Local Autonomy, Local Democracy and the ‘New Localism’

Lawrence Pratchett
De Montfort University

Most studies of local autonomy and local democracy fail to distinguish adequately between the two terms. As a consequence, there is an assumed bilateral relationship between them in which changes in one are always deemed to affect the other – particularly in policy formulations. This article develops a stronger analytical distinction between them by considering local autonomy in three separate ways: as freedom from central interference; as freedom to effect particular outcomes; and as the reflection of local identity. Each of these conceptualisations raises different challenges for local democracy and its relationship to broader forms of democratic practice. When used to analyse the recent emergence of the ‘new localism’ as a policy approach within Britain, this separation also shows significant limitations in current policies towards democratic renewal and central policies that are supposedly focused on outcomes rather than processes. Although localities are being afforded some autonomy, most initiatives are not supporting the enhancement of local democracy.

Local autonomy is a perennial issue in the study of sub-central government. Indeed, it is almost impossible to discuss the relationship between central and local government, or the political context of local government more generally, without substantial reference to concepts of local autonomy.1 Such concepts have been used normatively, to defend local government (Layfield Committee, 1976; Jones and Stewart, 1983), and empirically, as either a measure of constitutional change (Chandler, 1988; Rose 1990) or as a device for comparing local democracy across nations (Page and Goldsmith, 1987; Wolman and Goldsmith, 1990; Page, 1991). From Tocqueville onwards, there has been a strong normative argument within political theory that local self-government is a fundamental component of broader democratic structures and practices (see, for example, Tocqueville, 1968; Mill, 1991; Weir and Beetham, 1999). It is difficult to avoid the conclusion, therefore, that local autonomy is a fundamental concept in political science, linked to both the theory and practice of democracy more generally.

Despite the attention that it has received, local autonomy is rarely, if ever, distinguished from local democracy. At best, local autonomy is seen to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for local democracy to flourish. More often, especially in policy debates surrounding local government finance, the two terms are simply conflated. I argue here that such a conflation not only oversimplifies the relationship between local autonomy and democracy, but also disguises deep ambiguities in the relationship between local democracy and broader democratic practice. Such simplification and ambiguity are problematic for both theoretical and policy purposes. At a theoretical level, oversimplification and ambiguity limit the ability to understand central–local government relations and its ongoing problems. At a
policy level, a failure to distinguish effectively between the two terms leads to confused policy aims and outcomes. I address both the theoretical and policy challenges that arise from a clearer distinction between local autonomy and local democracy and offer a new framework for understanding its implications. From a theoretical perspective, autonomy must not only be conceptualised as freedom from higher powers, but also include the capacity for developing or expressing local identity. Crucially, a conceptual separation of local autonomy from local democracy allows for the existence of locally determined differences within nation states. From a policy perspective, I then apply these concepts to the emerging debate around the ‘new localism’ and analyse the limits to Labour’s democratic renewal policies at the local level.

My focus is on the institutions of elected local government as the primary locus of democracy at the sub-central government level. This focus does not ignore the existence of other quasi-democratic institutions that exist or are emerging in different polities. In England, proposals for elected regional government, elected boards for Foundation Hospitals and the existence of community-wide elections to the management boards of New Deal for Communities all threaten (among other developments) to challenge the hegemony of elected local government as the only institutions beneath parliament to have the political legitimacy of direct periodic election (Loughlin, 1996). However, these new quasi-democratic bodies do not carry with them the same representation of broad community interest or the range of opportunities for political engagement that are delivered by multi-purpose elected local government. Although some may argue that these new institutions enhance democracy by extending ‘community control over many more areas of the public realm’ (Blears, 2003), it is also evident that they fragment community focus around concerns with particular service areas. If democracy is seen as a process through which competing interests are reconciled, then multi-purpose elected local government remains the primary institution of democracy at the local level: as such, it deserves special attention.

The first section briefly examines contemporary discussions of local democracy and the assumptions that are made about its role in a broader democratic polity. This examination is necessary not only to justify local democracy, but also to acknowledge its contribution to broader democratic institutions and practices. The second section analyses different theoretical insights into the concept of local autonomy and develop a definition of local autonomy that is distinct from that of local democracy. Having developed a clear distinction between them, the third section applies the framework that emerges from this analysis to recent developments in English central–local government relations. Finally, a concluding section addresses the tensions that exist between local autonomy and a broader democratic polity.

**Local Democracy**

Normative political theory holds a special place for local democracy and its institutional embodiment – local government. Orthodox justifications for local government (Stoker, 1996a) include pluralist arguments that institutions of local democracy provide for a diffusion of power within society (Hill, 1974; Phillips,
arguments that local democracy supports diversity and difference in the face of an otherwise constrictively uniform set of central policies (Jones and Stewart, 1983) and arguments of local responsiveness (Sharpe, 1970). Such justifications are embedded in the European Charter of Local Self-Government, where it maintains that decision-making for public policies should, wherever possible, be exercised ‘by those authorities which are closest to the citizen’ (Council of Europe, 1985, article 4.3). In short, there are strong normative justifications for local democracy and local government.

More recently, however, there has been a revival of interest in the role of local democracy in facilitating and encouraging political participation as part of a broader democratic polity (Stoker, 1996b). This argument has its roots in nineteenth-century political thought and maintains that local institutions of democracy are the most accessible locations for political skills to be acquired and practised. J. S. Mill argued in 1861 that local democracy not only provided greater opportunities for political participation but also that it was an instrument of social inclusion:

But in the case of local bodies, besides the function of electing, many citizens in turn have the chance of being elected, and many, either by selection or by rotation, fill one or other of the numerous local executive offices ... It may be added, that these local functions, not being in general sought by the higher ranks, carry down the important political education which they are the means of conferring, to a much lower grade in society. (Mill, 1991, p. 413)

For Mill, local institutions of representative democracy provide an opportunity for political skills to be developed among a much broader range of people than centrally organised institutions.

Whereas Mill was concerned with the way in which local government allows many more people to participate in the process of representative government (as elected representatives), more recent interest in local government has focused on its capacity to facilitate and enhance participatory democracy. This focus on participatory democracy argues that local government is closer to citizens and deals more directly with the issues that impinge on them. Consequently, local government is more accessible and its institutions are easier to engage with (Pratchett, 1999; Stoker, 2004). This argument of political accessibility and engagement is borne out empirically, especially where participatory (as opposed to representative) forms of democracy are considered. As well as providing much wider opportunities for the election of representatives, local democratic institutions are also closer to citizens and can encourage more participatory forms of engagement. A study of political participation in Britain found that

as many as 44% of all targets of people’s main action on their prime issues are to be found in local government, compared with only 15% in central government and a further 11% either in other government or quasi-governmental institutions. (Parry et al., 1992, p. 268)

More recently, the Citizens’ Audit, a major survey of citizen participation in Britain, found that average trust in local government was higher than that for central
government and that local variations in such factors as trust and civic association have a significant effect on local government performance. As they put it, ‘services are affected – in positive ways – by local cultures of citizenship’ (Pattie et al., 2002, p. 15). In their study of participation in the US, Verba et al. (1995) found even higher levels of political participation at the local level, although their definition of local in this context also included state government. Empirical evidence, therefore, strongly supports the normative assertion that the local arena has the capacity to facilitate and encourage political participation beyond simply that of participation in elections.

These arguments are more than simply a concern with the vibrancy and vitality of local democracy. On their own, they make a case for local democracy based on the preference of individuals to engage with local rather than national institutions of democracy. However, the other part of this argument links the opportunities for local political participation to the effectiveness of democracy at the higher level. In short, the argument is that, for democracy to be effective, there must be multiple channels of engagement and multiple opportunities for democratic participation. As David Held argues, ‘direct participation and control over immediate locales ... can most realistically advance the principles of participatory democracy’ (1996, p. 269). Local democracy provides more than simply the opportunity for individuals to influence those decisions that affect their immediate social and economic environment. Local democracy also builds and reinforces notions of participatory citizenship, because it is the primary venue in which most people practise politics. It follows that, without some form of local democracy, the opportunities for developing democratic values and skills that can be used at broader institutional levels would be severely limited. Consequently, local democracy provides the foundation for strong national democratic institutions and practices. According to this argument, without a vibrant participatory democracy at the local level, representative democracy at both the local and broader level cannot flourish. As Weir and Beetham state, ‘local participation does more than create self-confident citizens, and share out political power; it also contributes to a culture of democracy throughout society’ (1999, p. 243). It is partly for this reason that, as part of their criteria for assessing and comparing democracies, they include a measure of the existence and vitality of sub-central democracy (see also Beetham, 1999, 1994). For them, a democratic society underpins democratic processes. Sub-central or local democracy is a cornerstone of a democratic society.

The role of local democracy, therefore, is more than simply that of local self-government. Local democracy, in both its representative and participatory forms, is also an essential feature of a broader democratic polity. Within elected local government, representatives develop and practise democratic skills and are held to account by citizens. The responsiveness of local representatives is, at once, both complemented and challenged by the wider opportunities for political participation that the local institutions of democracy offer citizens. It is at the local level that the relationship between representative democracy and widespread citizen participation makes most sense. Seeing local democracy as a fundamental component of a broader participatory democracy has important consequences for the understanding and application of local autonomy.
Local Autonomy

Local autonomy is often considered to be synonymous with local democracy because, without some degree of freedom for exercising discretion, communities are unlikely to cultivate democratic practices. Although the argument above has asserted a broader role for local democracy, there can be little dispute that local democracy is, fundamentally, about local self-government. It is the primary rationale for local government. Institutions of local democracy are places where politics is practised (Stoker, 1996b). In other words, these institutions are venues for competing values and priorities and for the collective resolution of such conflicts. If competing values and preferences are to be articulated and conflicts resolved, the institutions of local democracy and those engaged in them must have a degree of power and authority to act – that is, some degree of local autonomy. For this reason, Jones and Stewart (1983), the democratic audit (Weir and Beetham, 1999) and the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Council of Europe, 1985) all emphasise ‘local freedom from central government interference’ as a fundamental component of local democracy. Local autonomy, therefore, is an issue of sovereignty – if not sovereignty over everything within a territory, then at least sovereignty over certain spheres of activity.

The issue of sovereignty makes local autonomy problematic, for within unitary states such as the UK, sovereignty is vested in one authority only – the Crown in Parliament. It is impossible to discuss local politics without acknowledging that local government exists in its current form and with its current powers because parliament allows it to (Wilson and Game, 2002; Byrne, 1992; Stoker, 1991). Thus, the principle of ultra vires and the conceptual, as well as legal, constraints that it imposes on local authorities is important in understanding the limits to autonomy that exist within the British system of government (Leigh, 2000). Even in federal systems, sovereignty is often carefully proscribed such that local self-government is greatly weakened by reference to higher authorities. The best example is Dillon’s Rule in the US, which asserts that local government is a ‘creature of the state’ and, following a Supreme Court ruling of 1923, can have its powers and structures modified or withdrawn at the state’s discretion (Brown, 1993). In other words, local self-government in both unitary and federal systems occurs only because a higher-level authority delegates some of its sovereign powers and responsibilities. These powers and responsibilities can be withdrawn or altered at the whim of the sovereign power. As Page defines it:

To be local implies some control over decisions by the community ... However, these notions of local government as control by the community contrast with the fact that local government is essentially a subordinate institution ... In principle its structures and powers are subject to higher laws and can be changed by them. (Page, 1991, p. 1)

The issue of sovereignty, therefore, makes local autonomy a relative concept. Because local autonomy implies a degree of control over particular policy issues, if not over a territory as a whole, there will always be a tension between national and sub-central units of government over who has authority in particular spheres.
To some extent, this tension is the problem that many studies of intergovernmental and central–local government relations have sought to resolve. Marxist-inspired analyses of the topic have tended to focus particularly on the role of the local state in relation to national government (Cockburn, 1977). Thus, the ‘dual state thesis’ of Saunders (1984, 1986) distinguishes local government’s focus on the politics of consumption from central government’s concern with the politics of production. This approach implies that local autonomy is constrained by capitalism’s overarching concern with production and that local issues will always be subjugated to the national government’s concern for maintaining and improving the means of production. In contrast, the power-dependence model (Rhodes, 1981) characterises relationships between different levels of government as being contingent on the possession and exchange of resources. When applied to analyses of policy networks (Rhodes, 1988; Marsh and Rhodes, 1992), this approach has particular implications for concepts of local autonomy, because it suggests that there will be significant differences in policy approach between policy areas. Consequently, power-dependence theories recognise that local autonomy may vary in both style and extent across different policy areas. Levels of local autonomy and discretion, therefore, may alter over both time and issue, within the same constitutional system of governance.

Although these broad theories provide a useful context for studying local autonomy, they are of less relevance when relating it to the practice of local democracy. There are three particular approaches that focus explicitly on local autonomy, its limitations and its potential and have direct relevance to the study of local democracy. Firstly, it is possible to define and analyse local autonomy as freedom from higher authorities. Secondly, it is possible to define local autonomy by the effects of local governance and its freedom to achieve particular outcomes. Finally, it is possible to define and analyse local autonomy as the reflection of local identity – the ability of communities to reflect their own sense of place and meaning within localities. Each of these has different implications for the way in which local autonomy is perceived to relate to local democracy.

**Freedom From**

‘Freedom from’ approaches to local autonomy are based on constitutional and legal understandings of central–local relations. This approach represents the classic political science perspective on the topic and defines local autonomy as the degree of discretion that local authorities have from central government. Consequently, the focus on local autonomy is largely top-down, examining the extent to which national governments are prepared to delegate power and authority to sub-central units of government. Different authors address this notion of ‘freedom from’ in different theoretical and empirical ways. All, however, conceptualise local autonomy as being primarily about freedom from higher authorities.

Clark (1984) provides the most developed theory in this context. He draws on the ideas of Jeremy Bentham to develop a theory of local autonomy based around the dual principles of initiation and immunity. According to Clark, initiation is essentially permissive and refers to the ‘power to act, whatever the circumstances, provided that prior rights to do so exist’ (1984, p. 197). In contrast, immunity
is essentially the power of localities to act without fear of the oversight authority of higher tiers of the state. In this sense immunity allows local governments to act however they wish within the limits imposed by their initiative powers. (Clark, 1984, p. 198)

By distinguishing between initiation and immunity, Clark is able to develop a fourfold typology with which to compare different local authorities, the most autonomous of which have both powers of initiation and immunity from oversight, whereas the least autonomous are heavily constrained in both respects. This theory has attracted considerable interest (Goldsmith, 1995), not least because Clark’s application of it tends to point to low levels of autonomy in most systems of local government.

Empirical applications of the ‘freedom from’ type approaches to local autonomy have been both country specific and comparative. Within the UK, Jones and Stewart (1983) have pointed to the centralising tendencies of successive governments and the negative effects that this control has on various dimensions of local autonomy. At a comparative level, Page and Goldsmith (1987), Blair (1991) and Page (1991) have all adopted a focus on local autonomy in the context of freedom from higher authorities. Variations on this theme have been service specific. Kröger (1996), for example, compares child day-care policies in Scandinavian countries and finds a significant absence of local autonomy in the different countries, despite a supposedly strong tradition of local self-government.

More-developed theories of local autonomy also consider the local state in relation to neo-Marxist arguments of relative autonomy, examining the extent to which local government has autonomy from broader capitalist forces, as well as from other state institutions (Cockburn, 1977; Gurr and King, 1987). The conclusion from all of these studies, however, is that local autonomy is greatly constrained by a range of political and economic factors.

Although the range of theoretical and empirical approaches to local autonomy as freedom from higher authority is broad, their conclusions and implications tend to be similar. Two factors stand out. Firstly, there is a common focus on the constitutional/legal position of sub-central government in different countries and the way in which constitutions affect opportunities for local autonomy. This focus leads to a concern with a range of different central–local relationships: the division of functions between tiers of government (Page and Goldsmith, 1987); the legal basis of such divisions (Pierre, 1990; Page, 1991); and the financial regime that underpins such relationships (Layfield Committee, 1976; Blair, 1991; Jones and Stewart, 2003). Although all are considered important, the financial independence of local government is often deemed the most significant. Indeed, financial autonomy (the right to raise revenue and set spending priorities independently of central government) lies at the heart of competing ideological commitments to local autonomy, from Margaret Thatcher’s failed attempts supposedly to increase local government accountability through the poll tax (Butler et al., 1994), through to the ‘localist’ argument for financial autonomy as the basis of local self-government (Jones and Stewart, 1983). In short, the argument of financial autonomy rests on the notion that legal, political and organisational autonomy is meaningless without the resources to realise the benefits of such autonomy. This argument persists in
current debates about central government policies towards local government (compare with Richards, 1996; Hale, 2001).

Secondly, the focus on financial constraints leads to a common concern with the centralising tendencies of different national governments. If financial autonomy is seen as being the key to local autonomy more generally, then there is an inevitable tension between central government’s concern with overall economic management and local government’s demand for policy discretion (Goldsmith, 1986). However, financial autonomy is not the only feature in studies of increasing centralisation. Michiel de Vries (2000) charts the changing interest in decentralisation policies in four European countries and concludes that support for decentralisation arises largely from self-interested local elites rather than from a normative or ideological disposition towards local self-government. Thus, centralisation is a natural tendency when there are no strong arguments being advanced to the contrary. Indeed, in defining local autonomy as freedom from higher authorities, there is, inevitably, a systemic concern with centralisation. If attention is focused on a relative level of independence from central government, it is inevitable that the primary concern of any study will be the limits of such independence. This concern is a problem for such studies, because it accepts the normative value of local autonomy without examining its consequences.

Defining local autonomy as freedom from higher authority, therefore, is problematic for local democracy, because it accepts the assumption that local autonomy and local democracy are bilaterally linked. Implicit in the findings of all of these studies is a derogatory use of the term ‘centralisation’ and a tacit argument that any loss of local autonomy is a threat to local democracy. Although such concerns may be true in many circumstances, the conflation of local autonomy and local democracy ignores the potential distinction between the two concepts and the argument that changes in the nature or extent of local autonomy may have no bearing on democratic practices and vice versa.

**Freedom To**

To some extent, the problem can be addressed by focusing on the outcomes of different constitutional and political arrangements for sub-central government. The ‘freedom to’ approach is adopted by Wolman and Goldsmith (1990) in their comparison of local autonomy in the UK and the US. Their unique contribution to the study of local autonomy is to redefine it as its impact and consequences for localities:

> By local autonomy we mean much more than the traditional concern for the ability of local governments to act unfettered by constraints from higher levels of government, a concern dominating the literature of inter-governmental relations and local governments in the United States and Britain ... Instead, we ask a much different and, to our minds, more fundamental question: Do local governments in urban areas have autonomy in the sense that their presence and activities have independent impacts on anything important? Does urban politics matter? (Wolman and Goldsmith, 1990, p. 3)
This redefinition of autonomy is similar to Clark’s concept of initiation, in as far as it deals with the rights and obligations of local authorities to undertake particular activities in the interests of their citizens. It goes further than Clark’s, however, because it focuses attention not only on constitutional and legal freedoms from central interference, but also on the consequences of such freedoms. In other words, it addresses the outcomes of providing local government with the freedom to undertake particular initiatives. Their approach moves the debate away from the degree of discretion afforded to units of local government and places much greater attention on their capacity to influence central government. Thus, their redefinition of local autonomy concentrates on the residual ability of local authorities, when all extraneous economic and political variables are taken into account, to affect the well-being of their localities. Their argument suggests that local politics matters, in as far as it can exert pressure on central government. Consequently, they are able to compare local government in the UK and the US not simply on constitutional grounds but also by the different impacts that local political processes have, potentially, on their areas. This novel approach lends a new dimension to the study of local autonomy, although its conclusions are similar to those of earlier studies. By treating local autonomy as a residual phenomenon – as the scope left to local government after the ‘primary determinants’ (p. 24) have been taken into account – Wolman and Goldsmith discover that local autonomy is heavily circumscribed by central governments and other broad socio-economic factors.

The ‘freedom to’ approach is important in the relationship between local autonomy and democracy because it acknowledges variations in local autonomy within particular systems of government. It suggests that, although local government exists within broad constitutional, economic and political constraints, individual local authorities can, nevertheless, achieve different outcomes for their localities. The approach is limited, however, because it focuses on the ability of local politics to influence central government, rather than on elements of discretion or autonomy within formal relationships. Consequently, although some units of local government may have the capacity to influence central government, their influence does not necessarily equate to autonomy. This capacity can only be transformed into autonomy when local governments are given greater discretion to govern in their localities.

**Reflection of Local Identity**

The final approach conceptualises local autonomy as being a bottom-up phenomenon (Lake, 1994), in which localities reflect and develop a sense of place through political and social interaction. Local autonomy, from this perspective, is not freedom in relation to particular legal or other constraints, but is, more broadly, the capacity to define and express local identity through political activity. Although this approach does not deny the importance of the nation state in circumscribing action, it argues that localities ‘are made powerful or powerless not by a sovereign, but by those who represent them through events in social life’ (Brown, 1993, p. 264). Consequently, it places much more emphasis on the activities of communities in defining their own autonomy. From this perspective, the degree of local autonomy found in any given locality depends on what that locality is striving to
achieve and what it is seeking to be autonomous from. This approach concentrates not on the potential of areas to be different, but on the way in which they seek to define their own differences. Differences may be obvious variations in policy outcomes, where they reflect particular social or political preferences. However, they may also be more subtle expressions of local difference, associated more with political processes and ‘the way things are done’ than with just the eventual outcomes.

Local autonomy in this approach, therefore, is about the discretion to practise politics in preferred ways and the freedom to express and develop local identity through political processes. Autonomy is intrinsically linked to the institutions of local representative democracy, in as far as these institutions provide the forum in which politics can be practised and local identity expressed.

Focusing on the expression of local identity does not deny either the role of the nation state or other factors in shaping the opportunities for local autonomy. Indeed, much of the work in this vein builds from an understanding of power relations between localities and their broader environment:

autonomy is not a discrete commodity that is possessed or not possessed by individuals or localities. Instead autonomy is a set of power relations. A locality therefore cannot have autonomy, since autonomy can only be realized through the social, political, and economic relationships that those within the locality are engaged in with the extra-local world. (DeFilippis, 1999, p. 976)

Understanding local autonomy in this way has great appeal for the study of local democracy, because it brings participatory democracy, and its potential relationship with the institutions of representative politics at the local level, into the analysis. Local autonomy, under this definition, is not simply about the discretion of elected local government, but is also about the wider social and political relations that occur within a community. Widespread political participation, not only in the electoral process of representative government, but also more broadly, is crucial to the notion of local identity where it is to be expressed through local politics. The institutions of elected local government remain fundamental to this approach however, because they are the means by which social relations within a locality are consolidated, and the conduit through which relations with extra-local bodies are conducted. In other words, if local autonomy is primarily about empowering local communities to define their own sense of place, then political institutions, and particularly democratic institutions, lie at the heart of any attempt to justify or enhance local autonomy.

The problem with this approach lies in understanding the definition of place in this context. Political geography has a much more fluid conception of place that is not necessarily coterminous with the jurisdictional boundaries of conventional local government. In many respects, this bottom-up approach asserts that communities, if they are to express their own identity and sense of place, must first define themselves as communities. This contrasts with traditional constitutional approaches to public administration, and indeed reality, which acknowledge the rights of sovereign states to define and redefine the functional boundaries of sub-central government. This contrast does not invalidate the notion of local autonomy as the social and political reflection of place, but it does raise an important problem: if
local autonomy is not about the relative independence of centrally defined institutions of sub-central government, at what level is local autonomy appropriate? If local autonomy is concerned with social and political identity, it may occur at various levels, both beneath and above that of traditional local government. The problem really is that, within the liberal tradition of political thought, autonomy is essentially about the freedom of the individual – in contrast with democracy, which is essentially about collective decision-making. Once the analysis of autonomy moves away from a focus on the organisations of local government, it becomes an ambiguous and mutable concept that has limited value in understanding the realities of democratic practice in localities.

The ‘New Localism’: Realising Local Autonomy?

The ‘new localism’ argument is more than simply a normative reworking of concepts around local autonomy and democracy: it also has practical implications for central–local relations and, in particular, central government policies towards local government. To explore these implications, the article will now turn to recent developments in sub-central government relations in England and the emergence of a so-called ‘new localism’ that supposedly informs central government policies towards localities (compare with Corry and Stoker, 2002; Walker, 2002). In so doing, the analysis not only applies the concepts developed so far to the emerging policy context, but also uses the framework to begin an evaluation of the prospects and limitations of recent attempts to renew local democracy.

The policy context is one of extensive central government attempts to enhance local democracy as part of a wider project of constitutional and democratic modernisation. Since its election in 1997, the Blair government has made ‘modernisation’ a watch word for virtually every aspect of its policy reforms, including local democracy. As well as high-profile devolution policies in Scotland and Wales, proposals for elected regional assemblies in England, and the creation of a directly elected mayor and assembly in London, less glamorous but nevertheless important reforms have also taken place within local government. These reforms have ranged from the ‘modernisation’ of internal political management structures, experimentation with new electoral processes and technologies, through to exhortations for greater citizen involvement and engagement in local affairs. Although the detail of this democratic renewal programme does not need to be set out here, it is worth noting the substantial commitment that New Labour has made to local democracy through a range of initiatives. Despite this commitment to local democracy, however, the same government has also been heavily criticised for its continuing centralisation strategies and its ‘control freakery’, especially over local government (Wilson, 2003). Furthermore, extensive criticisms of the financial regime in which local government operates and the limits to local autonomy that this regime supposedly imposes have also been prominent in recent debates (Stoker, 2004). There remain, therefore, significant tensions within the UK as regards local democracy and local autonomy. Indeed, recent policies have exacerbated these tensions by highlighting the absence of local autonomy (defined as freedom from central government) while seeking to extend local democracy.
An even more recent development, however, has been the emergence of the ‘new localism’ as a way of conceptualising central-local relations and understanding the limits to local autonomy. Indeed, if seen as a set of guiding principles for central government, it helps to explain much of the current tension between increasing centralisation and enhanced local democracy within contemporary policy. Superficially, the ‘new localism’ offers many of the characteristics of local autonomy developed in this article. It has two key features. Firstly, it recognises the importance of national standards and priorities as a driving force for public policy. Central government has a primary role to play in ensuring territorial justice, equity and the collective provision of public goods. In this respect, the centre can be expected to emphasise particular policy outcomes and to focus attention on particular priorities, especially where it has manifesto commitments to specified policies or outcomes. An explicit recognition of such roles and responsibilities circumscribes local autonomy, making it a secondary concern to national demands. Secondly, however, the ‘new localism’ also recognises the primacy of the institutions of local governance in delivering public services on behalf of the centre, as well as wider arguments for locally sensitive policy implementation and community leadership. The advocates of the ‘new localism’, therefore, argue that diversity, choice and local difference should lie at the heart of policy developments. As Corry and Stoker put it, ‘there are no decent reasons for saying each locality must have exactly the same set of objectives’ (2002, p. 22). Consequently, expressions such as ‘constrained discretion’ and ‘earned autonomy’ lie at the heart of the ‘new localism’ vision. It is a combination of local variations in the process of implementing nationally prescribed outcomes. The Government’s commitment to the ‘new localism’ is evidenced in a range of policy documents and ministerial statements, from the 2001 local government white paper (DTLR, 2001) through to statements made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer (quoted in Corry and Stoker, 2002). Indeed, the weekly news magazine that focuses on local government issues, Local Government Chronicle, goes as far as to suggest that the ‘new localism’ could be one of the battlegrounds of the next general election, as political parties compete to demonstrate how they will secure greater local autonomy and democracy across communities (‘Localism Crosses the Police Line’, 2003).

The ‘new localism’ is more than simply policy rhetoric. Its effects can be seen across local government and beyond. For example, local Public Service Agreements have sought new, locally sensitive ways of implementing carefully defined national priorities (DTLR, 2001; Pratchett, 2002). The recently introduced comprehensive performance assessment for local authorities extends this process, allowing the ‘best’ councils to earn new freedoms, including a new prudential borrowing regime (Lowndes, 2003; Pratchett and Leach, 2003). Outside of traditional local government, the creation of Foundation Hospitals within the NHS will offer extensive opportunities for localities to develop distinctive policy processes that reflect local preferences operating within a quasi-democratic framework. The possibility of other key local bodies, such as police authorities, having direct elections is also on the agenda (‘Localism Crosses the Police Line’, 2003). In the most deprived parts of the country, the New Deal for Communities has also enabled locally led responses to national priorities following another quasi-democratic process.
(Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002). All of these central initiatives allow for local diversity and variation within carefully articulated national standards. The ‘new localism’ is not simply an analytical construct, but is also a policy reality, being implemented across a range of government policies.

As a policy approach, the ‘new localism’ is not without its critics. Walker (2002, p. 2), for example, is concerned with the possibility that ‘along with local differences, go inequality, under provision of vital services and capriciousness in their delivery’. In short, he argues not only that central government has a role to play in ensuring equality across areas, but also that encouraging local differences will exacerbate variation and inequality. It is also possible to question the extent to which local variation is really gaining precedence over central goals. Many of the freedoms granted to even the best-performing local authorities have been criticised as being derisory and meaningless in the face of an overwhelming raft of central government targets, inspections and standards. The extent to which the ‘new localism’ has been grasped by different central departments is variable. Although the main local government department, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, has gone some way in this direction, others seem more reluctant. From this perspective, flexibility is minimal and limited to a few carefully proscribed policy implementation choices.

It is too early to undertake a full evaluation of the ‘new localism’. It may be a passing policy fad or it could become an overarching vision for central–local relations that recasts localities in a new role for decades to come. However, using the framework of local autonomy and local democracy developed earlier, it is possible to pose two types of questions that need to be asked of the ‘new localism’ to begin to understand its long-term future and implications for sub-central government.

The first set of questions concern the type of autonomy that the ‘new localism’ is potentially fostering and its implications for central–local relations. The policy debate has moved beyond a straightforward focus on ‘freedom from’ type conceptualisations of autonomy. This observation does not deny that this type of autonomy remains important: the 2001 white paper (DTLR, 2001) supposedly frees local authorities from a host of centrally required plans and inspections, but it is only part of the story. Policy attention has begun to focus much more on ‘freedom to’ types of autonomy. New powers allowing local authorities to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of their areas, granted by the Local Government Act 2000, are an illustration of such a focus. Indeed, much of the policy discussion has been around exhorting local authorities to grasp opportunities rather than requiring them to do so, particularly in processes such as democratic renewal and public participation. Even where policies are directive, they allow considerable flexibility in how they are implemented in the locality. This flexibility is evident in the creation of local strategic partnerships, all of which have emerged in different ways to reflect differing local needs and involvement (Stewart, 2003). In this respect, various central initiatives have actively promoted greater discretion.

The extent to which the ‘new localism’ supports the reflection of local identity as an ideal form of local autonomy, however, is more questionable. It is not that the ‘new localism’ prevents local difference. Indeed, many of the policies, from education to the health service, actively encourage a degree of local variation in the
processes of policy implementation. It is more that current enactments of the ‘new localism’ do little to shift power relations in favour of localities. If anything, current policies have reinforced the centre’s power over localities, enabling it to define what is best practice and to penalise those who do not meet with this definition. Under the Comprehensive Performance Assessment that each local authority is now subjected to, the centre not only defines the outcomes required in particular policy areas but also what constitutes good practice in a host of managerial contexts. The criteria and methods adopted to measure success are centrally set and controlled. Yet this same process also decides which communities, through their local authorities, will be granted the greatest freedom from central intervention and receive the greater financial rewards. The centre has developed a more sophisticated tool for ensuring that localities deliver its priorities by enabling it to identify and focus attention on those deviant areas that are not meeting the centrally set standards for one reason or another. The discourse in which central–local relations is played out remains centrally defined and controlled. Questions need to be asked, therefore, about how effective contemporary policies are in facilitating the expression of local identity and altering power relations between the centre and localities.

The second set of questions focuses on how emerging policy towards local autonomy links with local democracy and, especially, democratic renewal. In particular, it concerns the way in which competing aspects of the local government modernisation agenda enhance or inhibit particular features of democratic practice at the local level. Different components of the modernisation agenda simultaneously seek to improve the practice of representative democracy (through, for example, strengthened and more transparent political leadership); to enhance local participation and engagement; to develop different democratic practices and institutions at the local level; and to impose greater central regulation and standards on localities. Any evaluation of the ‘new localism’, therefore, must ask questions about the type of democracy that different initiatives are fostering.

Michael Saward argues there is little to be gained in continuing to debate the value of competing democratic principles or models to advance democratic theory (Saward, 2003). Rather, the way that democracy is enacted in particular social and political contexts is what matters. Within the context of local democratic renewal, this argument is particularly prescient, recognising the ambiguity and multiplicity of objectives that remain in the concept of local democracy. A primary problem is that the core values of local government in Britain remain implicit, rather than being explicitly stated in any policy context. Although committees of enquiry such as the Layfield Committee (1976) have sought to clarify the meaning of local democracy within the UK constitution (for a discussion, see Jones and Stewart, 2003), it seems fair to argue that policy responses have never fully accepted such clarifications and have remained ambiguous. Probably the closest to such clarification appeared in the 1998 local government white paper (DETR, 1998), but even this document offered a combination of different democratic possibilities rather than a clear statement of the role and value of local democracy. Knowing what democratic values are being prioritised and what form democracy is supposed to take in localities seems fundamental to any process of democratic renewal, whether it is led from above or below. Current policy appears to support a range
of different forms and priorities, which, while not necessarily in direct competition with one another, are nevertheless not wholly consistent. Although such a plurality might seem healthy, it does not necessarily mean that democracy is enhanced.

In the absence of a clear articulation of democratic priorities and values, it is not inevitable that a range of values will be supported and that a mutually consistent form of democratic practices will emerge. An alternative is that deeply embedded institutional norms will capture particular democratic innovations to reinforce institutional priorities and values. Although this alternative will not necessarily lead to non-democratic outcomes, equally it does not automatically support democratic enhancement. If democratic renewal is not explicit about the values that it wishes to enhance, implicit norms are likely to dominate. The ‘new localism’ has the potential to extend local democracy by providing greater clarity of its role and purpose. On the other hand, it also has the potential to obfuscate even further the value of local democracy by introducing new institutional structures and practices that implicitly support particular values and priorities. The particular practices that are supported in localities, therefore, have a material effect on the way in which democracy is enacted.

Conclusions: Local Autonomy and Democratic Tensions

Local autonomy poses tensions for broader democratic structures and practices, because, conceptually, it has the potential to challenge the sovereignty of nation states. The earlier discussion identified strong justifications for local democracy based not only on liberal concepts of local self-government, but also on the argument that local democracy fosters democratic practices throughout society. National democracy can flourish only if it is underpinned by strong democratic foundations within localities. To the extent that this argument is sustainable, it provides one normative justification for high levels of local autonomy. If democracy is to thrive within localities, it requires autonomy not only as freedom from higher authorities, but also as freedom to undertake particular initiatives and for communities to be able to reflect or express their own political identity. As has already been observed, local autonomy requires an acceptance of difference between areas in both democratic processes and political outcomes. This challenge is significant for the ‘new localism’ vision.

The problem for democracy at the level of the nation state is that differences in democratic processes and political outcomes are often unpalatable. The distinction between ‘freedom from’ and ‘freedom to’ is useful here, not only because it provides a helpful analytical distinction between types of liberty, but also because its use draws parallels with the autonomy of the individual. Autonomy is about liberty, whether of the individual person or the individual organisation. In contrast, democracy is a collective process through which conflicts and differences are articulated and resolved. Tensions exist because, in allowing for a degree of local autonomy and local democracy, nation states automatically generate multiple levels of collective decision-making. The democratic collective at the level of the nation state, as represented through elected governments and parliaments, will inevitably seek to pursue a discrete set of policies across the whole of its sovereign territory. Even where differences between areas are acknowledged, central governments
can be expected to try to structure them within a broad framework that suits its national priorities. From this position, local expressions of difference and autonomous attempts to reflect specific local identities can be perceived as threats to the sovereignty of national government. Consequently, local autonomy and democracy can be in conflict with the institutions of national democracy.

National governments are caught, therefore, in a paradox. On the one hand, strong local autonomy is essential to maintaining the local democracy practices that underpin broader democratic cultures within the polity. On the other hand, local autonomy threatens the viability of democratically supported national priorities. Too much local autonomy, in this sense, can destabilise the national institutions of democratic government. This argument holds only in as far as local democratic practices are dependent on a degree of local autonomy. However, as the earlier discussion recognised, although there are limits to the dependence between these two factors, there is nevertheless a clear but complex relationship between them. There is an inevitable dilemma between local autonomy, local democracy and the maintenance of a broader democratic polity. Although the ‘new localism’ may have managed to clarify some of the complexities that bedevil central–local relations, its capacity to resolve this dilemma seems limited.

(Accepted: 13 January 2004)

About the Author

Lawrence Pratchett, Local Governance Research Unit, De Montfort University, Leicester LE1 9BH, UK; email: lap@dmu.ac.uk

Notes

I am grateful to Vivien Lowndes, Josie Kelly, Gerry Stoker and Melvin Wingfield for their comments on working drafts. I am also grateful to the three anonymous referees for their supportive and constructive comments.

1 See, for example, Sharpe, 1970; Page, 1982; Goldsmith, 1986; King and Stoker, 1996; Jones and Stewart, 2003.


References


