

Militant Liverpool: a City on the Edge

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For some the 1980s is within living memory; others are familiar with it as a piece of history. Whatever your attachment to the decade that in many ways significantly shaped the Britain we live in today, this book serves to paint a great image of the contours of that bygone age. It covers the well-known story of Militant Tendency and the Liverpool City Council, but it is the emphasis on Liverpool as a city that sets this work out from the other literature. The authors' ability to marry the political, through the forum of the marginal Militant Tendency, with the trajectory of Liverpool is worth recognition. Both authors are academics at the University of Liverpool, so they have a clear motivation to depict the story of the city, to which they are both clearly attached. The book is also timely, published in May 2013 to coincide with the 30th anniversary of the event that it documents. Of course, the fact that the book is written during a period of austerity adds to its poignancy.

The authors set out their intentions, saying that they hope that 'readers from all persuasions will enjoy what we recount' (p. 5). Of course, it is not possible for me to speak for all readers, but the authors certainly succeed in their ability to making the book accessible, and therefore enjoyable. The scope of their research also allows those with a more cultural interest in one of the North's most varied cities to take some enjoyment from the book and the city of Liverpool is the red thread throughout the work.

The methodology of the authors is crucial to making the book an enjoyable read for those who might not be particularly interested in history or politics. The selection and use of 'typical' historical sources, such as

secondary literature and a broad range of newspapers, is elevated by the collection and use of oral testimonies. Often, particularly later in the book, it is these interviews that really carry the story. The authors intended this, saying that they hoped to provide ‘an account that lets the protagonists, both supporters and opponents, speak with their own voices’ (p. 5).

Also intended is impartiality, with a clear decision to avoid joining the ‘many voices that condemned, both at the time and subsequently, the City Council’s overall stance’ (p. 5). This stance is maintained admirably throughout the book, although at the end the authors are forced to hint their own position, saying that the ‘Liverpool Labour Council of the early 1980s was composed of ordinary Liverpool folk, with all their passions and faults’ (p. 206).

The book opens with a sharp punch; Neil Kinnock’s infamous speech to the 1985 Labour Party annual conference, where he criticised the taxi deliveries of redundancy notices from the council, and which is an easy way into the subject for those who might not be familiar with it. The authors then provide a succinct pre-history, explaining the problems that Liverpool Labour Council faced in the context of rampant Thatcherism and its associated cuts to public services.

The best bit of the introduction, however, lies with the authors’ ability to catapult us into the Liverpool of recent years, with which we might be familiar. Historic, troubled Liverpool becomes the Capital of Culture (2008), the city which opened the Liverpool One shopping complex and generally ‘got its mojo back’ (p. 3). An element of popular culture is used to paint this image; the authors remind us of the ‘Desperate Scousewives’ and ‘Big Fat Gypsy Wedding’ TV shows, which have given Liverpool a sort of cultural street cred previously lacking.

Yet just when we are imagining that today’s Liverpool has recovered from the turbulence of the 1980s, the authors remind us that, even today, North Liverpool in particular still faces problems. When we are considering that city might once again be suffering from the ‘entrenched poverty, deprivation, criminality and drug abuse’, with which it has often been demonised, we are reassured that the new mayor, Joe Anderson, is ‘working with, not confronting, central government to address these problems’ (p. 3). By this point in the book it is impossible not to understand the trajectory of the city and (at least for me, as a northerner myself), it is impossible not to feel incredibly sympathetic towards it.

Readers are then given some historical context to explain how the Liverpool of the 1980s came to be. The publication of the book on the thirtieth anniversary of the events described has enabled the authors to use documents recently released under the 30-year rule; we are told that the Tory government wanted to leave Liverpool to ‘its own destiny’ (a ‘managed decline’) (p. 4). The authors do a great job of getting readers to understand the problems of the city in the context of the de-industrialisation in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which Liverpool suffered terribly from.

Chapter one’s title is loaded with the imagery of decline; ‘Liverpool from world case to basket case’ sees the city’s problems stemming from its lineage of global trade and the subsequent, highly casual, employment patterns of dock labour. The authors describe what the implications for Liverpool’s working class might have been as follows: ‘Liverpool’s working class grew on a diet of casualised worked based around the docks that was poorly paid and notoriously volatile’ (p. 7).

The authors enable us to imagine, and empathise with, the perils of being one of Liverpool’s working class in the post-war period, and they show us how the working environment changed in the 1960’s. Better wages and culture were but a brief hiatus in the troubles of the city, and soon Liverpool was in trouble again. Government attempts to solve Liverpool’s problems, mostly around housing, followed; the Liverpool Inner City Partnership pledged additional funding, but such intentions were soon shelved by the Thatcher Government. The result was that no social housing was built in the city between 1979 and 1983. By this point, Liverpool was set on a path to be ‘the Bermuda triangle of British capitalism’ (p. 17), and we can understand why. Using the testimony of Jeremy Kyle’s predecessor, the 1990s chair of chat and MP for Knowsley, Robert Kilroy Silk, we know that Thatcher bemoaned Liverpool’s lack of entrepreneurship,

claiming that those living in the city had 'no get up and go' (p. 17).

The authors have done an excellent job of creating an image of the somewhat tragic Liverpool and the ruthless Thatcher administration by this point in the book. In an attempt to further place this polarisation in the context of class divisions, the authors reference the 1981 'Peoples' March for Jobs' (p. 17). By page 29 the authors suggest that Liverpool's left networks went beyond Militant Tendency, challenging the popular perception of Militant Tendency's ubiquitous nature on the council, and reminding us that actually only 13 out of 47 disbarred councillors were paid-up members.

In 'Liverpool responds to the crisis', the authors draw on the political history of the city. The genesis of Trotskyism in Liverpool is pertinent here, and it feeds into an assessment of what Militant Tendency could offer that other groups, such as the Socialist Workers' Party, International Marxist Group and Workers' Revolutionary Party, could not. Mostly, the authors argue, it was Militant Tendency's emphasis on being able to offer something to the working class that gave it credibility.

By chapter three, the authors also begin what goes on to be a focal argument, namely that Militant Tendency failed to engage with the 'new identity politics', around gender and race, for example, debates which gained currency within the left from the 1970s. The authors also argue that it was Militant Tendency's ability to monopolise meetings through moving formulaic motions that helped it to do well and by 1983, the authors claim, Liverpool Labour Council was 'elected on a wave of militancy' (p. 54). This leads onto the authors' key argument at this point; that Liverpool was 'militant', not 'Militant.'

Chapter four conveys the sense that there was a general left-wing consensus across the Council that became committed to fighting Thatcherism because of the Government's attack on key services. The authors point out that Militant Tendency appealed on 'bread and butter' issues that the people of Liverpool could identify with, and would need. The problem with this strategy was that it did not directly lead into a support for socialist politics. The authors later make the point that the failure to link daily issues with a political agenda was not a massive problem for the Militant Tendency members on Liverpool Labour Council, because they were motivated by helping the people that the Council represented. The 'Merseyside in Crisis' meetings, which were designed to build support for the case against obstructing central government cuts, were a pertinent example of this. Evidence of the Council's actions is given, such as the refusal to implement the required 1,000 job cuts and the creation instead of an additional 600 jobs (p. 71).

The details in this chapter really allow the reader to understand the tensions around these events. By page 75, we are reminded of the role of Neil Kinnock and his belief that it was better to try and preserve essential services in the wake of the central government cuts, rather than risk being thrown out of office by the District Auditor. Just when it looked like the Liverpool Labour Council was about to run into difficulties, there was a breakthrough. Like with the National Union of Mineworkers in 1982, Thatcher realised that in 1984, during the miners' strike, that Liverpool Labour Council was not a battle she could take on. The result was that extra funding was given and the Council's deficit was reduced by £20 million.

Chapter five, which focuses on the 1985 'budget crisis', outlines the sense of optimism amongst the Council, based around the belief that they had forced Thatcher to back down. Again, Kinnock's disapproval is used to frame these events and by the September 1984 Labour Party Conference, it was clear that rather than being heroes, Council members were viewed by Kinnock as 'liabilities' (p. 96). The authors manage to sketch in the details of the origins of the problems, whilst retaining their impartial stance. The situation painted is of a Council faced with either setting no rate or running a deficit budget. The second option, trying to run a deficit budget, was the one that was initially chosen. Yet this failed, and the Council did not set a rate. The ultimate situation, where no rate was set, launched the Council into illegality and caused the District Auditor to threaten it with bankruptcy, in wake of the financial losses incurred.

The Council's counter-tactic, to try and get the Labour Party to support them against the Government, hugely backfired. The strategy is one that has been told time and time again; the Council, committed to preserving jobs, issued redundancy notices, with some delivered in taxis. It is here that the collection of oral

interviews, particularly Derek Hatton's, elevates the work from what has gone before. For the reader the relevance of the opening Kinnock speech is clear and by this point, its context fully appreciated. In fact, the Labour Party commissioned the Stonefrost Report, which called for rate increases and pushed the Council to near-insolvency. By October 1985 Kinnock had 'lost patience' with the Council and supported the District Auditor, suggesting the use of troops if needed (p. 119). The Council had a reprieve, however, in the form of a generous loan from Switzerland. These details are presented in a clear, factual way, which allows the reader to understand the complexities of the incident.

Chapter six draws the focus back to Militant Tendency. It is a significant triumph that the authors have explained the key event, then added the political dimension, because it allows an independent understanding of both these intertwined factors. The authors make the point that the size of Militant Tendency was out of proportion with its influence and also that it was sometimes out of step with the broad left (on issues like race) but clearly affiliated through its opposition to Thatcherism. The authors make the point that Militant Tendency's workerism caused it to miss opportunities to affiliate with other groups, one of the major examples being those seeking to fight racism in Liverpool at this time (p. 130).

The issue of racism is a window into the bigger problem with Militant Tendency. Much of this discussion is based around the example of Sam Bond, who became Principal Race Relations Advisor in 1984, largely because of his connections to Militant Tendency. This example is used again by page 147, but becomes the crux of chapter seven, particularly around p. 155. The example of Bond, designed to argue that his approach 'backfired and fed into the undermining of Militant leadership in Liverpool' (p. 155) is a pertinent one, but one that is repeated.

Despite this perhaps excessive repetition, it does provide a good case study of the inner workings of Militant Tendency, which the authors explain has been perceived as 'bullying' in its style (p. 172). It is here that, again, the use of interviews is particularly effective, and this image is contrasted with one that represents Militant's approach as a more organic form of working-class debate.

Chapter eight is interested in the legacy of the event, particularly the expulsion and subsequent failed appeals of those Councillors who were expelled from the Labour Party. The notion of Militant Tendency being a 'cancerous growth' in the Labour Party is clearly evidenced through the party's annual conference in September 1985, where delegates voted 20:1 to keep the expulsions in place. (p182)The story continues into the late 1990s, albeit sparsely, but this is a useful scope.

Although the authors set out to avoid being drawn into the rights and wrongs of the Council's actions, they do conclude from their interviews that the intention of Liverpool Labour Council was to protect the people of Liverpool, rather than use the Council as a wagon for a revolutionary form of political change. They argue strongly that Militant Tendency failed to engage with the broader picture, such as racial oppression, and this limited its effectiveness. They reject the view that Militant Tendency was 'messed up'; a view that is 'too simplistic' (p. 206). The work also concludes with a note of optimism, that the regeneration of Liverpool has demonstrated that lessons have been learned from the 1980s, insofar as the central government, local authority and wide government are more willing to work together (p. 195).

The authors have produced what is an enjoyable and timely read; I read it twice in order to write this review, and the first time I found that I could not put it down. The work is also a good way into a subject that is well known, but perhaps not fully understood, by many. The only way that the book might be criticised is for its occasional repetition, but this is more than outweighed by its timeliness and by its use of interviews, which give a more detailed post-mortem of events than might have been gained from relying just on primary and secondary sources.

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