

# The challenges of 'turning Britain's pyramid of power on its head'



**The White Paper calls for Britain's public services to become accountable to the local people they serve and their elected representatives. Kate Blatchford of the Institute for Government outlines the practical difficulties of decentralising power away from Westminster.**

When the Conservatives were in opposition, David Cameron spoke about decentralising power away from Westminster to individuals and communities – what he called 'turning Britain's pyramid of power on its head'. The White Paper develops this vision by suggesting that rather than being primarily accountable to central government, public services should be accountable to the people they serve and their elected representatives at the local level.

It is not unusual for governments to come to power promising to give power away. Indeed, Tony Blair's government, seen by many to have been the most centralising in recent history, had a programme of decentralising policies in its 1997 manifesto. In addition to devolution to Scotland and Wales, this included piloting executive mayors in cities and referenda on directly elected regional assemblies.

Yet over the course of a government's life, promises to decentralise power and strengthen local accountability tend to lose momentum. Much like Tantalus' grapes, the promise of more power locally is often dangled in front of us by politicians seeking to generate support at the ballot box, but is seemingly forever beyond our reach.

So why does decentralisation seem to evade our political parties once they get into a position of power? Particular events and setbacks can throw a decentralisation agenda off course. The

Blair government, for example, was badly burned by the 78% of voters who rejected the North East assembly referendum in 2004.

But events are often symptomatic of deeply entrenched traditions that reinforce the centralisation of power in Westminster. If Mr Cameron is to succeed in turning the pyramid of power on its head, he will need to address these traditions. To do so, he will need to change expectations that ministers are accountable for all operational decisions, ensure that new, locally accountable institutions are seen as a legitimate alternative to Westminster and test whether local routes of accountability are coherent and comprehensive from the perspective of citizens and service users.

## Decentralising power requires changing public expectations that ministers are accountable for all operational decisions

### **The tradition of ministerial accountability**

The first challenge facing any government with decentralising ambitions is overcoming media and public pressure to act when things go wrong. Ministers experience this pressure even when there is a locally elected representative or body who in theory should take the hit. For example, it was Eric Pickles, the secretary of state for communities and local government, who was held responsible for the decision taken by many councils to move to fortnightly bin collections, rather than the councils themselves who commission and sometimes directly provide refuse collection.

It would take a very brave – and perhaps politically suicidal – minister to stand up in parliament and say ‘while the public is understandably outraged, it has got nothing to do with me’. So it is not that surprising that in the case of bins, central government has resorted to providing financial incentives for weekly bin collections. Cash-strapped local governments are unlikely to reject the extra £250 million on offer if they guarantee weekly bin collections for five years, yet this does not feel like the freedom to prioritise local spending that they were promised.

The pressure Eric Pickles felt to intervene in the debate over bin collection highlights that, just as turkeys are unlikely to vote for Christmas, so a secretary of state is unlikely to give power away for fear that in the event of a crisis he or she will be unable to act. But by directly intervening in local policy, politicians are in danger of reinforcing the perception that locally elected institutions are accountable primarily to central government, rather than their own electorates.

So what can be done about politicians’ fear of appearing to flounder in the face of public pressure? Change could come from within the institutions that embed the tradition of ministerial responsibility. Our recent report (Moyes et al, 2011) takes up this suggestion.

The report recommends that the Ministerial Code and existing House of Commons resolutions should be amended to recognise formally that ministerial accountability for the acts and omissions of departments should not incorporate operational decisions made by frontline service providers, independent regulators or commissioners, provided there are other routes of accountability to parliament. Changing ministerial accountability to reflect the realities of a more decentralised state may help to change the existing expectation that ministers should intervene in all matters.

#### **Embedding new democratically accountable institutions**

The second challenge facing any government with decentralising ambitions is to provide alternatives to the traditional route of ministerial accountability that are seen as legitimate by local people.

The coalition government is planning a suite of new democratic alternatives to Westminster – such as elected mayors, police and crime commissioners and health and wellbeing boards – to provide a check on centripetal forces in British politics. For these new democratic institutions to gain legitimacy, it will help if they represent geographical areas with which local people already identify.

The creation of new parliaments in Scotland and Wales and the mayoral authority in London was a logical development of existing political geographies, which goes some way to explaining why they have successfully become part of our political landscape. But without a pre-existing local identity, attempts to install new locally accountable institutions from policies created in Westminster are likely to meet the same local resistance as the regional assembly in the North East.

New institutions may appear to have been ‘foisted’ on the local people and will consequentially lack legitimacy.

This leaves politicians in a tricky situation. Building legitimacy for new local political geographies is dependent on a whole host of cultural and economic factors beyond politicians’ control. Furthermore, developing local political geographies takes time, which is in increasingly short supply as the parliamentary cycle gets underway. Thus, if politicians decentralise too soon, they will be derailed by public perceptions that new institutions are being foisted on them. But act too slowly and they will reach the end of the parliamentary term without having turned the pyramid of power on its head.

To some extent the coalition has already learned these lessons. Confirmatory referenda for elected mayors (which would have installed mayors for a period after which a city’s residents would vote) were considered for a short period, before being rejected in favour of full referenda for fear that elected mayors would seem imposed by Westminster. If the mayoral referenda pass a ‘yes’ vote, there is a fair chance that these mayors will be seen as accountable for the fate of their cities, which already have a strong sense of identity.

More questions hang over police and crime commissioners, which will represent 43 police authorities whose geographical remit does not map onto local authority boundaries. Encouraging people within police authority boundaries to identify with police and crime commissioners and hold them to account may prove challenging.

Each public service needs an ‘accountability map’ setting out specific powers retained by ministers, where other powers lie and what mechanisms will keep them accountable

#### **Coherent and comprehensive accountability**

The third challenge facing a decentralising government is to ensure that local accountability mechanisms make sense to local people. This is important, as without ensuring that local forms of redress are coherent and comprehensive, locally accountable institutions will probably be bypassed in favour of the secretary of state.

This is a particular challenge for the coalition as they envisage a web of different forms of accountability operating at a local level. Direct forms of accountability – such as choice, transparency and voice – will operate within a broader democratic framework provided by locally elected representatives. If you are unhappy with the service you are

receiving, then you complain (voice), use another provider (choice) or vote out the elected representatives that are accountable for the service.

Faced with an array of different accountability mechanisms, there is a danger that service users will not know which form of accountability best suits their needs. For example, if I visit a hospital that is unclean, should I voice my concerns about the particular cleaning company contracted to the hospital, choose a different hospital or vote out the government for introducing a market for hospital cleanliness?

## New, locally accountable institutions must be seen as a legitimate alternative to Westminster

This confusion is strengthened when the division of responsibility between different forms of accountability is unclear. If enough of my neighbours choose a different hospital, my local hospital may close. But this may be against the wishes of a local democratically elected figurehead who want the hospital to stay open.

In this situation, it is unclear who has the authority to act in the interests of the community. A lack of clarity about how different routes of redress operate alongside one another may mean that service users ultimately pursue a form of redress that proves unsuitable to the particular problem they face.

To help address this challenge, for each service in which significant decentralisation is proposed, policy-makers should publish an 'accountability map' setting out specific powers retained by ministers, where other powers lie and what mechanisms will allow the public to hold the holders of these powers to account. This would help to bring some clarity to the new accountability landscape, which may help to keep accountability local.

### Conclusions

The White Paper suggests that public services will become primarily accountable to local citizens and their elected representatives. This would be no mean feat. But it depends on three things: changing the expectation that ministers are accountable for all operational decisions; ensuring that new democratic forms of accountability are seen as legitimate by local people; and making different routes of local accountability coherent and comprehensive.

**Kate Blatchford** is a Research Analyst at the Institute for Government.

### Further reading

William Moyes et al (2011) *Nothing to do with me: modernising ministerial accountability for decentralised public services*, Institute for Government