Driven partly by memories of the internal strife of the 80's, Labour sees local government as "the enemy" who should just be there as a body to implement national policies and priorities in the most effective way possible.

So, we are bound to ask, are the freedom and extra life chances generated by Liberal Democrat votes in local government more or less

likely to be used in a Liberal way? Have we been systematically building the conditions for a Liberal society? Or, remembering the words of Jo Grimmond, has each decision been made 'out of the blue'. Are we playing politics 'off the cuff'? Have we lost sight of the vision?

Labour's reforms of local government has made these questions even more significant. Reacted to without reference to our core values, implemented by ad hoc decisions, played 'off the cuff', these reforms will be illiberal, destructive of freedom and anti-democratic. Even with the vision in mind they may be frustrated rather than assist people in taking and using power in their communities?

First the good news. Stewart Rayment writes about the achievements of the Lib Dem administrations in Tower Hamlets. One of the architects of those decentralisation issues has been living in Australia for the last ten years. If he returned now, he would be struck by the permissive attitude that appears to exist for decentralisation, for Area Committees. Liberal Democrats are rightly seizing this opportunity with enthusiasm. The systems devised by Liberal Democrat Councils will not encounter the resistance encountered by earlier pioneers. Setting up area committees is now relatively easy. But

decentralising power, responsibility and resources to them will require enormous political will.

**For Area
Committees to work
the centre must let
go**

For Area Committees to work to help people take and use power (rather than for them to work as placebos given to second class, non-executive councillors) the centre must let go and the community must be able to get involved. A Chief Executive was recently heard to say, "Leader, you can't afford not to be able to countermand a decision of an area committee." When it was suggested to him that the only justification for the decision of an area committee being 'called in' for review was if the community of that local area had willed it (say by a petition of a certain number), he reacted with enthusiasm. When his draft new standing orders were published there were two ways of blocking an area committee decision. You guessed it: by community decision or by decision of the 'cabinet'. I wonder how long the community provision lasted in subsequent re-drafting stages? If few Liberal Democrat councillors have a sharply defined Liberal ideal that they are working towards, how many local government officers know what it is and are working towards it too? The so-called pragmatic, decision by decision approach, encouraged by

local government professionals and welcomed by too many councillors, is more likely to side with the centre against effective public and democratic participation. Area committees will be toothless palliatives doomed to failure and adverse reaction unless we keep the vision in mind. They must have power and resources.

Similarly 'scrutiny' is attractive to Liberal Democrats. It does seem to be a re-badging of the 1970's Performance Review model. Still, if it makes greater use of the skills, experience and energy of local representatives it will be to the good. If it allows for the involvement of experts from the wider community it will be even better. If it links with real community planning and leads to real community involvement it will be a good thing. But scrutiny without the power to change policy is a charade. And a scrutiny process without adequate and able resources is a pantomime. As Cathy Priddey and Matthew Huntback report from Lewisham, there is no evidence that 'scrutiny' is working. There is manifest evidence that this is the most immediate cause of disaffection with the reforms.

Our own group leaders are aware of this, but seem as powerless as anyone to find a remedy. Once again the centre must let go. Scrutineers must be trained, must be well resourced, and must have access to independent and high level advice. As

with Area Committees, scrutiny will be a toothless palliative doomed to failure unless we keep the vision in mind. They must be able to change the policy and the practises of the Council.

Which brings us to the issue of cabinets. Many decisions in local government were actually taken by single party groups or individuals with little reference to either members of their fellow group, let alone Councillors generally, or the community affected by the decision. The thing is that cabinets and the new law are designed to perfect that process, to make elitist decisions easier to make and keep. They lead to two tiers of councillor, one of which is denied the chance to take part in policy formation and executive decision. The other tier, the executive, is so weighed down by work that the process professionalises them. The victories that John Strak and others won for the rights of backbench and opposition councillors are gradually being unpicked.

This makes them more and more dependent of their local government advisers, who in turn spend less and less of their time 'serving' backbenchers. Every trend results in a further widening of the gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' of the Council membership. It is because these tendencies are inherent in the cabinet system that even those systems designed carefully by Liberal

Democrats to protect the rights of all councillors and to make community participation more likely, necessarily work out in practise as instruments of secrecy and privilege.

If the decision is wrong - no matter how little waste or effort occurs, the last thing the process is, is efficient

Officers, civil servants and Labour ministers and some Liberal Democrats think that the cabinet system is more efficient. What they are saying is, 'less (participation) means more'. Efficiency implies productive with minimum waste or effort. If the decision is wrong, no matter how little waste or effort occurs, the last thing the process is is efficient. Practise tells me that the smaller the body making a choice, the more likely it is that the choice is wrong. The less connected with the public and especially with the people affected by the decision, the more likely it is that the decision will be wrong.

Decisions should be taken by those affected by them, or by that level of elected governance closest to them. Where that requires a borough wide decision, the Council as a whole should remain sovereign. And for the Council to remain sovereign the information must be freely available to all those involved in the decision.

For the Council to be accountable that information must be freely available to the community, and the electorate should have a fair and effective means of choosing its representatives to take decisions on its behalf. There is only one system that will do that and that is STV.

We must conclude that the Labour reforms of local government are fundamentally flawed. They are as illiberal and as dangerous as Labour reforms to the legal system that have removed the right to jury trial. They should evoke a similar degree of passionate opposition. This must be expressed in the Party's manifesto and in our vigorous campaigning during and after the General Election.

For Liberal Democrats local Government is not just a "bolt on" extra to the real government machinery in Westminster but an essential part of the process of giving people real power over their lives and communities which underpins our entire system of government.

Local Government "A Good Thing" Say Lib Dems in Shock Statement

By Alex Wilcock

The Liberal Democrat approach begins with freedom for the individual. We should all have the opportunity to live our lives as we choose, without trampling the rights of others. For freedom to be real for everyone, it needs fairness. We want to see social justice, with equality before the law and properly funded public services. Freedom cannot thrive without good education, for people to make their own choices and realise their potential. Freedom needs good health, which must be safeguarded by a decent environment, both for people today, and for future generations. And the only sure way to guarantee freedom and fairness is for people to work together in communities.

Local government is vital to that free, fair and green approach. Of course, local authorities are central

to the provision of education and to making local environments good places in which to live. Even more importantly, local government is closer to the people it serves. Liberal Democrats do not believe in the sovereignty of Parliament, but the sovereignty of people. We aim to disperse power, so that decisions are taken at the lowest practical level, not dictated from above. For many actions, the lowest appropriate level to make choices must remain the individual. Where power must be exercised by communities, individuals must be able to make a full contribution to the decisions which affect their lives. Local government is important because it is the level of government at which the most individuals can make the most impact.

The Liberal Democrat approach to local government rests on this belief in every individual. We aim to encourage people to take and use power within their own communities, as well as to represent them within political structures. We believe that if people contribute to their own communities, they'll be run better than by a remote state. Where difficult choices must be made, it makes sense to involve the people affected in making those decisions, with bottom-up solutions more readily put into practice than enforced bossiness. This belief has informed the Liberal Democrat philosophy and strategy of local government through the last three decades, community politics.

As well as changing elections - community politics has changed the way in which Liberal Democrat-led councils do business

Community politics is not just a technique for winning elections. Developed in cities like Liverpool and Birmingham and officially adopted by the Liberal Party in 1970, the attention of community politics to local issues raised by local people and its techniques of informing people through FOCUS leaflets have been highly successful in winning the support of voters. This is hardly a surprise, given the aloof attitude of

other parties. As well as changing elections, though, community politics has changed the way in which Liberal Democrat-led councils do business. Public question times, decentralised neighbourhood committees, local referenda and bottom-up activity such as recycling are all signs of how Liberal Democrat councils do things differently.

The other parties' approach to local government has been a clear contrast to Liberal Democrat openness. Too often local government is remote, inefficient and unrepresentative. The old Julian Clary line, "Who did your hair, dear? Was it the council?" sums up the contempt with which many regard Labour's record in the cities. The practice of community politics in places like Liverpool, Sheffield and Islington has helped break open arrogant municipal socialist monoliths.

During the 1980s, the Conservatives developed a distrust of local government bordering on hatred. The arrogance and waste of Labour councils unchallenged in power for far too long helped discredit local government enough to enable attacks on local democracy such as capping and the abolition of councils that disagreed with the government to go ahead. In the meantime, the government ignored both the Tory sleaze that discredited central government and the lazy complacency of Tory councils. The

voters did not. By the mid-1990s, Conservative councils were near-extinct.

We still suffer from the aftermath of that Tory vendetta, as central bureaucracy takes local decisions and messes them up. The poll tax is gone, but the Council Tax has its own unfairnesses. Local government now has control of just a tiny fraction of its own finances, with most of its cash doled out from above and ordered into particular areas by central government diktat.

***Labour believe in
devolution as a
mechanical process -
not in letting power
go***

There remains a chronic shortage of affordable housing in many parts of the country. Powers formerly exercised by accountable local government were not taken from monoliths to give to local people, but to undemocratic quangos and direct rule from Westminster. The official bigotry of Section 28, created as another stick to beat local government, is still on the statute books in England and Wales. Today, Tony Blair defends the primacy of Parliamentary control, and still does not trust local government. Labour believe in devolution as a mechanical process, not in letting power go. They still want to hold control, while Liberal Democrats want to involve people in taking power over their

own lives. Executive Cabinets and mayors are Labour gimmicks to centralise local power which can do nothing to turn around the feeling that many councils are inaccessible.

Liberal Democrat visions for local government are different. We value diversity. Local government should be given the power to experiment with many different ways of doing things and find the best local solutions to local problems, not be bullied by central government. Decentralisation and pluralism are key to controlling central government power and increasing individual freedom. Every local community should be able to find its own way to meet the minimum standards; Westminster's job should be to set these, not to dictate every detail.

Liberal Democrats will replace the Council Tax with local income tax, and give local authorities more discretion over spending. Our plans for regional government will take powers from Westminster, not local government. Perhaps most significantly, we will establish a power of general competence to enable local authorities to make the decisions they believe are best for their communities, unless specifically forbidden by law. At present, local government can only do what is specifically permitted. Greater power must also be balanced by greater accountability and freedom of information. We will decentralise more power to neighbourhood

government, introduce Citizens' Initiative referenda to ensure people have a say between elections, and introduce STV for local elections to prevent councils being controlled for decades by parties holding 'safe seats' without majority support in the community - even when the party in control is the Liberal Democrats.

The Liberal Democrats believe that the best way to guarantee rights and opportunities for individuals to run their own lives and influence their surroundings is through decentralisation of power to local level. People should be able to feel proud of and participate in their local communities - the schools in which their children are taught, the streets they travel every day, the local environment in which they live. Local councils have a vital role to play in fostering such revitalised communities.

Since the adoption of community politics over thirty years ago, Liberal Democrat councillors have risen from a few hundred to four and a half thousand, and Liberal Democrats have won 28% of the popular vote at the 2000 local elections. Most Liberal Democrat MPs won their seats after a steady buildup of trust in our local government success. How we handle power and influence in local government is vital to the people we involve and represent, and has a direct effect on their lives. All local government can play its part in encouraging and supporting strong,

diverse and sustainable communities, made up of free individuals. The challenge is to give local government the power to take real action, and ensure local people have the power to hold their local councils to account and help set themselves free from poverty, ignorance and conformity.

Alex Wilcock

**Vice-Chair, Liberal Democrat
Federal Policy Committee**

Throughout the 80's some big battles were fought (and won) by Liberal and Alliance councillors who were being excluded from the decision making process. The efforts of these councillors led to some of the legislation (most notably the 1985 and 1989 acts) guaranteeing the rights of opposition councillors and giving them access to information
John Strak was a councillor on Hyndburn BC during the 80's and was one of those who had to fight for his rights as an opposition councillor.

Access to information - the hassle factor

1985 was the year that Dire Straits, Madonna, and Duran Duran were top of the pops. That memory ages me because, just when these icons of pop music were making their mark, I was up in front of Lord Justice Woolf in the High Court in London. 1985 was the year that my complaint about access to information on Hyndburn Borough Council was determined by the due process of Judicial Review.

That process involved solicitors, barristers, and QCs (Lord Anthony Lester for me) and a lot of hassle all round. I was at the centre of that hassle but I wrote my own invitation so I don't complain. But I will complain if the blood, sweat and tears that went into the fight for more information for councillors are forgotten when the latest Labour ideas on how Councils should be organised are discussed. It was a fight to get better access to information for councillors when I was a district councillor in the 1980s and I wouldn't want to see the gains made then just thrown away.

My story began in the 1983-85 period as the leader of a small group of SDP and Liberal councillors on Hyndburn Borough Council in

Lancashire (better known as Accrington - home of the famous Accrington Stanley football club).

The Council was run by Labour but occasionally swung Tory as the electoral ping pong game swept a red or blue tide one way or the other. Clearly, the arrival of a third group of councillors, the SDP-Liberal Alliance, wasn't in the game plan of the old parties and we were treated with a mixture of hatred and contempt. We could handle that but it became more and more evident that the old party system was also unwilling to share the information that all councillors were entitled to receive in management of the Council. Incredibly, Tory and Labour party leaders (supposedly arch enemies) were prepared to regularly sit down in meetings with the Town

Clerk and other officials and make decisions about key items of Council business. These decisions were not subject to discussion or consultation by the SDP-Liberal Alliance (or any of the members of Labour or Tory groups). In my view, the old parties were operating a de facto caucus and I told them as much.

This injustice had to be put right - not just for my sake but for the sake of any councillor who wanted to know all relevant information

I was given the brush off. I was told that no new information was being given to the other party leaders, nor were decisions being made. But they reckoned without my innocence and ability to fight hassle with hassle. Good legal advice from Cowley Street underlined my conviction that this injustice had to be put right. Not just for my sake but for the sake of any councillor of any party who wanted to know all relevant information and take part in all relevant Council decisions. So, again with Cowley Street's help, we threatened them with Judicial Review. They laughed us off with the famous response, "we'll see you in court".

Judicial Review isn't like most legal actions. The complainant has to prove that he has a valid case before the High Court will even allow the case to move to a full hearing. So we

had to do all the paperwork that set out the basis for my complaint in advance, and make it as solid as possible. Only when we passed this hurdle would the full hearing occur in front of a Judge in London. We passed the first test and the hearing date was duly set. The case was held in front of Lord Justice Woolf (as a mere High Court judge as he was then) and frankly, it was terrifying. The QCs did all the talking and my sworn affidavit looked pretty pathetic next to the affidavits of the Town Clerk and the opposing party leaders. Suddenly, it seemed a very hard fight against some very entrenched interests.

I, meanwhile, had to raise "promises" from as many supporters as possible that would underpin the estimated £30,000 legal bill that I faced if it all went pear shaped. There are more than a few people who will remember me approaching them with a pledge form for them to sign in the summer and early autumn of 1985. The party conference at Torquay in that year was one place where I hassled people in an attempt to reach my financial target. I'll gladly repeat my thanks now to all those who signed up to help me.

In the autumn of 1985, some months after the hearing, we were called back into the court to hear the Judge's verdict - and, just as I thought I heard the trap door of the gallows open for me, Justice Wolf made it clear that we had won. And all

expenses were allocated against the Council! In a landmark verdict we had legally established the right of councillors to have access to information and for minority parties to be allowed full access to the decision-making process. The champagne afterwards couldn't have tasted better.

What's the moral of this story? Everyone will have their own view but, to me, the case was all about trusting the individual and giving individual councillors a chance to question the system's wisdom. Access to information and to a Council's decision-making procedures are an essential part of keeping the system in check and ensuring that it doesn't ossify. Parties who keep control of a Council for a

long time can become arrogant and fixed in their views and, even worse, can restrict the rights of the individual to challenge their way of doing things. There need to be rules and legal principles which act as a check against the system. Local government must recognise this and seek to keep the balance tipped in favour of the individual. Labour's so-called vision for local councils doesn't do this.

And, if we don't defend the rights established by legal cases like mine against Hyndburn Council we run the risk of them being taken away or undermined. 1985 was a hassle but worth it in the end. I just hope that what was won back then isn't somehow lost in any reform of local government in the future.

The proposed new structures for councils cast somewhat of a cloud over the future role for 'ordinary' councillors. Much hot air has been expended on talk of 'powerful representative roles' but how powerful a role can back-benchers have if they are excluded from the mechanisms of decision making.

Can Councillors Be Effective Community Advocates?

Our role as community councillors is central to the success of our party in local government. But we must also recognise the continuous challenge to improve service delivery in all areas of council activity. This is the *raison d'être* of all that we do.

Councillors can be effective advocates and leader for their own communities only when the political structures of the council enables them to do so.

Local Government reorganisation is vital to our future effectiveness as community councillors. That is why it is so important that we set our own agenda for change, rather than following meekly in the footprints of the Labour party.

Government reform can be shown to limit the choice of local councils and communities, increase the degree of central government control, and to hoodwink the public into believing that the object of the exercise is to increase local autonomy.

The additional purpose behind the government's agenda, systematically pursued across a wide range of

initiatives and legislation; is to arrive at a point where local government is reduced to quango status, delivering strategic planning for privatised local services.

Schools, hospitals, social services, housing, will be delivered increasingly by the private sector. Central Government continues to force local councils, by financial constraints, to adopt limited options for transferring ownership into the private sector with reduced levels of local democratic accountability.

The direct delivery of local government services by democratically elected councils, will be replaced by a small group of highly paid executive councillors, with the role of community councillors in the delivery of local government severely weakened.

Neither is the adoption of the select committee model for scrutiny in local government working well. Labour ministers have failed to understand the differences between national and local government and the variables in good local government itself.

As Liberal Democrats, we will want to see far more autonomy returned to local communities in partnership with their own councils.

This is already reflected through many of our existing policies

- To end capping mechanisms used to control council expenditure.
- To move away from the endless rounds of bidding processes for central government funding.
- To achieve a shift in the balance of monies raised locally for the delivery of local services - from the current 17% to a target of 60%.
- To break the stranglehold of central government on the delivery of local authority services.

We need to ensure that it is its outcomes for the community which drives the political agenda - not the political needs of a controlling party - however benign it may profess itself to be!

We need to revive electoral interest in the political process by making sure that everyone's votes count and equally important, that local councils have the power to deliver.

Increasingly, political parties at local level are left tinkering at the margins because so much activity is controlled and determined through central government and its agents.

If nearly two-thirds of the money for local government was raised and spent locally, people would take far greater interest in the election of local councillors and councils.

There is a strong public perception that it doesn't really matter - only partly offset by active community councillors of any party.

Council groups too, would have to put forward robust and well thought out manifestos.

Our aim must be to make local Government count - return governance and democratic control to local communities. If we make this our marching tune, we will strengthen and enhance our role as community councillors, and our standing as THE party of Local Government.

Cllr Richard Burt is the leader of the Liberal Democrat group on Dudley MBC

The Local Government Act 2000 has only recently been passed - but some councils have been falling over themselves to be the first to modernise. Whilst Liberal Democrats have been taking the opportunity to open up their councils that has not always been the case in other areas - as Cathy Priddey and Matthew Huntbach from Lewisham explain.

“Modernising” Lewisham

The London Borough of Lewisham has been energetically pushing an image of a “modernising” Labour council in the local government press. From its propaganda, and, alas, some of the coverage it has been given by gullible journalists, one might assume that having an executive mayor has been universally welcomed after extensive consultation in Lewisham. The truth is very different.

After the 1998 Borough elections, a “New Labour” faction under Cllr Dave Sullivan ousted the former middle-of-the-road Labour leadership. They made clear how they wanted things to develop in the first Council AGM after the election, when the seating arrangements had the committee chairs in a circle round a “cabinet table”, with the rest of the councillors arranged as an audience.

Immediately, a council working party was established to “investigate new models of governance”. It was clear from the start that this working party was meant to come up with the answer “cabinet and executive mayor”. The “experts” (including Professor Paul Corrigan – whose interest as Hilary Armstrong’s husband was not declared) – chosen to speak to the working party were all people known to be in favour of mayor/cabinet systems. Matthew’s

was the only voice in the working party against, he was given little opportunity to express his views, and nothing he said was included in the working party’s final report.

A “citizens’ panel” was also set up to approve the working party’s conclusions. Whether the members of this citizens’ panel were truly randomly picked is unclear. But what is clear from what has been said by panel members publicly and privately since is that they were given a very one-sided account of the different models of governance, and neither we nor any other opponent of mayors/cabinets were invited to address them. The fact that the citizens’ panel voted in favour of executive mayors has continuously been used to accuse opponents of “arguing against the view of the people”. We faced abuse and jeers

when we attempted to disagree with the working party report at the next Council meeting.

The 1999 Council AGM put into effect all changes that were possible under existing legislation. The Executive Committee took over as many of the Council's powers as it legally could. Cllr Sullivan was elected to both the posts of Mayor and Leader of the Council. After long congratulatory speeches from the Labour leadership, the Liberal Democrat group attempted to open debate on the constitutional changes, but were shouted down and accused of "spoiling the day" for the guests who were invited to what was meant to be a "purely ceremonial occasion".

The Executive Committee had to be proportional, and both the leaders of the Liberal Democrat group and the smaller Conservative group were offered places. The Conservative leader, agreeing with New Labour's plans, accepted his place, but the Liberal Democrat group decided its leader should not. We felt that this would be seen as endorsing a system with which we disagreed, and that the appropriate place for the Leader of the Opposition was leading a group united on the scrutiny side. For taking this position Matthew was accused of "receiving pay" (the opposition leader's SRA) "but not doing the job". Perhaps this suggests the real value the New Labour leadership put on scrutiny.

Scrutiny committees in Lewisham have not been given the call-in powers. When we asked about call-in we were referred to the old standing orders that allow five members of the Council to call a special meeting of Full Council. Doubtless if we were to attempt to use this we would be accused of "wasting taxpayers' money". The scrutiny committees act almost exclusively in an advisory capacity. The string of recommendations agreed by the Environmental Sustainability Committee, for example, most of which have been Liberal Democrat initiatives, have not been formally tracked or followed up in Committee despite repeated requests.

The conflict of interest with the Leader of the Council also chairing it as mayor has been obvious. He has used his power as Mayor to rule as "out of order" motions critical of the Council, and to have fewer meetings of Full Council than dictated by Council Standing Orders. His name and image has been plastered over as much council material as possible, down to the council letterheads.

Our experience of the new system has not been good. We have insisted, despite resistance, on our right to see all papers for the Executive Committee. Although the fact the Executive Committee met in public was trumpeted, we discovered by chance it was having extensive private pre-meetings with officers under the

title “Mayor’s Board”. Our legal right to access to the papers presented at these pre-meetings was only granted grudgingly.

The familiarity with council business that was gained through membership of service committees (even though of course they only rubber-stamped decisions made previously by the Labour group) has been lost. We have been less able to scrutinise council business in scrutiny committees than we were in service committees which covered the full range of the services. Many crucial decisions have now been delegated to officers.

We have worked hard to raise the dangers of the new system in the press and we have gained considerable coverage of our warning that “an executive mayor is an elected dictator”. The Labour leadership continue to state that the only issue is whether “the leader of the council is elected by the people or by the councillors”. It is important for us now to get the message across that it isn’t how the council leader is elected, but what power that leader has: should he or she have to be accountable to a council representing the various areas and parties in the borough, or should elected councillors be reduced to the mere advisory role that an executive mayor system gives them?

***Cllrs Matthew Huntbach and
Cathy Priddey - Lewisham LBC***

A major driving force behind Labours determination to 'modernise' local government has been the failures of some councils to adequately deliver effective services and representation. The following two articles expose the failings of both a Conservative (Broadland) and Labour (Wansbeck) authority

Experiences on Broadland

When I was asked to write an article about Broadland and the antics of the leading Conservative group I readily agreed, then I sat down in front of the computer screen and just didn't know where to start! There are just so many issues that I feel that some people will perhaps suspect that I am either exaggerating or taking a whole section out of the "how not to do it" manual on local government. Can I assure you that this is not the case, the following scenario actually did happen over the last year or so at Broadland.

Broadland District Council has in the past often been highlighted as a Tory flagship, having been in Tory control for more years than I care to remember. This all began to change in 1994/5 when the council went into a no overall control situation. There then followed several years of various arrangements for committee chairs between Liberal Democrats and either Labour or Tory, with the Tories reaching an all time low of only 12 members out of 49 in 1997/98. As it was virtually impossible for either the Labour or the Tory group to contemplate an arrangement with each other the Liberal Democrats were very much able to drive much of the agenda. At no time did we even slightly divert from our own policy and manifesto. This was clearly very much resented by many of the Tory leading councillors who appeared to

be accusing their leader of giving in to the Lib Dems. This was a little unfair but I didn't think it was my place to point that out. They did not have the numbers to get anything through council on their own and as we had no policy agreement with them whatsoever she had little option. I was quite happy to remind the Tory leader of this whenever necessary and she realized very early on that it was rather futile to put motions forward that we would just blow out of the water.

Having gone through this period of having to listen and cooperate with others the Tories were very happy to finally see their numbers swell again but chose this time to argue between themselves. This got to such fever point that after the 1999 elections, although they had 25 out of the 49

seats the leader, having fallen out with one of her group, could not come to any sort of accommodation with him. Although he was a leading Conservative member and made it very clear that he remained a member of the national party, after much heated discussion it was announced that he was not a member of her group. This effectively gave away their overall control position! Obviously this made a significant difference to the number of seats they held on each committee. The council officers not being sure quite where to place this Tory then invented a new party called "other" as he was not a member of any political group but he wasn't an Independent either! The Tories then ran a minority control council – the Liberal Democrats not being willing to support a group which clearly was now concentrating on undoing all of their good work over the past years. We did however persuade them to appoint an Independent as Chairman of the Council. I was totally amazed that they went for this bearing in mind the tightness of the numbers and the obvious advantage of the Chairman's casting vote. They very soon realized their mistake but could do nothing about it.

Many people will be aware that there then followed a well publicised dispute between the Chief Executive of Broadland and the Labour group leader, most of this is, unfortunately, still confidential. What I can disclose

as it is a matter of public record, is that in the final event the council ended up in court fighting a case brought against it by the Labour leader, the Chief Executive, after much unpleasantness, having taken early retirement. Having lost the court case the Labour leader then took it to appeal and lost again, in both events a tidy sum of costs were awarded against her. The Tories throughout this began to argue very strongly within their group, much of it in public, and it was no real surprise when the Tory leader left the group and took a sizable chunk of Tory members with her. Having spent a while as the Broadland District Conservative Group (as opposed to the Broadland Conservative Group which they had just left) they then all became members of the Independents.

There has been a total shambles

So where has this left us regarding policy and the running of the council? My answer to that is that there has been a total shambles. The Conservative Group now trying to run the council has not improved with time. Even now when after the last elections they have 25 members again, they cannot seem to agree on anything. The members of the Tory group who became Independents are always around to help encourage a split in their former group and thoroughly enjoy doing so. The main problem seems to be that the leading

group want to appear decisive but do not appreciate that you actually need a real grasp of the issues before you can charge ahead and, most crucially, you need to take all of your members with you – which they are still not doing.

What they have put forward in recent months is, for example, to spend millions on building a new council office, which we could well do without but (as they stated in public) they would like because it would be “prestigious”. They more than doubled the budget for members allowances (having requested an independent report on what allowances should be, they dismissed the report and did their own thing). Balanced against this they cut grants to voluntary organisations, began charging charities for their refuse collections and cut some specific grants for the over 65’s.

They also decided to start charging people for collecting garden waste (not such a bad idea in itself if it encourages people to compost garden waste in their own gardens). Their proposition was that they would charge for separate bags to put garden waste in, but this would then be put in the back of the same refuse vehicle and buried with the general refuse. Then they just caved in under pressure, much from within their own group, and decided to go back and have a re-think. At the moment the official line is that they want to separate garden waste but, for the

time being they haven’t made their minds up about charging and have no real plans for it’s future disposal. This indecision is a great pity as the council is part of a county wide waste management partnership but the Tories appear to be having trouble appreciating that fact! As their deputy leader seems to be all for incineration for just about everything (he doesn’t seem to understand the term recycling) I sometimes despair of anything ever being resolved.

***The Tories have left
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As I write this the budget process is working its way up through the various committees (Broadland is still well entrenched in the old committee structure as the Tory leadership has left decisions on the Modernisation agenda to the last possible moment). The opportunity for mischief making is almost irresistible. The reason I say almost is that with the Tories having no direction the council could be left floundering totally and we are concerned about the effect that this is having on the electorate. We have therefore, as always, been very careful to put forward only well thought out and sensible amendments to the Tory budget and I believe that this has gained us much respect. It has now

got to the stage where the Tory leadership in most cases are just falling in with our propositions rather than risk the public embarrassment yet again of its own group members voting with us. We have therefore managed to get many of their propositions reversed and in the process have shown yet again the weakness in their leadership. This is pretty good going for a Lib Dem group of 9; it is now up to us to use this for the next elections to significantly increase our numbers. We have so much ammunition for "Focus" that we are spoilt for choice and the local media has had a field day pointing out the splits in the Tory camp so we have made a good start.

Apart from the Tory disarray we haven't had much to laugh about at Broadland these days so, I do hope that you don't mind if I end this report with a little humour. Last week William Hague was touring our area and I had cause to telephone the ex-chairman of the local Conservatives who is still a councillor, albeit an Independent, having been a well known Tory in this area for many years. His answer phone message was as follows:

"As the Conservatives are coming to my area and as I am considered uncouth, unruly and dishonorable I am leaving and I will return after they've gone".

***Moira Toye (Lib Dem Leader,
Broadland District Council)***

The failure of Labour in Wansbeck!

The statistics published by Central Government each year always show Wansbeck at the wrong end of the table. For instance Wansbeck has 660 V.A.T. registered businesses in a population of 66,000 people. This is half of the number of businesses in adjacent Districts.

Two years ago the Observer newspaper compared the statistics nationally and declared Wansbeck as the worst Council in Britain.

These indicators are an accurate reflection of the abject failure of the local Labour Party's ability yet they do not see it that way. For them the problems are all the fault of others, usually the Tories, but also the County Council (despite it also being Labour Controlled) or the Government, (Labour controlled) or Europe or the Man in the Moon; in fact anyone will do.

In Wansbeck the Labour Party representatives at District Council level see themselves, not as elected representatives so much as inheritors of their position by divine right. A feudal inheritance bestowed on them by legacy from the National Union of Mineworkers. The apathy they have created over the years has contributed to this belief because in the main few of the Labour Councillors have faced an electoral contest in their ward. They were elected unopposed.

The NUM still govern Wansbeck for the benefit of the NUM. Last summer Arthur Scargill dutifully appeared at the annual Miners Gala in Wansbeck and sat on the platform with the NUM sponsored Wansbeck MP and the NUM Secretary who happens to Chair the Cabinet Committee of Wansbeck and they once again advised the dwindling band of supporters (about 150) that the future of Wansbeck would be wonderful if only the Government would open at least twelve new coal mines in Wansbeck. This must have been a disappointment to their audience who were told the previous year that Wansbeck needed twenty four new pits.

"You can have pits or nowt"

It is against this background that the people of Wansbeck are governed. 'You can have pits or nowt'!

For nearly two decades now significant sums of money have been made available to Wansbeck to finance a new infrastructure that

would support new industries and a new economy. Almost none of these opportunities have been exploited and the problem is compounded because potential investors have usually paid one visit to meet the leadership before turning on their heel never to return.

Add to these failures the fact that Labour in Wansbeck have used Council tax to fund schemes instead of applying for grant funding and a clearer picture of the level of irresponsibility becomes clear. When an application for grant funding is made the applicant has to explain everything about the project not just the bits that the applicant wishes to divulge and the previous administration in Wansbeck was very secretive.

What makes matters worse is the hypocrisy. The Labour leadership constantly refer to the awful statistics as though they were badges of honour; 'we have the worst unemployment in the country' they declare with satisfaction but they never ever go on to explain a policy, plan or strategy that will overcome the problem. Why should they? After all they are in power and they are quite comfortable with the situation and they have surrounded themselves with people that have a mutual interest in their mutual survival. Any change, redeployment of resources or alteration to the status quo is heresy.

The malaise that continues to threaten the good people of Wansbeck is currently compounded by the fact that the present Government has created dozens of initiatives for neighbourhood renewal, combating crime and generating a skills base. Access to the monies available through these schemes is conditional and project based. The Wansbeck Labour Party are not prepared to support projects that are not their idea and therefore well thought through community projects are thwarted and the malaise deepens.

Let me give an example: In January 1995 I became the Project Leader in a non Party Political organisation that had support right across the village of Newbiggin by the Sea, a village with a population of over 7,000. A visionary project was put together over the period of a year that involved hundreds of meetings with over fifty, institutions, quango's, Local Government and Central Government bodies.

An internationally recognised firm of Consultants endorsed the engineering element of the project and accountants that are often engaged by Her Majesty's Government endorsed the business plan. The bid to finance the project was then submitted to the Millennium Commission. To the delight of everyone in the community the bid was put through to the short list and we were invited to give a presentation

at St James Park, Newcastle upon Tyne in May 1996. We met with three of the eight Millennium Commission Commissioners. Our bid was not successful. We do not know the reason why but one of the criteria specified that the bid could only succeed if supported by the Local Authority.

We needed six words in a letter stating; 'We support this bid in principle'. The only organisation that would not subscribe to the submission was Wansbeck District Council controlled at that time by 46 Labour Councillors. There was no opposition in the Council Chamber.

Our organisation was the only organisation in Wansbeck to make bids to the Millennium Commission; no bids of any kind were initiated by the Labour Party.

Subsequently an agreement was made with the Labour Group over bids for Single Regeneration Budget grants. Our organisation honoured its commitment only to discover that the Labour leadership of Wansbeck District Council reneged on their part of the agreement.

Six of the sixteen wards in Wansbeck qualify for almost every European and National initiative devised to breathe new life into the area and still there is no programme of projects that can access the available funding. The stultifying inertia that bedevils the people of Wansbeck is bound up with political

policies that create ever more positions that contribute to ever more bureaucracy and the people that the money is aimed at never see it or benefit from it.

Economic Regeneration itself is now our only growth industry as the quango's multiply. That situation will continue until this wretched regime is replaced by an intelligent body with the competence, commitment and vision that will offer a better future for the people of Wansbeck.

Despite awful intimidation and untrammelled bias the twenty Liberal Democrat Councillors elected to Wansbeck District Council in May 1999 have pursued a plan designed to bring about the culture change that can prise power from the oligarchy that currently wrecks all initiative and replace it with a programme that will bring real leadership, and in turn enterprise, skills and culture for an area that could compete with the best given the opportunity. Progress is slow but at least some progress is being made.

Cllr Alan Thompson
Lib Dem Group Leader,
Wansbeck Council

Throughout the 80's and 90's Liberal and Liberal Democrat administrations led the way in pioneering new forms of local governance. None more so than the London Borough of Tower Hamlets which pioneered decentralisation of decision making and promoted real community involvement. Stewart Rayment was a Tower Hamlets councillor during those years.

Decentralisation in Tower Hamlets 1986- 1994

The Liberal initiative in the decentralisation of local government in Tower Hamlets is probably one of the most radical reforms ever attempted in and by a local authority. Like many such revolutions it did not fail, it was simply replaced.

Leaders of the Labour group, which replaced the by then Liberal Democrats, could not countenance the risk of giving so much power to their colleagues - many on the hard left. Pure hatred of everything we had done was another motive - Labour can't bear losing in 'their' heartlands.

Yet Liberals were quite prepared to allow those associated with Militant and Socialist Organiser access to power. To have not done so would have been a betrayal of principle. There are many lessons from Tower Hamlets; some have been learnt - most notably in Kingston-upon-Thames, others have yet to be examined. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate an alternative to what Labour is doing in local

government (essentially, using the process of government to sort out the problems of the Labour Party).

**"The best ever
document produced
by Liberals in local
government"**

The best means of defence is attack. From the late 1970s the Liberal Focus Team targeted, canvassed, surveyed until they knew their wards inside-out. From this came the small print of our 1986 manifesto 'Handing Power to the Hamlets'. It has been described as the "best ever document produced by Liberals in local government and should be required reading by anyone serious about 'giving power to the people' ." On day one when we took

control of the borough in 1986 we slapped it on the desk of the chief executive and told him to “do it”.

The London Borough of Tower Hamlets was divided into seven neighbourhoods, to which practically all of the powers of the Borough were delegated. The Standing Neighbourhood Committees (SNC) (those councillors in the wards comprising that neighbourhood) were set up immediately, thereby guaranteeing that even those opposed to the process would work towards it, wanting the opportunity to exercise power themselves. Budgets were also delegated to these SNCs, and Liberal neighbourhoods such as Poplar went further, delegating some of their budget to the elected members of their area committees (environmental improvements within the housing revenue account for example). This follows a core Liberal assumption - that the wearer knows best what fits - and very well they did with it too.

Planning decisions benefited from more local input, as did Social Services, despite the statutory requirement to maintain a central committee. Housing management (Tower Hamlets was practically a monopoly landlord in 1986) particularly benefited and given proper funding, the area management (covering between 500 and 1500 dwellings), is certainly an alternative to privatisation via uncontrollable and unrepresentative Housing

Associations. Whilst a strength in many respects, the closeness of our relationship with residents prevented some of the more radical solutions to the dehumanising socialist housing policies of the 1950's, 1960's and early 70's. We might have pursued Tenant Management Organisations for example. Contrary to Labour lies, Education was not decentralised, though the SNCs took on responsibility for functions like school cleaning.

To achieve this, there was an unprecedented level of consultation with the unions, only grudgingly appreciated, but it enabled us to go further than originally planned with decentralisation and build up a relationship with the workforce. Few will remember the mid-80s when industrial action in local government was commonplace. There were no strikes in any Liberal-led neighbourhood throughout our administration.

Not that all the workforce appreciated the change; old style officers hated decentralisation but either left or adjusted whereas the creative and useful officers blossomed with innovation, commitment and enthusiasm. This was also experienced in Kingston. In both boroughs the third tier of officers (the people who really do the work) were liberated by the extra responsibility that came their way.

The ‘centre’ - that which was not decentralised posed problems. We

should have had a clearer view of what we wanted to do with it from the outset, not least in our dealing with the then Department of the Environment (DoE, now DETR). The DoE wanted and expected to deal with a conventionally run LA and saw Neighbourhoods as inefficient and an aberration.

"Trust the people"

The centre was very much that which was left behind, and it might have been better if small departments like Trading Standards (but not necessarily Environmental Health) had been left there. What was needed, and this was corrected in Kingston, was a stronger role for the centre - managing those functions that did not lend themselves to fragmentation (often for economies of scale or specialisation). A lead Neighbourhood might have been an alternative approach, with the centre monitoring fair play. The centre also lacked the strength to seriously coordinate strategic policy - again Kingston compensated for this.

One other thing about the Tower Hamlets initiative. It was brought about by some highly able and dedicated individuals. We targeted ruthlessly - we never seriously fought all the wards in the borough, ever. On taking control, those individuals pursued a very hands on management as councillors but the burn out rate was enormous and insufficient attention was given to their

replacement. Unlike the cabinet system, there were no back-benchers and practically every councillor - majority group or opposition, in Liberal-led neighbourhoods at least, had a role chairing one committee or another.

The agenda in local government has moved on. Future models of decentralisation can build on the Tower Hamlets experience, it is the core. In hindsight an alternative approach would have been to place much greater emphasis on the Neighbourhood as client - ie: purchaser/enabler of service provision - rather than as service provider per se. Much more highly developed service level agreements with providers might well have sat quite happily with centrally-run services, and would have side-stepped many of the arguments we faced. The concepts of purchaser/provider splits were still very new in local government in 1986/87 and many of the political problems associated with them at the time are now resolved.

As an alternative to Labour, with its cabinet committees to institutionalise their innate corruption, decentralisation puts trust in the people of the community. Even seven years after our fall from power, I am still moved by the comment in the street - 'You know, when the Liberals were in, we really felt the Council belonged to us, it belongs to them now.'

Stewart Rayment

The Quote that says it all about Labour's approach to local Government!

“National Government is a significant player at the local level, both because of the resources it provides and because local government and other public bodies are often involved in delivering national priorities. The aim of community strategies is to allow local communities to articulate their needs and priorities. However, **action at the local level will, inevitably, take place against a backdrop of priorities established at a national and regional level.** Partnerships will need to give due regard to relevant national and local priorities. It will be important, therefore that there is effective dialogue between community planning partnerships and central Government. Councils should closely involve the Government Offices for the Regions in the development of their community strategies.”

***From DETR draft guidance on preparing
Community Strategies - June 2000***