

David Walker's principal points

The Lyons review is published at an auspicious time. It is, without labelling itself as such, a constitutional document because it has to do with the distribution of powers within the democratic state. It needs to be read into debates about the UK/English legislature, the existence and powers of a second chamber of parliament, and the possible impact of separatists taking power in Scotland and Northern Ireland and calling into question the UK settlement. We must not allow the Lyons report to be pigeonholed as a technical or essentially fiscal document but make an effort to keep it in the forefront of incipient debates about governance inside England, and between England and the other jurisdictions of the UK.

Lyons is published when the conventions which underpin public business are under assault. The report appeared a day after Lord Turnbull's intervention which, though it painted itself as a plea for pluralism, was more like a cry of pain at the passing of an old administrative order – without a clear sight of what the new one looks like. The civil service is in a state of denial about the many questions concerning its role. It's noteworthy how incoherent have been criticisms from the former cabinet secretaries. They have sought to score political points against Blair and Brown without drawing wider lessons about the position of the civil service or the public service at large. Their interventions could be read as a bid to maintain power and position for Whitehall rather than understand the logic of the recent focus on public service delivery, which leads to a single public service. This superficiality was demonstrated by Turnbull's decision to give a newspaper interview on the eve of the budget rather than address a considered critique to, say, the Commons' Public Administration Committee.

Lyons is published as searchers after public service delivery solutions – notably, recently, Sir David Varney – propose to abolish (in the public's eyes) differences between central and local government. Lyons himself says “central and local governments need to work more closely together as part of a single system”. But can a unified model of public service delivery, one-stop shops and all, accommodate a more differentiated and autonomous local government? Many questions remain to be resolved, high among them variation in remuneration for public officials in different places – and the effects that might have on officials' identification with a “single system”.

Missing dimensions

Compendious as his report is, Sir Michael could not cover everything and two domains are notably absent.

1. Political parties. As long as the motor for collective decision about place is partisan attachment to an historical party, the appetite for differentiation will surely be faint. And if party is to be replaced, locally, by new formations, we are given no guide to how they will organise themselves, on the basis of which values. The entry of national parties into local politics in the 19th century happened for good reasons and we need to be clear what the cost of seeking to banish them from place might be.
2. Public managers. The Turnbull intervention showed how threadbare Whitehall civil service culture has become. Is it time to move to a unified public service, with common patterns of training, as suggested by Sir Michael Bichard. Perhaps the time has come for local government executive staff to speak out and seize the moment when the civil service is manifestly unfit for purpose. Differentiation of local services would be somewhat paradoxical if all public sector executives shared a common formation and culture. But such a common formation would be one way of finally dispelling the cult of Whitehall knows best.