



T I N H A T T O N

Keir Starmer has so far – just about – rubbed along with elected Labour leaders like Andy Burnham but Derek Hatton offers a warning from the past, writes **Andrew Southam**. Illustration by Matthew Tittley

Keir Starmer and his new chief of staff, Sue Gray, assured current Labour metro mayors including Manchester's Andy Burnham and London's Sadiq Khan of the party's intention to continue devolving power.

Surprisingly, no one seems worried about local circumstances that might

pit these new regional administrations and mayoral personalities against Whitehall in struggles over finance or policy.

Margaret Thatcher notably abolished the Greater London council in 1986, 21 years after being formed, on the grounds of efficiency while clearly frustrated over the council's political positions. Yet the most prominent set-piece showdown between central and local government remains Derek Hatton's Militant-influenced Liverpool city council defying

Liverpool over rate-capping in 1985.

Liverpool's colourful background, which blends working-class Protestantism, Catholic and Protestant Irish immigration and even a seam of freemasonry alongside seaport wealth, has always produced a distinctive political scene.

These conditions produced a mostly Tory-controlled council across the 19th century alongside a growing Catholic constituency that returned the only Irish Nationalist MP in an English seat, with journalist Thomas Power O'Connor representing Liverpool Scotland between 1885 and 1929.

Conversely, Irish Protestants made Liverpool the English home of the Orange Order – with many lodges continuing

today, providing significant support to a local Liverpool Protestant Party, which only disappeared after 70 years in 1974.

Although Labour won control of the council from 1956 to 1967 with only a year's blip, the Conservatives subsequently held power for another four years, losing it for the last time in 1971, with Labour and Liberals then vying but failing to gain control between 1974 and 1983.

Meanwhile, long-term decline had a heavy impact on the city in the 1970s and 1980s: the docks could not cope with large, sea-container-bearing vessels and heavy industry disappeared, notably marked when the last Meccano factory in Britain closed down in 1979, ending 75 years of Sir Frank Hornby's toy-making enterprise with 1,000 losing their jobs. Unemployment and the 1981 Toxteth riots created despair.

Labour's local party in Liverpool was infiltrated by Militant, a 1960s Trotskyist organisation created by founders who couldn't agree on a name so grudgingly chose 'militant' mainly because a notable 1930s socialist workers' newspaper in America had carried the title. Labour member Derek Arthur Hatton, a former fireman and community officer, fell under its spell and became a Liverpool councillor the same day as Margaret Thatcher entered Downing Street in May 1979.

Despite Militant-backed Labour pledging its intentions to the electorate, Liverpool's voters still had confidence to make it the governing party in the May 1983 local elections, much to the party's own surprise.

Hatton became the deputy leader, overshadowing actual council leader John Hamilton, a mildly-spoken former schoolmaster who lacked the stature to control Militant. When Hamilton wanted a secretary, he was instead given a personal assistant who couldn't type but happened to be a full-time Militant member.

Hatton's council then proved its radical credentials by abolishing the office of Lord Mayor, packing off the gold regalia to a museum and flogging off the ceremonial horses.

Headlines were made in 1985 when joining a collective action by 15 councils from Greenwich to Yorkshire defying the government overspending targets. Only

Liverpool and Lambeth stood firm after district auditors threatened to intervene: Hatton's Liverpool was emboldened by winning an extra £30m from Whitehall the previous year despite running a deficit, as the government wanted to avoid a distraction from the miners' strike.

This time the council threw down the gauntlet to London by maintaining a budget deficit and writing 31,000 council staff redundancy notices, prospectively, the biggest in British public history. Aghast local union bosses refused to issue the notices, which were instead delivered by a local taxi service, one cab crossing a picket line of protesting teachers.

Liverpool became a national story and Derek Hatton a household name, giving Neil Kinnock opportunity to mount his well-known purge of Militant from the party and Liverpool. His famous 1985 conference speech made compelling television with lines about the "grotesque chaos of a Labour council – a Labour council – hiring taxis to scuttle round a city, handing out redundancy notices to its own workers!"

A district auditor forced Liverpool to set a legal budget partly through a £60m loan from Swiss banks: Hatton and 48 other councillors were disqualified from office in March 1986 and ordered to pay fines.

Lambeth's Labour councillors suffered similar disqualification and fines, though not before police were brought in when mock wanted posters appeared in the local

supermarket displaying the photograph of the district auditor.

Both Neil Kinnock and his deputy Roy Hattersley missed Prime Minister's Questions in June 1986 to lead the expulsion case against Hatton and several other Militant leaders in a two-day hearing. Hatton used lawyers to seek an injunction, which failed, so he snubbed the whole affair, remaining in Liverpool. The NEC agreed on his and others ejection by a 12-to-6 vote. Hatton's exploits inspired, possibly, an Alan Bleasdale dark comedy, *GBH*, starring Robert Lindsay as a hard-left, man-about-town

council leader called Michael Murray who bullies primary school headmaster, Michael Palin, for ignoring a strike order. In June 1991, a transfixed nation watched weekly episodes as Murray, burdened by a childhood secret, breaks under the pressure, develops a hilarious arm tic and is eventually undone by the machinations of London employing MI5 in a delicious plot, with the graceful Lindsay Duncan as Murray's nemesis.

Everyone thought *GBH* parodied Derek Hatton even to the point of Merseyside police asking Channel 4 for access to future episodes, fearing that publicity might affect a court case against him. Hatton asserted that everyone apart from "Bleasdale and his mum" thought he was Michael Murray in a live television debate with Channel 4's deputy head of drama, who provided a tortuous defence, convincing neither him nor much of the country.

Few instances of defiance have so far arisen in real life since the metro mayoralalties appeared in 2017. Andy Burnham came closest when trying to resist Tier 3 lockdown measures in October 2020 unless the government provided extra funding. West Midlands mayor Andy Street created national headlines last year over briefly protesting Rishi Sunak's decision to abandon the second leg of HS2.

This spring sees four new metro mayors elected – two in Yorkshire, one in the East Midlands and one in the North East – adding to the current club of 10. Another four – Greater

Lincolnshire, Suffolk, Norfolk and one more in the North – are due in 2025 when non-mayoral devolution schemes also start in Lancashire and Cornwall.

However, it's still early days to see how local culture and characteristics might influence these new structures and affect relations with London. But current North of Tyne mayor Jamie Driscoll is crowd-funding a reasonable prospect of winning the North East mayoralty as an independent, after Labour rejected him as the official candidate supposedly for his hard-left views. The "new Hatton" may not be as far off as Starmer would like. 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿

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