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How is efficiency best measured?



The benefits of localism are there for all to see, but you have to dig deep, argues Sean Langley ■

The turnout of just 28.8% in December’s **Feltham and Heston by-election** was shocking, and the lowest in any by-election for eleven years. Following the summer riots, I think this is a clear indication of just how the general public is disenfranchised from politics, especially at local level.

Since the election of the **Thatcher Government in 1979**, this country has witnessed a gradual subsumption of control towards the centre, and away from local regions. The Blair/Brown administration’s focus on efficiency savings, whilst laudable in principle, masked an almost subliminal message that ‘bigger is best’ and, inevitably, ‘economies of scale’ lead to the desired result.

But, how is efficiency best measured? It cannot simply be cheaper, as we all know that cheap does not necessarily mean better. At present, where public service is concerned, the end-users – the general public – have no real idea whether they are getting **value for money**. That applies whether we are talking about local government, the police, the NHS, or even our MPs.

The dog’s breakfast of the local government system, in England in particular, does nothing to overcome the confusion and disillusionment felt by most voters. And the continued move toward larger unitary authorities only serves to distance – both actually and metaphorically – people from local politics. What we perceive to be a measurement of relative value is often, at best, guesswork, and at worst propaganda fuelled by a (mostly) ill-informed media.

Efficiency savings on council tax bills, league tables on performance of NHS Trusts, and publication of MPs’ expenses tell us part of the story, but actual performance is far more complex than merely those cosmetic indicators. Therefore, it is essential that we grasp the nettle, and map out a sustained programme for educating our children – the future electorate – into how public service works, and how it weaves through almost every aspect of our lives.

I recently viewed a recording of creativity expert **Sir Ken Robinson**, who spoke at a **Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED)** event back in 2006, where he urged the need to radically reform our approach to education, saying that globally, too much emphasis is placed on more technical aspects, such as mathematics and languages. However, Sir Ken claimed, these subjects do not encourage creativity because, generally, there is one right answer and many wrong. What he suggested we need do is to recognise the critical importance of more creative studies, in subjects like music, art and dance. The argument being that we are not fully exploring our cerebral capability, stifling any opportunity to generate genuinely new ideas.

Whilst promoting politics through the medium of dance might sound a step too far, only through education will we truly increase voter participation and turnout. That, of course, is a more profound and longer term solution and would take years to bear fruit – which is not, in itself, a reason not to act – but, there is a serious problem now, and we need a shorter term solution.

Do not be too quick to dismiss this government’s **Localism Act** as simply ‘blue sky’ thinking. Rome was not built in a day, as they say, and we have to start somewhere. I believe there is potentially merit in the Act’s aims to empower cities, and improve community rights and neighbourhood planning.

We should also embrace the potential – difficulties and all – contained within the proposals to allow local authorities to retain business rate yields and, in particular, those to localise ‘council tax support’. And I would argue that should also include allowing local authorities to set, without capping measures, their own council tax levels – proper local accountability.

One of the ways to make all of that work, to the benefit of local communities, is to engage and involve those communities in the programme of work, none more so than with council tax support. Initiatives involving benefits, housing, healthcare and support agencies could make a significant difference to local families. If you think I’ve lost the plot, just remember Sir Ken Robinson’s thoughts!

Regular readers will know that I am a strong advocate of ‘involvement’, as a vehicle for achieving demonstrable and sustainable high quality service provision. I have discussed previously about involving staff in finding solutions to operational problems. What we need now is to **extend** those same principles and involve the public in finding solutions to strategic problems.

Poverty, prostitution and drug-dealing were rife two decades ago in **Five Oaks, Dayton, Ohio**. In an example of local ‘empowerment’, residents decided to divide one big neighbourhood into several smaller ones. This was partly achieved by the use of street closures, speed bumps and associated measures to calm traffic flow. Their vision was that the decline could be halted by **enhancing the sense of community** and making anonymous crimes more difficult to commit. In just one year, there was a **67% decrease** in community traffic, and violent crime fell by half. Now, that is localism!

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