

LOCAL DEMOCRACY - GOING BEYOND THE BALLOT BOX, 26.4.17

**Maggie Chapman Co-Convenor of the Scottish Greens and Brian Robertson, City of
Edinburgh UNITE**

The Organising Meeting decided that this assembly should look beyond the forthcoming local elections and examine meaningful local democracy. Maggie Chapman Co-Convenor of the Scottish Greens and Brian Robertson, City of Edinburgh UNITE were the two invited speakers.

1. Maggie Chapman

Democracy is about more than elections. Politics needs to be embedded into the everyday, so we have power over our daily lives. We need to have control of resources for our community.

We live in a sham democracy. Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU, but there has been no engagement from May.

We were told in the Independence referendum that voting No was a condition for remaining in the EU.

1 million people marched against a war in Iraq, yet war was started using the lie of Iraq having weapons of mass destruction.

Westminster is not democratic. The forthcoming general election is being conducted in defiance of the Fixed Parliamentary Terms Act, and purely for Tory party convenience. It is not about power for the people, but power over the people.

The cuts to services have led to the alienation of communities.

Cuts have led to false economies. Cutting meals on wheels leads to more people needing to use medical services including hospitals.

Westminster and Holyrood both see centralisation as the same as collective action. This is true of both Right and Left.

The rights to appeal in planning decisions are lopsided favouring businesses, not communities.

Lesley Riddoch has pointed out that the UK has the least local democracy in western Europe.

Collective decisions have to be taken at the appropriate level. Combatting climate change can not be done effectively at the local level.

We need to move away from arms spending and fossil fuels including fracking.

We need to examine the different levels of government, and also increase access for women, people of colour and LGBT communities.

Yet, where local communities have gained greater power, such as the Isle of Eigg, they have gone from strength to strength, bringing local job security and community solidarity.

We need to see participatory democracy, including over budgeting, planning, education and health.

We need citizens' assemblies, housing and consumer cooperatives.

New technologies, e.g. IT, can increase the scope for decision making online. The process can also be used to increase transparency and greater accountability.

2. Brian Robertson

There are different ways to actively participate in the democratic process, other than voting.

Anyone can go to a local council meeting provided they give a day's notice. People can speak to a council meeting for 10 minutes.

There are also petitions to parliament, Most recently Holyrood has received petitions against Brexit and an official Trump visit.

You can also make a Freedom of Information request. I have made use of this as part of the Council Debt Campaign.

Leith Neighbourhood Partnership asked for community participation in deciding how to spend £10,000. They decided to have a swing park and improve the local graveyard.

The big problem facing local councils is funding. The City of Edinburgh Council is responsible for education, social work, council housing, roads and lighting, rubbish collection, environmental health, local planning and licensing.

In 2008 the council spent £963M. In 2016 £936M was spent. If you add the cost of inflation this amounts to about a 10% cut.

Council taxes only account for about 18-20% of funding. The Scottish government is responsible for the rest, Business rates are also collected by the Scottish government and redistributed to local councils.

However, the third highest item of expenditure after education and social work is paying off interest. A good deal of this consists of payments to the Public Works Loans Board, under the control of the Treasury. Punitive interest rates were set when interest rates were much higher than today.

There is also a new Programme of Transformation. This is all about making cuts. There have been 1300 voluntary severances and there are planned reductions for example in janitors and school cleaners.

Although union resistance can prevent certain cuts, these are displaced on to weaker sections. There is a need for more united action.

Questions and Answers

Allan asked if another problem was the role of senior council officials. They seemed to make the real decisions, which the councillors were meant to rubber stamp. These officials were highly paid, enjoyed similar lifestyles to the business owner and managers they met socially. They had no direct experience of the communities they were often trying to impose their decisions on.

Maggie said that this was a problem, and there were councillors all too ready to do the senior officers bidding. New administrations could be more of a pushover. However, councillors could make a difference, if they provided alternative scientific evidence.

Callum also argued that another problem was the role given to consultant accounting firms like Price Waterhouse Cooper, which were taking an increasingly large cut for their services, and also directly intervening in making recommendations which favoured a business orientated approach to the provision of council services.

Luke asked how willing councillors were to consult trade unions. Labour controlled Clackmannan Council just ignored trade unions.

Maggie said that the SNP had a better record than Labour.

Willie argued that we don't have a real voice on the council. Councillors are now managers, back in 1984 we had some real influence over a left labour led council. There were 44 tenants associations and council chamber occupations.

Today there is no generalised fight back. We fight cut by cut. Even when trying to campaign over a community centre, we face three different managements. Redundancies and worsening conditions had a direct affect on the quality of services.

Today activists need to be political fighters.

Callum pointed to some positive examples. He worked in community education. They had started the Democracy Project to get school students involved at the time of the IndyRef1. Youth Forums had been set up and hustings organised. Students had been involved in poster making and writing songs. A Scotland Event had been organised in which the students became highly involved.

School students had also been given a direct say in how money should be spent, they had come up with improved music provision and spending on special schools.

The Napier Partnership had also given £3000 for young people to decide on how to spend.

The Scottish Youth Parliament is another example, but it costs money to run.

One problem in schools is the impact of the National 4s and 5s and the Curriculum for Excellence, which with its constant testing, puts massive pressure on extra curricular activity. Teachers feel they don't have the time to set aside for extra-curricular activity anymore.

He argued that it was possible to resist cuts if you did the research and were able to counter the arguments of the councillors,

Angus pointed out that the proposed new increase in council tax (after the prolonged freeze) didn't amount to a 3% increase in spending, because council taxes only accounted for 20% of local government spending.

He suggested that direct income tax should be reduced so that local councils could raise most of their own spending, and that there should be local council control of business taxes.

Maggie pointed out that in France 84% of local funding was raised locally, whilst in Germany 73% was raised locally, compared to 20% in the UK. Responsibility for local funding was necessary to build community power.

Brian agreed that because of the low proportion of money raised locally, cuts had a huge effect on the provision of local services.

He also suggested that a Citizens Debt Audit should be organised and then an alternative budget.

He liked the idea of working in and against the state, as well as using the methods of Paulo Freire from Community Education to get more effective participation.

Discussion

The meeting divided into 2 groups, Here are the main things raised in these groups.

Group 1.

- * Open different spaces for dialogue, e.g. students on school boards
- * Democracy works better when there is money. If there is no money then 'democracy' is about making cuts.
- * People don't vote if they don't think it will make a difference.
- * What are we aiming to change? Saving a local bus route versus establishing local democracy
- * Local authorities could get involved and active by providing services again, e.g. the provision of heat and power
- * Support for all social movements is essential
- * Redistribution of wealth is a national issue
- * How do we educate? - It's about doing not learning principles
- * Active participation leads to longer term engagement
- * How do we get people to feel they can make a difference?
- * It is important to protect social centres - libraries, community centres, schools and to keep the cost of hiring venues down

Group 2

- * It is difficult to motivate young people in trade unions today - guilt tripping doesn't work. Unions are no longer organising centres for large numbers of people.
 - * Perhaps the structure and organisation of trade unions today no longer addresses today's situation. In the nineteenth century there was a move from the narrower craft unions to the more widely based industrial unions. Maybe we need social unions, which link workplace and community.
 - * In Barcelona unions try to organise from the cradle to the grave, linking people in workplaces and communities.
 - * There could also be regularly elected officials who are on the average pay of the members they represent so they share common interests.
 - * The experience in Sydney, Australia was outlined. Local councils had been amalgamated to eliminate Left councils. A major road development had taken place in Sydney without any regard for its consequences, or consideration of alternatives like improved public transport.
 - * Edinburgh is a wealthy city, so why are the cuts happening?
 - * The public gets very little of the benefits of tourism, which mainly goes to private individuals, yet there are considerable social costs - litter, traffic congestion and pollution.
 - * The present council has a real poverty of imagination. This is the city which produced the New Town and Patrick Geddes.
 - * The council is so trapped into promoting the city as tourist centre, that it wants to develop central Edinburgh for the benefit of 'Stags and Hens'. The Edinburgh Tourism Action Group, which represents hoteliers, shopkeepers, etc., shows no interest in public concerns but is only interested in private profits.
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- * At a national level, the drinks manufacturers' successful opposition to the government's proposed additional tax on alcohol shows what we are up against.
 - * There could be a tax on tourism, e.g. on hotel beds.
 - * Other possibilities could include a Supermarket Levy
 - * In Germany there are extra local rates on private concreted areas compared to grassy areas to ensure that there is proper drainage.
 - * Sports facilities are under threat - Meadowbank (again) and the Jack Kane Centre (Craigmillar). How do we get beyond purely local protests to pushing the council into having an integrated sports and health policy for the whole city?
 - * A Citizens Audit could provide a check on the council.
 - * Education was valuable, particularly when done on a participatory basis.