



# PLANNING 1984

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## Watching Big Brother

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This invitation to celebrate *Nineteen Eighty-Four* gives me the third opportunity to argue in these pages for 'democratic planning', or, more plainly, the democratic control of capital.<sup>1</sup> The same demon drove Orwell: "Every line of serious work I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic Socialism, as I understand it".<sup>2</sup> The huge and perverse popularity of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* owes something to Orwell's journalistic skills. But the main reason for their success is that they rang true to people everywhere.

They still ring true as an allegory of political disillusionment and as a horrifying vision of totalitarian futures. 'Official' apologists point to crude disparities between the novels and our Year of Grace: we must, it seems, be reassured! But, in fact, the options for avoiding something resembling *Nineteen Eighty-Four* continue to close. Orwell, it must be remembered, was not providing a blueprint but rather, given fundamental trends, a picture of the kind of society that *could* arrive: "totalitarian ideas have already taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences".<sup>3</sup>

My purpose here is to emphasise one logical consequence which is now evident: centralisation of political and economic power as a totalitarian trend. It is common to all large developed countries. Moreover this economic centralisation continues not only *within* nations but also at an *international* level. Within states, any alternative centre of power (such as local government) is being emasculated just as surely as civil liberties are being whittled



away. World-shrinking information technology is often a sinister handmaiden to both. International concentrations also demand greater conformity (“over-mighty allies”) and, with the prospect of “pre-emptive nuclear strike” we are, in any event, already beyond the stale-mated superstates of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

I should like to pick up the thread of my earlier paper in this journal,<sup>4</sup> in which I explained how centralisation would lead to a further dislocation of central and local planning: a process starting a couple of decades ago but which shifted into top gear with the '73 oil crisis, world recession and structural trends in employment. The main point here was the effect on Treasury reform and how this became a mechanistic and aspatial annual sum: a form of continuous budgetary control to which all other administrative reforms and planning systems were clearly subservient.

In passing, it might have seemed too dramatic to have asserted, in January 1981, that this form of centralisation spelt the final collapse of traditional local government and territorial planning. But who can seriously doubt that now? As predicted also, a proliferation of central agencies (only indirectly answerable to government) would continue to fill the gap for the provision of life-chance services: health, housing, transport and so on. But that is not all. The ‘design’ ensured that no single person, no single agency either, could possibly tell *what was really going on* in any local area.

Without sustained growth, so the argument ran, all this would lead to a growing distance between politicians and the mass of people; between politicians themselves and executive government. It would become “difficult to proceed on a consensual basis”. Obviously this would be felt first in urban areas and, in the most deprived areas, we then had the urban riots of 1981. More quangos moved in, but now urban areas, as a whole, are programmed for massive central control by 1985.<sup>5</sup>

### Beating against the current

I have also argued that the continued development of ‘Expenditure-Based Plans’ are a political device for resolving local needs with central control. Because they were first promoted amid the otherwise mindless labours of central and local government re-organisation, stimulated for a while by early Transport Policies and Programmes, Housing

Investment Programmes, etc., in 1981 I still thought we had a chance!

But during that year, Government officially became disengaged from HIP consideration of local needs.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, other forums of ‘drip-fed democracy’ (the working parties of the Consultative Council, for example), became much more overtly the *post hoc* rituals they always were. It is rather worse than embarrassing to waste a decade and a half on policy measures which simply have no chance against the crude realities of centralisation: the consolidation of power. In the Whitehall of 1972 I was amazed to find plans advanced for the re-organisation of UK local government without any thought of financial innovations.<sup>7</sup> One or two officials cared a lot but most accepted the situation fatalistically. On reflection, I realise, it simply didn’t matter!

Whitehall pipes a well-bred *obligato* over the main themes of whatever is happening anyway. If that means the progressive exclusion of people from government, local communities, Toxteth, Liverpool, etc., and if that means the stifling of individual and local creativity and by-passing representative structures, so be it.<sup>8</sup> No one official or indeed Minister can change, in this respect, the inexorable tide of events. The First Lord of the Treasury has never more than, at best, a secondary interest in territorial politics. The inability of Parliament to control expenditure is notorious, and with the hiving-off of services to agencies, consultation becomes unimportant. Categorically, there is no longer any framework of debate.

As Professor McAuslan said recently, “a government which does not put a high priority on *constitutionalism*, which is so concerned to carry through its policies that it places the toughest priority on having the power to do what it wants, when it wants and to whom it wants, will sooner or later feel the need to attack and emasculate those alternative governments and alternative centres of power at their electoral and financial roots”.<sup>9</sup> Putting it simply, the main reason for the growing pressures on what remains of local government is because it is elected!

### Localisation

*Can Planners Choose?*<sup>10</sup> suggested automated routines to see what was happening to life-chance services, individually or collectively, in *any* locality. I have difficulties with a word like ‘constitutionalism’ while supporting the

generality of McAuslan’s intention. I suspect that the spending ‘50s and ‘60s reinforced Victorian myths about UK constitutionality.<sup>11</sup> The ‘economic miracle’ validated West Germany’s ‘social market’ and ‘transitional socialism’ justified the constitutional ‘economic plan’ in Hungary—and so one could go on. But in the late ‘60s everything began to go wrong everywhere.

With the end of growth, centrality itself became more clearly dependent on the international monetary system: a spider’s web from which no one country can break free. In Marxist terms ‘money is only an intermediary’ but it still makes Big Brother’s world go round with a pitiless wisdom all of its own. And the essence of this monetarism is that the ‘world governing class’ (not that ‘class’ is a good word for it) is now very much more concerned about the conservation of money than with industrial production, systems of equity or anything else.

This fairly meaningless (malign?) cash nexus accelerated totalitarian trends and, consequently, affected both ‘localism’ and life chances. Locality—the boundary of a system—became more clearly defined by the State’s power to create or destroy money within its own currency area—but only just! The UK became a single ‘economic planning region’ and, like everywhere else, there were new and enormous pressures on the alleged economic and constitutional rationale of local government.

It seemed a good idea, therefore, to look—however sketchily—at the localisation of central aspatial sums or, putting it in another way, the ‘constituency implications’ of the Government’s expenditure plans. Due to the fragmentation of agencies, local government (the traditional advocate of the spatial dimension) no longer has information on the plans and budgets of many local services. Therefore, so this argument goes, an alternative information system is necessary if local authorities are to reassert their interest in real life-chance services such as health and housing.

Of course, in the Orwellian sense, any such exercise will appear ‘subversive’ if it suggests that government can resort to ‘organised lying’. Thus, a year after the Toxteth riots, and the personal intervention of a Minister, overall per capita expenditure within Merseyside was still less than the national average.<sup>12</sup> The need for such overall information systems is obvious when one realises that in 1969 elected authorities spoke for about two



thirds of expenditure in the above area, that in 1982 it was less than one third and that by 1985 it will be less still.

One cannot discuss local democracies, mandates and so on in such a budgetary haze. Thus, in housing, it is clearly necessary to look at housing corporation allocations and HIP allocations together if one wants any picture of the public sector contribution to housing across the country or with respect to any one area. Similarly, poor housing is, with unemployment, ethnic diseases and other 'inner city' conditions, a major source of medical problems; but none of these factors is recognised in the formula which, marginally, attempts to correct large discrepancies in NHS resources, for example, between the North West and the South East. Yet an across-the-board cut by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in July '83 meant cutting medical services in Liverpool. The point is, of course, that the political debate must have a total picture of essential services in each area.

Anecdotally, just after the 1981 Toxteth riots, one of Heseltine's people asked me what to do and I held the 'twenty year line' about reinforcing the local political process. A blank response said all: I was "unhelpful". Liverpool, therefore, could be quangoed to hell on the one hand and starved into militancy on the other. Street barricades could be 'municipalised' so to speak, and the city programmed as another 'Exhibit A' for central control. Writing in October 1983, this is not an unlikely scenario since central government decided long ago that no locality should challenge its central sums.

### The Terminal Argument

In Liverpool we are working to show the local implications of centrally planned expenditure for any local area. Eventually we hope to link our central computer to public view-data networks—and this calls for support from any interested parties. But in the context of this article we have to face a troublesome question: what is the difference between an 'inter-active viewdata system' and the 'two-way telescreen' in Winston's room? Rapidly, with the advent of 'telematics' (roughly the combination of telecommunications and computing), the arrival of instantaneous credit transfers, etc., information, money and power are becoming the same commodity. And it has to be faced, also, that such technological developments have paralleled centralisation, repression,

personal surveillance and dominance.

Janet Morgan, special adviser to the Director General of the BBC, recently reported "the systems which provoke most public anxiety are those managed by government organisations: the DHSS, Inland Revenue, the Department of Transport, and so on. Not only are these bodies known to keep detailed records but, it is believed that if any institution were in a position to introduce centralised, inter-connected record keeping systems, it would be the government". Such fears, she argues, would be misplaced since people "underestimate the muddle and inefficiency of governments and administrators"<sup>13</sup>.

In his time Orwell was often enraged by this form of self-censorship—at which the English establishment are so adept. In our field we know that the centrally planned economy has now grabbed all the hardware and software it needs for determining local budgets and plans. Where this *does* result in muddle, secondary legislation is designed to make that muddle the law of the land, unchallengeable in the Courts.<sup>14</sup> Also, Janet Morgan might have added that a colleague in her previous job (Central Policy Review Staff) now heads a large new Home Office unit for the computerisation of UK personal records. Personal Identity Numbers (the new German 'Personalausweis') cannot be far behind.

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is about attitudes: Ministerial attitudes to the Data Protection Bill and the Police and Criminal Evidence Bill are among the more recent causes for alarm. But given the more general trend towards the consolidation of economic and political power, how can we face my question about information control? The argument is not finally, I believe, about democracy but rather about survival itself.

It must be faced that many do not care about such trends. "What", they ask, "is so bad about central control?" As in the past, the drift towards totalitarianism is, for the most part, accompanied by tacit acceptance. But the terminal argument now is that a lasting stalemate between the super-states is improbable. Our central economies are fast becoming war economies where weapon development itself determines policy and the prospect of a nuclear holocaust is real. Unless we use information systems to watch Big Brother we may all be blown to hell! As in so many domestic issues, such decisions

cannot be left to one or two people.

There was a moment of sheer beauty when Stafford Beer explained his information systems to President Allende of Chile: "I worked up through the first, second, third and fourth levels. When I got to the fifth I drew an histrionic breath—all ready to say: "And this, *companero presidente, is you!*" He forestalled me. "Ah", he said, with a broad smile, as he drew the topmost box: "at last—the people"."<sup>15</sup> We know what happened to Salvador Allende! This time the people must be there.

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