

Labour, leadership and locality: distinctive approaches to place shaping



Preface

Julie Grimble, Project Leader

The genesis of this project dates back to several years ago when I was shown leaflets from the three main parties contesting a significant local by-election. If you had removed each of the party brands and imprints you would have been hard-pushed to tell the difference.

It struck me then that we needed to do some serious work on how ideology and competence are vital in a healthy Labour place and debate how core values fit in with a localist agenda. We needed a rejuvenated Labour local government platform to communicate to voters and also to recruit and retain good Labour councillors.

Early in 2007, the opportunity arose for both the LGA Labour Group and the Leadership Centre for Local Government to undertake a more in-depth project. We decided on a pamphlet which would then be used to promote a programme of practical work for Labour councils, regions and opposition groups seeking to regain political control.

I hope you find these essays to be a useful reference point when considering the role of Labour in local government and the challenges that face us in the coming years.

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Foreword



The future is local

Hazel Blears MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

This pamphlet is well timed to make a valuable contribution as we enter a new phase of government with localism and devolution at the core of our approach. It is encouraging to me that so many leading Labour councils are at the forefront of the localism agenda - of which I have been a long-time supporter. I am fiercely proud of the fact that Salford, the area I currently represent as an MP, and where I used to be a city councillor, and also Greater Manchester where I worked as a local government solicitor, are among these vanguard Labour authorities.

For those of us who are immersed in political life, it is always worthwhile to stand back and review our core values and beliefs and consider how they underpin what we are currently trying to deliver and achieve. We need, as Labour politicians, local and

national, to be responsive to changing trends, expectations and needs and to new global challenges.

Local councils are seen as vital strategic partners of central government, and their role beyond providing vital local services is now well established. In all the many ministerial posts I have held local government has always been a key partner. As Party Chair, I relied heavily on developing a good relationship with Labour leaders and councils.

It is no accident that Gordon Brown chose to make the Green Paper *The Governance of Britain* the centre piece of his first days in office. It calls for a democracy where people are proud to participate in decision-making at every level, and to clarify the role of government, both central and local, through a new Concordat.

This is a time of great opportunity for Labour councils. The stories the Labour leaders tell about 'Labour place-shaping' show how they are up for the challenge and are ready to seize this opportunity for their local communities and citizens.

This decentralist, localist strand has always been present in socialist thought, from the earliest days of the Labour Party itself. Labour is the party of localism, both in theory and practice, and in the coming months we can go even further and faster.

Introduction



A town hall of all the talents

John Healey MP, Minister for Local Government

After a decade of relentless central government attention to basic competence, quality of service and value for money, local government has largely taken such requirements to heart. This has led many to make the argument that elected councillors are now managers rather than political leaders and that Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat councils have become indistinguishable from one another.

I reject this view. I remain completely convinced that politics and core values count. In asking Labour leaders to contribute to this collection of essays, we wanted to test the belief that there is a distinctively 'Labour' local government.

The conclusion is emphatic. Labour local government leaders have a confidence and clarity of vision and values for their area that does distinguish them from their counterparts in other parties.

This is clearly evident in John Merry's declaration that "we wanted to shock people out of their assumptions about Salford". He challenges the stereotype of a Labour city area, he is ambitious for Salford's international – not just national – standing and by using L.S. Lowry he roots the development strongly in the local community and local pride.

We need to challenge people on their assumptions about Labour councils. The local stories set out in this collection do just this, and with it the LGA Labour Group is launching an important initiative.

Labour leaders stress the central importance of economic success and prosperity that all residents have the opportunity, through work and skills, to share. They emphasise the essential feature of progressive politics, in planning for the future to meet collective community needs. And they point both to greater pluralism with important partners, and to further devolution beyond the town hall. In our modern-day economy and society, these are important principles and must be a priority for Labour local government.

In his first statement to the House of Commons as Prime Minister, Gordon Brown set out why we now have the potential to reinvent the way we govern, with greater devolution and more representative democracy. He believes Britain needs a new type of politics.

I want to work with Labour leaders, councillors, activists and others to help define and design this new way of doing politics.

I want our party to be the one that puts greater powers of challenge and change into the hands of people in our neighbourhoods and communities.

And by bringing key decision-making roles into their reach, I want Labour to be the party that shows people that being a councillor – and even standing for election – is an important and rewarding civic activity.

In short, I want Labour to be seen at the forefront of making local politics meaningful again.

The challenges

I see our principal challenges in five areas, and this collection of essays shows Labour councils demonstrating in practice how we can tackle each in turn:

- More progressive devolution to councils, and beyond to their local communities
- Collective action for greater opportunity and common good
- Opening local government to all the talents and making power at every level more accountable
- Regenerating the Labour party and widening our local reach
- Winning the argument on 'localism'

Progressive devolution

Soon after becoming Prime Minister, Gordon Brown signalled his determination to see more powers placed as close to people and their communities as possible. This should have surprised no one. It is the same devolutionary principle we applied to economic policy making in the Treasury over the last five years. Understanding the level at which decisions are best taken and allowing people to deliver more for themselves is the sign of a more mature and confident politics.

I am committed in my belief that politicians – whether ministers, MPs, council leaders, mayors or frontline councillors – should not be micromanagers, attempting to achieve their aims by taking direct charge of the tiniest details.

The sub-national review of economic development, which I oversaw in the Treasury and launched from the Department of Communities and Local Government, sets up the steps needed to decentralise economic powers a great deal further. Alongside this, Local Area Agreements, local public service agreements, and now Multi Area Agreements are valuable tools to enable devolution to local partnerships across all of our public services.

I appreciate the concern that these mechanisms can be overly-bureaucratic. I hear the call from local government for more radical and ambitious change. As Roy Oldham eloquently puts it:

“We need government to trust us. What we really want is for government to leave us alone with a 10-year strategy, agreements about capital and revenue and a deal about what we are going to make happen... if we're good, four star and excellent, then why not cut the bonds that prevent us from doing what's needed?”

However, I would also argue that it is equally legitimate that ministers elected on a national manifesto want to see results against our promises and commitments. After all, voters will hold me and other ministers to account every bit as much as they will elected councillors. Steve Houghton encapsulates this when he suggests that local council leaders need to be “mature enough” to recognise when they represent agents of change for a Labour Government.

He also calls for a new constitutional settlement which defines what is national, what is regional and what is local. This is an interesting idea, and Gordon Brown’s proposal for a central-local government compact is similar. It is essential for me that we should develop a set of principles based on the presumption that decisions – on policy, delivery, funding – should be located at the local level unless there is a good case for taking decisions at a higher level, turning on its head the UK way of doing things for decades.

Serious questions hang over Whitehall, however. Can it allow decisions that properly belong at the local level to be made there? Can it trust local democracy to work? Back in May, at the local elections, voters expressed their opinions about alternative weekly bin collections without the need for central government to intervene or determine local services. Quite simply, there are no direct levers in Whitehall connected to every locality.

In my view, this same principle applies to the town hall too. As Steve Bullock states, when describing his approach in Lewisham, “you should only do at borough level what cannot be done more locally”. And like him, I do not simply see the replication of mini-town halls and bureaucracy at a more local level. For example, a neighbourhood model has been part of Stevenage since its inception – a model based on the needs of communities not administrative functions - and has been used by Labour leaders over decades to sustain strong and active communities.

What emerges very strongly from this collection of essays is that Labour leaders do share common values and beliefs but their ‘local’ is different, according to their area.

Collective action for the common good

It is apparent from this collection that what defines a Labour place and style of leadership is the idea of collective action for the common good. As Sir Richard Leese says: “We in Labour believe that there is such a thing as society”. Hazel Harding describes one of her aims in Lancashire as fostering in communities “a generosity of spirit”. In traditional Labour doctrine, this has been articulated as ‘by the strength of our common endeavour’.

As Labour politicians we believe in opportunities and aspirations for all. One very good example of this in practice is the way Ken Livingstone and his Labour colleagues in the five East London boroughs are exploring the opportunities and the long term legacy that the 2012 Olympics will bring. They are determined to ensure a long lasting economic, environmental, sporting and cultural legacy for all who live in East London. They are also addressing the stark statistic that three quarters of the Great Britain Olympics squad were educated in private schools. Boroughs like Greenwich and Newham have set up academies to spot and support home grown talent and nurture Olympic stars – a firm commitment to ensuring sporting opportunities for all, regardless of their background.

As Labour politicians we often don't make things easy for ourselves. A localist approach which seeks to shape a Labour place by engendering a culture of local philanthropy, and which is responsive to the dynamic and complex nature of communities cannot be easily codified or implemented.

Unlike the Conservative Party we do not believe in a small state as an article of ideology. We require value-for-money but we value public service. We see that active government is both necessary and can be positive. Indeed, Labour leaders across local government have helped redefine what we mean by intervention, with their instinct for social justice and fairness in determining local spending priorities. Lord Smith exemplifies this approach:

“Trying to make a more equal Wigan, trying to make sure that everyone within the community has the best quality of life... We start with that fundamental value, and worry about how we are getting through to the most disadvantaged groups, think about how to do it better, about the barriers, how we will achieve breakthrough; it drives everything we do.”

Good governance is a delicate balance of when to govern and when not to govern. Something Sir Richard Leese describes well “...helping to build solutions to collective problems – the council is part of that ‘solution building’, not doing things ‘to’ people but always willing to intervene to get things moving”.

This dynamic and complex approach to how Labour runs local authorities – how we do localism – relies also on an expectation that everyone takes responsibility for their own behaviour. Local government has an obligation to intervene to enforce a range of good behaviours, including being tough on those whose own actions impact negatively on the lives of their neighbours or the broader community.

A town hall of all the talents

Labour leaders have seized Labour government policies, applying and adapting them to their own area. Manchester City Council has taken the opportunity offered by City Academies by becoming the sponsor. Lewisham has melded tradition with modernity by inviting the Leathersellers company (a city guild with a century old stake in local education) to set up a Foundation School. Tameside has made positive use of the Government's Building Schools for the Future programme to modernise all local schools. Labour councils have met, and exceeded the Gershon efficiency targets. Districts like Stevenage have embraced Labour policies on housing and sought to influence the housing policies of neighbouring Conservative boroughs.

Yet, this is not just about Labour-led councils delivering at the behest of the central government. Labour local government has also been a powerful influence on this partnership, helping shape national policy. The basis of national policies to tackle worklessness reflects the move from welfarist policies to work-based strategies described by Steve Houghton and Sir Richard Leese. We have seen Gateshead use culture as a powerful tool in the urban renaissance of the North East. The approaches of Manchester, Newham and Nottingham to crime, community safety and anti-social behaviour were a strong influence on the national Respect agenda, with Nottingham also helping to set the pace on early intervention – something the Labour-led council had long considered the logical next step.



With a strengthening record of innovation, leadership and delivery in place, I now want Labour in local government to help raise our game further.

The Prime Minister said in September: “I want to see a vibrant reformed local democracy, from neighbourhood level engagement, community calls to action, a renewed focus on the devolution of powers and responsibilities to local government, the accountability of our police, our healthcare services to their communities...”

This is a big challenge and a big opportunity for local government in general. But based on our values and our innovating approach in the councils we run, Labour local government should be leading the way in strengthening community involvement in council decision-making and expanding the influence of local democracy over other public services, such as healthcare, criminal justice or welfare. After all, empowering the people we serve provides the impetus and power of progressive politics.

In the first week of my new job as local government minister, at the LGA Annual Conference, I called for local government to create a ‘town hall of all the talents’. Strong and stable politics is built on engaging people, not excluding them. Confident politicians can reach beyond the narrow circles of their own power. Above all, the challenges we face throughout the country can only be met by drawing on the widest range of contributions, expertise and talent.

There is a long way to go but we can see signs of such potential in the essays within this collection, as well as other Labour-led areas. Former Ofsted chief inspector Mike Tomlinson chairs the Learning Trust in Hackney; the elected mayor’s advisers on faith, youth culture, environment and community relations in Lewisham are all experts, not political figures; and the first chair of the local strategic partnership in my own authority of Rotherham was a very well-respected local business woman.

Regenerating the Labour Party

The last decade of Labour government policies for local government have seen a major pay-back in terms of performance. Although further improvement is needed, excellent public services accessible to all are now an unquestionable imperative amongst Labour leaders – something that is embedded in Labour policies at all levels. As Steve Houghton puts it, “Competence counts... Whatever we do to make Labour more attractive we must continue to get the basics right for local people... People won’t vote Labour if we can’t do those things well”.

Alongside this however, we need to work to promote a wider definition of politics. The vast majority of people are actively interested in the issues that affect them, their families and the wider world, and want to have a say in how things are run. This suggests real potential for greater participation if we can first overcome the perception of politics as a restrictive practice, done merely by professional politicians in formal institutions and with little link to everyday life.

Traditionally, party membership has been the route through which citizens become involved locally. A combination of overlapping membership, active community links and stable populations meant that parties, without trying, could act as a local forum through which a range of other interests could be heard.

Nowadays, any mediation or articulation of community interests tends to be increasingly left to elected politicians, with councillors and MPs less supported than before in this role by party headquarters. So political parties must do more locally to renew their role as institutions which contribute and mediate for





the common good. This means developing more active forums for debate and deliberation; being more pluralist in culture and composition; acting as a sharper voice and stronger bridge between local concerns and national policies.

Such a new style of politics would more directly hit the mark with a public who are clear about the reforms they wish to see. A recent survey for the Young Foundation asked people what changes would help to make political parties more appealing. The top three responses were: involving people more in local decision-making; listening more to the public; and taking the time to talk to people about their organisation and explain their values.

With the general decline in collective institutions and identities, the traditional form of party association – pay to have your say – is too limited to meet these challenges. As Steve Houghton says: “The party needs to become the natural home for community and civic debate”. Parties must therefore look at extending their reach and encouraging wider connections through supporter status, online networks, consultative forums and more joint meetings, training and campaigns.

New technologies and electronic communications will help but a political health warning is needed: there is no techno-fix. What parties and politicians do, and crucially how they respond directly to public interest and views, is the key.

Winning the argument on localism

Some in local government think there has been too much talk about 'localism' over the past few years. I look at it another way. It is a ready-made vehicle for describing Labour's approach to politics – a national framework of principles and policies, but locally driven by those with a better grasp of the context within which daily life takes place.

There are risks. Other parties are claiming 'localism' for themselves. But the contrasts are important and profound.

The pavement-pamphleteers with 'FOCUS' newsletters confirm the infinite contradictions of a politics that is fashioned for the popularity of a particular time and place and that rarely deals with the difficult long-term challenges facing many local communities.

Meanwhile, much Conservative interest in localism is founded on a traditional Tory mistrust of those who are not local and a mistrust of the state. This leads directly into the narrow-minded NIMBYs who make up many of Cameron's footsoldiers and to a willingness to see communities fail as they are not just set free but cut loose.

Labour's localism is different. Increasingly, as this collection illustrates, we can show how our approach and our philosophy is based on a real drive for greater decentralisation to the town hall, and then beyond to community and ward level.

We can demonstrate how the practice of leading Labour councils is founded on our values of equity and opportunity for all.

And we can also make clear that a purposeful elected centre, in the town hall and Whitehall, is important as a bulwark against those who would use greater powers to marginalise the vulnerable or voiceless in our society.

I am convinced that by leading the debate on localism, by making power more accountable locally, by opening up the town hall to 'all the talents' and by renewing our party that Labour can create a vibrant local democracy and a strong local government able to shape prosperity and prospects of the cities and towns we serve.

Ken Livingstone writes in his essay of the "duties" that he believes are cornerstones in how Labour should run London:

"It means that the economy must succeed. The barriers that prevent all Londoners from participating in that success must be challenged – be they the lack of adequate transport or housing, right the way through to racism, or any other form of discrimination. And in leading the fight to tackle climate change we mobilise one of the most important features of progressive politics – to plan for the future on the basis of collective need."

This is just where Labour in local government should be in all parts of the country.