

Opinion

David Byrne



Local politics is in need of an overhaul

WHAT is to be done about local government? The rejection of an elected mayor by the citizens of Newcastle leaves things as they were.

That doesn't mean the present system of local government is in good shape – far from it. When asking “what is to be done?”, it is necessary to identify what problems need addressing.

The first problem is that there is so little real political engagement with it by the general public. Election turnouts are pathetic and voters vote in relation to national politics rather than taking account of the actual achievements or lack of them by local councils and local politicians. However, they can't really be blamed for this since local councils have so few real remaining powers.

Problem number two is that the main political parties are so indistinguishable in terms of what they do when they get into office – a case of tweedledum, tweedledee, and tweedleother in the North East – that who gets in makes minimal difference to what is done.

This is partly because there is so little room for manoeuvre, given limited powers, but it is also down to the abandonment of any real political principles by Labour in the Blair years and, locally, there is no sign that Labour has any distinctive political project.

The absurd “One Core Strategy” for Newcastle and Gateshead was agreed by a Lib Dem administration in Newcastle and a Labour one in Gateshead, and neither party could come up with anything better than an agreement on a future based on more house building and more shopping as the world moves from recession towards depression!

New Labour loathed Labour party activists and did its best to neuter its own political base. In local government, it did this by replacing an effective system of management by committees with cabinet systems and leaders with prime ministerial authority. This reduced internal democracy and meant that only those either wanting to be a full-time politician or unemployable in any real job could play a proper role in local government.

In the North East, we can add to this the presence of carpet-bagging blow-ins using a local government role in the hope of a Westminster seat in the future. Part-time councillors who had to work for a living had a connection with reality which is now lacking in most politicians across much of the UK political spectrum.

Finally, there is an issue of scale. The trouble with existing local government is that it is both too big and too small. The system we have of seven unitary authorities covering the Tyne Wear City Region and eight covering Teesside – Durham is in both and two authorities in North Yorkshire are part of the Teesside region – means that there is no democratic control over crucial levels of planning and service delivery. Teesside has at least got an undemocratic act together on planning. Tyne and Wear is the usual stupid rats in a sack fight and hasn't even done that.

Eric Pickles' Localism Act gives some very minimal powers to people who get their act together to start using it. It is a meagre start but it is a start and anything is better than nothing, so I suggest looking it up on the web and getting going.

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1975

How would you do?

NOW

Sample 0-level chemistry questions from 1975.

1. Which one of the following compounds does not yield oxygen on moderately strong heating?

- (a) Copper nitrate
(b) Lead nitrate
(c) Potassium nitrate
(d) Iron (III) oxide
(e) Lead (IV) oxide

2. Equal volumes of the vapour of an alcohol X and of oxygen gas have the same mass at the same temperature and pressure. Oxidation of X gives a weak acid Y of molecular formula H₂CO₂.

2.3 g of Y neutralise 50 cm³ of 1.0M sodium hydroxide. (Relative atomic masses: C = 12; H = 1; O = 16)

- (a) What is the relative molecular mass of X?
(b) What is the relative molecular mass of the acid Y?
(c) What volume of 1.0M sodium hydroxide would be needed to neutralise one mole of Y?

3. 1.0 dm³ of ammonia was passed over heated copper(II) oxide (CuO). The

nitrogen formed (measured at the same temperature and pressure as the ammonia) would have a volume of...?

- (a) 250 cm³
(b) 500 cm³
(c) 750 cm³
(d) 1000 cm³
(e) 2000 cm³?

4. An element E forms a hydride EH₄ which contains 90.0% by mass of E. If the relative atomic mass of hydrogen is 1.0, then the relative atomic mass of E is...?

- (a) 9
(b) 22.5
(c) 36
(d) 86
(e) 90?

5. The volume of 8.0g of oxygen is 7.50dm³ under certain conditions. What would be the volume of 8.0 g of methane under the same conditions? (Relative atomic masses: H = 1; C = 12; O = 16)

- (a) 3.75 dm³
(b) 7.50 dm³
(c) 11.25 dm³
(d) 15.00 dm³
(e) 18.75 dm³?

GCSE questions now.

MATHS

1. Sunita runs for 32 seconds at an average speed of 6 metres per second. Work out the distance that Sunita runs.

2. The chocolates in a large tin are shared equally between 20 children. They receive nine chocolates each. If there were only 15 children, how many chocolates would each child receive?

3. Which farming system is described in the following sentence? “This type of farming uses small amounts of inputs on large areas of land.”

- a) Intensive
b) Extensive

4. Which of the following is a disadvantage of using nuclear power to generate electricity?

- a) It produces large amounts of waste.
b) It is a very inefficient method.
c) The power stations are expensive to build.

BIOLOGY

5. In addition to methane, which other greenhouse gas do cattle release into the atmosphere?

- a) carbon dioxide
b) carbon monoxide
c) nitrogen dioxide
d) sulfur dioxide

6. Forests help to reduce the greenhouse effect mainly by...

- a) “locking-up” carbon dioxide as wood.
b) giving out oxygen.
c) taking in methane.
d) absorbing radiation from the Sun.

GEOGRAPHY

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ANSWERS
1. 192 m
2. 12 g
3. Extensive
4. The power stations are expensive to build
5. Carbon dioxide
6. “Locking-up” carbon dioxide as wood.

“Otherwise, it will be like when diplomas were introduced not that long ago, which seemed to disappear soon afterwards, leaving students with diplomas wondering what had happened.

“Changes to qualifications could also impact on staff resources at the school, so they would need to be given time to make sure they had the right people in place.”

She added: “When you are looking at introducing changes that could affect young people's futures, and teachers' jobs, it has to be done properly.”

The Government targets for schools are based on the number of pupils scoring at least five A* to C grades, including English and maths.

A move to reduce grades could mean a cut, for example to A* to E, which is the same system as A-levels, or even A* to C.

It has been suggested in the past that the general public, and especially employers, only see grades of C and above as passes.

A regional spokesman for the National Union of Teachers said: “Whilst it is important that the exam structure is kept up to date and relevant for the benefit of today's students, it is also important not to rush into any major changes.

“Teachers work extremely hard to support their students and help them prepare for exams, so it is vital that they are consulted if changes were to be made.

“To say the current system isn't working is an insult to those who dedicate their lives to educating others and it's an insult to the young people who study for the exams.

“Far too often, decisions are made by people who are not directly working in

class for up to six weeks because they are doing controlled assessments; but this is what we have to do.”

Beccy Earnshaw, director of Schools North East, said it was vital that the value of qualifications was not challenged by any changes.

“Teachers need to be consulted about the design of the future of qualifications, to ensure the quality of courses is not undermined in any way,” she said.

“Any changes that are brought in must be agreed and understood, not only by teachers and students, but by the parents, employers and the wider world. There is nothing worse for students or for schools than when something is rushed through. Schools, like any other organisation, can not make major changes overnight.

“They need to be given proper time to implement them and the proper resources to ensure they have everything they need to deliver quality education.



‘GCSEs TOO BIG’ Dr Bernard Trafford Headmaster of the Royal Grammar School, Jesmond

“ Schools spend more on examining kids than they do on books and paper

From 1975 they do on books and paper.”

Every year GCSE performance appears to improve. Last summer, nearly one in four GCSE entries scored at least an A grade while almost seven in 10 exams were awarded a C or above.

So is it time for change? The suggestion has led to a mixed reaction from education chiefs in our region.

Dr Bernard Trafford, headmaster at Newcastle's Royal Grammar School, said GCSEs had become “too big and too important”, causing years of exam misery for students.

“GCSEs are huge these days and it seems odd that they still carry such importance when education goes way beyond the age of 16,” he added.

“The stakes have grown too high and you start to wonder why life has to stop for students taking GCSEs. We put them through it because that's the currency.

“With the introduction of vocational courses, said to be worth up to four GCSEs, the whole system has become barmy, so maybe it is a good idea to come up with a fresh approach.

“The idea to give marks as percentages is quite a sensible one, but it would be difficult to do this at A-level, when students are competing for university places and every mark would be scrutinised.

“GCSEs are much broader than A-levels and should be treated as such, rather than giving them the same.

“I am not against the idea of an overhaul, but I do pray schools and teachers are consulted. Some of the rules in place at the moment are ridiculous.

“Some teachers won't be teaching their



STRESS Students in an exam

schools with pupils, yet what they decide could have a massive impact on a young person's life. It will be left to teachers to implement and make it a success; and it's the teachers who'll be left to pick up the pieces if it doesn't work out. This isn't a decision to be made lightly.”

It is understood that Ofqual is also considering reducing the number of subjects from the current maximum of more than 70. It may result in many non-academic courses such as catering and motor vehicle studies being scrapped, it emerged.

Ofqual said that the current range of

subjects “devalues the GCSE brand”.

Meanwhile, national reaction has also been divided.

Sue Kirkham of the Association of School and College Leaders said the number of grades should depend on who the exams are aimed at: “If it's for the whole cohort, then you need a wide range.

“If you want to have different qualifications for different groups of people you don't need so many grades.”

Ms Kirkham added that reform of GCSEs should be the subject of a major consultation involving teachers, pupils and employers.

But Chris McGovern, chairman of the traditionalist Campaign for Real Education, added: “We would support any change to the grading system because most universities and employers pretty much ignore anything lower than an A anyway.

“But removing the F and G grades is not going to wipe out 20 years of rampant grade inflation.”

A spokesman for the Department for Education said: “We want all exams in England to stand comparison with, and be as rigorous as, those in the best-performing education jurisdictions.”

Columnist

Clegg places himself on the right side of Britain's great divide

WHEN the history of David Cameron's government comes to be written, the Budget delivered by Chancellor George Osborne on March 21 may well be seen as a decisive turning point in its fortunes.

Whether it was the pasty tax, the granny tax, the tax on charitable giving or the abolition of the 50p rate, those looking for something to criticise in the Chancellor's package found plenty to choose from.

But of all the measures announced by Mr Osborne two months ago, surely the most pernicious as far as this region is concerned was the proposal to introduce regional pay rates – paying teachers and other public sector staff in Newcastle less than people doing the same jobs in London.

Far from seeing the prosperity gap between richer and poorer regions as an evil which needs to be addressed, the idea of regional pay takes such inequality as an incontrovertible fact of life and then threatens to institutionalise it throughout the entire British economy.

Despite the efforts of some North East MPs and union leaders, the proposal has received little national attention up until now, demonstrating once again the London-centricity of our national media.

But that may be about to change. For the question of regional pay now appears to be playing into the much wider political narrative concerning the longer-term future of the Tory-Lib Dem coalition.

In what can only be seen as a shot across Mr Osborne's bows, Lib Dem leader Nick Clegg warned this week that his party could not sign up to a policy that would exacerbate the North-South divide.

It seems that regional pay has now joined the growing list of issues, alongside Europe, House of Lords reform and Rupert Murdoch, where the two parts of the coalition are singing from increasingly varying hymn sheets.

Speaking to the National Education Trust in London Mr Clegg said: “Nothing has been decided and I feel very, very strongly as an MP in South Yorkshire, with a lot of people in public services, we are not going to be able simply willy-nilly to exacerbate a North-South divide.

“I think people should be reassured we are not going to rush headlong in imposing a system from above which if it was done in the way sometimes described would be totally unjust because it would penalise some of the people working in some of the most difficult areas.”

Perhaps the most heartening aspect of Monday's speech was simply hearing a senior minister talking about the North-South divide again.

It became practically a banned subject under Tony Blair, who first attempted to dismiss it as a “myth”, then tried to con the region into thinking something was being done about it by inventing a spurious target to narrow the gap between the three richest regions and the six poorest.

In one sense, Mr Clegg's intervention is not unexpected given his own status as a South Yorkshire MP in a three-way marginal.

Mr Blair's former spin doctor Alastair Campbell has stated that Mr Clegg's only hope of retaining his Sheffield Hallam seat at the next election is to join the Conservative Party. Even making allowances for Alastair's obvious partisanship, I've a sneaking suspicion he may be right.

But, in the meantime, it is clearly in the Lib Dem leader's interests to try to put some clear yellow water between himself and the Tories on issues with a particular relevance to the northern regions.

In view of the Lib Dems' dismal performance in local elections in the North since the party joined the coalition in 2010, it is surely not a moment too soon.

Mr Blair's indifference to the whole issue of regional disparities was partly responsible for the Lib Dems' dramatic surge in support in the region between 1999 and 2007, with Labour-held seats like Newcastle Central, Blaydon and Durham City briefly becoming realistic targets.

Meanwhile at local government level, the party took control of Newcastle from Labour, and managed to hang on to it for seven years before being swept away in the post-coalition backwash of May 2011.

It will be a long way back for the party to reach those giddy heights again, still further if it is to mount a serious challenge for additional parliamentary seats in the region.

This week, however, Mr Clegg might just have taken the first step along the road.

Paul Linford

