

Conservative Conference Speech

Eric Pickles: Giving Mayors the power to change lives - and save money

Rt Hon Eric Pickles, Sunday, October 3 2010

It was a great honour to be invited by the Prime Minister to become the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government particularly as this was once part of John Prescott's great empire.

On the way to the department, I wondered what memorabilia I might find from Prezza's era. I was a bit embarrassed to ask directly so I hit on the idea of asking for a quick tour of the most wasteful items in the building.

First item was a beautiful red Parisian sofa costing £5,000.

"Wow that IS expensive".

"Glad you like it we've got £130,000 worth of them".

"Did Prezza order them?"

No - it's part of Hazel Blears' efficiency drive.

Next stop was the serene green peace pods, a two storey up market port-a-cabin designed to bring tranquillity and the better bits of Zen to civil servants.

"How much did that cost?"

"£83,000..."

"A Prezza's?"

"No, Hattie Harman ordered it."

I was shown giant pot plants, massive taxi bills, receipts for eye watering expensive hotels - none of them Prezza's fault.

I was beginning to lose heart.

Surely all trace of this great man could not have been eradicated from his former department?

And then I found it - the largest stationary cupboard in Whitehall.

A time capsule from a not-so-distant era.

A sea of boxes proudly marked "Office of the Deputy Prime Minister".

What could his legacy be? With trembling hands I tore open the packaging.

So conference I present to you the last remaining legacy of regional government, integrated

transport, and the
M4 Bus Lane.

The Prezzy plastic pen.

I've got twenty thousand of them.

But we are a coalition of thrift - so Nick Clegg if you are watching at home, leave that stationery order alone, I can keep you in branded bios all the way through this fixed term Parliament.

But Nick me old chum there is a problem: they don't do punctuation and they don't work for more than five minutes.

Conference,

Government is not a rehearsal.

We have waited 13 long years in opposition, there is much to do and much to repair.

Last week one of my predecessors, Hazel Blears described the last Labour government as sometimes "wicked and malicious".

Labour's new Leader, Mr Miliband, confessed that Labour rode roughshod over local communities during their time in office.

So it is time to put communities back in charge.

We need to redraw the balance of power within our constitution.

What makes that daunting is that we have to do it when there is a lot less money to fund the change.

For the first time, in a long time, local government has the chance to make real decisions.

Goodbye to Labour's regional government.

Goodbye to the Audit Commission which tied up councils in red tape.

And farewell to the Standards Board and its petty and malicious complaints.

Now,

I'm under absolutely no illusions about the difficult challenges in local government.

We inherited an economic mess from Labour.
BUT there is a choice.

Slash and burn is pointless and wrong.

Councils must fundamentally rethink their finances.

Councils should share services, work across boundaries to drive down costs and protect front line services.

Is it really necessary for councils to have separate education or planning departments or, heaven forbid, separate press offices?

Take Hammersmith & Fulham with Westminster.

They will save the taxpayer £100 million by merging services, such as education.

And that's just the start.... the revolution is spreading
Christchurch and East Dorset councils are among the growing numbers that now share a Chief Executive.

This is the future of local government.

More for less - no duplication and better productivity.

And I have no doubt that Conservative councils will be at the forefront of this revolution.

Already Conservative charge lower council taxes and deliver better services.

There has never been a better time to be involved in local government.

We're cutting back the red tape which holds councillors back:

- * The bureaucratic Comprehensive Area Assessment,
- * The interfering Government Offices for the Regions,
- * The flawed predetermination rules.

They're all going.

Local councils will have a general power of competence and new freedoms to run services free from Whitehall diktat.

A stronger say on licensing, on planning, on public health.

The ability to restore the Committee system if they wish.

We've freed up over £1 billion of ring-fenced funding - much more to come.

We'll allow councils to borrow against future business rates to provide new infrastructure.

We're shredding unnecessary guidance, performance indicators and data reporting
And we want to put local councils in the driving seat to join up public services, pooling resources across the public sector to tackle social problems.

Conference

Right here in Birmingham, there are two notorious gang families who have cost taxpayers £37 million.

What an appalling waste.

It doesn't have to be this way.

Council spending on early intervention for children and families can deliver £10 of savings for every pound spent.

Investing money to address the causes of social breakdown is far more effective than subsidising the symptoms.

So we'll allow councils to pool the budgets across the public sector - social services, care, housing and health improvement, and reward councils for delivering results and preventing social breakdown.

We want elected mayors to trail blaze such initiatives.

I believe elected mayors in cities will be embraced by the public if they have real powers.

It's time for Home Rule for our cities, from Birmingham to Bristol, from Newcastle to Liverpool.

Just over a hundred years ago, the power of civic pride and mayoral leadership was plain to see right here, in Birmingham.

Before Joseph Chamberlain was elected mayor of Birmingham its citizens lived in destitution, its streets were squalid and its public services non-existent.

In the few short of years of his civic leadership, he gave Birmingham clean water, gas and electricity, he cleared the slums and oversaw the construction of Corporation Street.

Imagine - what could be achieved by a 21st Century generation of Joe Chamberlains, championing civic pride and social renewal.

But new powers for local government need to be backed up with greater local accountability and transparency.

So councils should show me the money they should show you the money.

Everything they spend over £500 they should publish

My department has already done this.

Sure it will at times make for an uncomfortable ride
But this will unleash an army of armchair auditors.

Greater transparency is good for democracy and it will save us a bob or two.

Everyone in the public sector must do their bit to cut back.

The Prime Minister's taken a pay cut,

I've taken a pay cut,

So I say to my many chums who are Council Chief Execs...

... it's your turn now.

Trust me, you will feel better for it - you'll be able to look your council workers in the eye.

I want to be helpful - so here's a suggestion.

If you're on a salary of £150,000, you can afford to take a 5 per cent pay cut,

Likewise, to all those on £200,000, you can afford a ten per cent cut.

And no new council chief execs should be appointed on a salary greater than the Prime Minister's

Conference,

We have a long way to go.

We must keep up the momentum.

With more power to local authorities comes more responsibility and greater accountability to the electorate.

Real localism means that we must give power back to neighbourhoods who are the building blocks of the Big Society.

We can be as bold, as radical, as ambitious as we want.

This is a once in a generation chance to change our country for the better.

Let's get on with it!