

The coalition government's 'new localism' decentralisation agenda may well undermine local government. A new agreement is needed

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Conservative and Liberal Democrat ministers have sought maximum publicity for their policies of decentralisation. But LSE emeritus professor [George Jones](#) finds that the steps taken and proposed will in fact encourage a creeping centralization of many more policy areas away from local authority control. Ministers are essentially promoting sub-localism, taking powers from councils allegedly to give to 'Big Society' actors below the local- authority level, but ineluctably sucking up key control functions to Whitehall at the same time. A new agreement is now needed between central and local government to prevent these repeated squeezes of local powers and competencies by successive governments.



Localism as a concept is something to be welcomed. It's the polar opposite of centralism. Instead of governmental decisions being taken at one central point, they are dispersed to representative councils that have been elected by the people locally. Services provided closer to their point of use can be targeted better, and can be cheaper and more efficient than if provided by central government. Local citizens know best how to spend local money raised by local taxation, and in the present era of austerity, local councils know best where and how to make cuts, and where they will cause hardship – not central government or its regional offices.

The coalition government considers itself to be a champion of localism – indeed, that is Eric Pickles' current mantra, along with decentralisation. But it is hard to tell what interpretation of localism and decentralisation his Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) are currently applying. Pickles and CLG consider themselves to be champions of both local government and of the Big Society agenda of empowering communities and associations. This latter approach is an extension of David Miliband's 'double devolution' of a few years ago. It is really decentralisation below the local government, a form of "sub-localism". Power is being decentralised to entities below local government, thus eroding the responsibilities, power and relevance of local government.

This sub-localism is especially fraught when contrasted with CLG's continual assertions that it knows whether a council-tax level in every locality is excessive and needs capping or freezing. Mr Pickles also claims he knows better than elected local authorities how they should deal with refuse collection, how they should make data available to their citizens, how surveillance and CCTV should be carried out; and what salaries to pay their employees.

This move to pass governmental decision-making to a level below local government is ill-thought-out. We do not know what is meant by community associations, how representative they will be, their boundaries, nor their audit, probity and accountability arrangements. Rather than setting up such amorphous entities, the Government should empower local authorities, to promote and support public involvement in their localities. After all local authorities already exist with their own ready-made governance structures, their own democratic mandate, and with 20, 000 community activists called councillors in place.

The Government's new scheme of Community Budgets (which replaced Total Place) is far too narrow in scope, limited to a few areas and focusing mainly on public services going to problem families. The system

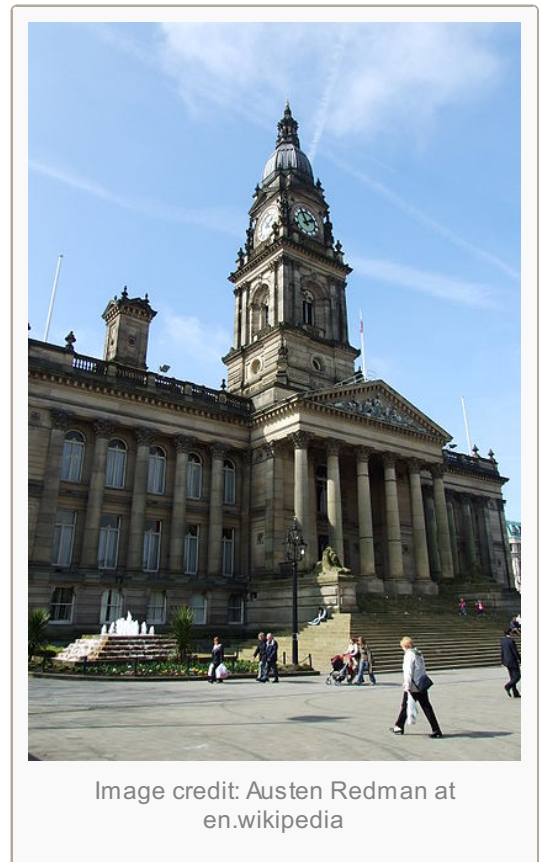


Image credit: Austen Redman at [en.wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org)

should be extended to the budgets of all other departmental spending in local areas, so that local authorities are genuinely the government of their local communities. Increasing their powers of local taxation, to reduce their dependence on government grants, in effect bringing decentralisation to the Treasury, councils and local citizens would have to balance their spending decisions with the consequences of finding the resources to finance those decisions. This change would make local elections matter, increase election turnouts and encourage a much more vibrant local politics.

As Tony Travers has said, if local authorities had been able to make their own decisions about banning smoking, rather than having to wait for central government to mandate a ban everywhere, many more lives might have been saved years earlier. The effect of such centralisation is that all too often local authorities wait to be told by central government. Some will not act unless they have been given central guidance. A culture of deference erodes local democracy.

Localism would improve standards. By their very nature, national standards are usually minimum ones, and have an intense self-generating pressure towards centralisation, since the centre cannot set stable standards and has to raise them to meet desires for higher standards. Getting rid of them would allow local authorities and local people to decide for themselves what their priorities are.

Unfortunately we cannot rely on the current governmental or Whitehall culture, attitudes and laws to protect the relationship between local and central government. More permanence in the relationship is badly needed to stop the creep of centralisation. There needs to be statutory protection for local government in a law which codifies the central-local government relationship. This statutory code should be monitored by a joint committee of the Commons and Lords, reporting on specific government proposals and activities that breached the code, and producing an annual review of trends. It would ensure that the legislature considered the effects of all government policies and activities on local government and their cumulative impact.

Alongside this strengthening of parliamentary scrutiny, the UK executive should create a capacity within itself to ensure that departmental policy proposals impinging on local government conformed to the code. A powerful cabinet committee chaired by the Prime Minister or Chancellor of the Exchequer would have more authority over other departments than would CLG alone. Any interfering actions by the centre on local government would have to be considered before being made law. Such a statutory code would do much to challenge the current mindset of Whitehall that local government is simply the delivery agency of central government. The code would state that local government is not division of central government, but a major independent element of the British constitution – the government of the local community, primarily responsible to local voters.

This blog summarizes evidence given this week by Professor Jones to the House of Commons' select committees on Communities and Local Government and Political and Constitutional Reform, along with his co-writer of nearly 30 years, John Stewart, emeritus professor at Birmingham University.

To view Professor Jones' evidence on localism to the Communities and Local Government Select Committee please click here: <http://www.parliamentlive.tv/main/Player.aspx?meetingId=6990>

To view his evidence to the Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee on the prospects for codifying the relationship between central and local government, please click here: <http://www.parliamentlive.tv/main/Player.aspx?meetingId=7018>

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