The Limits of Local Democracy: Class, State, and Welfare in 1980s Britain

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Speaking at a demonstration in Glasgow on Wednesday 18th August 1971, Jimmy Reid - chair of the joint co-ordinating committee for the Upper Clyde Shipyard - made the following statement:

The workers of Britain are getting off their knees, getting on their feet and asserting their dignity. Asserting their abilities in a determined and disciplined way that they will have a say in the decision-making of this country. No one has the right to destroy the aspirations of young men or the security of old men. No one has the right to demand that people leave their countries if they want work.

We started off fighting for jobs, and in a matter of days we knew we were fighting for Scotland, and for the British working-class movement.2

With the benefit of hindsight his words have a prophetic ring, since over a decade and a half a struggle did indeed take place over right of working class people to have a say in the decision-making of Britain.

This took place on many levels and in many ways, most visibly:

- as opposition to the 1969 White Paper In Place of Strife and the Industrial Relations Act 1971;
- the campaign against the Housing Finance Act in 1972, and
- campaigns against redundancies and factory closures, including the occupation of the Upper Clyde Shipyard in 1971 and the Lucas workers’ alternative economic plan in 1976.

There were also national strikes by Dock workers in 1970 and 1972, Miners 1972 and 1974 and the rebellion against incomes policy toward the end of the 1970s, which culminated in the ‘Winter of Discontent’. In the 1980s there was another national strike by miners and a series of campaigns were mounted against central government attempts to restrict local authority spending, autonomy and local democracy.

There are three specific areas of contestation that shed light on the workings of democracy as a lived experience for working people in 1980s Britain. These are:

- the organization and operation of elected local government,

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• Changes to welfare policy; and,
• the implications of these for service users and providers.

To realize this, however, it is necessary to transcend conventional interpretations of the democratic process and – to paraphrase Walter Benjamin – ‘cross the frozen wastes of abstraction’ so that we can arrive at a concise, concrete understanding.

On a list of relevant abstractions we can include: universal adult suffrage, party competition, elections, freedom of association, free speech, the rule of law, an independent judiciary, separate executive and legislative functions, government by consent and the ‘will of the people’.

In reality, however, these categories have a limited specificity for working people in so far as they obscure the experience of every day struggles to take control of their own lives and resist attempts to incorporate or deny their interests.

In the first place, the assumption that elected local government is democratic simply because elections are held annually is based on one of two leaps of faith:
• That voters sanction councillors and officers to act on their behalf; or,
• That popular participation is evidence of democracy in action.

Taking the second argument first, the reality is that voter participation in local elections is low. Between 1973 and 1978, for example, average turn-out in contested Metropolitan County elections was 39%, which contrasts to an average of 76% for general elections between 1951 and 1987 (Stoker, 1986: 44). This is still not a true reflection of participation, however, as both sets of figures are based on those who bothered to register to vote.

Paradoxically, the 1974 re-organization of Local Government in England and Wales halved the number of elected local authorities on the assumption that larger bodies would improve democratic practice, technical proficiency and professionalism.

This process also created 85 unelected quasi-autonomous governmental agencies and therefore transferred powers beyond the purview of electoral politics. This practice of transferring local government responsibilities beyond the influence of local electors has a long history in Britain that includes:
• Creating the Unemployment Assistance Board in the 1930s;
• appointing Regional Hospital Boards and Hospital Management Committees in the 1940s;
• the post war nationalization of gas and electricity utilities;

3 Details taken from Dearlove, 1979; Dunleavy 1980 and 1984 and Saunders, 1984,
setting up Regional Economic Planning Councils to bypass local structures in the 1960s; and

establishing regional water authorities in the 1970s.

Whatever the official reasons for such changes, a strong analogy can be drawn with the recession of power at the parliamentary level - into cabinet and civil service - that accompanied the extension of the franchise to the working class in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

At the local level, the introduction of new management techniques under the guise of:

• planning, programming or budgeting systems;
• policy planning;
• corporate planning; and,
• corporate management,

also ensured that detailed policy decisions were made on the advice of officials in committee and then rubber stamped in the council chamber. This meant a reduction in back-bench influence over and participation in the decision making process and that all real power was vested in political leaders and senior officers (Cockburn, 1977).

In fact, the euphemisms of ‘efficiency’, ‘councillor calibre’ and ‘vested interests’ were used to conceal the real objective of curtailing working-class representation on locally elected bodies. This agenda is brought to the fore in rare moments of candour, such as when the academic W A Robson advocated the fragmentation of working-class representation on local authorities as part of his evidence to the 1959 Royal Commission on Local Government in London (Goss, 1988).

No doubt this was also a consideration when abolishing troublesome authorities like Clay Cross, which had been at the forefront of the campaign against the Housing Finance Act. Here the Labour Party held all 11 seats and followed a policy of affordable rents for council tenants which it funded with a 16% subsidy from local taxation (Skinner and Langdon, 1974).

Steps to reform local government were also taken at a time of expanding welfare provision in education, social work and personal care. The intimacy of such services mean that they are relatively labour intensive but at the time of expansion and improvement, quality and effectiveness were measured in terms of worker to service-user ratios rather than the impersonal standards of cost, price or value for money.

On this basis enhancements to social services, for example, translated into an increase in the number of home helps from 6,000 in 1949 to 11,000 in 1975. Even so, local government
wages and salaries accounted for similar proportions of current expenditure in both 1958 and 1978 and this was due in no small part to the use of low paid, part-time women workers. There was, for example, a rise in part-time female employees from 15% of the local government work-force in 1950 to 33% in 1980; by which time women accounted for 91% of part-time workers. (Newton and Karran, 1985: 86; Thomson, 1982: 111)

The location of jobs such as school secretaries, school meals workers, cleaners, home helps and carers in social service centres meant that they were accessible to people who lived locally. They also provided a much needed supplement to income and - crucially for the reproduction of labour - allowed unpaid domestic work to take place as before. This also meant that women were poorly paid for doing arduous work and afforded little in terms of employment rights and working conditions. To a certain extent this was possible because the people involved were slowly and reluctantly unionized. They were also difficult to organize for trade union action due to their small isolated work places and emotional attachment to clients. In other words, then, the state’s capacity to expand service provision without increasing costs depended on the exploitation of working class women.

With the advent of a Conservative Party Government in 1979, however, neo-liberal prescriptions were now imposed on these very service areas and their workers. In abstract terms this was fuelled by a dogmatic antipathy toward collective consumption and the use-value of services provided free at the point of contact.

Thus while spending on defence, unemployment assistance and old age pensions increased, local authorities, their workers and service users in urban areas had welfare services reduced and at the same time their chances of changing policy were restricted by the introduction of:

- centrally devised formulae and criteria to calculate local needs and funding;
- targets and penalties aimed at reducing funding for those local authorities deemed to be high spenders.
- Privatization of services; and,
- Central control of local tax raising powers under the Rates Act 1984.

Authorities were considered to be high spending if they disagreed with the government’s calculation of need and decided to spend more than allowed.

This was especially contentious in impoverished inner-cities where local electors voted for policies that suited demographic and socio-economic circumstances. In authorities like Liverpool, Sheffield and Manchester, migration and mass unemployment created an
electorate dependent on council services, but reductions in funding were designed to deter the adoption of policies tailored to local needs and wants.

The Housing Act 1980 is one example of this threat to local autonomy as it placed restrictions on capital expenditure and made the sale of council houses compulsory. In Sheffield this meant that the local authority reduced its house building programme to a virtual standstill and local people had to wait longer for a house, as 5,000 names were added to the waiting list in the first year of its operation (Alcock and Lee, 1981: 74).

The outcomes of reduced general funding were also evident in:

- the London borough of Wandsworth where 230 social service posts were made redundant; 11 social service aides posts deleted; a day centre closed; the number of meals on wheels reduced; and the home help budget cut by £380,000 (Rayner and Conway, 1981: 82-3); and,
- Birmingham where the 1981 education budget was reduced by £3,000,000; Sutton Coalfield Leisure Centre was privatized, vacant posts left unfilled and a redundancy programme introduced (Kline, 1983: 94).

The Transport Act 1980 targeted another area of service provision, by making it easier for private sector operators to obtain licences to run bus services. In Cardiff this resulted in the authority reducing fares and increasing the frequency of buses to deter private tenders. Further down the line, Cardiff City Transport authority won the County Council's schools transport contract, but this was based on changes to working conditions as extra duties were incorporated in existing shifts and a lower standard of maintenance checks were made on vehicles (Evans, 1985).

In this and other cases, therefore, privatization formed part of the process of reducing local expenditure by effectively lowering wages through the weakening working conditions.

As well as changing the way general funding was calculated, the Local Government Planning and Land Act 1980 also required local authority Direct Labour Organizations to compete with private firms for a percentage of existing work.

In this area the threat of privatization and the process itself were used to reduce jobs, costs and standards of service provision. In Birmingham again, 236 Refuse Collectors jobs lost in 1982-3 as part of a successful in-house tender (Kline, op. cit: 96) and in London, Croydon's school cleaning contract, required longer hours to be worked for a smaller hourly rate of pay.

Other examples of reductions include:

- the removal of bonus schemes; compulsory overtime at lower rates and reduced holiday entitlement for Southend Refuse Collectors; and
reduced rates of sick pay; reduced holiday entitlement; and inferior pension provision for Street Cleaners in Wandsworth (Halford, 1982).

In overall terms, this measure resulted in a reduction in the numbers of DLO employees from 156,606 in 1980, to 121,381 in 1985 (Stoker, op. cit: 186).

Furthermore, of the 90,000 local authority jobs lost in England and Wales between 1979 and 1982 it was manual workers who suffered most; especially those in construction and refuse collection (Caulcot, 1983; Travers, 1983: 64).

These experiences were not unique to local authority workers. They were symptoms of a strategy to reduce real wages across the economy that involved an assault on the legal rights and organizational abilities of working people and their trade unions. The employment acts of 1980 and 1982 for example, placed restrictions on the right to picket and on closed shops, made trade unions liable for civil damages, outlawed secondary action and allowed employers to sack striking workers without redress.

In what was effectively a vicious circle, anti-trade union measures were made more potent by job insecurity associated with levels of unemployment that, in turn, had been made possible by the weakening of workplace organization.

Thus, in 1982 the jobless total reached three million and, discounting the statistical manipulation of only recording people claiming unemployment benefit, as opposed to people seeking work, it did not fall below 2 million until 1997 (Lowes, 2012: 15).

It is also worth noting that the transfer of functions and responsibilities to the private sector fragmented the workforce. Whereas all had previously worked for the same employer, there were now several separate employers.

All this meant that local authority workers had less and less control over the working lives and the struggle for democratic control in the workplace was stifled at the same time that options for the variation of local state policy and service variation were also being undermined.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the struggle for an equal voice and equal access to resources, opportunities and information to enhance working class involvement in decision-making processes suffered a serious setback in the 1980s. It was no longer the case that voters only lacked effective means of influencing local decision-making between elections. The local state had been reformed so that it was no longer a means through which working class interests could be advanced.

Thus in line with Edmund Burke’s dictum, local representatives were now able to act as free agents without recourse to those who elected them.
This was made only too clear in December 1981, when in the case of Bromley London Borough Council-v-Greater London Council, the Law Lords declared that representatives should not ‘treat themselves as irrevocably bound to carry out preannounced policies contained in election manifestos’\(^4\)

References