

UK: Brent Council conducts night-time raid to force library closure

Paul Bond
6 June 2012

Barely a week after Mohammed Butt, the new leader of London's Brent Council, promised campaigners he would hold off removing murals and furniture from Kensal Rise Library, council workers, supported by police, were sent into the building at two o'clock in the morning to do just that.

Both the council and the owners of the site, All Souls College Oxford, continue to claim sympathy for the library campaigners while insisting that they are powerless. Each claims that its hands are tied by the other, while the library has been gutted and removed.

Kensal Rise is one of the highest profile libraries axed as a result of the government's cuts programme. Labour-run Brent Council announced a £41.7 million cuts programme for 2011/2012 alone, with further cuts still to come, including the closure of six libraries, half the borough's total provision.

The campaign group Brent SOS launched legal challenges to the closures. Elsewhere in the country, as in Gloucestershire and Somerset, such challenges won a stay of execution for the libraries. But these delays were granted on technicalities relating to "public sector equality duties". The courts supported the position that the councils were not in breach of any responsibility to provide a service by cutting libraries, leaving the way open for future cuts to be made.

In Brent, the legal challenges were not successful. The court rejected Brent SOS's initial challenge. An appeal to the legal arguments used in the Gloucestershire and Somerset cases was rejected. In late February, the Supreme Court refused campaigners any further right of appeal, saying there was "no arguable point of law" supporting it. The law accepts fully the need to cut services to balance council books.

Such was the widespread anger at these library closures that councils sought to encourage community

groups and protesters to shoulder the financial and administrative responsibility for the crisis in library provision by developing voluntary schemes. Such schemes are a dead end. They resulted in campaigners offering councils advice on how and where to make cuts, including redundancies.

South London charity Greener Bexley, which took over Bexley Village library, announced that it would be funding a basic free service by a two-tier subscription platform for more-advanced services. Brent SOS, too, advanced a business plan for community management of the library at no cost to the council. Despite this, after the Supreme Court decision, the council said that it had failed to make £400,000 of savings because of the delays involved in fighting the legal challenge, and these would have to be implemented elsewhere.

Two weeks ago, on the last day in office of former council leader Ann John, council workers were sent into the library to pack up books for removal. Protesters blocked them, and urgent phone calls were made to incoming council leader Butt. Eventually, the council workers were instructed to withdraw.

The purpose-built Kensal Rise library was opened in 1900 by American author Mark Twain. All Souls College Oxford, which owns the land, provided it for use under a covenant that it must be used as a public library. If it ceased to be used as such, the land reverted to All Souls. The campaigners, anxious to prevent this clause being invoked, have maintained a pop-up library in the grounds since the building was closed.

It was clear throughout that the council wished to trigger this clause. Butt told campaigners that he could not guarantee the books in the library would be kept on site during the negotiations, as "the Council needs them". This was said even as the council was removing shelving from other library sites.

In correspondence in March, Thomas W. Seaman, the Estates Bursar of All Souls, said the College “would be happy to consider the Library being kept open” under community proposals of the Friends of Kensal Rise Library. However, he noted, “We have received the impression that the Council is not keen.... If this is the case, it has nothing to do with the College”.

A week after the attempt to remove books and fittings, Butt promised campaigners that the murals and furniture would be safe. Campaigners requested a delay until the council had organised a joint meeting with campaigners and the College. Instead, last Tuesday, around 15 council workers under Property Officer Richard Barrett, supported by around a dozen police, entered the building between 2 a.m. and 3 a.m. Campaigners were unable to mobilise in time to defend the library and had to watch as the council stripped it of its books, furniture and murals. The council workers also removed the plaque commemorating Mark Twain’s involvement in the opening of the library.

Butt said afterwards that he had not authorised the removals, which were a legacy from his predecessor. He claimed he had not known of the planned action until midnight because of IT problems.

The reversion clause in the covenant has, he insists, been activated, and deeds handed back to All Souls. Seaman told the press after the raid that the College had “made that gift and there was only one condition: that it continued to be used as a library. Others, i.e., the democratically elected officials of the people of Brent, decided to close that library and therefore they triggered something—which is a law, which we have no control over; it’s an act of parliament—and now it’s reverted to our freehold.”

Butt acknowledged to protesters that the Council had no wish to freeze the transfer of ownership, and the College is likely to put the site up for sale at commercial rates shortly.

The Council has promoted the idea that, in the words of campaigners, “they can give the building back to All Souls and then ask All Souls to let us have it, instead of just letting us have it themselves.” However, Butt also told them that it would be difficult for the Council to have a community-run library in the borough, as this would undermine their Libraries Transformation Project—the proposals for a library provision of only six libraries across the borough.

Campaigners described the idea that a volunteer scheme would undermine the Libraries Transformation Project as “verging on the pathetic.” But this is based on their proposal for “a small, volunteer run community library” and throws the campaign back to appeals to a council that is intent on implementing cuts.

Opposition to library closures must not continue to be diverted into a fight over spreading cuts more evenly, or fire-fighting individual instances. Placing the burden of running costs onto an increasingly impoverished population cannot be the basis for defending the libraries, or any other social provision.

Opening the library, Mark Twain said, “I think that the legislature should not compel a community to provide itself with intelligent food, but give it the privilege of providing it if the community so desires.”

An economic and political order that is systematically destroying the ability of large sections of the population to access the riches of human culture cannot be reformed, but must be replaced. Stopping these vicious attacks on cultural and educational provision requires an alternative socialist perspective for a mass movement of opposition to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government and councils of all stripes that collude with its cuts programme.



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