

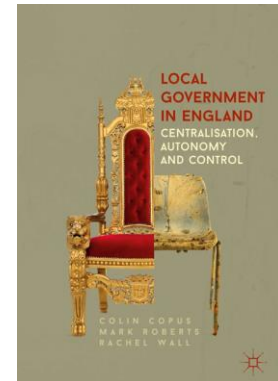
Jonathan Carr-West

Local Government Information Unit
London
United Kingdom

Email: jonathan.carr-west@lgiu.org.uk

Local Government in England: Centralisation, Autonomy and Control by Colin Copus, Mark Roberts, Rachel Wall

(Palgrave MacMillan 2017 ISBN 978-1-137-26417-6 price £59.99)
www.palgrave.com/gb/book/9781137264176



Local Government in England: Centralisation, Autonomy and Control is a serious book and an important contribution to the scholarship around local government. It opens however, with a pleasingly comic tableau as academics from England, Portugal and Poland bicker amiably at a conference and on Twitter about whose country is really the most centralised. The rest of the book is devoted to showing why the English academics were right, why it matters and what should be done about it.

The main thrust of the text is an analysis of the impact of the dominant policy narratives around centralism and localism. The argument that Copus, Wall and Roberts put forward could be boiled down to the assertion that the problem with local government in England is that it is neither local nor government. But to make this case they first helpfully unpack several sets of concepts that are all too often elided together.

Firstly, we must distinguish between local democracy and local government. Local democracy is a process of governance which gives political expression to the views of people in a locality such that they may shape the places they live in. The authors place themselves within a rich and diverse body of

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/cjlg.v0i20.6021>

Article History: Received 17/07/17; Accepted 24/07/17; Published 28/03/18

Citation: Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance 2017, 20: 6021, - <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/cjlg.v0i20.6021>

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thought in which this ability to exercise local autonomy is seen as an essential precondition of liberty and well-being. Local government is also, however, the body that delivers (or commissions) public services at a local level. These two functions are normally conflated but, they argue, in reality they are separate and, indeed, may be in tension with one another.

The dominant policy narrative of recent decades has focused almost exclusively on local government as the provider of public services locally and thus as a relatively small part of a much broader network of public services controlled and funded by national government. Once we treat local government as a delivery arm of the national state, the game is up: centralism is hardwired into the system.

Within this context the authors also distinguish between decentralisation (the transfer of functions from national to local government) and devolution (the transfer of authority from the national to the local). But both decentralisation and devolution operate within a clear hierarchy whereby power belongs to central government and is disbursed (freely or grudgingly) to the local. Paradoxically, therefore, narratives around decentralisation and/or devolution actually end up reinforcing centralism, not challenging it.

The observation that decentralising narratives reinforce the paradigm they purport to undermine is not new, but the narrative logic underpinning that claim is unpacked here with great clarity and rigour. So it is hard to find fault with the analysis of where we are and how we got here. But what can we do about it?

Unsurprisingly, given the analytical framing around policy narratives, the authors see a large part of the solution as being bound up in the construction of an alternative narrative: one they describe as ‘muscular localism’. This builds on work Colin Copus has published previously on the local state: that is a state in which local government is the primary legislator with issues passed up to national parliament if, and only if, there are reasons to support this. Around this concept is developed a narrative that rests on six foundations: an organic foundation self-identifying local communities; a local patriotic foundation that engenders civic pride; a governmental foundation that places real decision-making in the hands of local communities, an experimental foundation that tolerates failure; a financial foundation of fiscal autonomy; a local interest foundation that questions the primacy of the national interest; and a proximity foundation that keeps units of government as close as possible to the communities they serve.

This is all good stuff: powerful and provocative. The state it describes is a fundamentally different policy to the one we currently inhabit. Yet there are two fronts it could further open up. The first

would be to make more of the link between localism and public service reform. The book treats local political autonomy as a moral good, which it is. But there is also an increasing body of evidence that if we want to achieve innovation in public services which responds to complex challenges created by changes in our population, economy and environment and which genuinely reduces service demand, then this requires a level of adaptability and integration that can only be achieved in a more localised system. This is a powerful public goods argument for the sort of localised state that Copus et al. describe. I imagine the authors' argument might be that even to talk in this way is to fall into the centralist trap of conceiving local government as a service arm of the state, but I wonder if there is some way to square this circle?

Secondly, the book has a very geographic, rooted conception of localism, and one occasionally detects a whiff of nostalgia for the Anglo-Saxon hundred. That is fine as far as it goes, but of course geography is only one of the axes through which people experience life and community. How do we reconcile localism and cosmopolitanism? No community stands apart from the tides of global change and we need to think about localism as a way of being in the world, not as a way of standing apart from it. That might be outside the scope of this book but it feels like an increasingly urgent task in Brexit Britain.

However to find oneself challenging some elements of the book's conclusions actually illustrates the central point of the authors' analysis. Centralist narratives are so dominant within our political discourse and we are so far from constructing a proper localist narrative that even to find oneself engaging in disagreement with the shape of that narrative feels like an important and refreshing step forward.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.