
earth rights

Martin Stott reflects on 25 years of involvement in local government

goodbye to all that?



I left local government in the autumn after serving for over 25 years as an elected member or as an officer. It seems like a good moment to reflect on how local government has changed and to offer some thoughts about future directions.

Local government could never be described as fashionable. It retains an image of dullness and bureaucracy with occasional flashes of corruption (such as the Westminster 'homes for votes' scandal) and over-the-top 'right-on-ness' ('Winterval' and all the urban myths *that* generated). There is more talk now about the importance of 'the local' but less freedom to act locally – the Poll Tax has been and gone, but its legacy, the Council Tax, has seen to that. When it was introduced it raised barely 15% of local expenditure; Whitehall controlled the rest through business rates and block grants. The proportion has shifted over time but, as the current freeze on Council Tax rises demonstrates, Whitehall's desire to control remains just as strong.

Local government hasn't suffered as much at the hands of Whitehall as the NHS, where the current reorganisation (for what purpose exactly?) follows countless previous adjustments – none of which appeared to have any clear rationale other than perhaps to undo the actions of a previous Minister and 'prove' that the new Minister is in charge. In this respect local government has fared better, because it has had one priceless asset throughout this time: its independent democratic mandate.

But there's the rub. Nothing drives Westminster politicians wilder than others challenging their supposedly democratic right to rule. But local government has done so and still does – hence its abiding unpopularity in Whitehall and Westminster. The excuses are many and varied – 'inefficient' (when was democracy ever efficient?), 'expensive' (let us try to recall local government equivalents of Whitehall's IT and defence procurement fiascos, among others), 'postcode lotteries' (but isn't that a subjective term for local decision-making?), and the



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'poor quality of elected members' (remind me which political parties put up these candidates – and why do they select them if they are so poor?). In the end, though, the reality was summed up to me by a member of Tony Blair's Cabinet, himself ex-local government, who, when I asked him once over dinner how many local authorities he thought there should be in England, replied firmly: 'One.'

Just in case these so-called criticisms of local governance don't hit home with the public, the plans for fragmentation, competing foci of accountability and localism without democracy ('localism lite') have continued apace. Examples include:

- **Police Commissioners:** Elections in late 2012 will confer a certain cloak of democratic legitimacy (and therefore useful rival foci for Ministers to point to when disparaging local authorities), but with a few exceptions their jurisdictions will have little connection to existing democratic jurisdictions. Think of the Thames Valley or West Midlands: any Commissioner there will be working with (or not) literally dozens of pre-existing local authorities with significant responsibilities for aspects of public safety,

community cohesion and emergency response. All with different perspectives, priorities and resources. Who will be the voice of the locality when a major security incident occurs? If the 2011 London riots are anything to go by, the Commissioner. Who will be responsible for picking up the pieces on the ground afterwards? The local authority.

- **The NHS:** It's hard, even now, to know what the NHS reforms will really mean in practice. Local authorities have been 'given' responsibility for public health – as if environmental health, trading standards or waste management had nothing to do with the subject already. Convenient, because it is a subject that is not easily packaged up and commissioned in the market place. Those GP commissioners may or may not engage with local authorities about the health of their populations, but their accountability remains to Whitehall.
- **Schools:** Not long ago, local authorities were deliverers of education for children aged from 4 to 18 – and, indeed, when polytechnics and colleges of further education were run under Local Education Authorities until the 1990s, they were major players in the further education sector as

well. To some extent they still are, but look at the speed with which education is disappearing into academies, foundation schools, free schools and the like. The mantra is 'freeing schools from local authority control'. From *what* exactly? I was a parent-governor at my daughter's comprehensive school for some years until I stepped down in 2009. A year or so earlier, the much respected headteacher for the previous 19 years retired. At his leaving event he remarked that when he arrived he had complete control of the school's curriculum and responsibility for a budget of £37,000. On leaving he had no control over the curriculum but complete responsibility for a budget of £6.5 million. So where would the dreaded 'local authority control' be in that? Whitehall controls the curriculum, and he controlled the budget.

There is a debate to be had about the way in which this particular aspect of the Welfare State has been delivered over the past 60-odd years. Unlike the NHS – emphasis on the 'National' – education has always been delivered locally, through Local Education Authorities. So there are still 163 grammar schools, and a patchwork of

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other different types of school and structure, (primary/secondary, first/middle/upper, sixth-form colleges, etc.). This lack of national standardisation and the resources allocated have led to wildly differing opportunities for children across the country. That is certainly the view of parents who, if they have the means and the motivation, are

well known for moving house to get their children into the 'right school'.

This process is now being exacerbated by the new forms being introduced, amplified by the fact that these new kinds of school will have no direct democratic link with their localities. The fragmentation will be encouraged by Whitehall, but the failures will always be the fault of the headteacher and governors. For parents a system that always lacked the consistency of the NHS will now be even more complex and difficult to negotiate, and outcomes will be even more of a lottery, dependent on where they live. Even planning for school place numbers will now be done somewhere other than the relevant locality.

- **Town and country planning:** I don't need to rehearse the issues in any detail with readers of *Town & Country Planning*. When I have been visited by American environmental or planning colleagues, I start explaining the planning system in the UK to them by reminding them that individual property owners do not have the right to develop their land. That right was nationalised under the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act. The process of granting or refusing planning permission was then delegated to local authorities. I'm not sure I can say that any more. Localism Act? Infrastructure Planning Commission? Brick by brick, the foundations of democratic local determination are being removed.

- **Elected Mayors:** Like Police Commissioners and charter schools (academies in the UK), these exotic beasts have been imported from the US and grafted onto a pre-existing system of local government without much serious thought about how they might distort or disrupt. A bit like an outbreak of Japanese knotweed in a suburban street.

The argument in favour of Mayors is simple: a single point of accountability for things that go wrong – or right – in a locality. The problem is that giving a single person a lot of power can be a recipe for corruption (witness examples from the USA) and doesn't allow for the nuances, ambiguities and consensus-building that is so important in local democracy. Graft that onto an existing system of councillors, committees, etc. which is supposed to facilitate just that, and suddenly the opportunities for conflict, point scoring and paralysis multiply.

Mayors also provide a focus for all kinds of discontent to be channelled into the ballot box with very unpredictable results on low electoral turn-outs – like the English National Mayor of

Doncaster, and the prospect, for a time, of a British National Party Mayor of Stoke. Be careful what you wish for.

Despite all this, by and large, local government has risen to the challenges of the last 25 years. Gone are the command and control attitudes. The diverse ecology of local public service provision has made a new way of working essential. Whether working in policing, health, housing, schools, transport, skills, regeneration or environmental protection, local government has found itself sharing responsibility rather than doing it itself. That has required new skills of vision, leadership, partnership-working, consensus-building, constructing canny financial packages, land assembly, lobbying and much more.

There remains a distinct division of opinion in local government between the local-authority-as-service-provider view and the local authority as community leader and local voice. The two aren't necessarily in conflict, but the rise of the customer has led to a view in some quarters that service provision is all. High-quality value-for-money public services are a very important part of what local government offers. But if they were *all* it offered, why bother with the democracy bit? I'm sure there are plenty of companies efficiently delivering high-quality public services who would be happy to take up the reins. Come to think of it, though, whenever anyone mentions energy companies, water companies or rail operators, quality, efficiency, or value for money aren't usually words that trip off the tongue.

There is a gap in the market for local leadership, the championing of 'place', a focus for the expression of local democratic legitimacy. Sadly, the trends seem to be heading in the wrong direction as, rather than bolstering local government, powers and responsibilities are stripped from it, alternative foci are created ('super-heads', Police Commissioners), and big decisions are taken either by Whitehall or by multinational corporations. Remember the casinos fiasco of 2006-07.

As society changes, so must local government. One hundred or so years ago, when County Councils, County Boroughs and the London County Council were established, people basically lived, worked and took their leisure in the same place. Now lives are totally different, with long-distance commuting, foreign travel, more leisure time, and more complicated family arrangements with, among other things, older parents often living a long way from their children and young people living away from home studying. Local authorities are no longer universal providers, and are in many ways just

another part of the service sector. People identify less with their locality, let alone specifically with their local authority. That is part of the fragmentation of society in which – positively – people often associate with 'communities of identity or interest'

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rather than 'communities of place', and – negatively – the 'bowling alone' syndrome leads to social isolation and anomie in a huge, impersonal, consumerist society. Surely in this globalised context 'the local state' still has a role to play?

It is interesting to note that over the past 20 years, with emerging democracies first in Eastern Europe and more recently in parts of Africa, the World Bank, of all institutions, has insisted on strong systems of local governance being put in place as part of the infrastructure for a successful and legitimate market-based economy. As these are stripped away in the UK, as I have observed from the inside over the past 25 years, could this have something to do with our decline as a global economic power?

Could this combination of a growing lack of transparency for the citizen about how they are governed locally (and in whose interests) and the steady accretion of power to the centre under the entirely spurious guise of the 'free' and the 'local' yet prove to be a slow burning fuse for some kind of democratic renewal?

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