

Local democracy, civic engagement and community

From New Labour to the Big Society



Hugh Atkinson

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Abbreviations

ACEVO	Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations
AMS	Additional member system
APBB	All-Party Parliamentary Beer Group
BBPA	British Beer and Pub Association
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
BNP	British National Party
CABE	Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment
CBN	Community Broadband Network
CHC	Community Health Council
CLD	Commission for Local Democracy
CLG	Department of Communities and Local Government
CoSLA	Convention of Scottish Local Authorities
CPRE	Campaign to Protect Rural England
CPS	Centre for Policy Studies
CSR	Comprehensive Spending Review
CSV	Community Service Volunteers
DCMS	Department of Culture, Media and Sport
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
Defra	Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
DETR	Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions
DLTR	Department of Local Government, Transport and the Regions
EHRC	Equalities and Human Rights Commission
ERS	Electoral Reform Society
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FPTP	First past the post
GLA	Greater London Authority
GLC	Greater London Council
IDeA	Improvement and Development Agency
INLOGOV	Institute for Local Government Studies
IPPR	Institute for Public Policy Research
JRT	Joseph Rowntree Trust
LAA	Local Area Agreement
LGA	Local Government Association

LGiU	Local Government Information Unit
LGR	Local Government Review
LINKs	Local Involvement Networks
LSP	Local Strategic Partnership
MP	Member of Parliament
NALC	National Association of Local Councils
NCVO	National Council of Voluntary Organisations
NDC	New Deal for Communities
NEF	New Economics Foundation
NFSP	National Federation of Sub-Postmasters
NGO	non-government organisation
NHS	National Health Service
NLGN	New Local Government Network
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
OCS	Office for Civil Society
ODPM	Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
PCT	Primary Care Trust
PFI	Private Finance Initiative
PR	Proportional Representation
SAZ	Sport Action Zone
SCP	Sustainable Communities Plan
SNP	Scottish National Party
SNT	Safer neighbourhood team
SOLACE	Society of Local Authority Chief Executives
SRB	Single Regeneration Budget
STV	Single transferable vote
UN	United Nations
VCO	Voluntary Community Organisation
VIRSA	Village Retail Services Association

Preface

I first got the idea for this book about three years ago. For some time I had wanted to explore the links between local democracy, civic engagement and community. I had a broad idea in my head but what I lacked was a conceptual framework. I explored various ideas, but it was on a bird-watching holiday in Norfolk that my thoughts took on more of an analytical feel. It must have been the combination of fresh air and the occasional pint of bitter that stimulated the old grey matter! I have a long-standing experience of local government and local democracy, first as a local government officer, then as an elected local councillor and finally as an academic and researcher. This book is hopefully the culmination of that experience.

For all its limitations, local government is an important locus for political participation, accountability and democracy. It can act as forum for local groups to state their case and thus help shape the democratic process. Just as importantly, local government and local democracy can act as an important counterweight to central government that, despite its perennial rhetoric of decentralisation, is reluctant to cede power. Beware of central government bearing gifts of localism, one might say!

The book may only have my name on the cover but it would not have been possible without the support and guidance of a number of people. First of all I would like to thank Tony Mason of Manchester University Press for his help and support in getting this book published. I am also very grateful to my colleague Stuart Wilks-Heeg for his invaluable insights and comments on my original proposal for this book. I would also like to put on record my thanks to an old colleague of mine, Dr Mike Hickox. His encouragement and support (notwithstanding the odd barbed comment) has been central to my academic development and critical thinking.

Deep thanks also to Chris Wood. Without his support, sheer professionalism and friendship through a very difficult time I would not have finished this book. I would also like to thank my daughter Donna for her love and support for Mr Hugh. Finally, I owe so much to my wife and colleague Ros Wade. She has been a constant source of support and reassurance during the writing of this book, commenting on drafts and

proofreading the manuscript. Her blend of considered advice, combined with the odd drop of brutality, kept me on the straight and narrow when I needed it most.

Hugh Atkinson

Introduction

This is a book about local democracy, about community and civic engagement in Britain. It was conceived as a counterweight to the many negative accounts that seek to dominate our political discourse with their talk of political apathy and selfish individualism.

Barack Obama made the point effectively in the American context long before his successful bid for the Presidency. In an interview given to the *Chicago Reader* newspaper on 8 December 1995 he set out his now well-rehearsed argument about the need for change in the way the USA does its politics. For Obama, too much of the emphasis in political debate rested on 'that old bootstrap myth: get a job, get rich and get out'. 'Our goal must be' said Obama 'to help people get a sense of building something larger. The political debate is now so skewed, so limited, so distorted. People are hungry for community. They miss it.'

I was reminded of Obama's point about the hunger for community early on the morning of Monday 2 February 2009. The snow that had started on the previous Sunday evening had continued to fall throughout the night. I awoke from my slumbers in my house in South London to find a thick carpet of snow, more than a foot deep in places. Cars were snowed in and local roads impassable. The stillness and silence were something to behold. What struck me most, however, was the attitude of local people. It was not just the children happily playing in the snow that struck me, but the behaviour of their parents and other adults. Deprived of their cars, they were out on foot, off to the local store in search of supplies or just simply to enjoy the magic of the moment as the pristine white snow lay all about.

Something truly fascinating started to happen. Perfect strangers smiled at each other and engaged in conversation. A community was emerging out of the snow. Across the city in Primrose Hill something similar was happening. In an item in the *Guardian* newspaper a local resident and mother was watching her daughter happily sledging down the snowy slopes. 'Mummy' said the little girl 'everyone is much nicer when there is snow. Everyone talks to you' (*Guardian*, 4 February 2009). Out of the mouths of children as they say! Press reports and anecdotal evidence from across the country painted a similar picture. It was a neat counterpoint to the gainsayers of community.

It was if a window had opened up allowing individuals to crawl through and become part of a community. With the opportunity there, countless people were happy to grasp it. Sadly, and perhaps unavoidably, this particular window soon closed as the snows melted, the roads cleared and people clambered back into their cars and carried on with their busy daily lives.

One snow event does not make a summer, if one is allowed to mix one's metaphors, but it did demonstrate the real if yet latent sense of community and civic spirit that exists. It is a theme that I will return to.

The state of local democracy

There is a widespread view that local democracy in Britain is in deep trouble and that we face a crisis of civic engagement and political participation. Indeed there is available evidence that would appear to lend credence to this viewpoint. This includes low electoral turnout and the significant difficulties that political parties face in recruiting local people both to carry out political activity on the ground and to stand as candidates for election to the council (Power Inquiry, 2006).

However, a central argument of this book is that a deeper analysis of the evidence points to a much more nuanced and complex political terrain with a wide variety of informal and formal activity at the local level. To borrow a phrase from Robert Putnam in his highly acclaimed analysis of civic engagement and community in the USA, the local space has a potential and a vibrancy thanks to its cultivation by 'assiduous civic gardeners' (2006: 16). The difficulties of civic engagement and political participation at the local level are real enough but there are rich seams to be mined and clear opportunities to be grasped. Reports of the death of local democracy are much exaggerated, to paraphrase Mark Twain. It may be a bit poorly at times but it is not time for the undertakers to move in yet.

This book focuses on local democratic politics in Britain over the last decade and a half. It includes an analysis of civic engagement and participation across a range of policy areas and in the context of debates around accountability, legitimacy, and sustainability. It argues that new and alternative forms of civic engagement are opening up at the local level driven by a range of government and non-government actors. These are reshaping the local space.

The period under analysis starts with the election of the New Labour government in 1997 and covers the first year of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government that came to power in May 2010. The thirteen years of Labour government saw a seemingly never-ending stream of initiatives, the purported aim of which was to revitalise local democracy. The pace of reform was at times frantic, with policy paper succeeding policy paper. However, if students of local democracy hoped for a period of calm and consolidation under the coalition government then they were in for a

disappointment. The twin agendas of localism and the ‘big society’ combined with the large-scale cuts to local authority budgets (some 30 per cent in the period 2011–15) have the potential to radically transform the nature of local democracy and elected local government itself.

Local democracy is in a constant state of flux. One has to check repeatedly to see whether this or that body still exists or if it has been abolished in the name of localism or the ‘big society’. Policy announcement follows policy announcement. Ministerial statements abound. Local democracy, for so long the quiet backwater of British politics, has become a lot more interesting!

The book is divided into seven chapters. [Chapter 1](#) looks at theoretical debates as to the meaning of local democracy, civic engagement and community together with a number of related concepts. The issues raised will provide the basis for a more developed analysis in the subsequent chapters. [Chapter 2](#) analyses the widespread view that we face a crisis of local democracy with such evidence as low electoral turnout and declining membership of political parties. However, this chapter will argue that a more nuanced analysis of the available evidence points to a much complex picture with a wide variety of both informal and formal political activity taking place. [Chapter 3](#) looks at the policy agenda around local democracy in the context of the developing nature of central/local relations since 1979. It provides a broad survey of some of the key policy initiatives, ideas and proposals to enhance local democracy that have come from central and local government, together with various policy think tanks and other interested parties. [Chapter 4](#) focuses on the ‘crisis’ of formal democracy at the local level. This includes the ‘decline’ in the role of political parties and falling voter turnout at local elections. Possible solutions for a reinvigorated formal local politics are analysed.

[Chapter 5](#) looks at recent developments beyond the realm of elections, political parties and formal political institutions. These include citizen panels, neighbourhood governance arrangements and the use of referenda. The effectiveness, or otherwise, of such measures in boosting civic engagement will be analysed. [Chapter 6](#) focuses on local services and policy attempts to widen public participation in the shaping and delivery of such services. Finally, [Chapter 7](#) looks at the concept of sustainability and regeneration strategies to build sustainable communities, both physical and social. Within this, there is also an analysis of local strategies to combat climate change.

The last fifteen years have seen a variety of policy initiatives that have sought to reshape local democracy and elected local government. Yet, they have often been contradictory in nature. Under New Labour, the narrative was one of reinvigorating local government and empowering local communities with an emphasis on decentralisation of political power. Yet, in practice, government policy often veered towards more central control with

the imposition of more and more targets and continuing restrictions on local government's room for financial manoeuvre. Under the coalition government, the narrative has been one of localism and the 'big society'. But the reality has at times fallen short of the rhetoric. From continuing restrictions on the ability of local councils to determine their own level of council tax through ministerial pronouncements on bin collections central government seems to have difficulty in letting go. And yet, despite all this, local democracy still remains a vibrant terrain of innovation, civic engagement and participation, and dynamic community activity.

The theoretical context

Introduction

I will look first at theoretical debates as to the meaning of local democracy and related concepts. We need to establish an understanding of such concepts before we are able to appreciate and comment on the welter of empirical evidence, debate and opinion that is available to us. Such an understanding will help set the scene for the analysis in subsequent chapters of the status and health of local democracy.

In the nineteenth century, the well-known Prussian politician Otto Von Bismarck stated that *politics is the art of the possible*. More broadly, we can understand politics as being about conflicts between groups and the resolution of these conflicts. As Hague and Harrop note, it is ‘the process by which groups make collective decisions’ (Hague and Harrop, 1987: 3). Groups can range from formal political institutions such as cabinet, parliament and political parties through to local tenants’ groups and voluntary organisations. Political decisions can be determined in a variety of ways. These can include diplomacy, negotiation, voting and, in extreme cases, violence. What makes such decisions essentially political is ‘their collective character, affecting and committing those who belong to the group’ (Hague and Harrop, 1987: 3).

Healy *et al.* argue that ‘A redefinition of politics and the role of elected representatives’ is necessary if we are to enhance political and civic engagement (Healey *et al.*, 2005: 42). Indeed this is most certainly true. Whilst we need to acknowledge the importance of formal political institutions and political parties, we need to construct a way of doing politics that is about more than petty squabbles, sound bites and wheeler-dealing. In other words, we need a politics that addresses and confronts the social and economic challenges that face communities and individuals in their everyday lives.

At the local level, there are many examples that this is happening already, and we will focus on some of these in subsequent chapters. Research evidence does point to public apathy and distrust about many aspects of formal politics (voting, membership of political parties and a willingness to stand as a local councillor, for example). Yet even here the picture is mixed.

In addition, there is a significant amount of activity and civic engagement beyond the formal realm of politics taking place at the local level. The challenge at the local level is to harness this energy to help drive forward and strengthen formal politics and broader forms of civic engagement in a relationship of mutual benefit and reciprocity.

In the debate about the state of local democracy, words and phrases such as civic engagement, political participation and community enter the debate, often without a clear understanding of what they actually mean. Add to the brew civil society, social capital and public value and the head can really start to hurt! Yet if we carry out a robust audit of the health of local democracy in Britain, a good dose of theory is essential. Theory provides a framework to help us to understand what is going on, to make sense of the evidence and the arguments, to make an analysis and possibly even to offer prescriptions for the future. In other words it offers us a *context*, it gives meaning to the why and the what, it provides us with an organisational tool without which we may well end up with a random and disparate collection of facts, what has been described as mere empiricism.

To this end, I will now focus on the meaning and definition of six interconnected but distinctive concepts. These are democracy, political participation and civic engagement, social capital, community, civil society and public value. Subsequent chapters will give empirical weight to this theoretical discussion.

How can we conceptualise democracy?

Democracy itself, Beetham argues, ‘belongs to the sphere of the political’ (Beetham, 1996: 29). It is a sphere ‘of collectively binding agreements and policies’ and the attempted resolution of conflicts as to how such agreements and policies should be shaped and implemented (Beetham, 1996: 29). It starts from the premise that that we are ‘social creatures’ whose lives are interdependent on each other and as such require common rules and policies (Beetham, 1996: 29). This does not deny individual choice and individual rights but they have to be seen in the context of this interconnectedness. Notions of democracy are not confined to formal institutions of national and local government but extend to any organisation where there are disagreements to be mediated and objectives and rules to be agreed. This can include national groups such as the Women’s Institute and local tenants’ associations.

The concept of democracy, its interpretation and implementation is multifaceted and highly contested. Should democracy, for example, be about responding to the wishes of the majority of the electorate? In that case, how do we deal with the needs and aspirations of minority opinion? Healy *et al.* argue that the real measure of an effective democratic system ‘may not be how effectively it converts the will of the majority into political action but how able it

proves in standing up for the rights and needs of minorities' (Healey *et al.*, 2005: 38). Larry Flynt once observed that 'majority rule only works if you are also considering individual rights ... you can't have five wolves and a sheep voting on what to eat for supper' (see Healey *et al.*, 2005: 38).

The issue of minority rights is important. We only have to look at the example of Northern Ireland to see how the marginalisation of the minority catholic/nationalist community over sixty years led to frustration, social upheaval, political protest and, in some sections of society, the pursuit of the 'armed struggle'. This is an extreme example, certainly, but it does highlight a basic principle. How can the various shades of political opinion in communities receive their proper share of political representation?

The method of election is pertinent here. The system of simple plurality (or 'first past the post' (FPTP), as it is known colloquially) used in UK general elections is a case in point. Look at the example of the 2005 general election. The Labour Party won 356 seats, giving it a majority over all other parties of 66 seats yet only gained just over 35 per cent of the vote. If the number of seats gained had been directly proportional to the votes cast, the Labour Party would have won only 227 seats. In the 2010 general election the Conservatives received just over 36 per cent of the vote (1 per cent more than Labour in 2005) and yet won only 306 seats.

Whilst accepting that some voters may have acted in a different way if the last two general elections had been fought under a system of proportional representation, these examples highlight the ongoing debate about the nature and purpose of elections. Supporters of the FPTP system argue that it produces stable majority one-party government. Proponents of proportional representation, in its varied forms, argue that it results in fairer representation. Both points of view have validity. In essence it is about striking a balance between the exigencies of stable and effective government, on the one hand, and fair representation, on the other. Where that balance lies is the point of contention. FPTP is also the system used for local elections in England and similar arguments pertain here. In Scotland, the situation is different. With the devolution settlement, local government in Scotland comes under the aegis of the Scottish Parliament, thus allowing policy differentiation from England and Wales. In 2007 proportional representation, in the form of single transferable vote (STV), was introduced for Scottish local elections. The implications of this initiative in terms of both political representation and political participation will be analysed in [Chapter 4](#) when I look at formal democracy.

Direct democracy

We can draw a distinction between indirect (or representative democracy) where we elect our representatives, such as members of parliament and local councillors, and more direct forms of democracy, such as referenda where specific questions are put to the electorate. Representative democracy has