

Revitalising politics: the eclipse of local government as the root of a problem

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The British system of government is often described as ‘centralised’. Decisions about both national and local issues are made at the core of Whitehall. This arrangement has evolved over many years, though it has intensified in the period since 1945. Moreover, despite widespread agreement that such a heavily centralised system is seriously imperfect, it has proved impossible to shift power away from the centre in England. Scotland and Wales provide a different narrative.

The evolution of local government, leading to central control

A significant literature has built up about the decline of municipal government in Britain.¹ Indeed, the debate about over-centralisation in Britain (but, particularly, England) has been so regularly rehearsed as to have become clichéd. But there has been rather less concern about the plausible link between the decline of local autonomy and the collapse of the membership base of the major political parties. Put simply: could the decline of local government have played a role in the collapse of wider civic engagement and interest?

The government itself has certainly been prepared to make the case for a need to act to halt the decline in political involvement. In one of the dozens of reports that have poured out of the variously-named departments that have sponsored local government since 1997, it was stated:

“Western democracies are all facing a decline in interest in conventional forms of politics. Voter turnout at elections in England has generally declined. The gap between local and national turnout remains high...Fewer people are prepared to participate in political parties and traditional democratic processes. All this has serious implications for the legitimacy of existing political institutions and the priorities they set for public services”.²

This analysis was disarmingly honest about the state of democracy and democratic institutions in Britain. The government went on to argue that giving greater power to people within their neighbourhoods was a possible solution to the problem of collapsed interest. In the intervening years, further documents have been published about the precise form of neighbourhood governance, but little progress has yet to be made. There is certainly no evidence that the solution proposed has produced any results.

Before considering possible ways of escaping from ‘not-yet-revitalised’ politics, it is probably worth a brief analysis of how Britain’s once-robust system of local democracy was overwhelmed by central government. The origins of the particular, tangled, centralism that now ensures that all important decisions in contemporary England are made in London can be found in the Fabian ideals clearly articulated in Sidney Webb’s book on grants-in-aid, published before the first world war.³

¹ See, for example, a book written as long ago as 1985: M. Loughlin, M. Gelfand, & K Young (eds), *Half a century of municipal decline, 1935-1985*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1985

² Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Home Office, *Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter*, London: ODPM, 2005, pages 7-8

³ S. Webb, *Grants in Aid: A Criticism and a Proposal*, London: Longmans, 1911

Many of Webb's social democratic principles continue to underpin debates about resource distribution in England/Britain in the early years of the 21st century. In *Grants in Aid: A Criticism and a Proposal* he argued grants-in-aid were necessary for several reasons. Most importantly, grants of this kind would reduce extreme inequality of burden between one place and another. They would also help central government to encourage efficiency and economy within local government. The oversight and control of grants would allow central departments to improve the quality of smaller councils. Finally and crucially, grants-in-aid would produce a 'national minimum' level of local service provision that would reduce the risk of undesirable social spill-over effects from one place to another.

The Webbs paved the way for the intrusive equalisation and regulatory arrangements that are used in England (and, to a lesser extent, in Scotland and Wales) today. There is also little doubt they sowed the seeds of the 'postcode lottery' debate that is so prevalent today. A similar ideological approach informed the Welfare State reforms instituted by the 1945-51 Labour government, creating a National Health Service and a 'national service locally administered' for education. As recently as 2001, the government stated

"Reform is needed because Government has a responsibility to ensure that wherever people live in this country, they have access to good quality public services. Where local government is responsible for providing these services, it must be held to account for achieving appropriate standards across the country. That means tackling the current variability in service quality especially in critical areas like education and social services"⁴

For many decades now, Labour and Conservative governments have approached localities in Britain in such a way as to diminish their autonomy. The United Kingdom's decline as a global power has undoubtedly encouraged Westminster and Whitehall to turn their attention from Canada and India to Cumbria and Ipswich. Britannia may no longer rule the waves, but it can make an effort at ruling Waverley. Powerful, consensual, demands for equity and consistent public services have dominated discourse about State provision. Latterly, a cogent defence of centralisation has been developed.⁵ In such a system, local government has found it difficult to defend its powers and freedoms.

Constitutional and fiscal centralism

Two further factors have influenced the debate about centralisation and devolution within the UK. First, the country has no written constitution and is unlikely ever to do so. British politicians enjoy the pragmatic flexibility that is a consequence of a constitutional vacuum. As a result, local government has no formal, defensible, position within the country's system of government. It has proved easy for successive governments to diminish local autonomy and taxing powers.

Secondly, the UK is among the most fiscally centralised countries in the developed world. 95 per cent of all taxation is controlled by the Exchequer. The remaining five per cent of tax revenues consists of local taxation, though it is fully capped. Thus, in England, all tax rates are centrally-determined. As a result, virtually all decisions about major investments and service levels are made in Whitehall.

The post-1997 Labour government has made efforts to devolve power, though only to Scotland, Wales and, to a lesser extent, London. While decision-making over most domestic policy has shifted to Edinburgh and Cardiff, taxation powers remain almost wholly centralised. An attempt to introduce limited regional government in England outside the capital failed dismally. Whitehall departments,

⁴ Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, *Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services*, London: DTLR, 2001, page 10

⁵ D. Walker, *In Praise of Centralism: A Critique of New Localism*, London: Catalyst, 2002

which are now virtually focused only on the government of England, would be seriously diminished if there were devolution within England. This reality meant that the offer of devolution within England was minimal. The electorate noticed the feebleness of the proposed English regions and rejected the offer.

The post-1997 Labour government's initiative-led effort to decentralise

Within England, a large number of initiatives have been launched in the years since 1997 in a stated attempt to 'modernise' and 'empower' local governance. Policies such as 'Best Value', 'New Localism', 'Earned Autonomy', 'Place Shaping' and 'Local Area Agreements' have been developed. Most have fallen by the wayside after a couple of years. All were initially described as a stepping-stone away from excessive centralism. Thus, for example, the government has described its neighbourhoods and communities policy as one that would promote a number of benign outcomes:

“Active involvement in decisions that affect individuals and the places with which they associate can give greater depth to citizenship. It can enhance confidence in decision-making processes by placing more emphasis on how things are decided as well as what is done”⁶

However, despite several publications over a number of years, the policy is still largely 'work in progress'. “Depth to citizenship” and “confidence in decision-making processes” may indeed result from improved neighbourhood-related policy, but the policy itself remains largely unimplemented.

The most recent output from Whitehall about the revitalisation of local –and thus national – politics was included the first in a series of documents published in summer 2008 under the title *Communities in Control*. The government stated:

“1.1 The White Paper, *Communities in Control; Real people, real power*, is about passing power into the hands of local communities. It sets out a range of policies to achieve this, building on work still in progress from the 2006 White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*.

1.2 This is part of the Government's wider agenda to modernise our democratic system, to strengthen participatory democracy and through the *Communities in Control* White Paper to deliver genuine empowerment to local people and local communities – passing more power to more people through every practical means. Central to this is a vital local democracy, at the heart of which are councils – providing strategic leadership delivering services and empowering communities”⁷

The government is, once again, clear about what it is intending to achieve. The objective is no less than to “modernise our democratic system” and to “strengthen participatory democracy”. The ways of delivering these benefits include enhancing councils' scrutiny functions in relation of 'local area agreements', requiring councils to take note of petitions, the right for the public to hold senior officials to account and the possibility that councillors could vote 'remotely'.

Local government, local governance and the decline of 'the local'

⁶ Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Home Office, *Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter*, London: ODPM, 2005, page 9

⁷ Department for Communities and Local Government, *Communities in Control: Real people, real power Improving local accountability Consultation*, London: DCLG, 2008, page 5

The long-term decline in Britain's local government will, inevitably, have had impacts on politics more generally. There has been little research about the strength of local democracy and wider political health. However, it is unlikely that the UK's national democratic institutions could function effectively if local government were moribund. A succession of white papers since 1997 has assumed that local democracy is the starting-point for national political health.

An analysis of medium-term political developments in different parts of the country provides clues about the importance of local politics and government to Parliamentary party strength. The decline of one or other political party within a local authority appears to lead to subsequent decline in that party's capacity to win Parliamentary seats in the same area. The weakness in recent years of the Conservative Party in local government within the North West, Yorkshire & Humberside and the North East appears to have contributed to a decline in the party's capacity to win MPs. Cities such as Manchester, Liverpool and Sheffield used to return Tories to Parliament but no longer do so. This failure at the national level was preceded by a wipe-out of councillors within city government. Labour is now in danger of facing a similar problem in the South East and South West of England.

Political activism is far more likely to be encouraged if there is a reasonably-sized group of councillors on the local council. Councillors provide a stepping-stone into democracy and, unless the group is old-fashioned, encourage others to join. Without activists, a political party is unlikely to be able to generate new members and without members, national parties have little income. The consequences of needing to make up the loss of income derived from a mass membership has led all three major political parties into the need to depend on money from rich individuals, private companies and trades unions. Such practices are easily misrepresented and somehow corrupt or unsavoury.

The revitalisation of British politics would, therefore, be encouraged by a re-kindling of activism within local politics. Put the other way round, it is very unlikely that re-vitalisation could occur if local politics remains marginalised. There is, it is reasonable to assume, a link between the health of British local politics and that of British democracy more generally.

Multi-level governance

Multi-level government in Britain is a reality in Scotland, Wales and London. For the rest of England, governance institutions exist at the regional level while multi-area agreements are evolving in city-regions. Local government has survived, albeit in a diminished condition. If revitalisation is to be achieved, the key question is: could existing or new institutions contribute to the strengthening of an increasingly enfeebled and discredited democracy?

Such an objective begs important further questions about whether or not appointed regional or local institutions can realistically contribute to the revitalisation of democracy. The government's recent White Paper *Communities in Control; Real people, real power* proposes to allow the public to petition the chief executives of public bodies so as to require them to appear to respond to local questioning. It is also proposed to introduce powers to require non-elected institutions to be overseen by local government scrutiny committees. However, it is hard to see how such initiatives will radically affect democracy or participation.

Giving powers, tax-raising capacity and autonomy to local, city-regional and regional government would be a start in the process of re-kindling public interest in democracy at the local level. Until and unless local decision-making can have additional and discernable impacts, it is hard to see why anyone would decide to start to take part in the process of community governance.

In his book *Why Politics Matters*, Gerry Stoker argues there are a number of good reasons for renewing political institutions as part of a process of strengthening democracy. The author proposes a

“commitment to ‘new localism’...characterised as a strategy aimed at devolving power and resources towards front-line managers, local democratic structures and local consumers and communities”⁸

A commitment of this kind would be a response to the complexity of modern governance while creating an opportunity for improved engagement in politics. Such improvements would foster “trust, empathy and social capital”. They might also assist in the strengthening of political activism and parties at the local level, thus feeding through to improvement at the national level.

To achieve such a major change would require a significant transformation of official and public attitudes. National politicians would have to agree to moving power away from the centre, allowing local and/or regional authorities to take control of spheres of public policy. These authorities would then need to have the confidence to shift power further towards neighbourhoods and communities. For reform on a scale of this magnitude to occur, many long-evolved expectations about central oversight and equalisation would also have to change. This is not to say gross inequity should be tolerated, but rather to see locally-determined difference a positive outcome of choice rather than a wicked ‘postcode lottery’.

Conclusion

Revitalisation within multi-level governance will require a new approach by national politicians, local government and the public. The development of Britain during the 20th century had the consequence of leaving the country tightly centralised and with little power in institutions beyond central government. Unless there is a willingness for the centre to ‘let go’ and the public agrees to accept a greater degree of local difference, there is little chance that local or national democracy and politics can be revived. The consequences of failure would have implications well beyond the traditional British debate about central-local relations. Parliament and local government share the same democratic roots. If local democracy remains moribund, national democracy will follow it. Parliament and local government share the same democratic roots. Revitalisation for one would revitalise both.

⁸ G. Stoker, *Why Politics Matters Making Democracy Work*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006

