



Next Steps for Local Democracy

Leadership, accountability and partnership

A collection of essays edited by **Iain Roxburgh**



New Local Government Network (NLGN) is an independent think tank that seeks to transform public services, revitalise local political leadership and empower local communities. NLGN is publishing this report as part of its programme of research and innovative policy projects, which we hope will be of use to policy makers and practitioners. The views expressed are however those of the authors and not necessarily those of NLGN.

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Published by NLGN

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1 *Overcoming the obstacles of devolved government*

Iain Roxburgh

On 20th March this year the NLGN convened a seminar of academics working in the field of governance – a Research Insights Roundtable on the theme of “Where next for localism?” Afterwards, a number agreed to contribute short papers on aspects of the theme to this pamphlet. By no means could all participants in the seminar nor the contributors to this pamphlet be described as evangelists for localism, however they overwhelming support the view that we have got the balance in governance between the centre and the locality wrong and we need to do something fundamental about it.

This is being written as we hear rumours about what we might expect in the “Empowerment” White Paper. Will this represent the shift in central government – and in particular Whitehall – thinking that is needed? Or will it be just a worthy CLG document full of exhortations to local authorities, most of which will already have much more expertise at citizen engagement than central government departments; and devoid of commitments by other government departments – for example Health and the Home Office?

In his paper, Peter John expresses the hope that some of the reforms following the White Paper may help institutionalise more powerful mechanisms for citizen engagement and lessen the tendency for it to be regarded and dismissed as “a minority sport”. He quotes research that has shown that a five minute conversation can increase voter turnout by seven percentage points and that much of the decline of participation in recent years can be put down to the decline in personal contact with real people in institutions. My own recent experience of leading a village/neighbourhood appraisal where over 55% of households returned a 24 page survey questionnaire, confirmed the view that the way citizens are engaged is critically important. The doorstep, the local library, post office, surgery and shops are where face to face “engagement” happens and needs to be both enabled and harnessed by official bodies – and the public meeting is not dead, if it is done right!

Both Su Maddock and Gerry Stoker focus on the style and quality of leadership needed at local level. Stoker argues for a facilitative style that constitutes a different way of exercising power and influence, which his research demonstrates is more likely to be evident in mayoral authorities. Though Mayors are not “all powerful”, they are “not so prone to be enfeebled as council leaders can be”. Maddock defines the qualities of leadership that encourage public service innovation and the imperatives of local engagement with service users and communities. But “the lack of respect within Whitehall not only for local government but also for local communities is hampering innovation diffusion across the public sector”. In the UK, she argues, the “policy infrastructure is dense and multilayered and change agents are trapped within policy and performance regimes”, with centralisation an acknowledged barrier to effective government.

John Tizard argues for greater tolerance and celebration of differences area to area arising from local requirements, priorities and preferences and less attention to “post code lottery” complaints. Both he and Helen Sullivan emphasise the importance of instruments such as LSPs and LAAs which recognise the complexities of local governance and the inappropriateness of centrally determined “command and control” strategies for addressing them. Sullivan looks at the obstacles to exercising good local judgement and what is needed to foster it – including the explicit acknowledgement by Whitehall that central policy judgements do not necessarily “trump” local judgement where the two conflict.

Why have we still got the balance in governance between the centre and the locality, the national and the sub-national, wrong and what are the obstacles to rebalancing it?

New Labour, before the 1997 election and throughout the Government’s terms of office, has stressed the importance of developing local leadership. White Papers and legislation have given shape to this emphasis and these have been backed by substantial central funds invested in training and development. Local government as a sector is now indisputably the best performing part of the public sector. Behind this commitment there was the implicit and sometimes explicit promise that effective and accountable local leadership would lead to greater freedoms and flexibilities for local authorities.

What we have experienced in England, however, is greater delegation rather than devolution (with the noted exception of the London Mayor). What has this done for and to local leadership? Its main impact has been to increase the leadership status and importance of the Chief Executive, since local authorities have been judged on their CPA scores and predominantly managerial criteria, rather than on the effectiveness of their policies in addressing the issues in their areas and their “place shaping”. Maybe this will change with the introduction of the CAA, but the culture of managerialism is embedded and the basis for a revival of real local political leadership will not be present unless there is much greater financial freedom for local authorities.

Fiscal policy considerations – the control of aggregate public expenditure – prompted the imposition and ratcheting up of capital controls on local authorities following the 1976 IMF crisis and the imposition of controls over revenue by capping rate rises in the early 1980s. Nowadays the arguments about Council Tax capping are about politics rather than fiscal policy. Successive central governments have liked to pose as protectors of the Council Tax payer, much to the detriment of local accountability. Financial devolution is the key to real devolution that goes well beyond delegation. It is also the key to effective place shaping and to attracting a new generation of people to see local political action and membership of their local authority as the way to improve their locality and shape its future.

Political and institutional obstacles to devolution abound. Ministers (and civil servants) assume responsibility for things that they can not in any real sense be held accountable for. Accountability for many essentially local services has been nationalised. As Helen Sullivan argues, many recent reforms with their regimes of inspection and regulation within which the exercise of judgement is limited to a privileged few (inspectors and regulators), have undermined local decision-making. And in their role of holding to account, the national media have reinforced the centralisation of politics and accountability. The centralised, London-centric, world must be challenged by a greater multi-centric power. Evidence from abroad suggests that this boosts chances of city region and regional development, leads to greater equity across the nation and greater overall prosperity.

A more insidious obstacle to devolution has emerged in recent years: a growing parent / child relationship between central and local government.

This is manifest in the over-reliance on guidance by local authorities themselves, the inspection regimes with its naming and shaming, the managerial takeover with its target driven, competitive environment that welcomes delegation but not devolution and the patronizing attention given by national politicians to the perceived weaknesses of local democracy (while ducking more fundamental weaknesses of our national democratic system).

The intellectual arguments against devolution are substantial and need to be carefully considered. Principle amongst these is equity. All UK citizens (or is it now just English citizens?) are entitled to be treated the same by the state wherever they live. On the other hand, communities' needs and priorities are different in different places. The Labour Party was formed with the objective of using state power to redress inequalities. I went to university with a good maintenance grant from Labour Lancashire CC while colleagues who lived in many Tory shires got very little. Each education authority was exercising its freedom to decide policies, priorities and resources in accordance with its own values and judgement. I benefited as a "citizen" of Lancashire. The Wilson government subsequently imposed national consistency, recognising that enabling qualified young people to go to university was in the national interest and, in effect, making access to a proper maintenance grant an entitlement as a UK citizen (a view I regret the government has long since abandoned).

The balance between national consistency and local autonomy is at the heart of the devolution debate. Surely it is possible to come to some sensible conclusions about citizen entitlements and a view about what should be in the national domain on the one hand (though it may be delegated to local authorities to manage) and what can and should be the subject of democratic local determination on the other? All the evidence points to the need for a rebalancing towards the latter.

As with any governance system, we need to consider where power lies and on whose behalf it is exercised. Is it "power over" or "power to" do something? Is it empowering to individuals, communities, localities, or is it disempowering? Does it encourage innovation? Does it encourage local leadership? Or is power shifting from the democratic public sphere to the "market" – to a neo-liberal model of local governance, once removed from democratic influence?

There is a need to challenge the orthodoxies that have become deep-rooted in our thinking about governance in England, including learning from the experiences of Scotland and Wales. With a general election now at least a year away, 2008 should be a year of new ideas and arguments for devolution. This collection demonstrates that academics as well as practitioners are here not just to observe the world, but to change it.

2 *Political leadership in local governance: a facilitative style*

Stephen Greasley and Gerry Stoker

Drawing on the work of Svava (1994) we note the emergence of a type of elected local political leader who is ‘a facilitator who promotes positive interaction and a high level of communication among officials in city government and with the public and who also provides guidance in goal setting and policy making’ (Svava, 2003, 157). We suggest that to cope and be effective in the modern policy context with competing government bodies and agencies and a more critical and demanding citizenry, fuelled by a more challenging media, means that a different style of political leadership would indeed appear to be a prerequisite. Facilitative leadership constitutes a different way of exercising power and influence.

To explore the value of the concept of facilitative leadership we suggest four features of political leadership that could be empirically tested: partnership skills, accessibility, low partisanship, and decision-making capacity. A facilitative leader would be able to partner with public officials and other politicians in his own authority but also work effectively with other public agencies as well as private, voluntary and community sectors. The leader would be relatively visible to citizens and be able to engage with them and offer an accessible form of politics. The leader would be outward-looking and not tied to a narrow partisan party politics, although they may be elected on a party ticket. Finally the leader would be able to offer a streamlined focus for decision-making in order to provide momentum in a complex world. We show how mayoral authorities display this kind of leadership to a greater degree, reflecting in turn we argue, the nature of the constitutions under which they operate.

Comparing leadership Styles: Mayoral and Leader-Cabinet authorities

Using evidence from our research we can show that mayors appear to be displaying a greater prospect of delivering of facilitative leadership than leaders in leader-cabinet authorities. The first evidence for this proposition

comes from our 2005 survey of councillors, officers and stakeholders in a mixed pattern of 40 authorities. Figure 1 on the page opposite shows that judged against facilitative leadership criteria identified above leaders in mayoral authorities perform better than those in leader-cabinets. Mayors are perceived to offer more effective partnership relations. The councils they lead are perceived to be better at dealing with cross-cutting policy issues that require input from a range of partners and they are seen as generally having better relationships with partners. Where mayors fall down, but so too do council leaders, is in the extent to which non-executive councillors (backbenchers) feel engaged in the policy process. Mayors, our field research suggests, do have effective working relationships with those councillors that join him or her in the cabinet -and so do many council leaders- but neither form appears to have encouraged a greater engagement with the wider body of councillors.

On the accessibility front the mayoral form appears to have made more strides than the council leader model in making decision-making open, transparent and engaging. Although neither form has proved able to fully overcome ingrained barriers to access. Moreover the mayor is seen as higher profile leader and the mayoral system appears to have developed a reputation for speedier decision-making and a stronger leadership role. Mayors are perceived to have developed a less partisan form of politics, although such is the strength of partisanship traditionally within English local government they are not seen as fully shaking off its characteristics. Table 1 suggests that among insiders only 3 out of 10 see mayoral authorities as dominated by party politics whereas 5 out of 10 make that judgement about non-mayoral authorities.

Our extensive interviews and wider qualitative work give further support to the sense that mayoral authorities are seen as offering a successful governance model that is outward facing. Our wider field research in addition confirms the sense of heightened profile and decision-making capacity that surrounds mayors. The evidence suggests that because of their higher profile mayors may be able to galvanize a more engaged response from the public, although that response is far from automatically positive. All the mayoral authorities reported speedier decision making and that the targeting of resources on priority areas was facilitated by the mayoral system.

Figure 1 Perceptions of Impact of Leadership Forms

<i>Agree/strongly agree that...</i>	Leader-cabinet%	Mayor %	Base	Statistical significance
Partnership				
The council is better at dealing with cross-cutting issues	38	48	1481	**
The council's relations with partners has improved	43	57	1456	***
Backbench members are more engaged	10	12	1509	n/s
Accessibility and openness				
It is easy to find out who has made specific decisions	40	48	1477	**
The public is more involved in decision-making	15	30	1482	***
It is easier for women to become involved in council business	22	34	1501	***
It is easier for ethnic minorities to become involved in council business	19	34	1495	***
It is easier to find out about council policy	49	59	1503	*
Partisanship				
Political parties dominate decision-making	47	29	1504	***
Profile and decision-making				
Decision-making is quicker	45	61	1464	**
The role of leader has become stronger	68	79	1474	***
The leader of the council has a higher public profile	59	82	1478	***

n/s = non significant difference, * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$

What encourages facilitative leadership?

To explain why mayoral authorities appear to offer greater support to facilitative leadership than leader-cabinet authorities we consider the underlying drivers of leadership performance and show that there are factors at work that do not simply reflect the haphazard impact of personality or context on leadership style. Contexts, capabilities and constitutions are the classic ingredients used to explain the trajectory that different leaders, including mayors, take (Lowndes and Leach 2004; Mouritzen and Svava, 2002) Constitutions are for us the key ingredient in that they create the rules and incentives in which actors make their choices. We are not here referring formal general document that lay out political rights and sovereign powers of different bodies but more the institutional rules of governance that define who makes decisions and on what terms and with what accountabilities.

Constitutions cannot determine a leadership style but they can however make certain leadership styles more or less likely. Plainly not all mayors are as successful as each other and not all will display the qualities of local leadership that have been identified as perhaps those most appropriate to the demands of the 21st century. Context factors may undermine their efforts or a lack of skills may make them unwilling or unable to deliver that form of leadership. Moreover some leaders in the leader cabinet model will display the characteristics of the leadership style using the context and their capabilities to their advantage. Figure 2 and 3 contrast the position of the mayor with that of a council leader under the English mayor-council and leader-cabinet systems.

The constitutions of mayoral authorities do put mayors at an advantage compared to other leaders as table 2 and 3 indicate in detail. Mayors face fewer internal constraints and veto points so that they can enter the arena of negotiating with partners, other agencies and indeed citizens from a stronger base. They are not 'all powerful' but they are not so prone to being enfeebled as council leaders can be. As such they are freer to develop outward-looking facilitative leadership style. The prospect of mayors doing so is further enhanced by the different nature of their relationship with followers. The greater distance between the leader and the followers and the reduced closeness of the monitoring gives mayors more freedom to maneuver than council leaders. The certainty of a four year term also

we suggest encourages mayors compared to council leaders to develop a long-term strategic agenda. Ultimately mayors rely on the public judging their behaviour favorably and so they are encouraged to look outward for approval. The constitutional position of the mayor leads, through the powers and relationships that it sets up, to a push for a mayor to adopt a facilitating leadership form.

Figure 2 Structural differences: powers and capacities of leaders

	Mayoral	'Leader-Cabinet'
Budget and associated policy framework	Council can only reject mayors proposals with a 2/3 majority. A majority of 50% plus 1 is required to adopt the budget and policy framework.	Council can reject with simple majority, and adopt an alternative with simple majority
Operational decisions	Mayor is given individual power to make decisions	Council members' choice as expressed in the constitution about whether decisions are made by individuals in executive or whether they have to be collective
Selection of cabinet and portfolios	Mayor	Cabinet may be voted in by full council, or leader may have power to choose cabinet and portfolios

Figure 3 Structural differences: relationship with followers

	Directly-Elected Mayor	Leader (in Leader-Cabinet)
Principals	Electorate	Councillors
Principals link between goals and preferences	Relatively flexible	Relatively fixed
Principals monitoring effort	Loose	Potentially Tight
Period before punishment/reward	4 years	Yearly

Conclusions

Leadership is not simply a product of personality, capabilities or contingency – although all those factors play a part in determining the style and approach of an individual leader. We provide support to the idea that institutional design does make a difference. In the language of probabilities we argue that in mayoral authorities the institutional framing means that it is more likely that a visible, partnership-based, open and less partisan form of leadership will be practiced.

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3 *Creating the conditions for a more innovative public sector*

Su Maddock

Innovation has become the favour of the month and the solution to social problems; this presents a major challenge to government given that its machinery, governance and accountabilities frameworks constrain rather than support innovation. However, it is widely accepted that innovation cannot be decreed by central government nor delivered by command and control management; it is dependent upon the active engagement of staff and communities and on the radical redesign, not just of services, but of public institutions, including government.

Public service innovation is about relationships and organisational design rather than new products and a response to social problems. For instance, as *'baby boomers'* grow older, they will demand services that prolong active life rather than provide standardised care and medical intervention. They will play a part in developing innovative social care for older people and develop a demanding community of users.

It is no surprise that so much social innovation is generated by younger people who are committed to social change and like front-line staff and the third sector are close to social problems and bureaucratic cock-ups; they are in a position to see the problem and the solution. Social innovators tend to work through networks of people with similar concerns on the margins of large institutions; there is a huge gulf between innovators and official bodies in terms of their attitudes, work cultures and procedures. Their energy for social change results in unpredictable, messy and informal relationships which sit uneasily with more formal institutional procedures and practices.

Last year the National School of Government organized a conference on public innovation [NSG 2007] to encourage a dialogue between social innovators and senior civil servants, where social innovators recounted their stories when working with local, regional and central government. They said that they experienced:

- a lack of support from those in government;
- unrealistic expectations and short-termism;
- crushing performance management, paperwork and constantly changing priorities;
- exclusion from mainstream thinking; and
- contractual arrangements and criteria that made the adoption of innovation practices extremely difficult.

Local initiatives outside government are fragile and easily blown off course; even government programmes such as *Sure Start* are undermined mid-stream by changing political priorities. While social innovators want to explore possibilities those in government tend to be looking for risk and not innovative solutions. However, some innovators do find champions in government, who become early adopters of their work. Public service innovators need allies, champions and high-level support if their ideas are to be translated into the mainstream.

Creating an innovative environment

A key objective of public sector reform was to root out unnecessary bureaucracy, however, the contracting environment has not greatly improved the environment for innovation. Innovators continue to be confronted by inflexible institutional people and procedures and if anything 'contracting' has fragmented activities and rendered interventions (short) time-limited which undermines connectedness, sustained development and the value of social relationships. Public service innovation is dependent on a much more egalitarian working relationships between all parties but particularly with front-line staff and service users/communities. Not that the public are currently driving innovation in the public sector [Mulgan et al 2008]. It is pockets of professionals and managers and some third sector organisations that appear to be more instrumental. However, the catalysts for innovation often remain hidden from the view of both policy-makers and researchers [Maddock 2007]. For instance, women in particular are forging new associations and campaigns and highlighting the problems that need to be addressed by more innovative solutions at the community level.

Public service innovation cannot just be copied or scaled up as generic model it requires appropriate adaptation with each new context. Various ways of supporting innovation are emerging, such as innovation platforms or hubs, Communities of practice, networks and project teams working on particular challenges in health, education etc. While innovative ideas can emerge at any level, government innovations have tended to be programmes, new institutions such as the BBC, The Open University etc. New technology can drive particular innovations in communication through phones, networks etc and in health. The challenge in the public sector is that innovation is usually more located in social solutions which can be assisted by ICT etc but the content or solution involves the active engagement of people. This means that the diffusion of innovation travels when people connect. The unpredictability of the innovation journey in the public realm defies the dominant image, of innovation adoption as involving a 'pipeline', because public innovation flow moves between those ready to adopt new practice; the orderly pipeline and current contracting arrangements do not capture the dynamic nature of social networking; consequently the diffusion of public service innovation suffers.

Leading innovation

Creating the conditions for Innovation is not easy [NSG2007], especially in public bodies where disincentives discourage innovative people; consequently, public leadership is critical to innovation flow. Innovation is not easy within institutions but courageous leaders can make a difference especially when they *direct less* and *ask more*. They can encourage or stifle innovation. A senior manager who *'tells'* rather than *'asks'* is unlikely to drive or recognize innovative practice, which is a problem when it is those at the front-line who are most likely to generate new ways of working and innovative ideas [Borins 2000].

Leadership to do what?

Few in government are clear what it means to be a leader of innovation although the majority of executives agree that the most important drivers of innovation are culture and people. Currently there is a process at work of redefining the sort of leadership that will support public innovation and partnerships that have become an essential organisational form for those attempting to forge new more porous organisational structures. The challenge is to move beyond supporting single projects and transform inward internal cultures. This involves a shift in thinking about what leaders do? and what

their role is? Creating the conditions for innovation is less about style and more about attitude – it involves less direction and a greater sensitivity to the wider public system. The leadership role is one of transformation, not of squeezing innovation into established processes.

Those leading innovative practice need to be adaptive, agile and tactical; open and collaborative but most important brave and able to defend those experimenting and taking risks. They have to have the courage to both create space for creative people and to operationalise new practices that are flexible and open enough to embrace challenging individuals and more open ways of working. Within government this means spending time building external relationships and spending less time on policies, plans and processes and start to develop more responsive corporate functions, that value innovation.

A critical question for executives is whether they employ the right people, whether they reward innovators in their company and how they can create the conditions for innovation. Civil servants and chief executives are often recruited on the basis of their ability to manage existing systems when innovation demands that they transform systems. There is a critical difference between those who think they will drive innovation through the new technology solutions and those who use ICT to support front-line staff get closer to service users and motivate them to make improvements. Unsurprisingly, this difference is gendered [Maddock 2006]. Women in particular are aware of the need to inspire and motivate staff such that they can see first hand the problems to be tackled. For instance, Alexis Cleveland, previously Director General for Pensions recognized that department staff needed to connect to pensioner experience if they were to be motivated to change their practice. So she suggested that all staff interview five pensioners. Similarly, some innovative local authority chief executives have modelled a more responsive approach to local people in order to bring front-line staff closer to local people and local social challenges in service provision. “we asked, you said and we did it’ [Irene Lucas, CEO South Tyneside 2007].

Leaders who embrace innovation (box)

- define the kind of innovation needed;
- use foresight research and intelligence as a driver of change;

- build innovation networks across boundaries;
- provide space for innovators and listen to staff;
- Put innovation on departmental agendas;
- secure time and funding for risk-taking and experimentation;
- define what works and use innovation metrics;
- dismantle disincentives;
- lead systemic change to support innovation flow;

What does being innovative in government mean?

There are no blue-prints or easy guidelines, but there are guiding principles, for instance, getting closer to the problems, understanding the delivery chain and demanding feedback from services users and communities. Public innovation demands that policy makers and practitioners not only become responsive but also understand their role within the delivery chain.

The new government department DIUS has recently published a White Paper 'Innovation Nation', with one chapter on the innovation in the public sector, and aims to develop the demand for innovation from government departments. The success of the DIUS strategy is likely to depend on how far Whitehall can transform its own thinking and practice and reconnect to the wider public sector

There is growing evidence of systemic innovation at the local level driven by pressing demands, crisis, and damning audits; entrepreneurs, local authority executives and professionals are innovating in many British cities and in rural communities. Cities such as Manchester have reinvented themselves – galvanised by local entrepreneurs. Rural communities have been supported by innovative professional and executive leads such as in Shropshire, Devon and the East Riding of Yorkshire. Regional partnerships of authorities such as in Yorkshire and Humber are demonstrating what collaborative strategic leadership can achieve. There is a growing emphasis on innovation hubs, networks and ecosystems sought by those leading partnerships and more interested in 'place' rather than just their individual service or authority. Crisis and decline has nurtured a rebirth in places such as New Orleans and

the work of Richard Florida has shown the value of diverse communities in innovation and social regeneration- again illustrated by Barcelona, Birmingham and Bristol.

Innovation requires systemic change and therefore is part of any corporate strategy, not an addendum relegated as a technical matter to be solved by those further *'down the food chain'*. This is a changing landscape and companies are also failing to put innovation on the board agenda. Although, business executives say that innovation is their top priority only 27% said it was integral to their corporate strategy (McKinsey 2007).

Unfortunately, the short-termism of politicians is undermining both the conditions for innovation and strategy policies that address entrenched environmental and social problems. Corporate strategy in government is driven by politicians and senior advisers, and while much time is spent discussing policy, very little is taken reflecting on whether government change strategies or processes are likely to support innovation. Yet managerial solutions need to connect to a wider purpose, and given that current government machinery is underpinned by techno/rational and positivistic perspectives is not helpful to innovation. The techno-rational model tends to lead to more 'doing' and less policy, but only to make the existing systems go faster. Innovation demands escape from the efficiency model which reduces staff and stakeholders to slaves of the system's processes.

Public service innovation is dependent on all public sector policy-makers, managers and practitioners getting much closer to service users and communities if it is to lead to more personalised and effective services. If policy-makers are physically and emotionally distanced from what matters to the public they it is difficult for them to appreciate either innovation where it occurs or appreciate why good national policies fail in the implementation process. Interventions based on poor psychology have led to a growing number of unintended consequences, largely because people are neither 'cogs' or 'rational' beings and have their own perspective which determines whether they have confidence in the future or not. The deficit model of the public has lessened in local services but is still evident within national policy-making departments. This is an unhelpful perspective because it lacks sympathy for those people failing to conform to rational expectations of them as parents etc

The lack of respect within Whitehall not only for local government but also for local communities is hampering innovation diffusion across the public system. Added to which the audit culture leaves too little time, energy and resources for those public officials who could take a lead in the process of conciliation between central government and local agencies. Communities and Local Government are aware of the need for more than institutional devolvement and for relationship building between policy-makers and practitioners. However, a shift in power from Whitehall to localities will demand more than Local Area Agreements and partnerships, it will involve the Whitehall machine relinquishing some of its power and a stock-take of how policy-makers can develop new governance arrangements and a realignment of relationships; in essence develop new practices, as well as audit them.

What is clear is that social change demands local engagement and there is surely a need for greater alignment between innovators at the local and government level. In the USA there are a multitude of change agents exploring new ways of working but less strategic policy infrastructure—where in the UK the opposite is true, the policy infrastructure is dense and multilayered and change agents are trapped within policy and performance regimes. Ultimately, the conditions for public innovation will be underpinned not just by a more egalitarian social settlement between citizen and the state, but between central government and local governance and a culture that values sustained social relationships as well as social outcomes. Centralisation in the UK is an acknowledged barrier to effective government yet the power imbalance between national and local government continues. British and European public administrations have not yet found a way of ensuring bottom-line accountabilities to government of basic services while being open enough for local social innovation. Interestingly, just at a time when the UK is looking again at forms of devolvement, Scandinavian governments are tightening their grip over public administration and increasing central control to become more efficient.

It is interesting to note that is Icelanders who are the happiest people in the world – but perhaps this is not so unsurprising when Icelanders are nurtured by a state that values children and child care and is a country that values women. They elected the world's first woman president 28 years ago [The Observer Magazine].

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4 *Local people, local service, local governance — the trinity*

John Tizard

The challenge for central and local government – partnering and letting go

The days when the dropped bed pan in Tredegar would reverberate around the Secretary of State’s office in Whitehall are over. Equally the days when local public service strategies, plans and targets are determined by central government should be history.

Central government will have to accelerate its trend of letting go and empowering local agencies to respond to local needs and local preferences. Of course, this doesn’t mean that central and local government should become independent of each other – they are and will remain interdependent. Certain matters will always remain the province of central government and it is likely to be the principal source of local government funding for the foreseeable future. The challenge is to find ways of working productively in partnership.

Local government, in many contexts, has demonstrated that it can respond to local circumstances and in so doing can let go and empower neighbourhoods, communities and individuals to take greater control over their own lives. Local government cannot and does not claim a monopoly of knowledge about the locality and the needs of citizens or how they can be best met. This rests in a number of agencies and above all in the people themselves.

Of course, both central and local government find it difficult to let go. What we have seen in the UK so far is only a glimmer of what might be achieved – as we can see from international comparisons, where local self-government is constitutionally enshrined and entails a dramatically different delegation of powers to local level and where much smaller localities have a budget and a real say in what services their citizens receive.

Moreover, central and local government sometimes fail in their duties. They therefore require strong and independent external scrutiny. Traditionally, this

has been provided by elected politicians, in Parliament and councils. Such a system can only work properly if the lines of accountability are reasonably clear – it is patently inappropriate, as well as inefficient, to hold local government to account for policies and delivery outcomes which are largely fashioned at central government level. And vice versa. However, elected councillors should scrutinise all agencies that impact on their communities.

Diverse local services and solutions to reflect diverse localities

Across the country the message is universal - citizens want responsive local services and to live in safe, clean and vibrant neighbourhoods. However, they do not all want the same services or to live in identical neighbourhoods.

Diversity of provision is essential to meet the diverse needs and choices of diverse communities. There will be differences in different parts of the country and, indeed, within local authority boundaries, because there are differing requirements and preferences. This applies to health as much as to local government led services. These differences should be cause for celebration rather than the cause of constant complaint about the “post code lottery”, which in reality has always existed in many service areas, even when there were national standards and prescriptive delivery models.

Public service delivery is changing rapidly to meet the needs and choices of services users. Over the next few years user demands – enhanced by the development of personalisation – and public sector financial restraint will require much greater reconfiguration and re-engineering of public services in order to meet public expectations. Public agencies will be seeking the more efficient and effective forms of service delivery.

Moreover, local public services cannot be designed and delivered in isolation. There is a significant interdependency between services and there has to be of integration and co-ordination of service design, planning, and commissioning and design to maximise the outcomes being sought for individual service users and for communities. For example, community safety is dependent on street scene, education, youth, planning and other local services as much as it is on the police. Tackling social exclusion requires both a multi-agency and an integrated service approach. Special interest groups such as the elderly require a range of services and are affected by a spectrum of policy decisions taken by a number of local agencies.

Consequently, services will increasingly be delivered through a complex myriad of networked service delivery bodies – some of which will be owned and run by their users; others by community organisations; others by third sector bodies; some by businesses; some by employee co-operatives; and some by various public sector agencies working in partnership or singularly. There will be cases where local authorities empower and enable parents to manage their own schools; and disabled people to run their own support service co-operatives.

Governance and commissioning have to change too

Central government provides much of the funding for a range of locally delivered public services and also has a responsibility to ensure equity and social cohesion across the country. This means that there will always be some tension between central and local government in key policy and service areas. Personalised services cannot be commissioned or delivered by remote centrally or regionally based agencies. Therefore, there should be mutual agreement between central and local government on what is locally determined in respect of scope, specification and outcome targets for local services. In most cases the default option should be local determination with local user and civil society engagement in the process.

Local government is in a unique position to take the lead in local place shaping. It is the only local organisation with the democratic legitimacy to take this lead and to represent the area in the making of key decisions. However, it is not the sole source of civil engagement and voice. The third sector and others also have a stake in and an essential contribution to the governance of their localities

Local authorities through the local strategic partnership and local area agreement processes are collaborating with other public agencies operating in their areas and more importantly their local civil society. Without this collaboration the local government power of well being cannot be translated into thriving, healthy communities.

Given that every public body has a duty to achieve value for money there is an imperative to pursue and realise efficiency and effectiveness. Indeed the current and projected financial position facing the public sector is increasingly a driver for more effective partnership. The service delivery, community

well being and financial agendas coalesce around joined up strategic commissioning across local public agencies.

In reality there are and will need to be a series of networks of commissioning in every locality. This will range from the LSP to individual agencies; to individual professional workers; to individual clients with their direct payments; and to neighbourhoods and communities empowered with delegated budgets and decision making powers. Commissioning has to be undertaken explicitly both when services are delivered by the internal public sector and by external delivery partners, as it is principally about identifying need and specifying how that need will be met.

Joined up strategic commissioning is challenging. There is a very complex web of relationships; partnerships; conflicting performance management systems; different funding sources and resource allocation criteria; different accountabilities and decision making processes; and different cultures.

Therefore, local strategic partnerships have to be serious bodies - all members need to be committed participants. This includes central government agencies as well as locally based ones. There has to be political and managerial commitment from all the key members. LSPs can no longer be “talking shops” or a loose collective of a range of other local partnerships. They require executive power and resources to undertake defined tasks. They need to be strategic – i.e. focused on their priorities. They require their member partners to be willing to share resources and pool authority.

This is fundamentally a political process. It should not be sidelined as a technical and operational activity. It has to be high on every council leader’s agenda and that of her or his cabinet and senior officer team.

There has to be officer, managerial and professional collaboration across the local agencies to ensure that political level decisions are executed. The middle and professional managers in the partner organisations have a key role in the fulfilment of community well being. This includes officers and officials from central government departments and agencies and not solely those from locally based organisations.

This local political and managerial leadership cannot be exercised by central government or regionally based officials.

Make local what should be local

The principal of subsidiarity and networking will be at the heart of successful governance, commissioning and service delivery.

The future for local government can be bright but it will require many traditional and vested interests to change or to be swept aside. A modern dynamic economy; a cohesive and fair society; and a sustainable future demand a new set of relationships and power (and resource) transfers between the centre and localities and within localities. Horizontal and vertical partnerships will be fundamental to this. The challenge is on central and local government, their agencies and their partners. The aim should be wherever possible to achieve the trinity of local people making local decisions; securing and using local services; enjoying the benefits of strong local communities.

5 *Rediscovering local judgement*

Helen Sullivan

Why we need local judgement

Recent reforms have reinforced local government's role as community leader with responsibility for securing local economic, social and environmental well-being. They have also provided instruments to fulfil this role, including Local Area Agreements. These reforms reflect a policy mood that acknowledges the increasing complexity of the challenges facing local governance yet recognises the inappropriateness of centrally determined 'command and control' strategies for addressing them. The consequent turn towards local choice and discretion in priority setting and delivery represents hope (rather than expectation) that a more relational, discursive and reflexive local governance can succeed in this uncertain world.

A number of themes jostle for primacy in debates about how to realise this new 'localism', including leadership, collaboration, co-production, trust and accountability. Absent (at least from the headlines) is any discussion of the role of local judgement. This is a striking omission as, in a pluralist society where competing values and interests seek to influence choice and discretion, the exercise of judgement is a vital component in decision making. Indeed for Kieron Walsh 'the reaching of decisions through balanced judgements is the determination of what is in the public interest. There does not exist something separate against which we can justify our choices' (1995:256). The enormity of the challenges now facing localities and the great diversity of voices seeking influence make the determination of 'balanced judgements' much more difficult but also more important in democratic local governance.

What is local judgement?

The exercise of judgement involves weighing up potentially competing factors (ideas, evidence, interests) to come to an informed decision. For Vickers exercising judgement requires an assessment of matters of fact and matters of value. In his view, 'Facts are relevant, only by reference to some

judgement of value and judgements of value are meaningful only in regard to come configuration of fact. Hence the need for a word to embrace the two, for which I propose “appreciation,” a word, ... which in its ordinary use (as in “appreciation of a situation”) implies a combined judgement of value and fact (1970: 198). A key challenge for decision makers in a world of numerous options and multiple values is determining which are the relevant facts and which the priority values – ‘learning what to want’ in Vickers terms.

If judgements are to be regarded as credible and legitimate then those exercising judgement need to be seen to have particular skills, attributes and/or experiences that equip them to make ‘good’ judgements. These attributes are most readily associated with professionals; individuals who by virtue of their specialist qualifications and training coupled with their practical experience, have achieved the status of ‘experts’. Politicians draw on a rather different set of skills and resources in order to exercise political judgements. For example Lowndes and Stoker (1994) concluded that political judgement was the product of both analytical and intuitive thinking. Most recently citizens and/or service users have also been acknowledged to have access to particular experiential resources that enable them to offer ‘lay’ or ‘user’ judgements, which are distinctly different to those of politicians or professionals.

The exercise of judgement (professional, political and/or public) occurs in specific decision making arenas and is influenced by the governing rules and norms which signal the appropriate scope of judgement in that arena. Judgement is then ‘interpreted’ in the context of these rules and norms (Stewart, 1998). Rules and norms include the codes of conduct of professional bodies and political associations, and the rules governing decision making within local authorities, local partnerships and citizen/user groups. While many of these rules and norms will be nationally specified, others will be locally determined and all will be influenced by ‘the way we do things around here’, meaning that the exercise of judgement is always locally conditioned.

In this context ‘learning what to want’ and exercising judgement accordingly is a delicate and difficult process. It involves taking account of different forms of judgement (professional, political and public) through an inclusive public discourse in which the various positions are debated. An inclusive public discourse is essential because what is being sought is judgement for and about the public interest (Stewart 1998). Public discourse not only secures the

legitimacy of the particular judgement arrived at but also offers a mechanism for enhancing the exercise of judgement in the future (Forester 1994).

Obstacles to local judgement in practice

While recent reforms may have exposed the need for local judgement in the governing of localities, the legacy of previous reforms combined with other social and cultural trends has generated important obstacles to its practice.

First among these is the dominance of the performance management culture in which governing is reduced to the identification and monitoring of targets and measurable indicators associated (however loosely) with the achievement of predetermined outcomes. The belief that all aspects of governing can be understood in this way and that all that is necessary is better evidence, technique, technology or systems has generated an over reliance on the pseudo-scientific and the apparently rational amongst public servants, leaving little room for judgement of either a political or professional kind.

Closely related to this is the regime of inspection and regulation within which the use of judgement is limited to the privileged few (inspectors and regulators) who are able to define ever more closely what should be done in service delivery, to what standard and in what way. This has reduced the autonomy of local professionals and local politicians and crucially, shaped their expectations of what constitutes 'good governance' in their locality, particularly though the operation of the CPA.

The reform of council constitutions and the institution of the executive/scrutiny split have 'cut off' non-executive members from senior managers, limited their skills development, and alienated them from important forums such as the Local Strategic Partnership. These developments have reduced councilors' confidence and limited their capacity to exercise judgement, particularly where the scrutiny and ward roles are under-developed in the authority.

These difficulties have been compounded by the transformation of access to information through the internet, and the general decline in respect for/trust in professionals and politicians. These developments have contributed to an unsettling of citizen/professional/politician relationships, as traditional perspectives on authority and expertise are challenged.

The consequences for the practice of local judgement have been severe. Professionals have lost confidence in their ability to exercise judgement and are aware that users trust them less. Politicians have been sidelined from important arenas and processes of decision making and have more difficulty engaging citizens in local politics. Citizens and users may feel less trusting and deferential but importantly do not necessarily feel more empowered to exercise their own judgement.

Fostering local judgement

An ability to govern collaboratively is the key to successful local governance in the 21st century. Collaborative governance acknowledges the increasing interdependence between state and non-state actors including citizens and service users. In this context decision making is at least as concerned with the regulation of relationships as with the pursuit of quantifiable objectives. For example the appointment of 'lead professionals' in local Children's Trusts aims to improve the delivery of 'child centred services' by co-ordinating the work of all professionals involved. Importantly, many of the skills and attributes associated with this role are about relationship management including representing the child to service providers, negotiating and influencing, communicating and liaison, leading multi-disciplinary teams and managing conflict (Morris and Brumfitt 2006).

Fostering local judgement for collaborative governance requires action in a number of areas:

- The development of an inclusive public discourse based on deliberation and debate between politicians, professionals and citizens/users in pursuit of the public interest. Two important early outcomes from this process could be the co-production of public service values for the locality and a framework of beliefs and behaviours to guide collaborative action.
- A review of the way in which key strategies and plans (e.g. the community strategy, LAA) are designed and developed to ensure that matters of fact and value are explicitly examined and debated.
- The (re)connection of politicians to key partnership institutions including the LSP, Children's Trust and Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships and a reassertion that these arenas are 'political' rather than simply 'technical' or 'managerial' spaces.

- A demonstrable shift to citizen/user control of local resources through participatory budgeting, the transfer of assets to community bodies and individual service user budgets. These developments will encourage the exercise of lay or user judgements in meaningful ways.
- A corresponding shift in the role of local professionals which emphasises their potential to advise and enable citizens/users to take their own decisions about services and which focuses on the use of professional judgement as a proactive rather than reactive resource e.g. preventing the incidence of ill health rather than simply treating it (Leadbeatter 2006).
- Enabling professionals to overcome differences in ways of working that hinder collaboration. For example in Children's Trusts Morris and Brumfitt suggest that professional tribalism may be overcome by an appeal to 'something deeper: the ethical commitment to their clients that all children's services professionals share' (2006:74).
- Reviewing instruments of central regulation such as the CAA to take account of the soundness of the process of reaching local judgements.

Explicit acknowledgement by Whitehall that central policy judgements do not necessarily 'trump' local judgement where the two conflict.

6 *The benefits of local citizen engagement and dialogue*

Peter John

Critics and commentators pay too much attention to the defective relationship between central and local government, which has always been broken and probably always will be. But what if the problems of central-local government relations partly originated in the continuing democratic deficit in local government? The reason that local government has been attacked so successfully during the previous decades is because it has not made the best of its democratic connection and natural sources of legitimacy. Is such an idea heresy?

Strangely enough, there is now a powerful alliance between central and local government that accepts such a proposition and is trying to remedy the problem. Reforming politicians, civil servants, local councillors, officers and a collection of specialist advocates have lobbied for measures to strengthen the citizen's direct involvement in local government decision-making. What is remarkable is that central government persists in trying to save local government from itself, even in the wake of previously unsuccessful attempts, such as all-postal ballots, local strategic partnerships, and, except in a few places, directly elected mayors. The main question is whether this post-2005 flurry of initiatives is likely to survive much beyond the political lives of the current crop of ministers or whether there is the basis for a more significant and long-lasting form of democratic renewal.

Reformers need to address a paradox. While the general population is often very concerned about local matters, such as crime, the quality of schools, the state of the streets, planning applications, and how they are treated as consumers, which sometimes turn into short-term protests or complaints, they are reluctant to engage in sustained exercises in political participation and are increasingly turned off established political institutions (Stoker 2006). While people worry about the issues, they do not relate to the institutions that make the decisions. It may be the case the local government has become too bureaucratized and professional – too grey to excite. Maybe the reforms to local government structure in the 1970s created large monoliths, too distant

from local experiences and with few connections to the community? Maybe the fault is with councillors themselves, who retreated from being community champions into committee attendees? The 2000 Act that tried to inject some life into the role of the councillor was avoided by local authorities that were too quick to create yet more meetings to go to (ELG 2005).

So can the democratic connection between local government and the citizens be re-made? The argument of the reformers is that it can only be done outside the formal institution of local government through direct participation by the citizens in its day-to-day decisions. Initiatives to stimulate engagement from the public and to encourage more listening, responsive local councils have been kicking around since the early 1970s. They influenced the experiments of the 1980s that decentralised power within local government areas. Local government itself has pioneered more engagement with the public through focus groups, citizens' juries, panels, surveys and by revamping democratic services departments. Since 1997 the centre had made a concerted effort to complement these initiatives. Examples are forums for council house tenants in Tenant Participation Compacts and Housing Cooperatives. Crime is another area, especially the public participation on Crime and Disorder Partnerships created in 2004.

But it was the 2006 Local Government White Paper, and subsequent legislation, that applied these participatory ideas directly to local government. It introduced community calls for action; powers so councils may create parish councils; recommendations that that councils should deal with petitions and delegate budgets; expanded the power of the ombudsman; and empowered people to manage their own neighbourhoods. While diehard local government traditionalists may see these mechanisms as by-passing local representative institutions, it is significant that the Local Government Association welcomed the proposals (LGA 2006). It is too early to say how far these reforms will work. There is a line of thinking that suggests that the public are so disillusioned with central and local government that participatory experiments are unlikely to succeed without a fundamental transformation of current politics (Power Commission 2006). But such pessimism is not justified. The decline of participation in recent years has much to do with the way the state and civic organisations make much less contact with the citizens rather than an intrinsic reduction in political interest or a change in political values. There is a lot of research evidence to show

that it does not need much effort to re-mobilise citizens (Green and Gerber 2006); it is more about smart forms of intervention and taking a personal interest. In fact, a five-minute conversation can increase voter turnout by seven percentage points (John and Brannan 2008). There is also evidence to suggest that, if participation initiatives are carried out in the right way with feedback from policy-makers to those who are involved, there is the basis for a more sustained form of participation (Lowndes et al 2006). But a more typical experience is where the citizen is initially enthusiastic, but gets disillusioned as a result of not being taken seriously or from a badly-handled response – or in many cases getting nothing back from the policy-makers.

While conventional political acts, like the membership of political parties, are in terminal decline, citizens increasingly draw on a new repertoire of behaviours to influence decisions (Pattie et al 2005). It seems to be the case that form of direct contact between the citizen and bureaucracy is an important example. This sounds surprising, largely because many commentators believe most people would agree with the saying usually wrongly attributed to Oscar Wilde: 'The trouble with Socialism is that it takes too many evenings'. But evidence from the 2005 Citizenship Survey shows that 8.3 per cent of the population of England and Wales participated in these forums (John 2008). And just under half of these people – about 1.4 million – are doing this as their only form of participation. A lot of evenings have been lost, it seems. And the total contrasts with some gloomy figures presented by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation study, *Who Benefits?* (Skidmore et al 2006), which estimated the total numbers of community participants at about one per cent of the adult population. Another positive finding is that citizen governance involves a wider group of citizens in its deliberations, and reaches groups of citizens who have been excluded from decision-making, such as ethnic minorities and young people. From these figures it is not possible to dismiss citizen governance quite as much as a minority sport as some do.

But what is the significance of these activities? One view is that they are simply consultation and legitimisation devices, perhaps of similar ilk to the old Soviets, which were a form of direct participation that cloaked oppressive regimes before 1989. Some critics regard direct forms of participation as a diversion from the effective business of representative government, an example of the failure of new Labour's vision for democracy (Judge 2006).

And some case studies seem to confirm the symbolic character of these experiments (see Barnes et al 2007). One study of Exeter suggests that the participation exercise was more to do with manufacturing consent rather than making a genuine influence on policy (Cole 2004).

But it would be wrong to see these forums as merely symbolic. Some studies exercises do find them to influence policy (see Brannan et al 2006). The conclusion of many accounts of citizen governance is one where there were good experiences and practices, but there is more to be learnt from these exercises (Skidmore 2006). And then there is the often unnoticed but extensive community self-help activities that complement the wider participation initiatives (Richardson 2008).

However, it would be fair to say that these participation exercises tend to lack formal grounding, relying too much on bureaucratic discretion rather handing over significant institutional power to citizens. It appears that citizens tend to lack formal rights of redress or for information, which may reflect the weak conception of the role of the citizen in the process and the sense in which it is not possible to have formal alternatives to representative democracy. This tension is felt very much in neighbourhood affairs where elected councillors see themselves as the only legitimate advocates and tend to resist community representatives (Richardson 2008). So in spite of the flowering of new initiatives and much experimentation and good practice, there is still a long way to go with more direct forms of democracy and citizen engagement. The hope is that some of the reforms following the Local Government White Paper may help institutionalise these potentially powerful mechanisms.

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7 *Obstacles to devolved governance in England*

Alan Harding, Martin Burch and James Rees

It might seem odd to dwell upon ‘obstacles to devolution’ at a time when the national media has recently devoted much attention to the evolving implications of a keenly-fought and intensively scrutinised contest for the London mayoralty and to renewed debate about future institution-building in and for Scotland.

On the face of it, the fact that Boris Johnson – now the second most important Tory in the country, according to some – is using his Mayoral platform to demonstrate Cameronian Conservatism in action on Westminster’s doorstep, and that the Labour leadership in Scotland broke ranks with its UK-level counterpart in trying to goad the SNP into calling an early referendum on Scottish independence, would appear to be proof positive that the first wave of New Labour devolution has thoroughly re-invigorated sub-UK level politics, exactly as promised.

The fact remains, though, that the new, directly elected institutions created by the post-1997 reforms cover only around a quarter of the UK population. Beyond London and the non-English UK nations, progress has been much slower; arguably non-existent. Why is this, and are there signs that the barriers that have long stood in the way of more devolved governance for the vast majority of the English population are beginning to crumble?

Views differ. On one hand, the more optimistic opponents of centralism and centralisation can find evidence, variously distributed across the 2006 Local Government White Paper and last year’s Lyons review of local government finance, the Governance of Britain Green Paper and the Sub-National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration, to suggest that the Labour Government has finally come to terms with seeing its plan for the very mild devolution of powers and functions to the English regions derailed by the crushing 2004 referendum defeat in the North East. Out of the ruins of a half-hearted push for Elected Regional Assemblies, it could be argued, has emerged a reformulation of Labour’s commitment to bring decision-making

closer to the people through a set of measures that claim to liberate and empower local authorities, improve local leadership, encourage (non-elected) regional agencies to delegate more and be more strategic, and subject them, along with other decisions that impact upon regional fortunes, to greater, albeit largely national, political scrutiny. The optimists might also take heart from the fact that, whilst the mood music played by Tories and Liberal Democrats is subtly different, there is little in the known policy commitments of the major opposition parties to suggest that a radical change of course would follow upon the election of a non-Labour government.

Sceptics, however, can be forgiven for finding it difficult to see how the disparate strands of reform that the Government has recently set in train add up to a new departure for devolved governance in England as opposed to a belated attempt to tidy up some of the anomalies thrown up by the stillbirth of democratic regionalism. They are also entitled to take the latest set of warm words about the importance of local democracy and leadership with a pinch of salt given that every Government since the days of Margaret Thatcher has mouthed them but largely failed to translate them into anything that has significantly shifted the balance of power between central and sub-national government.

Optimists and sceptics alike could, perhaps, agree upon two features of the governance of England that have been underlined rather than challenged by the search for a devolution 'fix' within England, outside London. First, the system of decision-making continues to be so thoroughly dominated by democratically elected national and local tiers that it is difficult to establish or secure legitimacy for governance arrangements that might operate at an intermediate scale, no matter how important they might seem to intellectuals and policy wonks who argue that the 'nation' and the 'district' (or 'county') are not ideal units for thinking about policy formulation and delivery in an increasingly inter-connected and differentiated world. This continues to bedevil the English regions which, compared to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London, lack territorial coherence and cultural resonance for their diverse inhabitants. Second, the constitutional superiority of national over local government is such, and the system of resource allocation so dominated by transfers from the national to the local scale, that it is manifestly problematic, even with the best will in the world, for local authorities either to put aside parochial interests or to abandon a largely submissive, box-ticking

approach to their paymasters in favour of a more collaborative and assertive stance on localism and devolution.

Put these factors alongside three other longstanding features of English central-local government relations – extreme Governmental sensitivity to allegations of a ‘post-code lottery’ which makes any spatial differences in the performance of public services seem like a problem, a somewhat Olympian and disdainful attitude to ‘the local’ on the part of the national, metropolitan elite, and a tendency by Governments of all stripes to see local authorities as delivery instruments for the routine elements of national policy – and it becomes evident why the political confidence and popular support that surrounded the initial post-1997 devolution reforms continues to prove difficult to recreate in the rest of England.

In formal terms, the Government’s latest initiative to shift the balance of responsibility from the national to the sub-national scale focus mainly upon ‘place shaping’, economic development and regeneration. The approach being taken is experimental, permissive and facilitative and largely denuded of the national spending programmes, however small, that have underpinned policy approaches for the last 30 years. The status of ‘sub-regions’ provides a good case in point. Here, a protracted debate about the role that urban regions have played in the transition to a ‘knowledge economy’ has combined with a more concrete discussion about the potential for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery through inter-jurisdictional economies of scale to produce a set of instruments – Metropolitan Area Agreements, a potential ‘duty to collaborate’ on the part of sub-regional partners and a possible move towards the institutionalization of sub-regions that would require fresh legislation – that rely upon ‘bottom up’ mobilization and unspecified carrots from government departments. The result could hardly be described as devolutionary but it does hold open the possibility, following on from a somewhat opaque process of inter-governmental and inter-agency bargaining, of a patchy, ad-hoc strengthening of sub-regional governance capacity, in certain policy fields, where there is sufficient enthusiasm for pursuing it and where local partners consider that the game is worth the candle. Current evidence suggests this is proving to be the case in selective parts of non-metropolitan England, mainly in the North and the Midlands.

The tentative, formalised process that is being taken forward in provincial England contrasts strongly with a set of less formal, but stronger and more advanced developments in what we might describe as the London super-region. Here, London, of course, already has its own devolved governance arrangements. Just as important, last year's Comprehensive Spending Review, taking its cue from a set of Treasury-inspired policy reviews in the fields of housing and planning (Barker), transport (Eddington) and skills (Leitch), put significant flesh on the bones of a more strategic and directive approach to sub-national governance which emphasises the need to sustain and manage growth in the UK's principle economic 'hot spot'. In particular, it gave a green light to a number of significant investments – for example in the London Olympics, Crossrail, Thames Gateway and other growth areas in the greater South East – that will have the dual effect of continuing the recent trend for public expenditure per head to grow fastest in the most economically advantaged regions (London, South East, East) and, a national economic downturn or recession notwithstanding, underpin continued divergence in regional economic fortunes.

In short, we currently see a twin track approach to sub-national governance which is broadly decentralist and 'hands off' in provincial England but is characterised by a combination of stronger devolution (to London) and a more pro-active, benign centralism in the metropolitan core. Whether these emerging arrangements will prove politically, economically and environmentally sustainable in the longer term remains an open question, as does the issue of where any momentum for challenge and change might come from. What seems clear, however, is that there will be no straightforward process of devolution in England that is remotely comparable to the golden years of a decade ago in the non-English nations and London. For those of us with an interest in understanding the politics of sub-national governance in the UK, however, the coming period should prove just as fascinating.





New ideas about the future of local democracy are needed more than ever as the loud voice of centralised governance in Britain continues to dominate. In this short collection of essays, senior academics and writers on local government and devolution set out their analysis of current issues in local leadership, accountability and partnership - and reflect on the future options for policy over the years ahead.

Across our universities and academic institutions, evidence-based research continues to show the important role to be played by local authorities in frontline service delivery and how new public engagement strategies are crucial for a functioning and cohesive society.

As a think tank dedicated to the cause of localism, New Local Government Network is pleased to coordinate this series of reflections and hopes to continue bringing together the country's leading thinkers on this vital area of public policy.