

Councillor Christopher Holley
Welsh Liberal Democrat Councillor for
Cwmbwrla ward
446, Middle Road
Gendros
Swansea
SA5 8EH

Phone: 01792 419957

Fax:

E-mail: chris.holley@swansea.gov.uk

Welsh Liberal Democrats Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru

Ms Sarah Sargent
Deputy Committee Clerk
Legislation Office
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

14th September 2009

Dear Ms Sargent,

Local Government Legislative Competence Order

I am responding to the call for evidence issued by Legislation Committee No.2 on the Proposed Local Government Legislative Competence Order in my capacity as Councillor for Cathays Ward on Cardiff Council.

Our party has continually backed all proposals to confer further powers upon the National Assembly. We believe that for the National Assembly to be able to reach its potential it should have full law making powers equivalent to those currently possessed by the Scottish Parliament. The Welsh Liberal Democrats support any move that will bring us closer to this situation, even if it is achieved one power at a time. On this basis, I support the proposed LCO.

While I support those matters that will be conferred, I am also disappointed at the exceptions. These exceptions lead to me conclude that the proposed LCO is too narrow in its scope.

I do not believe that “the voting system for the return of members in an election” should be excluded from Matter 12.9. The First Past the Post electoral system currently in place does not provide results which necessarily represent the wishes of electors within a specific electoral area. With so many multi-member wards within Wales, it is often the case that a ward can return four or even five Councillors of one party, despite the majority of electors within the area voting for other candidates.

It is also a factor in reducing the electoral chances of candidates from minority backgrounds, as well as women and younger candidates. Currently many local authorities within Wales are dominated by older, white men. While attempts have been made to encourage these Councillors to stand down, it has not been as successful as hoped. Putting an electoral system in place that encourages competition and reduces safe seats and single party dominance will increase the number of Councillors from other backgrounds and make authorities more representative of their electorates.

The biggest problem caused by first past the post is that it is possible for a party to become the largest party on a council whilst not winning the popular vote. This happened in Cardiff in 2008, where the Welsh Liberal Democrats came third in the number of votes cast but returned the greatest number of Councillors and therefore is now leading the council. This is obviously not something that should be able to happen in a democracy. Effective targeting of swing voters becomes more important than being able to speak to and gather the support of the majority of the electorate.

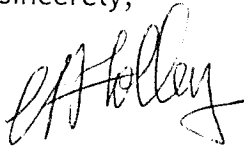
If the power is not sought at this stage, then even if Wales did decide at a later date to change its electoral system, it would be unable to do so until at least the 2016 elections. Many people do want to see any change, but that is a debate for a different day. What is clear is that the current system has problems and that it should be up to the Welsh Government how it wishes to proceed with this, not Westminster.

I also believe that the two other exclusions are an unwelcome absence. I understand that this is to do with their specific exclusion in Schedule 7 of the Government of Wales Act. But the Minister should push the Secretary of State to remove these exclusions. Being able to exercise powers in these areas could give the government an important tool to tackle the apathy which seems inherent in our political system at present. Changes to election arrangements and extension of the franchise may be able to increase turnout and improve involvement in the political process.

I welcome this LCO, but at present it will be a missed opportunity to reform many of the problems that exist within local government elections in Wales.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Holley'.

Cllr Christopher Holley
Councillor for Cwmbwrla Ward Swansea.