

## How to resist the threat from the far right

**The Labour government's take back control legislation is welcome but bolder thinking is needed if the far-right threat to our democracy is to be permanently thwarted, writes Robin Hambleton, emeritus professor of city leadership at the University of the West of England, Bristol.**

Prime Minister Starmer is right to argue that to stave off the populist right the government needs to make 'a material difference to people's lives.'

Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner is also right to stress that her department – the sensibly renamed Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government – is now working to 'rebuild local government, with integrated, long term funding settlements to local leaders, giving them greater certainty and the ability to plan for the long-term.'

These steps are to be warmly welcomed by all those who recognise that strong local government has a vital role to play in meeting the challenges the country now faces.

But, given the emergence of the threat posed by the far-right, a more fundamental restructuring of local/central relations within our country is essential.

Allow me to introduce an international perspective to this debate.

### *An open pathway for the far-right*

Readers of LGC are more than familiar with the fact that the UK now has one of the most centralised governments in the western world. This creeping super-centralisation has impaired our government's effectiveness as measured by a raft of economic, social and environmental indicators. It has resulted in unacceptable regional inequalities and has eroded trust in government and in politicians.

In addition, and not widely noticed, the centralisation of power in Whitehall provides an open pathway for far-right politicians to reshape our country at some point in the future.

The collapse of local government in Hungary illustrates my point. Viktor Orban, the populist Hungarian Prime Minister, has since 2010 eroded press freedom, damaged judicial independence, and enfeebled elected local governments.

A consequence is that Hungary, precisely because its constitution does not provide adequate protection for elected local governments against an overbearing central state, has lurched away from decency and integrity in public affairs. Hungary has changed from being a society characterised by active citizen participation and the existence of democratically accountable local and central government, towards one in which political power has been centralised in an extraordinary way, with national politicians becoming increasingly authoritarian and repressive.

### *Constitutional protection*

The first step is to recognise that UK society is, because power has been over-centralised in Whitehall over a long period, entirely vulnerable to a far-right takeover.

As in Hungary, we have created a way of governing that does not provide any adequate constitutional protection for elected local governments.

Gordon Brown's Commission, 'A new Britain: Renewing our democracy and rebuilding our economy', published in December 2022, provides good pointers for the way forward.

The Brown Commission offers forty sensible recommendations but, possibly because the far-right threat did not loom so large in 2022, the recommendation relating to the constitution is nowhere near strong enough. It states that: 'There should be a constitutional requirement that the political, administrative and financial autonomy of local government should be respected by central government.'

This, we can now see, is entirely inadequate. It is self-evident that any central government - established or incoming - can say it 'respects' the role and importance of local government and then take no lasting action to protect the democratic and innovative political space provided by local democracy.

### *Swedish example*

If the far-right threat to our democracy is to be thwarted it is essential for the Labour government to put in place, as soon as possible, solid constitutional protections establishing the formal, legal autonomy of all elected local governments in the UK to do things differently.

This is a straightforward suggestion that has been implemented in many democratic countries. For example, fifty years ago, Sweden, in the 1974 Instrument of Government Act, set out the basic principles for political life in Sweden defining political rights and freedoms.

As I have set out in these pages, Sweden's very strong system of powerful local government has helped the country deliver not just far better economic growth than the UK, but also a superior performance than the UK on every environmental and social indicator you can think of. (*Robin Hambleton 'Economic growth Swedish style', LGC, 30 September 2022: <https://www.lgcplus.com/politics/devolution-and-economic-growth/robin-hambleton-economic-growth-swedish-style-30-09-2022/>*)

It is worth highlighting that citizen participation is highly developed and voter turnout in local government elections in Sweden is 80%. Yes, that's 80%. This was the case even before Sweden decided to synchronise local and national elections on the same day.

### *Dispersing formal power*

Yes, it is true that the far-right Sweden Democrats attracted 20% of the national vote in the 2022 General Election and this has given them a 'confidence and supply' influence over the current national government. This is, of course, worrying.

My point, however, is that, even if the Sweden Democrats win more influence at the next General Election in 2026, their ability to advance their misguided aims will be stymied by the Swedish constitution. Elected local authorities in Sweden have immense power. It follows that a far-right party would have to win power in a majority of the 21 regions and 290 municipalities that exist in Sweden to make any significant difference to the values that will guide the future development of this country.

Sweden provides, then, an example of a country with a truly vibrant civic culture. Elected local authorities have substantial fiscal and policy power and, to use Prime Minister Starmer's words, they make 'a material difference to people's lives.'

The evidence demonstrates that, if UK political leaders, both local and central, follow the Swedish approach to constitutional redesign and make radical steps to disperse formal power in our country they can offer us not just a much brighter future - they can also help to protect us from a far-right takeover in 2029.

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<https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/cities-and-communities-beyond-covid-19>