

Time to cut ties with the pandemic power grab

As the restrictions of the latest lockdown are eased, Claire Fox asks whether councils are clinging to their new powers to override democracy



Whether you think lockdown legislation was disproportionate or totally necessary, we can all agree that individual freedoms and rights have been suspended. Yet despite COVID restrictions slowly being rolled back, there are worrying signs that government, both national and local, seem keen to cling on to their new powers and retain control over people's lives.

One of the most egregious examples of this power-grab has been the way that some local authorities have opportunistically taken advantage of a pandemic to impose contentious non-COVID-related transport policy such as low-traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs) without democratic scrutiny.

When the Department for Transport's fast-tracked statutory guidance to allow local authorities to 'reallocate road space to people walking and cycling', councils took the bait, enforcing LTNs on local communities, without mandate or debate. While citizens were confined in their homes under order of lockdown, up sprang bollards, giant flowerpots and barriers to block off residential roads all over London and other UK cities.

As part of the 'Streetspace' active travel policy, these and schemes such as bike lanes and wider pavement, have been boasted about as behavioural nudges. The Department for Transport stated: 'Such changes will help embed altered behaviours and demonstrate the positive effects of active travel.'

Lockdown provided a once-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver a lasting transformative change in how we make short journeys in our towns and cities'. There is something shameful about politicians declaring that 'unprecedented

levels of walking and cycling across the UK during the pandemic' equate to a 'new era'.

After all, people were walking and cycling more because driving was all but banned for the majority; you could be fined for going for a spin to the beach. Worse is the bad faith push to make less car use a 'new normal'.

Low-traffic neighbourhoods have not eradicated pollution or congestion, just moved them to less well-off areas

Transport secretary Grant Shapps has said: 'When the country gets back to work, we need them to carry on cycling, and to be joined by millions more'.

The consequences of these top-down decisions have been dire for ordinary citizens. For example, LTNs have not eradicated pollution or congestion, just moved them to less well-off areas. For all the rhetoric about valuing our frontline workers, these schemes have had a devastating impact on those who use the vehicles for their livelihood.

The lack of consultation about such drastic changes to our streets has led to a backlash by myriad rank-and-file protest groups. Have local politicians listened to their complaints? No.

Deploying divisive identity politics, we are told that car ownership is 'highest among London residents of white ethnic origin', that 'women are less likely to own

a car. Campaigners are even demonised as selfish, macho gas-guzzlers, their journeys 'rat runs'. Nothing could be further than the truth.

For example, many campaigners are women, for whom the family car is indispensable for childcare, school drop-offs, ferrying teens, the weekly shop. So it is hardly surprising that one of the largest activist groups, Horrendous Hackney Road Closures, was set up by young mothers and carers.

Rather than being selfish, many local people use their car to help neighbours. As one anti-LTN activist, Ruth Parkinson notes, politicians seem oblivious to the usefulness of cars as a community resource.

One can only guess at why councils implemented LTNs amid a national health emergency, when little political scrutiny was possible. Might such a blatantly undemocratic tactic be related to the fact that anti-driving initiatives lack popular appeal?

Harrow LBC has just announced it is scrapping local green roads schemes after a full consultation with residents. LTNs were subject to disapproval ratings that ranged from 65% to 80%, while two cycle paths were unpopular with 93% and 87% respectively.

Politicians may have forgotten that their increased pandemic power is not a green light to make less democracy the new normal. I suspect voters will not share their memory-loss. ■

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soapbox



By Arianna Giovannini

Local government has been in the midst of several intersecting crises for some time. Recent analysis from the National Audit Office concluded the challenges our councils face are so profound that the entire system of local government cannot be fixed anymore with short-term interventions and is at the risk of collapse.

The latest report from the Local Governance Research Centre at De Montfort University, commissioned by Unlock Democracy, seeks to address these questions – developing a diagnosis of the key issues that have led to an erosion of local government autonomy over the past 40 years.

Lack of constitutional protection for local government means central Government has been playing with a loaded deck in shaping centre-local relations. Over the years, different administrations have used different tools to achieve this. The legal relationship between central and local government has been re-written and juridified through tighter legislation, ministerial oversight and guidance that considerably affected local government autonomy. The use of secondary legislation allowed the centre to extend its hold on the local level through the back door.

Funding has also substantially shrunk, while most grants have become ringfenced and tied to prescriptions and criteria set by Whitehall. Turning off the financial taps has eroded local autonomy. Central control has also been enacted through the weakening of local authorities' role in service delivery. Pushes towards increasing outsourcing of services has led to the creation of new tangled webs of accountability over service delivery. As a result, local government is often bypassed by a new magistracy of unelected bodies. Democracy has been squeezed out. Local government has become 'bigger' in size, but less powerful and accountable.

This process has been gradual, but local government has been repeatedly reformed, reshaped and hollowed out. In this way, we have walked backwards into increasing centralisation of our practices of politics, policy-making and democracy. Local government is the backbone of a healthy democracy and must regain its 'sovereignty': it needs greater independence, financial autonomy and a clear place in our constitution. ■

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