Reform or Revolution:

The UK Experience of Getting Government to Work to a Community Agenda

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by

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It's 10 years, almost to the week, that Tony Blair made his first formal speech as Prime Minister. In that speech, made on a disadvantaged social housing estate in South London called the Aylesbury Estate, he set out his government's intention to tackle disadvantage and community wellbeing.

In doing so, Tony Blair introduced two key ideas into the British and then the international policy debate. The first idea he introduced by saying that joined-up problems demand joined-up solutions. From that speech, from an idea which had been developed by Geoff Molgum, my predecessor at DEMOS and former boss, the whole worldwide discussion of joined-up government and the aspiration to link everything together came into being.

The second thing he said in that speech was that his government would be backing thousands of social entrepreneurs, people who bring to the social arena the same flair and drive as our most successful business entrepreneurs. He then went on to elaborate on a whole series of policies that he wanted to push forward.

It felt like a moment of revolution, I have to say, looking at the change in tone and substance, in orientation, and looking at the level of energy and enthusiasm that this new Prime Minister and this new government was able to bring.

Now of course it feels a bit different. Ten years on I've grown up a little bit, but I think we've also all learned a whole series of other lessons.

What I want to try and do is to take you through both the issues and the policy responses and the lessons from the journey of the Blair Government (which has also become bound up with the journey of the Victorian Government and many others), in trying to find ways of investing in, in supporting, and ultimately empowering communities in today's world.

There are many failures along that journey, but there are also some important gains.

The opportunities for learning in the right ways, and for learning how to accelerate our overall progress, are many, but they are also complicated and they need the right kinds of collaboration, and that's where I want to try and stop and start the conversations – how we focus on the right kinds of collaboration and then how we build them up over time.

So why did it strike such a chord for Tony Blair to be pointing in this direction? Well, Britain had been under Conservative rule for nearly 20 years and in the eighties and most of the nineties had gone through a pretty profound period of social and technological and economic change.

Tony Blair was responding politically to feelings and anxieties that were very deeply rooted in British life, and I think have their analogy in Australia.

The growth of economic inequality and quite profound industrial restructuring had left many of our geographical communities, especially in former industrial heartlands, essentially depressed and marginalised and struggling with these multiple problems of disadvantage and challenges of regeneration.

There was also an issue with falling trust in government and the idea that market and commercial values had somehow got out of balance with the other things that make life good and important, and that somehow the desire to gain financially and commercially had begun to infect the way that politics was done, probably also as a result of having a national government in power for too long.

During that mid-nineties period the idea of sleaze, of politicians on the make, of people only being out for themselves, gained a lot of traction in the wider public debate and in people's perceptions of what was happening in government.

That compounded a sense that people's trust in government and in public institutions was falling away – we had this great sense of a need to restore a sense of balance in our social, in our collective, in our public lives, while at the same time reflecting the other deeper changes that were going on in our social structure and in the way that

life works for most people. Those deeper changes are equally challenging, I think, for government.

Ten years on, people are not so worried about corruption in government anymore, although corruption scandals have reappeared in the last couple of years as a kind of cyclical issue. And the question of how to fund and finance political parties turns out to be a very big problem that is yet to be cracked.

People may well be in tune with the idea that we need some kind of balance and social fairness, a sense of community responsibility in government, in corporate life, in our everyday lives, but many of the structures and institutions through which those shared values have been expressed in the past are no longer fit for purpose. They're not fit for purpose anymore because of the way that we, as individuals and families, have changed our own behaviours and our own orientations.

People no longer join the traditional associations and religious institutions; people no longer believe in the institutional expression of large, shared-value systems in the way that they did a generation and certainly two generations ago.

Individualism and social diversity, driven as they have been partly by liberation and civil rights movements, present a positive but a very big challenge for some of our traditional social and organisational expressions of togetherness. Assisted by technology and by higher living standards, we live much more flexible and therefore much more fragmented lives than we might have done a generation ago.

Building community under those circumstances in a modern, diverse, often cosmopolitan and also very widely spread-out city like Melbourne, or a state like Victoria, is a pretty tough challenge. And that's the challenge that government is trying to play itself into.

So what did the Blair Government do and what should we learn from what it has tried to do as this story has unfolded?

First of all, it created a series of very big, very expensive national programs. The New Deal Communities, the National Program for Neighbourhood Renewal, and Sure Start are three that I would pick

out. They're big, long-term, ambitious, properly funded programs, involving new models of engagement and intervention, a very strong focus on prevention and capacity building, and that attempt to try and link together people in local communities, service providers and the political and government institutions responsible for trying to make it all work. They are mostly area-based programs, and they're programs that try to produce a revitalising effect in some of the areas where multiple compound disadvantage has really taken hold.

What have the results been? Well, in one sense it's unfair to ask. Many of the national evaluations, both of Neighbourhood Renewal and of Sure Start, have been ambiguous – uncertain about who's benefiting and what the compound effects are. The same was true a longer time ago of the High Scope and Head Start programs and their initial evaluations. In the US, they went on to be validated and to be accepted and taken up.

These programs have had a very positive effect where they've been able to really embed themselves in local community life. They have acted as a conduit for the channelling of public money, government spending into services and support structures for people who could benefit most from the availability of those resources.

But one specific area where they've broken down is in their ability to generate widespread community participation. The sense that if you conducted the right consultation, if you created partnership boards and shared responsibilities for decision-making across different communities, you would somehow find a way of tapping into the latent energy, enthusiasm, commitment, ideas and needs of these widely distributed communities, has not been borne out.

Many community sector organisations have ended up feeling like they have been sitting on boards in which the structural inequalities of power and resourcing and expert knowledge were too great for them to represent a genuine or an authentic community perspective.

Many more people, interestingly enough, have felt that the community sector organisations working on many of these programs have become separated from a broader spectrum of community need and community identity. There is a sense that once you become involved in

these large-scale institutional processes it's very hard not to lose some of the qualities and connections which gave you that vitality and that authenticity to start with.

All of those programs have an important role to play, but they haven't in themselves produced the dramatic or the revelatory effect which perhaps Tony Blair hoped for.

Number two, we have had 10 years of investment and increased spending on public services – the health service, education, crime, transport and so on. There has always been a commitment to and an intention by central government to pluralise the way that services work, to make them more responsive to communities and to community need. I would argue that it's a good thing to have better funded, better organised services, and that in many of these areas, it's the people we might be most concerned with who have benefited from there being higher literacy rates, better funded primary schools, more accessible treatment centres and a whole range of other things. Certainly, the expansion of early years provision and the growth of family and Sure Start services has been profoundly important.

But again, two lessons have stood out (and I'm deliberately compressing this, you'll understand). The first lesson concerns the fact that Tony Blair, and many of his government, were very interested in beginning to organise services which were more diverse in their composition, so that communities themselves, whether local communities or faith communities or specific groups of interested citizens, could create services that ended up being part of the broad public spectrum.

Ten years on, the oligopoly of public service providers (I can't quite say monopoly anymore) has remained pretty strongly intact. There are now some more voluntary sector organisations providing mainstream services in areas like youth transitions and ageing and disability services and so on, and there are many more private sector organisations involved, especially in the health service. But the idea that this particular kind of diversification has led to a growth in community ownership, and that local communities can somehow work out how to get together and start services and create organisations

that will become part of the local fabric of community and part of the state and the public provisional services, has not really come true.

The same, I think, is true of the framework for social entrepreneurship. There have been many social entrepreneurs with a very high profile, people like Dick Atkinson at Balsall Health in Birmingham, Andrew Morton in the East End – they are now celebrated figures. But somehow, again, the intention, even from a very popular, very powerful, pretty well-resourced national government, to connect with this growing movement of entrepreneurship and innovation, didn't really take off in the way that people thought.

There are now about 55,000 registered social enterprises in the UK. There is a policy framework for social enterprise. There's a coalition supported by central government, and there are various efforts still to stimulate and grow the sector. But 10 years is a long time, and somehow we could have tried to progress further. We've got the programs and we've got the services, and both of them have shown reasonable improvements (certainly nothing you would want to dismiss wholesale), but somehow they don't have the excitement or the historical achievement that we might also have hoped for.

So where else can we look for lessons? Well, we can try and look to politics and to the decentralisation of governmental power itself. Again, a rhetoric of community mobilisation, of decentralisation, of devolution, was pretty strong in the Labour Government. The government has undertaken some very important constitutional reforms, creating the London Mayor and Assembly, the Welsh National Assembly, the Scottish Parliament. (The Scottish voters have now just finally responded by kicking the Labour Party in the teeth, which is an essential and healthy part of the democratic process.)

But again, interestingly enough, while those things have happened at the global-city level and the nation-state level, the effort to devolve and decentralise power and discretion over community decision-making at the local level has not progressed as deeply or as rapidly as we might have expected or hoped.

This is partly because powerful national governments usually want to collect power rather than give it away, even when they have good intentions.

It's partly because many in the Labour Government were not sure whether or not they trusted local authorities enough to take up the challenge of responsiveness and higher quality and working in partnership with these more diverse communities. (And that's an attitude, or an orientation, that I detect here in Victoria, as well as back there in the UK.)

And it's also partly because many people were never quite sure whether or not decentralisation of these kinds of powers meant giving more power to locally elected politicians, or giving more power to a much broader range of organisations, entrepreneurs, community associations and so on at a more dispersed and even more local level of activity.

And so the experience, again, rather than being a big historic shift, has been more of a slow diffusion.

One of the most interesting reforms has been the introduction of a statutory duty of community wellbeing at the local authority level – local government is now responsible for community wellbeing in that very broad, slightly hard to pin down way. That duty has in turn led to a whole range of new forms of community engagement, partnership, measurement, incentives for joint planning, and taking seriously the range of qualities that actually contribute to people's wellbeing in local communities, rather than just the formal measures of service quality or through-put that we might have had, say, five years ago.

It has resulted in huge amounts of cross-community partnership, local strategic partnerships, neighbourhood planning forums, and all these other things that are designed to try and get the different public service providers working together in a more coherent and more joined up way, but somehow not the wholesale transfer of real power to this local level. A recent report by Sir Michael Lyons on the future role and function of local government proposed a whole series of things, things which would have been quite radical in the long run if they'd been adopted. The poor guy spent three years working on it and pretty

much every recommendation has been politely turned down by the government.

So we've got the entrepreneur option; we've got the program option; we've got the services option; we've got the local democracy option. All of them have gone somewhere, but none of them has quite given us the complete package that we would like to see.

I think that this in itself is leading us into some important lessons about the nature of change, and about the opportunities that we have for creating genuinely community-led, community-empowered approaches to tackling disadvantage and, more broadly, strengthening wellbeing and encouraging participation in every community.

The final approach which the Blair Government has also been very enthusiastic about has been what I would summarise as the social capital approach. We have these new theories, many coming from North America but also from other countries, relating to the importance of informal associations, networks and norms; people working together over their back garden fences, through local clubs and parks and so on. Quite aside from the institutional infrastructure provided by government, we can find ways of building local networks which link together change agents in our communities through social capital, and improve everyone's lives as a result.

But what we've learned in the UK is that trying to make a systematic difference with social capital is very hard for government institutions and governance frameworks that have evolved to do different things over much longer periods of time.

Secondly, unfortunately, while they sound fantastic, social capital can be exclusionary as well as inclusive. DEMOS did a very detailed study of two neighbourhoods, one in West Cardiff and one in Manchester, that looked at the experience of participation in local governance and these new partnership and community-based structures. What we found was that if you study the science of social networks, they will help to explain why simply using old structures to encourage new participation leads to a tiny minority in a local community becoming overburdened and in a sense over-privileged, gaining network

participation and access to local decision-making at the expense of the wider community.

So we're left with a situation where even when all your channels are on and all your political commitment is facing in the right direction, there's still quite an important gap between the institutional framework and the lived experience of perhaps 98% of our community.

The essential question to try and ask is, "What is it, and under what circumstances, that can help to bridge that gap?"

We know from Tony Vinson's study that almost regardless of government spending localised disadvantage will reproduce itself and turn itself into very entrenched resilient patterns over time.

We also know from that Vinson study, and the ones came before it, that there is another side to this. In many of the communities where long-term economic and multiple disadvantage has applied, and things haven't really improved, by the economic indicators, over 30 or 40 years, you find that there's another set of indicators which systematically improve life outcomes and quality of the experience of life. They're not just about the material resources, although they do continue to matter. What they're about is whether or not people trust and work with each other at the doorstep, the neighbourhood and the everyday level.

So we can see that there is a need for both the macro-level processes of design and advocacy and policy development, and the micro-level processes of connection, engagement and ultimately of empowerment.

What you find is that when people talk to you about the social things that they are part of, they don't really have much to do with government, with community language or with political goals. We still have a situation where there is a huge mismatch between the orientation of not just our government sector but also, dare I say it, our community sector in the kinds of goals and the kinds of mobilisation that they would like to achieve collectively, and the way in which people actually live, experience and understand their everyday lives.

So how do we find ways of not throwing the baby out with the bath water, but at the same time recognising that the move to sustainable change, the ways to build critical mass for long-term change, may go beyond any of the tools of intervention and the institutional channels that we currently have at our disposal? Well, I've got two stories to finish with that present clues as to how you do it.

The first is a story of a car wash that I went to visit a few weeks ago in a public housing estate in Richmond. This car wash was a fantastic idea, using recycled rain water to wash local cars and at the same time giving kids on the estate meaningful economic activity and contact with a range of role models from beyond the boundaries of the estate. The then Minister for Victorian Communities, John Thwaites, opened it a few years ago.

That car wash is currently unused. The hoses have been stolen; the kids have lost interest. The voluntary chair of the tenants' action committee told me there was already an informal agreement with one of the local taxi garages that they would be the first institutional client of this budding social enterprise, but it never took off because before the rest of the funding could be released, the relevant government department, which will remain nameless this morning, had to commission consultants to undertake a business case study and identify a revenue stream for the car park. You've probably heard similar stories too many times before.

I'm not here to bag the government department, I'm just here to say that our knowledge processes, our learning, our organisation of the sequence that community capacity building needs to go through, is not properly set out in the rules and regulations and the organisational structures that we all depend on. Learning to make those connections between the formal and the informal, and then give them space to grow, is one of the ways in which we can get over the structural defects of the British and, to some extent, the Victorian story.

How do we do that? Well that relates to my second story. Next week I'm going to Frankston for the first time for a forum at the Arts Centre called *Men Behaving Positively*. My main excitement is that I get to be on a platform alongside Wayne Schwass and Merv Hughes, who are

both talking about men behaving positively and who I figure might be slightly more of a draw than Tom Bentley.

This is a forum organised by local health practitioners and local government to try and build the basis of support for a new way of offering health services to men. Rather than going through the traditional forms of consultation and consultancy and organisational design, what they're doing is creating forums to which 1000 or 1500 people want to come.

It's that kind of approach to communication and conversation which, under our contemporary social conditions, builds community. You have to build community if you want to create the legitimacy and the energy which will support the process of taking risks and building new enterprises and learning new ways of doing things at that organisational level.

In a sense, that is the quite simple conclusion of my story. In Britain, we set out to try and create a revolution in our own naïve way. What we ended up with was a string of imperfect, inevitably comprised reforms.

If we really want more powerful models of change over time, we need to bring them together into something more like an evolutionary model, in which every experience and every imperfection becomes a learning resource for the ongoing process of building cumulative change.

In that process, learning how to link the political language and leadership with the policy design and evaluation, and the organisational brokerage and linkage, is the fundamental process which I think can give us a new context in which to build new communities.

Thank you very much.

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