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Councils Must Concentrate on Core Functions and Cut Out the Bureaucrats. Redwood's Politeia pamphlet shows how accountability to the electorate and not Whitehall is the way forward.

No one who cares for the institutions of democracy can be sanguine about the problems to which local councils have fallen prey. Planning, development, highways and motor traffic schemes bear witness to the failure of councils to reflect the wishes of those they are there to serve. The dismal turn-out for local elections is a further reminder of such failures. Does local government have a future? The Rt Hon John Redwood argues that, if local government is to recover its role, it must be drastically reformed.

In the latest Politeia pamphlet, *A Balance for the Best: Towards Accountable and Responsible Local Government*, Mr Redwood suggests that the reasons for the decline in local government are both internal and, more and more, external - the results of government policy. Local politicians too often have taken second place to their officials who in fact run the system. Whitehall too has cast its malign shadow as priorities and funding are set centrally, often against the wishes and interests of local people. As a result, Redwood explains:

There is a lack of confidence in local government. Councils have become supplicants seeking more and more money. Central Government has become more and more interventionist, defining...exactly what it wants local councils to do...by doling out the money in [a]...bewildering array of different schemes and grants....The ...officers gain authority at the expense of elected councillors since they are the gate keepers to funding.

And now, to make matters worse, the government's new schemes for regional government will leave local people without sufficient means to hold their councils to account because the balance of responsibility in central matters such as planning and the environment will shift to the regions.

Redwood explains that the decline can and must be stopped. The functions of local councils must be reformed and their structure simplified and severely pruned. Councils should be responsible for a small number of important functions: planning, the environment, and housing. Social Services will remain an important matter, but education should be devolved to schools and parents. And councils must be accountable to the electorate for these functions. Regional government and the millions it costs the tax payer should be scrapped. Under such a system, as Redwood says,

Local people will know that in a wide range of areas, from development, through planning, to the environment, education and social services, it is primarily local councillors who have the power to sort out their problems. Consumer choice will also be strengthened and more service provided by the private sector, paid for by public money.

Above all, Redwood argues, the Councils must change, so that councillors take responsibility for strategic decisions. Elected councillors must be at the head deciding – and taking responsibility for executing – policy. The numbers of officials must be cut, with considerable savings to tax and council charge payers. At the moment, councils often pay twice for services and advice, by employing their own staff as well as private consultants. They should be willing to rely more on contracts for specified services and advice, tightly drawn up with penalty clauses that ensure that taxpayers' interests are protected.

As John Redwood says on the launch of his pamphlet:

“The UK is being wrecked by too much wasteful spending . . . We need to cut back on waste and over government urgently. The best place to start is Regional government . . . [and] we have no need of Regional Government. We just need a layer of local government and a

national administration. We need to get much better value from much of our local government. The pamphlet proposes a reformed system of streamlined local government, more accountable to local voters. . . In many Councils today we pay twice. We pay the salaries of an army of officers working directly for the Council, and pay again for the consultants and contractors who work for them and often do the work . . . with a public sector extending well out of control. We need people governing who spend public money as carefully as their own. Today we are paying for bloated bureaucracies that often fail to deliver. Why do we need Local Education Authorities in their present form? Why not give all the money directly to the schools, and let them choose how they will spend it...This pamphlet sets out a radical blueprint for a more democratic, less expensive and more focused government in the UK.”

(John Redwood, April 2003)

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A Balance for the Best: Towards Accountable and Responsible Local Government is published by Politeia, 22, Charing Cross Road, London, WC2H 0QP, April 2003

