I am heartened that you found and settled on your “good” argument for devolved decision making. It seems to me though that this “good” argument is a function of the important insight at the heart of what you call the “bad” argument.

You characterise the “bad” argument in such a way as to leave it open to your critique, namely that “those who judge what to do by what they see in front of them are liable to suffer from three characteristics” (characteristics that, for me, apply to the worst of our current crop of centralised decision makers), namely i) limited knowledge ii) excessive subjectivity and iii) tribal bias. The most influential tribe of all (The Eaton Tribe) suffer from a remoteness that is remarked on with great frequency in the national debate.

 “Closer to”, “proximity” and “local” should be seen as metaphors and context should offer us a clue as to their deeper significance.

A deeper analysis (like the one you offer in setting out your “good” argument) acknowledges that “closer to” and like phrases are ambiguous and encompass proximity but also engagement, attachment, ready access to decision makers, opportunities to object, inform and influence. It is this interplay that makes it more likely that decisions will be appropriate and effective, born from a deeper understanding and shared objectives.

Your tendency to use “can” in ways that appear to allow it to be understood as “will”, without much support for the assumption, as in, for example:-

“Social challenges tend to have underlying causes as well as …. local expressions – a wider lens ***can*** show that some interventions work better than others.”

“National analysts ***can*** be dispassionate but local decision makers tend to be biased in favour of local solutions….”

…leads me to emphasise that there are no guarantees that devolved decision making will bring about the improvements we seek. The possibility for corruption in decision making at the local level (T Dan Smith, Poulson for example?) is another potential pitfall to which the current system is not immune.

Much hangs on the quality of those elected, as it always has. There is no absolute guarantee that greater engagement and sense of influence will lead to deeper and more effective thinking in choosing from the candidates in the polls. And yes, from my own experience, local councillors are a mixed ability bunch. The best of them, though, are priceless. These are useful caveats and must be kept in mind in promoting devolution of decision making and in making it work when we get it.

Oversight of local decision makers will be essential and Rowena’s suggestion of an auditor with teeth makes sense. I have a hankering after ofstgov or ofstpol, but that may just be because as an educationist I would delight in getting my own back on politicians for foisting a damaging accountability regime on teachers. Another caveat there!

I envisage much debate about the relationship between the central organising structure and the local provincial assemblies (on a thoroughgoing federal solution which I prefer to the piecemeal derogation to (some) towns and cities) and anticipate that there would be a national framework to contextualise local decision making and a carefully worked out distribution of powers. We have models that can help us understand the issues involved in such countries as Canada, Australia and even here in the UK with our devolved assemblies.

Uwe DeVrient is right to remind us that the principle of subsidiarity underpins this issue. This principle is applicable a fortiori in the realm of corporate structure where the best version of the “bad” argument (if that makes sense) and the core insight of the “good” argument come together in making the case for a major increase in co-operative structures.

Thank you for giving us all such rich food for thought!