

**Local Government: the erosion of council power**  
**Presentation by Mark Hunter MP at Liberal Democrat Harrogate Conference**  
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Local government is on the ropes. Whilst central government demands more and more from it, expecting it to deliver with fewer and fewer resources, more and more people who are involved in local government are feeling disaffected and disillusioned. Of course they are not the only public sector workers to feel this way – under the Blair Government it has become common place for public servants to be referred to as some sort of under-class.

Local Government has been on its knees for far too long, and its supine relationship with central government has run its course. Local government needs a new champion, somebody, or perhaps a political party, that is going to speak out and make the case for good local government and take the trouble to explain why it is important.

I hope I can take it as given that we all believe strongly in the case for good local government. Not just as an efficient and effective delivery vehicle for much needed local services, but because it is important in its own right. It is my contention that it's about time for the Liberal Democrats once again to proudly proclaim the case for local government – and why it is important in its own right.

Somebody, somewhere ought to be loudly stating that being a local councillor is a valuable and worthwhile thing.

Somebody, somewhere ought to be loudly stating that councillors of all parties, are usually trying to do a decent job, and are working to the best of their abilities.

Somebody, somewhere ought to be loudly stating that local accountability is vitally important.

I want that somebody to be us.

I want the Liberal Democrats to proclaim once more why local government is so important. I want the Liberal Democrats to lead the campaign for local democracy.

Andrew Stunell, as our spokesperson, and his team are doing a first rate job of ensuring our local government policies are fit for purpose. And it

is hugely important that we have a strong progressive set of policies in this area.

But our local government team need our help, they can't do it by themselves.

We need to help them reassert the aims and values of community policies – and make sure that the party hierarchy continues to understand its relevance and importance today.

But, what I am really looking for is a crusade to save local government as we know it, because, make no mistake it is under threat.

The centralising tendencies of both successive Tory and Labour governments have only been resisted so far because of the opposition of those of us who care about the future of local government.

Now we must go on the offensive again and pro-actively make the case for local government.

We need to remind people of the opportunities provided by local councils to be innovative, enabling and empowering.

We need to remind people of the opportunities provided by local councils to provide quality services.

We need to remind people of the opportunities provided by local councils to provide value for money for local council tax payers.

But most of all we need to make sure that local government and the public sector in general has a strong voice in Parliament.

Millions of people in this country work in the public sector, many of them in jobs that are not all that well paid and where career prospects are limited. Now, almost as a final insult, their pensions - which so many were depending on - are being raided.

Liberal Democrats are speaking out against this, but we need to recognise that many in local government feel their work goes unnoticed and unappreciated. Many of these people are, or could be, potential natural supporters of our – but they need to be reassured that at least one party, our party, recognises there is such a thing as a public service ethic.

Let us never forget that local government has been the originator of many of the great social reforms over the last hundred years, and let us be proud once more to say we are the party that speaks up for local government and the public sector.

We are the party that recognises the enormous contribution made by public servants to society.

We are the party that can be relied upon to stand up for local government when it is under threat.

**Mark Hunter MP**