

McConnell “astonished” at lack of reform in local government

Lord Jack McConnell, former First Minister between 2001 and 2007, says he is “astonished” that local government has not been reformed in Scotland in the last three decades.

It is 30 years since the last significant reform by then Scottish Secretary Ian Lang. At that time the two-tier system of regional and district authorities in Scotland was abolished and a single-tier structure replaced it.

As chair of think tank [Reform Scotland](#) Lord McConnell wants to encourage debate on reinvigorating and empowering local government. The body will [publish articles](#) with suggestions on the measures needed, and these opinion pieces will be written by a range of people from all across the political spectrum. Submissions are also invited by the non-partisan [organisation](#).

He said: “Thirty years ago this year, the then Secretary of State for Scotland Ian Lang decided that the best way to reverse the growing tide of support for strong devolution in Scotland was to reform local government instead.

“It is really quite astonishing that the original decisions of Ian Lang have survived. The two most significant changes to have happened in local government over these three decades – proportional representation for elections when I was First Minister and the council tax freeze under the SNP – have left

the basic structure unchanged.

“Meanwhile, local leaders have struggled to cope or find a strong voice. And in economic development, the management of policing and other areas of Scottish government responsibility, centralisation rather than decentralisation has been the order of the day for just over a decade.

“Reform Scotland believes that devolving power, encouraging innovation, responsibility and local partnerships by empowering local leaders is the best way to drive towards excellence in public services, create economic growth around the whole country and enhance accountability.

“We want to kick off a big democratic conversation and we want to hear from a wide range of voices across Scotland.”

Chris Deerin, Director of Reform Scotland, said: “For years, there has been discussion about the very obvious problems with Scotland’s councils. They are constantly under-financed, heavily restricted in their ability to tackle local issues, which often differ radically from place to place, and lack the freedom, heft and profile that they need to be effective.

“Since Covid, many of us are spending more time in our local communities and can see for ourselves the consequences of this. Devolution from Westminster to Holyrood was supposed to be the beginning of a process, not an end to one. Instead, Holyrood has hoarded power and stripped it from our councils.

“You can look across the world and see the benefits brought to successful societies by properly empowered local government. Scotland’s failure here is an outlier, not the norm. Reform Scotland invites those with something to contribute to this conversation to join our project.”