

Time to restore local democracy

Richard Price (Leyton and Wanstead CLP) sets out what needs to change on our councils

Don't get me wrong. Some of my best friends are councillors. But things in local government have got to change, and change radically. Members' rights to choose their own candidates have to be fully restored, and the entire governance of councils needs to be overhauled by the next Labour government.

In 1926, the year of the General Strike, Labour stood 26 candidates in my area. Of these, 15 were manual workers, four were clerks, one was a bus conductor, two were "married women", one a "widow", and the professions were represented by two teachers (one man, one woman) and one optician. Many of these people worked 44-hour weeks, had little or no paid holiday, and weren't paid as councillors.

These days, many Labour groups consist of middle and senior managers, lawyers, a disproportionate number of landlords, and retired people. Most are owner-occupiers, many are multiple property owners, few are renters and even fewer live in social housing. As Mandy Clare points out elsewhere in this issue, it is not enough to tick the boxes on gender and diversity. We have to end the near-monopoly of the privileged and the self-interested, whose standard of living is well above the average of the areas they represent. We're all familiar, I'm sure, with disadvantaged BAME communities being "represented" by self-appointed community leaders and business people.

In order to do that, the trigger ballot system, which gives huge advantage to incumbents, must be abolished, and the ability of members to freely choose who they want to represent them restored. It is an open secret that in many areas in recent years, local government selections were manipulated by Regional Directors with the assistance of Local Campaign Forum officers to ensure sitting councillors were re-selected. Some of the cheating was completely brazen, safe in the knowledge that CLPs and members had little chance of redress. The scandals in Enfield, Newham and Sandwell were just the tip of the iceberg.

Last year, the NEC decided to defer consideration of local government for a year. We have confidence that the Democracy Review will make positive proposals this year. Much will depend on whether the trade union reps on the NEC support them, and it is essential that trade unionists lobby their leaderships to support the restoration of basic local democracy.

According to the Rule Book, members and local parties should have a role in developing manifestos and be consulted on major policy and financial issues. We have to end the freemasonry where this is seen as the property of a small inner circle of councillors. The culture where backbenchers are expected, under threat of withdrawal of the whip, to vote for policies they have had no time to study, let alone debate, must end.

Both the 'strong leader' and 'executive mayor' models of council governance are broken. In the name of efficiency, vast amounts of power and patronage are vested in a single person, who can hire and fire, promote or demote, and who is almost impossible to remove within a four-year term. We need to return to a committee system, and Group leaders should be elected by an electoral college that includes members and affiliates.

Independent oversight of ethical standards must be restored. In-house regulation by monitoring officers doubling as heads of legal (and often hired as mates of the leader) enables the worst councillors to get away with flagrant and sometimes illegal abuses, such as the failure to declare interests.

And while we're on the subject of interests, shouldn't members know in advance of candidates being selected what is their main source of income? I'm sure many of us are also aware of non-resident councillors, who claim to be living in the local government unit they represent, but may be living miles away, renting out their homes and failing to declare the interest. And why are councillors only obliged to declare interests in their own borough when they may own half a dozen houses in a neighbouring borough? Of course, not all landlords are incapable of disinterested public service, but the probability is that they will not see affordable housing in the same light as the rest of us.

And in what other branch of the economy can the employees decide on their own pay rise? I'm told that a generation ago council leaders received around double what backbenchers got. In some boroughs we're now approaching differentials of five and six times. It's time to cleanse the Augean stables, comrades.