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The new localism: Local government and the Constitution Transcript

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The new localism: Now, those who have been coming to these lectures on a regular basis are, I think, hardy people of great stamina, and those who have come to this one, I think particularly show great stamina, because it has been said by someone, I do not know who, that the study of government is boring and that local government bores absolutely. It is difficult, at first sight, to see why that should be so, because local government after all is meant to serve all of us in our different localities. We all live under a system of local government, and it should, in theory, be nearer and more responsive to us than central government. Most people, if asked, would say that local government is an essential part of our democratic system, but unfortunately, we do not take as much interest in it as perhaps we should.

Let me begin by asking what local government actually is, and I think I can detect six characteristics of it. The first is that it is directly elected: we vote for councillors or a mayor in a particular locality.

The second is that it provides various services. It is, in general, multi-purpose and, in this way, can be distinguished, for example, from a school governing body, which has just one particular purpose: dealing with a school. Most of the services that we associate with local government are, in a sense, personal services - the social services, for example, education, housing, and also environmental services, perhaps becoming of increasing importance in the modern age, highways, transport, and planning.

But also, local government has a responsibility and a duty to secure the wellbeing of the community as a whole, and this is expressed in an idea, which has become very fashionable in recent years, of the council as an enabling council, an enabling local authority. What that means is that it is not necessarily the task of a local authority to provide all the services - for example, social services and so on - but to see that they are provided by someone or some body, and that body can be perhaps private, or a voluntary organisation, but as long as it is provided, it matters less that the local authority itself does the providing.

This idea was very much associated with the Conservatives in the periods of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, but it is also very much associated with Tony Blair and his Government. Tony Blair said in 1998 that "There can be no return to the bygone era of big local authorities where the council tried to do everything." So it is not the job of the council to do everything, but it is the job of the council to make sure that things are done that the community needs - it does not necessarily have to do it itself.

So these are the first two principles, if you like, of local government: it is directly elected by us; and it is a multi-purpose body whose aim is to secure the wellbeing of the community.

Thirdly of course, it is on a local scale. It is confined, its powers are confined, to the particular area for which it has responsibility.

Fourthly, unlike Parliament, local government is subordinate. Those who have come to earlier lectures will remember that an important theme of the lectures was the idea of Parliamentary sovereignty; that Parliament, very crudely, can do what it likes. Ministers need to be empowered by statute to act, but so does local government need to be empowered by statute to act. Just as if ministers exceed the limits placed upon them by Parliament, they are acting illegally, so also a local authority, if it goes beyond what it is empowered to do by statute, is acting illegally; the so-called *ultra vires* rule, a local authority acting beyond its powers. A local authority is allowed to do only what it is permitted to by statute. It has very limited powers, and that contrasts very fundamentally with Parliament in our system, which is unlimited. Of course, the legislatures of some other countries, like America, the Congress, or Germany or France, are limited by the constitution, but we, as I have said in earlier lectures, do not have a constitution in that sense, so our Parliament is unlimited, but the local authorities are very much limited bodies.

So these are the third and fourth principles of local government: the limited geographical scope of a local authority; and the fact that it is subordinate.

Fifthly, a local authority is in the remarkable position, rare outside Westminster, of being able to raise some of its own revenue. I am sure I do not have to remind almost everyone here that they pay a form of taxation called Council Tax towards their local authority services. In fact, heavy though we might find Council Tax to be, it contributes only a comparatively small proportion of

the revenue of local authorities, around 20% or even less, and the rest of it comes from Government grants to the local authorities, so the Government, if it is feeling generous, can lower your Council Tax bill by paying more into local authorities, although what more often happens is that Governments, being fairly strict with cash, will give your local authority less, which means your Council Tax will be more. So the bulk of the revenue of local authorities is provided by central government, but it does, nevertheless, have the power to raise its own taxation in the form of Council Tax.

As I am sure many people here know, there has been a long debate on what the best form of taxation for local authorities should be. At the present time, there is a Government Inquiry, chaired by Sir Michael Lyons, on whether the Council Tax needs reform. I suspect there are not many people who would say it does not need reform, but probably the debate is on what direction the reform should take. Those with long memories, like myself, will remember a time when the main form of local taxation was not the Council Tax but the rates, which had existed from time immemorial, but that was abolished in the late-'80s by the then-Conservative Government, under Margaret Thatcher, who established a form of taxation called the Community Charge, which was colloquially called the Poll Tax, and was not – and perhaps this is an understatement – the most popular of taxes, and indeed had to be abandoned after two or three years. Then the Conservative Government of John Major went back to the Council Tax – I say “went back” because the Council Tax, although there are all sorts of differences from the rates, is a tax on property, whereas the Poll Tax was a different form of taxation, a taxation on individuals. There is a great deal of debate within local government circles on whether the best form of tax for local authorities is a property tax or some type of income tax, or tax on individuals. I think the present Government is not going to move away from a property-based tax.

No one likes any form of taxation, and I think people probably like Council Tax even less than they do Income Tax or other forms of taxation, but it does have one advantage, in that it gives local councils some degree of independence from Government. I think if local councils relied on the Government 100% for their money, such autonomy or independence as they have would be even less than it is at the present. So I am not saying that we should give three cheers for the Council Tax, but we might perhaps give one for any form of local taxation if we believe in local government, because it seems to me an important principle of government that government should be responsible for raising the revenue that they spend. If an authority is getting all of its money from somewhere, I think it will be less careful about what it is doing with the cash than if it has to raise the money itself. That seems to me a fundamental principle of good government.

The final point about local government that I want to make, the final principle, is, in my view, the most important of all, and that is it is government, on the whole, by people like us and not by professional politicians. There are a few career politicians in local government, but most of them are not. Most local councillors combine that role with a perfectly normal career (not that I am saying politics is an abnormal career!) but they combine it with a perfectly normal career. In other words, the people in local government are not professional politicians; they are, as it were, the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker. There are also a lot more of them than there are MPs. There are 659 MPs, but around 22,500 local councillors, so there is much more chance, for any of us who are interested in politics, to become local councillors. Also, we do not have to give up the day job, as it were, whereas being an MP for most people now is a full-time professional career, and indeed many MPs, some would say too many MPs, have never done anything but politics – they have never had a “proper job” at all.

So there is a sense in which local government is a form of self-government. It is a means by which we can govern ourselves rather than having professional people govern for us, and that seems to me of some importance. It also has become a training ground for Members of Parliament. Around one-third of Members of Parliament have at one time or other been local councillors, and perhaps many people who want to become MPs try it out first on the local level and see whether they are suited to politics.

I have given six basic principles, ideas if you like, behind local government, of which I think the last is perhaps the most important in a democratic society and constitutes an important justification for local government, and why I think it is important. But having said that, it has to be confessed, we do not value local government very much. A lot of people talk about its great value. We all talk about decentralisation, the importance of localism and so on, the importance of defending our locality against Whitehall, but we do not actually do much about it. Indeed, if you look at turnout in local elections, it is very small. Turnout in national elections is small enough perhaps – at the last election, 62% voted, in 2001, 58% voted – but the average in local government, according to the Electoral Commission, between 1992 and 2002, was just 31%. I wonder if anyone can guess the figure of what the percentage during that period was for people of 18 to 24? The figure is 11%, that is just one in 10 of those of aged 18 to 24 voted.

In the General Election of 2001, 39% of those between 18 to 24 voted, and amongst young girls of 18 to 24, 33% voted, one in 3, and this led to my only encounter with the magazine *Cosmopolitan*. I was rung up before the last Election by *Cosmopolitan* and I thought they might have wanted my photograph, but that was not actually the case! They asked me what could be done

about the fact that so few young women voted in general elections, and I suggested that they might have interviews with the party leaders on issues of interest to young women and publish the result, which they did, but I do not think it actually affected participation at all, so if anybody has got any better ideas, get in touch with the Editor of *Cosmopolitan* – I am sure you have got a better chance of getting your photo in it than !!

So the percentage of people voting in local elections, local government, is very small, particularly small amongst the young. Plenty of politicians talk a lot about the youth vote, but the vote of someone over 75 is worth 4 times that of someone between 18 and 24, because there are twice as many of them and they are twice as likely to vote, despite the physical difficulties many have getting to the polls. So forget about the youth vote; it's the grey vote that really counts!

However, for local government, very few people vote, many fewer than national government, which seems odd if we really value local institutions. Even more important than that perhaps, when people do vote, they vote mostly on party lines; they vote for the same party they vote for in national elections. A survey some years ago, and I do not think things would be different today, showed that 80% of those who voted in local elections – and that's already a small percentage – they all voted the same way as they do in national elections, and said they were voting on national issues, not on local issues. Of the remaining 20%, that 20% said they were voting on local issues, but roughly half of those voted the same way they did in national elections anyway, so it was really only about 10% who vote generally on local issues; that is 10% of the 31% who actually vote, so about 3% of the electorate are actually voting on local issues.

It is odd really because, in surveys, for what they are worth, on this issue, people say they are very interested in local matters. In a recent survey, 78% of those who say they rarely or never vote in local elections, said they were interested in local issues such as housing and education and so on, and so you may say there is a sense in which the democratic spirit in Britain, or the localist spirit, whatever you call it, is healthy, is still there, but it has not led to a vibrant local democracy, and I do not think even the most starry eyed defender of local government would say we live in a vibrant local democracy. This is the key question I want to deal with today.

I think the reason why relates to many other things that politicians are interested in, namely, the question of how to develop a society with civic and local roots, because it seems it is very difficult to create a sense of local democracy in a society that is rootless. You cannot develop a sense of locality in such a society, and the question I really want to ask is can we alter that?

Local elections are seen by most people, in the national press, and by people who study elections and media and so on, as being, as it were, opinion polls and plebiscites on the performance of national government. It is now said already, in preparation for local elections in May, that Labour will do badly in those local elections, not because Labour is necessarily bad at running local councils but because Tony Blair and the Labour Government are unpopular. They are seen as national plebiscites. However, they are not seen as a verdict on local political behaviour.

The sense of locality which is necessary to create strong local government has been gradually undermined throughout the 20th Century by fundamental social and geographical developments which are I think difficult to reverse, in particular the growing sense of social and geographical mobility.

The local government structure which the 20th Century inherited was created by the Victorians, and survived, a strong and robust structure, able to administer the welfare state beginnings before the First World War, and then, under the Atlee Government, after the Second World War, but it could not survive the revolution of individual aspirations, which led to greater social mobility, and the development of the motor car, which led to greater geographical mobility. Governments since the 1960s have been trying to come to terms with these developments, and they have done so by reorganising local government, the structure of local government, almost every few years. There have been a number of reorganisations since the 1960s. It was said, under the Conservative Governments, between 1979 and 1997, there were over 100 major pieces of local government legislation, but it is not obvious that any of these contributed to creating a strong sense of locality. Each time, the promise has been made, by Conservative or Labour Governments, that local democracy would be improved, but each time, the reality has been otherwise, and the main effect of the successive reorganisations of local government has been to create much larger units of local government on the grounds that they are more effective than the smaller units.

We have, compared with the Continent, the largest local government units in Europe. Our smallest unit of local government – and I exclude parish councils here – but district councils and borough councils, their average population size is 123,000. The next largest is in Sweden with 32,000; that is about a quarter of the size. The average in the rest of Western Europe is about 10,000, and in the United States the average size of a local government unit is about 12,000, so we are by far the largest, even

in our lowest rung, as it were, and in many areas, the lowest rung is not the most important area. If you live in Oxfordshire, as I do, the district councils are not the most powerful authorities; it is the county councils that are really powerful and they are of course larger still. Oxfordshire County is about half a million people.

This has two major consequences. The first is that we have fewer councillors than most other countries. In Britain, we have roughly one councillor to every 1,800 citizens. In Sweden, it is one to 120, and in other countries, much lower. Now, you may say, "Jolly good, councillors are a bloody nuisance and the fewer we have of them the better. We do not want these overpaid people on expenses," and so on, but the consequence is that people then turn to others when they have grievances. They will go to the Citizens' Advice Bureau, the Ombudsman, or any other outlet they can find, or, most often in Britain, they will go to their local MP. It is a familiar point of anyone who talks to a Member of Parliament, that they say people come to see them about problems which are really the problems of the local authority, like housing or education. I think most MPs would say that their post bags are full of letters about housing problems, that the main complaint people have is about housing. But housing is a statutory responsibilities of local authorities, and there is very little an MP can do about housing except perhaps lobby a local authority or local council. Its one of the consequences of the fact that we have fewer councils than many other countries and they are seen as more remote figures than they are in many other countries.

The second consequence of the larger local government structure is even more fundamental, and it is this: it meant the end of the independent local councillor and a development of a party political structure in local government throughout, and that has been a prime development since the 1950s and 1960s.

We had a major reorganisation of local government in the 1970s, under the administration of Edward Heath, and that gave us much larger authorities. Before that Local Government Reorganisation, under the old system, there was a very interesting statistic, that there were only four counties in England and Wales where the average size of the ward, that is the local government constituency, was under 3,000, and there were party political labels in those authorities. In other words, in only four authorities, where the average ward size was under 3,000, was there party politics, and in only four authorities which were over 3,000 was there not party politics. In other words, 3,000 seemed to be the crucial size. Under 3,000, you would be likely to get independent politics; over 3,000, you would be likely to get party politics. The reason for that I think is fairly obvious: if you are an independent candidate, you can canvas up to about 3,000 people personally and you are likely to be known by many of them in a small unit. Over 3,000, you are not going to be able to do that, and only a party machine can really carry out the canvassing and other things required, so you rely on a political party as you get to a larger local authority unit.

One of the oddities about the growth of size was that all surveys of public opinion show that people identify not so much with their towns or counties, but with very, very small areas, the group of streets and roads around them, and the very small units where they tend know people. In the countryside, it would be the parish council area, not these larger units, but nevertheless, governments of both political colours have been involved in increasing the size of local government and making it less local.

It is fair to say, before the reorganisation of the Heath Government in the 1970s, even in local authorities where there were party labels, they were not applied rigidly. To give one example, Oxfordshire, as you would expect, was a solidly Conservative authority; it was always Conservative. But nevertheless, until the reorganisation of local government, the Chairman of the Education Committee was Labour. The reason for that was the councillors thought this was the best man for the job, and the fact that he was Labour was neither here nor there - this was the man who would run education best for the locality. I do not believe that happens anywhere today. It has become purely party dominated, and therefore, as political parties have become unpopular, so local government has become unpopular, because instead of local councillors being seen as representatives of us, as it were, against them, they are seen as part of the party political establishment of "them" who run things for "us", and therefore the discredit and distrust attached to the political class in Britain - it is in other democracies as well no doubt - attaches also to local councillors who are seen as representatives of that political class, and we do not see Councillor X as a councillor for our particular area, we see Councillor X as a local Labour Party or Conservative figure, as a party politician. That, I think, is something comparatively new, because although, as I said, party labels were often there before, they were not applied so rigidly as they are now.

However, I do not think that these changes in structure alone are sufficient to describe why we have this deep-seated problem of a loss of a sense of locality. There are other factors which need to be brought in as well, which are also very difficult to reverse. (This is rather a pessimistic lecture, as you will realise!)

The key factors, throughout the 20th Century, are the economic factors leading to greater centralisation in industry and the trades' union movement, though there has been some reversal of that in recent developments in both of those areas.

So far I have been criticising the politicians, but now I am going to criticise us because I think we are just as much to blame as the politicians if there is no effective local government.

There are social factors associated with the welfare state. A basic principle of a welfare state is that benefits and burdens should be distributed not upon the basis of geography, upon where we live, but upon the basis of need. Before the Second World War, before we had a Health Service, doctors were paid differently depending on which area of the country they were in, and a doctor in leafy Surrey could expect to earn a lot more than a doctor, say, in Liverpool. Part of the purpose of introducing a National Health Service was to eliminate such local differentials.

This was why Aneurin Bevan, the famous Labour Health Minister of the late 1940s, although he was Welsh himself, was so against having a Welsh Health Service, a Scottish Health Service, an English Health Service, and so on. He said it had to be a National Health Service. He said sheep do not change their character when they move across the Welsh border from England, and similarly illness is not different. If you are ill in Wales, it is the same as if you are ill in England. The benefits you get and the service you get should be exactly the same. It should not differ because you happen to live in Wales or in England. Similarly, it should not happen to differ because you live under one local authority rather than another local authority. It should be equal.

A later generation of politicians said if comprehensive education is a good thing, and they said it was, it is just as good if you live in London as if you live in Surrey. The quality of education, or the structure of education, that you get should not differ within different parts of the country.

That was a key point: the desire to get uniform national standards. This was a great factor in undermining local government. It is worth pointing out that a number of the nationalised industries immediately after the Second World War had been in local government hands before the War: transport, gas and electricity had been largely run by the local authorities. The view at the time of the Atlee Government after the War was that these should be national so the same standards should apply everywhere and that geography should not be taken into account, but only the needs of the population.

This principle may be undermined to some extent by devolution, and one is seeing already in Scotland some differences in services. For example, if you are a student in Scotland, you will get a more generous benefit; the loan system is more generous than if you are in England. If you are an elderly person in Scotland, you will get free residential care, which you will not get in England. There are gradual differences growing in the welfare state. If you live in Scotland, there will not be any foundation hospitals or city academies. That is out with the power of Blair's Government to impose. It is up to the Scottish Parliament, which has decided it does not actually want those things happening.

You may say it is difficult to justify this, but when this began in Scotland, I was walking in Oxford to a lecture hall to give a lecture, and some students very courteously placed in my hand a leaflet, which said, well, if this form of student finance is right for Scotland, why isn't it right for England also? What's different about an English student from a Scottish student? They may be studying the same subjects, the same principles – shouldn't the same principles apply? Why should they be different? It is a difficult question to answer.

I think Tony Blair also finds it difficult to answer. There is a very revealing passage in the second volume of Paddy Ashdown's diaries (a former Liberal leader) when Blair was attacking him because the Scottish Liberals, who were in coalition with Labour with devolution, say there should be a more generous system of student finance in Scotland, and Blair said, "You can't have a different system in one part of the country from the rest of it." Ashdown said, "Well, in that case, you shouldn't have given Scotland devolution." Blair said, "Well, what do you mean by that? Why?" He said, "Well, you devolved the power to set student finance details to the Parliament in Scotland. It's out of your power now." Blair said, "Well, in that case, perhaps devolution isn't such a good idea as I thought."

It is interesting, if you look at Tony Blair's five promises in 1997, two of them – to reduce class sizes, and to reduce hospital waiting lists – are now out of his power as regards Scotland. They are within the power of the Scottish Parliament and he can do nothing about them. It is up to the Scottish Parliament.

So this principle I mentioned may be undermined, but there are strong pressures against it being undermined, and obviously you have to make up your mind as to whether it should be undermined or whether we should keep to the principles of the welfare state which Clement Atlee and Aneurin Bevan established in the late-'40s.

Furthermore, the effect of social mobility has been to undermine the sense of locality, because there is now no necessary connection between professional success and status in local society, so the successful people tend to move away perhaps

from the small town where they grew up. So those who become councillors are less likely than they were to be on a ladder of promotion in industry, the trades' unions or professions, and the term required to master local council work will exclude many of the most ambitious and influential. The ambitious tend to move on – and perhaps the really ambitious tend, or many of them, to come to London. So we are still, despite devolution, a fairly centralised country.

Moreover, the Government wants to have a 50% participation rate in higher education. Now, when one in two go on to university, and when the idea of a job for life has disappeared, the sense of locality goes with it. A bright person growing up, shall we say, in Birmingham, goes to university in London, and moves around every few years; the sense of rootedness has gone. Where do people belong when geographical communities are so mobile? This sense of belonging is crucial.

When one reads, for example, a good deal of English literature – if you read the novels of George Elliot or D.H. Lawrence or Arnold Bennett – you can see the sense of rootedness there, people growing up in a certain society which they live in all their lives, and that has gone. You could not have an Arnold Bennett or a D.H. Lawrence now. The miner's son would go off to university and forget about Nottinghamshire, and similarly with George Elliot's heroines and the people in Arnold Bennett would leave the five towns and not come back. It is a fundamental social problem, affecting much more than local government, a lot of the other things that people are worried about – the breakdown of society – that we are a much less rooted society than we were, perhaps inevitably.

There are no real local leaders in the sense that there were in the days of Arnold Bennett, or D.H. Lawrence, or George Elliot, and therefore the councils have lost that sort of respect as well, because councillors in the past tended to be local leaders, people who were already respected before they went on the council. They went on the council after they had achieved professional or business success, and they were councillors first and party politicians second. Local politics was seen as an extension of the community leadership role. Now, local politics derives not from professional or business success, but from connections with a political party, and councillors acquire status from being members of the council. They are not local leaders who have status regardless.

So you have got, to some extent – despite what I said earlier – the growth of another political class in local government, and perhaps in consequence, councillors these days tend to be very elderly people. One quarter are retired, and 50% are over 54, so they are people who want to serve the community but long after they have done anything else. As I said before, there are also the party faithful, the people who use local government as a stepping stone to Westminster. They tend to be young and not to stay in local councils very long. There has been a decline in municipal leadership therefore.

We do not get any more the great local leaders whom we could name – the late 19th Century Joseph Chamberlain in Birmingham, the famous radical Mayor of Birmingham, the response to the slum clearance, taking over many local undertakings, gas becoming a public authority, planning and so on... the great, local, radical Mayor of Birmingham. In the 1930s, Herbert Morrison, the first Labour leader of the London County Council, the old London County Council – it was just inner London – who made the LCC a byword for efficiency and effective local government. Its schools were widely admired, as were its hospitals, and it was generally thought to be an extremely good example of local administration. I will be talking more about London in January. London is not quite as it was when Herbert Morrison ran it in the 1930s, but it was a really remarkable authority at that time. These are great people, who admittedly later went into national politics, but they established reputations as local leaders almost independently of party. Perhaps the nearest we have got to that today is Ken Livingstone, about whom I will say a bit more later on. Most local council leaders are really emissaries of national political forces. They are the representatives of the Labour, Conservative or Liberal parties, or in Scotland, the SNP, in local government.

The present Government has tried to tackle this in an imaginative way, which has not so far come off, though it may well. In the Local Government Act of 2000, which I think is a very important piece of legislation, they try to encourage local authorities to have directly elected mayors. The advantage, they thought, of a directly elected mayor was it would get away from this sort of tribal politics that I have really been describing. In a way, it has. There is the famous monkey candidate in Hartlepool, who I do not think a political party would have adopted, and there is Ken Livingstone in London who, although he is now Labour, won his first election in London as an independent candidate against the party machine, and he was explicitly rejected by the party machine.

Although this gave some discomfiture to the Labour Government, nevertheless, you may say it was what they wanted when they said there should be a directly elected mayor, to have someone who might not be the choice of the party machine but would be a popular local representative. The trouble is only 14 councils have directly elected mayors, too small a number really to make much judgement on how they are doing. The Blair Government is still hoping that more local authorities will adopt this

method, particularly in the inner cities, and we do not yet know whether that will happen, but it is one of the reforming ideas this Government has, which is a genuine attempt to tackle some of the problems that I have been talking about.

There is a further problem that affects Britain in its attempt to revitalise local government. Some of the social trends, perhaps most of those I have already been talking about, affect most advanced industrial societies, but I think Britain is more highly urbanised and centralised than many others. Britain, unlike I think most of the countries on the Continent, and certainly unlike America or Canada or Australia, has a very dominant capital city, London, which tends to suck everything into it. France, although it has also got a strong capital, has much more vibrant provincial centres, and a much stronger provincial press. Germany, America, Australia and Canada are federal systems, where there is no equivalent central magnetism in one part of the country. Symptomatic of the situation in Britain I think is the decline of provincial newspapers, the decline of the provincial press; London seems to suck everything in and that if you do not live in London, you do not really count for very much.

Incidentally, this works even I think for the Liberal Democrat Party, which claims to be a party supporting federalism. A friend of mine was on a commission set up by the Liberal Democrats to consider various constitutional reforms. He was not of course paid, but he had to travel in quite a way, and asked really if he could be paid his expenses. The Liberal Democrats, a fairly poor party, said no, we cannot do that, and they almost implied it was a privilege for him to be invited to London where the things were happening from the provinces, and they claim this was a decentralist party! Nevertheless, everything happened in London – all the meetings were held in London. That was where things happened, where things counted.

Moreover, in many countries, certainly in federal states, there is a local representation in Parliament itself in the upper house of Parliament. You are familiar, I am sure, with the American Senate, which represents the states. The individual constituencies to the lower house, the House of Representatives, and the upper house represents the states. The same is true in Australia, and the same is true in Germany. The provincial governments are represented – they are the upper house. In France, the Senate is elected roughly by local councillors, so you have got, as it were, local government in strength represented at the centre, and the sense of locality is brought home to Parliament, but you do not have that in Britain. As I said, a lot of MPs have local government experience, but it is quite rare for MPs actually to represent the area they were councillors. They tend to be councillors in one area and then get a safe seat somewhere else, so the sense of locality is not helped even by that.

As I said, the present Government is trying to deal with these problems and trying to regenerate local government. In its early days, as a young Party – it was founded around 100 years ago – the Labour Party certainly gave great weight to local government, and the Fabians, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, and Bernard Shaw and the like, gave great weight to the idea of municipal socialism. Indeed, Sidney Webb was one of the first leaders of the London County Council when it was formed in the 1890s, and they, in a sense, experimented with socialism on a local basis, seeing how public ownership worked on a local level – gas, electricity, transport, education, and so on, so it is part of the tradition of the Labour Party.

But you may say that once a party becomes mature, there is a slight element of hypocrisy in claiming to be in favour of decentralisation. For example, would the Labour Government allow a Conservative local authority to re-introduce grammar schools if that's what it wanted to do? I suspect not, and therefore, the decentralisation is a much greater value when you are in opposition to the government than when you are actually the government itself.

The Conservatives, equally, they were accused of being hostile to local government when they were in office, but now they are in opposition, they say, "Yes, we made a terrible mistake, and we favour localism," but you may say if they were returned to office soon, they would be just as hostile to left wing local authorities as the Labour Government would be to a Conservative local authority that wanted to do things of which it disapproved.

So you may say the real difference is not between the political parties, but between whether a party is in government or whether it is in opposition, that the parties are all schizophrenic. In opposition, they are all in favour in localism; in government, they say Whitehall knows best.

However, as I have said and I want now to stress, the decline of local government is not merely the result of politicians but also of popular attitudes, in other words, of us. I said first the welfare state argument, the argument that benefits should depend not on geography but on need, and I think a lot of people who would claim with one breath to defend local government with another breath will criticise what they call the postcode lottery, whereby one area of the country has more or less than another and they say it's unfair. You cannot both be in favour of localism and criticise the postcode lottery, because presumably, if you favour genuine local autonomy, some local authorities are going to be more generous with public services than others, some are going to be more careful with the public's money than others, they are going to do things differently from others. Someone

once defined local government as the government of difference. There is no point having local authorities if they are all going to do the same. You might as well have it run from Whitehall.

Similarly, with the early argument about devolution – there would be no point setting up a Scottish Parliament if it was going to do exactly the same as Tony Blair was doing in London, and this was why I think Tony Blair missed the point about devolution in the argument with Ashdown that I mentioned. If the Scottish Parliament did exactly the same as the Labour Government in London was doing, what's the point in having it? You might as well save a lot of money and get rid of it. The point of doing it is it does things differently. Now, if it does things differently, in some people's eyes, they will be doing it better, and in some people's eyes, they will be doing it worse, and one has to be prepared to accept that. The test of whether you really believe in local government is whether you believe in the government of difference or not. It is very easy to say, "Oh yes, I'm a strong decentralist," but you cannot at the same time support the postcode lotteries.

There is another test where I think most of us fall down. Suppose we take the service of education, which is primarily a local government service, and we are unhappy with it. Suppose we say "Little Johnny isn't learning to read and write very well. I am very worried about the schools." We go and see our local MP, and the MP says, "Yes, it's a serious problem, but the schools aren't for me really. They're for local councillors, and I suggest you go and see your local councillor or the Director of Education." Now, would we actually be mollified by that? "Wait a minute," we might say to the MP, "but your Government," (say we say Tony Blair) "he said he was going to give education priority. How about it? You are responsible for education! Johnny isn't reading and writing, and it's your fault! What are you going to do about it?" Governments – not just a Labour Government, the Conservative Government and any other Government – governments are held responsible by us if the education system is not as we think good enough, and if it is important to us, we may well vote against the Government.

That feeling I think was first felt about 30 years ago when James Callaghan was Prime Minister, when it was thought people were getting sceptical about comprehensive schools, and Callaghan was worried that many previous Labour supporters were moving against the Government because of poor schooling. From that time on, governments have centralised responsibility for education. This Government is continuing to do so through the city academies and other reforms.

The reason is very clear, because if a government is held responsible for, shall we say, education, it will take the power to match that responsibility. If we say, "I'm not going to see my local councillor. You, my MP, and you, the Government, you're to blame!" If we say that, governments will say, "Very well, if you hold us to blame, in fact we do not have the powers, but we will now take the powers to make sure we can control what's going on in local authorities." So we cannot at the same time be localists and say it is the Government's fault that Johnny cannot read and write properly. We have to accept, if we want to be localists, the corollary, that no doubt education standards will differ from area to area, but that in our particular area, if we are not happy with things, we must keep the MP out of it and we must go and see the local council, or the head teacher, the Director of Education, and it is really nothing to do with the Government.

There is a very interesting case study of how the media tend to blame the Government for everything. A city academy recently – they are not under local authority control, they are directly administered by the Government, with a headmaster and so on – but a city academy, I think it was in Islington – it was in London certainly – had bad results a few months ago, and the press immediately said, "This is the Government's fault. It shows the experiment of city academies is not working." Now, why shouldn't they say it's the headmaster's fault or the teachers are no good? They say that similarly with any schools that are failing: it's the responsibility of the Government. As long as that happens, the Government will take the powers to match that responsibility.

Let me conclude by asking whether we can reverse this trend that I have been talking about. In theory, the chances should be good, because we have got a more assertive electorate and people are more concerned with local issues than they have ever been. They are more concerned with schools, the environment and so on, and there is a sense in which they may be more likely to want to become active citizens. But as I have tried to show, the problems of local democracy are very deep-rooted, the problems lie with us and with them, the politicians. One root cause is the dominance of local government by a very rigid form of party organisation. I have stressed the growth of professional party politics in local government, the political class a class apart. I have said that one of the reforms to deal with that would be the extension of elected mayors.

A second reform, in my opinion, which this Government has begun to pioneer, is to extend the role of local referendums and initiatives so that we, the people, can participate in local matters.

With the elected mayors, various surveys showed that most councillors were against them because they felt it would weaken

their position, but many local voters were in favour of them. So the Government, in the 2000 Local Government Act, introduced a novel provision, which I have talked about previously, that any 5% of us, in any local authority area, if we signed a petition, could require a referendum to be held on whether the authority should have a mayor or not. I took part in such a petition in Oxford. I signed the petition, we got the 5%, but sadly, from my point of view anyway, sadly, we lost the referendum. Still, we got the referendum, although we lost it. Now, 5% can do that. Also, any group of affected parents can require a referendum on abolishing selection, abolishing grammar schools, in the few areas where there are grammar schools left. They cannot require a referendum on building new grammar schools, but they can on abolishing them.

You may say, if we can be trusted to decide whether we want an elected mayor or whether we want grammar schools, why not wider matters that affect the local community? Why not, for example, the size of the local authority budget? Or the structure of the National Health Service in our area? Things of that kind are just as important, and why shouldn't we be able to make decisions on those matters? Why shouldn't we extend this principle? The instrument is called the initiative. Why should not we say any 5% can require a referendum on some other aspect of local activity? I think once you introduce this principle, you have to ask the question of whether it can be extended.

This idea of new localism is becoming fashionable. It is an idea that has been called, I think by David Miliband – he was the Minister for Local Government, now in the Environment – the idea widely associated with him, called the idea of double devolution. In other words, we do not just want to devolve to local government, because that is just “them” under another hat as it were, but we want to devolve from local government to us, the people, through the use of weapons of direct democracy like referendums, initiatives, and so on. The danger with that is that it is a democracy just for people like us; that is, the articulate. The articulate, broadly the middle classes, already assertive, already have a lot of influence, and the disadvantaged tend to take little role in those kinds of activities. There are perhaps ways of guarding against that danger, but there is a danger that you give too much weight in these activities to those who are already articulate and already possess many political advantages.

A third way of regenerating local government would be by having a method of election for local authorities which would allow us better to distinguish between a good and a bad councillor. At present, if the Labour Government is unpopular, it will lose councillors in a local election, and it will lose good councillors as well as bad. We have no real way of distinguishing. We cannot say, “Councillor X is Labour, but actually rather a good Councillor, and I think I would like to keep him or her on, but Councillor Y, not so good.” There are various systems of election, primary proportional systems, in my view, which do allow that possibility, that you can choose within a party which people you want to vote for. Some people may remember that from my lecture last year on systems of proportional representation.

In my opinion, whether or not you're in favour of proportional representation in central government, the case for it in local government is much stronger, both for this reason and for a further reason, that many local authorities are permanently in the hands of one political party. In parts of the South of England, the Conservatives are always in power, and in some parts, some industrial cities, the Labour Party is always in power. That does not happen at national level. A party may be in power for some time, but there is always an alternative government, and that party is always in some danger of being replaced. But in a number of local authorities, there is such strong one party control it knows it is secure against any opposition, and that does not lead to good government, in my view, and I think proportional representation would help that.

Finally, I think greater use of the parish principle, which is the principle of direct democracy. Those of you who live in rural areas have had our parish meetings once every month, and that is, again, a form of direct democracy. Again, it is in danger of becoming a democracy of the articulate, but the parish meeting is an important part of local government, and I think parishes could be strengthened. The parish is the area that people identify with much more than the district councils. The journalist Simon Jenkins once said, “It's only in England the term “parish pump” is one of abuse.” In many other countries, the sense of locality is not abused in that way. So I think that could be done, and that would give a greater sense of democratic legitimacy rooted in genuine communities, that parishes have roots in a way that most local authorities do not have. They have roots like French communes have roots or New England town meetings have roots, but most other units of local government do not.

Smaller units of local government would weaken the hold of political parties on the electorate, and you would get more independent-minded people. In that way, if you want to restore local government, you would help to create a demand for diversity. The Labour Government may have helped, perhaps unwittingly, to create this through devolution. Local government is the government of difference.

Let me conclude by repeating that I have been very critical in this lecture of party politicians and party dominance in local

government, but I hope you will accept that I have also been just as critical of us, of ourselves, all of us. If we want local government, the fault lies as much in us as it does in them, because it is we who denounce the postcode lottery, and it is we who attack central government when Johnny is not reading and writing properly, rather than seeking redress at local level. So it is we who have to change our habits if we really want the new localism, effective local democracy – but do we? Is there a real place for local self-government? What do you think?

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