

Report on the Seminar held in Ely on 7th May 2011

Alec Hartley, representing the **East of England Civic & Amenity Societies** (Website: <http://cambridgeppf.org/eecs/>), welcomed the attendees to the Cathedral Centre in Ely. He described the work that EECAS does, which includes arranging seminars on subjects of mutual interest to Civic and Amenity Society members in eastern England.

Alec stated that one of the main questions to be asked today was what are the implications for Civic Societies of the government's 'Big Society' and 'Localism' agendas? He saw many problems raised by these: Civic Societies often struggle for members and resources but the Neighbourhood Plans, the Government envisaged emerging, would require great expense and effort. How willing were local authorities to embrace this new agenda? In Norfolk the County Council had carried out a consultation on incinerators but, despite an overwhelmingly negative response, were going ahead with them regardless. Whose views were the most legitimate, professionals and elected representatives or the public? With the abolition of regional targets and tiers of government who carries out strategic planning and balances conflicting needs?

Alec then introduced the first speaker **Tony Burton, the Director of Civic Voice** (Website : <http://www.civicvoice.org.uk/>), who would be speaking on the 'Localism Agenda'. The slides from his talk can be found here. <http://cambridgeppf.org/eecs/documents/TonyBurtonSlides.pdf>



Tony began by pointing out the lovely setting, opposite Ely Cathedral on Palace Green, and said he could see why people care about their locality and want to protect it. But what were the practical and political means to do this? Civic Voice is one part of a large national movement. Everywhere is special to the people who live there and everyone wants to protect and enhance their area. There are many things that can help to do this and we need to inspire "hearts and heads"; for instance by promoting schemes whereby people can be a tourist in their own area for a day. Tony then raised the issue of the problem of assets and services in the hands of local authorities being offloaded or dispensed with; for instance public parks now maintained by contractors. Recently we had seen the withdrawal of the state in many areas, but can communities really step in? He asked how you quantify the 'value' of an area. The 'Love Local' campaign had

deliberately emphasised people's emotional response to their surroundings, this was important and too often neglected in favour of spreadsheets and calculations. Civic Societies were often patronised by professionals using the latest jargon who offered

only the options they wanted and didn't engage in proper consultation. This was an ongoing challenge for the Civic movement. Tony saw localism as moving away from 'representative democracy' towards 'participative democracy' and so representing a threat to councillors and officers in local authorities. However, we must recognise that communities add value to decision-making.

Tony explained how when Civic Voice was formed, during the last general election, all the party leaders welcomed this and wanted to be associated with them. The Localism Bill was a shift of power down to local authorities who would have more freedom, but there was also provision in the Localism Bill for 'rights' for communities. These included a community right-to-buy for pubs, post offices, etc. so, if they were put up for sale, communities were offered it first. This amounted to a 'right-to-bid'. Included would be those things held on a 'local list'; so it was important that societies began influencing what was on the 'local list' now, as this could become law in spring 2012. Civic Voice had been asking for a 'social valuation' to be included in the decision as to who won the bid.

The Localism Bill would also mean planning enforcement and pre-application consultation would be improved. Tony thought the Neighbourhood Plan proposals in the Bill were 'radical' as they were not controlled by local authorities. They could be as important as the Local Plan and are approved in a local referendum by a simple majority.

Tony pointed out that Local Authorities were going to receive money from various sources for Neighbourhood Plans and the consultation required by the new agenda, including a share of the £3 million 'Front Runner Programme'. They would also potentially receive money from the New Homes Bonus and the Community Infrastructure Levy. He said that Civic Societies and Neighbourhood Forums needed to learn the lessons from those involved early on in the process and that we needed 'exemplars'.

Tony concluded by saying that Localism will only happen if people use it. That it is an attitude of mind rather than a philosophy. However, there is a serious need to foster the right attitudes amongst Councillors and Council officers.

Alec Hartley then introduced **Neil Stott, the Chief Executive of the Keystone Trust** (**Website** : <http://www.keystonetrust.org.uk/>), to speak on the subject of '**Big Society : Opportunity or Threat?**'. A copy of a book the Keystone Trust has produced on this issue can be downloaded from their website here: <http://www.keystonetrust.org.uk/communities/index.php?page=21>

Neil began by saying that there were over 500 Development Trusts in the country, they varied considerably in size and delivered a diverse range of projects and services; including youth clubs, urban regeneration and Borough Market. The idea of 'Big Society' resonates with people and Civic Societies, as it does with Development Trusts, but does Big Society mean a fundamental shift in power? Neil thought that, while it presented some opportunities, the list of negatives was longer. He felt that experience of localism showed that power rarely decanted downwards and that government and local authorities have a long-term 'trust issue' with local communities, particularly poorer communities. He felt that localism and the Big Society would work better in more affluent communities where people engaged more.

Neil said that policy making was often driven by 'sound-bites' and 'academic fads' which then become 'the only way', and the only criteria by which funding bodies then

measure funding bids, even when the fad is 'half-baked'. Big Society is another of these 'viral' concepts and may soon become the 'hoop we all need to jump through'.

Neil thought the best approach was as an 'engaged pragmatist', understanding the impact of an idea and engaging with it, but not 'on any terms'. We needed to 'explain, adapt and improvise'. The most difficult place to make a difference was in poorer areas and made even more difficult by constant policy changes. Neil said that poorer places were more 'fragile', in that they were more easily affected or damaged by policy changes, and cuts in public spending have greater impact. People in poorer areas have less time and money to engage, being on welfare or the margins was 'hard work' day-to-day and kids activities, for instance, have to be self-organised and can't be 'smoothed' by cash resources. People rely on grants and philanthropy.

Neil said he had seen little evidence that public bodies really want to shift power down. They hold consultations on their terms and not those of the public. In part of Thetford public consultations had produced similar results for 20 years but these had been ignored.

Keystone Development Trust had produced a book with both positive and negative views on 'Big Society'. Neil said that 'Big Society' will adversely affect poor areas and that cuts in grant funding will produce unintended consequences, such as increases in crime resulting from cuts to youth activities. The early Thatcher government's cuts had resulted in riots that had then meant vast sums were later invested in inner city areas. He urged us to treat all such concepts as 'Big Society', with caution.

Alec Hartley then introduced **Alex Plant, the Interim Director of the Greater Cambridge and Greater Peterborough Local Enterprise Partnership (Website : <http://www.yourlocalenterprisepartnership.co.uk/>)**, to speak on the subject of '**Local Enterprise Partnerships**'. The slides from his talk can be found here: <http://cambridgeppf.org/eecs/documents/AlexPlantSlides.pdf>

Alex began by saying that Local Enterprise Partnerships had no staff and no money. As a result of this they are 'your' enterprise partnerships. in that they have to tap into localism. The LEPs are not a replacement for the Regional Development Agencies particularly as these did have money and staff. The new LEPs had been set up in response to an invitation from the Communities and Local Government Ministers Eric Pickles and Vince Cable for bids. Their focus is to be on 'enterprise' in an attempt to create a rebalance between public and private sector. This is also part of a shift to decentralise power. Alex said that in many ways regionalism had been arbitrary in its geographic divisions and the new LEPs generally better mapped economically unified areas in the country, though some appeared a little strange.

Alex said that the boards of LEPs are self-determining and not government-controlled, though the government expects the LEPs to communicate with ministers, particularly on issues of strategic planning. The boards have little accountability in that, while some of its members are Councillors, their role is participative rather than representative. However, the priority for the LEPs is 'business' and business representatives make up the majority appointed to the boards. The only current source of funding for the LEPs are Local Authorities but, as they are cutting their budgets, this is unreliable. A Parliamentary Select Committee had been sceptical that LEPs would survive without any interim funding and collapse. Eric Pickles response had been to "stop whinging and get on with it". In the future the LEPs may be able to access funds through Public Private Finance(PPF), Enterprise Zones (which can generate money for use by the LEP) and Tax Increment Financing. This represented 'localism' through financial devolution.

The Greater Cambridge and Greater Peterborough LEP had applied to the government to be designated an enterprise zone in their area. The LEP's area was a net contributor to Gross Domestic Product and an important economic driver, but it had a poor transport infrastructure and pockets of poverty. The two zones comprising the LEP had complementary economic interests but there were skills shortages, unaffordable housing and a £5 billion transport funding shortfall.

Alex concluded by saying that while the LEP is supposed to operate at a strategic level, because they are 'unaccountable' they cannot impose their views or impose infrastructure such as waste sites etc.

Alec Hartley then introduced the last speaker **Paul Ainsworth, Pubs Officer for the Cambridge Branch of the Campaign for Real Ale(CAMRA)** (Website : <http://www.cambridge-camra.org.uk/>) to speak on the subject of 'Saving Pubs'. The slides from his talk can be found here: <http://cambridgeppf.org/eecs/documents/PaulAinsworthSlides.pdf>

Paul began by saying that it was CAMRA's 40th birthday this year and that this successful consumer organisation now had over 120,000 members. He said that campaigning to keep pubs open was an important aspect of their work as without pubs there were few outlets for real ale.

Paul said that it was undeniable that public houses were in trouble as the number of closures showed, 39 per week. There were various things blamed for this; including supermarket discounts, social changes including increased home entertainment and high taxes levied on alcohol. However, the pub industry itself was partly to blame with pub companies charging exorbitant rents and wholesale prices. Also many acted simply as property companies and asset stripped their pub estate, as the pubs were worth more as redevelopment than as businesses. There were also many pubs that were simply badly run with awful beer and food.

Paul said that though things looked bad many pubs were doing very well and often pubs, which pub companies and landlords had said were unviable, had proved highly successful when run properly. He hoped that the Localism Bill would outlaw the use of 'restrictive covenants' whereby pubs were sold as property that could no longer be a pub. He hoped the Bill would also introduce greater planning protection for our pubs as they are essential to communities as social centres, and a unique national institution. They are also important employers and through the 'Pub Is The Hub' scheme he hoped many could diversify their activities and sell other goods and services. Paul said that there were now more villages without a Pub than villages with one.

Paul then explained the ways that you could campaign to save a pub and how CAMRA campaigns locally. He concluded by giving examples of successful past campaigns.

Alec Hartley thanked all the speakers and a short question and answer session with them was held. **Carolin Gohler of Cambridge Past, Present & Future** then asked all the attendees to ensure that the members of their Civic Societies all received the EECAS Newsletter and kept their contact details up-to-date with EECAS. She also asked that people provide input and articles for the Newsletter and ideas for future seminar topics.

The day concluded with a guided tour of the magnificent Grade 1 listed Bishops Palace in Ely, courtesy of King's School Ely, the new owners. Some pictures and views from the Palace are included below:



