

# Government hand-washing guidance – the legacy of CENs

*'Community empowerment is local government's core business'*  
*Simon Milton (in DCLG's 2007 Action Plan for Community Empowerment)*

*'Power is never given'*  
*Operation Black Vote organising slogan*

One of the ironies of community empowerment networks (CEN's) was that they couldn't empower themselves, or more accurately save themselves from the crude dynamics of how power works at both a central and local level.

Indeed it is a mark of their success.

It should have been written into one of the hundreds of targets in the 2001 Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plan: get those who think they have the monopoly of power to behave true to form.

The challenge facing Community Empowerment Networks was about manifesting a radical political possibility. Maybe it shouldn't even be that radical – the idea that the voluntary and community sector (VCS) should be equal partners and that some resource be ring fenced to that end. The idea that the VCS needed to reach out into the wider community and do more than just try to recruit people on to management committees and get them to go on training courses. The idea that the VCS was a central, yet separately defined player that could go to the partnership table on its own terms. And of course the hope that local authorities, rather than lobbying central government for years thereafter, successfully as it turns out, to get rid of CENs and give the bulk of the resource to them, could nurture a plurality of voices, not crush them. It was always going to be easy to sit tight, go slow, wait for government to change its mind and then Hoover up the resources as a newly trusted community leader.

The circular trajectory is instructive in the light of an imminent Empowerment White Paper, for the obvious reason that the last time the sector heard about empowerment it was that the CEN infrastructure, in the form of the Single Community Programme and hence the tripartite integrity of LSPs was going to be wound down. Community empowerment is no longer about an independent third sector; it has become the main business of local authorities. Black is the new white

Third way and reformist approaches by government as practised on the community have a talent for ambiguity and expansiveness – all things are possible, and then, they're not. It should be possible to have both a strong local authority and thriving third sector, but it mostly isn't, because both their existences hang by a thread. Constitutionally there is not right for local authorities to exist. The Widdicombe Commission of 1986 stated it in exactly those terms and nothing structural has changed significantly since. Parliament is sovereign and under an increasingly presidential style of government it is unlikely that local authorities are likely to be

empowered to, for example raise the majority of their own finances by local taxation, build up as opposed to deplete their own housing stock and so on. Indeed to assert an independent autonomy based on the fact of an actual local mandate, as opposed to overseeing increasingly distant hybrid services.

The cat and mouse game that defines the central local relationship, between Westminster and the local town hall should sound familiar in the context of CENs. Local authorities newly empowered to empower local people, until the next throw of the policy dice at least.

Both local government and the VCS have been predictably moulded, through a plethora of modernising templates and the market based approach of new public management. But to what end? Is the fetish for technocratic solutions from the centre working? At some point, in order to create deep and truly transformational change, both in terms of democracy and services, government has to genuinely let go. This letting go is distinct and different from the neo liberal drift that would have government's do less and citizens more. Empowerment as outsourcing and offloading is not going to transform anything. Active and sustainable communities are built on nothing less than social justice and mutual respect – to do this power structures must be changed not shored up, because they are the issue that prevents people participating in the host of other issues that affect their lives.

The Power Inquiry reported back in 2006 that 'the solution is to download power by rebalancing the system towards the people'. How clear does it have to be? People want an alternative not more of the same. The dilemma for government is that, for all the dedication of its staff and leaders, it is locked into a central contradiction of our times: people expect and want something else. Increasingly we know and feel that another world is both necessary and possible, most obviously on a global level but also in the local spaces of our lives.

There are several convenient but constraining boxes that can package off the much needed debate about empowerment – the compartmentalisation of the third sector, of local government, of public services – can stop us from asking the bigger political questions. But asking questions sets in train a genuine dialogue for transformative action, not the simulacra of entrapment. Thankfully the logic of empowerment is unstable and contagious, how much giving of power is ever going to be enough?

If you're part of the problem and have a vested interest in resourcing the status quo (public choice theory) are there any recent examples of successful bucking the trend? This is the challenge and the lesson of CEN's. CEN's took a first term New Labour government at its word and on their better days, pushed the boundaries of what had been possible, by the voluntary and community sector (VCS) at a local level. But also in their bolder moments, challenged externally the vested interests and oppressive practices, we know so well, that give the lie to partnership working. For that reason they were closed down. And for that reason they will need to be reinvented and return.

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