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# Localism as restorative politics; social capital and anti-politics in the London Borough of Burgundia

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the political implications of policies and measures designed to promote "localism".  That is to say, the devolution of power down to a neighbourhood level, as enacted under the 2011 Localism Act.  The implementation of localism in London boroughs will be examined.  The context is the current concern over disengagement in an era of "anti-politics", so it is intended to gain an understanding of how localism is interpreted and implemented on the ground.  A tentative thesis, of a "restorative politics", is proposed, such that localism is dynamic and is generating healthy political activity which counters anti-politics in the local community.  This could have profound implications for the political parties locally and at Westminster.  The extant theories about localism include constructivist interpretations suggesting that a neo-liberal localism is anti-political.  This is contested.  An emerging narrative heralding a new dawn of empowerment, and related themes concerning social capital, subsidiarity and anti-politics are reviewed.  A necessarily empirical approach is adopted in an essentially functionalist frame of reference.  There is a review of both academic and policy literature, combined with interviews of professionals involved in localism.  This paper is designed to scope a future more substantial piece of research.  The conference brief asks; "what scales or levels are appropriate for organising politics in this century".  In a century so far characterised by disillusionment, democratic deficits and abstention, the answer may be; local.  The Good Life is lived locally in shared experience and familiar surroundings, hitherto not much amenable to local change.  Burgundia is a reference to the film "Passport to Pimlico" (1949), when a London neighbourhood declared independence and its citizens temporarily created the Good Life for themselves.  Is the 21st century localism generating a restorative politics?

LOCALISM IN PRACTICE - INTRODUCTION

There are at least 100 (estimated) community groups throughout London getting to grips with permitted land uses and the complexities of planning in their own areas.  Many of these volunteer groups are now officially designated as "neighbourhood forums" under the Localism Act 2011.   They are currently

deliberating, and agreeing planning policies, with the intention of devising a "neighbourhood plan" for their bit of the capital, which will have statutory force when finally approved (Burton 2015). The Localism Act covers England as a whole and as at November 2015, a total of 143 neighbourhood plans, following a local referendum, had been "made" and come into force (DCLG 2015). A new tier of land use planning is being created below that, in London, of the borough plan (still called the "Local Plan"). This paper contends that the commendably active citizens in these planning groups are creating a new element of local governance, which is formative and dynamic , and which may constitute a form of restorative politics. This is in opposition to much of the theoretical literature. The statutory right for local people to shape and plan for the future of their neighbourhoods is the most radical of a range of devolved powers available under the 2011 Act. According to Greg Clarke, the Minister of State for Decentralisation, the Act has measures with potential "to achieve a substantial and lasting shift of power away from central government towards local people" (DCLG 2011 p 1). There are also powers for local government itself, such as the general power of competence (long called for), which enables town halls to take action provided it is within the law, instead of taking action only if permitted explicitly by the law. The really significant devolved powers are however granted to local people. A community right to "bid" and a right to "challenge" enable communities to bid to take over services or buildings including, in successful practice, pubs (ibid). The neighbourhood planning power enables "residents, employees and business, to come together through a local parish council or neighbourhood forum and say where they think new houses, businesses and shops should go – and what they should look like" (DCLG 2011 p 12). Because of the complexity of the process, the government has funded a Quango, known as Locality to provide guidance, technical support, consultants and grants, of up to £14,000 in any one year, to groups in London (My Community 2016). In fact there is a plethora of guidance available and Locality had a modest £6.7 million in grant aid available nationally during 2015/16 (DCLG 2015). When a neighbourhood plan is finally approved, funding is available to the area from any completed and local major developments, in the form of 25% of the "Community Infrastructure Levy". This to be spent, in agreement with the local authority, on the group's shopping list of local improvements set out in the plan.

Neighbourhood planning is not for the faint hearted. There are several stages in the process and typically, making a plan is taking years. In the first instance a local group in London requires to be "designated" by the planning authority (the London borough) as a "neighbourhood forum", with a suitably defined area. Agreement on boundaries has proved a persistent problem in London with its continuous built-up area. This has engendered disputes between groups and furthermore, the actual designation process conducted by the boroughs has proved to be problematic. It is alleged that some councils have been wilfully obstructive and reluctant to devolve their planning power. Tony Burton the founder of Civic Voice and convenor of the London Local Network of planning groups has a list of blocking tactics employed by councils in London (Burton 2015). Once a planning forum has been designated, plan-making requires multiple partnerships, constant engagement and demonstrably diverse involvement. Aside from the planning technicalities of site

allocation, "visioning", generating policy options and so on, proof of iterative consultation is required.  A plan must meet various such conditions and is subject to an independent inspection (Chetwyn no date).  Broad, sustainable and in-depth engagement on the scale required is politically significant.  Arguably, this practical politics is bringing about planning for the people by the people.  Formal democratic legitimisation is supplied by the need ultimately for the plan to pass a referendum of local electors.  There was some self-congratulation north of the border when the Scottish independence referendum, deciding the fate of the nation, achieved a turnout of 85% from 4,283,392 voters (BBC 2016).  So far in England, deciding the fate of Tescos and other such developments, the 143 local referendums have involved over 250,000 votes with an average turnout of 33%.  Still lacking national media profile, another 1,700 local communities are in the process of developing their plans with a total electorate of over 8 million (DCLG 2015).  Localism in England might be termed devo-softly and with so many disparate local groups working independently through such a tortuous process, progress was bound to be tortoise-like.

LOCALISM – QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CONCEPT AND THE PRACTICE

After four years since the Act came into force, and with so much planning activism on the ground, perhaps a re-conceptualisation of the generic term "localism" is called for, in specific and empirical terms.  An exploration of this form of devolution is surely overdue and there has not been a concerted research effort.  Has the community genuinely been empowered? The party politics of localism appears to be little explored.  Neighbourhood planning policy was carefully chosen by its authors as an arena for the achievement of this statutorily-sponsored localism and at the time of enactment there was cross-party support.  Is localism still "owned" by all parties, or, as hundreds of local groups play their new role in local government, has there been a differentiation in how the political parties define, identify with and support this localism?  With such a high level of engagement and thousands of citizens mobilised, is localism countering the widespread political disenchantment commonly called anti-politics?  Is localism the antidote to anti-politics?  Tensions and conflict have already been referred to.  Disputes over boundaries are only the precursor to profound and honest differences of opinion over vision, identity and land use and planning.  Arguments over the scale, location and tenure of housing development for example can be played out much more openly and deliberately than in the days of relatively quick and closed planning committee determinations.  There is a re-distribution of power between the planning authority and the people.  Resolution of conflict, decision making and the distribution of power is the very stuff of politics.  Could it be that neighbourhood planning (and the other related community rights under the Act) are creating a secure platform upon which a reinvigorated and healthy form of political activity is spreading and accumulating at the local level?  Linked to the idea of a counter to anti-politics, is it credible to conceive of a form of "restorative" politics emerging?

THE METHOD OF ENQUIRY

These are very broad brush questions which occur naturally to a participant researcher. In fact this is a scoping exercise for a more substantial study. In tentatively putting forward the hypothesis that localism is restorative of healthy politics, relevant policy and research will be explored. Thus there is a review of literature concerning the central topic of localism but also the related themes of; anti-politics, subsidiarity, partisan politics, and social capital. It would seem difficult to consider the notion of restorative politics without taking an overview of this policy nexus. With further research in mind, this paper initially confines enquiry to London boroughs and some expert interviewees on the London scene. It is hoped provisionally to identify and characterise the political consequences and implications of Localism in London through these interviews. The anonymised interviews have been conducted with seven practitioners. The interviewees are professionally involved in localism both in policy and execution, and work in local and central government and as consultants in the field. In conducting these semi-structured interviews, the researcher is known to the interviewees and is also a participant. It is difficult to avoid interviewer bias, but such an inductive and interpretive method is appropriate for the scoping exercise intended. It was considered that this was an ideal group from whom to obtain data about a complex and relatively unexplored topic. A series of eight, standard, semi-leading questions were posed. The answers and conversations were recorded and notes made. This is the first tranche of a planned set of interviews. Importantly, localism volunteers will be interviewed with a view to systematic coding and interpretive analysis, possibly leading to a grounded theory methodology. Throughout the review of policy and literature, any matters of contention or other problematic issues are identified and captured. These are illuminated and analysed in the light of the interview findings, so as to supply markers for further research and an agenda for testing the hypothesis. With respect to the PSA conference brief, the related philosophical question arises as to which is the greater contribution of localism to the Good Life. Does neighbourhood planning and consequential improvements to the built environment and amenity contribute most to the Good Life? Or is it the political action and deliberative process itself, in developing the plan, that most uplifts the demos?

CONCEPTUALISING LOCALISM

The case for the devolution of power in the UK has been easy to advocate. There is complete and principled agreement across the political parties, and the idea comfortably conforms to our democratic norms and values. Over-centralisation of government is received wisdom. In his book "Who Governs Britain?" Anthony King (2015 p 15), summarises the post-war settlement as "the British system of government at that time was *highly centralised* (his italics). Coming up to date, he takes the view that "Whitehall still exercises far greater control over English local government than it used to; but against that there now exists in Scotland and Wales, as well as in Northern Ireland, real governments with substantial legislative and executive powers" (ibid p 167). Local government as the subordinate tier of executive power in England is not reviewed in the book. Perhaps political scientists too possess an over-centralised attention and neglect of local governance? King does deplore the incidences of low voter turnout, "In local elections, it hovers just

above 30%, in European Parliament elections it has never exceeded 40% and once fell to 24%" (ibid p 118). The Localism Act 2011, as a possible redress of an English deficit in devolutionary innovation is not mentioned. Localism under the Act, is peculiar to England and operates at a neighbourhood level below a local government, which consistently fails to engage the majority of voters at election time. However, as will be seen from the literature and in practice, localism is a contested policy. Thoroughgoing critiques of localism are available from a constructivist point of view. For example Williams, Goodwin and Cloke (2014) argue that localism is profoundly neoliberal, promoting individualism and market-based technologies which are inimical to local democracy. Nevertheless, in defining the means by which community and protest groups can actively acquire this agenda, Williams et al actually endorse the subversive value of transfers of power to the neighbourhood. For example; "the changing architecture of governance brought about through the drive towards localism has opened up opportunities for the direct appropriation of governmental structures by local groups seeking progressive outcomes" (ibid p 2809). Clarke and Cochran (2013) in an analysis of localist rationale and antecedents, describe localism as "spatial liberalism" and object that it can promote anti-politics. In particular; "Participation has also had little effect on decisions because elites, often unelected, set the procedures and agendas" (ibid p 15). Further, "this localism seeks to replace New Labour's technocratic government, but it appears to be doing so with just another form of anti-politics: naïve, populist liberalism" (ibid p 17). Studies with a more empirical stance suggest localism has dysfunctionalities. It is alleged by Ludwig and Ludwig (2014) that localism is covertly intended to promote the private-sector, and that an espoused emphasis on local empowerment has in some cases provoked an emergent anti-development reaction. Painter et al (2011) in reviewing literature on localism and empowerment find "substantive grounds for questioning the assumption that increased localism necessarily promotes community empowerment" (ibid p 5). They identify critical problems in conceptualising localism, including the issue of the "technologies of citizenship" (ibid p 7) where increased responsibilities actually create greater regulation rather than real empowerment. In reviewing international case studies, Painter and his colleagues were able to devise four conditions for positive empowerment to have occurred. The applicable conditions are: support by "complimentary legal and statutory frameworks", devolution to "different scales of local government", encouraging "active civil society" and, "different tiers of government treating localism as a policy priority" (ibid p 6). The paper predates the Localism Act, and neighbourhood planning, as a fact on the ground, unambiguously meets three of these conditions, with a question mark over the priority accorded to localism by some local authorities.

More recent research (Bailey and Pill 2015) reviews government attempts over a twenty year period to "empower" local communities. A distinction is made between the many initiatives prior to the Localism Act in 2011 and the current situation. Two models of neighbourhood "localism" are suggested. An earlier "state-led" model characterised by central government funding and priorities, was targeted at areas of deprivation and typically set performance indicators for service delivery.

The more recent "state enabling/ self-help" model is heavily dependent on voluntarism and local initiation.  It is concluded that:

> "Those initiatives which are top-down, state-led policy initiatives tend to result in the least empowerment, whereas the more bottom-up, self-help, state-enabled projects at least provide an opportunity to create the spaces where there is some potential for varying degrees of transformation" (ibid p 300).

In comparing two groups in Milton Keynes City, the effects of austerity are noted. The chair of a parish council saw their role as "protecting a vulnerable population from cuts in services and a reduced quality of life, rather than expanding and taking on new commitments (ibid p 297)".  Another, but business-based group, obtained funding and political backing to produce a business neighbourhood plan.  The caveat to the fairly positive Bailey and Pills conclusion is that those more prosperous areas with skilled residents and business involvement are more able to take advantage of neighbourhood planning than deprived areas.

A STUDY OF LOCALISM IN LONDON

There is a direct study of localism in London.  The Greater London Assembly Planning Committee has produced a report on neighbourhood planning and the community right to bid (GLA 2014).  This appraisal received few responses and there has been no follow-up.  Slow progress, even with initial designation of areas, was noted in London's heterogeneous and complex social and built environment. Demonstrating legitimacy and acquiring sufficient and suitable support and resources was proving hard going in all but two of London's boroughs.  No attempt was made in the report to isolate the factors which differentiated the pioneering Westminster and Camden boroughs and the many boroughs where there appeared to be little or no interest in neighbourhood planning.  Responses reported to the Planning committee in March 2015, included a comprehensive one from AECOM, a specialist consultancy, which said:

> "Better leadership from councillors would help get a forum recognised although they tend to have reservations about neighbourhood planning posing a threat to representative democracy, particularly as traditional planning has been something done to communities, rather than led by them" (GLA 2015 Appendix 1).  .

In the submission from Locality, the government agency employed to facilitate neighbourhood planning, there was a detailed set of eight identified barriers to progress.  These included; where there is a lower percentages of owner occupiers since development might affect their property, lack of higher level skills and capacity in deprived areas, and inconsistent local authority support, possibly due to "lack of political support, or a lack of understanding of the process by both councillors and officers" (ibid).  Comments by Adam Cook, a member of RTPI London, quoted research which identified the need for "place based leadership" involving; political, professional, community, business and trade union leadership, necessary to achieve influence and legitimacy (Cook 2015 as cited by GLA 2015 Appendix 2).  The

appendices contain a potent source of insight into these systemic issues by way of the written submissions to the GLA Planning Committee.  The specialist professional community, if asked, has tacit knowledge and analyses available about how neighbourhood planning as a specific form of devolution is manifesting itself.  Hence the interviews conducted for this paper.  Literature suggests that the patchy, slow and largely unexamined progress of localism in London certainly has the potential to empower the communities which take it up.  The central enquiry here concerns the political dimension of the devolved planning power and in particular the implications for anti-politics.

LOCALISM AND ANTI-POLITICS

In an examination of the relationship between localism and anti-politics, Gerry Stoker's (2006), Why politics Matters is a very good place to start.  The general proposition, through an analysis of causes and pathologies, is that there is a widespread disenchantment and disengagement with politics and politicians.  Throughout this consideration, of low voter turnout, breakdown in trust and so on, Stoker is posing the question as to how far this is a crisis and if so, is it a crisis of leadership or a crisis of followership? In his defence of representative democracy, he emphasises the importance of efficacy in governance and argues the requirement for "a politics for amateurs".  "Politics in democratic societies needs more than effective leaders and activists and a silent patient citizenry.  It also requires citizen engagement" (ibid p149).  His search for solutions and reforms includes a review of localism, defined as, "devolving power and resources towards front-line managers, local democratic structures and local consumers and communities" (ibid p 176).  Stoker endorses localism as; providing a base or site for better engagement in politics, as a means of employing local knowledge and linking this to higher levels of governance.  Crucially, localism "enables the dimensions of trust, empathy and social capital to be fostered" (ibid p176).  According to Stoker, there are two serious objections.  The first is the danger of narrow parochialism and "not in my back yard" (NIMBYism) politics.  Nevertheless Stoker welcomes local tensions and says, "conflict between interests and their resolution remains at the heart of politics, wherever it is conducted" (ibid p 177).  The second objection raised is the need to address inequalities faced by different communities and to recognise "both diversity in communities and a concern with equity issues" (ibid p 177).  The book was published in 2006, pre-financial crash, and a third objection, reinforcing the second one, must surely be added, about the difficulty of devolving power within the constraints and contradictions of austerity in local government with much reduced budgets.  Although localism (and its neighbourhood planning variant) is a reform which may be worthwhile in tackling anti-politics, this is probably conditional on overcoming these three objections.  Stoker also supplies what amounts to some performance criteria for a politically healthy localism.  Gathered from international experience, five innovations in engagement techniques are posited in a final chapter about creating a "civic arena".  Tentatively, utilising these criteria, localism gets three ticks and possibly two more.  Functionally, neighbourhood planning certainly meets the descriptions and particulars of; "consultative innovation", "Co-governance" and "direct democracy": and probably meets good practice in "deliberative democracy"

but also "E-democracy" (ibid p 183). Gerry Stoker's interpretation of anti-politics is supported by other researchers such as Jennings' (2014 slide 2) empirically-based finding of "widespread disillusionment with mainstream politics and politicians".

There is of course a much wider literature, some with a more purely theoretical perspective. Definitions of anti-politics are discussed in "Geographies of politics and anti-politics", such as Schedler's construct (1997 as cited by Clarke 2015) that anti-politics is the replacement of politics by self-regulating orders (especially market forces), uniformity and necessity (populism), and also by alternative rationalities such as information technology. Clarke specifically identifies the spatial issue, "that sees London – and especially 'the Westminster village' – lose touch with people and places in the rest of the UK" (ibid p 191). Clarke notes the arguments that this political elite has, for essentially careerist reasons, adopted a strategy of "depoliticisation" which creates the consequent public disengagement; a logical relationship of; "cause (elite strategies of depoliticisation) and effect (citizen negativity towards formal politics)" (ibid p 191). There are other explanations for public disengagement and political negativity such as "post-politics" (exclusion of dissidence to achieve consensus), party political dealignment, the collapse of social capital, and so on. On the contrary however, in examining the practicalities, specifically of neighbourhood planning as a form of localism, it is difficult to detect any of the characteristics used to describe "depoliticisation" or "post-politics". Conversely, there appears to be an exemplary display of the conventional politics defined by Clarke (2015) as, "tolerating, canvassing, listening, negotiating, conciliating and compromising" (ibid p190). Even so, Clarke and Cochrane (2013) emphasise the ideas of Schedler and point out that neighbourhoods are plural, interdependent and comprise not so much sited residential links as networked relationships. They suggest the structural anti-politics of localism "implies an active strategy not a passive condition" (ibid p 26). This is to impute motives or at least to infer an ideological intention.

THE PARTY POLITICS OF LOCALISM

In arguing that localism is poorly researched, Jane Wills (2015) notes populism and anti-politics have grown and that all three main parties have adopted localism as part of a reform agenda. In the light of austerity however, "most of the citizenry remain cynical about this agenda" (ibid p 188). Wills argues that "the strongest advocates of this agenda have been on the right" but that "this agenda has been echoed on the left and support for localism features strongly in the Labour party's policy review" (ibid p 189). It is not difficult to find prominent Labour politicians who advocate localist solutions. For example Jon Cruddas (2015) who, in a plea for radicalism, wanted, "to take decisions about England out of Westminster and hand them to our regions, cities and communities. So we need a broad alliance for change - constitutional reform, devolution of power and citizen empowerment" (ibid p5). The IPPR report, The Condition of Britain – Strategies for Social Renewal, published so as to inform Labour's 2015 election manifesto, supported greater devolution to the combined authorities (Manchester, Liverpool etc), the councils, and to neighbourhoods (Lawton et al 2014). Previous Labour initiatives came with too much centralised direction it is alleged. "Impact was dampened by ringfencing, short time horizons and a

suffocating audit culture" (ibid p 40). The coalition government's localism however is objected to for its curtailment of action to tackle social needs (in the context of austerity) and for "seeking to empower all neighbourhoods instead of retaining Labour's focus on deprived places" (ibid p 42). Clearly localism should be a means to social ends. "The failure of our centralised state to tackle our biggest social problems make it imperative that the next government prioritises genuine devolution of power" (ibid p 42). Mary Riddell (2015) writing in the Daily Telegraph reports that Ed Milliband, the Labour leader prior to the election dismissed the IPPR report in 18 minutes and notes that following the election the leadership candidate most supportive of devolution (Liz kendall) received the fewest vote from the party members. Labour has been "outflanked" on devolution Riddell claims. It may be that the Labour party subordinates localism to other policy imperatives and that its enthusiasts are confined to a group of modernisers. In the Conservative party devolution appears to be better supported. Vernon Bogdanor (2015) locates current devolution policy in the "Big society" initiative which is he says, "rooted in Conservative traditions" (ibid p 2) and has three strands; decentralisation, voluntary rather than state action, and "empowerment, competition and choice" (ibid p 2). He notes however that "those hard-pressed by austerity are unlikely to have much time to act as volunteers" (ibid p 2). One of the Conservative promoters of localism, along with Greg Clarke, the current localism minister was Steve Hilton (2015), formerly a No 10 adviser. In a Daily Telegraph article he argues for yet greater powers for mayors and for neighbourhoods. He sees service delivery of education, healthcare and "the fight against poverty" as best delivered at a level which is, "truly local – literally neighbourhood – service providers who understand the needs of the community and know the lives of the individual people they serve" (ibid p 2). He is highlighting the issue of subsidiarity, at what level to deliver services.

LOCALISM AND SUBSIDIARITY

As localism is evolving, a lack of clarity has emerged as to the most appropriate level at which to locate power, management and accountability. Neither party has developed an answer to this. Albert Bore (Collins and Phillips 2013) the then Labour Leader of Birmingham City Council, referred to the notion of "double devolution" coined by Davis Milliband and argued "I believe there needs to be a triple devolution of powers and resources – from Whitehall to the city regions and councils, and from the councils to their neighbourhoods" (ibid p 24). This is echoed on the right by Paul Carter (NLGN 2015), Conservative Leader of Kent County Council who is unimpressed so far, "If localism was meant to empower local councils and communities to deliver a radical new vision of the state, it doesn't feel particularly successful" (ibid p 11). He objects that "the principle of subsidiarity – that higher authorities should only have responsibility for what lower tier authorities cannot do for themselves – appears to have been completely absent" (ibid p 11). In a paper designed to influence the Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill (now an Act), Locality and navca (2016) set out five key principles of devolution (which are applicable at all levels including the neighbourhood level). Locality, responsible for promoting the powers in the Localism Act, is concerned that the "Northern Powerhouse" might presage a "top down approach to devolution, and new layers of

sub-regional decision makers" (ibid p1).  The principles, including that of subsidiarity, are designed to "strengthen community involvement in decision making, generate long term social and economic value" (ibid p1).  So, "subsidiarity" may be added to "NIMBYism", "local inequalities", and "austerity", as a fourth problem with localism.  These matters may be defining in party political terms.

LOCALISM AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

There is another major theme, which is fundamental for all the parties, and a desideratum for localism policy.  Social capital and the promotion of a civic society is a Good Life prerequisite.  Much literature on social capital is problem-oriented.  Jane Wills (2012) draws upon the idea of community organising, originated in Chicago, and applies this thinking to contemporary London.  Noting London's high population turnover ("limiting opportunities for place-based trust"), increasing diversity and the social pressures arising from housing and other issues, Wills nevertheless says "data from the UK suggests that the death of social capital has been wildly exaggerated" (ibid p 117).  The link is made with anti-politics, "based upon a longer body of scholarship that connects the importance of social association to the well-being of social groups and their ability to engage in political life" (ibid p 116).  Whilst sceptical of the effects of the 2011 Localism Act, Wills describes the high coincidence of Conservative and Labour thinking.  Conservatives are urged to seek "a return to the traditions of mutualism and strong civil society", as Labour is encouraged "in the direction of localism and community engagement" (ibid p 115).  Community organising has been adopted by "London Citizens", an essentially faith-based group, and its success in campaigning is attributed to its "networked architecture" (ibid p 124).  Neighbourhood planning has similarities in its organising rationale, in that a pre-existing infrastructure is utilised, but relying on community and amenity groups rather than London Citizens' institutional churches and mosques.  Actually the outcomes are very different, in the form of agreed planning policies of local import, as opposed to London Citizens' attempts to build a lobbying coalition to change government policy.   The question then arises as to what the mechanism is by which existing social capital is multiplied to create more capital, stronger networks and more powerful political activity?  What can be done when there is a limited network and limited social capital which may be below the critical mass needed?

This social capital issue corresponds to Stoker's concern with local inequalities.  In developing policies for the Localism Act it was obvious that investment, or capacity-building, would be needed, especially in places with high deprivation and limited organising capability.  This recognises a major objection from the left of the spectrum.  There is a dilemma here for policy-makers.  Localism is designed to be empowering and permissive, not a prescriptive form of state provision.  The question is, how to enable initiative, whilst retaining local autonomy and achieving self-sustainability?  Many of the earlier localism projects under the last Labour government may have been over-reliant upon professional staff and programme budgets, simply reverting to the status quo when the programme ended.  Sustainability and growth in social capital obviously depends upon sufficient voluntary organisation, networks and cohesion.  Number 10 thus created a national programme of community organisers, with 500 full-time staff, in turn training 4,500

volunteers for deployment by local government where needed. This programme has been evaluated and although there are inconsistencies between projects, the programme is believed to have delivered incremental and measurable enhancements in social capital (Cameron et al 2015). The purpose might be termed "progressive" involving, "building relationships in communities, mobilising people to take action and supporting projects which make a difference to people's lives. Community organising creates social and political change through collective action." (ibid p 3). Various think tanks and learned societies have contributed to policy development on localism, especially concerning the issue of social capital. Phillip Blond (2010) in, Red Tory: How left and right have broken Britain and how we can fix it, influenced the thinking behind the Localism Act, suggesting a blend of economic egalitarianism with social conservatism so as to strengthen local communities. Currently the Royal Society of Arts is promoting a blend of communitarianism and a whole-system approach. RSA has published, Community capital; the value of connected communities (Parsfield et al 2015) which reports from a number of community case studies (linked with the Number 10 community organisers' initiative) that intervention can provide a range of benefits identified as, "four kinds of social value: a wellbeing dividend, a capacity dividend, a citizenship dividend, and an economic dividend" (ibid p 48). RSA has supported a network of Labour councils comprising the Co-operative Councils Innovation Network, promoting a left-wing version of localism. There is in evidence an overlapping acknowledgement of the need for reform by the political parties and a degree of consensus about localism as an empowering and socially desirable reform policy. A range of problems with localism have been identified which will differentiate the parties to some degree or another. The key issues are; austerity, subsidiarity, spatial inequalities, NIMBYism.

LOCALISM IN LONDON – AN INFORMED APPRAISAL

Seven interviews have been conducted with professional/expert practitioners, which were recorded with notes taken. The interviewees provided a detailed and insightful portrait of how localism is being taken up by communities in London, and they identified emerging issues as they saw it, which might be taken into account in any appraisal of this policy. The questions, supplied in advance, were asking for specific evaluations, such as "Does neighbourhood planning generate conflict and how is this resolved"? and "What is the role of elected councillors and how influential are they"?. The interviewees were all adamant on the need, after four years, for an overall policy evaluation. For the purpose of this paper the comments were categorised for commonality and strength by inspection of notes, checked by playback. Formal codification is likely to be carried out for a more systematic interpretation when further interviews are completed. It is both a compliment and a methodological health warning that these professionals are definitely enthusiasts. Their answers will be employed to add illumination to the findings from the literature, so as to inform further enquiry into the restorative politics thesis. To provide structure, the policy themes employed to review the literature, and the emergent issues, will be used as sub-headings.

**Spatial Inequalities**

Concerns are expressed throughout the literature about deprivation and the uneven distribution between neighbourhoods of wealth and capacity. This is an issue both in terms of social justice and, from the perspective of localism, capability. All the interviewees highlighted this as a problem where well organised, professionally employed and politically savvy groups were typically way ahead and taking full advantage of the legislation. The community organiser initiative was an attempt to redress the balance and boroughs have deployed this support in selected areas. The technical and grant aid supplied by Locality has an additional element where social deprivation is measurably lower in an applicant neighbourhood. Interviewees were unimpressed by the scale of such support. One said "poor communities were being missed out" and they needed to be given "voice". This is obviously an enduring problem and may well act as a party political differentiator as to how localism is perceived, resulting in the Labour party's sometimes hesitant support. There was a further concern. The complexity of localism, the length of the process and major learning curve involved was emphasised. There are DCLG statistics on designations, inspections and referendums. Very little is known about the neighbourhoods moving through the process and even less about groups attempting (or not attempting; why so?) to get started. There is an acknowledged problem of communities which are unable to get started. A related issue to emerge may be that of groups fading out. There is an unknown attrition rate. Painter et al (2011) devised four criteria to identify whether empowerment is taking place. Encouraging "active civil society" is hardly met if groups stall in their attempts to utilise the statutory power available. If significant numbers of groups were dropping out because of an inability to overcome the intrinsic complexities of localism then a negative reaction and further disengagement is only to be expected. Non-starters then have further justification for their inertia. With other groups able to forge ahead and devise town plans for themselves, there is scope for even greater social inequality.

### Austerity

Austerity is a defining issue and anti-austerity is an obvious rallying cry for the left. There is opposition to devolution if it is seen as a strategy to pass responsibility for budget cuts out of Westminster and down even to the community level. The key provisions of the Localism Act are actually about devolved planning powers however, not devolved budgets for local government services. Opposition to neighbourhood planning as such on the grounds of austerity may be misplaced. There is a direct effect however on localism. Interviewees report that London boroughs have disproportionately reduced planning staff. Moreover the limited DCLG funding for localism to pay for designation, referenda etc. is not ring-fenced. There is thus a much reduced resource in the town hall to deliver the statutory "duty to support" local forums. The major reductions in Whitehall funding for local government are partially offset by other income such as more of the business rate and an incentivising New Homes Bonus. Communities too are being supplied with an incentive for producing pro-development neighbourhood plans, in the form of the "neighbourhood element" (25%) of the Community Infrastructure Levy paid by major developers. The interviewees were very dubious about this financial fillip. In London this CIL funding

will be held and spent by the council and may not entirely meet the intentions of local people as indicated in their neighbourhood plan.  In any case it all depends upon the actual building development that occurs and in some areas this will be nil.  In other high growth areas of London there will be many millions to spend.  It was agreed that there will be greater transparency about how the developer levies will be spent and this is a very good thing.  Several interviewees raised an issue which has received very little attention.  There have been aggrieved developers who have lost court cases when thwarted by neighbourhood plans, so now, some developers were beginning to realise that there is a new game in town and were approaching local planning groups early on in the process.  The large developers normally have very close partnerships with London boroughs (perhaps too close) and partnerships with neighbourhood planning forums are a natural recognition of a shift of authority.  Despite the production of a Memorandum of Understanding, the scope for conflicts of interest is obvious and there is an absence of accountability where citizens are not elected, nor subject to local government codes of practice.  There is another policy issue relating to austerity in the form of a school of thought that budgets and services should indeed be devolved to the neighbourhood level.  There are claims that services can be delivered more effectively and at less cost in a place-based organisation rather than in the traditional departmental silos.  Locality has promoted "local by default" where combined services are tailored to local and personal needs.  The evidence is very limited but credible and it is claimed that locally reconfigured services can "substantially improve the lives of those in need while at the same time draining cost out of the system" (Seddon 2014 p 38).  Again, this lobby for localism is possibly a party political differentiator where Labour supporters are deeply suspicious of cost-saving arguments which maybe too good to be true.

**Subsidiarity**

It is perfectly reasonable to infer from the literature that the current transfers of power from Whitehall to city regions are genuine and welcome across parties, but that the allocation to appropriate (subsidiary) levels, of accountability, budgets and authority is highly confused.  The professionals interviewed about London are alert to an emerging subsidiarity problem in London also.  The making of neighbourhood plans has created a new level of planning beneath that of the Local (borough) Plan.  But these plans are often for a very small scale area and cover only one or two of the borough plan policy areas.  "Patchwork planning is unlikely to meet borough-wide needs and targets".  It is unusual for a neighbourhood plan to encompass a whole electoral ward.  Meanwhile, driven by financial considerations, borough services are being aggregated at a supra-borough level. So a local library may feature in a neighbourhood plan for improvement or greater community involvement in some way, while library administration is now conducted by a strategic body operated by three boroughs in combination.  It would seem a London borough may be too big to plan for its own neighbourhoods, but too small to run a library service.  Although ad hoc, this may work very well, but there is room for duplication and a lack of accountability.  If planning power is passing from the council to the community there is an opportunity to simplify the borough's Local Plan so that it becomes a purely strategic document.  Or there would be, except for the patchwork quilt of lower plans varying in their policy

coverage, and of course the large gaps with no plans at all. It was alleged by one of the interviewees that Labour's shadow local government spokesperson in 2014 had proposed making neighbourhood planning compulsory. This would be the antithesis of autonomous community planning but would certainly clarify and simplify a subsidiarity problem.

## The neighbourhood says no to NIMBYism?

According to the interviewees, the process of neighbourhood planning has engaged communities in the wider issues and had the opposite effect to that predicted by some people. One of Stoker's fears was of a narrow self-interest prevailing (2006 p 176). Fierce opposition to housing development was the obvious danger. The figures from DCLG suggest that neighbourhoods with "made plans" are actually planning an increase of an average of 10% in housing starts than otherwise (DCLG 2015). However it is not quite that simple. There was an interviewee consensus that communities were actually keen on housing development, if only for their own children. At the same time, there was a strong desire to improve housing quality and design. It is possible that allowing for costs, tenure types and so on, there may be a reduction in the proportion of housing for affordable rent which emerges from the plans. Communities are on a steep learning curve, not only about the process of producing their plan but on the strategic, London and borough issues, especially the Local Plan, and about the difficult land-use issues which planners are so alert to. It was suggested that local people are "coming to terms" with the need for taller buildings and planning intensification. Some interviewees were sure that the Mayor and the Greater London Authority were remiss in not addressing neighbourhood planning so as to give guidance on speeding up the process, but also in educating the public, posing the strategic choices about how London will continue to grow and how neighbourhoods are affected.

## Social capital

The interviewees were not asked about social capital or related matters, but concerns were raised of their own volition about the inequality issue noted above, and the caveat applies about the potential ill-effects on groups of fade out and attrition. On the whole, and without prompting, the interviewees were strongly of the view that communities were the winners from localism. Initial lack of confidence was being overcome by group formation and team building. The major knowledge gap between professionals such as consultants and planners, and the local people was cited as typical at first, but gradually replaced by an equal relationship where the community was genuinely managing the consultants and the process. Ironically the frequent disputes between neighbouring groups over borders enabled groups to build clear identities which gave them a new "civic voice". It was claimed by one interviewee that the legislative requirement for a forum to be representative of its community had effected a genuine bringing together of diverse communities and young people had actually joined in with planning activities. In the terms of the RSA research on community capital (Parsfield 2015) there is clear correspondence between the identified benefits in the RSA case studies and the London effects of localism, that is to say, wellbeing, capacity and citizenship benefits. In a textbook

answer one interviewee claimed that localism, "brings people together giving them power and agency". Which is probably just as well as the interviewees were unflattering about council representatives and the council itself. Councils perceived they were the losers from localism and some imposed delays and obstruction. Two interviewees said this was truer of Labour councils. It was easy to do business with cabinet members who were empowered to do the deals, but typically ward councillors were not very engaged. Some councillors were helpful and these tended to be the newer and younger ones. To offset the rosy social-capital picture, interviewees were concerned about the "big ask" of ordinary people and the time involved and opportunity cost to them. There may be unrealistic expectations. Despite the insight of the professional people interviewed, the only way validly to identify changes in social capital is to ask the citizens themselves who are participating in the localism project.

## Anti-politics

Interviewees were not asked explicitly about anti-politics, but their answers revealed much about the politics of localism. There was a clear consensus that this policy was engaging people, as one said in a "completely fresh way". This was a model turned upside down. Previously planning was "decide then consult" but localism was "consult then decide". This involved "an intensely democratic process". The referendum was crucial as planning groups had to take people along and build support. This was generating a "new kind of political involvement", with stakeholders identified, collaboration encouraged and trust created. One interviewee said that some groups described themselves as "apolitical". This revelation does indicate a healthy form of political activity, but surely their term is a misnomer. In this context, a group may be non-partisan, or it may be cross-party, but it surely cannot be apolitical. The professionals painted a picture of newly active political engagement which might comprise the form of restorative politics which is the thesis of this paper. In reviewing some of the literature on anti-politics, it was suggested that the constructivist and radical theories on anti-politics ostensibly do not apply to the neighbourhood planning form of localism. Evidence suggests this new localism does appear to contradict the theory. Such theory is typically opposed to a denoted "neoliberal" ideology. Arguably however neighbourhood planning has antecedents in an older conservative philosophy, owing as much to Edmund Burke as to Hayek. So, from the conservative perspective, merely permitting some local fine tuning, to overcome planning protests, is perhaps a minor reform designed to conserve the status quo of cosy planning deals in a sensible and well-ordered national and local planning regime. Whether conservatively or neoliberally inspired, it is reasonable to theorise that indeed neighbourhood planning is a replacement of politics by bland and uniform procedures, by a technology of citizenship. Thus in this view, neighbourhood planning is a diversion from, or displacement of, political struggles about deprivation, education, immigration etc. Localism is, in effect, anti-political not pro-political. We have some interview evidence to the contrary. Research in the field, asking the participants, would establish if localism is replacing political activism or comprises an additional and efficacious form of political activity. The entirely opposite hypothesis, tentatively put forward in this paper, that localism is generating a "restorative" politics

would require both evidence of this (quantitatively) additional activity, but also of a qualitative and multiplier effect on how the community behaved politically.  Where to test these opposed hypotheses?  It is intended to find some case studies of neighbourhood planning in action.  It might be just as important to find a case study where localism was not in action.

One well known London location offers such a would-be case study which is right at the heart of the localism, anti-politics and social-capital nexus of policy.  Brixton has a very active, young, metropolitan movement known as "Reclaim Brixton".  In a long running campaign against Lambeth Council and its partner developers, Reclaim Brixton has opposed "gentrification" and "social cleansing", where incomers buy-to-let, or purchase new builds unaffordable to locals (Cobb 2015).  The whole character of Brixton is being transformed due to housing and commercial pressures it is alleged.  The campaign is well organised and networked, and able to mobilise protests and collect thousands of signatures for petitions.  This is a job for localism!  The potential for local people to do their own town planning, with statutory power over development, and endorsed by referendum, is obvious.  Moreover a statutory Brixton Plan would enable Brixton people to devise their own shopping list of socially desirable projects to be financed by a forthcoming multimillion pound fund of CIL levies on developers.  Despite three nearby designations of planning forums, there appears to be no interest in Brixton for neighbourhood planning.  Where s there a burden of proof?  On those who favour engagement with localism to demonstrate that neighbourhood planning is a practical and effective tool with which to reclaim Brixton in exactly the way the campaigners want?  Or is the onus on the radicals to demonstrate that neighbourhood planning is probably an establishment diversion, ineffective against the borough's own Local Plan, and essentially a displacement for political activism?  There may be a direct correspondence between the theoretical critique of localism, and the practical reluctance of Brixton people to engage in neighbourhood planning.  This is an intriguing would-be case study.

CONCLUSION

The subject of this paper is the thesis that localism maybe generating a "restorative" form of politics in London neighbourhoods.  Literature has been explored about localism in theory and as a policy, and about the related themes of anti-politics, subsidiarity and social capital.  This literature review has been supplemented by an initial tranche of interviews with leading professionals involved with the neighbourhood planning version of localism.  The progress in London of localism has been slow, but increasing numbers of groups have mobilised their communities to create a vision and a plan for their area.  Issues have been identified from a range of literature and from the testimony of interviews, which clarify both the problems and benefits of localism as a political process.  Some well-established theory has been contested, although it may be simply that the form of localism enacted in 2011 is exceptional.  There are good grounds for arguing that this localism is pro-political not anti-political.  But problems abound.  Despite targeted resources, the capacity for communities to organise varies widely.  The technical complexity of urban planning and even the process of agreeing boundaries are daunting.  A lack of championship

by elected councillors and actual obstruction by their councils is a very real barrier. Even so, the evident efficacy of localism is persuasive and a claim for an emergent restorative politics is worthy of investigation. From the evidence, the "restorative" hypothesis can be elaborated. Party politically, this localism project has support from a modernist or reformist wing on both the left and the right, but it is not in either mainstream. The Labour party has objections to localism in so far as it may distract from issues such as local inequalities and the effects of austerity. Localism has not been promoted as a policy and the government appears to have left it on the back burner while attending to devolution deals and legislation at the combined cities or county level. The role of local government and the problem of subsidiary levels is unfinished business. Generally, borough councils appear to dislike localism for the loss of power and for generating community activity out of their control. This reluctance, to embrace the legislation and engender the local empowerment they claim to want, is remiss. A democratic deficit in local representative government is implicit in the notion of restorative politics.

To the thousands of people (not all of them 'the usual suspects') engaged in localism, the necessary political activity involved is a means to an end. This paper supposes that the process itself should be examined for its social and political import. New connections and wiring in the community can be discerned. But we should be looking for the electricity. Healthy political activity has emerged from engagement, but it may not be perceived as such. There may be a lack of political consciousness, at each of three levels. Those volunteers directly involved in arguing, deliberating, consulting and so on may be unaware of the importance of the restorative politics they are creating. The implications for local government of a thoroughly refreshed community activism and its consequent political potency have yet to be assessed. So far unconsciously, there is a whole movement (hypothetically) restoring politics in a thousand neighbourhoods, and perhaps in due course in the local parties, as well as in the town halls. The potential long term impact in turn, on the body politic nationally, is intriguing. Thus a research project is now proposed to detect and define what is really going on, as well as to test the hypothesis. A tandem analysis would firstly involve a number of case studies of localism in relevant neighbourhoods (including Brixton) to test the hypothesis, and examine the ramifications for local and national governance. Secondly, interview data from the case studies would be aggregated to enable an inductive "grounded theory" method to shed light on how local people interpret their localism experience.

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