

Chapter 5

Irony Localism and a Critical History of English ‘Reform’

Mike Bennett and Kevin Orr

There are two particular challenges in writing about the outlook for twenty-first century local government in England, and the forces that may come into play, especially with the implication that we are drawing lessons which might benefit local government in the rest of the Commonwealth. The first is to avoid seeking to pre-empt events and foresee trends that stretch into the future, inevitably beyond our own existences. The second is to resist the temptation to describe our own time as somehow historically special; a stage of history at which our successors’ destiny will be decided.

The task, therefore, is neither to overestimate our powers of foresight, nor the exceptional nature of the pace of change. This has led to a stance of critical uncertainty. Our foresight may be limited, but that does not excuse us from using the best of our experience to try to prepare the future. We have, therefore, done our best to read the runes of local government’s future destiny. In doing so, however, we have not sought to deliver a classic, horizon-scanning survey of the ‘big issues’ (economic austerity, social unrest, democratic disengagement, rise of political extremism and so on), nor have we gone for a micro review of UK policy trends.¹ Instead we have interpreted our commission quite broadly, by looking backwards rather more than looking forwards. This approach also speaks to our understanding of local government not as a homogenised institution about which there is a single, essential story to be told (of past, present and future), but rather as a *mélange* of traditions, assumptions and competing voices (local and national) which have jostled with each other over time.

If one theme is consistent, albeit recurring in different ways reflective of time and circumstance, it is the ever-present tension between different levels of government. We therefore begin our analysis with Eric Pickles, Member of Parliament (MP), English Secretary of State for Communities. In doing so we consider how his political interventions can be understood as drawing upon and perpetuating the longstanding to-ing and fro-ing of traditions of centralisation and localism.

5.1 The irony of ‘localism, localism, localism’

Whatever happens in the rest of the twenty-first century, it is likely that Eric Pickles MP will be remembered as a controversial politician in English local government. A radical Thatcherite leader of metropolitan Bradford in the late 1980s, Pickles held a number of shadow frontbench posts in opposition before he became Secretary of State for Communities in David Cameron’s Conservative-led coalition in May 2010.

Surrounded by his southern and privately educated colleagues, Pickles cuts a distinctive figure on the Conservative frontbench. The 'straight-talking northerner' stereotype is one that he plays on knowingly and to good effect. In a speech to the Conservative party conference in 2007, he prefaced his explanation of Conservative local government policy with a statement of personal credo:

I used to be a blunt Yorkshireman, but now I am an Essex Boy.² There is one thing that unites these two great counties, they like people who mean what they say. So, let me tell you something straight. The long-term success of the next Conservative government depends on giving people more opportunity and power over their lives. We are passionate about transferring power to local authorities and to do it in a way that will make it difficult for central government to ever take those powers back. Councils will help us to dismantle the centrist state, distributing its power to the people. Once that power is in their hands it will be impossible to take away. We have optimism and trust in our councils. We live in a new world where the destructive fringe that existed within some local authorities in the 1980s has long gone. ... Conservatives will match this mood by giving ALL Councils greater flexibility both in finance and functions. We are sure that you can trust our Councils with funding without stipulating the way every single penny must be spent. ... To do this you need to have a deep trust that communities will set sensible priorities and govern themselves well, and if they don't that the electorate will have the good sense to kick them out (Pickles 2007).

This blunt statement of the party's commitment to 'localism' could not have been clearer. It describes a Conservative commitment to taking power away from the central state, to diffusing power to councils because freedom demands it and, as we will discuss later, it feeds off a long-established tradition of localism in the local government milieu. Pickles' intervention does not suggest that 'localism' would bypass local government in the way that previous Communities Secretary David Miliband's 'double devolution' envisaged devolving beyond councils to neighbourhoods and communities. Furthermore, there is a strong, unqualified statement of belief in local government's competence. They are well run, there are no reasons not to trust them and Pickles is saying that, philosophically speaking, central government has no right to distrust democratic choices made by the electorate. It is not for central government to intervene when the electorate has every right to choose and to change their local leaders. This approach was further distilled into a joke that Pickles used repeatedly in speeches while in opposition. 'I have three priorities,' he used to say, 'my first priority is localism, my second priority is localism and my third priority is ... localism'.

Four years after this speech, now in government, having piloted the Localism Bill through parliament and on the day it received Royal Assent, Pickles once again asserted how his government had changed local government for good, and revisited his campaign joke:

Since ancient times governments and politicians have sought to wield power, which has always been about command and control ... [but] this Government is leading the clarion call for more people power. ... Localism Localism Localism has been our mantra for some time now. We entered Government listening to the

people and we were clear localising power and information would be a priority. Even as global problems mounted and dominated public attention, we remained steadfast in our pursuit of localism ... And the compulsory imposition of Whitehall knows best decisions have [sic] been shut off at the source. This act of localism is an act of political realism. Gone are the days of top-down command and control over communities – they have ceased – everybody is crossing the Rubicon into a new era of people power and local say so (Pickles 2011).

Here Pickles' claims are if anything even bolder. His thunderous blast reaches back to 'ancient times' to say that until now things had always worked in a certain way. Before the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition, governments had held power back from citizens; power had always served that state. The administration to which he belongs, however, has broken free of history, empowered the citizens and changed the way that government works. 'Crossing the Rubicon' is an allusion to Julius Caesar, who led his army over the river (Rubicon) towards Rome, launching an attack on the Empire in full knowledge that, if he did not succeed, he and his army would be condemned to death. What are we to make of such rhetoric? Is Pickles saying that, if his localism policy does not succeed, then he knows he faces certain political death? Is he comparing his own heroic leadership to that of Caesar's? Or is deliberately suggesting a radical break with history, even if he knows the truth is rather more mundane? Either way, Pickles' more literal assertions are uncompromising and his claim to have changed the course of history unambiguous.

Yet, for all his straight talking, there is more than a hint of irony in his claims to have entrenched localism beyond the point of no return. While some in the local government sector appear to take the promise of localism at face value, there are others who are more sceptical that Pickles really has crossed the Rubicon to fight against centralism. At the very least, elements of localism seem to co-exist (uneasily) with strands of centralism.

Some would begin, for example, by pointing to a letter written by Pickles to Nottinghamshire County Council to complain that the council has made 'disproportionate' cuts to its funding of the voluntary and community sector. The secretary of state, who in opposition railed against central interference as a bureaucratic iron cage and who urged councils to 'just say no' to central guidance, now says:

I would be grateful if you could reconcile your council's decision on funding the voluntary and community sector to the strategic guidance (Pickles, in Butler 2012).

Sceptics may also submit the new stacks of guidance which the government is issuing to local authorities on a wide range of issues including local tax rates, council pay policies, neighbourhood bin collections, street parties and council prayers, and point to the sometimes brutal way in which ministers criticise councils (Keeling 2012; Ross 2012) for choices with which they disagree. Indeed it appears that local government ministers have alienated even the normally loyal Conservative council leaders who have bypassed their secretary of state and written directly to the Prime Minister, David Cameron, to warn that a 'retrograde tendency towards greater centralism' and 'constant criticisms' by ministers have left local activists 'angry' and possibly

unwilling to help the party win the next general election (Keeling 2013). Finally, sceptics look, with eyebrows raised, at the way in which the Localism Act centralises power by providing 'unprecedented ability for the Secretary of State to introduce significant measures through secondary regulation' (Local Government Information Unit [LGIU] 2011). Many agree with Sir Merrick Cockell, Conservative Chair of the Local Government Association (LGA), who says that 'this bill actually centralised more powers than it localised' (Cockell 2011), or again with Sir Howard Bernstein, Chief Executive of Manchester City Council, when he says, 'These are fundamentally the same problems that we've had with successive governments over the last 20 years. This current government is probably a little bit smarter because it has managed to develop a headline or narrative around localism, which is meaningless in the context of what it's trying to do' (cited in McCann 2012).

In other words, sceptics would point to a track record of centralising action that provides a stark contrast to the localist talk. It was therefore no surprise to many when the secretary of state began to talk about 'guided localism', notably in evidence to a parliamentary select committee which subsequently labelled the government's approach to localism as incoherent and inconsistent, and its understanding of localism as 'elastic' (Communities and Local Government Select Committee 2011). In response, in September 2011, the Department for Communities and Local Government issued a weighty statement which defended the government's interpretation (Department of Communities and Local Government 2011). Significantly, in that paper we see the clear evolution of Pickles' view. Now the definition of localism has apparently reverted to the previous New Labour view 'that power should belong at the lowest appropriate level ... Whilst the most appropriate level will vary from service to service, it is the Government's clear view that, overall, power has accreted at too high a level over the years and that a process of decentralisation is needed to give power away' (Department of Communities and Local Government 2011: 5). It adds, by way of confirmation, 'the Government believes decentralisation should go beyond transferring power from central government to local government, important though that is. There should be a parallel decentralisation of power from central government to local government and to people and communities' (Department of Communities and Local Government 2011: 7).

While in opposition, Pickles' straight talking made it very clear that localism was about local government. Now the definition is much more qualified: it appears that the focus for reform has moved from campaigning for local government as an insurgent against the incumbents, to seeing local government itself as the incumbents that need to be challenged. Indeed, the disjunction between what ministers say and what they do in the name of localism suggests that the commitment to localism was part of what Stoker and Taylor-Gooby call 'politics as normal' rather than an ideological commitment to 'high Tory romanticism of a more organic social order in which individuals contribute to a common good through their own direct efforts' (Stoker and Taylor-Gooby 2011: 11–12). There is, therefore, a double irony in Pickles' rhetorical commitment to localism.³ First, that the continuing deployment of localist rhetoric is knowingly out of kilter with his action: we can never know his motives for this approach, but it is worth noting that his strategy has been convincing, and remains

popular in many influential non-local government Conservative circles. The second irony is that, given the long history of reform narratives providing principled cover for realist political manoeuvring, Pickles' claims to localist policy while in opposition were taken so uncritically.⁴ For both these reasons, we speak of Eric Pickles as an exemplary, contemporary proponent of ironic localism.⁵ The next sections consider two antecedents of ironic reform discourse.

5.2 Jump-cutting through the long history of 'reform'

Our first case study is Tudor England in the time of Henry VII, and the second is the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867. This unusual starting point represents an almost exaggerated gesture designed to disrupt our idea that the 'now' is new. The narrative is intended to perform an unsettling function, unpicking certainties and allowing a fresh vision of present-day issues.

Using this approach, we want to look at the way in which leaders talk about ideas of reform, how they contextualise the challenge of change and how they frame their own responsibilities and those of others. In this way we aim to show that Pickles' use of the language of localism stands in a long pattern of ironic or tactical deployment of commitment to reform.

This analysis, therefore, questions the view that the twenty-first century is a uniquely localist moment and that there is an epoch-changing, paradigm-shifting collection of circumstances that create the conditions for localism to flourish. Rather, the current discourse of localism, when looked at in historical context, can be understood as a government using the talk of change to retain the mantle of insurgents, rather than become the established incumbents. This is, we suggest, a lesson worthy of study by all who argue for local government 'reform'.

5.2.1 The Tudors and central–local relations

Henry VII is well known as the founder of the Tudor dynasty in unifying the warring factions in the Wars of the Roses, and for the way in which he built the foundations of the British monarchy. But Henry's constitutional agenda was much broader than uniting the competing Houses of York and Lancaster. Under the feudal system, the government of localities was dominated by rich landowners who had the resources to resist central interference. However, following the Wars of the Roses the local nobility could not compete with the King's increased influence, and Henry seized this opportunity to centralise power, while at the same time creating elements of a recognisably modern form of local government built on common legal foundations.

The key to this centralisation was the professionalisation of the office of Justice of the Peace, seen as an essential condition for maintaining order in local communities, for executing the King's wishes and being held responsible when things went wrong (Tanner 1951). The main legislative instrument was the 1489 Justices Act, which was directed against the negligence and corruption of some Justices of the Peace in an attempt to heighten their accountability and improve their performance.

The Act proclaimed:

The King our Sovereign Lord considereth that by the negligence and misdemeaning, favour, and other inordinate causes of the Justice of the Peace in every shire of this his realm, the laws and ordinances made for the politic weal, peace, and good rule ..., be not duly executed according to the tenor and effect they were made and ordained for; wherefore his subjects be grievously hurt ...; for to him is nothing more joyous than to know his subjects to live peaceably under his laws and to increase in wealth and prosperity (cited in Tanner 1951: 465–8).

Henry's Justices Act sets out a powerful case for reform in the local criminal justice system, but gives us the perhaps ironic case of the Sovereign seemingly rendered impotent by local bureaucracy. He conveyed the will to change the way things work, but was frustrated that local justices did not do his bidding. He may have created the British monarchy, but Henry portrayed his sovereignty as incomplete and divided. Even at the height of his powers he claimed that his writ did not rule in the towns and shires of England.

Faced with these limits to his power, Henry's response is twofold. First, he constructs a new legal framework, nominally for citizens to hold local justices to account. But second, because of his inability to command the justices' obedience, we also see Henry appealing directly to his subjects, over the heads of local officials, mobilising public opinion to place blame and responsibility firmly on others.

While the value system, attitudes and expectations of people in Tudor times towards their 'government' are largely obscure to us at this distance, Henry's renaissance reforms embody a recognisably modern approach to politics. He promises his people that he wants to improve their lives and he empathises with their problems. By demonstrating his zeal for reform he places himself, discursively, outside the establishment that he is criticising. He frames the challenge as one that can be achieved within existing resources. He has done all that he can, he wants things to change and he is putting pressure on others to show he is on the side of the people. As he says, the system 'lacketh nothing but that said laws be put in due execution' (*Justices Act 1489*, cited in Tanner 1951: 466). In other words, where life does not improve as desired for his subjects, where robbery or counterfeiting continues unchecked, it is clear from his declaration that he will blame local officials for inefficiency and ineffectiveness in not executing what he has ordained to be.

5.2.2 The nineteenth-century reform movement

Reform movements in local government ('localism' being an early twenty-first century example) share key features with other narratives of parliamentary or democratic reform, such as the nineteenth-century reform movement. While the so-called 'Great Reform Act of 1832' is often looked back upon with nostalgia as one of the landmark points in the growth of British democracy,⁶ its architects would have been horrified to think they would be remembered as such. Following the death of its leader, Lord Liverpool, in 1828, factionalism and infighting within the Conservative Party and the rise to the leadership of the hardliner Wellington saw the party suffer heavy electoral

defeat in 1831. This dramatic change of political control, combined with increased popular unrest calling for reform, led to a growing will for change. The House of Lords initially resisted the Whig proposals that consisted largely of the reconfiguration of parliamentary boundaries and constituencies, including representation of some large industrial areas such as Birmingham, Leeds and Sheffield for the first time. To persuade the Lords to back his measures, Prime Minister Earl Grey promised that change would go no further:

If any persons suppose that this Reform will lead to ulterior measures, they are mistaken; for there is no one more decided against annual parliaments, universal suffrage, and the ballot, than I am. My object is not to favour, but to put an end to such hopes and projects (cited in Evans 2000: 24).

But it was Robert Peel, leading the opposition to the bill, whose pessimistic analysis turned out to be more insightful, saying that ‘my belief is, that neither the monarchy nor the peerage can resist with effect the decrees of a House of Commons that is immediately obedient to every popular impulse, and that professes to speak the popular will’ (cited in Wright 1970: 118–20).

In a related debate, Peel argued that this reform was a slippery slope to democracy:

It was surely absurd to say, that a man of ten thousand pounds a year should not have more influence over the legislature of the country than a man of ten pounds a year. Yet each was entitled to a single vote. How could this injustice, this glaring inequality, be practically addressed ... How could the government end but in democracy, if the influence were merely accorded to numbers (cited in Machin 2001: 25).

But, while the 1832 Act did somewhat increase the electoral franchise, the ‘increase in the electorate had not brought the system much closer to anything resembling democracy’ (Wood 1982: 85). As Lynch argued, ‘when the concessions were made in the “Great” Reform Act of 1832, they were in the view of those who made them the minimal required to assuage the most powerful groups amongst the disenfranchised and to ensure that power remained in the same hands as before’ (1992: 386).

As counterintuitive as it now seems, the reform movement was fundamentally about resisting greater change. Lang argued that ‘to modern eyes, what was wrong with the unreformed parliament was that it was undemocratic; it is difficult to grasp that that was, to the eighteenth-century eyes, including those of many reformers, one of the system’s greatest assets’ (1999: 3), and Whig Thomas Macauley declared that he ‘support[s] this measure as a measure of reform; but I support it still more as a measure of conservation. That we may exclude those whom it is necessary to exclude, we must admit those whom it may be safe to admit’ (cited in Wright 1970: 117–18).

The irony, therefore, is that those arguing for reform were doing so in order to preserve as far as possible the status quo.

The subsequent 1867 Reform Act was another product of tactical, political manoeuvring (what Stoker and Taylor-Gooby call ‘politics as normal’ [2011]). The Conservatives were keen to correct the disadvantage that they had suffered since the

previous Reform Act, but had to find a way of tying in the more moralistic reformers. The Conservative leader Disraeli judged that, by including proposals for increased suffrage, sufficient radical Whig support could be attracted to carry a bill which he thought would increase electoral advantage for his party.

Thus, far from progressing logically from first principles towards democratic emancipation, the Reform movement was significantly influenced by party manoeuvring, the search for political advantage and a desire to change only so that things could remain largely the same.

The history of nineteenth century parliamentary reform is not a story of stately progress from the darkness of corrupt manipulation and highly restricted voting rights to the broad sunlit uplands of open, participatory democracy. Britain had its democrats in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but the overwhelming majority of reformers in parliament wanted change in order to frustrate democracy and preserve what they saw as the essentials of good government (Evans 2000: 92).

As with Pickles and Henry, here we see a telling example of ironic reform: politics carried out in the name of change for the purposes of consolidation; politicians assuming the mantle of the radical in order to preserve the status quo; and the language of reform being used to play to an array of interest groups and constituencies to bolster personal and political advantage.

5.3 Localism: the eternal return of the same?

So what does this analysis tell us about local government and where its future may lie in the twenty-first century? One way of exploring the apparently eternal antagonism within central–local relations is through the co-existence of interacting traditions of governing. Local government is more than a collection of institutions and statutory responsibilities. It is also a space for political sense-making and storytelling, in which competing versions of its purpose are played out. Two of the most prominent of these contested traditions can be described as localism and centralism, each of which represents distinctive values and assumptions about what ought to be the proper domain of local and central actors and institutions.

In this way, the localism tradition might be said to position local government as a key vehicle for forming a sense of identity and direction for communities. This view incorporates the notion of civic pride, or what Joseph Chamberlain (1885) called 'local spirit' or 'municipal patriotism'. The localism tradition in the UK draws on neo-Victorian narratives of trusted guardians and 'city fathers' who do the public good in the locality. Those who have felt a sense of loss or perceived the diminution of the institution have often spoken in terms of the erosion of localism, and such anxieties are age-old. A long line of commentators has offered normative rationales for the importance of the institution of local government based on the idea that such 'community-based' organisations are better placed to assess and respond to the needs of local people than are more remote central government ministries (Jones and Stewart 1983; Stewart 2001).

Aspects of New Labour's 'modernisation' narrative carried echoes of this tradition in calling for the 'revitalisation' of local government and communities (Bleas 2007). The tradition also surfaced in the debate about the concept of 'new localism', advocates of which have emphasised community leadership rather than a service-delivery role for local government (Stoker and Wilson 2004; Bennett 2006). The priorities for action that this tradition highlights are the need to nurture the local economy, environment, culture and communities. It implies a correspondence of interest between the institution and the locality, and emphasises councils' roles in shaping identity, protecting local interests and expressing local values. It creates a sense of difference by defining places in relation to 'the local' and the 'non-local'.

The centralism tradition portrays local government as subject to a central state which tends to act in ways that delimit council autonomy (Keith-Lucas 1977; Burgess and Travers 1980; Duncan and Goodwin 1988; Wilson and Game 1994; Rao and Young 1997). It emphasises the ways in which central control is exercised by, and power is concentrated in, central government. Its antecedents appear to have existed as long as local government itself. Alexander cited a frustrated local alderman as saying in the 1850s that 'it was much to be regretted that Parliament, in passing measures urging on public improvements, did not at the same time decrease the difficulty and expense of carrying them out' (Alexander 1985: 48). Jennings' (1935) account of 'Central Control' quoted Sydney and Beatrice Webb's observation of Sir Robert Peel's 1815 legislation requiring prison authorities to provide statistical reports of their gaols as:

the first that dictated to local authorities the detailed plan on which they were to exercise a branch of their own local administration; the first that made it obligatory to report, quarter by quarter, how their administration was actually being conducted; and the first that definitely asserted the duty of a Central Department to maintain a continuous supervision of the action of the local authorities in their current administration (Webb and Webb 1922: 462).

Similarly, Joseph Chamberlain (1885) complained that Home Secretary Sir William Harcourt's 1885 bill for local government reform involved 'immense centralisation'.

Almost a century later, the discourse of centralisation was just as pronounced, as one councillor complained apocalyptically that:

Local government, I am saying quite frankly, has already declined in significance since 1970. The reorganisation of local government has been the biggest con trick ever played ... Housing has already been effectively taken over by national government. Now we have got water and sewage disposal, which will be taken away very soon. Before long, we will be able to see that the police, the fire brigades and even education will follow suit ... I am telling you now – I am forecasting – that before the end of this century local government will have effectively disappeared and we shall have Government directives and appointed boards (Phillips 1973: 51).⁷

Under the Blair government, the chair of the Local Government Association described a wish to 'achieve a dramatic reduction in the imposition of national targets, standards and performance indicators on local government, a radical overhaul of the

burdensome system of inspection and regulation, and to build a new way of managing the central–local relationship' (Bruce-Lockhart 2006: 22).

What emerges from this picture is a sense that localism and centralism have long been co-existing concepts through which the lived experience of local government has been interpreted. At different times in the twentieth century, we have had governments elected with more or less localist manifestos or more or less centralist commitments. We also see a litter of Royal Commissions and other inquiries looking at the proper relation between central and local government. It is eye-opening to look back and see that almost each decade seems to have undertaken a serious examination of reform. The Royal Commission of 1925–28, the Local Government Boundary Commission of 1945, a Royal Commission of 1966–69, the 1972 Bains Report, the Local Government Commission of 1992 and the Lyons Report of 2007, all wrestled with the 'more strategic, but more engaged with communities conundrum' (Bennett 2006: 6); yet none produced reforms which created an enduringly popular political settlement.

Seeing the eternal return of the same issues in central–local relations, the irony is that the latest simulation of reform-as-localism under Eric Pickles has been taken so uncritically by a range of local government leaders, central local government actors and local government think tanks (Cox 2007; Coen and Raynes 2007; Keohane and Scott-Smith 2010; NLGN 2011).

5.4 Local government and the internalisation of reform

Local government actors have developed new skills of camouflage as a form of evolutionary survival. Following near extinction under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, leading local government storytellers generated a new capacity to tell tales which were more or less pleasing (or at least inoffensive) to new ministers. By mimicking each new language and reproducing the narrative of reform produced by successive governments, local strategists have enabled their councils to blend into the new landscape, ensuring they cannot be charged with being beyond the government's pale (see Table 5.1).

The Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher is often said to have had a radical reforming view of local authorities, seeing local government as 'wasteful, unaccountable and ultimately undesirable' (Seldon and Collings 2000: 76). The attempted introduction of outsourced contracts into a range of white- and blue-collar services sought to take politics out of services and promoted a new vision of local government purpose. Local government's controversial behaviour, the 'Looney-Left' and its commitment to disputed international causes, framed a critique of local authorities as being too political, using local taxes to pursue non-local issues ('South Africa and nuclear policy' [Ridley 1988: 35]) when really they existed in order to secure value-for-money services for local people (Orr 2005). While the then Secretary of State Nicholas Ridley's objective that 'enabling' councils delegate 'as much as possible to the private sector' (Ridley 1988: 29) did not come to pass in his lifetime, the narrative of local government's purpose did change as result of the Thatcher years, and outsourcing has been widely embraced in some local government services (Seymour Pierce 2013).

Table 5.1 Interplay of central–local discourses

Government	Government discourses	Local government discourses
Thatcher (1979–1990)	Market reforms, public sector crisis, towards a residual role for local government	Resistance, collectivism – followed by New Public Management, enabling
Major (1992–1997)	Consensus through ‘consultation’, value for money, top-down re-organisation and choice through citizen’s charter	Consolidation of mainstream, reform of central bodies, desire for consensus
Early Blair (1997–2005)	Earned autonomy, performance and regulation, Best Value, political leadership reforms	Improvement and development, self-criticism, partnership, commissioning for outcomes
Late Blair/Brown (2005–2010)	Double devolution, communities and neighbourhoods	Localism, place-shaping, rejection of regulation
Cameron (2010–present)	‘Localism, localism, localism’, guided localism, transparency, the Big Society, open public services, anti-officer	Open access, open source, localgov2.0, the Big Society, sharing, austerity

Although councils opposed much of the government’s policy agenda, local government rationalised many of the government’s objectives and integrated the principles of contracting-out into their new ways of working. While resisting Ridley’s vision of a ‘residual role’, councils did adopt (and adapt) the government’s ‘enabling’ vocabulary.⁸ Management by objectives, and the New Public Management, refreshed local government’s narrative by providing a new focus on customers and users of services.⁹ Now councils talked about better management, about a mixed economy of provision, about performance measurement and efficiency. The rise of managerialism saw a decline of deference towards dominant professional groups in local government, and opened up services to external scrutiny and challenge. This evolution involved changing the relationship with service users, absorbing the language of customers and consumers, introducing charters and choices.

Subsequently, under John Major, the next Conservative government pursued a more emollient policy towards local government. Thatcher’s controversial ‘poll tax’ was replaced and in came a concern with a more consensual approach. Indeed, as Wilson and Game report, ‘In October 1992 Michael Howard, then Secretary of State at the Department of the Environment, argued that “the old image of eternal central-local conflict is out of date”. He maintained that ministers “have taken an entirely fresh look at the way in which we bring local authorities into the Whitehall decision making process”’.¹⁰ In future, local authorities and their representatives could expect to be consulted when government departments developed policies that put additional burdens on councils. Indeed Wilson and Game go on to quote the Association of County Councils’ Secretary Robin Wendt, who welcomed ‘a sign of a new partnership which in government is indicative of an advance on where we were a year ago’ (Wilson and Game 1994: 115). Clearly this optimistic assessment did not hold for long, but it

shows the new minister's wish to signal a move towards a softer stance, and the desire of the corporate face of local government (by which we mean central bodies, umbrella groups etc.) to speak positively and to act co-operatively.

The Major government pursued a policy of reorganisation, introducing unitary authorities¹¹ in Scotland and Wales, as well as in parts of England. The 1992 Local Government Act also gave significant new powers to the Audit Commission to 'give such directions as it thinks fit for requiring relevant bodies to publish such information relating to their activities in any financial year as will, in that Commission's opinion, facilitate the making of appropriate comparisons (by reference to the criteria of cost, economy, efficiency and effectiveness)' (Local Government Act, 1992, Part 1, Section 1).

These powers were later used by the Audit Commission under Blair's governments to put in place a powerful framework of public audit and inspection, which would become one of the hallmarks of his government. Through this web of performance information and public reporting, and along with a new duty to provide 'Best Value', councils were graded in various ways and the results published. Such disciplines formed part of a new narrative that local authorities could knuckle down and show themselves responsible enough to be conceded further powers and responsibilities. This formula evolved over time and went through different incarnations from 'earned autonomy' to 'pathfinder councils' to 'trailblazer councils', and was supported in turn by local government through the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA). While the criticism of councils from Blair's hardline reformist message could be tough, it seemed that many in local government agreed with it, and that the promise of freedom to come motivated much of the sector to engage with the new approach.

Under the later Blair governments, and the short Brown administration, the energy associated with early reforms seemed to drain away and was replaced by narratives on community engagement and building social capital which, as objectives that no-one could oppose, were easily adopted by local government. The key concept in Sir Michael Lyons' long-awaited report (2007) was 'place-shaping'. This was a development of the idea that local government politicians should be leaders of community, rather than simply leaders of an organisation or deliverers of services. Place-shaping local authorities exerted leadership to mobilise all the resources in their territory to deliver outcomes for citizens. Lyons' report was warmly welcomed in local government and its language became fully integrated for a number of years.

On becoming shadow Secretary of State of Communities and Local Government in David Cameron's frontbench team, Eric Pickles purged 'New Labour talk' and the Conservatives began to develop a new political language for local government: out went efficiency, in came austerity (Laws 2010); out went social capital, in came the 'Big Society' (HM Government 2010); out went 'Best Value', in came 'Open Public Services' (HM Government 2011). On coming to power he announced the abolition of the Audit Commission – which, though a Tory creation, had become, ironically, a symbol of Blairite centralism (Phillips 2011) – and put his focus on transparency, basic services such as bins and tax collection, and reducing the pay and power of local government senior officers. His measures on transparency seem to be the most

far-reaching. Councils are now required to publish large amounts of spending data (every transaction over £500), pay levels for senior staff are also published and pay deals must be voted on by full council. The Localism Act also requires local authorities to hold a referendum for any council tax increase over an amount deemed reasonable by the secretary of state. The theme of many of these moves is (rather like Henry) to appeal to public opinion to mediate professional judgement or political choice.

5.5 Local government into the twenty-first century: stories of reform

Before the Conservatives came to power it was entirely possible to question whether their commitment to 'localism' represented a commitment to local government (Bennett 2009), but no one should have been surprised by Eric Pickles' choice to wrap himself in the localism flag. It has been for some time the reformist flag of choice. Localism was Pickles' cry for change in opposition, and he was determined to hold on to its cutting edge in government.

It was Peter Mandelson who exhorted the Labour Party in 2009, at the end of its period in office, to think like 'insurgents, not incumbents' (Mandelson 2009). This is perhaps a lesson that some of David Cameron's government, and certainly Eric Pickles, have learned.

The journalist John Rentoul writes about the current government's similarities to, and differences from, the Blair governments. He has written that one of the strengths of David Cameron is that 'he understands the politics of impossible promises' (2011). Rentoul sees the Prime Minister's 'populism' as more democratic than the 'realism' of other politicians. His promises may be empty (in the sense of unachievable) 'but it doesn't seem to matter, because the Prime Minister's impossible promise gives an impression of what he wants to do' (Rentoul 2011). Rentoul is suggesting that it is not enough for a politician to have an analysis of what it is possible to do. Politicians need to be able to empathise with what voters want to be done, whether that is possible or not.

The ironic, tactical use of the language of reform is one such manoeuvre, and in deploying it so forcefully Eric Pickles has, we argue, joined an illustrious political tradition.

So what will this mean for the next century of English local government? Our interpretation of the past suggests that local government is a robust, if contested, set of institutions and ideas that has developed remarkable endurance over many years.

In our King Henry case study we see the King as a central authority reliant on local government, which effectively limits his own power to rule. He ordains, but he cannot execute. We see the sovereign who appears at the top of the hierarchy, but finds that, when he legislates and makes his decrees, his policy can be subverted for one reason or another. The sovereign is absolute perhaps in matters of war, but not in people's heads, their souls, their intimate lives. The sovereign's power to influence the population, people's behaviour in society – that which is necessary to produce well-being, peace

and good rule – is so limited that he is reduced to issuing decrees to influence public opinion and to direct blame elsewhere. While the power of a Sovereign Lord to punish may be absolute, his power to discipline, to influence a population's behaviour, is weak.

More recently, with Eric Pickles, we see how much he too is reliant on local authorities to deliver basic services, and how much he and his team concentrate on influencing the public, forcing local government into the sunlight of immediate public opinion.

In turn, twenty-first century local government will continue to adopt and adapt these new discourses. Some of this is intellectual, not just embracing the argument for transparency but also moving to spread the open data and open government philosophy (localgov2.0); some will be economic, as reduced budgets lead to reduced or reshaped services; some will be influenced by wider social and environmental trends such as immigration, climate change, food security; some will be discursive, for example, re-branding purged languages such as community cohesion and writing new narratives such as the Big Society. We will see the durability of some traditions and perhaps the fragility of others.

We can be sure that, in the course of the century to come, other narratives will develop and other structural forms will be devised. What is unlikely is that local government will cease to exist or that the struggle between central and local authority will become any less fraught with tension, freighted with irony or laden with tradition. What is likely is that politics as usual will continue between central and local actors and institutions in their ongoing struggle to promote their own ideas and interests.

Notes

- 1 For roundups of this kind see O'Leary and Van Slyke (2010); Stoker and Wilson (2004); 20/20 Public Services Commission (2010).
- 2 Before becoming MP for Brentwood and Ongar in Essex, Eric Pickles was leader of Bradford Council in Yorkshire, 1988–1990.
- 3 By this first use of 'irony', we mean that Pickles deploys a rhetorical commitment to localism at times knowingly out of kilter with his actions.
- 4 We have focused on Eric Pickles as the secretary of state in power today and of most relevance and interest to readers. However, we could equally have written about Tony Blair's New Labour party, which was elected to govern in 1997 on a manifesto that criticised the British state as 'centralised, inefficient and bureaucratic' and promised more 'independent' local government. Once in power, he turned this discourse of reform from the central state he had criticised in opposition towards the councils he had supported. Introducing the principle of 'earned autonomy' Blair wrote, 'If you are unwilling or unable to work to the modern agenda then the government will have to look to other partners to take on your role' (Tony Blair [1998], *Leading the Way: A New Vision for Local Government*, Institute for Public Policy Research, London). However, as the government's authority declined and the Labour party lost power in local government, later Labour secretaries of state adopted far more conciliatory language towards councils in order to try to regain their support.
- 5 The term 'ironic localism' has been used previously here: <http://publicintelligence.co.uk/2011/08/26/shapps-punch-and-judy-localism/> (accessed 15 May 2013).
- 6 See this celebration as part of Parliament Week, available at: www.parliamentweek.org/stories-of-democracy/stories/from-the-archives-the-representation-of-the-people-act-1832/ (accessed 15 May 2013).
- 7 For further actor accounts, see Alexander (1982); Broadhead (1989); Campbell (1988); Beecham (1986); Walton (1988).

- 8 See Leach et al. (1994: 235) for discussion of good and bad enabling.
- 9 See Orr and Vince (2009) for a discussion of the 'management tradition' in local government.
- 10 Wilson and Game (1994: 115) quoting from *Local Government Chronicle*, 13 November 1992.
- 11 Single-tier local authorities that replaced separate regional/county and district councils.

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