

## Is the coalition serious about “open-book government”? Can it really be a citizen-powered substitute for top down, central controls?

*The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition came into power promising greater transparency in its spending, especially in the wake of the 2009 expenses scandal, and greater decentralization to local government. Eric Pickles the Secretary of State at the Department for Communities and Local Government today [released details of all CLG's expenditures](#) valued at £500 or over – foreshadowing a legal requirement on all English local councils to do the same thing by November this year. LSE Professor [Patrick Dunleavy](#) was interviewed this morning on BBC Radio 5 Live's Morning Reports programme. The interviewer began by asking Professor Dunleavy about his reaction to the news that CLG spent £635,000 on taxis and chauffeur-driven cars last year, and the nearly £310,000 on catering and food. How did he react?*



**PD:** If you think about that spending on cars, quite a lot of that will be on the Ministerial car service, which was a bit of a scandal under the previous government, and which has been reined back. So I would imagine that amount would probably halve this year. I think that that's the kind of thing people might find interesting – how much is being spent on Ministerial cars, by senior civil servants, or by just by staff catching taxis and things like that; and could they have caught the train, etc?

The reason the department is publishing all this, which could be seen to be pretty embarrassing for it, is that they're going to ask all local governments across England to publish data in the same way. So they had to start doing it themselves, to show that it wasn't one law for the local government and one law for the central department.

**Interviewer:** *Does this strike you as a genuine push for transparency, or is it a nice little piece of PR?*

**PD:** It's certainly a big change in the way that we've been running things, because in the past (particularly this is the local government ministry) under Labour there was a lot of top-down control. Every time something went wrong, the Minister would intervene, and say “*You've got to tell me about this, you've got to report about that*”.

Now, Eric Pickles has got rid of some of those big reporting requirements, especially a thing called the Comprehensive Area Assessment. And he's hoping that lots of local citizens, as soon as their council publishes their results (and probably not many people will scrutinise the departmental result so much), you'll be able to find out exactly what the council has spent money on to the closest £500. And if you think they're spending too much, you can write in and protest.

Not only that, local officials, when they are making these decisions, will know that this information will go public. And so in that way, he's hoping to create a ‘grassroots’ control instead of top-down control. Now whether that works, whether anybody takes the slightest bit of interest in it, and whether anybody can muster the time and the patience to trawl their way through all these vast reams of data, that's a really interesting question.

**Interviewer:** *So what about other Whitehall departments? Are you optimistic that they will follow Mr Pickles' lead?*

**PD:** I am, and I'm generally optimistic that this [open book government] will make a big difference. If you think back to the MPs' expenses scandal in Parliament in 2009, and what a huge impact that made, the problem there was that governments hold the really interesting data, but they don't publish it, it's secret. Of course, you can ask for bits of it under the Freedom of Information Act, and they say, “*Well, we're not going to disclose it to you, it's commercially confidential*”, or things like that. So you're very limited in how much scrutiny you can do.

Now I have a professional interest, I spend my whole day watching government, trying to work it out, sometimes trying to criticise or offer advice. And so it's very good for people like me, good for a lot of think-tanks, and I think it will be good for a lot of citizens also right across the country. I hope that people will

actually take up this opportunity to see exactly what their money's being spent on.

You can listen to the full interview online here: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/console/b00tcp72>

To see the spending details for the Department of Communities and Local Government, go to CLG's release [here](#).

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