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Maintaining local democratic governance and inspection

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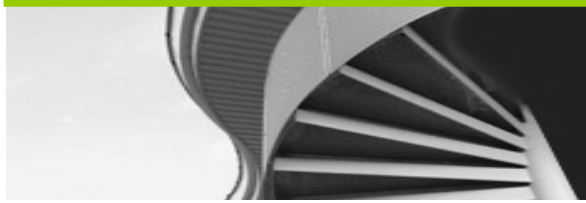
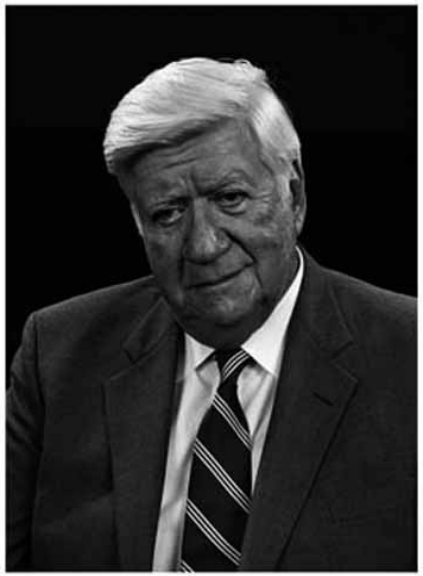


Local Governance Research Unit

Winston Churchill on being offered the Local Government Board in the1906 Government

There is no place in the government more laborious, more anxious, more thankless, more cloaked with petty and even squalid detail, more full of hopeless and insoluble difficulties

"Tip" O'Neil: Former Speaker of the House of Representatives



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All politics is local

An Inspector Calls

- Tradition of external inspection
  - Independence
  - Check standards
  - Ensure probity
  - Ensure value for money
  - Monitor the achievement of statutory requirements
  - Enhance service performance
  - Promote improvement
  - Increase accountability (opening up to public gaze)

Centralisation though Inspection

- Erosion of local democracy and choice
  - Conflicting with local manifestos and electoral promises
  - Replacement of local priorities and choice with national prescription
  - Dilutes local flexibility
  - Removes variation and diversity from local policy
  - Process over outcomes and purpose
  - Minimises political and policy risk taking
  - Managerialises local politics

Localism and Inspection: 1

- Coalition Agreement (p:11):
  - shift power from Westminster to people
  - promote decentralisation and democratic engagement.
- Localism Act
  - 'Power should be held at the lowest possible level. We want this to be the first Parliament for many years that, by the end of its Sessions, will have given power away' (Greg Clark 7th November 2011)

Localism and Inspection: 2

- Using general power of competence
- Local inspection regimes and choices to reflect local policy, preferences and priorities
- Involving the public in inspection
- Peer review across councils
- A greater role for the elected member
- A role for overview and scrutiny working with external inspectors (local, regional and national)
  - Willingness to accept responsibility when things go wrong

Inspecting others: Issues to consider

- Use of statutory and regulatory powers to influence policy and behaviour
- Developing the role of overview and scrutiny to ‘inspect’ and influence policy and behaviour elsewhere
- Strategic approach to inspection and regulation as a policy tool as well as a statutory responsibility
  - Draw together the various inspection responsibilities and powers into a policy tool
- Treat others how local government wishes to be treated

Conclusions

- Inspection is not new nor is it always to be feared
- Danger in the use of inspection as a tool for centralisation
- Inspection regimes can be localised without surrendering independence and rigour
- The need to recognise local priorities, policies and preferences
- Reflect local politics by avoiding a managerialist approach
- Local government is not just a part of the public service framework; it is a vital part of the democratic system