

Mr. Chairman members of council

This is one of the most important topics which we will be discussing for the remainder of this council and probably all through the next council. It's a complete alteration of the thrust of policy.

Local government today is based on the local government act 1972. Now the 1970s were the Decade of Big. Big schools, big government departments, big industrial conglomerations -and Big local government.

Before the act local authorities came in varying shapes and sizes. Lower districts and urban districts municipal Boroughs and county Boroughs -and exercise a range of powers commensurate with their size. But the 1972 act changed all this. It embodied two bits of conventional wisdom of the sixties' and seventies -big is beautiful and one size fits all.

Small Boroughs and districts that had quietly done a good job of representing their people and providing local services were binned. Small county councils went with them. County Boroughs lost their powers which were transferred to remote counties. Power was moved away from the people. And the councils got bigger: no more borough solicitors or borough engineers or borough treasurers. Wonderful new titles were invented so not only did power become more remote it became more expensive. The promised savings never materialised.

Now there were attempts to put matters right. metropolitan counties were abolished and their functions returned to the districts. County Boroughs reappeared in the guise of unitary authorities.

But in 1997 came John Prescott. And back came Big. Big Regions. GOSW – as ugly an institution as it is an acronym. And whereas the unitaries that the Conservatives had created pushed power back towards the people, his “rural unitaries” took power away. Salisbury governed from Trowbridge. Saltash governed from Truro. Hexham governed from Morpeth.

A slogan of the 1970s is appropriate – don't vote for R E Mote

And now this Conservative government is continuing and indeed extending the movement of power back to the people. Now powers that local government has never had before will be given to those authorities who will form bodies big enough to exercise those powers.

We have to do this. We have to bring back power closer to the people. Why should decisions about Dorset highways, Dorset rail links be taken in London? We have to work together where it's appropriate without sacrificing our sovereignty either as a county or as boroughs. We moan about low turnouts in local elections: might it not be because people feel alienated and excluded? People in my division don't want to be governed from Brussels from Bristol or even from - or especially – from Bournemouth. They want to be able to see their council in operation. They want enough Councillors to represent and help them and they want them close enough to access.

But we need to go further. The 1972 structure is wrong. Why should decisions on where the parking restrictions go in Christchurch remain in Dorchester? We've said we've got to stop doing things to people and start doing them with people – but that presupposes we're close enough to know what the people want.

We've got to look at a new structure: if you like, a “county light” system in which while we get new power from central government we devolve power ourselves down to authorities closer to the people.

Chairman, “He who does not learn from History is condemned to repeat it.” And in part of the County we see some who really haven't learnt anything from History. “Big” is back on the agenda. It's been said in support of what we might call the County Borough of Greater Bournemouth that it will be one of the biggest authorities in the country. Big is not beautiful: big is a recipe for alienation, for inefficiency and in the end for failure.

So we have to make this work. This is the way forward. We must not return to the failed decade of the 1970s. For the sake of Dorset, for the sake of all our constituents, we must seize this opportunity. We must go forward as one County – go forward together.