

POLICY
THUMBNAIL

Devolution Done Right

Local Decisions, Stronger Accountability & Fewer
Politicians



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THE PROBLEM

Passing power down from Westminster to devolved Governments, Regional Mayors or local Councils ought to bring decision-making closer to the people it affects, but the current approach suffers from multiple & serious problems:

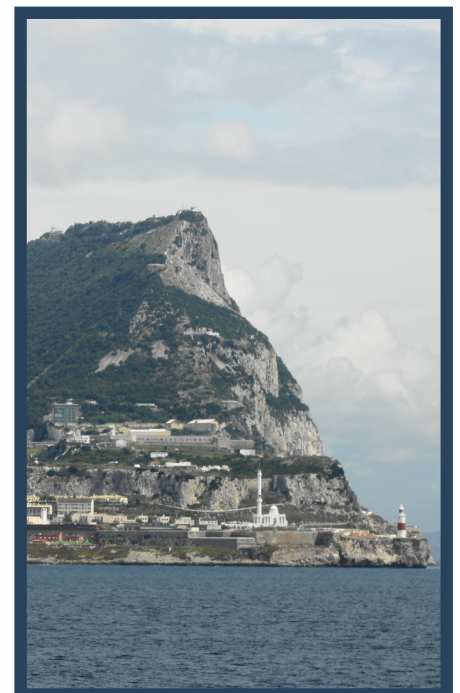
- a) Local authorities frequently don't fit into natural boundaries for public services (eg river catchments for flood prevention, or travel to work areas for transport) creating delays, expense & poor decisions whenever different Councils can't agree. Current Government proposals for geographically-bigger strategic authorities & unitary Councils won't solve this problem because while some services may fit the wider boundaries better, others will fit them worse.
- b) Local & devolved administrations have historically relied on grants from taxes levied by Westminster for a significant proportion of their funding, rather than spending money raised through local taxes they've imposed themselves. This creates:
 - one-sided incentives for ever-higher spending, because elected local & devolved politicians aren't responsible for the taxes which fund their

spending

- weaker democratic accountability because community politicians can blame Westminster for poor local services, regardless of whether they are providing them well or badly.
 - lower turnout in local & devolved elections, because voters know their local administration matters less than the UK Government in Westminster.
- c) Scottish, Welsh & Northern Irish MPs in Westminster are not responsible for representing their constituents on topics which are devolved to the Edinburgh Parliament, Cardiff Senedd & Stormont Assembly, whereas English MPs are. This issue (often called the 'West Lothian Question') creates 2 significant problems:
 - It isn't fair or right for Westminster MPs representing Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish residents to speak in debates or vote on laws which only apply to England, even though Parliament allows it. A previous attempt to solve this imbalance (called 'English Votes for English Laws') was abandoned & the problem has remained unsolved since then.
 - It is more expensive & less efficient. To cover the same portfolios as 1 English MP (salary of £90k+) Wales has 3 Senedd members & 1 Welsh Westminster MP (combined salaries of £300k+); Scotland has 2 Holyrood members & 1 Scottish Westminster MP (combined salaries of £230k+); & Northern Ireland has 5 Stormont members & 1 Westminster MP (combined salaries of c£350k).

The same problem exists in local Government too, where multiple representatives on County & District Councils (where they still exist); mayoral assemblies; Borough Councils etc. are elected to cover the same responsibilities as a single set of Unitary authority Councillors instead.

- d) Multi-member Council wards or divisions weaken democratic accountability by allowing low-performing local Councillors to coast on the abilities of higher-quality members in the same ward team.
- e) 3 different electoral systems (first past the post; single transferable vote; closed lists) add complexity, are democratically unjustified after the 2011 Referendum produced a big majority in favour of 'first past the post' & undermine electoral legitimacy as a result.
- f) British Overseas Territories (like Gibraltar, the Falkland Islands & the Chagos Islands) and Crown Dependencies (Jersey, Guernsey & Isle of Man) have no direct UK Parliamentary representation at all, which weakens their democratic voice in Westminster compared to other parts of the country when natural disasters occur or changes to sovereignty are being discussed.





THE SOLUTION

We will make UK devolution work better by:

1. Electing a single local Councillor for equal-sized wards or divisions to represent local residents in every tier of local government which applies to their area. This will mean:
 - The same Councillors will represent their residents in all types of local authority, including Country & District Councils (where they still exist); mayoral assemblies; Borough Councils etc. Council meetings & sittings will be adjusted to avoid clashes.
 - There will be the same numbers of Councillors per resident in all parts of the country, no matter how local authorities are structured, and fewer Councillors overall.
2. Electing a single Parliamentarian for each Westminster constituency, to represent electors in every Parliamentary tier of government which applies to their area. This will mean:

• Scottish Parliamentarians will represent their constituents in both the Holyrood & Westminster Parliaments; Welsh ones will do the same in the Senedd & Westminster, and so will Northern Irish ones in Stormont & Westminster too. Parliamentary & Assembly sittings will be adjusted to avoid clashes, so Westminster can hold 'England Only' sittings when English MPs will debate issues & laws which only affect their constituents, in parallel to Holyrood, Senedd & Stormont sittings covering devolved subjects.

- There will be the same numbers of Parliamentarians per resident in Scotland, Wales & Northern Ireland as in England, and fewer Parliamentarians overall.
3. All Councillors and Parliamentarians will be elected by people who are eligible to vote in UK Parliamentary elections, using the first past the post electoral system.
 4. Where local authority boundaries don't match natural service areas (eg police force areas, river catchments for flood prevention etc) we will not add extra layers of politicians & Government for each one. Instead, all Councillors representing residents inside each service area will form an Assembly to elect a leader who commands their confidence to deliver the service, and who they will hold accountable through normal democratic scrutiny processes. These leaders will take over all existing powers, responsibilities & budgets for delivering their specific service from other local authorities in the area they cover, replacing extra tiers of politicians such as Police & Crime Commissioners or regional mayors entirely.
 5. Updating & extending the long-established Business Rate Retention Scheme so as many local authorities as possible finance their spending entirely from locally-raised income rather than central Government grants, and so the remainder need smaller top-ups from Westminster for their budgets to cover assessed local needs. Once any local authority's total central Government grant falls to zero, it will gain the power to set its own business rates in the same way as Council Tax, independently from Westminster.

This will devolve powers to all local authorities across the UK, including those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland where grants are currently distributed via Holyrood, the Senedd or Stormont. Westminster funding of the devolved administrations will be adjusted (reduced) to match. The devolved Governments' existing powers to top up local authority grants if they wish from their other funds will not change.

6. British Overseas Territories & Crown Dependencies will be given an open-ended offer to elect Parliamentarians to Westminster if they wish. For those that take up the offer at any stage, the Boundary Commission will decide the number of MPs and the boundaries of each constituency in the usual way. The powers, responsibilities & budgets of each territory's existing local Government arrangements will remain unchanged.
7. The UK central Government will mandate public, independent, post-completion outcomes evaluations of all public bodies & services in every devolved administration & local authority, so efficiency, quality and value for money are clearly reported on a consistent & comparable basis across all parts of the UK. There is more detail on how to achieve this in [A New Public Productivity Act](#).



THE BENEFITS

Electing a single Councillor to represent UK citizens in every local authority, & a single Parliamentarian to represent them in every Parliament will:

- Be fairer, easier to understand & more accountable, because all electors will have just 1 Councillor & 1 Parliamentarian responsible for sticking up for them in all types of local authority or Parliament which apply in their area.
- Improve efficiency by reducing the number of politicians, the costs of Government & the size of the state.
- Solve the 'West Lothian Question' completely.

Ensuring elections use the first past the post electoral system and the same eligibility rules as UK Parliamentary elections will be simpler, more easily understood, avoid charges of opportunistic rule-changes for party-political advantage, and ensure democratic legitimacy after the 2011 Referendum decision to retain First Past The Post as a voting system.

Amending local authority boundaries to match natural service areas for the service they provide will:

- Deliver better & more efficient local services, by reducing the disagreements, delays, expense & poor quality decisions created when multiple local Councils cover the same service area at present.
- Improve efficiency by reducing the costs & layers of local Government, the number of politicians & the size of the state.

Making UK local authorities financially independent from central Governments by updating the Business Rate Retention Scheme will:

- strengthen democratic accountability & remove one-sided incentives for ever-higher spending, as local and devolved politicians have to raise the taxes they need to fund what they're spending, for the first time in decades.
- strengthen devolution & localism by giving local authorities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland the same improved rights to financial independence from national governments as those in England.
- improve turnout in local & devolved elections as voters conclude local democracy makes a difference again, for the same reason.
- create stronger incentives for local Councils to improve their finances by encouraging businesses & economic growth in their area.
- improve the effectiveness of the Business Rate Retention Scheme, which has never received the planned upgrades & modernisations which were originally intended many years ago.

Giving citizens in British Overseas Territories & Crown Dependencies the right to elect Parliamentarians to Westminster will give them direct UK Parliamentary representation for the first time ever, strengthening their democratic voice in Westminster to match what other parts of the country already have, particularly in the wake of hurricanes & other natural disasters, or when changes to sovereignty (like Chagos) are being discussed.

Mandating public, independent, post-completion outcomes evaluations in a consistent and comparable format will transparently reveal which local and devolved politicians are providing efficient, high-quality, value-for-money public services, and which are not. This will improve the quality, efficiency and value for money of public services in all parts of the UK, while cutting the costs of compliance and performance reporting red tape significantly as well.

THE SOUNDBITES

"The whole point of local decisions is to make them quicker, simpler & cheaper. So how on earth has devolution given us more politicians & expensive bureaucracy rather than less?"

"No matter what local Council boundaries you choose, one size can't fit all. What's right for flood prevention won't work for policing or commuter trains. But if we make them flexible, it'll be simpler, cheaper & public services will work better too."

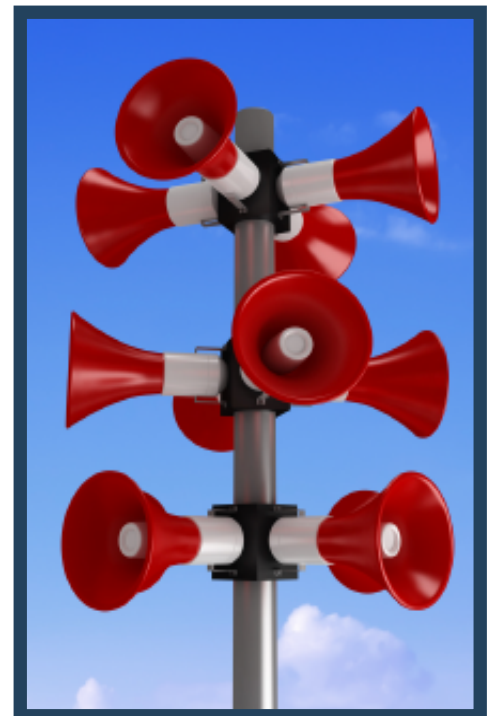
"Any politician who wants to spend money should first have to take it in taxes. Because if someone else does their dirty work, they will soon take taxpayers for granted & behave as if there's a 'magic money tree'."

"True devolution isn't just handing more & more power to politicians in Holyrood or the Senedd. The real test is what happens when it's their turn to devolve power to democratic local Councillors too."

"We had a referendum on whether to change our voting system, & a huge majority of us decided 'no'. So it's worth asking: precisely who stands to gain from keeping all these other voting systems going, in spite of such a strong & clear democratic verdict?"

"Offering British Citizens in our Overseas Territories or Crown Dependencies the right to send MPs to Westminster gives them the same democratic rights as the rest of us."

"Publishing like-for-like comparisons of public services across the UK will uncover which politicians are doing a good job with taxpayers' money, and which aren't. Sunlight is the best disinfectant, so let's see who's got something to hide"



THE REBUTTALS



1. How does this make things simpler? Won't all these flexible boundaries mean more local Councils rather than fewer?

Quite the opposite! Today's Councils are really lots of different legal authorities covering everything from transport to housing, all crammed into the same geographic boundaries regardless of whether they work well or badly for each local service. Our changes will give each service the natural & most efficient boundaries it needs, with fewer politicians & stronger accountability to local residents as well.

2. Why are you undermining devolution by neutering [Holyrood / the Senedd / Stormont / Regional Mayors]?

These changes will strengthen devolution rather than weakening it by moving decisions closer to local residents than today, connecting public servants more strongly to the people they serve while making sure the numbers & costs of politicians aren't massively higher in some parts of the country than others.

3. The British Overseas Territories & Crown Dependencies don't want MPs in Westminster. What's wrong with the way things are?

Some may want Westminster MPs at first while others may not. But the offer will always be there for any of them to take up whenever they want. Democratic representation in Westminster isn't just important if there's ever a threat to their sovereignty, or a natural disaster like a hurricane: it also shows they are valued & equal members of a modern United Kingdom, rather than relics of the past.

4. Why are you taking us back to an unfair & old-fashioned voting system like First Past The Post, when other systems are fairer & more modern?

But they aren't. We had a referendum on whether to change our voting system & a huge majority of us decided 'no'. How is it democratic to keep using those other voting systems after such a strong & clear decision?

