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Community Governance – Where did it all go Wrong?

By

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Abstract

Over the past decade there has been much debate challenging the approach that New Labour took on tackling social and economic division across Britain. Coupled with this debate, questioning the merit of community governance, British society in 2006 was described by the then Leader of the Opposition, David Cameron, as being 'broken', implying that New Labour's policies, which focused on local government, were seen as failing. When the new coalition government was formed in May 2010 the 'Big Society,' an alternative style of community governance was introduced. The introduction of the Big Society is creating a new discourse in respect of local and regional planning and decision making, which challenges the notion of community. Against this background this paper provides an analytical discussion on the emerging new forms of community governance and in particular the re-democratisation of communities in Britain.

Keywords: Big Society, Community Governance, Local Government, New Labour

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Introduction

Since Victorian times local government has been a central aspect of British Politics. The characteristics of local government are dominated by multifunctional elected authorities. Throughout the last 30 years the United Kingdom has experienced some fundamental changes in local government. Back in the 1980s the Thatcher Government was highly suspicious of how local government functioned, particularly when it came to political leadership and the allocation of resources. By the early 1990s the then Conservative Government, led by John Major, were perceived to be more aware of the opportunities that local government provides in the community (Healey, 1997; Pacione, 1997). John Major's Government of the time was keen to promote elements of social cohesion within the emphasis of economic regeneration.

A significant shift in structures, within local government, followed New Labour's election victory in 1997. New Labour went about making these changes by placing a new importance on community leadership and community governance (Jones, 2003; Ward 2004). However, following the election of the coalition back in May 2010, the new government had a rethink on how local government should be run. Since then the coalition have taken steps to decentralise local government and have brought in the 'Big Society' agenda.

Therefore, this poses the question, why has the community governance agenda not been embraced and furthermore why is this perceived by many to have failed? The aim of this paper is to critically explore the displacement of community governance in a local government setting. The paper firstly, seeks to define and understand community governance in the policy context. Secondly the paper questions how the concept of the Big Society influences and impacts on issues around community governance.

Understanding Community Governance

Local government has had a long association with the complex process of community governance. The emergence of the concept has been influenced by the geographical tendencies from the terms 'community' (Delanty 2003) and 'governance' meaning new governing structures (Goodwin 2009). Debates on community literature have had a long association with group theory and policy networks (Powell and Steel 2012, Imrie and Raco 1999). Moreover, debates on the term community have outlined a clear pathway in the advancement of political institutions. However, recent developments in this area have created a rediscovery of community in public policy discourse because the practice has been influenced by the lost legitimacy of states and markets (Newman, 2010; Smith, 2010; Alcock, 2011; Evans, 2011). Thus, as O'Toole and Burdess (2004, p. 434) note, the lost legitimacy of states and markets has created 'a convergence of neo-liberalism and communitarianism to form the basis of a new relationship between the state, the market and civil society.' At the central part of community governance is social capital. Robert Putnam (1995, p. 67) defines social capital as:

“...features of social life - networks, norms, and trust - that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives...Social Capital, in short, refers to social connections and the attendant norms and trust.”

Purdue (2001, p. 2214) has noted that the purpose of social capital is to create 'trust between social and economic actors' as the concept promotes conditions for innovation, economic development and democracy. Over the years social capital has created different types of

complexities and complements both the theory and the practice of social/community cohesion. Stoker *et al* (2004, p. 391) have stated that social capital has three components:

1. “The context of obligations, expectations and trustworthiness in which actors operate;
2. The quality of the information channels which they have access to;
3. The availability of norms and effective sanctions to discipline relationship.”

For social capital to work effectively it must first of all be practiced efficiently within governance as the ideas around social capital are strongly linked to governance. Skidmore *et al* (2006, p.8) have noted that there are strong connections ‘between the properties of social capital and effectiveness of governance.’ Hence the promotion and practice of social capital means better governance (Putnam 1993). The success of social capital is the development of institutions and opportunities for public engagement and involvement.

The purpose of community governance is to establish and nurture a collective identity within local authorities (see Figure 1). Banner (2002, p. 221) has defined community governance as:

“...a broadening of the notion of local government beyond its traditional role in the delivery of services to encompass greater breadth in ‘governing’ all aspects of the local community. This implies a shift of emphasis for local authority from public administration towards political leadership in civic society.”

- “The community leadership role of councils and the complicated world of community governance are not new. Government policy now brings them centre stage, highlighting the complex relationship between public, voluntary and private sector organisations with citizens and communities
- Community leadership can involve developing a vision for the locality, working in partnership to deliver that vision and guaranteeing quality services for all. New approaches and new ways of working are necessary for councils to be effective in this.
- Community planning and partnership processes and innovative ways of involving citizens and communities will be needed as the local authority becomes more open and outward-looking.
- These changes will make new demands on elected members and officers. Different relationships, more emphasis on networking and brokerage and new skills and competencies will be required.
- Political structures and processes and the officer machinery of local government have grown to support the management and delivery of services. The broader concerns of community leadership and community governance will change these.”

Source: Clarke and Stewart, 1999

Figure 1: Community Governance in a nutshell from a New Labour Approach.

Hence this illustrates the linkages between ‘Community’ and ‘Governance.’ Bowles and Ginitis (2002, p. 421) have argued that the conceptualisation of community governance recognises that: ‘Communities are part of good governance because they address certain problems that cannot be handled either by individuals acting alone or by markets and governments.’ This then highlights the initial points in the paper of the linkages within Community and Governance. Smith *et al* (2007, p. 2) have defined the term Governance as ‘the combination of rules, processes and structures in operation to secure ‘order rule’...in complex and fragmented societies, including the determination of key policy goals, and the design and delivery of related

policies, programmes and services.’ One of the central critiques of community governance is the relationship between central and local government. In recent years there has been much discourse on this agenda (Wilson 2003; Pratchett 2004; Liddle 2007). Murdoch and Abram (1998, p. 42) have provided an insightful, critical discussion on community governance and have argued that the limits of community governance ‘can no longer govern national spaces in an all-inclusive fashion (due to increased demand for state action allied to expenditure constraints) but does not wish to be seen as exclusionary.’ In addition Murdoch and Abram (1998, p. 42) have argued that from a local level community governance causes further difficulties:

1. “Not all citizens and communities have the abilities or resources to take on the responsibilities that partnership entails, thus the state retains such mechanisms as ‘safety nets’ and compensatory mechanisms;
2. Increasing the local dimension in new partnership arrangements gives rise to complicated problems of co-ordination: how can some broad notion of the public interest be delivered if citizens and communities are left to go their own way?”

It is important to understand how community governance was first introduced into the United Kingdom’s policy dimension. Since the Second World War central government policy has tended to focus on community development in three different phases. From the 1950s up to the end of the 1970s government policy was driven towards the ‘Community’ (Wallace 2010). By the 1980s the focus shifted away from the community to more of a theoretical context of ‘Social Cohesion’ (Cantle, 2005). The underlying reason for this was the ever increasing levels of social deprivation. The Conservative Government (1992-1997) developed a newly emerging and fragmented form of community governance (Clarke and Stewart 1994). When New Labour came to power in 1997 we witnessed the emergence of a form of community governance which interlinks with social capital, social cohesion and community cohesion. As Atkinson and Helms (2007, p. 1) note ‘The new [Labour] administration set about addressing the continuing problems of urban Britain: pockets of high unemployment, poor and obsolete housing, low educational achievement, and the on-going task of urban regeneration...’ Further to this New Labour had a fresh approach to implement Community Governance from a local context.

The post 1997 New Labour government took the concept of community governance to a new local level. Bache and Catney (2008) noted that this is because of the ideological change from ‘Labour’ to ‘New Labour.’ They suggest that New Labour’s enthusiasm with community governance relates to a society of stakeholders driven by the state that forms partnerships and networks based on credence. This ideological shift in New Labour has been recognised as the Third Way driven by social democrats who disagree with the Old left and the new right. As Amin (2005, p. 614) has noted:

“The Third Way has spawned a new localism underpinned by policies to build regional capacity through the promotion of locally rooted activity such as industrial clusters, technopoles, and local knowledge transfers, harnessed to various institutions of regional promotion such as regional development agencies, business-led regional assemblies, and devolution in general.”

New Labour’s approach to the acceptance of community governance was to bring a new modernisation agenda to local government. Two key policy initiatives to drive this were the (1998) ‘Modern Local Government, In Touch with People’ and (1999) Local Leadership:

Local Choice.’ The (1998) white paper emphasises the importance of local authorities being in touch with local residents and to ‘...provide high quality services and give vision and leadership for local communities’ (DETR, 1998, p. 4). The (1999) paper energizes a debate on the relationship between local councils and their communities and legislate ‘...new forms of local governance including directly elected mayors’ (DETR, 1999, p. 4). Both these policies integrated within local government created a local resonance which established new programmes: Health Action Zones, Crime and Disorder Partnership, Education Action Zones, the Sure Start Programme and the regeneration programme New Deal for Communities. Sullivan (2001, p. 3) has noted that ‘These programmes combine the modernisation objectives of service improvement and democratic participation and also deal directly with a key priority of government – tackling social exclusion.’ In 2002 another white paper was published ‘Strong Local Leadership - Quality Public Services’ which updated New Labour’s approach on Local Government and placed a new emphasis on leadership. By 2006 further strengthening on local political leadership was outlined in the white paper ‘Strong Prosperous Communities.’ This white paper enhanced the efficiency and choice in community governance providing options in service provision, a strengthened governmental capacity at local government level, a new framework for logical strategic partnership and community strategies (Leach and Wilson, 2008). This change has had a fundamental effect on the displacement of community governance in a local setting.

The Big Society Influence

The thinking behind the Big Society is nothing new in British Politics. When New Labour came to power in 1997 the country saw a series of politicised policies launched with the specific aim of tackling social divide across Britain. In the last decade there has been much debate on how communities function at a local level (Flint and Robinson 2008, Atkinson and Helms 2007, Boody and Parkinson 2004). In 1997 Tony Blair declared that New Labour was the party for middle Britain but at the same time Labour was warned that if ‘we raise the standard of living of the poorest people in Britain we will fail as a Government’ (Lister, 1998, p. 216). New Labour perceived solving deprivation in Britain was through the concept of community governance and wanted to encourage a stronger and cohesive relationship between central and local government. Governance in the broadest sense:

“...involves venturing into broad debates about policy and administration, about politics and policy, about levels of government, about the states and citizens, about authority and legitimacy, and about what shapes cultures and processes of governance.” (Healy, 2007, p. 15)

The terminology of the ‘Big Society’ has generated much criticism in the media and academic circles (Hunter 2012; Ishakanian and Szreter, 2012; Pharoah, 2011). One of the biggest problems with the idea of the Big Society is that the general public as a whole do not understand what the term means. This is evidenced when we see that the idea of the ‘Big Society’ has been launched 4 times, firstly at the Manifesto launch in April 2010, secondly at the coalition launch in July 2010, then in February 2011 and finally May 2011. Furthermore this persistence by David Cameron of continually pushing the idea of the Big Society was admitted by a Whitehall source when they reported that ‘It won’t be branded as a re-launch because that would be an admission of failure, but it cannot be allowed to fail because it was central to Cameron’s manifesto’ (Maddox, 2011, p. 2). Moreover, there is a general agreement that the Big Society’s two main principles are: (1) the state should be smaller and (2) the general public should be more involved in the decision-making (Taylor *et al* 2011).

The vision behind the concept of the Big Society was first discussed in November 2009 at the Hugo Young Memorial Lecture, when David Cameron used this terminology as a platform which offered a solution to tackling Britain's economic and social problems (Evans 2011). At the 2010 General Election the Conservatives used this concept as a policy initiative and as the Conservative Manifesto (2010, p. 37) states 'The Big Society runs consistently through our policy programme. Our plans to reform public services, mend our broken society, and rebuild trust in politics are all part of our Big Society Agenda.' Currently there is an accusation from the opposition that the Big Society concept is simply an attempt to hide Government spending cuts. According to Brindle (2011) the Big Society has developed '...a growing sense that the brand is damaged goods, a vessel fatally holed below the waterline.' This is also confirmed by the introduction of the Localism Bill the main aim of which is to decentralise power from the centralised state to local communities.

The ideology of the Big Society originates from Phillip Blond, a political scholar, who is currently a director of the think tank *ResPublica*. Blond gained eminence back in November 2009 when he gave a speech on the Future of Conservatism. In that speech he argued for an advanced acceptance of the worthiness of 'Civic Conservatism' in relation to the state and an appreciation of the potential transformative impact of this on society. As Kisby (2010, p. 486) notes David Cameron perceived the Big Society as:

"...the implicit ideas that 'responsibility' ought not to be defined by individual citizens - through the payment of taxes to the state-ensuring that all citizens' basic needs are provided for. Rather, it is principally about citizens having a moral obligation to undertake voluntary activity in the community and to take responsibility for their own individual welfare needs."

Conclusion

From 1997 there have been fundamental changes in local government. Community governance has been part of this process but now the Big Society is being presented as the solution to problems within local government. There is nothing wrong with the concept and the ideology of community governance. However how this has been presented and implemented over time is questionable. Since New Labour community governance has been continually reshaped and revaluated with regard to the relationships between central and local government. Over time there has been an accusation of 'control freakery' between central and local government.

The big society has different agendas within the public and the private sector. The concept termed the big society has placed brought a contemporary emphasis on how the system works and is integrated into the local government. It will be interesting to see how the new Localism Bill will have an effect on local government and what the Big Society will do in the long term. Currently, as demonstrated earlier in this paper, the introduction of the Big Society has had little impact at a local level. The prime reason for this is that the general public has not grasped the thinking behind the policy. More crucially cuts in funding to the voluntary sector have directly gone against the whole ethos of the coalition government's aspirations for a Big Society. A very real challenge to the public's acceptance of the Big Society is the expectations that some roles previously taken up in local government, often roles of a supporting nature to those vulnerable in society, are expected to be taken up in a voluntary capacity.

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