It’s your money – why don’t you and your elected representatives have control over it?

14.30 – 15.45 Main Auditorium

Throughout the Western World electoral turnovers are falling. Much agonising rightly goes on about what this means to the electoral mandate that elected representatives now possess.

Much concern is expressed about how to reach out and involve people in decision making so that what we as politicians do represents what they want to see both in terms of the type of society they live in and the type and level or services that we deliver.

Most of the solutions that we have seen come from Government have concentrated on making it easier for people to get involved in an increasingly pressurised society. They range from letting people vote by text to giving people a raffle ticket and a chance of a big prize for voting.

These are solutions which value quantity at the expense of quality. Do we just want people to vote or otherwise participate or do we want them to think about the choices they make when they sign a petition or put an X on a ballot paper?

There appear to be six main reasons that people do not vote:

1. They now have a wide variety of other ways to express themselves.
2. They see no relationship between voting and change – especially in local government with its restricted powers.
3. They see no relationship between the money they ‘spend’ through their various taxes and outcomes – again a particular problem for local government which only raised about 20% of its income (with the exception of charges) from direct taxation.
4. People are less civic minded that they used to be – we have constructed a society of consumers not participators.
5. They see Government as being remote from their day to day lives.
6. They are put off politics generally by the antics of national politicians.

Liberal Democrat principles for dealing with these matters seem to be clear – although we should not assume that we necessarily have solutions for all the problems outlined above:

1. Take more decisions locally
2. Reflect local need in local programmes although that might mean different services in different parts of the country.
3. Take more decisions in public
4. Make people who take decisions on public spending more accountable

Such principles clearly build on the long-term Lib Dem commitment to community politics – the extension of the franchise and the involvement of the ‘consumer’ of public services. This can be done in many ways but councillors argue that the way forward is to enhance the powers of local councils and wherever possible take decisions at the lowest possible level to ensure the maximum possible involvement.

The Government has already taken some tentative steps in this direction after almost forty years of Whitehall based centralisation. The Local Government Act 2007 gave a duty to co-operate to the vast majority of government funded Quangos and agencies who meet...
around the local partnership table. Individual councillors were given more rights and responsibilities for scrutinising local services of all providers.

Our commitment to financial transparency remains unaltered. Tax should be transparent and fair. We believe that the Local Income Tax should be pursued and when explained properly is popular with the majority of people – even many of those that will pay more! Most business people think that they pay their rates to the Council rather than through the Council.

The National Non-Domestic Rate, paid by businesses and other organisations (NNDR) has gone up considerably less than Council tax since 1993. And over the first 10 years of Labour Government, the NNDR has only increased by 18.3% compared to 61.7% increase in Council Tax (source: Local Government Association, 2006).

It is now a national tax which gets reapportioned like other taxes. In fact of the approximately 375 precepting authorities about 300 get back pretty much what they give out with only redistribution from about the 30 wealthiest to the 30 poorest. The NNDR should be converted back into a local tax with safeguards for businesses that councils would not be able to put up business rates by more than the rise in council tax. In addition councils should keep 100% of the money that arises from planning consents through section 106 agreements or tariffs. Councils can find mechanisms between them for sharing out cash to necessary infra structure projects if a development is large enough to affect a number of councils or straddles more than one council, area.

We can also point to examples of funding for cities elsewhere in Europe where the cities have been able to go to the market to raise bonds for capital projects like new trams, which gives them a freedom local government in the UK has not had for decades. In the 4-5 years that Bristol and its neighbours were in discussions with central government about their proposed single tram line (which was then cancelled), Seville had built a whole network!

Some in our Party call for a range of elected bodies to provide local services such as directly elected health trusts. The problem with direct elections for different services is one of fragmentation - we all then have to spend much of our time creating partnerships rather than getting on with delivering good quality and responsive services.

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An American style approach, where even the dogcatcher can be elected, does not by itself increase participation rates or people’s feelings that they can influence decisions.

We’re all familiar with the problems of bed blocking and poor liaison between Health and Social Care. An integration of Health and Social Care would mean services could be determined by the needs of the individual rather than the provider.

The important principle must be that local democracy and accountability are the key drivers in any service - and the best place for this is nearly always the local authority, still the only local body which has the ability and duty to co-ordinate services across the board.

Services like Learning and Skills Councils and Primary Care Trust should be transferred back to the local government which originally established the services that they now provide. There is a compelling argument for dealing with local and proactive health activity particularly non-acute and preventative work in a joined up service with the children’s and adult services departments of councils.

The new duty to co-operate of other agencies should be extended so that the Bodies which fund the agencies also had a duty to cooperate with the local strategies of councils. At present the duty will only be partially effective if the agencies have a higher duty to central government.

The existing duty to co-operate should be extended to include housing association who are major players in social housing and regeneration but lack accountability.

All local agencies that remain legally independent such as colleges, school governing bodies, housing associations and universities should have the same standards of corporate governance imposed on them as on councils. They should meet in public. Their ‘Board’ members should be available to be contacted by the public that they serve. Breaches of codes of conduct of Members should be dealt with by a public sector standards committee established to cover Councillors as well as Board Members.

Councils do not need to wait for change. We should, as a party, be more demanding on our councils to take advantage of freedoms that they already have such as the powers to deal with the environmental, economic or social problems of their area. They should be bold and working together to achieve real and lasting solutions.

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