Blog: Local authority chief executives: an endangered species?

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Chief Executives pay has been the focus of much attention in recent weeks. Ministers say they must take a cut in pay or spread themselves across several authorities - apart from those cities where there will be an executive mayor, in which case those chief executives should simply fade away. If such things were done, the ministers argue, the impact of central government cuts would hardly be felt at the frontline.

More heat than light has been generated by these pronouncements. On the subject of pay, ministers make comparisons between with the Prime Minister's net salary (without any mention of his other benefits, including two lovely tied cottages and free travel) and chief executives gross salaries. Chief Executives themselves have maintained a commendably calm demeanour - as is their wont. **The current habit of ministers of attacking chief executives - by way of full frontal assaults or unpleasant side swipes - is an affront to three of the principles which should underpin the operation of the Coalition Government.**

The first one is the long upheld convention that elected politicians should not make personal attacks on public servants who are not able to defend themselves. Individual chief executives have been attacked.

The second one is the Conservative's belief in the free market. The role of chief executives has become increasingly demanding and, not surprisingly, demand for the right skills and attributes has outstripped supply and so salaries have risen. An unkind person might be inclined to say to ministers of a Conservative persuasion – 'it's the free market, what did you expect would happen?'

The third one is localism - so important to the Secretary of State that he has to use the word three times when once would do. Locally elected politicians in local councils set the pay of their chief executives. They decide who they want, what they want them to do and how much to pay them. This is by no means an unmixed blessing for chief executives. If administrations change the chief executive can become the enemy of the new administration simply because they worked well with the last one. Their lives can be made a misery until they resign - precisely because both legitimate and illegitimate power operate locally. Not the most attractive face of localism but perhaps a predictable part of the picture.

So there it is - three fundamental principles espoused by all or part of the government and all undermined by the behaviour of CLG ministers. If chief executives were not so implacably calm and also so very, very busy with other things, they might be tempted to retaliate with some pretty obvious reposts. Why are there so many ministers in CLG? It's not a big department and they only seem to be busy offending local government and upsetting their staff so they could surely get by with one. And another thing, if an executive mayor could manage perfectly well without a chief executive, why do ministers need a permanent secretary? Surely, they could do it all, with the effortless style and grace to which we have become accustomed.

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