

Welcome Speech for NALC Annual Conference & Awards

By Paul Twivy, 17th October 2015

Good evening, I am Paul Twivy. Thank you for inviting me to host your Star Council Awards ceremony tonight.

As tonight is about the importance and inventiveness of *Local* government at its best, I thought I'd start with a few jokes at the expense of *National* Government to get us all in the mood.

The Conservative MP Simon Burns apparently once let it slip that he got a third class degree at University, which immediately landed him with the nickname "Third Degree Burns". Not known for his love of diminutive Speaker John Bercow, he once called him "a stupid, sanctimonious little dwarf." It is also rumoured that Burns deliberately backed his car into Bercow's in the Commons car park. Bercow seeing the incident, ran out and shouted "I am not Happy. I am not Happy." To which Burns replied "Which one are you then?"

I have the possible privilege that my book - "Be Your Own Politician" - is published by Biteback, the publishers responsible for "Call Me Dave" and the "Pig-Gate" scandal. I wanted to pay tribute to the brilliant irreverence of the British public by picking out a few of the best puns that have circulated about Pig Gate. "There may be truffles ahead"; "Don't go bacon my heart!" "I couldn't if I fried"; and "Fancy a drink after work Dave?" "Yes I'll see you in the Boar's Head for a quick one" or even more perversely "I'll *join* you in the Boar's Head for a quick one" and finally "The Prosciutto Affair." Ah politics and puns. Sadly none of them quite come up to the standard of "Show me where Stalin is buried and I'll show you a communist plot."

To get somewhat more serious, when you stand back and draw breath after this year's dramatic and surprising General Election, there is a deficit in true democracy in the United Kingdom as worrying as the economic deficit and related to another kind of deficit: trust. Despite a long and vibrant democratic tradition, the "Mother of all Parliaments" is failing her children.

Voter turnout at this Election, although being trumpeted as "the highest since 1997", was, at 66.1% only marginally higher than 2010's 65% and well behind the 71.4% who voted in Tony Blair's first election victory.

A staggering 7.5 million people did not register to vote, which is almost 1 in every 6 adults. It is particularly acute amongst the young: only 39% of 18-24's voted in the 2010 UK General Election compared to 64% of the same age group in the last German Election. Russell Brand may consider that a victory of protest but I consider it a calamity of apathy.

By contrast, the turnout for last year's Scottish referendum at almost 85% was the highest in any UK election since 1951. This demonstrates that when crucial issues that eclipse party politics and relate to fundamental identity and collective ambition are put to the electorate, the electricity of true democracy returns. It was particularly moving to see many 16 and 17 year-olds asking incisive questions: reasons to be optimistic for years to come. Local politics, as our awards tonight will demonstrate, is also about the fundamentals of what kind of society we want, combined with the ability to influence and act on it. That's what makes it so potent and important.

The peculiar maths of the last UK Election may of course give rise to renewed cries for Proportional Representation. Just less than 1.5 million people voted for the SNP's and yet they won 56 seats. By contrast the Green party won only 1 seat from just over 1.1 million votes. Yet in my view the solution lies not in PR but elsewhere. It lies in this room and it's called "Localism."

The theory is that the UK Parliament is the coming-together of 650 MP's representing, on average, almost 100,000 constituents each. Issues and solutions should therefore be able to rise bottom-up as well as top-down.

Sadly, political parties reduce the ability of MP's to genuinely represent the views of their local constituents via whipping/ toeing the line on so many issues. No longer is Parliament an aggregate of local needs debated at national level.

Is it any wonder therefore that most people in the UK feel most of the time as if they are watching the spectacle of a small body of powerful people or organisations make the real decisions behind closed doors. They have lost the knowledge of how to influence and the habit of trying. They need to re-develop a sense of how their individual actions make a difference and local is the place where that can happen.

There are 93,000 square miles in the UK. 64.6 million of us live in 7,500 to 8,000 of those square miles. Power is concentrated largely in only two of them: the square miles of The City and Westminster. We need to ensure that citizens can have power in the other 7,998 square miles.

We have one of the most over-centralised countries in the developed world. There are 37,000 communes in France; 80% of them have fewer than 1,000 residents. There are 290 municipalities in Sweden with an average of 31,000 each; half have less than 15,000 inhabitants. The average county in the USA had a population of roughly 100,000 people as at the 2000 Census. An average Local Authority in England & Wales covers 147,000 people. We need more parish and town councils.

In 2013-14 only 41% of people took part in any civic participation in the least year, a statistically significant decrease compared to 2012-13. Only 34% of people felt that they could influence decisions affecting their local area, a statistically significant decrease compared to 2012-13 (38%) and all other years since 2001.

Yet, 44% of people want to be involved in decisions made by the council and 74% say it is important to be able to influence local decision-making. So there is a widespread thirst for participation in democracy but one that isn't being quenched. Tonight we will see some inspiring examples of how it can and is being quenched.

Since 2009, I have dedicated the majority of my time to Localism ideas that are intended to be fun, practical, inclusive, creative and rewarding.

With Tim Smit of the Eden Project I co-founded "The Big Lunch", the street party movement. The idea was to establish street parties as a "Thanksgiving Day for Neighbours": not just for Jubilees. We wanted to tackle social isolation and get streets to act as practical units of warmth and hope. In 2009 we started with 730,000 people. This year it was 6 million.

Your Square Mile was established in 2010 as a social enterprise to help citizens make positive change in their neighbourhood by providing tools, inspiration and advice on how to be a savvy citizen and pull the levers of change. It now specialises in working with businesses and local authorities on developing bespoke approaches to community engagement.

In the original 16 communities where we have worked, some of which are the toughest in the UK, we doubled constructive contact between citizens and local authorities; increased from half to two-thirds the number of people who feel they can influence local decisions, increased neighbourly contact and increased the number of people saying they like their area. Some remarkable individual projects have also been launched.

I believe there is a ladder of citizenship akin to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. People can be encouraged to move up this "ladder" or hierarchy and they will settle at their own level. It is a pyramid with a broad base: a lot of people will never go beyond simple, neighbourly actions or informal community groups.

Most people start with baby steps or simple neighbourly actions such as joining a street party. They might then join a hobby-based group such as Stitch and Bitch, a football club, a local choir or volunteering around a passion. Some might then start a group or driving an existing one towards social change. A few will move up to start a social enterprise or co-op. Vitally a number will also become councillors or work actively with local councils. There are 700,000 to 1 million community groups in the UK and 250,000 social entrepreneurs. Imagine if we can leverage their power more effectively.

Tonight is about celebrating the remarkable achievements of Local Councils, Council employees and Councillors who have delivered real influence. So, let's begin the Awards.

It is very easy to snipe at Local Government. The word “parochialism” is sadly seen to be negative whereas in fact it should be a positive: a concern for your immediate parish. The stereotype is that Local Newspapers are full of stories about firemen rescuing cats and scout parades yet they tell the balanced and complex story of most people’s lives and communities better than any national medium. Local Councils similarly can be parodied but solve the problems closest to people’s daily lives.

Recent Nobel prize winners have shown that the most efficient irrigation systems in the world have been created by local farmers collaborating to solve problems: far more efficient than anything created by national governments or corporations. Problems are best solved by people close to those problems.

Barry Quirk, Chief Executive of Lewisham Council said in 2010 that Local Authorities should go beyond service delivery. They should foster civic spirit and “a warm sense of place.”

He also said we need “close communities” not “closed communities” and that we need a network of open groups. I think we have seen that demonstrated tonight.

Manton Community Alliance believed that the old way of neighbourhood renewal was not sustainable. In 2004 it developed its own social capital model and adopted **“residents are part of the solution rather than passive consumers of public services”** as its ethic.

After 3 years in a very deprived, former mining community with very low levels of engagement: 62% of the population participated in the life of their neighbourhood. 41% of residents believed they could influence what is going on in their community, 11% higher than the national level.

Through a Participatory Budgeting programme 1526 people (25% of the population) voted. Many of these people had never voted in an election before and for some of these people it encouraged them to vote in subsequent local elections. In Latin America by the way, PB sessions are local cultural events with food, children singing and local crafts. What an inspiring vision that we might follow. Let us bring fun into our democratic meetings and events.

We have had lots of inspiration tonight. Alex Collier has applied much creativity to her village providing more services and opportunities to young people. Getting children to design their own street signs is inspired. Debra Roberts has shown the power of engaging a very broad range of partners to solve local problems including schools, community groups and national charities. June Saltmarsh has proved the power of sheer visibility, the vibrancy of face-to-face meetings when done well and the power of leading by example by collecting and taking home elderly people.

Stone Parish Council in Kent aim to “make even the boring interesting”. They make strong use of infographics to present their budgets. They have an excellent web-site with intuitive navigation. They have project-specific websites and social media accounts. They are developing an interactive map on their Neighbourhood Plan website including a private forum for the steering group. They digitise and tag council minutes. They have a digital council newspaper. They use Survey Monkey for public consultation on-line. They prove the power of using digital communications as human communications.

The Hertfordshire Association Clerk Leadership programme shows the vital importance of investing in talent and knowledge and of setting up shared learning amongst peer group networks. The Oswestry CCTV project brings together the best use of technology with the power and cost efficiency of volunteering.

Frome County Council shows that a town or village is an asset, a brand if you like, that deserves its own independent representation not party politics. Its aims are great mixture of the visionary and the brutally realistic.

Frome describes its aims for 2014/15 as four fold: to make people feel proud of and engaged in their town, to “sell” the town to the outside world, especially investors as somewhere interesting and “sexy”, to raise the profile of sustainability and to prepare for even more austerity by building on the town’s independence and resilience. They have raised £300,000 for local projects from local residents by crowd-funding: offering a better return than many ISA’s. I have long been trying to persuade the banks to offer Social Investment ISA’s whereby their customers can invest in a cause, their community, or a combination of the two.

Derek Ailes has shown an assets-based approach to his community co-ordinated by a human asset: Derek himself. His tenacity in the face of bureaucracy and challenge is an inspiration. Stamina is all. Allan Moffatt has shown how a passion, tireless energy and skill for recreational facilities can reap huge rewards.

I also want to pay tribute to all the runners-up whose work was also so impressive.

We need a new kind of politics in this country: one that learns from the examples honoured here tonight.

Businesses need to do much more than just pay lip service via CSR and need to act as societies themselves and see their societal and commercial purpose as one.

We need to start supporting social entrepreneurs more, seeing charities and social enterprises as IP owners and cost-effective solvers of social problems as well as humane, not-for-profit organisations.

What we need is “a grand coalition” of the type that was assembled in wartime: a coalition not just of parties, but of politicians and citizens working as one. We are after all fighting a number of wars: on terrorism; on the health problems of an

ageing population; on food poverty and the worst inequality since the 1930's; on the housing shortage; on social isolation and mental health problems. We are fighting the biggest battle of all: to save our planet in under 40 years.

Can NALC make a difference? Well 25% of England is "parished"; there are 9,000 Town and Parish councils; 80,000 councillors; £1bn is invested in these communities; 16 million people are represented by town and parish councils and it's growing with 100 communities currently in the process of setting up a new council. That sounds like influence to me.

I want to end with the best quote about localism I have ever heard.

Margaret Mead, a cultural anthropologist said "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." I would simply modify it to say " Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens, councillors and councils can change the world". Well done and enjoy the rest of the evening.