

What is devolved government for? The practical question...

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The Scots have decided. Now the real debate begins there and elsewhere.

One demand we are going to hear time and again now is that England, and maybe its regions, should have devolved responsibility to govern. It's an interesting idea, but power without responsibility is meaningless and taxing power without the requirement to spend would be as pointless, so before going further, what precisely are we talking about existing and new local governments having responsibility for?

I am guessing that defence, foreign affairs and international development are all going to be central functions? I would also presume a lot of justice would be as well. I am rather hoping criminal law is fairly consistently applied whilst responsibility for policing has already been devolved. What is left of the probation service is vital, but not much to argue over, although I would agree that on this issue local delivery is vital, as it can be on others. But, delivery, whilst important, has to be undertaken within established frameworks set nationally. That won't excite passions.

Education and health would do that, but in England they've moved a very long way from local control. I would very strongly argue that these should be under local government management subject to minimum service standards, but is anyone going to really deliver that? If not, what is this debate about?

Once upon a time a great deal of transport and energy policy was also established locally. But now we're pretty much down to minor roads and bus route subsidies being in this domain. They're important, but a residual. And only so many places need a tram.

So what else is there? Well housing, obviously, and planning, which is already devolved. Of these two housing policy would be enough to revive local government. We need more housing and there is possibly no issue of more importance in many localities. But will decades of centralisation and dogmatic control on this issue be changed by central government and will the control of the necessary finances be given? Without courage nothing might happen - especially if localism equates to nimbysm.

And finance? What does all this mean for fiscal control? Can the Treasury accept that the democratic demand requires that they pass over control? This would require an unprecedented change of view in Westminster.

The semantics of the day matter.

The proposals for democratic reform matter.

But what I also want to know is what will actually change.

And that's hard to see without enormous changes on issues - not least those addressing the existing de facto privatised control of education and health - how the demand for democratic accountability can be delivered.

And that to me is now core to this debate, because the question will be what is government for? And not many people have a coherent answer right now.