

Why did 30000 people march through the streets of Hayle?

As we snooze away Christmas meals bureaucratic wheels are turning which may reorganise local government in Cornwall, if the Government goes along with the proposals of Cornwall Council, or if it plumps instead for the ‘pathfinder’ approach mooted by the District Councils. At a number of meetings held by each tier to canvas support and to describe their proposals, I have been brought in as the ‘cabaret’ – a lively speaker with a colourful turn of phrase to keep ‘em awake till lunchtime!

As the Chairman of the Cornish Constitutional Convention I have been grateful for the opportunity to explain to voluntary sector organisations, parish and town councils, business people and the like how we propose Cornwall should grasp the opportunity offered by the Government’s review of Governance, and why.

What we propose is to bring together the whole of the public sector in Cornwall (and the Isles of Scilly, if it wishes to participate) into a single organisation with a two tier, streamlined structure that separates strategic functions from service delivery, embeds democracy and encourages local decision-making..

Savings

By merging all the ‘back office’ systems (payroll, finance, ICT, admin etc) of 10 or more organisations, we would immediately save money. By working with the structures we already have, reshaping their functions and reducing their number, we would be reducing the costs of change. Most importantly, by merging the big services, such as health and social care into a single organisation, we would immediately make things much better for people using the services, and we would be able to stop the haemorrhaging of money as the two dinosaurs try to work together to achieve simple transactions.

Scrutiny

In all this, we would also ensure that there is democratic accountability to elected representatives, and that the elected are engaged in the processes and decisions of governance, rather than being ushered on to ‘back benches’ to ‘scrutinise’ and ‘develop policy’. Scrutiny is important, and we propose that it should be carried out by Local Strategic Partnerships, giving the citizen the opportunity to challenge and focus.

Parish & Town councils

Lastly, we would build in to our proposal the delegation of local services and processes to parish and town councils. We are not so patronising as to assert, as many do, that some communities are more apathetic than others. We believe that it is the right and responsibility of all communities to take responsibility for ensuring the grassroots are well tended to. Therefore, we would agree with all parish and town councils a package of delegated services, functions and duties, and offer support and resources to help make things work. This package may differ between towns and rural parishes. We would also ‘parish’ the whole of Cornwall.

Democracy

30000 people marched through the streets of Hayle to demand democratic accountability in their health service. The Government is now seriously looking at local management in the health service. This new development is part of the opportunity presented by the Governance White Paper – no discussion has taken place, as yet, between health and local government to actively explore the benefits and opportunities of a merger. Why not?

Perhaps, because, as usual, thinking about this review, tends to err towards preserving familiar institutions rather than thinking about the citizen, democracy or improving services.

Over Arching Strategic Body

In separating strategy from delivery, the Convention proposes an Over Arching Body which would be responsible for strategy, commissioning services, agreeing and approving budget, monitoring performance and promoting Cornwall. A Body with strategic responsibility for all public services in Cornwall would be a clear and accountable focal point, and, when presenting Cornwall's complex and distinctive position to the Government (and EU, and markets) would have clout – a somewhat primitive term, but, experience tells me, a very necessary tool to carry in your bag!

Standing Conference

In order to set about working out how services would be merged, and systems integrated, how democratic representation would be built in and how delivery 'areas' would be defined, we propose calling a 'standing conference' at which all Parties could work things out. It would have a timetable and a work schedule. To make it thorough and effective it would invite the Government to participate in the business planning processes, as it is doing in the major cities. We would expect that this partnership between Government and locality would ensure that the functions, duties and powers currently held elsewhere but which would be necessary to make a new, single public sector, service delivery organisation work, would be transferred into Cornwall.

Opportunity – if we dare!

The Governance White Paper offers Cornwall an opportunity to achieve the efficiency and accountability in public services which, in many ways, it is leading the Country in seeking. Public services are fragmented and isolated and thereby costly and inefficient. Cornwall, as a peripheral region with distinctive opportunities (eg to become the first non-metropolitan knowledge economy) is a confident, positive regions with excellent sustainable prospects.

We are challenging ourselves, and challenging others to confront major challenges such as climate change and peak oil in constructive and creative ways. If we are to fulfil Cornwall's potential, and ensure that it retains its unique heritage, culture and environment, and make it a place which is exciting and stimulating for the young as well as caring for the old and vulnerable, then we need the governance toolkit to do the job.

What you can do

There is no better place in the UK to take on these challenges. We should stop being deferential, break down barriers to change, establish genuine democratic accountability and fit the whole public sector for its Cornish purpose for the 21st century. As usual when Cornwall seeks change, it is up to the citizen to guide the politician, including making sure that we can fight our corner at the Centres of power effectively. This is how we got Objective 1; it is how we began to change the health service – I'm not calling for yet another march. Please phone your councillors, write to the Government (Ruth Kelly, 26 Whitehall, London SW1A 2WH); tell your MPs what you want – second best, self-preservation is simply not good enough.

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