

## **Professor Jane Wills, University of London**

Edited transcript of speech

It's a great privilege to be here so thank you very much for inviting me. I'm going to set the scene for today by talking about an emerging government agenda around devolution and it's quite important I think to start by reminding ourselves what the major shift in policy there has been around state policy in relation to devolution since 2010. So I think the first phase of this push towards devolution, there may be a shift in where we were 20 years ago, you might remember this guy on the right who launched a big policy agenda around the big society and in what I'm calling phase one of the devolution agenda it was led by David Cameron to talk of the big society, the community, localism, the scale, geographical imagination and this policy agenda was about the local, it was about community.

As it says half way down that slide, localism is about encouraging people to get involved in a direct development of their communities. And if you remember that rose garden moment when Nick Clegg and David Cameron were setting out their agenda for government in May 2010 they issued a coalition agreement, and I don't know if anybody read that agreement, on page one the agenda was decentralisation, this was to be their ambition for the five year period of decentralisation. And when they talked about it they meant the local, they meant sending power from Whitehall to Westminster down to the local whatever that meant and whomever that meant.

So we have our first ever ministers for decentralisation if you remember, Greg Clark, who's also now very significant in the current government and he said in the House of Commons localism is the ethos, decentralisation is the process and the outcome is the big society. And obviously we don't hear about the big society anymore but that was the scale imaginary of the government in question and of course the key legislative plank of that agenda was the localism act and that was very significantly giving powers to the local community and councils like you for the first time in terms of statutory powers for local planning and I'll come back to this later on but it has been very significant and probably largely under-estimated, not talked about very much, but it's very profound. So that was phased one in 2010 to 2013/14.

But in the second phase of the coalition period but particularly since the conservative government in 2015 devolution is still on the agenda but most of you of course will have noticed the geographical imagination is very different. Somehow without being a public debate really we've shifted from a local community to a much larger scale of devolution as this map shows, hopefully, the emerging city deal or devo deals. And this is the deal between the treasury and the new local authority body, which were often scaled up. So in Manchester the picture there in the Manchester deal, Manchester's obviously a combined authority deal and that involves ten local

authorities working together. So although it is the same political agenda the geography that we're talking about and the scale of the units of government, which is how we see decentralised in theory, at least has shifted dramatically.

So these are much larger units and often it seems as though it's one of Westminster, doing a deal, a deal that's very popular at the moment, with the Trump phenomena, deal making with another group of elites in the Town Hall and this agenda has often become much more remote from ordinary people, but even other layers of government and the parish and the locals being taken out of some of these deals and what I want to argue in the next five or ten minutes is that it's not a duty now to put the local back on the agenda. I think it's people like you that are absolutely essential to that shaping again this government agenda and reminding ministers where they were when this process started was very much at the forefront of this.

So it's interesting when you hear people talk about devolution that whether it's a local scale or this combined authority scale or the county scale, devolutions are always justified in relation to the same things. And what I've done is called these the three Ds. The three Ds are argued to be absolutely essential about why we need devolution at the present period. And they are:

One - decision making. The argument is that it's better for decision making to make decisions which all of you know is quite obviously, because you're doing it all the time but to make decisions close to the people who are affected by those decisions. But there's also an argument about the fact that we live in a kind of multi networked society where lots of people have lots of ideas and you can kind of have this approach to policy where you might tap local energy and ideas to problem solve and government being about problem solving and evolving the power is about tapping into ideas.

The second thing argued to be better for democracy and we all know there's more at stake in a political arena, more people will stand for office and citizens will feel it's worth their while organising to contest the decisions that are made by that level of government. And this was very obvious in relation to Scottish and Welsh and Northern Irish devolution that when genuine powers devolved to these bodies even though they were set up relatively recently they've become very significant institutional players in their own rights. The Scottish government and Welsh Assembly for instance have great public credibility, there's a lot at stake, it's worth citizens in those places organising to get things done.

And the final thing which is often the thing that academics focus on the most about this agenda, is the third D, it's the deficit. The argument that it's simply more efficient and there's potential savings by devolving power. And the arguments here tend to be about place space policy making break down the silos from Whitehall by finding ways of sharing ideas and sharing resources and focusing at the local scale. This is

the one that in the public domain people talk about probably a bit less but it's the one that academic focus on all the time, they think that devolution's really more of a sham and to justify a national government trying to save money and giving you guys the headache rather than them having to take the public flack at the decision making.

So those three Ds are still there and I think they're implicit now in the City deals, as the devo deals that are going on, the argument is that the Manchester combined authorities should be then devolving power that they get down to the local citizens and communities and councils to engage in this agenda. But there's a lot to play for and there's no certainty that that's going to take place.

So Sue mentioned my book and when I started researching this, which is called *Locating Localism*, it's in all good book shops in time for Christmas as of today. When I started researching the book in 2012 I asked these kind of questions, why is localism back on the agenda? After such a long period of state centralisation why now, why does it matter, what's possible and whether or not might it get stuck? And you'll be glad to know I'm going to summarise this in the next five minutes, literally with just one findings, but in the book I basically argue that localism and this devolution of is really shaped by two forces. One is top down and one is much more bottom up. And the top down one in the book, in chapter two, I look at the period of history that's got us to where we are, so going back over 500 years looking at the structure of local government in England and it's very much a book about England, back to the parishes and the tensions that existed over time between allowing a localism, often around necessity. So the period of Henry VIII for instance, Henry VIII was an amazing centraliser, anyone who's read Hillary Mantel's books, will realise the scale of what he did to government in England is truly phenomenal, but the fact that he centralised during that period and took over the church they allowed him to use parochial structures, church structures to facilitate government across the country.

And at that time the King, even as powerful as he was, couldn't possibly control what was happening in every parish, but there had to be a localist ethos where the state would administer things through their own agents in counties, justices of the peace, the highways agencies and so on and these were left to the local parish and the local structure and often lay participants to make things happen.

What I do is look at how over 500 years that process of setting up administrative structures became increasingly centralised particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but increasingly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as reformers couldn't resist the desire to rationalise, to make things better, to centralise power. So there were some key agents along the way that made this centralisation happen.

Henry VIII I've mentioned, Edwin Chadwick who was a big informer around water and sewage and public health in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, big battles included at that time

about where power should lay in terms of good government and the central powers tended to win out.

Clement Attlee, if you think of 1945 government was doing a lot for the nation but Clement Attlee's government's probably the most centralised of them all. With the NHS taking over local and voluntary systems, local hospital systems in one national system. And Mrs Thatcher of course again, very centralising tendencies. Tony Blair with his targets.

So we've had these long periods over hundreds of years where gradually centralisation has happened. And this is why the devolution agenda for me is so significant because it really does mark a reversal in what's been a kind of centralisation over the last 500 years and it's really about shifting the geography, the political geography of the state. Every state has a constitution, we're famous for having an unwritten constitution, a sort of set of rules and practices that constitute government and determine where power lies and who has decision making powers and where money is and who spends money.

In many ways this is top down but it's about shifting our constitution or our geo constitution, the planned shift. But it's also matched by this much more bottom up shift in the kind of culture, the society as a culture which in the book I argue is a kind of post 1960s phenomena where you saw in the 60s an energy around it. A do it yourself culture linked to trends in the media and music and creativity for increasing rates of higher education, the rise of the creative path and there's people (inaudible: 00.12.04) that have a post bureaucratic culture that's shifting into society, where at least a minority want to do things for themselves much more than in the past.

Steve Hilton for me kind of epitomises this, he is part of this DIY Californian Wiki kind of culture that found its way into the Number Ten policy unit and was very significant in shaping David Cameron's big society. So the argument that these post 1960s people, students that I teach are out they're now in government, in think-tanks, in policy centres, in our communities and they are shifting the culture in terms of how people want to do government. And where the people are going to step forward in terms of problem solving and solving their own problem in alliance with government rather than another kind of bureaucratic and technocratic culture. And if you think about this is where the contrast with New Labour is interesting because New Labour was a very technocratic government. It had some big solutions in Whitehall and then they were kind of imposing them on the country. And this is a shift in that kind of culture away from the power of the technocrats.

Whether you're convinced by it is another matter and I think it's a minority of the population but I think it is part of the energy behind devolution. So I'm trying to say then that something is going on, something very significant. I don't think we're talking about it as much as we should be in the public sphere; it's about a new vision for

government. If we took it really seriously so that new way of doing government, a new set of practices opening up the state to the citizen in terms of making a new civic offer to people to problem solve together, to work with citizens but it also rests on a profound expectation around civic capacity that there are enough people out there who are going to step up, and this is where there's huge questions about whether this will take off and whether it's going to work.

So if we take this seriously for a minute, and I'm hoping that questions will come back and you'll challenge it, I know this is not an easy road, if you took it seriously localism is the right hand problem here, it's a vision of what government in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would look like and it's about a total shift in the political geography and the political imagination of what government would be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The first is the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So if we think of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was really a vision about centralism, national standards, uniform delivery, national strategies, local compliance, concerns about the postcode lottery that people wouldn't have their universal entitlements because they lived in the wrong place.

And the goals of it were really social space equity. Now if you then contrast that with this localist vision of in the 21<sup>st</sup> century you've reversed a huge number of those complete visions of what you're about. It's about in theory it's about subsidiarity, making decisions at the lowest possible scale at which they make sense. Local democracy, so if your people elect somebody who wants to do X even if it doesn't fit with the national target, that should be perfectly acceptable, it should be allowing a local fly-sheet of potential solutions to local problems.

And they are totally different from that conservative postcode lottery. The risk in this agenda is often about the loudest voices ringing out and people not having a look at to shape the agenda.

So if we took it seriously government; is it a profoundly different vision of government?

So as I've said what's needed for localism to work in every locality is that independent neighbourhood forum and voice, that civic structure that really does represent the diversity of residents and I think would have to be non-partisan. Most of the planning groups I talked to, if you mention political parties they really run a mile and one thing that puts them off becoming a proper urban parish council is the fear that they'll become party political and they want to retain that non-partisan broad based approach to the community.

The second thing is there needs to be more support for community organising and then third is the question of shifting culture. So I think there are huge opportunities in this agenda, not least for people like you, people who are on the ground doing this work all the time. Localism might make it easier in terms of neighbourhood planning, broadening the diversity of the people engaging in a plan and then trying to build their leadership into formal structures, the fact that more money. Section 1 of 6

money is now coming down to local bodies in theory at least means there should be opportunities for non-partisan bodies to say well how should be spend this, what can we do to improve our community?

And in theory again there is an argument that high level councils now have more pressure on them to work properly with lower level councils so in Cornwall for instance the devolution deal is supposed to be that engages with the parishes on a much more secure basis in terms of the future of government.

So there are real opportunities to shift the way that government operates with the locals which could be very profound and if we could put that on the agenda and to change the profile, so I've put this slide here, to change the profile of a parish and the local council into something that's doing things for the local community, society that's diverse, it's got energy and maybe we could come back to this in the discussions.

There's also, interestingly a very long history of struggle about where the best place is for decisions to be made. And as I've said for hundreds of years there's been this centralisation, those periods of centralisation were contested very strongly at so the guy with the beard might be known to some of you, Joshua Kilby-Smith, he was seen as the champion of a parish of parochialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, against Edwin Chadwick. So these things have always been contested and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century this guy here, Michael Young, was writing in the 1970s about the need for urban community councils just like the one that's happening now in Queen's Park. So there's always been this struggle and in many ways we're just in a new phase of it.