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Public Administration Committee Annual Conference

Nottingham September 2010

Panel Theme: Citizen Involvement and Participation in Public Services

Public Participation under New Labour: an Unsentimental Review

John Fenwick and Janice McMillan

1969: “Politics is the act of finding solutions to problems. Acceptable solutions. But some of the problems wouldn't exist if it weren't for the politicians. The current solution is "participation"; the current problem is too much government: the fashionable theory which links the two—that interference by Government will be acceptable if more people participate in it—is nonsense.” (Margaret Thatcher, 1969)

1989: “...those advocating a new initiative may invoke the community in support of their case, without making it clear which community they mean, in what sense they refer to it, or how they have established what its opinions or interests are” (Peter Willmott, 1989)

1991: “John Major, addressing the Conservative Central Council in Southport, outlined plans for a ‘citizen's charter’ to maintain standards and improve ‘every part of the public services’. ‘People who depend on public services - patients, passengers, parents, pupils, benefit claimants - all must know where they stand and what service they have a right to expect,’ he said.” (BBC, 1991)

1999: “Asking people how they want their community governed is not enough. It is right for local people themselves to take the decisions about new forms of local governance...The Government intends that such decisions are to be taken through binding local referendums. This will give local communities real influence and power over the way in which they will be led”. (Office of Deputy Prime Minister, 1999)

2010: David Cameron ‘will tomorrow promise a new model of public service reform, claiming that greater citizen control of public services is the best way to increase efficiency at a time of constraint... “We want to turn government on its head, taking power away from Whitehall and putting it into the hands of people and communities...” ’ (Wintour, 2010)

Introduction

The opening quotations, spanning a period of more than 40 years, could be taken at face value as simple confirmation of the maxim plus ça change (plus c'est la même chose). A concern with widening public participation has after all engaged politicians and policy-makers over a very long period. As baseball player 'Yogi' Berra memorably put it, it's like déjà vu all over again.

However, a closer inspection reveals that debates about public participation have shifted over the years, displaying a changing agenda, and a number of different strands. Rarely - except perhaps in the early example of Thatcherite thought cited above - has there been any questioning of whether widening participation is desirable, or any interrogation of exactly what the public are being invited to participate in. During the New Labour period 1997-2010 the theme of public participation was prominent indeed: something at the heart of the guiding philosophy of government. This paper seeks to review public participation under New Labour, with particular reference to local government and local participation. Reaching a tentative conclusion about the concepts and the practice of public participation in this period – successes and failures - will be valuable in assessing the impact of the new coalition government's developing policies in this area and will provide a critical lens through which to view the current climate of change.

To understand the meaning and practice of public participation under New Labour, it is useful to set this in context by providing a brief account of the preceding Conservative governments and their concern with creating a consumer-driven model of public services. This was a powerful challenge to monopoly public provision, but it was more than simply introducing specific policy initiatives such as compulsory competition and privatisation: it was a different way of conceiving of the public service consumer, a significant conceptual change as well as a change of practice. This was the era of a Public Service Orientation (PSO) (Clarke and Stewart 1985), of responsive public services, the rise of the consumer and the critique of local State socialism and of public sector producerism. The PSO was concerned with changing cultures, and it "...would undermine both departmentalism and professionalism by increasing the power of customers relative to providers" (Pollitt, 1990: 152). Consumerism was always deeply ambiguous in having different meanings and implications for different actors involved in public service, including the public, managers and elected representatives (Fenwick, 1989). But not to worry - this was the 1980s - fire up the Quattro, the consumer is powering through. This attempt to move local public services toward a market model envisaged society as atomised individuals privately 'consuming' their services, empowered by the existence of competition and, ostensibly, the growth of choice. Participation was conceived within this framework.

As the 1990s began, and Major succeeded Thatcher, the empowered consumer was handed something even more valuable: a statement of minimum expectations, along with some limited rights to redress if they didn't like what they were getting, underwritten from 1991 by the Citizen's Charter and the Patient's Charter. The Citizen's Charter included some mildly comedic elements - not least, the celebrated traffic cones hotline - but "...despite the criticisms, it is still the case that the Charter programme was one of the clearest articulations of the need to focus on the experience of public service users, and for services to be responsive to the people using them". (House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, 2008: 10). The Citizen's Charter was revamped in 1998 with a new (if now largely forgotten) emphasis on 'Service First'; the Patient's Charter was abolished in 2000. Things, it seemed, would be different from now on under New Labour.

Public Participation and New Labour 1997-2010

The emphasis on public participation was a remarkably persistent feature of the programme of each successive Labour government during this time. The influential early White Paper, *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People* (ODPM, 1998, paras 4.6-4.17), set out a lengthy list of changes – including referenda, more frequent elections, “innovations in electoral procedures”, a “duty to consult” - which would provide the opportunity for people to take a greater part in local affairs. The emphasis was clearly on process – on mechanisms – by which greater opportunities for participation would be provided. It would subsequently become clear enough (for instance, in the low turnout at referenda, and subsequent elections, relating to the establishment of elected mayor systems) that the people were not exactly pining for greater opportunities to take part - at least, not in the ways envisaged by government. Nonetheless, the drive toward more participation in its various forms remained strong during these thirteen years, indeed its impetus increased through each successive White Paper and discussion document. How can this persistence be explained?

A possible answer is that - as the opening quotations amply illustrate - the participation drive was not new. Thus it is unsurprising that it continued incrementally as before, building on the consumerist policies of the preceding Conservative administrations. But this is not entirely convincing. Although there were some continuities from Conservative to Labour, there were also different ideological strands within the broad drive toward participation. The scale and tone of the New Labour approach suggested – or claimed - something different. The real difference lies in the central importance of participation to the New Labour philosophy itself. This also accounts for its persistence. The government could not abandon participation without abandoning being New Labour. The drive to participation was an intrinsic part of the attempt to reconfigure the State. The old democratic

institutions were presented as outmoded, and could be represented as fundamentally un-modern. The rationale of New Labour itself was precisely about participation.

Yet this presented immediate problems. If attempts to stimulate participation are not working, this starts to suggest some problem with what New Labour is about. Hence – as was the case – attempts to increase participation are redoubled, not watered down. A more fundamental problem resides in the managed nature of participation in this period. In the name of extending democratic input through organisational reforms, in some ways the scope for democratic involvement was curtailed rather than expanded. The ways in which people would participate were prescribed from the centre, inviting a peculiarly passive sort of participation. Further, this was mirrored within the Labour Party itself, as a more passive role came to be expected from its members and perhaps (as we will suggest below) from public servants too. All this can be seen as part of an approach which conceived of participation as something that can be managed: an agenda which required not an active public, but a reactive one. This very approach makes participation more difficult.

The matter becomes more complex still. Although the New Labour years changed the emphasis of participation away from individual consumption of public services toward a focus upon communities, this was not a static one-off change. The conceptual weight given to the notion of community during the New Labour period changed during thirteen years in office. This can broadly be described as a move from Community Engagement, through Community Empowerment and finally, in the period 2008 to 2010, to Citizen Governance. Each of these conceptions of participative community involvement was reflected in the guiding documentation of the time: in 2005, the Office of Deputy Prime Minister published ‘New Localism – Citizen Engagement, Neighbourhoods and Local Government...’; the Local Government White Paper in 2006 referred to “changing the way we work to give citizens and communities a bigger say...” (DCLG, 2006c); in 2006, the Department for Communities and Local Government also provided a guide for local authorities entitled ‘Promoting Effective Citizenship and Community Empowerment’ which, perhaps significantly, offered guidance on helping people develop a ‘sense of empowerment’ (DCLG, 2006b, our emphasis). In 2007, along came ‘Champions of Participation: Engaging Citizens in Local Governance’, followed by the White Paper ‘Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power’ in 2008. Much relevant guidance was also issued: for instance at the end of 2009 there was specific guidance on how to evaluate programmes designed to empower communities (DCLG, 2009). Specific legislation, particularly in 2000, 2001 and 2007 has given statutory force to the relentless move toward further participation.

A significant literature has developed to chart and assess these developments. It cannot be reviewed comprehensively in the present paper, but Painter’s (1999) early account of the continuities between the preceding Conservative years and the advent of New Labour remains a useful place to start, for it

points up the ways in which the managerialism of the emergent New Labour philosophy was also to be found also in the party's own organisation (1999: 99). "Far from abandoning the managerialism of the Thatcher-Major years, under New Labour public management-speak...appeared to have arrived with a vengeance. This included its capacity to be highly centralist and prescriptive" (1999: 100).

Pratchett, in another early commentary, identified the essential link between participation and democracy: writing at the outset of the New Labour period he defined the twin concerns of his discussion as "...whether the latest fashions in public participation complement, replace or undermine existing institutions of representative democracy" alongside "the consideration of whose interests public participation serves" (1999: 617). Over a decade later, these remain vital questions. He refers to the earlier use of private-sector inspired consumer methods, before focussing upon the significance of Labour's linkage, at the 1997 election, of public participation and democratic renewal (1999: 619). Yet, as Pratchett recognised, the participation agenda could not be associated solely with Labour. It had after all been accepted across party political divisions (1999: 620). In the early years of New Labour government, then, he saw a coming-together of different strands relating to consumerism and participation, with different emphases and with a differential focus. This is a helpful way to envisage public participation in the early New Labour years. As argued within the present paper, it soon became apparent that New Labour thinking itself contained different conceptions of what participation was about, and where it was leading.

Looking specifically at the agenda for 'community leadership', Sullivan et al (2006) picked out some key issues of how the public perceived their relationship with the local authority. Rightly pointing out that community leadership arises from within the community itself, rather than being something exercised 'over' it, their discussion suggested that all was not well in assessing the 'challenges' involved (Sullivan et al (2006: 497-501):

- Engaging the Public ("some authorities seem trapped in dysfunctional consultative relationships with their communities")
- Providing Strategic Leadership ("We asked our interviewees whether there was a vision for the area and who represented it...")
- Developing Collaborative Capacity ("A significant proportion of our interviewees despaired at the complex and fragmented character of local governance")

Numerous studies have subsequently explored different aspects of the participation agenda. Barnes, Newman and Sullivan (2007) considered participation through the lens of politics and power, concentrating upon how their case-studies of public participation can provide insight into the dysfunctions as well as the positive impacts of specific interventions. Clarke et al (2007) reported in

detail on their ESRC/AHRC project on ‘citizen consumers’, deliberately placing the two terms together within a hybrid figure which brings together all the debates about state or market, individual customer or member of collective community and so on, pointing to the problematic nature of the terms within their very descriptions. It is interesting that both these studies, and others, suggest a focus on constructing the consumer/participant, rightly depicting the phenomenon as one of relationships as well as mechanisms. The participation agenda can even be inverted - and hence subverted. As the contributors to the collection by Barnes and Prior (2009) argue, closer co-option of the ‘responsible citizen’ in the delivery of public services can give the citizen (and public service staff) the opportunity to transform or ‘subvert’ the relationship that is offered to them by the state, changing – inverting - the meaning of the relationship.

A substantial policy-oriented literature has also arisen during the New Labour years. In an early but still important study, Lowndes et al (1998) asked the question, drawing from what would then have been experience gained under the Conservative administration, of ‘why do citizens participate?’ She and her fellow researchers found that motivation to participate tended to be prompted by the ‘big issues’ facing people locally; or by self-interest; or through self-image as a ‘community leader’, or through the simple fact of having been invited. There seems, from this, to be little evidence of an overwhelming groundswell of people wishing to participate. Even more interesting were the reasons given for not participating, including ‘overwhelmingly negative views of the council – its services, its officers, its members’; lack of information; typical lack of council response and, tellingly, the belief that it’s not for ‘people like me’.

If this is an accurate view of the beginning of the Labour years, there is little indication that much changed thereafter. Research carried out by BMG Research for the government and published in 2006 under the title ‘Perceptions of Local Government in England’ (DCLG, 2006a) suggested that few people had an understanding of the role of the local councillor, and, overall, public perceptions were negative: “driven by ego and desire for local recognition” (ibid, para 2.17); and that most consultation exercises tended to be “phoney” (ibid, para 2.30). A “central theme that ran through the research is that many respondents do not trust their local authority” (ibid, para 2.32) - in the sense of local councillors and also in the sense of the council as an entity delivering services. Again, does this imply a great unmet public demand to participate in this perceived state of affairs?

Yet there was still no shortage of initiatives. The Together We Can project launched in 2005 – a series of pilot projects sponsored by government to encourage local empowerment, partnership working and sharing of case study successes – generated interest. The government itself remained keen to commission and publish research on its own successes and failures. A report from the Department for Communities and Local Government: ‘Motivations and Barriers to Citizen Governance’ (DCLG,

2007) arose from the Together We Can initiative. The growth of the term 'citizen governance' is significant here. It denotes playing a formal part in one of the many (and growing) aspects of governance: eg, becoming a lay member of a police authority, a school governor, a youth offender panel member, member of a public panel and so on. Importantly for the participation agenda, governance had become increasingly diffuse, augmenting or even replacing the previously dominant role of the elected councillor. But did such diffusion reach wider members of the community, or just the familiar socio-economic groups who were already 'participating'? In the report, based on qualitative focus group research in several areas with a range of respondents, it was found that those who were participants regarded themselves as primarily volunteers rather than "citizen governors" (DCLG, 2007: 18). In the eyes of some respondents, taking on one of these roles was the province of the well educated and 'well to do' and those with plenty of spare time (a thesis which could be tested further in many areas of local governance, such as foundation trusts in England or community councils in Scotland). Barriers were seen as lack of time, lack of knowledge of how to get involved, and lack of confidence, and there was indeed some suspicion of the motivations of those who did 'get involved'. "Governance roles were seen as potentially cutting people off from their communities rather than making them champions for their communities". (DCLG, 2007: 48). In advancing citizen governance, the report recommended countering the "misconception" that governance roles are not open to "ordinary people". These findings are, of course, directly relevant to current advocates of the 'big society', particularly their assumption that people will actively and spontaneously participate in roles abandoned by a retreating state.

In the latter years of New Labour, the references to renewal through active citizenship, stronger communities and partnership working found their place into a succession of policy papers and evaluation reports. By the end of Labour's tenure in government in 2010, old-style consumerism had gone through numerous further incarnations as participation, involvement, empowerment and citizen governance. Each successive document and discussion paper had ratcheted up the tone and the language, if not the practice. In Spinal Tap terms, the participation dial had definitely been turned up to 11. But what did this actually mean, in practical terms, for the public?

There remained, at the close of the Labour ascendancy, an essential problem of practice. This was the difficulty of establishing exactly how greater participation takes place, what it looks like, and what it is for: a vehicle of change, a means of producing certain outcomes, or – as seemed to be the case – an end in itself? Part of the answer was the slightly abstract reasoning that the changes in the political management of local councils provided elected councillors with an enhanced role in community leadership: thus the impetus toward greater participation was in part to be addressed by proxy, through newly empowered democratic representatives. This is however a rather indirect way of dealing with the question. Certainly, a range of more direct participative mechanisms has been

extensively discussed and some were implemented. Serious attention was given to practical methods of participation in the initial White Paper (ODPM, 1998). Subsequently, for instance, postal voting became much more easily obtainable. There was a flurry of interest in citizen juries in the health service and in local government. Voting at every local supermarket didn't quite happen, but public panels have been established widely in local councils, and area and neighbourhood forums are common. There is no doubt that at least some of these have become 'embedded' in the local structures of the State, and that they form a part of the broadened notion of participation – perhaps even of citizen governance - which was an important part of the discourse of participation in the latter New Labour years.

However, some significant issues remain unresolved in any review of public participation under New Labour. First, there is no evidence that, during this period, participation extended beyond the groups in society who were already more likely to participate, although it is recognised that such groups now have more and easier opportunities to take part (for instance, in England, in their local NHS trust, school governing body etc). Secondly, and more difficult to address, there is no evidence of an unmet wish from the rest of the population to participate in what is on offer: the government certainly focussed on supply-side mechanisms of participation but gave little attention to the demand side, raising the uncomfortable issue of whether the entire emphasis on participation is based on a false premise of unsatisfied demand. Thirdly, and most difficult of all, is the nature of New Labour itself, with its strands of centralisation and decentralisation, managerialism and libertarianism, statism and empowerment, in sometimes unhappy combination: these may conspire to ensure that such a managed form of participation could never have succeeded. These issues will be explored further in the next two sections of this paper, before offering some overall conclusions.

Participation, New Labour and Centralisation

The tension between decentralisation and centralisation created problems for the drive toward greater public participation under New Labour, as it had for consumerism during the Conservative years. The public participation agenda, under the Blair governments in particular, ran alongside a powerful political will to devolve power through decentralisation of services and the formal devolution of decision making responsibility. The former was partially an outcome of the inherited position that greeted the Labour Party in 1997. The civil service, for example, had been reduced in numbers, and (it might be argued) in knowledge capacity. Thus the traditional instinct to centralise became a practical impossibility. This left the Blair governments with an interesting dilemma that was never fully remedied: how does the core executive ensure the successful implementation of reform without itself militating against the purpose of those reforms? It can be suggested that the resultant failure of the

public participation agenda in fully meeting its intended outcomes was not limited only to the public, but that an unintended consequence involved reduced participation of public servants themselves.

This is an important aspect of the participation debate, for in this analysis public servant participation is represented by the devolution of responsibility and authority within the public reform agenda. Certainly, across all areas of the public services, the New Labour agenda of reform was aimed at allowing local decision making for local problems: a move away from the `one big solution` approach of the previous Conservative governments. Yet the issue remained of how to maintain control centrally to ensure the reform drive and momentum was carried through. The urge of governments - and New Labour was no different - was to reach for centralist tools to maintain decentralist approaches. The `rubber levers` (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010) were replaced by a strong centralising force in the form of fiscal control through the Treasury. As Rhodes (1998) intimates, the idea of breaking down public bureaucracies and allowing the reform agenda to roll out at local level depends in part on trust. It is this trust that the Blair governments did not fully come to terms with in the participation agenda, and indeed thus undermined the capacity of public bureaucrats to make meaningful decisions.

The devolution of formal decision-making powers through the varying national and regional devolution settlements provides another layer of analysis in considering public participation. Relationships of trust need to exist between central government and local public servants. Under devolution, civil servant participation was limited by formal decision making processes, but was also limited by the ability of elected representatives to defend against centralising forces. Rhodes et al (2003) showed that in the regional civil services there was concern around the governing capacity and potential of the `new` politicians, a lack of trust from civil servants in politicians. Added to this is the often unrecognised assumption that the public have the knowledge and desire to participate fully in the new governance.

New Labour governments, particularly under Blair, may have decentralised in order to centralise - and, conversely, used centralised tools to underwrite decentralisation. Hence participation often seemed a strangely awkward combination of bottom-up `renewal` and highly managed process, in which public servants as well as the public themselves were allocated a specified and at times ambiguous script. The national devolution settlements added another formal level of government, making Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland highly governed in the formal sense without considering the successive moves (for example in network governance) which made the constituent nations highly governed in the informal sense. England, although not part of a devolution settlement, has also seen a centralisation of the governing structures. For example, the Government Offices were conceived of as the voice of the regions in Whitehall instead the central control mechanisms meant

that the power relationships produced the opposite outcome in practice (McMillan and Massey, 2001; Rhodes et al, 2003). In this, there was little participation for civil servants beyond the geographical boundaries of Whitehall.

The tensions between centralisation and decentralisation continue under the UK Conservative/ Liberal Democrat coalition government. The announcement of the abolition of the last vestiges of regional representation in England has brought participation of both public and public servant to the fore again. A series of announcements in the early months of the coalition has signalled the end of regional development agencies, leaders' boards, regional planning strategies and government offices for the regions. Explicitly, this is done in order to achieve a greater localism, and this will no doubt reopen discussion of the perennial problem of identifying community and how it is to be represented (see Fenwick and McMillan, 2008; Elcock, Fenwick and McMillan 2010). Of course, experience suggests the gap could just as well be filled by a renewed and relatively unrestrained centralisation. The coalition government may find an ever bigger problem than its predecessor in dealing with the gap between rhetoric and reality.

Participation, New Labour and Mutualism

In considering the nature of New Labour, it should not be overlooked that both Gordon Brown and Ed Balls are members of the Co-operative Party as well as the Labour Party. Thus far, this has been neglected in assessments of the overall record of New Labour. The salient point for our discussion is that the co-operative and mutual strand within Labour political ideology is longstanding, and – moreover – is historically distinct from both statist welfarism and Blairite managerialism. During the latter years of New Labour government this mutualist tradition began to generate distinct policy initiatives, most significantly the creation of foundation schools linked to co-operative trusts rather than private sector sponsors. This is relevant to any review of public participation under New Labour.

Co-operative values are easily stated: they include commitments to democracy, self-help, self-responsibility, equality, equity and solidarity and ethics; overall co-operative principles are voluntary and open membership, democratic control by members, members' economic participation, autonomy and independence, providing education and training for members, co-operation with other co-operators, and concern for the wider community (Cooperative College, 2010b). These principles form the basis of a co-operative 'identity', defined by the International Co-operative Alliance (2007) as follows:

“A co-operative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly- owned and democratically-controlled enterprise”.

In its later years, New Labour encouraged the growth of the co-operative model as a basis for forming trust schools, run by a foundation trust and with a measure of autonomy, while remaining part of the state sector. They are not academies. The first co-operative trust school, announced in 2008, was Reddish Vale Technology College, an 11-16 comprehensive in Stockport. Its trust is a “membership based organisation which shares the international co-operative movement’s values and principles”. Partners include the local authority, Stockport College, the Co-operative Group and the Co-operative College. (See: <http://trust.reddish.stockport.sch.uk/index.php>). The second co-operative trust school was set up in 2009 when Campsmount Technology College, Doncaster, became a Foundation Trust School, with partners from education and the co-operative movement (Fenwick and Gibbon, 2009). Ed Balls, then the government Minister responsible, stated in September 2008 an intention to create 100 co-operative trust schools “owned and controlled by the local community” (Wintour, 2008). The co-operative model was specified in detail within then government policy, where the link to underlying values was made explicit. By the time of the General Election 2010, the stated objective appeared to have been met, 63 schools having become co-operative trusts, with the prospect (when the number of schools going through the statutory notice period are added to the total) of over 100 co-operative trust schools by September 2010 (Cooperative College, 2010a).

The present paper is not the place to debate the relative merits of different forms of educational governance, but this development in schools policy has a twofold importance for the present discussion. First, it highlights a distinct strand of Labour thinking that has been present throughout the history of the party but, during the early Blair years in government, tended to be sidelined amidst the fanfare for full-scale managerial modernisation. Secondly, it represents an aspect of participation that repays further examination in any final assessment of New Labour’s record. It connects directly to the participation agenda by beginning to provide an interpretation of public participation with its roots in a specific and long established set of values, which are part of but distinct from the overall New Labour enterprise. Although growing, this element was underdeveloped by the time Labour lost office.

The coalition government now asserts an interest in co-operativism too, though this is placed alongside such a rapidly escalating and disparate series of policy changes in educational provision that any overall statement of prospects is – for the moment – impossible.

Conclusions: Making Sense of the Participation Agenda

There is no doubt that some of the specific mechanisms of participation introduced between 1997 and 2010 have been successful in limited ways: public panels appear to work well in local government; minor delegated spending on the appearance of the local area allocated through decision of a neighbourhood forum is common, and has doubtless made a modest but visible difference to the lives of some people. Equally, some reforms during this period have proceeded in quite the opposite direction: to continue our example of school governance, for instance, there is no longer any provision for parents to participate in an annual meeting of the governing body (in England) as the annual meeting and report was dropped in favour of a 'school profile' document (itself since abandoned).

More important than specific instances of whether participation has advanced or receded is the overall picture – an overview of whether the participation agenda as a whole can be judged to have been successful – and here there seems little firm ground for coming to a positive conclusion. The final report of the meta-evaluation of the government's modernisation programme (Bovaird et al, 2009) is perhaps the most thorough assessment of the impact of a range of policy interventions during the period in question. The relevant section of the Executive Summary – 'engagement' – is expressed cautiously:

"Policy makers at all levels need to be patient in their pursuit of improved outcomes through stakeholder engagement.

Central government needs to help to simplify local partnership arrangements and reporting arrangements. Councils and their local partners need to enable local citizens to easily understand how to hold them to account" (Bovaird et al, 2009: 7)

As the evaluation explicitly sought to examine the links between different policies and initiatives, there is no discrete verdict on participation in isolation, but the section of the main report dealing with 'stakeholder engagement' is of relevance to our discussion, in suggesting that:

"...Government policies (in particular LSPs, community strategies and the best value regime) were credited by local authority officers and other interviewees with having encouraged councils to engage with local partners and with service users...

Engagement with service users was positively (but weakly) associated with officer perceptions of service quality, staff satisfaction, and the ability of residents to hold authorities to account. But it was negatively associated with user satisfaction. The implication of these findings would appear to be that user engagement is more common when users are dissatisfied with services but that over time engagement leads to improvements in service quality.

There was a positive association between engagement with voluntary sector organisations and responsiveness to user needs, joined-up provision, and the effectiveness of other local stakeholders in holding authorities to account. But it was negatively associated with service effectiveness...

There was a positive association between engagement with other local public bodies and partners and improvements in service quality, joined-up provision, community leadership and several measures of accountability (including effectiveness in explaining decisions to other local stakeholders, the ability of other local stakeholders to hold local authorities to account and perceived improvements in the accountability of senior managers). The negative associations with the ability of residents to hold the authority to account and an effective executive may indicate the tensions of partnership working – authorities with an effective executive may feel less pressure to work through partners and authorities which are under pressure from residents may need to demonstrate their own internal capability of dealing with local issues.” (Bovaird, 2009: 41)

Certainly the evaluation report captures the complexity of links within the whole modernisation programme. The words of this section allude to what could at best be described as unfinished business.

More recently, the Citizenship Survey 2009-10 (DCLG, 2010) has presented a range of statistical information relating to ‘empowered and active communities’. In the section entitled ‘influencing decisions’, it is reported that in 2009-10, 37% of people “felt they could influence decisions in their local area”. This is lower than 44% in 2001 and 39% in 2008-09. The report adds however that this is “not significantly different from 2007-08 (38%)” (DCLG, 2010:2).

No doubt such data can be presented in a number of ways but it is difficult to draw a positive conclusion from this. Further, in the section entitled ‘civic engagement’, it is reported that, in 2009-10, 34% of people “engaged in some form of civic participation, such as contacting a local councillor, attending a public meeting or signing a petition”. Again, this is lower than in 2001 (38%), 2007-08 (39%) and 2008-09 (38%) (DCLG, 2010:2). Additionally, in the section on ‘volunteering’ – highly relevant to current political debates – 25% of people in 2009-10 had “volunteered formally at least once a month” in the past year. Once again, this is lower than in 2003 (28%), 2005 (29%), and 2007-08 (27%) – although, the report adds, “not significantly different from 2001 (27%) and 2008-09 (26%)”. (DCLG, 2010: 2).

The selection of specific years summarised here is the selection made in the report itself, and the judgement about what is significant is similarly the one made in the report. If ‘influencing decisions’, ‘civic engagement’ and ‘volunteering’ are indicators of public participation there is no basis for concluding that such participation has been extended during the years 2001-10. Indeed there is evidence that it has declined.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, in empirical terms, the participation agenda has largely failed in its stated objectives. As noted above, this is not to say that every specific participation initiative has failed. Mechanisms for participation have been introduced where they did not previously exist, but they are only mechanisms - not changes in the relationship with the public. Fundamentally, by depicting empowerment as a managerial issue and a question about processes – where and how often to vote, choosing one new form of political management from a list compiled by government, and, at the very end of the New Labour period, the prospect of some limited participation in choices about voting reform - rather than conceiving of it as a political problem, government ensured that its own participation agenda could not succeed.

Yet configuring participation in this way was politically important for government. It was a key motif of New Labour. It was symbolically important, something that had to be present within the New Labour enterprise, part of its character. It was resolutely modern. Participation would be defined from the centre and managed from there.

We would therefore conclude:

The participation agenda was an intrinsic part of the character of New Labour, not an ‘add on’. Viewed in this light, its persistence – indeed, its ever-increasing importance - during thirteen years was entirely understandable, even in the absence of any strong evidence that it was proving successful. To abandon participation initiatives would have been to abandon a core tenet of New Labour.

In some respects – the managerial approach, the centralist instincts – the nature of the New Labour approach to participation helped to ensure that it could not succeed. The way in which the issue was defined carried within it the reasons why it would fail.

New Labour as a philosophy and programme comprised different elements, ranging from the received traditions of State-oriented welfarism, a corporatist conception of central-local relations, Blairite managerialism, and mutual co-operativism. The last of these, in some of the policy initiatives of the final two years of the Labour period, provided a different lens through which to view participation, in emphasising values rather than processes.

There is little evidence from empirical sources that the participation initiatives of the period can be judged a resounding success. It appears – as the earliest research suggested at the very beginning of the New Labour incumbency – that people are still largely motivated, if motivated at all, by negative issues, by factors that immediately affect them, or by those that affect their families.

New Labour offered a managed model of participation. The coalition government – if a coherent view of participation can yet be discerned – offers an individualist approach: volunteer to provide a service, set up a free school of your own, use the part of the health service that you find most attractive, encapsulated in the White Paper on the NHS as follows.

“We want the principle of “shared decision-making” to become the norm: no decision about me without me.” (Dept of Health, 2010: 13, emphasis in original)

The current prospect for participation and for public service reform is ultimately a market and demand model that potentially goes much further than that of the pre-1997 Conservative government. Unexpectedly, the opening words of Margaret Thatcher, from more than a generation ago, now suddenly seem timely.

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