

NON-VERBATIM MINUTE

**DATE:** Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2021

**TIME:** 13.00-14.00

**METHOD:** Zoom Meeting

**Chair:** Andrew Lewer MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Devolution

**Speakers:**

- John Howell MP - Leader of the British delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
- Cllr James Jamieson - Chair of LGA
- Cllr Alison Evison - President of COSLA
- Dr Arianna Giovanni - Associate Professor in Local Politics and Public Policy at DeMontfort University
- Professor Zoltan Szente - Centre for Social Studies, Institute for Legal Studies

**MINUTES**

The Chair, **Andrew Lewer MP**, welcomed the meeting attendees and speakers to the meeting.

Andrew Lewer noted that if we should look at how other nations look at devolution, and how we can learn from it.

He then reflected upon the APPG's recent work, such as the Levelling Up Devolution report, which received a large amount of media attention and had led to the Chairman securing a meeting with the then Minister of State. The Report has now been sent to the new set of DLUHC ministers. He shared how there was a new report on Devolution by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee (upon which the Chairman sits) to be released soon, noting that the Levelling Up Devolution Report of the APPG is referenced heavily in it. *(NB. The Select Committee Report has since then been released and can be found [here](#)).*

He then moved to introduce **John Howell MP**, Leader of the British delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, to share what he thinks the UK can learn from other countries' devolution of powers.

**John Howell MP – Leader of the British delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.**

John Howell MP Introduced himself within his role and explained the role of the Council of Europe (CoE). He explained that the CoE covers a variety of topics, from human rights and rule of law to taxation. He also stressed how the CoE has 47 members, including the 27 European Union member states.

He then expanded on the topic of taxation, and what comes after Covid restrictions across Europe. He further explained how the process works, respecting national sovereignty and that the CoE can ensure double taxation rules can function properly.

Andrew thanked John and introduced **Cllr James Jamieson**, Chair of the Local Government Association (LGA).



**Cllr James Jamieson – Chair of LGA**

Cllr James Jamieson thanked the APPG for organising such an important session, and stressed how he is in favour of giving more power to local government – this is because, in his opinion, a local focus can deliver faster and better results. He made examples around housing, civic pride, investment in public health and how local government can be better than coordinating Whitehall departments.

He stressed how challenging the last 18 months have been for communities and councils, but how councils have delivered for communities – food parcels, supporting businesses by facilitating funds, setting up Test and Trace and vaccination.

He continued by saying that local government hopes to build on what has been achieved thus far and seeks to work as equal partners with the government – something that can only happen if local government is genuinely empowered. When discussing the European Charter, he regarded it as a benchmark for progressing the empowerment of local communities; he asked the panel whether we want to just be in conformity to it, or instead a trailblazer for devolution and self-government and referred to the fact that the UK remains one of the most centralised nations in OECD, especially as regards finance.

Andrew Lewer MP thanked Cllr Jamieson and introduced **Cllr Alison Evison**, President of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA).

**Cllr Alison Evison – President of COSLA**

Cllr Alison Evison opened the discussion by sharing how we have seen what can be achieved when councils are given resources to empower local communities.

She continued by saying how the voices of our communities can be heard, appropriate local services delivered, and how the voices at the council decision-making table should represent their communities.

She stressed how Local Government is the anchor in communities, but how it can only be that if given the power to deliver as it stands as the enabling force for social, economic and environmental renewal in communities and being where local democracy takes place

She continued by saying that centralised decision making has not allowed communities to thrive; Community empowerment, function and fiscal empowerment must be delivered together – collaboration with the government is central.

For instance, notwithstanding COSLA's response to the national care consultation, it has led to the replacement of local democratic accountability with centralisation, led to the silencing of local people and distracted the focus away from improving outcomes. To her, the enactment of the European charter would assist in the drive to ensure local democratic accountability.

Andrew Lewer MP thanked Cllr Evison for her powerful speech and introduced **Dr Arianna Giovanni**, Associate Professor in Local Politics and Public Policy at DeMontfort.

**Dr Arianna Giovanni, Associate Professor in Local Politics and Public Policy at DeMontfort**

Dr Giovanni focused her contribution on the evidence coming from the research of the Unlock Democracy report, which she shared during her presentation.

She continued by saying she would concentrate on three points that are central to the debate around what the problem is in England and by doing so relating what other countries do and what this country could learn from. According to her research, local autonomy has been eroded in multiple ways, funding reduced and even then increasingly linked to competitive bids with winners and losers. She also referenced units of local government becoming bigger and therefore - in her view - less democratic. Dr Giovanni concluded by saying that her research indicated that we as a country were walking backwards into more centralisation without sufficient local democracy.

She continued by saying that local government needs protection within a framework as the current lack of constitutional protection in England has led to the erosion of autonomy: local government is currently instructed by Whitehall, rather than being treated as a partner. She then made international comparisons, saying that in most European countries, this simply would not happen. Constitutional protection in Italy, Germany, Spain etc. leads to all voices being heard during the formulating of decisions that affect the local level.

She concluded by saying the devolution framework needs a long-term agenda to benefit all regions and how it should set powers and resources available to all areas. In addition, this should be co-produced with local authorities, rather than forced on them and areas should be allowed to create their own local governance, but at their own pace and incrementally so they can build institutional capacity.

She commended the work done by the Devolution APPG as something that does put pressure on Government; this would ensure these conversations and meetings don't turn into "wasted opportunities" and ensure levelling up happens across England.

Andrew Lewer MP thanked Dr Giovanni and introduced **Professor Zoltan Szente** from the Centre for Social Studies.

#### **Professor Zoltan Szente – Centre for Social Studies, Institute for Legal Studies**

Professor Szente gave some practical examples of decentralisation in Europe, and how municipalities are ruled through local democracy, apart from certain exceptions.

He continued stating how there is constitutional protection across Europe for LGs, even when it comes to financing and how the standard of constitutional protection can only be changed by parliament or similar.

He moved to discuss decentralisation, and how it is usually through extensive administrative reforms rather than temporary ad-hoc agreements. He then stressed the need to entrench legal agreements with decentralisation.

Andrew Lewer MP thanked the speaker and noted the meeting had 15 minutes for questions.

#### **Questions:**

Lord Foulkes (former Chair) thanked all speakers and noted that the UK government should adopt the Council of Europe's European Charter of Local Self-Government. He then thanked Alison and reflected upon the irony of centralisation in Scotland as a devolved authority that centralises.

He then asked "How do we get from the ad-hoc model in the UK to something more sensible, diverse? What would be the way forward, as a constitutional settlement, for devolution?"



**Cllr James Jamieson** answered that fundamentally, it is attitude (which may be enshrined in law) – but until there is recognition that there are many things done better at local level and that things should be devolved to the lowest practicable level. He would massively encourage local government structures to join together to provide services as required.

He stated that to him, devolution is about knowing your residents and businesses and what they're willing and not willing to fund.

Legislative principle to devolve to the lowest level and independent funding to determine services should not be dependent on the Chancellor.

**John Howell MP** answered that it is impossible to move away from something ad-hoc, continuing that it's difficult to not see the background that Mayors have sprung up. What is required is something similar to charter – sticks to general principles, and allows countries to implement it how they feel best. Individual countries will resolve this satisfactorily if they follow the principles.

**Dr Arianna Giovanni** noted that the attitude problem is central & fundamental – move to an asymmetrical model, rethink how the centre operates, and how its mode of working can be more collaborative. She moved on and proposed two options: big-bang option, make all the changes at once – constitutional convention could be beneficial, but requires time and funding, or incremental changes which are a pivot to a long-term vision. She also added that, in her opinion, subsidiarity should be embraced in full.

She then concluded that whatever decision was taken, it should be ensured for local government to be part of the discussion and input into the white paper. If done this way, whatever comes out of white paper is beneficial for all across the UK.

**Cllr Evison** said that following the constitutional convention in Scotland, they are no closer to devolution than Britain. She added that subsidiarity is key, Euro charter is key to do that. If you want to change outcomes financially and socially, local government is key to that. She said that you should focus on outcomes rather than be distracted by the spheres of government

**Professor Szente** urged for caution when seeking foreign patterns to follow continental systems as they are built on general competence to local authorities, very opposite to the British principle.

He stressed the important difference that on the continent, Local Authorities have a constitutional status; if you seek guidance on what to do/how to decentralise here they should seek guidance from the general principles of the Euro charter- especially from the national and regional identities of UK rather than continental systems.

## Conclusion

After the question-and-answer session, the Chair concluded the meeting by thanking the speakers for their contributions. He shared details about the next APPG meeting due to be scheduled in early November.