

[Note: The article published in LGC is a slightly edited version of this article]

Osborne's devo deals disguise centralisation

Robin Hambleton, Professor of City Leadership at the University of the West of England, Bristol, suggests that Chancellor George Osborne has advanced his claim to usurp Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher as the supreme centraliser of the British state

Until November 2014 Prime Minister Thatcher stood tall as the unrivalled centraliser of power in British politics. Her Rates Act of 1984 enabled the central state to decide, over the heads of local voters, how much they would be allowed to tax themselves. In countries that value the importance of local democracy in society such a centralising step is regarded as incomprehensible.

However, with his speech on 3 November 2014, 'Manchester to get directly elected Mayor', Chancellor George Osborne hopes to introduce an era of hyper-centralisation into England, one that goes well beyond the Thatcherite command and control state of the 1980s.

His Autumn Statement, presented to Parliament last week, confirms his bid to finish off the idea that locally elected democratic institutions should be accountable to the people who elected them.

So startling is the nature of current central government policy that I suggest we need a new word to encapsulate it.

The Osbornification of public policy?

To Osbornify public policy involves introducing **extreme** measures to boost the power of the central state whilst all the time pretending that power is being decentralised. It takes political spin to a new level of deception.

Mr Osborne said, in his November announcement, that his proposals to create a directly elected mayor for the Manchester conurbation, with powers over transport, housing, planning and policing, would: '... give Mancunians a powerful voice and bring practical improvements for local people'. Not all bad, you might say.

But he went on to state: 'I want to talk to other cities who are keen to follow Manchester's lead – every city is different and no model of local power will be the same'.

Think about it. The Osborne proposals involve Whitehall taking three **massive** steps to centralise power.

First, who is going to decide which areas of the country are to have these new governance arrangements? Answer: Ministers.

Second, who will decide the criteria for devolving power to these lucky localities? Answer: Ministers.

Third, who will be crawling over the detailed proposals individual cities have for urban development and socio-economic innovation? Answer: Ministers

This is classic divide and rule tactics. Cities around England understand this well enough. However, at this point in time, they have few options. The solidarity of local government is a casualty as localities vie for the bespoke attention of ministers.

It is truly disappointing to note that the recent RSA City Growth Commission report on Unleashing Metro Growth says nothing about the centralisation of power that would stem from their proposals. The Commission acknowledges that 'The UK is one of the most centrally driven countries in the world when it comes to tax raising and spending' (p8)

But then goes on to advocate a ludicrously over-centralised model of decision-making. Under their proposals, welcomed with delight by Chancellor Osborne, individual cities are expected to prepare detailed metro applications for devolved status.

The dynamics proposed here resemble the dialogue that takes place between autocratic parents and their children over pocket money. The government seems to be saying to cities, by the way counties and country areas are left out of the loop completely which is another major flaw, if you do as I say you can have a bit more to spend.

In preparing a new book, Leading the Inclusive City. Place-based innovation for a bounded planet, I have been fortunate to work with some of the most innovative cities in the world to document seventeen examples of bold and effective civic leadership.

The Innovation Stories, drawn from fourteen countries covering all continents, show how powerful elected local authorities are advancing social justice, promoting care for the environment, boosting local economies and strengthening community empowerment.

Big cities, like Chicago, Copenhagen, Melbourne and New York City, feature alongside smaller cities and localities, like Freiburg, Malmo and Curitiba.

The analysis shows that remarkable improvements in the quality of life can be achieved if locally accountable, elected local authorities are freed from central government interference.

If Osbornification is to be consigned to history there needs to be a significant rebalancing of power within England.

Councillor David Sparks, Chair of the Local Government Association, in his letter to *The Observer* on 30 November 2014 (one signed by the leaders of 119 English councils from all parties) notes correctly that: 'There is compelling evidence that taking decisions closer to the people affected achieves better results and saves money.'

As well as supporting this argument, the Innovation Stories in my book show that powerful local authorities can drive bold innovation and creativity in the economy and society.

More information

A new book by Robin Hambleton: Leading the Inclusive City. Place-based innovation for a bounded planet (Policy Press)
<http://www.policypress.co.uk/display.asp?K=9781447304968>