

In search of the coalition's localism in planning and sustainable development

Announcing the inclusion of a Decentralisation and Localism Bill in the Queen's Speech, the department for communities and local government issued this on behalf of its new secretary of state, Eric Pickles: "This important Bill would shift power from the central state back into the hands of individuals, communities and councils. It will empower local people giving them more power over local government. It will free local government from central and regional control so that they can ensure services are delivered according to local needs."

Were it not for the telling "and regional", you could be forgiven for thinking that a lazy press officer had copied-and-pasted that quote from one of the previous government's ministerial announcements on local government reform. It was Labour who first invoked the idea of a "new localism": the notion underpinned Labour's policies to confer greater managerial discretion, as distinct from political or fiscal power, on local government through regimes of targets and ring-fenced funding decided in accordance with national policy aims, and the appointment of regional bodies responsible for the distribution of economic development largesse and house-building targets – all of which served to extend rather than rescind central control.

The new new localism

Dominated by a Fabian ethos that regards universal minimum standards as the first obligation of the beneficent state, New Labour always struggled to enunciate a coherent philosophy of central-local-citizen relations, with "double devolution" just one of many big ideas that proved as faddish as they sounded.

Whatever its limitations, however, Labour's worldview did beget some sensible if often unpopular policies; for example in planning and housing. The logic ran something like this: owing to demographic trends, changing family structures, migration and the growing concentration of economic power in London and the South East – something Labour wrongly believed it could and should do little about – Britain has a deficit of around three million homes and, as a result, one of the most stretched house-price-to-income ratios in the world. Left to local government interacting with the development industry, too many houses would be built in the wrong places – northern towns experiencing population decline all trying to build their way out of it, for example – and not enough in places experiencing the most acute housing shortages, such as the Home Counties, where 'insiders' find the combination of green landscape unspoiled by new-build together with rapidly rising property values extremely congenial, and would vote (or rather, veto) accordingly. Meanwhile, the overwhelming imperatives of environmental sustainability demanded that planning and development everywhere should respect gentle-but-firm principles for the efficient use of land, conservation of natural resources, and less impactful patterns and modes of movement. Sustainable development was enshrined as "the purpose of planning".

Themed national policy statements and regional building targets feeding into local allocations, which spread the jam/pain (delete as appropriate) and allowed more pro-development areas to volunteer for more without absolving others of responsibility, constituted a pragmatic response to the need to balance global and national imperative with local will. Local Development Frameworks ensured that the practical resolution of these targets at the local level was above all else orderly, transparent and based on extensive consultation which would mean that, even if people opposed development outright, they could have their say and hope to engineer a least-worst result. Something of a classic British muddle, this was at least an example of Labour's top-down localism getting to grips with a real-world problem of growing concern to many – especially young – people: where on earth are we going to live?

From the outset, David Cameron was at pains to imbue localism with a deeper philosophical purpose and connect it to his idea of the "big society". Launching the Tories' pre-election green paper on localism in February 2010, he wrote in the Guardian of "a deep connection between where decisions are made and what works" and that "[w]hen people experience a yawning gap between the changes they want to see and those they can directly affect, it is inevitable that demoralisation and democratic disengagement follow". This and other language in and around the localism green paper, and that which followed shortly afterwards on "open source" planning, suggested strong attachment to the idea of local self-determination, appreciation of connection between place and identity, the need to avoid treating local institutions as chattels for central government policy, and a desire to extend both the scope of local power and the ability to exercise it.

So in planning and housing, for example, people and their locally elected representatives would be invited to embrace development on the basis of its benefits rather than being caricatured as NIMBYs for resisting development driven by top-down targets. There would be a single national policy statement on planning and a "presumption in favour of sustainable development" that accorded with local interpretation of it. If, as implied by Tory economic rhetoric, this could be connected to plans to rebalance the economy away from dependence on the Greater South East and financial services, reversing years of growing London-centricity and tackling housing pressure on the demand side, all the better.

That's the theory, and it deserved a cautious welcome from progressives who think that the alignment of power, responsibility and identity at the local level is an important part of the basis for rebuilding social, economic and environmental systems. The question was how it would translate into a programme for government, and in particular how it would deal in practice with national challenges of economic imbalance and housing need. The practice is now starting to take shape. But for those who gave Cameron the benefit of the doubt, the early signals are worrying.

Not in my department

It is striking how little influence the Lib Dems – municipalist to the bootstraps – appear to be having on the coalition's localism agenda. Eric Pickles's oft-quoted mission to "wipe out municipal socialism forever" when leading Bradford Council in the late eighties may have been very much of its time, but it's apparent that local democracy as conceived of by Conservatives does not have very much in common



with the swashbuckling, visionary European city mayoralties beloved of Nick Clegg and his intellectual compadres. Commitments to elected mayors in England's biggest cities have already been shelved (too expensive), Labour legislation to establish unitary councils in important regional cities such as Norwich and Exeter is to be repealed (ditto), and the language in the quote above on "free[ing] local government from central and regional control so that they can ensure services are delivered according to local needs" suggests that, if Pickles doesn't share the Labour view of local government as essentially a transmission mechanism for public services, he has yet to update his department's lexicon.

Meanwhile, the heads of terms for the Decentralisation and Localism Bill announced in the Queen's speech indicate that it is largely the more populist Tory pre-election proposals that have made it through the Whitehall grinder first.

On local democracy, they present a confusing picture. Although mayors have been kicked into the long grass, the Bill will establish a "general power of competence" for local government which, if it does in practice what lawyers take it to in theory, will mean that nothing – albeit with the rather important exception of taxation – will be beyond the powers of local government. So councils will be able to do things to improve their areas regardless of whether there is specific enabling legislation (provided, presumably, that it can be done for free), including things that Whitehall doesn't agree with. But countervailing this welcome empowerment of local government is the frankly barmy plan for local referenda instituted by popular petition. Designed primarily to petrify councils into freezing or cutting council tax to avoid the threat of an exercise which in many cases would cost more to administer than the revenue at stake, but also apparently to offer a route into public policymaking for single-issue interests too cowardly or lazy to stand for election, this is the localism of the mob. Council tax is essentially a top-up mechanism to make up the difference between the standard of services the centre demands of local authorities, and the funding it provides via an arcane and inflexible formula grant system to pay for them. That council tax accounts for only a quarter of local government revenues, and that – with grant largely fixed – a 1% change in the cost of providing services (often caused by rising input costs or central directive) implies a 4% rise in council tax – is lost on many voters. Moreover Labour's shameful failure to revalue council tax bands has left it looking remarkably similar to the poll tax in some areas, with the majority paying the same. But rather than replace it with a politically contestable system of local taxation which might reconnect local government finance to local votes (over to you, Lib Dems) the government seems intent on exploiting popular antipathy.

However the most concerning aspect of the coalition's early policy forays are in housing and planning. Regional spatial strategies and associated building targets are to be abolished, as expected, probably along with the regional development agencies that administer them together with economic development spending; but it looks like the single national policy statement and the "presumption in favour of sustainable development" that would fill what might otherwise become a policy vacuum may have to wait. Meanwhile, ministerial pronouncements have begun to call into question what the government actually understands by sustainable development: DCLG has announced that rules on minimum housing densities are to go, while transport secretary Philip Hammond has promised to "end the war on the motorist". One needs have only a basic grasp of planning and development to understand that density – far from being a "meddling" regulation as the government labelled it – is one

of the principal factors in the viability of local shops and services, decentralised energy, non-car transport modes and ultimately the amount of England's green and pleasant land that has to be built on to meet latent housing demand. Meanwhile, Labour's will presumably have been the "war" on drivers that saw record spending on roads and, except in London and a few other cities, the proportion of journeys by bike fall. If this is indicative of the Tory outlook on sustainable development then a presumption in favour of it will not be welcome.

Localism of Chingford and Runnymede

What are the practical implications of all this? To be clear, abolishing building targets will not, as some have suggested, necessarily paralyse the supply of housing in the Greater South East. For all the fuss over targets, the reality is that under Labour the hotspots for housing growth were in areas where market energy alone would not have put nearly so much of it (the Thames Gateway, for example), which bought into, or were sold, the idea that growth per se would help 'regenerate' or 'resolve' existing places, and where opposition is either less vocal or perhaps less electorally influential than elsewhere. Under the government's plans, those places will presumably be able to stick with that theory if they wish, and so the construction of tract housing in less bucolic parts of the country may well continue apace; although that may be small comfort to places like Cambridge, Reading, Brighton and other cities whose ability to grow economically and to house their young and less well-off people depends almost entirely on the extension of their urban footprints into neighbouring administrative areas.

Nor is it necessarily the case that other places will become completely housing-proof. Most Tory-dominated areas aren't anti-development per se: they just don't like top-down targets, "density", "garden-grabbing", dreary housebuilder 'product', and being made to feel guilty for driving everywhere. And perhaps in some ways they have a point: research by the consultancy firm Saint suggests that four-fifths of people are opposed to new development where they live – and who can blame them when so much of what we as a country have built in recent decades, especially outside of major cities, has been so depressingly bad? For people of all political persuasions, terms of art like "urban extension" and "sustainable community" have become synonymous with pattern-book housing estates adjacent to sprawling business and retail parks, which feel twice as cramped at half the density of older places, and through the proliferation of which Britain has become the country that builds the most meanly-proportioned homes in Europe (that this stuff will all soon need to be "zero carbon" is surely a parody of sustainability). For sure, the classic insider-outsider problem is usually at work wherever development is opposed – "our town is full!" – but it isn't good enough just to shout "NIMBY!" in response. People are entitled to ask why years of rhetoric around sustainable development, reducing car-dependence, promoting design quality and so forth has had little discernible impact on what is being built, especially on strategic greenfield land. And they are entitled to wonder: why should I allow that in my back yard?

Thus one potentially welcome consequence of the policy agenda now under way may be that the principle of development in a given place is no longer decided independently of its form and function. Quality and sustainability might trump brute numbers, and builders be required to put some effort and investment into making the case for what they want to build rather than sticking in a planning application for the usual bog-standard stuff and waiting for the bureaucratic machinery to grind. For those of us concerned with making sustainable, vibrant, aesthetically appealing places, that could be good news – but there is no escaping that it needs to happen on a



grand scale if underlying social need (as opposed to short-term market demand) for housing is to be met.

However, one doubts that anything as high-minded as that is occupying the government. The most plausible interpretation of the coalition's early pronouncements is that a kind of localism of the Home Counties is emerging; a rag-tag and contradictory collection of measures that give far greater weight to stopping development which offends the minority than to delivering homes which respond to a widespread social need. Grant Shapps says that Britain "must build more homes" and that regional targets have failed; but none of the many reviews Labour commissioned of housing supply (Barker, Callcutt, etc) thought building targets were the problem; and the logic of the coalition's initial programme is to make large-scale housebuilding less rather than more likely. The Tories hate sprawl, but they've abolished the density rules that serve as a bulwark against it. They want more brownfield development, but their only act in respect of brownfield land so far has been – rightly or not – to reverse the Thatcher government's classification of gardens as brownfield land and so reduce the amount of land available for building within existing urban areas.

There is a tremendous irony in this, which is that many of the most anti-development parts of England (think of some Tory ministerial seats) are bust. Having allowed only piecemeal development for decades, each village or town adding a few houses every year, their geography is of a multitude of settlements each too small to support all the services their residents need or to generate much economic energy of their own. The result is crazy patterns of car use as people crawl from home to school to work to shop, resulting congestion problems, and rising anger which manifests in opposition to the kind of planned, strategic growth that would actually form the (only) basis of a functioning movement economy in which places are better able to sustain themselves. In these areas, Philip Hammond's pro-motorist rhetoric is as empty as many of the buses.

Where there is despair

It is early days, and Cameron is busy with the deficit, but the prognosis is not good for new localism. It is looking less like a political philosophy more like a cynical catch-all for miscellaneous Conservative shibboleths. Ideally the government would go back to the drawing board; but with both coalition parties backing third-party rights of appeal for planning decisions, for example, moderation seems unlikely. That being so – and accepting that governments have to honour manifestos – what might they do to bring greater coherence and clarity to what may else become an area of non-policy?

First, the single national planning policy statement when it comes will need to face up to the implications of new localism in practice. If development in many high-demand areas is effectively to be curtailed by either oppositionalism or just uncertainty (perhaps played out in front of m'learned friends for years to come) then there will need to be some account of how the economic energy in those places can be channelled to others so that, in true localist spirit, anti-development areas can become the backwaters they aspire to be and progressive areas can deliver progress. There will need to be a clear signal that the steady gravitation of population to the Greater South East will have to slow or even stop and that the Labour approach of limitless economic growth in and around London is over. This will not just be about spatial planning; it will, for example, be about how sources of economic energy in northern and midlands cities, such as leading universities and growing low-carbon manufacturing sectors, can be reinforced as generators of knowledge and industry in their back yards, and more

meaningful institutions of economic governance established at regional and local levels (except, um, see above...).

Second, much rides on how the "presumption in favour of sustainable development" plays out. If it's another way of saying "allowing development local people don't oppose" then it will become clear that conservatives still haven't really 'got' sustainability and would rather redefine its meaning away from scary leftist stuff like an 80%-less-carbon society, wind turbines, smart jobs, urban bike culture and so forth and towards cuddlier notions focused preservation of the countryside and of ways of life that – carbon emissions be damned – 'our' people rather like. It could, on the other hand, be a vehicle for fundamentally rethinking and reshaping Britain's geography and settlement patterns, ending the quantity-before-quality culture, and requiring developers to adopt planning processes and economic models – and ultimately deliver outcomes – that contribute not only to better local environments but (whisper it) global responsibility too.

Third, the Lib Dems need to get a bit bolshier on local government reform. It's a fantastically dull issue for many, but with the odd rule-proving exception you get the quality of local leadership your powers, structures and electoral systems allow. Liberals know, deep down, that the only way of creating enlightened leadership and vigorous democracy – and thus the heterogeneity and independent-mindedness of place that Tories also cherish – is proper devolution of power, fiscal capacity and responsibility to municipal government. This includes what Labour could never allow, which is the power to screw things up. Our preference is for metropolitan mayoralities with powers over the environment, planning, housing and economic development as in London, capable of governing for growth in our 50 biggest cities and their hinterlands, but we'd settle for mayors on existing local boundaries for starters. The Lib Dems also need to get stuck into the (yet another) promised review of local government finance and make sure their long-held local income tax plan is prominent on the table.

We're not holding our breath. But let's end optimistically: there are places for which all this presents a terrific opportunity. Places that will use their new-found freedom to advance rather than retrench from a progressive agenda. Places that have identity and a sense of purpose which manifests itself in a pro-development stance but know that genuine growth and competitiveness depends on quality and, increasingly, sustainability rather than sheer scale. Places that know how to use property development to advance prosperity, rather than regarding them – with undue complacency or suspicion – as symbiotic. As Eric Pickles writes to local authorities inviting them to dump their Core Strategies or rescind their housing targets, we will soon see which places they are.