

Austerity is in serious danger of sending the role of councillor into a slide towards irrelevance

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The local government sector has seen unprecedented cuts since the 2010 General Election. With the Conservatives back in power again following 2015, austerity can be expected to continue. **Neil Barnett** argues that these cuts, as well as other long-term trends such as managerialism and de-politicisation have combined to gradually undermine the role of the councillor.*



Despite the on-going rhetorical attachment to 'localism' from across the political spectrum, the democratic health of local government in the UK remains a subject of long-standing concern, as interest and participation in local elections has gradually waned. As [Colin Talbot](#) has argued, there are 'supply side' reasons as to why this may be the case; these include the relative lack of power of UK local government and the centralised nature of the polity, but also reforms to internal organisation and local Councillor roles which have turned it into a 'warped variant of executive dominance in Parliament' and failed to connect with the public imagination. However, the current period of austerity has brought the weakness of local government and Councillors into sharp relief.

Austerity to some seems to have been met with relative acquiescence, when historically, Councillors have been at the forefront of high- profile and politically charged confrontations with the centre over issues which, in hindsight, have been less fundamental to the future of local government than the challenges posed since 2010. For others, Councillors have pragmatically done as best they can with the hand they have been dealt, at a time when they have less room than ever for manoeuvre in just about every aspect of finance and service delivery; following this line, resistance is there, but we have to look harder for it in day to day practice- austerity may even have been a catalyst for creativity .

It is no surprise that for some on the left, Councils making cuts evokes images of past battles, and to some extent, myth. It is true that in times which have, by comparison, been less 'austere', Councillors have found themselves at the forefront of high profile resistances. In contrast, despite dire warnings of civil unrest from the leaders of Newcastle, Liverpool and Sheffield Councils, and rumblings concerning the 'death' of local government, the response of Councils of all political complexions has been to comply and implement the cuts required, some Councils with more optimism than others.

The majority have invoked reluctant compliance. It can be argued, following [Peter John](#) that this 'dented shield' approach is the default position, and that we should not romanticise the relatively brief, seemingly heroic resistances of the past. Also, there has been no widespread public demand, it seems, for local government in particular to lead co-ordinated political campaigns against the centre. It could be argued then, that pragmatic compliance by Councillors is a reflection of the public mood and of the times and context in which they find themselves.

Despite this, it is clear that austerity has led to a further undermining of the influence of most Councillors, who now find themselves open to range of practical and more wide-ranging challenges. There are now fewer Councillors- financial pressure is leading to a 'Councillor cull' as Councils are merged, if not statutorily, then for all practical purposes via sharing services. They have much less financial discretion, leaving doubts about whether even statutory services can be maintained. 95% of Councils in England are now sharing a total of 383 shared service arrangements, leading to a dilution of Councillor influence. 'Backbench' Councillors not involved in the strategic decision making find themselves increasingly in the dark re. the details of contractual arrangements which directly impact on their wards and which may be in place for 25 years.

This in itself seems to represent an acceleration in a long -term trend towards the 'managerialisation' or de-politicisation' of Councillors- their becoming overseers of contracts and monitors of performance at the expense of a fully formed 'political' role. This needs to be seen in the context of a long-standing elite concern for the 'quality' of Councillors in the UK, culminating in the creation, by New Labour in 2000, of a clear distinction between this in the Executive and the rest. According to research conducted for [APSE](#) by De Montfort and Cardiff Universities, this has led to the creation of [Two Tribes](#)- with only 43% of 'backbench' Councillors agreeing that they would personally be able to contribute to efforts to improve Council services in the foreseeable future, in contrast to 87% of Executive members.

The majority of Councillors, it seems, are caught in a pincer movement- between the practice of austerity, and more wide-ranging challenges to their role as primary focus of political representation from alternative forms of locality based political engagement. One consequence may be that local politics, and particularly protest and resistance, become even more detached from Councils and Councillors. A common refrain from academia, think tanks and assorted practitioners in the recent past has been for this to signal a need for a re-conception of the role of the Councillor, away from the 'old fashioned' representative to become more of a deliberative facilitator, in line with the 'Community Champion' role floated by New Labour, or perhaps the 'Councillor 2.0'.

There are thus no shortage of exhortations for Councillors to change (a much repeated refrain in the history of UK local government) and for them, in particular, to ditch 'traditional' party politics and take up new roles as consensus builders. However, Councillors, have generally, been reluctant to embrace any such shift, much to the dismay of some commentators who see this as evidence of self-preservation and party loyalty; this reluctance, however, has a justifiable basis, as these re-imagined roles serve to consign Councillors further away from the centre of contentious and often divisive decisions concerning vital service provision.

Austerity has weakened the roles of Councils and Councillors, adding to fundamental weaknesses and leaving particularly those outside of the Executive positions searching for a place. A radical re-invention is some way off, and itself may be based on flawed optimism. Without any serious re-positioning of local government within the national polity, it is hard to see Councils in the future being at the forefront of even the sporadic challenges to the centre that they have led the past. Currently, the role of the Councillor in the UK polity faces serious danger of continuing to slide towards irrelevance.

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