

We'll transform Britain by giving power away

di David Cameron e Nick Clegg

When we formed our Coalition just nine weeks ago, we did so because we shared a view that our country needed strong and stable government to steer it through a time of enormous difficulty. With the largest peacetime deficit in our history, the inevitable short-termism of an unstable minority government wouldn't have been good enough. So we put aside our differences to work together in the national interest, and have set to work tackling Britain's debt.

But, for both of us, sorting out the public finances is a responsibility, not a passion. We didn't come into politics just to balance the books. We are both ambitious for Britain: we want to change our country for the better. We want to see the best schools open to the poorest children, a first-class NHS there for everyone, streets that are safe, families that are stable and communities that are strong.

But our commitment to give power away isn't just born of instinct; it has been strengthened by the evidence of the past. For decades, governments have assumed that the only way to make things better is to centralise. Of course, central government has a crucial role to play, but it cannot and should not try to do everything. It's time for the central state to allow the genius of grassroots innovation, diversity and experimentation to take off.

We know this won't be easy. We know that the political machine has an inbuilt tendency to centralise. That's why we are bringing in a new way of coordinating government action. Last week we started publishing Structural Reform Plans, one for each government department. Don't let the dry name fool you. These are radical documents that are going to change the way government works.

Each government department has its own plan, with a list of objectives and deadlines to achieve them by. So far, this might sound like the last government with its Public Service Agreements and Prime Minister's Delivery Unit. The difference is in what we're asking departments to do – not to control things from the centre but to put in place structures that will allow people and communities to take power and control for themselves. In place of the old tools of bureaucratic accountability – top-down regulation and targets – are the new tools of democratic, bottom-up accountability – individual choice, competition, direct elections and transparency.

Decentralisation will mean different things across different services. In the plan for schools published last week we identify the major task for the Department for Education: to set schools free, encourage diversity and allow people to start up new schools, thereby opening up the state monopoly on education.

Instead of teachers thinking they have to impress the department, they will have to impress parents, who will finally have a real choice over where to send their child. The most disadvantaged children will benefit from a "pupil premium" so that schools have an incentive to take them on, rather than the incentives they have at the moment to keep them out.

Today we launch our White Paper on health. Yes, we're committed to increasing NHS resources in real terms in each year of this parliament, but we're also committed to reforming the NHS. To help achieve that we'll make sure every penny is spent more effectively, removing £1 billion a year by 2014/15 from bureaucracy and waste.

The plan for health, like all the others, says a lot about the Coalition – not just that we're committed to reform, but that the very act of combining our policies has made us more radical about decentralising power.

It combines Conservative thinking on choice and competition with the Liberal Democrat belief in local democracy to create a truly radical vision for the NHS – giving general practitioners authority over commissioning and patients much more control, and ensuring democratic accountability with councils taking greater responsibility, in particular over public health.

Dealing with the deficit will be painful, but if we ensure reform goes alongside it, Britain will be stronger, freer and fairer. We hope and expect that people will look back at the days when central government held all the power and think it arcane and bizarre. If we continue on the path laid by these plans, if we are bold enough to let go of the controls of government and if we can truly empower people and communities, this country has a great future to look forward to.