

The Local Parliament

BRIEFING



Printed on recycled paper

From Cllr Richard Kemp, Leader, LGA Lib Dem Group

The Liberal Democrats – like the Liberal Party before it has always been able to claim until very recently that we were *THE* Party of local government.

We did so for two reasons.

Firstly, because localism, the politics of the community, and community politics are a major part of our political credo and our political practices. Localism is not a term for us – it's a way of life. More prosaically we emphasised our local credentials because we had so few MPs and so little traction within Westminster.

Now however all three national parties are talking localist talk. Labour have reduced the number of KPIs we have to deliver and given us some easing in the way we spend our budgets. The Local Government Act 2007 makes us first amongst equals around the LSP table and creates a duty for other organisations to cooperate with us.

The Sustainable Communities Act which was not a Government Act but one that they grudgingly allowed through will give us much enhanced information about the work that the Quangos and Government departments do within our communities. But and it's a big BUT we don't know how much they mean it. Ministers have fought to keep their KPIs in. We move from CPA to CAA – not less

inspection but more complicated inspection.

The Tories talk about localism – about reducing targets and about cutting bureaucracy but then their Local Government Spokesperson Eric Pickles acts the bully boy by threatening to name and shame councils (including Tory ones) who do not do what he says and he isn't even a Minister yet!

“More elected bodies will cause greater confusion about ‘who has *THE* mandate’ ”

Neither of the other Parties are prepared to grasp the nettle of local government finance reform. We will always be subservient to Government if we get 80% of our finance from them. At least Vince Cable is sticking to the Lib Dem policy of Local Income Tax.

But all is not healthy in the Liberal Democrats either. Two years ago we rejected the whole of a local government policy document although subsequently endorsing

one that was jointly written by the Party's apparatchiks and councillors.

In Bournemouth we have proposals to establish directly elected police boards. This led us firmly into the same territory as Tories who want elected sheriffs, and Labour whose rallying cry will be directly elected chairs of crime and disorder reduction partnerships.

So now all Parties are talking about more elections to more bodies. It assumes that more democracy is the way to improve services and that having more democratic bodies will produce a rush of people wanting to get involved in the electoral process.

I just cannot see the smug quangocrats who get paid tidy sums for few of the pressures faced by elected members wanting to venture onto the campaign trail. More elected bodies will cause greater confusion about ‘who has *THE* mandate’ and will lead to bodies fighting for turf and resources rather than joining up service delivery around an agreed vision and set of priorities.

The Local Council – Local Parliament Campaign has been introduced by the LGA Liberal

LGA Liberal Democrat Group, Smith Square, London, SW1P 3HZ

Email libdem@lga.gov.uk

Phone 020 7664 3204

Fax 020 7664 3240

www.libdemgroup@lga.gov.uk

Democrats to try and get the Liberal Democrats at least to talk seriously about the implications of localism. We will also try to get our opponents to have similar debates but we don't hold out too much hope!

Why do we have a police service that is separate from the Council; an education service over which we have marginal control; a police service which works best when linked to the services of the council; a health service which links strongly to us in so many ways but reports to quango boards; housing associations which are public funded for much of their work but masquerade as the private sector and colleges and universities which provide massive services to our communities but which need take no account of the detailed knowledge we have of our communities?

It wasn't always like this! Until the launch of the NHS most of the public health and health promotion activities were run by or with local government. Until the 1980s most social housing was run by councils; most FE and HE came under the control of the Council as did all publicly funded schools. Until the 1970s councils ran the police services and only in the mid 1990s did councillors lose their majorities on police committees and authorities.

What caused the changes in governance? Three things:

1. We were not very good at running some of those services. In some ways we were too big, clumsy and certainly old fashioned. We looked in to the Council and not out to the community
2. The Government wanted to extend its influence to exert its political mandate over the local mandate achieved by the Council. This was most notorious

under the Tories but clearly followed by Labour.

3. Our Government chose to interpret the public sector borrowing requirement in specific way. It sought off balance sheet accounting methods such as PFI and RSLs for housings to take legitimate capital expenditure incurred in ensuring the public good out of the public sector accounts.

Over the next few months we will be debating within the Party and within local government more widely what localism really means. We start with key principles:

1. That there is no need for anyone to invent more democratic bodies. There already exists an elected body capable of calling all public sector providers in a locality to account. It is called a Council.
2. That councils to perform their functions do not need to 'do' everything. They work at their best when they do some things but have influence or power over a range of specialist providers.
3. That no body but the Council has the mandate to look at the long-term future of a locality and work out with its residents a way forward which ensures long-term stability for that area.
4. That councils continue to rise to the challenge and that they really are, as the Treasury suggests, the most efficient and rapidly improving part of the public sector.

5. That councils will only really be local when they have control of their own finances. That means less national taxation and more and fairer local taxation.

Our first question to Liberal Democrat Groups is, "Are those principles correct?"

- Should we have a range of elected bodies?
- Should we take back into direct control all the services we have 'lost'? If not all which ones and how?
- Do councils have a real mandate when our turnout is so low?
- Are we continuing to improve and would the acquisition of more powers and authority divert us from the efficiency and 'joining up' agendas?
- Is local income tax still right or are there other and better ways to have local taxation such as local consumption taxes?
- Are things all that much different in the devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland?

What do you think? We are inviting you to discuss these issues and let us know. If possible we will send a speaker to join in your discussion and introduce them.

To get involved or to let us have your opinions contact Seth Thevoz, at seth@localleadership.gov.uk or Liberal Democrat Group Office, Local Government House, Smith Square, London SW1P 3HZ – or visit www.libdemgroup.lga.gov.uk