

Localism - not Populism**Discussion led by Merelene Davis****Summary**

Localism is defined as a preference for one's own area or region especially where this results in a limitation of outlook. If followed strictly this would appear to be severely limiting the extent to which a country is able to develop cohesive politically and economically sound unifying policies.

The background material circulated before the meeting explained that localism turns the political and economic situation completely on its head. Instead of central government and central organisations delivering dictums to be obeyed by lower authorities and mortals, localism starts with the individual, carries on through local communities, rises to regions, counties, devolved nations and ultimately the United Kingdom.

Discussion***What is Localism?***

Localism truly begins with taxation being levied at local level, out of which the central government is allocated a slice. Rather than the other way round as at present - with directions too as to how that money is to be spent by local authorities! A portion of localized income tax should also automatically go to unitary authorities, like Buckinghamshire is now, which should also have the power, as an elected body, to raise local taxes too. The question arises then as to why the central government, which is also an elected body, should then not have the power to raise taxation and decide how it spends that bounty?

In February 2009 David Cameron was looking forward to issuing a Local Government Green Paper envisaging huge proposals for decentralisation, sweeping away the regional layer, giving more power to local government, to drive it out to the lowest level, so they can help build those strong economies of the future. He also espoused the cause of volunteering, particularly at local level.

So how can we promote localism?

One can start with setting up local investment trusts; they would be set up by regional inhabitants with the aim of investing in that region's entrepreneurial commercial projects. Buckingham Business First is an example of one and provides a hub to help aspiring ventures with organisational and funding capital either directly or indirectly.

Quite a number of businesses started up in Bucks, expanded across the UK and beyond, like for example:

- The 'Douglas McMinn Centre' in Chesham, which has been involved in Care and Community Services, Local businesses and Hospitality since its founding in 1978.
- 'The Entertainer' started by Gary Grant in 1981 from his first shop in Amersham (followed by numerous branches elsewhere) and supplying 'kids' of all ages with something to entertain and educate them.
- Mike Clare and his 'Dreams' Bed shops which he founded in 1987 (but sold in 2008) and which now has more than 200 super stores. Since then Mike is heavily involved in helping

and mentoring local businesses and charities and in Stable Ventures Ltd, which provides short term business loans for local venture

Why should we promote Localism?

The main reason would be ensuring that decisions can be taken at local level. At the meeting an instance was quoted of a couple purchasing a house in Chesham, the money had been paid over and everything was in order, the only thing outstanding was to collect the keys from the Estate Agent in order to take possession of their new residence. The Estate Agent, however, was unable to do this because he had not received the appropriate instruction from his centralised Head Office.

Another example is in the operation of bank accounts, whereas in the past it was important to go to a local bank, where the manager would take a personal interest in the conduct of one's bank account. It now no longer matters because everything is controlled centrally involving the use of algorithms rather than 'real' people.

Where charities are firmly tied to their local community, they are free to direct funding and support to the local inhabitants without any interference from huge centralised charitable organisations, where monies collected seem to disappear into a vast pot and who knows whether it is actually used for the purpose intended or funding high managerial costs.

Community owned public houses are great for promoting togetherness.

The local or unitary Councils are used to own great tracts of land farmed by tenants. However, for quite a time now, they are told by the Central Government to dispose of these local assets, thereby releasing funding for current expenditure, but, at the same time, stripping them of strong resilience. Usually, the withdrawn land is no longer used for farming operations limiting the ability to grow products for local consumption. The Central Government then enforced rate capping on Councils, reducing even more their ability to raise sufficient funding for local requirements.

Centralism can lead to waste where Councils spend money on projects purely because there are grants for it and not because it is needed.

How effective is Localism?

Sometimes Localism cannot reach far enough because the lack in quality of its personnel needs sourced from a small local pool. This can lead to organisations not really being able to use, due its low-level capital base, economy of scale to reach a wider customer base efficiently and effectively.

A member argued that we should try to correct the deficiencies of Central Government first, then promote regional devolution and finally improve local controls. The process of creating unitary councils covering larger areas and thus able to exercise greater influence over centralised decisions can be seen as a significant step towards that goal.

The quality of goods and their price determines whether we buy products and not whether they are produced or manufactured where we live or even in our country. In fact there seems to be a prevalent opinion that foreign means quality.

It is a great shame that we in the UK are fantastic at developing a vast range of products, only to sell them to foreign nations for them to exploit. Atomic energy was first developed in this country and then disappeared across the English Channel and beyond. Now we no longer have the expertise to build our own atomic power stations, instead having to rely on the French and, dare I say, the Chinese.