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## Localism and the left: the need for strong central government

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# Localism and the left: the need for strong central government

**Phil Parvin**

We share a conviction that the days of big government are over; that centralisation and top-down control have proved a failure. We believe that the time has come to disperse power more widely in Britain today; to recognise that we will only make progress if we help people to come together to make life better. In short, it is our ambition to distribute power and opportunity to people rather than hoarding authority within government.

The Coalition Agreement (Cabinet Office, 2010, 7)

Any despotism is preferable to local despotism. If we are to be ridden over by authority, if our affairs are to be managed for us at the pleasure of other people, heaven forefend that it should be at that of our nearest neighbours.

John Stuart Mill (Mill 1977 [1862])

**We are all localists now, or so we are told.** The political parties, NGOs across a range of policy areas, and many think tanks from the right, left, and centre of British politics are now broadly unanimous in their support for the idea that the British democratic system needs to be overhauled and that many of the powers currently possessed by central government should be devolved down to local communities.

That support for localism has become widespread among members of Britain's political elite was obvious in the run-up to the 2010 general election in which the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, and Labour shared with the likes of UKIP, the British National Party, the English Democrats, and the Greens a vision of politics in which decisions about such things as policing, planning, and the provision of local services should be taken by the people who would most benefit from these decisions, rather than by politicians in Westminster, mandarins in Whitehall, or bureaucrats in Brussels.

Support for localism by the government and other parties can at one level be understood purely in terms of electoral self-interest. It seems to fit the mood of many voters. The MPs' expenses scandal and 'lobbygate' appeared to feed a pre-existing and widespread cynicism among many British voters about their elected representatives, the institutions in which they work, and the democratic mechanisms which legitimate them.

But localism is also a radical response to what many on the left and the right see as a profound political and constitutional problem: that the Westminster Model, and the notion of representative democracy which animates it, has failed (for example Diamond, 2011). Localists fear that political power has become centralised within a closed community of insider groups, expert advisors, and unelected organisations, coordinated by an elite group

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of professional politicians who are empowered with the ability to govern according to their own consciences and self-interest, rather than the expressed will of those who elected them (Bevir, 2005, 2010; Rhodes, 1996 and 1997). They argue that this approach has, in the wake of successive governments who sought to strengthen the centre at the expense of the local, led to the development of a *de facto* oligarchy with the strong central state at the centre of a web of influential organisations whose democratic links with the citizen body are minimal or non-existent.

Their alternative requires us to adjust our traditional understanding of the state, to reject the failed Westminster Model, and embrace instead a more deliberative conception of democracy and governance.

The Decentralisation and Localism Bill, published in December, represents the clearest statement yet of the Coalition's plans for wresting control away from experts, politicians, and quangos, and giving it to local people. Specific measures outlined in the Bill include giving local authorities a 'general power of competence', abolishing the current regime of standards oversight and regional planning strategies, and giving local communities the right to take over the running of local services, to take planning decisions, to call for referenda on local issues, and to veto council tax rises.

Taken together with the government's commitments to establishing Free Schools and publicly elected police commissioners and mayors, increasing the involvement of non-state actors in the delivery of public services, encouraging higher levels of civic volunteerism, and widening the scope for front line staff to be involved in decisions concerning the provision of health and social services, the extent of the government's ambition becomes clear: it wants nothing less than to reform British democracy from the ground up by cutting the size of the state and devolving existing state powers down to non-state actors like charities, front line service providers, and volunteers, in order to remove central institutions as much as possible from the day to day lives of British citizens.

Given the widespread disaffection felt toward politics and politicians by many in Britain, reaction to the Bill has been mixed and not a little confused, especially among those on the left (Mulgan, 2008a; Turner, 2010; McCarvill, 2010; Colenutt, 2011). The general feeling on the left seems to be that while some form of localism is a good thing (in that it breaks up those political hierarchies and elites which have traditionally dominated the political system to the detriment of political equality and social justice), the exact form of it stipulated in the Localism Bill is mistaken or problematic. That is to say, the devil is generally taken to be in the detail. The government's localist agenda is, for many, complicated by nebulous commitments to the Big Society, and to a vision of Britain in which local people are 'encouraged' to do the work of trained, professional service providers for free in the wake of drastic cuts in public expenditure. Consequently, it is commonly held that the task for those on the left must be to produce a new, and more socially just, version of localism which retains the central drive toward the decentralisation of power, but which does not rely on the vocabulary of the Big Society for its justification (Mulgan, 2008b).

I suggest that this is a mistake. I argue that the vision of localism currently presented by the majority of those involved in the debate is largely empty of substantive content and that those on the left who have sought to defend some form of localism have succeeded only in providing a vision of politics which under-theorises the role of individual citizens in the democratic process and undermines the traditional leftist commitment to identifying

and resolving social and economic injustices. I therefore suggest that, when it comes to localism, the devil is not in the detail but in the broad vision of society and politics it embodies and invokes.

I argue that anyone committed to rectifying the most egregious excesses of the market economy, securing basic freedom and equality for the most vulnerable members of society, defending public services, and ensuring greater levels of representation for the worst-off members of society should reject localism and embrace instead a vision of politics in which policy-making and decision-making power lies primarily with central institutions and elected politicians, and in which local authorities work in partnership with central government to implement decisions made by central government, and not by members of local communities.

It is not possible to discuss all the various problems associated with localism here. In what follows, I focus on two: firstly, the fact that localists have thus far failed to make the intellectual case for localism and, secondly, that in as much as localists present a substantive alternative vision of politics to centralism, this form of politics would exacerbate and entrench inequalities and social injustices rather than resolve them.

### **The emptiness of localism**

The general appeal of localism is rooted in the observation that the 'United Kingdom is one of the most centralised states in the developed world' (Barrow, Greenhalgh, and Lister, 2010, 1) and that, despite the devolution of certain powers to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, the introduction of elected Mayors in cities like London, and a range of other initiatives aimed at providing local people with a greater say in the ways in which they are governed, Britain still remains a country in which the citizens are considered merely 'suplicants' by those in Whitehall and Westminster (Boyle, 2009).

Local concerns are ignored by centralised institutions which are too preoccupied with meeting 'targets' and 'efficiencies' to actually respond to the concerns of real people. Local businesses are crushed by centrally-driven regulation and red tape, which – while well-meaning – seems to do little but thwart innovation and disincentivise entrepreneurial spirit. And decisions about such things as planning, health provision, policing, sentencing, the content of school curricula, and teaching are all made by well-intentioned but misguided 'experts' in parliament or the government or elsewhere who claim to know more about the issues which affect the people living in local areas than the people themselves. As a consequence, localists claim, democratic politics has become something that is driven by influential elites, powerful sectional interests, and the narrow concerns of partisan hacks, rather than the needs of real people (Beedham, 2006; Centre for Policy Studies, 2007).

Localism has therefore proven appealing to politicians and activists across the political spectrum. Those on the political right see it as a check on what they perceive to be an inexorable growth in the political power retained by unelected quangos and other non-governmental organisations in particular, and on the growth of the state in general (for example Cameron *et al.*, 2009; Carswell and Hannan, 2005 and 2008; Beedham, 2006). Those on what we might call the progressive left have argued that the devolution of power to local communities and individuals increases 'choice', and harnesses local expertise by

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giving parents, teachers, health care providers, and others, more of a role in decisions about policy priorities and delivery (for example Blears, 2008; Charteris *et al.*, 2010; Milburn, 2008; Mulgan, 2008b). Many of those in the centre-ground of British politics have, in turn, seen localism as exemplifying the kind of constitutional change that is required to ensure greater levels of civic responsibility, participation, and electoral equity (for example Clegg, 2008; Liberal Democrats, 2009).

One of the most common strategies among these and other defenders of localism, however, and one of their most common errors, is to view the mistakes of past governments as failures of centralism more generally. That is to say, it is very common among defenders of localism to criticise particular policies, institutions, or decisions as if these policies, institutions, or decisions are in some way required by, or an inevitable product of, non-localist politics, when they are not.

For example, David Boyle, author of a recent report for the New Economics Foundation entitled *Localism: Unravelling the Suppliant State*, complains that, under the Brown and Blair governments, increased centralisation has caused 'a slow emptying of our institutions, a destruction of our way of life as tangible as any terrorist attack.' Britain is, he argues, gripped by a 'debilitating sickness, which happens when ... decisions about what we should be offered to buy, and how we live locally, are made by high-paid corporate executives, often in other countries' (Boyle, 2009, 18-19). Having suggested as much, Boyle assumes that the path is sufficiently clear to outline his localist alternative. But his claim is not a claim against centralism, but rather a form of centralism in which the interests of big business are allowed to dominate those of citizens. Unless he believes it is an *inevitable* consequence of *any* set of policies produced by *any* non-localist system that policy decisions will end up being made by big businesses and 'corporate executives' in other countries, he needs to explain what his problem is with non-localist systems in which big businesses and corporate executives are not given the opportunity to significantly or unfairly influence policy decisions before presenting localism as the only alternative to the 'debilitating sickness' that he describes.

Similarly, the authors of *A Magna Carta for Localism*, a recent report published by the Centre for Policy Studies, argue that the delivery of local services is currently characterised by 'complexity, duplication, and overlap' caused by conflicts arising among the profusion of different service providers, agencies, and bureaucratic mechanisms at work in local and central politics (Barrow, Greenhalgh, and Lister, 2010, 5). This may or may not be true. But even if it is true, it does not in itself justify the reform of local services and the wider democratic system along localist lines; it simply suggests that the last Labour government could have, and should have, made different decisions and that the delivery of local services can and should be streamlined.

And finally, the government, the Centre for Policy Studies, and the New Economics Foundation join with Simon Jenkins, and virtually every other defender of localism, in arguing that localism is needed to replace the culture of targets that now infects service delivery in Britain (Jenkins, 2004). But again, a critique of targets of the kind that was characteristic of the Blair and Brown governments' approach to public service delivery is not in itself an argument against centralism. It is merely an argument against a particular – and arguably flawed – approach to delivering public services.

In none of these cases do the author's conclusions follow from their premises. All

these and similar arguments establish is that there is room for improvement in the way governments decide upon, and implement, policies. None of them establish a case for localism over any of the many other, arguably easier and more straightforward, alternatives which are available. I suggest, for example, that in most cases the appropriate response to mistaken policy decisions by central institutions is a reversal of these mistaken decisions rather than the wholesale and widespread reform of British democracy from the ground up.

If localists reject such an approach (as they do), then they have to come up with *both* a more substantive critique of centralism itself, *and* a vision of localism which is more attractive than the non-localist system that we have now. But localists are on the whole unwilling, or unable, to do either. Not only do localists spuriously conflate flawed policy decisions with flawed institutional mechanisms and structures, they also fail to present a coherent vision of how localism might actually work at a level of detail necessary for it to represent a practical foundation for constitutional reform.

Localists seem to assume that all they have to do in order to establish the case for localism is criticise the current system: although localism is often presented by its defenders as if it were grounded in a positive vision of democracy and self-government, a survey of the pro-localism literature indicates that it is in fact grounded more in negative arguments about the shortcomings of our currently non-localist system than any clear, detailed alternative conception of governance or democracy.

For example, Douglas Carswell and Daniel Hannan (a Conservative MP and MEP, respectively) spend significantly more time in *Direct Democracy: An Agenda for a New Model Party* (2005) and *The Plan: Twelve Months to Renew Britain* (2008) presenting their critique of the 'quango state' than outlining the specifics of their localist alternative.

And while Patrick Diamond, in a recent edition of *Renewal*, argues passionately for the replacement of the Westminster Model with a 'more participatory and deliberative model' of politics in which local groups and organisations have a greater role in decision making and policy formation, he spends very little time indeed explaining what his alternative participatory, de-centred conception of politics would actually look like, or how it would work in practice (Diamond, 2011). In both cases, as in many others, the authors are detailed in their criticisms of the current system, but sketchy and ambiguous when it comes to outlining their alternative. Consequently, the reader is left with a clear and detailed sense of exactly what is wrong with our current system but only a very vague sense of exactly what it should be replaced with.

This is important. The ultimate test of localism is whether or not it represents a better approach to resolving the specific policy dilemmas which arise in a diverse, liberal democratic society than a non-localist system of the kind that we currently have. And the more we look beyond the rhetoric and evaluate in detail what a localist approach to public policy dilemmas would look like, the whole idea starts to unravel.

Take planning, for example. As we have already suggested, it is entirely possible, and right, to join with localists like Carswell, Hannan, Jenkins, Milburn, Blears *et al.* in their concern for the vibrancy of local communities and town centres. It is also surely right to join with David Boyle in rejecting the idea that big businesses and their consultants have a central role in the development and delivery of policies. However, it is also entirely possible and right to do so *without* accepting the associated idea that decisions about policy priorities and delivery (and planning in particular) should be made at the local level. Boyle is

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certainly correct in his assertion that the effect that successive governments have had on the integrity of many local (especially working class) neighbourhoods has been generally negative. And he is right that town centres across the UK have seen small businesses squeezed out by large corporations with the consequence that towns and cities throughout Britain are losing their individual character and identity. Such uniformity reduces consumer choice and strengthens the reliance on big companies among members of local communities, villages and towns.

Given this, it may therefore seem that a localist approach to planning, in which local communities decide what is and is not built in their neighbourhoods, is a fairer way to go. But there are practical and normative reasons for rejecting this approach. If we consider the practical question first, it is not clear how a system which gives disproportionate power to the residents of local communities to decide on controversial policy matters would resolve the legitimate conflicts of interest which arise in debates about what should be done in these areas. Local people cannot be the only, or even the final, arbiter of decisions about what is or is not built in their local area, just as they cannot be the only or final arbiter of what policies are or are not implemented in their local areas.

The reason for this, of course, is that the residents of any particular local community will not be the only people with legitimate interests in the outcome of local policy or planning decisions. Indeed, they might not even be the most important people with interests in these decisions. Often, for example, what is built in any particular local area will often be a matter of national and even international concern. Any commitment to a nationwide, publicly-funded anti-homelessness strategy, for example, will require the building of homeless shelters or the local provision of other support services. Any commitment to providing support services for people suffering from alcohol or drugs dependencies may also require the provision of new buildings and infrastructures. Migrants awaiting the outcome of their claims for asylum will need to exist somewhere until that outcome is determined, and any commitments by the government to the reduction of our reliance on fossil fuels (for example, of the kind made by the present coalition government) will require the building of significant numbers of wind farms, solar fields, and/or perhaps nuclear power stations across Britain. It is not clear how a localist system would resolve conflicts of this kind – between the local and the centre, and between different local communities – other than to give the final say in all such conflicts to the residents of local communities by giving them the power of veto.

Defenders of localism believe that localism will allow for a more constructive relationship between the centre and the local, and they place significant faith in the willingness of individual citizens to accept the burdens as well as the benefits of citizenship by recognising that, sometimes, they will need to put aside narrow self-interest in the interests of doing what is right more widely. But this merely avoids the central question of what should be done in the event of specific conflicts of interest between the centre and the locality, and between different local communities, and once again requires defenders of localism to be clearer than they have been about what should be done in such circumstances.

The government is not much help. The Localism Bill, for example, states that local people may in fact not always be best placed to decide on matters as controversial as whether a wind farm or power station should be built in their neighbourhoods, suggesting that local projects which are of 'national significance' should not be decided upon by local

communities. But, again, this just complicates the question and renders ambiguous the scope of their localist alternative to centralised decision-making. For the government must either draw the category of what is 'nationally significant' very broadly (in which case local communities will not have a say in a large number of proposed initiatives) or very narrowly, in which case local communities will be able to undermine a wide range of national policies.

The question for the government, and for defenders and critics of localism more generally, is not whether it would be nice if local citizens got more involved in political debates, or whether the concerns of local people should figure more highly in policy debates, but rather who, in the end, should possess the final and ultimate power to control the course of public policy decisions which effect local communities (and, inevitably, the communities beyond them)? In a localist system, in which decision-making power over a range of policy areas is devolved down to the level of local representatives or officials who are legitimated by the will of the citizens who live in a particular area, it is surely these officials and representatives (and hence, the local people on whom they depend for their jobs) who decide, and not national or international institutions, representatives, or bodies.

This brings us to the deeper, normative problem with localism. Localists like Carswell, Hannan, Jenkins, and Boyle believe that it is undemocratic for central institutions to defy the wishes of local people in areas such as planning and the provision of local services. But on a range of issues of the kind mentioned above, it may well be entirely appropriate and necessary in a democracy that local communities bear the costs of national policy commitments. That is to say, assuming that these national policy commitments were openly expressed and democratically mandated through an appropriate electoral contest, there is nothing undemocratic about the members of particular local areas having to bear the costs of national policy decisions.

The reason for this is, again, that it there is nothing inherently undemocratic about requiring some individuals to do things, or to put up with things, that they would ideally not wish to do, or put up with, in the interests of furthering more important wider social, economic, and political ends. Similarly, there is nothing undemocratic about national political institutions defying the wishes of some citizens in the interests of furthering national policy commitments on which they have campaigned and which are necessary for the resolution of wider problems.

Such a thing could only be considered undemocratic if one holds to a conception of democracy in which it is the role of democratic institutions to give everyone exactly what they want at all times. But, again, this is simply not possible. Politics is a messy business. Policy dilemmas give rise to profound political disagreements about what should be done, how it should be done, who should do it, and how it should be funded. While public deliberation might go some way towards resolving these conflicts, it is utopian to assume that it will always do so, or that public involvement in political debates will necessarily produce political consensus.

In circumstances in which political disagreements remain despite widespread public debate, it is necessary for strong, reflective, representative institutions to decide the best course of action, all things considered. These decisions will inevitably please some people and infuriate others. Politics produces winners and losers and, sometimes, it is entirely appropriate that these losers should be the residents of local communities.

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It is an unfortunate fact that national policies – especially the kind of controversial, redistributive, expensive ones associated with left-wing progressive movements and governments – will inevitably require some people to bear their (sometimes quite considerable) costs. But just as the left should not seek to enable the richest members of society to opt out of paying taxes which are used to fund wider social and political initiatives aimed at alleviating social, economic, and political inequalities so they should not seek to establish a regime of decision-making in which residents of particular local areas can refuse to bear the costs associated with addressing wider social and economic problems. And at the international level, national governments need to be able to enter into agreements with other nation states in order to resolve global issues like climate change without worrying that the agreements they make are going to be rendered undeliverable because some local communities would rather not bear the costs of these agreements.

A democratic system premised upon the idea that members of particular communities or geographical areas can veto projects or initiatives which are necessary for the furtherance of wider national policies is going to be straightforwardly antithetical to any political movement which seeks radical, progressive change at a national level. Hence, it should have little or no place in a leftist approach to governance or democracy.

### **Localism, inequality, and the entrenchment of elite interests**

Localism therefore fails on practical and democratic grounds. It also fails on egalitarian grounds.

Defenders of localism argue that giving power to local people and allowing them to identify local priorities and provide policy solutions to local problems is an emancipatory project (Barrow *et al.*, 2010; Blears, 2008; Boyle, 2009; Cameron *et al.*, 2009; Carswell and Hannan, 2005, 2008; Clegg, 2008; Liberal Democrats, 2009; Milburn, 2008; Mulgan, 2008b). They argue that the current system enshrines a traditional hierarchy between the ‘rulers’ and the ‘ruled’ which is contrary to wider notions of democratic and political equality. Giving citizens themselves the power to decide their own fate through active debate and engagement with others who share their concerns is both more democratic and more socially just than our current system, they argue, in that it gives those citizens who are currently marginalised by the political process a voice and an ability to improve their own circumstances by influencing the political agenda and the course of policy debates.

But this view, while intuitively appealing, is idealistic and not supported by empirical evidence. In fact, academic evidence gathered over the past fifty years suggests that devolving power down to local communities would entrench and perpetuate social, economic, and political inequality rather than resolve it.

It is often noted by activists, academics, and practitioners, that the vast majority of liberal democratic states around the world are suffering from declining levels of political engagement (for example Lijphart, 1997; Putnam, 2000; Macedo *et al.*, 2005; Stoker, 2006). Britain is no exception. Increasingly, it seems, British citizens appear unwilling to participate in the democratic life of the polity: they vote less often, and in fewer numbers, than they used to; they do not lobby their representatives as often as they used to; and they do not join political parties or trade unions in the numbers that they once did. On a

range of measures, that is, the British people seem to be turning away from the democratic process, and from politics more generally (McHugh and Parvin, 2005a, 2005b; Stoker, 2006; Hay, 2007).

Low rates of political participation are particularly obvious at the local level, with turnouts in local elections consistently around 35 per cent. This dramatic decline in voting at the local level has been interpreted by some defenders of localism as a further consequence of our centralised system (for example Mulgan, 2008b; Charteris *et al.*, 2010). It is not clear that there is any compelling evidence to substantiate this claim. In fact, if there is any truth in this claim, then it weakens the argument for localism.

The authors of *A Magna Carta for Localism*, for example, suggest that 'levels of participation in local politics continue to fall, *precisely because the powers of local authorities have been severely restricted*' (Barrow, Greenhalgh and Lister, 3, emphasis added). But this seems incompatible with their wider critique of centralism. For if, as the authors suggest, it is the weakness of local democracy that is the problem, then the authors' own claims about the strength of central institutions would lead us to reasonably expect participation in national and EU elections and other forms of politics to be very high. But they are not. Only around 34 per cent of those eligible to vote participated in the 2009 European elections, and in 1999, a decade earlier, less than a quarter of eligible voters cast a ballot. Similarly, only around 65 per cent of registered voters participated in the 2010 general election, which means that while 29 million people chose to cast a ballot, another 15 million failed to make it to the polls. Numerous organisations, including the Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society, have united with parliamentarians and others in expressing deep concern about the general levels of engagement among the population, and about the fact that citizens seem to be turning away from strong, central institutions as much as they are from weaker, local ones (Hansard Society and Electoral Commission, 2011).

Academic evidence suggests two things. Firstly, that the problem is not that local democracy is weak. Secondly, that despite the top line figures, the UK is not experiencing a general, widespread decline in engagement across society. Rather, it is experiencing a dramatic decline in engagement among certain members of society (Stoker, 2006; Turner, 2010). Numerous studies have shown that propensity to engage in democratic politics is closely associated with the level of education and social and economic resources that citizens have at their disposal, with wealthier, better educated citizens participating at much higher rates across the board than poorer, less educated ones (for example Lijphart, 1997; Macedo *et al.*, 2005; APSA, 2004).

For example, a recent report published by the ippr claims that the participation gap between manual and non-manual workers more than doubled between 1997 and 2005 (Keaney and Rogers, 2006). In the 1960s there was a seven point difference in turnout between the top quarter of earners and the bottom quarter, by 2005 it had grown to 13 points. Those who live in wards considered 'very deprived' have the lowest propensity to vote (at 37 per cent), while those in 'affluent' areas have the highest (at 76 per cent). Not surprisingly, therefore, the most deprived areas in England contain the constituencies with the lowest turnouts: Liverpool Riverside had turnouts of only 34 per cent in 2001 and 41 per cent in 2005. Manchester Central, the constituency with the highest level of unemployment in the country, had the lowest turnout in the 2010 general election, at 44 per cent.

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Furthermore, the 2004 British Citizens Audit corroborated the link between socio-economic status and levels of participation, stating that 'political engagement is very much dominated by the already resourced; in other words, the most highly educated, [and] the rich'. Educational attainment has also been 'positively and significantly related to voter turnout in virtually every study of voter participation' (Chong and Olivera, 2008).

This evidence poses a problem for defenders of localism. Localists are committed to devolving power down to 'the people'; academic research on rates of participation provides a clearer picture of who 'the people' are and who they are not (and hence, who is most likely to make use of this power and who is not). Devolving power down to local communities would only ensure greater political equality and inclusion if a broad cross-section of that community were likely to use that power.

However, the overwhelming evidence suggests that in fact politics is not something that is engaged in by a broad cross-section of the members of any particular community – or in society more generally – but by those of a high socio-economic status. All the current evidence points to the fact that broadly affluent, educated members of society are much more likely to engage in a range of formal and informal political activities than those who are poorer and less educated (McHugh and Parvin, 2005a, 2005b).

Given this, devolving power down to local people would do little more than place greater power into the hands of those citizens of a high socio-economic status who possess the requisite time, resources, knowledge, and inclination to use this power at the expense of those poorer, less educated citizens who do not. Those on the left who are committed to social justice and equality in both its political and economic forms should therefore be highly sceptical of any desire to devolve decision making power down to 'local people' as, in practice, this will represent little more than the devolution of power down to local socio-economic elites to the detriment of those below them.

Localists would no doubt dispute this, as they tend to assume that opening up the policy making process to local people would encourage more of the currently excluded to get involved. Geoff Mulgan, for example, claims to have a 'sense' that 'when there is real power at stake ... people are willing to commit time' to engaging in democratic debates. His sense is that 'a large minority do want to have their say locally' and that all 'that is holding them back is the absence of an accessible and relevant local democracy' (Mulgan, 2008b, 9).

The vast majority of the evidence suggests, however, that while there may indeed be a 'large minority' out there who are keen to have their say locally, the members of this minority will overwhelmingly come from a particular (affluent, educated) section of society, and that what stops many others from getting involved is not the ineffective nature of local democracy, but inequalities in education and wealth. There is no empirical evidence to suggest that simply devolving power to local people would do anything to encourage poorer, marginalised citizens to participate in the democratic system.

This is especially important when we consider the scope of the government's plans for localism. After all, the Localism Bill makes specific provisions to increase the powers held by local groups and individuals in such areas as policing, education, and planning in order to break up what we might call the tyranny of experts in these areas (Cabinet Office, 2010). The government's argument for Free Schools, of course, is that decisions about such things as school curricula, teaching methods, and schools budgeting should be taken out of the hands of well-meaning experts and placed in the hands of parents. Similarly, the

government's plans to give local people more direct control over policing in their areas via elected police chiefs is driven by the assumption that it is a person's place of residence which renders them capable of making decisions about such complex matters and not some level of expertise drawn from experience. And their proposal to give more power to local communities to make decisions about planning initiatives or the delivery of health care and social services suggests, again, that these are domains over which citizens in general should have jurisdiction and not planning experts, health care professionals, or experienced social service providers.

There are various problems with such proposals, which I have discussed elsewhere (Parvin, 2009, 2010). The principal concern voiced by critics of government plans to establish Free Schools, for example, is that they will disproportionately benefit pushy middle class parents who will make use of their newly acquired power to set up and run their own schools at the expense of those parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds who, for a range of overlapping reasons, have not acquired the same bundle of social, economic, and political resources that more advantaged citizens have. There is good evidence to suggest that this concern is well-founded (for example Ravitch, 2010; Spicer, 2010).

Furthermore, once we take into account the unequal levels of political and civic engagement among citizens of a higher and lower socioeconomic status, it is reasonable to extend this same concern to all of the areas mentioned above. That is, once we take seriously the fact that, on current evidence, only certain (highly educated, affluent, time rich) members of the 'local community' will use their newly acquired powers to make decisions about the content of school curricula, policing priorities, the sentencing of criminals and the availability of certain kinds of health and social care, and that citizens with less money, time, and education will not avail themselves of the opportunity to participate in debates about such issues, then the egalitarian and inclusionary credentials of localism are seriously undermined. Localism would give disproportionate power to the rich to set the political agenda and to make decisions which are in their interests, and, hence, it would further exclude lower socioeconomic status individuals from the political system. It would merely replace one form of tyranny with another, by giving engaged, articulate, advantaged members of local communities the power to dominate and marginalise disengaged, disaffected disadvantaged members of that same local community.

Localism is thus not only *impractical* and *mistaken* (as we suggested in the previous section). It is also *unjust*, and straightforwardly antithetical to the concerns that we might traditionally associate with the left. It eviscerates the capacity of central institutions to identify and resolve social injustices on the national stage, to allocate appropriate funding to delivering services which might go some way to rectifying these injustices, and it also undermines the ability of central government (and state institutions more widely) to defy the wishes of those self-interested majorities in local communities who would seek to veto measures which perpetuate or further entrench the wider problems about which the centre is concerned.

## Conclusion

There are many problems with localism that I have not discussed in this article but which are commonly raised by critics, such as the widespread concern about postcode lotteries,

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geographical inequalities in local service provision, and the rejection of the idea that expertise and experience should play a more important role in political decision-making than the fact that someone lives in a particular area (see for example Walker, 2002a, 2002b; Parvin, 2009).

For the purposes of this article, I have focused on two specific problems with localism. Firstly, that, despite the popularity of localism among many involved in public policy debates in Britain, localism has yet to be coherently defined, and the intellectual argument for localism has yet to be convincingly made. And secondly, that in so far as it is possible to determine what a localist system of governance would look like, it should be rejected on the grounds that it is impractical, undemocratic, and unequalitarian.

The major concern for the left, therefore, should not be to present an alternative conception of localism, but to continue to articulate a workable vision for the progressive redistribution of wealth and opportunities throughout society and, hence, to empower individual citizens from across social, economic, and demographic groups to take part in democratic life. That is, instead of thinking about new and alternative ways in which power can be stripped from central institutions and handed to local people in the name of democracy, or new alternatives to the Westminster Model, we should instead be thinking about ways in which the power of central institutions might be harnessed in the fight against unfair inequality, social exclusion, and other forms of social injustice.

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