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The long march to collaborative democracy and open source planning – public participation in English local governance

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Note, June 2015: Four years and a general election later it seems worth putting this paper into the public domain. The book project it was part of never materialised, so it has been gathering metaphorical dust on my hard drive ever since. The Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition was less than a year old when I wrote the paper, and much has since been written about its localism and planning ‘reforms’. However, this analysis of how we arrived at ‘the Big Society’ in 2010 is still of interest, I believe, even if the ‘Big Society’ itself became seen as a ‘toxic brand’ and was rather rapidly dropped. The ideas live on in current policy and it is important to know that they are part of a long trajectory. I haven’t updated the text –it’s still in the present tense about the ‘new’ government of 2010.

Introduction

The new UK national government has proclaimed its commitment to localism - decentralisation and empowerment of ‘the public’ across the realm of public administration. Explicitly linked to increasing local democracy, albeit in the novel form of ‘collaborative democracy’, this drive is exemplified by the current reforms of the land use planning system which will (in principle) initiate a radically decentralised, neighbourhood-based and people-driven process of ‘open source planning’. Radical though this may sound, it follows on from twenty-five years of almost continuous so-called reforms of English local governance and planning, most of which have embraced, in principle at least, the same ideals of a changed relationship between local government and the state which will give ‘the people’ a more influential and direct voice in governance. This paper therefore aims to provide an understanding of the current wave of reforms and suggest ways of making some kind of evaluation of their likely effects through seeing them as part of a continuous narrative, or set of narratives.

From this perspective, the prognosis is not very rosy. Despite the democratic ambitions espoused in the rhetoric, the outcomes have been very uneven and, in democratic terms, far less substantial – while some institutional change has occurred, and it is clearly the case that many new actors are involved in policy making, there has been very little progress on engaging the (unorganised) public, and still less on the empowerment of marginalised groups.

Given the breadth, complexity, and unevenness in outcomes of this apparent ‘participatory turn’ it is impossible to provide a comprehensive description of all the relevant policy and institutional changes within the confines of a single paper. However, given that this *has* been a broad sweep of ‘reforms’ to local governance, description and analysis of a single initiative

would be too narrow. In this paper I therefore take a more analytical approach, firstly identifying in the participatory turn intertwined yet contradictory ideologies whose working can be observed across the entire range of policy fields, which both explain the lack of radical transfer of power to ‘the people’ so far, and lead me to suggest that the most recent proposed reforms will be equally unimpressive. Secondly I suggest that critical (normative) analysis is to some extent hampered by a theoretical political language of ‘representative’ and ‘participatory’ democracy which is inappropriate to the current situation, and can be used to mystify and justify governance reforms which transfer power away from the public in the name of increasing democracy.

Following some important contextualising remarks, the next section gives – as simply as possible and despite the comment made above – an overview of the development of public participation in local governance since the sustained ‘turn to participation’ started in the late 1980s. The central section provides the analysis in terms of three contrasting ideological strands: a neo-liberal drive towards both individualisation and diminishing the role of the (local) state; a communitarian reformist agenda, often coupled with a commitment to sustainable development; and a (generally weaker) radical empowerment agenda. The final section addresses the implications of these developments for theoretical understandings of local democracy, and argues for a more fundamental analysis of what ‘counts as’ democratic which can be applied across the complex networks which constitute local governance, based on Plotke’s insistence on the centrality of representation to all governance processes (Plotke 1997).

Two preliminary notes on scope and terminology.

Firstly, this paper is about England in particular, rather than the United Kingdom as a whole. Over the same period that decentralisation and public participation at the local, municipal level has purportedly gained in importance, the UK has gone through processes of decentralisation of responsibilities from the ‘national’, ‘central’ government in London to the ‘devolved administrations’ in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Each of these has its own political and cultural context and, to some extent, gone its own way with governance reform. In England the current (March 2011) situation is very open and fluid, as the key legislation for the new government’s ‘localism’ initiative is still passing through Parliament.

Secondly, to avoid ambiguity throughout the paper I use ‘governance’ in a broad sense to mean ‘processes for the regulation and mobilisation of social action’ in general (Healey 2006: 302). Within this I distinguish the ‘new governance’ as the evolving outcome of a widely recognised change from governmental domination of policy development and delivery to situations in which a range of stakeholders collaborate in flexible and often less formalised structures (i.e. ‘governance’ in the narrower sense used by Rhodes (1996).)

‘Public participation’ in English local governance

The recent developments of public participation in local governance have to be seen in relation to three, broader aspects of English society and politics. Over a long timescale, there

appears to be an underlying secular drift towards more public participation in governance, driven by popular aspiration. This can be tracked back over centuries, but in the recent, post-World War II period a speeding up was marked by: the political upheavals of the late 1960s; the introduction of public participation in land use planning in 1968; influential reports on public involvement in planning and social services in 1969; the abolition of unelected local councillors in 1974; and a series of experiments in community development by left-wing urban local authorities in the late 1960s and 1970s (Town & Country Planning Act 1968; HMSO 1968; MHLG 1969; Boaden *et al.* 1980). While these initiatives largely disappeared in the 1980s, in the face of changes brought in by a radical, neoliberal central government, their memories and the legal and policy changes are still important, having left an institutional and cultural legacy which to some extent has influenced later approaches to participation (Stoker 1991).

Perhaps more constant has been an unequal and often tense relationship between central and local levels of government. Despite a long history of legally-constituted local administrations, the modern system of local government has no constitutional status – local authorities literally are ‘creatures’ of central government, and could, in principle, be abolished by national legislation (Wilson and Game 2006). All local government powers are devolved by statute from the centre, and the exercising of these powers is further constrained and directed by central government policy and control over resources. Since 1990 approximately three quarters of local government finances have been provided by central government, at levels fixed by the centre rather than calculated locally. The remainder is raised by local authorities themselves through charges and taxes (on residents but *not* businesses) but central government retains some indirect control through ‘capping’ the level of local taxation. Until very recently, central control was yet further reinforced by an elaborate system of performance indicators and targets, scrutinised and enforced by the national Audit Commission (Wilson and Game 2006). Public participation in governance at the local level is thus affected (and often constrained) by a combination of central government policy on governance, the lack of scope for independent local-level policy making on service delivery in which the public might wish to be involved, compounded by perennial resource limitations, in part imposed by the centre.

Shifts in the extent and ways in which the public are involved in local governance therefore have to be understood in relation to the secular pressures for ‘more democracy’ (however understood), and as moves in the power games between central and local government. This introduces a third, crucial ‘contextual’ aspect for ‘public participation’: the changing role of citizens with respect to their local authorities has been part of a much broader change in the nature of governance.

Since the 1980s this change – encapsulated in the common phrase ‘from government to (new) governance’ – has involved local governments increasingly sharing their responsibilities for public service provision with a huge variety of other actors including, but extending far beyond, ‘the public’ (Rhodes 1996). Overall this has resulted in increasing institutional complexity, as this ‘sharing’ has taken a bewildering array of forms: from contractual,

marketised relationships; to partnerships in which policy making and implementation are shared endeavours; through to complete divesting of responsibility to other bodies. Some new responsibilities and powers have been taken on by existing bodies, but a salient characteristic of the new governance has been the creation of a myriad new organisations – some in the private sector, as state functions have been privatised, but many in a quasi-statal hinterland outside local authority control, and still others independent and emergent from the community level (Skelcher *et al.* 2005). Hybrid structures which bring together institutional and individual actors from the state, voluntary, community and private sectors are also common, ranging from more-or-less formally constituted partnerships (in which the partner organisations maintain their individual identity) to new organisations – often constituted as trusts with boards of trustees drawn from across the sectors (Connelly 2011). Such trusts are based on an ancient model of English governance, predating the very idea of elected local government, which endured largely as a legal structure for charities (Booth 2010) until being revived for new governance bodies providing services ranging from hospitals to community-led regeneration.

This fragmentation and creation of new kinds of structures provide the setting in which opportunities have opened up for ‘members of the public’, or groups representing them or their interests, to become involved directly in governance. This contrasts with the ‘traditional’ mode of local government, in which public ‘participation’ was limited to the electoral process and contact with elected councillors. The new governance sits rather awkwardly alongside the old, as the legitimacy of the new structures, and the public engagement through them, is based on very different principles from those of straightforward representative democracy (Connelly 2011). At the same time opportunities have also been mushrooming for a different kind of public involvement, more easily accommodated by the traditional structures. These have been widespread and often imaginative new forms of consultation with the wider public, and many experiments in participatory planning at the local scale of the village or urban neighbourhood, the outputs of which inform – but do not determine – local government policy.

These developments can usefully be divided up into three broad phases, marked by changes in central government policy following general elections. Thus the years of the Conservative administrations under Thatcher and Major (1979-1997) were characterised by fragmentation of governance and the proliferation new bodies (Lowndes and Sullivan 2004), onto which the post-1997 New Labour government attempted to impose order through the promotion of partnership working. Following New Labour’s defeat in 2010 the Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition government has signalled, and to some extent already started to implement, what may be the most radical governance reforms yet, of which the likely outcomes are still very uncertain.

In the first of these stages, the shift towards increasing public involvement in governance was halted, at least in fields in which central government policy was most dominant. The neo-liberal concerns with promoting economic development and empowering the private sector led in the 1980s to the creation of partnerships between local authorities and businesses, as

well as a substantial degree of privatisation and the removal of public services from local democratic oversight. This shift largely precluded public involvement in governance, though the same period was also characterised by increasing levels of *consultation* by most local authorities. The situation in the inner cities was rather different, as here dissatisfaction with disempowerment and the local effects of municipal and central government economic policies led to widespread discontent and sporadic civil unrest. In response central government took the first steps towards providing specific regeneration funding for deprived inner city areas, with some – though initially very limited – local community involvement in the neighbourhood programmes (Imrie and Raco 2003). In a parallel but largely disconnected process, the rise in the importance of sustainable development as a global policy objective saw the growth of partnerships between local authorities and other actors, many under the banner of Local Agenda 21 and principally concerned with ‘the environment’ as a broad policy field. In the absence of any strategic and statutory guidance from the UK government, which was slow to engage with the participatory implications of the Rio Earth Summit agreements (Carter and Darlow 1997) much innovative work ensued, bringing together diverse actors, often including significant numbers of ‘the public’, to coordinate initiatives such as estuary and coastal management, community-level educational projects and so on.

Following the 1997 general election, the New Labour government set out to bring some order into this very fragmented institutional landscape. There were a number of drivers: in part the recognition of the administrative chaos left by the preceding ‘reforms’ (Skelcher *et al.* 2005); in part a (short lived) embrace by the new government of sustainable development as an overarching goal, together with its integrative and democratic aspects; and a parallel broad ambition to tackle ‘social exclusion’, manifested not only in poverty but also in rising crime levels, and a perceived breakdown and lack of ‘community’, particularly in disadvantaged urban areas (Taylor 2003). A central part of this was a broad programme of reform of local governance, labelled ‘modernising local government’ which continued through the government’s entire term in office, in a bewildering series of initiatives signalled by local government White Papers and given legal force by a number of Local Government Acts. The ostensible goal has been achieving the social goods of cohesion and a reinvigorated sense of citizenship and, more instrumentally, more effective and appropriate local governance. Further, giving local communities a voice in governance networks operating in and beyond their neighbourhoods has been seen as a way of promoting more responsive local government and re-legitimising local representative democracy (DETR 1998; DCLG 2006).

Structurally the most significant of these reforms was the creation of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) in every local authority area, mandated by the Local Government Act 2000. While having ‘non-statutory, non-executive’ status these were intended to ‘bring together at a local level the different parts of the public sector as well as the private, business, community and voluntary sectors so that different initiatives and services support each other and work together; [and] operate at a level which enables strategic decisions to be taken and is close enough to individual neighbourhoods to allow actions to be determined at community

level' (DETR 2001: 4). Thus the Act put in place a new, formal set of partnership structures for local governance which almost everywhere removed local authorities' monopoly of power, and, where most effective, led to genuinely shared policy making. Moreover, the Act gave LSPs responsibility for drawing up a 'Community Strategy' (or, later, a 'Sustainable Community Strategy') through a consultative process, which subsequent guidance made clear should involve substantial engagement with 'the community' as well as other governance actors. In disadvantaged urban areas the work of the LSP was specifically tied to the government's social exclusion agenda through a required link between the Community Strategy and a local 'neighbourhood renewal strategy'. Implementation of this was supported by a central government fund, with representation of the community, and specifically of the local third sector, on the LSP was further supported through establishing Community Empowerment Networks, again with central government funding (DETR 2001).

This should have been a very significant development, as the intention was that Community Strategies would be the overarching strategic plan of a municipality, into which all other plans would fit. To enable this, in principle, most LSPs established a constellation of sub-partnerships to deal with specific policy field, some of which had their own statutory role in, for example, guaranteeing adequate provision of children's services. Land use planning was however, a special case, as there were already in existence plans which had substantial implications for a great deal of activity within a municipality. The legislation made it clear that Community Strategies should have precedence, and considerable effort, culminating in the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, went into aligning the two systems. Land use plans were to become more indicative sets of 'local development documents' including overall strategies and detailed plans for specific areas of particular development interest. Community involvement in drawing up these documents was intended to be more significant than under the previous system, with authorities required to draw up 'Statements of Community Involvement' specifying how they would engage with 'the public'.

By 2005 or so there had thus been a great deal of development in the structures of governance and opportunities for community involvement. On the one hand there were the LSPs (with, in some places, Empowerment Networks to support community involvement) and a linked network of other organisations and partnership, which provided various levels of engagement for service users and representatives of interest groups. On the other, the need to consult, which was becoming evident during the Conservative (pre-1007) administration, was given ever-increasing importance, with statutory consultation required on virtually all policy making. Urban regeneration continued to be a field in which governance reforms were particularly salient, with increasing levels of community involvement in determining government-funded neighbourhood programmes. This trend perhaps culminated in the 'New Deal for Communities' programme, in which locally-elected boards managed very significant levels of resource in ten-year programmes. In other policy fields – away from engagement with local authority structures – similar trends were apparent, as for instance in the devolving of spending decision for personal social services down to individual users, and proposals for creating elected policy commissioners. Meanwhile, the development of independent trusts

and other community-based organisations also continued apace, linked in some cases into the governance networks through membership of partnerships.

Clearly, despite the government's intentions to rationalise local governance the situation remained extremely complex, perhaps even chaotic. The hoped-for reconnection of the public with elected local government still seemed very distant, and a further raft of reforms were brought in during the second half of the 2000s. The titles of the White (policy) Papers indicate central government's concerns - 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' (DCLG 2006) and 'Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power' (DCLG 2008) – along with a subsequent legal duty laid on local authorities to 'promote democracy'. Three elements are salient within these. Increasing powers were given to communities to hold their local authorities to account and otherwise engage directly in the representative democratic process. Reflecting a growing perception that power had become over-centralised, a programme was also initiated of so-called 'double devolution' (Miliband 2006), in which a transfer of power from the centre to local government was made contingent on further transfer to community organisations. However, the proposals were very vague, both in the details of how such transfers were supposed to take place, how 'the community' would be supported, and what, if any, sanctions would be in place to ensure that effective community engagement actually took place.

In contrast, alongside all this activity was an intensification of the bureaucratic technologies of control, both by central government and more generally within all the governance structures. Budgets were tied to achieving targets and league tables of performance against centrally determined indicators were published, in the name of increasing efficiency and promoting 'best practice'. A (perhaps) unintended consequence was increasing constraint on local freedom of action, and so for meaningful public involvement in policy making, except over very local issues (and so, to some extent in land use planning). By 2010 the primary function of LSPs, and the rationale for engaging in partnership working for many organisations, was to make sure that targets were reached.

The third, most recent phase in the decentralisation and participation 'reforms' started in the months immediately after the general election of May 2010. Reflecting a perceived mood amongst the electorate, and drawing on enduring liberal and neo-liberal ideologies, both the principal opposition parties had already signalled their commitment to 'localism' in their manifestos. Once in power, in coalition, and faced with a sizeable defect in public finances, two parallel initiatives were started. The removal of regulations marked a significant break with the past, although arguably New Labour had been starting to move in this direction. The Comprehensive Area Agreements, which bound LSPs to reaching a set of targets in return for central government funding, were scrapped, and anecdotal evidence suggests that, in some places at least, the partnerships are falling apart as their constituent organisations no longer have to work together. Despite scepticism at local level, there does not yet seem to be a replacement central control mechanism over local expenditure priorities, and it even seems possible that local business taxation powers will be returned to local governments (Hetherington 2011). The second initiative is much more a continuation of the previous

government's agenda, with an emphasis in a 'Localism Bill' (not yet become law) giving more powers for local people and groups to challenge existing service providers, compulsory external tendering by local authorities, and a great deal of rhetoric about the social and economic benefits of volunteering and social enterprise, under the rubric of 'the Big Society' (Cameron and Clegg 2010). A flagship element of this agenda is an apparently radical reform of the planning system, aiming to create a system of 'open source planning' in which within a 'basic national framework of planning priorities and policies', 'local people and their accountable local governments can produce their own distinctive local policies to create communities which are sustainable, attractive and good to live in' (Conservative Party 2010: 1). The explicit aim is 'a fundamental and long overdue rebalancing of power, away from the centre and back into the hands of local people' (2), based on the principle of 'collaborative democracy' (3), with locally-produced plans binding on local authorities unless there are 'strong grounds' for modifying them. Although as yet there is no indication of what guidance will be provided to communities, some indication of priorities is given by the proposals for financial incentives for communities if they accept development (Conservative Party 2010).

Simultaneously there are also initiatives which appear to be moving away from public involvement in governance. The LSPs are being superseded by Local Enterprise Partnerships between local authorities and the private sector business, justified again in the language of 'rebalancing' in favour of non-state actors (Cable and Pickles 2010). Overshadowing, indeed overwhelming, virtually every other initiative are enormous cuts in public sector funding, resulting in losses in programmes and personnel, with immediate knock-on effects in the voluntary and community sector. While this is in its early stages, the effects are clearly to substantially weaken the institutional infrastructure which has developed to support public engagement, both in partnership governance and more widely. This is equally true of the planning reforms – despite their implications for skilled and effective public engagement, the existing proposals contain no indications of funding mechanisms, or ways of providing professional support to communities.

The current (spring 2011) situation is clearly one of transition, with a great deal that is still unclear and unfinished. Contradictions in the policies reflect tensions both between unanticipated coalition partners and between competing ideas about the role of public participation in local governance. While perhaps starker now than at any time in the past, these latter, ideological, tensions are evident throughout the story narrated above, and it is to their analysis that I now turn.

Analysing these developments - contrasting and competing discourses of governance

This narrative is one of hugely increased complexity of governance since the 1980s, including increased opportunities for voices from, or representing, 'the public' to be heard both as partners and – in greater numbers – as consultees. Conceptualising this engagement as taking place across a spectrum from policy to hands-on implementation, and at a range of spatial scales, there is a clear tendency towards more consultative engagement at the policy,

strategic, larger scale end, and for more radical devolution of responsibility and power to be confined to implementation and to smaller geographical scales (Sharp and Connelly 2002). Overall and unsurprisingly there has been no radical transformation for the public, who have been given more voice in some new policy- and decision making arenas. Arguably the radical change has been in who the public has a relationship with - in the weakening of elected local government and so, indirectly, in popular influence over services. Although there has been some progress, the social and political problems which have prompted many of the reforms still endure, prompting both popular discontent and critical commentary (Couch *et al.* 2011).

However, the story is not simply one of thwarted would-be radicalism, but a more complex one of different ideological conceptions of the function of participation in governance, which provide very different rationales for participatory practices. Following Hajer, I use 'discourse' to refer to these associations of ways of thinking and acting – as he put it, 'specific ensembles of ideas, concepts and categorisations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices' (Hajer 1995: 44). Such discourses span scales of governance - appearing in the rhetoric of central government, they shape practice and also the possibilities of practice, defined both by formal institutional rules and by the taken for granted, routinised approaches to 'how things should be done'. As such, they also endure over time – successive government policies are turned into practice in institutional and local cultural settings inherited in part from previous policy initiatives.

Three discourses, broadly neo-liberal, communitarian, and radical (perhaps 'left'-inspired) in nature, are found twisted together in policy rhetoric despite their contradictory nature, and can be identified in the complexity of the institutional landscape and practice, which has evolved as reforms have played out in extremely varied local political and institutional contexts, set in what is still essentially a representative democratic system, often hostile to more participatory modes of governance.

The discourses share a basic understanding of the problems to be addressed. On the one hand there have been enduring worries about the health of local democracy and society, expressed both in the very practical terms of the need for elected councillors to 'get closer to the people' (DETR 1998; LGA 2006) and also more abstractly as problems of alienation and social cohesion – merging in concerns about the failing legitimacy of local representative democracy, as electoral turnout rates routinely fall below fifteen per cent in the country's poorest wards. On the other hand are pragmatic concerns with the inability of traditional forms of governance to deliver effective solutions to cross-cutting 'wicked problems' such as social exclusion and sustainability. (Of course, these two are linked in that in a liberal welfare state (as perhaps in other political systems) failure to deliver increased welfare is likely to be linked to a failure of legitimacy (Scharpf 1999).) The differences between the discourses then appear in more precise characterisations of the problems, which both explain them and so specify appropriate solutions. In each case this involves promoting changes in the relationship between the local state and its citizens which involve more public participation.

a) ***The neo-liberal discourse.*** From a neo-liberal perspective the principal problem is a crisis of democracy – the failure of social democracies and the superiority of less-regulated markets in delivering adequate welfare. The solution is thus one of diminishing the role of the (local) state and of collective approaches more generally, and promoting an individualistic approach to public participation which characterises people as consumers of services rather than citizens. Within this there is an idealisation of the devolution of relatively limited responsibilities to local communities, though often in practice limited by the dominance of market processes (Taylor 2003). Participation can play an associated role in depoliticizing and legitimizing these changed relationships between state, people and private sector (Williams 2004) moving public engagement away from collective action, articulated through the interest- and class-based politics of representation, to the individualised market-research consultation of a consumer society (Lowndes 1995). At the same time, neo-liberal governance involves the transfer of power – either wholly or partially depending on the policy field - to the private sector, and then privileging the sector's access to governance over potential oppositional (local) publics (Swyngedouw 2005). This discourse can be seen running almost unbroken through the local government reforms from the Thatcher government up to the present, in the emphasis on efficient local service provision rather than democracy. Governed by the practices of the New Public Management this involves the marketisation of services or the introduction of behaviour modelled on the private sector into state activities – consultation and consumer surveys, along with performance targets which are linked to public, consumerist pressure through published 'league tables' (Lowndes 1995; Orr 1998).

b) ***The communitarian and localist reforming discourse.*** This emerged as a defensive response within local government to the neo-liberal 'reforms' of the Thatcher administration, and emphasised local authorities' role as local *government*, rather than as service providers delivering on behalf of central government. Central to the proposals, which first emerge from academic circles and local government support organisations in the late 1980s, were reforms aimed at enhancing local authorities' democratic legitimacy, both through making them more responsive to the public and involving the public more in policy making i.e. simultaneously strengthening accountability within local representative democracy and augmenting it with more participatory democratic elements. Such reforms would in turn, it was claimed, enable authorities to be both effective providers of services and play a broader role as leaders of their communities. The discourse gives 'the public' a more active and collective role than does the neo-liberal one, casting them as citizens active in the governance of their own communities and working in partnership with local government, which maintains a central, coordinating and leadership role (Stoker 1991; Lowndes 1995).

These ideas could be seen as driven both by a self-interested need for local authorities to protect their role, and by a more principled commitment to the need for strong, *elected* local government. They were, however, given more intellectual reinforcement by communitarian philosophers such as Amitav Etzioni, Antony Giddens (both of whom were explicitly drawn on in the development of the Blair government's overarching 'third way' ideology, which

informed the raft of reforms of local government in the late 1990s) and Henry Tam, who was a senior officer within a local authority in the 1990s and went on to influential posts elsewhere in government (Etzioni 1993; Blair 1998; Giddens 1998; Tam 1998). At the heart of communitarianism is an emphasis on ‘community’ as the repository of shared values and a vehicle for social improvement, and on partnerships not just as mechanism but also bearers of the values which should inform governance (Frazer 1996; DETR 1998). Consensus is crucial to these ideas: there is an underpinning assumption that communities are (or should be) fundamentally consensual, and that class-based conflict in particular is a thing of the past (Blair 1998). For the new, post-1997 administration this belief was reinforced both pragmatically and ideologically by concerns for sustainable development, grounded in a belief in a common, environmental challenge facing humanity, and also by a social democratic commitment to addressing social problems – in particular inequalities which had widened under the previous government.

A particularly significant aspect of communitarianism, at least as manifested in rhetoric and policy in the UK, is its emphasis on the value of localities, of small geographical scales, as the site of ‘community’ (Taylor 2003), and thus on communities of place, rather than of interest. Many of these ideas are echoed strongly in the current rhetoric of localism, and (as with the neoliberal discourse) one can see clear continuity from the New Labour reformist agenda through to the current government, despite their opposing party political make-up.

Increased public involvement in governance is at the core of practices which emerge from this discourse: as the founding policy document put it, ‘[t]he Government wishes to see consultation and participation embedded into the culture of all councils and undertaken across a wide range of each council’s responsibilities’ (DETR 1998: §4.6). The explicit rationales for this ranged from an instrumental desire for better-informed policy making through to democratic principle, usually with no acknowledgement that these were different rationales, and might lead participation in rather different directions (see, for example, Audit Commission 2000; Connelly 2002). The outcomes were the proliferation of partnerships, and in particular the development of the LSPs, the entrenchment of consultation as a routine part of policy making, and the more recent introduction of communities’ right to local referenda triggered by petitions and to take over local authority-held assets. Reflecting the government’s interest in tackling urban social problems these innovations were particularly marked in disadvantaged urban areas, with support for the involvement of disadvantaged communities in LSPs, and increasing levels of community influence, even limited control, over regeneration programmes.

These two discourses started to be tightly intertwined in rhetoric and practice during the 1990s, and jointly dominated the changes in local governance through the New Labour years (1997-2010). Their relative strength varied across both space and time, reflecting differences in both local political cultures and shifts in national politics. During this period most local authorities extended their interaction with their public, and while in some this was reactive and carried out in an ad hoc and unstructured way, in others changes in the practices of interacting with the public were associated with changes in overall ethos and internal working

practices, or at least with aspirations in that direction. This has been described as representing a shift from 'traditional' to one of two kinds of 'enabling' authorities: 'market-oriented' ones which take a central role as the promoter of local economic development and potentially as provider of services as long as this can be done efficiently and accountably, whereas 'community-oriented authorities', are leaders of their communities which 'enable' the provision of services by the best possible means, with no ideological predilection for public or private sector solutions (Leach et al., 1994). At the local level which party was taken was to some extent associated with party politics, as historically the main parties have had differing attitudes to public involvement beyond the ballot box, depending on whether this was seen to enhance or threaten the pre-eminence and legitimacy of local councillors. Liberal Democrats and New Labour were generally in favour of it, and tended towards community-enabling models, Conservative ruling groups were in general opposed and favoured either market-enabling or the status quo, with 'old Labour' the most traditional, dragging their feet on reforms which weakened the Party's traditional grip on power in its strongholds (Leach and Wingfield 1999).

The changes over time at central government were somewhat capricious, depending in part on electoral cycles and other political pressures which made central support for local government more or less expedient, and also on the minister involved. For example in the early years of New Labour (the late 1990s) there was a strong message that local government needed reform, badly, and ten years later the then minister's promotion of 'double devolution' was premised on a suggestion that local government stood between central government and 'the people'. At other times, however, central government was at pains to stress the importance of, and praise, the role of elected local authorities in local governance.

c) ***The radical, empowerment discourse.*** Throughout this period, ever-present but much less evident in either national or local policy rhetoric, has been the third, minor discourse of participation as a route to empowerment for disadvantaged groups in society. Following on from the earlier experiments in community development, radical participatory approaches pursued by some left-wing urban councils in the early to mid-1980s involved substantial support for groups in the community and experiments in neighbourhood decentralisation (Burns et al., 1994). Such programmes have continued sporadically through to the present, but as a model of local governance adopted as policy by entire authorities, this discourse was marginalised by the abolition of the Greater London Council and the metropolitan counties in 1986 and the eclipse of the New Urban Left (Stoker, 1991). While it has endured in the practice of individuals both within and outside local authorities, often in the context of inner city regeneration projects, local forums and occasionally in experiments in 'alternative', community-based land-use planning, its ideology has had no significant place in the reforms of local governance and has thus been without legislative or regulative support. Thus one can see very clear evidence of radical impulses in *some* Local Agenda 21 programmes in the 1990s, in *some* neighbourhood regeneration projects and *some* local authority planning processes through to the present, due to the efforts of individuals or small groups working on the basis of their own commitment to community development of a more-or-less radical kind.

However, these have failed to become the norm and have usually been marginalised by more communitarian or neo-liberal approaches to participation (Church *et al.* 1998; Connelly 2002; Taylor 2003).

So what are we to make of the current reforms, which certainly appear ‘radical’ in the sense of signalling the government’s intention to introduce very significant changes to local governance and make a clear break with the past (Cameron and Clegg 2010)? While some of the proposed changes *are* for very different ways of doing things, there is a clear continuity here in the way that the proposals embody elements of all three discourses which have been so evident in governance for many decades. Set within the context of an arguably overall neo-liberal approach to government, in particular as evidenced in fiscal policy, we can see neo-liberal elements in the privileging of private sector engagement in governance and the incentives provided to communities to permit development, sitting alongside a communitarian emphasis on the importance of local communities as centres of both action and moral and political value. However, these same changes can also be interpreted as steps towards disempowering local government and empowering ‘communities’, particularly in land-use planning. Whatever the government’s motives, the proposals appear at least to offer the possibility for a re-articulation of community mobilisation and radical community politics, which might well be expressed in opposition to other aspects of the government’s developmental agenda (Beddow 2011).

Democracy and ‘reformed local governance’

This complexity, with the intertwining of different discourses in what are presented as single policy initiatives, should not perhaps be surprising, as it is the result not simply of contingent comings-together of different ideologies but emerges (at least in part) from a fundamental tension within any practice of democracy. Returning to the deep, secular shift towards ‘more democracy’ referred to above, this entails two contradictory elements: an ideal of ‘rule by the people’ and the necessary reality of rule by some people over others, a necessity which in turn entails both a pragmatic need for stability and an almost inevitable creation of an elite with a tendency to protect its position (Held 1987; Mouffe 2005). Governmentally-initiated moves towards ‘more democracy’ are thus bound to be complex, as they take place not only in the context of other ideological shifts and currents (such as the ascendancy of neo-liberalism) but also involve a mix of more inclusive ‘developmental’ and stability-preserving ‘protective’ elements (Held 1987).

This intertwining throws up a number of challenges both for those who might wish to promote any of the individual discourses - perhaps in particular for those committed to the more marginal, progressive agenda – and also for analysis. One of these is the issue of evaluation: how can governance reforms be judged? Clearly a number of overall criteria might be of interests, such as the question of distributive justice. Here, however, I am concerned with democracy as a normative concept, and the question of whether or not these reforms are ‘democratic’. Given the *essentially* contested nature of the concept (Gallie 1955) such judgements are inevitably problematic, but my concern here is with two linked issues

which must be addressed before engaging in (inconclusive) debate about which definition of democracy is preferable.

The first is that the rhetoric of the reforms is not clearly based in a single discourse. Conflicting analyses in terms of the different discourses are thus always possible, and to some extent are likely to reflect genuine compromises made in the policy making process between, typically, neo-liberal and communitarian-inspired ideas about how governance, and public participation, should be conducted. This points to the importance of analysing the practices of governance, where one might perhaps hope to be able to provide less ambiguous evaluations.

However, here we encounter the second issue: a problem with the available conceptual frameworks, which developed alongside the institutional development of democracy, and which are not entirely appropriate for the new governance. Neither the intention nor the impact of the reforms described above has been a simple extension of participatory democracy, nor a simple challenge to (or defence of) the primacy of representation – or even a clear extension of the domination of elites and the reduction in genuine popular influence in governance. As ways of bringing more people into governance, the salient characteristic of the new forms is their hybridity between categories which might provide the basis for evaluation. Firstly, as state, public, private and third sector actors working in partnership they bridge the distinction between ‘invited’ and ‘claimed’ spaces of participation (Gaventa 2007). Secondly, even the most ‘participatory’ processes inevitably also involve processes of representation – the two are intimately linked, rather than opposed (Plotke 1997). Moreover, these theoretically distinct kinds of setting and process operate within wider webs of governance which are also hybrid, linking together actors and organisations which can be elected and non-elected, traditional and innovative, and based on hierarchical, partnership or market principles (Connelly 2011).

Thus normative approaches which suggest that participation is better than representation, or the reverse, or value deliberation and collaborative processes, are too simplistic to make sense of the complex reality of participation in its modern setting. The Conservative appeal to the merits of ‘collaborative democracy’ as the basis for ‘open source’, neighbourhood planning is a case in point (Conservative Party 2010). The concept draws on a strand in planning theory which has achieved a certain dominance in recent years, exemplified by Healey’s ‘collaborative planning’ (Healey 2005) and promoted in its purest form by the California-based Center for Collaborative Democracy (Innes and Booher 2004; Center for Collaborative Policy 2005). Sharing much political and intellectual common ground with communitarianism, this approach promotes inclusive and deliberative democratic processes, emphasising the potential of these to reach consensual solutions to problems intractable using more ‘traditional’ planning approaches (Innes and Booher 2004). This ‘communicative turn’ in planning has been subjected to sustained critique, principally on the grounds of its optimism about the potential for deliberation to overcome power differences between participants and achieve resolutions across ‘deep differences’ (Huxley 2000; Watson 2006). In the context of a policy promoted by a government pursuing overtly neo-liberal policies in

other fields, it is hard not to see the promotion of consensus-oriented planning as an example of participation being used as a means of depoliticising potentially conflictual issues (Williams 2004). A second, more recent, avenue of criticism has been that the focus of collaborative planning on participatory processes themselves has neglected the wider governance context in which they take place, and so produces inadequate analyses, incapable of explaining the (often disappointing) overall outcomes of even exemplary exercises in public participation.

Within collaborative planning theory circles the force of these criticisms has been, to a certain extent, acknowledged. In particular there has been a recent recognition of the need to see collaborative processes in a context of broader public engagement with governance, though the essentially optimistic attitude towards deliberation endures (Healey *et al.* 2008). However, the unreconstructed ideas still appear to have considerable appeal within central government, providing an intellectual basis which appears seriously flawed as a means of understanding either public participation in planning or in governance more widely. Whether this is wilful ignorance, and what the ultimate aim of the reforms is, remains unclear, although it is relatively easy to see it as part of the discourse of disempowering local government legitimised by an unrealistic and mystifying rhetoric of local empowerment.

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