ICON Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods

Not just the Big Society: community politics and the labour movement

An essay for the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods

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The Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods

The Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods (ICON) was launched with the support of Alex Norris MP, Minister for Local Growth, in September 2024. The Commission aims to address the significant challenges faced in England's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods and how tackling them could generate significant social and economic improvements in the lives that live in them. The initiative aims to build on existing research, generate new insights and propose concrete actions that could improve the lives and prospects of people living in these areas.

About this essay

ICON asked Phil Tinline to write an essay exploring the history of community politics, giving him a free hand to do so. On that basis, the ideas set out here are the author's, and so should not be ascribed to the Commission as a whole, or to any individual Commissioners or their associated organisations.

About the author

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Introduction

Politicians who make speeches about involving the "community" in improving "neighbourhoods" risk provoking groans. Such language triggers memories of the Big Society: David Cameron's misbegotten promise to restore social bonds by encouraging communities to rely less on the state and do more for themselves. This was doubtless well-intentioned, but it was conceived before the 2008 crash prompted George Osborne to plan swingeing cuts. David Willetts was one of the more thoughtful advocates of a more civic conservatism. But as he observed in 2021:

> *There was a danger that, instead of us saying, "We believe in community action and strong institutions as goods in themselves", it became instead, "We'll cut spending and hand it over to you guys instead." It becomes a justification of retrenchment: "charities will pick up the slack of shrinking government".*[1]

At a more fundamental level, the Big Society could not thrive in a party divided between the One Nation Tory tradition, which sees community as vital, and free marketeers who hear in the word 'community' nothing but oppression. It was telling that even the Big Society's noisiest proponent, Cameron aide Steve Hilton, became more focused on cutting the state than on repairing the fabric of society.

To conclude from the brief life of the Big Society that a focus on community action and restoring neighbourhood bonds is somehow alien to the labour movement is bizarre. Doing so erases over a century of history of people who achieved rather more, not least Clement Attlee. For Labour to give up on the idea because the Conservatives tried it once and flopped is as though Mick Jagger met a Mick Jagger impersonator, panicked, and decided to retire.

If the idea of community action divides the Conservatives, it brings Labour's tribes together: Old Right and New Labour, liberal and Blue Labour, Hard and Soft Left.

As Alex Norris MP, Labour's minister for local growth, recently pointed out, the word "community" appears in the party's founding clauses, the trade union and co-operative movements, and the 1945 Labour manifesto. In his address to the Civil Society Summit in January 2024, Keir Starmer noted that, long before 1945,

> it was people, faith groups, and organisations like you who supported people through sickness, who educated our children and who protected people living in poverty.
>
> Because it has always been people like you who have recognised the dignity of every single person. And that's the history and heart of the Labour party too. Community organisers, campaigners, and charitable movements, who fought for people to live better lives in a better country.
>
> When the Labour government set up the welfare state, they were influenced by people like William Beveridge who recognised that the government couldn't – and shouldn't – do everything by themselves.
>
> And that civil society and faith groups play a unique and vital role in this country, building the relationships and the shared values that shape our national life.[2]

1 Quoted in Tinline, *The Death of Consensus: 100 Years of British Political Nightmares*, 2023, 262

2 Starmer, speech to Civil Society Summit, 22 January 2024, https://labour.org.uk/updates/press-releases/keir-starmers-speech-to-civil-society-summit/, 5, 14

At Labour's annual conference at Blackpool in 1968, Harold Wilson appealed to the belief that "the duty of the community is to eliminate poverty".[3] In 1986, Neil Kinnock wrote that "the central thread running through the British socialist tradition" was "concern with fellowship and fraternity; with community and participation".[4] New Labour used this idea to defined itself against 'Old Labour' statism – but the continuity is as striking as the contrast. In 1998, Tony Blair declared that "The crude individualism of the Eighties is the mood no longer. The spirit of the times is community."[5] And more specifically, success in urban policy "depends on communities themselves having the power and taking the responsibility to make things better".[6]

Yet today, the central role of civil society and local organisations in Labour's history has slipped from view. And while Labour's engagement with community action has receded, disaffection with politics has surged in to take its place. As Lawrence Black wrote in the wake of the 2009 MPs' expenses scandal: "Representative politics has been challenged not just by falling party membership and participation, but has been a victim of a secular decline in a range of other forms of associational activism."[7] This is partly because that activism used to offer more routes to political power for members of the community itself. Over the last couple of decades, the breakdown of all this has produced a loss of agency and trust that right-wing populists have been exploiting with increasing success.

Since 2010, that felt loss of local political agency has been exacerbated by austerity and economic stagnation. Watching your high street and public services rot, with no obvious way to push back, breeds a hopeless sense that it's not worth trying to make things better, even that the system is rigged. Research conducted for the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods shows that "The political segment most likely to feel neighbourhood decline are Reform UK voters", who are particularly concerned about "potholes, high street shops closing and overdevelopment".[8]

This suggests that Alex Norris is right to insist that the politics of community is not some fluffy "nice-to-have"[9] – restoring a sense that people have some power to improve their lives and the places where they live them is vital to the fight to restore trust in mainstream democratic politics. It is therefore vital that the labour movement recovers its memory of how it has successfully played its part in community action in the past. As the historians Peter Ackers and Alastair Reid pointed out in 2016, surveying a century and more of British history: "we have found community, civil society, associational democracy and liberal-pluralist ideas remaining much closer to the centre of British labour's thought and action than is usually assumed."[10]

3 Wilson, Labour Party Annual Conference, 1968 http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm
4 Kinnock, *The Future of Socialism*, Fabian Society, 1986, 3-4, quoted in Garland, 'Community Socialism: The British Left and the Politics of Community 1968-1997', unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2025
5 Blair, Labour Party Annual Conference, 1998 https://www.lgcplus.com/archive/tony-blairs-speech-to-the-labour-party-conference-full-text-30-09-1998/
6 Blair, Foreword to *Bringing Britain together – a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal*, Cmnd 4045, Stationery Office, 1998, 7, quoted in Imrie and Raco (ed.), *Urban Renaissance?: New Labour, community and urban policy*, 2003, 211
7 Black, *Redefining British Politics: Culture, Consumerism and Participation*, 1954-70, 2010, 1
8 Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods: Opinion Research Summary, 2025 https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/ICON-Report.pdf
9 Norris, speech at the launch of *Stories from Community Britain* (Co-operative Party, 2025), 25 February, 2025
10 Ackers and Reid, 'Other Worlds of Labour: Liberal-Pluralism in Twentieth-Century British Labour History', in Ackers and Reid, (ed.), *Alternatives to State-Socialism in Britain: Other Worlds of Labour in the Twentieth Century*, 2016, 17

‘He stayed’

Today, the community activities of the labour movement long ago may seem irrelevant. If so, perhaps that’s partly because we tend to assume that ‘community’ formed naturally in the villages, towns and cities of pre-second world war Britain. We imagine a land where neighbours all got on swimmingly with each other, and community action happened almost by accident – a world away from the isolation and division of today.

This is sepia-tinged nonsense, as logic and a glance at history both show. One person’s strong bond is the next person’s exclusion. It makes more sense to think of those communities as a thicket of sometimes mutually-exclusive micro-communities, often based around family not friendship. As Ross McKibbin has written, “social relations tended to be sharply divided between men and women, husbands and wives, kin and neighbours, and home and the outside world.”[11] People in working-class communities did not simply let their non-family neighbours wander in and out of their homes. Privacy may have been harder to achieve, but it was prized all the more for that, especially as people had far less choice about who those neighbours were.

One site of political discussion was the room in working men’s clubs where “officials of the unions or the co-ops, or local councillors, drank”.[12] These played a vital role, but they also excluded half the adult population. Overall, political organising in such communities was not necessarily straightforward, even setting aside long working hours and lack of disposable income.

So this was not an environment in which community action just happened. Rather, it required a part-radical, part-common sense idea: that ordinary people had common interests and shared identity, and that they could have practical political agency. Pressing this into practical reality required some of those ordinary people to organise, and win the trust of sceptical neighbours and weary workmates.

This was the world from which the Labour Party emerged, at the dawn of the twentieth century – but as Ackers and Reid have highlighted, the party was just one of a rich range of civil society organisations that had by then taken shape, including “mutualist welfare organisations (for savings, temperance, housing, health); adult education and cultural societies; and sport and leisure associations”.[13] By 1900, the co-operative movement had over 1.7 million members, and a Women’s Co-operative Guild had been founded to push issues affecting married women up the political agenda, such as “subsidies for maternity clinics, women’s health, especially the maternal mortality rate, home helps for pregnant women, food prices and profiteering”.[14]

These organisations fostered democratic engagement, not only by empowering working people to pursue shared interests for their own sake, but by providing a route to local political office. Some working-class women involved themselves in “voluntary organisations that focused on home visiting, health and education”,[15] and went on to stand for school boards and the council, and even as poor law guardians and magistrates. As Ruth Davidson has underlined, this “active citizenship”, often conducted among people who these women had known all their lives, was “the key to democratic inclusion”.[16]

Beyond their primary role in the workplace, trade unions likewise provided a route for working men to become councillors, serve on public bodies and even seek to represent their community in parliament. Unions funded local educational services. Sid Weighell, later general secretary of

11 McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, 1998, 179
12 McKibbin, 185
13 Ackers and Reid, 17
14 Pugh, *Speak for Britain!: A New History of the Labour Party*, 2010, 146
15 Davidson, ‘Working-Class Women Activists: Citizenship at the Local Level’, in Ackers and Reid, 94
16 Davidson, 97

the railwaymen's union, remembered how in the 1930s, his father both ran the union locally and was involved with Labour. "Our front room became a sort of citizens' advice bureau and social security office", he recalled. "Everybody seemed to know our house was the place to go if you lost your job or your home or needed advice." Religious bodies played a role in providing ad hoc welfare services, and in binding communities together – and keeping them apart. Along with secular political belief, and the sight of poverty, personal religious faith was one of the spurs that drove working-class people to be active in their communities.

This culture also provided a way for middle-class political activists to contribute to the empowerment of working people, provided they were prepared to embrace it, rather than impose their own attitudes. Later social surveys often highlight working people's resistance to charity – they tended to prefer solidarity – though that did not stop middle-class do-gooders descending from on high to dispense moral lessons and largesse. But one such figure – a top-hatted young man who arrived in London's east end one day in 1905 – managed to dodge that trap. Clement Attlee's charitable visit to Stepney began a long immersion in the struggles of east end life which transformed his politics, and eventually the nation's. As one admiring local Communist Party activist put it:

> In the old days rich folks would sometimes come down here giving us clothes and money and saying how sorry they felt for us…But Clem was different. He came down here and he stayed. He worked with us and showed us how we could help ourselves.[17]

Attlee's experience pulled his politics leftward, but not wholly in statist terms, and he recoiled from the intellectual elite's "lack of confidence in what ordinary men and women could do in a democracy".[18] In 1919, he became Mayor of Stepney, and spent his year in power taking practical steps to make life better for those he represented. He raised rates, and "built five prenatal and child welfare clinics, appointed professional health visitors, and provided free milk for more than 6,000 families" while instigating regular refuse collection and tackling slum landlords.[19] In his mix of personal radicalism, military service and municipal pragmatism, of middle-class activism and egalitarian empathy, Clem Attlee embodied several of Labour's traditions at once.

17 Quoted in Bew, *Citizen Clem: A Biography of Attlee*, 2016, *69*
18 Quoted in Bew, 104
19 Bew, 109-10

The post-war settlement and its discontents

A quarter of a century later, when Attlee led Britain's first majority Labour government into power, he and his ministers brought a faith in on-the-ground action, in local government and trade unions, with them. However, in the wake of the huge wartime expansion of central government, a more Fabian belief in the efficacy of state planning often dominated the approach of Attlee's ministers. This uneasy ambiguity reshaped the context in which community action would now need to work – at once bringing the ideas behind it into power, and overriding them.

This was visible in the post-war approach to planning and building new housing settlements and its consequences, which continued after 1951 under the Conservatives. As Jon Lawrence has noted, it was widely assumed "that urban space could be organized to engineer social mixing and neighbourliness into the fabric of daily life".[20] And for a time, it worked: Lawrence notes how, in the late 1950s, some residents of the post-war new town of Stevenage thought of themselves as "part of a great social and political experiment". They were "pioneers of a new way of living in which the private hopes and ambitions of individual families could be realized through progressive social reform enacted on a grand scale".[21] Some even saw the new towns as the fruit of the efforts of those in power to improve their lives. For the moment, there was no shame attached to living in social housing; post-war Britain seemed to be developing a "classless" mix of middle and working classes around the idea of "ordinariness".[22]

But the planners' goal of mingling the classes never quite came to fruition; by the 1960s, a lasting stigma had begun to stick to the idea of council housing. At the same time, a new liberal individualism spread among working people. This sprang partly from the liberation which new settlements provided from old family and neighbourhood strictures, and partly from the greater confidence instilled by rising affluence and the post-war welfare state. As Lawrence has argued, while this did not destroy people's sense that community had value, it did begin to undermine the assumption that those in authority knew best – especially in the late 1960s, as the economy began to sour.

This brought something of a resurgence in the idea that ordinary people could effectively assert agency over their own lives. The population as a whole became less passively loyal to parties, but that did not mean a slide into apathy. Instead, 'politics' expanded beyond party. Subsequent accounts of this may have been dominated by the far left, but as Lawrence Black points out, in reality this process was "not confined or unique to radical, progressive politics, as is often assumed. The do-it-yourself political spirit and flourishing of voluntary organisations was widespread and was latent before the sixties."[23] Indeed, as Nick Garland notes, "community workers coming from a more orthodox Marxist perspective saw the concept of community as an obstacle to the development of class consciousness". What would become the Bennite left believed in decentralisation and community socialism, but other Labour traditions were developing versions of community politics too.[24]

This new wave of grassroots politicisation shrugged off the sentimentalisation of working-class areas that had developed in the 1950s and 1960s, in plays, TV soap operas and studies like Michael

20 Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me?: The search for community in post-war England*, 2019, 235
21 Lawrence, 75
22 Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics and the Decline of Deference in England, 1968-2000*, 2018, 201-6. See also Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method*, 2010, 221-22
23 Black, 8-9
24 Garland, 'Social democracy and community in postwar Britain', in Yeowell (ed.), *Rethinking Labour's Past*, 2022, 144-9

Young and Peter Wilmott's *Family and Kinship in East London* and Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*".[25] This was more active, less interested in fetishizing the past than in making life better.

The most visible manifestation of this was in the trade union movement, centred on shop stewards – ordinary workers who volunteered to take on various unpaid duties on their union's behalf. By the late 1960s, as Selina Todd writes, "more workers than ever were frustrated by the 'top-down' negotiation process established in the 1940s, which in practice gave trade union officials a seat at the managers' table, but offered ordinary workers little say."[26] Shop stewards cut 'in-the-plant' wage deals, sometimes by calling unofficial strikes. Younger workers' expectations and attitude to authority were infused with the confidence instilled by affluence and full employment.

At the same time, women were joining unions in increasing numbers. In 1968, sewing machinists at Ford's Dagenham plant went on strike to pressure the company to acknowledge the skilled nature of their work, forcing the male trade union hierarchy to take women more seriously. In the 1970s, women began to make significant progress up the hierarchy of the National Union of Public Employees.[27]

Likewise, in reaction against the top-down planning of the places they lived, people moved to take power over their lives. Historians trace the emergence of a new 'community development movement' to the reaction against the worst of the post-war housing schemes, particularly in Liverpool, Glasgow and London, where, in May 1968, the corner section of Newham's Ronan Point tower block collapsed, killing five people.[28] As Holly Smith writes in a study of the scandal that followed, it exposed not just the state's carelessness but "the extent to which residents had been marginalized within the political culture of post-war reconstruction."[29]

When the disaster struck, Newham's local authorities were about to rehouse local people in a block similar to Ronan Point. In its wake, those residents formed a committee to resist the move, but their concerns were ignored. Those involved in Ronan Point's construction dismissed suggestions that the building suffered structural problems. Yet the inquiry that followed found that such blocks were "liable to progressive collapse". When members of the public were invited to write to the inquiry, their letters "railed against the exclusion of grassroots voices in post-war planning".[30] As Smith notes:

> One letter-writer blamed Ronan Point on the 'Ignorance, Stupidity, Barefaced arrogance, dishonesty, coupled with a total disregard for the safety of human life' of the local architect, officials, and councillors. 'Give us ordinary people a chance to prove our worth'.[31]

This encapsulated a much broader problem: of public servants thinking they knew best, and so neglecting to consult the public they were there to serve. This could have led to one of two conclusions about the post-war settlement. Either the whole towering construction was intolerably oppressive, and had to be condemned and demolished. Or the top-down *means* were wrong, but the *ends* were just and vital – and could be better achieved by involving the people the system was intended to benefit. As the reaction to the Ronan Point calamity suggests, some of those people were pushing for exactly that.

What followed was a concerted effort to achieve those ends by means that were more rooted in communities themselves. It was set in train partly by a politician of Labour's Old Right, James Callaghan, but was taken forward by a very different strand of the movement.

25 Garland, 'Social democracy and community in postwar Britain', 140-1
26 Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class*, 2014, 287
27 See López, *The Winter of Discontent: Myth, Memory and History*, 2014, chapter 6
28 Boyle, *A history of community development*, 2021, https://longreads.localtrust.org.uk/2021/05/01/a-history-of-community-development/
29 Smith, 'The Ronan Point Scandal: Architecture, Crisis, and Possibility in British Social Democracy, 1968-93', in *Twentieth Century British History* 34(4), 2023, 810
30 Smith, 814
31 Smith, 820

The Community Development Projects

In the year after Ronan Point, in response to the growing problem of urban deprivation – as apparently exacerbated by immigration – Harold Wilson's Labour government decided to use its powers and largesse to try to revive the spirit of mutual aid and self-help. With the blessing of Callaghan, then Home Secretary, a series of Community Development Projects (CDPs) were set up in Hillfields (Coventry), Southwark (South London), Upper Afan (Glamorgan) and Vauxhall (Liverpool). From 1971, a further eight followed, mainly in northern England. The aim, Callaghan wrote later, was

> to encourage those who lived in the most poverty-stricken areas of inner cities to recognise that they themselves possessed the capacity to manage the affairs of their neighbourhoods, to reduce their reliance on outside help and, in the process, to achieve greater control over their own lives and more satisfaction from them.[32]

The CDPs were the brainchild of a Home Office civil servant, Derek Morrell, and drew some inspiration from anti-poverty efforts undertaken by the Johnson administration in the United States. They each consisted of an action team based in the area in question, and a research team in a nearby university or polytechnic, tasked with evaluating the action team's work, diagnosing the problems revealed, and developing policy recommendations.

However, the project was launched just as British politics entered a period not only of prolonged economic turmoil but of breakdown in political consensus – with the plight of the areas concerned increasingly presented as a symbol of the post-war model's Ronan Point-like collapse. After Morrell's early death, the Home Office lost enthusiasm for the scheme, and it devolved into ideological warfare. This pitted the young community workers running the CDPs against the forces which they blamed for the problems of the inner cities – from councillors to Whitehall to capitalism itself. Drawing on their first-hand experience, but perhaps also their prior political convictions, they argued that the scheme was seeking to blame the victims of government underfunding and market-driven de-industrialisation. As the 1970s wore on, this antagonised both Conservative and Labour governments, until the CDPs were finally shut down, having achieved relatively little.

Each side cast the other as ignoring the role of the actual residents of these areas. Callaghan remembered "watching a group of experienced local councillors and residents almost visibly wincing as they listened to the jargon of 'social pathology' and 'the culture of poverty' employed to describe their neighbourhood."[33] Conversely, radical CDP workers insisted that it was the government that was doing the pathologising. In a report called *Gilding the Ghetto*, they contended that the CDPs' "community approach" brought people together "to discuss problems", resulting in them "taking collective action – possibly radical action"[34] – only for their pleas to be ignored.

Contrary to the original goal of encouraging local initiative, the project became a conflict between two top-down approaches, as the CDP radicals argued that the only way to fix the inner cities was the full-scale transformation of the economy, while the Home Office sought to take back control from its wayward missionaries. But beneath this, *Gilding the Ghetto* pointed to a problem on which both sides might have agreed.

32 Callaghan, *Time and Chance*, 1987, 237-38
33 Callaghan, 238
34 Anon, *Gilding the Ghetto: the state and the poverty experiments*, 1977, 51

With the collapse of the economic foundation of these inner city areas, "the skilled, the mobile and the young moved out, the traditional family and community networks which had previously provided support for local people were badly undermined" leaving "concentrations of poor people":

> It was not just that there was a higher proportion of people in such places eligible for state support but the ways in which they had formerly cared for each other were breaking down, and when family or neighbour support failed they were going to the social services or social security causing further 'expense'.[35]

This was more or less the problem Callaghan was trying to tackle in the first place, and one that remains urgent today. The eventual failure of the CDP project's attempt at a cure should not distract from the accuracy of its diagnosis. Rather, it suggested that to address these problems, different Labour traditions would have to find a more effective way to collaborate reviving struggling neighbourhoods and their broken systems of mutual support.

35 *Gilding the Ghetto*, 37-38

The heyday of community action

For a time, the decline and fall of the post-war dream of the state-led betterment of society cleared space for community action to flourish. As Ronan Point and its aftermath had suggested, it seemed reasonable to believe that social democracy could be better achieved by involving the people it was intended to benefit, even if they had to fight their way to the table. Community action groups sprang up across urban Britain, campaigning on "council housing, playgrounds, historic buildings, public transport, childcare and adult education", winning tenants greater say in the management of their estates, for instance, and attracting the involvement of "people from diverse political traditions alongside the formerly apathetic". Activists set up housing co-operatives to oversee renovation and new construction, with the residents involved "responsible for collecting rents, allocating homes and appointing professional advisers." In the view of David Ellis, this was a "disruptive political insurgency" whose "challenge to the postwar social democratic settlement and to established modes of governance was as far-reaching as it was innovative".[36]

Thousands of these groups appeared in Greater London alone. One of the most successful, the Covent Garden Community Association, was set up in 1971 to fight plans to demolish the majority of buildings in the Covent Garden and Seven Dials areas of the capital. The redevelopment scheme, agreed by the Conservative-run Greater London Council, two borough councils and large construction companies, proposed to replace the eighteenth century buildings – many of which were empty, even derelict – with new offices, hotels, housing and a road. Against this alliance of the state and corporations, local residents and small businesses organised a campaign which pushed for rehabilitation of the existing architecture rather than its replacement. Local Labour politicians backed them and when the party recaptured the GLC in 1973, it played a major role in saving the area.[37] A Covent Garden Forum of Representatives, consisting of elected residents and local businesspeople, spent a decade involved in the pioneering regeneration process that followed.[38]

At the same time, proposals originally developed as the post-war settlement took place in the 1940s were being pressed into action to plough a motorway ring road through London, as part of the Greater London Development Plan (GLDP). 'Ringway One' was to run through the capital's run-down working-class districts, from Willesden in the north west of the city, east to Hackney, south to Lewisham, west to Battersea and back north via Kensington, whose poorer residents had just welcomed the Westway extension of the M40 outside their windows. A London Motorway Action Group and a London Amenity Transport Association duly formed; when the public inquiry into the GLDP opened, it received 28,392 formal objections. Once again, it was Labour's victory in the GLC elections of 1973 which proved instrumental in the community groups' success in stopping the scheme.[39]

36 Ellis, 'Against Nostalgia: On taking (back) control: lessons from Community Action in 1970s Britain' *Renewal* 25(1), March 2017, 53-54, 56-57

37 White, *London in the Twentieth Century: A City and Its People*, 2001, 69-70

38 'From Demolition to Conservation', The Seven Dials Trust, https://www.sevendials.com/history/from-demolition-to-conservation

39 White, 71-72; https://www.roads.org.uk/ringways/ringway1

This may have helped to lay the ground for Nimbyism today, but it is possible both to overcome resistance to the building of good, much-needed new infrastructure and to cheer local organising energy as a phenomenon.[40] Indeed, from around 1975 onwards, the focus of community action "shifted from opposition to drafting positive proposals". As Ellis notes, a "new generation of councillors and officers were receptive to the idea of collaborating with community activists to pioneer solutions to the salient social and economic problems of the period." Activists developed their access and expertise, drawing them closer into policy making, and paving the way for them to "pioneer new types of community institutions".[41]

This was a constructive collaboration between state and activists in the service of fostering community action – something that the contemporaneous failure of the CDP project was suggesting was necessary. However, this was not the only way of responding to the confrontations of the 1970s and the failures and frustrations of the post-war state.

40 Squaring this circle involves ensuring that in consultations with communities about development, it is not only the loudest voices that are heard, by designing the consultation process on that basis, for example, and providing funding or tax breaks to employers to make it easier for a wider range of local people to participate.

41 Ellis, 56

The fork in the road

As the CDP radicals had correctly detected, the consensus breakdown of the 1970s shifted the bounds of the politically possible, but not towards a socialist command economy, or even a more participatory version of post-war social democracy. The Thatcherite right pointed to disasters such as Ronan Point, and to resentment at the way the welfare state imposed its authority on working people, to discredit the whole post-war model and to offer market-driven solutions in its place. To an extent, this shift began under Labour. By 1977, environment secretary Peter Shore published an Inner Cities white paper which signalled a shift in urban policy towards tackling the economic causes of inner-city decline, rather than the socio-cultural symptoms – but doing so through public-private partnership. After 1979, the turn towards market solutions to the problems of the inner cities came to dominate, alongside a greater emphasis on fighting crime.

This approach sent new divides running through working-class communities, as some neighbours bought their council houses, while others lost their jobs. As Marilyn Taylor has suggested, "'community' was reinterpreted predominantly in terms of self-help, with the potential to substitute for what leading right-wing thinkers saw as excessive dependency on the state."[42] The community action politics of 1968-79 continued in a new, ambiguous context: while a right-wing government preferred to see community groups as an alternative to the state, increasingly left-wing local authorities were ready to see them as an ally. Those authorities were ready to involve community activists in a way that would have seemed bizarre a decade or so before, consulting them, bringing them onto committees, and giving their groups transformative levels of funding.

This had serious downsides, from wasting money and fostering dependence on state funding, to needlessly fuelling tabloid mockery and accepting activists uncritically as the representatives of complicated communities. However, the hullabaloo thus stirred up drowned out many quieter, more worthwhile projects. Given today's severe disaffection with politics, it's worth noting Stuart Hall's celebration of the Greater London Council's approach as "the sound of a real, as opposed to a phoney and pacified, democracy at work".[43] For some, this continued to point to a new, less commanding, more facilitative role for the state, offering funds, or permission, or expertise – providing resources but giving people with local knowledge more say over how they were used.

Viewed from today, the level of community action seems impressive. In Eldon Street in Liverpool, an unemployed forklift truck driver led a project to build new homes on the site of a derelict works. On London's south bank, the Coin Street Action Group campaigned for seven years to buy a derelict site slated for office development, and created Coin Street Community Builders to lead the successful creation of riverside gardens, shops and cooperative housing. A National Child Care Campaign led to the creation of community nurseries. Community groups "ran adventure playgrounds, established advice and information centres, provided training for the unemployed, offered adult education, delivered arts programmes, planned new public developments, and operated community transport services." But this was dependent on state funding, and eventually the Thatcher government put a stop to much of this, not least by abolishing the GLC and its equivalents, and, ironically, by imposing heavy-handed state conditions and monitoring.[44]

Thatcher was able to exploit the far left's noisy prominence in 1980s local government to justify closing down resources for community action, which often owed less to voluble hardliners and more to ordinary people's hard work. At the time, this turn seemed decisive. And looking back, the notion that the post-war settlement might have been reformed and democratized through the doings of plucky community groups seems embarrassingly naive. Given public discontent at

42 Taylor, *Public Policy in the Community*, second edition, 2011, 10
43 Hall, *Hard Road to Renewal*, 235, quoted in White, 314
44 Ellis, 57

the power of the trade unions and the failing economy, the late 1970s and early 1980s was not a good time to try to reinvent the post-war model. But more than forty years on, the alternative now looks discredited in its turn. Today's labour movement need not accept the accounts of the 1980s offered by either the Kelvin McKenzie-era *Sun* or its far left enemies. Nor need it mistakenly conclude that the idea of more participatory public services and collaboration between councils and community groups is somehow permanently impossible.

New Labour, New Deal for Communities

In 1997, Labour returned to power after eighteen years of Conservative rule, amid an increased focus on the question of community resilience. New jargon – "social capital", "civil society", "social entrepreneurs"[45] – sought to fuse the start-up energy of the 1980s with the emphasis on social conscience that had gone before. Blair established multiple units to renew those neighbourhoods excluded from the Thatcher boom. The core of this effort was the New Deal for Communities, which targeted 39 areas with an average population of 9900. These were not chosen on grounds of electoral strategy (as appeared to be the case with the Johnson government's Towns Fund), but on the basis of objective measures of deprivation. The aim was to bring these places' levels of crime, housing quality, education, health and worklessness closer to those in the rest of the country.

In some respects, this was a revival of the top-down attempt to foster local initiative that drove the CDPs – a continuity acknowledged in the seven-volume assessment of the project conducted by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University. However, the NDCs also sought to innovate, and were certainly able to spend more money than had been possible amid the economic woes of the 1970s. The scheme was also expressive of a period of greater political consensus. To a degree, it followed on from the efforts of Michael Heseltine's City Challenge and the attempts of 1994's Single Regeneration Budget to involve communities in regeneration bids.

Once again, the NDCs sought to square the circle of fostering autonomy while retaining central control. As Rob Imrie and Mike Raco wrote in 2003, while the programme was in progress, on the one hand the NDC's executive boards "are not given the bulk of their funding until they have engaged local communities in the development of wide-ranging regeneration plans". On the other: "large sums of government money have been spent on hiring 'expert' consultants from the private sector – indeed one critic has dubbed the NDC "'the new deal for consultants'".[46] The risk was that, to access resources, local people involved in the project were "expected to internalise a series of policy discourses and narratives, demonstrate adherence to particular programmes of government", when it might have been more productive for government to adapt itself.[47]

Attempts to engage local communities seem to have worked with some people. At least half of the members of 31 partnership boards were local residents; community representatives received training. Beyond that, forums were convened and dedicated teams were deployed to try to engage the rest of community. The relative largesse of the programme allowed for the provision of everything from facilities for parents of young children to food co-operatives aimed at improving health. In Bradford, local groups won funding to build three new neighbourhood centres, which then remained under the ownership of the NDC partnership. The Sheffield Hallam researchers reported that residents regarded their areas as much improved, and that gaps with the rest of Britain were narrowed, particularly on issues concerning place.

However, this approach also came up against hard limits. The report suggests that no earlier "ABI" (Area-Based Initiative) had "ever placed such an emphasis on engaging with local communities".[48] Yet, as was perhaps inevitable, most residents didn't engage, particularly young

45 Boyle; Taylor, 1
46 Imrie and Raco, 'Community and the changing nature of urban policy', in Imrie and Raco (ed.), 19, 27
47 Atkinson, 'Addressing urban social exclusion though community involvement in urban regeneration', in Imrie and Raco (ed.), 118
48 Batty et al, *The New Deal for Communities Evaluation: Final Report – Volume 7*, 2010, 35

people and businesses. And as we've seen, there were plenty of local initiatives that deeply engaged with their local areas decades before the phenomenon was crystallised in a three-letter acronym. Fifteen years on, as right-wing populism advances, it is striking to read that the areas judged least responsive to the NDC approach were "stable, homogenous, peripheral, 'White' estates" on the edge of what are inelegantly referred to as "non-core cities". In some cases, these estates were a legacy of top-down post-war planning. Their residents not only had fewer economic options than those in the urban areas, but were "less welcoming of change".[49]

More broadly, there are hints in the report that residents' expectations had to be managed down, that communities proved better at defining needs than delivering projects, that community involvement should have begun earlier, that staff inter-personal skills left room for improvement, and that the best results came when leaders of partnerships stayed in place for years – as Clement Attlee could have told them. Just as the ideological jargon of the CDP radicals alienated local people, at least according to Jim Callaghan, it is not difficult to imagine the NDCs' consultancy jargon of "annual delivery plans", "benchmarking" and "core indicators" leaving residents similarly unimpressed a quarter of a century later. Such terminology may have encoded useful approaches. It also captured the aspect of the NDC approach which sought to import the mechanical culture of corporate management into the places people called home. It cannot be that difficult to steer a path between Marxism and McKinsey-ism.

Nevertheless, as David Boyle has suggested, the 2000s marked the high point of community development funding. The Sheffield Hallam report ends on a note of foreboding, anticipating the austerity guillotine that was soon to fall, which cut short the legacy of the New Deal for Communities.

49 Batty et al, 37-38

The Big Society

In their 2010 manifesto, entitled *An Invitation to Join the Government of Britain*, David Cameron's Conservatives outlined their vision of creating "a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities", in which the state would help "social enterprises to deliver public services" and train "new community organisers to help achieve our ambition of every adult citizen being a member of an active neighbourhood group".

The thinking driving the idea pointed to similar concerns to those of the community movements whose story we've been tracing: the need to decentralise the state, empower neighbourhoods and repair social bonds. But where New Labour's NDCs had sought to do that in a structured, well-resourced fashion, engaging local people around specific goals, the Big Society remained – ironically – a strikingly Whitehall-led, top-down concept, which largely evaporated on contact with the difficulties of actual neighbourhoods. It created a youth volunteering programme, the National Citizen Service, and Big Society Capital, which financed organisations that addressed social issues. A Localism Act gave community groups the right to buy buildings and to challenge to take over the running of council services. But in the context of George Osborne's austerity budgeting, polling suggested two-thirds of the public saw uplifting calls for the revival of the spirit of volunteering as a euphemism for cuts.[50] As Sam Freedman, then a special adviser in the Department for Education, has observed: "Even if people had the time, and were willing, to engage in civic duty to this extent there is no plausible way complex and interconnected public services can be run by local communities in the absence of significant oversight, funding and support. None of which was forthcoming."[51] Even in the face of the riots of summer 2011 and the torn social fabric they revealed, the Big Society had little to offer; by spring 2012 it had faded from sight.

Cameron's advisers had seized on the notion of 'community organising', but this was already being put to much greater practical effect elsewhere. The East London Citizens Organisation (TELCO) – pluralist, broad-based, brought together in part through religious groups – had begun work in 1989,[52] challenging the disempowerment of ordinary working people. As London Citizens, it rose to prominence through its campaign for a 'London living wage'. This involved challenging the capital's big employers – not least City banks – over their contracting-out of cleaning, security and other services. The group exerted moral pressure on bosses to bring these staff back in-house, and then pay them decently.

London Citizens, later Citizens UK, took inspiration from the pioneering US organiser Saul Alinsky. However, Maurice Glasman, who spent a decade working with the group, has written that its approach was also "founded upon the traditions developed within Labour and trade union organizing based upon building relationships between divided communities so they could act on matters of common concern; developing leaders from within the working class and engaging in action agreed from within a common organization."[53] By campaigning in this way, it had more impact on Cameron's Conservatives than the Big Society. In his 2015 Budget, George Osborne significantly increased the National Minimum Wage, reaming it the 'National Living Wage', in a nod to the campaign and the impact its moral pressure had had. Osborne did not match the level campaigners had been pressing for, but the increase had significant impact on low pay.

50 Seldon and Snowdon, *Cameron at 10: The Verdict*, 2016, 154
51 Freedman, *Failed State: Why Nothing Works and How We Fix It*, 2024, 38
52 The original name was the Citizens Organising Foundation; see https://www.citizensuk.org/about-us/our-history/
53 Glasman, *Blue Labour: The Politics of the Common Good*, 2022, 108

Tough on populism, tough on the causes of populism

Part of the point of community organising is to address a problem identified by one of its gurus, the American organiser Arnie Graf: "As fewer and fewer people belong to political parties, as fewer and fewer people trust the state or the market, a large space opens for the dangerous populist movements on the Right or the Left that tap into people's anger and mistrust."[54]

Graf wrote that a decade ago – and now, here we are.

The Thatcherite, market-driven response to discontent with the top-down welfare state, rebadging citizens and consumers of services, has not restored people's sense of agency. If anything, in many cases, it has corroded it further. The sociologist Sacha Hilhorst has conducted in-depth study of the political thinking of people in two post-industrial towns: Corby in Northamptonshire (2019-20) and Mansfield in Nottinghamshire (in 2021). What she heard from her interviewees speaks to the central role of the community, and how politics affects it in fostering dangerous levels of disaffection. After years of seeing their public services decay, often in precarious, undervalued employment, feeling hopeless and disempowered, their interpretation of their treatment by democratic politics was that they had been tricked.

Where once they had gifted their votes and their trust to politicians who emerged from among them, and who had returned voters' generosity by looking after the community's well-being, what they now saw was self-seeking 'representatives' who did nothing for them – yet still expected their votes, and appeared ready to make any promise, no matter how empty, to secure them. This sense of violated mutual loyalty, Hilhorst found, had become entrenched as a belief that politicians were not just liars, but were corrupt. As she writes:

> politicians were widely understood as moral outcasts, whose perceived transgression of community norms served to reaffirm the existence of the norm, as the narration of their moral depravity offered the community an opportunity to rehearse their shared values.
>
> ...
>
> Those who interpreted politics largely through the frame of corruption often juxtaposed the care that ordinary, "real people" provided for one another with the lack of regard they received from politicians.[55]

Hilhorst concludes that 'politics' and 'community' are now cast as opposites. One of her interviewees, Amanda, is a Labour councillor but downplays that in her role running an allotment which grows food for needy local families, and as "an informal social worker", advising locals on their struggles with landlords and public services. This echoes Sid Weighell's dad's front room, back when Labour politicians were not so routinely suspected of betraying working people. This suggests that concrete community action might point the way to a gradual, painstaking re-legitimisation of politics, "drawing on the desire for care and sociability to reconnect people to civic life."[56] Meanwhile, however, several of Hilhorst's interviewees predicted that discontent would eventually erupt into riots.

54 Graf, 'Community Organising and Blue Labour', in Geary and Pabst (eds.), *Blue Labour: Forging a New Politics*, updated edition, 2015, 70

55 Hilhorst, 'Afterlives of legitimacy: A political ethnography of two post-industrial towns in England', unpublished DPhil thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2024. See also Hilhorst, 'Political legitimacy after the pits: Corruption narratives and labour power in a former coalmining town in England', *British Journal of Sociology* 76(2), March 2025, 278-294 https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.13169 (open access)

56 Hilhorst, 'Afterlives of legitimacy'. Similarly, Labour's former director of strategy recently suggested that the best way to restore trust in politics at local level would be for party members to "get out there and fill the potholes". (Power to Change webinar, 8 May 2025)

Conclusion

The labour movement, in almost all its elements, has long believed in the importance of community action, and acted accordingly. So the best way to build on all these past efforts, however flawed, is not to forget or dismiss them, swallowing the fallacious Cameron narrative that all that came before was top-down statism. Given that public funds are under greater pressure than they were in the 1990s, it is all the more vital to draw on the wealth of expertise and creativity waiting in local communities. Particularly as doing so might do more to restore a sense of agency, belonging, and faith in mainstream politics than any amount of benchmarking. Discontent with distant, top-down politics is a serious threat to democracy, but it also points the way to saving it. The state can neither dictate nor disappear: both options have been tried and the consequences are all around us. Government must instead create the conditions in which people can improve their own lives. The labour movement's various traditions now need to rediscover their common record of empowering community action, and work together to revive it. This history suggests some ways this can be done. The alternative – clinging to a broken status quo – is no longer tenable.