



The Local Government Association is the national voice for more than 400 local authorities in England and Wales. The LGA group comprises the LGA and five partner organisations which work together to support, promote and improve local government.



The "Who's in charge?" campaign is calling for more accountability and greater value for money within the public sector.

This is one of the LGA's corporate campaign for 2009/10. More information on this and other LGA campaigns can be found at www.lga.gov.uk/campaigns

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Local Government Association

Who's in charge?

a manifesto for a new politics



Putting power in local hands



THE EXPENSES ROW HAS REALLY PUT ME OFF POLITICS... SO I'M GOING TO VOTE FOR RACISM, BIGOTRY, AND HATRED INSTEAD

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Britain's political system is rocking on its axis. The government, reshaped largely because of the fall-out from revelations about MPs' expenses, is once again talking about constitutional reform, and this time with urgency. The call for a new politics is being heard from politicians, commentators and academics. Most importantly, it is being heard from the public – and, in the first week of June, the public spoke loudly and clearly through the ballot box. Voters want to see the political system change in response to their frustration with it.

New politics is what the LGA is all about

The LGA is made up of politicians who, unlike those at Westminster, have seen their mandates refreshed at the ballot box since 2005. The organisation has been calling for a new politics for a long time. It is more than coincidence that it was in the local elections that people vented their anger at politicians. As a crisis of confidence shakes Westminster, local democracy has a central and distinctive contribution to make to rebuilding confidence in our political institutions.

Voters may be disillusioned and angry with what they have learned about their MPs. But that is because they see a system that is falling short of their idea of democracy, not because they do

not want democracy. Expenses scandals have catalysed a more fundamental and longstanding sense that the system doesn't care about the interests of real people and is run by cosy insiders for their own benefit. Ordinary people do not want to replace flawed Parliamentary institutions with even less accountable models like bureaucracy or political extremism.

The insider problem

No democratic system can survive for long if the people believe it is merely providing a screen for the self-interest of an insider clique. Even within political parties, it is necessary for leaders to provide reassurance to members that their voices are being heard and responded to. Political parties themselves can no longer give this satisfaction to the electorate as a whole. Membership of political parties has declined. More voters stand back from formal commitments and ideologies, and are seeking an electoral bargain with the parties in which they lend their votes for one election at a time. In such a world, ordinary people are at two removes from formal power structures. If they do not feel that those who hold power are reaching out to them to make a meaningful electoral bargain, it is no surprise if they say "no deal" to any party.

There is a real danger, too, that in their search for politicians who appear to be willing to listen to them, politics is being reorientated towards the fringes of extremism. Marginal parties are

hungrier for votes, challenging both the big parties and the pre-existing small parties and conventional independent candidates. However extreme their programmes may be, they are doing one completely mainstream thing: making voters feel wanted. To compete, the political mainstream has to outbid, not extreme political positions, but extreme political willingness to embrace and respect voters. They cannot rely on reviving former loyalties; instead, they need to build new, meaningful relationships with electors who want to feel wanted.

People are demanding what they thought they had in the first place: real elected representatives that stand up for their interests and challenge the arrogance and condescension of executive power. The worst possible outcome of the current debate would be simply to fix parliament's expenses system with new rules and external regulation. That would just take elected representatives further down the path towards their becoming minor civil servants with a purely procedural role in ticking through empowering legislation for a faceless and power-hungry bureaucracy. In the same way, important as discussions about the electoral system are, what people really want to know is not how their vote is counted but what difference it makes to the way they are governed and their relationship with politicians.

Bigger voters, smaller government, more politics

As we contemplate the need to rebuild confidence in our political system, therefore, we must look for ways of making voters more powerful and the ballot box more meaningful. It would be wrong to try to solve the problems we now face by relying on even thicker rulebooks and more powerful unaccountable quangos. As the parliamentary expenses affair has shown, public accountability is weakened, not enhanced, when officials believe their moral duty is done simply by obeying the rules.

Those of us in local government regularly witness the same thing. Rules designed to ensure propriety mean that decisions are hedged around with process that limits what elected members can do to express views on behalf of their electorates. Voters unsurprisingly feel excluded, disempowered, and angry. And while they vent their anger on politicians, the basic truth is that they want to see more politics, not less - just not the stale politics of national parties.

On the contrary, it is the remote and unresponsive executive state that must shrink. In terms of the power and influence they wield, government must become smaller and citizens bigger. And to make the voice of the people bigger and clearer, elected representatives need to be made more responsible, not less. They must face their voters transparently on a real record of making a difference.

Councillors are rooted in their places

Local elected politicians stand at a crucially important place in times like these. They have one tremendous advantage over national politicians, which is that they are fundamentally in and of their places in a way that Westminster politicians rarely can be. Councillors live and work from day to day among the people who elect them. They do not spend the working week in the capital, but in the villages and towns where their voters do. They are not parachuted in through selection contests open to national party activists, but are chosen from among local people who are active in their communities.

Councillors share the experience of the people who vote for them. They are rarely full-time politicians; even among leaders of councils running very large organisations, it is common to find teachers, community workers and business people who balance their political commitments with a working day leading ordinary lives. The summit of their ambition is to lead and serve in their places, not to play on the distant Westminster stage. They are rooted in their places. They connect with what parents, entrepreneurs, NHS patients and care users feel about those places in a way that MPs and ministers with two (and more) homes and working lives do not.



More local democratic decisions

But as things stand, councillors face a serious disadvantage, too. Councils are hemmed in by limitations on their ability to respond to what they know local voters want. Their budgets and local taxes are set by national rules, not by pressure from local taxpayers. Their decisions on issues from liquor licenses to planning applications are strictly constrained by processes and rules that, under cover of preserving integrity, deprive local voters of a voice (a councillor legally cannot, for example, raise concerns about a rowdy pub with the licensing committee unless a resident is prepared to come forward and be named in public). No wonder voters are sceptical about how well councillors can stand up for them; no wonder one recent book by a respected academic judges that local government is no longer allowed to be government.



And councils are not alone in being shackled. Almost all the local arms of the public sector are not trusted to take decisions that respond to local voters' concerns. Colleges and schools must deliver the courses and curriculum prescribed in Whitehall, and meet targets for their results set by government, not by students, parents, or governors. Local Jobcentre managers must administer services to nationally-prescribed scripts, down to the number of minutes allowed to interview an unemployed person. Hospitals must put waiting time targets ahead of service standards or cleanliness on the ward. Parliament and ministers cannot adjust those national playbooks to respond to local conditions, and local managers are not allowed to. No wonder many people are frustrated with the blameless but powerless officials who deliver those services locally.

Localists know that the way to tackle that frustration is to return more decisions to direct democratic influence through the ballot box. Voters should have more ability to set and direct budgets for the whole of the public sector locally. Local service providers should have more discretion to shape services to suit their places – and more responsibility to the voters locally for what outcomes they achieve. Until people have a real sanction over the things that matter most to them, they will, quite rightly, feel that voting doesn't matter, except as a way of venting their frustration with a political system that they feel works for the politicians, not for them.

Time for change

Most recently in our publication *One Country, Two Systems*, the LGA has set out a range of proposals for restoring a stronger and more effective connection between voters and the exercise of power. They include:

- rolling back the quango state and giving voters more direct influence through the ballot box over how their money gets spent by government at all levels; bringing more decisions over planning and the economy closer to the communities they affect; and requiring ministers to carry out regular reviews to make sure all policies are carried out as locally as possible.
- giving local voters more decision-making power over local hospitals, GPs' surgeries, and local policing;
- connecting parliament and local councils more effectively, by linking MPs better with local councils and partnerships and possibly by aligning parliamentary constituency and council boundaries more closely; giving councils the power to introduce national legislation at Westminster to improve the way they work for local people; and giving councils the right to have their say on proposed new laws they would have to implement;
- freedom for councils to shape local housing development and renewal making creative use of their housing assets and revenue;

- giving councils a general power to provide any public service not explicitly ring-fenced by central government;
- setting local taxes – including business rates – locally.

These proposals are not about the 'balance of power' between councils and government, as a recent parliamentary report insisted on portraying the issue. They are not intended to transfer budgets and powers between different layers of government. Instead, they are designed to create a more joined-up, devolved state that is directly answerable to local voters, and where local voters will have a much stronger sense that their vote makes a difference. They directly face up to the debate about the 'postcode lottery' and assert that local democratic choice is right and good. If they tilt any balance of power, it is the balance between the citizen and the state.



Alongside these changes, councils will need to continue to earn their democratic keep. Already, local government does more than any other arm of the state to work with communities and give people more voice. Young people are involved in designing youth services, and brought into the political process through initiatives such as youth parliaments, young mayor schemes and school councils. Villages are invited to draw up their own priorities for road maintenance. Councils use new technology and old-fashioned face-to-face discussion in consulting residents about their budgets. Physical assets are given to community groups to run, and voluntary sector bodies take over service delivery. Public question times in councils allow voters to directly face the decision-makers, and councils have led the rest of the public sector in their responsiveness to public petitions. All this and more needs to continue in order to maintain the lively conversation with voters that needs to go on between elections.

If we made these changes, people's direct experience of public services and of politics would be different:

- hospitals would no longer be able to blame national targets for dirty wards, and voters would be able to throw out councillors who allowed dirty hospitals to be run in their area;

- councils would be able to press ahead with useful initiatives which their voters demand without the fear of having to spend time and money defending them in court, and even seeing the courts quash them, as has happened to the London councils' mutual insurance scheme in recent weeks;
- MPs and councils could no longer trade press releases over controversial local decisions for purely political effect, but would have to work together to find compromises that local people supported;
- council taxes and rates would no longer be set in Whitehall, but in the town hall, and voters could make meaningful choices about the level of tax and services they wanted;
- legislation would be scrutinised by people who understood the practicalities of implementing it and what its effects on citizens would be; we would avoid legislation like the Licensing Act, which has cost over £100 million more to implement than civil servants told ministers it would;
- taxpayers would have to pay less, because there would be less quango bureaucracy in between Whitehall and local decision-making.

In such a state, MPs would have more of a stake in the local delivery of public services in the communities that elect them, work more closely with local councillors, and have a much clearer local mandate to challenge central government on their voters' behalf. Fewer decisions would be made by remote quangoes and Whitehall departments. Councils would be less able to hide behind centrally-dictated rules or government funding decisions. Parliament would be less busy and MPs would have a clearer locally-based platform to challenge central government.

But most importantly, voters would have more of a say, a real dialogue with people in their place who are accountable to them for their decisions, and more reason to believe that politicians serve them, rather than the other way around. Our political system needs those things urgently. A new politics is a local politics.

*Margaret Eaton,
Chairman of the LGA*

*Jeremy Beecham,
Labour Group Leader*

*Richard Kemp,
Liberal Democrat Group Leader*

*Keith Ross,
Independent Group Leader*

*David Shakespeare,
Conservative Group Leader*

June 2009



“Cities, boroughs and shires are dependent on central government for some 80 per cent of their spending. As Whitehall has provided the money – capping councils’ right to raise extra funds locally – it has micro-managed spending. Voters have been stripped of the right to make local choices. Only the other day the citizens of Surrey were told by Whitehall that they are simply not allowed to spend more of their own money to improve policing.”

Philip Stevens, Financial Times, 1 June 2009

“As long as these leaders refuse to trust communities to run their own affairs, people will rightly scorn their efforts to rebuild faith in national politics.”

Philip Stevens, Financial Times, 1 June 2009

“MPs have perforce become local as well as national –representatives. They are ill-suited to the dual role. They are thrust on to a stage where few can stand the strain.”

Simon Jenkins, The Guardian, 2 June 2009

“People crave some accountable individual – not party or council or institution – with whom to identify and from whom to seek help.”

Simon Jenkins, The Guardian, 20 May 2009

“The truth is that the British constitution is rooted in monarchical power, ranking in Kipling’s pantheon with horses, women and war. When a prime minister enters office he or she is confronted by overwhelming demands for good to be done and an apparent lack of means to do it. The outcome is never self-abnegation but the opposite – a mess of initiatives, quangos and dribble government.”

Simon Jenkins, The Guardian, 26 May 2009

“It is said, often, that our problem is greed. I disagree. The missing link here is civic engagement and I am beginning to think that the answer to the need for renewal is forcible and massive decentralisation of power.”

David Aaronovitch, The Times, 19 May 2009

“Through a new “general power of competence”, councils will be able to do whatever they like as long as it’s legal – creating solutions to local problems without getting permission from the centre.”

David Cameron, The Guardian, 25 May 2009

“The role of MPs would change significantly. Their business should be governing the country: too much time is spent now as advocates for individual local cases... Some casework should go to councillors, if more power is to be devolved. Good MPs say they need some casework, to see at first hand where government departments are failing, but the balance now is out of kilter.”

Polly Toynbee, The Guardian, 20 May 2009

“ Together, over the next 100 days, we could achieve nothing less than the total reinvention of British politics. These months could become a great moment in British political history, rather than a shabby footnote to a shameful month of scandal.”

Nick Clegg, The Guardian, 28 May 2009

“...the biggest task we have is to restore the public’s support and trust in our political system as a whole....Now I believe we need to look much more deeply at how Parliament works so that it functions as an open, transparent, modern Parliament in which the British people can have not just trust but have pride. And we cannot do this just in Westminster. It must be a process that engages citizens themselves, people of all parties and none, of all faiths and no faith, from every background and every part of the country.”

Gordon Brown, press conference, 19 May, 2009