

Political Thinking

Chiltern U3A 'Political Thinking'

Meeting No 16a and 16b Fri Dec 15th and Mon Dec 18th

There are two meeting slots in each month, the 3rd Friday and the 3rd Monday. In this month the same topic was planned for both and the attendance differed. The report summarises the two discussions.

Topic: " Localism as a political tendency"

Discussion

Members gave a general account of their personal views in respect of Localism.

Most agreed that decision taking in matters of public policy should become more localised, most were concerned that modern trend towards centralisation should be slowed down and reversed.

As to recent experience of the trend to Localism, was little awareness of the UK Localism Act 2011; no one could indicate a positive local consequence of the legislation. In respect of Town Planning issues the Act appears to make possible considerable local input into the development of local plans. There were no experiences of this in effect reported.

In localities other than our own election of mayors with extended powers had occurred, elected Police and Crime Commissioners is perhaps the only recent example of Localism in action as it were in our area. There was no particular comment on this or conclusion that this area of public service provision had improved as a consequence.

The US American experience was considered not to correspond closely to the UK; presumably because many more public positions are filled by election in the US than in the UK.

As to the more general issues around Localism, more local taxation might lead to more local accountability, but would also lead to more post code lottery examples where the quality and extent of the provision of public services varies apparently at random from one locality to another. This was considered to be unfair; the level of provision of public services generally should be comparable from one locality to another was the common opinion.

The consequence of devolution of power to Scotland and Wales seems to be that to justify its existence a devolved government needs to point to its achievements which inevitably means some public service provision being superior in some way to that in England. As these are not financed locally, the perception is of unfairness; more is being spent by central government through the devolved government and consequently the provision is superior.

Whether the local income tax now planned in Scotland will reduce the perception of unfairness remains to be seen.

More localised food production and consumption was seen as a positive trend, support for local farmers and reduction in food miles as the main drivers; but the consequential reduction in choice eg reduced availability of produce out of season and exotic imports was seen as a negative.

Local decision taking in respect of public services necessarily implies differences in extent and quality of provision from one locality to another.

Where there is a demonstrable local need then this can be justified. For example flood protection or sea defences are needed only some areas and not in others. Should the cost of these be met nationally so that taxpayers in areas unaffected are in effect contributing to the cost or should the cost fall only on those affected? The answer tends to vary according to whether the respondent is affected or not!

Perhaps a consequence of excessive Localism is the so called pork barrel effect in the US; local politicians achieve popularity and re-election consequential on their effectiveness in obtaining federal funds for local projects! Location of major employers providing jobs perhaps is similar in the UK.

How and where political decisions are taken will continue to be a source of contention.