

What Now for Localism?

Abstract: *So the Tories have been returned with an overall majority to govern us for another five years. What does this mean for democracy, sustainability and identity at a community level? LocalismWatch tries to read the runes.*

Now that last week's speculation about a hung parliament has been replaced by the certainty of five years' Conservative rule, it's time to consider what this means for the issues we've been covering in LocalismWatch. The only piece of campaign literature that's been spared my recycling bin is the Tory [manifesto](#). Manifestos, however, are deliberately crafted as self-fulfilling prophecies aimed at 'people like you', whereas localism carries different meanings for different people and places. So it's with a copy of the manifesto in one hand and a generous pinch of salt in the other that I'll offer a few preliminary thoughts on what might happen in the next few years and how folk at the grassroots can best respond.

The Planning System

Cameron's manifesto doesn't talk at any great length about the planning system, which underwent major reforms under the former Coalition. Half a century of statutory guidance was replaced by the 50 page National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), to which Local Plans must now conform. Regional plans were abolished and a new layer of neighbourhood plans created. But as we've previously [shown](#), the new system is far from well-established. Only a tiny proportion of neighbourhoods have a plan in place, and the vast majority haven't even started the process: they're all but absent in the big cities. Worse still, only a minority of English councils have an approved Local Plan at all, let alone one that's up-to-date. That hole in the system acts as an impediment to responsible developers and an incentive to those who're less so.

So a big challenge for Cameron's new administration will be to ensure that everywhere in England is covered by fit-for purpose local and neighbourhood plans – ones that meet the needs and aspirations of their areas, *and* that work harmoniously with neighbouring plans: in other words, ending planning postcode lotteries. There lies the difficulty. The Tory agenda is based on economic growth, achieved through competition – themes that permeate their manifesto. But the idea of sustainable development is more nuanced. It goes well beyond the realm of market economics. Although it's stated as a 'golden thread' in the NPPF, the government consistently refuses to define what it means by sustainable development – something that's led to expensive disputes between developers, communities and councils. All too often, the outcome has been a victory in the courts for well-resourced developers, or the Secretary of State using his powers to decide by decree.

One response to this might be along the lines of seeking the greatest good for the greatest number, and highlighting that a lack of clarity and coverage in the planning system is both a cause and effect of market failure. The gaps, inconsistencies and cross-boundary disputes in the current planning system need to be resolved if a national vision of prosperity – Tory or otherwise - is to be achieved.

A possible way of accommodating this within the existing system would be to regularise and democratise the network of private sector-led Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) that the Coalition established to cover some of the work of the former Regional Development Agencies. Even if LEPs

are precluded from reviving spatial strategies and economic plans, they do have an integrated agenda for their areas: their boards include councillors from several local authorities. Unlike the gestating combined authorities in Manchester and some of the other big cities, the LEPs cover the whole of England. So there's plenty of scope for them to become more visible, community-focused champions for their areas, act as convenors and brokers for determining planning matters that are 'bigger than local yet smaller than national' (and where necessary bang heads together), all without the need for legislation.

Community Rights

Interestingly, these do get a mention in the manifesto, albeit in a brief paragraph about strengthening the rural economy and local communities. LocalismWatch has repeatedly [exposed](#) the ineffectiveness of these measures in the Localism Act. The Right to Build, allowing communities to undertake small-scale, locally-specific developments, has to date secured the construction of just 3 houses in the entire country.

The Community Right to Bid permits local facilities to be registered as Assets of Community Value (ASV), giving communities first refusal to buy and manage them if and when their owner decides to sell. But it doesn't force a sale or guarantee a purchase by the community: the status of some ASVs has been [overturned](#) on appeal, and the listing of a pub in Maida Vale proved no deterrent to its offshore owners, who went ahead and [demolished](#) the property a few weeks ago. A disproportionate number of ASVs are pubs, so it's perhaps no surprise that the manifesto focuses on them rather than community halls. And because politicians everywhere delight in lists and numbers collected in ways that prove their point, it's always far easier to produce statistics suggesting wide uptake of the rights than those demonstrating any tangible improvements that accrue.

In any case, exercising these powers is bureaucratic and costly, and inaccessible to all but the most affluent and empowered groups. The manifesto talks about 'strengthening' community rights. But set alongside the Tories' headline commitment to further public sector cuts, and the limited capacity of the government's franchisees [Locality](#) and the [SIB](#) to promote the rights, it's hard to see how they can possibly become more accessible to those who most need them.

The manifesto's commitment to helping people play a full part in community life is rich in rhetoric but short on substance. Many had thought that the Tories had quietly abandoned the Big Society as a policy plank, but the manifesto has resurrected it: "This is about a national culture change, saying to everyone in Britain: ask what you can do for your community and your country." Even if we ignore the fact that this 'new' approach has been inexpertly cribbed from John F Kennedy's 1961 inaugural address, the examples used to illustrate the Big Society in action are of rather questionable worth: 'free' schools, the Work Programme, and social impact bonds, to mention but three.

There's also a lengthy section in praise to volunteering, including the promise to workers of three days' paid leave (but only for those in a 'big company' or the public sector). Beyond this tokenism, however, there's a less pleasant side to its vision of volunteering's unsung heroes. LocalismWatch has shown that councils increasingly rely on [unpaid labour](#) by the likes of 'snow champions' and 'pothole vigilantes' to carry out statutory duties, something that's certain to become the norm in the new order. And hidden in the text of the same section, there's encouragement for the "1,400 communities engaged in neighbourhood planning to complete the process". (Three years into the process, the number who've actually completed it only runs into tens, not thousands.)

Kind words, then, but no parsnips buttered. Community activists need instead to set their own agendas, seek sources of advice and funding beyond the mainstream, and build wider alliances if they're going to secure rights that are meaningful and lasting. It's important for those alliances to be established across geographic and cultural boundaries that previously seemed impenetrable – especially before the new government gets a chance to implement its programme.

Housing

The housing crisis didn't happen overnight, but has resulted from government actions (and more often, inaction) over several decades. Official statistics show that after an all-time peak of 425,380 UK house completions in 1967, there's been a [gradual decline](#), down to just 138,000 for 2013, the last year for which records are available. The Conservative manifesto's assertion that "house building is at its highest since 2007" is therefore difficult to justify, as 226,420 recorded completions occurred during that year.

What accentuates the problem for Cameron is the matrix of relationships between local job markets, housing markets, the availability of land for new build, and the policy shift to promote home ownership and private renting over council housing that began with Thatcher in the 1980s. Put simply, there's a growing disconnect between places with jobs and places with available and affordable housing, or more simply still, the rise of 'generation rent' – all of which threaten growth. So the manifesto's top priority is less about giving more people a decent roof over their head, and more about investing in the housing market: if you "work hard" you can buy "a home of your own". It hopes to massage the market through measures like extending the Right to Buy to Housing Association tenants, and Help to Buy mortgage support (the latter [condemned](#) as a Ponzi scheme, even by *The Spectator*). All are likely to inflate house prices in the long run and further reduce the supply of social housing.

The document sets no national target for an annual rise in house completions to the levels of half a century ago. So where will the much-needed new housing stock be located, and how can it be secured in a market economy? The manifesto says that Green Belts around cities won't be built upon, but doesn't say how these will be better managed. One of the Coalition's first acts when coming to power in 2010 was to [abolish regional housing targets](#), leaving the decision up to individual local authorities in their Local Plans. But the widespread failure of councils – most of them Tory-controlled - to designate new housing areas, or even to have a plan that's up-and-running has been a signature feature of recent 'localism'.

That leaves only a few possibilities – which seem to be fudges and re-brandings at best. They include '[locally-led garden cities](#)' at Ebbsfleet and Bicester, on land already earmarked for many thousands of dwellings. And the pressing need to provide housing in London will be addressed through a new [Land Commission](#), which will designate up to 95,000 new homes on surplus public sector brownfield sites. Effectively, then, it's a recipe for procrastination, tinkering round the edges and delegating responsibility (and ultimately, blame) to others. Who wins? The property industry, of course – whether it's the volume builders who wait for the right moment to maximise returns on their land banks, or private landlords, who eagerly buy up Right to Buy properties and use the mechanism of Housing Benefit to ramp up rents at taxpayers' expense.

High Speed Rail and Fracking

Because the manifesto's been aimed at an audience of offshore investors as much as local electorates (witness how gilts and the FTSE [rose](#) at news of a Tory victory) it contains commitments aplenty to major infrastructure proposals. The second largest sum referred to in the entire document, £50 bn, is the cost of HS2, as part of delivering the so-called 'Northern Powerhouse'. The paragraph in question is replete with investor-friendly machismo, but empty of what this may mean for the sustainability of local communities. That's because the [infrastructure legislation](#) introduced in the last Parliament to drive through the tracks trumps or removes any powers communities can exercise under the Localism or Town Planning Acts to resist such developments.

Set against this is a small aside on page 55 of the manifesto to "replace locally any biodiversity" lost as a result of HS2. But that pledge is closely followed by a paragraph headlined "We will secure your energy supplies" with a commitment to what it describes as "the safe development of shale gas and [for local communities to] share the proceeds through generous community benefit packages". In other words, it's a go-ahead to fracking, offset by undefined sweeteners to some, but not necessarily all, those affected. As environmental lawyer Nicola Davidson [points out](#), the Infrastructure Act 2015 removed residents' centuries'-held protection from trespass to help fracking prospectors; and while last-minute amendments to the legislation sought to protect certain areas, these must be defined by regulation by the end of this July.

Given the election result, the up-titling of George Osborne to [First Secretary of State](#) and his [close family connections](#) to the fracking industry, it won't be surprising if those protections turn out to be minimal. Indeed, as the most important policy announcements in and around the localism agenda since 2010 have been made, not by the relevant departmental ministers but the Chancellor himself, we're tempted to draw the conclusion that what the government presents as localism is no more and no less than what George Osborne wants it to mean. So one of the big issues for community activists in critiquing, challenging and changing localism for the better will be to keep an even closer tab on what the Chancellor says and does and anticipate his next steps. True, he's the government's powerhouse, but in view of the many contradictions, gaps and inconsistencies in its policy framework, he's also a potential Achilles' Heel.

How Are We Ever Going To Cope?

The strange coincidence of the election result with the VE Day celebrations can maybe help focus our minds on how best to survive what few of us expected to see: a five year, fixed term Tory government. While it's often been propagandised, over-romanticised and satirised, the idea of a 'wartime spirit', where people worked together, focused on the practicalities, and kept on keeping on in the face of adversity has more than a ring of truth to it. And it also helps to explain the enormous groundswell of support for the landmark social and institutional reforms introduced by the Attlee government between 1945 and 1951.

That's why it's important for those of us who're committed to real localism not to despair, but gather strength. There's been lots of online reaction in recent days, much of it venomous, self-seeking and indeed, self-defeating. But for my money, the best prescription comes from [Rebecca Winson](#) of the Centre for Labour and Social Studies. What she says is absolutely central, not just to

the messages we're trying to put across at LocalismWatch, but to anyone working for a society that's fair and sustainable for all. So I'll summarise it here:

1. If you're in work - or maybe even if you're not - join a trade union.
2. Get involved in community activism too. Work for the vulnerable.
3. We're going to have to be tireless
4. Don't be tied by party lines
5. Find a way to preach to the unconverted. We need them on our side.
6. And finally . . . be so, so kind. The government won't be.

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