



## Japan Local Government Centre, London

### Monthly Report for October 2009 (UK) – Dividing lines

The next UK general election must take place before June 3 2010, when Gordon Brown will be seeking a fourth term for the Labour Party. However, by law local elections are scheduled for May 6 2010, so it is anticipated that the government will seek to hold the general election on this day, rather than wait, if it does not call an election before April. To replace Labour as the governing party, the opposition Conservatives would require an increase of 118 parliamentary seats on their 2005 general election showing of 198 seats in the House of Commons.

While the differences between the main parties are less ideological than in the past, divisions over policy remain, especially concerning the question of public services and how to resource and deliver them. Local government, as a key delivery agency and democratic institution in its own right, is no exception here.

The September and October 2009 party conferences were the last occasion before the next general election for the parties to showcase their policies ahead of the publication of any election manifestos once an election is called. While the detail of the manifestos remains worked on until the last possible moment, particularly around spending pledges, it is possible to discern a basic shape to many of the parties' intended programmes of government. Furthermore, as the main parties in contention are the governing Labour Party and the Official Opposition Conservative Party, the policies of the Liberal Democrats tend to be overlooked by the media and those in public affairs, though they could have some impact in the event of a hung parliament if a coalition was sought.

At their party conference in October, the Conservatives set out their policies on local government. Shadow Communities and Local Government Secretary Caroline Spelman in her speech to the party conference set out her proposals to "revive democracy with the oxygen of localism". Among the policies announced were:

- the abolition of the Infrastructure Planning Commission, with ministers assuming its powers over key projects such as Heathrow's third runway
- the ability for councils to take over the economic development powers of Regional Development Agencies by disbanding them and forming their own partnerships
- to hold referendums on elected mayors in England's 12 largest cities, with the option of elected mayors assuming the role of local authority chief executives
- allowing councils to return to the committee system, if they wish

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- a halt to any further local government reorganisation, cancelling any planned mergers even if at an advanced stage once in government
- the abolition of the Comprehensive Area Assessment
- all council spending over £500 to be published online

Her speech follows the party's *Control Shift – Returning Power to Local Communities* green paper, published in February. This promised:

- returning regional planning and housing powers back to local authorities from Regional Development Agencies
- allowing councils to retain any increased Council Tax revenues from new homes, rather than redistributing them from central government
- allowing councils to apply business rate discounts to certain businesses under threat
- allowing residents the right to veto Council Tax rises by referendums
- requiring councils to publish senior staff salaries online and curbing pay-off packages for senior staff who resign early

While the governing Labour Party has not published any major proposals on local government in advance of its election manifesto, beyond current central government policy, its party group at the Local Government Association has taken the step of publishing its own manifesto for Labour councils under the next government. *Putting fairness first* sets out Labour's "local stall" based around the following principles:

- fairness and greater equality – the community-by-community promotion of social justice
- collective action by the local state – worthwhile social and economic progress can only be delivered by and on behalf of the whole community
- continuous economic development as a means of creating sustainable and prosperous communities across the United Kingdom;
- the sovereignty of local political institutions – even when it rubs us up against central government
- local accountability as the main building block and the guarantor of an engaged and vibrant political system

However, for the most part the document is concerned with heralding the commitments of the Labour Party nationally or highlighting Labour's recent record in local government. The sole policy proposals or suggestions in the document relate to:

- extending the Future Jobs Fund to 25-34 year olds in long term unemployment and extending Sure Start to 5-7 year olds
- making public service accountability more clearer to citizens
- the introduction of a statutory duty to devolve from central to local government,

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wherever possible

- encouraging other councils to copy the example of the London Living Wage
- rebanding Council Tax, ending capping and relocalising business rates

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