

Localism Bill Blog

As the Localism Bill receives its second reading in Parliament (17.01.11) Deborah Cadman, the chair of the University's Policy Commission, reflects on the Bill's implications for local public services.

The Localism Bill WITH DEBORAH CADMAN BIRMINGHAM POLICY COMMISSION



Monday 17 January 2011

The Localism bill was published in December to “*fundamentally shake up the balance of power in this country*”. Its main foundations are to -

- Empower communities to do things their way
- Increase local control over public finances
- Diversify the supply of public services
- Open up government to public scrutiny and
- Strengthen accountability to local people

- Lift the burden of bureaucracy

The Bill is ambitious and wide-ranging, and poses significant challenges to local councils and other service providers at a time when the public sector is facing big financial cuts.

The public is anxious about what will happen to frontline services and to the country's most vulnerable individuals and communities in this harsh economic climate, and it will be public sector organisations, particularly local government that will have to take the tough and unpopular decisions about future local service provision.

The Bill advocates localism and more power to communities to determine their own destiny. A key strand of this is the proposed referenda which will enable local people to decide on issues from local planning to city mayors.

Does all of this provide the necessary underpinning that will allow for Big Society to take hold and flourish?

It seems to me that the Government's philosophy for the 'Big Society' is right. “Rolling back the frontiers of society through the promotion of social responsibility and scaling back the size and scope of government” has to be a sound aspiration.

Seeking a shift from state to social action by breaking state monopolies, allowing charities, social enterprises and companies to provide public services, devolving power down to neighbourhoods and making government more accountable are indisputable as principles for building a good society.

The big challenge for all policy makers is to grasp this opportunity but to realise that you cannot simply roll back the state and expect a tsunami of local activity to take its place immediately. The design and implementation of change needs to be radical but needs to take account of the social, political and cultural norms that underpin local communities.

The Prime Minister has argued that young people will “sow the seeds of Big Society” and wants them to “burst into bloom in future years”. If that is the case then policy makers need to be able to present this 'new world' in a way that makes sense to people within the context of -

- Reducing public sector finances
- The willingness and capacity for civic engagement
- A growing gap between institutions and people
- An increasing emphasis on autonomous action
- A move from hierarchical social structures to a more networked culture

The University of Birmingham/Demos Policy Commission that I chair is exploring the implications of the Localism Bill as part of its investigation into the future of local public services in a 'big society'. Our focus on young people will allow us to examine the impact of the Coalition's proposals on both statutory and discretionary areas of local public spending. It will also enable us to focus on the potential of these policy changes to support young people in growing their own 'Big Society'.

If you would like to contact the Policy Commission or respond to Deborah's blog please email policycommissions@contacts.bham.ac.uk (<mailto:policycommissions@contacts.bham.ac.uk>)

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Reflections on the blog - Monday 31 January 2011

Professor John Raine, Institute of Local Government Studies (INLOGOV)

“*The world will be your oyster*”, suggested the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, The Right Honourable Eric Pickles MP, at the Local Government Association Conference back in July 2010, when outlining new freedoms that his forthcoming Localism Bill would provide for councils.

But that was before the Bill was published and presented to Parliament. Now we know better what it contains – some new freedoms, for sure, but a raft of new requirements and controlling powers for the Secretary of State as well! Indeed, such is the extent of centralising measures now being proposed that Professors George Jones and John Stewart suggest that the legislation could as well have been called the Centralism Bill.

Read INLOGOV's reaction to the Localism Bill. (<http://www.inlogov.bham.ac.uk>)

