National, Local or Regional - Does it matter?

12.15 – 13.30 Main Auditorium

Three years ago John Prescott allowed a resolution to be put to the people of the North East encapsulating a poorly thought out and inadequate proposal to devolve power to an elected assembly in the region. Predictably the question was lost, and many think that the regional discussion is now over for our political lifetime.

But regions and regional government have not gone away. Tremendous power and patronage is still employed by ‘government’ at regional level, but the government they respond to is the national one and not one that can adequately understand the needs and complexities of a region, and crucially, be held to account by the people of that region.

The Government has attempted to respond to the failure with a multitude of decisions which seem, taken at face value, to have understood the basic fact of political organisation, “The UK cannot be micro-managed by Whitehall”.

The Sub National Review has given opportunities for collections of local councils to work together. The Local Government Act 2007 gives these collections a legal framework – the Multi Area Agreement.

The same Act has radically reduced the number of targets that Councils have to meet and some Ministries are now pleading with Councils to adopt ‘their’ targets. It also gives a ‘Duty to Co-operate’ to most of the Quangos which work and deliver services on behalf of central government and gives Councils an enhanced new role in ‘place shaping’ or setting the direction to be taken by the area which their council covers.

So far so good, but progress is slow and only partial. DCLG Ministers concede that other Ministers do not really understand the Duty to Co-operate. Even when Ministers do understand their civil servants are even more reluctant to let go of the power and empires that they control. The particularly bad side of the Local Government Act 2007 is the imposition of ill thought out plans for Unitary Councils which will take power away from districts, neighbourhoods and communities.

Our other opponents, the Tories, have also taken up the targets of localism – but only until they have to make decisions about service delivery, when they will also announce national prescription and targets.

If we just take the example of the Police Service we can see a range of appropriate interactions to provide the Police Service with

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the strength it needs to combat a range of problems:

- **Neighbourhood** – work with beat Bobbies – youth service etc. on localised hot spots for ASB and crime.
- **Area** – work with sergeants/inspectors on district centres, traffic flow problems and problem secondary schools.
- **Borough Commanders** – work on town/city centres; drugs strategies with education service; prostitution and drug education activity.
- **Chief Constables** – development of targets for improvements in crime and ASB levels; development of policies that exist alongside council ones for a range of activities.
- **Regional** – Development of enhanced regional crime squads to tackle regional gangs in drugs, prostitution and gun crime.
- **National** – Working with regional and local forces on international drugs and people trafficking – organised crime syndicates.

Two years ago the Government decided that it wanted to create regional police forces so that the resources would be available at that level to deal with regional problems.

After £40,000,000 of wasted expenditure it called it off because it realised that by solving that level of problem and resourcing it would simply destroy the relationships needed for all the other activities. It has yet to come up with ideas about how the relations needed at different levels could be created with relevant authorities led by the local government sector.

So once again it is left to the Liberal Democrats to enunciate clearly what should be done at neighbourhood, area, district, council, conurbation, (or county), sub regional and regional levels, and then decide what the best system of Government is to deliver those services.

Starting with what needs to be done at each level, and then deciding on a suitable structure must have a better chance of success than looking at the structure and then shoe-horning in services to fit.

So where will “Top Down meet Bottom up?” The following questions might guide us to some answers:

1. Is the question of elected regional parliaments dead for a generation?
2. How do we shine a spotlight into the power and patronage of Regional Government Offices?
3. Do we support the existence of Regional Development Agencies in principle or practice?
4. How do we help councils gear up for activity that covers more than one council area for the:
   - Development of long term proposals for the future of those wider areas?
   - Forward planning on a regional/sub regional basis?
   - Delivery of services?
   - Planning of services?
5. How do we decide what should be done at what level, and who takes responsibility for those services with a democratic mandate?
6. What devolution can we make within our existing powers to delegate authority to others?
7. How will we hold organisations that function above council area level to account and scrutiny without regional government?

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