

My Conservative Home article on Mayors and Councils

The local elections were ignored by a large majority of the electorate. Whilst polls usually show enthusiasm for more devolution and more local decision making, when people are offered a chance to vote for local representatives most choose not to.

The Police and Crime Commissioners have not taken off as an idea, with many people regarding it as an unnecessary layer of government. Few of them become well known names in their regions, and most avoid undue controversy. The public want an independent police force enforcing the law without party preferences coming into it. The Commissioner has to be careful not to intervene in operational matters or seek to politicise the look and thrust of daily policing. Setting a budget, an agenda and priorities are all good things to do, but they have rarely become matters of general debate. There is no formal opposition to the Police Commissioner to highlight issues, options and differences.

The idea of elected mayors is not universally popular and some areas have rejected the proposition. Some of them decide to use the mayoralty as a platform to grandstand on national issues. Labour mayors often seek to enter the national debate talking about things they have little or no power over, and may see the mayoral pulpit as a means of enhancing their position and career prospects within their own party. When it comes to things they do have power over they normally blame the government for anything that goes wrong whilst claiming credit for anything positive that happens whether they initiated it or whether it came from government. They often have difficult relations with the Councils they need to work with.

As a former County Councillor myself I want local government to work. A good Council can make a lot of difference for the better, making wise choices over local services and the local environment whilst providing good value for money. I find too many Councils lack good political leadership capable of using the considerable financial and other resources they command to serve their public well. The Lib Dems running Wokingham Borough waste huge sums on things we do not want, pursue vendettas against local drivers, hike the car parking charges and Council tax, plead poverty and blame the government for everything that goes wrong. They often ignore the views of the public whilst spending liberally on formal consultations. Many Labour and Liberal led Councils run down local government, belittle their budgets and powers and run campaigns against the government and local Conservative MPs. They see their job as advancing their party rather than looking after the needs and the money of the people they are meant to serve.

Many Councils have spent too much money buying up properties at high prices, claiming they would make money for taxpayers,. Some of them are teetering on the edge of bankruptcy as a result, now finding the interest they have to pay on the large borrowings they took out exceeds the rentals .They did not forecast the big changes to local property markets which have led to some empty shops, lower office rents and difficulty in keeping and recruiting tenants. The private sector saw them coming and offloaded shops and fringe properties to Councils. These same Councils apparently have

plenty of money to spend on consultants, on new schemes to wreck roads and impose more cameras, lights and controls, to increase their numbers of well paid officials and maintain large office estates.

Few Councils experiment with better ways of delivering social care. Not enough spend transport money on improving junctions to make them safer and easier to use, avoiding jams and delays. Most Councils think they can keep on adding extra homes without adding road capacity, and without facilitating more cables and pipes to increase utility supplies. They often even allow delays in putting in more surgeries and school places, then have to rush to catch up.

To succeed Councils need opposition groups that concentrate on expressing the needs and preferences of the public. They need to expose what is wrong with the way the ruling group is spending all the money available with a view to improving priorities and value for money. Those Councillors leading Councils need a good working relationship with officers, need to be well informed about what is going on and need to take complaints seriously. Local government controls much of social care, education, most roads, local transport services, leisure and amenities, and the maintenance of our important public spaces. They have wide ranging planning powers to decide on how much development and where it should go.

We need a better and more honest account of how much money they spend and how much power they have. We need more focus on their options and their responsibilities. With that more people would see a good reason to go and vote. Democracy needs the voters to engage as well as the politicians. Too many are put off by parties wrongly claiming everything comes from central government.