

THE **next** PHASE



what is local government for?

refocusing local governance
to meet the challenges
of the 21st century

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Introduction

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chapter 1 local government: who cares?

The basic problem with our local government system is that not enough of us really care about what it does. The Thatcher years are largely responsible for that situation, although previous regimes are also culpable. Vernon Bogdanor in his evidence to a 1996 House of Lords Committee refers to a process of ‘steady attrition’ as functions and responsibilities were removed from local government leading to an outcome in which elected local authorities become ‘merely residuary bodies... the repository of those public services that no one else can be bothered to provide’.¹ That judgement may be a little harsh, but there is little doubt that for the last quarter of the 20th Century local government was pushed to the margins of our governance in the drive for public expenditure control, and central oversight and control over core services.

At the practical policy level, the response of Labour since it came to power in 1997 has been to make local government better at what it does. The key goal has been to improve its image by a drive towards increasing managerial efficiency and an attempt to improve its political focus and accountability. This core attitude is captured in the following comment from the Prime Minister:

‘It may be asking too much to expect local government to get people shouting from the rooftops. But it is not too much to expect most people to care enough to vote or to know who to praise or blame for what is going in their locality’.²

With only a little exaggeration, many senior New Labour people believe in their hearts that local government is essentially worthy but dull. Local government has a near to the ground ‘bins and street cleaning’ image. It is low level stuff and a graveyard for ambitious politicians. For the Prime Minister and other senior politicians it has never been able to get past the ‘Why bother?’ question.

Indeed there is some evidence that the public agrees with the sense that local government is about relatively mundane but nevertheless laudable issues – concerns such as street cleaning, maintaining green spaces and general liveability emerge as the key drivers of a local authority’s reputation. According to MORI people make a general judgement about the perceived ‘value for money’ of an authority and they are affected by the media coverage it receives and contacts with members of staff. Beyond these general factors it is not the quality of education or social services that drive the image of a council – unless they are

¹ Quoted in House of Lords (1996) Select Committee on Relations between Central and Local Government, *Rebuilding Trust*, Volume 1 Report, HL Paper 97, London: HMSO

² Blair, T. (1998) *Leading the Way: A New Vision for Local Government*, London; ippr, p14

exceptionally good or bad – it is ‘cleaning and greening services that matter most: they are the most visible of services’.³

Turnout rates for local elections in England have been low for most of the last fifty years. The view prevades that there is not much over which to galvanize people to vote. Postal ballots and voting in supermarkets – to highlight two of the tricks tried by Labour to encourage participation – have at least in the former case increased turnout to a limited degree. Directly elected mayors on their own have not managed to transform local politics, but there are signs that they have begun in some places to capture the public’s imagination.⁴ So some progress in grabbing the public’s interest has been made. Yet, no matter what the voting system is or how effective mayors have been, people still need to be motivated to vote because they care over what is at stake. The truth is that for most voters, most of the time, there is not much to care about when it comes to local government.

Do we simply accept that most local government is about the humdrum? At least it is better managed and run than it was when Labour took over in 1997. Moreover it has had significant real investment, although much of that has gone on education and social services. Overall by 2008 there will have been a 30% real increase in local government spending. Capital spending has also increased significantly and the new prudential borrowing system gives local authorities new opportunities to make investments on behalf of their communities.

The reality is, of course, that some local government, some of the time, has stepped way beyond a concern with the humdrum. There is, for example, the obvious effort of Labour-controlled Manchester to revitalize its city. There is the work of Conservative-controlled Kent in addressing both the management of growth and the underdeveloped parts of that county. There is the work of Liberal Democrat-controlled Liverpool in establishing the city as the 2008 European Capital of Culture. There are dozens of other examples known to NLGN of effective community leadership.⁵ But are these examples of local government the exception to the rule, the occasional burst of dynamism in an otherwise fairly low key state of affairs? Moreover, as the commentator Simon Jenkins pointed out recently – in making his people’s nomination for the House of Lords on Radio 4’s *Today* programme – local government leaders who have helped to deliver the transformation of their communities remain largely unsung and unknown heroes to both the national media and the general public.

At the level of rhetoric New Labour has also endorsed the idea that local government is about more than delivering a few public services well. Lip service has been paid to the idea of community leadership as the

3 MORI (2004) *Understanding Local Communities*, London: MORI Social Research Institute

4 Randle, A. (2004) *Mayors Mid-term: lessons from the first eighteen months of directly elected mayors*, London: New Local Government Network

5 See, for example, Randle, A. and Arend, N. with Panchal, K. (2004) *Vitality through locality: lessons from Lewisham and Suffolk*, London: New Local Government Network; and also, Randle, A. (2005 forthcoming) *The West Sussex, Wakefield and Birmingham ‘Localism Project’*, London: New Local Government Network

future of local governance, and the current Government's commitment was repeated in the ODPM's ten year strategic vision document published last year:

'Councils have a clear local democratic leadership role as the only body elected by and accountable to the whole community ... There is leadership in decision-making and the accountability for what is delivered by the council. There is a role in leading local partnerships and bringing stakeholders together to help meet local needs and priorities, providing a focal point for local decisions. And there is a leadership role in enabling communities to lead themselves, developing social capital, fostering greater engagement in local decisions, and taking action to promote inclusion'.⁶

The ODPM document goes on to identify some low key things that have been done by New Labour to promote community leadership through, for example, the requirement that local authorities produce community plans and the provision of a general power of well-being.

But requiring plans to be drawn up and providing some new powers has not made a big difference. Notwithstanding the rhetoric about community leadership and a few interventions in practice, New Labour has effectively ducked the changes necessary to really deliver that community leadership role. Indeed, the vision document notes: 'there is still some uncertainty about the nature and the legitimacy of this leadership role'.⁷ The Government has given a partial endorsement to the idea of community leadership. By its own admission however, it has not always delivered the tools to enable it to happen. Going on about the need for better leadership is one thing but you have still got to give those leaders the capacity to do something that matters.

But what if that vision of community leadership was given real clarity and focus – with a system of local governance designed to have the structure, functions, resources and politics that would deliver it? That is my vision of the future of local government and the focus of attention of this pamphlet. I remain convinced a more devolved system of governance is required and that local government has a vital part to play in that system.

We need a local government capable of carrying the torch for devolution in England; a torch that was all but extinguished by the debacle of the regional referendum in the North East. On November 4th 2004 by a ratio of 4 to 1 the voters of the North East region of England turned down the opportunity of a devolved elected regional assembly for their area. People, it is clear, are not automatically inspired by the argument for devolving power.

As far as devolution in England is concerned we are back to the drawing board. On this now blank canvas my starting point would be to recognize that if people are going to believe in the idea of power

⁶ Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2004) *The future of local government: developing a 10 year vision*, London: ODPM, p11

⁷ Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2004), op. cit., p11

being devolved to their communities, they need to be offered something fundamentally different to suit the circumstances of England rather than a pale shadow of what was given to Wales or Scotland. The scale of England, the size of its population and governing class demand a more complex and subtle solution. Above all people need to believe that they are not going to get the 'same again' style politics that passes them by. They need to see the institutions on offer as ones they can control or influence. And of course they need to think that these institutions can control things they care about. Above all we need more of the 'wow' factor in people's response to local government.

If local government is going to be the torch bearer for devolution in England then we need to rethink its role. Enhanced neighbourhood governance, a few more elected mayors and a more subtle form of performance management – the options most likely to surface from the current strategic review of local government⁸ – are all worthwhile innovations in themselves but they will not deliver the platform for a devolved government settlement for England. If local government is going to be the answer to the devolution question in England then, to mangle a well-known line from *Star Trek*, we need people to exclaim when they see it: "It's local government, Jim, but not as we know it".

⁸ For the up-to-date set of policy and research documents, visit the 'local vision' pages of the ODPM website: www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_localgov/documents/divisionhomepage/029981.hcsp