LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN ENGLAND

CENTRALISATION, AUTONOMY AND CONTROL

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palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-1-137-26417-6 ISBN 978-1-137-26418-3 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-26418-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017930264

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
The registered company address is: 236 The Campus, 4 Crinan Street, London, N1 9XW, United Kingdom

Preface

It is commonplace for academics from England attending conferences with overseas colleagues to make strenuous claims that local government in our country exists in the most centralised system and experiences the greatest level of central control. We are used to winning these arguments hands down. One of the authors, however, recently attended a conference where colleagues from Portugal and Poland both developed a spirited—but ultimately futile—case that it was local government in their respective countries that experienced the greatest centralisation and central control. After a convincing England victory in that argument but leaving the encounter muttering under the breath 'how dare they', the decision was made to write this book.

The authors of this book are staunch defenders of the freedom of local government, all three of us have worked in local government and two of us have been councillors. Not only have we studied centralisation and its consequences, we have worked on a day-to-day basis in local government, politically and managerially, and have experienced the pernicious effects of centralisation. As academics we have also been able to lord it over our overseas colleagues at conferences by challenging anyone to a centralisation dual, as the English contingent always wins this fight. So, our Portuguese and Polish colleagues have thrown down a gauntlet we could not but do anything other than pick up.

There is, of course, a very serious reason for writing this book. Local government exists in an environment of constant pressure and control from the centre, and while the intensity of that environment can, and does, alter over time, it is never fundamentally challenged or changed.

As we wrote the book, we did so in the midst of yet another central government-inspired devolution exercise, with devolution deals being struck and undone as we continued to write. Through the process of putting the book together, an intense debate was taking place between central and local government and groups of councils as they negotiated complex deals and sought to forge new entities known as combined authorities. The debate also raged over whether or not the combined authorities should be headed by a directly elected mayor—a usual sticking point for councils in most of the negotiations.

What struck us throughout that debate was that the narrative used by the centre (and by local government) continued to reflect what we as academics detected as a centralist foundation and a desire to reshape and reformulate local government for central purpose. It was for that reason we decided to use the concept of policy narratives as a way of understanding why it is that not only can the centre promise to decentralise while simultaneously doing no such thing, but also how it can use devolution to exert even greater control over local government. The term devolution is a politically loaded one and may mean no more than the decentralisation of functions, responsibilities and some budgets, rather than the handing down of political and governing power and capacity. Understanding the narrative becomes important to understanding exactly what is going on.

We also wrote the book to explore and understand why it is that local government is so often complicit in its own demise, despite protestations to the contrary. In doing that, we decided to investigate how far the absence of a powerful alternative localist narrative meant local government was always particularly wrong footed when trying to articulate its position to the centre. As a consequence, we determined to develop a narrative of muscular localism that was not merely a response to centralist arguments and therefore shaped by them, but a narrative which set out a fundamentally different role for local government and a fundamentally different set of relationships between local and central government. In the book, we rest for the development of that narrative on our love of local government, and our normative approach is therefore an unashamed one. Not only have we sought to understand and articulate the pervasive and pernicious strength of the centralist view about local government, we are intent on providing local government with a method of reshaping the nature of the debate.

Centralisers and localisers exist across the political spectrum, but they vary in how far they would take their particular arguments, and of course,

they differ among themselves in the role they perceive that local government should have in the overall governing system. In developing our arguments and our vision of a muscular localism, we offer a localised state as the foundation for a new way of articulating the role of local government. We have no doubt that what we offer will frighten many, be unworkable to most and be of little practical use to others, or so it may seem. In developing our narrative, however, we borrow from different local government systems—most of what we argue exists somewhere to some degree: we have merely packaged it together to provide local government with a muscular localist narrative. In addition, we just enjoyed writing the stuff.

We are, however, in writing this book determined to provide local government and localists with something of value and use and something which they can employ to shape their arguments and strengthen their position. Our view is that there is a need for a radically new narrative to reformulate the working of government and from which the debates about the role of local government can take a different turn. We hope we have provided that material and a rationale on which it can rest. If so, then we would have provided some practical assistance to local government.

A few thanks to be made: first we would all like to thank Professor Steve Leach, who set us on the road to writing the book and whose advice and guidance throughout were invaluable to the project. Then from me, thanks to my wife Julia and two daughters, Emma and Harriet, for their support and also to my new grandson, Reggie, for not crying too much during the finishing stages of the book. Next from Rachel who would like to mention the unstinting support she has received from her father Garry and from her closest friend Stefanie which she found invaluable during the writing process. Mark wants to put on record his sincere thanks to his wife Sylvia for her patience and support and his three granddaughters Yasmin, Lucia and Riley, for being there.

Finally the three of us would like to say thank you to our colleagues, Filipe Teles from Aveiro University Portugal and Pawel Swianiewicz from Warsaw University Poland, for throwing down the challenge to see which of us has the most centralised system and where local government suffers the most. After reading this book, you will see that we win.

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Contents

1	**Centralisation: The Constant Struggle**	1
2	**Policy Narratives in Local and National Government**	37
3	**Fragmentation and Centralisation**	57
4	**Mergers and Acquisitions: Narratives, Rhetoric and Reality of Double Centralisation Through Structural Upheaval**	85
5	**Devolution Today: Revolution or Submission?**	113
6	**The Ties That Bind**	139
7	**Conclusion: Localism and Centralism—A Constant Conflict or Time for Change?**	165
	Bibliography	185
	Index	203

List of Figures

Fig. 1.1	Devolution and decentralisation	15
Fig. 4.1	New unitary councils 2009	100
Fig. 5.1	Key decentralisation policies since 1998	116
Fig. 5.2	Review of agreed devolution deals to date (15 May 2016)	125
Fig. 5.3	Devolved powers and functions of new combined authority mayors	131

List of Tables

Table 4.1	The legislative reductions of local government	89
Table 4.2	English council populations, by council type	90

CHAPTER 1

Centralisation: The Constant Struggle

Introduction

To understand the value of local government and what centralisation means to the relationship between a nation-state and its disparate geographical communities of place, we must understand the purpose of local government. To understand the purpose of local government, a simple starting point is to understand those words that used to describe sub-national, politically representative bodies: local government. The reasonable assumption is that it will be 'local' that is connected to, based in or reflective of, identifiable geographical communities of place, and that it will be government, that is, it will be politically representative and with sufficient governing power and capacity to be able to take authoritative and binding decisions within its field of competence. In other words, local government is a product of a governing system which has grown from the bottom up, rather than as a result of from devolution from the centre, or from the mere decentralisation of functions, tasks and responsibilities (see Bogdanor 1999, 2001, 2009; Hazell 1999, 2010; Hoggett 1987; Burns et al. 1994). While the growth of a state-wide governing system from the bottom up may reflect a process of nation and state building that is now confined to the past, with more modern states, for example, those emerging out of post-communist Eastern Europe or African states (Mann 1986; James 1996), taking a more top-down approach, assuming a bottom-up development provides a context within which to explore centralisation and localism.

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C. Copus et al., *Local Government in England*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-26418-3_1

Such an initial and simple attempt to set up a dichotomy from which to explore the purpose of local government will be developed and examined throughout the book so as to understand, particularly in the English context, the process, effects and implications of a centralised governing system over a localised one. It will also help explain how, in England, we have lost any real sense of local government being about the government of identifiable communities of place, to such an extent that the in vogue term 'place shaping' is seen as something local government must do, rather than what it is—a unit of government shaped by its place (see, Lyons 2007). In addition, understanding the tussle between centralisation and localism and between centralists and localists, as a way of defining the purpose and value of local government, is the contribution local government makes, or can make if it is allowed, to broader concepts such as liberty, good governance and local self-government—the latter can be seen as distinct from representative local government (Toulmin Smith 2005) and will be explored in more detail in Chap. 3.

Throughout the development of local government in England, there has been a constant tussle between pressures of centralisation and localism (Chandler 2007), and some of those pressures are ideological or attitudinal, rather than generated by economic, social, moral, political or technological factors. The pressures which provide a centralising or localising direction in government will be explored in more detail throughout the book, but those pressures also include globalisation, urbanisation, Europeanisation, austerity, increasing public demand and economic downturn, all of which have often resulted in the institutional restructuring of local politics (Kersting and Vetter 2003; Berg and Rao 2005; Denters and Rose 2005; Magre and Betrana 2007; Elcock 2008; Wollmann 2008). That restructuring of local politics and government is inspired by the centre and where the centre cannot control—because it lacks the constitutional and legal powers—it can cajole, through financial and other inducements.

While the book tracks the international pressures that result in a centralising or localising response from political communities at the local, regional and national level, it focuses its main attention on local government in England. The book leans on the nature of political interaction in unitary and federal states, to illuminate and elucidate the debate and to provide an understanding of how the arguments about centralisation and localism can travel across and within national boundaries. Moreover, the antidote to centralisation we develop unashamedly lends from thinking of

local government as a form of very local state, as will be seen particularly in Chaps. 6 and 7.

The book has been written for seven reasons. First, the current Conservative government (and its predecessor coalition Conservative and Liberal Democrat government, 2010–2015) placed devolution at the centre of its policy towards local government. During the passage of the coalition government's (2010–2015) devolution Bill into law, Greg Clarke, then minister of state at the department of Communities and Local Government, made the following statement in the House of Commons, which is worth repeating at length:

> For the best of a century, most Bills that have passed through this House have taken power from communities and councils and given more power to Central Government, or in some cases to European government. This is an historic Bill, not just for the measures it contains but for what it represents. It is about striking out in a different direction. Power should be held at the lowest possible level. We want this to be the first Parliament for many years that, by the end of its Sessions, will have given power away.
>
> That is true for many of the Bill's provisions—the community right to challenge; the community right to bid for assets of public value; the abolition of regional spatial strategies; the introduction of neighbourhood planning—but nowhere is it more significant than in clause 1, which deals with the general power of competence. The general power of competence changes the default position. Currently, local government exists to do the things that central government requires it to do. Clause 1 turns that default position upside down. Local government can do the things that it thinks are right, unless they are positively banned. What is not forbidden is permitted. The question for councils is not, "Can we do this?" but, "How can we make it happen?". (Greg Clark, House of Commons, 7th November 2011)

Indeed, Part one, chapter one, clause one, section one of the Act boldly states that: "A local authority has power to do anything that individuals generally may do".

We use a concept of policy narrative developed from Roe (1994) throughout this book, and when a Conservative government was returned in 2015, George Osborne the Chancellor of the Exchequer continued to be one of the most powerful and vocal narrators of the 'devolution' and the regional 'Powerhouse' storyline. In his speech to the Conservative Party conference in October 2015, Osborne made a statement in praise of

devolution, which, as we are interested here in exploring the language and reality of devolution, is also worth repeating at length:

> *There's a building, not too far from here that reminds us of what local government used to mean.*
> *Look at Manchester Town Hall, in all its neo-gothic splendour.*
> *It was built as a place of power -a great civic cathedral, where the decisions affecting this city would be taken—not remitted to a committee in London.*
> *But over the decades, the wings of local government were clipped again and again by all parties, most especially ours.*
> *Almost everything, from the amount they could spend…*
> *… to the taxes they could keep…*
> *… to the work they undertook…*
> *… was determined in Whitehall.*
> *It's time to face facts.*
> *The way this country is run is broken.*
> *People feel remote from decisions that affect them.*
> *Initiative is suffocated.*
> *Our cities held back.*
> *There's no incentive to promote local enterprise.*
> *It's time we fixed it.*
> *And I'll work with anyone, from any political party, to make that happen.*
> *That's why we're devolving more power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.*
> *That's why the people of Greater Manchester will elect their first ever Mayor, in just eighteen months' time.*
> *That's why just last Friday we reached agreement on a new elected mayor across the whole of South Yorkshire.*
> *We're putting the power into the Northern Powerhouse.*
> *But we can go much, much further, here in the north and around the country.*
> *While everyone knows this country has to live within its means—and that means savings in local as well as national government—I want to make sure that as we make these necessary savings we use this moment to undertake far-reaching reform.*
> *Right now we have the merry go-round of clawing back local taxes into the Treasury and handing them out again in the form of a grant.*
> *In my view, proud cities and counties should not be forced to come to national government with a begging bowl.*
> *So I am announcing this:*
> *Today I am embarking on the biggest transfer of power to our local government in living memory.*

We're going to allow local government to keep the rates they collect from business.
That's right, all £26bn of business rates will be kept by councils instead of being sent up to Whitehall.
Right now, we collect much more in business rates than we give back in the main grant.
So we will phase out this local government grant altogether.
But we will also give councils extra power and responsibilities for running their communities.
The established transfers will be there on day one, but thereafter, all the real growth in revenue will be yours to keep.
So this is what our plan means.
Attract a business, and you attract more money.
Regenerate a high street, and you'll reap the benefits.
Grow your area, and you'll grow your revenue too.
And to help local people do that I want to make another announcement today.
We're going to abolish the uniform business rate entirely.
That's the single, national tax rate we impose on every council.
Any local area will be able to cut business rates as much as they like…
…to win new jobs and generate wealth.
It's up to them to judge whether they can afford it.
It's called having power and taking responsibility.
And for those big cities with elected mayors, like London, Manchester and now Sheffield, I will go even further.
Provided they have the support of the local business community, these mayors will be able to add a premium to the rates to pay for new infrastructure and build for their cities' future.
Yes, further savings to be made in local government, but radical reform too.
So an end to the uniform business rate.
Money raised locally, spent locally.
Every council able to cut business taxes.
Every mayor able to build for their city's future.
A new way to govern our country.
Power to the people.
Let the devolution revolution begin.

(http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2015/10/full-text-george-osbornes-2015-conservative-conference-speech/)

The Cities and Devolution Act rapidly followed and was granted Royal Assent in January 2016. So, we now have a Localism Act and a devolu-

tion Act, the direction of travel, however is clearly top down. Given the priority placed on devolution as a policy tool, it is necessary therefore to test the veracity and strength of the 'devolution revolution' as it is being implemented in England and to assess if it is indeed a revolution or simply revisionism shaped by a policy narrative. Indeed, given historical trends in England (Chandler 2007), we need to know if the current government's devolution revolution is a historical hiccup or whether, as the current political debate could lead one to believe: we are all localists now.

The second reason for writing the book is that the international trends identified above create conditions within which debates about the value of centralism and localism can be located and developed and which can embolden centralists, within whichever type of political system they inhabit. Thirdly, it has become commonplace for commentators to narrate England as the most centralised country across the globe. It is necessary therefore, to explore if centralisation is so extensive, if we have done it so well and so completely and if it is a process and a way of governing that has damaged local government and democracy. After than exploration we then need to examine what solutions can be developed to reverse centralism as a governing and political doctrine. Especially as it can be a policy narrative which suits both major political parties: Conservative and Labour. Fourth and linked to this last point, one of the authors was involved in an exchange on twitter in which he made the comment 'England is the most centralised country in Europe'. That comment was challenged by a colleague who tweeted in reply the comment: 'no, Portugal is the most centralised country'; another colleague tweeted in reply: 'come to Poland'. That twitter exchange has prompted an exploration and justification of why England is the most centralised state and what can be done about it.

Fifth, we need to understand the nature of the debate between centralisation and localism and the nature of the narratives and storylines which have developed around the two concepts. Moreover, we need to understand how the narratives of centralism and localism are deployed by the supports of both concepts to influence public and policy thinking. By understanding the power and use of the competing policy narratives, we may be able to predict the outcome of the ongoing debate between centralisers and localisers. As a consequence we can assess whether we are seeing the revitalisation of English local government so that it becomes both more local and more like a government, or whether the slow demise of local government, local politics and local democracy is likely to continue. Sixth, as academics operating in our Research Excellence Framework

driven world, we obviously want to add to theory, knowledge, conceptualisation and modelling (but do not let that put the non-academic reader off of progressing beyond that statement). Above all we want to influence how local government is perceived by the public, the media, policy-makers and by local government itself, and we want to strengthen the role of local government in the government of the country. No mean feat, then!

Before moving on, we need to quickly review, in the next section, the purpose or point of local government, a question which will be addressed more fully throughout the book, so as to provide a context for our exploration of centralism and localism. Differing views to that purpose and point find different expressions and deploy different language as a way of convincing others of a particular case, and it is those cases we seek to explore in depth. The third section examines, again briefly, the nature of the debate and key policy narratives of localism and centralism, to produce a definition of these two concepts that will be employed throughout the book. The fourth section sets out the structure of the book

What's the Point of Local Government?

English local government is a dual-purpose institution. It provides an additional layer of democracy, political representation and engagement to Parliamentary politics, and it allows for the diversity of political views and opinions expressed by communities to find outlet in an authoritative and elected body. Moreover, as thinkers such as De Tocqueville, Mill, Toulmin Smith and the Webbs have variously argued, to differing degrees and from different ideological and time-bound pers;pectives, that local governing institutions are essential to freedom, liberty, a potential protective barrier to an over powerful central state. Moreover, they are an integral part of any democratic system. Within a representative system of government, representative institutions have a premium over a wider interpretation of local democracy—that is the myriad of interactions that take place between citizens and communities within the confines of the boundaries of any one council. Local democracy is a linked but distinct concept from local government, both with a place in the overall democratic fabric of a society. But, those bodies legitimised by the public vote (councils) and their members—councillors—are in a legitimised governing position to make a choice between competing demands and about the reconciliation of competing views within the locality. It is therefore necessary to separate, not conflate local government and local democracy.

As well as a politically representative and governing institution, local government is also responsible for the provision of public services vital to nations where the state has taken the major responsibility for social welfare, social cohesion and the development of infrastructural integrity. Councils, of course, need not be direct providers of public services, and the neo-liberal policy narratives that pervade much thinking about local government have seen councils experiment with a range of delivery options and agendas such as commissioning, outsourcing, shared services delivery agreements between councils and shared chief executives to co-ordinate joint working as well as reduce salary commitments. Whatever innovations are made in the delivery of public services by councils, they are made more often as a necessity rather than a policy choice that, everything remaining equal, reflected a political choice taken by any one council. In other words, financial, political and legal controls by the centre direct the political choices taken by local government.

In addition, the dual role of governor and public service provider generates a tension, as it cannot be assumed that the roles are mutually compatible or that they respond to the same stimuli. Nor can it be assumed that political representation, governing and decision-making, or the expression of local values and views, can be achieved through a set of institutions designed primarily to administer, oversee and be responsible for the provision of public services. It is the assumption that local government, in England, is about the provision or oversight of services, almost to the exclusion of its wider political and governing role and that the latter is less important than, or indeed only possible because of, the former, that is itself the cause of much of what is currently wrong about the debates about the purpose of local government. Indeed, it is such assumptions shaped by the dominant policy narratives that have already resulted in terms such as 'unviable' being banded about around the financial problems being experienced by West Somerset Council and other district councils. The sounds can be heard of the exponents of ever larger local government sharpening their knives to hack away at that part of England to pursue the chimera that larger local government is inherently better. Such a one-dimensional view of local government ignores its governing and representative functions.

It is the notion that local government is primarily, if not exclusively, about the provision of public services that has served to hinder the development of English councils as politically powerful local centres of government that are meaningful and relevant to local people and that matter as

institutions of government to local communities. Moreover, it is that narrative tapping into the erroneous assumption that bigger is better that has resulted in England having some of the largest units of local government in Europe. Moreover, rather than representing geographically distinct and identifiable communities, many council boundaries pull together a number of communities and distinct geographical areas to collect together in one place the size of population deemed necessary for the provision of efficient and effective public services.

The consequences of these dominant narratives and their taken-for-granted assumptions about local government have resulted in a disjuncture between councils and communities and, ironically, a central concern about levels of engagement between communities and councils, which central government has itself created. As political representation and government has, in this country, a clear geographical link—MPs elected for constituencies, councillors elected for wards or divisions (not at large elections across a council)—then a premium must be placed on local government as the reflection of identifiable geographical communities. It is not for that reason alone that local government should reflect clearly identifiable communities. If councils are to be meaningful entities that reflect a popular perception of a place that councils then can shape as a governing body, that place has to be a recognisable one, one that responds to a reality of place—not an administrative convenience that is narrated in technocratic rather than democratic terms the issue and discourse of place, mergers and local government size is explored fully in Chap. 4. It will be argued in that chapter that it is almost as though there is a deliberate policy to remove councils from place, people, culture, history, and traditions, so these factors are no longer displayed as councils continue the journey to being simple providers or overseers of public services and not politically representative and governing institutions. An added bonus to some is that the more and more meaningless local government becomes, the easier and easier it is to continue the policy of mergers and amalgamations until those seeking big local government are satisfied. But, the question remains at what scale will the promoters of big local government become satisfied, and when they are, we will any longer have a system that could be called 'local' government.

As we are exploring 'localism', one feature must give us concern, how do we make our councils local and why are we constantly following a path that takes us in the opposite direction. A direction which takes us further from concepts of local and localism and which refuses to give all but the

scantest regard to the 'government' in 'local government'. We have seen how local government is a dual-purpose organisation: responsible for the provision of public services while at the same time providing opportunities for political involvement and the expression of political diversity from the centre. Yet, these two roles are not treated equally, and the tension between the needs for efficient and effective service provision has overshadowed the role of councils in the governing fabric of the nation. We have arrived at the current shape of English local government through a number of government-inspired investigations into local government. The Herbert Commission (1960) and the Maud (1967), Redcliffe-Maud (1969) and Widdicombe (1986) Committees sought to reconcile the competing tensions between questions of service delivery and management and the democratic and political role played by local government.

While not ignoring nor minimising the careful balancing act which these government-inspired reviews had to undertake and the analysis and debates that they conducted about the appropriate population size for councils which allowed for efficient and effective services as well as providing community cohesion and democratic control and accountability of local authorities, the result of any subsequent central government-inspired re-organisation was the same—larger councils created by a process set in motion, by central government. But, it is a process in which local government is often complicit, and it is a process which has a supporting narrative which reflects centralist views—held nationally and locally—and which is met by an opposing more localist set of storylines. It is necessary therefore in order to understand the possible future of local government in England, and what general lessons can be drawn from that for local government more broadly, to understand the ways in which localism and centralism are narrated. Indeed, for clarity in the book, we need to briefly set out the possible interpretations and meanings of the terms to construct a definition that will be employed in the book. We need to do that to understand the principles which form the bedrock of arguments about the role, purpose and place of local government within the overall governing system and set within the modern context. In so doing we can see whether there is a consistent set of views about local government held by policymakers and politicians, locally and nationally, and if there is, how are those views identified when they may be couched in a new language or discourse to suit shifting circumstances. We now turn briefly to examine the nature of the debate between localism and centralism to provide a definition that will underpin the rest of the book.

Centralism and Localism: The Nature of the Debate

As one of the tasks of the book will be to examine the policy narratives which have developed and been employed around the concepts of centralisation and localism, it is necessary to set out how those terms will be defined for the purposes of the book. Constructing a definition is particularly necessary because few argue overtly for centralisation by employing the term 'centralisation' itself. While the word localism is used freely and interchangeably with devolution and decentralisation—the latter again often being used with little distinction in meaning (devolution and decentralisation are explored in Chap. 5 where we examine the current government's devolution policy in more detail). A distinction needs to be made between the competing concepts of centralism and localism because localism provides a conceptual counter-point to centralism in a way that the term decentralisation or indeed devolution does not. Indeed, decentralisation is not the opposite of centralism; rather it is a reaction to it.

Devolution and decentralisation are concepts which are often conflated and used interchangeably in policy and academic literature providing for unhelpful differing and overlapping definitions for both terms. Where some scholars (Bogdanor 1999, 2009; Hazell 1999; Burns et al. 1994) have provided explanations of devolution and decentralisation which allow the two terms to be perceived as separate concepts, others such as Crook and Manor (1998) have similarly conceived devolution to be the transfer of powers, but position devolution alongside deconcentration (the relocation of administrative functions) underneath an overarching umbrella of decentralisation. For the purposes of this book, the terms devolution and decentralisation will be viewed as separate and differing concepts, where devolution implies a substantial transfer of political power and autonomy as a result of a significant shift in the relationship between central and local government and decentralisation describing only the transfer of authority to exercise functions, responsibilities, tasks and finances from one tier to another in accordance with national policy objectives and motives of political expediency within central government.

Devolution

Much of the literature on devolution examines the concept through the lens of particular political events, perhaps the most prevalent being devolution to the home nations of the United Kingdom. It is here that the

words of the former Secretary of State for Wales, Ron Davies, become particularly relevant, in which he stated that 'devolution is a process, not an event' (1999). Interestingly, the word devolution has frequently been used to describe particular events, yet attempting to clarify what devolution means in principle remains challenging, resulting in a rather stark lack of consensus on what the word devolution really describes in theoretical terms. Does the term devolution simply explain the transfer of administrative functions, or does it go beyond this and imply substantive devolution of power from the centre? Rather, do we actually mean a significant shift in the relationship between the two tiers of government?

The devolutionary trend witnessed in many European states was resisted in the United Kingdom until the 1990s (Keating 1998; Hazell 2000). Devolution in the United Kingdom developed over the course of the twentieth century in two key dimensions: administrative, followed by political. Administrative devolution in this period can be traced back to the establishment of territorial government departments for both Scotland and Wales, exercising a considerable range of responsibilities in relation to their respective nations under the supervision of Westminster. Political devolution, by comparison, has since resulted in (for Scotland only) the formation of a devolved institution with legislative powers. The Scottish government has its own First Minister, Cabinet and Civil Service. England meanwhile enjoyed only limited administrative devolution during this period in the form of Regional Development Agencies and Regional chambers (Mackinnon et al. 2010). Within this context, a political definition of devolution has developed which centres on territorial and constitutional relations between two different levels government, where the term devolution can be understood as the transfer of power(s) from one political authority to a subordinate political authority on a geographical basis, in order to provide a degree of self-government (Bogdanor 1999, 2009; Agranoff 2004).

The process of evolution in the United Kingdom is designed to be a policy response to particular political pressures of the 1990s, namely, a rising nationalist sentiment, within Scotland and Wales and Scotland in particular, to establish a Scottish Parliament and a long period of Conservative government through the 1980s and 1990s which gave a spur to Celtic nationalism (Trench 2007). For Trench, this process embodied a significant shift in the constitutional and territorial landscape of the United Kingdom, wherein elected political entities were established, possessing a substantial degree of political and administrative power and autonomy.

While Trench recognises that the power and autonomy of the devolved nations is contingent, due to the entrenchment of parliamentary sovereignty, devolved institutions within this context still retain a degree of power which allows them to develop their own policies and are able to exercise significant influence on areas of policy at both the national and supranational levels.

While devolution does not go as far as Federalism in providing a division of powers between two levels of government of equal status, it establishes a specific constitutional relationship between those levels while, in principle, maintaining the sovereignty of Parliament. This entrenchment of Parliamentary sovereignty rests in the fact that any legislation enacted to establish a devolved institution can be repealed or amended in the same way as any other statutes. In spite of this 'shadow of hierarchy' (Héritier and Lehmkuhl 2008 cited in Swenden and McEwen 2014), Bogdanor's conception of devolution as a means to provide self-government, even if within the confines of central legislation, is perhaps most significant when considering the ways in which devolution and decentralisation can be distinguished from one another; power vs. authority.

Decentralisation

Decentralisation is a complex and multi-faceted concept which is used across a range of disciplines. For the purposes of this book, there are two types of decentralisation that are particularly useful to examine: political decentralisation and administrative decentralisation (Pollitt et al. 1998). Political decentralisation, linking closely to concepts of pluralism and representative democracy, is concerned with decentralising the political processes of decision-making to elected representatives and enhancing participation and the role that citizens and local actors play in those processes. By contrast administrative decentralisation seeks to reorganise authority, responsibility and resources for public service provision to lower levels of government or to managers and appointed bodies (ibid.). Decentralisation can therefore be broadly understood as the transfer of certain public functions—but not necessarily power—from the central government and its agencies to subordinate units or levels of government (Burns et al. 1994).

Pollitt (2005) brings a paradox to our attention, in that there is a perpetual struggle between centralisation and decentralisation where the two often occur simultaneously, and uses the example of education in the

United Kingdom to illustrate this point. In the 1980s, both the Grant Maintained Schools initiative and the Local Management of Schools initiative allowed for schools to opt of local authority control and take direct control of their budgets. Yet, the same period saw the 1988 Education Act introduced a highly prescriptive and detailed national curriculum which gave central government an excessive degree of control over what was actually taught within individual classrooms (Pollitt 2005).

The paradox between centralisation and decentralisation is evident within current devolution to English local government. While the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 implies a move towards stronger local government in England and a shift from the centralised Westminster model, typically what Whitehall gives it must also taketh away. Some 30 years later, we are now simultaneously witnessing a drive by the current Education secretary to convert primary and secondary schools in England to independent, centrally funded academies, which operate outside the sphere of influence of local authorities. The Housing and Planning Act is set to have a sizably negative impact on local social housing capacity, and Fire and Rescue policy is moving from the Department for Communities and Local Government into the remit of the Home Office.

Organising the concepts

It is useful, for the purposes of the book, to try and draw clear distinctions between these two complex and overlapping concepts, and so the figure below (Fig. 1.1) provides a summary of the academic literature explored above.

The first distinction is between *power* and *authority*; both political and administrative decentralisation provide differing degrees of *authority* and have the potential to enhance decision-making for subordinate tiers of government, bodies or individuals, thus in turn augmenting the political legitimacy of the state (Kopric 2016). On the other hand, political devolution goes beyond this to transfer legislative *power* to newly formed or existing political institutions, underpinned by the legitimacy held through election. The second distinction, and the one perhaps most relevant to the current devolution to English local government, is that between political and administrative devolution, where the latter only involves responsibilities and functions being devolved, and where it does go beyond this to provide greater *power*, these tend to be limited in scope.

	Decentralisation	Devolution
Political	• *Authority* and decision-making are decentralised. • Enhancing participation and role of citizens and local actors. • Enhancing the political legitimacy of the state.	• Establishment of elected political institutions with legislative *powers*, deriving their own political legitimacy. • Reforms the constitutional relationship between different tiers of government.
Administrative	• *Authority* is decentralised to managers and/or appointed bodies, who act as local offices of the central state administration.	• Responsibility, functions and resources devolved to territorial bodies under central supervision. • *Limited powers* are transferred, if at all.

Fig. 1.1 Devolution and decentralisation

In 2012 Lord Heseltine's report, *No stone unturned: in pursuit of growth*, made a series of recommendations which focused on boosting economic growth. To achieve that aim, he argued that power needed to be devolved to the English regions—a narrative (see chapter X) which forms the central pillar of the current reforms to English local government. Despite being repeatedly and misleadingly referred to as a 'devolution revolution' by government and commentators, it is evident that what we are currently observing in English local government is not a genuine wave of the political devolution of *power*, but rather a fragmented and inconsistent pattern of the decentralisation (or limited devolution) of *authority* over specific projects and financial incentives aimed at both addressing economic growth, nationally and locally, and further streamlining of public service provision—both of which are for the benefit of political expediency at the centre. Devolution revolution? This claim is open to significant scrutiny (examined in detail in Chap. 5).

Localism, on the other hand, sets up a different conceptual understanding of the role of the state both centrally and locally and certainly posits a relationship between the centre and the localities that preferences the latter (see below). Thus, we have two policy narratives which are mutually incompatible, and many who would claim to be localists are simply stating a preference for decentralisation or some degree of devolution.

Understanding a Centralist View

In examining the centralist perspective, we can find no better starting point than the findings of the Widdicombe Committee (1986:46) to explain what might be considered the contemporary view of the position of local government, certainly in the English context, but which reflects centralist thinking elsewhere. The report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business (Widdicombe) boldly stated that:

> Although local government has origins pre-dating the sovereignty of Parliament, all current local authorities are the statutory creations of parliament and have no independent status or right to exist. The whole system of local government could lawfully be abolished by Act of Parliament. Central government is not itself sovereign, and indeed its powers are—or may be—circumscribed by Parliament just as much as those of local government. In practice however central government is drawn from the political party with a majority in Parliament and its de facto political strength is accordingly much greater than that of local government. (HMSO 1986: 45, para 3.3)

The committee went onto comment:

> The position of local government in our political system is therefore governed by constitutional convention as well as by the simple fact that it derives its existence and powers from Parliament. It would however, be wrong to assume that such constitutional convention amounts to or derives from any natural right for local government to exist. It is a convention based on, and subject to, the contribution which local government can bring to good government
>
> It follows that there is no validity in the assertion that local authorities have a 'local mandate' by which they derive authority from their electorate placing them above the law. The electoral basis of local authorities lends added authority to actions they take within the law, and to any proposals they may make for changes to the law, but does not provide a mandate to act outside or above the law. Local authorities may properly lobby for changes in the law, but in their day-to-day conduct of affairs they must act within the law as it stands.
>
> (Widdicombe Committee 1986: 46, paras 3.5 and 3.6)

Such a statement is not an out-of-the-ordinary position on local government within unitary states, nor is it unusual in Federal systems where control of local government is passed from the national government to state

(or regional) governments. So, is it really a statement of centralisation rather than a description of a political and governing system, especially given that at the time the committee reported, central and local government were indeed locked in the mandate wars? That is during the 1980s a number of left-wing labour councils were challenging the supremacy of central government and the policies of the then Thatcher government (see Livingstone 1987; Blunkett and Jackson 1987; Carvel 1984). Even in those heated political circumstances, the committee did recognise that some systems of government—normally with written constitutions—would legally entrench 'the existence of those institutions that are most important to their political system, so they cannot be removed by a simple vote of the legislature' (1986: 45, para 3.4). It also noted that because Parliament did indeed have the power and right to abolish local government, it was not automatically acceptable that it should do so.

What Widdicombe postulated was then, that in England, local government lacks even the most basic constitutional protection, including the right to continued existence. It is central government that decides the shape, size, responsibilities, powers and functions of councils; it is central government which can, and does, abolish individual councils, or entire layers of local government, or create new types of councils when it deems that circumstances, or politics, or policy, requires such a change. The British unitary system is based on top-down Parliamentary sovereignty, not a bottom-up citizen democracy, and thus does not have to respect the institutions of local government.

But, policy narratives of centralisation and the arguments over its meaning and direction do not stem just from the 1980s and the time of the Widdicombe report. Throughout the history of the development of local government in England, central government has vacillated between a laissez-faire attitude through varying degrees of concern and control—sometimes developing piecemeal in reaction to the needs of particular services or certain political circumstances and at other times displaying a more ideological edge to a vision of government and the role of local government within it (see Sharpe 1970; Jones 1986; Chandler 1989, 2007; Wilson 2003). Growing public sector responsibilities developed during the Victorian period which saw the development of a wide range of bodies charged with public duties that impinged on the public purse and which were designed towards securing what today would be called the 'wellbeing' of local communities. Improvement boards, Poor Law Guardians or Local Boards of Health, to mention a few, existed alongside municipal

corporations, shared responsibilities for various aspects of public infrastructural development and the emerging welfare state. Elected councils working in conjunction with other elected bodies and non-elected public bodies, to secure public improvement is not a new feature and pre-dates our understanding of governance and governance networks.

With the increase in local public expenditure, the increase in local responsibility for public services and the increase in central concern for welfare and national infrastructure developed an increasing desire to control local government. We see the first real steps taken to provide a central point of government oversight and monitoring of local government with the formation of the Local Government Board by an Act of Parliament in 1871. The Board took over the responsibility for local government from various ministries and centralised the oversight of local government into one central place, and this process forms an essential part of the transformation of the relationships between central and local government from partner to agent (see Bellamy 1988). Crucially, Bellamy recognises the increasingly 'statist' policy narrative defining the nature of local government as propagated by the Webbs, for example (see Webbs 1920), Chadwick and Bentham, and she notes that this narrative is presented as a positive one with social change and progress at its heart. It is an account however, which saw local government as increasing a barrier to such progress and as failing as partner and therefore requiring a radical change in its position, to one of agent of the centre. In her review Bellamy notes the language of the time in regard to local government as dismissive, critical and deeply disdainful and one where storylines were developed to describe local government such as corruption, particularism, inefficiency, local failures of imagination and ability—terms, which until very recently, have found echoes in current day central usage. Bellamy (1988: 15) reminds us that Bulpitt had previously noted that at this point:

> The centre lacked the support of any positive coherent doctrine of an independent community orientated state … Moreover the place of Parliament in the political culture acted as an obstacle to theorising about the state. As a result laissez-faire many (sic) have lost its former intellectual hegemony. But nothing more positive or coherent arose in its place. (Bulpitt 1983: 124)

Bulpitt (1983) also displayed the importance of how central governments respond at critical social, economic and political times, or critical junctures. While Bulpitt stressed the conservatism of central political *elites*,

even at critical points, when it comes to local government, that conservatism can and has been of a radical kind and in some cases betrayed the often localist tendencies of local Conservatives (Young 1994). Bulpitt's notion of the dual polity, and the political division of labour between high politics at the centre and low politics in the localities, meant that local government could at times operate in greater degrees of freedom. The role it took in this account was not to disturb the centre-periphery settlement (Bulpitt 1983: 55), but the framework within which the centre and peripheries operate is not a static one (ibid: 56), and while the centres 'operational code' for relationships with the peripheries may not always be known (ibid: 57), local government will certainly know when it has operated outside that code.

Bulpitt (1983: 64–65) provides here power models through which to understand centralisation: *coercive* model—where threats, or the use of threats, are used against non-centre players; an *authority* model—the centre is able to dominate because non-centre players accept that it has the legitimate right to act and therefore acquiesce to centre policy—and in this model we see the acceptance by local government of its agency role; the *capital city bargaining* model where the localities articulate their views to the centre and attempt to obtain what they want through a bargaining process; and the *central autonomy* model where the centre distances itself from the peripheries to focus on high politics and in this model the centre isolates itself from peripheral concerns. In any case, the centre retains the dominant role, and it is the centre which can therefore select which model of power it wishes to operate. If the centre lacks the constitutional position to simply adopt a new approach, then it may need to negotiate and bargain to achieve the relationship it requires between the centre and localities, but such bargaining will, overtime, have a cumulative effect on the relationship between the centre and the peripheries.

Centralism rests on not just changing the nature of the relationship between local and central government from partner to agent, or developing a new operational code, or even having the constitutional freedom to adopt a new power model and approach, it also rests on preparing the ground for such a transformation. That preparation requires the development of a different suite of policy narratives about local government and about key features of its purpose, role, functions, structure, size and abilities—both in terms of what it can do and how good it is at doing it. Centralisation then required its own narrative justification and set of stories to shift the terms of the debate. Yet, it would be fair to say that

centralisation was in this country a gradual process and even rested on a permissive attitude towards changing the relationship between central and local government. The 1848 Public Health Act, for example, by linking public health to local democracy by allowing councils to define public health, created the image of a form of local autonomy, even if that autonomy is limited, contested and opened to re-negotiation. The 1848 Act required councils that became health authorities to guarantee minimum environmental standards, so an image of voluntarism and local autonomy could be constructed but a gradual journey of centralisation also maintained.

As Chandler (1991: 102) points out, by the use of the language of utilitarianism and rational administration, Bentham was able to assign a very low position to local government in his ideal constitution, arguing that the greatest good could only be achieved for the greatest number, if sectional interests—as articulated by local government—could be marginalised and ignored. Parliament, and not the localities, was narrated as the only body which could be trusted with, and expected to meet, the needs of the greatest number as an inherently more efficient and effective mechanism for the distribution of public goods and policy development than that which could be achieved numerous municipalities.

As the Victorian period wore on, local government increasingly had the role of the villain thrust upon it in the storylines, and the centre, parliament and government, became the virtuous and honourable hero. It is perhaps no surprise that there did not develop a local government equivalent of the 'honourable gentleman', but as we will see in the next chapter—the concept of the honourable gentleman has somewhat diminished. But, before it had, stories of local government, of inefficiency, profligacy, bureaucracy and wastefulness had to be generated to bring together an overarching narrative which eased the job of centralisation while diminishing the status, powers and position of local government and those elected to it. It is a storyline which did not end with the Victorian centralist social reformers, but carried on through the Edwardian period (Bellamy 1988) and, as we will see in the next chapter, has continued to our contemporary setting. Centralisers such as Bentham and Chadwick were suspicious then of local government and local democracy and sought to pursue sound administration and an end to corruption and graft by a process of centralisation (Hill 1974). Such thinkers saw the best solution to social and political problems as coming from central boards and *ad hoc* agencies not from local government—a theme still resonant today, but with the added element of partnerships.

Defining centralism, at least for the purpose of this book, needs to account not only for the power models above but also for the practical expression of centralism or centralist attitudes and the language used by both central players and those in local government. Moreover, the nature of the relationship between the centre and localities is not static, but changes over time, and this dynamism makes it all the more important for the centre to be able to maintain a justification for its own relationship with local government. The dynamism in the relationship between the centre and localities is generated by political expediency, changing attitudes or the need to shift direction because of policy failure; a dynamic relationship does not however mean that government lets its attention stray too far from the unfortunately titled: low politics. Nor does it mean that there is anything like local autonomy, merely local discretion around an increasingly small set of policy domains—as would be expected of an agency relationship. That agency relationship has to be reinforced by regular rehearsal of the key policy narratives and the subsequent shaping of public discourse around the relative roles and merits of the centre and localities.

Centralism then is a combination of a persistently narrated operating procedure or code maintained by the centre and acceptance by localities of the code alongside a willingness not to challenge the constitutional settlement but to operate within it. Centralisation is built on a set of stable and taken-for-granted assumptions held by central *elites* of the left and right (the reasons for which are examined throughout the book) about not only the proper role of central and local government but also about the right to govern from the centre. These attitudes are reinforced by the acquiesce of local *elites* sharing political party allegiances with central *elites* (Bulpitt 1983); centralism rests on the narrative justification that central authorities have a broader, undiscriminating and unrestricted assessment of the common good that transcends the particularist and sectional assessment of the local common good held in the localities; and centralism allows for equality or at least equalisation and therefore supports progress. Centralisation then is a set of storylines, supported by a public discourse, operationalised through a political and governing system which privileges central virtue, honour, integrity, knowledge and expertise over local dishonesty, maleficence, corruption, ignorance and incompetence. While the strength of the language used to underpin centralism will vary and be more or less intense, the moral of the story is the same: centralism is superior to government by weak localities.

The Localist Response

To assert localism in some historical context, as we have done with centralism, it is necessary to explore briefly the Anglo-Saxon roots of English local government which has been covered in detail elsewhere (Copus 2011). Loyn (1991: 78) notes that 'the history of government in Anglo-Saxon England is the history of local government'; in this period governing rested in 'the lord's hall, the hundred court and, … the shire court', governing was locally based, rather than centrally located. The shires and Burhs of Anglo-Saxon England were not, of course, what we would recognise today as local government, although certainly these laid the foundations of what the English political philosopher, Joshua Toulmin Smith, would call the English version of local self-government. Indeed, the Anglo-Saxon system provided the basis for the regular, fixed, frequent and accessible settings where the local common interest could be debated and decided upon which Toulmin Smith (2005) admired and used as the beginnings of an antidote to the centralisation of his time. Moreover, we see here the origins of a common-law system of local self-government which could act as a counter-balance to central authority (Redlich and Hirst 1958: 5). That system of localised governing was, however, ruthlessly crushed after the Norman-French conquest, and Redlich and Hirst (1958) identify that crucial juncture as the beginnings of the long centralising tendencies of British government.

As we have seen in the previous section, the process of centralisation was not a linear one; rather, at crucial moments, the centre developed an alternative narrative for local government and its role and propose. Yet, the centralisers of the Victorian period did not have it all their own way. As the push for modernisation gathered apace and as the standing of local government as an institution was rhetorically and actually undermined, we see in the work of Joshua Toulmin Smith and in his battle against the centralising tendencies of the Victorian age, a vision of radical local self-government that is the antipathy of not only centralisation but also local representative government, too. Smith's views on local self-government are explored more fully in Chap. 3 where constitutional status of local government is considered. Here some of Smith's views are outlined to provide a foundation for a new understanding of localism, as a concept clearly distinct from devolution and decentralisation outlined above.

It was the English Common Law which Toulmin Smith (2005) vigorously defended against what he saw as its usurpation by Statute law and

it was English Common Law which laid the foundations of local self-government. According to Smith (2005: 26), 'All law must spring from the people and be administered by the people.' Indeed, it is the:

> universal law and practice of this country [England], of old time, for the folk and people to meet in frequent, fixed, regular and conveniently arranged assemblies, for the purpose of understanding, and discussing together, and determining upon, all those matters which have regard to the welfare of the separate associated bodies and to the common interest of the whole realm. (p. 33)

Smith (2005: 81) accused Parliament and councils of being 'oligarchies' and commented:

> That the basis and only true foundation of Representative Institutions should not be forgotten: an original authority not be allowed to be claimed; the Institutions themselves, without which there can be no real representative system, not have their true character overlooked, nor their own integrity dealt with and weakened, by their offspring; finally, that the privileges of the Representatives may not eat up the liberties of the represented.

Indeed, Smith strikes many a blow at the notion of original authority and therefore the supremacy of parliament and, by extension, the central executive. There can be no Parliamentary authority on its own; Parliament does not and cannot exist without the people. He explains this fully, thus:

> … the very name of representative Government implies that the people are the source of all authority and power. There neither is, nor can be any inherent authority or power in Parliament. Its authority is derived only; and that from which it is derived is, necessarily, more fundamental than itself. The offspring can never be allowed to smother and outgrow the parent without the greatest mischief following… Parliament ceases to have any Constitutional existence or moral claim on the respect of any man. It becomes as much a Usurpation and a tyranny as is the engrossing of supreme power by any one man to whom, for any given purpose, authority may have been entrusted on any legitimate occasion. (Smith 2005: 80)

Smith narrates a vision of a bottom-up democracy and of a sovereign people and of a radical view of local self-government not local representative

government, but his thinking, as we shall see later, provides a counterpoint to centralist policy narratives. Moreover, Smith's stories of local self are rooted in communities of place and in the autonomy of local places.

Hill (1974: 27) in her review of the social and political changes of the Victorian period and the battles between centralisers and anti-centralisers (of which Smith was a key exponent of the latter) reminds us of the primacy of 'localness'. She notes that even at a time of politics and social upheaval, the belief was maintained by many reformers that 'popular elected government should be exercised in the smallest possible unit, that is, the parish'. Moreover that, 'the local community was the bedrock of democracy in the sense that it offered participation, discussion and political education to all' (a notion also propagated by Mill). She does note, however, that the enthusiasm for the parish as a unit of government was tempered by a recognition among its supporters that it may be too small for the functions now coming the way of local government (Hill 1974: 27). But, Hill also reminds us that 'localness' was seen as central to any democratic system of local government and that a primacy was awarded to 'localness' going as far as to comment that 'the definition of localness and the idea of collections of local people responsible to themselves in their community, remains a continuing part of English thinking on democracy.' Centralisation, and the large units of local government that often go along with it, can, given the Anglo-Saxon roots of our local system, therefore be seen as Un-English.

Moore (2014) presents localism as a way of breaking up the centralisation of power and the location of political control in any one central point. Localism is related to a marketisation of local democracy in that governments beyond the centre are able to construct legal and political systems that suit their communities. Moore sets out seven key pillars of localism:

1. A limited role of the central state in regulating sub-national (normally states) governments.
2. A series of checks and balances must be created between the sub-national units and the central authority.
3. Decentralisation of local political choice and an end to a two-party system locally.
4. A review of the constitutional system and settlement to identify where that system had been unable to prevent centralisation—to which could be added, where it had actively encouraged centralisation.

5. Localisation of the education system.
6. Checks and balances within sub-national units of government and for local governments to be able to act as a check and balance on state governments.
7. The power to determine citizenship resting with sub-national government.

Moore's work set within the context of the USA as a federal system means that the seven pillars of localism rest on a series of sub-national or state government, below which local government operates. But, there is something in Moore's analysis that enables us to configure a system in which local government takes on the role of a 'state government'. Miller et al. (2000: 30) argue that in the market model, 'the emphasis is not on facilitating collective choice by the local community but rather on ensuring that the system of local governance is designed in a way that ensures that individual consumers obtain the right bundle of services to meet their personal needs.' In this view, a market-based democracy still sees local government as primarily the provider or commissioner/overseer of public services, and not necessarily a governing body. Yet, this market-based narrative is located within a representative system, which as we have seen can be challenged and, as Sweeting and Copus (2012) has shown, is also under-pressure from different approaches to local representative democracy.

In setting out four forms of local democracy and government—representative, participatory, network and market—Sweeting and Copus (2012) make the point that such forms of local democracy exist and are likely to continue to exist, within a representative framework. Moreover, none of the four models of local democracy necessarily result in a powerful and independent system of local government or work as an antidote to centralisation. Developing this point Copus et al. (2013) argue for putting the government back into local government, and they envisage:

> a new style of territorial politics, not shaped by the state and central political institutions (Bulpitt 1983: 59) and not shaped by temporal developments that may be path dependent (Bradbury 2010). Rather, the role of local government is perceived to have broad governing powers and its responsibilities and role would be constitutionally protected. Indeed, the model moves beyond the idea of a 'dual polity' (see Carmichael 1996) and the notion of high and low politics to a 'localised polity' in which significant political and

> governing power rests with local government. If politicians today claim they are all 'localists now' then the localised polity tests the extent of that localism. (Copus et al. 2013: 399)

They are clear however that they are not arguing for a federal system, where a state government has control and oversight over local government, rather than a central authority. What Copus et al. (2013) propose governing system instead is the maximum localisation of political power, and their 'localised polity' would see maximum legislative freedom resting with the localities and the political power of the centre attenuated by those localities (Copus et al. 2013: 400–402). Copus (2016: 153–154) took the model further and talks of the 'localised state' as a federated entity. In that federation local government would have what in effect would be 'states rights', and primary legislative power would not only rest with local government but a six-point test would exist, which the centre would have to pass before legislating itself:

- Does the issue require a response that extends beyond the boundaries of the country—international affairs, treaties, economic arrangements?
- Is national security involved?
- Is it a tax-raising power needed for central government to carry out its functions?
- Is it an issue that requires regulating between local government such as currency, weights and measures, metric or imperial system usage?
- Does it affect national law and order issues and national policing? With the assumption that some criminal offences may vary in recognition as crimes and in the sanctions imposed for them and municipal police forces may exist by decisions of local government.
- Is it an issue which clearly, demonstrably and unequivocally must be dealt with at a national level (and as will be seen below, there are few issues, in a localised state, that require a yes answer to that question) (Copus 2016: 153–154)?

To some this may seem a flight of fantasy, but as Page (1991) pointed out, in some countries local politicians are as if not more powerful than national politicians. But, such policy narratives which provide a different way of thinking about organising a state and the relationship between the

centre and localities within it are a long way from the way in which the term 'localism' is understood within contemporary political debate.

The period of Labour governments from 1997 to 2010 produced a wealth of papers extolling their commitment to a form of localism and to powerful, modernised local government: *Modernising Local Government: Local Democracy and Community Leadership*; *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People*; *Local Leadership: Local Choice*; *Strong Local Leadership: Quality Public Services*; *The Future of Local Government: Developing a Ten Year Vision*, 2004; *Vibrant Local Leadership*, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*; and *Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power*. These publications formed the basis of a vision of localism that saw local government as a service provider or at least a body which oversaw the delivery of public services.

The modernisation papers set out a vision of local government which was based on a number of assumptions such as: an opaque, cumbersome committee system lacked transparency and accountability and therefore local government needed to be more open, transparent and visible and to do more to communicate with communities through participative democratic mechanisms; there was a failure of local leadership, which also needed to be more visible, transparent and accountable; that councillors spent too much time in meetings hidden away at the town hall, rather than engaging with local communities; that councils and councillors lack the ability, imagination and skills to solve complex policy problems; and that as a consequence of local government inability to respond to changing needs, it needed to be closely monitored and inspected.

To balance the rather negative view of local government, councils and councillors, in particular, were promised more powers and an enhanced role which was articulated, thus:

> Backbench councillors will spend less time in council meetings and more time in the local community, at residents' meetings or surgeries. They will be accountable, strong, local representatives for their area. They will bring their constituents views, concerns and grievances to the council through their council's structures. Their role will be to represent the people to the council rather than defend the council to the people.
>
> Each councillor will become a champion of their community defending the public interest in the council and channelling the grievances, needs and aspirations of their electorate into the scrutiny process. In-touch local councillors, aware of and responsive to the needs of those they represent, will

> have a greater say in the formulation of policy and the solving of local problems than they could have within current committee structures. (DETR 1998: 23–24)

The modernisation project was not indicative of a desire to enhance local government as a governing entity but of a localism that was a response to a set of assumptions about problems with local government and how they might be solved. Indeed the Brown premiership preferred to focus on regionally based solutions and regions themselves, as a response to what ailed the government of the country, even though regionalism was decisively and dramatically rejected (by almost 78% of voters) in a referendum on a North East Assembly in 2004. The Government at the time of the 2004 referendum had tied the creation of an elected regional chamber to the creation of unitary local government was, as a consequence of the referendum result, also rejected by the voters.

We can see that the logics of localism as narrated by the Blair and Brown governments also found a reflection in Conservative thinking at the time. In 2009, before becoming Prime Minister, David Cameron wrote in *The Guardian Newspaper* that 'the Conservative party wants nothing less than radical decentralisation, to reach every corner of the country.' That radical decentralisation—which formed the cornerstone of the 'Big Society' agenda—rested on the following:

> giving local people more power
> giving local councils much more power and responsibility
> restructuring of political power in cities (elected mayors)

He went on to say:

> Many worry that decentralisation is a step backwards. But localism isn't some romantic attachment to the past. It is absolutely essential to our economic, social and political future. If our local economies are vibrant and strong we are far less vulnerable to global shocks or the failures of a few dominant industries. If people know that their actions can make a real difference to their local communities, they're far more motivated to get involved—and civic pride is revived. If local government is both more powerful and more accountable, we can start to restore the trust that's been lost in our political system. It's for these practical reasons that I am a confirmed localist, committed to turning Britain's pyramid of power on its head. (Guardian: 17/2/2009)

The Localism Act which followed in 2011 was not however a great radical shift in central local relationships, even though it granted councils a new general power of competence to, in the words of part one, section one: A local authority has power to do anything that individuals generally may do. But, what we also see in the Act is a series of community rights over local government—the right to challenge to provide services provided by a council, right to bid where buildings and amenities can be kept in public use and nominated for inclusion on a list of assets of community value and a community right to build which enables local communities to undertake small-scale, specific, community-led development. The language of localism is not just, for Labour and Conservative (and coalition government), about local government, it is about often ill-defined communities, too.

Within this narrative context, localism is seen as a solution to a problem, and that problem, for the centre is with local government localism, is not the basis for a fundamental shift in the relationship between the centre and the localities. Indeed, we see from the brief introductory exploration of the contemporary use of localism (explored in more detail in the next chapter) that when the term localism is employed by policy-makers, they are certainly not referring to a localised state or to any system where local government becomes more local and more government. The term localism—as rehearsed in contemporary policy narratives—refers to decentralisation of functions and services and some additional financial controls; it does not imply a fundamental restructuring of the relationships between central and local government. Narratives of localism can at the same time appear to be offering greater power and responsibilities for local government while also providing a justification for continued central control and monitoring of local government and a faith that communities are the bedrock of a local system in a way they are not of at the central system. Local government is then rhetorically squeezed from above and below, at the same time. It is how that competition between contradictory policy narratives impacts upon local government which is the subject explored throughout the book.

Conclusion

As a creature of statute with no independent constitutional right to exist, local government in England has always been at the mercy of centralising tendencies existing at the level of national government. That the centre may have at times left local government alone was only because it suited

the centre's purposes, and over time there has been an intensifying control held by the centre over local government, again because it has suited central purposes. Those purposes have become clearer as modern industrial welfare states have developed and as the fortunes of central government have often been determined by the quality of public services and the strength of the national economy. Indeed, the conflict between maintaining local priorities and national standards of services means that localism often plays second place to avoiding the post-code lottery of public services (the term itself displays an anti-localism and is part of the language of centralism).

Policy narratives of localism and centralism construct support—among *elites*, the media and the public—for degrees of freedom and autonomy that are granted (or taken from) the localities within any political system. So, devolution, decentralisation and centralism need a supporting set of narratives which in turn provide a supporting cast of political actors to develop policies that shape the degree and nature of local autonomy. As we have seen above, as far as local government goes, decentralisation and devolution are variations of a centralist narrative designed to ensure central control continues in one form or another and that an alternative approach to government does not develop. We have offered, however, a brief insight to an antidote to centralisation in our 'strong localism'—our localised state.

What is intriguing about the competing approaches to government, centralism and localism, is that in contemporary setting at least, centralisers rarely narrate the benefits of centralism in robust terms—although the post-code lottery debate, as we shall see, comes closest to a full support for centralism, without employing the word 'centralism'. Localism, however, is a term employed by politicians across the political spectrum, even if it is used to disguise centralism or at least used to mean an attenuated or earned localism. We want to test the notion that 'we are all localists now' and to examine, by looking at the nature of political debate and government policy, what type of localist context local government exists within and what type of localism it will continue to be offered and the consequences.

The issues raised in this introductory chapter are explored in more detail throughout the book, and by the use of different contexts and examples, the importance of a localist perspective to local government, local democracy and local communities, is examined. Given the wide range of powers, functions, roles, responsibilities and relationships with the centre that exists for local government across the globe, it may seem strange to posit

a question: does local government have a future? It may seem particularly strange as central states are less and less likely to be able to provide, or oversee, the entire range of public services. But, that does not mean that local government will inevitably stay 'local' or 'government'. What is required is an analysis, understanding and framework that ensures those two essential features of any democratic system are protected and maintained, and that is what this book aims to provide. The final section of this chapter briefly sets out the overall structure of the book.

Structure of the Book

The exploration of the pervasive and consistent power of centralisation is explored in the book through the concept of policy narratives and in particular the centralist narrative that shapes so much public debate and frames the dialogue between central and local government. Chapter 2 sets out how we employ the concept throughout the book and also begins our exploration of the policy narrative of centralisation and how it shapes the nature of local government. That analysis is continued in Chap. 3 where the book explores the ebb and flow of the services' responsibilities into and out of local government. The chapter also establishes the centrality of public services for the purpose of local government and how that purpose is challenged when competitors emerge to share or take over the provision of public services. The chapter also examines the power of the centralist policy narrative when it comes to public service provision. In Chap. 4 we turn our attention to the structure, shape, size and boundaries of local government and to explore what the centralist policy narrative means for the very boundaries of units of local government. It examines how both 'local' and 'government' have been gradually erased from the centralist narrative and starts to provide an alternative to that narrative.

Chapter 5 moves on to conduct a necessary examination of the current government's devolution policies and explores the impact and implications of that agenda for local government. It asks whether or not we are seeing a fundamentally radical reformation of the role and nature of local government in England, or just a transfer of more stuff to do for our councils: the answer will not shock the reader. Developing from the arguments set out in Chap. 5, Chap. 6 explores the nature of the links between central and local government by focusing on party politics, the legislative duties of local government and finance. In examining these ties that bind local to central government, the chapter uncovers the reasons why, even

for some in local government, and autonomous and independent local government and a muscular approach to localism holds some fears: centralisers exist in local as well as local government and the chapter explores how those ties that bind could be cut. Our final chapter constructs an alternative narrative to that of centralisation. It does that to provide a normative platform for which to construct, not just a case for local government to be able to do more but for it to be able to act as a government of a locality. We finish our journey by providing the foundation stones for a localised state.

The book is unashamedly localist, but localist of a particular kind: muscular. We pull no punches in our normative position, and we deliberately set out to confront the pervasive, pernicious, poisonous but powerful narrative of centralism. There are some in local government who will no doubt argue we have gone too far and that what we propose is impossible. But, what we propose and even our foundation stones of a localist state in Chap. 7 are drawn from experiences and research into local and central government and exist, in one form or another, somewhere, we just pull that together and package it as the foundations for a new approach to governing. To those that may still be sceptical we say: Local government in England unite: you have nothing to lose but your chains. The next chapter examines how those chains may be understood.

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CHAPTER 2

Policy Narratives in Local and National Government

Introduction

The relationship between local and central government in the United Kingdom over the last 50 years has been typified by an odd mixture of conflict and consensus—conflict in the forms of an increasing distrust between the two tiers of government and the use of raw power to impose Westminster's will on the localities but also consensus across politicians around the general supremacy of the centre and indeed a willingness by many councils, which goes beyond mere compliance, to implement certain government policies in full. Several different approaches to understanding this paradox are available in the literature on politics and political analysis. Some tend to focus principally on the conduct of the actors at the centre of the drama; individuals such as Margaret Thatcher, Michael Heseltine, Derek Hatton and Ken Livingstone; and groups of actors such as New Labour, the Coalition, the Birmingham Labour party and the 'Manchester Men'. Others take as their starting point the institutional forces in play, the established ways of doing things at local and national government levels. Institutional approaches tend to highlight the differences between the formal rules and informal practices which constrain actors within each tier to explain the eruptions of conflict and the corresponding similarities to explain patterns of consensus.

In this book we recognise the importance of both agency (actors' strategies to achieve their aims) and structure (the constraints imposed on actors by institutions), but employ a rather different approach. We seek to

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C. Copus et al., *Local Government in England*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-26418-3_2

understand the developing set of relationships between local and central government through the concept of narrative or more specifically policy narratives. There are several reasons for this particular tack. Firstly, the use of the concept of narrative is increasingly evident in both popular and academic writing on politics but is often afforded a taken-for-granted quality in terms of what a narrative might be and how it impacts upon actors. This book offers an opportunity to explore some of these basic characteristics of narrative more fully. Secondly, from a more practical point of view, if one has ever worked in, or been elected to, local or central government, one is struck by the constant rehearsal of stories of certain events and individuals which often go back decades. These stories, clustering together into narratives and transmitting a normative message, not only constitute a substantial collective memory of the past but also influence the thinking and actions of politicians in the present and into the future. Finally, returning to the relationship between local and central government over the last 50 years, the conceptualisation of policy narratives used in this book specifically captures the consensus/conflict mix which has typified that era and is therefore particularly useful in understanding how this relationship has developed.

In this chapter we first outline the basic concepts underlying narrative and policy narratives. We then consider how one might recognise a policy narrative and how connections are sustained across a policy matrix. We outline how policy narratives influence us on a daily and long-term basis through shaping our thoughts and conduct and how they are reliant on human actors for their transmission and performance. Finally, we give some examples of policy narratives used in this book to bring these points to life.

What Is a Policy Narrative?

At its simplest a policy narrative is a set of stories which work together to shape our thoughts and actions in relation to political issues. In this book we will be focusing to a large extent on how local and central government actors' thoughts and actions are influenced by policy narratives, but we use the term 'our' here to indicate the ubiquity of policy narratives and their influence on many aspects of everybody's lives. For, as Boswell (2013: 620) points out, the list of those influenced by policy narratives goes way beyond the precincts of Westminster and the Town Hall. For example, those attempting to stimulate policy changes from outside the political

establishment, such as grass-roots activists and private sector lobbyists, often formulate their arguments within well-known scripts and plots. In academic circles, the intellectual trajectory of narrative has been similar to that of political analysis as a whole (Hay 2002: 1–58), with different schools of thought developing from a diverse range of sources and producing their own distinctive sub-literatures and controversies, but much of this work has been influenced by a critical perspective which examines how some voices and arguments are heard, while others are ignored (e.g. Jameson 1989; Roe 1994; Atkinson 2000; Stone 2002). And recently it is noticeable that political journalists have begun to use the term 'narrative' to express how politicians attempt to 'sell' their policies and programmes (e.g. Ashley 2013; Rawnsley 2015) to potential voters and 'ordinary citizens'.

If policy narratives influence most of us in some way, then what is their purpose? And why are they likely to be useful in understanding the relationship between central and local government? We start from the position that local and central government politicians are usually trying to find solutions to 'wicked issues'. They make take on this burden as a result of their own motion or in response to demands from pressure groups or the public at large. Trowler (2012) offers a description of wicked issues in terms of them being complex and difficult to understand: in addition, 'there are many causal levels; there is no clear "stopping point" where a solution has been reached; solutions are not clearly right or wrong.' Some examples which spring to mind in UK government which fit this description are raising educational standards for children, tackling drug abuse and homelessness and protecting the young and elderly from abuse by their carers. These types of policy problem are complex in terms of multiple causal chains and levels, and the solutions to them have been debated and contested over many decades. In terms of their visibility at the top of the political agenda, they follow a familiar cycle in which they briefly come to prominence, before being submerged, and reappearing in more or less the same form at a later date.

One of the purposes of policy narratives is that they allow disparate groups within society to reach some level of consensus around wicked issues such as these. Fischer (2003: 162–163) explains that policy narratives offer politicians and potential voters alike simplified accounts of the state of an issue, what has led to it and how things will or should play out. In this way they help people make sense of, and communicate about, complex and contested issues. Roe (1994: 50–51) adds that policy

narratives also give policy-makers the confidence to act and continue down that policy path 'in the face of what is genuinely uncertain and complex'. They do this by underwriting and stabilising the assumptions needed for politicians to make decisions about how to respond to the problems posed by wicked issues. Significantly for the themes which we pursue in this book, Roe (ibid.) argues that because they are so important in underwriting and stabilising, policy narratives are resistant to change in the face of empirical evidence to the contrary.

Here then Roe touches on one of the paradoxical elements of policy narratives: their capacity to promote consensus by suppressing conflict. Atkinson (2000: 213) argues that, in politics, consensus is bought at a price: 'Narratives attempt to project a particular version of reality, seeking to organize it in a certain manner while simultaneously attempting to mask or deny contradictions within that reality and limit our perception of such contradictions—a form of closure or what is termed a strategy of containment.' And the cementing an internal 'reality' by policy narratives in this way is often a precursor to conflict with an enemy without. In this vein Bevir and Rhodes' work on 'tradition' delineates three narratives of Thatcherism (2002: 142–148) which have factionalised the national Conservative Party and created consensus within, and conflict between, the separate Whig, Tory and Liberal traditions over the centuries. In this way, we can see that one of the main purposes of policy narratives is to allow groups of actors to form with common cause. But such groups often come together with the express purpose of taking on other groups who take a very different view of 'reality'.

One way of understanding how policy narratives can create both consensus and conflict in practice is to examine their stabilising effects alongside their essential requirement for performance. Because policy narratives are stable but not fixed, and they do not simply reside in people's heads or rest on the page; in order to do their work, they require actors to rehearse and perform them. They also need the work of human actors to adapt and nuance them in particular contexts and an audience to interpret their meaning and understand and support the policy solution which is being conveyed. In this way the core of any policy narrative remains the same and appeals to our sense of familiarity and the 'taken for granted', while the detail shifts to encompass the policy problem of the moment.

With this in mind, Boswell (2013: 622–624) offers a synthesis of narrative as a concept, which draws attention to its structural, stable features on the one hand and its more fluid, performance-based characteristics on

the other. In the first respect, policy narratives influence political actors' thoughts and actions 'by limiting the possible ways of viewing that issue'. Narratives possess a number of structural features which bound actors' perceptions and constrain their likely courses of action. Firstly, they are structured around 'plots' which link events together in causal chains and weave together 'the evidence' in such a way as to make the outcome seemingly inevitable. Secondly, they are populated by a cast of clearly defined characters who 'possess agency to varying degrees, some making conscious and consequential choices, with others being powerless in the face of events'. Thirdly, they are typified as 'canonical', in the sense that plots conform to well-worn scripts, and characters are often typecast as villains, victims and heroes. And finally, they transmit powerfully normative messages about how society should be and what action must be taken to secure this future.

In the second respect, Boswell (ibid. 623) argues that narratives are also typified by elements of fluidity and rely on actors for their maintenance and promulgation. Narratives are 'not fixed entities' but evolve through rehearsal and 'are always open to interpretation to some degree, both because narrative texts themselves are ambiguous and because their articulation in public debate is always diffuse'. Ambiguity is an important feature of policy narratives because sufficient imprecision of meaning and generalisation allows a diverse range of actors to interpret them to fit with their particular value orientations and join forces in support of, or opposition to, a particular policy. Articulation in public debate may reinforce these coalitional tendencies through rehearsal and confirmation but can also expose the different meanings concealed in that narrative and provoke clashes with counter-narratives articulated by opposition groups (see, e.g., Radaelli 1999; Miller 2012).

Ringen (2005) argues that governmental actors rely heavily on narrative interventions rather than simply on legislating: 'It does not help governments to be able to give orders … they need to be able to persuade…Regulating is not enough. Governments in addition depend on speaking. They need to explain, to "sell" their policies, to make themselves trusted'. Bevir and Rhodes (2012: 205) recount 'the performing game' in which Whitehall officials develop and test narratives as strategic responses to policy problems. Polanyi (1985: 187) emphasises the importance of both narratives' familiarity and their ability to connect with a particular audience: 'Speakers tell stories in conversation to make a point—to transmit a message, often some sort of moral evaluation or implied critical judgment—about the world the teller shares with other people.' Skilling

(2012: 364) argues that policy narratives typically include arguments as they make the 'normative leap from "is" to "ought"' (Rein and Schön 1993: 148). Policy narratives are not neutral descriptive accounts but performatives: attempts to act on their world through persuasion and, perhaps, manipulation'.

Beunen et al. (2013: 5) suggest that: 'Performance can be characterized as people bringing narrative to life and it can be described as a process of interpretation and embodiment of narrative.' Laws (2001: 7) considers the performative character of speech in deliberation and the misunderstandings and conflicts which can occur in deliberative arenas between narrator and audience. He argues 'For speech acts to go well there must be agreement on the conventional procedure that is being invoked and what this implies for who should be there, what is appropriate conduct and reasons. We would expect both a level of uncertainty and disagreement about these questions and an effort to resolve them. The latter might play out in the performative dimension of conversation rather than in the explicit content.' Hajer (2005: 447–448) argues for a 'dramaturgical dimension' in policy analysis which 'considers politics as "performance", as a sequence of staged events in which actors interactively decide on how to move on'. With relevance to misunderstandings and conflict, he suggests that when participants ponder the conventions appropriate to the arena in which they are performing: 'perhaps an answer to the question cannot be found in the register of political practices known to them. Or, more precisely, different actors most likely will understand the practice in terms of their own register.' Laws and Hajer, in particular, therefore remind us that the performance of policy narratives introduces a number of possibilities for conflicts to occur which are not so much of the head to head, intentional type outlined, for example, in the struggle between the Whig, Tory and Liberal traditions within the Conservative Party, but originate more innocently from actors' thoughts and actions being shaped by different narrative material and different understandings of 'reality'.

In summary, this brief literature review explains how the term policy narrative is used in this book and offers some insights into how the constraining and performative characteristics of narrative contribute to the flow of conflict and consensus in politics. As a conceptual framework for understanding the role of narrative in politics, the relationships between constraint and performance and consensus and conflict can be summarised as follows. Policy narratives build consensus across a political group by limiting the possible ways of viewing any policy problem. However to

achieve this, narratives simplify complex political dilemmas and disguise internal conflicts. In relation to outside political groupings, policy narratives are often sources of division and conflict because their function is to unite the group internally against a common enemy, drawing on stark distinctions between 'Them and Us'. Narrative constraint serves to produce consensus, therefore, while at the same time embedding potentials for conflict. Performance is required in addition to constraint, because narratives cannot do their work without the efforts of human actors who adjust the content and normative messages to fit the policy problem at issue. These acts of performance may reinforce a pre-existing consensus but may also expose the simplifications and internalised conflict which constraint has sought to disguise. Performance also invites conflict from oppositional groups and can produce misunderstandings with those in the target audience whose thoughts are shaped by different narrative configurations.

How Would I Recognise One?

As we apply the concept in this book, a single policy narrative comprises of several embedded stories, so that, while a narrative is an account of a 'grand conception', a story is a specific contextualised exemplar which supports and enriches our appreciation of that conception (Feldman et al. 2004). So we might read in a national newspaper, or hear on the news, a particular story about, for example, how a child has been neglected or killed by its parents, and then see this used to support a grand conception that the council which provides child protection services in the area is dangerously incompetent and 'chronically failing'. Equally we might see a story on TV about an MP who has been accused of 'fiddling' his or her expenses and see this placed within an overarching narrative about a corrupt political elite in the 'Westminster Bubble' which is out of touch with the electorate.

We can identify a policy narrative therefore by tracing the single story through to a collection of stories which come together to provide a grand conception, which, in its effects on both the teller and the audience, is greater than the sum of its parts. An important element of the added value which policy narratives bring to what otherwise might be a collection of loosely connected stories lies in their tendentious relationship with 'the facts'. In bringing together what may appear to be objective or neutral observations on the world, they actually consolidate particular sets of values and define power relationships. And so, they provide an account not

just of how things are but also a 'normative leap' to where we should be in the future and how we should get there. And so in the two examples given above, the single story which is very specific to a particular person and sequence of events leads to a much broader conclusion about the type of problem which needs to be solved and what the solution will be.

If, as outlined above, constraint and performance and consensus and conflict are important processes in creating these effects, then we should be able to use these too to recognise policy narratives. Atkinson (ibid. 213) argues that policy narratives constrain by 'attempting to mask or deny contradictions … a form of closure or what is termed a strategy of containment'. So with regard to the child protection case or the MP above, as an audience we are aware that things are usually a bit more complicated than they first seem in such 'scandals', but the policy narrative into which the specific story fits glosses over such concerns and leads towards a relatively simple diagnosis and agenda for action. Political actors benefit from the degree of consensus which is produced by this stabilisation and simplification in terms of policy making and implementation, but underneath the wicked issue remains amorphous and complex, and its conflicts and contradictions are only temporarily submerged. A second price which is usually paid for the capacity to move policy forward in this way is the drawing of stark distinctions between 'Them and Us'. With regard to the child protection case, a conflictual distinction may be drawn between Them 'The Council' and Us 'Outraged Citizens'. Similarly in the case of the MP's expenses, it may be drawn between Them 'in the Westminster Bubble' and Us 'The Electorate in the Real World'. From this perspective we can recognise a policy narrative in terms of understanding the ways in which it buys time and space for politicians to act on wicked issues in the immediate future, but builds in the probability of conflict and, at best, only partial success, further down the line.

The performance of policy narratives is required because they cannot do their work without the efforts of human actors who adjust the content and normative messages to fit the policy problem at issue. In both the case examples used here, acts of performance, often in the form of media reporting, debates in parliament, claim and counter-claim, will reinforce a pre-existing consensus around the incompetence of councils and the corrupt nature of politicians which has been built up over decades of narrative layering. One more story as a specific exemplar of a generalising and simplifying narrative adds another coat of taken-for-grantedness and hardens attitudes to the culprits a little further. But the recounting of the specific circumstances, and the debate which follows, will also expose contradic-

tions and inconsistencies which the simplifying and stabilising functions of narrative have served to disguise. Public performance will draw out resistance and calls for fair treatment from those accused of incompetence and corruption, during which the wicked issue is, temporarily at least, exposed in some of its complexity and uncertainty. With regard to the child protection case, local politicians and managers may point out, for example, that the council's record on child protection is generally a good one, and its practices and procedures have recently been endorsed by the national inspectorate. In the case of the MP's expenses, local party officials and constituents may rehearse stories of him or her as an honest and conscientious MP whose conduct has been above reproach in the past. And so we can recognise a policy narrative in terms of understanding the ways in which its performance in a variety of theatres will consolidate its normative message with particular audiences, but will also provoke resistance and specific counter-examples from other groups of actors.

The balance between how far the established narrative is consolidated and whether resistance exposes the complexity and uncertainty of a wicked issue is very important in the context of this book, and particularly with regard to the relationship between local and national government. Roe (ibid. 50–51) suggests that precisely because they are so important in underwriting and stabilising political agency, policy narratives are resistant to change in the face of empirical evidence to the contrary: 'As such policy narratives can be representationally inaccurate—and recognisably so—but still persist, indeed thrive. In fact when one narrative more than any other becomes the way we best articulate our 'real' feelings or make sense of the uncertainties and ambiguities around us, then we are often willing to put up with that narrative, no matter how empirically objectionable it is in many other respects.'

Here we believe Roe is talking about both politicians and their audience. That is to say, political actors become dependent on certain policy narratives because these appear to be the only way of navigating a path through the choppy waters created by particular wicked issues. If they had to take into account the full complexity and uncertainty around these policy problems, they would never be able to make a decision on how to move forward. If later they decide to change course, then the political risks and costs are high. They have to find an alternative stabilising narrative, sell this to the public, explain why the new narrative is better than the old and hope for forgiveness for a 'U-turn'. Accordingly there is a tendency to ignore, or explain away, what appears to be evidence undermining the credibility of a policy narrative to which actors are heavily committed,

because the implication of accepting such evidence is that policy must change and the resultant political costs must be paid.

In a rather different way, as citizens, we often become committed to particular policy narratives because of their strongly normative messages which appeal to values, rather than 'facts'. From this angle it may be more important for us to be able to express our disgust and anger at child protection failures or high-level corruption than become engrossed in the ambiguities and contradictions to which such cases give rise. Roe's point here is that policy narratives often have a strongly affective quality which is more about dealing with unsettling emotions than weighing evidence. In this way, we can recognise a policy narrative in terms of understanding the ways in which it often locks both politicians and citizens into apparently irrational ways of thinking and acting in contradiction of mounting evidence to the contrary.

This discussion leads to consideration of a final key characteristic. Policy narratives do not operate within a contained time and space. They reach back into the past and influence the future. They also gain support from, and clash with, narratives from other policy areas and interconnect with wider-ranging narratives (sometimes referred to as 'meta-narratives') which express a broader value base. In this way they can be identified as occupying a place within a spatial and temporal matrix, so that in the child protection case, the dangerously incompetent and 'chronically failing' policy narrative may be connected into narratives about the 'dysfunctional' politics of the council historically, the prevalence of such cases in areas of high poverty and deprivation and whether it is realistic to think that levels of protection will 'ever reach 100%'. A matrix can similarly be outlined in terms of the MP's expenses which would include narratives relating to whether MPs have been adequately remunerated in the past, whether they have progressively 'lost touch with ordinary people' and the prevalence of 'arrogant Metropolitan elitists' in both major parties.

Examples of Policy Narratives and How the Concept Is Used in This Book

One of the key themes of this book is the idea that the balance of power between central and local government has shifted so far in favour of the former over the last 50 years as to make the relationship between the two abrasive and unproductive. In response to this deterioration, Westminster and Whitehall have seen fit to impose their will on the localities by direct

and formal means, but we also observe a consensus across politicians around the general supremacy of the centre, and indeed a willingness by many councils which goes beyond mere compliance, to implement certain government policies in full. We believe that the potency of policy narratives helps to explain both these trends. That is to say, in central government well-established and long-running policy narratives have played an important part in shaping the thoughts and actions of ministers and senior civil servants in a largely negative way. Following on from Roe above, they have allowed these actors to plot a path through the complex and uncertain issues which arise the operation of local government in the United Kingdom and appear steadfast and determined in the face of arguments to the contrary. Such an approach helps to explain why, over that 50 years, the politicians and the parties in power have changed many times, but the approach of the centre to the localities has remained on the same course. A discontinuity of actors which would normally have produced variegation has been more than compensated for by the constraining and shaping effects of the dominant narratives. Equally the potency of policy narratives goes some way to explaining why ministers who have made their way up from local government show little sympathy for it when they attain office and are sometimes openly hostile to their old stamping ground.

Citizens for their part have lost confidence in both national and local actors but have identified 'The Council' as a less distant and more easily typecast villain on which to vent their anger and disappointment. In local government itself, the accumulating effects of narrative consolidation over half a century have convinced many actors that the centre is indeed supreme and have created an apologetic consensus in many councils that the local government of which they are a part is simply a rather inefficient device for implementing the policies of the government of the day. Such an approach helps to explain why, over those 50 years, resistance to control from the centre has been isolated and ineffective and leads to the conclusion that the representative organisations who were expected to put the case for the localities, such as SOLACE (for local authority chief executives) and the LGA (for local councillors), have been unable to locate a potent counter-narrative in support of local government.

In Chap. 3, we consider three 'meta-narratives' which span policy fields and have become embedded in actors' thoughts over decades. We record them chronologically in terms of their emergence to prominence over the decades as *The Sovereign Council*, *New Public Management* and Network Governance. In The Sovereign Council set of stories, the council is sov-

ereign both politically and in terms of service provision to citizens. It is narrated as the only legitimate elected body in its geographical area, as well as providing most of what Cochrane (1993) calls the services of the 'local welfare state' (e.g. education, leisure facilities, libraries and housing). Policy narratives carry a strong normative message, and in this case the local authority's monopoly on political sovereignty and near monopoly of service provision are both seen as 'good things'. Furthermore these two principal components reinforce one another's normative impact, and so, for example, it is narrated as right and proper that such 'quality of life' services should be delivered by an organisation which is directly responsible, and democratically accountable, to local citizens.

Critics of local government are inclined to use the same basic stories about 'The Sovereign Council' to draw out detail and interpretation which places it in a more negative light. The 'rotten borough' narrative is a generalised conception of local government as inevitably corrupt. The stories which comprise the grand conception in this case tend to focus on favouritism (e.g. giving jobs to friends and relatives), financial gain (e.g. taking bribes for planning permission) and electoral impropriety (e.g. buying votes, 'ballot stuffing'). The 'dangerously incompetent council' also has a range of possible storylines but since the 1970s has tended to focus on child protection scandals where council employees (usually along with members of the police force and health services) have failed to protect a child from harm at the hands of its carers. This policy narrative is often interconnected with the 'chronically failing' narrative which widens out criticism from individual child protection cases to failures to improve educational attainment among children and factional conflicts among members which throw doubt on the authority's political leadership.

By contrast the 'bureaucracy gone mad' narrative can relate to any public organisation, but has a particularly potent variant in the 'wastrel council' and 'health and safety gone mad' stories which often involve caricatures of 'jobsworths' and 'political correctness (gone mad)'. Hence the normative message tends to involve criticism of what the council does, rather than what is does not do, and presents local authority workers as constantly interfering in ways which compromise citizens' individual freedoms. Finally, 'stick in the mud councils' is a narrative rehearsed by civil servants and central government politicians which charges local government generally with a reluctance to accept the case for change and an inability to innovate—seemingly fixed, heavily institutionalised character-

istics which are usually contrasted with the flexibility and inventiveness of the private sector.

From the 1980s onwards, the problem of what to do about The Sovereign Council's alleged inefficiencies and incompetence has fitted the bill in terms of complexity and contestation, and the *New Public Management* (NPM) policy narrative continues to provide a set of simple solutions. From the academic perspective, Hood (1991) and Pollitt's (1993) work examined NPM as a worldwide policy narrative which stressed the importance of management and 'production engineering' in public service delivery, often linked to doctrines of economic rationalism. In simpler terms, the essential moral promulgated by the NPM set of stories is that if the public sector adopted the good habits and practices of the private sector, then it would become much more competent and efficient.

In seminal work Rhodes (1996) argued that the system of local govern*ment* was being transformed into a system of local govern*ance* 'involving complex sets of organisations from the public and private sectors'. The various service sectors within local councils could not achieve their objectives without creating networks of exchange with private and voluntary sector organisations, and public sector management should primarily be concerned therefore with 'getting things done through other organisations'. As applied to local government, the *Network Governance* narrative provided a simple diagnosis and solution, therefore, to the problems created by the monolithic and isolationist tendencies which had been identified in the critical versions of The Sovereign Council narrative. As a bonus, it also implied that councils would become more efficient and competent through the exchange resources and negotiate shared purposes with outside agencies.

The ways in which policy narratives enable actors to pursue a centralising agenda are examined in more detail in Chap. 4 where we explore how the structural re-organisation of local government and the constant trend of creating larger units of local government has resulted, in some cases, in deliberately concocted and neutral council names, and a further delocalising of local government. The proliferation of a narrative to ensure continued central control and oversight of council finances is explored in Chap. 6; in Chap. 5 we see how a policy narrative has shaped the current government's devolution agenda, which ironically demonstrates a top-down, centralised approach to the passing down of functions and responsibilities to new sub-national entities: combined authorities.

In relation to policy narratives which have taken a positive view of local government, for the reasons articulated above, these have tended to be lacking at national level. Attempts to develop these at a local level through councils' own publications (e.g. newspapers to households) and increasingly online have often themselves been re-interpreted as 'Council Propaganda' and connected into the 'wastrel council'. In the age of austerity and severe cuts to budgets, individual local authorities have felt the need to move further away from service provision and attempt to reinvent themselves as brokers rather than providers. The policy narratives which have emerged to justify these changes include the 'Co-ordinating Council', the 'Catalyst Council', the 'Co-operative Council', the 'Commissioning Council' as well as the 'Future Council', the 'easyCouncil' and the 'Entrepreneurial Council' (APSE 2014: 9). The common idea which these policy narratives share is one of 'transformation' although to date none of these seem to have gained any currency on the national stage.

Narratives developed in academia have met with rather more success in grabbing central government politicians' attention if only sporadically. In the mid-1990s, Clarke and Stewart (1994) put forward a concept of Community Governance which attempted to reshape the Enabling Authority narrative developed by the previous Conservative administrations in a way which recognised local government's special role in working with communities and citizens. Clarke and Stewart suggested that councils should have the prime responsibility for securing the wellbeing of communities in a complex and uncertain world, working in partnership with others to meet needs and secure wellbeing and finding new ways of communicating with citizens to identify community needs and facilitate 'collective choice'. As Sullivan notes (2004: 182–198), while the incoming New Labour government took up the narrative of Community Governance and translated some of its principles into policies and practices, across the piece the developing configuration was quickly marginalised and undermined by narratives, practices and policy making which pulled in the opposite direction. Despite resonating with the wellbeing of communities, the Coalition's Big Society and Localism agendas tended to work, in narrative and in practice, against giving councils a particular responsibility for communities, and in the Open Public Services White paper (2011), central government took a step backward in narrating the role of local authorities as purely 'enablers'.

More recently APSE and De Montfort University (2014) have developed the concept of the 'Ensuring Council' in direct contrast to the Enabling Authority. Ensuring is a term coined by Giddens (2009) writing on the 'Politics of Climate Change' and resonates with the community governance narrative in that it places a responsibility on the state to ensure the wellbeing of its citizens and its communities. However, rather than attempting to modify the Enabling Authority narrative which implies the handing over of responsibility to others, the Ensuring Council narrative explains why councils should actively pursue the responsibility to act as local leaders and place shapers which has lain within their grasp for some time.

The core narrative is built around three themes: the role of local stewardship, that is to say, the active rather than passive role outlined in the paragraph above; a corresponding opposition to seeing councils simply as strategic commissioners of services and a commitment to continuing to provide a range of good quality in-house services; and demands for a fair financial settlement between central and local government. What we might call sub-narratives are captured in three different storylines and roles for inhabitants of the Ensuring Council. 'Public stewards' are best characterised by their support for in-house public service delivery and their recognition of its strategic advantages over alternative forms of service delivery. 'Local brokers' are distinguished from public stewards by their comparative openness to different modes of service provision. Their commitment to in-house services tends to rest on a case-by-case evaluation of the efficiency of in-house services. 'Public valuers' are distinguished from other local practitioners and officials by their more positive attitudes towards the engagement of the voluntary and community sector in the delivery of public services.

Coming to the Coalition and David Cameron's Conservative government, as noted above, the Localism narrative, which seemed to offer some hope of a positive attitude towards councils, was not embedded by its proponents to anywhere near sufficient depth to challenge the dominance of the prevailing negative policy narratives. Plans for devolution of powers to city sub-regions in England seemed to be struggling in the same way until George Osborne, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, rehearsed what became known as 'the Northern Powerhouse' narrative:

> The cities of the north are individually strong, but collectively not strong enough. The whole is less than the sum of its parts. So the powerhouse of

> London dominates more and more. And that's not healthy for our economy. It's not good for our country. We need a Northern Powerhouse too. Not one city, but a collection of northern cities—sufficiently close to each other that combined they can take on the world. (George Osborne MP, Chancellor of the Exchequer. Speech introducing the Northern Powerhouse in Manchester, 23 June 2014)

Whether or not this particular policy narrative can promote a positive image of the government of Manchester and the other cities involved remains to be seen. Detractors (it has to be said with a political axe to grind) are already attempting to destabilise it by recoining the phrase 'The Northern *Poor*house'. Haughton et al. (2016) meanwhile echo Roe's comments above about the tendency for politicians to ignore, or in this case, be selective about, the evidence they rely on to sell policy narratives: 'Evidence-based policy is central to the political appeal of the Manchester model, but our work begins to expose how this involved the adoption of a particular economic model, agglomeration economics, with theory playing a less celebrated but nonetheless crucial mediating role that resulted in some questionable decisions about the way in which evidence was assembled and used to inform policy decisions'. (2016: 13)

Conclusion

Actors make things happen, but they do so in a particular context and with their thoughts and actions influenced by the ideas which prevail in that context. In the developing relationships between local and national government, the political parties in power and the key actors in Westminster and Whitehall, County and Town Halls have changed many times, but over those 50 years, very different sets of actors have done broadly the same thing, and in so far as things have changed, the conflict between local and national government has intensified. Why do we observe this consistency of trend despite the obvious discontinuity of actors?

A large part of the answer to this question, we believe, lies in the power and persistence of the policy narratives which are embedded in the fabric of English local and national politics and supply a continuity which transcends the arrival and departure of any individual or group of actors. Policy narratives in this conception are stories, clustering together and transmitting a normative message, and which not only

constitute a substantial collective memory of the past but also influence the thinking and actions of politicians in the present and into the future. As such they provide an account not just of how things are but also a 'normative leap' to where we should be in the future and how we should get there.

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CHAPTER 3

Fragmentation and Centralisation

Introduction

Public sector organisations lose power and influence in a variety of different ways. Some disappear altogether in a comparatively short time, but radical deinstitutionalisation is rare with competences and responsibilities often being passed on to new organisations or appended to existing ones. Slow, incremental decline is a more common fate, perhaps interrupted by occasional glimmers of hope as the downward trend is temporarily reversed. English local authorities have been losing powers and resources to directly provide services to citizens for over 30 years, but this is only part of the story. If one is of a cheery disposition, one could point to the way in which they have adapted to these changing circumstances and highlight the odd examples in which central government has produced legislation and funding projects which offer new opportunities for councils to engage with citizens. From our perspective such appeals to appreciate the ingenuity of local politicians and managers in making the 'best of a bad job' are at best Panglossian and at worst dangerously complacent. For, in our analysis, local government's decline is as much about a loss of identity as it is about loss of empire. The cumulative impact of decades of chipping away at powers and resources, reorganising structures and boundaries and rehearsing highly critical narratives of local government has left many people at all levels confused about what local government actually does and, most fundamentally, what it is for. Organisations which

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C. Copus et al., *Local Government in England*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-26418-3_3

lose their sense of purpose in this way lose public support and are diminished incrementally.

And one does not have to be a conspiracy theorist or a 'doom-monger' to subscribe to this view. It seems unlikely, for example, that such a negative outcome has been at the heart of central government's intentions for local government for the last 30 years. But surveying the local authority scene in England one is struck by the lack of consistent patterns of form and function within, and across, councils. Some of this variegation is to be welcomed, if it reflects citizens' wishes and demands, and indeed throughout their history, councils have been shaped to some extent by their particular local context. And as always, some continuities persist, not least in the hierarchical nature of the political and managerial systems in most local authorities. But, when taken as a whole, the overall impression is one of fragmentation, and an apparent lack any strategic intent, or locally qualified justification for such variety—a jigsaw of boundaries, political structures and services in which the pieces belong to several sets rather than to one and have been mixed up together. For, in terms of identity and purpose, it is difficult to determine exactly what services any one council provides, and almost impossible to identify what services citizens can reasonably expect to receive from it, or from councils across the country as a whole. How did such a chaotic situation come about across a range of organisations which are often narrated as monolithic, incapable of innovation and institutionally resistant to change?

The geographical variegation created by the restructuring of local government and debates over the optimum size of local authorities will be considered in the next chapter of this book. Here we focus on the questions of how and why the services provided by councils to citizens have become so fragmented and principally consider the time period from the 1980s when these cleavages began to appear and subsequently increased in width and depth. As we outlined in Chap. 2, we take the view that successive and changing groups of political actors have set these changes in train, but they have done so influenced in their thought and conduct by policy narratives which have created a curious mixture of conflict and consensus in the relationship between local and central government. Conflict in terms of increasing distrust and imposition of change from above, but also consensus about the general supremacy of the centre, and a willingness by many councils, which goes beyond compliance, to embrace certain government policies in full.

Given the timescale from the 1980s to date, and the range of services and organisations which could be considered, we are somewhat spoilt for choice in teasing out precisely which policy narratives demand our attention. Here we prioritise what can be called meta-narratives in the sense that they have the capacity to span this political time and space. We first outline the three policy narratives to which we refer by their titles used in the academic literature: *The Sovereign Council*, *New Public Management*, and *Network Governance*. We then examine the policy areas of housing and education to illustrate the effects of fragmentation, centralisation and residualisation on key services.

Three Layers of Policy Narratives—Building Consensus, Fuelling Conflict

In Chap. 2 we defined a policy narrative as a set of stories which work together to shape our thoughts and actions in relation to political issues. One of the purposes of policy narratives is to allow different sets of actors to reach some level of consensus around the 'wicked issues' which local authority services deal with on a daily basis. Policy narratives provide politicians and citizens alike with simplified accounts of the current state of these types of issue, how this came about and how things will or should play out in the future. In this way they give policy-makers at local and national levels the confidence to act and continue down a particular path in the face of uncertainty and complexity, 'events' and the strong emotions which are normally associated with 'quality of life' issues. Because they act as simplifiers and stabilisers, policy narratives are not generally responsive to evidence which indicates an alternative path would be more effective. Indeed one of their prime functions is to downplay conflict and complexity, and in particular: 'Narratives attempt to project a particular version of reality, seeking to organize it in a certain manner while simultaneously attempting to mask or deny contradictions within that reality and limit our perception of such contradictions—a form of closure or what is termed a strategy of containment' (Atkinson 2000: 213).

However, if we accept that the wicked policy issues for which local authorities are responsible (e.g. housing, education, child protection, economic regeneration) are, by definition, already conflicted and from time to time the subjects of heated debate, then processes based on containment and consensus are only ever going to be partially successful. In the

conduct of realpolitik, internal contradictions in the narratives themselves and factionalism in the political groupings which coalesce around them are exposed as the narratives are rehearsed and applied to problems in specific service areas. Equally conflict is generated externally as these groups and factions collide with others whose thoughts and actions are informed by a different narrative base. In the local authority setting therefore, as elsewhere, policy narratives will be sources of both consensus and conflict between groups of actors.

Here we consider three 'meta-narratives' which span policy fields and have become embedded in actors' thoughts over decades. For each we first outline the account which takes a positive view of the normative messages this gives out about local government, before giving the more critical versions informing its critics. We record them chronologically in terms of their emergence to prominence over the decades as *The Sovereign Council*, *New Public Management*, and *Network Governance*. However it is important to note that, although these are presented sequentially, the incoming policy narrative does not overcome and replace the others, but takes its place in contestation alongside it, and as a result, for much of the three decades under examination, all three policy narratives we cover are influencing actors' thoughts and actions and pulling them in different directions. We argue that this 'layering' of contradictory narrative forces goes a long way to answering the question we posed in the introduction to this chapter, how did such a chaotic situation come about in local government, and plays a large part in producing the loss of identity and fragmentation which we observe in the local government scene as a whole.

The Sovereign Council Policy Narrative

Skelcher (2004: 28–29) uses the term 'The Sovereign Council' as both an 'ideal-typical representation of local government under the welfare state regime of the period from the mid-1940s to the early 1980s' and a concept which 'conveys the empirical reality of the way in which communities were governed in this period'. Here we use the term to refer to a policy narrative which persists in local councils to the present day as an account of not only how things were done in the past but also how local government *is* conducted now and *should be* in the future. In this set of stories, the council is sovereign both politically and in terms of service provision to citizens. It is narrated as the only legitimate elected body in its geographical area, as well as providing most of what Cochrane (1993) calls

the services of the 'local welfare state' (e.g. education, leisure facilities, libraries and housing). Policy narratives carry a strong normative message, and in this case the local authority's monopoly on political sovereignty and near monopoly of service provision are both seen as 'good things'. Furthermore these two principal components reinforce one another's normative impact, and so, for example, it is narrated as right and proper that such 'quality of life' services should be delivered by an organisation which is directly responsible, and democratically accountable, to local citizens.

Both critical friends and critical enemies of local government are inclined to use the same basic stories about 'The Sovereign Council' to draw out detail and interpretation which places it in a more negative light. Among critical friends can be numbered scholars who have observed how political sovereignty can easily tip over into an indifference to engagement with citizens once election campaigns are over. These accounts demonstrate the isolationist and unresponsive characteristics of The Sovereign Council which rests complacently on its local election successes. Skelcher et al. (2005), Sullivan et al. (2006), Davies (2007) and Newman and Clarke (2009) all contribute to a research agenda which focuses on local elected members and council employees who perceive their actions as legitimised beyond any effective public scrutiny because they have been democratically elected.

The interpretations influencing critical enemies of local government, often based in the media and central government, have viewed the near monopoly, and continuing involvement, of councils in service provision as inefficient and incompetent, and in the previous chapter, we outlined five versions of this policy narrative. The 'rotten borough' version is a generalised conception of local government as corrupt. Its stories focus on favouritism and financial and electoral impropriety. The 'dangerously incompetent council' has tended to rehearse accounts of child protection scandals where council employees have failed to protect a child from harm at the hands of its carers. This set of stories is often interconnected with the 'chronically failing' narrative which widens out criticism from individual child protection cases to failures to improve educational attainment among children and factional conflicts among members which through doubt on the authority's political leadership. The 'bureaucracy gone mad' narrative is comprised of stories which involve caricatures of 'jobsworths' and 'political correctness (gone mad)'. 'Stick in the mud councils' charges local government generally with a reluctance to accept the case for change and an inability to innovate—heavily institutionalised characteristics which

are usually contrasted with the flexibility and inventiveness of the private sector.

'The Sovereign Council' meta-narrative continues to provide a focus for groups with very different perspectives on local government and as such generates both consensus and conflict. In its less critically orientated versions, it reinforces a consensus that it is right and proper the services of the local welfare state should be delivered by an organisation which is directly responsible to citizens through the ballot box. In its more critical versions, it provides a number of potent lines of argument for those who question whether this accountability works in practice and whether councils are capable of delivering these important and expensive services efficiently and competently.

The New Public Management Policy Narrative

In the second half of the 1970s, these critical lines of argument, which had been rehearsed largely in the background throughout local government's existence, emerged more strongly to influence the Labour government of that period. In the 1980s they came to prominence under a Conservative administration which did not indulge the 'post war consensus' on public spending or the One Nation Tories' commitment to the principles of the welfare state. After a decade in which central government had encouraged the development of local authority services, now guided by a rather more austere financial narrative of 'good housekeeping', its role changed to seeing itself as responsible for keeping councils' spending under control. As we noted above, one of policy narratives' main functions is to offer simple solutions to governments when faced with complex and contested problems. From the 1980s onwards, the problem of what to do about The Sovereign Council's alleged inefficiencies and incompetence has fitted the bill in terms of complexity and contestation, and the New Public Management (NPM) policy narrative continues to provide a set of simple solutions.

From the academic perspective, Hood (1995) and Pollitt's (1993) work examined NPM as a worldwide policy narrative which stressed the importance of management and 'production engineering' in public service delivery, often linked to doctrines of economic rationalism. In simpler terms, the essential moral promulgated by the NPM set of stories is that if the public sector adopted the good habits and practices of the private sector, then it would become much more competent and efficient. Sullivan

(2004: 184–185) offers a neat summary of NPM's core themes in terms of central government's attempts to realise this transformation. Control over councils' spending was increased through the Standard Spending Assessment and council spending itself was 'capped'. Compulsory Competitive Tendering was introduced to push services into external markets, while purchaser-provider splits within services were intended to recreate the structure and relationships common in business between those supplying a product and those buying it. The Audit Commission was set up at this time as the authoritative narrator of NPM and, through performance indicators, inspection and league tables, became the ultimate arbiter of whether individual councils were delivering the 3Es (economy, efficiency and effectiveness) to their citizens.

To complement and enhance the core NPM narrative, citizens who had previously been identified as 'clients' or 'service users' were reframed as 'customers', and an insistence on 'value for money', 'quality' and 'choice' recreated the language of active and self-interested individuals shopping around for the best product. Similarly 'rolling back the state' narrated the need for central government to displace The Sovereign Council's near monopoly on providing services by developing alternative means of delivery modelled on the private sector. In practice some whole services, such as Training and Enterprise Councils, were taken away from local government and given over the private sector leadership. However, in education, training, housing and regeneration, large parts of the service were reformed as quangos, or 'quasi-governmental bodies that are appointed rather than elected and have responsibility of shaping, purchasing and delivering … public policy' (Skelcher 1998: 1).

As we emphasise throughout this book, the power of policy narratives relies more on what Lukes (1974) called 'shaping preferences' than direct coercion, and, although central government certainly did its best to force the storylines and practices of NPM on local authorities, many officers within councils took to NPM enthusiastically, and many remain enthusiastic advocates of this form of managerialism to this day. A similar combination of effects can be seen among elected members. Here, as Snape (2004: 63) recounts central government used the Audit Commission to drive 'efficiency' into the committee system through its direct power. But in addition, Manchester City Council has provided an example of 'urban entrepreneurialism' for several decades which appears to be generated primarily by a locally based elite (Ward et al. 1996; Ward 2003). In this way it has become a favourite of central government and a coalition of

senior actors from the public and private sectors—the 'Manchester Men' (Tickell and Peck 1996)—has driven forward a supply-side strategy based upon property-led regeneration and place-marketing. From this perspective therefore NPM is narrated as 'a good thing' that not only promotes economy, efficiency and effectiveness in councils but also has the potential to boost the local economy and brings reward and other gestures of approval from central government.

Critics use the same basic stories about NPM to draw out detail and interpretation which places it in a much more negative light. Elected members and academics, for example, have questioned whether a narrative and set of practices which relies so heavily on a private sector business model can usefully be applied to what are fundamentally democratically governed responsibilities. Here they rehearse the normative message from The Sovereign Council narrative which asserts that it is right and proper that 'quality of life' services should be delivered by an organisation which is directly responsible, and accountable, to local citizens. In this vein Weir and Hall (1994) first used the term 'democratic deficit' to indicate that public services which were outsourced to the private sector, or located in quangos, were often removed from this sort of scrutiny and accountability. At the same time council officers and practitioners charged with realising 'value for money', 'quality' and 'choice' pointed out that these terms have limited credibility where only pseudo-markets exist, and politicians are able to interfere with their operation almost at will.

In producing his early work on the Network Governance narrative, Rhodes (1996: 663–664) criticised the managerialism of NPM for its inward-looking focus and drew attention to its similarities to The Sovereign Council narrative, at least in terms of its emphasis on hierarchical control. He argued that its 'managementby-objectives' was already outdated and that 'NPM may suit line bureaucracies but it is inappropriate for managing interorganizational networks and, more important such networks undermine NPM with its intra-organizational focus on objectives and results.' Bevan and Hood (2006) drew attention to the perverse incentives which are generated by the use of performance indicators in the English public healthcare sector, and it seems reasonable to assume that target systems of this type have invited 'gaming' by managers and other actors in the local authority services subjected to the same regime. Bevan and Hood defined gaming as reactive subversion such as 'hitting the target and missing the point' or reducing performance where targets do not apply—in other words cheating, and using loopholes in the scoring system, to maximise

one's score on the relevant performance indicators while ignoring the needs and welfare of the service user (or 'customer').

Some critics have suggested that NPM, at least as a set of practices, is now in terminal decline. Indeed, in 2006 Dunleavy et al. (2005) announced 'the death of NPM' as the result of a 'cumulation of adverse indirect effects on citizens' capacities for solving social problems because NPM has radically increased institutional and policy complexity'. By then the credibility of the Audit Commission, in many ways the vanguard of NPM, was certainly under attack. In 2009 Seddon (2009) wrote an influential article entitled 'Cut the Audit Commission, not public services' and argued that 'The Audit Commission fosters compliance rather than improvement; and compliance with bad ideas to boot.' And in 2010, the newly elected Conservative Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government announced that the Audit Commission would be abolished. It officially ceased to exist on 31 March 2015 with its functions being transferred to the voluntary, not-for-profit or private sector.

However, in our view, reports of the demise of NPM, both in terms of its practices on the ground and in its continuing influence as a policy narrative, are greatly exaggerated. It remains an embedded source of consensus which political actors and managers rally around simply because it is virtually impossible for anyone to argue that public services should not or cannot be made more efficient and competent (even though there surely must be some limit to how far 'continuous improvement' can be driven). Moreover, as we have seen in the last few years, the model of Manchester City Council as setting the pace for sub-regional devolution through its entrepreneurial and business-focused activities carries greater weight than ever before on the local and national scene. Austerity has produced deep cuts in local authority budgets, and strategies based on 'transformation', which owe much to the 'production engineering' tropes found in NPM, are increasingly evident as councils narrate themselves as the 'Future Council', the 'easyCouncil' and the 'Entrepreneurial Council' (APSE 2012). If NPM continues to influence a range of different actors at local and national levels in this way, then it also continues to generate conflict with both The Sovereign Council and Network Governance narratives.

The Network Governance Policy Narrative

In the 1980s researchers also discovered the importance of networks in political and economic life in the United Kingdom and the language of 'partnership'. In seminal work Rhodes (1991: 1) argued that the system of local government was being transformed into a system of local governance 'involving complex sets of organisations from the public and private sectors'. The various service sectors within local councils could not achieve their objectives without creating networks of exchange with private and voluntary sector organisations, and public sector management should primarily be concerned therefore with 'getting things done through other organisations'. As applied to local government, the *Network Governance* narrative provided a simple diagnosis and solution, therefore, to the problems created by the monolithic and isolationist tendencies which had been identified in the critical versions of The Sovereign Council narrative. As a bonus, it also implied that councils would become more efficient and competent through the need to exchange resources and negotiate shared purposes with outside agencies.

As it developed traction, the Network Governance narrative conflicted with The Sovereign Council and NPM analyses fundamentally in the way it framed the world of local government. In particular it attacked their shared hierarchical, introspective and authoritarian assumptions. It argued that these were outdated and ineffective because the boundaries between public, private and voluntary sectors had become shifting and opaque. Networks had developed between these organisations which enjoyed a significant degree of autonomy from, and were not accountable to, central and local government—they were 'self-organising'. As a result the council was no longer sovereign and could only 'indirectly and imperfectly steer networks'. 'Trust' was more important than the 'command and control' approach central to with The Sovereign Council and NPM narratives, and the rules of the game had to be negotiated and agreed by network participants. The normative message contained in the Network Governance narrative was expressed by Metcalfe and Richards (1991: 220) who were critical of management reform which looked into the internal operations of the organisation, rather than to its external environment. 'Governance is about managing networks' was the strap line, and, as applied to long government, the imperative could be summarised as 'you must work in partnership with other public, private and voluntary sector organisations if you are to succeed.'

Critical of NPM, Rhodes (1996: 661–662) also identified some of the problems which it had created for local authorities and network governance in particular, by 'hollowing out' the state: that is to say, shifting services and decision-making from central and local government to quangos and other bodies. He identified the fragmentation caused by NPM as leading to reduced control over implementation, difficulties in steering when different partners are involved, and problems with accountability when institutional complexity obscures who is accountable to whom for what. Despite these problems, from the 1980s onwards the narrative of network governance had a powerful influence over the thoughts and actions of local politicians and council employees. The term 'network governance' itself was not widely used by these actors, possibly because 'governance' was already being used in local authorities in its more legalistic sense to mean proper conduct in office. But, as Sullivan and Skelcher's (2002: 30–32) comprehensive analysis shows, collaboration across organisations and partnership working became the only game in town in some areas of local authority activity, which included regeneration (e.g. SRBs 2 to 6, New Deal for Communities), children's services (Sure Start projects), health and social care (Health Action Zones), crime reduction (Crime and Disorder Partnerships), employment (Connexions) and drug and alcohol dependency (Drug Action Teams). As with The Sovereign Council and NPM, central government certainly did its best to press home the importance of the normative message and what action was expected, but many politicians and officers within councils needed little persuasion to pursue the partnership route, and by this time in areas such as child protection and adult social care, the need to collaborate had already been established at local level.

Critics of the Network Governance narrative have tended to highlight its utopian appeals to trust and the idea of 'governing without government'. They argue it fails to take adequate account of embedded power relationships and institutionalised practices which are unlikely to allow actors the freedom to shake off the constraints imposed by their 'home' organisations and for networks to become 'self-organising' in any meaningful use of the term (e.g. Davies and Spicer 2015: 225–226). There are therefore strong elements of wishful thinking in the Network Governance narrative and a refusal to consider the contradictions inherent in dealing with wicked issues, which are both typical of policy narratives as a whole. Secondly, there are the 'so what' arguments which suggest that there is 'nothing new', or indeed remarkable, in the content of the narrative;

Rhodes and other network governance theorists have simply 'discovered' what has always been an essential part of city politics and local government. Urban Regime Theory (e.g. Elkin 1987; Stone 1987, 1989), for example, has been around for at least as long as network governance, and provides alternative explanations of why elite actors cooperate based on self-interest rather than altruism, and the simple idea that if local politicians can narrate that they are making a city wealthier, they are more likely to stay in power. Thirdly, there are the value-based arguments shaped by The Sovereign Council narrative that councillors and council employees *should* not give up power to self-governing networks who in themselves have no democratic accountability and thereby serve to increase the democratic deficit (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002: 150–153). As such, the increase in networks is simply another damaging development in the burgeoning of the 'local quango state' (Wilson 2004: 11). Finally, empirical evidence from research contradicts the network governance argument for a substantial paradigm shift from government to governance. Lowndes (2004) argues that the idea of 'local government transformed' is itself a narrative and at least counterbalanced by the evidence for 'local government unmoved'. Gains, John, and Stoker (2005) argue that even after central government pushed councils into reforming their cabinets, local authorities largely ran their affairs in the same way as before. John (2015) finds evidence of substantial adaptation to service fragmentation and councillors' capacity to retain control over partnerships and networks. At officer level, chief executives continue to run hierarchical structures with directors of services beneath them and line management structures below directors. Central government itself continues to model hierarchical relationships for local government and has not relinquished its centralising tendencies over this period (Marsh 2011).

In summary we see these three policy narratives competing with each other over more than 40 years. Although, as each gains in currency, it is temporarily in the ascendency, none is strong enough to dominate and completely replace the other two. Along the way each is criticised and weakened in credibility but nevertheless remains stubbornly embedded in the political fabric. The contradictory demands which together these three place on actors to a large extent explain the fragmentation which we observe in local authority services over this period and an increasing loss of identity and purpose.

Case Examples from Housing and Education

One of the main functions of policy narratives is to simplify complex social and economic problems and thereby provide the stability for politicians and managers to plot a policy course and stick to it. *Individually* the narratives of The Sovereign Council, New Public Management and Network Governance each provide this to a certain extent. But policy narratives struggle to maintain internal coherence over the long term, and, clashing and abrading with each other, in harness these three contradictory sets of stories confuse and undermine councils' perceptions of their roles and identity. This is not to suggest that there was a golden age when competing demands did not exist and everyone understood their roles and responsibility. Working in public service has always been a complex and conflicted business, but our case is that the years from the 1980s to date constitute an extraordinary period when council leaders, chief executives, council employees, citizens and service users and even central government actors themselves have struggled to understand what local government is for and what it is supposed to do. In the remainder of this chapter, we present two short case studies, or vignettes, which illustrate how this confusion has developed in a particular policy area. In Council Housing and Education, we show how the competing narratives have played their part in producing fragmentation. At the same time, we observe an increase in the centralising tendency of the Westminster government.

Council Housing

From the 1940s to the 1980s, the vast majority of the public sector housing in England was built, owned and managed by local authorities. During this time the 'post war consensus' ensured that the major political parties supported this position, with the Conservative government in the late 1950s and early 1960s increasing the percentage of new houses built by local authorities (Merrett 1979: 269). In this context 'the Council' exercised considerable power in terms of formulating its own housing policies in relation to the types and numbers of houses available to tenants and who was given a tenancy where. For over 30 years, therefore, the thoughts and actions of local and national politicians, council managers and employees dealing with the public were very much shaped by *The Sovereign Council* policy narrative. The local authority was sovereign not only politically but also in terms of service provision to citizens. It provided most of the

services of the 'local welfare state' (Cochrane 1993), among which a roof over one's head was vital. The strong normative message being conveyed and put into practice by actors in local and national government is that it is right and proper that such 'quality of life' services should be delivered by an organisation which is directly responsible, and democratically accountable, to local citizens.

Towards the end of this period, however, counter-narratives critical of *The Sovereign Council* and how it exercised its discretion in relation to social housing surfaced more powerfully than ever before and incrementally undermined the central principle which linked service provision to democratic accountability. From 1974 to 1779, with a Labour government in power, the cost of social housing in terms of capital expenditure became more of a concern to both major political parties, and it also became apparent that home ownership could be a badge of social status, as well as a way for the individual to make money. Many critics focused on councils' relationship with their tenants, rehearsing the overbearing, 'bureaucracy gone mad' versions of *The Sovereign Council*. And indeed, as Laffin (2013: 200) recounts, many local authorities 'treated tenants paternalistically as a dependent group whose homes, and even family life, could be subject to extensive and detailed controls.' They also rounded on the poor performance of many councils on housing, to the extent that some senior civil servants, rehearsing the 'incompetent and inefficient' versions of the policy narrative, suggested that local authorities should have the sector removed from their remit (Laffin 1986: 96).

Instead ministers charged civil servants with improving councils' performance by developing codes of practice, professionalising local housing managers and producing a Tenants Charter which promised tenants security of tenure. Here central government's thoughts and policy initiatives were being shaped by the essential moral of the *New Public Management (NPM)* set of stories that if the public sector adopted the good habits and practices of the private sector, then it would become much more competent and efficient. Coming to power in 1979, the Conservative government continued along the *NPM* path by implementing 'the right to buy' policy it had promised in its manifesto. Citizens who had previously been thought of as 'tenants' were now being treated as 'customers', active and self-interested individuals looking for a good deal. Consistent with this part of the narrative, local authorities were obliged to offer tenants the opportunity to buy their houses at substantial discounts, and Hills (2007: 14) estimates that between 1980 and 2006, 1.9 million homes were sold

under the scheme. In addition, the 'rolling back the state' elements of *NPM* narrated the need for central government to displace *The Sovereign Council's* near monopoly on providing services by developing alternative means of delivery modelled on the private sector. In accordance with this, after 1987 central government forced through Large Scale Voluntary Transfers (LSVTs) to the non-profit housing association sector, funded and regulated by the Housing Corporation.

It would be wrong to suggest that local authorities were totally passive or uncompliant during this period. As we noted above, councils have always contained passionate advocates of *NPM*, and certainly some saw the transfer of poor quality stock to individual citizens or not-for-profit organisations as an opportunity to relieve themselves of a burden, rather than a threat to their identity. Nevertheless Murie (2004: 140) argues that the legacy of this period was 'one of considerable nationalisation and centralisation of policy'. Even the levels of the housing benefit which was delivered by local government were wholly determined by central government. The net effect was 'to identify local government with difficult tasks more related to managing the poor than providing opportunity to the affluent working class'.

New Labour inherited this legacy in 1997, and both Laffin (2013) and Murie (2004) comment on the new administration's lack of interest in social housing. It too was influenced by the critical versions of *The Sovereign Council* narrative: ministers 'concluded that local authorities had signally failed to manage their stock effectively' (Laffin 2013: 201). The audit and inspection activities of *NPM*, led by the Audit Commission, continued and increased, but New Labour's approach was also shaped by the *Network Governance* narrative: ministers defined the council's role as strategic planning in partnership with a range of stakeholders, while housing associations took over delivery. In addition stock was transferred to Arm's Length Management Organisations (ALMOs), a 'middle way' for local authorities who were reluctant to transfer completely or for tenants who voted against such a deal. ALMOs are in effect a quango owned by the local authority but run by an independent management board comprised of council representatives, tenants and independent members. The thinking behind these New Labour policies conforms with the *Network Governance* narrative in that it views the boundaries between public, private and voluntary sectors as shifting and opaque. The networks which are developed between these organisations in relation to social housing are intended to enjoy a significant degree of autonomy and become 'self-

organising'. 'Trust' is more important than the 'command and control' approach central to with The Sovereign Council and NPM narratives, and the rules of the game had to be negotiated and agreed by network participants. The council's role is characterised in the assertion that 'Governance is about managing networks' and the imperative to local authorities is 'you must work in partnership with other public, private and voluntary sector organisations if you are to succeed.' Laffin (2013: 199) concludes that English local government has lost its monopoly over the provision of social housing to non-profit housing associations in most areas. Housing associations build almost all new social housing and manage almost half of all social housing (Mullins and Pawson 2010: 76).

This condensed case study of council housing is by no means comprehensive, but we believe it is sufficient to draw out the influence of the three policy narratives: *The Sovereign Council*, *New Public Management*, and *Network Governance*. It illustrates how, as each gains in currency, it is temporarily in the ascendency, but none is strong enough to dominate and completely replace the other two. Along the way each is criticised and weakened in credibility, but remains stubbornly embedded in the political fabric. The contradictory demands which in concert these three place on actors to a large extent explain the fragmentation which we observe in the local authority housing services since the 1980s and an increasing loss of identity and sense of purpose. To tenants who remain in housing directly run by the local authority, the council is still sovereign, but to almost everyone outside this group, the pattern is complex and confusing. Murie (2004: 148) points out that this confusion affects not only council employees and local and national politicians but also citizens and tenants:

> The simplicity of a situation in which subsidized rental housing was provided almost exclusively by the local authority has been transformed into a complex situation with a multiplicity of landlords operating in a single area, often with their head office based far away. Some housing associations have national and regional stocks more widely dispersed and larger than local authorities. This would not seem to be a recipe for greater community responsiveness or local control, and would almost certainly lead to a situation where people are unclear as to why their rents are what they are, who is responsible for services, and how they deal with problems.

If, as Kendall and Knapp (1996: 160) argue, the voluntary sector provided central government with the means to disempower local authorities in the

housing field, then the case study also suggests that, rather than creating a local plurality, government has increasingly pulled housing policy into the centre and effectively nationalised many areas of strategic planning. As far as any clear role and purpose is discernible for the local authority in the conflicted mix which exists at local level, it seems to be based on 'residualisation' (Laffin 2013: 204), the idea that councils' primary responsibilities are for managing poor and transient citizens who are left over after those more capable or more fortunate have achieved home ownership.

LEAs and Education

Local Education Authorities (LEAs) were established in 1902, but it was the Education Act 1944 which, within our frame of reference, gave them the powers and responsibilities most closely associated with *The Sovereign Council* narrative. The post war LEAs built and maintained all the 'state schools' and the one third of all schools provided by voluntary, mostly church, organisations. They appointed most teachers and determined and paid the salaries of all staff. They also decided what resources each school should be allowed, including numbers of staff, buildings, equipment and materials. They did not have close control over the curriculum taught in schools, but had the powers and responsibilities to build and allocate sufficient places for the children between ages five to fifteen, set the dates of school terms and the length of the school day in their local authority area. In this way LEAs provided a vital element of the 'local welfare state' (Cochrane 1993), and the normative message being conveyed, and put into practice by actors in local and national government was that 'the spiritual, moral, mental, and physical development of the community' (the 1944 Education Act Section 7) should be delivered by an organisation which was democratically accountable to local citizens.

Crook (2002: 249–252) recounts how, during the 1950s and 1960s, individual LEAs enjoyed a great deal of autonomy, to the extent that several engaged in innovation and 'experiments' to which central government was often at first hostile, but later adopted as national policy. In 1957, for example, the Conservative controlled LEA in Leicestershire began the 'Leicestershire experiment', in which all the children in a locality transferred at age eleven to a Junior High School for three years. Those judged brightest then progressed to grammar schools at fourteen, while the remainder stayed for a final year in the Junior High and then left school. Through maximising their autonomy and responding to what they

determined to be local need, LEAs created considerable diversity in the field of education, and each LEA was therefore also 'sovereign' in terms of what style of education (e.g. 'progressive' or 'traditional') and what structure (how many 'tiers') pupils and parents could expect within its particular local authority boundaries.

Nevertheless Crook (ibid) also suggests that these experiments were 'permitted' by 'the Ministry', and Bache (2003: 303) points out that central government has always maintained a strong interest in education at the local level, was careful in the 1944 Act not to relinquish too much control to councils and in particular retained residual powers which could be used by the Secretary of State to intervene if deemed necessary. And indeed, from the late 1950s through to the 1970s, concerns surfaced within both Conservative and Labour governments around *The Sovereign Council* narrative and education. In this way some critics focused on the authorities' relationship with parents, head teachers and schools, rehearsing the overbearing, 'bureaucracy gone mad' versions of *The Sovereign Council*. They also questioned whether diversity and experimentation in education were 'good things' if parents did know what to expect once their children moved across authority boundaries or even between schools in the same authority. Others, in rehearsing the 'incompetent and inefficient' versions of the policy narrative, suggested that if they were concerned so much with experimentation and 'progressive education', then perhaps LEAs were not capable of delivering the consistently high standards required by a powerful industrial nation (Cunningham 2002: 228). Many of these arguments surfaced in the fierce political battles which took place between central government and local authorities concerning whether grammar schools should continue to have a place in education (Crook 1993: 53–54). Nevertheless, during this period central government kept its residual powers on the shelf and attempted to 'steer' local authorities towards its national objectives for education, principally through issuing advice, promotional activity and offering financial incentives.

The 1980s saw a Conservative administration in power which was not committed to the 'post war consensus' on public spending and was influenced by the *New Public Management (NPM)* policy narrative which stated that if the public sector adopted the good habits of the private sector, it would become much more competent, efficient and consistent in the product it delivered. In this case education was the product, and parents the 'customers', narrated as active and self-interested individuals who should be encouraged to shop around for the best quality education for

their children. Ranson (1995: 107–108) argues that the 1988 Education Reform Act embodied this consumer-based approach in its four basic elements:

> an entitlement curriculum—a National Curriculum which was designed to tackle the consistency problem by giving all children a standard entitlement; accountability to parents—increasing the information to the customer (the parent) about each school's curriculum and achievement; public choice—more information to parents and competition between schools would create a pseudo-market; and local management of schools—head teachers were to be freed to manage their schools along the lines of a small business unit and without interference from the LEA.

Correspondingly the LEA was narrated during this period as no longer sovereign, or indeed the main provider of education in its area, but an enabling organisation whose role was to assist schools to operate as autonomous business units. To translate the *NPM* narrative further into policy, central government now triggered the residual powers contained in the 1944 Act to remove powers and responsibilities away from LEAs and free up the sector to competition and 'the market'. And so, higher education polytechnics, most further education and the careers service were relocated outside local authority control. Central government also used legislation to delegate responsibilities for school management to individual school governing bodies, and schools themselves were encouraged by the centre to 'opt-out' of LEA control altogether and take grant-maintained status instead. Meanwhile Ofsted took over most of the LEAs' school inspection and curriculum support duties (Ranson 1995: 114–119).

Despite the comprehensive nature of the application of *NPM* principles under the Conservative governments of this period, *The Sovereign Council* refused to go away altogether, and Wilkins (2000: 341 quoted in Bache 2003) recounts how head teachers continued to seek out LEA officers for advice and support, LEAs continued to be major providers of goods and services to schools, and 'local employers, voluntary organisations and other public service agencies continued to relate to LEAs in their accustomed ways'. Indeed when New Labour came to office in 1997, at first it appeared as though there might be a substantial revival of *The Sovereign Council*, for in its first term central government conferred on LEAs a statutory duty to promote high standards in the schools in its area, apparently placing the LEA back on top of the local hierarchy. Estelle Morris, the

Secretary of State for Education at that time, also appeared to be specifying a clear role in terms of the functions to be undertaken by LEAs and responsibilities for access and school transport, school improvement and tackling failure, educating excluded pupils and pupil welfare and strategic management.

On reflection, however, this 'specification' appears to be something of a ragbag of items left over after the previous administrations had removed all other powers and responsibilities from the LEAs. In addition it quickly became apparent in the late 1990s that in seeking 'a third way' for education and its relationship with LEAs, New Labour was experimenting with parts of all three meta-policy narratives simultaneously, and rather than providing stability and simplicity in concert, the narratives were producing complexity and confusion. And so now the role of the LEA in *Sovereign Council* mode was to ensure that children had access to schools and school transport, excluded pupils were educated and schools were confronted with the need to improve and succeed. At the same time, the new government had made it clear that 'partnership' was going to be at the centre of its approach to education, and so, in *Network Governance* mode, LEAs were required to undertake brokerage and collaboration with other public, private and voluntary sector partners over projects. But this government did not retreat from the *NPM* narrative rehearsed by its predecessors either, and so LEAs were also expected to continue treating parents as customers and schools as small business units free from local interference.

Indeed, developing the *NPM* narrative several stages further, New Labour legislated to have LEAs routinely inspected by Ofsted (in conjunction with the Audit Commission) for the first time and make them subject to intervention by central government where they were perceived to be 'failing' (Bache 2003: 306). As an example of the impact of the government's eclectic approach, in 2000 Leeds City Council was judged to be failing in this way and lacking capacity to improve, and as a result its functions were transferred to 'Education Leeds'. The composition of the board of this curious entity perhaps demonstrates most graphically the complexity and confusion generated by mixing the three narratives under central control. Following a report provided by external consultants and commissioned by the DfES, the council established 'Education Leeds', a so-called arms-length company (*NPM*) which was required to work as a partnership (*Network Governance*), governed by a Board comprising two directors appointed by Leeds City Council (*The Sovereign Council*), two directors appointed by the private sector company CAPITA (*NPM*) and

an 'independent' Chair appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills (*central control*).

As similar complex and confusing mix of narratives and roles was quickly provided by Education Action Zones (EAZs), which consisted of clusters of schools in deprived areas working together, with government grants and sponsorship from local businesses, and assuming some of the functions of the LEA. Schools in EAZs were allowed to dispense with the National Curriculum and were encouraged to innovate (Gamarnikow and Green 1999; Jones and Bird 2000). The city academies, on the other hand, which were announced by David Blunkett in March 2000, were comparatively simple in that they were designed to exclude the LEA altogether and applied a fusion of *NPM and Network Governance* principals to the schools themselves. As such, there was to be a network of city academies which were to, all intents and purposes, private schools paid for by the tax payer closely modelled on the 'charter schools' in the USA and the Conservatives' city technology colleges. Businesses, churches and voluntary groups would enter into public/private partnerships to build and manage the academies, and they would be outside the control of local authorities. In return for a £2m donation towards the capital costs, sponsors would be allowed to rename the school, control the board of governors and influence the schools' curriculum. Hasan (2012) records that the coalition government which assumed power in 2010 rapidly accelerated the growth of city academies and 'as of March 2012, there were 1635 academies in England … Most of them opened their doors from September 2010 onwards, with the blessing and encouragement of coalition ministers.'

Here again we see not only fragmentation but also centralisation, to the extent that as Stewart (2013) has observed that 'The DfE is now effectively the largest LEA in the country.' Of course the loss of 1635 schools in what is effectively an enforced privatisation represents a significant loss of resources from LEAs and raises important questions about 'democratic deficit', but one of our prime concerns in this chapter is what this does to the already confused identity of the LEAs. As noted above, in its first term central New Labour produced a ragbag of residual functions for local authorities in relation to education, but, in the midst of these, it seemed to confer a prize—a statutory duty to promote high standards in the schools in its area. The Local Government Association has recently argued that Ofsted inspections of schools which hold LEAs responsible to this duty no longer make sense because local authorities have no influence

over the standards in academies. We would add that is doubtful whether given their confused roles and diminished resources, they can reasonably be held responsible for standards in the state schools in their area either. However, the then Inspector of Schools probably reflected government thinking when he responded to the LGA in the *Municipal Journal* by stating that LEAs 'still have a role to ensure good provision' and 'the ball is in the local authorities court to demonstrate they are up to the challenge' (Stewart 2013).

As with the council housing case study above, we are aware that this vignette of LEAs and education is by no means comprehensive, but we believe it is sufficient to draw out the complexity and confusion produced by the three competing policy narratives: *The Sovereign Council*, *New Public Management*, and *Network Governance*. It illustrates how the contradictory demands which these three in concert place on actors to a large extent explain the fragmentation which we observe in the local authority education services since the 1980s and an increasing loss of identity and sense of purpose on the part of LEAs and anyone who has reason to seek their services. In completing the research for this chapter, we noted that many local authority websites attempt to explain their role and functions in bullet points following the Estelle Morris version of 1997: access and school transport, school improvement and tackling failure, educating excluded pupils and pupil welfare and strategic management. Viewed through the eyes of a parent and a citizen, the individual functions are obscure (What does 'access' actually mean? Can they get my child into a particular school?), and together as a job description they make little sense (how do strategic management and school transport fit together?). Essex County Council (Essex County Council 2016) includes this list of bullet points on its website and feels the potential for confusion is so great about its relationship with the schools in its area that the rest of the page is occupied by what is effectively a disclaimer:

> Schools are now largely self-governing. All manage their own budgets; many employ their own staff, own the land and buildings and only come into contact with the LA when they choose to make use of our services. The LA has strict guidelines it has to follow in its relationship with schools. In general, the LA has a closer relationship with community and voluntary controlled schools, because it still employs the staff and sets the admissions criteria. Parents are often not aware of these changes and think the LA still has the right to intervene in school matters and is refusing to do something about

> their complaint. This is not the case. All complaints about a school must go through the school's complaints procedure; this is now the law.

As with the housing case, we see a trend towards residualisation in which the 'best bits' are given over to the private and voluntary sectors and the LEAs are tasked with managing the poorest students and attempting to do something with the worst performing schools. Which brings us finally to the motives for the continuing insistence from central government and Ofsted that LEAs have a statutory duty to promote high standards in the schools in their areas. As we saw above, from an optimistic point of view, this could be seen as a revival of the LEAs' status and legitimacy. But everything else we have recounted in this chapter seems to pull against this interpretation. From a neutral perspective, it could be viewed as an empty phrase and a sop to councils in what otherwise has been a losing game. But why then the insistence by Ofsted and the DfE that LEAs will be held to account if high standards are not achieved and maintained? We find it difficult to avoid the conclusion that now the DfE is the largest LEA in the country, it is convenient for ministers to have a ready-made scapegoat at every locality in which things might go wrong, so the 'buck' can stop with the LEA, rather than being handed back to the centre.

Conclusion

We suggested at the beginning of this chapter that, in terms of identity and purpose, it is difficult to determine exactly what services any one council provides and almost impossible to identify what services citizens can reasonably expect to receive from it or from councils across the country as a whole. We asked how such a chaotic situation came about across a range of organisations which are often narrated as monolithic, incapable of innovation and institutionally resistant to change.

In the first half of the chapter, we gave an account of the positive, and more critical, versions of three overarching policy narratives which we believe have played an important part in creating this confusion: The Sovereign Council, New Public Management and Network Governance. We see them as competing with each other over more than 40 years, and although, as each gains in currency, it is temporary in the ascendency, none is strong enough to dominate and completely replace the other two. Along the way each is criticised and weakened in credibility but nevertheless remains stubbornly embedded in the political fabric. The

contradictory demands which together these three place on actors to a large extent explain the fragmentation which we observe in local authority services over this period and an increasing loss of identity and purpose.

The second half of the chapter applied this conceptual framework to two brief case studies or vignettes. Our analysis suggested that fragmentation has manifested itself in at least two ways. In the fragmentation of the services provided by council housing departments and LEA, the common pattern was the removal of large sections of service from the local authority, and the introduction of a multiplicity of actors from quangos, and the voluntary and private sectors to manage services where previously there had been only one point of reference for the citizen. In the fragmentation of identity, the common pattern was that citizens, parents, politicians, managers and council workers themselves were likely to be confused about what the service was for and what it could deliver. This arose through the fragmentation of services which was then compounded by the confusion generated by the competing expectations of The Sovereign Council, New Public Management and Network Governance narratives. We consider this loss of identity to be equally as important as the loss of resources which councils have suffered.

In reviewing the case studies, we believe we should add to these handicaps loss of confidence and loss of reputation. Loss of confidence is an important handicap which has been generated by the remorseless centralisation we observe through central governments of both complexions. It seems once self-confident and relatively autonomous services such as council housing and LEAs operate not just 'in the shadow of hierarchy' (Scharpf 1994: 41), but to adapt Cochrane's (1993) story are constantly looking over their shoulders to try to anticipate the centre's wishes. Finally, loss of reputation is a product of the constant rehearsal of the negative versions of The Sovereign Council narrative but also has its roots in the residualism we observe in both case studies. Delivering the 'local welfare state' was once something councils could be proud of. Managing the poor and those 'left behind' has always been part of their role, but when it becomes their sole raison d'être they become almost as vulnerable as the citizens they serve.

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CHAPTER 4

Mergers and Acquisitions: Narratives, Rhetoric and Reality of Double Centralisation Through Structural Upheaval

Introduction

The boundaries of the local Government in England are set by central government and so too is the shape, size, number of councils, number of tiers, powers, functions and responsibilities of local government. While decisions about the size and boarders of local government are taken by the centre, the job of merging councils is made far easier for the centre if local government political *elites* are willing to be complicit in their own demise and, like turkey's voting for Christmas, support the mergers of councils and the subsequent reduction in the number of councillors that inevitably follows mergers. As councils have no real control over their own boundaries, central government can, and does, abolish councils, force amalgamations and divide councils into new units, with minimal real consultation. But, the centre prefers to co-opt local political *elites* into sharing its views and into articulating those views in a similar fashion to the centre, as such co-option that minimises potential resistance from local politicians. Moreover, if government can co-opt local *elites into* sharing a centralist perspective, they may well provide willing allies in centralisation, especially when it comes to merging councils. As we have seen in previous chapters, the dominance of particular policy narratives in the relationship between national and local government plays an important role in successful projects in co-option where coercion plays little or no significant part.

The relationship between the centre and the localities rests on a single 'hierarchical' and 'asymmetrical' direction of control: top-down (Stewart

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C. Copus et al., *Local Government in England*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-26418-3_4

1983; Page 1991). As a consequence of centrally inspired re-organisation, English councils can cease to reflect identifiable communities of place or operate as vehicles for local self-determination. Moreover, through a continuing increase in size, local government becomes a series of artificially created, administrative conveniences, with boundaries created by the centre which are designed to respond to the technocratic criteria of population numbers which are deemed to be necessary for efficient service delivery. But, which service dominates that criterion? The map of local government in England which shows a small (by comparison with overseas) number of large councils meets another need—that of the centre to communicate quickly, effectively and clearly with subordinate agents. Yet, a consequence of increases in size and in a reduction in the number of councils has been that the centre has bemoaned a general pattern of public disengagement from local government (detr 1998a,b, 1999), which itself is a consequence of government policy, over the decades, of increasing the size of local government units. Central disquiet with public disengagement from local government, however, has not prevented the continual narration of an argument that produces the conditions for yet further amalgamations. Both the public disengagement narrative and the 'Big is Better' narrative have run alongside each other in the relationship between central and local government for many years now.

> Local government is the vehicle through which much of the modern public sector operates in modern welfare based systems, although it is rarely the only provider of public services and may even lose some of its direct provider role if central government so chooses.

Indeed, at key points in its development in England, local government was articulated by central government as a mechanism for service distribution and not as a mechanism for local self-government (Jones and Stewart 1983; Young and Rao 1997; Reynaert et al. 2005; Denters and Rose 2005). But local government is an elected body, and any elected body, even in a centralised system, could reasonably expect some policy and political autonomy and thus party politics has had a constant presence in the government of the localities (see Hennock 1973; Fraser 1979; Owen 1982). It is the presence of national political parties in English local government that assists in securing local *elite* compliance with the centre's view of council size local political *elites* can become particularly enthusiastic exponents of council mergers and acquisitions.

The debate about the appropriate size of local government—geographically and population—and about the number of councils there should be across the country and whether or not it should be unitary or tiered is as much about the role and purpose of local government as it is about how big it should be or how many units should exist. These policy narratives are founded on a set of supporting arguments and stories associated with them designed to convince others of a particular organisational and political approach to local government. The chapter explores how arguments are framed and employed by central government and its allies in local government, to secure the long-term policy objective of reducing the number and increasing the size of English local government. The next section briefly explores the tension between technocracy and democracy within English local government to set the scene for a wider exploration in section three of the policy debates and narrative about local government size. It examines how that narrative is reflected by local political *elites* for their own policy and political reasons. The fourth section then examines debates about the tiered or unitary structures available for local government. The fifth looks at how the policy narratives around larger local government have influenced the very names carried by English councils. The chapter concludes by summarising the arguments presented in the chapter.

Democracy and Technocracy

In the first chapter, we identified the long journey of local government from a semi-autonomous political body to an agent of the centre. But it is an agent which provides an additional layer of democracy, political representation and engagement for citizens and the politically active and a setting within which political representatives can arbitrate over local matters. Councillors and leading councillors, in particular, increasingly act as politicians, within multi-layered governance networks to channel into a range of policy players, their own views (as a trustee), the citizen view (as a delegate) or their party's views (as a party loyalist) (Eulau et al. 1959; Egner et al. 2013, passim). Councillors must be able to influence the decisions of a range of bodies that make public policy and spend public money but do so without a democratic mandate (see Klijin and Skelcher 2007; Sorensen 2006; Sorensen and Torfing 2005; Torfing et al. 2009; Sorensen and Torfing 2014).

We can see by the way in which councils and councillors negotiate complex networks, external to the council, that a local government political

and governing role is far from diminishing; it is simply shifting to arena outside of the council and comes in the form of influence rather than power. Yet, the need to provide, or oversee the public management of services means that the needs of those services drive the shape of local government rather than the need to represent identifiable geographical communities or to engage with external bodies. Councillors interact with technical and managerial experts and provide oversight of, and political direction to, an administrative machine focused on public services resulting in a blurring of the boundaries between the political and managerial spheres of local government (Chandler 1989). Despite an overlapping set of interactions, the political and the technocratic spheres of local government can be seen to be stimulated by and respond to different factors which have to be reconciled when shaping local government.

If we examine the managerial/technocratic sphere of local government, we see it is focused on service management and provision, administrative processes and rationality, professional and managerial competence and effectiveness and consistency and operates through an organisational structure that supports those purposes. Managerial narratives of local government whether couched in terms of the public sector ethos (Brereton and Temple 1999; Grimshaw et al. 2003; Hill and Hupe 2007), New Public Management (Dunleavey and Hood 1994; Lane 2000; McLaughlin et al. 2002) or public value (Stoker 2006; O'Flynn 2007; Bennington and Moore 2011) privilege the management and administration of services. While much of the attention of the councillor is also focused on public services, there is an alternate set of narrative imperatives for the elected member: the electoral process, citizen engagement and discourse, political objectives and priorities, party loyalty and advantage and value systems (Sweeting and Copus 2013). Any government wishing to colonise local *elites* must therefore shape its storylines round the purpose of local government and around its size to match that purpose.

Given that, in England, it is the centre that decides whether councils will be amalgamated and does not have to rely on inducements to councils to amalgamate voluntarily, it is interesting to note that the centre has been remarkably successful in creating a consensus around the shape, size and purpose of local government. That use of such a policy narrative is explored in the section entitled—"Groundwork for the Loss of Local Government Space"—where we examine the processes of re-organisation. The dominant articulated narrative imperative among local *elites* (as we shall see below)—particularly managerial but increasing also political—is that councils need to be bigger to ensure the efficient and effective

provision of public services. The managerial and political dimensions of local government need to be balanced (see Elcock 1982; Stewart 1986; Laffin and Young 1990), but that balance need not be an equal one, and one set of interests ultimately seems to always be the victor when it comes to the re-organisation of local government.

Local Government: Growth Through Reduction

Recognisably democratic local government was ushered in by the Municipal Corporations Act 1835 and arguments about the appropriate size of local government have continued since. As Table 4.1 below shows, the incep-

Table 4.1 The legislative reductions of local government

Act	*Effect*
Municipal Corporations 1835	The right to petition for an elected council
Local Government Act 1888	51 county councils; 62 county boroughs (and the London County Council)
London Government Act 1899	28 metropolitan boroughs within the LCC
Local Government Act 1894	688 urban district councils; 692 rural district councils
Local Government Act 1926	83 county boroughs; by 1927, 785 urban district councils and 787 rural district councils created
Local Government Act 1929	206 urban districts abolished and 49 created (a net decrease of 159); 236 rural districts abolished and 67 created (a net decrease of 169)
London Government Act 1963	Greater London Council and 32 London boroughs
Local Government Act 1972	Reduced 45 counties to 39; replaced 1086 urban and rural districts with 296 district councils; abolished 79 county borough councils; created 6 metropolitan county councils; replaced 1212 councils with 378
Local Government Act 1985	Abolishes 6 metropolitan councils and the GLC
Local Government Act 1992	Results in 34 county councils; 36 metropolitan borough councils; 238 districts; 46 unitary councils
2009 re-organisation under the provisions of the 1992 Act	Reduced 44 councils to nine across seven English county areas

Source: Copus (2010), amended

tion of democratic local government has been followed by a gradual and continual reduction in the number of both councillors and councils. The table, however, must be read with some caution as it is not a comprehensive listing of all Acts of Parliament that have re-organised local government; rather, the table is indicative and illustrative of the overall process of amalgamations. What the table also shows is how simple legislative change by the centre—and since the 1990s by secondary legalisation—local government units can be merged or abolished.

The 1920s were the high point when it comes to number of local government units with over 1700 councils in existence. That figure, however, has steadily but gradually declined to the current 352 councils. These raw figures however mask an interesting disparity in sizes; Table 4.2 sets out the largest and the smallest population size by type of council.

Despite the constant tinkering across the decades, it was the Local Government Act 1972 which provided the current overall shape of local government in England. As Table 4.1 shows, that Act, through mergers, reduced the then existing 1200 councils by just over 30% (67%?) to 378. But, that was far from the end of the process and subsequent legislation has further reduced the number of two-tier county councils to 27 and the number of district councils to 202. A mere 13 years later, the Local Government Act 1985 abolished the six metropolitan county councils (including the Greater London Council) that the 1972 Act had created. After a gap of 14 years in which London stood alone as the only

Table 4.2 English council populations, by council type

Council type	*Largest population*	*Smallest population*
County	Kent: 1,463,700	Dorset: 412,900
District	Northampton: 212,100	Melton: 50,400
Unitary (excluding Birmingham)	Cornwall: 532,300	Rutland: 37,400[a] (next largest, Hartlepool[b]: 92,000)
London boroughs	Croydon: 363,400	Kensington and Chelsea: 158,700
Metropolitan boroughs	Leeds: 751,500	Knowsley: 145,900

[a]There are special historic and political reasons why Rutland regained its unitary status on 1 April 1997 and its size is not representative of the usual scale of English local government

[b]Prior to 1 April 2009 the next largest council to Rutland was Teesdale with a population of 24,800. The council was abolished in 2009 on the formation of the county-based Durham Unitary Council (see section "Groundwork for the Loss of Local Government Space" below)

Western European capital city without its own elected government, the Greater London Act 1999 created the Greater London Authority with a 25-member London Assembly and a directly elected mayor of London.

In addition, to the two-tier structure of local government which covers most of England, there are 55 unitary authorities—all-purpose, single-tier entities—created at various times since the passing of the Local Government Act 1992. That Act allows the Secretary of State to sue a statutory instrument—thus avoiding the need for the full set of parliamentary legislative processes to create a unitary council by mergers and abolitions of existing units.

In a more recent legislative change, the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 made the creating of unitary councils and the reviews of electoral areas simpler and easier to expedite, thus paving the way for the creation of yet more all-purpose, single-tier, ahistorical unitary councils. In re-organisations of local government, the task is to reconcile the potentially competing factors of the managerial and the political in the shape and size of councils (Young and Davis 1990; Young and Rao 1994; Rao 2005). In the next section, it is argued that local government has been far less of a setting in which the management or public services have been carefully balanced with a governing and political role; rather, we see the development of a framing of a debate, a result of which is that the political and democratic constantly lose out to the management and provision of public services.

Groundwork for the Loss of Local Government Space

Government-inspired investigations of local government have, by and large, focussed more on local government's role in the provision or oversight of public services than its role as a politically representative institution. Formal inquiries provide an ideal point from which to frame a debate about the role, purpose and size of local government or to re-affirm an existing frame for the development of policy narratives. We can see from the Maud (1967) and Widdicombe (1986) Committees how arguments were constructed that posit local government primarily as a service-based organisation, although this required a careful balancing act. But in so doing, the Maud committee in 1967 did identify that local political *elites were* acquiescing in government interference and that this was a danger

to local independence. Widdicombe (1986) recognised the need to reconcile the political and service responsibilities for local government when it noted: 'the more local authorities provide services that are central to people's lives, and seen to be so, the less realistic it becomes that they can be autonomous in the provision of those services'. Yet, it went on to reiterate Maud's finding of 20 years earlier that: 'local government is more than the sum of the particular services provided; it is an essential part of English democratic government' (Widdicombe 1986: 54).

One of the consistent trends that emerged from government investigations into local government is that, in an effort to improve public service efficiency based on the unproven assumption that bigger is better, reorganisations have resulted in larger units of local government. As Stewart (2003) reminds us, however:

> The scale of UK authorities reflected the dominant concept of local authorities as agencies for the provision of services … It was widely assumed (by government and local government) that size [increases]was associated with efficiency, despite the reality that investigations have failed to find any clear link between size and efficiency and/or effectiveness. (Stewart 2003; 181)

Thus, a managerialist narrative of local government from within (see Bozeman 2002; O'Flynn 2004; Geddes 2006) and central government agency-based narrative of local government as a service enabler/provider combine to drive a demand for larger and larger units and moreover have underpinned the debate about whether local government should be unitary or tiered. Yet, the evidence on which these policy narratives are predicated has been challenged. Travers et al. (1993) repudiated the idea that there is necessarily a link between large population and efficiency and effectiveness, or that larger councils out-perform the smaller. Muzzio and Tompkins (1989: 95), in a study of New York City, conclude that: 'one size cannot be called better than the others; rather, different sizes are conducive to different goals.'

The debate about council size in England is a surrogate debate about the purpose of local government in the governance of the country. The way in which that debate is framed to suit a policy narrative about technical and managerial efficiency, or political and democratic processes, helps to condition the size of local government. What is often ignored in the debate about the role of local government and in debates about council size, in the English context, is that a number of democratic criteria are

damaged as the size of local government units increases (Larsen 2002; Ladner 2002; Rose 2002; Laamanen and Haveri 2003): turnout at local elections, direct citizen contact with councillors and officers, citizen attendance at council or public meetings, political discussion, citizen perception of influence over local affairs, trust in local councillors and officials, citizen identification with the council and levels of political engagement, decline in larger councils (see Oliver 2000; Denters 2002; Ladner 2002; Baglioni 2003; Kelleher and Lowery 2004; Denters et al. 2014).

The factors that may be seen to be related to the democratic health of local government are affected negatively with increases in population and geographical size, while research has shown that the benefits seen to accrue from larger councils in terms of efficiency, effectiveness and cost are not a consistent result of amalgamations (Nielsen 1981; Newton 1982; Mouritzen 1989; Keating 1995; Cusack 1997; Rose 2002; Frandsen 2002; Denters et al. 2014). Yet, such nuances do not appear in the policy debates about local government. Indeed, efficiency, effectiveness and quality improvements and reduction in cost are taken as a given from size increases and in policy discourse, presented as such (see below).

The Royal Commission on Local Government in England (Redcliffe-Maud 1969) struggled with a desire to see larger units of local government while recognising that such units would have a deleterious effect on democratic engagement. Redcliffe-Maud recognised that democratic considerations meant that there was indeed an upper size limit on councils beyond which councillors would find it difficult to maintain contact with constituents, hold officials to account; comprehend the problems of the area and determine priorities and policy decisions. Indeed, the crucial element of connectivity with the council was recognised in that the committee felt that citizens would fail to identify with large units or have any sense of belonging to them. But, equally as crucially Maud also argued that it was a requirement of effective local democracy that authorities should cover large enough areas so they could provide efficient services and that areas covered must contain populations large enough for the effective use of resources.

The commission concluded:

> There can be no firm rule about the maximum size of an authority. But we concluded that the range of population, from about 250,000 to not much above 1,000,000, which we considered most suitable on functional and organisational grounds for authorities administering all local government services, was also appropriate on democratic grounds. (1969, para: 276, p. 73)

The commission went on to say, in a paragraph worth repeating at length, that it had reached the conclusion that:

> Wherever we could find coherent areas which made good units for planning and transportation and also contained a population of about 250,000 to about 1,000,000, we would combine responsibility for all services in a single authority for each area. We call such areas unitary and the authorities responsible for them, unitary authorities. (para 277: 73)

Where however planning problems have to be tackled as a whole over an extensive area containing a very large population, as is chiefly to be expected in a great urban concentration with its surrounding territory, to make a single authority responsible for all local government services would put too heavy a load of work on it. The authority would run into difficult managerial problems; democratic control would be hard to achieve; and, there would be a serious risk that people would feel remote from their local government. We therefore concluded that where an area

1. Has a population of substantially more than a million
2. Must be planned as a whole, and
3. Can be divided into a number of units in the broad population range of 250,000–1,000,000, appropriate for education, the personal social services and housing

the right solution would be to have two operation tiers. Other services would be divided between the two according to which tier provides the more appropriate scale of operation (para 278:73).

What is unclear is where the population figures quoted in the extract from the commission's report originated and on what basis and to support what service it was calculated. Wood (1976) suggests that the evidence the commission received from the then existing local government organisations—which were divided among types of councils—and from various processional associations of local government officers and technical and service specialists all made estimates of population sizes based on the requirements of their own services. In other words, the population figures suggested were relevant to one field of local government activity alone and to a service rather than political or representative criteria. While population alone is a crude indicator of efficiency and effectiveness, the various claims of local government professionals appear to have framed

the debate (Wood 1976: 56) with children service professionals—education and social services—being particularly influential in framing the narrative of population size. Whatever the veracity of the claims for increases in council size promoting effectiveness, the debate was securely framed at that point, and debate about the shape and size of local government has been conducted since with an unswerving certainty in the benefits of increases in size. What that framing of a policy narrative achieves is to de-legitimise alternative narratives, thus enabling the dangers involved in making local government too large—that it no longer generates a sense of identity, belonging or purpose to communities and citizens or becomes unmanageable for councillors—to be ignored (Maud 1969; Widdicombe 1986; Wilson and Game 2006: 247).

We see a reflection of the managerial-democracy debate in the Blair government's modernisation narrative of local government which was predicated on assumptions about a disengaged citizenry faced with councils through which it was difficult to navigate and which politically and managerially lacked visibility, openness and transparency (detr 1998a,b, 1999; ODPM 2004, 2005). But, little recognition was given to the size of English councils as a cause of public disengagement. The coalition government from 2010 to 2015 levelled no challenge to the rhetoric of increases in size, and the Conservative government elected in 2015 is patiently waiting for local government to come up with its own re-organisation suggestions in individual localities. Indeed, the current government, while seemingly repudiating the need for local government re-organisation, has through the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 enabled the creation of a new form of collaborative framework for local government that rests on an acceptance that bigger is better by linking greater functions and responsibilities to the creation of new entities called: 'combined authorities'.

Combined authorities are sub-national entities that allow any number of authorities to combine for the purposes of securing service responsibilities, functions and budgets for areas that are not normally the preserve of local government. Although combined authorities are not mergers of councils and the constituent councils remain in existence—for now at least—because these entities cover a far greater geographical scale and population range than local government units, the government has shown its attachment to larger size by only devolving to combined areas, not individual councils. Each new 'combined authority' is formed with government approval.

The trend towards bigger units of local government has been consistent in England, and it is a trend that has developed across Europe (Baldersheim and Rose 2010; Goldsmith and Page 2010; Denters et al. 2014).The supporting arguments for larger local government have shaped a policy narrative which has been successful, although they have met local resistance in some cases (see Teles 2016), in co-opting local *elites* which in turn do the centre's work of stimulating re-organisation for it—if that fails, or the pace is to slow, the centre does not hesitate to legislate. By examining the arguments of inquiries into local government already listed and exploring the statements of ministers, MPs and councillors and senior local government officers, three rhetorical strands can be identified that shape the policy narrative and which ease alternative narratives out of the story.

Examples of those rhetorical strands that have emerged are provided below, and they were most recently articulated publicly by seven Members of Parliament for Northamptonshire, who issued a joint statement calling for the eight Northamptonshire councils to be merged into a single unitary authority. Their statement included the comment: 'We want councils that can meet the simultaneous challenges of increased demand for services reduced funding and we believe that simplified local government in the form of unitary authorities provides the opportunities to do that' (Northamptonshire Chronicle, accessed 18/3/16).

The three rhetorical strands that have been identified from exploring the narrative around local government size are as follows and examples provided below to illustrate those strands (which are also reflected in the examples given from committees of inquiry and commissions, earlier in the chapter):

Economic Rhetoric:

- Economies of scale
- Efficiency
- Effectiveness
- Cost reduction (austerity is the ally of mergers)

  – Reducing the number of councillors and local government officers as a cost saving

Administrative Rhetoric:

- Avoidance of the duplication of effort, staff, councillors
- Removal of layers of bureaucracy

- Financial and service improvements
- The alignment of council boundaries to areas of economic activity and patterns of living such as travel-to-work journeys and viability as economic and cost-based units of administration

Convenience Rhetoric:

- Simplification of the local government system
- Administrative clarity
- Single identifiable point of responsibility
- Ease of public recognition

These three rhetorical strands above, and the arguments within them, expressed to one degree of complexity or another depending on the rhetorician and audience, form the bedrock of arguments that while often couched in different language rely on a remarkably consistent set of narratives about increasing the size of local government over time.

What we also see, rather depressingly, is that councillors often rehearse these narratives when they offer their council up on the sacrificial alter to be merged with other councils. The following comments from councillors are indicative of the rhetoric deployed at the local level to promote mergers or acquisitions of other councils (the following provide a small flavour of the comments uncovered during the research for this book):

- The leader of Oxfordshire County Council told the Oxfordshire Guardian that *around £30m' of the £70m cuts could have been saved if there had been a single unitary authority across Oxfordshire in place of the county council, the city council and four district councils, which is known as a two-tier system. "Having a unitary authority across the councils would help save this money that we are forced in having to cut"* (Oxfordshire Guardian, accessed 15/3/16).
- *Cheshire West and Chester Council leader was quoted in the Chester Chronicle: The two councils—Cheshire East, and Cheshire West and Chester—were formed following Local Government Reorganisation in 2009, when Cheshire County Council was separated but combining the two current authorities would create a "stronger" presence as the divide weakened Cheshire in terms of its size, meaning it could not compete with larger councils such as Manchester or Liverpool. A unified and strong Cheshire would reduce council tax liability for every household to the tune of around £100* (The Chester Chronicle, accessed 16/3/16).

- UK Independence Party councillors are calling for the abolition of eight local authorities to create the largest administrative area in England. North Yorkshire UKIP county councillors Sam Cross and David Simister said *'they would also accept two smaller all-encompassing bodies to administer the county as part of a drive to save taxpayers millions of pounds. Councillor Cross said the council, which is mid-way through an eight-year drive to save £168m, needed to make some brave decisions. Government funding is making it increasingly difficult for the county council to balance its books, and as a result it is having to make cuts across all services. North Yorkshire has eight authorities, each with its own chief executive and senior directors, all of whom receive executive pay packets. Departments are not just duplicated, they are octoplicated'* (The Northern Echo, accessed 12/3/16).

  A District council cabinet member (in an interview) commented: *if we form a single council with (3 named councils) the cost savings and efficiency improvements would be enormous. We have a consultancy working on a business plan for us now, but the savings would be considerable*
  A county council leader commented (in interview) *it would make things so much easier for the public to have a single point for all services, rather than the confusion caused by the two-tier system with all the districts. Much simpler and more democratic to have everything in one place, and cheaper, too, we could reduce the number of officers and members quite drastically.*

It would be wrong to move on from here without contrasting what one of the Victorian founding fathers of English local government had to say about his municipality: Joseph Chamberlain:

> Unless I can secure for the nation results similar to those which have followed the adoption of my policy in Birmingham … it will have been a sorry exchange to give up the town council for the cabinet. (Joseph Chamberlain)
> All private effort, all individual philanthropy, sinks into insignificance compared with the organised power of a great representative assembly like this. (Marsh P. T. (1994). Joseph Chamberlain. Entrepreneur in Politics. Newhaven: Yale p. 79)
> I have an abiding faith in municipal institutions, an abiding sense of the value and importance of local self-government, and I desire

> therefore to surround them by everything which can mark their importance, which can show the place they occupy in public estimation and respect and which can point to their great value to the community. Our corporations represent the authority of the people. Through them you obtain the full and direct expression of the popular will, and consequently any disrespect to us, anything which would depreciate us in the public estimation, necessarily degrades the principles which we represent. (Coleman 2007: 159)

The brief examples of the language used about local government from our contemporary councillors and politicians are in stark contrast to the Victorian local patriotism expressed by Chamberlain. But our contemporary statements are used to illuminate the nature of the discussions by local political *elites* who have accepted the framing of the debate about local government size by the centre and are structuring their own debates locally within that frame. Why this reflects a 'mergers and acquisitions' rhetoric is because county councils—the upper tier of English local government—are often predatory towards their constituent districts and seek for them to be merged with the county and effectively abolished, thus acquiring their powers, functions, responsibilities and resources. What are deployed here are a set of arguments that promote the gradual abolition of a two-tier system of counties and districts and that process is explored in more detail in the next section.

Two-Tier or Shedding Tiers

Despite the lack of consistent evidence that larger councils are automatically better performers than smaller councils, the link between large authorities and efficiency is an article of faith for many involved in the English debate on council size. Yet, Andrews et al. (2006) concluded that size had little effect on the scores that councils received in their Comprehensive Performance Assessments conducted by the Audit Commission and had no consistent effect on results of a range of various performance tests. So, even by government's then existing measures, size had no consistent effect on performance, making the continued debate about mergers all the more surprising. So too is the debate about the number of tiers of local government there should be: two or unitary.

Both Conservative and Labour governments have favoured unitary councils; the unitarisation of local government has come in two main

waves, the first in the mid- to late 1990s and the second in 2006 (Scotland and Wales had previously been re-arranged on an all unitary local government in 1996 and Northern Ireland in 2015). While England has retained a mixed system, with two-tier and unitary councils, the recent unitary re-organisation in July 2009 reduced 44 councils to a mere 9. Figure 4.1 sets out the successful proposals and the basis of the new council as shown.

The then Labour Government's preference for the upper-tier county council to become the unitary authority is clear, only Cheshire and Bedford resulting in a sub-county decision. Chisholm and Leach (2008) produced a highly critical analysis of the government process through which the new councils were created and showed how government's selective use of its own criteria displayed a bias towards whole county-based unitaries. Moreover, the views of local citizens—expressed in referendum held in Shropshire and Durham which produced overwhelming 'No' votes to county-based unitaries—were simply dismissed.

While the government criteria for deciding on proposals for unitary re-organisation attempted to link issues of governance, political leadership and neighbourhood empowerment to value-for-money and efficiency, what was clear in the process and in the proposals approved was that the government saw larger councils as the way to meet managerial criteria (DCLG 2006: 9). The coalition government elected in 2010 overturned the previous government's plans to create two further unitary councils Exeter and Norwich and stopped reviews in Devon, Norfolk and Suffolk. Yet, there was no change of heart on unitary councils merely a desire on

County Area Unitary proposal (number of districts in brackets)	New unitary structure	Change in number of councils
Bedford (3)	2 Unitary Bedford	4 reduced to 2
Chester (6)	2 Unitary Cheshire	7 reduced to 2
Cornwall (6)	County Unitary	7 reduced to 1
Durham (7)	County Unitary	8 reduced to 1
Northumberland (6)	County Unitary	7 reduced to 1
Shropshire (5)	County Unitary	6 reduced to 1
Wiltshire (4)	County Unitary	5 reduced to 1

Fig. 4.1 New unitary councils 2009

the part of the new government—committed as it was to fiscal restraint—to avoid the estimated £40 million cost of restructuring.

Support among political *elites* for unitary and for larger councils refuses to die; in 2012, Lord Heseltine published a report, commissioned by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, setting out a strategy for economic revitalisation and wealth creation. Heseltine, a former Environment Secretary—with oversight of local government—in Mrs Thatcher's cabinet from 1979 to 1983 and his 2012 report showed no diminishing of his support for unitary local government. While he bemoaned the drift towards centralism in England, he argued that the 'English system of local government remains overly complex and inefficient' (p. 29) and the solution recommended (p. 54) was simply that 'All two-tier English local authorities outside London should pursue a path towards unitary status.'

Heseltine does not link his unitary solution to local government having a community or local identity and a geographical place or even to any view of councils as political and representative bodies. Rather, he employs an economic model of 'functional market areas' and states that: 'many English local authorities bear no relation to modern patterns of economic activity' (p. 30). So, to the belief that bigger local government is inherently more efficient and effective, the idea has been added that councils should not be based on identifiable communities, but on functioning economic markets. The decision to undertake such a re-organisation, of course, rests with the centre and what the report does adds more weight to the policy narrative that local government is about the efficiency and effectiveness of public services alone and that efficiency and effectiveness can only be achieved through larger and now unitary councils.

While the current government elected in 2015 has rejected a large-scale local government re-organisation, recent developments in the devolution debate and the creation of combined authorities have seen the matter raise its head once again. At the time of writing, the unitary battle is once again raging across the two-tier shire areas of England with proposals and counterproposals being produced by county and district councils in an exhausting and embittering process. Councillors themselves are conducting the debate within a framework set by the centre's policy narrative. It is likely the calls for unitary and larger local government in England will get louder and the loudest voices in that debate will be local government itself. As a consequence, local government is likely to drift away from being based on the governance of a locality. It is now time to see just how far we have already come by examining the artificiality of some existing

councils by exploring a related concept to the use of language, narrative and story—toponymy.

What's in a Name?

One of the problems of local government in England is a mismatch between the places with which people identify and the areas covered by councils, and this can be illustrated by looking at council names. Typically place names reflect a physical geography, a culture, history and people. But, when the centre re-organises local government, it is faced with constructing new names for the new entities it has developed and so it turns to more generic non-localised names for new local government units so as not to offend those whose councils have disappeared and to avoid any overly specific identification with an actual place. The problem of non-place names is particularly acute at district council level, although two English counties created in 1974, Avon and Cleveland, were named respectively after the River Avon and from a derivative of cliff-land—both were abolished in 1996.

When we look across English local government, categories of council names have emerged which display a casual disregard for any link between a unit of local government and a recognisable geographical community. These councils can be labelled: 'compass point councils', the 'and' councils and the 'non-existent' councils. We look at each of these in turn below. But what follows is not an exhaustive list, only a list of names used to illustrate the journey English local government has undertaken from being about the government of real communities of place to an administrative convenience shaped by technocratic and managerial demands, which is clearly seen in the toponymy of English local government and daily by citizens when they enter their council's offices.

Compass Point Councils

The compass point council is where in the naming process of a new local government unit formed after mergers and abolitions and when a convenient geographical space for local government size purposes is carved out from its home county to form a new district. The county name is retained but added to it is a navigational reference point, presumably used in order to assist the traveller in finding the new council. Examples of these 'compass point councils' are many, if not varied, and these examples are:

East Staffordshire
South Norfolk
North Shropshire
East Hampshire
West Berkshire
West Lindsey
Mid Suffolk
North Norfolk
Bath and North East Somerset
North East Lincolnshire
North Lincolnshire
North Somerset
South Gloucestershire
East Northamptonshire
North Devon
North Dorset
North Kesteven and although the following are not strictly points of the compass, they are locational: Central Bedfordshire, Mid Devon, Mid Suffolk and Mid Sussex. Further there is the lucky holder of two compass point references: North East Derbyshire

Next there are the 'and' councils where the name of the council reflects the convenient merging of former councils and where the desire to avoid offence is solved by simply inserting the word 'and' between the names of towns, such as in the following examples:

Redcar and Cleveland
Basingstoke and Deane
Barking and Dagenham
Brighton and Hove
Oadby and Wigston
Weymouth and Portland
Epsom and Ewell
Hinckley and Bosworth
Newark and Sherwood
Nuneaton and Bedworth
Reigate and Banstead
Telford and Wrekin (Telford being drawn from the famous industrialist Thomas Telford—yes a council names after a person)

Tonbridge and Malling
Windsor and Maidenhead
Hammersmith and Fulham
Kensington and Chelsea
The following and councils also include a point of the compass in their name:
Bath and North East Somerset, Cheshire West and Chester, Kings Lynn and West Norfolk
Then there is Blackburn *with* (but never and) Darwen

Finally and most telling of the cavalier fashion with which communities are often treated when councils are merged are the non-existent councils. The very names of these councils are simply made up and do not reflect any real community or locality. Rather, some inoffensive link to an area—no matter how tenuous is used to give a title to the new council. The following examples are of non-existent councils (the source of their name is in brackets):

Calderdale (River Calder and the surrounding geographical feature: dales)
Three Rivers (named after the rivers: Colne, Chess and Gade)
Sandwell (Sandwell Priory)
Newham (Merger of East Ham and West Ham, so it was a 'New' Ham)
Kirklees (Kirklees Priory, legendary burial place of the English freedom fighter and resistance hero: Robin Hood)
Trafford (indeed named after local sporting facilities from both the worlds of cricket and football)
Mole Valley (River Mole)
Vale of White Horse named after the Bronze Age Uffington White Horse
Medway (the River Medway)
Tameside (the River Tame)

Taking Kirklees as an example of the process of mergers that took place in 1974 and how new names emerged, we see that the borough of Kirklees was formed through the merging of Batley, Cleckheaton, Dewsbury and Holmfirth with the much larger neighbour, Huddersfield. The name 'Kirklees' derives from Kirklees Priory where Robin Hood, the heroic English outlaw and freedom fighter against the Norman oppression, is rumoured to be buried—at least some connection to an English past if not to any real geographical community of place.

In fairness, however, there are examples of where some care has been taken in relating a new council name to some geographical and historical point. The following names, for example, derive from an association with ancient Anglo-Saxon hundreds—although by now encompassing a far greater population than a hundred homesteads:

- Babergh
- Bassetlaw
- Wirral
- Craven
- Dacorum
- Shepway
- Tendring

So in the creation of new, administratively convenient and centrally shaped councils from the merger of existing councils, the name of the new entity must be acceptable to all. So, no matter how artificial and meaningless to most residents, the new council name is approximately one-sixth of English district and unitary councils bear 'compass points'. The search to avoid offence also explains why so many of the others are named after landscape features—valleys, vales, dales, rivers and moors. It is this very attempt at inoffensiveness, though, that is the problem for such councils. Their areas have become too large to match the real places with which people identify—hence the necessity for so many councils to be place-builders and place shapers, constructing the identities they never inherited. But, councils have no real control over the shape, size and boundaries of the very place they govern—that gift rests with central government. So, councils are often left trying to forge an identity—albeit an artificial one—around often disparate communities. The task is increased in urban areas, where it is difficult to tell where one borough ends and another begins.

An interesting example can be found when leaving Stratford railway station in East London. One is greeted by a large oval sign with the incantation:

> Welcome to Newham, London, a place where people choose to live, work & stay.

The addition of the word 'London' rather than 'London borough' simply masks that Newham does not exist; it is not a place, you are being

welcomed to somewhere that is no-where—Newham is the name of the council, only. Yes, it is a council that governs Beckton, Canning Town, Custom House, East Ham, Forest Gate, Manor Park, North Woolwich, Plaistow, Silvertown, Stratford, Upton Park and West Ham, and yes it is a great place to live (one of the authors was brought up in the old West Ham County Borough and lived there after the 1965 reorganisation of London government and the invention of Newham, where he was even a councillor for a term in the 1980s), and yes, it does retain 'Ham', the word for a settlement that is also reflected in other council names: Rotherham, Nottingham, Cheltenham and Durham, to name but a few—but Newham is only the council, not the area. A similar effect can be seen with Sandwell MBC which in practice to outsiders is nearly always complemented by the phrase 'in the West Midlands', covering as it does the six towns of West Bromwich, Oldbury, Tipton, Wednesbury, Smethwick and Rowley Regis between Birmingham and Dudley and Wolverhampton. Local politicians, officers, business people and citizens alike feel the need to explicitly locate Sandwell in the West Midlands because otherwise their audience would assume that it was a little known inner London borough.

The widespread mismatch between the places with which people identify and the areas covered by councils is a telling feature of the levels of disengagement between citizens, communities and their councils—a subject which strangely has concerned central government for some time, but which is largely of its own creating. In merging councils and by the formation of large, meaningless, geographically indistinct council areas, we are left with many 'non-place councils'. Such councils spend time, effort, resources and energy in overcoming the fact that their names tell us little about their place, its culture, history, traditions, people or of course—where they live. In addition, the use of fatuous council strap-lines and brazenly designed new emblems to replace Latin mottos and local government heraldry is an example of modernity being used to trample over and destroy past achievements and any semblance of civic culture and pride.

It is almost as though there is a deliberate policy to remove councils from place, people, culture, history, traditions, so these factors are no longer displayed as councils continue the journey to being simple providers or overseers of public services and not politically representative and governing institutions. An added bonus to some is that the more and more meaningless local government becomes, the easier and easier it is to continue the policy of mergers and amalgamations until those seeking big local government are satisfied. But, the question remains at what scale

will the promoters of big local government become satisfied and when they are, we will any longer have a system that could be called 'local' government.

If we are deliberating 'localism' one feature must give us concern: how do we make our councils local and why are we constantly following a path that takes us in the opposite direction? A direction which take us further from concepts of local and localism and which refuse to give all but the scantest regard to the 'government' in 'local government'.

Conclusions

In reorganisations of local government, the centre has resolved the tensions between the managerial demands of service provision and the political demands of representation and government in favour of the former. In doing so, a supporting narrative has to be constructed to frame the debate and to constrain the discourse around the role and purpose of local government in the government of the country. It is a tightly drawn frame which is demonstrated through three rhetorical strands—economic, administrative and convenience, which propagates the notion that larger units are consistently more efficient and effective and result in cost savings and that smaller units are no longer viable entities, particularly in the current financial climate. That narrative frame ignores evidence which conflicts with the intention of seeing local government grow larger, and for the centre a smaller number of larger councils make an easier reference point.

The support among political *elites*—locally and nationally and cross party—for larger units and unitary councils, exists despite inconsistent evidence about the efficiency and effectiveness of larger units of local government and despite the more consistent evidence of the deleterious effect that larger units have on the democratic and political processes. That narrative is not unchallenged and counter-narratives do exist privileging local government closeness to communities and real places. Those arguments have not been examined here as they are not the dominant narratives and are not shaping local government.

It is therefore likely that the growth of local government will continue over time and notwithstanding any overall re-organisation unitary councils are likely to increase in number. Decisions about the size and shape as well as the purpose of local government are ideological, political, value-laden and emotive although these are hidden by a policy narrative that appears

logical and rational. For many on the left, for example, larger councils ease the process of wealth redistribution as affluent areas are governed through the same council with poorer areas. To those on the right larger councils means fewer councillors, reduced bureaucracy and fewer council staff, thus reducing costs and local taxation.

The idea that the centre can re-construct local government to suit its own policy preferences—about the role of local government and about particular policy fields—it can be shaped to ease the process of central policy implementation rather than provide politically legitimate platforms for opposition to those polices. Yet, the government elected in 2015 is pledge to continue a process of devolution to local government—and as we hinted in the first chapter, this devolution is less about political power and more about the decentralisation of services and budgets. It is therefore time to examine the current devolution agenda and to explore if it is indeed a new dawn for local government or yet more centralisation under the guise of a power shift and what this all means for local government.

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CHAPTER 5

Devolution Today: Revolution or Submission?

Introduction

As this chapter was written, the devolution agenda currently unfolding within England has remained extremely fluid. The process of agreeing devolution deals has been inconsistent, resulting in the successful agreement of new governing structures in some areas and the complete collapse of these negotiations in others. Since the current process of English devolution began, a number of political developments have had a significant impact on the pace of the 'devolution revolution': (1) the United Kingdom has seen a monumental referendum result on its membership of the European Union, (2) a subsequent change in government, (3) there has been continual shifts in relation to devolution policy, and (4) continued uncertainty with regard to governance and elected mayors. In light of this turbulent landscape, it is worth highlighting that any attempt to paint a conclusive picture of the current devolution reforms is not feasible, and therefore this chapter aims to reflect on where we are at the time of writing. As we have seen in previous chapters, the dominance of particular policy narratives in the relationship between national and local government plays an important role in determining how forays into devolution fare in a centralised but shifting landscape.

The landscape of English local government has, since the 1960s, frequently been reshaped by national governments of different political persuasions, and it is clear that decisions about the size, shape and scope of local government have been subject to ideological shifts, party political

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C. Copus et al., *Local Government in England*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-26418-3_5

considerations and a range of vested interests (Stoker 1991). Throughout numerous changes to the structure of local government (which are explored in detail in Chap. 4), it remains clear that central government has been captured by a policy narrative which tells them that size matters and that smaller, empowered and truly local units of government are an unnecessary and overpriced indulgence.

According to some commentators, local government in England once experienced 'the golden ages of local self-government' (e.g. Norton 1994: 352) wherein local authorities enjoyed greater political and administrative control over a wide range of responsibilities, financed through locally levied rates. This golden era has since been replaced with numerous shifts in the range of responsibilities held by local councils and how they are financed (Wollmann 2004). There are a common set of assumptions on which reorganisations of local government have rested, whether the perpetrator of change has been a Labour or Conservative government. Those assumptions and beliefs are reflected in central departments and by a range of external bodies (Stewart 2014). These taken-for-granted parts of the policy narrative maintain that large single-unit municipal authorities could deliver economies of scale, a belief for which evidence is at best mixed (ibid; Chisholm 2010; Elcock et al. 2010). What is also clear in the changing shape of English local government is that the trajectory is towards increases and not decreases in councils (see Chap. 4). Strangely, while the size of local government has increased, it has been diminished in other ways: functions have been removed, resources have declined, staffing levels have been reduced and all at a time when the intensity and complexity of local needs and problems have increased significantly (Weir and Beetham 1999).

The relationship between central and local government is a problematic one where centralisation is seen as a first response to developing social, political and policy problems, and that relationship, as we saw in the first chapter, is in a perpetual state of crisis (Jones and Stewart 1985; Goldsmith and Page 1987; Jones and Stewart 2002). Local government has been subject to continual legislative changes that have significantly altered the function and role of local authorities and which have accelerated the pace of centralisation without empowering councils to be able to govern effectively their communities (Ibid.). As local government is a creature of statue and a creature reshaped by central legislative processes, it becomes all the more crucial to explore the newest addition to Whitehall's local government palliative care procedures and the policy

narratives which legitimise the treatment, and it is necessary to do that to assess whether English local government really is experiencing a devolution revolution.

The chapter examines in depth the current government's policy of devolution, and it does this through drawing on those devolution deals which have already been signed between combined authorities and central government. It examines the current process of devolution to date in order to highlight and discuss some of the common themes, concerns and implications of the government's approach to devolution deals. While the chapter uses the word devolution to describe these latest reforms, as per the legislation, the chapter does take some time to address the question alluded to within the first chapter of the book: are we seeing the genuine devolution of power to English local government, or just top-down decentralisation of functions and tasks?

The next section of the chapter will provide a brief contextual background to devolution in English local government. The third and fourth sections examine the devolution deals signed to date and hold them against the claims from central government that we are experiencing a devolution revolution. The chapter concludes by examining the extent to which the current devolution agenda represents a significant shift in the relations between central and local government.

The Path to English Devolution—Legislation and Narrative

It would be wrong to suggest that devolution has not made an impact on the political and governmental shape of the United Kingdom. It has, however, been far from a symmetrical devolving of power; Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have, to varying degrees, been the grateful recipients of the devolution of certain primary legislative powers from Westminster. In addition, those three constituent parts of the United Kingdom have been granted elected chambers, governments and first ministers of their own—although the powers accorded to each vary. England, however, has thus far been omitted from the process of what might be called nationhood recognition devolution. Until now England has remained the unfinished business of devolution in the United Kingdom that has yet to bring elected, democratic government to the regions of England—or indeed to England as a nation.

Year	*Policy*
1998	Regional Development Agencies Act 1998
2002	Local Government Act 2002
2003	Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Act 2003
2004	Referendums - Regional Assemblies in the North East
2009	Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009
	Total Place: a whole area approach to public services
2010	The Coalition: Our Programme for Government
2011	Public Bodies Act 2011 and abolishment of Regional Development Agencies
	Localism Act 2011
	Unlocking Growth in Cities
	16 Whole Place Community Budgets
2012	Referendums - directly elected mayors
2013	Lord Heseltine Review
	Local Authorities assume responsibility for Public Health
2014	Growth Deals
	'*We need a Northern Powerhouse*'
2015	Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill
	100% business rates retention
	Health devolution pilots
2016	Cities and Devolution Bill receives royal assent

Fig. 5.1 Key decentralisation policies since 1998

There have however been experiments, in England, with sub-national devolution but remembering our discussion in Chap. 1 distinguishing devolution and decentralisation, much of what has been experienced falls into the latter category. Figure 5.1 outlines the chronology of the major initiatives, policy suggestions and legislative reforms that preceded the current government's devolution agenda (although that agenda does build on its coalition predecessor and uses tools provided to it by the last Labour government, thus showing a centralist journey throughout); a number of these legislative changes will be discussed further in this section.

Tony Blair's New Labour Government (1997–2007) revived what had been at best a slumbering devolution narrative when it passed the Regional Development Agencies (RDA) Act in 1998. This introduced eight indirectly elected regional entities into England, with the exception of Greater London which saw the creation of an elected London Assembly, led by a directly elected Mayor of London, following a referendum in 1998. Although the referendum in London provided a 'yes' vote of 72%, it did so on a turnout of only 34%. The Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Act

2003 resulted in a referendum in the region identified as the North East of England in 2004 on the creation of an elected regional parliament—which if a yes vote had been delivered would also see the creation of unitary local government across that region, which the government strangely attached to the referendum on the regional chamber. The people of the North East voted against the proposal on 4 November 2004 by 77.9%, on a turnout of 49%. The result effectively applied the brakes on the then government's plans for regional devolution referendums that had been proposed for the North West England and Yorkshire and the Humber, which failed to materialise.

The coalition government (2010–2015) framed devolution in terms of a continued pursuit for local economic growth in England. It abolished the RDAs through the Pubic Bodies Act 2011 and introduced Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), whose remit was to define local economic priorities and lead economic growth and job creation within their local areas. The government also established a Single Local Growth Fund to which LEPs could bid for finances (John 2014). The replacement of a regional tier of government with a sub-regional tier presented implications for democratic accountability and efficiency: the LEPs are made up of unelected individuals and, as organisations, lack a formalised role and legal powers to effect change (Morphet and Pemberton 2013).

The Local Government Act 2000, which followed from a review of local government conducted by Michael Heseltine, as Secretary of State, in 1991, saw the end of what was narrated as an inefficient and ineffective committee-based system of political decision-making and required local authorities in England to adopt what was referred to as 'executive arrangements'. The Act provided local authorities with the political executive options from which they could choose, as follows: (i) leader (elected by the council); (ii) cabinet executive, mayor (directly elected by the voters); (iii) cabinet executive; and, (iv) the now repealed option of mayor and council manager (Leach 2006). The office of an elected mayor was a novelty in England—and some 16 years later, sill is a novelty—but it presented an opportunity for the electorate to 'choose for themselves the individual politician they wish to hold the political leadership of the council', a choice previously only available to councillors (Copus 2006: 29). The narrative justification for elected mayors was that the direct election of a strong, individual leader presented a new way to enhance the accountability of local political leadership and to ensure that leadership was high-profile and transparent (Lowndes and Leach 2004).

The Localism Act 2011 introduced by the 2010–2015 Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government was anticipated by many as a ground-breaking commitment to localism, seeing decision-making transferred to communities and individuals by moving from a 'Big Government to a Big Society' while enhancing the role of local government by granting it with a 'general power of competence' (HM Government 2010):

> It gives these authorities the same power to act that an individual generally has and provides that the power may be used in innovative ways, that is, in doing things that are unlike anything that a local authority—or any other public body—has done before, or may currently do. (HM Government 2011)

The drive for decentralisation, which this storyline promised, was articulated without any real consequences for the balance of power between the centre and the localities and so centralisation largely remained intact. Although the Localism Act provided communities with enhanced rights to challenge local decisions on service provision and rises in council tax and has, in some areas, seen the transfer of particular services to boroughs, the latter has often not been accompanied by any fiscal autonomy. In essence, costs were devolved, but they were not accompanied by financial or political autonomy. The misleadingly named Localism Act did very little in challenging what was and still is a highly centralised Westminster government.

The Localism Act 2011 was followed by the Wave 1 and Wave 2 City Deals. The first wave in 2012 focused on the eight largest cities outside London and their wider economic areas, with 20 cities following suit in 2013. All cities had to demonstrate that they had a clear strategy for delivering economic growth in their respective areas. Despite storylines from the centre which focused on stimulating growth and creating jobs, these deals could also be interpreted as means to soften the blow of central cutbacks to local government which at the time had reached full force following the recession of 2008. The then Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg when speaking in Oxfordshire at the Harwell Science Campus in 2014 delivered a 'Less Money but More Freedom' punch line:

> There is less money to go around, we all know that. Local Authorities are having to get more bang for their buck because of the terrible disaster in 2008.

> One way to make sure we produce more growth and opportunities for young people is for Whitehall to let go and allow councils here in Oxfordshire to make more decisions. Yes, you are looking at less money from central government but a lot more freedom.

The former Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne (a treasury minister, not a local government minister) narrated a long-term and supposedly radical agenda for local government to develop on from the City Deals and Growth Deals—a normative message based on 'prosperity through partnerships'—intended to increase the capacity of local leaders to identify local economic needs and promote local growth. In all 39 Growth Deals were announced in July 2014 as part of the 2010–2015 Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government's plan to regenerate local economies. Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs)—voluntary bodies comprising of local politicians and appointed representatives of the local business community—were asked to develop Strategic Economic Plans in order to compete for central funding for local growth delivered through the Growth Deals. The Growth Deals resulted in central government injected billions of pounds into local areas to create jobs, build new homes and boost infrastructure projects.

As a result of the 'No' vote in the Scottish separation referendum in 2014, the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, announced that alongside proposals for an increased devolution package for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, attention would also turn to discussions about the best way to 'empower' the cities of England. This announcement not only responded to the need to be seen to be doing something for England as well as the Celtic nations, but also for the 89 recommendations to help industry made by Lord Heseltine in his 2012 report: 'No stone unturned: in pursuit of growth'. This report stressed that in order for the government to address 'a lack of strategy for growth and wealth creation', power needed to move away from London and to English regions. The narrative here was still one of devolution—although decentralisation would be a more accurate term as no political power was to flow to English local government, which Heseltine also recommended should face whole-scale re-organisation on a unitary basis (Heseltine, 2012).

The key messages of these recommendations focused on renewing the relationship between the public and private sectors both centrally and

locally, empowering local communities to collaborate in order to deliver growth, enhanced roles for Local Enterprise Partnerships (see below) and a general drive to create wealth, create jobs and create growth; to quote Lord Heseltine's report, both central and local government 'should be organized and structured for success' (Heseltine, 2012: 184). In other words, local government should be organised in such a way that delivers success according to the nation's economic growth. Lord Heseltine's view of this structure for success was that all two-tier English authorities should work towards forming unitary authorities and advised that numerous district councils should be abolished to make way for what he perceived to be a more streamlined local government which was able to promote and deliver economic growth. What followed was a noticeable increase in the use of phrases such as 'levers of local economic development', 'functional economic areas' and an increasing interest in the role that local government plays in promoting economic growth. In these ways the 'Pursuit of Growth' report rehearsed a narrative that forms the central pillar of the current 'Devolution' drive in English local government today.

A number of reports followed, including 'Decentralisation Decade' (Cox et al. 2014) and 'Devo Max—Devo Manc' (Blond and Morrin 2014), but the emphasis of these was on a managerial agenda and sought further efficiencies in the provision of public services and a stimulation of local economic growth to compensate for reductions in local government funding by the centre. The changes proposed were for the decentralising responsibility for specific services and associated policy areas, alongside the transfer of relevant budgets, and the creation of combined authorities with directly elected mayors. As we noted in Chap. 2 of this book, the Northern Powerhouse narrative, which legitimised the Devo Manc deal among others, was first articulated by George Osborne in June 2014. Haughton et al. (2016: 13) argue that this was then taken forward by deploying an economic model, which was always going to prove the case for Devo Manc and others, and legitimised by 'the construction of a powerful narrative that has informed the case for devolution presented to and by central government. Our work suggests that this narrative was supported by a *selectively constructed* evidence base built up from commissioned research, engagement with an array of think tanks and the support of academic champions (our emphasis).'

The Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 provided the legal framework within which these changes would take place. The Act brought into being the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and provided the legal power for the rest of England to enter into devolution

negotiations with the government's Cities and Local Growth Unit, the Treasury and officials from the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills. Those deals would see the transfer of a set of devolved powers and responsibilities from central government to a combined authority formed from the constituent councils within a self-identified functional economic area. While councils were able to select their partners, what is also clear is that the devolution, so called, was a negotiated process and one with very much an economic, not a localist focus.

The Last Labour government's Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 had already made the creation 'combined authorities' a legal power of local government. What that meant was that a group of councils in any area, after the development of a consensus and agreement between themselves, could then be granted the power to take on certain service functions from central government (at the time limited to transport and economic development). The Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 removed the limitation on which powers and functions could be transferred from the centre to new combined authorities and made provision for the introduction of directly elected mayors to those new entities. Combined authorities are explored in more detail below. As Haughton et al. point out, in the negotiations between the centre and sub-regions which followed the Devo Manc deal: 'Whether by accident or design, a broadly accepted narrative has emerged in which local leaders in Manchester put aside their parochial and political differences with each other and with central government, and were granted extra powers in return' (Haughton et al. 2016: 2). While Haughton et al. are sceptical about whether this narrative tells the whole story, it certainly provided the sort of leverage which central government could use to push less responsive sub-regions towards similar devolution deals and acceptance of an elected mayor.

The 2016 Act does not force change in local government, rather it empowers authorities to draw up proposals for the establishment of a combined authority and make a bid for the transfer of powers and responsibilities to the new entity. That transfer, however, can only take place after agreement has been reached with the government and a 'Devolution Deal' has been brokered. The Act does not provide any detail or prescription of which powers are to be devolved, and so the government has suggested that their aim is 'bespoke devolution' which will allow councils to combine in different ways, for different purposes, in different parts of the country.

Although we see the potential for functions and responsibilities to be transferred from the centre to new sub-national entities—combined

authorities—councils are faced with continued financial reductions from central government (and yet more centrally inspired changes to the local finance regime; see Chap. 6) threatening the provision of some of the most essential local services. The lack of fiscal devolution or any loosening of the financial regime displays the severe limitations of the current policy towards devolution. While the chancellor announced late in 2015 that local authorities would be able to retain 100% of the business rates they raise locally, this still leaves English local government with a task of carrying out a financial balancing act while ensuring the provision of services and meeting complex local need. Local government must continue to meet its statutory responsibilities while potentially taking no more responsibilities through devolution deals, at a time of reducing central support and while hamstrung by a staggering lack of powers to raise its own finances locally.

The new Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 displays a policy of seemingly creating stronger local government finally moving away from a centralised Westminster knows best approach but what the centre gives the centre can take away—a recurrent theme of the relationship between central and local government in England. The contradiction in the policy of the centre can be seen by looking at the role of local authorities as an example of policy conflict. Local government's role in the provision of education has been consistently eroded since 1944, a trend accelerated in the mid-1980s with the creation, by the centre of 'grant maintained schools' in other words, schools which had chosen to 'opt out' of local authority control and to receive their funding directly from Whitehall (Waterman 2014). That contradiction between seeming devolution and increasing centralisation can be seen some 30 years later, by a drive by the current Education secretary to convert primary and secondary schools in England into independent, centrally funded 'academies'. Academy schools would operate outside the influence of their local authority. Given such a glaring contradiction in the policy narrative and policy action—devolution of some central government functions and powers while at the same time proposing the centralisation of education—we can legitimately challenge the centre's commitment to the 'devolution revolution'. In addition, we can rightly question the centre's political and policy motives for devolution and its policy objectives, because these are currently obscured by the opaque deal making between local and national political *elites* and civil servants. The current devolution agenda and process suffers from the absence of measurable and clear objectives which

suggests political expediency, rather than a genuinely commitment to a long-term process of changing the nature of the relationships and share out of functions, between the centre and the localities.

At the time of writing, the United Kingdom voted in a referendum on its membership of the European Union, delivering a 'leave' vote just shy of 52%. The high drama of 'Brexit', which has followed, has caused a degree of uncertainty, particularly in the world of local government and not just in relation to devolution. As part of a 'Brexfast' roundtable hosted by *The Municipal Journal* and PwC shortly after the referendum, local authority chief executives debated a number of implications for local government of the public's decision to leave the EU. While at the time the issues raised were speculative, this group of senior local government officials stressed the uncertain economic ramifications and the risk of more reductions in local government financial resources and raised questions about the capacity of Whitehall to keep the devolution process going while focusing on Brexit negotiations. At the moment, even though the public's choice is clear, there is uncertainty that the country will indeed leave the EU as legal and political challenges have thrown the result into doubt. While speculation is rife that withdrawal from the EU will take place, it is still legitimate to indulge some speculation not just about the negatives for local government but the positives.

Despite the concern expressed by *The Municipal Journal*'s meeting of chief executives, it is important to recognise the potential the referendum result provides for local government. Indeed, at a time where concerns about accountability, democracy and localism have played a significant role in shaping a nation's vote to leave the European Union, local government would surely benefit from pooling its ambition, confidence and democratic legitimacy into a set of devolution proposals to central government that demand to be heard. Moreover, local government must challenge any assumption that what was done by the EU should be done by central government on leaving. Rather, local government must use the devolution narrative to build a case that subsidiarity should form the basis of exit negotiations with local government being the beneficiary.

If local government is to benefit from any opportunities presented by the vote to leave the EU to demand acceleration to devolution and that local government is the recipient of new powers and functions flowing from departure from the EU, it will need to respond positively to another policy narrative that emerged from the centre in the late 1990s. That narrative stressed the need for local government to be clear, accountable,

visible and for transparent local leadership, which would come through the introduction of directly elected mayors. The issue of accountable leadership also forms part of the devolution debate with a Conservative government (it was a Labour government, which introduced elected mayors into English local government) brokering devolution deals where new combined authorities being led by directly elected 'metro mayors'. Before moving on to consider how devolution deals are being employed by the centre to reshape sub-national local leadership, the chapter first turns to an examination of the content of the deals themselves to provide a context to our exploration of a new, centrally inspired, form of local leadership.

Devolution Deals: Devolution or Decentralisation?

The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) is held up as the jewel in the crown of the current devolution process, and the agreement which gave birth to this new governing entity was signed in 2014. It has also been joined by nine additional devolution deals signed by government for the following areas: North East Combined Authority, Tees Valley Combined Authority, Sheffield City Region Combined Authority, Greater Lincolnshire Combined Authority, East Anglia Combined Authority, Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, West Midlands Combined Authority, West of England Combined Authority and Cornwall Council. The details of these deals are explored in some detail later in the section of this chapter entitled: 'Cut and Paste Devolution'. In that section a critical look is taken at the content of those deals to understand the nature of devolution and how local government has approached the deal-making process.

A total of 38 devolution proposals from local areas in England were submitted to the government by what was an arbitrary deadline of 4 September 2015. That date gave councils a mere seven weeks to consult with neighbouring authorities, identify viable options for devolution and agree a proposal with partner councils. The narrow timeframe certainly excluded any meaningful public engagement in the deal brokering which has been a process conducted largely behind closed doors—in a spirit of commercial confidentiality—by local political *elites*. There were some 16.1 million people living in areas that negotiated devolution deals, and for those voters, there has been little or no dialogue about what devolution

might mean for them, their local communities, the provision of public services and the way in which they are governed locally. The unhelpful (for local government) deadline demonstrates that the so-called devolution revolution has been shaped and driven in a way that best suits central government timescales and needs, rather than local government. It is also a small reflection of the wider process of devolution—it has been rushed, lacked transparency and seems devoid of clear, measurable objectives.

Figure 5.2 adapted from Wall and Vilela Bessa (2016) reviews the content of the devolution deals that were agreed between combinations of

Combined Authority	*Governance*	*Skills and employment*	*Housing*	*Transport*	*Business*	*Fiscal*	*Health*	*Rural*	*EU Funds*	*Digital*	*Trade*	*Environment*	*Pub Service reform*	*Public safety*
Greater Manchester Combined Authority	Mayor (directly elected) will be Chair and Member of GMCA Leadership Board	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
North East Combined Authority	Mayor (directly elected) will be Chair and Member of NECA Leadership Board	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔		✔	✔		✔		✔	
Tees Valley Combined Authority	Mayor (directly elected) will be Chair and Member of TVCA Leadership Board	✔	✔	✔	✔						✔	✔		
Liverpool City Region Combined Authority	Mayor (directly elected) will be Chair and Member of LCRCA Leadership Board	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔		
Sheffield City Region Combined Authority	Mayor (directly elected) will be Chair and Member of SCRCA Leadership Board	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔								
East Anglia Combined Authority	Mayor (directly elected) will be Chair and Member of EACA Leadership Board	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔				✔			
Greater Lincolnshire Combined Authority	Mayor (directly elected) will be Chair and Member of GLRCA Leadership Board	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔		✔			✔		✔
West Midlands Combined Authority	Mayor (directly elected) will be Chair and Member of GLRCA Leadership Board	✔	✔	✔			✔						✔	
West of England	Mayor (directly elected) will be Chair and Member of GLRCA Leadership Board	✔	✔	✔										
Cornwall	Government has signed formal agreement for devolved powers to county	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔		

Fig. 5.2 Review of agreed devolution deals to date (15 May 2016). *Source*: Adapted from Wall and Vilela Bessa (2016)

local authorities and central government by 15 May 2016. The figure presents the devolution deals that have moved through the parliamentary process of negotiation and subsequent approval. What the figure presents are the geographical/administrative make-up of established or proposed combined authority areas, the established or proposed governance arrangements and the powers and functions that have been granted or requested as part of the deal-making process with the centre. Thus, the figure presents a snapshot of devolution deals, but one which enables us to make some conclusions about the process and outcomes.

Devolution of Political Power or Decentralisation of Administrative Functions?

In the first chapter, we explored a number of—often overlapping—conceptualisations of devolution and decentralisation and provided an organisation of these concepts in order to draw clear distinctions which help us to analyse the current devolution reforms. In employing this framework, it is useful to start with the overarching narrative: 'Devolution Revolution'. That rather grand even hyperbolic description of the current reforms might lead one to believe that local government is experiencing substantial devolution of political power and authority. Such a process would involve local authorities working together to agree the establishment of new governing institutions possessing legislative powers and enhanced decision-making capacities. It would also imply a reshaping of the constitutional relationship between two tiers of government, as it did with devolution to Scotland; the UK Parliament may remain sovereign, but Scotland still enjoys a significant degree of power and autonomy (Trench 2007). But, will English local government enjoy the privilege accorded to Scotland in terms of power and autonomy? The process of devolution thus far has offered, at best, limited administrative devolution. The devolution deals, which have been agreed to date, outline the pooling of existing functions of local authorities upwards into a functional economic and quasi-regional area. Any additional responsibilities, which have been decentralised, form part of a clearly distinct menu of functions that central government has decided they are happy to pass down.

These responsibilities are just that—responsibilities, they are functions, tasks and things to do and often they cover projects of a specific nature which operate with a particular timeframe. Although significant funding is being devolved at the same time, that funding is delegated from Whitehall

and linked to specific projects and developments. Moreover, it is not newly generated local funding, rather government allocation—in other words a continuation of the normal funding arrangements from local government. So far, none of the agreed deals show any fundamental shift in the financial relationship between the centre and local government nor make any shift towards full fiscal devolution. There has been no attempt to create a financially independent local government through the deal-making process. The exception is some underdeveloped proposals for the retention of growth in business rates and levies on infrastructure precepts. Local political leaders will still not be able to fully raise and spend their own revenues; the only fiscal autonomy granted to mayors within the new legislative framework is to introduce a local precept on council tax.

We are left wondering why local government appears to be reluctant to take full advantage of the devolution process or to be bold in brokering deals with the centre. Given what was a short time period to prepare deals, this analysis might seem unfair. Yet, we could assume that given years of pressing the centre for more powers and autonomy, the deal-making process would be hotly pursued by councils, but negotiations to date have suggested that this is not the case. A recent report produced by the Communities and Local Government Committee highlights some of the problems, and it shows that the fault of the lack of real powers in the deals does not always rest with local government, as the committee found that requests for specific powers have been frequently and repeatedly blocked by central government departments who seem unwilling to trust local government (CLGC, 2016).

Cut and Paste Devolution

In analysing the devolution deals to date, it is clear that they represent a significantly similar set of responses to a centrally framed objective to support both local and national economic growth alongside further streamlining of public service provision at the local level. There has demonstrably been a continued push to see the mayoral model adopted locally, which has resulted in nine new mayors of combined authorities, spanning multiple local authority areas, all of whom will be elected in 2017.

Despite a promise from the former Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Rt Hon Greg Clark MP, of ‘bespoke devolution’, Fig. 5.1 shows that the patterns that have emerged in the deals agreed so far are almost all of the agreed deals to date reflect a common menu of

devolved tasks from the centre. All of the deals include devolved responsibility for areas such as transport and infrastructure, education and skills and business support. Most, not all, of the deals to date included devolved functions in relation to housing and planning, employment and welfare support and the integration of health and social care. Some exceptions were found, however, in Tees Valley and Liverpool who have requested devolved responsibilities in the policy domain of culture and Cornwall where responsibilities relating to renewable energy and energy efficient homes were negotiated.

There are some noticeable variations in how different combined authorities finessed the common themes that had emerged across the deals, but this finessing is dwarfed by the similarities across the deals. There appears to be a common set of demands which almost all agreed deals to date have made: £30m funding per year for 30 years; greater powers over local transport, buses and trains; new powers over skills and training; and more control over strategic planning. Not only are the themes of the agreed deals strikingly similar, but much of the wording of the deals is also remarkably similar, so much so, that on removing the names of the council areas from the deals, there is little that appears specific to particular local areas. Such similarity may result from similar needs across the country, or from reluctance from local government to be bold in the deal-making process, or from what could be called 'cut and paste devolution' (Wall and Vilela Bessa, 2016). That is councils simply taking from other deal items which appear attractive or easy to follow. The promise of bespoke devolution has become a template-style, cut and paste process for the agreement and of devolution deals which has resulted in a set of deals which lack any obvious sense of local or bespoke identity, nor is there evidence of councils engaging a fight for devolution against recalcitrant government departments.

Some commentators have offered a defence of local government's timidity in the deal process. The independent think tank, Centre for Cities—a non-partisan urban policy research unit—has identified what they perceive to be important differences between the devolution deals so far agreed. They point out that the Greater Manchester devolution deal, while significantly larger than the rest of the deals in its scope, includes substantial devolved responsibility for the provision and integration of health and social care services, as well as blue light services (HM Treasury 2014). The Centre for Cities also highlights how the West Midlands Combined Authority deal includes a commitment for a £4.4 billion HS2 Growth Strategy to ensure that the region secures 'ensure maximum economic

benefit from High Speed 2 (HS2) rail investment'. In addition, the North East Combined Authority deal boasts a commitment for the provision of ultrafast broadband across the combined authority area—this is seen to be a particular priority for the region given the diverse blend of urban and rural areas (HM Treasury 2015a). It is certainly the case that the examples here do reflect very specific sets of needs that are of importance to specific areas, and that is the least that could be expected from a devolution deal that should identify and meet unique requirements of combined authority areas. But, those examples do not mask the overall pattern that, by and large, there is less difference between the deals than would be expected as a result of a devolution revolution.

One of the areas of similarity in the devolution process emanates from central government, and that is the expression by the centre that where devolution deals are agreed and combined authorities are created, there must be clearly demonstrated arrangements for visible and accountable leadership of those authorities. The preferred option, for the government, in securing that visible and accountable leadership is for the new combined authorities to be headed by a directly elected mayor, and it is to that office the chapter now turns.

No Mayor, No Deal

Previous attempts by the centre to promote changes to local political leadership, through shifting to a system of directly elected mayors, have so far failed to gain traction and see the spread of this office (Copus 2006). Despite such attempts to stimulate the adoption of directly elected mayors since the Local Government Act 2000, only 16 currently exist across all 352 English councils—excluding the Mayor of London or the proposed mayors in Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region and other combined authority areas—all of which are covered by separate legislation and have different powers to local authority mayors.

Central government has been very clear in that, in order for combined authorities to be granted significant powers and significant devolved funding, the councils forming any combined authority should ensure visible and accountable leadership by adopting an elected mayor as the political head of the combined authority. Although ministers have hitherto insisted that the mayoral model will not be forced upon local areas, the government is applying significant pressure on councils to agree to this leadership model. Councils themselves are reluctant to agree to this, for

similar reasons that they have been reluctant to agree to elected mayors at the level of their own council (Copus 2006). It is clear from Fig. 5.2 that, at least for the deals that have already been signed, the push for elected mayors has had significant impact on the governance outcomes of those devolution agreements which have been formally agreed up to 15 May 2016.

The Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 provides for a new variant to the mayoral model that currently exists in England in that elected mayors of combined authorities will enjoy greater control over functions such as local transport, housing, skills and healthcare than could be hoped for by the existing council elected mayors. Indeed, elected mayors already existing have broadly the same powers and responsibilities as indirectly elected council leaders—the new combined authority mayors will have powers far in excess of a council leader. Where previous attempts to establish elected mayors in England have had very limited success (Copus 2006; Kukovic et al. 2015), the new, more empowered directly elected mayor of a combined authority has considerable potential to wield enhanced powers and responsibilities. In exploring the proposed powers for a number of new combined authority mayors, we can yet again see where the potential for devolution to local government to provide much of what local government has been demanding for some years is not being fully realised. With the exception of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the proposed combined authority mayors appear somewhat neutered. Figure 5.3, taken from a report produced by Centre for Cities, outlines the powers of the new combined authority mayors in England.

There have been significant and widespread tensions between councils and central government about the prospect of a directly elected mayor heading combined authorities. So much so that the adoption of mayoral governance has brought a number of devolution deal negotiations to a halt as local authorities have reversed their commitment to accepting an elected mayor even after signing deals with government, such as with the Hampshire and Isle of Wight's devolution deal. The government's insistence on mayoral elected mayors heading new combined authorities has proven particularly problematic in rural areas—such as Hampshire—councillors and council leaders perceive that method of governance to be best suited to urban, rather than rural, areas.

The current opposition from some councillors towards elected mayors is historic (Rao 2003), and local campaigns have often gone out of their way to stifle any public excitement about the prospect of being able to

	GMCA	*Liverpool City Reg.*	*North East*	*Sheffield City Reg.*	*Tees Valley*	*West Midlands*	*West of England*	*East Anglia*
Investment fund (30 years)	£900m	£900m	£900m	£900m	£450m	£1.1bn	£900m	£900m
Education	Apprenticeships, adult skills, further education	Apprenticeships, adult skills, further education	Adult skills, further education	Apprenticeships, adult skills, further education	Adult skills	Adult skills	Apprentices hips, adult skills, further education	Apprentic eships, adult skills, further education
Housing	£30m a year investment fund, strategic planning, compulsory purchase powers	Strategic planning, compulsory purchase powers, mayoral development corporations	Strategic planning, compulsory purchase powers	Strategic planning, compulsory purchase powers, mayoral development corporations	Mayoral development corporations	Compulsory purchase powers	Strategic planning, compulsory purchase powers, mayoral development corporations	Strategic planning, mayoral development corporations
Transport	Consolidated transport budget, bus franchising, smart ticketing	Consolidated transport budget, local roads network, bus franchising, smart ticketing	Consolidated transport budget, bus franchising, smart ticketing	Consolidated transport budget, local roads network, bus franchising, smart ticketing	Consolidated transport budget	Consolidated transport budget, local roads network, bus franchising, smart ticketing	Consolidated transport budget, local roads network, bus franchising, smart ticketing	Consolidated transport budget, local roads network, bus franchising, smart ticketing
Health and Social Care	£6bn integrated health and social care budget	Planning for health and social care integration	Planning for health and social care integration					

Fig. 5.3 Devolved powers and functions of new combined authority mayors. *Source*: Centre for Cities (2016)

directly elect a political leader (Copus 2006). Despite this opposition from councillors, there appears to be a slow shift emerging in the perceptions of the mayors among the local residents to whom councillors owe their election to office. Research consultancy ComRes conducted a poll, commissioned by the Centre for Cities, of more than 2500 citizens across the five biggest city-regions in England who anticipate the introduction of elected mayors in May 2017. The poll found that 57% of the respondents backed giving mayors more powers than councils, with only 25% opposed (COMRES 2016). While this is a very small sample survey and the findings are in stark contrast to the results of local referendum, in England, that have largely rejected elected mayors (Kukovic et al. 2015), it does provide a glimmer of hope that some support is emerging among the voters that they themselves should choose who heads the new combined authorities.

Despite opponents of elected mayors arguing that the new office will be too powerful, the powers expected to be devolved to combined authority

mayors (see Fig. 5.2) suggest the question that remains is whether they will have enough, not too much power, to be able to govern effectively a large and artificial entity that is the combined authority…. Most new combined authorities appear to be using the Manchester Agreement and Constitution when in setting out the powers of the mayor, as it is the role of the proposed combined authorities' constituent councils to develop and agree the constitution for governance arrangements before receiving the approval of the Secretary of State. The pattern emerging in the drafting of combined authority constitutions is that mayors' cabinets—effectively boards of the constituent council leaders—are being provided with a series of qualified majority voting powers (which effectively results in a veto power), normally a two-thirds majority, over aspects of the use of mayoral powers and actions. Thus, we see indirectly elected council leaders—chosen by the councillors of the constituent councils of a combined authority, ensuring that it is they, rather than the mayor elected by all the voters, that will wield significant powers, at least of a veto nature. The new mayors are being hamstrung before they are even elected, thus setting up that office and the combined authority to potential failure.

The recent introduction of directly elected leadership into English local government has presented a new set of dynamics to local politics. Firstly, it represents a potential reduction of the influence of the party machine and therefore allows, even with the election of a party political candidate, greater attention to be placed upon local issues through weakening the grasp on executive decision-making of the party group. Moreover, a directly elected leader is required to adopt a more outward style of leadership, being clearly visible and identifiable to the electorate from whom they gain their direct mandate and legitimacy. This more open and visible style of local leadership coupled with a consequently weakened party machine may allow for local issues and decisions to be deliberated beyond the restrictions of the majority party (Copus 2006).

Directly elected mayors have the potential to not only reinvigorate local democracy but to have a positive impact on local economic development. In a report produced by the Centre for Cities, a strong case is made for the potential of directly elected mayors to improve local economies within metropolitan areas through overcoming barriers to growth and using both formal and informal powers to bring together a variety of local actors in order to produce effective and locally tailored policies to drive local economic growth. The report draws upon the success of the Mayor of London as an illustration of these potential benefits, where the capital has

seen the implementation of initiatives such as Crossrail and the congestion charge (Centre for Cities, 2011). In order for combined authority mayors to enjoy similar levels of success as the Mayor of London in enhancing the local economy and improving the health of local democracy, they must possess the necessary powers and autonomy to effect positive change. The devolution deals agreed to date are a cause for concern; the West Midlands Combined Authority devolution deal illustrates this concern, where the metro mayor's powers do not appear to extend beyond exclusive powers over franchising bus services and building roads and enhance planning powers—this pales in comparison to the office of the London Mayor (HM Treasury, 2015d).

The new breed of 'metro mayors' provide a further opportunity to enhance democratic accountability. At a time where larger governing structures—combined authorities—are being created in order for groups of local authorities to obtain larger amount of public money and greater responsibilities, the need for effective and clear accountability is paramount. Clear lines of accountability are therefore even more necessary when we consider that the distance between local residents and decision-making is increasing. Metro mayors provide the electorate with a vital opportunity to directly elect the leader of a combined authority to office, as opposed to simply transferring existing governance structures to this new tier of governance, which often sees local leaders indirectly elected to office in accordance with the considerations of the political party in control at any given time (Copus and Dadd 2014; Berg and Rao 2005; Denters and Rose 2005). While a sense of place and territorial identity are tested through the creation of new 'super authorities', metro mayors will help to personify these new anonymous governing entities.

Conclusion

The current devolution polices, being pursued by the centre, are in a state of some fluidity and are likely to remain so for some times, making difficult to draw any definitive conclusions. We know from history that attempts by Westminster and Whitehall to recast and local government have had significant and often negative consequences for local democracy. While devolution may mean different things to different policy players and different political actors, there is a general mood at the time of writing that the shift of power from the centre to the localities is vital not only to broad notions of renewing local democracy but also to economic regeneration

and growth. Even more critical is the need for that shift to be shaped from the bottom up by local politicians and local residents supported by a policy narrative which not only takes on the deeply embedded centralisation narrative but also provides something more democratically cogent than Heseltine's 'Pursuit of Growth' and Osborne's 'Northern Powerhouse' logics. The new legislative framework for this shift in England has the potential to provide councils with a bespoke devolution deal for their areas, which they can forge to suit their own needs. Government simply legislating to make devolution happen is not sufficient for it to occur; what is required is a cultural change in the relations between the localities and the centre and this is something we return to in the 'Conclusion' chapter. Without that cultural change on the part of both local and central government, the longevity and sustainability of a devolution settlement for English local government remains merely a faint hope.

The deals agreed to date and the top-down negotiation process have demonstrated that the bespoke element of devolution is certainly lacking and that what has emerged, rather than bespoke deals, are a set of agreements which reflect the broad policy objectives of central government. The process for negotiating devolved powers with Whitehall departments has shown the existence of continued reluctance of the civil service to trust local government and to relinquish their power and role over policy areas which they see as central to a national programme. Moreover, the reluctance to devolve genuinely means that central departments are having significant influence in shaping the devolution deals, thus ensuring they maintain a shape that suits a central objective.

Trying to identify any clear and distinct differences between the devolution deals that have so far been agreed has proved to be a difficult task, indicating that local government is yet to fully grasp the devolution nettle. Moreover, the process of negotiation between a collection of councils and the central government has the effect of squeezing out local concerns and replacing it with a blueprint of sub-regional demands. Furthermore, it is difficult to see where the current government's devolution policy differs in any great extent to previously unsuccessful attempts at restructuring local government. Taking a pre-selected menu of policy areas and functional responsibilities and offering them to sub-regional newly formed entities, the creation of which was stimulated by the centre, is unlikely to lay the foundation of a radical reformulation of the position of local government in relation to the centre. Indeed, the evidence so far suggests that the current devolution agenda has a long way to go before it develops as a radical

and fundamentally new relationship between local and central government. In the next chapter, we look at some of the reasons why there has been such timidity in the deal-making process and how the centralist narrative and centralised system even when it appears to be devolving makes it difficult for local government to cut the ties that bind it to the centre.

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CHAPTER 6

The Ties That Bind

Introduction

The last chapter examined the current government's approach to devolution in some detail, and although it narrated the prospect of a radical restructuring of the relationship between central and local government, what we found was a centrally driven agenda to which councils collectively are expected to respond. Moreover, we also saw that the focus of the transfer from the centre to the localities was not so much a devolution of political and governing power, rather a decentralisation of functional responsibilities and budgets or finances. Differentiating between devolution and decentralisation is not a semantic exercise but one of clearly defining a set of processes to be able to understand the nature of the interaction between central and local government and whether or not local government is stronger and more autonomous as a result. In addition, it is necessary to consider whether or not the transfer of power or functions is reversible—and in the case of English local government, what the centre gives, the centre can still take away. We all saw in Chap. 4, some in local government are complicit in adopting and supporting the agenda of the centre when it comes to marginalising or reshaping local government.

The next stage in freeing local government from central control is to break this co-dependent relationship which has been abusive at worst and passive aggressive at best. What is it that binds local government to the centre and how can those ties be cut? We find when examining the nature of the ties that bind local government to the centre a series of

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C. Copus et al., *Local Government in England*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-26418-3_6

factors that make any form of devolution difficult to achieve. Indeed, there are a series of structural, collective, organisational, conceptual, practical and existential factors that serve to ensure local government remains bound to its master at the centre (Goldsmith and Page 1987). Cutting that Gordian Knot between the localities and the centre—a knot which is both intractable as the term suggests and also actual in the way local and central government are bound together—is the main problem for localists and those that wish to see maximum autonomy for local government.

The case for maximum autonomy for local government can be made normatively or practically. Briefly put a normative acceptance of maximum autonomy displays a belief that strong and free alternative centres of political governing power are good way to balance a constitution. Moreover, the greater the autonomy of local government, the better it is able to respond more effectively to the political and public service demands of local communities than the centre (Wilson 2003). Either way neither the normative nor the practical vision can be achieved, while local government remains tied to the centre and operates as a nationalised local system rather than a localised system of sub-national government (Carmichael and Midwinter 2003).

The factors that are responsible for nationalising local government are explored in this chapter with the aim of identifying those ties that must be cut before local government can operate with maximum autonomy. The next section looks at the role that national political parties have played in the nationalisation of local government. Linked to the effect of political parties on the relationship the centre has with the localities, the third section explores, through the use of selected examples, the political duties that are legally enforced on local government and how that imposition of duties relates to the broader concept of a general power of competence for local government. The fourth section examines the prospect of full fiscal autonomy for local government and what that might mean for local autonomy. The chapter concludes by drawing together the main themes of the ties that bind local to central government and how they may be severed. Each of the sections below and the suggestions contained within them for maximum local autonomy must be seen as a package, rather than a series of independent steps—for without the entire package of change suggested, individual changes would be unlikely to enhance local autonomy.

National Political Parties: Nationalising Local Government

Two elements of the party politicisation of local government have changed throughout the years in which national parties have established their dominance in local government: first is the sheer scale of national party political involvement in local politics and, second, the degree of intensity with which parties operate as cohesive and disciplined *blocs* of like-minded members. Both the scale of involvement of national parties in local politics and the discipline those national parties operate serve to bind local government to the fortunes of national parties in their contest for control of the national parliament. Moreover, as the fortunes of local and national politics and politicians become increasingly intertwined, the idea that local government is there to protect communities against an overbearing state or central politics with which they may demur only applies for local politicians when their opponent political party is in power nationally. Thus, not only the political fortunes but also the policy objectives and narrative orientations of the localities and the centre are drawn closer together as local government becomes an offshoot of the two-party dominated national political setting.

The control of local government by the three main parties—Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats—has recently been steadily, if gradually, increasing. At the time of writing, the three main British political parties hold just over 90% of all council seats in England, a step-up on the approximately 80% of seats held in the early 1970s (see Wilson and Game 2011; Rallings and Thrasher 2013). The domination of local governing institutions by parties that not only control the UK Parliament but by two of whom regularly are the national governing party has come at some considerable cost for local autonomy. While the myth of the golden age of party-free local government is just that—a myth—it is the case that at stages during the development of democratic local government in England, national political parties were far less dominant and less rigid in their approach to governing locally. Parties were always present, in one form or another in local government, but they faced a greater completion for dominance than is the case today (see Hennock 1973; Young 1975; Owen 1982). Even the struggle for the democratisation of local government as a result of the 1835 Municipal Cooperation Act was largely a party political battle with a Tory Anglican local *elite* being replaced by

a liberal non-conformist *elite*, after incorporation (Fraser 1979; Gyford 1985; Copus 2004).

Gyford (1985) has charted the development of the party politicisation of local government as going through five distinct stages. These he termed *diversity* (1835–1865), *crystallisation* (1865–1905), *realignment* (1905–1945), *nationalisation* (1945–1974) and *reappraisal* (1974–), and these stages indicate the process and periods of developing influence and control for party politics in local government. Gyford's final stage of *reappraisal* is a period of an increased escalation of the spread of national party politics in local government brought on by local government reorganisation. While Gyford gives no end point for that period, the continued increase in national party control could be said to have reached a new period of *dominance* by the 1980s. That *dominance* is displayed in three ways: first, the sheer scale of party intrusion into local government; second, by the ideological intensity which developed in the 1980s with the battles that raged between some urban Labour controlled councils and the government of Margaret Thatcher (see Carvel 1984; Blunkett and Jackson 1987; Livingstone 1987); and third, the increasing disciplined way in which council groups operate, with the political behaviour of councillors of the same party controlled by party standing orders and whipping systems (see Copus 2004).

It is unlikely, unless the suggestions that follow later in this chapter are adopted, that we will see national party politics shift to a period of *receding* and that we witness national political parties holding less than 80% of all council seats in England. The figure of 80% is employed to indicate the period of *dominance* as Wilson and Game (2006: 298–299) employ 80% or more of council seats on an individual council being held by one or more parties as an indication of a two-party system operating on that council. While across local government we are dealing more with a three-party system, with Labour and Conservatives currently the largest two of them here, it is reasonable to employ the dame figure—80% of seats—as suggesting national political party dominance of local government as a whole. To remind ourselves of that *dominance*, currently the three main parties hold 90% of all council seats in England.

It is not just the existence of such national party dominance that matters so much; it is the way in which national parties transpose the national party debate into council activities and business which has a nationalising and therefore centralising effect on the position of local government. National political parties bind local government, through their national

structures and through shared political visions and party loyalty, to the party at Westminster, whether it is in opposition or power nationally. Campaigning in local elections, because of the three-way national party politics, often becomes a confusing conflation of local and national policies with parties offering their supporters the chance to give the government of the day a 'bloody nose' or to reward it for its good stewardship of the national wellbeing, by electing councillors from a national party. Moreover, the policy narratives of the day are repeated locally, which this may not be much of surprise as an expectation is that national parties will display variations of the same policies locally and nationally, it distorts local political debate and discourse.

While it would be wrong to ignore the important role that independents play in local government—particularly in an international context (see Reiser and Holtmann 2008; Copus et al. 2012; Copus and Wingfield 2014), they have been unable to counter the dominance of the national parties. The size of English local government and the first-past-the-post system, being partly responsible for the three-party dominance but the nationalisation of the local media, the news focus of the national media on national parties and their leadership and the way the national parties conduct their business and local political discourse, serves to de-localise local government. The nationalisation of local government ensures that it continues to be bound, by national parties, to central government. Members of national parties active locally have nothing to gain from cutting their ties to national parties or politics or in conducting local politics in a way that is distinct from national political interaction.

National parties centralise power locally as they are expected to serve their parties within a local setting rather than their voters and the links that councillors, as local *elites*, have regionally and nationally within their national party draw them further away, as representatives from the locality. The language of local politics and the narratives behind policy are, as suggested, also nationalised, and the political space for alternative locally contextualised narratives is reduced by the dominance of the big three parties. The three-party local system survives because members of those parties look and operate beyond the immediate locality and engage in policy debate and understand public policy beyond the confines of their locality—and this is particularly the case for leading councillors (Copus 2016). It is that potential nationalisation of the policy narrative that is particularly worrying for the autonomy of local government. Without the space to explore and construct alternative solutions to local problems or the local

manifestation of national problems, without the freedom to experiment with thinking through how localities may best develop, with the narrowing of policy options that national parties bring to local government, then it remains ties to the policy narratives of the centre (Grant 1973; Copus et al. 2012). As we have seen in Chap. 4, the narrowing of policy narratives can even go as far as councillors arguing for the abolition of their own council—or other councils in the locality.

The solution is no less drastic than it is simple: non-partisan local elections and an atomistic electoral system. Non-partisan elections will be roundly condemned as undemocratic, unworkable and impossible to police but, the prize of cutting the ties between local and national government that limit policy narratives and policy alternatives, is great. Moreover, the suggestion is not that members of political parties would be legally prevented from standing for election to council or that parties would not be able to use their organisational structure and resources to campaign. Rather that party labels would be forbidden in local elections and that strict limits would be placed on the nature of local campaigning that would be directed towards reflecting local not national concerns. If we accept spending limits on candidates, restricting campaigning activity to local concerns is no massive step. No party labels in elections would have to be linked to the tearing-up of party rules, group standing orders and any disciplinary mechanisms formally existing for any parties that did secure the election of candidates to council.

The next simple change would be that of atomising the electoral system. It is beyond the scope of the book to debate the merits and demerits of particular electoral systems; it is suffice to say that alternative systems exist which provide the maximum opportunity for independents, social notables (Lee 1963; Clements 1969), single-issue groups, local and regional parties to also secure election to councils. By confronting party candidates that secured local election without the assistance of the use of a national party label, to council where no one party could guarantee an overall majority, would force a behaviour change. While it is likely that coalition administrations would develop, they would also have to operate in a political setting where local concerns and policy narratives dominated—a very different context to a coalition in local government where a national policy narrative dominates.

Thus, one of the first steps in localising local government and in cutting its ties with the centre to enhance local autonomy and freedom is the dilution of national party dominance through non-partisan elections and

restrictions on national party activity in local government. The importance of such a step is seen in the next section, which explores the problem of centrally imposed political duties and policies on local government.

Centralisation Through Imposed Duties

The existence of local government in England as a creature of statute that owes its very existence to central government has already been explored. But beyond the existence of a legislative framework within which local government operates is a more detailed and practical set of controls exerted by the centre—rule by regulation. In its 2013 report on the prospects for codifying the relationship between central and local government, the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee of the House of Commons noted a comment by the then Minister for Decentralisation, Greg Clarke, that there were 'at least 1,293 [statutory] duties imposed on each local authority' (TSO 2013: 8). The report went on to state that: 'Such imposition of duties by the centre on local government is against the principles and practices of localism' (Ibid). What has become clear since the publication of this report is that despite the last and current government's policies of devolution, little has changed in regard to the duties imposed and nor has central government's appetite for adding to the burden. Indeed, the existence of such 'duties' also restricts and restrains the general power of competence granted to local government by the Localism Act 2011.

But the centralising narrative is one that is based on a two-pronged deliberation about the need for regulation: the first prong reflects the idea that the post-code lottery—different levels of services or different policy decisions in different parts of the country—is inherently wrong. Public services and policy decisions should be the same everywhere to ensure fairness (Le Grand 2003; Nutley et al. 2007). But sameness is not fairness, far from it—the centre enforcing through regulation or duties the same levels of service or hindering the use of local political discretion cannot guarantee that those services will reflect the needs of local communities. The second prong of the narrative is that local government requires guideline, advice, assistance, direction and indeed control in the functions it undertakes, and it requires that because the centre lacks trust in local government's ability to deliver and that perceived lack of ability makes the centre's task of delivering its own electoral promises all the more difficult. So a misplaced and misguided sense of fairness and a lack of trust shape

the way in which central government attempts to bind local government through rules, regulations, guidance and imposed duties.

The use of imposed duties was not relieved by the Localism Act 2011 section one which gave councils the power to do anything that individuals may generally do, so long as not expressly prohibited by law. But, that Act failed to repeal any of the existing duties or regulations that at the time applied to local government and so the general power of competence operates within a boundary set by existing duties and regulations. Moreover, contained within the Act are some 140 reserve powers enabling the secretary of state to amend or repeal any of the Act's provisions should he or she choose to do so.

The imposition of duties on local government is twofold. First, there are those relating to the legal requirement for the provision of some service delivery or another, and related to that are the stream of guidance and regulations that asset out the standards to be met, how they will be met, how they will be assessed and how they will be achieved. These types of duties are an indication of centralisation supported by a pervasive narrative of *managerialism*—they set the way in which services designed for local communities are shaped, ordered and delivered. A quick review of the types of duties imposed on local government shows the depth of penetration the centre has over local government:

- Prepare assessments of the economic conditions of their areas (Local Economic Assessments). Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 Section 69
- Supply the Secretary of State with such information relating to the matters dealt with in Chap. 1, and at such time, as he may request. Local Government Act 2003 Section 14
- Form of Documents: All documents issued, made or given by Local Authority under the Act, must be in writing. Building Act 1984 s92
- To notify a relevant other local authority when proposing to take enforcement action in relation to a multi-site business. Regulatory Enforcement and Sanctions Act 2008—Section 11(2)
- Duty on Local Weights and Measures Authorities to enforce criminal offences in the Timeshare Regulations. Package Travel, Package Holidays and Package Tours Regulations 1992 (SI 1992/3288)
- To obtain confirmation from Secretary of State if authority wishes to acquire by agreement any land that is necessary for preserving a building acquired under s52 of P(LBCA)A 1990 or necessary for

preserving amenities or for affording access to it or for its control or management. Planning (Listed Building Conservation Area) Regulations 1990—Section 52(1)(b)

- Duty on commons registration authorities (exercising functions of a county council) to keep registers of common land and town or village greens. Commons Act 2006, Section 1
- Duty to remove abandoned vehicles Refuse Disposal (Amenity) Act 1978 (RDA), Section 3
- Duty to inspect the local authority area from time to time to detect statutory nuisances. Environmental Protection Act 1990 (as amended)
- Section 79: Regulation 7 (2): each food authority shall enforce and execute these Regulations in its area. Regulation 2 'food authority' does not include—(a) the council of a district in a non-metropolitan county except where the county functions have been transferred to that council pursuant to a structural change, or (b) the appropriate Treasurer referred to in section 5(1) (c) of the Act (which deals with the Inner and the Middle Temple); the full definition of 'Food authority' can be found in Section 5 of the Food Safety Act. Coffee Extracts and Chicory Extracts (England) Regulations 2000 (S.I. 2000/3323) Applies to England, equivalent Regulations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (EU origin)
- Duty to establish a Children's Trust Board as part of the wider co-operation arrangements. Children Act 2004 Section 12A as amended by the Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009
- Local authority to publish composite school prospectus. The Education School Information (England) Regulations 2008 SI 2008/3093 Regulation 5
- To consult before constructing road humps. Highways Act 1980 Section 90C
- To have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State relating to integrated transport functions. Local Transport Act 2008 Section 96
- Local Authorities working with Primary Care trusts to produce Plans to improve health. National Health Service Act 2006 Section 24(3)
- Duty of Local Social Service Authorities to provide after-care for certain patients. Mental Health Act 1983, s117
- (Source: Department of Communities and Local Government 2015)

The list above was selected at random from the material provided by the department of Communities and local government that details all the duties imposed on local government. The issue here is not to decry the importance or necessity of any of these items but simply to challenge the need for central government to produce such blanket requirements rather than local government, and individual councils, work out how best to do what they do. Central control through duties is indicative of a centralist policy narrative that articulates the need for constant oversight of local government and is a narrative which is operationalised through detailed control. Most of the examples above also come with specific regulations setting out not only what must be done but how it must be achieved. The centralist and managerialist policy narratives merge together and encourage politicians and civil servants to produce detailed legislation which moves far beyond the setting out of broad policy concerns and objectives into specific requirements which control the actions of local government (Hutchcroft 2001).

But the centralist narrative results in a more insidious, even sinister, form of the imposition of duties that extends beyond the managerial and which sets the policies and even the politics of local government (Hennock 1982; Blom-Hansen 1999). Such duties display a *civic* centralisation as through the imposition of political duties, local government loses its role as a civic and governing institution and becomes no more than a satellite of the centre, which not only provides services as the centre sees fit but also is forced to introduce political policies with which it might disagree (see Saunders 1982; Hooghe and Marks 2003). Some *civic* centralisation is linked to and results from local government's role as the main provider—or more recently overseer—of public services in any modern welfare state.

Another source of *civic* centralisation results from the centre's desire and ability to impose its political policies on local government—first, that relate to public services, but which are political decisions such —privatisation, comprehensive schooling, for example (see the next chapter for a more detailed discussion of this type of *civic* centralisation); but then there are duties imposed which require local government to operationalise central government political policy, and it is here we return to hints of the mandate wars in English local government of the 1980s. Central government imposes political duties on local government because it operates on the understanding that it is elected to govern nationally and that overrides the display of any local mandates. That then raises the question—why have

local mandates, why have local government that is elected, if that local electorally legitimised body is unable to introduce political policies that are at odds with the centre? There is no political division of labour that enables local government to what is in effect: govern. Thus, local government is subject to becoming the vehicle through which central government implements its broad political vision, agenda and objectives, and so we see that central politics well and truly trumps local politics (Elander 1991; Baldersheim and Stahlberg 2002).

What is provided here is a deliberately selective and provocative example of how *civic* centralisation works and is used because such an example will no doubt generate a reaction from those supporting and favouring the example used to explore civic centralisation. It is *civic* political centralisation that so needlessly denudes local government of its political and governing power and which places a question over the use of the word 'government' in local government, and such an example can be found in the Equalities Act 2010 and its *public sector equality duty* provisions. Under section 149 of the Act, public authorities have the duties to:

1. eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
2. advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
3. Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

A forerunner to the Equalities Act was the 2007 Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act; section 138 laid a duty on councils to consult; without such consultation with section of the public and without an understanding of the equalities implications of decisions taken by councillors, those decisions can be judged as illegal by the courts.

Other examples can be found in climate change or environmental legislation, education, health or procurement legislation and across a myriad of other legislative fields that impose political duties on local government. The merits or otherwise of piece of legislation that imposes political duties on local government is not up for discussion here and whatever one thinks of any central government legislation that imposes political duties on local government, such a discussion would miss the point. The issue at stake is at what governing point should political legislation be imposed and by whom. So taking the Equalities Act as an example—and deliberately

because it is a provocative issue, it is necessary to consider why that or any other political duty should be imposed on local government from the centre as this strikes at the heart of the real narrative about centralism and localism and exposes the innate and inherent centralism of many self-proclaimed localists.

At this stage a reminder is offered that it is not the subject of the pieces of civic centralisation that are provided that are of concern to localists. Rather, that the centre has reinforced a narrative that is so well embedded into the political culture of the country that it is hardly challenged and that narrative supports the constitutional subservience of local government (Copus 2010). That constitutional subservience means that local government is subject to political policy duties imposed on it even if the local electorate has rejected such national policies by providing itself with a political administration locally that is at odds with that of the centre. It is here then that challenge to *civic* centralism must be developed.

Copus (2016: 152–155) explored what was termed the 'localised state' as an alternative to a centralised political and governing system. That localised state was one in which locally elected government would set the primary legislative environment within each and every council area, rather than the centre. To imagine how this might operate, it is necessary to take a few more provocative examples by questioning why it is necessary that fox hunting or smoking in public places, the age at which alcohol can be consumed in pubs and whether public services will be provided by councils or private contractors, for example, be subject to national (centrally imposed) bans rather than left to councils to legislate for their own areas? In an age when diversity is King, it is odd that diversity of legislative frameworks, within and across England, is still eschewed and all the more odd given the devolution agenda that there is little fracturing of the centralised policy narrative that supports a nationalised approach to legislative change.

The centralised state can be inverted—and this would fit with devolution within Britain that saw Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland given governments and first ministers and primary legislative powers of their own, a process from which England was excluded. Indeed, we saw in the previous chapter that devolution to English local government comes nowhere near offering England that which has been given to Scotland and Wales. But, while the main three British political parties remain implacably opposed to England being granted the same governing privileges that the

three parties support for Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, there is an opportunity to shift the centralist policy narrative to a more localist tune. Copus (2016: 153) set out a vision of a muscular localised state which would be based on a:

> Powerful, politically independent local government with a constitutionally protected right to exist. To emphasise the politically representative role of local government, the maximum devolution of primary legislative power would be placed with elected councils and their councillors. The latter are to be seen as governors of their locality in their own right. It would therefore be councils and not central government which would set the legal framework that would exist within each council area. Decisions would need to be made about the nature of the legislative power to be devolved and what should remain at the centre, but this would be based on a localist and not a centralist presumption, in which the only matters that remained at the centre would be those that could be demonstrated as needing to do so, and even then, a heavy dose of local involvement would shape those policies. Indeed, it would be a federated England as a localised state where local government had what in effect would be 'states' rights'. (Copus 2016: 153)

He went on to propose a test that would need to be passed before central government had the right to legislate nationally:

- Does the issue require a response that extends beyond the boundaries of the country—international affairs, treaties, economic arrangements?
- Is national security involved?
- Is it a tax-raising power needed for central government to carry out its functions?
- Is it an issue that requires regulating between local government, such as currency, weights and measures, metric or imperial system usage?
- Does it affect national law-and-order issues and national policing? There is an assumption that some criminal offences and the sanctions imposed for them may vary across councils; indeed, municipal police forces may exist by decisions of local government.
- Is it an issue which clearly, demonstrably and unequivocally must be dealt with at a national level? (in a localised state, there are few issues that elicit a yes answer to that question) (Copus 2016: 153–154).

In addition to the tests set out above, the following questions could also be asked before an issue was proposed for legislation that was applicable across the country:

- Does it affect the boundaries, territories and territorial integrity of local government?
- Does it attempt to reshape or restructure any sub-national bodies (that role would be for elected councils to decide)?
- Does it affect the health, safety and morals of the public—if so then it is a local issue to decide?
- Is the proposed legislation likely to restrict, restrain or in any way alter the financial stability or independence of local government?

With a series of simple questions, a test is easily devised that underpins a localised state—the assumption is that all legislative and political issues are decided locally unless the national test can be met. With such a test, it would be elected councils that became the primary legislative bodies with such a change the centralised nature of politics would start to crumble, as those seeking to legislatively restrict an activity, or to lift some restriction would have to win 352 political battles with 352 councils, rather than win one battle focus on parliament and Whitehall. A localised state would not only be one where the primary unit of government was local not national, but one in which that pyramid of governability was laid on a foundation of full fiscal independence for local government. It is the question of finance the chapter now turns.

He Who Pays the Piper or Full Fiscal Autonomy for Local Government

Another area where the central policy narrative regarding local government needs to be challenged is that over local finances. Indeed, even local government's own narrative around this issue needs to be challenged and developed into a more localist narrative. As we saw in the previous chapter, devolution deals and the entire devolution agenda has not embraced the battle cry: full fiscal devolution for English local government. Rather, the deals that have been developed so far are parsimonious when it comes to the question of finance and financial freedom. A localised state would place maximum financial freedom with local government because councillors, as

local governors and representatives, would make choice on both tax and spend policies that would reflect the wishes of their electorate. Currently of course, that is far from the case.

Local government finances are the property of the centre, and decisions about the nature of tax and spend powers and indeed even the level of tax and spend can and are made for local government by the centre. Indeed, 58% of the total local government income received in 2013–2014 was in the form of government grants, while council tax provided only 15% of local government income (dclg 2015) with the rest made up by a range of course. Central government decides not only what taxes councils can levy, it can decide to limit the amount raised—that is to cap the levy—and, as with the case of the business rate, it can allow local government to collect the tax but require that the proceeds are forwarded to the government. The Local Government Finance Act 1988 introduced the system of non-domestic rates, commonly known as business rates, and although these taxes are collected locally, the rate at which they can be levied is set by the government centrally. Moreover, the rates collected are transferred to the government which distributes them across local government in line with a set of population-based formulas. So, councils are in effect merely collection agents for the centre when it comes to an element of their own local taxation (see, Bailey 1991; John 1999; Caulfield 2002).

The narrative justification for such a system is based on the claim that it avoids any disparities of financing from the widely different rate bases of councils, but such an argument can be applied to any local taxation and indeed undermines the whole notion of local taxation. If there are disparities in taxation bases or in the affluence or otherwise across a country, then logically no local taxation can be permitted. Clearly such an argument is nonsense because local finance raising powers must reflect a link to the wishes of local voters as to their preferences for tax and spend policies well as levels of affluence. It is at the point of the issue of equalisation that many who would profess to be localists start to crumble. Those who wish to see extra powers resting locally and for less central control must also rid themselves of dependency on the idea of financial equalisation as a way of solving local funding problems—that is, that wealthier local areas should be used to subsidise those areas that are less wealthy.

Councils themselves must break the equalisation dependency and change the narrative to one of full fiscal autonomy because the purpose of local government cannot be to provide separate pots of wealth into which the centre can dip to redistribute. It is not that such a position

would result in the removal of incentives for areas to improve their own economic base, because the current devolution debate set out in the last chapter shows that there is considerable appetite in local government for the power to stimulate and direct local growth. Indeed, the devolution adventure is currently predicated on an economic imperative, rather than a belief in localism for its own sake. While equalisation could be seen to remove an incentive to councils to stimulate growth and improvement, the problem with the concept is deeper. A reliance on equalisation between areas, through the government transferring funds from one locality to another, prevents a full and desperately needed review of the entire financial basis and powers of English local government and prevents an articulation of what full fiscal autonomy, as a much preferred localist option to equalisation, might mean. Finance and funding is a tie to the centre that must be cut by fresh thinking and boldness on the part of local government itself.

Currently, changes are being introduced to gradually localise the local business rate tax and what is being termed as a policy of business rate retention by local government; it was a move initiated by the Local Government Finance Act 2012 which enabled councils to keep 50% of the tax take, with the centre redistributing the remaining 50% (see LGA 2015). The re-localisation of a local tax was given a spur after an announcement by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, to the 2015 Conservative Party conference in which he pledged that local government would be able to keep some £26bn, calling it the 'biggest transfer of power' in recent history (BBC News). Business rate retention—and let's think about what that really means and that is local government keeping the proceeds of a local tax, raised locally, but sent to the government now being kept locally, it is a minor tinkering of the existing system, but the reaction is as though it is a major devolutionary shift.

The announcement speed up the flurry of activity across and within local government that continues a year on from the announcement and three years since the Act and that activity, among other things, has yet again set counties and districts at each other's throats with each demanding the greatest share of the retained local tax. The arguments between counties and districts about business rate retention have been around the way in which the proceeds should be shared between the two tiers of local government in England. Counties argue that with their social care responsibilities, they should have a greater share of the retained funds; districts

stressed their housing role; counties and districts however have argued within a policy narrative set by the government.

The central narrative stresses the devolutionary emphasis behind the move and as empowering local government, but it is a narrative trap, as not only does the policy of retention shift responsibility for costs to local government that are not fully covered, the discussion focuses local government onto the complexities and intricacies of the existing system. While understandably distracted into discussions about the way a change to the existing system should operate, a wider opportunity to explore full fiscal autonomy is missed. The government stresses devolution, but all that occurs is that a local tax is re-localised and tiers of local government argue over the spoils. Indeed, the policy journey that has been set in motion is that the centre will eventually end up not funding local government and all local finances will eventually be garnered locally. So it is doubly necessary that local government ends the equalisation dependency and that it attempts to shape the overall policy narrative to a much broader discussion about a range of financial and tax-raising freedoms. Indeed, within the context of austerity, this becomes all the more important.

Localism rests on financial autonomy for local government, but local finance remains the tie that neither central nor local government wants to cut. It is not as though opportunities to grasp the nettle have not presented themselves, they have. The report of the Committee of Inquiry into Local Government Finance (some 40 years ago), chaired by Sir Frank Layfield set out two board options for local government finance (for a detailed analysis, see Jones and Stewart 2002): first that central government should have more control over local expenditure and greater responsibility for local matters; second that local authorities should have more control over expenditure, with the balance of funding moving in favour of locally raised revenues, in part through devolving taxation powers. As Layfield recommended:

> there is a strongly held view amongst us that the only way to sustain a vital local democracy is to enlarge the share of local taxation in total local revenue and thereby make councillors more directly accountable to local electorates for their expenditure and taxation decisions. On balance, we consider that the administrative cost involved in introducing a local income tax for this purpose would be justified. After many decades of uncertainty in the realm of local government finance the time has come for a choice on the issue of responsibility. (Layfield 1976: 300–301)

Yet, government took no action and the local income tax and other suggestions went no further. In the 40 years since the report, the financing of local government has refused to dissipate with the same intensity that the government has refused to act. Indeed, as the recent London Finance Commission (2013) report noted, the inquiries into local government finance are many and varied, listing as examples the following:

- The Kilbrandon Review 1973 on the United Kingdom's constitutional arrangements
- The Layfield Report of 1976
- Paying for Local Government Green Paper, 1986, Cmnd 9714
- The Balance of Funding Review of 2003–2004
- Lyons Review (2004–2007),
- The City Finance Commission (subsequently recalled by the new mayor of London Sidiq Khan in 2015)
- The Mirrlees Review, conducted by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), 2011

The Lyons Review (2003–2007) was probably the next major review after the Layfield Report to try to change the policy narrative around local government finance. In what was a wide-ranging and magisterial report of considerable depth Lyons demanded was greater clarity about the respective roles of central and local government and for the centre to be clear about those roles especially in regard to public understanding. By focusing on the place shaping and leadership role of local government, it also demanded that central government reduce controls over local government while at the same time urging local government to act and use its existing powers more effectively (see Lyons 2007: 113–170). Throughout the report there are constant calls for greater flexibility for local government to act and to shape their place, for improvements and changes to council tax and business rates, enhancements to the transparency and clarity of the existing financial and taxation system, improvements to the incentives to local government to strengthen economic development and on the thorny issue of finance; the report stated that there was:

> No golden key to reform of local government funding. Reform will require a series of complementary measures, implemented over time, both to deal with the immediate challenges facing the funding system and to pave the way for wider choices in the future. (Lyons 2007: 211)

Indeed, the recommendations of the report on taxation (Lyons 2007: 361–317) were notably cautious and again rooted in the existing system. Changes to the existing system were suggested by Lyons—to both the council tax and business rate—but more radical suggestions such as a tourist tax were not enthusiastically embraced, although a reference to a bed tax (on hotels) was made (ibid.: 221–272). The normative message threaded through the report, however, was for central government to exert less control over local government generally and less specific controls, too. It wanted local government to become more confident and to take up a stronger local leadership role—envisaging greater interaction and control over external bodies. But, the report was evolutionary not revolutionary and stressed the developmental nature of the strengthening of trust between local government and the centre and between local citizens and their councils. Indeed, it is evident from the report that Lyons attempted to strike a balance between the needs of central and local government—no bad thing for a report of its nature, but again, an opportunity to change the narrative was not fully grasped—particularly on the question of local government finance.

So, despite all the inquires and reports, we are no further down the route to a financially autonomous local government and are left asking ourselves what would such autonomy look like? A localised state would rest on a taxation regime that provided maximum flexibility to local government and maximum ability to raise local taxes and generate income through a range of borrowing and income generating powers, including enhanced powers to operate in the commercial world through the selling of goods, products and services. In addition, councils should have complete control to set fees and charges and indeed fines, such as parking fines (and other fixed penalty notices)—currently controlled centrally. Local government needs to operate within a financial regime that is not uniform across the country that reflects the different levels of affluence and deprivation and which would see different councils levying taxation on those aspects that they saw fit and which did fit with local needs and resources (Ashford 1974; Midwinter and Mongahan 1995).

The only restriction on what can and should be the subject of local taxation and what level of taxation that could be imposed would rest not on the central government and its interests but on the tolerance of local citizens and voters and the imagination of councils. So, rather than the tentative reforms suggested by previous inquiries, which see the selection of one or two idealised taxes—local income tax being an example—that

are held up as part of a solution, what is required is for local government to have ownership of a radically reformed taxation system, where councils had a greatly extended range of tax-raising power than is currently the case and which could not be limited or altered by central government. Councils could secure full fiscal autonomy by generating tax income from not only property taxes but also, for example, from the following (which is by no means an exhaustive list):

- Local income tax
- Corporate income tax
- Sales tax
- Tourist tax
- Car tax
- Inheritance tax
- Royalties from various extraction or business activities
- Taxation of various advertisements and advertising activities
- Property tax (including stamp duty)
- Business tax
- Pet ownership tax

Each of these taxation powers exists for local government across a range of European countries, and so the menu is not a work of a fevered imagination, simply a drawing together of existing powers, overseas, into a far-reaching suggestion for taxation powers and it need not stop there. Indeed, in a system of true localism, councils would be able to fix the level of taxation, decide on rebates or reductions and offer incentives for payment as they decided. To many the suggestions will be a recipe for an unremitting taxation of local citizens, but if the reality is that such taxes already exist and if we base our system on a series of checks and balances resting with local citizens, such as the right to recall councillors or entire councils and the right to demand local referendum to ratify or otherwise local taxation, then we are in a far better position than if a distant central government decides arbitrarily to cap local taxes.

As Copus (2016) suggested:

> Imagine the following scenario: a council has within its area a major international airport with approximately 20 million passengers travelling through it each year. The economic and tourist activity generated by that airport already stimulates the local and regional economy. The council decides to

> levy a £ 10 tax on every passenger that travels in and out of that airport. It is highly unlikely that any passenger faced with such a charge will decline to travel, so passenger numbers will remain stable and only fluctuate with other market-driven factors. In addition, the council levies a small tourist tax which is collected and paid by tourists at any hotel at which they stay. Given the size of the main international airports in England, this power alone might see some councils secure almost complete financial freedom overnight. (Copus 2016: 156)

It is not a demanding stretch of the imagination to envisage such a situation, especially given that councils, across the country, are already involved in the running and managing of airports, of one size or another, and gain some return on their investment from such ventures. What is suggested here merely extends the financial freedom of local government to something that would be linked to a commercial venture—involvement in an enterprise such as the local airport, thus allowing two streams of income from the same source.

A critique of the above suggestions is that it places too much emphasis on taxation as a miracle cure and as a way of ensuring full fiscal autonomy. It is neither of those things, but it is a good and necessary start to the process and a start which recognises that like all good governments, local government has the right and ability to raise taxation. It is with that recognition that other financial freedoms will flow or be enhanced with the idea that local government has total financial freedom not regulated by government. Taxation here is used as an example to promote debate and to shape a new way of articulating the role and purpose of local government—as just that: a government. It also moves the debate away from a sterile, introverted examination of the existing, complex and tangled financing system to suggest ways in which full fiscal autonomy can be secured.

Conclusion

The chapter has reviewed, through three specific strands, the ties that bind the localities to the centre and which local government itself is reluctant to cut. The role that national political parties play in controlling local government is not unique in England, but it is certainly a contributing factor in the control by the centre of local government. With currently 90% of all councillors in England coming from one of the three main parties, there is little, if any, incentive for parties and councillors to change their political

behaviour at the local level. Indeed, the motivation is for them to play out the national political battles in a shadow of Westminster politics at the local level. Party discipline and loyalty add to the mix to ensure that councils provide very little space for genuine deliberation between councillors from different parties and that local issues with little national relevance can become party politicised (see Copus 2004).

With national parties controlling so much of local government, the ability of local government to act as a genuine bulwark to central power and while councils can and do confront governments of their own party of policy specifics, they also oppose central government—controlled by a different party as part of their political role. There is the possibility of a non-partisan alternative for local government and for enhanced powers for citizens and changes to the electoral system to end one-party role which could be used as a way of ameliorating the worse excess of party-dominated local government. It is not surprising that parties controlling councils that may nationally be in opposition to government see part of their role as opposing that government, especially when considering our second tie to the centre: government's ability to impose *managerial* and *civic* duties on local government.

Central government uses its power and constitutional superiority to impose duties, rules and regulations on local government, in very detailed and specific terms, across the range of public services and can also alter what local government does by removing services from it and placing them with other bodies or by giving local government extra responsibilities. That shifting of responsibilities and the detailed regulatory control are underpinned by a centralist policy narrative that articulates the need for constant oversight of local government to ensure it meets its expectations and in a way government deems necessary. Thus, central *managerial* duties control hinders the ability of local government to respond to specific local needs. The fear of a post-code lottery ignores the fact that local communities may indeed have different needs from different services in different places and at different times. Worse still is the imposition of *civic* duties, which is through legislation enforcing a central political policy on an elected council which may have a different political complexion or a set of political priorities to that of the centre.

While the mandate wars of the 1980s were well and truly won by central government, we are still left with the question: if localism is to be of any real value, how can we achieve political diversity across a country. Moreover, we could ask bluntly: why elect councillors if they cannot

introduce policies preferred by the local electorate? The answer posed here was to design a test to be passed by every government before national legislation is drawn up and brought into law. That test, which was set out above, has a distinct and deliberate localist bias and is shaped to make it difficult for national government to legislate nationally. The test also underpins a localised state within which local government has what are in effect 'states rights' to govern within a specific geographical area, but those states rights amount to little without full fiscal autonomy for local government.

The financial base of local government has so far proven to be one of the most intractable ties to cut among those that bind local to central government, and this is the case for two reasons: first, the centre's reluctance to give up detailed control of local government finances as a way of controlling public expenditure in totality or, and more interestingly, local government's own reluctance to reduce its dependency on the centre by demanding a greater degree of autonomy to raise its own finances. There is a mutually supporting policy narrative here with the centre expounding the need for national control of taxation and spending and local government echoing that position by demanding national government equalise funding and resources between councils.

While the positions of central and local government are beginning to change somewhat, with the government's move to re-localise the business rate and signalling a longer-term shift from central to local funding, that shift is motivated by central austerity policies rather than a conversion to localism. Local government only continues to make general statements about the need for greater financial autonomy while providing little examples of how this might be achieved while continuing to engage in explorations of the minutiae of the existing system. It has been left to a number of independent inquiries and commissions to examine new ways in which local government could be funded, but, so far they have lacked imagination, have been rooted in the existing system of local government finance and failed to produce truly radical change—with a local income tax being the most radical suggestion to have been ignored by central government.

Thus, we have a series of policy narratives that tie the politics, policy and finances of local government to the centre into a form of mutually dependent abusive relationship, in which the centre generally mistreats local government, but then, after a period of time, makes up for its behaviour with some sweetener which appeases the localities, for a while. What must be remembered, however, is that whatever that sweetener is that the

centre provides to local government—and the recent devolution agenda is a considerable sweetener—it can be taken away again by the centre should the policy priorities of the government change or should the government itself change. There is no certainty that the current devolution to English local government will continue and although today it may seem outlandish to suggest it could be reversed, who in the mid-1980s would have predicted the great devolution revolution of the 2010s? Those that suggest a counter-devolution revolution in the mid-2030s would currently be mocked—but, without more fundamental change to the centralisation narrative and without a counter-narrative, such re-centralisation is always a possibility. The final concluding chapter sets out to build the foundation of that new narrative of muscular localism and a localised state.

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CHAPTER 7

Conclusion: Localism and Centralism—A Constant Conflict or Time for Change?

Introduction

The book set out to re-establish the notion that there should indeed be a 'local' and 'government' in the English approach to local government and to develop a counter-narrative to act as an antidote to the policy narrative of centralisation. That latter narrative has been responsible for the gradual erosion of any notion that local government in England is and should be allowed to operate as a territorial recognition of the importance of politically representative sub-national government able to act as a counter-balance to the centre. The narrative of centralisation, which we have explored throughout this book, has meant that we have moved far from local government being about the government of recognisable and identifiable communities to a point where local government is shaped and reshaped by the centre—sometimes through local government's own urging or collusion—to reflect a technocratic purpose driven by the needs of public service provision (Dunleavy and Hood 1994; Pierre 2002; Agranoff and McGuire 2003). The centralising narrative goes further as it justifies, by providing an underpinning logic, not merely the constitutional subservience of local government but also its weakness as an institution which requires constant central monitoring.

The strength of the centralist policy narrative is that it skilfully sets up local government to fail and it does this by defining local government as, in the main, the provider of public services, or where it is not the direct provider, then presents it as a competitor with other providers for the

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C. Copus et al., *Local Government in England*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-26418-3_7

provision of public services. The value or importance of public services is not what is at issue here; rather the concern must be about a narrative that presents a governing institution that is no more than a service vehicle, with minimal space for political, policy and financial autonomy. Moreover, the ability to control the shape and size of local government means that it can be restructured to suit central policy objectives, which currently are focussed on economic growth and regeneration. Should that priority change, then the roles, functions, responsibilities and tasks of local government, as well as its very shape and size, can be redesigned to suit any new purpose. The centre can do this because it is the constitutionally recognised centre of political and governing authority, but by creating a policy narrative of a subservient and somehow ineffectual level of government (the local), the centre protects itself from any claim that there are alternative policies or legislative frameworks, to that of the centre, that could exist and operate within a national framework.

Any alternative localist narrative to that of the centre's must eschew a defensive position that is articulated in merely calling for more service responsibilities and more central funds to provide them. Rather, it must set out a truly localist alternative to a centralised state. A narrative which must of necessity draw on arguments that reflect a federal style sharing of political and governing power between the centre and the localities and which must stress that the opposite of the post-code lottery is localism and diversity. Moreover, it must indeed construct a new version of the mandate wars that plague local and central government interactions the 1980s and stress that councils do indeed hold a legitimate political position that is electorally legitimised and, rather than repeating a sterile argument about who governs nationally, use that legitimised governing role to ensure that the current policy of devolution that the centre is pursuing sees a similar gift of governing ability to English local government as that granted to Scotland and Wales as regions of the United Kingdom.

In the book we have employed the approach of identifying and exploring the policy narrative that shapes the relationship between local and central government so as to understand how political actors develop strategies to achieve their aims and the constraints that are imposed upon them by the political institutions within which they operate. We took that approach to allow us to develop an opposing narrative to that of centralisation but also to help identify how and where local government is complicit in not only accepting institutional constraints but accepting the narrative that generates such constraints, with little or no challenge. The broad central

policy narrative which has developed to reflect changes in the nature of local government and local democracy as well as the role it plays in the modern welfare state is extremely resilient to political and economic changes. Indeed, the centralist narrative is a main feature of the political landscape, and while centralisers and localisers are found across the party political spectrum, the centralist narrative reflects long-standing political views about the role of local government and the central state in the government of the country. Indeed the narrative of centralisation reflects a dominant view of the purpose of local government which is to be primarily a vehicle through which central policy is enacted.

The next section draws together the main threads of our arguments throughout the book and reflects on the power, resilience and seemingly permanent grip that the idea of a centralised democracy and centralised representative government has on the role of local government. It accounts for the weakness of the alternative localist narrative. In doing this, the section explores why the often-made claim among national politicians that they support devolution is a mirage. The section reflects on why it is that opposition parties promise greater powers to local government but so often fail to deliver when in government while at the same time, when in government, claiming to be developers of power. The third section draws together the main threads of the book to ask: Can local government in England take its place as a truly governing institution of its locality or is it doomed to a future of continual reshaping and repositioning to suit the political agenda of the centre? The section also suggests the factors that would need to combine to develop a truly localist approach to the government of England.

The Government Should Do Something

One of the rallying cries that goes up from the public, the media and other commentators when some natural disaster, social upheaval and policy problem occurs or even when the trains fail to run on time is: the government should do something! In other words, our political culture and political attention is focused on the power of the centre to solve or at least to attempt to resolve whatever ails. Even the floods which struck the country in 2007 and 2014 saw not only demands that the government respond but also national politicians in their wellies looking purposeful and stern while talking to local residents of the afflicted areas. The expectation was that the government would sort it all out—the reality was very different

as councils co-ordinated the work of an array of agencies to alleviate the problems. Indeed, councils—of all levels—were active in the immediately required emergency work and in the long-term clear-up activities necessary to bring some semblance of normality back to the afflicted areas and to do so quickly. Moreover, local government was working long after the national politicians had left the areas for the safety of a somewhat drier Westminster, having fulfilled their duty of being seen to have 'done something' about it.

The one example here, of two different sets of flooding, very pointedly highlights that much public, media and political attention was given to whether or not the government had responded adequately to this particular natural disaster. Such nationally focused attention and questioning of the government responses to these events was also played out by local and national politicians. By focusing political attention on the need for the 'government to do something,' the quite herculean efforts of local government during and for some time after the events were overshadowed. But, local government politically must take some of the blame as national political parties are always inclined to use local difficulties to reflect on their national opponents or colleagues in government and to criticise or defend the government of the day, at least publically. It is that last point that is of particular note—by playing a national political game—irrespective of what negotiations may take place between the centre and local government on these sorts of issues, it is the public politics and narrative that reflects the centralised nature of both politics and government.

The example above is used simply to highlight the nature, not just of our centralised governing system but also of our centralised and mutually supporting, political culture. Indeed, we saw in Chap. 6 how that centralised culture and processes work together to make politics easier. If there is only one central point of governmental authority, then all political effort and attention is focussed on that point. But, centralisation extends beyond the chicken and egg question of which came first, the culture or the practice as both can be seen as mutually supporting (Almond and Verba 1963; Inglehart 1988; Lipset 1990). Centralisation is the practical expression of power politics and the use of power and authority to override political opposition within localities so as to construct a uniform governing, legal, political, moral and economic framework and one from which a party controlling the central political machine can have the greatest confidence that its policies and vision will be fulfilled.

The complexities of practical politics may always act as a brake on the use of centralised power across a range of policy domains as politicians grapple with the task of constructing alliances or coalitions of support within their own parties and beyond. Party networks of councillors interacting with central political policy-makers will always ensure that messages about proposed political action by the centre, in regard to local government, flow through the system. Indeed, council leaders may reach a tipping point over some central- policy initiatives or decisions and breakcover to publicly oppose the government. But such opposition, even from a government's own party, is restricted by the underlying relative governing positions of the centre and the localities. As we saw in Chap. 3, the constant ebb and flow of service responsibilities in and out of local government and the centre's changing view about the best way of delivering public services and in particular what constituted the narrative of the 'wicked issues' and how to deal with them meant local government exists on the shifting sands of changing policy needs. Moreover, we also saw that the notion of The Sovereign Council (Skelcher 2004) had been undermined by a developing narrative that holds local government up as ineffectual, incompetent and bureaucratic; thus the very fact that it is based on the same electoral legitimacy as the centre can be reduced to a mere co-incidence.

If local government's electoral base is no guarantee of its ability to govern, then it is further diminished in the eyes of policy-makers and the public, who themselves can adopt and accept the narrative of an ineffectual set of local government bodies. Indeed, ineffectual means the need for constant oversight, by an ultimately superior and effectual system operating at the centre. That narrative not only undermines local government but enhances the centre at the same time. An additional obstacle is placed in the way of local government by the central narrative and that is the constraint it generates on local government's ability to engage in an attempt to influence and hope complex governing networks and the interactions within them (see Sorensen and Torfing 2005; Klijn and Skelcher 2007; Lowndes and Sullivan 2008). Meta-governing has established itself as the alternative to local government's role as the direct provider of public services (Sorensen 2006; Sorensen and Torfing 2014). A policy narrative which undermines local government as a political and therefore governing institution consequently undermines its ability to act within networks as other players readily accept the narrative as a defence against interference by elected representative at the local level.

We also saw in Chap. 3 that the notion of citizens as customers—a narrative readily adopted with some enthusiasm by local government—undermines still further the 'government' in local government. Such a narrative suggests that local government best operates on the basis of a private sector model—a company rather than a council. Not only does that question the governing role of local government, it also suggests councillors are company directors and further than there is little to be gained from electing such representatives when appointment of the best candidates may be a more suitable option. Indeed, we saw in Chap. 3 how managerialism had made local government inward looking and introspective and how the narrative of the manager had often replaced the narrative of democracy at the local level. Services are king and government becomes its subject. Moreover, by constructing such a narrative central government gives itself permission to inspect, grade, categorise and produce league tables of the quality of the work of local government—narrative which, again, local government accepts and as a result of that acceptance councils game play to ensure their position in any league table.

The contemporary policy narratives explored in Chap. 3, which explain, justify and support the central narrative that local government must be watched, checked, overseen, graded and categorised, because it is largely ineffectual and bureaucratic and cannot be trusted, is a longer-standing political narrative. That narrative reflects a constitutional understanding, most recently summarised by the Widdicombe Committee (1986: 46), which as we saw in Chap. 1 demolished the notion that there existed a 'local mandate' and went further to point out that: 'The whole system of local government could lawfully be abolished by Act of Parliament' (1986: 45). While recognising that the system of local government in some incidences pre-dated Parliament, Widdicombe formally buried the idea of local government as being an independent unit of 'government'. While we also saw in Chap. 1 that during the development of local government, the centre had been willing to leave it more or less alone (Chandler 2007), the supremacy of the centre was left unchallenged. While thinkers such as J.S. Mill and the Webbs envisaged local government having a contribution to the overall governing of the country, it was Toulmin Smith that fundamentally challenged the notion of the sovereignty of Parliament and argued that it operated on the basis of a derived power and that statute had usurped the common law (2005). The arch English localist Smith dedicated his life to a constant struggle against centralisation and provided

the foundations for the development of a new narrative to suit contemporary English politics which we will see in the next section.

Thus we have a policy narrative which sets out local government as being little more than a public service provider or overseer of services provided by a myriad of players in complex networks. In that narrative local government is part of the overall vehicle through which a twenty-first-century modern, industrial welfare state is organised, structured and delivers. It is a narrative which also reflects the development of local government throughout the Victorian period (Keith-Lucas 1952; Redlich and Hirst 1958; Hennock 1973; Fraser 1979). As the need for the infrastructure of an industrial welfare state to be provided was recognised and localised, local knowledge and responsiveness to the local manifestation of national problems was one solution to an emerging set of economic and social problems. It was also a period in which localisers and centralisers battled over the best way of dealing with the increasing demands of supporting growth and adapting and responding to public service expectations (Bellamy 1988). Although such contemporary sounding debate would not have taken place at this point in time, the central concepts were reflective of today's exploration of the role and purpose of local government. Indeed, what was already accepted as the constitutional subservience of democratised local government made resolving the conflict between centralisers and localisers in favour of the former. The late democratisation of local government, from 1835 for towns and boroughs and 1888 for the counties, reflected not merely slowness in developing local democracy but a deliberate reluctance on the part of the centre to create alternative centres of electorally legitimised political power and to see cities such as London wield political as well as economic power (Young and Garside 1982; Saint 1989).

The nationalising Labour Government of 1945, despite the plaudits it receives today, did so much to undermine and destroy local government as a political and public service entity. That government did not however begin a process of diminishing local self-government and local service provision (although much of its actions achieved just that), it merely accelerated a process that had already begun. It accelerated that process because it could, because local government was clear established subservient governing entity to the centre. As we saw in Chap. 4, local government is not only complicit in its demise as a governing entity, it is complicit in the removal of any recognition that it any longer governs recognisable local communities. Services flow in and out of local government and the very

shape, size and boundaries of councils are replaced by the centre—often after protect negotiations as in 1974 or through a much shorter period and somewhat dubious and flexible criteria as in 2009 (Chisholm and Leach 2008). While local government often speaks of 'place-based' government or place shaping, the dreadful reality is that councils cannot shape their place as that gift rests with the centre. We also saw that complicity in surrendering boundaries and unnecessary turf wars between counties and districts in the fight for unitary local government, a battle which is only fought because some in local government accept the policy narrative that bigger is inevitably better local government (Baldersheim and Rose 2010; Denters et al. 2014)

In Chap. 5, which explored the current government's policy framework for devolution, there was little which dispelled or dissolved the existing managerial and governing policy narrative that encompasses local government. Nor did we see much in the devolution deals, creation of combined authorities, debates about governance structures or in the content of any agreements struck between local and central government, which fundamentally altered the nature of the position of local government in relation to the centre, the complex networks within which it operates or the communities it governs and serves. On the other hand, we see an acceleration of the ebb and flow of service responsibilities (this time flow), the emergence of complex financial arrangements and the continuation of discussions about the need for powerful and accountable local leaders, but with little real political and governing power coming the way of what will be a new crop of directly elected city region mayors. Moreover, we see the territorial re-scaling (Marks and Hooghe 2004; Kjear and Hjelmar 2009; Teles 2016) of local government without the upheaval of wholesale re-organisation from which three things emerge: a continuation of the bigger is better narrative, but attenuated by the avoidance of forced amalgamations of councils; a territorial re-ordering of local government based on a dominant purpose of economic growth generation (not a localist imperative behind devolution); and the continuation of a policy line which sees the shape, size and boundaries of local government as ultimately a centrally determined feature of the landscape.

The centralisers' narrative is a long-standing one and one which is consistent despite disingenuous and often-made claims that 'we are all localist now' made by governments of all political colours, claims which, as we have seen, do not stand up to scrutiny. The result of the centralising narrative is that local government is neither of those things, at least

in England: it has lost the notion that is based on the government of identifiable, geographical communities or that it indeed governs rather than acquiesces to the centre at the same time it competes with often more powerful policy players within networks of governance and influence. Chapter 6 deliberately portrayed local government as the spouse in an abusive marriage: badly treated, psychologically and physically misused and financially dependent, imprisoned in a relationship from which it could not break free and suffering a governing and political Munchausen's syndrome to get attention and when that fails resorting to self-harm and pleading. Three factors were used to explain this situation in the chapter: the nationalisation of local politics and the role played by national political parties and their dominance in local government; the ability of the centre to impose duties and responsibilities on local government—both managerial and civic; and the financially dependent nature of the relationship between the centre and local government. Despite the government's narrative of cutting the purse-strings, that is, localising the business rates, local government's response has been, as we saw, fearful, pleading and lacking in imagination and so too had been the outcome of the many inquiries into the financing of local government.

So, given the dominance of the narrative of centralisation, we turn to ask what, in the circumstances, a localist alternative might sound like and resonate and it is to that discussion the chapter now turns.

Muscular Localism and a Localised State

In Chap. 6, where the ties bind the centre to the localities, a vision was also set out of muscular localism and a localised state, building on some of Moore's (2014) pillars of localism. Although Moore was addressing creeping centralisation in a federal system, he provided a contextual background form which to develop a counter-localist narrative to that of centralisation. To give that narrative a particularly English twist and to locate it within the context of our own constitutional and governing system, we turn to Toulmin Smith, the defender of ancient rights of English communities and 'folk'. While Toulmin Smith saw local self-government as a distinctly different governing vehicle to local representative government, his record in practically defending localities against centralisation stands second to none. The collection of his work stands as a testament to the type of detailed work required in slowing down the relentless march of centralisation, and while not always successful, he does provide in his work

(see, 1849, 1851, 1857a,b, particularly) not only the pernicious nature of centralisation but the dire need for an alternative narrative to confront the narrative of centralisation.

It is not necessary to repeat here the outline of the localised state set out in the last chapter but it is necessary to crystallise the narrative that supports it. That task of developing a narrative of muscular localism, however, would be mistaken if it merely tried to provide the opposite to the centralising narrative surrounding local government. Such an error would mean that localist argument would then be shaped by the centre and merely be defensive and therefore hardly muscular at all. An added difficulty in the construction of such a narrative is that, unlike Moore's pillars which are designed to strengthen state localism in a federal system, a localist narrative in England is also constrained if it is designed to fit snugly with the unitary nature of the political system. The unitary nature of the state, however, has already been circumscribed by the Celto-centric devolution of the Blair government in the late 1990s, a process from which England was excluded and therefore had its nationhood denied by the centre. Thus, the localism articulated here is designed to meet a particularly English governing requirement, but it is still a narrative that could travel.

Localism and the localised state it promotes must rest on foundation stones which are interlinked to provide a base on which a localised state can be articulated and those foundation stones are, as follows:

> First, an *organic* foundation to local communities and local government areas as self-identifying entities that may both grow and shrink geographically and in membership but such change is one which fits logically with the needs of the community. What we have here is a localism of self-identification and of genuine community shaping and cohesion which reflects what would be a fundamental right and power of localities to shape and define their own intrinsic values and purpose through the identification of their own physical boundaries. Localism rests on localities—localities that have a sense of themselves as organic, coherent and identifiable communities with a territorial integrity that rests with those communities alone.
>
> Second, a local *patriotic* foundation, which generates a pride and affinity to the notion of a geographical and community base, which in turn would produce a desire to promote the needs and growth of the area and to develop a sense of commitment to a given locality. The civic pride

and local patriotism generated here will also generate civic virtue, that is, a willingness to participate in the business of the locality, to promote, protect and defend its interests, to engage with community members and to become a willing party in the governance, decision-making and political life of the community. Localism thrives of local patriotism and a sense of place, which is not a fantasy to generate, far from it. The sense of affinity expressed by some councillors, in the research for this book, in relation to the old urban and rural district councils that were swept away in 1974, indicates that such affinity takes a long time to fade. The civic regalia of local government today attest to civic pride and local patriotism as a force for positive community government that fosters an engaged and aware citizenry.

Third, a *governmental* foundation is required that places real governing and political power in the hands of communities, citizens and their local elected representatives, and a model for this has been described elsewhere (Copus 2010, 2016). Localism reflects the ability of political communities to differ in their policies, priorities and in their moral, value system and economic frameworks, to other localities and indeed to some national blueprint. Centralisation removes discretion, it negates local choice, it denies local political power, and it diminishes difference and political diversity. Localism does not require central oversight as it provides the space and ability for local citizens to reflect on their own priorities and their own solutions to the manifestation of complex local and national problems. It also provides the space within which to learn from the experiences of other localities and the results of policies and decisions enacted elsewhere. Localism retains a political right, however, for communities to differ in how they wish to respond to the challenges that face all communities, and it also provides a framework within which different choices can be made. With such governmental foundation to communities—recognised places of territorial integrity—the solutions chosen to challenges which may face many different communities across the country will reflect ideological and practical choices that are acceptable locally. The governmental foundation of localism is a celebration of political diversity and a recognition that if a community in a different part of the country chooses a different solution to your own community's choice, that is no one's business but their own.

Linked to the governmental foundation is the *experimental* foundation, and that foundation recognises and tolerates the right to fail. As strange

as that might sound, the right to fail is a vital component of experimentation, chance and serendipity as it is also an element of competition, so local government must compete and be tolerant of the occasions on which it fails but it is its tolerance of the right to fail, rather than to be a failure, that makes this element a necessary condition of localism. Localism and localists see a virtue in experimentation and recognise that the failure of some policy experiments is a necessary condition for seeking solutions to complex problems. Moreover, experimentation provides councils with very different economic bases a far wider range of options for growing and developing their communities and the economic base of the area. Redistribution of resources, through a central government, is a problem rather than a solution to a problem. It is a problem not simply because it perversely rewards failure and punishes success, but because it removes the ability and incentive for areas that are experiencing economic downturn or which are economically disadvantaged compared to more prosperous areas, to seek their own solutions and to challenge and address changes to local economic structures. Economic success and the alleviation of social deprivation and their effects are best understood locally and responded too locally by a local government which is able to experiment with economic policy, service provision and policy alternatives.

The *financial* foundation stone of localism is one that has been described in Chap. 6. Local government with the power to generate its own income through a range of fiscal and economic powers means that full fiscal autonomy ensures that the policy and governing foundations are well laid. Moreover, local patriotism and the organic nature of local self-governing communities are themselves supported and support fiscal autonomy and create a virtuous circle of localism. The raising of funds locally—either through taxation, commercial activity, investment or other financial activity—and responsibility for the stewardship of those funds strengthens the fiduciary relationship between local government and its public. It is the locality that provides the funds for the services it requires and it is the locality that benefits from, or indeed suffers as a consequence of, financial decisions made locally. Financial freedom is a necessary condition for devolved political and governing power, and without it a localism, muscular or otherwise, falls. But, communities taking control of their own financial destiny means that they provide for their own needs from their own resources and from the ability of their elected councils to generate funds and wealth and to employ it in effective ways, all of which liberates communities and local government to pursue the best interests of the locality.

The *local interest* foundation of a localised state replaces the idea that there is a general national interest in anything but the broadest international adventures and in the overall stewardship of the national economy, and again, Chap. 6 explored how this would operate. The national interest becomes the product of the collective local interests. Localities have the right to decide their own growth or anti-growth agenda, how the area will develop, what its economic base will be, whether or not it will allow certain activities within its boundaries (such as tracking) and how it will respond to inducements from industry and commerce for development opportunities. By focusing on the needs of specific localities and by imaginative use of the governing and political powers that would rest with councils to develop and set out to achieve a series of goals and ambitions across policy domains and which were designed to shape the complex world of public and private bodies and interests within and beyond the council. The local interest would be rooted in *RealLokalPolitik* (Copus 2015) and an assessment of what strategies were needed to achieve and promote the local interest. While there will be competing local interests, there will also be complimentary and collaborative local interests existing side-by-side, and the localised state will allow the differences in politics and policy to flourish as there is little that communities that are geographically separate should need or want to do to control those communities existing elsewhere or interfere with the economic, political, social or moral framework within which other communities operate. The national interest, such as it exists in a localised state, is the filtering of the collective local interests, and national politicians and government would seek to promote the diversity of interests that emerged and act only on clear patterns of behaviour that indicated any national trend or development.

Finally, the *proximity* foundation of the localised state ensures that all politics is indeed local. Units of local government exist to serve and represent the interests of their communities and individual citizens and this can best be achieved by ensuring the greatest proximity between governed and governors, represented and representatives. That proximity operates on two levels: first, that the institutions of local government that exist reflect the self-identifying organic communities of our first foundation stone and second, that the councillors elected to them are of necessity also in close proximity to the voters and citizens of the council area. In a localised state proximity, like subsidiary, operates at the lowest practical level to ensure a familiarity and closeness between citizens, councillors and councils so that local elected decision-makers can be held more easily to account, are

high-profile within their areas, are known and are approachable. Channels of communication between decision-makers and citizens will be open to informal networks as well as formal networks, but the degree of proximity ensures that such networks are not closed but rather are accessible to all—indeed a small, cohesive community operating as the basis for a proximate political institution ensures a far greater degree of open and public communication between citizens and representatives.

Thus, we have laid the foundation stones for our localised state, and the supporting narrative, while normative and of an ideal type the alternative set of arguments provided, enables us to take a different view of not only centralisation but how it can be challenged. While taken as a whole, the foundation of a localised state is deliberately an extreme one so as to provide a framework for an understanding of the relationship between the centre and the localities which is radically at variance with current experience. Moreover, the foundation provides a way of presenting a response to calls for further centralisation or for providing a way of detecting subtle, government-inspired, centralist activities; anything which offends against the principles set out above is an act of centralisation and is therefore to be resisted.

The localised state is not about the achievement of the Panglossian system of government—the best possible of all possible systems—as no system of government can be foolproof and no system of government can fully account for the people that will populate its institutions and offices. It is human political failings that undermine any system of government—but one closest to the people it governs and serves has the greatest chance of overcoming those failings. Moreover, local government, close to the people, has the greatest chance of generating an affinity, pride, concern and interaction between people, politicians and political institutions and of providing protection against an overbearing central state. It is local government that becomes the foundation of our state, not the centre.

Conclusion

We set out in this book to explore the nature of centralisation as it impacts on English local government and to examine the policy narratives that supported and strengthened the centralist agenda. Our starting point was not only to explore the reasons for the dominance of a centralist perspective but also to understand why that dominance is so consistent and remains effectively unchallenged. That exploration is necessary so as to provide an

alternative narrative to that of centralisation and to support those in local government seeking new ways of organising and new freedoms to be able to best govern their communities. Understanding the dominance of the centralist narrative becomes all the more important within the context of a government which, as the last government, has promised radical devolution to English local government as part of an economic recovery package and as compensation to England for being left out of the national devolution that was granted to Scotland and Wales.

By focusing on the policy narrative and the policy environment it creates, rather than on blockages to devolution that may exist among civil servants and politicians, we can understand not only why such blockages exist but also why devolution of any sort is likely to fail without a fundamental political change. Legislative change, localism acts or devolution acts are insufficient to alter an embedded narrative because ultimately they are based on and accept that narrative and therefore the scope and effect of such changes in bounded. Grand statements of devolution are also insufficient to change a long-standing approach to the role, purpose and function of local government, especially as the practice of devolving will revert to one acceptable to the dominate policy narrative, which reflects a dominant policy objective: centralisation.

We have also seen that the power of the centralist narrative is so pervasive that some in local government are under its spell, especially as it provides a simple, even simplistic, response to austerity. The narrative generates a line of thinking that can be condensed as follows: more central control, oversight and monitoring mean less chance that expensive mistakes will be made; and, merging councils so that there are fewer of them, fewer councillors and fewer employees means that huge savings are inevitable; these are attractive messages when resources are constrained. But it is the acceptance of the centralist policy narrative, in local government, that hinders the development of a more confident, assertive localist narrative to act as a genuine articulation of a different approach to government and governance. The absence of a powerful localist narrative, rather than one attenuated by an inherent acceptance of the weakness of that view point in relation to its centralist competitor, coupled with the imbalance between the relative political positions of centralisers and localisers—makes any concessions given to local government sound louder and appear brighter than the eventual delivery of any change. Localists can be fooled that concessions are major steps forward on an incremental journey towards localism—but concessions are just that, something delivered to end an argument and appease an opponent.

Concessions, of course, can and are withdrawn when they are no longer expedient.

While localism and centralism are a cleavage across the main political parties, it is not a cleavage that overrides party political loyalties or the ease with which a governing parties' agenda can be put in place nationally. Weak and almost non-existent sources of political opposition, which might exist in local government, can be placated or ignored by the centre. Therefore, localists in any party must choose between their view that local government should be stronger and independent (or at least more of those two factors) and their desire to order society according to their political views—in that case and in our system, localism loses out to the use of raw political power. Moreover, there is little to be gained for the national political parties in local government from a fundamental challenge to the centralist narrative because those parties would also lose the ability to impose their policies, across the country, once they came to power nationally. The centralist narrative is therefore underpinned by a local acceptance for national action.

Given a local acceptance of the centralist narrative, or at least a willingness to act within its confines, it is unlikely that the emergence of an independent and autonomous local government will develop from the bottom-up, or from a local government-inspired revolution. If, as we argued, local government exists in an abusive relationship, or as some form of political long-term hostage situation and consequent Stockholm syndrome, then it may be that only the stronger party—central government—can move to change the situation with any long-term chance of success. Indeed, it is central government that might well have to make the first move to change the dominant policy narrative and adopt a more strident localist policy tone. The current devolution agenda does not appear to be that first move by the centre, but rather a series of actions fitting the existing pattern of behaviour of expedient change to local government that suits a central narrative and set of central policy objectives. But, should the narrative from the centre change, then it must be supported and echoed by local government, for without a bold reaction to new policy initiatives and new policy narratives, the centre will merely revert to type. Local government may not be able to start changing the nature of the dialogue or fire the starting gun on a new narrative of central and local interactions, but it must respond speedily and effectively to the detection of any central change of tone. Constructing a new narrative of localism will itself be insufficient if he centre is not ready and willing to listen and respond.

So, is localism bound to fail, are the centralist policy narrative and the forces of centralism too great for any radical reformulation of the relationship between central and local government in England and will every central policy announcement for devolution inevitably fail? It would be far too easy to conclude this book on a pessimistic note and by so doing miss an opportunity to further the cause of localism. Rather, we prefer to offer a rallying cry for localism as not just a nice to have part of the political arrangements to be strengthened and weakened as economic and political circumstance and the caprice of the centre demand. Localism is a vital part of a healthy, functioning democracy that recognises that Penzance and Penrith, Carlisle and Colchester, Brighton and Berwick, Hexham and Havant while all part of the nation of England have their own unique needs, requirements, priorities and culture. What they and all the local communities across England need are powerful local political governing bodies that can promote, pursue and protect their unique local interests. England deserves no less than the best system of government and localism can provide it.

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C. Copus et al., *Local Government in England*,
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Index

A
amalgamations, 9, 85, 86, 90, 93, 106, 172
Audit Commission, 63, 65, 71, 76, 99
austerity, 2, 50, 65, 96, 155, 161, 179

B
bureaucracy, 20, 96, 108

C
Cameron, David, 28, 51, 119
cap, council tax, 153
centralism
  centralisers, 6, 22, 30, 32
  centralist, 6, 10, 20, 30, 180
Cities and Devolution Act, 2016, 5
City Deals, 118, 119
Clarke, Greg, 3, 145
coalition government, 3, 29, 77, 95, 100, 117–19
combined authority, 95, 121, 124–6, 128–33
communities, 1–3, 5, 7, 9, 14, 17, 24, 27–30, 50, 51, 60, 86, 88, 95, 101, 102, 104–7, 114, 118, 119, 125, 140, 141, 145–8, 160, 165, 171–7, 179, 181
Compulsory Competitive Tendering, 63
Conservative, 3, 6, 12, 19, 28, 29, 40, 42, 50, 51, 62, 69, 70, 73–5, 77, 95, 99, 114, 118, 119, 124, 141, 142, 154
constitutions, 17, 20, 132, 140, 150
council, vi, 3, 5, 7–10, 17, 20, 23, 27, 29, 31, 37, 43–51, 57, 58, 60–74, 76, 78–80, 85–8, 90–108, 114, 117, 119–22, 124, 127–32, 134, 139, 141, 142, 144, 146–54, 157–61, 166, 168–70, 172, 176, 177, 179
council housing, 69–73, 78, 80
councillor, v, 7, 9, 27, 47, 68, 85, 87, 88, 90, 93, 95–9, 101, 106, 108, 117, 130–2, 142–4, 149, 151, 152, 155, 158–60, 169, 170, 175, 177, 179

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C. Copus et al., *Local Government in England*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-26418-3

council tax, 97, 118, 127, 153, 156, 157
county council, 78, 89, 90, 97–100, 147

D
decentralisation, vi, 1, 11, 13–15, 22, 24, 28–30, 108, 115, 116, 118, 119, 124–7, 139, 145
deliberative, 42
de-localising, 49
democracy, 6, 7, 13, 17, 20, 23–5, 27, 30, 87–9, 93, 123, 132, 133, 135, 146, 167, 170, 171, 181
devolution, vi, 1, 3–6, 11–15, 22, 30, 31, 49, 51, 65, 101, 108, 113–35, 139, 140, 145, 150–2, 154, 155, 162, 166, 167, 172, 174, 179–81
devolution, deals, vi, 113, 115, 121, 122, 124–6, 127–29, 133, 134, 152, 172
district council, 8, 89, 90, 97, 98, 101, 102, 120, 175

E
education, 13, 14, 24, 25, 48, 59, 63, 69–79, 94, 95, 122, 128, 131, 147, 149
Education Action Zones (EAZs), 77
elected mayor, vi, 4, 5, 28, 91, 113, 116, 117, 120, 121, 124, 129–32
elite, local political, 85–7, 91, 99, 124
Equalities Act, 2010, 149
Europeanisation, 2

F
federal, 2, 16, 25, 26, 166, 173, 174
federalism, 13
fiscal autonomy, 118, 127, 140, 152–9, 161, 176
fragmentation, 57–80

G
globalisation, 2
governance, 2, 18, 25, 47, 49, 51, 66–8, 87, 92, 100, 101, 113, 125, 126, 130, 132, 133, 172, 173, 175, 179
Greater London Act, 1999, 91
Greater London Authority, 91

H
Herbert Commission, 10
Heseltine, Lord Michael, 15, 37, 101, 116, 117, 119, 120, 134
housing
  associations, 71, 72
  council, 69–73, 78, 80
  social, 14, 70–2

I
independents, 14, 16, 18, 25, 29, 32, 71, 77, 122, 127, 128, 140, 143, 144, 151, 161, 170, 180

L
labour, 17, 19, 29, 37, 50, 75, 76, 114, 141, 142, 149
Layfield report, 155, 156
LEAs. *See* Local Education Authorities (LEAs)
Liberal Democrat, 3, 118, 119, 141
local autonomy, 20, 21, 30, 140, 141, 144
local democracy, 6, 7, 20, 24, 25, 27, 30, 93, 132, 133, 155, 167, 171

Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act, 2009, 116, 121, 146
Local Education Authorities (LEAs), 73–80
Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), 117, 119
local government
  amalgamation, 9, 85, 86, 90, 93, 106, 172
  autonomy, 11, 20, 21, 24, 30, 66, 70, 86, 118, 126, 127, 133, 140, 141, 143, 144, 152–5, 157–9, 161, 166, 176
  finance, 153–7, 161
  legal duties, 2, 8, 24, 117, 120, 121, 123, 146, 151, 168
  merger, 9, 85, 86, 90, 91, 95–7, 99, 102, 106
  size, 9, 87, 96, 99, 102
  taxation, 108, 153, 155–9, 161, 176
  tiers, 11, 14, 85, 94, 99, 117, 126, 154, 155
Local Government Act, 1972, 89, 90
Local Government Act, 1985, 89, 90
Local Government Act, 1992, 89, 91
Local Government Act, 2000, 117, 129
Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act, 2007, 149
Local Government Finance Act, 1988, 153
Local Government Finance Act, 2012, 154
local government size, 9, 87, 96, 99, 102
localised state, vii, 26, 29, 30, 32, 150–2, 157, 161, 162, 173, 174, 177, 178
localisers, vi, 6, 167, 171, 179
localism, 1, 2, 6–7, 9–11, 15, 22, 24–30, 32, 50, 107, 118, 123, 145, 150, 154, 155, 158, 160, 161, 165–81
Localism Act, 2011, 116, 118, 145, 146
localist, vi, vii, 2, 6, 10, 15, 19, 22–30, 32, 121, 140, 150–4, 161, 166, 167, 170, 172–4, 176, 179, 180
local tax, 4, 154, 155, 157, 158
London Assembly, 91, 116
Lyons Review, 156

M
managerialism, 63, 64, 146, 170
Maud, 10, 91–3, 95
mergers, 9, 85–108
meta-narratives, 46, 47, 59, 60, 62
Municipal Cooperation Act, 1835, 141
muscular localism, vi, vii, 162, 173, 174

N
narrative, vi, vii, 6, 9, 10, 15, 18–22, 25, 29–32, 38–53, 57, 59–77, 80, 85–108, 115–24, 126, 134, 135, 141, 143, 145, 146, 148, 150, 152, 153, 155, 157, 162, 165–74, 178–80
network governance, 18, 67, 68, 87
New Public Management (NPM), 47, 49, 59, 60, 62–7, 69–72, 74–80, 88
Northern Powerhouse, 4, 51, 52, 120, 134
NPM. *See* New Public Management (NPM)

O
Osbourne, George, 3, 51, 52, 119, 120, 154

P
policy
  policy making, 44, 50
  policy narrative, vi, 3, 6–8, 11, 15, 17–19, 21, 24, 26, 29–31, 37–53, 58–70, 72, 74, 78, 79, 85, 87, 88, 91, 92, 95, 96, 101, 107, 113, 114, 122, 123, 134, 143, 144, 148, 150–2, 155, 156, 160, 161, 165–7, 169–72, 178–80
political leadership, 48, 61, 100, 117, 129
political party, 4, 16, 21, 133, 141, 142
proximity, 177, 178
public sector ethos, 88
public value, 3, 88

Q
quangos, 63, 64, 67, 71, 80

R
Redcliffe-Maud, 10, 93
region, 15, 28, 117, 119, 124, 125, 128, 129, 166, 172
regional chamber, 12, 28, 117
representation, 7–9, 60, 87, 107
rhetoric, 85–108
rotten borough, 48, 61

S
schools, 14, 39, 73–9, 122, 147
services, public, 8–10, 13, 15, 18, 25, 27, 30, 31, 49–51, 62, 64, 65, 69, 75, 86, 88, 89, 91, 92, 101, 106, 116, 120, 125, 127, 140, 145, 148, 150, 160, 165, 166, 169, 171
social housing, 14, 70–2
Sovereign Council, 47–9, 59–76, 78–80, 169
Standard Spending Assessment, 63
states, 1–3, 6–8, 12, 14–16, 18, 24–6, 29–31, 39, 51, 59, 60, 62, 67, 74, 76–8, 91, 101, 114, 133, 141, 145–8, 150, 151, 156, 161, 166, 167, 171, 174, 178
Strategic Economic Plans, 119

T
taxation, local, 58, 108, 153, 155, 157
technocracy, 87–9
tiers, 11, 12, 14, 37, 74, 85, 94, 99–102, 117, 126, 133, 154, 155
toponymy, local government, 102
Toulmin Smith, J., 2, 7, 22, 170, 173

U
unitary council, 89, 91, 99–101, 105, 107
urbanisation, 2
Urban Regime Theory, 68

W
wicked issues, 39, 40, 44, 45, 59, 67, 169
Widdicombe, 10, 16, 17, 91, 92, 95, 170