



CLES Summit 2011, 12th July Opening plenary

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It is with great pleasure that I am now opening this years Summer Summit. I am really looking forward to this event, and hearing from all the speakers and your own thoughts on how we can make places and the lives of people with them better. I hope you all have an informative, enjoyable and stimulating time.

You will have all been very busy. Stressed, worried, frightened. This is a time to

- exhale
- let rip
- have a barney
- debate
- learning from others
- push policy in new areas
- think afresh
- luxuriate in different perspectives and creative ideas and notions.

Now for those of you who don't know, CLES is a charity, a social enterprise and is independent. We are the UK's leading member organisation dedicated to local economic and place development. However, when we think about economic development it's not in isolation. Our economic focus is merely a lens in which we look at how that relates to all other activities within any given place. This includes the social, public and commercial economies and sectors.

So when we think about places we have a range of interests and over the next few days we will hear and discuss localism, public service reform, big society, Local Enterprise Partnerships, Regional Growth Fund, as well as looking at range of tools we need to make great places.

However, this Summit is a whole lot more than these ideas. I get angry with much of these notions, not because they are wrong, though some are misguided, but because they lack weight, heft, power, and substance or even hope of a great future when we start thinking about the core challenges that we face.

This core challenge is how do we create great places and communities, at a time when the state has less capacity and resources, and we have an economy which in many places is not growing...and indeed has not been growing for many years, even before Global Financial Crisis and the ensuing?

My nephew is a recently unemployed baker in a small Scottish town. In the pub one night he said to me..."Neil, it's just like the 1970's with the oil crisis or the 1980's. We saw it all then, inflation, petrol going up, falling living standards, not knowing where the next job is coming from, the dole queue and strikes. We might call it different things, but it's just the same."

We argued, and ending up having game of darts! But he was right in one sense, our economy, our society has had previous crises. However, I think the challenges now are very different and require a new set of responses and new ways of working. I failed to convince him, but maybe I will do better with you!

Like in the 1980's, we have an ongoing crisis in what we can we afford as regards public services. The government, now, like then, is responding to the problems by cutting public expenditure. However, unlike then, we are now increasingly consumers first and citizens second. We do not just expect our bins to be emptied, but we expect the bin lorry to run on biofuel, the waste to be recycled, and the refuse collectors to be part of a social enterprise!

We expect our public services to not just be a straightforward transaction, but have relationships to a whole load of other things. Our expectations are now much higher and we expect our public services to match what we receive as consumers of private goods.

Furthermore, public services face more and more demands upon them as regards need ... the demands on adult social care, as we are all living longer is a case in point.

Turning to the economy, like in 1980's, we know we must return the UK and local economies to growth.

I was recently in a very affluent and internationally successful location in southern Britain. In speaking with a range of public officials and representatives from the business and community sectors, they said to me growth is easy for us, what is hard getting the right type of low carbon growth, getting that growth in the right places for the people who need it!

I was also a year ago in a poor part of northern Britain, Clydeside and the Director of Economic Development of a local authority said to me "Look we have tried everything Neil....Its bad - even the pound shops are closing down! This was after a 3 decade long stimulus to the economy, via Enterprise Zones and courting of global capital which landed and then left when the sweeteners disappeared."

Now unlike then, we cannot expect a silver bullet, where a bit of global capital will land in a business park near us and provide thousands of jobs, even with the proposed Enterprise Zones. We are also unlike the 80's or previous crises, placing more demands on growth. And some of us are not even sure we want the negative environmental consequences of growth anyway. We are increasingly expecting growth to be more caring, working in a more philanthropic and place sensitive way.

So I think we are entering new age....an age in which the managed capitalism of the welfare state and the recent disorganisation and crisis in capitalism, requires new ways of how we think about societies, communities and places.

In this the diagnosis is not hard, but the prognosis is a lot more difficult.

In thinking as to what the solution should be, CLES has done a load of work on RESILIENCE. Starting as place resilience we are now looking at community and town centre resilience. Our resilience work tells us a very simple, but key and often overlooked, thing about places. The success of places and communities is about the relationship and networks between social, public and commercial sectors including institutions, people and citizens.

There are many reasons why places lack resilience; however there is one abiding similarity. They will have elements of public, private or social monopoly of activity. Furthermore, the citizen, the worker, the small businessman, the public sector worker, is disempowered and is a passive recipient not an active player in the destiny of that place.

So I have three messages for the public, social and civil society.

Firstly to local government.

CLES is working with many local authorities and is a supporter of public service values with more power to local government, and a decentralisation. However our understanding of localism is not some process or crude ideological belief in the commercial or social sector - where we will pass it all to over to them and it will be fine. We believe in a 'just localism'.

This just localism, rejects 'process or administrative localism', as it is presently being developed. Process localism lacks a value set and an outcome focus which is centred on making places/people lives better.

Localism or the aim of a 'big society' is pointless, unless it has real progressive outcomes at its heart. It needs to make peoples' lives better, in real terms. That is why we believe a 'just localism', needs a new local resilient and enduring alliance between local government, the social sector and business, based around addressing inequality and need.

A just localism will require plural delivery, but let's not confuse this with strategic power and leadership. I believe we need strategically powerful local government and representative democracy at its heart. That is why, I am impressed by some local authorities who I have met recently.

They know that to create outcomes which make inroads into an issue such as child poverty, they needed a transformation in cross departmental and cross agency behaviours, creative thinking and a new plural approach to the problem. They knew this was never going to happen by just doing it all in house, or letting out a contract to the lowest bidder.

Secondly to the voluntary sector.

You have an important role, to assist with service delivery, to be a key part of this just localism. This is not about seeing the present policy context as a means in which you become a more monetary efficient public sector. You are not there to be the cheap option; you are not about inferior terms and conditions for your employees. You are partly about making new relationships and alliances with the public and commercial sectors.

However, you also about campaigning and playing a counter role to the formality of the state or the singularity of the profit motive. You are there to hold service to account not just deliver. You also should work within the space which the public or private cannot or does not reach. You are there to work with representative democracy and create a new forms of participation and energy.

Thirdly to the commercial sector.

You must make an economic return on your investment, but you have to be as much concerned about the inputs to that return as the balance sheet. Great skills, great infrastructure, happy workers, enduring local green space, low or zero carbon, great places are as much your responsibility as the public or social sectors.

Finally a word on values.

These times we are in do not mean that CLES or any organisation should start shedding their values. Quite the reverse, we will be seeking to highlight how our values and the things we think are right are, in fact core, to improving local economic development, the lives of people, communities and places, and making policy better at both local and national levels.

We are 'committed to places and communities experiencing social and economic inequality and lack of opportunity.

CLES is independent. We cherish this. We have worked hard at it. We receive no government core grant, no benefactor. I am proud of this independence and when others blow in different directions, or are opportunistic in what values they have, or swallow the latest policy buzzword and speech or follow ineffectual trend, I know that CLES will be there as ballast.

We understand and empathise with the problems on the ground (through our work all over the UK and beyond). We are alert to how practice needs to change. We develop new ideas and thinking with partners, members and a host of other network organisations.

It is these values which have informed this summit.

The key to a successful Summit is for us all to not only listen and absorb information, but to also ask questions, debate, discuss and argue. Let's have some real debate here. We also need to use the ample informal time to speak with colleagues and share experiences.

Myself and all the CLES staff are here to help you maximise your experience of the Summit..so feel free to ask myself or any staff any questions or any help/assistance you may need.

I hope you have a great Summit.