

# Tories: speak the party's language

**M**ahatma Gandhi knew a thing or two about winning an argument. Just two years after returning to India to champion independence he told his audience at Benares that “our languages [are] the reflection of ourselves”. His point was that India could not realise freedom if its people “devoted precious years of [their] life to the mastery of a foreign language”.

The power of language is well known to today's spin-doctor, but has it been sufficiently understood by our councillors? Recently the Leadership Centre for Local Government undertook a series of meetings with Conservative leaders and deputies on the topic of “language and place”. Starting with the place-shaping agenda, we asked what would make, for example, a distinctive Conservative place as opposed to a place run by a Labour administration or a Liberal Democrat one? In other words, are councillors delivering the government agenda in a way that best reflects the political values on which they were elected?

## **'If politicians do not reflect their political colour, voters become disenchanted'**

These values are at the heart of our democratic system. At their best they provide the electorate with alternatives on how they wish to be governed: without them we would be in a more indeterminate world where policies would be accounted for by either individual decree or faceless systems. But if, once elected, politicians do not reflect the values of their political colour then it is small wonder that the electorate becomes disenchanted and we hear such expressions as “all politicians are the same”.

Now that the Conservative Party is the largest political party in local government it is time for it to offer a coherent vision in a language and in actions which portray Tory values. They would be the values of pluralism and choice and the freedom to exercise it; of civic self-belief as opposed to standardisation; and of experimentation instead of uniformity.

I am not suggesting Conservative administrations should reinvent the structure of local government to suit themselves: that would be wrong and undemocratic. We have a legitimately elected Labour government whose responsibility it is to establish the national framework within which local government operates. I am suggesting that within this restriction, Conservative authorities could do more to translate what they have to do

in Conservative terms. For example, the expression “post-code lottery” should be banned from Conservative lexicon. Conservatism is all about pragmatism, not centralised control. If localism is to be realised then a variation in service deliveries and priorities should be expected.

The term ‘equality’ also means something different to Conservatives and to old and New Labour. To the latter it means equality of outcome; to the former it means equality of opportunity. Nonetheless, I know many Conservative administrations where boxes are blindly ticked when it comes to doling out public money to single-issue groups on the basis of equality rather than need.

Moreover, Conservative authorities should resist defining their population as communities and see everyone as a resident with different needs.

We know there is more to local government than neat flowerbeds and empty bins. It should be about tailoring services to the needs of the area. But that tailoring has to be honestly done according to the political traditions which the ruling administration represents. That would make more sense and be less bewildering to the electorate.

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**If you have a view to share email: [dan.drillsmamilgrom@emap.com](mailto:dan.drillsmamilgrom@emap.com)**

