

Mapping the manifestos - local government

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Abstract

Local Government analysis: What are the implications of the policy proposals for local government contained in the manifestos of the political parties? David Bowden of David Bowden Law analyses the manifesto proposals of political parties in the 2015 general election

Analysis

Against the background of cuts, and the possibility of further cuts, what aspects of the manifestos are of greatest interest for local authorities?

Conservative

The Conservatives are promising £8bn of extra funding for the NHS. It is not clear whether any more funding is being promised for social care. It is thought that £12bn in further cuts have been pencilled in by the Conservative party already to implement if they win the general election. On housing benefit, this includes a £1bn freeze overall and abolition of its availability for those aged 18-21. There will be restrictions on child benefits and disability benefits will be taxed.

Labour

Labour is promising to keep all state schools open for 10 hours a day from 8am to 6pm--but not of course on election days when most schools are closed to be used as polling stations. It is not clear how this will be paid for and this will be of concern to county councils in England when setting their budgets. Surprisingly, Labour is rather economical when it cuts to talking to voters about austerity cuts and its manifesto refers to this only twice. Labour makes a clear commitment to abolish the housing benefit restriction on underused bedrooms in a property (bedroom tax). It pledges to tackle food bank dependency. Those aged over 60 will be able to keep their bus passes which offer free bus travel throughout the nation. It will retain the benefit cap.

Liberal Democrats

The Liberal Democrats are promising an extra £2.5bn a year for state schools and colleges. They propose a 1% cap on benefits uprating for 2015-17. Better training is promised for foster carers. A statutory code of conduct is proposed for all those working in the care sector.

Green

The Green Party is promising to increase public spending by 25% and to end austerity. Of all the manifestos analysed, that of the Green Party represents the most extreme example of the 'tax and spend' model. The Greens promise an extra £900m for foster carers. Overall, the Green party is promising an extra £10bn for local authorities. This will be paid for by higher council tax bands, the end of the restriction that stops councils increasing council tax by more than 2% a year and a revaluation of all properties in the country for council tax.

UKIP

UKIP is promising to cut rates for small businesses. If this happens, then it is not clear how local authorities would bridge any corresponding funding gap. UKIP promises to re-introduce weekly refuse collections which are likely to prove popular with voters. It also wants to slash excessive pay deals for council executive officers.

SNP

The SNP manifesto refers to the austerity cuts the most with 20 mentions. The SNP is clear that it wants an end to austerity at least as it applies to Scotland. The SNP is clear that it too wants to see the bedroom tax abolished immediately.

Plaid Cymru

Similarly, Plaid Cymru wants an end to the austerity cuts in Wales and it too mentions this subject 11 times in its manifesto. It wants an uplift on empty properties in Wales for council tax of 200%.

Are the parties offering anything manifestly different from one another?

This is a complex question to analyse from the manifestos. The average length of the manifestos is 84 pages or so but the Liberal Democrats is the longest at 158 pages. The SNP is the briefest at 56 pages. While Tony Blair may have won the 1997 general election for the Labour Party will the mantra 'education, education, education' this has not gone away but merely been recycled and updated for the 2015 election. All the manifestos talk incessantly about 'schools'--the Conservative Party manifesto has nearly 100 mentions of them. The Liberal Democrats too are keen to talk about schools (over 80 mentions) but the SNP are the least keen to talk about them (14 mentions). In the interests of balance, the number of mentions of schools by the other parties is 42 (Labour), 46 (UKIP), 56 (Green) and 39 (Plaid Cymru).

Conservative

The Conservatives are promising to extend the 'right to buy' scheme initially set up by the Housing Act 1980 to those tenants of housing associations. They are also promising to remove homes worth up to £1m from inheritance tax. The Big Society is back in the Conservative manifesto with five mentions but true to the legacy of Mrs Thatcher the Conservative manifesto does not mention society at all other than in the context of the Big Society. The Conservatives promise to double free child care allowance to 30 hours a week for three and four-year-old children in families where both parents work. There is a vague promise too of better protection for vulnerable children.

Labour

Labour is promising to introduce a mansion tax on properties worth over £2m. It wants to ban zero-hours contracts--but this will hit some local authorities or their outsourced service providers who may use these contracts. It wants to raise the minimum wage but no figure is set. There is an unquantified promise to build more affordable homes. Labour proposes a new National Primary Childcare Service. It also wants to double the paternity leave entitlement. Labour is promising 25 hours a week free childcare which is five hours a week less than the Conservative party. Labour wants to introduce three-year fixed tenancies with rent increases linked to inflation. Labour makes a pledge to start building one million homes by 2020.

Liberal Democrats

There appears to be much common ground between the Liberals and the Green Party in relation to talk about society in the Liberal Democrat manifesto where society is mentioned 47 times. The Liberal manifesto is full of promises to make changes that will result in what it sees as a fairer society. The Liberals want to abolish the requirement for a local authority to hold a referendum where a council tax increase of over 2% is proposed. On childcare, the Liberals are proposing free childcare for two-year-olds for all working families and 20 hours a week free childcare for parents of children aged 2-4. The Liberals want to build 30,000 rent-to-own homes by 2020 which will convert from a tenancy to home ownership after 30 years. It too wants to limit rent increases for all tenants. The Liberals have a commitment to build 300,000 new homes a year including building ten new garden cities. They want to abolish the right-to-buy scheme for all publicly owned housing stock.

Green

The Green Party is promising to halt a programme of £15bn that is scheduled in to improve or upgrade the nation's roads. While this is a significant saving of money there are a lot of bottlenecks on roads that need unblocking including on arterial routes and motorways that are key to the future economic development of the country. This will be more so if there is, as appears likely, a major house building programme in the next five to ten years. The Green Party is the most keen to talk about society in its manifesto with over 45 mentions with a great deal of aspirational talk about building a better society. The Green Party proposes an extra £10bn of funding to local authorities in England. The Green Party wants to increase the minimum wage to £10/hour. On childcare, the Greens propose that this be free for the first seven years of a child's life. The Greens propose to build 500,000 social homes in the next 5 years. It wants to introduce five-year tenancies and to abolish the right-to-buy scheme for all publicly owned housing stock.

UKIP

UKIP is promising to cut business rates for smaller businesses. It is also promising tax cuts on the premise that this would increase the amount of money people have in their pockets and should correspondingly boost the economy when it is spent. UKIP wants to re-introduce weekly refuse collections. It wants to abolish non-essential jobs in local government. It too wants to abolish the bedroom tax. It proposes to fund 800 welfare advisers to be based in food banks. On help to buy, UKIP wants to see this restricted to British nationals only. UKIP proposes that social housing be available only to those who have lived and worked in the UK for over five years.

SNP

The SNP wants to increase social security spending by £4.5bn a year.

Plaid Cymru

Plaid Cymru wants to develop for Wales a separate and devolved employment and benefits system.

How would the various models of devolution to local government work in practice?

Conservative

The Conservatives are promising to devolve powers and budgets to boost growth. However, since 2010, central government grants to local government have been cut by more than a third and local councils are struggling to make up the shortfall. A referendum is needed to approve a council tax increase of over 2% proposed by a local council. On balance, it appears that while the Conservative party makes a promise of devolution, especially to key regional cities such as Manchester, there will be no additional money. The Conservatives are proposing there be regional adoption agencies.

Labour

Labour has proposed £30bn of funding to local councils for business support and transport to be held centrally in Whitehall. This does not address the falling central support grant. To work, it would need to revalue all properties for council tax purposes not just those valued at over £2m within its proposed mansion tax scheme.

Liberal Democrats

The Liberals propose devolution to let local areas take on more power and responsibility in something called 'devolution on demand'. It envisages groups of local authorities working together for a common good and with a detailed economic plan. In a 2004 referendum, the idea of a regional assembly for North East England was rejected. However, the Liberals point to a Yorkshire-wide agreement between various local authorities which it says works better than the top-down approach.

Green

While the Greens advocate an extra £10bn of funding for English local authorities, they also want higher council tax bands as well and the removal of referendum approval for increases of more than 2% a year in council tax itself. The Greens have run Brighton and Hove Council and they have a mixed record in local government.

UKIP

UKIP is clear that it wants an end to the Barnett formula. It says it is out of date, discredited and not right that Scotland receives £1,400 a year more for each of its citizens and Wales £450 than is available to be spent on English people. It proposes a transitional period of three to seven years to ease the pain. UKIP says that the Scottish Parliament has tax raising powers which it can use to address any shortfall.

SNP

The SNP wants full independence for Scotland from the rest of the UK. However, Scotland benefits substantially from the Barnett formula which the SNP wants to keep. While, under the Scotland Act 1998, the Scottish Parliament already has powers to levy taxes in Scotland, it has not done so. The SNP wants as many powers transferred to the Scottish Executive as possible in any event which falls short of full independence.

Plaid Cymru

The Government of Wales Act 1998 constitutes the Assembly of Wales differently to the Scottish Parliament and it does not have tax raising powers of its own. Like the SNP, Plaid Cymru would like to see more powers transferred to the Welsh Assembly.

Are there any concerns around any pledges that directly affect local authorities?

Conservative

The Conservatives want to provide 10,000 homes at below market rent to allow occupiers to save for a deposit to buy a home. The Conservative manifesto sets no targets for housing development. If the proposed 'right to buy' scheme is extended to housing association tenants, then this could exacerbate the nation's housing shortage. The Conservatives are also promising a right to three days paid volunteering leave for all employees which will affect local authorities as well as all other employers. The Conservatives say they will continue to protect funding for schools.

Labour

Councils in England will be concerned about the cost of keeping state schools open every day from 8am to 6pm that Labour propose. Similarly, Labour is promising face-to-face careers advice in all schools and this will need funding too.

Liberal Democrats

They propose to soften but not abolish the bedroom tax.

Green

The Green Party's plans to cancel all further road building could hamper economic development, particularly in those areas where there is the most new house building. The Greens are promising free social care for adults aged 18-65 and this may affect some council's budgets disproportionately.

UKIP

While UKIP promise to reinstate weekly refuse collections will prove popular with voters, this will have a cost for councils who have to provide this enhanced service.

SNP

The SNP proposal to increase social security spending by £4.5bn a year will be welcomed by all councils who are struggling to provide social care to an increasingly elderly population with a reducing budget to do so.

Plaid Cymru

It is not clear how much extra revenue will be generated by the proposed doubling of council tax on empty properties in Wales. This will doubtless benefit some authorities more than others. The recipients could be in receipt of a windfall to offset any austerity savings.

In the event of a coalition, would there be any natural bedfellows when it comes to local government policy?

It is worth stressing at the outset that all parties have set out their manifestos on the basis that they are trying to win this election. Publicly at least all parties are saying 'no' to a coalition.

Conservative

In the manifesto itself, coalition is the elephant in the room and does not get mentioned at all--not even to refer back to the past five years.

Labour

Labour, like the SNP, does not mention coalition at all in its manifesto. There is a clear overlap with the SNP on housing policy.

Liberal Democrats

The Liberal Democrats are perhaps not so bitter after five years of coalition with the Conservatives and so in their manifesto, coalition is mentioned six times. This would seem to indicate that nothing has been ruled in and nothing ruled out when it comes to another coalition for the Liberal Democrats.

Green

The Green Party has only one MP at the moment and is hoping to make gains in this election as well as retain this one seat. It is not surprising then that the Green Party manifesto is the most enthusiastic with 36 mentions of coalition in its manifesto.

UKIP

From the language in its manifesto, where coalition is mentioned five times, UKIP also appear to have an open mind about this subject in the event that its MPs may hold the balance.

SNP

Rather surprisingly the SNP does not mention coalition at all in its manifesto. It has said publicly it will not enter into any arrangement with the Conservative Party. The SNP are closely aligned with Labour on many policy areas relating to local government so if a formal coalition is not arrived at, a confidence and supply agreement of some description seems highly likely. However, the SNP ruled in the Scottish Parliament as a minority government and it may seek to persuade Labour to do the same if Labour is the largest party but short of a majority.

Plaid Cymru

Similarly, Plaid Cymru does not mention coalition at all in its manifesto. With some policy overlaps it would seem to have enough in common with Labour to arrive at a confidence and supply arrangement.

Interviewed by David Bowden.

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