



Thinkpiece
#82

The new Jerusalem at our feet?

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July 2015

This thinkpiece is a longer version of Hilary's essay in ['Finding our Voice – Making the 21st Century State'](#).

About Hilary Wainwright

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About Compass

Compass is a home for those who want to build and be a part of a Good Society; one where equality, sustainability and democracy are not mere aspirations, but a living reality. We are founded on the belief that no single issue, organisation or political party can make a Good Society a reality by themselves so we have to work together to make it happen. Compass is a place where people come together to create the visions, alliances and actions to be the change we wish to see in the world

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the late Roy Bhaskar for discussion and guidance on the theoretical issues and the late Kenny Bell and Tony Benn for political inspiration in opening up in exemplary practice the possibilities I describe.

The new Jerusalem at our feet?

We are in the middle of a political transition without knowing precisely where we are going. We are moving from the settled and familiar order of a mixed economy in which the state was responsible for social provision and material infrastructure while the private market catered for production and individual desires. Workers for both state and market had the right to organise and to strike. It was seen as natural that the state, a hierarchy of professional experts, local and national, was directed by politicians with a five-year electoral mandate. Their political parties represented either bosses or labour. That was democracy as we knew it.

Now, the market – or the private corporations that dominate the market - is breaking up the state, destroying public spaces and undermining civic organisations such as trade unions and non-governmental associations. We see elected politicians from different parties encouraging the process, under economic and political pressures beyond their national reach. At the same time, voters across Europe on both the far right and on the radical left are disengaging from conventional politics and experimenting with new political forms. Others are inventing new forms of democracy, experimenting with a politics independent of party, and attempting to transform the state in the process. If today we think of the word “state” we think of conflict, disintegration and repression. But it also conjures images of change and struggles for more radical democracy.

From Brazil to Coin Street

We saw the ebbs and flows of this process in struggles to exert direct democratic control over municipal budgets in Brazil. The impetus had been a revolt against corruption and the subversion of the state to private interests. It was evident, too, when community and cultural activists at the Marsh Farm estate, near Luton, appropriated New Labour’s rhetoric of “community-led regeneration” and made it work for the people. It is seen in Coin Street, between the Thames and Waterloo Station, where the community of houses with gardens and squares of local shops and restaurants contrasts with the surrounding environment of tower-block apartments and offices and soulless supermarkets and chain restaurants. And finally, from the inside of local government, we heard it from “back office” council workers in Newcastle on Tyne who not only halted privatisation but improved the service they provided and used cost savings to improve care for the elderly and other front-line services.

These stories all illustrate the changing dynamics of power and they challenge us to analyse the nature of the transition and to look beyond our ideas of democracy.

But power as domination (“power over”) is distinct from power as a transformative capacity (“power to”).

Democracy as we have known it has been concerned with competing to use government instruments of power to manage the state according to the will of the people expressed through an electoral process. It has been a paternalistic notion of meeting the common good and is founded on a close bond between knowledge, expertise, and authority. The “will of the people” is interpreted and implemented by those employed by the state.

By contrast, power as a transformative capacity involves breaking the bond between authority and knowledge. It involves a popular understanding that the dominant order depends on the work and practical knowledge of everyday power including the power to refuse and the power to transform: for example, women sharing their knowledge and creating the capacity to challenge male power and transform gender relations; workers moving from strikes to pooling their practical know-how to transform the purpose and organisation of production.

Some thinkers counterpose these two forms of power (for example, John Holloway in *Changing the World Without Taking Power* distinguishing between changing the state on the one hand and developing direct forms of democracy in society on the other).

The four examples below show that a genuinely democratic state needs a combination of the two forms of power.

1. Participatory Budgets

Towards the end of the 20th century, the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, capital of Rio Grande del Sol, in Southern Brazil was a working example of a radical democracy combining representative and direct democracy. The experiment was directly shaped by the history and politics of the Workers Party (Partido Trabalhadores or PT) whose candidate won the mayoral elections in Porto Alegre in 1989. The PT had been founded by militant trade unions, urban movements and the powerful movement of the rural landless along with liberation theologians and radical intellectuals. Together they led the resistance to the decade-long military dictatorship. From the start, the PT combined a respect for liberal democratic rights and the rule of law. From the struggles against the dictatorship and from its constituent movements it inherited principles of popular participation, education and capacity for self-government. They had witnessed the frailties of liberal democracy in the origins of the dictatorship and were determined to bring the state apparatus and the vested interests of private business and big landlords under stronger, more direct forms of democratic control than electoral democracy could achieve on its own.

In practice, this meant that the first PT Mayor of Porto Alegre, Olívio Dutra, a bank-worker and trade union organiser, rejected the conventional idea that the office brought a monopoly of power. He developed a way of governing that was both modest and radical. The principle was to share power with the movements to which the party owed its success. This entailed opening up decision-making on municipal finances with a popularly determined Participatory

Budget (PB). The tradition had been of secretive deals frequently clinched with bribes. Dutro made financial decisions transparent, using council resources to support city-wide participation in setting the budget for new investments. By the late 1990s more than 15 per cent of the new investment budget was allocated by participatory processes: more than 40,000 citizens were directly involved.

Participation can take many forms, from a government consulting citizens on plans or budgets already drawn up to sharing or delegating decision-making powers to autonomous citizen-organisations. Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre was explicitly about sharing power. The principles included:

- Recognition of popular capacity for self-government, leading to citizen-organised implementing of the PB rather than a government-run process to which citizens were invited.
- The participatory process was city-wide; citizens met in open assemblies in their neighbourhoods, debated and voted on local priorities which were then negotiated through elected representatives on the PB council, and ratified by the legislative council of the municipality.
- City-wide negotiations took place on the basis of agreed criteria through transparent regular meetings.
- Every citizen had the right to be involved.
- The process was supported by the government but the process of developing and proposing projects and negotiating priorities within and across neighbourhoods was self-regulating.
- Participation extended to implementation of budget decisions and monitoring of progress.
- Popular education was a foundation of the process.

The material benefits of participatory budgeting for Porto Alegre residents were considerable, particularly for the poor.

In 2004, after 15 years of an increasingly participatory process, the PT lost the mayoral election, mainly as a result of problems with the PT at regional level and growing disillusion with the PT federal government. Participatory budgeting had become popular and the new electoral alliance built its campaign around maintaining it, but in reality the new council leadership did not take participation seriously. The mayor and senior officials did not attend popular assemblies; a junior official would be present but would treat it as a consultation rather than

budgetary decision-making.

The experience of opening local government to the participation of every citizen has remained a potent memory in Porto Alegre and other Brazilian cities. In 2011 a new generation took to the streets across Brazil, in response to a national government that seemed to have turned its back on ordinary people, particularly the young, in the priorities it set for hosting the 2016 Olympics: first-class sport stadiums but second-class services for those who lived in the surrounding neighbourhoods.

2. Popular Planning

In the early 1980s, Ken Livingstone, as Labour leader of the Greater London Council (GLC), put a similar emphasis on opening municipal decision-making to popular participation as a means of strengthening democratic power. This involved more than transparency of decision-making. It involved complementary forms of power and using the GLC's power of domination over funds and land and its national public platform, to provide space and resources for the exercise of more collective ways of transforming.

The women's liberation movement had held out an example of new kinds of politics, in which voters – in this case women - acted not as individual citizens electing a representative and then leaving matters of public services to the politicians and public officials, but instead organised and asserted their rights to control and guide the use of public resources. Many of the campaigns and initiatives of the women's movement at the time were concerned with making parts of the welfare state less paternalistic and more responsive to the needs of women. Women's groups would get together informally, improvising ways to raise funds for women's centres or nurseries, then campaigning for a local council to provide funding but under community control. There was no single model but an approach emerged in practice that defended and sought to extend public services and which also worked to change the way they were managed. Out of these experiences came questions of democratic relationships, social movements and civic initiatives that could open up the state and redistribute power and resources.

The 1982-86 GLC provides a rich example of an attempt by a group (mainly politicians) to carry through a radically transformative mandate. The strategy was innovative. It did not rely on the power of local state institutions, partly because they knew these powers and the knowledge with which they were deployed was limited. Their strategy was to work with social and trade union movements who shared the goals of their electoral mandate but were mostly autonomous from the Labour Party with distinct (but limited) sources of democratic public power.

One example, the community-led development of Coin Street, on London's South Bank, illustrates how the power and knowledge of organised citizens extended the capacity of the GLC

to implement its policies for inner city communities. At the same time, it illustrates the other side of the relationship: how local state power can be deployed in response to democratic organisations of citizens, rather than the pressures only of big business.

In the late 1970s, the streets and community around Coin Street faced destruction as City-based developers tried to buy the land for speculative office blocks. A strong community movement developed, whose members drew up a detailed plan of how local people and their organisations could develop this inner city riverside area: social housing, co-operative and social businesses, cultural and tourist activity and so on. Some of those involved had links with the London Labour Party and along with local activists from other inner city areas developed a section of the 1982 local election manifesto that gave high priority to securing and expanding inner city communities against pressure from property developers to expand office buildings. Several of these campaigners were elected on to the GLC. Indeed, the motive behind their decision to run for office was to win the political support for implementing the plans.

In the case of Coin Street, the GLC used its powers of compulsory purchase to buy the land and block the property developers. It did so in a collaborative relationship with the community campaign, providing expertise from the GLC's experienced team of architects to complement the shared knowledge of the community. It convened a regular gathering of community campaigns from inner city areas across London and discussed their needs with the GLC planners. The GLC supported the creation of the Coin Street Community Trust, and was represented on it until Margaret Thatcher's government abolished the GLC.

Such relationships were a hallmark of the GLC's way of implementing radical policies. Recognising its own limits, the GLC used the powers it had as a particular kind of state body – powers of funding, planning, regulation and so on – to help civic democratic organisations deploy other sources of power and knowledge and thus implement shared negotiated goals.

This pragmatic opening up of the state and democratisation of the management of its resources was made possible because of the autonomous existence of certain kinds of citizens' organisations, movements and initiatives. These were organisations based outside the state and independent of big business that did not simply make "demands" on government but sought direct transformations. On the basis of that autonomy, they had a variety of relationships with the state. Generally, they sought to maintain autonomy while bargaining for state support.

Such innovations were not always able to garner sufficient power to overcome hostile economic and political forces. The GLC's strategy of supplementing its powers through alliances with popular movements did not always succeed. For example, "The People's Plan for the Royal Docks" supported by the GLC and the Newham Community Forum proved no match for the Conservative government's docklands quango, London Docklands Development Corpo-

ration. The LDDC had been given powers that overrode those of the local council (Newham) and of the GLC. It determined that the most appropriate use of the docks was a private airport, to be constructed by Mowlem and run by Ryanair. Power as domination can only be a transformative power when there are shared goals and values - a convergence between the programme and methods of a political party and the aspirations of collective organisations in society. The convergence with local groups that the GLC had achieved collided, in this case with a national government seeking the exact opposite.

We do not know what would have happened had the GLC survived. Margaret Thatcher was determined to destroy London's elected body and Tony Blair was equally determined to stop Ken Livingstone becoming Mayor of London. The GLC's representative politics provided a perspective on the state quite different from that of the market-driven politics of both Conservatives and New Labour and the predominantly state-centred politics of the traditional left. The GLC had transformed itself from the hierarchical and off-putting public institution it had become by the late 1970s to an open institution that invited Londoners to contribute under-used skills to the public good. It provided the funding, legitimacy, confidence and, expertise to do it - in stark contrast to David Cameron's "Big Society", which borrowed the language of empowerment but cut the funding, buildings and public spaces on which community organisations depended.

Democratic control of public resources

Thatcher's counter-revolution did not entirely crush the impetus for self-government and democratic control over state resources, especially in working class communities and where significant resources are at stake. Thatcherite governments severely weakened the unions and all but destroyed local government. However, determined community organisations, often led by young, alienated rebels rallying to a cause, or women defending and trying to improve the neighbourhoods on which their families depend, have proved beyond their reach. Two examples reveal the ingenuity of popular organisations in finding levers and weak spots in the ambivalences of government power. The principle of popular participation has a legitimacy that governments cannot always dismiss.

3. Marsh Farm: creating a new public space under community control

In the late 1990s, an alliance of local groups on the Marsh Farm Estate bid for £50 million worth of government funds for a 10-year programme of "community-led" regeneration. It was a motley but resilient coalition. Its members included what used to be "the Exodus collective" which, like the Pied Piper, had led young people from rioting on the estate to raves free of hard drugs held at quarries around Luton and had turned an abandoned hospice into communal living space for homeless young people by pooling housing benefit. Well before any government offered funds for "community-led regeneration", it was transforming lives through socially responsible direct action. Out of this grew an ambition to apply the same spirit to

achieve change across the estate. Exodus was soon joined by tenant organisations, youth leaders, socially conscious vicars and organisations of the significant Afro -Caribbean population.

Marsh Farm bid successfully for the chance to participate in the New Deal for Communities Pilot in 1999. At the hundred-or-so-strong meeting that followed, it became clear that they were not being invited to build on their existing successes in the estate. Luton Council laid out the phases that its officials had planned for a 10-year development – and the hoops that had to be gone through. Participation was by tick-boxes. A council official summed up the government's intentions for New Deal for Communities explaining that “the glue that holds it all together will be private business”. However, community activists were mixing their own glue and just needed the resources that public money could bring. Their goal was to unite a diverse community of 9,000 people to create a thriving local economy with useful and fulfilling jobs: 26 per cent of residents were under 16; 41 per cent of those between 16 and 25 were unemployed; elderly people felt isolated and were afraid to leave their homes; Asians and Afro-Caribbean residents were concerned how their desires and ideas would be represented in the process.

The group decided it needed a base to encourage people to go to meetings. With a tradition of occupying empty buildings and putting them to good use, former Exodus members took over an empty Co-op shop in the shopping centre.

The importance of buildings as a means of generating confidence and a sense of common identity, or in Marsh Farm language a “hubbub”, is a theme running through the development of this community. The prize towards which most activists looked was the empty Coulters factory at the centre of the estate. They hoped that one of the first major tranches of the £50 million New Deal money would be funds to buy the cavernous factory and to fit it out for social enterprises, public services and community groups.

But this attempt to exercise genuine community control – power over public resources - was not achieved without a difficult and complex struggle. For several years the Marsh Farm Community Trust was not given delegated authority for any spending over £250,000, the normal procedure with other NDCs. Regional government officials regarded the Marsh Farm community, especially its former Exodus component, with suspicion.

Now, 16 years on, the Marsh Farm Community Trust's “Futures Building” is buzzing with activity. The former vast factory stands next to the shopping centre with a toddlers' adventure playground at the centre. It is run by a childcare co-operative. Local NHS staff are at work on one floor and council youth services and social services in others. There are still conflicts but the community's initial vision of a hubbub of community activity and a base for wider regeneration and participation is a dynamic reality.

Key to the community's relative success in turning power as (initially hostile) domination into a resource for transformative capacity, were the following:

A principle of learning and gaining strength through getting things done, even if they had to be done in an improvised way. Behind this was a culture of lateral thinking that enabled the community to outflank paternalistic assumptions and fixations on bureaucratic rules.

Experimentation to find the most effective means of self-organisation, both of the activist core and of the wider population of the estate.

Making shared values explicit and not taking them for granted.

A commitment to work for a basic income

A long-term goal of strengthening democracy by rooting it in a democratic political economy, hence the emphasis on social enterprises and on strengthening the local economy to create a multiplier effect rather than see local economic gains leak away.

The Marsh Farm Community was careful to forge links with all those with power who took seriously the rhetoric of community-led regeneration. Staff from the government-initiated Social Exclusion Unit took an interest in the Marsh Farm Community Trust and sometimes spoke of it as an example of what could be achieved through community leadership. This support came at a time, around 2001, when the Community Trust was being persistently rebuffed by benefit agencies and regional and local authorities. Individual council officers were often helpful, especially those who had direct contact with members of the Community Trust. The Trust's ability to build personal trust among public officials was sometimes decisive. It was the support of local MP, Kelvin Hopkins, followed by ministerial intervention leading to an overruling of the Regional 'Go East' staff responsible for the Marsh Farm NDC, that enabled the Community Trust to buy the Coulters factory in 2003 on their own terms, as a hub for social enterprises, public services and community organisation.

It is 16 years since The Marsh Farm Community Trust's first public meeting following the successful NDC bid and the council officials' assertion that "the glue that holds it all together" would be private business. The glue is still being mixed but after many struggles and achievements a combination of democratic control over public resources and, through local co-operatives, control over local economic flows is emerging.

4. Public service improvement through democracy driven reform

Until 1996, Newcastle City Council had been Labour-controlled in the post-war years. Labour councillors took their re-election for granted. This did not encourage a rigorous democratic scrutiny of the executive and there were areas where the council got away with failing to

provide value for money. One area was the council's 25-year-old IT system, a customised old-fashioned tape-based system which required an expensive update involving special software and high council labour costs.

Managers and councillors wanted to hand over the problem to a private company, British Telecom, even though a good part of efficiency savings would be profits for BT shareholders. The trade unions, which in collaboration with council management had held off privatisation during Margaret Thatcher's governments, believed strongly that there was a public sector alternative. They fought this new threat with industrial action and political campaigning; stopped the privatisation and with management, helped to drive a process of change that, over ten years, modernised the technology, improved the related services and made significant savings that were reallocated to front-line services such as care for the elderly.

The response of unions, leadership of public sector managers and the role of politicians, showed that public sector reforms can be made through a democratic mobilisation of public service staff in alliance with citizens and elected politicians.

The achievement of City Services (the department responsible for IT and Related Services) was for management and unions in tandem to open up the internal processes of managing public money. This created conditions for a thoroughgoing democratisation, from policy commitment in the Council Chamber to complex delivery of frontline services. The examples above look at citizen power over state, especially municipal, institutions. But if the internal organisation of local councils remains top-down, fragmented and ignorant of staff potential, citizens' participation is easily defused or blocked by hierarchical structures and bureaucratic procedures.

The conditions that made it work...

The transformation in Newcastle began with the imminent threat of outsourcing to BT. The union's militant opposition to privatisation and its mobilisation in support of the in-house bid gave management the confidence to make a success of it. They were insistent that management should lead in a close relationship with the unions whose positive engagement and organisational strength was a necessary condition for the success of the transformation.

This does not mean that the threat of privatisation is a necessary condition for change. Just as we don't keep dropping apples in order to verify the laws of gravity, so councils need not go through the considerable expense of competitive tendering to understand and develop democratic mechanisms of change. If we understand the conditions that favoured the changes that worked here, then key relationships are replicable without repeating the experiment.

They included:

An appreciation of the capacities of workers at all levels, encouraging them, supporting them and believing in them. It entailed, where possible, eliminating hierarchies and some supervisory layers, in order to push initiative to where it could be effective, along with an approach to leadership which offered support rather than control. City Services' director put it thus: "Relax, don't freeze - recognise the future is uncertain ... you don't become unbureaucratic bureaucratically". A high priority was given to supporting people as they planned their future in response to the changes, giving them time, training, support in finding redeployment within the council, and successfully avoiding compulsory redundancies.

Shared motivation and common purpose. All shared a vision of a transformed public authority with improved services that could make savings and redistribute them to frontline services. Every aspect of the transformation programme was geared to and judged by that goal and contributed to avoiding drift and overcoming conflict. It enabled management and union leadership to move the process forward.

A service ethic. The shared vision brought to the fore a public service ethic, an idea that normally lies dormant or is reduced to a matter of formal rhetoric. The ethics of public service can be a lot more dynamic than the often inanimate formal features of public sector culture. An active thinking-through of public service ethics was valued and encouraged in all parts of City Services. This included the call centre and customer service centres; back office staff; council tax debt collectors; payroll staff; benefit processing staff; and IT support staff going out to community organisations.

A strong union voice. There is widespread talk of "empowerment" or "releasing creativity" with regard to public service workers, an approach that implies taking public service workers as well as users seriously, but there is scant recognition of the necessity of a well-organised and democratic trade union for achieving this. Newcastle UNISON was a key and indispensable actor in the transformation. The union has placed a high priority on communications, education, membership involvement and the development of a new generation of leaders.

Negotiating time off for training for union members and staff played a crucial role. The union organised an extensive "workplace learning" scheme. Though union and management worked together, the union could escalate an issue to a point of conflict if agreements, including those concerning employment conditions, were broken.

Research was an indispensable ingredient in Newcastle UNISON. The Centre for Public Services, a research organisation committed to the defence and improvement of public services, gave strategic advice, which played a key role in getting the in-house bid accepted.

Day to day autonomy. Within City Services, the department undergoing change – the Business Development and Transformation Team – had day-to-day autonomy. This kept the vision in focus and alive. The flexibility and collaborative internal relationships in this team would be

hard for an outside contractor to replicate.

Question everything. No secrets. Change driven by threat leaves people frightened of asking questions and sharing knowledge. City Services built in forces of questioning, including self-questioning. The process was helped because staff felt relatively secure and there was an unusual degree of transparency. This contributed to genuine accountability of public officials to elected councillors and the public.

Changing boundaries between public and private. The commitment to publicly led public service reform shaped City Services' relationship with private companies. From the beginning it was clear that City Services would need to buy in help – both in purchasing hardware and in the management of particular projects – to achieve savings on a tight timetable. But there was also an energetic collective determination to take the most useful and efficient tools of business practice developed in the private sector and adapt or transform them for social goals and democratic accountability.

A strategy for public service reform must address the UK's blunt electoral institutions. A leading councillor, looking back to the days of the mainframe computer and its constant adaptation, described how “there was always another million pounds or so needed for updating the mainframe, which was always nodded through”. A more robust, pluralist system of democratic debate and scrutiny would have challenged this state of affairs.

The impact of the city-wide political and trade union campaign to keep council services in council hands revived political pluralism, mainly as a result of dissenting voices in the Labour Group having the courage and determination to speak out. A proportional electoral system would help to build this pluralism and debate into local government. This is a question that needs to be discussed as part of developing effective strategies for publicly led public service change. Much more needs to be done to make local accountability a reality.

Writing of efficiency in the public sector at a time when the financial edifices created by neo-liberal economics are collapsing, brings home the importance of the welfare state and the urgency of its renewal and reconstruction. The reform of Newcastle council's ICT services shows how the public sector can have its own criteria of efficiency, distinct from the goal of profit. The livelihoods and communities of millions of people need protecting from the mis-judgments of those with political and economic power. Local government has the capacity to be an effective steward of public money.

Conclusion: the basis of radical democracy

What then is the significance of these experiences in the context of the erosion of democracy by the growth of corporate driven markets? In the past forty years or so, under pressure from the growing power of finance and global corporate power, democracy has been reduced to

the formal procedure of voting and the rituals of legislative assemblies. Voters face a narrow choice between political elites. They have little access to information, few opportunities for deliberation or reflection, and negligible power over the decisions that determine their lives. The four examples in this essay point to ways in which citizens are building their own sources of power.

In the earlier cases (in the early 1980s and 1990s respectively) of popular planning within the Greater London Council and participatory budgeting in Brazil, the threat to democracy was not at the time much concerned with the growth of corporate power – though that was emerging in the background. In Brazil, in the early nineties the threat came from the legacy of the dictatorship: endemic corruption and a political system based on parties tied to the vested interests of land and property. In the case of the GLC, the threat came from Thatcher's destruction of local government and her government's unleashing of the power of the City.

But in both cases, the citizens counter-power that the politicians encouraged and allied with to address these hostile forces illustrated a political model of deepened democracy that can serve us well in the face of today's corporate threats to democracy.

The later cases of Marsh Farm and Newcastle Council show the possibilities and benefits of an alternative, 'democracy friendly' basis for production and wealth creation, so that governments are not vulnerable to capture and blackmail by corporations pursuing private interests. This need for a democratic economy applies to the production of services and production of public value as well as production for the market.

Thus Newcastle illustrated how the public sector with democracy-driven change, especially the deep involvement of the staff, was able to improve the council's efficiency to maximum public benefit. As a result, the Council was no longer vulnerable to BT's offer to take the IT services off the council's hands.

Marsh Farm used public money to encourage co-operatives, and illustrated how a local economy could develop, becoming independent from the corporate economy in certain areas of life – for example in food, entertainment and culture, building and repairs.

State institutions did not welcome Marsh Farm Community in spite of political statements about "community-led regeneration", particularly when the community asserted its own agenda and attempted to develop a deeper, semi-autonomous, process of community democracy. It is a significant contrast to the participatory budgeting of Porto Alegre and the Popular Planning of the Greater London Council and underlines the importance of changing the institutions and the mentalities governing the internal administration of the state.

We are in the middle of a contested transition between the forces of the corporate led market and the emerging forces of organised, productive and knowledgeable citizens. The challenge

then for any party gaining political office, nationally as well as locally, is how to support genuine democratic civic power and use the strengths of organised, knowledgeable, concerned citizens to exert an influence on state institutions that is equal to or stronger than the forces of the corporate led market.



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