

The Sunday Telegraph

COMMENT & ANALYSIS

5th December 2010

A Radical Plan to Give Power to our Neighbourhoods

One of the Coalition's most attractive doctrines has been its attachment to localism – the principle that power should be devolved to the lowest level possible. This ties into and overlaps with the “Big Society” agenda, which is based on the idea that it is more effective, more beneficial for society and more cost effective for groups of citizens, or voluntary organisations, to carry out many of the functions currently monopolised by government.

This kind of thinking can often seem abstracted, distant from the reality of people's lives. Yet the proposals to be outlined in the Localism Bill, on which we report exclusively today, show how it has the potential to transform our relationship with government, and with each other. Eric Pickles, the Communities and Local Government Secretary – and one of the most active and impressive members of the Cabinet thus far – intends to allow a community's inhabitants to band together to form a distinct “neighbourhood”. That group will then be entitled to take over many of the responsibilities for permitting, or blocking, building projects that presently rest with local authorities. The “neighbourhood” will be able to draw up a development plan, to be put to a local referendum, which would dictate the shape of their community – including such issues as whether or not homeowners would be allowed to build extensions, to add an extra storey to their houses, or to construct a driveway. The local authority would no longer be involved at all, nor would planning permission be needed.

Of course, local communities will still have to abide by national planning laws and building regulations, and will not be able to veto large-scale infrastructure projects, such as high-speed rail lines or new nuclear power stations. But they will have considerable power to decide what homeowners will be allowed to do to their houses – and to vote down or

put forward new developments, or propose new community facilities such as schools.

This is a radical, bold and innovative idea, and one which should be broadly welcomed. Who can seriously be against taking power away from the bureaucrats, and giving it to those who have to deal personally with the consequences of these decisions? This is not to say that the reform will be smooth sailing: indeed, things will almost certainly turn out to be more fraught than the deceptively simple provisions of the Bill suggest. As every homeowner knows, planning is one of the most contentious issues imaginable, with every proposal from a loft conversion to a new-build estate leading to the bitterest of quarrels. There is also the problem that most of Britain's major cities are ethnic and demographic patchworks. It may prove extremely difficult to gain any form of consensus in a "neighbourhood" comprised of, say, orthodox Jews, fundamentalist Muslims, and working-class whites.

Still, if enacted, the new Bill will at least encourage vigorous local debate, and local participation in local decision-making. There are certainly risks with devolving power in the way proposed. But it must be better for people to take their own decisions than to subject them to the tyranny of officials who know little and care less about the communities their actions will transform.