



Maureen McGoldrick, whose hounding by Brent allowed a victory for Thatcherism.

Labour's Left Councils Charge Of The Light Brigade

Brent became a *cause celebre*. Maureen McGoldrick became a martyr. It all went wrong for the Left. **Beatrix Campbell** asks what has gone wrong with new municipal socialism

Equal opportunities and local democracy is what the women's movement, the black movement, the politics of disablement have given to their political allies on the new Left in the town halls; the municipal Left reciprocated, their gift was to make the administration of local government accessible to a cultural revolution. The alliance around radical labourism has changed the contours of local and national politics, it set the new left agenda of the 1980s. For the first time, movements which lived their life outside the state and political parties found themselves moving in the same orbit.

But what is missing? The traditional institutions of labourism within civil society, primarily the trade union movement, have often innured themselves from this process. The Labour Party itself has been the instrumental agency within the state, but has been inert or absent within civil society. It is not a mobilising party, it has not shared the new political conversation with its constituents.

Nor was the Labour Party particularly engaged, as a party, with the new politics in the process of renewal. Regeneration has hardly been understood, if at all, by many of Labour's parliamentary front bench, and not much more by Labour's parliamentary

Left. Not surprisingly, they don't know how to defend the cultural revolution taking place in the town halls.

Thatcherism's first phase operated on the contradictions within the old forms of postwar social democracy, gathering around the Right all the pessimism and disappointments with 'public' provision and indeed with politics itself. But in its current phase, Thatcherism has proved to be breathtakingly resilient in attacking the new form of egalitarian social democracy, its outreach into the economy, its sexual politics and its anti-racism which are its novel features.

The government lost round one of its education contest against the teaching unions - over pay - only to bounce back by winning round two against Brent council - *in alliance with the teachers*.

The Brent debacle synchronised vital manoeuvres for Thatcherism: the attack on the local state, equality in general and black people in particular. The sub-text is socialism itself; within Thatcherism, Left = loony.

In the wake of the assault on the so-called 'loony Left', it is culpably complacent to dismiss the project inaugurated by Stuart Hall and *Marxism Today* of theorising Thatcherism's 'fearful assault', as a preoccupation only with 'the squalid, depressing and ordinary Tory administration it has now become' (Helena Catt and Patrick Dunleavy *New Socialist* January 1987).

Thatcherism is squalid and depressing, for sure, but what it isn't is ordinary. And in any case none of that's really the point; the point is that it keeps winning.

The thesis was never only about Thatcherism itself, but about its meaning for the Left, it's 'not just a problem for the Left, but of the Left'¹; Thatcherism has targeted our territory and means to take it.

In some cities, particularly in the south, the new alliances described above have transformed the profile of Labour in power. In three local authorities - all of them in London - we now have black council leaders, and in Brent there is a new generation of councillors who enjoyed a landslide victory on a radical manifesto; the 'class of 1986' include more women and more black people than ever before, who have lived their lives in their communities' politics rather than in the Labour Party as such. Brent is probably the most representative council in the country.

But they have been thrown into public calumny in defence of their anti-racist programme by an unprecedented coalition; the government, the teaching unions and some right-wingers on Labour's front bench. Besieged and isolated, who knows the price of their pain and exhaustion? Relatively inexperienced, certainly courageous, perhaps a bit careless, it has fallen to councillors like these to defend a subtle political project against the simplifications of Tory common sense.

Why is left local government so vulnerable to the holy war on the 'loony Left', and why is the municipal socialist project, flavour of the month between 1983-85, and certainly one of the most creative features of modern labourism, now in crisis?

Part of the problem is parliamentarians' indifference to what Sheffield's David Blunkett describes as the necessary 'partnership between socialist government and local government'. The locality may not be where all social contradictions are manifest, but it is where the people *live with* the Labour Party. Labour's survival as an *important and useful party* among the people depends on its ability to become *important and useful* to the people; that means making local government nothing less than a model of democracy, efficiency and equality if Labour is to repair most people's experience of political powerlessness.

But the crisis is deeper than parliamentary indifference; the problem is, in part, that in the labourist tradition, the local state has replaced the political party within civil society as the agency of regeneration.

That makes labourism vulnerable to the anti-statist sting within Thatcherism. Without the infrastructure in the organisations making up civil society - from parent teacher associations to trade unions, from play groups to chambers of commerce - to wrap around its political challenge, then

Labour cannot protect that challenge against a crusading political enemy whose success is that it has articulated most people's despair with politics and in particular the state.

Let's be more concrete and look at some of Tebbit's targets. There's Militant in Liverpool - still being defended by some of the Labour Left despite its authoritarian, racist and sexist record. Militant in Liverpool is a model of trotskyst statism which finds a niche in Labour's own traditions. Militant's policies have echoed old-fashioned god-fatherism on the one hand, and conservative workerism on the other. Machine politics plus economism = Militant. It has tried to destroy the infrastructure of the city's civil society - for instance the voluntary sector, the housing co-op movement and the Black Caucus network. It should be noted, too, that when the party's national executive moved against Militant in Liverpool, it relied on administrative measures rather than on regenerating the party. The reservoir of political opposition remains outside the party, but securely grounded in the life of the city. It now comprises a popular alliance between the Black Caucus, which co-ordinates the many voluntary organisations among black citizens, the women's organisations, the housing co-ops movement disowned by the city council, the voluntary sector which has been starved of resources by the Labour council, and the trades council.²

Liverpool is an example in *extremis* of the problem of statism in Labour's local government. But it in no way shares in the experiments of the new municipal socialism. On the contrary it attacks their very roots. It is these new policies, and the councils that espouse them, that have now become the main target for Thatcherism, with little or no protection we might add from the Labour front bench. Moreover, these councils have sometimes set themselves brave objectives.

In impoverished Hackney, for example, ethnic minorities comprise 44% of the population, of whom 33% are black. When Hackney adopted its equal opportunities policy in 1979, together with two or three other London boroughs, only about 10% of its workforce were from ethnic minorities, and among senior officers the proportion was only 3%. Today 33% of its manual and non-manual workers are from ethnic minorities. The initiative did not come from the trade unions, some of which have been less than co-operative.

Then there's Lambeth, also one of the poorest patches of Britain, where one of their most remarkable and honourable achievements is that the council has integrated disabled workers into their workforce and exceeded the statutory 3% quota when most employers have yet to honour the minimum. And quite properly they are trying to make the staff profile match the population, over a third of which is

black. Lambeth and Hackney (loonies, remember) were among the first councils to take on their own discriminatory employment practices at the end of the 1970s.

In theory, many of our local authorities are behaving contrary to our sex and race discrimination laws. Most don't know who they employ because they won't find out - fewer than a handful of local councils have properly monitored their workforce to find out if they were discriminating against women and blacks, which of course they were, and then done something about it. But where is the challenge to the rest? The bad practice of Tory authorities ought to have made them the target of a progressive, co-ordinated offensive. But there is none. It isn't coming from the Labour front bench. It isn't coming from the trade union movement. There is still not yet a national challenge to the endemic racism and sexism which populates the hierarchies of local government, Tory and Labour, with white men.

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Having said that, the citizens of the radical boroughs are still faced with a contradiction; heroic councillors ready to go to prison over ratercapping still preside over boroughs where basic services don't work. You still can't get your repairs done. In the case of Lambeth, you can't get your housing benefit for months, maybe years. In the case of Hackney, half its directorate has disappeared during the course of an inquiry into freemasonry, corruption and inefficiency by barrister Andrew Arden. The town hall staff union Nalگو has boycotted the inquiry for over a year.

There's a disease in this poor little borough called the Hackney syndrome; it means not getting things done. And it's not helped by an unholy alliance, which often operates informally in these places, between extravagant political promises which excite expectations, reluctant rightwing bureaucrats (as against nice, enthusiastic bureaucrats, who do exist, too) and conservative trade union consciousness, which comes in the macho trotskyst, Stalinist or labourist varieties.

We're talking about poor places and poor people here - for whom the council may be the most important agency in their lives. And yet they're places where service delivery is bad for people who deserve the best. Rhetoric minus management = a mess.

Part of progressive councils' problem is they are often challenging discriminatory traditions in which the trade unions are themselves implicated. A protagonist involved in the GLC (where the unions resisted the equal opportunities programme) mused bitterly, 'what breaks my heart is the trade unions. They don't take industrial action in the Tory boroughs like they do in the left boroughs. None of the equal opportunities initiatives have come from the

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unions. Sometimes it's used as a source of aggravation between unions, or it's used in collective bargaining, not because they want it, but because they know we want it.'

(To be fair, others have taken it on board with some enthusiasm - girls get apprenticed these days in the direct labour organisations of several local authorities, usually where left Labour or Communist shop stewards have taken the initiative. The point is, however, that rarely does the initiative either nationally or locally come from where it should, the trade unions.)

At worst this becomes a degenerate wrangle between a conservative trade union consciousness, and a radical socialist consciousness, in which the real issues are buried in a struggle not for hegemony - cultural and political leadership - but for control. This is exactly what has happened in the London borough of Brent, where the majority of the children in schools are black, but only 10% of their teachers share their ethnic origin, and therefore their experience, their history and their culture. Brent's staff shortage is also so acute that in many schools children are already, in effect, part-time pupils.

When the council commissioned an academic study of black children's 'failure' in the school system, the National Union of Teachers in the borough refused to give them access to the schools. They said they hadn't been consulted. As it happens, the union is part of a regular consultative machinery with the council. But in any case, was that a good enough reason to withhold their co-operation? And why didn't they take the initiative in the first place?

Maureen McGoldrick was the headmistress of Sudbury infant school, where 80% of the children are black, and less than 25% of the teachers are black. As we know, she was accused by an officer of opposing a new black teacher to fill one of several vacancies because she was black. The officer, quite properly, reported the problem to a senior officer. McGoldrick was then suspended, which may not have been quite proper, but either way any equal opportunities employer would have had to take some action.

The union's response was to encourage McGoldrick's denial, and to take legal action to stop the council carrying through its inquiry, which would have investigated not only McGoldrick's alleged remarks, but the source of any resistance to the employment of more black teachers at McGoldrick's school. What seems to have happened was that the white-dominated governors didn't want any more black teachers and McGoldrick - accused by no one, not even the council actually, of being racist - buckled to their pressure.

One of the most important sources of opposition to Brent's anti-racist strategy has been the Brent Teachers'

Association (part of the National Union of Teachers), which has, for many years since the days of former Communist Max Morris, been led by the so-called Broad Left. While supporting member McGoldrick, it failed to support a black probationary teacher's right to a job, has consistently opposed the black NUT members' self-organisation in the borough, and is still refusing to sign the borough's equal opportunities code.

The role of the NUT was instrumental and a model of conservative trade union consciousness. What was the union defending? Firstly, the power, not of ordinary members, but of head teachers. Second, the power of whites. Thirdly, tradition. It thus threw itself into a vortex, unaware of its unconscious motivations. For where can it go with such a strategy? Where it did go, actually, was into an unprecedented coalition with Thatcherism - Brent was where the Tory cabinet, the NUT and elements of Labour's front bench (without talking to their comrades in Brent first-hand) came together.

A local dispute became a national drama. The stakes were suddenly very high. Some local Labour leaders shrug it off, saying 'we'll still win in Brent'. Probably true. But that ignores the national dimension - Brent lost the argument. And the effect was to give a new respectability to racism, and a new notoriety to anti-racism.

That happened because the drama was lived out not as the council's campaign to get more black teachers into its schools, but over its right to hire and fire. The real issue is that the teachers' unions, central government and until recently the council have not taken responsibility for the plain fact that the schools fail black children and the system fails to deliver black teachers.

Witch-hunted Brent council appeared to be hunting down a nice lady who nobody thought was racist. The fatal factor was that an individual, rather than a structure, was the target. Brent appeared to be defending only its own prerogatives and procedures, rather than the community's rights. That was partly a problem of public relations, but it was more than that; the council was trapped in what used to be known in the communist movement as using an administrative method to deal with a political problem. Besieged in their bunker, councillors have felt the disciplinary hearing had to be kept separate from their anti-racist strategy. One was a matter of procedure, the other a matter of politics. So the council appeared to be defending their own right to hire and fire, when they were defending their perfectly sound anti-racist policy.

One of Brent's biggest assets is its leader, Merle Amory, a fundamentally nice woman, for years hounded by the media and no doubt haunted by the scale of hardship facing her constituents. Unusually for someone who

would have got a parliamentary seat if she'd sought one, she's chosen to stick with ordinary people and extraordinary problems. She was away during the worst of the crisis. But not even she could get out of the proceduralism in which the council was imprisoned.

Amidst the alchemy of bureaucratic procedure Brent appeared to be policing people rather than protecting either people or a policy. What should have been a consciousness-raising and learning process degenerated into a wrangle over authority and discipline.

The web connecting civil society and the state was so fragile that Brent council was left terribly exposed; the infrastructure within civil society to sustain anti-racism had not been secured. The school governing bodies, no less than the NUT, have not been promoting anti-racism, and yet you can't win with an equal opportunities strategy in schools unless the pressures bearing down on schools want it. If white middle-class heads and white middle-class parents run the governing bodies, then the council's anti-racist strategy is doomed. That white dominance was in part the effect of previous political appointments made by Labour.

Now let's turn to Haringey. Indifference to the problem of consciousness and of civil society found this London borough embroiled in a battle over sexual orientation in sex education which does not even enjoy the support of all the Labour group. This is probably the first time that black socialist councillors have agreed with rightwing white Tories.

No doubt thinking it was doing the right thing, the council employed a lesbian and gay unit which earlier this year sent out a brusque letter to school heads. As one veteran of lesbian and gay politics in local government put it, 'heads aren't in the habit of being told what to do. That's not how you handle teachers'. Furthermore, 'nobody had deemed it necessary to tell parents what they were doing'.

Lesbian and gay politics are for sure the most vulnerable; where there is a popular, if inchoate, mandate for equal opportunities, it is clear that there is sadly no equivalent mandate for positive images of homosexuality, nor even perhaps for minimal civil rights for gay citizens. The panic over Aids has legitimised rampant homophobia. Gay rights need sophisticated political protection.

But in the absence of any public work within civil society, statism has replaced consciousness-raising.

The gay movement has lived its whole life having to come out, build alliances, change consciousness, create its own culture and carve out emotional and physical space for pleasure and for its own survival. Unlike the heterosexual world, it has always had to keep its own secrets and yet defend its desires. If the gay movement has learned anything, it is that you must know yourself

and your enemies, for they are everywhere. If we are to protect the gay and lesbian initiative we have to find some shared sexual language with exactly those people who in some other moment may be our enemies.

None of this experience seems to have informed the bravado of some of the front-line councils. As one councillor who has campaigned for gay policies put it, 'the gay issue has been dragged in by well-intentioned councillors who think it is the same as sexism and racism, when it's not, without realising the forces ranged against it'.

This is not to argue for retreat, but it is an argument for a strategy! And that means a network of alliances and conversations to diffuse its truths within the culture. A gay councillor puts it like this, 'no one is making a clear argument. We've got to talk it through carefully. As long as you have a strategy it doesn't matter how long it takes, because it will have a truth of its own. What we've got to worry about is how to help people convince themselves. We can't guilt trip people any more'.

From these various examples, we can conclude that, in the absence of any public discourse, the new anti-racist and anti-sexist policies are not being defended; policy-formulation in the town halls has not been shared with the communities they represent. Instead a

new language is being thrown around as a stick to beat people with, militant moralism is replacing pluralism, solidarity and consciousness-raising. This is compounded by the way in which the new politics have been hijacked by a kind of ultra-leftism.

In the name of accountability, one of the benchmarks of Bennite democratic reform, local parties often seem to exist only to police their councillors rather than activating their communities. 'These days put a foot wrong and wham, your toes are off. It's not very comradely', complained an old hand in both the gay movement and southern municipal socialism. 'No one is immune. One minute a shining knight, the next minute', as one northern Labour council leader put it, 'the chalice is knocked out of your hand.'

Thatcherism's attack succeeds exactly in this maelstrom, where administrative methods are used in the name of a new politics; the problem arises where administrations use the power of the town hall to short-circuit the toil of creating a new consciousness.

The demise of the GLC has exposed the ragged state of the Labour Party as a party. In London the GLC seemed to replace the party. 'The very success of the GLC seemed to reduce the party to a state of terminal idleness', says one councillor. In many other cities it is the same, but for different reasons, particularly in the north. In many, perhaps most cities, there is *no* Labour Party

functioning as a *party* in civil society. If Labour's strength (compared with little parties and big movements) is that it understands the machinery of power, then its weakness (compared with little parties and big movements) is that it doesn't seem sensitive to the movements of consciousness. It doesn't mobilise, and it doesn't inhabit civil society.

Labour has been using the state to effect transformations without transforming itself. Often you get the impression that it doesn't see that kind of work as important. Labour didn't create black consciousness, the gay movement, feminism or peace politics, but now it borrows their work. These movements have changed some of the political agenda, and perhaps increasingly there is a symbiotic relationship between the party, these movements and the state.

But while engaging with the party, many activists in these movements have discovered that in adopting their demands Labour has not adopted their culture. We've got to learn how to share that culture with the Labour Party, but the Labour Party has to learn how to be more than a political manager, it has to learn how to be a political *party*. •

1 *The Politics of Thatcherism*, introduction, ed Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques.

2 For an exhaustive account of the black movement's challenge to the council see *The Racial Politics of Militant in Liverpool: the black community's struggle for participation in local politics 1980-86*, by Liverpool Black Caucus, published by the Runcymede Trust, 1986.

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SHEFFIELD

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