# Britain: Doncaster Council taken over by government fiat

**Dave Hyland**
**8 July 2010**

The sending in of commissioners to supervise the running of Doncaster's Labour-controlled Metropolitan Borough Council in South Yorkshire, England, is a major infringement of democratic rights. A democratically-elected body has been supplanted by an unelected cabal appointed by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, with the full agreement of the Labour opposition.

The commissioners also take over the powers of the recently created post of elected mayor.

Eric Pickles, the community's secretary, claimed his decision was based on the latest Audit Commission report originally ordered by the previous Labour government and published during the May general election. The report found the council was failing due to "a culture of poor governance".

On this basis Pickles sent in a team of commissioners with powers to appoint, discipline or dismiss officers and ensure council decision makers do not fail to act or act against the advice of their statutory officers. They will have "powers to appoint, discipline or dismiss officers".

A non-executive Intervention and Recovery Board will support, challenge and monitor progress delivery, alongside the commissioners, reporting to the secretary of state.

The chief executive of Kirklees Council, Rob Vincent, will be the new chief executive of the council, "who will oversee the appointment of other key officers and secure value for money from its £450 million revenue budget".

These measures are more draconian than any ever imposed on a council, well beyond the ministerial interventions the commission recommended for Hull and Hackney in 2003. Yet the implications of this move for the rights of voters to elect their governing bodies have hardly been mentioned by the media and political establishment.

Pickle's announcement was endorsed by leading Labour MPs for the Yorkshire area, Caroline Flint for Rother Valley and Ed Miliband for Doncaster North—a challenger for the Labour leadership. This enabled him to declare that, "All parties have agreed that intervention is needed, and the package of measures we're announcing will ensure that Doncaster gets the proper leadership and expertise that is urgently needed for turning the situation around".

He failed to explain how this was going to be accomplished with the government pushing through a massive austerity budget.

The Audit Commissioner's report followed a hysterical media campaign surrounding the torture by two brothers, aged 11 and 12, of two other children in the former pit village of Edlington. One year earlier a government intervention into the town's children services had been ordered, when it was made public that seven children known to the service had died in a three-year period.

It also focused upon political conflicts between the Labour council and the mayor, the English Democrat Peter Davies and his cabinet of three Conservatives and three unaffiliated councillors.

The report criticised the council for "slowness in producing a Local Development Framework". It stated "pursuit of long standing political antagonisms is given priority over much-needed improvements to services for the public". Councillors were described as "venomous, vicious and vindictive" and responsible for widespread "bullying and harassment" of council officers.

While the commission expressed the view that Mayor Davis and his cabinet "were not up to the job", they condemned Labour councillors for putting their "hatred of the mayor" before their responsibilities to local people and electors. This had supposedly resulted in poor housing, poor schooling, high crime and poor health, and was the reason many local adults were too unhealthy and/or unskilled to find new jobs.

Like his Labour predecessors, Pickles would like the outside world to believe that the dire state of Doncaster's social services is simply the result of problems within the local council. While it is true that the Labour council has plenty to answer for, this alone does not explain the appalling fall in the standard of social care in Doncaster that is the direct result of the anti-working class policies pursued by successive Tory and Labour governments nationally for over 30 years.

The Audit Commission was a mechanism originally created by the Thatcher Tory government in 1983 to impose financial discipline on councils. It was brought in as primary auditor of local public services under the Local Government Finance Act

© World Socialist Web Site

"to provide assurance and promote value for taxpayers' money across local government".

Its role was to intimidate local authorities into tightening their budgets and forcing through cuts. After Labour came to power in 1997, a number of amendments were made extending the commission's powers. In 1999 local authorities were given the new duty to make arrangements "to secure continuous improvement in the way in which their functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness". The commission was given the power to carry out inspections to make sure an authority was in compliance with this duty.

The Local Government Act 2003 gave the commission power to inspect registered social landlords, as well as placing Comprehensive Performance Assessment [CPA] on a statutory footing. The Health and Social Care [Community Health and Standards] Act 2003 brought the National Health Service under its auditing control and transferred certain functions relating to social services to the commission for Social Care Inspection.

The Serious Crime Act 2007 allowed it to carry out data matching. A year later the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act [2007] altered the Commission's structure, made various changes and extensions of its powers including a new power to advise and assist public bodies, and another to undertake Comprehensive Area Assessment [CAA].

This has been used to undermine local councils and facilitate the steady privatisation of the social services.

Doncaster has been hit particularly hard as a result of this ongoing offensive against the working class. Margaret Thatcher used the army alongside the police to battle the pickets along the Nottingham/South Yorkshire border in the 1984/85 miners' strike, which was lost due to the refusal of the National Union of Mineworkers leadership under Arthur Scargill to challenge the treachery of the Trades Union Congress and Labour Party. The resulting economic devastation not only affected the mining villages, but the town as a whole.

Labour's embrace of the capitalist markets under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown compounded this already terrible situation, encouraging the most self-serving and corrupt elements. In 1997 a police investigation was launched in Doncaster, which eventually led to 74 arrests and 23 Labour councillors being convicted for expenses fraud. The centre of the "Donnygate" scandal was a property developer and two senior Labour Party councillors. In 2002 they were sentenced to 11 years in jail.

Another innovation was the introduction of a "cabinet", into council meetings, which undermined democratic control over local authorities by allowing major decisions to be made by half a dozen people behind the backs of the majority of councillors and the electors. This often involved concluding contracts drawn up in secret with private companies.

In 2002 a referendum to have a directly elected mayor was passed on a 25-percent turnout. Labour held the post until last year, when the sitting mayor withdrew his nomination as a result of the children's social service scandal. The right wing nationalist English Democrat candidate Peter Davies beat an Independent after second preference votes were counted, a total of 25,000 votes out of a population of over 291,000.

Davies, a religious education teacher, is anti-European, anti-"political correctness" and calls for a devolved English parliament and cuts to immigration. His son is the Tory MP for Shipley and chairman of the Freedom Association's anti European Union campaign, Better Off Out.

With no other English Democrat councillors, Davies co-opted three Conservatives and three uncommitted councillors to make up his cabinet. For the last 12 months they have been at daggers drawn with the 15-8 majority Labour-controlled council. Local newspapers had a field-day reporting on the factional in-fighting and making it appear it was impossible for everyday council work to proceed.

Pickle's has sent Rob Vincent and his team to unblock this jam. Vincent is reportedly on £176,000 per year, well beyond the dreams of the vast majority of Doncaster workers. Instead of the previously well paid skilled jobs in engineering or the mines, many are either unemployed or confronted with poorly paid jobs inside call centres or one of the malls such as the Lakeside shopping centre. Even these are in decline, as the call centres move away and the austerity measures begin to take real affect. The jobs promised at the recently-built Robin Hood Airport never fully materialised and now there is a question mark against its survival.

Drugs, binge drinking and sexually-related diseases are widespread problems. The number of baby deaths is among the highest in the country. In 1980, before the miner's strike, according to the Social & Spatial Inequalities unit at the University of Sheffield, the breadline poor, excluded from participating in the norms of society by their income, in Doncaster stood at 22.7 percent of the population. Five years after the miners' strike, in 1990, this had risen to 28.10 percent and in 2000 to 34.60 percent

The infighting in the council is ultimately a reflection of the nervousness and divisions within the political elite over how to impose cuts in face of the social tensions created by this class polarisation.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**wsws.org/contact**


© World Socialist Web Site