

LOCAL COUNCILS AND DECENTRALISATION

'One other town in Western Europe embarked on a similar path to Walsall . . . Bologna.' This claim was not made by West Midland Communists, but by the Walsall Labour Party in 1981, comparing its plans for council decentralisation with Bologna's *decentramento*.

'Decentralisation' has become established in the political vocabulary in recent years, as left Labour councils have proposed it as part of their local, socialist strategies. Pioneered by Lambeth council in London from 1978 onwards, decentralisation achieved major prominence in 1980, when Walsall Labour Party took control of the local metropolitan council with a manifesto commitment to service 42,000 council tenants through 20-25 neighbourhood offices. And since the local council elections in May 1982, a number of London councils, notably Islington, Haringey, Hackney and Brent, have launched ambitious schemes to decentralise many of their services.

Decentralisation plans have been developed to suit local needs, but they share certain basic characteristics. They aim to establish attractive, convenient and informal local offices providing a wide range of council services, staffed by officials from various departments — housing managers, repairs inspectors, social workers etc, — able to deal with a wide range of problems, make decisions and provide practical help. They hope to encourage increased awareness of council affairs and stimulate greater popular participation in community and labour movement organisations and local political activity. They aim to provide communities with the means to make decisions about what services are provided and how. And they are designed to widen the political activity of councillors, reduce their work in 'taking up cases', while unravelling much of the red tape that frequently surrounds decisions by officials.

The ideas behind decentralisation derive from a number of different sources. In part, it is a response to the problems of welfare state spending, which have been revealed ever more sharply as the economic crisis has deepened. Decaying services, increasing rents

' *Walsall's Haul to Democracy — The Neighbourhood Concept* VCMsall Metropolitan Borough Council 1981.

and rates and widespread popular discontent with the way that services are provided, have all contributed to Thatcherism's attack on the welfare state. The Labour Left in the town halls has been forced to reconsider the credibility of the local services they provide and the extent to which they can rely on automatic support for Labour as the proud providers of municipal socialism. And decentralisation has become a more vital strategy to maintain support for Labour, given the failure of anti-cuts campaigns to fend off government cuts in council spending and controls on rates.

But support for decentralisation is not just based on pragmatic considerations. By the mid 70s it was recognised that there was a strong trend for central government to determine, in increasing detail, the pace and direction of the provision of local services. And it is tough, central administration that has been the Tories' principal method of cutting the cost of local government. Decentralisation is seen as a response to this process; as well as a means of combatting a widely-perceived lack of democracy in local government. The actions of local councils frequently bear little relationship to the promises made during election campaigns. Decisions are often left in the hands of appointed council officials, and the great majority of people feel powerless and excluded from the local political process. Decentralisation is seen as remedying this deficiency, extending local democracy, giving more power to the people. The link between the extension of democracy and the development of a socialist strategy has become an important theme in decentralisation policy.

Another key influence has been the election of left wing Labour councillors, whose political origins lie in the community politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In many areas the Labour Party has a new generation of socialist councillors committed to increasing the quality of services, reducing its more oppressive characteristics, running council affairs in a less secretive fashion and encouraging much wider participation by people and organisations in their neighbourhoods.

However, the implementation of decentralisation has not been undertaken without problems. Many of the policies have been ill thought-out and superficially applied. In Islington, for instance, it is quite likely that there will be a friendly local office for council tenants to report their repair problems, but little chance, as plans stand, of the repair job being carried out any more quickly or efficiently. There is a great danger that if they fail to win popular support, Labour strategies will collapse in ruins and progressive policies to reform the welfare state will

end in disrepute.

Few Labour councillors have embarked on their quest to extend democracy equipped with a clear conception of who *has* power, who *should* have power and who should be *deprived* of power. Broadly, there are four groupings of political forces engaged in local council politics. Firstly, there are the elected councillors of the ruling party, loosely accountable to their local party organisations, who make decisions through the committees and full council meetings. Secondly, there are the senior managers in the permanent bureaucracy — mainly the chief officer — who service these committees, but who also have vast, delegated decision-making powers. Then there is the bulk of the workforce, manual workers and white-collar workers, who directly provide or organise the services. Their main political power lies in their trade union organisation. Finally, there are the local people who depend on the services. Some will be members of community and neighbourhood organisations and exert collective influence through campaigns and lobbying. But the great majority of people are not touched by these organisations and remain powerless.

At present, real influence over decentralisation plans in the town hall invariably rests in the hands of a small group of Labour leaders and a group of senior managers. Labour leaders often attempt to implement their decentralisation plans by issuing naive, though often resolutely expressed, directives to the chief officers. Right wing Labour has always worked in this way, yet left Labour councillors have generally repeated the patterns of the earlier generation. Labour's exclusivity when in office and its monopoly grip on the Left electorally, has resulted in its decentralisation strategies being conceived and executed within a narrow political framework. This is particularly dangerous when decentralisation plans are being prepared. Such plans clearly threaten the power of many chief officers as they involve the dissolution of centralised, corporate management (supposedly developed along the lines of rational big business) and its replacement by neighbourhood control. Directing decentralisation in this way, frequently without even the support of local Labour Parties, will inevitably result either in the most conservative re-organisation — yet another layer of bureaucracy — or else outright obstruction to the devolution of power.

It has become clear that Labour councils must develop a different set of alliances. They need the support of the council workforce, organised through their trade unions, and of the less powerful council officials and staff, particularly the 'front line'

workers — the repairs clerks, 'dinner ladies', housing estate managers, dustmen. These are, after all, the people most likely to come into contact with the public and work hard providing some of the services most complained about. In addition, many of these workers are frustrated by carrying the can for the failing of local services and are cynical about new political initiatives. But what many workers and town hall trade unionists have discovered is that Labour leaders have developed their plans without engaging in open and comprehensive discussion with them. Instead, the Labour leadership either commands from above, Michael Edwardes style, or else relies on loyalty to the Labour Party or simply passivity to get their plans past the workforce. Little or no effort is made to build alliances with the workforce who provide the services, and confrontations with understandably defensive town hall unions have been frequent.

Building neighbourhood and street organisations as part of the process of extending democratic control is not easy, and the Labour groups have often responded to the problems by ignoring them. In Haringey, north London, where Labour controls the council, devolved power to neighbourhood committees would result in Tory control on the committees in the affluent west of the borough (Highgate and Muswell Hill areas). Faced with this problem, Labour intends to install Labour majorities on western neighbourhood committees, by allocating Labour councillors from the working class south and east of the borough to these committees to secure majorities. No socialist would argue that equal council resources should be given to Highgate and Tottenham. Clearly, Tottenham should have more. But many socialists would argue that such an administrative approach to political struggle is no way to defeat the Tories and extend the popularity of socialist ideas.

To be successful, decentralisation must be part of a broader strategy that includes a radical reform of council finances, detailed measures to ensure 'open local government', and the successful operation of services such as the direct labour building departments to ensure that the threat of privatisation can be fought off. And a strategy for reform cannot be a command strategy. The active involvement of the organised town hall workforce must be guaranteed and patient community and neighbourhood work is essential, for decentralisation to become a natural part of local political life.

On its own, decentralisation is no guarantee of popularity — after two years of implementing such a policy, Walsall Labour Party lost control to the Tories in 1982.

Mark Page