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Socialism and Decentralisation

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Decentralisation and the Socialist Tradition
Decentralisation and Local Government
Two Cheers for Decentralisation

Anthony Wright
John Stewart
Nicholas Deakin

Fabian Tract 496

Socialism and Decentralisation

Chapter

1 **Decentralisation and the Socialist Tradition**
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2 **Decentralisation and Local Government**
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3 **Two Cheers for Decentralisation**
by Nicholas Deakin

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This pamphlet originated in meetings of the Birmingham Fabian Society, of which Anthony Wright is Chairman and Nicholas Deakin Vice-Chairman.

This pamphlet, like all the publications of the Fabian Society, represents not the collective view of the Society but only the views of the individuals who prepared it. The responsibility of the Society is limited to approving the publications it issues as worthy of consideration within the Labour movement.

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1. Decentralisation and the Socialist Tradition

Anthony Wright

"The objection to public ownership, in so far as it is intelligent, is in reality largely an objection to over-centralisation. But the remedy for over-centralisation is not the maintenance of functionless property in private hands, but the decentralised ownership of public property. When Birmingham and Manchester and Leeds are the little republics which they should be, there is no reason to anticipate that they will tremble at a whisper from Whitehall."

R.H. Tawney, *The Acquisitive Society*, 1921.

We are all decentralisers now, at least in the sense in which a century ago Lord Harcourt could declare that we were then all socialists. Now, as then, it is important to distinguish the reality from the rhetoric. What 'participation' was to the 1960s, 'decentralisation' looks like becoming for the 1980s.

Rhetoric and Reality

Mrs Thatcher is a decentralist, in the rhetorical sense. She has effectively nourished a popular ideology in which state/ centralism/bureaucracy (equals socialism and the Labour Party) is opposed by individual/ choice/ freedom (equals Thatcherism and the Conservative Party). This is a familiar enough theme in the tradition of anti-socialist propaganda, of course, but a striking aspect of the present period has been the breathtaking nature of the gap between ideology and practice. The Thatcher Government has engineered a deliberate and massive intensification of central state power, by attacking those organisations representing group power (notably the trade unions) and those institutions that represent a constitutional antidote to centralism (notably local government). Thatcherism combines a particular version of economic decentralisation, the market version borrowed from classical economic liberalism, with a sweeping political centralism. The intention and effect is to expose individuals to the economic power of the market and the political power of the state, and thereby to diminish general freedom.

David Owen is a decentralist too, or used to be. Indeed, in his *Face the Future* he argued that decentralisation was the key issue in British politics, that there was a decentralist Left tradition that should be resurrected, and (in his revised edition) that the Social Democrats were the contemporary heirs to this tradition. The first proposition was plausible, the second was convincing, the third was incredible (as many Liberals enjoyed pointing out). In general, those social democrats who became Social Democrats belonged precisely to that wing of the Labour Party that had been the most uncritical carrier of the centralist version of collectivism. Yet in abandoning Labour they claimed (at least initially) to be abandoning not socialism

but the state. Their initial prospectus was for a *Socialism without the State* (in the title of Evan Luard's book), but in their steady and inevitable drift to the Right a decentralist version of socialism has been supplanted by a 'social market' version of capitalism. There is to be no diffusion of economic power, the commitment to political decentralisation weakens, and the 'state' resumes its familiar role as a rhetorical stick with which to attack Labour.

However, although it may be comforting to record the bogus character of some current advocacies of decentralisation, this does not advance the real argument very far. In particular, it does not help to define the position of the Left on this issue. At the present time Labour is busily (and rightly) hoisting the decentralist flag in opposition to the Government's assorted attacks on local government, but it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that in some quarters the defence of 'local democracy' extends about as far as the preservation of the GLC or the West Midlands County Council. Yet the local state can look centralist too, depending upon the angle of vision. There is even a suspicion that some sections of the Labour movement may be allured by the future possibilities offered to a Labour government by its inheritance of sweeping new central powers over local authorities. Today's Liverpool may be tomorrow's Solihull. It is surely necessary to try to understand why a decentralist ideology, even when bogus, has become so pervasive and evokes such a ready public response.

A major reason for the general falling out of love with the state clearly turns on the increasing failure of the state, in a period of economic decline, to deliver the goods. Bureaucracies, both central and local, will be less liked when they say no rather than yes. Out of this has emerged the ideological offensive from the New Right with its doctrine of 'realism', alongside the seeming paralysis of a Fabian redistributive tradition stripped of its economic supports. In such conditions it is not difficult to see why 'decentralisation' should gain wide currency. Failures of policy and performance are converted into arguments about structure and machinery. In part, at least, they should be. Over a wide range of public policy areas a confident collectivism has ended in doubt and disillusionment about what has been achieved. The example of the high rise flat, that post-war Jerusalem in the sky, has become a cliché but it serves well enough to make the point. The point is that discussion of policy needs to extend into discusison about structures, in such a way that the view from the top down is at least matched by the view from the bottom up.

In thinking about these matters, the Left confronts a number of difficulties. These must be squarely faced, if a genuine decentralist socialism is to be constructed. There is, for example, the enduring legacy of Labour's own collectivist and centralist tradition. As David Donnison argues in his *Urban Policies: a New Approach* (Fabian Tract 487, 1983), this is a powerful tradition, with many achievements to its credit, but a price has had to be paid for it. This tradition now looks increasingly like part of the problem rather than the solution. There is a paradox here, in that Labour was uniquely a party formed not in the Westminster corridors of power but out of the array of self-governing institutions developed by working people in the interstices of British society. A.H. Halsey has remarked (in his *Change in British Society*) on the way in which "the movement which had invented the social forms of modern participatory democracy and practised them in Union Branch and Co-op meeting, thereby laying a Tocquevillian foundation for democracy, was ironically fated to develop through its political party the threats of a bureaucratic state." In short, Labour nationalised itself.

Reasonably enough, Labour set its sights on the capture of the central state and sought to use it for its own purposes. Britain's centralist political culture, reflected in the whole institutional landscape of British public life, both encouraged this

process and was buttressed by it. So collectivism slipped into centralism. However, this also carried with it some undesirable consequences and the loss of some valuable traditions. The centralist focus changed the terms of the relationship between movement and party in the direction of an instrumental electoralism. Socialisation became nationalisation, and in the form of the public corporation model that set its face against producer democracy and the diffusion of power. The 1945 Government can now be seen as the high watermark of the collectivist tradition, but this was reflected not merely in its many real achievements but in its confident brushing aside of other traditions.

One casualty was local government and municipal socialism, which found itself the victim between 1945 and 1951 of "a relentless drive towards centralisation and bureaucracy sweeping everything else out of the way" (W.A. Robson, *Political Quarterly*, January 1953). For example, the creation of the National Health Service was a considerable achievement, but it was a *national* service and involved the loss by local authorities of their valued hospitals. A generation later Labour's centralism still seemed intact, prompting at least one observer to comment on the 'puzzle' of the Party's failure to mobilise the localities and peripheries against the striking 'geography of inequality' in Britain (L.J. Sharpe, in *The Politics of the Labour Party* ed. D. Kavanagh).

However, it should not be thought that Labour's collectivist tradition represents the only difficulty confronting the Left in thinking about decentralisation. Both Nicholas Deakin and John Stewart explore this matter further in their later contributions, so one or two preliminary considerations are simply registered here. For example, there is the need to come to terms with the ideological basis of Labour's collectivism, which has turned (at least in part) on an egalitarianism that sought to universalise itself through collective action and uniform administration. This raises the question of whether equality can be combined with diversity, or whether the egalitarian baby would get thrown out with the centralist bathwater. Beyond this central issue, there are also the very real difficulties involved in thinking clearly about the dimensions of decentralisation. For example, there is both territorial *and* functional decentralisation, administrative *and* political decentralisation (with combinations of each). We may all be decentralisers now, but equally we may not all be talking about the same thing. This raises the central question of what decentralisation is wanted *for*. There are clearly those who espouse it as part of a general opposition to socialism, while there are others (including me) who embrace it as an essential element in a particular *kind* of socialism. This makes it important to establish the distinctive identity and credentials of a socialist decentralism. Does the socialist tradition itself offer any assistance at this point?

Traditions and Tensions

When, at the end of the 1950s, G.D.H. Cole rounded off the final volume of his *History of Socialist Thought* with some general reflections on the socialist tradition, he declared that he was "neither a Communist nor a Social Democrat, because I regard both as creeds of centralisation and bureaucracy". At the time such a position, neither communist nor social democrat but participatory and libertarian, could be regarded as a personal idiosyncracy, although in fact it turned out to be a remarkably prescient anticipation of the terrain on which much future socialist argument was to be conducted (especially by the generation of '68). For several decades democratic socialism had suffered everywhere as an independent Left was snuffed out by the international rivalries between a communist authoritarianism and a social democratic reformism. This had a catastrophic effect on socialist thought generally, from which recovery is still underway. One particular

effect involved the loss of a whole dimension of socialist argument, of which Cole's remark serves as a reminder.

This cannot be explored in detail here, but a few general points need to be made. The reminder is that there has existed a rich tradition of associational, decentralist and libertarian socialism. It contains such names as Proudhon and Fourier, Kropotkin and Morris; and is reflected in much anarchist and syndicalist literature. Whatever its defects, this tradition was valuable in confronting one kind of socialism (defined in terms of state, organisation, planning) with another. As Marxism consolidated its grip on European socialism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, theoretical pluralism was shown the door and dissenting traditions were temporarily lost. Indeed, they were further submerged by the rupture within international socialism after 1917 and the rapid suppression of libertarian tendencies in the new Soviet state and in its satellite parties in the West. At the same time, social democrats in the West tended to settle for a cautious reformism and to narrow their range of theoretical vision. So traditions were lost, and for a long time. In one sense, then, what is involved now is a process of retrieval.

In another sense, though, the task is not merely to retrieve but to extend and construct. This is necessary because of the historical neglect within socialism of attention to the sort of matters that an actual, operative, decentralised socialism would have to confront. For example, some Marxists might protest that Marx was demonstrably a libertarian democrat and that it is, therefore, absurd to put him on the other side of the argument. They are probably right about Marx from the evidence, but only in the sense that he *assumed* the future socialist society would be democratic and libertarian. Indeed, how could it be otherwise? He had no patience with those who wanted to discuss the structural form of socialism (a pointless activity he dismissed as writing "recipes for the cookshops of the future"), and even less patience with those who argued that a 'scientific' socialism in the hands of an intolerant party might inaugurate a new authoritarianism. From Marx we learn simply that socialism will be the rule of the 'associated producers', which is less than helpful in confronting the actual business of running a socialist economy or the actual business of constructing a socialist democracy.

Nowhere is this more tragically demonstrated than in Lenin's *State and Revolution*, written on the eve of the Bolshevik revolution and containing a lyrical account of the sort of self-managing popular administration that will follow the destruction of the existing state ("under socialism *all* will govern in turn and will soon become accustomed to no one governing"). We know the rest of that particular story. Meanwhile, the social democratic tradition (both in its Second International Marxism and its later revisionism) came to regard the state as the object and agency of its reformist purposes, but without thinking it necessary to think through the implications of this approach in terms of the structural form of socialism. Indeed, any such thoughts were ridiculed as unscientific by Kautsky ("about as rational as writing in advance the history of the next war"), because all would depend upon the nature of economic development. Indeed, there was little to discuss anyway since socialist society would be "nothing more than a single gigantic industrial concern". In this way did Marxist orthodoxy combine with reformist purpose to prevent any serious engagement with this issue.

At this point it is appropriate to say a few words about the British socialist tradition in this respect. Something was said earlier about Labour's collectivism, and all that might be thought necessary now is to supplement this with a nod in the direction of a bureaucratic Fabianism that underpinned the political practice. Everyone knows about the Webb version of administrative socialism with its army of experts and bureaucrats. Yet this is only

half the story. The Webbs were bureaucrats, but they were not centralists (and this distinction serves as a useful reminder that decentralisation is not the same as participation). The early Fabians were predominantly *municipal* socialists, and they envisaged a variety of forms of socialism. The local emphasis was crucial. As Shaw put it: "At present the State machine has practically broken down under the strain of spreading Democracy, the work being mainly local, and the machinery mainly central. Without efficient local machinery the replacing of private enterprise by State enterprise is out of the question". This is the Shaw of *The Commonsense of Municipal Trading* and emphasises the extent to which the early Fabians were collectivists without being centralists.

If this should be recorded now, it should also be recorded that there has existed a powerful tradition within British socialism that has been both decentralist and participatory. It stretches from Morris to Cole, from Tawney to Orwell, and has recently begun to reappear in some strength. It takes in Tawney's functional socialism, Laski's pluralism, and Cole's guild socialism. None of this can be discussed at length here, but it is worth indicating just how relevant to present concerns are some of the arguments from an earlier period (the period being roughly the second decade of this century). When G.D.H. Cole took up guild socialism and launched a socialism of 'self-government' against a Webbian socialism of administrative collectivism, there followed a decade of intense theoretical and organisational argument (discussed in my *G.D.H. Cole and Socialist Democracy*). It began with Cole's advocacy of producer democracy in industry, but soon extended over the entire terrain of social organisation.

The point about recalling the period and the arguments is not merely to find a historical pedigree for current positions, but to point attention to issues that were raised then about a decentralised socialism and will have to be faced now. For example, the need to reconcile the interests of both producers and consumers, a general interest and particular interests, devolution by function with devolution by area, democracy with efficiency. In 1920, both Cole (in his *Guild Socialism Restated*) and the Webbs (in their *Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain*) offered their mature thoughts on the structural form of socialism. They differed on much, but they addressed some of the key questions involved in the division and dispersal of power. Nor, unlike many socialists, did they simply assume that such questions would resolve themselves with the development of socialism, but believed rather that they would need to be asked and answered with added urgency.

One final point in this extended historical parenthesis. Guild socialism and its associated traditions were soon buried beneath the twin monoliths of official communism and official social democracy. Organisational versions of socialism were in the ascendancy again in both East and West, economic depression took its toll of the labour movement's energy and imagination, socialism became a matter of planning, progress and productivity (and the Webbs fell in love with Russia). All this is crude historical shorthand, of course, but it serves to draw attention to the loss of a whole dimension of the socialist argument for a generation. Thus Schumpeter could write (in the early 1940s, in his *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*) that "what may be termed Centralist Socialism seems to me to hold the field so clearly that it would be waste of space to consider other forms". Similarly, when Orwell delivered his telling satires on a particular *kind* of socialism, the climate was such that his meaning could be almost universally misread as an attack on socialism *tout court*. It is from this nadir that the socialist traditions sketched here have had to recover.

Points of Departure

In the immediate post-war decades such

recovery seemed unlikely. The concentration of power was increasing, accompanied by a politics of welfarism and economic management. This prompted fears on the Left about the growth of a 'managerial' society (in *New Fabian Essays* Richard Crossman declared that planning and the centralisation of power were "no longer socialist objectives"), but these remained minority voices. However, much has changed over the past two decades, both in Britain and elsewhere. The cultural revolution of the 1960s has worked its way through into socialist politics, old Labourism has been judged inadequate, Marxism has escaped from its Communist prison, the new Right has taken the ideological offensive, and a traditional collectivism has found itself shunted into an unpopular cul-de-sac. This is even cruder historical shorthand, but indicates at least some of the context in which forgotten issues (e.g. producer democracy) and their associated traditions have re-emerged as an essential element in the contemporary Left.

Indeed, on all sides, this seems to be the case. A decentralist, self-managing theme has distinguished some of the most innovative recent socialist thought in Europe (for example the work of Bahro and Gorz). Marxism has recovered some of its original emancipatory mission, turning from Leninism to Gramsci and reclaiming a tradition of 'council communism'. European socialist parties have been reactivated over the last decade by debate around the issues of statism and democracy. As Strasser (of the German SPD) formulated the new approach: "As much autogestion as possible, as much central planning and administration as necessary". In Britain these themes have been heard too, although more confusingly and often only glimpsed through the distorting mirror of Labour's crippling internecine strife.

So a valuable and venerable socialist tradition becomes available to us again. This is significant and should be welcomed. However, the real task is that of building upon this tradition to construct a viable socialist project. The difficulties are considerable and need to be faced squarely (if the tradition described here is not to remain forever a minority, dissenting one). In his recent *Rethinking Socialism*, Gavin Kitching put the matter clearly: "A persistent and apparently insoluble tension exists between the centralising tendencies which seem to be inherent in the desire to substitute planned control at macro levels for the market forces which determine these macro outcomes under capitalism, and the apparent need to make economic and social decision-making under socialism much more decentralised and small scale in nature if it is to have any hope at all of being genuinely democratic and 'unalienated'." This is a real tension and its existence cannot simply be ignored (as it has been, for example, by Tony Benn, notwithstanding his major role in reviving a non-statist tradition in Britain). Thus the task becomes that of reconciling the need for a 'macro' and a 'micro' socialism. This is conspicuously the case in the economic sphere, where a democratically accountable machinery of central planning has to be combined with producer freedom and consumer choice; but similar considerations will apply over the whole field of social policy and organisation. For example, in his recent Fabian pamphlet Raymond Plant (*Equality, Markets and the State*, Fabian Tract 494, 1984) rightly identified the tension between an egalitarian redistributionism and the inequalities produced by a decentralised co-operative economy. A socialism committed to both equality and decentralisation would need to confront such problems not evade them. Fortunately, there are indications that these questions are now being tackled by socialists. This is apparent in some of the discussions about 'market socialism' and its institutional framework, where the need to think in terms of trade-offs between desirable objectives is recognised. There is renewed attention to the enterprise as "a site for a multiplicity of interventions by socialists"

(Jim Tomlinson, *The Unequal Struggle? British Socialism and the Capitalist Enterprise*); while Alec Nove (in his important sketch of *The Economics of Feasible Socialism*) has outlined the structural principles of a possible socialism in which planning and public property are combined with market choice, decentralisation and producer democracy.

Similarly, in their contributions here Nicholas Deakin and John Stewart identify some of the key questions raised by decentralisation for social policy and local government. Thus Deakin shows why decentralisation should not be regarded as a panacea (and why bureaucracies have merits) and Stewart forces socialists to confront the implications (especially in terms of local diversity) of a genuine commitment to local democracy. Some socialists and collectivists will not want a genuine commitment to decentralisation. These will be those who espouse party democracy but stop short at including the whole membership, or who seek to turn the governing bodies of schools into a party caucus, or who oppose industrial democracy because it complicates the traditional role of the trade unions – and so on. By contrast, genuine decentralists will be constantly searching for new ways to diffuse power and expand opportunities for self-direction, to groups (e.g. neighbours, parents, workers) and to individuals (e.g. by cash payments rather than services-in-kind).

In doing this, decentralists will be aware of the perennial need to balance competing considerations (of the sort mentioned above) and to accept the untidy structure of a decentralised socialism. We need centralism and decentralism, state and community, plan and market, universalism and particularism, statutory and voluntary, professional and lay, producers and consumers, public property and private property, democracy and efficiency, ... However, we need all these combinations in the context of a commitment to the kind of socialism that 'decentralisation' implies (but does not exhaust). This is the kind of socialism that understands equality, following Tawney, as involving redistribution of *power*. This is not marginal to the socialist project, but absolutely basic to it (so in this sense I would take issue with Nicholas Deakin's description of decentralisaton as "politically neutral").

It is also the kind of socialism that takes the idea of community seriously, as self-government, as neighbourhood, as association, and as fellowship. Against the fragmentation and individualisation of modern life it offers the prospect of an active citizenship in accessible arenas. If socialists can offer no such prospect, there will be others who will offe- bogus remedies for contemporary ills. Already, 'decentralisation' has been mobilised *against* socialism. The task now, as Tawney argued over half a century ago, is to mobilise it *for* a community socialism of fraternity and citizenship. A final thought, not altogether irrelevant in present circumstances, is that a socialism of this kind might actually prove popular.

2. Decentralisation and Local Government

John Stewart

The Dominance of the Ministerial Model

The ministerial model of political change has dominated Labour Party thinking and action. The ministerial model assumes that political change is brought about through legislative action and ministerial initiative and by those means alone. It has had a deep impact on thought. The emphasis has been placed on uniformity in political change. Its influence has limited experiment and diversity. Change has had to be adjusted to the limits of political capacity, and the political capacity of ministers is necessarily limited by time and numbers.

The emphasis on legislative change has meant neglect of the critical process of implementation. Reliance has been placed on simple bureaucratic modes of service delivery as a necessary adjunct of the limitations of ministerial control. The assumption has been too readily made that at the centre there is understanding of the field.

The role of local government in political change has been neglected, because local government within the ministerial model is regarded as a mere agent for carrying out national legislation. The dominance of the ministerial model has neglected the role of local government in political change.

Yet for most of this decade the only power that can be held by the Labour Party is in local government. The political experience that is being built up by councillors confronting the decaying physical, economic and social fabrics of our cities with declining financial resources is a school for socialist thought and action. The organisation of the Labour Party has however remained largely based on the assumption that the national stage is the only stage on which significant political change takes place.

Any understanding or knowledge of the political practice of local government today must recognise the development in socialist thought and action that is taking place. New approaches to the role of the local authority in the local economy, the stimulus of production for social need, the search for alternatives to the bureaucratic mode of service delivery, new patterns of decentralisation for community control, the new styles of government associated with work by women's committees and on race relations, are all showing the capacity of local government as an instrument for political development. This development must not be seen merely as a trial run for ideas that can later be transposed to the national scene. Many of these developments could not be transposed to the national scene without destroying the diversity, the responsiveness and the innovativeness that are their character. The uniformities of national action and the remoteness of ministerial control set

their own imperatives. The development of local action must be envisaged not as a mere preliminary to national action, but as of continuing importance in its own right.

There is then a need in the Labour Party for new thinking on the role of local government. The need is the more urgent, because local government is at the centre of political conflict. The attacks upon local government require from the Labour Party not merely a negative defence of local government, but a positive perspective. The problem for the Labour Party will be to find that positive perspective against a background dominated by the ministerial model. It is not convincing to be arguing against the interventions of central government in curbing local authorities' expenditure if the aim of the Labour Party is to enforce new uniformities of service delivery. The struggles over the Government's proposals require a new consideration of the role, purposes and functioning of local government.

The Assumptive World of Centralism

That reconsideration must challenge the centralist perspective on which the ministerial model is based. In that centralist perspective the role of local authorities is seen as necessarily of little importance. There is an assumptive world of centralism within which local authorities are viewed.

A set of assumptions is so readily accepted in much national commentary that they are assumed not to require evidence or argument. They are assumed and hence do not need to be proved.

'It would be unrealistic to think that you could ever give substantial powers to small local authorities' . . . 'the public demand a common standard of service' . . . 'central government must control local government expenditure as part of its macro-economic control' . . . 'the public look to MPs not to councillors' . . . 'local elections are entirely determined by national trends' . . . 'low calibre of councillors and officers'.

They gain their power as a set. Each assumption gains support not from evidence but from the attitude generated by the set. Even to show that a particular assumption is unfounded does little to challenge that attitude. The attitude justifies a centralist perspective. Based on the assumptions of centralism, a strange logic develops which sees any example of local authority inefficiency as justifying further centralisation, but does not see an example of central government inefficiency as undermining the case for centralisation.

The assumptions of centralism have developed in the village of Whitehall, that enclosed world in which the ministerial model is based, and can encompass senior civil servants, ministers, many MPs and the national media. It is a world which is remote from most local authorities. Its direct knowledge of local government is dominated by a few London authorities.

The isolation of the village of the centre starts with the civil servant. He is protected by his career from ever having worked in a local authority. Thus it is rare for a senior administrative civil servant in the Department of Education and Science to have worked in a local education authority, although one would have thought such experience essential to a department which administers through local authorities. Such isolation encourages the sterility of the supervisory spirit – the attitude of one who looks at the actions of others, but takes no action himself.

And assumptions gain a life of their own. Evidence is not needed when assumptions are shared. If evidence were needed, then the media is there to supply it and the assumptions are shared by those inhabitants of the village.

Challenging the Assumptions

The danger is that the assumptions of centralism, grounded though they are in the village of Whitehall, have come to be accepted in the Labour Party's own approach to local government. That is why reconsideration of the role of local govern-

ment has to start from a challenge to those assumptions. I select a few of those assumptions to show that challenge is possible.

'Local elections are determined by national trends'

Assumptions reproduce themselves, producing spurious evidence for the assumption. If it is believed that local elections are determined by national trends, then they will be presented as if they are determined by national trends, and that indeed is how they are presented by the media. The results are translated into national swings and calculations are made as to the balance in the House of Commons if a general election were held. The assumption having been made that the local element is insignificant, the results are presented without regard to that element. Thus the assumption supports itself.

The increasing evidence of growing differentiation in local election results has gone virtually unrecorded. While there is a national trend, there is also significant variation from that trend. Even in 1982 when the local elections were supposed to have been determined by the Falklands factor, it was possible to find significant variations between local authorities. Recent survey material show that over 25% of the electorate indicate a readiness to vote differently in local elections from the way they intend to vote in national elections, and that is more than enough to alter the pattern of any election. (The arguments on this issue are deployed at greater length in George Jones and John Stewart, *The Case for Local Government*).

The tragedy is that the Greater London Council election of May 1985 is not to take place. Few can doubt that that election would have been influenced as much by a judgement on the Greater London Council Labour majority party as by national factors. That is however only a special case of a general phenomenon. It now matters how one votes in local elections. Different local parties stand for different policies – on expenditure levels, on the allocation of expenditure, on privatisation. The electorate have noticed.

'It is impossible to give substantial powers to small local authorities'.

This statement reveals an attitude rather than states facts. The statement however assumes that local authorities in this country are small, whereas the average size of local authorities is over 100,000 – many times above the average size of local authorities in most countries in Western Europe.

Our local authorities are not small; they are amongst the largest local authorities in the world. Indeed their population is of a size of which in federal countries states are made. Thus Kent County Council has a population greater than 16 of the States of the United States of America, greater than all the States in Austria and much greater than all the cantons of Switzerland. To such states substantial powers are certainly given. In this country it is merely assumed that substantial powers cannot be given to 'small' local authorities.

'The public look to MPs rather than to councillors – even on local matters'.

This is widely believed by MPs, ministers and civil servants. They would claim to have evidence. They see the complaints made to the national level about what are inherently local matters and assume on the basis of that one-sided evidence that more people contact MPs than councillors. Although MPs have contact from constituents on matters that are the responsibility of the local authority, councillors have contacts on matters that are the responsibility of central government – for example, on supplementary benefits. What actual evidence there is suggests that more people contact councillors than contact MPs. A survey by Louis Moss of *Some Attitudes towards Government*, (Birkbeck College, 1980) found that 22% of those surveyed had contact with a councillor, but only 14% had had contact with an MP.

'Central government requires control over

local government revenue expenditure for macro-economic purposes'.

The need for such control is by no means self-evident. It is more often assumed than argued. Local government revenue expenditure, unlike that of central government expenditure, cannot be financed by deficit funding. It has to be financed out of revenue. It is by no means clear that such expenditure has a significant effect on the money supply or on aggregate demand. If detailed control over local government expenditure is so essential, one has to ask why federal countries can manage to run successful economies without such controls over their states, never mind their local authorities.

The Danger of Acceptance

The first danger of the assumptive world of centralism is that many councillors and officers can come to accept the assumptions, and any such acceptance can weaken local responsibility and local initiative. After all, what point is there in local government if the assumptions are soundly based?

Councillors and officers can come to accept the language of the centre as if it described reality. The use of the phrase 'over-spending' is an example. The phrase is used to describe local authorities which are spending more than central government specifies their expenditure should be. The statement that a local authority is 'over-spending' is not an objective statement about the circumstances of an authority. It merely means that the judgement of the authority about its own level of expenditure that it has been elected to make and the judgement of central government differ. It would be surprising if they did not.

The existence of 'over-spending' authorities and of 'under-spending' authorities (for both exist) is not a sign that something is wrong with the system. It is only those caught in the assumptive world of centralism who could take that position. Rather the system would be at fault if there were no 'over-spending' and no 'under-spending' authorities and every authority spent exactly what central government laid down. There would then be little point in local authorities with local taxes and local elections. For local government is about the government of difference, responding to difference and creating difference. The danger is that local authorities can become so caught in the assumptive world of centralism that those responsible for it can forget that simple principle.

The Danger of Institutional Instability

In the village of the centre, local government is seen as of little importance. The lack of a written constitution makes it too easy to change the institutions of government. The argument is not that institutions of government should not be changed, but that they should be changed with care and deliberation. At the moment, local government can be played with around the Cabinet table.

In 1974 the Conservative Government reorganised the whole fabric of community government in England and Wales outside London. They divided the powers of the county borough not into two but into four types of authority – county, district, health authority and water authority. The succeeding Labour Government then set up a Royal Commission on the National Health Service, and proposed a reorganisation of local government under the misleading title of organic change. The present Conservative Government has reorganised health authorities, and reconstituted the water authorities. Structures were created in order to be destroyed.

Now the Greater London Council and the Metropolitan Counties are to be abolished. That decision was not taken on the basis of a consideration of how London and the great conurbations should be governed. Indeed the evidence is that

the decision was made before it had been decided how their functions should be reallocated. In this irresponsible way institutions are abolished. The absence of a written constitution makes it possible. The centralist perspective conceals the irresponsibility, for local authorities are barely seen to matter.

If, instead, local authorities were viewed as the only other elected institution in the country apart from Parliament, the relationship between local government and central government would be recognised as a key constitutional relationship. That relationship could be changed, but not lightly changed.

That relationship has been subject to more change than the institutions themselves. Since the election of the Conservative Government in 1979 there have been five major Bills on local government finance. Major changes such as the introduction of referenda as an element in the budgetary process have been put forward to be dropped. The rules of the game governing local government finance have been changed not once but many times. There have been at least eight grant systems since the Conservatives came to power.

A local authority cannot act as responsible local government or be clearly accountable to the local electorate if the rules governing its finances change and change again. Those rules have changed after budgets have been set, during the financial year to which they apply and even after the year is over. Institutions can be destroyed by erosion through changing conditions as well as by direct attack.

Local authorities are now penalised by massive grant loss for failure to achieve targets. Neither targets nor penalties are mentioned in the Local Government Planning and Land Act 1980. Yet only a few months after the passing of the Act, they were introduced by the Secretary of State manipulating some of the provisions of that Act. Later he sought Parliamentary sanction. That was given in the Local Government Finance Act passed in July 1982 to apply as from April 1981. The rules of the game could be changed even retrospectively.

It is a sign of the dominance of a centralist perspective that the relations between central and local government should be changed in this way without major outcry or even comment.

The Rates Proposal

The Government now proposes to take direct control over the power of a local authority to set the level of rates. It barely matters whether in practice the legislation retains the reserve powers to be applied generally or the powers are restricted to selective use. A principle will have been breached – and once the breach is made powers will be extended in use or in law.

Up until now each local authority has had the right to determine its own level of expenditure paid for by its own taxes. For that decision it has been responsible to the local electorate. Local authorities have been given the power of taxation to make their own decisions on expenditure. If Parliament had intended local authorities to make not their own decision but central government's decision on expenditure, they would not have been given power to tax, but a grant. A tax provides for local choice. If the right to raise that tax is limited, then in effect the local authority becomes dependent on central government's decisions on grant and on the level of rates. Local authorities will only be able to make choices of which central government approves. Local electors will not be able to choose policies for more public expenditure if disapproved of by central government. They will be denied choice for more public goods.

Local accountability will be critically weakened – for in effect a local authority will be accountable to the Secretary of State for its expenditure policies. Electors may find it more important to persuade the Secretary of State to use his powers against an authority than to cast a vote in

the elections. Councillors belonging to a party defeated in the election can still hope to win in reality through the powers of the Secretary of State.

The weakening of local government reflects the centralist perspective. Local authorities are seen not as an important element in the system of government, but a subordinate element in 'a unitary state'. Yet a unitary state can be a state of diffused or of concentrated power.

The Case for Local Government

Members of the Government in their campaign in favour of the Rates Bill have advanced a doctrine of the unitary state which in effect challenges the existence of any alternative legitimate view of government. In this doctrine the unchallenged dominance of central government is asserted not merely on those matters which are the responsibility of the centre, but on all matters that fall within the province of government.

The doctrine has an appeal to those within the Labour movement who see political change solely by reference to the ministerial model. That however limits the form of change to that which can be brought about by national legislation, and it leads to forms of organisation heavily dependent on bureaucracies to enforce what is inevitably remote political control. Change introduced by national legislation, based on the dominance of central government, will inevitably have to be reduced to rules that are capable of application on a uniform basis. Such changes may be appropriate for some of the issues faced in our society.

It has however to be recognised that for many of the issues in our society such an approach is not appropriate. At the heart of the system of community government – by which I mean that complex of agencies that governs conurbations, cities, towns and villages – there are changing problems and issues regarding which there are deep uncertainties about the capacity of government to resolve. There are no longer the certainties that built the high-rise flats, constructed the urban motorways, undertook comprehensive redevelopment and built new services in the confidence of what they would achieve. The certainty of the centre – whether it was the centre of the local authority or of central government – was imposed. There are no longer the same certainties to be imposed.

Faced with a society which is experiencing an era of endemic unemployment in which dividing lines between work and unwork are changing, in which the economy's structure is profoundly altered, in which new social pressures are emerging and in which new lines of division are being built in society, the response required of government is less certain and less sure. This is not to be regretted, but welcomed as opening up a style of governing less dependent on imposed certainties and more on learning from the community. In the government of a changing and an uncertain society, the role of local government becomes more important. Local government provides increased political capacity, diversity of response and a capacity for responsiveness. All are required for the government of an uncertain and a changing society.

An increase in political capacity

Through the political process, society seeks issue resolution. The political capacity of a system based on the ministerial model of change alone is limited. Local government increases political capacity by the active involvement of many councillors and by direct community involvement that is possible on the scale of local government but not for central government.

A diversity of response

Local elections provide for a legitimate point of authoritative political decision-making. A system of local elected authorities provides a capacity for difference within a national framework. It has a capacity for diversity in response and it is

from diversity that learning comes. From uniformity one learns neither of relative failure or success. All is risked on a single throw. An uncertain society facing complex social problems needs an increased capacity for learning. Local government provides that capacity.

A capacity for responsiveness

A local authority lies close to the area it governs. Decisions are made about situations known or seen. There is a possibility of responsiveness to local circumstances that is not open to the decision-makers at the level of central government, where decisions have to be made abstracted from local circumstances in the safety of a file. There is a capacity at local level for a style of governing less dependent on the uniformity of large-scale rule bound organisations. In that responsiveness the learning can be grounded in local communities.

The Limits of Local Choice

At the present time, the Labour movement is committed to the defence of local government and local democracy and to maintaining the right of a local authority to determine its own level of expenditure. It is not always certain whether all in the Labour movement will defend the right of an authority to 'underspend' as well as the right to 'overspend'. There is no point in the right of a local authority to make its own decisions if that right is only the right to make decisions of which a particular party approves. The issue has to be confronted of how far the Labour movement accepts local choice. For local choice can be choice by authorities controlled by Conservatives or by the Alliance. A diffusion of power to local authorities is a diffusion of power to differing political parties.

The arguments currently put forward by the Government on the need for central intervention to protect ratepayers can be parallelled by arguments that are put forward within the Labour Party on the need for central intervention to protect users of services. The Conservative Government legislates for maximum levels of expenditure through rate-capping. A Labour Government might legislate for minimum levels of expenditure. The arguments for decentralisation in theory are confounded by the priorities of politics.

The issue has to be confronted, and it is a wider issue. Arguments based on the diffusion of power, diversity of response and responsiveness to local circumstance can be seen to run counter to principles of equality. Unrestrained local government can, it is argued, lead to unacceptable difference in standards of service; minimum standards of service are required.

Uniformity of service provision should not be seen as the same as equality. Indeed there are circumstances where such uniformity could be argued to lead to inequality. Where needs or wants differ, uniformity of provision can deny certain groups effective services. The hard lesson has been learnt in the provision of services for the ethnic minorities that uniformity of provision can mean needs unmet. There is no simple equation between uniformity and equality.

There is in any event no certainty that local discretion will lead to unacceptable differences. That it will lead to differences is inevitable, but those differences will lie within limits. There are many pressures in our society towards convergence – professional and public pressures – as well as forces for diversity. It is often assumed that there are statutory minimum standards of provision in most main local government services because there is in practice a minimum level of expenditure below which no authority falls. These standards have emerged from the complex of pressures rather than been imposed by legislation. Thus minimum standards of expenditure on education grew between 1945 and 1975 not because of statutory change, but because of local authorities' own response to educational need, professional aspiration and public demand. In recent years there has been growing dis-

parity in expenditure, but that disparity has come about because of central government intervention. The mechanisms of targets and penalties led some already low-spending authorities to reduce their expenditure.

It should not be assumed that the argument here is for no intervention. Local authorities operate within a framework of powers and duties. The statutory basis of local government is expressed not so much in terms of minimum standards of provision, but of general duties to provide. Within that general duty there is or can be discretion about the method or level of provision. There is scope for the development of local initiative and a diversity of response.

The principle that should govern the statutory framework of local government is the avoidance of over-determination. Where central government seeks through legislation or regulation to lay down how a service should be provided and to what level, it limits local capacity for learning and development. It is as if at a specific moment of time knowledge about a service is frozen. It is even more dangerous when there is over-determination across the whole range of local authority services.

The attempts by central government to control the level of expenditure of individual local authorities by reference to nationally set targets is just such an example of over-determination. That over-determination will become even more marked as the Government moves with rate-capping to what must inevitably involve detailed consideration of the budgets of particular authorities. Equally, to base central-local relations on a general system of minimum standards would be to over-determine the pattern of services. There is a fundamental difference between setting a minimum standard in a particular service if provision is found to be unacceptable and requiring minimum standards for each activity. To base a system on minimum standards is very different from the use of minimum standards to deal with a recognisably unacceptable situation. The former is over-determination limiting innovation. The latter minimises constraint.

There are limits to local choice. Those limits should be set by central government through Parliament, but choice should not be limited for the sake of limiting choice. That is to over-determine the diversity of local choice.

A New Local Government

The case for local government is not and should not be for local government as at present constituted. There is a danger that in defending local government against attacks by central government our case becomes defence of what is, rather than advocacy of what might be. The need is for a wide-ranging reform of local government to make community government capable of responding to emerging problems and issues.

Reform of local government is normally taken to mean reform of boundaries and the division of functions between tiers. While it is likely that the disruption caused by the present Government's continuing attack will require a fundamental review of local government structure by any future government, questions of structure should not be over-emphasised. Previous discussion of local government reform has focussed on structure at the expense of the prior issue of the role and function of local government.

If local government is seen as a basic unit of government capable of responding innovatively to community problems, then its functions, its finance, its conditions of working, its political processes and central-local relations must support that role.

The functions of local government are more a result of historical accident than of any consideration of the requirements of local choice. The need is to review the functions which impact directly on the local community, whether discharged by local government or not, and to determine

those for which a degree of local choice is appropriate. Those should be the functions of local government. On this basis the health service and the training functions of the Manpower Services Commission should be made part of local government, reversing the depoliticisation and fragmentation of community services.

The conditions of local government should reinforce the wider role of local authorities in the local community. They should be given rights to review the activities of organisations – both public and private – in their area. They should be given a general competence to undertake activities on behalf of their local community (other than those expressly prohibited) rather than be restricted by *ultra vires*.

The finance of local government should reinforce local choice and local accountability. At present only 22% of the expenditure of the local authority is borne by the one tax that bears clearly on the local electorate – the domestic rates. The introduction of a local income tax is a necessary step in realising the potential of local choice. That local income tax would replace undue dependence on grant and would enable the transfer of the non-domestic rate to central government as a national tax, as befits a tax on industry and commerce. Central government grant would still be required to equalise resources in relation to need, but probably about 75% of local government expenditure would be borne by local income tax and domestic rates. Local choice between expenditure and taxes would be for the local electorate.

The political processes of local government should express local choice and local accountability. There is a case for the introduction of a system of proportional representation in local government. There is a case for increasing the frequency of local elections. There is a case for the use of local referenda. The political processes of local government do not have to follow those of central government and could be strengthened by difference.

A Bill of Rights for local government would give expression to the principles that should govern central-local relations. The last few years have seen the dangers of an unwritten constitution in making institutional change too easy. A Bill of Rights would not prevent change, but would ensure that such change could only be undertaken by altering that Bill of Rights. Fundamental change would be identified.

The structure of local government should increase the capacity of local authorities to meet the changing needs of society. That structure should be clear and comprehensible. The fragmentation and depoliticisation of local government can best be reversed by unitary local authorities. That should be the bias of any reorganisation, but in the final resort structure must be treated as secondary to purpose, functioning and role.

A New Style of Governing

The case for a local government responsive to community needs requires a new style of governing within local authorities. If the case for local government is made against the dangers of centralisation, then that case has implications for local authorities. If the case for local government is made by the diffusion of power, the diversity of response and the capacity for responsiveness, then there are implications for local authorities.

There have been three main organising principles which have given meaning to administration in local government. The principle of uniformity has dictated a common provision of service throughout the authority. The principle of functionalism has been represented by the division of the authorities into services whose boundaries have been guarded by the professionals. The principle of hierarchy has divided the organisation into tiers separating centre from the field and restricting

the responses that can be given in the field. Those principles reflect the bureaucratic nature of local government.

The bureaucracy of local government has been justified as necessary to political control. Yet there is a new challenge to the bureaucracies of local government, combining as they do the authority of hierarchy with the authority of professionals. There is a new negative consensus of the radical left and radical right, challenging the definition of problems and need not by the client, the consumer or the community, but by a professionalised bureaucracy. The consensus is a negative consensus. The response differs. The radical right seeks consumer sovereignty through the market. The radical left seeks new forms of community control through decentralisation within the authority. Decentralisation within the authority can involve managerial devolution giving more authority to fieldworkers in neighbourhood offices; can involve political devolution giving more authority to local councillors; or can give more direct control to service users, to tenants or to the local community.

The search for alternatives to traditional forms of bureaucracy is not restricted to the exponents of decentralisation. In the work of women's committees one finds a rejection of the forms and procedures of local authority administration as means are sought of overcoming the barriers between the local authority and women. Many examples of community development are taking place in which local people are assisted to give their own definition to service requirements. The search for a new style of governing is part of the search for socialism.

The dilemma is that there are limits to decentralisation as there are to local choice. On certain issues a local authority-wide response is a political necessity. Only at the centre lies the means to distribute resources between areas. Over and above such issues there will be issues of political priority. Few socialist authorities would decentralise the right to determine policy on equal opportunities. The hard political decision – and it is a proper political decision – is to determine the parameters of decentralisation. Socialism involves political priorities but should encourage choice and diversity within those priorities in the local authority as for the local authority.

The dilemma is that there is a necessity to bureaucracy. It has its own rationale. It is rule-bound to ensure all are treated alike. It is impersonal to ensure fairness. It is hierarchical to ensure the enforcement of political will. Its defects of rigidity, unresponsiveness and remoteness are also its virtues. Bureaucracy cannot be eliminated for the larger scale delivery of services, and few would wish to eliminate all such services. The issue is how and for what services bureaucracy can be modified or even eliminated.

Local authorities are the testing ground for a socialism that can be responsive to changing community needs and problems. The search for new forms of service delivery involves decentralisation but also new styles of governing. Yet centralisation has its logic as does bureaucracy. The hard political choice is to determine the limits of decentralisation as well as to determine the necessities for bureaucracy. Those who do not face that issue will fail. To decentralise all or to destroy all bureaucracy is to attempt the impossible. In the end the problem is to determine the limits both within local government and for local government – but in a way that allows real choice. Choice must not be over-determined.

3. Two Cheers for Decentralisation

Nicholas Deakin

Walsall seems an unlikely location for the New Jerusalem. Yet the local authority's much publicised experiments in decentralisation through its neighbourhood offices continue to attract coachloads of eager seekers after truth, undeterred by the fact that the experiment that they have come to see ground to a halt in 1982, after the local Labour Party lost power to a Conservative-Alliance Coalition. They have come to see the socialist future and proclaim to the world that it works.

There is little doubt that the message has got across. A group of local authorities in London have already drawn up detailed schemes, and there cannot be many Labour parties outside the capital that will not have proposals for decentralisation featured prominently among their manifesto commitments. Yet in the context of the problems that Labour groups in such authorities will have to face if they take or retain control – new and drastic restrictions on the resources available to them and above all the challenge to their autonomy from the centre – decentralisation as a major policy emphasis seems curiously out of scale. Worse, the very real merits of decentralisation are in danger of being obscured by its indiscriminate use as an undefined remedy for all the ills that local government has to face. How has this come about?

At one level, it is clearly to do with symbolism: a ritual proclamation of faith in the gospel of high-principled rejection of centralism, big government and bureaucracy, to which all local politicians must now subscribe. At another, it can be seen as an all too convenient evasion of the major problems facing local authorities and their electorates: "a good way of defusing the tensions caused by the cuts", as Jeremy Laurance cynically puts it (*New Society*, 13 October 1983). But fundamentally, decentralisation is important because it touches a vital nerve in the Labour Party of the 80s: that of attitudes towards power.

Within the Party, the generation of 1968 has completed the long march through institutions. That process has brought to prominence younger socialists who have established themselves by fighting authority – often, what they chose to call the local state. As a result of this experience they are deeply sensitive to suggestions that they might be attracted to power for its own sake; and the alliance that they have struck up on the journey with feminists has made them especially self-conscious about over-dominating styles of government.

Some of these problems can be dealt with by another popular ritual, pummelling your predecessors in power. In local terms, this means the Labour Parties who ran local authorities until five years ago. As the Leader of Islington recently put it, "in the 1960s and 1970s local government became divorced from the people as a sort of big brother" (*Islington Neighbourhood News*, 1984). Nationally, that gigantic straw man, the 'Fabian-social democratic consensus', fulfils much the same scapegoat function. But having accepted power and begun to use it to introduce new policies that will signal a complete break with the 'pseudo-socialism' of the past, some further rationalisation for its exercise is

urgently needed. The characteristic solution has been to find ways of sharing power: to pass it along or even in some instances to relinquish it entirely. Michael Ward, the Chair of the GLC's Industry and Employment Committee, has recently observed that: "elected power is not an end in itself but a resource to be shared with other groups and movements and used in alliance with them to achieve social change" (*New Statesman* 13 January 1984). Decentralisation fits perfectly into this strategy.

This delicacy (or perhaps prudery) about the contaminating effects of power continues to surprise and disconcert some older socialists, to whom the socialist enterprise consists of the conquest of power and its exercise. This appeal to tradition can of course be countered by demonstrating that the libertarian and decentralising tradition is also part of the Party's inheritance – the shade of William Morris is never far away in such debates. While it is true that there are some excellent socialist precedents for mistrust of centralised power, the form that present proposals have taken owes as much to sources outside the movement altogether – in particular the concepts and vocabulary of the embryo British Green movement that never really was: alternative lifestyles based on concern for the natural environment and respect for the human scale secured by deliberate turning away from economic growth. That movement never made much direct political impact, but its legacy of mistrust of institutions and association between scale and degrees of virtue ("small is beautiful") has remained a permanent item in the intellectual baggage of a generation.

A second influence was the populism of the American Poverty Programme with its rhetorical assertion that power belongs to the people, and in particular the Federal Government's attempts to mobilise neighbourhood organisations in direct opposition to city and state governments. Accounts of these experiments – floating across the Atlantic and arriving half soggy, in A.H. Halsey's phrase – helped in turn to set in motion a third set of initiatives, this time within the structure of government itself. Attempts to devise methods of securing greater public involvement in the planning process preoccupied a large number of people inside and outside government from the end of the sixties. Earnest young planners sought in the Skeffington Report the means that would enable their authority to scale the ladder devised by Sherry Arnstein, whose rungs led, like Jacob's, from earth-bound consultation to heavenly citizen participation. A harder edged approach was adopted by the Community Development Projects sponsored by the Home Office, whose teams rapidly moved away from their sponsors' original brief and developed a combative style of community action. Another variant of the neighbourhood approach was incorporated into the managerial institutions that were introduced into local government through the Heath Government's reforms of the early seventies. But the measures taken to promote area management within a corporate framework were widely denounced as wasteful and irrelevant, not least by critics on the Left like Cynthia Cockburn (in her widely quoted polemic, *The Local State*). They withered in the blight that fell on local government as the seventies progressed – just some of the toys that had to be packed up when the party was over. Meanwhile, the Home Office, in collusion with some of the local authorities concerned, had brought the CDP experiments to an abrupt halt.

Now decentralisation has brought that whole confused and acrimonious debate back to life, but in a new form. Within the Party it has been sponsored principally from the Left, to whom it appears particularly congenial. "The Democratic Left", Tony Benn says, "would want to emphasise self management and the decentralisation of initiative and control to protect us from the abuses of central power" (Preface to R. H. Tawney's *The Attack*, 1981 edition). But the appeal of decentralisation is not just to the Left and

indeed not only to the Labour Party.

Political attitudes are clearly part of the reason for decentralisation's sudden popularity and it is important to understand why this has happened. But if the Labour Party is to make something positive of it there is also a need to locate the substance behind the rhetoric. This in turn suggests questions that urgently need answering. To be specific: are there particular features of a decentralised system that make it distinctively socialist? What exactly are the objectives that decentralisation schemes can secure; and how can they be attained?

Decentralisation as Socialism?

To answer the first question simply by asserting that the outcome of any system of decentralisation is socialist by definition is demonstrably wrong. Whatever their other virtues or defects, decentralised systems of administration are politically neutral.

Some schemes are non-political by design: that is, they are devices for devolving power within the existing bureaucratic structures. As such, they may result in some redistribution of responsibilities from senior to junior staff; but the relationship between the institutions in which they work and the public that they serve are not likely to be modified in any fundamental way. Other schemes are ostensibly concerned to expand the charmed circle by devolving some share of power to citizens, either as individuals or groups. Decentralisation in this form, if properly undertaken, will make additional resources available to the local community concerned; but the extent of the gain will depend upon the way in which the authority chooses to share power over these resources. One key test is the extent to which local organisations are entrusted with a budget over which they can exercise independent control. Unless substantial discretion of this kind is provided for, the probability is that the overall distribution of power between the authority and local citizens will be left largely undisturbed. In such schemes, the issue of the distribution of scarce resources between different localities within a single authority is also left unresolved.

A third alternative is more thorough going. It seeks to establish an alternative focus of power outside the existing formal structure of government. The local organisations involved may be either spontaneous growths or promoted by an outside agency. Such an approach is intended to give the locality an independent status and bargaining capacity. But even the third form is not by definition socialist. There are a whole range of examples of local institutions, from the American South to Ulster, that have provided rallying points for reaction, clothed in a language of populism.

What is true of wholly independent forms of decentralisation is equally the case with the more dependent versions, if not more so. In this connection, the social services example is instructive. As Robert Pinker reminded his colleagues on the Barclay Inquiry into the future of social work (*Social Workers: their role and task*), the Poor Law was an outstanding example of a locally organised and controlled social service. The 'patch' system which the Barclay Committee (Professor Pinker dissenting) has endorsed is the latest attempt to apply the principles of administrative decentralisation. This system is based on the community as a geographical unit and designed to reinforce current moves towards care within the community: it is presented by the Barclay Committee largely in terms of the status and morale of the social work staff operating the system, but does have the additional merit of providing an easier point of access for the client. However, it can also be criticised for providing the means for exploiting them. Two particularly vociferous critics, Peter Beresford and Suzy Croft, have recently commented that "it is disturbing that patch with its liberal and even radical rhetoric proceeds apace with more and more authorities 'going local' and more

and more progressive publicity attached to it, at the same time as there is a voluminous and growing literature mainly from feminists evidencing and analysing the ways in which present proposals for such a community social work and 'community care' approach appear to be injurious to equal rights and opportunities for women. Patch's progressive reputation is living on borrowed time." (*Community Care*, 26 January 1984)

This is not to deny that decentralisation can be used by socialists as a means of resisting the introduction of changes of which they do not approve. This may be merely a matter of asserting local priorities against national ones – the case that is being strenuously argued in the rate-capping debate. But local preferences can equally be used to resist the imposition of socialist reforms from the centre. It is only necessary to compare the recent debate with the stand taken by Conservative-controlled Tameside in the last stages of the Callaghan Government to see that localism pure and simple wears no party label.

There is an alternative – and more precise – argument that decentralised services based on locally expressed preferences are a way of capturing local support for measures designed to make local authorities more accountable. The most relevant illustration here is the popularity of the Walsall experiments, which frustrated the declared intentions of Labour's opponents to dismantle the scheme on gaining power. But equally the fact of their continuation under the Conservative-Alliance administration could be taken as an illustration of their compatability with a variety of political perspectives. Thus, the then Secretary of State for Social Services, Patrick Jenkin, before he departed to knee-cap local government, enthusiastically endorsed the principle behind the patch proposals; and Dr. Owen has declared that his Party's policies should henceforth be saturated with the principle of decentralisation.

Some of the most enthusiastic advocates of decentralisation in the Labour Party see it as a device for constructing a coalition of progressive forces, built from the ground up. The most strenuous recent advocate of this view has been Peter Hain; however, the credibility of his advocacy of this approach as an explicitly socialist device is a trifle tarnished by the fact that he employed virtually identical arguments in his days as an active Liberal, promoting 'community politics' as a device for seizing local power for his Party (his 1975 book *Radical Regeneration* offers the intriguing scenario of a community-based Liberal Party pushing a Marxist-tinged Labour Party on to the fringes of British politics).

Perhaps more important, it is far from clear that the interests of the community groups that Hain identifies as partners in his rainbow coalition and those of the Labour Party are necessarily always coincidental. The objectives that these groups exist to serve, important though they are, are not necessarily in themselves socialist. The unspoken assumption is that they will at least be radical: but on occasion the demands of some ethnic and neighbourhood groups have been in certain senses of the term conservative. Nor, it must be added, given the current level of ethnic participation in elections, is such a coalition necessarily a prescription for electoral success. Even London is not yet New York City. In these circumstances, decentralisation as a device for providing essential electoral leverage for the Labour Party is unlikely to be very effective. A Labour Party of minorities would risk remaining a minority Labour Party.

If the general objective of decentralising either in the wider sense of devolving both delivery and services and control over them to the neighbourhood, or in the narrow organisational definition, cannot be said to be explicitly socialist, are there other ends that it can serve that are worth supporting on general grounds? Two possibilities suggest themselves. Decentralised schemes may be more *democratic* in the sense of allowing citizens either individually or through membership

of groups a larger share in the control of local services. Control in this sense could also include identification of objectives that these services should be designed to meet. As part of that process, decentralisation may also enhance the vitality and internal cohesion of the *communities* to which the services are made accountable. This might be desirable both as an end in itself and also as a means of helping such communities – especially deprived inner city ones – to cope with the additional problems now being generated by economic recession.

Decentralisation and Local Citizen Control

Organisational decentralisation within bureaucracies is not likely to be sufficient in itself to meet either of the goals of democratisation and enhancement of community, though it may be a necessary precondition to securing them. If these goals are to be achieved, to what level should power be devolved and to whom should it be entrusted?

Again there is a simple answer and again it risks misleading. The neighbourhood is identified as the focus for new initiatives and the community as the recipients of their benefits. But both concepts are elusive. As the research sponsored by the Maud Commission showed, most people can provide an adequate definition of the neighbourhood that they inhabit. But there is not necessarily common agreement on the size and boundaries of that neighbourhood. For a small child or an old person the limits are determined by their own physical mobility. The variety of groups and voluntary organisations that help to define the existence of a neighbourhood will do so in terms of their own membership or specific interest. But the neighbourhood, however defined, does not necessarily command its inhabitants' primary loyalties. As citizens, most people have a variety of cross-cutting allegiances, some to locality, some explicitly to neighbours or friends, some to relations, some to peer groups, some to ethnic or gender groupings, others deriving from occupation or workplace. These allegiances coexist and assume different levels of importance at different times.

Because decentralisation is by its nature a geographically determined policy linked to a specific locality or institution it cannot cater for all these loyalties. The best that can be done, especially in a densely populated urban area, is to devise some form of representation that will reflect the complexity of these different ties.

The early experiments in democratic self management for local communities in the United States simply assumed that direct election of a representative body could resolve these problems. The goal of "maximum feasible participation of residents of the areas and members of the groups served" was written into the legislation with this intention: but the derisory turnouts in the 'poverty elections' did a great deal to discredit the notion of popular democracy through direct election (D. P. Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*). Experience in Britain has been very similar, though it has taken less extreme forms. The standard British form of citizen involvement has been through the public meeting – usually ill-attended, acrimonious and fatally lacking in continuity. Its manifest weaknesses as a device have led to pressures for neighbourhood councils to provide continuity and focus. Such councils exist; but only rarely have direct elections been employed to establish their legitimacy. Where they have, a problem that has emerged is that the successful election of a neighbourhood council may be construed as undercutting the authority of the local councillor. The extent to which this poses difficulties in practice depends on the powers and responsibilities vested in the councils: but the coexistence of two separate mandates makes for uneasy bedfellows.

The major alternative that has emerged during the current phase of renewed activity is the representation of the community through the involvement of 'community

groups'. It is characteristic of our culture that in almost any area, however sparsely populated, a multiplicity of such groups will exist, performing a variety of functions and defining their membership in different ways, with a life-span ranging from a few days to years. Despite what might seem to the administrator's eye an endemic untidiness, these community groups offer a real opportunity of securing direct involvement of local people. By listing and categorising all the different local groups, a diligent local authority can usually identify a sufficiently wide spectrum of organisations to cover most interests in a locality.

The principal device that has been used to mobilise a community view based on local groups has been to call them together as a forum in which the initial claims of all groups to representative status are accepted as valid. This process customarily involves an open meeting as a device for identifying a common set of issues and views on them, and then builds on the conclusions of the meeting to involve the community in the policy making processes. Continuity is then secured by electing representatives from the forum in a form of indirect democracy. In some models, certain groups (blacks or women) are seen to have special constituencies to represent that must be catered for under a different umbrella from other local organisations.

Even with the addition of some form of electoral process the status of the forum is still unclear: how far are the groups that take part in the process and provide the legitimacy for its operation representative? This often leads to some form of culling by local authorities. One form that this process takes is to confine representation to 'user groups' – defined by direct relationship to the services that are to be made accountable. More specifically, some Labour controlled local authorities will want to be highly selective about the type of group permitted to have representation – thus, one Labour group's blueprint refers to 'city council recognised residents, tenants and community groups'. Generally, such authorities will be inclined to favour the involvement of tenants groups, trades councils and gender and race based organisations and discourage that of amenity groups, leisure organisations, consumer bodies and ratepayer organisations. Some authorities will want to go still further and draw distinctions among elected officers even within approved groups: thus, Communist Party tenant leaders can be accepted; National Front ones are not.

Another form of check on community representation is the limitation of decentralisation proposals to certain specific areas within an authority. The argument here is that since decentralisation is to do with steering resources to areas in need, singling out poorer areas is justified as part of a general strategy to equalise resource distribution. But the effect may be not only to exclude those living in more prosperous parts of the authority (who may in practice be better able to cope with some of the organisational issues that arise) but to place the minority of poor people living in those areas at a particular disadvantage.

In some cases, the motivation behind the narrowing of the basis of selection is clearly the promotion of the Labour Party's immediate political objectives by an alternative route. Cross membership between local voluntary bodies and the local Party is common now in many inner city areas. The result is sometimes closer to farce than democracy: a stage army whose cast is in the final stages of meeting addiction engages in sham manouevres that are passed off as negotiation between the statutory and voluntary sectors.

An alternative and simpler means of dealing with the problem of representation is to treat the issues of democratic control explicitly as an extension of the political process. The equation between the community as a social and as a political entity becomes complete since the local Labour Party is treated as synonomous with the community. By this device it is possible to provide a clear cut and easily

understood means of bringing local institutions under 'community control'. The local Labour councillor is the community representative; the source of policy advice on community needs is the local Labour Party – its base broadened by extension into workplace branches and women's councils. Additional contributions can be secured (if this is thought necessary) by involving local trade union branches or trades councils or through cooptions on its local government committees. This is explicitly the approach adopted in Sheffield and promoted by David Blunkett and Geoff Green in their recent Fabian pamphlet (*Building from the Bottom*, Fabian Tract 491, 1983).

But the claim is to various degrees false or at best highly oversimplified. Local Labour Parties in many urban areas are now wholly untypical of the communities within which they are located. The takeover by young middle-class activists, especially in London, has left a wide gap between the electorate and their representatives. This, rather than the disgraceful treatment of Peter Tatchell by the media, is the real moral of the Bermondsey story. And the gap is not best bridged by playing the ancient ludicrous game of prolier than thou. Suggesting through clothes, accent and vocabulary that one's class origins are other than they are is equally absurd whether coming from a Prime Minister or a local Labour Party activist.

But even if local Labour Parties were broadly representative in terms of class, age, sex or race there would still be a problem. A democratic system is one which admits the possibility of change. So any system that is introduced must be sufficiently widely acceptable to survive a change of regime, as the Walsall scheme has done. This in turn means that the institution and the devices that support it must allow for the play of all shades of opinion – and indeed of none. The Apathetic Tendency has rights too: as Crosland rightly observed, "the fact is that the majority will continue to prefer to lead a full family life and cultivate their gardens" ("Socialists in a Dangerous World", in *Socialism Now*). The interests of those who decide on strictly rational grounds that the likely return on the investment of their time is insufficient to justify participating, or that the means adopted for participation are overstructured and excluding, should not in consequence be passed over.

Hence if the outcome of decentralising is to reinforce socialism it can only be because the policies that are being pursued through those means are accepted by those that they are devised to serve – not because an artificially created coalition of selected local groups views them as serving their particular interests. Decentralisation, in other words, should be primarily about policy content, not structures.

Securing Socialist Outcomes

If it is accepted that decentralisation schemes in themselves are not socialist and only in certain circumstances democratic or supportive of comunities, can they nevertheless be seen as means by which socialist policies are translated into action?

Here the difficulty is that introducing decentralised systems poses a number of practical problems, which are likely to restrict the scope for introduction of specifically socialist measures. In the first instance, it is surprisingly often overlooked that only some of the relevant services fall under local democratic control and are therefore accessible to change through schemes introduced by Labour controlled local authorities. The boundaries of the local state have been arbitrarily determined over time by an accretion of policy decisions taken by governments of all political colours. As a result, there is little coherent logic in the division of services between central or local government. Responsibility for public utilities, the health service or what was once called the 'public assistance' function have all at some stage fallen, in whole or in part, to local authorities. None are now locally controlled,

but all are directly relevant to the objectives of decentralisation. As a result, these objectives – accessibility, accountability and co-ordination – are compromised by the existence of institutional boundaries that threaten attempts to bring a 'bottom up' client oriented perspective to bear on service delivery.

The functions that do fall to local government make up an untidy bundle, not all elements of which are readily adaptable to a system of administrative devolution. Early experiments have quite naturally tended to concentrate on those that do lend themselves to this approach. Social services has been one key area of experiment; housing management another. The process of preparing for the implementation of schemes has exposed a number of issues affecting the different service areas, singly or collectively.

The first is the question of the impact of professionalism and in particular problems involved in collaboration between professional groups and in sharing power with community groups. One practical issue in the case of experiments, like Walsall's, involving social services and housing has been the presence of specialised functions in one service area and their (relative) absence in the other. This means in practice that the local office can exercise reasonably comprehensive control over service delivery in one area, but remains partly dependent on the centre or an intermediate tier on the other. These organisational problems complicate an already complex situation by diffusing responsibility. Given that the two professional groups concerned are among the weakest of the local government professions (not a coincidence, some would argue), this can produce a recipe for division and conflict among the professional staff servicing local offices.

But the most important goal identified in most decentralisation schemes so far is the sharing of power and authority by the professional with the client. Clearly, one important source of power is access to information; and here the role of the New Technology has been seen as particularly important. By giving clients instant access through computer terminals in the neighbourhood offices to information held centrally, decisions on rate rebates or allocations can be taken at the point of contact on the basis of facts known to both officer and client. More efficient delivery of the service in this way promotes what advocates of the system have taken to calling the 'McDonald's effect' – swift and effective action on demand. The new technology also serves other purposes: by giving clients information on benefits it helps to underpin welfare rights initiatives taken through the local office. More broadly, this wider dissemination of information provides the foundations both for decentralisation itself and other activities – community development, for example – that some authorities see as essential to the success of the decentralisation strategy.

In the pursuit of community development the location as well as the functions of the neighbourhood office is a key issue. Apart from housing management, there are other local government services that fit reasonably clearly within an organisational format based on the neighbourhood unit and accountability to local people through a strategically located centre. But there are other cases where the natural focus for community involvement lies in the institution – education would be one obvious example. Here, there is a long history of debate around the theme of accountability and the specific issue of political appointment of school governors and managers. It is an interesting reflection of the extent to which the debate has been dominated by the schemes devised by Inner London boroughs that despite the heat generated by the issue of parental involvement in the running of schools, education (not a borough responsibility there) has not yet figured predominantly in the current decentralisation debate. Yet schools as a neighbourhood resource and the broader questions of the service that education provides for a locality are – or should be – crucial to a systematic process of

community-based decentralisation.

Another area of activity that involves resources that could come under more direct community control is that of leisure services – libraries, parks, recreation centres – and here some of the same considerations apply as in education. An intermediate group of activities provides opportunities for different management styles: technical and environmental services (street cleaning, refuse disposal). But this is also a service area where another approach is on offer: these services are regarded by Conservative local authorities as prime candidates for privatisation, which is presented by its proponents as an alternative and superior means of securing consumer control, accountability and value for money. Decentralisation within the public sector in this area has to be sufficiently effective and responsive to consumer demand to provide hard evidence to refute these arguments.

A range of functions within local government is unlikely to fit effectively within any straightforward model of decentralised service delivery. In some cases, this is a question of scale. Economic development, the newest of all local authority activities, has proved most successful when conducted at regional level by top-tier authorities. Within major conurbations, there is only limited scope for separate initiatives by individual boroughs or districts – the amount of leverage that can be exerted on the economy within their geographical boundaries is generally too limited to achieve any substantial change. However, there is a strong case for demonstration projects and experiments; and some of these (especially co-operative initiatives) may originate at local level and involve local voluntary organisations, along the lines indicated by David Donnison in his recent Fabian pamphlet, *Urban Policies: a New Approach* (Fabian Tract 487, 1983)

There remain those activities which are grouped together at the centre, around the central core of the Chief Executive and his department. Decentralisation may strengthen the role of the Chief Executive, by placing a premium on coordination and negotiation between departments, service committees and their Chairs. The tensions between centre and periphery which are certain to arise in any system that devolves even a modicum of power are likely to have to be mediated through the Leader and the Chief Executive. The remaining central functions are likely to include finance, legal services, valuation and perhaps planning and architecture. In terms of local government professionalism these are the main baronial strongholds; it would not be easy to persuade their chief officers or professional staff that decentralisation to neighbourhood level is in their interests. Yet some form of modification of structural relationships that ensures that these services are accessible to the new decentralised institutions when required is essential.

Clearly, the type of political lead provided is the critical element in determining how far decentralisation is pervasive, affecting the whole structure and management of the authority, and how far it is a marginal extra activity. At political level, too, decentralisation is likely to have the paradoxical effect of increasing the power of the Leader, at the centre, at the expense of the service committee Chairs, in particular. New styles of operating, and in particular a new approach to budgeting and consequential resource distribution, are going to be required.

Those authorities introducing decentralisaton schemes, even of the most ambitious variety, will have to reconcile themselves to a degree of unevenness in the extent and distribution of service decentralisation among the functions for which they are responsible. The administrative consequences of the relationships that will be created within the authority as a result of this process will require very careful handling. So, too, will the relationship with the public sector unions and in particular NALGO, which has already expressed strong reservations about the

implications of decentralisation proposals in several authorities. Given the general rise in militancy in the public sector over the last decade and the willingness of NALGO, with its unusually wide spread of membership among the local government grades, to take on management over a wide range of issues, this is clearly another area that the prudent Labour group will approach with caution.

Assessing the Success of Decentralisation

Even a brief sketch demonstrates the complexity of the practical problems that any authority introducing decentralisation schemes has to face. Nevertheless, their advocates claim that there is already evidence that schemes that have been introduced within these limitations can be directly helpful in terms of the acid test – making local authorities better at meeting the needs of local populations.

There are three principal ways in which this test can be satisfied. First, decentralisation can provide existing services more efficiently and more sensitively – for example, by cutting out overlap, improving co-ordination, increasing accessibility for clients. Second, decentralisation can open up new ways of delivering the services, facilitating self help and securing the involvement of voluntary organisations. In principle, decentralised services should also be quicker at identifying new needs and ways of meeting them than traditional services operated on a 'top down' basis. Finally, decentralisation can change the status of services locally by increasing the community's sense of involvement and making the process of service delivery visible to them – 'transparent', in Rudolf Klein's phrase. Ideally, this should also break through the barriers between professions and between professionals and public, and (in a more ambitious version) could provide the basis for a popular planning process.

Some optimists would even be prepared to add a fourth claim: that the process is likely to be more rational in its use of resources. By encouraging flexibility in their deployment, and dispensing with some middle managers and intermediate tiers of administration, it may even be cost-free. Moreover, local committees entrusted with taking resource decisions in these circumstances will, it is suggested, be more prudent in determining their priorities, since they will be spending money that is their own, and seen as such.

Probably the least convincing of all these arguments is the one that decentralisation can be introduced at little or no extra cost. In the Walsall case, the expenditure involved in making provisions for setting up, equipping and general support of neighbourhood facilities has been described by the Director of Housing as 'astronomical' (*New Society*, 13 October 1983). By general consent, local control of resources through sums allocated as budgets for expenditure by neighbourhood organisations is almost certain to result in some duplication of provision. Some of the other presumed benefits are also at least open to question. Accessibility to clients may well increase dramatically; but only for those services that are fully decentralised. Specialist services may actually become more difficult to locate and use. The extent of responsiveness to existing and newly emerging needs will depend on the quality and attitudes of the staff: even the new technology may turn into a device for evading rather than promoting involvement. Duplication and lack of coordination may be created by going local as well as resolved: the risk of overlap with authority-wide services and those provided by other agencies may well increase. If inter-professional and inter-service rivalries can be lessened by joint working at local levels they may be replaced by inter-area competition for funding, competition for access to decision takers and manipulation of evidence to make special cases. 'Deprofessionalisation' may be seen by staff as deskilling – misuse or non-use of the qualifications that they have struggled to acquire. Staff

involved in local schemes may also feel concern for their future careers if they are required to identify themselves too closely with a programme with explicitly political objectives (as in the Sheffield case), and may also come under pressure to identify themselves more closely with the neighbourhood in which they are working by living there – not necessarily always a welcome prospect. Union anxiety about local authorities' 'real' intentions has already emerged as a factor in one or two situations; the implication that management are attempting through decentralisation either to divide and rule, or to introduce cuts by the back door, has proved difficult to refute. Finally, voluntary groups have legitimate anxieties about the interests of those bodies that represent borough or district wide groups and activities and how they can be fitted into decentralisation schemes.

Limits to Decentralisation

Because the evidence is still so skimpy, the conclusion that can be drawn from it must necessarily be tentative. Until all the returns are in, the enthusiasm of the advocates of decentralisation should be tempered with the recognition not just that as an end but as a means to other broader policy goals, decentralisation has a number of deficiencies that are imperfectly concealed by the essentially populist rhetoric with which it has been presented. The clearer sighted among these advocates recognise these deficiencies and accept them, but they are in a minority: wholesale decentralisation is still being portrayed as the royal road to achieving socialism in one authority. To those who are still hesitating three essential qualifications are commended:

First, it is important to recognise that there are certain major objectives that can only be met by action based on decisions taken centrally. Proposals for fundamental change based on the key socialist theme of equality are a prime example: an obvious instance at the local government level would be reorganisation of the system of secondary education. Policy making on these major issues should not be a closed or a stationary process: the concept of the non-negotiable mandate commitment has mercifully begun to fall into well-deserved disrepute. In its place, devising means of consultation and even involvement in decision taking has come to be recognised as an essential part of policy development. But ultimately differences on issues of principle are likely to prove irreconcilable, especially if they are sharpened by pressures generated by shortage of resources. In these circumstances, effective government means taking decisions, and taking responsibility for them.

Second, the time is now long overdue to recognise the merits of bureaucracy. We need to be very careful about subscribing to some of the criticism of the bureaucrat and his activities that is now being heard. Some of the populist rhetoric now being produced by the Left on this theme is indistinguishable from that of the Right before 1979 – and equally shallow. Bureaucracy as a device for achieving equity by sustaining common standards, providing a framework of support and above all maintaining fairness in resource allocation has virtues that cannot be secured in any other way. Recognising the validity of some of the criticisms of past practice in the delivery of welfare is one thing: promoting loss of confidence in bureaucracy generally is quite another. David Donnison's reminder on who profits from this process is salutary: "those on the far Right and the far Left who are hostile to the State as such may pull down the institutions around which humane and unifying loyalties can be mobilised – loyalties we destroy at our peril" (*Urban Policies: a New Approach*, Fabian Tract 487, 1983).

Third, we should recognise that all the arguments on the issue of scale do not

point in the same direction. The economists' case for larger units has had a good airing; but there are social and political arguments for them as well. It is not for nothing that the stifling intolerance that small communities can exhibit is a constant motif in twentieth century literature – autobiographies, novels, even operas. Small organisations are often prone to fall under the tyranny of minorities, for the simple arithmetical reason that small groups find it easier to secure and retain control in such circumstances. Such tyrants come in many shapes and forms; but they are no more admirable if they are peddling what has aptly been called the 'unofficial lefty checklist'. Many of the items in this list are not socialist in any sensible definition of the term, nor are they particularly related to the experience of people in contemporary urban communities except in a very broad and general sense. Yet experience suggests that in some areas access to the decision taking process may well be blocked without the essential act of obeisance to them.

Conclusions

A Labour local authority elected in the next year or two will need to be very clear about its objectives if it is to achieve positive results from 'going local'. It is hardly helpful that the alternatives to wholesale decentralisation are not so beguilingly simple. Nevertheless, I conclude by trying to state them in as simple a form as the complexities permit.

It remains the prime task of local Labour parties to seek, obtain and use power. The overriding priority for which it should be used it is the promotion of equality. In the absence of a Labour government for most of the eighties the broader task of promoting equality between areas and social classes at a national level, persuasively argued by Raymond Plant in his recent Fabian pamphlet (*Equality, Markets and the State*, Fabian Tract 494, 1984), will have to wait. But it is still possible for local authorities to assert the importance of equal life chances for all – positive discrimination not just in favour of poorer areas but poorer citizens. If decentralisation can be introduced in such a style that this goal can be served, that is all to the good. But if it proves to be merely a device by which better organised poor areas remove marginal resources from worse organised ones, then it is not. Generally, the most desirable outcome is a pattern in which policy goals are set and broad resource allocation decisions taken at the centre, and some form of control over service delivery devolved to the localities with resources attached. This process should involve the recognition of the claims of voluntary organisations to be involved on their own terms – that means organisations of all kinds and not merely those identified as appropriate by local authorities. Throughout this process, it is very important to retain a sense of continuous development and not aim for an end state, especially at a point when we still have such a great deal to learn. (The authors of the Hackney and Islington schemes have a justified grievance in that judgements are being passed on their experiments before they have even been introduced).

Inevitably, even in the Sheffields, the political pendulum will swing – if not between parties then within them. The urban working class may once again come to play a significant part in local Labour politics: odder things have happened. When these changes occur, for whatever reason, the innovations of the middle eighties will come under scrutiny and those that do not address real needs will be scrapped, and rightly so. Today's institutional innovation is often tomorrow's fossil.

The new decentralisation proposals are welcome because they have revived a stale debate with a blast of fresh air, and because they hold out the promise of opportunities that can be grasped – to shift our system of government permanently in the direction of more openness, more accountability, and more involvement. The risk is that exaggerated claims and the

distortion of objectives will place too much weight upon them and they will founder. If they do join the scrapheap of discarded fashions, the coach trips to Walsall will cease and local people will remember decentralisation only as yet another way in which 'they' tried to impose their will on 'us'.

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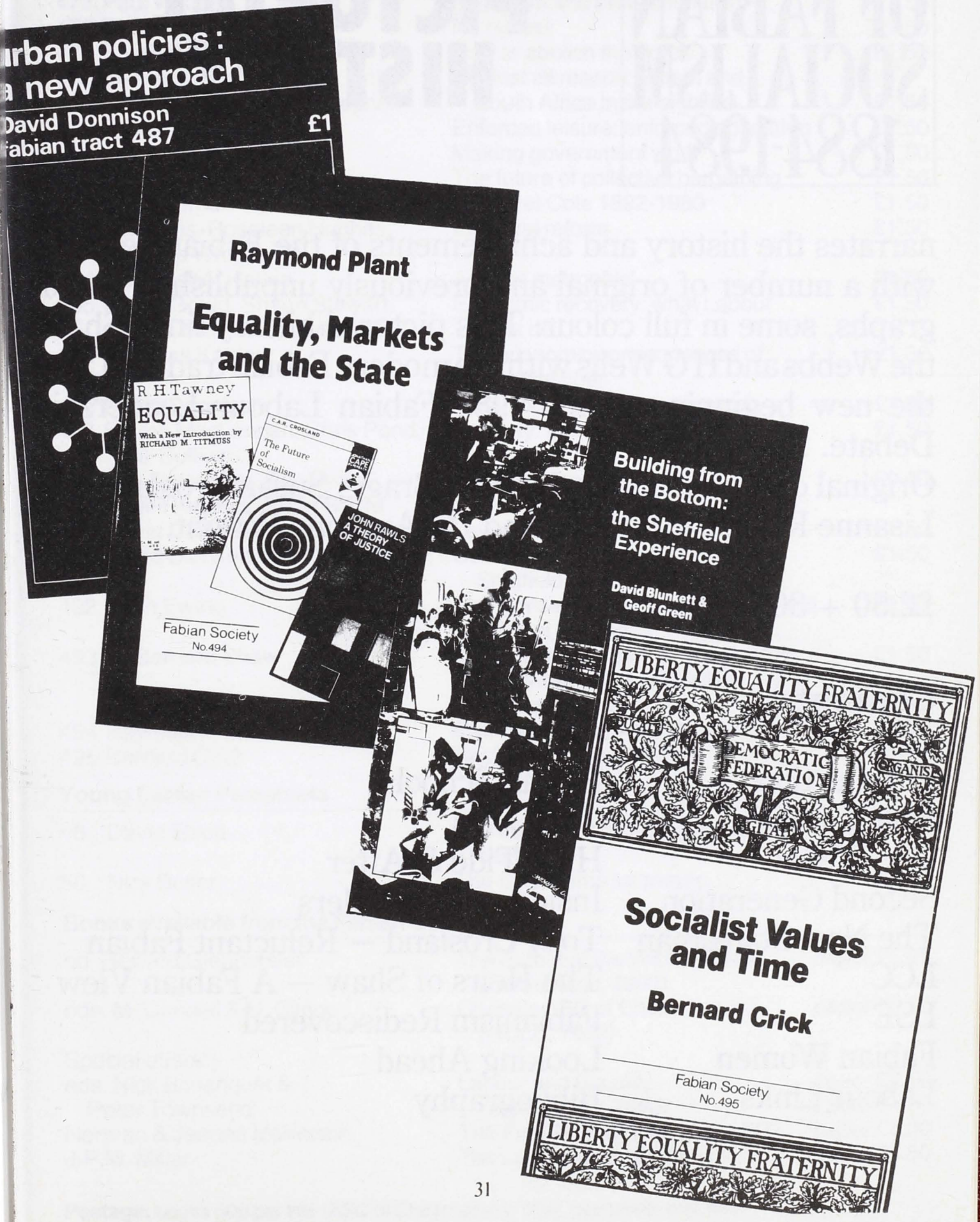
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