

Nothing Short of Rank Socialism!

Paul Sweeney MP

I recently had the pleasure of attending the launch of renovation works to a historic old primary school in my constituency. Derelict for several years, the school lies at the heart of the Parkhouse district of Glasgow North East, which I have represented in the UK Parliament since June last year. Long since disused for any pedagogic purpose, the Wheatley Group – the inheritor of Glasgow’s municipal housing stock – acquired it for conversion to new sheltered social housing.

The name ‘Wheatley’ and the history of the school itself evoked a reflection on the long and proud heritage of municipal socialism in Glasgow, and what the prospects are for that tradition to re-emerge in the future.

Parkhouse was one of the first districts to be developed for municipal housing by Glasgow Corporation after the passing of the historic 1924 Housing Act during the first Labour Government, led by Glasgow Labour MP John Wheatley.

The superior ‘cottage’ style of dwellings in Parkhouse was modelled on Ebenezer Howard’s ‘garden suburb’ concept, presenting a stark contrast to the city’s traditional tenements, and was intended to serve as a showpiece for the healthier post-war city.

State subsidies for house building, led directly to the creation of Glasgow’s municipal housing department, and saw large scale building of some 57,000 new homes in Parkhouse and other new districts during the inter-war period. Indeed, the pressure to develop suitable land for housing led to Glasgow more than doubling in size during the 1920s and 1930s, although it was not until after 1945 that new districts like Easterhouse, Drumchapel, Pollok and Castlemilk were fully developed.

Even to this day, Parkhouse remains one of the most desirable residential districts in the city – a testimony to an ambitious model of municipal socialism that has stood the test of time.

Glasgow’s Gilded Age

Glasgow has been Scotland’s largest metropolis for almost two centuries and is a city with an extraordinary legacy of fine Victorian and Edwardian architecture. The ‘gilded age’ prior to the outbreak of the First World War that bequeathed such a handsome cityscape saw Glasgow grow to become the fourth largest city in Europe - a status that was commensurate with its position as a world leading centre of industry - the wealth of which generated extraordinary civic investment in public buildings and infrastructure that was on a par with any major city in the world. The gas supply, water, electricity,

subway, fever hospitals, the tramways and the telephones all were in direct municipal ownership during the early 20th century, and there was much talk of Glasgow as a European model for municipal socialism.

Indeed, at the International Conference on Workers’ Dwelling Houses in Paris in 1900, a Glasgow Councillor, Daniel Macaulay Stevenson, after learning that municipal control of housing was regarded as impractical by delegates remarked that far from that being the case, it had been carried out to an ever-greater extent for twenty-nine years and elucidated the Corporation’s extensive portfolio of services under municipal ownership. The delegates felt that this was “nothing short of rank socialism”!

The impetus behind this interventionist model of civic government was the frenetic pace of population and economic growth. The rapid expansion of the city saw the population of districts like Govan increase more than tenfold: from 9,000 in 1864 to 95,000 by 1907. Such pressures resulted in slum housing conditions as private tenement construction failed to keep up with demand, and political pressure increased throughout the early 20th century to address this chronic problem.

Post War Planning

Glasgow was relatively lightly damaged by bombing during the Second World War, but the fervour with which subsequent urban planning policy was implemented would see a level of decimation of the city’s urban fabric that even the Luftwaffe couldn’t have hoped to rival. No less than 29 districts of the city were designated as ‘comprehensive development areas’ within which everything was to be demolished and rebuilt, including the road layout. A third of the city’s entire stock, was demolished. The first such development area, the Gorbals, saw the complete destruction of that district and the population reduced from 26,000 to just 10,000.

Glasgow is now only one of two cities in the western world - the other being Detroit - to have the ignominious title of being a former ‘million city’, which means a city that once achieved a population

of over one million but has since declined below that threshold again.

The scale of this sort of intervention to address the city's social problems is scarcely imaginable today. There is simply no capacity or scope within local government to undertake this sort of muscular intervention anymore – however misguided or hopelessly utopian it may have been.

Centralisation not devolution

Today, Scotland, after nearly two decades of devolution, now has the most centralised system of government of any country in Europe. Its current 32 unitary authorities are the unfortunate legacy of the final days of the Major government and its vindictive desire to break-up the bastion of radical Labour politics in the west of Scotland – Strathclyde Regional Council – and its defiant stand against the privatisation of the region's water supply through holding a local referendum on the matter in 1994.

We now have the absurdity of the Glasgow City Region's wealthiest suburbs carved up into self-contained enclaves, where the residents enjoy relatively low rates of council tax, while the urban core of the city itself is home to the poorest communities in the region, yet those residents must carry the burden for maintaining and operating all the core services and amenities that are enjoyed by its wealthier suburban 'free riders'. Not only has Glasgow been stripped of its residential tax base through historic depopulation and relatively recent gerrymandering of its suburbs, but the advent of the Scottish Parliament has seen a continuing war of attrition against the power of local government.

A notable example of this gradual emasculation has been the centralisation of public transport planning into the unaccountable and unelected Transport Scotland. Once Strathclyde operated one of the most advanced municipally operated integrated mass transit systems in Europe, pursuing a radical policy of re-opening abandoned urban rail lines such as the Argyll Line in the 1980s and 1990s; however since centralisation of transport planning in 2008, we have seen no substantial infrastructure investment occur in the city region's urban rail system; the most notable dormant project being the long-awaited Glasgow Crossrail scheme, which has been continually and arbitrarily frustrated by Transport Scotland.

Although laudable new programmes like the Transformational Regeneration Areas, which involves the construction of some 7,000 new homes within inner city districts as well as the infrastructure projects outlined in the Glasgow City Deal, offer some opportunity to reassert the role of local

government, these programmes remain heavily dependent on the largesse of central government, which continues to control the vast majority of council budgets and has passed on amplified cuts to it over the last decade – half a billion pounds worth in Glasgow's case.

Unless Scotland urgently addresses this issue of over-centralised governance from Edinburgh and rediscovers its radical tradition of municipal socialism, it is increasingly likely that Glasgow will fall further behind its peer cities in the UK, such as Manchester and Birmingham, as they establish new city region governments, centred on directly elected metro-mayors.

The Glasgow City Region has no similar pole of political influence, as it has been largely subsumed into Holyrood over the last two decades. British cities outside London already lag well behind their equivalent sized European peers in terms of productivity, but while English core cities are being re-equipped with the institutional capacity to address that gap, we see no similar impetus with Scotland's great metropolis of Glasgow.

The constitutional debate has been preoccupied with nationalist questions over the distribution of powers between the British Parliament at Westminster and the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood. It is now incumbent upon us all to break this narcissistic duopoly of parliaments and strive to rediscover our radical tradition of municipal socialism. We in the Labour movement are not driven by nationalist sentiment when it comes to constitutional questions, but by how best to structure government to serve the interests of delivering socialist policy.

The atrophy of municipal government in Scotland is therefore an urgent crisis that we must address boldly and with imagination. As I stood in that old school in Parkhouse watching its rebirth as new social housing, I was inspired to rekindle the spirit of John Wheatley, of Macaulay Stevenson - the great tradition of municipal socialism in Scotland, if we are to truly advance the cause of the common good in our great cities.

As we consider plans for a constitutional convention in the near future, the question of a municipal as well as parliamentary route to socialism must be firmly embedded at the heart of it.

Paul Sweeney is MP for Glasgow North East