

Chris Huhne responds to questions submitted by the Beveridge Group

8th Nov, 2007

Q1: If all parties now claim to be localist, environmentalist, supportive of the free economy and quality public services what make the Liberal Democrats distinctive?

Response: Imitation is the greatest form of flattery! The Conservatives and the Labour Government can make all the claims they want. Without hard-edged policy solutions, it merely amounts to vague and vacuous promises and spin.

How can the can the Tories claim to be anything other than fair-weather friends of the environment when their Scottish manifesto scored 0/10 on the environment from Friends of the Earth? Or when David Cameron is chasing after the Czech Prime Minister who believes that climate change is a form of "hysteria" as threatening to freedom as communism? How can this Labour Government claim any environmental credentials when emissions have risen, green taxes have fallen and climate change budgets have been cut?

How can this most centralising of Governments - responsible for the regressive council tax – possibly claim to be localist? It is simply ludicrous. Under this Government, more tax money goes through Whitehall than ever. We have become the most centralised major european nation as measured by centralised taxation.

And how can the Conservatives claim they wish to see quality public services when they have argued for school vouchers? In Arizona, three quarters of voucher funding went to children already in private schools. As well as problems of fairness, school vouchers also have real practical difficulties. They have no place in quality public services.

We need to judge the substance not the spin and on that basis both Labour and Tories fail badly. People want honesty and real commitment from their politicians. Track record does matter. If you take the environment, for example, the Lib Dems have always placed the environment at the heart of our thinking. It was under my leadership that the Liberal Democrat DEFRA team championed green taxes and it is no coincidence that on the environment we are at our highest poll rating for over a decade and leading both Conservatives and Labour.

Q2: Every politician says these days it wants to 'empower people' ; what does this actually mean and does it mean giving people responsibilities they do not currently have as well as entitlements?

Response: Sadly, empowering people is little more than a sound bite for both the Labour Government and the Conservatives. Britain has become a nation of the few and many. The few have influence but the many feel dangerously disenfranchised from the political process. They feel completely unable to influence what goes on around them.

Empowering people can be achieved through a variety of measures; but the starting block has to be to ensure that all citizens feel that their voice is heard. That requires a fair voting system where every vote counts and eight thousand votes don't decide the outcome of an election.

On empowerment in public services, I stand by the conclusions of the public services reform commission that I chaired during the last parliament, and which was adopted as party policy. The key is to decentralise decision-making so that local people can hold local decision-takers to account in health and education. This allows the sort of innovation and experiment in the public sector which is such a feature of the private sector.

Imposing particular market-based solutions from Whitehall is a higher risk strategy: look at the failure of BR privatisation because the Major government split the operating companies from the network. There are those within our party who talk loosely of breaking up the NHS and imposing consumer-based market systems. Top down one size fits all solutions will not work. Advocates of top-down market solutions have to say what will happen to children left behind in failing schools? What happens in areas where you can only reach one hospital easily, and choice is an illusion? Introducing properly devolved democratic control (with proportional representation), on the tried and tested lines seen in Scandinavia, Germany or Switzerland, would do more far more to empower local communities. Initiatives such as Community Forums can play a valuable role in empowering people, giving them a real say in how their local hospital or child's school is run.

True citizen empowerment is achieved through the devolution of power and through the type of community politics developed by Bernard Graves and Gordon Lishman nearly forty years ago. We have to rediscover our philosophical roots, and not see community politics as merely a tool for breaking down the first past the post election system.

It is simple: people are empowered by handing over control over the things that matter to them. Giving local people control of local services empowers people.

Q3: Some USA states empower their citizens by allowing them to carry guns - what kinds of citizen 'empowerment' do you not support?

Response: A lot of the Government's attempts at 'empowering' citizens are simply a smokescreen for illiberal legislation. One of the reasons given for ID cards and the Big Brother state is to '*empower the law abiding.*' This is just double-think and double-talk. As George Orwell pointed out in "1984", those who remove liberties always argue most volubly that they are protecting them. It is not empowerment to force ID cards on the population. It is not empowerment to ban the right to protest or to arrest people like Maya Evans, or to extend the period of detention without trial or charge to which any of us can be subjected.

Any good liberal can detect empowerment when they see it: does it give the individual more power? Or does it reinforce the state?

Q4: How would you ensure that people working in the public services are motivated by a public service ethos and highly productive?

Response: Many who work in the public services are motivated by a sense of duty and altruism, however mocked that ethos was under Thatcher and Blair. The wish to serve; the desire to make a difference; to help create a better community. Those motives matter, and we lose them at our peril.

To improve our public services, we need to remove the top down system of one size fits all failure. Local control over local decision-takers is so much preferable to top-down directives from Whitehall. Target-setting has failed, a victim of the law of unintended consequences. For example, GP targets to see people in 48 hours meant that GPs refused to book appointments more than two days in advance.

When we look at the countries overseas that manage to deliver fair and high quality services to all their citizens - particularly in northern Europe - a key feature is decentralised power over local decisions. Those who know the services, because they use them, are the best people to hold decision-takers to account.

Q5: What are the potential risks of allowing social enterprises and voluntary bodies to perform roles formerly carried out by public services?

Response: There are many, many instances in which social enterprises and voluntary bodies play a vital and irreplaceable role in the delivery of public services. Just look at the work of

the Shaw Trust which helps disabled people find employment and does this far more effectively than the DWP.

There has always been a balance between provision of services in house, and provision by outside voluntary organisations and contractors. Even at the height of the NHS under Nye Bevan, hospitals were built by construction companies, not direct labour. But the relationship has to be based on pragmatism, not imposed by some market-driven ideology. Markets are great servants, and poor masters.

With voluntary organisations, impartiality is one area of concern. What is there to stop some faith groups from refusing to provide services to homosexuals or contraceptive advice to women? We need to be aware of potential conflicts of interest between a voluntary organisation's agenda and that of public policy.

Q6: Do you favour allowing councils to resume their role as a provider of affordable housing and how do you think affordable housing targets can be met?

Response: Like any constituency MP, the number of cases of young people who come to my weekly surgery because they cannot find homes is heart-rending. Over the past year, I have spent time thinking about the UK's housing crisis. I have written the rural manifesto, addressing the particular problems of rural areas. I am also impressed by the ideas of our Shadow Housing Minister Paul Holmes, who has rightly put social housing back on the party's agenda.

The current housing situation is a disgrace. More than four million people are trapped on the never ending tragedy of growing council house waiting lists. Almost an entire generation is priced out of a property market that has spiralled out of control. Young families and essential public service workers simply cannot afford to buy even the most modest home. And affordable priced homes to rent are rarer than gold dust

If the Government wishes to end the nightmare for the 1.6 million families stuck in the quagmire of waiting lists, then restoring local decision making and financial powers to local authorities is key. All councils - not just those that who meet the Governments preferred method of delivery of social housing - should be allowed to build more social homes to meet local needs.

One idea that played a major role in my thoughts was the example of the Liberal Democrats in South Shropshire, who have used equity mortgages to provide low cost affordable housing for key workers and first time buyers. Under this scheme the council retains a part ownership in any affordable homes built at its instigation. The homes are sold at cost price to those who are unable to afford a home on the open market. As part owner of the house, the council is then able to control the price at which the house is sold for the second and subsequent times. Under this scheme the glaring error of Labour's approach is corrected as the homes remain affordable.

We should also look at the community land trusts which have worked in the US and Scandinavia to provide homes that are genuinely affordable for a wide range of people. Rather than handing over large tracts of public NHS and MOD land to profit-seeking private developers, the government should be handing it over to such land trusts. That would swiftly provide many thousands of homes which are affordable and remain affordable when sold on.

I am also a long-standing champion of land value taxation, which would allow local authorities to capture the uplift in land and rental values that takes place when there are improvements in an area (such as better bus services or transport infrastructure). That will give councils a clear source of revenue which will help improve local services and local housing. By making land banks subject to the land value based business rate, it would also penalise developers who hoarded land rather than built on it.

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