PROTEST, OPPOSITION & ACTION – A HEALTHY STATE OF PLAY?
A personal enquiry into the balance of power between the citizen and the establishment.

I am 55 years old. I was brought up in a family and generation where individual and collective rights, and distrust of authority, was the air I breathed. Gradually, over the last decades I have found myself starved of this air. The public sector agencies, with whom I work, have left me bad tempered with what I perceive as their increasing co-option into, and acquiescence to, establishment power structures. Groups that I had looked to, to right power inequalities, appeared to have lost their bite. So I decided to stop being irascible and find out why people don't say no, the factors that nurture protest and how I might help to inject a bit more spine into me and the world I operate in.

My enquiry is not impartial nor is it scientific. My starting point is that the exercise of State power (through resources, knowledge, contacts, decision-making, influence), and that of the wider establishment, dominates the lives of the majority. The Establishment will not voluntarily share its power. The People have power but do not, or are unable to, use it sufficiently - individually or collectively. This relationship is not a good thing and leads to an unhappy society: oppression, disadvantage, poor use of collective experience and expertise, misery, anger, apathy & depression. Opposition and protest are a main mechanism to adjust unequal power relationships and to check destructive use of excessive power.

My enquiry is on-going. So far I have limited my investigation to people involved in local public services, service providers, politicians, local citizens, professionals and community activists. This paper describes what I have found so far. The people I have talked to so far, and the agencies within which they might work, are not primarily involved in protest, being within the service sector. Next I will be exploring the experience of people and groups that are explicitly involved in opposition, as a means to challenge and change the status quo.

If you, the reader, are interested in these issues I'd welcome feedback and dialogue. You can reach me on info@penandy.co.uk. Please feel free to circulate this information as you wish.

Protest: what have people told me?

▪ Most people I talked to understood & generally had a positive view about the concept of protest

▪ There were two exceptions to this: some people thought that protest was pointless because it never resulting in any change; one person (the Mayor of a London borough) saw protest as an impediment to progress

▪ There was support for protest for the sake of protest: for the benefit of individuals and for democracy. It is seen as a way in which people can have a voice and feel less helpless, even if it makes no difference. It shows Government/authorities that the people are awake and will act as a source of scrutiny over what goes on. Some people disagreed with this

view and said that protest had to be purposeful and must result in change to be worth while.

▪ I was given few examples of protest leading to change.

▪ Protest is seen as part of the democratic system & healthy for society. Two types of protest were identified: acceptable protest & illegitimate protest. Examples given are: speaking out for yourself; making a complaint; being involved in local/national campaigns, strike action. This is seen as distinct from protest that causes disruption, which for some people is viewed with some suspicion and alarm eg. direct action. Others could see the value of this sort of protest – more effective - but said it was not for them.

▪ Issues that people mentioned as worthy of protest are: the Iraq war/occupation; the disappearance of the welfare state & the state of public services; citizen rights; the position of developing countries; incompetent and abusive managers/employers.

▪ Protest makes people feel good about themselves, particularly, but not only, where this is experienced as successful. Direct representations to authority are seen as particularly effective in building a sense of powerfulness, regardless of success. Poor self-esteem stops people from protesting.

▪ Turning positive, but theoretical, views about protest into practical personal action is a different picture. Those who worked in community advocacy were most likely to take action personally. Reasons for lack of action, despite support in principle, were:

- What's the point, it makes no difference or there is no opportunity
- Not in my practice to do this, despite my support for the issue
- Personal pressures/survival took precedence over citizen action
- Didn't know how to go about it, but would like to – where do people put their protest
- Poor level of confidence/self esteem

Protest: what influences people?

▪ It varies and depends on individual interests/concerns/circumstances. But some basic aspects emerge as influential:

- upbringing/modeling/love & encouragement
- faith/strong sense of right & wrong
- experience of and anger generated by injustice/exclusion
- distrust of authority, feeling outside the club and not wishing to be a member
- a supportive network of allies and inspirational models
- resources to protest (time, knowledge, skills, confidence. self esteem & self effectiveness)
- actual & perceived risks
- the cultural context: diversity & notions of fairness; mandate for dissent.

▪ There appears to be a difference between generations. This is not necessarily the same as saying there is a difference between older and younger people:

- younger generations = personal values; single issue; international perspectives; poorer understandings of how the world works; little structural/political analysis
- older = political/structural framework for action; focus on wider civic society/welfare state/basic rights; understanding of how the system works/what makes for successful action

- Parenting appears to be an important factor: as model; as advocate to support action and remedies; as a symbol of successful citizen/self esteem indicator. What sort of experience do people have of parenting and what does it make them think about themselves? Might parents form a constituency for collective action on behalf of generations coming up?

- I met many different types of protestors:

- easy allies - that take a collaborative approaches
- competitors - that take an assertive and partisan stance
- professional protestors – who are likely to be involved across a range of issues
- specialists – who are interested in single issues
- one off protestors – who are prompted to act infrequently
- sole traders – who don't like to join causes but can be effective on their own
- life style protestors – who live in a way that challenges the status quo
- silent protestors – who are sympathetic to regime change but are unlikely to be at the front, or visible in a struggle/action
- armchair protestors – who hold ideological and theoretical perspectives but who rarely take action
- helpless protestors – who are sympathetic to change but feel powerless to play any role.

Protest: the organisational & professional response

- There was little difference between those working in statutory & voluntary sector agencies. Each group of workers and organisations saw themselves as public servants taking organisational instructions. As one person explained, "most of my colleagues leave themselves at the door when they come to work".

- In particular, workers in community development agencies experienced a dilemma between directional and non-directional community work - "The role of professionals in providing an ideology is a no go area. We can't mix politics with business. But we can't give people the knowledge/awareness without the tools to change things. It's a vicious circle".

- In place of protest, there is a focus on participation, partnerships, co-option, creating responsible citizens (easy allies) and individual capacity building rather than creating critical/challenging citizens, protest, opposition, disrupting the established order, and involvement in collective action. The national curriculum on citizenship and conflict stresses forgiveness and building understanding (of the status quo?). A local hospital feels easier with professional lobbyists who understand the rules of the game. A primary school focuses on individual confidence building in order to participate in mainstream society and has set up a school council designed to avoid challenge. A Youth Offending

Team is allowed to operate as a maverick sole trader, amidst a chaotic organisational framework.

- Vigorous debate and challenge is lacking within organisational cultures. Some agencies are overtly hostile to dissent. The practice of whistle-blowing fall far short of policies designed to encourage such action. There is a reduction in professional discretion & loss of independence of mind. Structure not action becomes important - "staff are frightened when they don't know where they'll end up".

- The voluntary sector context impedes protest and opposition. Funding regimes make it difficult to bite the hand that feeds you or to act outside tight professional parameters. There is a competitive climate with scarce resources and many agencies are struggling to survive. There is a focus on service delivery, contracts and delivering external agendas. Many agencies need to focus on internal organisational factors/survival and struggle to give priority to their connections with, and focus on, change for local communities.

- The current generation of managers, and workers, is poorly equipped for protest and do not have the practical experiences of previous public sector workers who learnt their trade in the war and post war protest generations.

- The individual professional response within this context is to: join the club & not rock the boat; withdraw from organisational influence; focus on what is within their control; and detach from personal belief (leave themselves at the door). One writer describes professionalism as, "an instrument of the powerful and supporter of the status quo".

- An exercise carried out with a group of community work managers illustrates the different universes represented by professionalism and that reflected by protest.

Words associated with being a Professional

Knowledge	Diplomacy
Experience	Facilitation
Expert	Calm
Compliance	Gagging
Skills	Empowerment
Compromising	restricted
Boring	Dull
Constrained	Staid
Bureaucracy	Negotiator
Permanent	

Words associated Protest

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Challenge	Insurgence
Violence	Revolution
Anarchy	Riot
Marching	Action
Change	Trouble
Fun	Aggression
Ignorant	Criminal
Determined	Outside the rules
Nuisance	Short term

Protest: what can theory contribute?

What does theory tell us about protest, opposition, notions of partnership and the power of the State? Where does protest fit within partnership? Who benefits from partnerships/protest? And most fundamentally - what is the purpose of power?

Much of what I have read focuses on participation of people and communities. I wondered whether participation was the same as protest and decided it wasn't:
- participation = being asked to contribute to the status quo
- protest = challenging the status quo.

If we look at Hirshman's framework, it shows the assumptions behind much of the thinking about power and citizen involvement:

Exit	voice
Alienation	loyalty
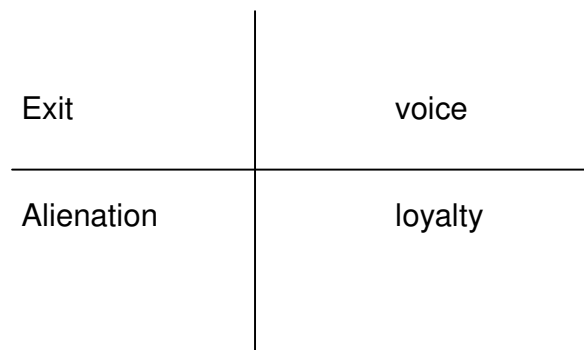
Voice & loyalty are described as constructive and consensual models
Exit & alienation are seen as destructive and conflict models
Exit & voice are active. Alienation & loyalty are passive.

So where does protest & opposition come in? Why is exit/alienation seen as destructive, and to what?

Other writers also talk about these distinctions. For example, Handy talks about negative power as disruption, power used outside the domain, gatekeepers, blocking, resistance, withdrawal.

Within the thinking and notions about power relations & citizen involvement appears the notion of danger. The language gives us another hint:

Power, to have power (the noun) – implies a possession or property. Who has such property and how do people feel about owning such a possession? Our student discussions gave focus to the negative attributes of power. Is it a bad thing? Have we lost our concept of power as positive, creative, beneficial and owned by all?

The verb used in the writings is "to empower" (not "to power"): the dictionary describes this as "to give, delegate, authorise, enable and permit". We find that power is to be provided through a third party. What can be given can be taken away. Under what terms is it to be given? We have emerging the concept of control. At the same time we read that, "central to empowerment is a willingness to challenge formal authority". How do we square this circle? Can partnership help?

Partnerships & power

The experience of partnership, to spread power more evenly, is not good:

- within partnerships it is unusual for power relations to be made visible; lines of accountability are (deliberately?) obscure
- in practice, partnership arrangements reinforce existing power relations; those with little power are unable to influence results; there is little capacity for challenge
- attempts to break this mould have concentrated on building capacity for those with little power; and also for those with power to work in less controlling ways
- Examples of successful partnerships indicate the importance of: an independently organised power base for those with less overt power with access to independent technical support; a recognition of different as well as common interests; and a philosophy based on the premise that power must be taken and will not be given.

Luke's dimensions of power gives us some insight into why partnerships rarely change power relationships:
- *overt conflict resolution* (negotiation between different interests) – partnerships do not recognise conflict or different interest groups but stress instead common interests, despite this not being the case in many situations
- *hidden power* (agenda setting) – partnerships are usually set up, serviced and controlled by those with most power
- *structural/institutional acceptance* (co-option/default positions) – there is a tendency for systems, individuals & groups to consolidate and accept current power positions.

So partnership does not provide a way in which to challenge formal authority and to take power.

Where partnership meets protest

Mary Douglas, a social anthropologist, provides an insight into the apparent dichotomy between working within the status quo and challenging established ways of doing things. She introduces the concepts of taboo and danger and talks about "horrible disasters which overtake those who inadvertently cross some forbidden line" and describes a universe that is "harnessed to man's attempts to force one another into good citizenship". Herein lie concepts of:

Legitimate power	Illegitimate power
formal power	informal power
form	formlessness
order	disorder
safety	danger
belonging	marginal/excluded.

What we see here are two power circuits. The formal is vested in recognised points of authority, controlled and approved. Informal power is associated with those with ambiguous roles: outsiders, marginal people (witches, people in transitory states, dissenters). She proposes that both aspects have their part to play and both have their dangers and potential. The exercise of power can move between the two circuits. They can live together and indeed are both critical for the smooth running of society. Mechanisms, such as ritual, are found to integrate the two circuits, and in particular to avoid danger.

She suggests the idea of power switches as a means of accessing and moving between the two circuits: "it is as if the positions of authority were wired up with switches which can be operated by those who reach the right places, in order to provide power for the system as a whole".

Perhaps this is where protest meets partnership? Protest as the building blocks to active citizenship. What is required for this synthesis is the intelligence to manage and merge form, formlessness, consensus and conflict. What is necessary is to see opposition and challenge to the status quo as part of a social enterprise.

Other pertinent theories

Which leads us to writers who have commented on the different audiences intended to participate/get involved:

The citizen	The user
Civic responsibility	Individual consumer
Collective interests	Product interest
Collaborative/welfare state	Competitive/market state

An approach that takes the user/consumer as audience will not tackle the whole system approach required for Douglas' approach. Government policies have shifted the agenda from the citizen to the consumer, blurring the differences. There has been an increase in consumer protest and a reduction in citizen action. This has profound implications for our capacity to find common cause with our neighbours.

Handy provides a practical guide to the use of power. He identifies five sources of power and invites us to identify the relevant sources that we, as individuals, might draw on.

- physical
- resources
- positional
- expert
- personal.

The trick is to maximise access to power sources; build those required; and use them tactically. "To have impact requires allies, political skills, prestige and power". And more prosaically, "to know what you want and how to get it".

But that assumes that we are all eagerly waiting to seize our power and take to the streets. Concepts such as "learnt helplessness", "self-efficacy", "social breakdown syndrome" and experiments with hapless dogs warn us about such an assumption. "People avoid activities they believe exceed their coping strategies".

Which brings us finally to Friere, Praxis and Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal). Such approaches draw on reflection as a means to initiate action upon the world and thus transformation. They bring together as one programme: education, building community

leaders, increasing understanding, developing communities of interest, taking action and giving priority to change.

Protest: reasons to be cheerful

- There are lots of examples of protest and challenge, mostly in the community/campaign sector
- The Iraq war has awakened populations to the dangers of an unfettered establishment
- The internet, global links and internationalism extend the potential for common cause
- The generations coming up are showing a renewed civic engagement, which, along with the experience of older people might be harnessed to social, political and economic change
- There are planetary and social survival issues that we can't avoid
- The public is more aware, and there is an increasing transparency, in the abuse of power
- Government policies (active citizens & user involvement) may lift pandora's box letting forth actions in an unexpected way
- The may be opportunities for alliances between disaffected professionals, citizens and users
- Community development is back in vogue
- Black and minority voices: greater mobilisation of marginalised groups and more access to resources to build capacity (but will this lead to more club members or a more positive alternative?)

And as Victor, a fellow student, said to me:

"He told me to toe the line. So I made a new line. And now he's toeing a different line".

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