Political Geography 53 (2016) 43–53

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Political Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo

# Emerging geographies of English localism: The case of neighbourhood planning

Jane Wills *

*School of Geography, Queen Mary University of London, London E14NS, UK*

ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*
Available online 18 February 2016

*Keywords:*
Localism
Neighbourhood planning
The neighbourhood forum
Civic capacity
Civic infrastructure
Liberal institutionalism

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the development of localism in policy making in England, focusing on case studies of neighbourhood planning in Exeter, Leeds and London. The paper argues that localism is a form of liberal institutionalism: it is 'freeing up' local organizations and people to act but it also depends on the existence of local institutions that enable a local response. As such, localism exposes the existing geography of civic infrastructure and capacity. However, the case studies also highlight the potential of localism to foster the creation of new institutions – in this the case, the neighbourhood forum – that can subsequently bolster civic capacity in and beyond the focus on planning.



## Introduction

Since the early years of the twenty-first century, arguments for localism have taken hold across the political spectrum in England influencing the activities of the New Labour Governments (1997–2010) and becoming more prominent during the subsequent Coalition (2010–2015) and Conservative (2015-) governments (and for exemplars of the range of political argument see Clark & Maher, 2003; Corry & Stoker, 2002; The Smith Institute, 2014). Broadly speaking, this agenda involves a shift in policy making and practice to decentralize political power towards local institutions and local people. This paper outlines this emerging localist policy agenda and highlights the salience of the geography of civic infrastructure and capacity in relation to policy outcomes. The paper makes a particular contribution to debate in this field by exploring the development of neighbourhood planning. It draws on original research in three different urban areas of England in order to explore the evolution of neighbourhood planning and its wider implications for the geography of localism.

## What is localism?

In its current policy manifestations localism relates to the devolution of political power from Whitehall and Westminster (the 'centre') to England's localities. These imagined localities potentially include a wide range of 'local' bodies including representatives from city-regions, local authorities, Local Economic Partnerships and other state-funded bodies, as well as communities. In addition, however, the term is also used to capture the ways in which people can be more fully engaged in the political process and civic life through their connections to place. In this second reading of localism, the geographic locale provides the ground on which citizens are called to new forms of agency in relating to each other as well as state-funded bodies and local politicians. In theory at least, these two strands of localism are designed to work together to ensure subsidiarity whereby 'power [is] held at the lowest possible level, whether this is individuals, communities, neighbourhoods, local institutions or local government' (Department for Communities and Local Government, cited in The House of Commons' Select Committee on Communities and Local Government, 2011, 10).

As such, localism is about 'top down' reforms whereby responsibilities, funding and authority are to be taken from parts of government in Whitehall and passed to other bodies such as local authorities. Indeed, many proponents of localism argue that local authorities or combined authorities and/or local economic partnerships should take on a greater role in areas such as infrastructure planning and spending, skills training and public health (Heseltine, 2012; RSA, 2014; O'Brien & Pike, 2015). By devolving decision making to those closer to the ground, it is argued that more appropriate and more efficacious decisions will be made with greater accountability for what is done. In addition, many proponents of localism advocate greater financial freedom such that local bodies can decide how to raise and spend the money they have, without interference and control from the centre. With greater financial freedom and a larger brief, localism is about granting civic leaders the space and power to act in the interests of their local communities, thereby trying to generate the economic growth, jobs and well-being that serve both local and national interests. In so doing, it is argued that

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 (0)20 7882 8200; fax: +44 (0)20 7882 7032.
*E-mail address:* j.wills@qmul.ac.uk.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2016.02.001
0962-6298/

**Table 1**
The shifting geography of statecraft from centralism towards localism.

| | Centralism | Localism |
|---|---|---|
| The vision | National standards and uniform delivery | Subsidiarity |
| The means | A national strategy, targets, audit and local compliance | Local democracy (politicians, voters, lay representatives and community) |
| The fears | The postcode lottery | The lack of local capacity |
| The risks | Being out-of-touch and unable to meet the challenges faced; a democratic deficit | Providing an uneven and uncertain landscape for business and life; that the loudest voices determine what's done |
| The goals | Social and spatial equity in access, experience and outcomes of services | Locally determined and accountable activity and outcomes |

increased political engagement will follow as local citizens and interested parties have the scope to demand change and hold local politicians accountable for the things that are done.

In addition, however, arguments about localism also signal a demand for more 'bottom up' forms of civic engagement. Rather than being about devolving power to more localized arms of the state, this part of the localism agenda is about tapping the capacity of citizens to engage in solving their own problems by working together, sometimes in relationship with the local state and state-funded bodies, but also on their own terms. This kind of localism is really an argument about the place of the people in democratic life. Those subscribing to this form of localism are concerned to unpack the ways in which sharing space in particular places can provide both the social relationships and the common experiences from which citizens can then engage with each other as well as the state, finding solutions to shared sets of concerns (Bryson & Crosby, 1992; de Sousa Briggs, 2008; Leighninger, 2006; Saegert, 2006; Stone, Henig, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001).

This second strand of localism has a very long pedigree in democratic thought and practice, as well as government policy. Governments have called for more active citizenship and community self-help since the 1960s. David Cameron's calls for the creation of the 'Big Society' is merely the latest instalment in a long catalogue of government efforts to get citizens to do more (Hurd, 1989; Loney, 1983; Wilson, 1999). The previous Labour governments encouraged local authorities to experiment with a range of new tools to engage residents and service users including citizens' juries, focus groups, neighbourhood committees and referenda (Pacione, 1988; Wilson, 1999; Lowndes, Pratchett, & Stoker, 2001; Barnes, Newman, Knops, & Sullivan, 2003; Barnes, Newman, & Sullivan, 2007; Copus, 2010; Copus & Sweeting, 2012). The idea was to encourage local authorities to provide new experiences to citizens and to foster a 'habit of citizenship' (Pratchett & Wilson, 1996, 241). Today, organizations such as local authorities, hospitals, housing associations and police authorities are being further challenged to cede some authority and power to those living in the local community and/or those using their services (Local Government Taskforce, 2014). If this kind of localism develops, it has the potential to encourage new relationships between citizens and the state with opportunities for co-commissioning, co-design and co-production (Boyle & Harris, 2010; Cooke & Muir, 2012).

## Making sense of localism

As suggested above, localism comprises a shift in geographical imaginations about government. Driven more from above than below, localism represents a challenge to the model of government and politics that developed during the twentieth century and in theory at least, it marks a new phase of statecraft. This model is about a central government that devolves political power, authority and responsibility to lower level institutions and people. The vision is that localism will facilitate greater initiative and creativity in public policy making as place-based publics are convened to solve local problems. In this model, the central state is there to facilitate rather than direct what happens on the ground. Localism is about a spatial and institutional pluralization of government and agency, moving the locus of political power and decision making from a concentrated executive in the capital city towards a wider diversity of actors across the nation-at-large. As a reaction to the perceived centralism of the twentieth century, localism reflects a very different geographical imaginary of governmental power and practice – as broadly characterized in Table 1.

In the academy, localism has been widely understood as a manifestation of the wider shift towards forms of neo-liberal government and governmentality. Rather than attempting to foster spatially uniform economic activity through the use of regional policy, economic development assistance and state-led interventions, neo-liberalizing governments have strengthened the market as a way to deliver economic growth despite the spatially uneven effects (Martin, Pike, Tyler, & Gardiner, 2015; Pike, Rodriguez-Pose, & Tomaney, 2014). The widening gap between the North and South of the British economy and the uneven fortunes of different parts of the country are the outcomes of market forces and as such, localism can provide a useful political justification for the resulting spatial inequality and social injustice. In this vein, localism can be understood as the necessary outcome of a beggar-thy-neighbour competition for investment and talent between people and their places that has been promoted by the neo-liberal state (Lovering, 1990; Peck & Tickell, 1994, 2012). As Clarke and Cochrane (2013) suggest, localism is a form of spatial (neo)liberalism whereby localities are 'freed up' to act in their interests, albeit that local decisions are expected to chime with the requirements of responsible government laid down by the centre, and the outcomes are argued to reflect the ability of local people to solve their own problems.

As such, localist policy is also argued to be part of a wider armoury of neo-liberal discourse that seeks to promote greater personal – and spatial – responsibility for economic success. In the large body of literature about governmentality, scholars have argued that neo-liberal policy discourses have promoted the language of self-help so that people and places are encouraged to solve their own problems and fill the service gaps that are left by a state in retreat (Rose, 1999). As Bacqué and Biewener (2013, 2209) point out, this can involve a cynical adoption of the language of radical social movements (about empowerment, self-organization and local democracy) in order to endorse a conservative agenda whereby 'poor populations are expected to take responsibility for and to self-manage the issues they face, rather than fostering a democratization of power and leaving aside any questions concerning the redistribution of wealth or social solidarity'. Such discourse has helped to enrol civil society organizations in the doings of the state, reducing their scope to resist (Eversole, 2011; Newman & Lake, 2006). Furthermore, in the face of major cuts in government spending, poor communities are forced to become more self-reliant whether they want to or not. At a time of dramatic cuts in government spending on public services, particularly to local authorities, localism can be argued to provide ideological cover for a national government that needs to enrol new actors in the delivery of services, some of them working for free (Bulley & Sokhi-Bulley, 2014; Davoudi & Madanipour, 2013).

In a recent intervention about the geography of localism, Featherstone, Ince, MacKinnon, Strauss, and Cumbers (2012, 178)