

Lives are local

Colin James sum-up comments to Inspiring Communities conference
Wellington 22 June 2016

You are doers. I am a be-er/talker. You are insiders. I am an outsider. So I should stop now and let you get on with the "messy" business you do, as Nichola Brehaut put it.

But perhaps I should pick up Nicola's "messy" point. "Messy" is democratic and your disparate actions in response to the people around you are the essence of democracy. Doing things democratically, as you do, may, as Nicola also said, take a little longer but it leads to better outcomes – "hoods" can become "goods", Stone Soup told us.

That democratic description of what you do leads me to an analogy with climate change.

Climate change is local – as is an earthquake, as we heard in the context of Christchurch. Local is where climate change happens. People have to adapt – or move to somewhere where the effects are different. Because climate change is local, adaptation is unavoidably local. It is up to local councils and communities to prepare the adaptation.

The climate change story tells us that lives are local. People are local.

We rather lost sight of that in the twentieth century. We loaded a lot of the enabling and remedial work for people's lives on to central government and it worked well for many decades.

But it had a cost: local initiatives and councils were less valued. They were subordinate to national imperatives and action.

Central governments are still important in a number of supportive ways. Again climate change illustrates that. Or, rather, the near-absence of support for councils for adaptation illustrates it.

There are guidelines and they are being updated. But otherwise councils are left to deal with the knotty questions adaptation poses, involving property rights, LIM notifications, development consents, insurance and managed retreat in advance of sea level rise. That is because knotty questions involve conflicting interests and so political difficulty. There is also cost, both long-term and, if a council wants to smooth the cost, short-term. Central government doesn't want to know about cost or plan for it or help with it but makes it difficult for councils to do so by relentlessly attacking them over rates levels.

Councils meanwhile, realise they have to do something: south Dunedin, eastern Christchurch, the Hauraki Plains. That is taking some of them across to mitigation to help reduce the need for adaptation.

This central-local tension over climate change adaptation illustrates a broader tension between central and local which we heard about quite a bit today. It is also associated with another tension – between "public" and "private". [There is another associated

tension: between "state" and "public", but that is a topic for another day]

On enabling people to live better lives, the central government says it wants local initiative but treats councils as subordinates and says it wants the innovation and close-to-the-people skills, insights and values that not-for-profits can bring – but then it ties the not-for-profits in heavy, short-term contracts which stamps out initiative and adds costs and it favours large or national not-for-profits over smaller and local ones.

Now note the tension between national sovereignty and 2010s hyperglobalisation which is chipping away at national sovereignty: a tension illustrated in the Brexit vote and the Donald Trump United States presidential candidacy.

I have argued that we may be in a transition similar to that two centuries back from local to national. For Jane Austen's characters "the country" meant the proximate area they inhabited but 100 years later "the country" meant "the nation". Economic change melding local into national also dragged social change and then governmental change from local to national.

Now hyperglobalisation – of jobs, finance, people, ideas, speeded and complicated by digitisation – has been leading to the development of informal, semi-formal and near-formal arrangements and treaties which limit the scope for discretion by national governments. This is very uneven, with many resistances – overnight the World Trade Organisation reported a growing number of small trade protectionist measures – and it is multi-generational but there does seem to be a trend toward something we might call global citizenship (which I described in a speech last year).

This might paradoxically – but also logically – strengthen what some see as a tendency to "localism" – for example, in food preferences and "buy local" movements. It is too early to be sure but as central government is globally constrained in what it can do (though there will be much for it still to do), that opens scope for more initiative and activity at the local level. We may shop/travel/work/engage globally but also pay more attention to what we can do locally and cooperatively.

That's where I see the activities described today fitting in.

So, to pick up on the openness Shreya Basu talked about at the beginning of today's discussions, central government may need to take more notice of local initiatives, councils, communities and enterprises – like yours – if it is to stay relevant.

Which you are.