

Blame them, not us: how the Comprehensive Spending Review reflects the interests of the cabinet, and not the people

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*While others have tried to look into their crystal balls and predict the effects of the government's Comprehensive Spending Review on the economy and society, it is just as important to look at how it was carried out. **Professor George Jones** argues that the political games and plays used reflect the realities of cabinet government.*



The Comprehensive Spending Review was larger in scale than previous exercises in budget cutting, but it was essentially carried out in a traditional way. The usual tactics were employed by those defending their turf and by the various sectional lobbyists. They vividly displayed the bleeding stumps of where popular programmes would be slashed while reflecting a compromise between the spending departments.

The Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) and local councils have come out of this spending review in the worst position, with the deepest cuts by far. This result was predictable. The ministers around the cabinet table taking the decisions were motivated first and foremost to save their own departmental spending. It was easier for them to make cuts in areas for which they are not directly responsible. The dynamics of cabinet government shifted the burden of cuts to those not sitting around that table. Local councils' lack of representation gave them the raw deal.



Through the summer there was a great deal of back-and-forth haggling between departments and the Treasury about how spending cuts would be decided and how they would be presented. As David Cameron made great pains to point out during the Conservative party conference earlier this month, Eric Pickles and his Communities and Local Government department was the exemplar. By settling early with a 51 per cent cut, Pickles showed that he was a big player he was within the coalition, and was able to participate in decision-making about other departments on the key cabinet committee. Ironically, he did not have to take the blame for the consequences of the cuts he had already agreed to.

Local councils will have to sell the Government's increased localism agenda to their constituents, as well as to administer the bitter pill of over £5.6 billion in cuts in their expenditure- all while there is a freeze in council tax. Perhaps they should have been given more freedom, but realistically it would only be the freedom to cut services. When libraries and other social services are cut councils will bear the brunt of people's ire – not Eric Pickles, and certainly not the cabinet. They will say that these decisions are made by the local authorities; in other words, blame them, not us.



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