

PAROCHIALISM GONE MAD

‘Why centralization is leading to a failing state’

Evidence to the Housing, Communities and Local Govt select Cttee.

SUMMARY

- ❖ **England is over-centralised;** government at all levels is under performing and stuck in a complacent stasis, which has led to some serious failures in the delivering of services and administration. All systems of governance fail occasionally, but some of the failures in the 21st century were serious and are showing no signs of deep level improvement.
- ❖ **Austerity, Brexit, and now the coronavirus emergency is testing the governance of England as never before.** This disparity in funding and outcomes between parts of England and that of the devolved countries that make up the United Kingdom, is becoming a source of complaint and concern. The last UK election outcome was partially decided on the perceived disadvantage of ‘left behind Britain’ , and how this was meant to be resolved.
- ❖ **Many of the so-called devolution deals are heavily circumscribed and made with central govt setting the terms of any ‘deal’.** Most involve increased liabilities for the new organisations with an insufficiency of finance delivered in ways set by H.M. Treasury. There is a distinct preference for elected Mayors, even this form of governance offers no proven advantages over other administrative systems.
- ❖ **There is no sense of place in many devolution deals,** where citizens can participate and feel that local concerns are being considered. Only highly managerial and technocratic administrative methods are given credence. Many Councils are highly defensive in outlook, with safety first policies, silo management, and a propensity for very expensive I.T systems which are meant to and nearly always fail, to make ‘game changing’ savings.
- ❖ **There is no consideration of local devolution.** Localism is a dead letter and no longer given much support from central govt. Bringing devolution to the very local level has a low priority, as any power is jealousy

hoarded by those higher up in the larger councils, who fear a loss of any power, sometimes to an almost comical level.

- ❖ **The ordinary citizen is not really involved as no one really talks about devolution in positive terms.** Often it is portrayed as increasing the number of politicians and therefore wouldn't it be better if central govt did all the thinking and doing.
 - ❖ **The third tier could do more if the structure and rules were brought up to date.** The disparity between the very largest Town Councils and the smallest Parish Councils needs to be addressed.
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PAROCHIALISM GONE MAD-REPORT

Introduction

The UK is one of the most centralised states in Western Europe, constant streams of regulations, directives and ministerial interventions pour out from Westminster down to receiving bodies in local government, who are themselves constantly centralised in thought, word and deed.

The instinct to micro-manage the locals, is high in the priority to do list of ministers, officials and local govt CEO's. This would be acceptable if the centre really did know best, but as we shall see, that is not always the case.

The structure of local govt is highly complicated, often adversarial and highly defensive. This structural defensiveness is brought about because the electoral system is unresponsive to minority interests and alternative thinking. The winner takes all first past the post electoral system, has seen a decline in voter participation often because the result is forgone in most council areas; *'Why bother to vote when the same scoundrels are returned to office'*. Recent voter participation rate increases can be allocated to holding a general election at the same time as local elections and not to an upsurge in approval in local government policies.

Social media has become the battleground of ideas and Councils spend an inordinate amount of time trying to justify their policies to a disbelieving and somewhat fractious populous.

At a local level the use of 'Cabinet govt' has had an equally divisive effect, leading to the growth of the 'rogue councillor' who grandstands at meetings or

uses social media in highly divisive ways to influence policy, mainly because he/she is cut out of the decision making process.

Another factor in this toxic mix of power distribution is the technocratic substate which pervades everything from transport policy, to housing and the management of the environment and heritage. In England there is NHS England, Public Health England, the Environment agency etc.

Like a hydra these unelected bodies (Agencies and Quango's) decide policy and allocate resources with very little democratic control and it is only when things go seriously wrong are 'lessons learnt' or not.

Them and us

Vernon Bogdanor in an article on Brexit has put the referendum result down to the English lack of identity and hankering for the British empire 2.0. Others have put it down to the those in the 'left behind areas' seeking redress. There is no doubt that the inequality in wealth and incomes in the UK economy is also a factor. If we also add in the banking crisis of 2006-8 and a decade of unremitting austerity, where the poorest in society and local govt services have taken the brunt of the 'cuts'; we have a perfect storm of events designed to bring down the most stable of constitutions, so in some ways 'the elite have reaped what they sowed'.

What I can report is a general feeling at all levels that too many feel that they have no voice and that 'They' make decisions that benefit them and not 'Us'. The growth of nationalism in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has not stilled the clamour for localism but has instead increased it. 'Why has N. Ireland got a devolved assembly, which meets only when the spoils of office are finally carved up between its elite, when its population is barely larger than Kent'.

It must be said that the relationship between the devolved assemblies of the UK are no better at local devolution than in England, from reports I have seen.

Byzantium or bust -the unstructured structure of English local government.

The patch work quilt of English local govt must be seen to be believed. In the regions there are Unitary Councils based on Counties (Wiltshire), unitary Councils based on Districts (Medway, Plymouth, Torbay + Brighton), Elected Mayors,(London, Manchester and Liverpool) and then there is what's left of the traditional (since 1974) 3 tier system of County, District and Parish.

On top of this are Fire + Police authorities, with the police having commissioners and authorities. Aligned to all this are various Quango's, joint Districts, joint committees, NHS trusts, LEPs and now Regional transport boards. At no time since the formation of 'modern' local govt in 1886, has such a patchwork quilt of organisations tried to administrate England, to so little effect.

The 1972 local Govt Act was meant to sweep away all 'Bumbledom' as Charles Dickens called it, and instead impose a streamlined centralised system where there would be accountability and presumably more efficient administration.

Unfortunately, sectional rural interests did not want to be run from urban centres and so many of the benefits of the Redcliffe-Maud committee's findings were lost. There were of course many anomalies within the report's findings, but a new structure was proposed to sweep away many of the cobwebs that lay around in the provincial local govt system for years. Instead of Redcliffe-Maud, the 1972 Local Govt act gave birth to the District Council. What this meant was the reverse of what was feared by the rural lobby. In many places rural Cllrs designed urban policy sometimes to the detriment of urban areas.

In Thanet where I work, all the larger borough Councils were abolished, and nothing was put in their place. The smaller Towns, Broadstairs and Birchington, however, maintained Town Councils with parish status. In the long run this could not hold and steadily by a complicated process new Town Councils were formed, often despite opposition from District Cllrs who feared being side-lined. Only Margate remains in the odd status of Charter trusteeship, which was a last-minute patch to a flawed policy. An anomaly is those Towns, such as Ashford, who style themselves as 'Borough Councils' with a civic infrastructure.

County Councils remained, but a growing chorus of dissatisfaction with the status quo, led to the coalition govt's Neighbourhood Planning and localism policies covering rural, mainly planning issues and a growth in the number of Town and Community Councils in urban areas.

Some of the new Town Councils like Salisbury and Shrewsbury are significant bodies, but this has led to a split between the larger, mainly urban Town Councils, and the smaller rural Town and Parish Councils.

The representative body for local councils NALC reflects this split, as it has to offer a superior service to the larger councils who pay a higher proportion of the running costs of the organisation.

Nemesis or the proof of the pudding.

It could be postulated that the scandals of T.Dan Smith and John Poulson, with the collapse of Ronan Point flats in Newham, might have led to the 1972 local govt act in order to clean up after 'Big- bossdom', which had held sway for so long.

If the 1960's and 1970's led to a municipal decline and the rise of agencies, quango's and centralised technocratic managerialism; then Grenfell Tower, the business failure of Carillion and the collapse of Northamptonshire County Council has shown how threadbare and moth-eaten the current system has become. It may be that austerity has exacerbated an already failing system, but week after week there are constant failings in the admin structure of England. I shall not enumerate the many failings reported in the media, but collectively they have eroded trust and credibility in the system.

Another factor is the rise and rise of social media and 24-hour news. Social media has allowed those with the time and energy to almost wage war on Councils of all sizes. Several Parish Councils have had mass resignations following sustained online abuse from trolls seeking to undermine a council. Principal Councils have in many cases retreated to an online redoubt where entrance is gatewayed and closely monitored. Physical interaction in person or by phone was already in decline before the coronavirus emergency and has for the most part ceased completely in the upper tiers of Councils and govt. This can only erode trust still further.

Local government is now facing its sternest test with the coronavirus emergency how it will fare is an open question.

Rebuilding trust: how to place people and communities within decision making.

We have seen why devolution is necessary, but how can it be delivered in a way that minimises disruption, but instead increases the beneficial outcomes we are looking for, such as increased levels of trust in the new organisations from the public, effectiveness in delivering beneficial change for all, but especially for the disadvantaged in society, and of course value for money.

What are the pointers that indicate sustainable devolution?

- ❖ **Devolution should be bottom up not top down.** So called 'Devolution deals' are nothing of the sort, they are in fact impositions handed down from Westminster with terms set down by Westminster to enable micro - management from the top.
- ❖ **Devolution should reach down to the lowest levels** (i.e. Parish level) and not stop part way, because all that does is shift the centralizing tendency a bit further along.
- ❖ **Devolution should encompass a sense of place for the citizens living in the newly devolved area, which engenders a feeling of security and civic pride.** For instance, if there is a genuine design for a devolved Yorkshire, why insist on imposing something else?
- ❖ **There should be genuine public consultation beforehand, with various viable options and not the usual tick box process that often confirms what those doing the consultation want to happen in the first place.** It never ceases to amaze me that govt funding schemes insist on considerable proof of public consultation, but when seeking to implement a policy, public consultation nearly always appears to confirm the nominated policy, by selectively using the data that was generated as proof of acceptance.
- ❖ **There must be a genuine desire to devolve power and resources to local control,** anything else will fail and will seem like a sham to the receiving citizenry. Imposing particular forms of govt, such as elected mayors or commissioners will not secure buy in and support, from the public. The Police commissioners are a case in point, after 2 elections they still receive little public support. At 27.5% turn out in 2016, where even the Govt suggest that other factors boosted the turnout and with only 20% voting in person, it must be asked as if there is a real democratic deficit here (HMG figures).

- ❖ **Devolution must be a general process**, there is little point in keeping old style local govt in some places and unitaries in others. A patchwork quilt of local govt only risks failed institutions.
 - ❖ **Devolution will not work, unless an adequate means of financing adult social care is found.** The current lacunae are hollowing out local govt and the longer it continues the greater the damage will be to the institutions that deliver local govt in England.
 - ❖ **Ministerial oversight should be light touch and trusted on both sides.** For instance, planning appeals should only be resorted to, where there is clear lack of due process and not as now, where well financed developers seek to overreach the local democratic mandate. How would successful devolution work and be implemented?
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Here is a worked example of how sustainable devolution might be delivered:

Kent is the archetypal shire county. When one thinks of a County Council, Kent will often come to mind. The council has survived for 131 years with mostly the same polity during much of the period. The 3-tier system of county, district and parish councils holds true for much of the area covered by the county council. Its tradition extends to retain selective education and other socially traditional policies.

The traditionality and stability that this council exudes is not as deep as the surface would suggest, however. From the start encroachment by London nibbled away at its northern border. A further chunk was lost when the GLC was formed in 1965, and in 1998, Medway broke away and became a unitary council.

Since that time a series of financial deals have gone awry with first the Icelandic banks during the banking crisis in 2008, and more recently the Woodford investment failure. This has taken away the sheen of competence and dare I say conservatism, from the council. If we add in the crushing pressure of the funding of child social care and adult social care on its finances, it is not as rock solid as it once was.

However, in my considered view, its biggest failure is the continued failure to invest and rejuvenate the coastal town economies of Dover, Folkestone and most of all Thanet. Far from investing in and shifting some of its core activities eastwards into those areas, it has done the opposite. It has centralised and pulled in its activities into areas that are already economically better off, and has in some eastern areas, reduced its outreach to a virtual nullity.

In 2016 the 5 eastern District councils produced a proposal to group together into a single district. This was in fact an extension of existing arrangements between them in housing and other services. It would have been a relatively short step to go to a Canterbury and East Kent unitary council, as envisaged by the Redcliffe-Maud Committee in 1969. It never happened. Talks broke up after Ashford and then Folkestone (then known as Shepway) failed to go to the consultation stage.

The third tier, Town and Parish councils, remained sceptical, with western parish councils firmly wanting the status quo to remain, and indifference from the eastern towns and parishes, because no demonstrable benefits were shown. Things have remained the same ever since, except for the shutdown of East Kent Housing and the shambles over the Ramsgate Brexit ferry service (Seaborne freight).

The EK5 scheme failed because it was a money saving exercise and not a people driven project where power and control were diversified.

It was a technocratic, centralising fix, a patch, not a permanent solution, and even if it had succeeded, it would have failed in the long term, as the glue that bonded the 5 councils was weak and skin deep. It would fail on its own contradictions. What EK5 did was to show how not to deliver, stable, effective local government, trusted by the citizens who rely upon it.

So how do we get a viable, sustainable form of local government with genuine devolved powers?

- ❖ **Firstly central govt has to show what it is prepared to devolve and it has to be substantial;** for example: break up Highways England so the devolved entity maintains all roads, with Highways England reverting to managing motorways and providing oversight of any maintenance and improvement. NHS and all social care under one organisation with the devolved authority having a substantial membership of the trust or health board. Other devolved powers are possible and required, in education, transport, the local economy and infrastructure.
- ❖ **Next a full consultation process should take place** with 2 or 3 options based on 3, 2 or 1 unitary organisations or possibly a two-county conjoined body say Essex and Kent. The benefits would have to be fully laid out, and these benefits would have to be financial and social. Too many 'reorganisations' in local govt suggest financial savings which are often never delivered and are done in the teeth of opposition, with almost total social stasis.

- ❖ **Any combined/unitary body should take a cue from Wiltshire when it became a unitary council.** Ramsgate and Salisbury Town Councils were formed on the same date, yet the outcomes are startling in their differences. Wiltshire devolved services, assets and revenue streams. Thanet, on the other hand has ignored Ramsgate, and has refused to invest or devolve in Ramsgate in any meaningful way. Salisbury is a bit larger than Ramsgate and certainly wealthier, but Salisbury's advantages do not explain the very wide differences experienced by both Town Councils over a decade of operation.
- ❖ **Any local devolution should go much further than Wiltshire- Salisbury and devolve powers and resources so that local interests are given the opportunity to manage their own affairs.** Too often as in the case of Neighbourhood Planning the outcomes is far smaller than the hype surrounding the original proposal and genuine devolution involves root and branch reform to the lowest possible level.
- ❖ **Any scheme purporting to be devolution, should go beyond the usual local govt reorganisation,** and should be demonstrably a genuine devolution, to the extent that an English citizen will feel that he or she has more say over the affairs in his or her locality, as his/her counterparts in the other countries/principalities, that make up the UK. Too many schemes put forward are unimaginative, poorly conceived and poorly received by their citizens. This must change.
- ❖ **Not all Parish Councils are big enough or capable of expansion.** Part of the current problems with this tier or sector is the insistence on increasing, scrutiny, process and yes, paperwork, without considering the effect on small authorities, with limited budgets and limited populations. These tend to be in rural areas and I would suggest that the smaller councils are encouraged to form confederal bodies that carry out the new duties of a larger authority, but is done so, in a way that allows each community to maintain its independence. There would have to be an undertaking to accept some democracy in decision making but allows for those who disagree to appeal. it would be a revival of the old Rural District Councils. I see no reason why small rural Towns (under 20,000), should not join up with fellow Parish Councils, if they wish. Alternatively, the larger Towns could work under contract with their smaller parish councils, to deliver devolved services.

- ❖ **Electing representatives in these new unitary devolved organisations will need to move away from 1st past the post to some form of PR** because the present system has very poor participation and leads to tiny majorities forming mini fiefdoms where sectional interests are given full play to the detriment of some communities. If there is to be 'buy in', everyone would need to feel that their vote counts.
- ❖ **Whether a plebiscite is necessary or required, to confirm a devolved option is a moot point**, but there should certainly be robust evidence demonstrated, by means of a thorough survey of local public opinion, which should also take into account any suggestions for improvement/variation by the public.

This then an outline of what future devolution could look like.

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