

The weblink for this article is here:

<https://www.lgcplus.com/politics/devolution-and-economic-growth/robin-hambleton-greg-clark-should-return-to-his-old-devolution-diagnosis-26-07-2022/>

Article as submitted to LGC reproduced with the permission of LGC.

Robin Hambleton: Greg Clark should return to his old devolution diagnosis

The new levelling up secretary's 2003 analysis of over-centralisation in the UK could be used to make a lasting mark on the future governance of our country, writes Robin Hambleton, emeritus professor of city leadership at the University of the West of England, Bristol.

I send congratulations to Greg Clark on his appointment as secretary of state for levelling up, housing and communities earlier this month.

For those of us who care about local democracy in our country the good news is that, early in his career, Mr Clark demonstrated a well-honed and sophisticated understanding of the dangers of centralising too much power in Whitehall.

In 2003, when he was Director of Policy for the Conservative party, he co-wrote, with James Mather, a blistering attack on Labour's centralised approach to government. Their report, *Total Politics. Labour's Command State*, provides a lucid analysis of the four main drivers of centralisation: targets imposed from Whitehall, centrally controlled funding, bureaucratic audit and inspection, and rigid terms and conditions.

Lost wisdom

Clark and Mather concluded that it was essential to create local communities where: 'Local government is directly accountable to ordinary people, not lost in the complexities of Whitehall' (p. 100). Sounds good.

The bad news is that, when he was communities' secretary in 2015-16, Mr Clark seemed to lose sight of the wisdom articulated by his younger self.

In practice, and this was startling to witness, he presided over, what can only be described as, an extraordinary super-centralisation of power in Whitehall – one that has not only ripped power away from 'ordinary people', but also landed local leaders in a bewilderingly complex process of ongoing, and entirely wasteful, negotiations of 'complexities' with civil servants in Whitehall.

Take the misnamed *Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016*. Those involved in setting up the new 'combined authorities' in 2017, and ever since, were required to engage in the preparation of Parliamentary Orders documenting, in mind-boggling detail, how each combined authority would operate.

Devolution in name only

These new arrangements, and the whole ‘devolution deal’ approach that Mr Clark promoted, extended ministerial control over the minute details of how individual places in particular parts of England would be governed. It made the Blair Labour Government’s approach to local government of the 2000s appear almost entirely hands off.

The central problem with the Conservative government’s approach to devolution in England during this last ten years or so is that it is not, in fact, devolution at all.

On the basis of their own unpublished preferences, ministers have been picking and choosing which localities are to benefit from these various deals. Ministers decide the criteria, ministers decide the content of each deal, and ministers decide what funding will flow to the selected areas. To suggest that this model of decision-making has anything to do with devolution represents a misuse of the English language.

Various academic studies have shown that this super-centralisation of decision-making in Whitehall, which is entirely out of step with other western democracies, has not only done great damage to local government, but also paved the way for central government practices that border on the corrupt.

For example, it was claimed by ministers that the Towns Fund, announced in 2019, and the Levelling Up Fund, launched in 2021, were designed to allocate billions of pounds to localities selected on the basis of local need.

However, independent academic analysis by, for example, Chris Hanretty at the University of London, demonstrates, in detail, how ministers took decisions that were, in practice, biased to favour Conservative marginal seats.

Rebalancing power

His important paper, ‘The pork barrel politics of the Towns Fund’, published in the respected academic journal, *Political Quarterly*, last year concluded that:

‘The findings call into question ministers’ commitment, under the Nolan principle, to take decisions “impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias.”’(1)

This finding is explosive. Go past the diplomatic academic language and recognise that rigorous academic research demonstrates that Conservative ministers clearly did not act impartially and that, moreover, they paid scant regard to scientific evidence relating to social needs.

Whilst the title of his department now no longer includes the words ‘local government’, a stain that will remain on the Conservative Party until the department is renamed, the most

important challenge now facing Mr Clark is to consider how to level up, or rebalance, power between local and central government.

The international evidence shows that countries with very strong systems of local governance have coped far better with current challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, than centralised states. I explore this theme in my recent book, *Cities and Communities Beyond Covid-19. How Local Leadership Can Change Our Future for the Better*, and I also explain how to rebalance power in the UK.

The uncertainties posed by the current Conservative Party leadership contest certainly provide troubling challenges for Mr Clark. But he has an opportunity.

I encourage him to revisit his 2003 clear-sighted analysis of local/central relations and take steps to bolster the political and fiscal power of all elected local authorities in the UK.

Endnote

1) Hanretty C. (2021) 'The pork barrel politics of the Towns Fund', *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 92 (1), 7-13.

Robin Hambleton is Emeritus Professor of City Leadership at the University of the West of England, Bristol. His latest book, *Cities and Communities Beyond Covid-19. How Local Leadership Can Change Our Future for the Better*, was published in 2020.

<https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/cities-and-communities-beyond-covid-19>