

Government White Paper shimmies around the disaster that awaits us

Andy Benson spots fake sincerity and voluntary sector window dressing in the Open Public Services White Paper

Having just read the government's [White Paper 'Open Public Services'](#) I am reminded of two maxims. The first – 'above all else people value sincerity; if you can fake that you've got it made'. This document is full of false sincerity – the policy and plan is about giving power to people and communities, about spreading choice, about level playing fields and, in the unkindest cut of all, about righting inequalities. Perhaps this feature of the document lies in the influence of the Liberal Democrats, adding lots of cuddly 'power to the people' inflections and, in the process, placing the iron fist inside a velvet glove.

For the more likely truth that lies behind this display of intended vandalism towards our public services is to be found in the second maxim – 'context is all'. For instance, one can argue about the necessity of public expenditure cuts but there's no argument about the way they've been made, targeting the biggest reductions on the geographical areas and the vulnerable populations which can least bear them. Righting inequalities? - I don't think so. And there can be no argument about the fact that the context for this White Paper is the concurrent and massive cuts to services, already happening and set to continue for the rest of this parliament, at least. Once the verbiage is stripped away it is clear that the essence of government policy towards the public sector is a) cut as much spending as possible and b) contract out what is left to "any willing provider". A word and phrase count of the White Paper would easily reveal that the recurrent theme is 'open up delivery of public services to new providers'. Fulfilling these two objectives is really the objective of this exercise; the rest is window dressing.

The voluntary sector is, of course, caught up in this. It helps with the window dressing. For example the letting of the Work Programme contracts to private businesses was disguised by the DWP press release which broadcast that 289 community groups (i.e. the sub-contractors) were stepping up to help the workless. Look too at the requirements of the 'Transforming Local Infrastructure' fund, or the announcement of the 'Investment and Contract Readiness Fund'. It is clear that, despite all the talk of devolved power, freedom and independence, the government has a single minded and doctrinaire view of the ways in which the voluntary sector can support and (if it plays its cards right) be part of the largest privatisation programme that the UK has yet seen. To conspire with this is shameful.