

Local Government Reform in Great Britain

Dr Helen Sullivan, University of the West of England, UK

Paper for the Joint International Conference of the International Political Science Association's Research Committee 05 on the 'Comparative Study of Local Politics and Government' and the German Political Science Association Workgroup, 'Local Government Studies',

**Reforming Local Government: Closing the Gap Between Democracy and Efficiency,
25-27 September 2002**

Introduction

Local government remains in a state of flux in Great Britain. Currently being 'modernised' by the New Labour Government, it has been subject to radical programmes of reform for most of the last twenty years. This paper will describe and analyse those programmes of reform focusing attention on the kinds of reform strategy that have been introduced, the goals of those reform strategies (legitimacy, efficiency and effectiveness) and their consequences for localities. The paper will consider the Conservative Government's programmes of reform (1979-1997) and the New Labour Government's programme (1997-) separately and then draw together and discuss the key themes and the continuities/differences in strategy employed in the two periods. Finally the paper will consider the impact of contextual and structural factors on central government's capacity to deliver reform, paying particular attention to the fact that Britain has no codified constitution. Before describing and examining the respective reform strategies the paper will provide a brief overview of the development of local government in Great Britain.

Development of local government in Great Britain

The principle of elected local self government was not established in Great Britain until the Municipal Corporations Act (1835) which set up 78-multi purpose elected local authorities. However these bodies had limited powers and were also limited in their operation of democracy, elected as they were by a franchise of male ratepayers (Wilson and Game, 1998). Prior to this arrangements had been less clear cut with a variety of bodies including parishes, counties and boroughs as well as ad hoc authorities each fulfilling functions at the local level. Each of these different bodies had different jurisdictions and different bases of legitimacy, some being appointed and others functioning through a combination of appointment and election.

Once having established the principle, a system of local government did not emerge till the late 19 century. In little over a decade several pieces of legislation were passed that attempted to systematise the existing variety of institutions. The Local Government Act (1888) created 62 county councils in England and Wales. These were joined by county borough councils - all

purpose independent bodies - established for areas with populations above 50,000. Similar developments occurred in Scotland in 1889. The Local Government Act (1894) established urban and rural district councils within the existing county areas as well as a network of non-county borough councils. The Act also provided an opportunity for parish councils to redevelop a role. In Scotland legislation in 1900 had a similar effect. Finally the London Government Act (1899) established a layer of metropolitan boroughs in London within the London County Council area. For Wilson and Game (1998) the combination of these pieces of legislation was nothing short of a 'constitutional revolution' providing local government with what would come to be one of its early defining characteristics - a dual system - comprising all-purpose authorities in the largest towns outside London, accompanied by a two or three-tier system elsewhere, with powers divided between county, district/burgh (in Scotland) and parish councils.

This system of local government was in the ascendancy until the 1930s with the various tiers commanding more and more functions and population growth precipitating reviews to merge/create new county boroughs. The remaining ad hoc arrangements diminished as more power and responsibility was taken into hands of local government. However the pace and type of change (often incremental and reactive) meant that the system became unbalanced and unwieldy with local authorities ostensibly carrying out the same purpose varying massively in size. The variation in development also meant that service delivery was often inefficient as local councils struggled to cope with increased populations and new responsibilities. In the post war period local government was reshaped by the advent of the welfare state. The attempt by the new Labour administration to rid society of its major ills and to correspondingly create a more equal society was manifest in the development of new institutions that were centrally organised and administered. As a consequence local discretion and variation diminished and local government became the agent for the delivery of centrally determined programmes.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a process of review and reform that culminated in major structural change in local government in Great Britain and Northern Ireland and which represented the replacement of the dual system with that of the tiered system. Royal Commissions were set up to review the system in London, the rest of England and Scotland although none was considered necessary for Wales. The Commission for London reported first and as a result of its recommendations a new strategic authority for London and part of the Home Counties was established - the Greater London Council (GLC). This was complemented by the establishment of a tier of multi-purpose borough councils. The Royal Commission for England reported in 1969. Its report indicated support for the development of all-purpose unitary authorities throughout England. However, before the Labour Government could implement these proposals they found themselves out of office. The new Conservative administration supported reform but within a multi tier system - one which functioned on the basis of counties and districts (with parishes in rural areas). A similar multi-tier arrangement was operationalised in Scotland and Wales though here the third tier (community councils) had no statutory basis. In Northern Ireland the suspension of Stormont led to the introduction of direct rule, subsequently limiting the role of elected local government in the region.

The development of local government in Great Britain has been driven by a combination of pragmatism and political ideology rarely informed by a shared statement of purpose or agreed set of principles about local government. As a consequence local government has frequently found itself subject to considerable structural and functional reform following national changes in administration. However, at the same time the existence of powerful cultural and contextual norms at local and national levels as to the nature of appropriate governing instruments and structures have also acted to dilute any attempts at rational planning at a system level of local government for Great Britain. This state of affairs has been summed up by one long term observer of local government as reflecting the nature of British local government - subject to powerful forces of uniformity and diversity, continuity and change (Stewart, 2000). The remainder of this paper will examine the ways in which more recent reform programmes have approached reform (and the similarities and differences to previous endeavours) and the extent to which they have managed and addressed the identified tensions within the British system.

Reform in the 1990s - the Conservative legacy

The Conservative administrations 1979-1997 sought and largely succeeded in transforming local government in Great Britain. Their reform programmes combined with the economic and political consequences of developing global trends changed the conditions within which local government operated. They also reduced and redefined its role to such an extent that by the mid 1990s the term 'local governance' had been coined to reflect the changed nature and form of local authority, decision making and service delivery (Stoker, 1999).

The Conservative's believed that local government was wasteful and that mechanisms were needed to make it more efficient. Part of this commitment to efficiency was reflected in a questioning of local government's role in service provision and a testing out of alternatives. This also fitted with another Conservative principle, that of 'rolling back the state' to allow citizens more freedom and choice. By focusing on the citizen's experience as a consumer of local services and empowering consumers in their relationship with the local state central government also hoped to make more transparent the accountability relationship and thereby improve local democratic legitimacy. These principles of efficiency, a limited role for the state and the empowerment of consumers remained constant throughout successive Conservative administrations although the emphasis given to each varied over time.

Putting principles into practice required some form of strategy for implementation and while the Conservative's strategy has been described as 'emergent' by Stewart and Stoker (1995:192), that is that it developed its coherence as a result of practice, it was at all times overtly ideological, informed principally by 'New Right' and liberal arguments (King, 1995). These ideological preferences both informed the selection of the above mentioned principles and ensured that they would be put into practice in a particular way. So the pursuit of efficiency

would concentrate on minimising costs, developing systems to monitor how local authorities used resources and introducing market mechanisms into local government, in ‘rolling back the state’ the government would express a clear preference for the influence of the private sector in delivering key policy objectives, and the empowerment of consumers would concern itself with changing individuals’ perceptions of themselves and local authority services so as to perceive them in the same way as any other consumer/service provider relationship.

Improving efficiency - the New Public Management

Radical Conservative Government reform in the 1980s and 1990s not only transformed what local authorities did but also how they did it, challenging all aspects of decision making with a view to promoting a more rational means of taking decisions over the exercise of conventional political and professional judgement. The promotion of rationality was influenced by the adoption of ‘public choice theory’ which purported to explain why public sector organisations were always likely to be less efficient than private sector ones, the potential contribution of market mechanisms to public sector services and the opportunity for liberated public sector managers to engage in ‘bureau shaping’ so enhancing the strategic capacity of the organisation (Niskanen, 1971, 1973; Dowding, 1996; Dunleavy, 1991). The New Public Management (NPM) embodied the rationality suggested by public choice theorists and it took effect in all areas of public service during the Conservative administrations (Ferlie et al, 1996) although its impact on local government is what will be explored here. Farnham and Horton (1996) highlight a number of characteristics to describe the NPM (figure 1).

Figure 1: Characteristics of New Public Management

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rational management through strategic management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achievement through efficiency, economy and effectiveness using performance indicators
<p>Revising organisational structures to separate policy from administration and delegating responsibility for service delivery</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing on consumers, customers and citizens, not dominated by professionals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individualising performance and responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations which are demand rather than supply led
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying human resource management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing value bases to more market oriented values

Farnham and Horton (1996:260)

To operationalise NPM within British local government change was required in 3 key areas:

- *Legislative change to establish the statutory basis for the new financial and service arrangements.* The legislative programme of the different Conservative administrations in the 1980s and 1990s was huge. During this period central government sought to emphasise the virtues of financial responsibility and cost consciousness in local government by exercising controls, e.g. introducing a new block grant to local government based upon central government's assessment of its spending requirements (Local Government Planning and Land Act, 1980) and subsequently taking powers to 'cap' local authority spending (Rates Act, 1984), and by exposing local authorities and citizens to new systems of raising finance at the local level via the move from rates to Community Charge or poll tax (Local Government and Finance Act, 1988) to Council Tax (Local Government and Finance Act, 1992). In addition the nationalisation of the non-domestic rates, the reduction in the proportion of local government finance raised locally and the increase in service specific grants from central government meant that by the mid 1990s local government had minimal control and discretion over how it resourced local services - a situation described by Tony Travers in *The Guardian* as 'a spectacular example of a command economy control system in operation' (quoted in Wilson and Game, 1998:193)

This 'brave new world' where efficiency was the key was further advanced by another raft of legislation which intervened in the service delivery environment. Government's intention was to reduce the monopoly control of local authorities in service delivery and to introduce a 'mixed economy' of provision thereby improving value for money for local taxpayers. This was achieved through a presumption towards contracting out or externalising service activities in local government. This was applied primarily through the operation of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) in services such as road maintenance, street cleansing, housing management and 'support' services (Local Government Planning and Land Act, 1980 and Local Government Acts 1988 and 1992). In other service areas where CCT did not reach, the 'mixed economy' was introduced in other ways, e.g., the policy of community care saw the designation and separation of purchasers and providers within social services and the increasing use of external (private or voluntary sector) contractors to provide care (NHS and Community Care Act 1990). The experience of CCT has generated a considerable body of research and comment and conclusions about its impact vary (see Walsh, 1995). However, it is generally considered that CCT did act to save money without reducing service quality, largely through its impact on worker's wages and conditions which have declined (Leach and Percy-Smith, 2001).

- *Changes to the organisational structure to facilitate the shift in decision making via devolution or delegation.* The consequences of the government's introduction of market mechanisms went far beyond the specific services involved, frequently precipitating a wholesale reorganisation in order to accommodate the new responsibilities attached to new modes of service delivery. In relation to CCT even where the local authority was successful in winning the contract, important changes were necessary to realise the delivery of the

service. The local authority's direct service organisation (the provider) had to be separated from the commissioning or purchasing part of the local authority and the relationship between the two was managed through a contract. In education the 'local management of schools programme (LMS)' (Education Reform Act, 1988) dramatically changed the relationship between individual schools and the education authority prompting complete reorganisation of many education departments. Likewise social services departments were frequently divided into assessors and providers while departments with responsibility for 'technical' services were split into purchasers and providers. In order for decision making to be taken as close the service delivery point as possible, devolved budgetary responsibility became commonplace in a wide range of service areas including housing, social services and technical services with particular service units becoming cost centres in their own right, e.g. the fate of schools under LMS (Keen and Scase, 1998). For Leach et al these changes were hugely significant and were indicative of a major challenge to local governance in the years to come. In their words, 'one of the most powerful organisational effects of the Government's post-1987 programmes of legislation has been to fragment- or differentiate the activities of a local authority into their component parts' (1995:75).

- *The creation of a distinct body of managers.* The development of new ways of resourcing and delivering services was accompanied by new approaches to monitoring the performance of local authorities. A new national body - the Audit Commission - was established by the Conservative Government in 1982 with a remit to ensure that local authorities were financially operating within the law. Latterly the remit of the Audit Commission was extended to assess the performance of local authorities in relation to providing 'value for money'. Local authorities were to be assessed on the basis of their 'economy, efficiency and effectiveness' (3Es) in their use of available resources. In 1992 a series of national 'performance indicators' were introduced against which all local authorities were assessed and their respective performance published in a series of 'league tables'. As measures of performance and specifically the 3Es became common currency in local government, particular mechanisms had to be established internally to guide officials and politicians. These included setting up new systems to monitor budgets, monitoring performance against key indicators and the re-orientation of services towards needs and away from traditional patterns of supply led provision. Farnham and Horton emphasise the importance of this last point,

"Managerialism incorporates not only the importation of private business systems and techniques into public services but also a set of ideas and values justifying a central role for managers and management within organisations and society. It is a challenge to both professionalism and syndicalism and has been opposed by both professionals and trade unionists, because it is seen as an attempt to weaken their power bases" (1996:260).

In addition to the challenges identified by Farnham and Horton, Gyford (1993) saw NPM as representing a fundamental challenge to the operation of political judgement in local government decision making. He was concerned at the potential impact of NPM's 'apparent rationality' and apolitical nature upon the autonomy of politicians and their relationship with citizens. He argued that local authorities could not be run on 'rational' grounds because the nature of resource allocation is inherently political and requires the ability to operate within and between a range of interests. The special relationship that exists between politicians and citizens can only be achieved through the "construction of a common vocabulary" (Day and Klein, 1987:245), which according to Stewart and Ranson is provided by politicians who speak the common language of citizenship (1988:18) and manifests itself in a relationship built on accountability.

Closer examination of local government's response to the challenges posed by the NPM reveal that while change has been significant and long lasting, local authorities have been much more than either willing recipients or intransigent opponents. Doogan (1999) and Travers (1993) suggest that local authority officers are actually very accomplished at acknowledging the politicised nature of Government reform and have been effective at constructing their responses in order to adapt to change but also to protect certain key interests and values of local government. This is supported by Keen and Scase (1998) in their discussion of how far managerialist changes resulted in the 'transformation' of local authority cultures. For Pratchett and Wingfield (1994) what the NPM has done is challenge the operation of a public service ethos in guiding decision making. Their study of local government officers revealed that those most exposed to NPM modes of operation were more inclined to consider non-traditional values in decision making, such as the prioritisation of outputs over bureaucratic processes. However this change was not universal and nor were 'traditional' values associated with local government decision making entirely disregarded by those studied.

Rolling back the state - quangos and the 'enabling' council

The growth in appointed bodies, where certain activities were removed from government control and handed over to newly established appointed organisations, was considerable in the 1980s and 1990s. The most well-known form of appointed body - QUANGO's - (Quasi-autonomous, non-governmental organisations) were not invented by the Conservative Governments of these years but they were certainly rejuvenated as a result of central government's desire to reduce the scale and scope of direct local government control in any given locality. What is particularly significant about the development of quasi government under the Conservatives is that the expansion has taken place primarily at the local level and that it comprises service areas previously held elsewhere within the public domain (Davis and Stewart, 1993; Weir and Hall 1994 and Skelcher, 1998). The penetration of appointed bodies is dramatic and is summarised by Stewart,

Local authorities no longer made direct appointments to health authorities. Health service trusts were created to run hospitals and community health services. Training and enterprise councils exercised substantial responsibilities in training and economic development. Grant maintained schools, sixth form colleges and colleges of further education were removed from local authorities' responsibilities to be governed by appointed boards which received their funding from nationally appointed bodies. Housing associations increasingly took over the social housing functions previously exercised by local authorities. Police authorities were set up separated from local authorities. Urban development corporations and housing action trusts took over major responsibilities for redevelopment in certain urban areas (2000: 117-118).

What is also significant about this growth in appointment is the way in which private sector influence was sought to influence the operation of the new appointed boards. This was particularly the case in relation to regeneration where a number of high profile, resource rich regeneration programmes such as Urban Development Corporations, City Challenge companies and Housing Action Trusts were led or dominated by private sector players. Elsewhere the removal of certain functions from local government and their replacement by appointed bodies also saw the replacement of public sector leadership with that of the private sector. This was most obviously the case in relation to Training and enterprise councils (TECs or LECs in Scotland) but was also evident in relation to colleges of further education.

While QUANGOs have been a common instrument used by governments to implement policy or address certain issues for many years (Skelcher, 1998) they have also been criticised as inappropriate tools which remove from public view issues and decisions which are inherently political (Chester, 1979). Therefore, the rapid expansion of these bodies in the 1980s/1990s fuelled concern about the accountability of QUANGOs and the work of Skelcher (1998) and others (Davis and Stewart, 1993; Weir and Hall, 1994 and Skelcher and Davis, 1995) has demonstrated how QUANGOs are protected from public scrutiny, how little is known about the people who are appointed to take decisions, the standards to which these bodies must perform and the way in which decisions are made. Notwithstanding these factors their existence, number and variety made it essential that local authorities took account of their activities and attempted to work with them in order to achieve key policy goals.

A specific consequence of the move to appointment and the introduction of market mechanisms into local government was the increasing complexity of the local scene in terms of service provision. The service environment became increasingly fragmented and mechanisms to maintain the coherence of service delivery became more difficult to sustain (Clarke and Stewart, 1994). This fragmentation and complexity emerged at a time when researchers and commentators on local government were identifying another challenge to localities, namely the emergence of 'wicked' or cross-cutting issues, those issues which are not easily addressed because of their complexity and require a number of parties to take action together to effect the

desired change (Clarke and Stewart 1997). Examples of these 'wicked issues' of prime concern to both local and central government included environmental sustainability, community safety and regeneration.

One way of securing this joint action rested with the operation of partnerships within and across different organisations and sectors. Partnership working was not new to local government as partnerships between central government and local government had a long history (Bradford and Robson, 1995). What was new about partnerships under the Conservatives was the range of actors and variety of functions involved. What was also uncertain was the role that central government expected or envisaged local government playing in the partnership arena. One clue emerged from the 1991 White Paper, 'Competing for Quality'. This presented an outline of the Conservatives' rationale for further local government reform in which the separation of service delivery from strategic activity was introduced and coupled with a focus on the local government organisation operating as an 'enabling' authority. The need for strategic capacity was particularly acute in the large urban areas which had seen their overarching strategic authorities - metropolitan counties - abolished in 1986. However, any future role for local government in providing this strategic capacity was tied up in the how the word 'enabling' was defined.

At the publication of the White Paper and subsequently there was considerable debate about the definition. Leach and Percy-Smith (2001) trace the first usage back to Jones and Stewart (1983:147-149) who use it to advocate a role for local government beyond that of providing services. However, under the Conservatives its use became associated with Nicholas Ridley whose pamphlet *The Local Right* (1988) equated 'enabling authorities' with what were essentially residual bodies, elected agents making arrangements to supply services where the market could not be engaged. A less minimalist but similarly inclined perspective prevailed through the Major years summarised by Stewart and Stoker as implying that 'a local authority will work increasingly with and through others' (1995:3). Local authorities' response was equally varied with some preferring the minimalist position while others exercised what influence they had to develop partnerships with other bodies to jointly address cross-cutting issues at a local level. An important issue arising from the embedding of multiple partnerships into the fabric of governance in localities is the tendency to try and rationalise activity at the strategic level. This has been used by local government as a way of reasserting its influence. A formal manifestation of this was the City Pride initiative - central government project - which was initially implemented in three English cities - London, Birmingham and Manchester to provide a strategic vehicle for the realisation of the cities' long term visions.

Empowering consumers - charters and choices

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the concept of citizenship was the subject of a great deal of attention with the Conservatives attempting to popularise particular interpretations of citizenship.

The rationale which underpinned this attention was one guided by a perception of the public sector as being self interested, unresponsive to citizens and careless of the needs and rights of users of services (Prior et al, 1995). In the same way that policy change led to private sector language and ethos being employed to organise local government service delivery, so too successive Conservative Governments used this language and ethos to inform the relationships between the provider and the user of services. Private sector terms such as consumers, customers, value for money, and quality began to be employed and new mechanisms were developed through which consumers could be made more aware of the level and standard of service they should be able to expect and what should happen if these standards were not met. Similarly market research type techniques became more common as the vehicle for finding out how services users felt about service quality and choice. Finally the introduction of specific legislative changes sought to offer consumers more choice in their public services. The Housing Act, 1980 offered council tenants the 'right to buy' their property, the Education Act, 1980 introduced 'parental choice' into which schools their children were sent to, the Housing Act, 1988 gave local authority tenants the opportunity to 'pick a landlord' through a process of public ballot and the NHS and Community Care Act, 1990 gave all service users the right to a bespoke 'care package'. This 'distinctive strategy of empowering the public as consumers in the market of public services' was perceived by Stewart and Ranson (1994:13) to mark the clearest shift from traditional forms of public administration to public management in the Conservative administrations.

The consumer movement was legitimised at central government level through the establishment of the Citizens Charter initiative in 1991. This initiative was based on six principles:

- to publish the standards and targets public organisations set themselves and the performance achieved against these standards and targets
- to consult with service users in setting standards
- to give information in plain language about the range of services available
- to provide a courteous and efficient service to customers
- to maintain a responsive complaints service, with some means for independent review
- to ensure that performance is validated independently and that the organisation has a clear commitment to value for money (Leach and Percy-Smith, 2001:171).

While not all local authorities signed up to this initiative with its awarding of charter marks to local authorities that achieved particular standards of service, the majority of local authorities began to develop and adopt their own sets of service standards designed to improve relationships with their consumers. The impact of the initiative on quality of services is debatable (Leach and Percy-Smith, 2001; Prior et al, 1995) but it did have the effect of encouraging local authorities to systematically provide information about service standards and complaints procedures.

Corrigan (1997) argues that the consumer movement is valuable as it gave to citizens a meaningful expression of their citizenship, not previously expressed through voting. In addition to introducing the concept of consumers the Conservatives also reinterpreted and defined the concept of citizenship - emphasising the notion of active and self-interested citizens. This focused on two particular features of citizenship - as taxpayers citizens had a right to demand value for money from their local authorities and to hold them to account on this basis and as responsible individuals citizens were obliged to engage in self-help, to take responsibility for themselves, their property and their families. This manifested itself particularly in relation to the key concerns of local people, e.g. community safety, through the setting up of Neighbourhood Watch schemes (Gilling 1997) and complements other policy areas popularised by the Conservatives, including private health insurance and private education.

Barnes (1999) concurs that the engagement of users as citizens was legitimised by the consumer movement. However she argues that the various different goals sought by stakeholders could not be accommodated in this movement, e.g. user groups seeking to act collectively and assert control over provision were an anathema to a consumer movement that saw user groups as instruments by which professionals could retain their control and consolidate their position.

The consequences of reform - the emergence of 'local governance'

The combined effect of the Conservative governments' reform programmes was to secure a significant change to the governance of localities. Governance has been described by Rhodes (1997) as 'a *new* process of governing; or a *changed* condition of ordered rule; or the *new* method by which society is governed' (p.46). In the UK the term is used in two ways, both of which reflect the seismic change which affected local government between 1979-1997. The first usage focuses on governance via a new method, in the Conservative era exemplified by the way in which the dominance of hierarchy was successfully challenged by the introduction of market mechanisms. The second and more popular usage focuses on governance as a changed condition. Here the Conservative era is commonly described as the period when local government (governing through a single dominant institution) gave way to local governance (governing via a multiplicity of stakeholders).

However, this was not all one way traffic. While the change in the mode and environment of governance suggested to some, e.g. Rhodes (1997), a much reduced role for local government, others e.g. Stewart and Stoker (1995) saw this shift as providing an opportunity for local government to take on a different (but no less significant) role. This role centred upon the 'enabling' capacity of the local authority, but unlike the Ridley interpretation it offered a more positive vision of what enabling might be seeing it as 'enabling communities to resolve their problems and meet their needs in the most effective way' (1995:204). Based upon prior normative reflections of the most appropriate role and function for local government (e.g.

Stewart and Stoker, 1988, Clarke and Stewart, 1988) and developed further elsewhere (e.g. Stewart, 1995) these writers saw the enabling local authority as going beyond service delivery to provide local leadership for their communities (Stoker, 1999). This prescription for the future of local government came to be known as community governance, discussions about which informed the subsequent New Labour government's own prescriptions for further reform. For Stewart and Clarke (1994), community governance is characterised by three things:

1. A prime responsibility for securing the 'well-being' of communities in an uncertain and complex world (the term has a general rather than specific definition)
2. Working in partnership with others to meet needs and secure well being
3. Finding new ways of communicating with citizens, to identify community needs in order that 'collective choice' may be exercised

Stewart and Clarke understood community governance to be central to the future role of local government and likewise, local government to be central to the future operation of community governance. This is captured in their definition of community governance as, 'By community governance is meant the local authority as an expression of the community governing itself' (1995:1).

The election of New Labour to power in 1997 was a cause for optimism among those who supported the community governance agenda with its clearly articulated role for local government. However, while New Labour were, like the Conservatives before them, anxious to make their mark on the public sector in general and local government in particular, their preferred strategy was not necessarily going to be entirely sympathetic to the aspirations of the advocates of community governance.

Local Government for the 21st Century - New Labour and Modernisation

We need a new- a different - local government to continue the task of modernising Britain.....

At the heart of local government's new role is leadership- leadership that gives vision, partnership and quality of life to cities, towns and villages all over Britain.....

If you accept this challenge you will not find us wanting. You can look forward to an enhanced role and new powers. Your contribution will be recognised. your status enhanced.

If you are unwilling or unable to work to modern agenda then the government will have to look to other partners to take on your role (Blair, 1998:13 and 22, reproduced in Stewart, 2000:121).

On taking office the New Labour Government wasted little time initiating a programme of reform of the public sector, promoted under the banner of 'modernisation'. While local

government was not the first institution to receive attention, activity when it came was far reaching and has been sustained into New Labour's second term. New Labour's overarching aspirations for local government are neatly encapsulated in the title of the first White Paper, *'Modern Local Government, In Touch with the People'* (DETR, 1998). The use of the word 'modern' fulfils two functions; emphasising the radical intent of the reform agenda to create a more relevant and effective institution while at the same time making a clear judgement about the prevailing condition of local government and the consequences of years of Conservative Government reform. 'In touch with the people' sends a clear message that under New Labour local government will be an institution for all members of the community, not just those who pay for or provide services, again signalling a distinctive break with the Conservatives' previous emphasis on consumers and tax-payers. The new approach was sustained into implementation with New Labour (formally at least) eschewing the kind of ideological imperatives that had characterised the Conservative administrations and emphasising instead a pragmatic approach to implementation based upon identifying and replicating 'what works'. However, notwithstanding these expressed differences of approach there remained important strands of continuity, the most significant of which was the fact that New Labour like its Conservative predecessors was not prepared to concede to local self-government. While it was more prepared to articulate a commitment to a central role for local government (see above) this was contingent upon local authorities responding appropriately to central government's reform agenda. If appropriate responses were not forthcoming then central government would not hesitate to look elsewhere for the exercise of local leadership.

The key policies articulating the government's vision for a modern system of local governance are contained within the aforementioned White Paper (DETR, 1998). The White Paper highlights what central government perceives to be the major weaknesses in local government, namely: its inward looking and paternalistic culture, under developed community leadership role, weak local electoral system, public anxiety about ethical standards, inefficient and opaque decision making and poor service quality and uneven service performance. It then goes on to propose a programme of reform that will address these weaknesses. Seven streams of reform can be contained under three main headings: modern public services, democratic renewal and community leadership. However, as indicated earlier central government's pursuit of modernisation can be found in other policy initiatives that have local resonance. Proposals for health improvement (Health Action Zones), community safety (Crime and Disorder partnerships) and neighbourhood regeneration (Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal) combine the modernisation objectives of service improvement and democratic participation and also deal directly with a key priority of government - tackling social exclusion. Therefore a comprehensive analysis of the government's reform programme for local government will ultimately need to engage with these wider policy areas though there is insufficient space to conduct that analysis here.

Modernising public services

Modern public services are understood in the Local Government White Paper '*Modern Local Government, In Touch with the People*' (DETR 1998) to be both high quality and efficient (para. 7.1). The government's flagship initiative to secure this objective is Best Value, a performance management tool introduced in the Local Government Act (1999). Heralded as a replacement for CCT Best Value was important practically, politically and symbolically. Its practical significance rested with the fact that CCT was no longer considered to be the most appropriate tool for delivering services economically, efficiently and effectively and so needed to be removed (Rogers, 1999:35). However, New Labour wanted to ensure that its determination to achieve high quality and efficient services was clearly understood by local authorities and so replacing CCT with a more appropriate mechanism made an important political statement about central government's intent. Nonetheless the government wanted to demonstrate that its tenure would mark a break with the past and abolishing CCT - one of the key symbols of Conservative rule - was vital to this task.

The Best Value regime is concerned with continuous service improvement within local authorities. This continuous improvement is to be achieved through: the setting of local authority objectives and associated performance measures, the selection of a number of service areas to undergo fundamental performance review in that financial year, the publication of the performance of those service areas in a local performance plan and the independent assessment of the process and the outcomes by a designated external body. At the heart of Best Value is the fundamental performance review which subjects services to assessment based upon the 4Cs. These are:

- to *challenge* why and how a service is being provided
- to invite *comparison* with others' performance across a range of relevant indicators, taking into account the views of both service users and potential suppliers
- to *consult* local taxpayers, service users and the wider business community in the setting of new performance targets
- to embrace fair *competition* as a means of securing efficient and effective services (DETR, 1998, para. 7.18)

In introducing Best Value the Government sought to stress that its intent was to focus on quality as well as cost, to ensure that local stakeholders could access the process (by reading the results of the performance plan and/or by contributing to the process of consultation as a user/tax-payer) and to make comparisons with other local authorities easy through the use of revised Audit Commission performance indicators. The headline that accompanied the introduction of Best Value was the removal of the requirement to subject service to competitive tendering. However Government sought to stress that this did not mean a return to direct delivery, rather that local authorities should review all options for service delivery and select the one that provided 'best value'. This is emphasised by Corrigan et al in their study of the implications of New Labour: 'New local government believes in a pluralism of systems of service delivery. This is enshrined in the process of delivering best value to the public. There can

be no presupposition that one method of delivering the service will provide best value' (1999:14).

Early reflections from the evaluation of the Best Value pilot programme suggests that it is not easy to accommodate New Labour's desire to improve service outcomes and involve local people (politicians and the public) effectively. Martin and Davis (2001) argue that central government's focus on using Best Value to drive up service performance to meet nationally determined targets has resulted in the development of a performance management regime that conceives of value in a narrowly defined way – denoted by financial costs, inputs and outputs. Such a regime, they argue offers little opportunity for elected members to act as anything other than managers and also provides little real opportunity for the public to become engaged. Their alternative conception of Best Value is one which 'allows for a range of different interpretations of what constitutes value and for whom, and acknowledges the legitimacy of variations in local priorities and service standards' (2001:474). In such an environment local politicians would be able to use Best Value as an instrument for supporting the exercise of judgement in decision making where different needs and interests have to be identified, weighted and balanced. This kind of approach may also have more chance of successfully engaging the public by demonstrating that their efforts may result in locally relevant service developments. However, the authors are not optimistic that central government is either able or prepared to contribute to the creation of the necessary environment for this approach to develop within.

While the Government may not have initially expressed a preference for the private sector in the Best Value regime, it has promoted the involvement of the private sector in other areas for the purpose of modernising services. The Private Finance Initiative and the Public-Private Partnership programme are examples of this preference for drawing in the private sector in certain circumstances.

PFI/PPP offer an alternative means of funding public investment projects than central government borrowing which adds to the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement. Under PPP/PFI government contracts out the funding, building and operation of the scheme to the private sector. The private sector company or consortium then accesses the necessary capital finance itself, recouping this in fees charged to the government for its use of the facility. In addition, PFI/PPP provide a means of developing a longer-term partnership between government and business and according to Sullivan and Skelcher 'the added attraction of PPP to post-1997 Labour governments is the belief that it will stimulate an injection of private sector creativity and thus aid the modernisation of public services' (2002:). PFI/PPP projects have been undertaken across the public sector with particular emphasis on hospital and prison building. However, local authorities have also entered into the PFI/PPP fray, e.g. in relation to the building of new schools. To date the evidence on PPP as a stimulus to innovation is mixed and there is considerable debate about the real cost of such initiatives (see Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002 for a review).

In recent years new forms of longer-term public-private relationships have developed. These are termed strategic partnering and focus on a complex package of relationships between a public organisation and a company or consortium with a typical package containing a number of elements including contracting-out of council services, private investment in council business processes and IT, and call-centre and business park development.

Another policy initiative to stimulate innovation among local authorities is the 'Beacon Councils' programme launched in 1999. The aim of the initiative is to recognise good practice and to allow the best performers in particular service areas or sector access to new freedoms and flexibilities. Local authorities are invited to apply to gain beacon council status in thematic or service areas specified by central government. The selection of those to be awarded beacon status is via assessment against published criteria by a body of officers with the final decision taken by ministers. New rounds of the scheme have been announced since its introduction in 1999 and the Government now intends for there to be at least six tranches of beacon councils, citing response rates to date as indicating the success of the scheme. Others express concern at the scheme. For example Stewart (2000) questions its value indicating that assessments of this kind are always based on judgements which can be contested. Rather than privilege a small minority through the awarding of freedom and flexibilities (thereby widening the gap between 'winners and losers'), Stewart believes that the emphasis should be on mutual learning across all authorities as exemplified through the Improvement and Development Agency's peer review scheme.

Stewart draws attention to the ways in which central government has taken increasing powers to itself in its dealings with local authorities. The beacon council scheme represents one end of the spectrum, while at the other end those authorities that are perceived to be 'failing' can be subject to special measures determined by central government. Judgements about the performance of local authorities is derived from the myriad of inspection and audit regimes that have developed under 'New Labour' some dealing with specific services areas, e.g. social service inspectorate and others with the council's performance as a whole, e.g. Audit Commission's role in corporate governance and latterly comprehensive performance assessment (CPA). Stewart's concern is with the power wielded by inspectors, their fallibility and the processes by which they may be held to account.

Notwithstanding New Labour's commitment to 'modern local government' the financial framework within which local government operates remains constrained. The Local Government Act (1999) abolished the Conservative initiated 'capping' of local authorities but central government did not give up its power to take action to curb the spending of local authorities where it considers them to be 'excessive' (as defined by central government). While the newly instituted Spending Review cycle provided more certainty for local authorities as spending plans were identified for three years rather than the annual settlement, and more money has been made available to local government as a result of that process, local government has less influence over how much of that money is spent. This is because central government has increasingly directed resources in line with its own national priorities; e.g. education budgets

grow while resources for cultural service decline (Wilson, 2001:302). Central government has also acted to funnel resources directly to service providers without channelling them through local authorities. So for example 'direct payments' have been made to schools to top-up their budgets. Another variation of this theme is the introduction of local Public Service Agreements (PSA's). Announced in 2000, the PSAs provide local authorities with the opportunity to enter into an agreement with central government to improve performance in previously identified areas. A small amount of resource is available to help local authorities to deliver on their PSAs and additional money is released should targets be achieved. However, the targets do not reflect local priorities but instead are derived from the targets set out by central government in its national PSA for local government.

Democratic renewal

The focus on democratic renewal stemmed from New Labour's concern at what it perceived to be a legitimacy and credibility gap between local government and the public. Declining levels of voter turnout in local elections combined with increasing levels of reported apathy amongst potential voters and a sense that local council's and councillors were neither respected nor admired - particularly amongst the young - led New Labour to prescribe some very strong medicine to local councils under the banner 'democratic renewal'. Broadly the proposals covered the following areas: electoral reform, new political management arrangements and a new ethical framework.

In relation to electoral reform the Government proposed that it would take action to promote a number of experimental initiatives to try and increase voter turnout. Initial proposals in the 1998 White Paper included: electronic voting, mobile polling stations, voting at any polling station in discrete area, voting at different times, postal voting and alternative forms of vote counting. The Representation of the People Act (2000) put in place the necessary legislation to introduce a new 'rolling' registration system along with the piloting of new voting arrangements. 32 pilots were undertaken in May 2000 experimenting with new way of when, how and where to vote. The most significant finding was that in areas where postal ballots were held turnout increased significantly (an average of 14%).

Game (2000) is however critical of the Government's stance on electoral reform suggesting both that they have been tardy in pushing reform through (the pilots took three years to launch) but also that the problems and the solutions to low turnout are well known and researched. Game cites the work of Rallings and Thrasher (2000) and their extensive analysis of voting behaviour in English local elections which concludes that 'electors appear more willing to vote in circumstances where they have a greater chance of influencing the outcome and where local politicians are more likely to encourage them to do so (2000:7). The solution therefore lies with radically reforming the nature of the voting system itself, i.e. introducing a more proportional electoral system not merely tinkering with when and how to vote (Leach and Game, 2000).

However, Game is not confident of the Government's preparedness to act, concluding that, 'the sad consequence of the Home Office's irresolution in these matters is that it is achieving the worst of both worlds: being quite prepared to sacrifice any vestiges of civic ritual and communal solidarity, yet not to sanction the kinds of innovations more likely to bring about a significant increase in electoral interest and participation' (2000:147).

The Government's proposals for new political management arrangements in local authorities represented another attempt to increase the legitimacy and profile of local government with the public. This part of the reform agenda has certainly dominated the lives of elected members for the last few years although it is debatable how much members of the public either know nor care about these major changes.

Prior to 1997 the council was the authoritative body with decision making delegated to decision making committees. While the committee system has been regularly reviewed over the last twenty years and in 1986 the Widdicombe Committee did consider the potential of a separate executive body there has been no wholesale change until the election of New Labour. The Local Government Act (2000) contained three core options from which local authorities had to select: an elected mayor with cabinet, an elected mayor with a council manager and a leader and cabinet. The Act also permitted small councils the option of an amended committee system. Following the publication of the Act local councils had till 2001 to draft new constitutions and till June 2002 to operationalise their new arrangements. The criteria which informed New Labour's selection of these three options and which were to guide local council's in their development of new arrangements were set out in the White Paper *Local leadership, local choice* (1999). Decision making arrangements were to be efficient, transparent and accountable.

According to researchers and commentators following the developments local government was not enthusiastic in its response these proposals (Snape, 2000). A large majority of councils opted for what was termed the 'least worst' option of elected leader and cabinet. Those opting for elected mayor arrangements (either with cabinet or with council manager) were relatively few in practice. Snape (2000) considers that part of the reason for this was that elected members were simply 'emotionally tied' to past arrangements.

A national evaluation of six authorities undertaking experimental arrangements (Snape, Leach et al, 2000) found that the chief benefits of the new arrangements related to the operation of Cabinet which led to more efficient decision making, improved corporate working and was considered more satisfying by Cabinet members. The legislation also permitted local authorities to establish area arrangements as part of the new system - either area committees with delegated powers or area forums with an advisory role - and the evaluation found that these had considerable potential for enhancing the capacity of the executive, providing roles for non - executive councillors, keeping the cabinet linked to the grass roots and providing forums for public involvement. However, the evaluation also found some key weaknesses with the new arrangements including a tendency for cabinet to become overloaded and not be able to

delegate or cope with its responsibilities, relatively weak overview and scrutiny arrangements, marginalised non -execs and a failure to develop the role of full council and make links between all the different elements. The evaluators also noted that as with Best Value developments in implementation have resulted in central government becoming more prescriptive and less flexible about what is/is not permitted. For example the requirement upon councils to take all key decisions in public and to give advance notice of these in a 'Forward Plan' held the danger of worsening rather than lessening the bureaucracy surrounding decision making.

Associated with the requirement for new executive arrangements were complementary arrangements for overview and scrutiny. Government guidance (DETR, 2000) identified the key roles for scrutiny as being: holding the executive to account, policy review, policy development, Best Value reviews and external scrutiny, e.g. in relation to the National Health Service. Councils have generally been slower to develop their overview and scrutiny arrangements than their executive arrangements and have been criticised for their frequently minimalist resourcing and support for the function (Snape and Taylor, 2000). They argue that to make the most of these arrangements councils need to develop specific principles about how scrutiny is approached and they also need to establish what capacity elected members have for developing the necessary influencing skills and channels in council and without. The authors identify a number of key pitfalls to avoid - a vital one being the operation of the overview and scrutiny system without suitably skilled chairs.

The final aspect of the democratic renewal agenda concerns the way in which decisions are made and the way in which councillors and officers conduct themselves in the delivery of their duties. Responding to what it terms 'anxiety' about the way council conduct is perceived, central government has opted to avoid the recommendation of the Nolan Committee's Report on *Standards of Conduct in Local Government* (1997) to enhance local arrangements for monitoring standards and conduct. Instead in the Local Government Act (2000) central government establishes a national regulatory structure with a statutory code of conduct, local authority standards committees, a national regulatory organisation and a tribunal to consider cases of misconduct. Skelcher and Snape (2001) see a tension in the successful operation of a new ethical framework within the new political management structures. In their view the operation of the new political management arrangements inevitably leads to intensified individual decision making and this in turn will lead to reduced transparency. 'Local authorities may, therefore, face a choice between ethics and efficiency. High ethical standards amongst members of the executive can be demonstrated by collective decision-making in public, but efficiency is better served by delegation to individuals. The council manager model presents a neat solution to this problem by making an employee responsible for decision-making on all executive functions. Whether this is conducive to the stimulation of local democratic activity is another question' (2001:85-86).

As Pratchett points out, 'as both a descriptive phrase and as an organising concept for the modernisation of local government....' democratic renewal' has the advantage of meaning all things to all people (2000:). He further specifies three ways of using democratic renewal: as a

purely practical response to particular problems e.g. electoral reform, as a way of understanding the systemic failings in local democracy and the need to engage in wholesale change in order to redefine the role of local government or in a normative sense, using the term to describe a new mode of democracy, one which combines enhanced representative mechanisms with innovations in participative democracy. Working to achieve the latter goal requires a far more rounded view of democratic renewal than the reforms identified above, important though they may be. It demands closer attention be paid by local government to the potential and development of new and different forms of public engagement that can start from and work with citizen's own interests. However, as Gray and Jenkins (2000) point out none of this will go any way to resolving what they perceive to be the real problem which is the alienation that people feel from the processes of governing and the profound doubt that local people have about the capacity of local government to actually make a difference. For these authors the absence of local autonomy means that no amount of organisational reform will have any real impact, the Government simply having failed to define the problem properly.

Community Leadership

Clarke and Stewart (1999) have long argued for a restoration of the role of elected local government to address what they perceive to be a leadership vacuum created by the fragmentation arising from the impact of the Conservative administrations (1979-1997). In the Local Government White Papers (1998, 1999), the Labour Government appeared to have accepted this argument and assigned to elected local government the role of 'community leader'.

The meaning of community leadership is most clearly articulated via the power of 'economic, social and environmental well-being' contained within the Local Government Act (2000) and the associated duty of community strategy afforded to local authorities to help achieve this objective. The new power of 'well-being' aims to enable local authorities to promote sustainable development outwith the constraints of *ultra vires*. While falling short of a power of 'general competence' for British local government, this development does represent an important opportunity for local authorities to undertake new initiatives appropriate to their context (Kitchin ed., 1999, 2001). According to Rogers, the new duty of community strategy provides stimulus to local government in at least six areas:

- Giving real meaning to their role as community leaders
- Creating a shared framework that will help them and their partners to make better sense of the multitude of plans and strategies that are now produced at local, sub-regional and regional levels and which increasingly cause confusion and misunderstanding
- Rationalising and co-ordinating the many partnership arrangements that now litter the local public policy landscape
- Creating more reasoned, skilful and co-ordinated way of consulting with their communities - and in some cases engaging and empowering their communities

- Extending the concept of best value to incorporate a focus on the best use of total public resources in their area
- Creating a process that will stimulate ideas about how the local authority might use its newly acquired power in relation to well-being (2001:91)

While the new duty of community strategy provides an opportunity to adopt and develop an holistic approach to local agenda setting there are also potential difficulties facing elected local government in delivering community strategies. While local authorities are responsible for developing the Strategies there is no attendant requirement on other agencies to participate, a key problem identified by the 'pathfinder projects' in Scotland (Rogers et al 2000). While the process combines political and managerial approaches by specifying the role of elected members as important in leading and scrutinising the Strategy, this raises questions about whether elected members will be able to hold other organisations to account for their actions. Finally while the guidance emphasises the need for community involvement it is likely that the 'strategic' nature of the plans will mean that key agencies will set the agenda and that the process will be top-down rather than bottom-up (Rogers et al 2000).

Ideas about galvanising community leadership are also visible elsewhere through the development of new political management structures, the potential of elected mayors and the reinvigoration of the representative role for local councillors at the sub-local or ward level. However, while the leadership role for local authorities is reinforced by other policy initiatives such as the joint statutory duty with the police in delivering crime reduction programmes in other cases leadership is assigned elsewhere, such as health authorities in relation to the Health Action Zone initiative and communities in the regeneration programme New Deal for Communities. Consequently the multi faceted nature of local leadership in practice is likely to present difficulties for elected local government attempting to realise the role of 'community leader'.

A more recent initiative emanating from the central government Social Exclusion Unit has the potential to both simplify matters. Drawing on the experiences of local authorities with regard to regeneration programmes the SEU proposed that as part of its Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal the receipt of new regeneration funds (the neighbourhood renewal fund) would be contingent on local stakeholders developing an acceptable overarching strategic framework within which regeneration funds would be allocated and mainstream services influenced to support the achievement of key government targets for neighbourhood renewal. These strategic frameworks or Local Strategic Partnerships would aim to provide coherence to policy development and implementation within the locality and act to 'join-up' resource flows so as to maximise impact. Latterly these LSPs have come to embrace more than just regeneration priorities and there is a closer alignment of the Community Strategy with the operation of the LSP. For example, in one local authority, Sandwell the Community Strategy was developed by the established Civic Partnership and will be delivered through the work programmes of the various partners overseen by the reconstituted civic partnership, the LSP¹. At their inception LSPs were only required in those areas in receipt of NRF money. However, as a recent LGA

study (2002) has revealed the potential of LSPs to act as an overarching strategic mechanism has popularised their development throughout England.

The complexity of the local environment and the need for leadership and 'joining-up' is not an issue exclusively for the strategic level. Another important element of the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal is the introduction of neighbourhood management which aims to improve co-ordination at the sub-local level. The key features of neighbourhood management are:

- Each neighbourhood to have a manager to bring local stakeholders together .
- Any organisation can lead neighbourhood management providing they have the capacity to co-ordinate at a local level and have history and credibility with the local community.
- A neighbourhood management board to be set up with representation from all sectors.
- Neighbourhoods linked to Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP) - an oversight body with a district wide remit. Neighbourhood manager can draw in LSP if local providers fail to respond.
- If LSP fails the relevant service 'inspectorate' can be called upon to intervene.
- Central Government to establish performance targets for service deliverers in relation to neighbourhood renewal and make future regeneration money conditional on the existence and operation of the LSP and neighbourhood management .

While the focus of this initiative is clearly on 'joining-up' it is clear that the local authority is not necessarily assumed to be best placed to do this. At the same time the linkages between this policy initiative and others which focus on local government reform more specifically are poor. For example while the policy document supporting neighbourhood management (SEU, PAT 4 report) does consider possible roles for elected members at Cabinet level, as ward representatives and as scrutineers, the proposals are tentative and lack the definition and coherence of other areas of the report (SEU 2000i, pp 20-22 para 1.18 - 1.24). This limitation has been recognised elsewhere (LGA 2000i, p2) while the importance of elected local government to neighbourhood management schemes has emerged from other recent studies (LGA 2000ii, p.6).

Consequences of New Labour programme

The New Labour programme promised to take action on a wide range of issues in local government to modernise services, renew democracy and establish local government as a vehicle for community leadership. In principle then this represented an opportunity for the goals of effectiveness and legitimacy to be achieved in a complementary way. The reality, however feels somewhat different with different strands of the New Labour programme occupying attention at different periods and with different stakeholders. The most pronounced examples of this relates to the way in which Best Value appears to have become the territory of the officers and the New Political Management arrangements that of the elected members, with little

attempt to link the two. There are two main reasons why the New Labour programme may not be having the kind of impact that central government hoped it would.

In the first place the programme was delivered in a compartmentalised way - even the evaluations have been undertaken separately and it could be argued that New Labour began its reform programme with the wrong initiative. By introducing Best Value first the government encouraged local authorities to focus exclusively on learning about and implementing a new service improvement mechanism in isolation from wider decisions about local needs and well-being. Once the reform programme had begun in this way each new element was responded to in a similarly exclusive manner. One way of avoiding this would have been to introduce the new duty of community strategy and power of well being first. This would have had the benefit of encouraging local authorities to reflect on their role and purpose and how they and other stakeholders could contribute to community outcomes. Subsequent initiatives like Best Value and New Political Management arrangements would then have been seen in this context. Secondly, the issue of local government finance needs to be addressed if local government is to stand any real chance of achieving legitimacy amongst its more disengaged citizens. Without any real capacity to raise income and be held directly account for that income, local government remains for many at best an agent of central government and at worst an impotent institution

Key themes of local government reform

This section will focus on two key questions: to what extent local government reform has been able to address the three goals of legitimacy (democratic renewal), efficiency (reducing costs) and effectiveness (improving services/ outcomes), and whether there are common themes emerging from the reform programmes of the Conservative and New Labour Governments?

Legitimacy, efficiency and effectiveness

Experience to date suggests that it is unlikely that local government reform will deliver on all three goals in Britain, either because in practice central government chooses to prioritise specific goals, believing that the achievement of the others will follow on, or because the process of implementation becomes all encompassing causing attention to be diverted and resulting in the outcome being at best the sum of the parts. The approach of the Conservatives is a good indicator of the former. Throughout their administrations, (though arguably with a higher profile under Thatcher) controlling the cost of local government and improving its efficiency was *the* priority. By developing policy instruments to deliver efficiency, e.g. controlling local government spending through 'capping', introducing the market into service provision through CCT and extending the local tax payer base through the 'poll tax', the Conservatives argued that improvements in effectiveness and legitimacy would follow as competition drove down costs and improved choice/quality for users and a wider groups of tax payers became more alert to the relationship between their contributions and local government performance.

The approach of New Labour is a telling example of the latter, where implementation diverts attention from the overall programme objective. Unlike the Conservatives who were criticised for being heavy handed in their approach to policy making, failing to consult properly and even worse to evaluate the effect of their actions (Pollitt et al, 1999), New Labour has generally sought wide consultation on proposed policy changes and also renewed the formal central-local government partnership with a view to establishing a common approach to the development of local government . However, while this consensual partnership approach to developing policy has worked reasonably well, the relationship has been less successful at the point of implementation. Evidence from evaluations of Best Value (Martin and Davis, 2001), new political management arrangements (Snape, 2000) and early development of LSPs (LGA/IDeA, 2002) indicates that central government has developed a reputation for issuing every more detailed guidance about the implementation of particular initiatives, the net effect of which is to reduce the room for manoeuvre among local authorities and to increase the reporting requirements to central government through processes of audit and inspection. As a consequence New Labour's modernisation agenda for local government which in the very first White Paper (DETR, 1998) articulated the need for action to improve legitimacy - 'Councils need to listen to, lead and build up their local communities'- and efficiency and effectiveness - 'Councils will need to demonstrate to their communities the quality and efficiency of local services' (pp. 3-4) - has taken on a fragmented aspect. Particular aspects of the policy agenda such as Best Value and New Political Management arrangements have come to dominate with other aspects appearing peripheral, e.g. developments in participative democracy, the community planning process. Even amongst those elements of the policy agenda that have dominated such as Best Value and New Political Management arrangements there has been little linkage or cross fertilisation between them.

Role of local government

One important reason why local government reform in Great Britain has not resulted in the achievement of legitimacy, efficiency and effectiveness rests with the confusion that remains about the role and purpose of local government. At the heart of the issue is the ambivalence that both parties feel about its role and purpose. Both Conservatives and New Labour were very clear in their analysis of what was wrong with local government but neither has provided a convincing vision of what local government could be. Even the apparently comprehensive vision of 'modern' local government presented by New Labour is internally inconsistent prescribing for local government both a central and peripheral position. The contents of the government's proposals for Community Strategies suggest a central leadership role. However there are no institutional changes suggested in the relationship between central and local government that might help create the conditions to develop a local leadership role despite the promotion of elected mayors (John and Cole 2000). Equally this central role is not echoed particularly strongly in related proposals that seek to address the needs of neighbourhood within localities, Here the role of other stakeholders - public, voluntary and community are preferred. While the DETR guidance on Community Strategy acknowledged the existence of neighbourhood

management and the need to engage with it, it is unclear how that relationship can work. It is likely that the Local Strategic Partnership will be the body that oversees the development of the Community Strategy. However while elected local government has a lead role in the latter its role in the former remains ill defined. Issues of accountability are raised here too as in practice both the Local Strategic Partnership and any neighbourhood arrangements will be required to meet targets set by central government in certain key service areas and will be reliant on central government's view of their effectiveness in relation to the release of certain additional regeneration monies. While elected local government has the responsibility to deliver the Community Strategy its capacity to act is overshadowed by the profile of central government in localities.

How representative and participative democracy operate together

Another theme that emerges from the different programmes of local government reform under discussion here is the relationship between representative and participative democracy. It is now taken for granted that representative democracy without participative democracy is insufficient (see for example Burns et al 1994, Stoker 1996ii, Stoker, 2000). This is a theme that was strongly articulated by New Labour in its early pronouncements on democratic renewal. However, it is also a theme that was developed, albeit rather differently under the Conservatives through policies to promote the 'consumer movement' in local government e.g. through the Citizens' Charter programme and through other initiatives that sought to increase the involvement of service users in the improvement of quality in service provision. Under New Labour the emphasis on citizen (rather than consumer) participation is reflected in a wide variety of policy initiatives, including those that are contained under the 'modernisation' banner, e.g. Community Strategy and Neighbourhood Management. However as Pratchett points out (2000) what is unclear in discussions about the respective contributions representative and participative approaches is how the two combine and what the balance is between them.

For example, in developing a Community Strategy the local authority will determine how the community will influence the agenda. However in proposals for neighbourhood management the rules are set by others (including central government, the Local Strategic Partnership) and the aim is that communities ultimately become the rule setters. For elected representatives the different policy initiatives suggest both a central and a marginal role. In developing Community Strategies elected representatives are seen as key at both strategic and neighbourhood level, seeking out views, balancing perspectives and making judgements on the basis of contributions made. However in relation to neighbourhood management elected members appear to become invisible, not understood as representatives of the community but implicitly as representatives only of the Council.

Top-down or bottom-up approaches

A common criticism of elected local government is its tendency to act in a 'top-down' manner stifling the sub-local or community capacities that could help improve local service delivery and democratic participation (Lowndes et al 1998, Rogers et al 2000, Stewart et al 1999). As a consequence experiments with decentralisation were attempted by different local authorities as a way of engendering a more 'bottom-up' approach. (Sullivan 2000). Over the lifetime of the most recent New Labour and Conservative administrations, the same complaints about the stifling affects of 'top-down' policy making and implementation could be levelled at central government in its dealings with local government. Linked to its ambivalence about local government, central government of whatever complexion has sought to regulate and control the actions of local government. Paradoxically these actions have often been expressed in terms of decreasing central control and enabling diversity at the local level. The Conservatives education reforms such as LMS were they claimed about decentralising decision making power away from the townhall to local schools themselves. At the same time the introduction of the national curriculum effectively centralised the content of pupils' learning while the development of national performance indicators enabled the government to publish 'league tables' of schools and to threaten action against those it considered to be under-performing. This kind of policy development was coined 'centralised decentralisation' by Pollitt et al (1998). Martin and Davis (2001) suggest that something rather similar has happened under New Labour in relation to the advent of LPSAs. The net effect of these 'contracts for outcomes' could be what they term 'regulated autonomy' where local authorities gain some additional funding and flexibility over how they do things in return from meeting central government targets. Taking this argument a little further the 'modernisation' agenda for local government could legitimately be characterised as an expression of 'uniform diversity' wherein local authorities are offered certain pre determined 'freedoms and flexibilities' for good performance or are able to choose amongst options for reform , e.g. which type of new political management arrangements. This gives the appearance but not the reality of flexibility and diversity.

Challenging the public sector ethos

The Conservatives sought to challenge what they believed the prevailing public sector ethos to be, one that privileged providers over consumers and process over output. Professionals were perceived to be key agents of this ethos, their decisions cloaked in the mystique of professional judgement and not easily amenable to external scrutiny. As Pratchett and Wingfield's (1994) work demonstrates the Conservative reforms did impact significantly on the public sector ethos in local government. It introduced a new body of managers who operated on a different basis, with consumers and outputs as their focus and prizing rational decision making above the balancing of interests. Some commentators did not acknowledge the kind of division perpetuated by the Conservatives. For example Stewart and Clarke (1987) sought to reclaim what they terms the public service orientation by arguing that a focus on the public was not anathema to traditional local government but that a focus on the public was more than just about consumerism, it implied a relationship with the public as citizen as well.

The reform agenda of the New Labour Government has reasserted this relationship with the public as citizen and consumer but has presented its own challenge to professionals and others by emphasising the need for them to work more effectively across organisational and sectional boundaries to develop service responses and programmes of action that achieve holistic rather than functional outcomes. However, the management emphasis introduced by the Conservatives remains a constant in the New Labour programme and while local authorities and other providers are required to achieve targets that are functionally specific, the capacity to work across boundaries will remain limited (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002).

Cultural and contextual factors impacting on reform strategies

'In Britain there is no codified constitutional document setting out the rights and responsibilities of local authorities and their relationship with national government. Instead there is a set of institutions and practices, some centuries old, that were created and have been adapted in response to changing circumstances' (Wilson and Game, 1998:41).

The above quotation highlights perhaps *the* defining feature of the British system of local government which provides important underpinning for any discussion of local government reform in the late 20th/early 21st Centuries. Unlike its European counterparts, local government in Great Britain has no formal constitution with which to defend itself in its relationship with central government. A creature of statute British local government is subject to the vagaries and predilections of central political administrations which, as this paper has demonstrated, has often resulted in considerable 'reform' of the local government system, a feature particularly in evidence since 1979. More specifically the absence of a 'power of general competence' afforded to British local government has meant that its capacity to act in relation to the well-being of local communities is restricted to what is legally permitted. While recent New Labour legislation to introduce the 'power of well-being' (Local Government Act, 2000) represented an important step away from *ultra vires*, British local government still does not enjoy the constitutional security afforded in many other governmental systems.

The relative insecurity of British local government in its relationship with central government should imply that the latter would experience little resistance in its implementation of reform, however radical. The recent experiences of British local government outlined in this paper are testament to the capacity of central government to reorder and reshape local government to meet its own needs. However, this does not mean that central government is always able to implement strategies as easily or successfully as it would like, the experience of the 'poll tax' is evidence enough of that. In fact there are underlying cultural and structural issues that provide an important dynamic in central-local relations and which can act to mediate outcomes in unexpected ways. There are two linked elements that will be discussed there, the first concerns the values of local government, and the second, the salience of the local context.

The values of local government

For Hill (1974) local government is “an integral part of democracy” with a two-fold purpose: the protection and promotion of democracy and the delivery of services in a locally appropriate way. This perception of the value of local government is part of a theoretical tradition associated with writers such as J. S. Mill and Tocqueville who understand the representative institutions of government - at central and local level - fulfilling the three core values of democratic theory - liberty, equality and fraternity.

Other writers have attempted to make a distinction in the values associated with central and local government based on their different contributions to the aims of democracy. For example, Maass and Ylvisaker (1959) emphasise liberty (division of powers), equality (opportunities to participate) and welfare (capacity to meet societal needs - service provision) as core values of local government while Dupré (1967) specifies liberty, participation and efficiency (in service delivery). In both cases the writers attempt to provide values that are pertinent to the local context and have an enduring quality. However, Sharpe's (1970) influential critique of these writers rejects Maass and Ylvisaker's values precisely because he believed them to be inadequate in describing contemporary local government.

In specifying what he considered to be more appropriate values Sharpe (1970) focused on Dupré's contribution and developed from his critique two key values. These are:

- Participatory value. Drawing on the work of Tocqueville and Mill among others Sharpe acknowledged the contribution of local government as the facilitator and articulator of local 'voice'. At town level in which citizens can successfully participate secures its right to exist regardless of its capacity to deliver services.
- Service co-ordination value. Local government's role as a provider of services was itself the subject of debate with Mill arguing that local government was important to provide services that central government could not and Chadwick conversely suggesting that local government was an agency for providing national services to national standards. Sharpe identified other virtues for the service co-ordination role in contemporary local government: reconciling different community interests in reaching decisions, acting on behalf of consumers and marginal groups and challenging professional power.

So for Sharpe the conflict that existed between Tocqueville's view of the value of local government (existing in principle as a representative institution) and the Chadwickian view of local government (a pragmatic creation delivering services to national requirements), is resolved by accommodating both. However the experience of British local government since 1979 suggests that such accommodation has not occurred. Instead under the Conservatives there was an explicit promotion of the latter over the former. The consequence of this was the diminution of local government as a representative institution and its transformation into an agent of central government in many areas, e.g. education and social services, effectively limiting its scope

(Loughlin, 1996). While New Labour's initial intentions indicated that they would restore the balance between these values, the reality has been rather different with a similar promotion of a Chadwickian perspective effectively marginalising the role of local authorities as political institutions 'with a capacity for local choice and local voice' (Stewart, 2000:26).

The way in which the values of local government are interpreted and communicated continues to inform the approach of central government to reform and the reaction of local government to those reformsⁱⁱ. Local government reaction is informed by its traditions, cultures and practices, many of which are rooted in the local context.

The salience of the local context

Notwithstanding attempts to nationalise its functions and rationalise its structures British local government retains a powerful sense of local identity which is manifest in a variety of ways. Civic buildings act as vital symbols of local government's presence not only in large high profile cities such as Manchester but also in small modest towns such as Rochdale. Political traditions are borne out of the economic conditions and employment patterns embedded in the locality e.g. mining communities, farming communities, manufacturing centres and these continue to hold influence long after those conditions and employment patterns have changed. They are also influenced by the nature of local demography, e.g. some local authorities have a largely stable, homogenous population while others have diverse communities and/or experience considerable population turnover e.g. those with high numbers of asylum seekers.

In parts of Scotland, Wales and England the election of 'Independent' councillors still remains a feature of local elections ensuring that party politics is not the only expression of local voice. Local identity is aided in part by the diverse range in size of local authority units in Britain. The largest local authority has a population of over a million and 117 councillors while many district councils have fewer than 80,000 population. Attempts by successive governments to rationalise the system of local government have met with considerable resistance particularly where local people perceive that the community or area they identify with will be renamed or changed. As a consequence attempts in the 1990s to introduce unitary authorities throughout Britain ran into considerable difficulty and while unitary status was achieved in Scotland and Wales, the structures in England remain mixed partly as a result of successful local campaigns to retain the status quo (Leach, 1995). The recent introduction of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly have acted to legitimise the significance of context - at country level - as policy proposals for local government in Scotland and Wales are now developed and implemented in different ways to those in England.

The net effect of these and other factors is that local authorities in different areas have developed a unique sense of what is appropriate in their environment. The impact of this on attempts to implement reform can be quite profound. For example Lowndes (1999) argues that the introduction of New Public Management into local authorities was conditioned by local

interpretations of what was appropriate. She suggests that 'While external triggers to management change are important, the susceptibility of individual authorities to change and the direction of that change, is related to internal power relations and to local sensibilities and circumstances.... Change is not produced simply through introducing new language and structures; it involved a reworking of what is considered appropriate behaviour' (1999:37). The interaction of central direction with local appropriateness stimulates that reworking and produces an outcome that may be rather different to the one envisaged by the centre. Reviewing the impact of more recent reforms e.g., the introduction of New Political Management arrangements is likely to reveal that a similar process of reworking is underway to adapt central prescription to local circumstances.

Conclusion

British local government has been the subject of considerable reform particularly in the latter years of the 20th century and into the 21st century. Its insecure constitutional position made it an apparently easy target for the whims of central government and since 1979 it has suffered the diminution of its capacity to generate local finances, a reduction in local discretion over how resources are allocated and a corresponding increase in central grant giving and national target setting. However, despite this British local government has retained its local identity and has been able to draw upon this to influence the application of policy at a local level to fit with local conditions.

The figure below (Figure 2) summarises the changes in the role and purpose of local government throughout that period. The Conservative era was dominated by the goal of efficiency in local government heralded by the introduction of the market, the emergence of local government managers, the redesignation and empowerment of the public as consumers and the assumption against the local authority as the most appropriate provider of services.

Figure 2: Changes to British Local Government

PRE -1979	CONSERVATIVE 1979-1997	NEW LABOUR 1997-
Provider	Enabler	Leader
Client	Consumer	Citizen
Hierarchy	Markets	Networks
Corporate bureaucracy	Fragmentation	Joining-up
Professionals	Managers	Reticulists

The New Labour administrations have been characterised by an attempt to balance the goal of effectiveness with that of legitimacy, emphasising the need for local government to develop the leadership capacity to ensure that all relevant local stakeholders are brought together to achieve community well-being and focusing on those mechanisms and skills (networks and reticulists) that will facilitate the necessary 'joining-up' to achieve this well-being. The

management ethos remains strong however and combined with the increasing centralisation marked by national target setting and audit and inspection, threatens to undermine the development of local legitimacy.

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1. I have argued elsewhere for a further development of the values of local government to respond to the demands of 'modern' local government (Sullivan, 2000). The proposed value are: policy coherence and service co-ordination value, representative value, conduct and standards value and participation value.