

We are on the eve of the era of rate-capping. And the hit-list local authorities are still standing firm. Where are we likely to end up?

Ratecap Resistance

Interview with David Blunkett

David Blunkett is the Leader of Sheffield City Council. He is one of the key figures in the new generation of local Labour leaders. He has lived in Sheffield all his life and has served on Sheffield City Council for 15 years. He is a member of the Labour National Executive Committee and is chair of the Local Government Campaign Unit, an organisation representing trade unions and some 70 local authorities, which was formed in October 1983 in response to the attack on local government. Here he is interviewed by Mark Page.

The Government's rate capping law, and the announcement of a hit list of councils last summer has prompted a remarkable united front from the Labour councils under attack, including your own, Sheffield City Council. Why did this happen and how effective has it been?

Firstly, simple survival meant that the oldest adage of all, unity being strength, overwhelmed the differences, worries and fears that individual councillors, Labour groups and parties have had and will continue to have. Differences of complexion and tactics paled into insignificance in the face of the onslaught and the need to unify. Secondly, people have learnt the lessons of the past. Gesturism, individual go-it-alone charisma politics, the salvation of the political credibility of individuals as more important than the end goal, these things won't wash any more. Many people have seen what happened when councils either had to go it alone, or when individual councillors were attempting to put forward a strategy which could not draw in sufficient support from others, and did not succeed. So we've learnt a number of lessons. We've learnt the tragic lessons of the very considerable and brave stand by the Lothian Regional councillors in 1981. We've learnt about the difficulties of creating unity when Lambeth Borough Council in 1981-82 were in conflict, and we've also seen the important mobilisation and propaganda victory of Liverpool in 1984 which still left the problems to be picked up a year hence. And therefore the common stand, the commitment to unity, was based very much on the desire to get a settlement which would last, a commitment not only to defending services, jobs and democracy, but to some sort of commonsense relationship between local and central government, between public services that we want to defend and market forces that they want to promote.

What is your approach to discussions in the coming period with Patrick Jenkin?

To ensure that it is seen that the Secretary of State is acting unreasonably, and following through the dictates of the Prime Minister and others in seeking a confrontation over the issue of community and collective provision, over public services; that the belligerent stand of the Prime Minister, and not the attitude of the Labour Party and the local councils is the cause of the present difficulties. This means that the councils have to be seen to be reasonable, to be willing to negotiate, to be able to give, in order to find a long-term solution. But they are not willing to stand by and let the Secretary of State simply trample them into the ground.

What happens to the resistance if Patrick Jenkin makes no real material concessions?

Obviously if one side is making no gestures, taking no steps to find a solution, then inevitably that involves stepping up the action and trying to create an environment in which meaningful negotiation does take place. The problem we face with the present government is that they are not used to negotiating. Their practice is to

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take tactical decisions to avoid confrontation when it suits them, but to be willing to smash their opponents and be seen to be all powerful, determined and unbending when that particular profile suits them. We have to ensure that the environment in which they work - political, financial, administrative, social - is such that they really can't adopt that stance of belligerence and unbending intolerance, that they are forced into a position of seeing that, in their own interests, they must give way to provide a lasting accord. They must be forced to recognise the historic rights of local communities to decide for themselves, and the important element in a pluralistic democracy of the balance and sharing of powers in the electoral as well as in the non-electoral arena.

In stepping up action, if the Government still makes no concessions, what are the limits to such a confrontation?

The limits are determined by the climate and atmosphere in which you work and the position at the time. There is no doubt that the

financial climate has assisted the case of local government, in that further volatility and dislocation in this country affects the financial institutions, and therefore also exchange and interest rates. That must worry the Government. On the other hand the outcome of the miners' dispute also affects the possibilities. We're realistic and open about this and wouldn't wish to hide the difficulty in which we find ourselves. We need to mobilise the communities which are affected by rate-capping and also those concerned who are outside the immediate area of the authorities on the Rates Act list, so that we can be seen to have the community and trade unionists with us. If we have that then it gives us strength to believe that we can reach a solution.

But I have to say this: win or lose, campaigning for public services, public enterprise and collectivism cannot be underestimated. We are in the business of raising political consciousness and awareness. There's no chance of returning a socialist government unless we are not only seen to defend what we have, but also to promote the values of public service and collectivism in a new, interesting and innovative way which ensures that people see that we are promoting values for the future.

Not all rate capped councils are in the same position. If the Government continues to take a hard line, some councils may be able to survive by limiting the damage. Others like Hackney, Islington and Haringey, for instance, will be very hard pressed if no major concessions are made. And the legal and financial threats to councillors are so intimidating that some left leaderships may not be able to carry a confrontation policy with their Labour groups. How do you see the problems of maintaining unity?

Our strategy has been to keep people together as long as possible, recognising that it wouldn't always be possible for everyone to take the same line. What we want to ensure is that if people are following different paths, they do so in full agreement between ourselves. Some councils may have to bear the brunt of forcing the Government to make a long-term settlement with local government as a whole. So we think it's possible, and have done all along, that we'll see different strategies emerge in order to keep people together, to stop the disintegration of individual Labour groups, because that would not be in the interest of the labour movement. We are not going back to the era when there were scapegoats, where there were people looking to blame someone else for failure. That means we do have to help individual authorities who've got particular problems, like for example, the Inner London Education Authority.

To what extent would you say that past strategy has been successful in that struggles over cuts in council spending have succeeded in limiting the damage to services, generally by raising the rates.

We went through an era when raising the rates was an acceptable solution. It shared the burden across the community and ensured that individual groups within the community were not the ones who shouldered the impact of government policy. We've come to a situation now, though, that if we raised our rates any more we wouldn't be spending that additional amount on services but on paying it back directly in the form of a penalty. But in any case we believe that the present level of rates now represents an unacceptable shift from national to local taxation and places a burden on those who can ill afford it. A different solution has to be found, and that means stopping any further erosion through grant loss, and removing the target and penalty system which is generally accepted now to be absurd.

Some councillors have advocated breaking the law over rate-capping as if it were an article of faith. Other leaders like Dr Cunningham are completely opposed to law breaking. Where do you stand on this issue?

The law is secondary to our supreme value of democracy. Therefore, if there is a conflict between democracy and the law, democracy, in a democracy, must always prevail. I don't believe that to divert attention into arguing about the law rather than services, jobs and democracy is very helpful. I therefore think that holding up breaking the law as some sort of test of one's socialist virility is nothing less than immature and destructive. It plays into the hands of our opponents. Equally I find people pronouncing on the law at every opportunity, in terms of lecturing others on how to keep within it, both unhelpful and irrelevant. I think it's helpful if those who disagree with each other on that particular aspect keep their mouths shut.

The Tories have already indicated their willingness to turn struggles over rate-capping into a law and order issue. If councils break the law

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and there is chaos and/or partial collapse of services in some areas, how should the Left respond?

It is a very difficult and sensitive issue. We're going to need the maximum personal as well as collective discipline in order to ensure that we don't face a situation where the Government are able to transfer the discussion right out of the arena in which we want it and on to the grounds where they want it. That's why I'm against our side raising the law on to a pedestal which actually ensures that we are arguing on the ground of our opponents. I therefore believe we have to act with absolute responsibility, be seen to be non-belligerent individuals, and not allow the lessons of the picket line to escape us. It isn't going to be easy because the law is a useful and manipulative tool in the hands of government, and one which is very dangerous for those who are campaigning radically in the public arena. We have to be aware therefore that there is a real danger that rather than the more attractive confrontation that we may have expected, we may find ourselves having to deal, cat and mouse, with the use of the law. However two can play at this game, and it is possible that the Secretary of State may find that if it is the courts and the use of law which is to be invoked, we may be as skilled and as able at finding ways of combatting it as he is of using it. I think it's beholden on us to have that discipline and to be able to work together in a way which, for socialists, is not as attractive as building the barricades; and in a way that is not as readily understood by the rank and file as some of the tactics which we might have felt were appropriate some time ago; but which will be absolutely essential if we are to win rather than to lose gloriously.

In working together, some people may be faced with considerable personal sacrifice. People on the front line of rate-capping may be frightened. What do you think can be done to establish trust and confidence in them and with the movement so that they won't be isolated?

First we've got to reject the notion that you can bully people into a situation and frighten them into doing something that they are totally against. We have to persuade them about the way forward

and we have to be sure that if we ask people to, what is euphemistically described as, go over the brink, we do so not as a meaningless gesture of purity but because we believe it will be successful. It is crazy for any of us to do this simply to avoid accusations of copping out, of not having 'bottle'. This is not some sort of game that we're in where we test each other out. We intend to succeed. So if success can only be gained, and can be seen to be gained, by putting oneself at risk and one's house, one's cash, one's livelihood - then as in the past it will be worth that sacrifice if winning is attainable. It is not worth a sacrificial gesture of socialist martyrdom if at that point people know that it can't be achieved. That's the fine and difficult balance that has to be looked at. I don't believe that we will get to a point where people will be asked to sacrifice all. I believe we can win sufficient concessions to ensure that that will not be necessary. But I think we have to look at the tremendous example of the miners, losing a year's pay, their savings, in some cases their homes and their families and everything they've built up, to see what sacrifice really means. My only hope is that anyone who asks others to

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sacrifice would be just as willing to sacrifice an equal amount themselves - their job, their opportunities, their cash - so that we can do it together rather than as people who are being tested out by others who sit on the sidelines waiting and watching to see whether you get it right.

How do you see the fight between local councils and central government over rate capping in relation to the overall struggle against Thatcherism?

We're in an historic battle about dissent. It's been with us ever since people came together and had any kind of body politic. And we are fighting for the right to dissent, the right to tolerance of differences of view, for the kind of society that people take for granted. Above all we're fighting against a restructuring of the economic and social life of the community. Thatcher is intent on creating the 'property owning democracy' where the market place and not the ballot box is the way in which we will distribute our wealth, order our society and control our resources. The pound in your pocket rather than the cross on your ballot paper will determine your vote in this new, restructured, so-called 'democracy'. The battle for collective public service is a key element in all this. We must start debating as a movement our values and the ways in which we will extend democracy, participative democracy, as well as defending what we've got; because it is partly the inadequacy of, and the alienation from, the way in which the system is worked that has enabled Thatcher to take the steps she has with such success.

Why do you think local councils have become centres of opposition to the power of national government?

First, it's because opposition within the Palace of Westminster has been so ineffective over the last six years. Secondly, Thatcher herself has elevated local government to a new political importance by recognising that collectivism is as much her enemy as any traditional parliamentary opposition and seeking to destroy it, be it the provision of collective community services through local government or people coming together in traditional industries



and resisting her restructuring. To her, social democracy, socialism, radicalism, just simple collectivism, are all much of a muchness. They are what she dislikes and is determined to smash. And from her point of view the operation of market forces, the creation of privatisation as an alternative to social provision, clearly demands that she does indeed take those steps.

What do you think is the significance of the campaign around local government services for the Labour Party more generally?

We have to win people for a vision of the future, not just against Thatcher. Therefore people's participation in democracy, in their own lives, is a key question now being raised. That's why housing sales, and the flotation of shares to the workers in British Telecom evoked such a response from ordinary people. They need a new way of being able to find some expression for their desires. We need to recognise that and develop a socialist response, to win them to what we want in a world where people work and pull together and share their talents and resources.

Secondly, a Labour government can't simply run things from parliament. Parliament is important, it helps to gain power for people, but state socialism, in the form that people formerly envisaged it, is frankly dead. Whilst we want parliament to concentrate on the great problems of international finance and international affairs, and to extend control by using its legislative power to give back to people that which is theirs, the power which is theirs, we actually need at local level instruments to make it a reality. I don't think local government can do it all, but it can act as a catalyst to support and help people to take control over their lives, whether it's by municipal ownership in the economy, extending democracy in the social provision of social services, education, leisure, housing, the environment, transport, or whether it's putting resources at the disposal of people. It's a partnership between a socialist government struggling with the problems of international politics and finance, and the local state mobilising people behind the objectives of the government and at the same time providing an instrument for carrying out those detailed policies that make a reality out of all the slogans and the jargon. In the past we've expected state socialism and state sectors

of the economy to turn people on, and they haven't. We've relied on nationalised bureaucracies which have frankly alienated people. We've got to ask ourselves in the 1990s and the 21st century what role will we in the individual communities be playing in making socialism work, not how we will be criticising the failures of a Secretary of State for Industry or the Chancellor of the Exchequer of a socialist government.

Do you think there is such a thing as a new kind of municipal socialism? What's new about the policies of Sheffield City Council and the GLC for instance?

We ought to be clear that much of what we stand for is not new at all. It is really a return to the early days of local government and the notion that people wanted to control and have a say in their own lives rather than simply hand over to parliamentarians who would do it on their behalf for five years and if you did not like what happened you could get rid of them. We have drifted away from that, we have drifted towards a centralised paternalistic democracy where we have expected and relied on solely parliamentary action to resolve difficulties and that has failed to mobilise people. We are going back to that. The radical local authorities have also been trying to show that democracy is not confined to spending money on services, democracy is about our lives and therefore it is about the local economy, industry and commerce, it's about where we are going.

The old style municipal socialism has been criticised for paternalism, bringing services to people rather than developing them with people. Do you think that's changing?

This is a very long, slow and difficult process. There has to be change in the relationship between the community and the workers who provide the services, between councillors and employees. We have to decentralise services, providing genuine involvement and participation in managing facilities, whether they are day centres, sports facilities, schools or old people's homes. This is a painful, but very necessary process, giving back to people the democracy and control which ought to have been theirs. This is obviously true in the housing field where the right to buy legislation was successful because people have been alienated by the way in which housing has been managed and the way in which tenants have been treated. That is a lesson that has been learnt, but rather late in the day in terms of people's experience of public provision.

It's become a commonplace, almost a new orthodoxy, for a left Labour leader to speak about the need for an alliance between the elected councillors, the workforce and the community. On the ground there's not a lot of evidence for this alliance beyond well meaning statements. What do you see as the difficulties in establishing this?

It's partly that we've not been used to it and partly that it is now a bit late in the day. We ought to have been doing it when the times were halcyon, money was available and we could respond to need in a way which is very difficult now. Even in those authorities which have been holding firm, and in some cases like my own, have actually been expanding, you've still got the problem that you create a climate where expectations are raised and they're not totally fulfilled, leading to disillusionment and frustration. Mobilisation creates its own problems in raising people's expectations. The second problem is that people have been demoralised and depressed and we need to lift them so they feel it is worthwhile

taking action. The third factor is that political education is so deplorable in this country that people are not aware of the power that exists in their hands. They're not aware of how the machinery works, they're not linked up to the political system, and the Labour Party has failed abysmally to mobilise people as a mass party in recent years and we're suffering from that. Fourthly, local government has been very bureaucratic and it's very difficult to get it to mobilise people either inside the workforce or outside it. Traditional management structures and industrial relations practices, about which I'm personally only too well aware, have fostered difficulties inside the workforce in local authorities, and the experience of communities of poor, bureaucratic services and inadequate provision has disillusioned people in the community. All this needs to be overcome, and it can be. The campaigns of the GLC, the success in mobilising people in Liverpool in 1984, and the very considerable mobilisation which is now to be seen across the country around the Rates Act and the abolition of the counties is very important. When you mobilise people for something which they understand, they will support you. We saw that in 1982 in South Yorkshire over the defence of the transport policy and the maintenance of fare levels which is now, in 1985, in its eleventh year.

It is not immediately obvious that there can be unity of purpose between the workforce and the elected councillors. The elected councillors may have their manifesto commitments that they are very keen to see in practice and the workforce may be resisting this for all sorts of other reasons from their point of view.

There are very good reasons why trade unionists and their representatives should not simply be incorporated into the plans

I use the skills of hearing when I think a meeting is losing its patience

of Labour councillors to change things. They should defend the interests of their members as they see them and have vigorous dialogue about what sort of impact change is going to have on their membership. Change is frightening and worrying to many people. In order to implement it you have to remove those fears and worries as far as it is humanly possible to do so. But it is also important that trade unionists understand that they are not fighting multinational combines in radical Labour authorities, and that they don't go through a game where they play at being in a battle of that kind. They need to understand that in defending and protecting their members' interests they should play a part in defending the long term prospects for public enterprise and public service on which their members' jobs and prospects will depend. On the other hand, Labour councillors too have got to think through much more clearly what being a socialist employer means, the difficulties and the possibilities of that, and to understand much more clearly the fears and worries of workers who for very long, although they have had jobs, have not necessarily had good conditions, good pay and good prospects, and certainly have not understood what the council was attempting to do, why it was doing it and what part they were going to be playing in it.

In mobilising constituencies generally neglected by local councils and the traditional labour movement - women, the unemployed, black people for instance - do you think there are lessons to be learned from their movements in bringing about common purpose and activity?

Yes I do. I think what has happened has been very important and has illustrated how areas in the past were neglected and people felt themselves to be at the receiving end of gross inequalities and to have been left out of the political system. However, we need to ensure that people feel that they are not being dealt with simply as a minority, but that their special problems, their difficulties of access to power, of equality and justice, are given special attention, but as part of, and not separate from, the overall needs of the community. I don't wholeheartedly go along with the view that we can build alliances of minorities to form a majority.

Women make greater use of local government services than men - many more women use buses than men, women rely on nursery facilities and old people's homes more than men do and of course women probably provide generally more than 50% of the workforce of a local council, although frequently in the lower paid and part time work. We neglect their needs at our peril.

I think there should be an appeal to people on the basis of their experience of public services and their reliance and involvement in public services, and clearly women in many ways are more reliant on socialisation than men have been, for economic as well as for power-based reasons. I believe you need to develop the issue rather than appealing to people because they are women, that, for example, people are freed by public transport to move about whether they are unemployed men or women. I would like to get that across rather than to believe that there is one set of people who are quite separate from others. This is, of course, alongside and not an alternative to changing historic attitudes which have contributed to the unequal position of women in society.

Sheffield Council has an equal opportunities panel. The women

members are themselves now looking at what they want in terms of developing a women's unit within the council. I think that we have problems in getting men to understand some of the arguments being put forward, but persuading each other is a key element in ensuring that something works.

The Left in the Labour Party since the last election has often been presented as engaged in a struggle between the 'hard left' and the 'soft left'. How would you describe yourself?

I described myself at a *Tribune* rally two years ago as being firm left. From the steel industry, hard is brittle and breaks under pressure, and soft is malleable and gives way too easily, but firm is usable and durable in all circumstances.

One last question, a more personal one. What political skills do you feel you have developed being blind that otherwise you might not have developed?

I think you obviously use your hearing and feeling of what is happening around you when you haven't got the ability to look and see and therefore you use that. It has made me slightly more aggressive and abrasive, which is a disadvantage; on the other hand it has made me quite honest. I often say things, without being able to see people's faces, that other people would draw back from. That does mean that things get argued out straight on the table. I use the skills of hearing when I think a meeting is losing its patience, when papers are rustling and people are coughing, when you have lost their attention. I can feel that, and part of political skill is to have a nose and a feel for what is happening.

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