

The number of quangos

Some of you have written in reply to my piece on how Ministers can and should monitor and direct government bodies that we have too many of them. You would prefer abolition to better performance review and budget controls.

This is to miss the point of my piece. No government is going to abolish all the government bodies that are under their own CEOs and Boards. Some of these bodies are both necessary and sensibly set up with an appropriate governing structure which Ministers need to help make work well. The piece responds to a need for better control and performance checking of these bodies. This has been highlighted yet again by the obvious failings of the independent public sector model in the Post Office where Ministers failed to intervene when they could have saved the Post Office a lot of trouble and expense as well as saving the livelihoods of wrongly accused people.

I do agree that there are too many of these bodies. It would be good to persuade Ministers to have a review of which ones could be abolished altogether, which ones do work that would be better undertaken directly by government departments, and which ones could do with new directions. Good Ministers keep such questions in mind as a matter of course for the bodies that report to them, and should be on the look out for opportunities to slim the quango estate as legislative time and political will allows.

I remember making the case over several years for the abolition of the South East England Regional Development Agency. Eventually the incoming Coalition government took up the idea and abolished the English Agencies in 2012. In order to succeed you do need to identify the body, show how what it does does not need doing, or demonstrate how what it does is best done by someone else. In the case of the Development Agency I argued

1. Homes for sale and the provision of new factories, warehouses, offices and other commercial space was best left to the private sector. The public sector involvement should be confined to the local Planning Authorities over land use.
2. The public sector does have a monopoly on the provision of road space and usually supplies less capacity than is needed. The Development Agency was usually deaf to entreaties to resolve the capacity and related safety issues. The Local Highways Authority remained the body with budget and powers to sort out local roads, and the central government and its English Highways Agency had the budget and powers over strategic roads. The Development Agency could slow things down or get in the way of resolving roads issues. I never remember it helping when I was trying to get improvements.
3. The public sector also controls the rail network and has extensive national budgets and regulators, so there was no helpful role for the Regional Agency there either.
4. It was difficult to see what the Agency added to local Colleges, national apprenticeship programmes, and local Six forms to the general tasks of education, training and development.

I mention this success again, because government when it did the right thing and abolished these bodies could not resist setting up mini versions called LEPs. These are less costly and interventionist, but it is difficult to see why they are needed given the big roles in planning and development taken by Councils and central government anyway. My argument against LEPs has so far not succeeded.