

Who should own our communities? The case for social and public ownership in the UK

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Should people own their local environment? [Robin Jervis](#) presents the arguments around community ownership and control. He explains how this idea could help move democracy closer to the people and help counter the trend of privatisation in public services.



Who should be in charge of local amenities and services in the UK? The argument I put forward here is both simple and radical – that the people who live in areas should own *and* control their local environment through the formation of interlinked community co-operatives. A nominal stake in the collective ownership of public land, libraries, care facilities, community centres would become a right associated with residency in an area, and with this ownership would come the right to participate in open, democratic forums about how these resources should be managed. Here I will focus on the arguments around this idea in British politics, rather than on details of how these institutions might be designed.

A few years ago, I carried out [research at workers' co-operatives](#) where the people who work at a firm collectively own and manage it. I wanted to see whether work at these companies was stable, secure, and rewarding. Members of these co-ops really valued the opportunity to contribute to how the firms were run, and the lack of a professionalised, hierarchical management structure did not seem to be a huge barrier to firm success – in fact, according to Co-operatives UK, the co-operative sector [seems to grow from strength to strength in the UK](#).

The research found that running these firms democratically, though meetings of all workers (sometimes upwards of 100) and, depending on the size of the firm, delegating to smaller committees responsible to the general meetings of all members, gave people a sense of control and ownership. It also meant that everyone had access to the information needed to make decisions about how the firm should be run and what the impact of these decisions would be on their working life and future. If a firm can be managed and owned co-operatively, why limit this form of organisation to workplaces?

This is not a new idea. Community ownership has been an active, and growing, theme in British politics for a number of years. [Scottish land reform laws](#) allow for communities to buy and manage land, sometimes huge areas, and run them on the principles of community benefit and environmental sustainability. In England, there are cases of communities collectively purchasing and managing previously privately run [local shops](#) and [pubs](#), often aided by charities and government initiatives. Communities in England can also write “[Neighbourhood Plans](#)” which give communities control over planning and infrastructure provision. Fishing communities often run harbours as local co-operatives. In terms of public services, [Explore York](#) – the library service in the City of York – ‘span out’ of local authority control and is now run by a variety of stakeholders including staff and community representatives.



Part of the appeal of the possibility of this form of co-operative ownership is that it confounds the left-right spectrum – for the right, it takes such provision outside of the state, echoing David Cameron’s “[big society](#)” initiative. On the left, [it presents a challenge](#) to the marketisation and privatisation of public services such as bus routes and healthcare, although there are fears that so-called mutualisation merely offers more palatable alternative to outright privatisation. Furthermore, it challenges our notion of the responsibilities and purpose of the private and public sectors. In areas where the market is unable to provide the services which help to keep communities alive – shops, pubs and so on – the community steps in; whilst services we might see as being publicly run by local authorities are increasingly drifting towards private provision and management, if not by for-profit companies, by trusts and charities.

But there are many challenges to these types of projects. Firstly, trends towards privatisation of services produce extremely powerful private sector interests. Communities need to be strong enough to resist co-option by private interests so that the community sector more generally can produce [a countervailing power base against private provision](#). One model proposed for the local ownership and management developed by Fung and Wright is known as [Empowered Participatory Governance](#). The model is an attempt to draw together existing thought suggesting civic benefits to participation. It has three main principles: a focus on real problems facing communities; a focus on local knowledge and local interests; and the use of deliberation to locate needs and build solutions.

Another set of concerns comes from institutional design and democratic theory. Can communities effectively run their own resources? Academic literature on deliberative and participatory democracy is mixed in terms of its prognosis for success, but there are many organisations, including the [Sortition Foundation](#), which make the case for ordinary citizens, not politicians, making decisions. They argue that individuals can absorb information to make complex decisions, achieve a high standard of debate and discussion, and make reasoned judgements on policy proposals.

Sortition, a process of random selection of eligible individuals to form deliberative bodies, may also be an appealing way to address practical concerns about widespread participation, although it is not without critiques, including issues around inclusion, the legitimacy of the selection process, and the need to ensure participation is a privilege rather than a burdensome obligation. My own research on co-operatives suggests this type of control of resources is a learned behaviour – over time people develop the sense of ownership and responsibility which makes prudential management possible, and learn how to resolve disputes and create consensus.

The idea of community ownership and control offers some exciting ideas for researchers and practitioners in politics. Firstly, it moves democracy closer to the people – in an era where international power politics seems to dominate political discussion, there is space to return control to communities directly, empowering them and reinvigorating the democratic process considering the challenges posed by recent events. Secondly, it provides a counter to a trend of privatisation in public services by taking them out of the traditionally defined private and public sectors. Finally, for

political theorists, it offers the opportunity to consider the relationship between ownership and democracy, and the idea of how public property and public space is constituted.

About the Author

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