

David Cameron speech at the Young Foundation

Speaking today at the Young Foundation, David Cameron said:

(Check against delivery)

“I am honoured to speak at the Young Foundation. Michael Young stood for so much of what is great about our country: the spirit of enterprise, and enterprise for social progress. It is entirely right that there is a foundation to promote his legacy. Because Lord Young was that essentially English thing – an institution-builder. He recognised that we live, not as isolated individuals, nor as undifferentiated members of the mass – but as friends, neighbours, colleagues, families: ...we exist in our particular and personal relationships.

Institutions – whether churches or schools or businesses or charities – are the means by which we formalise our relationships for social purposes. That’s why I can say – without daring to hijack Michael Young’s memory for my purpose – that institutions are central to the Conservative vision for the 21st century.

Co-ops

Let me try and prove that. Last week in Manchester I made a speech in which I launched a small institution myself: the Conservative Co-operative Movement. Co-ops offer a really positive answer to one of the great questions of public service reform – how to inject dynamism and consumer focus without losing public ethos and accountability? Co-ops can do this because they are independent but democratic public bodies. They also offer a real alternative or complement to commercial firms – food co-ops, for instance, are one great way to challenge the domination of the big supermarkets. Of course the co-op is a very old idea. But I believe that its time has come, just as it has come for a range of related ideas about the institutions of local democracy.

The bureaucratic age

I have described the 20th century as the 'bureaucratic age'. With huge advances in communications and travel, it became possible to concentrate power in the central state. Wise men in Whitehall had a monopoly of both information and capability – they knew the most about what was happening, and they had the most resources at their disposal to make things change.

At the same time, our national culture emphasised conformity and knowing your place. There was a sense that top-down control was not only practical and efficient, but that it was also fair and moral.

So even after the denationalisation of the economy, the apparatus of civic and social organisation remains firmly under central control. Schools, hospitals, police forces, town councils... all are remotely controlled by central government.

The post-bureaucratic age

I believe that it's time to abandon that model once and for all. It is not fair and moral, just as it is not practical and efficient, for the state to control society. And I feel confident in saying that because the culture which justified the old way has changed. Society no longer emphasises conformity and knowing your place. Instead our culture reflects the extraordinary liberation, the huge growth in the horizon, which has taken place in the way we live.

In our private lives and in business we are living in the post-bureaucratic age. It's no longer true that the state has all the information and all the capability. Technology has done the most amazing thing: it has put the facts, and the power to use them, at the disposal of everyone. Satellite imagery used to be the preserve of governments – now anyone can get on Google Earth. In parts of America you can see online crime maps of your area, showing where crimes have been committed and what the state of the investigation is.

People don't have to accept a top-down offer anymore: they can drive their own choices. It's most obvious in the world of leisure and commerce. You can control so many aspects of your life – from financial services that are tailored to your needs to trainers that are customised to your tastes. You can be your own music producer, your own video shop, your own publisher, your own travel agent. I want to see a similar opening-up in our democracy. That is what I mean when I talk about the post-bureaucratic age. I want to see us move from an age of bureaucratic control to an age of democratic control.

Democratic control

Why? Two reasons. First, because local democratic control works, well – locally: it allows communities to tailor customised solutions to local problems, rather than having to fit into a national template.

And second – perhaps paradoxically – local control works nationally too. Diversity strengthens the country as a whole. From diversity and competition and picking up tips from each other and making mistakes and learning from them – ...out of local innovation comes rising standards across the board. You might say *e pluribus unum*: from many, one. There are hundreds of councils in England and Wales. Imagine the social progress we could see if each of them were free to experiment, to compare their results with next door, to adapt and cherry-pick the best ideas from around the country? As my latest favourite quote from Edmund Burke has it, “the reciprocal struggle of discordant powers, draws out the harmony of the universe”.

Our localist policies

Let me descend from the lofty to the practical. Over the last few months we have been setting out in more detail the precise plans that we have for government. Among these are a range of policies that are aimed directly at the invigoration of local democracy – both in the town hall and beyond, in local civil society.

In education, we will allow new providers to come in to the state system – including schools run by groups of local people. We want schools to be independent, locally-accountable, free institutions – not outposts of the Department of Schools and Young People, or whatever Ed Balls' empire is called.

In healthcare, we will abolish central targets, leaving doctors free to treat their patients according to their own clinical judgement. We will give patients greater choice over their GP and empower GPs to control more of their patients' budgets.

We will give local private and voluntary bodies contracts to get people off welfare and into work, rather than relying on central government agencies. We will allow local people to elect the man or woman to whom their police force is accountable, making the police answer to local people rather than to the Home Secretary. We will give local communities greater power over planning and licensing decisions. And we will give local people the right to decide on what sort of local government they want. In our major cities, we will give people the choice of electing their own Mayor – a single individual with responsibility for the city. I know the Young Foundation is concerned with the issue of civic leadership and I believe that this is a real concrete step we can take in that direction.

These plans to empower local people and local institutions will be accompanied by greater powers for local government. We will introduce a radical programme of decentralisation and deregulation, to relieve councils of unfunded burdens, regulations, inspections and red tape. We will reduce the ring-fencing of money so that councils can spend their funding as they see fit. We will abolish the regional assemblies and return their powers to local councils – not to the unelected Regional Development Agencies as the Government plans to do. We will cut back the bloated inspection regime – typified by Best Value and the Comprehensive Area Assessment – which just gets in the way of councils trying to do their job. And we will look seriously at the proposal from Michael Heseltine to transfer the powers from the Government's quangos – like the Learning and Skills Council, English Partnerships, the Housing Corporation and Regional Development Agencies – to transfer their powers to local councils too.

Council tax

All politicians in opposition talk about giving more power to local councils. But all governments seem to end up centralising power.

I want to prove that we will be different. That we really mean it when we talk about localisation. That's why I am announcing today a significant new element in our policy platform: the democratisation of council tax.

Since Labour came to power council tax bills have doubled – largely thanks to unfunded burdens and extra bureaucracy from central government. The new powers we will give local councils will reduce the pressure to increase council tax bills. But I don't propose to hand over power to councils without strengthening the accountability of councillors to the people they serve.

Today, that accountability is enforced through capping – an old-fashioned idea straight out of the bureaucratic age. I want to replace bureaucratic accountability with democratic accountability. Capping will be scrapped – and I want to allow local people themselves to have a say over local taxation.

So the next Conservative government will require councils that want to introduce high council tax rises to submit their plans to a local referendum. They must explain to local taxpayers why they want to raise taxes by so much and they must show what they would do – a shadow budget – in the event of their plans being rejected. Council tax referendum ballots would be sent out with the annual council tax bill – and if people voted against the rise, a rebate would be credited to the next year's bill.

Conclusion

In the 1980s the Conservatives devolved power and responsibility to individuals – reductions in tax, sale of council houses, an extensions of share ownership. The challenge for us today is to devolve power to communities, to institutions – both to independent institutions and local councils. That's triple devolution, if you like – individuals, local government, community organisations all receiving more trust and more power.

From state control to social responsibility. From bureaucratic accountability to democratic accountability. From government to

people. That's the direction of travel in the 21st century and that's the way I want to take our country."

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