

A New Start for Sutton Coldfield?

Stranded between the commercial success of Birmingham's city centre and the thriving suburban centres of Tamworth and Solihull's Touchwood, Sutton Coldfield town centre looks decidedly the worse for wear. The Town that once ranked as a commercial and retail centre alongside Lichfield, Walsall, Tamworth and Solihull, is in danger of sliding into an alarming decline. Locked inside a concrete and tarmac ring-road and now without the magnet of a major supermarket, the town centre desperately needs new investment, new shops, better parking, a bus station, and a quality night life scene befitting of the area instead of its current domination by the youth binge-drink culture.

Puzzled by the curious spectacle of such evident decline in the midst of one of the region's most affluent neighbourhoods, earlier this year I approached the Councillor, Dr Andrew Coulson, who until recently held the job of Birmingham's cabinet member for regeneration. I asked to see a copy of the Council's Town Centre Plan for Sutton Coldfield. I was eager to see what ambitions were laid out for the long-term recovery of Sutton's economic fortunes.

But the filing cabinet was bare. There is no Town Centre plan. Instead, a predatory queue of opportunistic developers has thrown in speculative bids to build isolated one-off schemes of flats and more bars. A half-cock bus station plan was tentatively prepared for the Council by the transportation consultants Mott McDonald 18 months ago. None of the options met public approval and the scheme is back in the cupboard. The former Sainsbury's supermarket site crumbles slowly, abandoned behind a Beirut-style barricade of rusting metal fences and growing piles of concrete rubble.

In the midst of the most desirable and expensive residential area in Birmingham's hinterland, populated by some of its most talented and able residents, the sorry tale of Sutton Town centre is more than just a symbol of local economic decline. It is an indictment of a failed system of civic governance. It shouldn't happen. It tells us something is fundamentally wrong.

So what's the problem? Now, as a duly selected Prospective Parliamentary Candidate, I have to be careful here. Quietly behind the scenes many of us know Parliament still basically limps along with procedures crafted essentially to enable eminent Victorians to spend the morning in the office, lunch at the club, and later into the evening in

Westminster sorting out the empire. But then it has always been a remote place operating far from daily concerns of working people. Local government on the other hand was designed at once by those same Victorians as the fountain-head of local vigour, the prime source of local industry and ambition, for energetic reform and local progress. Yet local government has lost the will and the wherewithal to save Sutton Town centre. Much though we berate the limitations of Westminster, they are as nothing to the dismal failure of traditional local government to respond to the 21st century challenge of invigorating our local neighbourhoods. Possibly this can be understood when faced with the longstanding structural crises of our inner cities. But nothing can excuse the neglect and abandonment of Sutton Coldfield, short of a 'major system failure'.

Fundamental to the problem is the old-style party political system. When traditionally Conservative Sutton was joined in 1974 (at the behest of Edward Heath) to boost the party's vote in predominantly Labour Birmingham, the seeds of the present crisis were sown. For 30 years a largely Labour Birmingham turned its back on Sutton Coldfield. And a solidly Conservative Sutton Coldfield denigrated what little Labour sought to achieve. While Labour politicians looked to the City centre, Conservative politicians retreated into the indulgence of negative criticism. Where Sutton needed cross-party action and clear positive civic leadership, it found itself the victim of inter-party warfare and the battle for narrow party-political advantage.

So wherein lies hope? Curiously, Labour's current national difficulties are spawning a raft of ideas that promise to sweep aside the structural flaws in the system that have so damaged Sutton's prospects. How so? Labour it must be admitted, currently lies exposed to a fault line in public confidence running from our policy on Iraq to the political performance of our cities and the quality of our public services. I see cracks appearing under our parliamentary procedures, our relationship with the media and the stability of the very infrastructures through which we live out our lives in modern society. The ballot box is ever more deserted. Yet strangely and to its credit, Labour shows signs of responding with positive enthusiasm to the challenge of renewing the contract between governing and governed.

It is an immensely fertile time for progressive politics. International thinkers such as Anthony Giddens and Robert Putnam, yes and Matthew Taylor of New Labour are addressing the fundamental role of politics in the community. Active politicians have a

responsibility to administer the last rites to systems no longer appropriate for the societies we live in. They have a further responsibility to come up with, and make credible, alternative models. Crucially, we must preserve what is left of the representational function of the Councillor but we do have to move on, we cannot persevere with a system unable to deliver its root *raison d'être* – enabling its citizens to manage their lives and reinvigorate their own neighbourhoods. And all too often, it's the elected Councillors that are as likely to be part of the problem and get in the way of solutions.

So the recent publication of the discussion paper from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, proposing a radical alternative picture of local government in 10 years time, has raised some excitement (*'The Future of Local Government – Developing a 10 Year Vision'* published by the ODPM 27 July 2004). Here there are some possible answers. Tucked away inside a seemingly- innocuous civil service document lie some highly controversial proposals. Such as self-management of local housing. A bigger role for local individuals in designing and running local services, beyond the party political remit, as we now have already in parent governors. To re-fashion the now-infamous 1983 Labour manifesto, the ideas amount to 'a fundamental and irreversible transfer of power, from the state and the political parties, to neighbourhoods and to active local citizens'.

In short, hope lies in devolution, in decentralising power, in active citizenship and in scaling back the dominance of the party political machines. In the case of Sutton, this means 'in Birmingham, but not run by Birmingham'. It could mean for example, a cross-party, non-political Town Centre Summit where residents, businesses, developers, public administrators and a true 'big tent' of local politicians, can take a long, cool look at the town we want to create 10 and 20 years hence.

And if it means politicians and people re-engineering a more equal relationship, it also means active citizenship as a positive counterweight to the deadweight of party political machine. It means political parties accepting a more subordinate role, but it also means local citizens accepting the obligation of active engagement. That in essence, is the cornerstone of a 'new deal', a new start for Sutton Coldfield and for a new 21st century interpretation of British social democracy.

This, in essence was also what Labour's 'Big Conversation' was about. An idea that received a bit of a mauling in the press, but we in Sutton Coldfield insisted on organising

meetings simply and honestly to engage the electorate. The results were surprising and encouraging. A wide diversity of people turned up to give their views and responded very positively to an honest appeal starkly to 'tell us what you think'. The event was by no means an answer to the shifts and movements that have affected how we live and how we organise society. It could be said, however, to give some succour to the optimists among us who have not yet despaired of the people investing their talents in their society for the purpose of making it better. Its small beginnings but that's how all revolutions start. And it could yet help to put a flourishing smile back on the face of Sutton Town centre!

Dr Rob Pocock is Labour's Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for Sutton Coldfield and a co-presenter of BBC Radio 5 Live's Richard Bacon show.