

NCIA comments on co-production reports (Andy, Bernard, Rachael, Melaina)

TUC Reforming Public Services Report

The first section on the failure of market approaches is really good and provides us with lots of material for our anti-privatisation work – we have no problem supporting this at all.

The second section on public value is less clear and becomes rather airy-fairy. Positive aspects and ideas they stimulate for us:

- good on relationships between public sector staff and employers (ties in with our managerialism work. It is inclusion of staff and service users in decision making that makes services responsive and causes people to commit and innovate. Market-led targets and competition stymie innovation and cause staff to burn out. To us, this isn't only about an alliance between staff and users for decision-making; it's also about the minutiae of how organisations are run).
- strong on warning against separating public value from the agency delivering it - keeping services inside an openly and directly funded, democratically controlled environment (and not in the private or voluntary sectors) is a key argument for us, although we do point to some services that are better delivered by the voluntary sector, such as advocacy, and to areas where the public sector can learn from the voluntary sector about moving towards a more bottom-up model. The left needs to get on with making these arguments about the kinds of replacements for bureaucratic centralisation we want to see quickly, because this is precisely the ground that the ConDems are now trying to occupy.
- the four core principles are great - vital and impressive. We can certainly respond to the idea of 'enhanced public value', incorporating these key ideological principles, rather than the vaguer version that seems to be about little more than trying to be democratic (this alone is not going to stand up to the market).

Some criticisms:

- it places too much faith in the willingness and good will of state agencies to implement the approach and it ignores the top down pressures on local state agencies to conform to central government drivers and requirements. A key sentence is 'if a politician is looking for a coherent alternative to the market-based approaches which is more in line with public expectations, public value might be the solution.' (pg 19). The glaring problem is that no politician is looking for this, whether the public would prefer it or not.
- there is an often false assumption about the enthusiasm, commitment and competence of public sector staff to behave in these progressive ways. Though we certainly agree that the public sector should be committed to a different set of values from those of the private sector, given the complex power relations involved, implementing these values via any form of bureaucracy (or indeed professionalism) is not straightforward.

- there is no detail on how users and communities are to be so closely involved in the process. Projects like the schools council project work because they're on a small scale and democracy is part of the content. How does it work in running a health service? People don't necessarily want influence over the operational details, or want to develop the skills and knowledge to do so meaningfully. 'Communities' are often referred to as if they are all instantly well functioning, homogeneous and harmonious. No allowance is given to the painstaking work needed on the ground to get them to anything like this state.
- The academic nature of the discussion and the use of the word 'value' grates (just as social return on investment language does). Why not move right away from the language of markets and just talk about positive effects?

Compass Co-production Report

We agree with the argument that people with less privilege and different views need to be listened to and have an influence in order to set good local priorities for public services that balance the competing needs for equality and choice. However in the report, 'voice' is defined as 'participation, democracy and co-production'. It isn't clear what exactly is meant here and how the three are linked.

The paper gives an important focus to 'process' – something which was missing from New Labour's policies and is again from the ConDems', and which hasn't always been given enough attention by the labour movement.

Some criticisms:

- it doesn't tackle the power imbalances between those who control the resources and run the services (essentially professionals) and those users and communities who are on the sharp end of what is offered. Professionalism needs humility or it won't be able to understand what users and communities are really saying they want (this is where the likes of Bob Rhodes are strong and coherent).
- it assumes the state to be open to these ideas, its staff to be inclusive, well-informed and well meaning, and implies that if we can just get the structures of communication right, lots of excellent things will follow.
- The appeal to people's ideology (taking actions that are 'morally right in terms of egalitarian and democratic values') will limit the reach of the argument. With ideas like this, either you're behind them or you're not. The problem is how to persuade those who are not, which include the holders of most of the power. No political party supports these ideas. Strategies need to be developed that show awareness of this.

How NCIA's work differs from/goes beyond these ideas

In the world of voluntary action, activists are getting on with it, trying to make the most of the limited power they've got. They may see themselves as neither customers nor 'citizens', but just as people creating society around them through community activity. There are other types of 'civic engagement' that are about people forging reciprocal relationships, but aren't about services and being part of a narrative defined by the people running those services. Nor are they about worker rights and toeing the line of big campaigns and lobbying. For NCIA, the ability of the voluntary sector to campaign and practice dissent is key; voluntary sector management has been suffering from inappropriate public sector practices as well as inappropriate private sector practices.

How do these ideas link with grassroots trade union activism?

How do they link with the work of independent voluntary sector organisations (and more informal groups), which operate in a space different from that of the public sector or the market? What are the opportunities and experiences of real partnerships between voluntary organisations and public sector, and what's the role of professional expertise in this? For example, local authority youth workers often share the same values as voluntary sector youth workers, and private sector youth workers may share these values too. Can 'public value' be a shared concept working across sectors?