

Empowerment, Spin or Substance?

Contradictions and Possibilities

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When the Labour government was elected in 1997 it introduced a whole new dictionary, a lexicon of political language, based on the notion of the 'Third Way'. This idea of politics being in part composed of language, and 'discourses' which actually have effects in changing climates, and attitudes and then behaviours is at the heart of understanding aspects of current social policies.

The meanings of terms like

'community', 'involvement', 'consultation', 'engagement', 'empowerment' and 'regeneration' and 'renewal' are 'contested' or 'slippery'. They are typical of a discourse where people may be

'Using the same words, but speaking different languages'.

Consider the term 'empowerment' which has at first encounter embodies the idea of power somehow being moved and given to people or communities. Traditionally power was seen by many social scientists as part of a 'zero sum game'. If someone gained power, someone else had to lose it. Those activists involved in social movements like June Jordan a Black feminist in the U.S. declared that 'power could only be taken, not given' in other words the very process of gaining power was the empowerment.

Many of you will have considered Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation which clarifies different stages of community development and empowerment. In the latest statements on 'empowerment' the Communities and Local Government department clarifying their definitions in the White Paper 'Communities in Control: Impact Assessment' (July 2008) changes the rules again.

Empowerment is defined as helping citizens and communities to acquire the confidence, skills and power to enable them to shape and influence their local place and services. It also includes the provision of support to national and local government agencies to develop, promote and deliver effective engagement and empowerment opportunities.

A distinction should be made between subjective and objective empowerment. The subjective aspect of empowerment relates to a sense of efficacy and is measured by the extent to which people feel that they can influence local (and/or national) conditions and decisions. The objective aspect relates to whether people truly have and use power and is measured by the extent to which people actually participate in and influence their local (and/or national) conditions and decisions. There are also different depths of engagement, participation, and therefore, empowerment ranging from information provision through to citizen control. **The White Paper recognises this in its chapter structure, which is broadly based on Sherry Arnstein's 'Ladder of Citizen Participation', but presents these stages of participation not as a ladder but a spectrum where the citizen engages at a given level without an expectation of 'climbing the ladder' to deeper stages of participation**(emphasis added).

That's clear then....empowerment is a 'spectrum' rather than a ladder.

The words are then very important and go to the heart of the government's **contradictory policies**.

I believe that radical or popular community development is at core part of a process of 'changing the world'. It entails working with people in a process which can demonstrate that collectively we are not powerless, in

the words of the Social Forum movement 'another world is possible'. This 'transforming' element in cd was never part of the government's agenda.

At the centre of the switch to another period of 'poverty programmes' after 1997 was the centre staging of the **notion of social exclusion**. But the obverse of this was that 'social inclusion' became a central aim of policy and of community development. We have to remind ourselves that social 'inclusion' does not entail political or social change, at best simply including the 'excluded' minority into a society which apparently is fine and works well.

I remember some years ago speaking at the Coop college at a conference on 'Neighbourhood Management'. I was not popular with civil servants there for pointing out that at a local level it was more efficient local public service 'management', and 'better value' (i.e. cheaper) local services which were in the small print of the government agenda NOT neighbourhood democracy, or new rights to services. Management means someone is managing. It also means that 'they' have to count and quantify to manage – familiar agenda? Social Exclusion Unit in 2000 in its fourth Policy Action Team report, which set out the role of neighbourhood management as: *"...to help deprived communities and local services improve local outcomes, by improving and joining up local services, and making them more responsive to local needs."*

Of course we now count and evaluate quite happily, we even commodify people's enthusiasm and ideals in notions such as 'social capital'. We are enthusiastically involved in 'capacity building' for 'community regeneration' and 'partnership building'. Sometimes we should perhaps look beyond the latest training session or partnership 'busy' meeting to the world out there, at present crashing around us.

In fact housing and particularly life on council estates are a salutary lesson in the way that cd has been annexed to government policies, and stripped of any notion of being involved in independent community campaigning or resourcing protest. Millions of council homes for rent have been privatised;

many have been transferred and sold to housing associations. Tenants have understandably exercised their right to buy, but not one tenants group has initiated or demanded Large Scale **Voluntary** transfer of their homes. Where has cd been in this social revolution?

Surveys of community development workers suggest few see campaigning as part of their role. Scottish surveys in traditional radical territory have also suggested that cd workers simply opted out of 'housing' issues.

Being 'In and Against the State' has now often been swapped for a role in servicing partnerships, training for skills in running voluntary organisations providing public services, or 'extending the police family' through community safety and ASB programmes.

In one of the classic studies of community development Keith Pople argued:

In this paradigm community workers are situated in a pivotal position within the civil society, for although they are often employees of the state and are required to play a part in maintaining the social system, they are not necessarily in agreement with its ideology. Accordingly community workers have opportunities to work alongside members of communities as they articulate their contradictory understanding of the world and their situation within it. This theory also proposes that community work is concerned with moving from the terrain of ideas and discussion and into transforming action to change people's material situation.'

There has been a great deal of energy expended on the idea of Voluntary Sector Compacts which guarantee the independence of local organisations. The reality seems to be that although the government trumpets the fact that the Third Sector has a role in campaigning

The third sector is a vital component of a fair and enterprising society, where individuals and communities feel empowered and enabled to achieve change and to meet social and environmental needs. The Government

recognises the value of the diversity of organisations in the sector in providing voice for underrepresented groups, in campaigning for change, in creating strong, active and connected communities, in promoting enterprising solutions to social and environmental challenges and in transforming the delivery and design of public services. The third sector has always been at the heart of social and environmental change and the Government wants to continue to work to create the conditions where organisations can grow and achieve their aims.

The final report of the third sector review sets out a series of measures to build the partnership with the third sector. The key announcements are:

a new focus on enabling the third sector's role in campaigning and voice activity, including investment in innovative consultation approaches and better using the Compact to protect the right of organisations to campaign

The future role of the third sector in social and economic regeneration: final report Cabinet Office July 2007

The reality is somewhat different. In housing the CLG has actually agreed a funding package with TAROE a national organisation for tenants which specifically exclude use of the grant for housing campaigns. Conservative boroughs in London are making sweeping cuts in the voluntary sector; tenants' federations are still being closed down for opposition to transfer. The actual situation on 'Voice' and Campaigning is revealed in a recent document from the Ministry of Justice who:

'Recognise and respect the independence of the third sector and the right for third sector organisations to campaign whether or not they are under contract to deliver services. Funding and contracting agreements should not act as a barrier to campaigning activity. We must ensure that we keep separate the legitimate campaigning voice of third sector organisations and any commissioning and commercial activities' (Ministry of Justice 2008 Third Sector Strategy p.8)

In other words you can campaign as long as you don't use money from commissions or contracts. As a large segment of funding comes from state contracts, service level agreements etc this is an effective gag on campaigning organisations.

When government policy really collides with voluntary sector actions then Compacts seem to be irrelevant. When the Lottery agreed to fund NCADC (National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns) David Blunkett unleashed an attack on the funder. In practice the radical cd sector has to resort to the courts for redress. Southall Black Sisters has recently won its case against the council which threatened its very existence using 'human rights' definitions developed by the government.

Regeneration and Neighbourhood Renewal actually disempowers.....

For all the money, voluntary time and effort expended over the last 10 years in 'regeneration' and renewal areas, independent research (as opposed to commissioned research and 'evaluations'), suggests that 'involvement' and 'engagement' in terms of the number of community groups, tenants groups and federations, has actually declined. Grant driven initiatives have not been 'sustainable' and few are being 'mainstreamed'.

Even the Commissioned research for the CLG has really struggled to provide any evidence of improved empowerment or involvement in Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders.

'Community engagement is a critical dimension of neighbourhood management, and this is one area where attempts have been made to gather evidence about impacts, even if the results are not conclusive.'
Only in '3% (4 Of 135) of the authorities the neighbourhood management approach is primarily focused on **engaging with and building the**

capacity of the community without a strong focus on service provider engagement.'

(CLG 2008 Neighbourhood Management – Beyond the Pathfinders October)

It is really difficult to see many of these targeted areas or ABI's (Area Based Initiatives) as 'empowered' communities with their LSP's and Local Area Agreements, and surely not the '**cohesive, empowered and active communities**' promised again in the most recent (2008) CLG policy paper 'Transforming Places, Changing Lives' setting out the framework of 'Regeneration'.

'Communities in Control; Real People: Real Power' July 2008

Suggests that we are moving on from the 'participatory democracy' of Neighbourhood Renewal! this White Paper aims to address directly the 'democratic deficit' (low turnout for elections and a lack of trust in politics and politicians).

There will be a new duty on local authorities 'to promote democracy', and previous Best Value (code for things which are inspected) requirement on local authorities to 'involve' people will be a requirement for other public bodies and 'quangos'.

Moving on from the 'participatory democracy' of Neighbourhood Renewal, the White Paper aims to address directly the 'democratic deficit' (low turnout for elections and a lack of trust in politics and politicians).

We believe that political activity is a worthwhile and essential part of British life, and we want to restore people's faith in politics.(p1)

This White Paper views political participation and democratic control in this light – not as a privilege grudgingly bequeathed to the citizenry by those with power, but as an activity fundamental to the definition of 'citizen', to be claimed as a right.

Communities in control: real people, real power has a simple aim: to pass power into the hands of local communities so as to generate vibrant local democracy in every part of the country and give real control over local decisions and services to a wider pool of active citizens. (p12)

The assumption running throughout this White Paper is that **political**

activity is valuable and worthwhile, should be recognised and rewarded, and is an essential part of Britain's national life. We want to challenge the stereotypes of politics and take on the cynicism which corrodes our political system. We aim to show that by engaging in politics people can enact beneficial change, serve their communities, develop their own skills and experience and contribute to a strong society and nation(p 13)

Local Charters, Citizens' Juries, Participatory Budgeting, Petitions and Calls for Action are listed as methods to be used .There is also a 'Power Pack' to help organise activities but.....

Already the LGA and councillors have watered down the proposals.

Local government will have to fund initiatives.

Only limited budgets will be available for participatory budgeting

Contradictory Policies – the 'secure' and responsible community

All this Spin on empowerment is happening at the same time as at community level we see the emergence of government policies and initiatives which have profound authoritarian and divisive effects rather than empowering ones.

- a punitive and custodial approach to social problems
- the 'responsibilisation' of neighbourhoods
- the growth of the racist Right and a climate of racism and division of working class communities
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The Problem of 'Order'- the punitive and custodial democracy

Public language about racism, active citizens and community 'engagement' is often combined with an overpowering emphasis on social order and punitive policing at local levels, and a very negative social and political image for young people. Since 1997 Labour has put over 1000 new

criminal offences into law most associated with the perceived threat of 'disorder' by young people.

This is a serious issue for community development and adult education because often the active citizens who emerge in local groups in this climate are those demanding a 'law and order' quick fix from government. We already have more surveillance cameras in the UK than anywhere in Europe (4.2 million, 1 for every 14 citizens) and yet community activists demand even more. ASB (Anti-social behaviour) has become one of the main issues community activists want to discuss on all training courses. Community activists are invited to join 'the police family' as neighbourhood wardens with some police powers, and volunteers working in police stations.

The UK has now the largest data base of DNA in Europe with one third of young Black British men represented there. A nation of citizens is becoming a nation of 'suspects'. The results of these trends have to an extent simply reduced local freedoms particularly those of young people. England and Wales with a record 81,592 citizens in prison (January 2008) probably the largest prison population in the EU, had in 2006, 3,350 young people (under 18) in custody, and has prosecuted 210,000 young people for criminal offences. England and Wales lock up 23 children per 100, 00 population France 6, Spain 2 and Finland 0.2 .A nation of citizens is also rapidly becoming a 'custodial democracy'.

In South Yorkshire the impacts of closures in the coal and steel industries, privatisation and continued loss of manufacturing jobs had by 2007 created an area with relatively low unemployment but a low wage and high benefits area, and growing service economy with a high dependence on public sector jobs. This is changing yet again almost as we speak with a major recession looming and cuts in public service employment. These rapid changes have created an atmosphere of personal and family, job and economic, insecurities. They have fostered neighbourhood anxieties and fear of 'crime' and 'disorder'.

Globalisation of labour markets has rapidly increased flows of migrant workers and 'illegal' migrants. In the U.K, particularly in the old industrial

areas, like South Yorkshire it is linked to a politics and media more and more proclaiming bigotry and intolerance, and mindless nationalism, typical of, a country, actually at war – at war with ‘Terror’, and the peoples of Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Responsibilisation not Rights

In the U.K. we have drifted into a world dominated by the ideas of the conservative communitarians of the U.S. In this world citizens already have their rights. What they have to share with governments and political elites are responsibilities. But it is not the wealthy that have to develop ‘responsibilisation’, but the poor and the socially excluded.

Active citizens in their positive roles according to the New Labour definitions should restrict their activism and work in partnerships with the local and national state, or follow the middle classes and become volunteers and givers to charities and media ‘appeals’. Community development workers seem often to have bought this definition .In 2003 in a national survey of community development workers in the UK less than 40% were willing to mention ‘campaigning’ as part of their work, and now the percentage is probably even less. We surely have to be conscious of the fact that in a period of widening inequalities and social divisions to retreat to a neutral facilitator role abandoning core values is in practice to become the ‘sticking plaster’, the therapist, the counsellor not an agent of change, bringing resources for a broad struggle for social change.

Community developers and ‘trainers’ are told local communities, particularly poor and working class communities, need capacity building, and more social capital to exercise these responsibilities. They have to take responsibility for their own poverty, for crime and ‘community safety’, and now in the U.K., British Asian ‘communities’ are told they have to take responsibility for ethnic divisions, even ‘terror’.

A Common Sense Racism?

Political discourses, within which community development operates, by 2004 had forefronted the manufacture of further fears and divisions in

communities, with the demonising of the migrant, the 'asylum seeker' as the root of social ills. 9/11 and the Iraq War in 2003 heightened tensions.

As Sivanandan has put it we face

'a politics of prejudice and fear to create a culture of xeno-racism and Islamophobia; the asylum seeker at the gate and the shadowy Muslim within'

The result was the generalising of a 'common sense racism' infecting debates and political practice. Symptomatic of this was the rise of the Fascist Right, the BNP. Yorkshire became the fastest growing region for racist parties, and election of BNP and UKIP councillors. By May 2004 126,000 people voted for the BNP in European and Local elections in Yorkshire and the Humber region. Where they stood they averaged 16% of the vote. In May 2005 the biggest increase in the BNP vote was in Yorkshire where their vote increased from 3,245 in 2001 to 60,990 in 2005, representing 2.8% of the regional total. Indeed at the local elections of May 2007 Yorkshire alone still accounted for nearly a third of the entire vote for the BNP in the UK. In Barnsley, the BNP were able to field 14 candidates in 2006 and 18 candidates and garner 8,000 votes in May 2007. In May 2008 the BNP had a candidate standing in 20 of the 21 wards in the town. Nearby Rotherham elected two BNP councillors.

Government policies have fuelled these racist trends. Recent legislation and events in the U.K. have actually redefined citizens and the very meanings of citizenship. Asylum seekers and refugees, and migrant workers 'without papers' are simply seen as 'illegal'. These are not people who have committed illegal acts: stripped of their rights, their very person, their identity is illegal. The UK Audit Commission estimated in 2006 that there were 285,000 'failed' asylum seekers who have no legal status or state support, and are being pursued for deportation (Narey 2006 p.32).

The emergence of a category called 'illegals' is a fundamentally new twist to state racism. The spectre of a Nazi legal world looms with people without any rights who can be abused and detained without recourse to any legal protection. With failed asylum seekers and migrant workers the current estimate in the U.K. is anything between one million and two

million people. Citizenship in Britain is now about both 'inclusion' and 'exclusion'. Judith Shklar describes

'A symbolic glass floor - citizens exist above the floor and can look down on those beneath who are excluded from citizenship and are thus the most deprived in society' .

Government policies also reinforce the attacks on 'multiculturalism' and openly link community cohesion to 'tackling extremism' in funding for community projects. Taken together these aspects of government policy within a climate defined by the New Racism described above have the effect of disempowering communities, fragmenting groups and dividing communities of interest against each other.