



A CATALYST WORKING PAPER

Citizen-consumers

New Labour's
marketplace democracy

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Executive summary

1. Introduction

- The government-citizen relationship is increasingly being remodelled along consumerist lines. It is essential to understand how and why consumerism has taken such a strong hold on public life, to diagnose the dangers it presents, and to identify the viable alternatives.

2. New Labour and the citizen

- On arriving in power New Labour signalled a change of emphasis towards a more active and substantive conception of citizenship from that of the Conservatives. Six years on the state of the government-citizenship relationship is not in a robust state of health, and on a downward trajectory.

3. Treating citizens as consumers

- The meaning and content of citizenship has always been subject to interpretation and political contestation. To claim that citizens are being treated as consumers is to say that the government-citizen relationship is replicating patterns of choice and power found in the private economy.
- The consumer is primarily self-regarding, forms preferences without reference to others, and acts through a series of instrumental, temporary bilateral relationships. Accountability is secured by competition and complaint, and power exercised through aggregate signalling.
- The citizen-consumer can be contrasted with an alternative model of participatory citizenship centred on concern for a common interest, collective deliberation and discussion, loyalty to the political community and the value of public engagement as a good in itself.

4. The consumerisation of citizenship

- The claim that citizenship is being consumerised can be supported through examination of key points of interaction between government and citizen: communication, consultation and service delivery.
- Government communications are taking an increasingly promotional and top-down form. This is manifested in the government's internalisation of the

language and techniques of commercial marketing and the shaping of information by “presentational” concerns.

- Government consultation exercises are focused on self-regarding individual responses without collective discussion, and concern personal experiences of policies and services rather than political questions behind them.
- The government’s agenda for public service reform is concentrated on an objective of maximising “customer satisfaction” and expanding individual choice and competition.

5. Why are citizens being treated as consumers?

- Consumerisation is presented as a response to demand and a result of social and cultural change. Such analyses lack sociological nuance and critical perspective: the tension of such trends with egalitarian and public objectives must be confronted.

6. The costs of consumerism

- There are limits to the relevance of consumerism to the public sector. Choice may be impossible to institute, have perverse effects, and may not be what is most wanted by service users. Use of complaint mechanisms is uneven across socio-economic groups and may have distorting effects.
- The fundamental danger is that consumerism may be fostering privatised and resentful citizens whose expectations of government can never be met, and cannot develop the concern for the public good that must be the foundation of democratic engagement and support for public services.

7. Alternatives to consumerism

- Current notions of active citizenship, community, co-production and voluntarism provide starting points for the development of alternatives. But to avoid the wrong turnings of individualism and statelessness we must look to accounts of political belonging offered by civic republican traditions.

8. Conclusion

- Consumerism provides no answer to the most fundamental questions of politics and the public good. Compared to a passive clientelism consumer empowerment can sound appealing. But against the promise of a robust and active participatory citizenship, it is revealed as flimsy and redundant.



Introduction

A fashion in left-of-centre discourse over recent years has been to regard consumers as citizens. As mainstream political institutions lose relevance, our attitudes to patterns of global ownership, employment conditions and environmental standards are expressed in the way we shop. This movement is exemplified by the success of No Logo, and in support for anti-sweatshop campaigns and Fair Trade goods.

In a fascinating inversion of this politicisation of consumption, recent governments in the UK have been consumerising citizenship. Rather than exporting the political dimension of citizenship into consumer behaviour, they have sought to import consumer values into the government-citizen relationship. The effect has been to turn democracy into a marketplace, downgrading those elements of citizenship that presume a more collectivist and political linkage between individual and state.

The New Labour governments in power since 1997 have intensified trends in this direction begun under the Conservatives. It has been evident in a style of communications which utilises marketing techniques borrowed from advertising to promote its messages, and an approach to consultation which emphasises market research and quantitative measures of customer satisfaction over more discursive and participatory methods. Presently it is most apparent in the area of public service reform, where, particularly since the 2001 election, New Labour has explicitly focussed on consumer choice and the responsiveness of services to their "customers".

The thread of consumerism running through New Labour's approach has been missed by many of its critics, who since 1997 have ranged their guns on the development of communications strategies based on tight message discipline and marketing techniques (1); the conversion of focus groups and opinion polls from campaign devices to tools of government; the fetishism of the private sector and fondness for the personnel and terminology of big business (2). All these critiques have been important in understanding the nature and limitations of the New Labour style of government. But they have missed the theme of consumerisation which unites these different

factors. Through the lens of consumerism, it becomes possible to identify a consistency in otherwise divergent elements of New Labour's style of government.

This process has profound implications for the relationship between government and citizen. It restricts citizens to a passive consumption of politics, excluding them from playing a creative and productive role in civic life. An individualised and commodified form of citizenship is taking hold in which communal and discursive elements are lost.

At a time when New Labour is staking its credibility on ambitions for civic renewal and the reinvigoration of public services, the language of customers and markets is undermining the idea that public life and public provision matters. Evidence that a consumer-based approach can benefit public service users is patchy at best, and it seems likely that the government itself loses more than it gains from pursuing this agenda.

With the individual, the community and the government losing out, it is essential to understand how and why consumerism has taken such a strong hold on public life, to diagnose the dangers it presents, and to identify the viable alternatives.

2

New Labour and citizenship

The language of citizenship has been common currency among our governing politicians in the last two decades, despite the formal designation of Britons as subjects rather than citizens.

In the latter years of Margaret Thatcher's premiership, the Conservatives discovered the phrase "active citizenship" and used it to convey their belief that local voluntarism should replace the morally debilitating nanny state. As Home Office minister John Patten wrote in 1989, "The active citizen is someone making more than a solely economic contribution to his or her community; nothing more or less"(3). Under John Major emphasis shifted to the Citizen's Charter, a declaration that government services should reflect the needs of users rather than wasteful and insensitive public bureaucracies. Despite their enthusiasm for the language of citizenship it was evident that the Conservatives' version of it was highly instrumental, providing a hook on which to hang broader public management objectives. The Citizen's Charter was explicit in its endorsement of consumerism, seeking to "give the citizen a better deal through extending consumer choice and competition" (4). Political questions about what should be provided to social security recipients, council tenants, NHS patients and school children were replaced by performance targets.

When New Labour came into power in 1997, there was a discernible change of emphasis. In opposition Blair had called for "a new relationship between citizen and community for the modern world" (5). Soon after the election, he wrote that "The democratic impulse needs to be strengthened by finding new ways to enable citizens to share in decision-making that affects them" (6). The language implied a vision of citizenship inspired by a principled belief in the citizen's role and the reinvigoration of political community, rather than a contingent effort to bend the concept to his own devices.

The message was reinforced by measures such as the introduction of Citizenship Education as a separate item in the National Curriculum, spearheaded by then Education Secretary David Blunkett. Blunkett's belief in citizenship education was shaped by his former tutor Bernard Crick, whose model of the citizen was explicitly political and participatory (7). As Home Secretary, Blunkett told the Commons, "Community engagement and active citizenship are fundamental to the fabric of our society. I aim to ensure that they underpin all aspects of policy development in the Home Office and across government"(8).

Six years after New Labour first came to power, a series of indicators suggest that the government-citizen relationship is not in a robust state of health. Voter turnout declined precipitously at the 2001 election, dipping below 60 per cent for the first time since the extension of the suffrage. MORI polling showed that there has been no decline in people's interest in politics in general over the last twenty years; it was current party politics and politicians that turned them off (9). Citizens appear reluctant to believe government information and advice, be it on GM food or MMR jabs. According to MORI only 21 per cent trust ministers to tell them the truth. Satisfaction with the government and with Tony Blair as Prime Minister has now been in negative figures for over a year (10). Cabinet Office minister Douglas Alexander recently warned that "a growing sense of disconnection from politics is surfacing amongst the public." (11)

Citizens' attitudes towards government appear to be lacking in trust and devoid of affection – and to be on a downward trajectory. Why should this be the case? A possible explanation is that despite the government's rhetorical warmth on the need for an inclusive and participatory citizenship, we are actually seeing the intensification of trends begun under the Conservatives towards entrenching a narrow and instrumental model of citizenship in our institutions and political culture. In this version, the relationship between government and citizen is individualised and transactional. Citizens are given no reason to support and participate in public life beyond the desire to attain a package of benefits and services. They are being treated not as citizens, but as consumers.

3

Treating citizens as consumers

To make sense of the claim that the government is treating citizens as consumers it is first necessary to understand what is meant by the two terms. “Citizen” and “consumer” are words that are commonly used but not consensually defined.

Anthony Rees suggests citizenship “has something for every shade of opinion” and “appears to be promiscuous in the company it keeps” (12). Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang argue that “We have little difficulty thinking of ourselves as consumers. Thinking of ourselves as citizens is more problematic” (13). Yet in practice consumerism too is a slippery concept, and there is not necessarily agreement on what forms of behaviour it encompasses.

A natural starting point is to assume that the role of consumer is economic and that of citizen political. Establishing the boundary between these two spheres is itself no easy matter, however. The disputes that have animated citizenship theory in ancient and modern times have centred, to a large extent, on the proper distinction between the political and economic spheres and the relationship between *homo politicus* and *homo economicus*. They have their echoes in today’s questions about the relationship between the citizen and the consumer.

“Citizenship” at its core designates membership of a political community, usually a nation state; but the terms of that membership are rarely made explicit and are the subject of contestation from rival theories. In some accounts, particularly those that derive from the civic republican tradition, economics is deliberately kept distant from politics. For writers such as Aristotle (c.350BC), Rousseau (1762), Dewey (1927) and Arendt (1959) economic activity is a distraction from or even a pollutant of public life (14). Other traditions have viewed economic roles and civic status as more interdependent. We can think for example of the nineteenth-century liberal presumption that property holding was a necessary qualification for suffrage. Such elitist claims became discredited in the twentieth century, yet the

belief that membership of the civic body was bound up with a minimal level of material comfort animated Beveridge and the other architects of the welfare state, and was captured in T.H. Marshall's notion of the social rights of citizenship (15). The shared sense of status and solidarity which underpinned citizenship was seen to entail a decommmodification of the individual's relationship with the community, using state benefits to bring everyone up to an acceptable minimum (16). Lately the influential political philosopher John Rawls argued that public participation in and reasoning about democracy requires the provision of certain important material and non-material goods to every citizen (17).

In these "social democratic" variants, access to adequate economic resources is a necessary condition of citizenship. But it is not a sufficient one: it does not tell people how they should behave as citizens. The relationship between the economic and political spheres is cast rather differently in the neo-liberal philosophy which gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s. According to this view, the political role of the citizen should be based as closely as possible on the economic role of the consumer. Freedom is equated with market autonomy rather than with a political form of emancipation. "As far as possible his activities as a citizen should be modelled on his behaviour in the economic market, taken to be a paradigm of rationality" (18). Individuals are to treat political exchanges in the same way as economic interactions, making only the minimal necessary concessions to the distinctive nature of public as opposed to private goods.

Citizenship, then, can be seen as variable and contested, mimicking the economic role of the consumer to a greater or lesser degree. But this leaves unanswered the question of what it means to act as a consumer, and how to identify when government is treating us in this way. In some cases it may be explicit – politicians and civil servants may call us "consumers", or "customers", its near relation (19). But we need to know more about the forms of behaviour attached to being a consumer to understand what people mean when they use the term, and to identify aspects of consumerism in public life even when the term itself is not used.

We can look to economists and sociologists for guidance on the behaviour of consumers, although these two disciplines have not always found

common ground. For neo-classical economists, consumers are rational actors maximising their utility through their purchasing decisions; according to sociologists, consumers exhibit irrational behaviour, are highly susceptible to advertising, and see consumption as an expression of their identity rather than a functional transaction.

For both economists and sociologists the consumer is the recipient of goods and services, choosing her preferred package from the available set. As Emily Hauptmann says, "The defining act of the consumer ... is choosing, whether it be choosing goods to buy or how much money to spend or save" (20). The process of choice is an individual one, in which the consumer exercises personal autonomy through the freedom to choose. In economics, consumers are assumed to act rationally, assimilating and processing all the relevant data, ranking their preferences and acting upon them, but we can relax the assumption of rationality and still accept that as a consumer choices are made to promote personal (or family) welfare, and are constrained only by individual resources and product availability. The consumer is self-regarding, choosing, as Jon Elster puts it, "between courses of action that differ only in the way that they affect him" (21). Sociologists will raise questions about the social context of consumption, arguing that consumer desires are shaped by societal pressures. But it remains the case that at the moment of choice the consumer is essentially "self-interested", even if the content of those interests is socially constructed.

The relationship between the consumer and the supplier of goods and services is one of voluntary exchange, established only for the duration of the transaction. It is a bilateral relationship, which assumes that the set of relevant parties can be limited to those providing and receiving the good or service. Accountability is also bilateral: companies are required to provide goods of an appropriate quality, otherwise the consumer will move to another supplier or demand a replacement for the faulty good. In most cases purveyors of poor quality merchandise will suffer the sanction of going out of business, although they may also be subject to legal prosecution.

Consumers can shape the content of the choice set through the selections they make. As Keith Dowding says, “the very act of making choices between alternatives leads the consumers to control the type of products which are made available” (22). Through exit (moving to another supplier) and voice (complaining) consumers signal to producers their satisfaction with the goods and services on offer (23). The need for sustained sales keeps producers responsive to consumer demand. However, control as a consumer is exercised in aggregate through signalling; the content of the choice set may be difficult for individual consumers to predict and control. At any moment of choice, consumers make their selection from a given set of options; there is no collective decision mechanism to allow them to have direct control over the range of goods available. In John Gyford’s words, “consumption is an act of receipt rather than creation.” (24)

Consumers are therefore distinctive in the way that they make choices (as self-regarding individuals), receive goods and services (through a series of instrumental, temporary and bilateral relationships with suppliers), and exercise power (passively, through aggregate signalling). To claim that the citizen is being treated as a consumer is to argue that citizens are encouraged to behave on the basis of the same principles. It takes the private sector consumer as the model for citizenship, and the relationship between the consumer and the private firm as the model for the government-citizen relationship. It implies reliance on individual choice and market mechanisms as allocative devices throughout the public sector. It entails downward and bilateral accountability of providers through competition and complaints procedures rather than upward accountability to elected representatives and political institutions. It means that the relationship between the citizen and the state is individualised, instrumental and transactional. Using Hirschman’s triadic distinction between exit, voice and loyalty, the citizen-consumer model presumes that the citizen will prefer to exit the public sector if possible, being kept there only by the lures of a promotional mode of communications and a limited ability to use voice to demand a certain level of service provision.

The citizen-consumer model can be contrasted with a different model of citizenship, which we can call the participatory citizen. This is drawn from the civic republican approach which is discussed in more detail in Section 7

below. In the participatory model, preferences derive from deliberation about the needs of the community as a whole. The participatory model emphasises voice not as complaint but as discussion, and presumes that the citizen will be loyal to the political community rather than tied in only by promotional forms of advertising. It relies on democratic procedures of accountability rather than those of the market mechanism.

Two models of citizenship

The citizen-consumer	The participatory citizen
Self-regarding	Community-regarding
Reflexive preferences	Preferences shaped by deliberation
Market accountability	Political accountability
Voice as complaint	Voice as discussion
Loyalty to the political community secured through promotional advertising	Loyalty to the political community based on common citizenship
Instrumental attitude to politics: political activity as a means	Non-instrumental attitude to politics: political activity as an end

To claim that citizens are being treated as citizen-consumers is not to say that goods are being provided by the private sector: a discussion of the consumerisation of citizenship is related to, but not the same as, the debate over the use of Public Private Partnerships, privatisation or contracting out. Here it will be understood that being a consumer is about a distinctive pattern of choice and power, leaving open the question of whether the private sector or the state provides the service.

4

The consumerisation of citizenship

Section 3 identified ways in which the citizen could be treated as a consumer. This section will review the evidence that the New Labour governments have been treating citizens in this way.

It should be acknowledged that although Labour is the focus here, 1997 is not year zero for the consumerisation of citizenship. As discussed above, it was the neo-liberal approach of the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s that created the soil in which consumerism could flourish. However, as we approach the sixth anniversary of the 1997 election, it is New Labour's record that commands attention.

To assess the relationship between government and citizen, it is necessary to consider the points at which they interact. We are most familiar with seeing politicians at election time as they tour the country shaking hands and kissing babies. But these are partisan activities in which politicians act as party representatives rather than members of the government. Once a government has been formed, the primary points of contact between the government and the citizenry are:

- communication – governments publicise policies and provide advice to citizens through official sources, the media and paid advertising
- consultation – governments invite citizen feedback on policies or undertake research to track citizen perceptions of issues
- service delivery – governments are responsible for providing a range of public services to citizens, funded largely through taxation

These three areas of interface cover routinised interactions between government and citizen and therefore offer the best way of evaluating the extent to which the government is treating citizens as consumers. They are discussed in turn below. Online interactions and the local dimension of the government-citizen relationship are also considered.

Communication

Communication is of particular significance to democracy and citizenship. It is in the public sphere that the practice of citizenship is given meaning (25). To claim that the government is systematically incorporating consumerist features into its communications is therefore to argue that the very experience of citizenship is being pushed in that direction.

What would a consumerisation of government communications look like? Drawing on the discussion in Section 3, it would be an approach that takes the relationship between a private sector firm and consumers as a model. This implies, firstly, a promotional aspect to communications, in which governments seek to sell something to consumers, as their private sector equivalents do. Second, it presumes a top-down, one-way process in which the government provides information and the citizen consumes it. There is no expectation of interaction or dialogue.

Under New Labour there is evidence that advertising and promotional techniques have been incorporated into government communications to a greater extent than ever before. The language of “branding”, “message” and “targeting” have entered the government lexicon for the first time. Soon after the 1997 election, Alastair Campbell sent a memo to the heads of information in all government departments requiring that the government’s “four key messages” be “built into all areas of our activity” (26). The (politically neutral) Government Information Service (GIS) was reformed to “improve co-ordination with and from the centre, so as to get across consistently the Government’s key policy themes and messages” (27). It was renamed the Government Information and Communication Service (GICS) to reinforce the change in attitude, “from reactive information supply in response to media queries to pro-active communication as part of the normal business of government” (28). That the language of branding is now adopted by government departments as they design their external communication is evidenced by regular Parliamentary Questions about the cost of departmental branding (29). Blair, in a recent article for *Progressive Governance*, talks of “rebranding” the “progressive political project” (30) – using the term with the same lack of self-consciousness that was displayed

in Philip Gould's claim that the New Labour "brand name" had become "badly contaminated" (31).

The promotional emphasis of government communications is evident in the content of information as well as in the tools of its presentation. A notorious example was the multiple counting of new health spending: a Panorama programme revealed how £20 million for a new instant booking system for NHS patients was announced on four separate occasions from September 1998 through to September 1999 without making clear that the money had been previously available (32). More recently the discovery of plagiarism in the government's dossier on Iraq also revealed how language was being manipulated for presentational reasons: for example, the phrase "aiding opposition groups" had been changed to "supporting terrorist organisations", and "monitoring foreign embassies" became "spying on foreign embassies" (33).

The concern for promotion is further underlined in reports from the outgoing Audit Commission head Andrew Foster that the government exerted "sustained and improper pressure in an attempt to interfere with independent reports on how its policies are working." A report questioning the value for money of privately financed schools had been held up because ministers were "unhappy with the message". Similar concerns delayed the release of a report on Accident and Emergency waiting times (34).

Writing in 1996, Blumler et al argued that we were seeing the emergence of a style of political communications which, "treats the voter more as a consumer to be pleased than as a citizen to be enlightened or engaged in debate" (35). Since 1997 we have seen the intensification of this trend. Romola Christopherson, Head of Information at the Department of Health in the early years of the Blair government agrees that there has been a qualitative change in the way that Labour used communications:

I always thought that any government has indeed to sell its policy. But there is a difference in the approach of an advertising agency or a commercial marketing outfit. There is a different in its approach to the information, the facts it has. This government has moved much nearer to taking a marketing approach. (36)

e-government

The development of “e-government” provides a test case of New Labour’s approach to interaction with citizens, as a strategy was barely in existence prior to the 1997 election. In practice, the same logic of consumerisation that is evident in offline government-citizen interactions can be identified in their online relationship.

The language of consumerism pervades documents on e-government emanating from government. In the foreword to a strategy paper on government in the “Information Age”, for example, Cabinet Office Minister Ian McCartney proclaims that “Information Technology is a powerful enabler but the starting point should always be to identify what the customer wants and then to look at how we use IT to achieve this.” (37)

The focus of government’s online activity has been public services, which have attracted firm deadlines and large investment. Developments aimed at maximising the interactivity of the Internet for deliberative purposes have been slower in coming. The UK Online site offers a portal into departmental consultation, but respondents are limited to an email response, with little scope for dialogue with ministers, civil servants or other consultees.

The informational capabilities of the Internet have dramatically widened citizens’ access to government documents, but here too there has been a move to establish promotional interfaces. The daily news information service on the UK Online site – allegedly dubbed “Pravda.com” by civil servants (38) – is managed by the “e-Communications” group in the e-Envoy’s office. On its website the Group lists its five main objectives, the first of which is to spearhead the “branding, marketing and campaigning” for the UK Online portal (39).

Consultation

The expectation that citizenship involves being consulted on aspects of policy between elections underpins all but the most extreme views of representative democracy. As David Beetham puts it, “The choices that people make at election time ... do not entail agreement with everything that the representatives may do in the future. Systematic and regular consultation is therefore a necessary democratic complement to the electoral process” (40). Consultation allows citizens to play a creative

political role between elections, sharing expertise, registering needs and indicating priorities.

The idea of treating consultees as consumers turns not on the literal definition of the consumer as a user of goods and services, but on being consulted in the same way as a private sector consumer. It is about the extent to which consultation demonstrates the characteristics discussed in Section 3. Consultation exercises can be classified as consumerist in method or content. Consultations which are consumerist in method are those which mimic commercial market research. Techniques include opinion polls, feedback forms and satisfaction surveys, which ask respondents to give information in the light of their own experience and require a reflexive and self-regarding response with low levels of discussion with other consultees. Usually only those selected to participate in the consultation are able to respond; others who might seek to influence the debate as members of the community are excluded from the process. Consultations that are consumerist in content are those which ask respondents to report their experiences as service users and not to consider wider community, policy or budgetary implications. The consultee is asked to appraise existing provision, not to deliberate on the merits of providing the service in the first place. The policy decisions that underpin the level of service offered are off-limits.

New Labour has significantly increased consultation undertaken by government. Its fondness for focus groups and opinion polls is well documented, but the Labour governments have also pioneered the use of techniques such as citizens' juries and the People's Panel. Government spending on market research increased by 43 percent between 1998 and 2001, according to figures from the British Market Research Association (41). Disaggregation of these figures using answers to Parliamentary Questions show that the majority of spending has gone on techniques which can be classified as consumerist in method, such as opinion polls and satisfaction surveys. More discursive techniques such as citizen's juries have been little used. In part this reflects their cost and the need to use survey techniques to gather reliable information about the population, but if governments are hearing from citizens only through quantitative surveys, we should recognise the limitations of this model of consultation.

The Prime Minister's Office of Public Services Reform (OPSR) has concentrated on developing customer satisfaction measures, which are consumerist in method and content. Last year it commissioned a report from MORI into how best to measure and understand customer satisfaction. Interestingly, the resulting report differentiates between "customer satisfaction" and "citizen satisfaction" in a way that government departments rarely do:

"When we are looking at customer satisfaction, we are asking questions directly about the delivery of services at an operational level; citizen surveys assess issues such as whether certain services should be provided by the public sector at all." (42)

Recognition of this duality, and – more importantly – the need to take steps to address it, are lacking from the OPSR's own approach (43). There is reason to be sceptical therefore about the extent to which the government is committed to using consultation as a way to include the participatory citizen in decision-making, rather than to measure the satisfaction of the citizen-consumer.

Service delivery

Reform of public services has been central to New Labour's vision for government. At the 1997 and 2001 elections Labour juxtaposed its vision of high quality public services with the residual, cash-starved version offered by the Conservatives. Speaking to party members in Glasgow in February 2003, Tony Blair asked the hall, "And why do we believe so passionately in these public services? Because they are what community is all about. They bind us together. As our constitution says, we achieve more together than we can alone." (44)

Despite this explicit endorsement of public services as expressive and constitutive of community, it is an individualised consumer model of service delivery that has characterised New Labour's approach. In a foreword to the government's first Annual Report in 1998, Blair wrote, "In all walks of life people act as consumers not just citizens. They want those providing a service to justify themselves" (45). Since then, and particularly since the last

election, this language has dominated Blair's pronouncements on public services. In a speech to public sector workers in London in October 2001, he set out his four principles for public service reform: high standards; local diversity; flexible employment; choice of providers. "All four principles have one goal", he said, "to put the consumer first" (46). In a pamphlet published in September 2002 he stressed that public services needed to be reformed "to deliver in a modern, consumer-focused fashion". In public services, he wrote, "Customer satisfaction has to become a culture, a way of life, not an 'added extra'" (47). An interview that month revealed a similar preoccupation: "The problems with the public services are that they are underinvested in, but they are also not based around the needs of the individual consumer" (48). Most recently, Blair's Progressive Governance piece speaks of the need "to build more diverse, individually tailored services built around the needs of the modern consumer" (49).

It isn't only Tony Blair who favours the language of consumerism. At a joint press conference in February 2003 Alan Milburn and Charles Clarke urged that consumer choice was "a means of driving up standards", without which "public services will not be sustainable for much longer" (50). As Education Minister, David Blunkett emphasised that schools and colleges must "make sure that what is on offer responds to the needs of consumers" (51). Gordon Brown, in a recent speech on the limits of markets, still emphasised the importance of the consumer, calling for "greater consumer choice" and public services that are "responsive to the consumer" (52).

Consumerist language is evident not only in the vision statements of politicians but also in the implementation of services. New Labour's core proposals for reforming the government machine were contained in its 1999 Modernising Government White Paper. In the Introduction, the then minister for the Cabinet Office, Jack Cunningham, says that the document "is a clear statement by the Government of what government is for. Not government for those who work in government; but government for people – people as consumers, people as citizens." Nothing is said about the difference between these roles, and the different interests they embody. The White Paper declares that "Government Departments and agencies must be sensitive to their customers", including "social security customers" and "customers" of the Inland Revenue (53).

The Office of Public Services Reform (OPSR) created in summer 2001 has explicitly concentrated on public service users as customers. Its head, Wendy Thomson, has described the role of the OPSR as “to improve current structures, systems, incentives and skills to deliver better, more customer-focused public services.” In 2002, the OPSR launched the government’s Principles of Public Service Reform, which stated that “for investment to deliver the improvements wanted, public services will have to be rebuilt round the needs of their customers” (54). The OPSR website proclaims:

OPSR is championing customers’ views across the public services by bringing data about customer satisfaction into government department’s consideration of policy and drive for reform. As a result, departments are now seeking customer views more regularly. OPSR has also developed 5 principles to guide the departments in the collection of customer feedback and an “ideal framework” of customer research which each public service should have. OPSR is working with departments and H.M Treasury to increase the use of customer feedback in policy and service delivery. (55)

There is plenty of evidence, then, of a zeal for consumerism at the corporate centre of government. It is interesting to note that this customer focus is also apparent further down the civil service hierarchy. In interviews conducted by the author, middle-ranking civil servants in the health and education departments spontaneously talked about their customers or consumers, and saw the prevalence of such language as a positive development for service users.

In some ways I’m more comfortable with the idea of talking about customers than with talking about service users. It’s much more helpful to think along those lines, to think what kind of service do you try to give to customers. What expectations should customers have of the service you give? How do you try to deal with customers?

(Civil Servant, Department of Health)

One of the DFES' key behaviours is about involving your customers and its about saying that everyone who works for the DFES should be driven by these behaviours, and one of them is involving your customers. So I think we see our work as being driven by our customers who are young people.

(Civil Servant, Department for Education and Skills)

It could be argued that this language is uninteresting, denoting little more than the reality that, as a user of public services, the citizen literally consumes goods and services. Yet the apparent neutrality of the terms consumer and customer in the context of public service delivery should not cloud their significance. In almost all cases the term consumer is used in a context that implies something about the nature of the transaction, rather than being simply a synonym for service user. For example, in the statements given above the terms customer and consumer say something about role of choice ("a means of driving up standards" – Milburn), the type of service provision ("diverse, individually tailored services" – Blair) and the mode of accountability (consumers "want those providing a service to justify themselves" – Blair).

This focus on the explicit language of consumerism does not mean that consumerist traits are absent where the language of consumerism is avoided. The patterns of choice, delivery and accountability that this government has promoted are those that cohere with the consumerist traits outlined in Section 3, even where politicians do not talk overtly about consumers or customers. It is hard to find a speech on public services since 1997 that has not given pre-eminence to individual choice, be it David Blunkett on post-16 education, Gordon Brown on the Public Service Agreements, Alan Milburn on Foundation Hospitals, or Charles Clarke on Specialist Schools. Blair expressed his government's faith in choice in his pamphlet: "Choice enhances quality of provision for the poorest, helping to tackle inequalities while it also strengthens middle class commitment to collective provision" (56) To maximise choice within the public sector, the government has encouraged competition between service providers. In the area of health, for example, patients waiting more than six months are to have a wider choice of treatment – in hospitals nationwide, in the private sector or abroad.

An interesting phenomenon of the last twelve months is that ministers have begun to step back from the explicit language of consumerism and competition, while still continuing to endorse the principles behind them. Talk of competition, for example, has been replaced by the euphemistic alternative “contestability”. Blair says that “we need to explore the usefulness of choice and contestability to extend opportunity and equalise life chances” (57). Brown’s speech called for “contestability to drive efficiency and reward innovation” in the NHS (58). “Contestability” carries with it a sense of deliberation and exchange of ideas – suggestive, perhaps, of a more democratic and participatory model of public engagement with the public sector – but here it appears to be a synonym for market competition (59). In a similar vein a recent speech by schools minister David Miliband asserted that parents “have the right to express preferences about the education of their children” – though the only form of “expression” under discussion was that of voting with their feet in a secondary schools quasi-market (60).

There are some signs that ministers have started to recognise the limitations of a wholly consumerist vision. Blair’s pamphlet emphasises that “Public services will never be just another customer service ... Modern public services need to affirm our status as citizens, while meeting our demands as consumers” (61). Early this year John Reid wrote in *The Guardian*, “Our vision is not one of consumerism in public services, but of a partnership in which the users of services get more power and choice, but in return help the system to work better for the good of all” (62). But the vision of a citizenship beyond consumerism presented by Blair and Reid is an anaemic one. For Blair citizenship is a matter of status; the practice – the active content of citizenship – is limited to consumption. For Reid, the balance appears to be one where consumers have the rights and citizens have the responsibilities. Their approach exemplifies the New Labour fudge on the relationship between the state and the market, which calls for a synthesis of the best of both without critically engaging with their fundamental contradictions. Only Brown’s recent Social Market Foundation speech sought to explicitly discuss this relationship, and did so with clarity and rigour. Yet even here Brown did not stray outside of health care to discuss the limitations of markets for other public goods, such as education.

Local government

Obviously there are methodological problems in measuring the extent to which all 386 local governmental authorities in the UK pursue a consumerist approach. But all are bound by the statutory framework established by central government and here it is possible to see clear echoes of the patterns that dominate the national scene. There is the same consumer orientation in service delivery. The 2001 White Paper Strong Local Leadership, Quality Public Services talks about making services more "customer-focused". The 1998 White Paper setting out the Best Value regime introduced after 1999 explained its emphasis on competition between service providers: "The Government views competition therefore not as an end in itself, but as a means of bringing about the continuous improvements that customers expect and best value demands." (63)

The same approach is evident in local consultation, despite early indications to the contrary. On coming into power the Labour government called for "close and regular contact between a council and local people between elections" in order to bring about a "fundamental shift in power and influence towards local people" (64). The desire to reinvigorate local government by forging strong links between councils and their communities, and the encouragement of a "New Localism" was one of the defining features of New Labour's approach. Yet the need to produce quantifiable measures of customer satisfaction to satisfy the Best Value auditors pushes councils towards consumerist forms of consultation. Particularly where money for consultation is scarce (and in most councils it is), service-oriented consultation becomes the priority.

The promotional techniques established at central government level are filtering down to local government. As with civil servants in central government, local authority officers are comfortable with the language of the customer, and the need to "brand" communications in order to target the customer most effectively. As the Head of Communication at a city council explained in an interview with the author,

We have to move to a position where the corporate communications department is thinking 'customer'... Most people come at it from the perspective that it's the services that matter, not the logos not the branding, without a fuller appreciation that the branding actually impacts upon the effectiveness of service delivery.

5

Why are citizens being treated as consumers?

The dominance of consumerist language and approaches within all tiers of government suggests that consumerism has a strong hold. This raises the question why – what is it about consumerism that has led this government to trumpet its virtues and demand its expansion?

From politicians and civil servants the predominant message about consumerism is that it is a response to public demand. An interesting feature of government discourse is how often they use the form of words: “People get x in the private sector; they expect the same from government”. This is assumed to be intuitively plausible rather than backed up by any evidence.

The 1998 Modernising Government White Paper states that: “The British public has grown accustomed to consumer choice and competition in the private sector. If our public service is to survive and thrive, it must match the best in its ability to innovate, to share good ideas and to control costs” (65). In his 2001 party conference speech, Blair said, “This is a consumer age. People don’t take what they’re given. They demand more” (66). He returned to this theme in his pamphlet, calling for “Services that are characterised by the flexibility, choice and responsiveness that people have grown accustomed to in other parts of their lives” (67). John Reid asserts that “as citizens and consumers the ambition of working people today is greater: they demand choice in public as well as in private goods and services.” He blames Labour’s electoral failures in the 1950s on its failure to respond to the emerging consumer society and the public’s demands for more choice in goods and services, and says Labour must not make the same mistake again (68). Alan Milburn told a recent press conference, “We are in a consumer age whether people like it or not. What will destroy the public services is the idea that you can retain the ethos of the 1940s in the 21st century” (69).

There is no denying that the world has changed since the 1940s, but such declarations are short on sociological nuance and critical perspective. There is first of all what is widely understood to be the decisive subtext of New Labour policy: that the advance of an individualistic and consumerist culture may not have been even throughout British society, but that it is most formative for the middle classes whose support is required if public services are to survive (70). This of course may raise questions of equity, especially if it is considered to what degree consumer pressures are themselves directed not to higher standards per se but for positional goods such as status and advantage. Alan Warde has suggested that “accounts of identity-led consumption projects perhaps generalise from the experience of a small fraction of the middle class” and warned that in some accounts of consumer society,

the pluralistic aspect of consumer culture is emphasised to the neglect of its hierarchical element. Status competition was once thought to be governed by a logic of hierarchy. It is a much less critical rendering that postulates difference without power, differentiation without hierarchy. (71)

But whatever might be said here about possible trade-offs between electoral expediency and egalitarian principle, there is a more fundamental question to be asked about the extent to which people do in fact expect government and public services to relate to them in the same way as private sector businesses. The danger is that by encouraging this read-across, government may itself be eliding a crucial distinction between the public and private domains without which public engagement with democratic processes, and support for public provision, is ultimately bound to be undermined.

6

The costs of consumerism

If the government is trying to turn us all into consumers, should we care? Or can we relax in the knowledge that the consumer responsiveness that supplies our private needs will regulate our public requirements? Some of the limits of consumerism have already been hinted at. They are discussed in more depth here.

There are two elements to a critique of the politics of consumerism. The first is to say that it does not achieve what it sets out to achieve, namely the empowerment of the individual, the regeneration of democracy, and the improvement of public services. In other words, consumerism doesn't work. The second is to say that a consumerised citizenship can't work, because citizenship is only meaningful where it is political and discursive rather than transactional and self-interested.

Consumerism doesn't work

There are many reasons why the position of the citizen vis-à-vis the government and public services will always be very different to that of the relationship of a consumer to private firms. Joseph Schumpeter, writing in the 1940s, warned of the disanalogies between private consumption and public participation: citizens are less able to test the success of policies than of products that they use and so more vulnerable to manipulative promotion:

The picture of the prettiest girl that ever lived will in the long-term prove powerless to maintain the sales of a bad cigarette. There is no equally effective safeguard in the case of political decisions. Many decisions of fateful importance are of a nature that makes it impossible for the public to experiment with them at their leisure and at moderate cost. (72)

Models of delivery, payment and choice in the public sector are more complex than their private sector equivalents. Citizens may use services

they do not pay for and pay for services they do not use; they may be unwilling or involuntary users, or may not know what kind of service they need; they may demand a service but be denied it due to rationing or ineligibility. The limits to competition in the public sector make it difficult for the citizen to exit when faced with an unsatisfactory service. Christopher Hood neatly sums up the problem with consumerism in the public sector:

A patient in the NHS, a social security claimant or someone on a council house waiting list is in the opposite position to that of a genuine customer: the person has little or no choice; the service does not profit by his or her custom; and it does not wish to expand its share of the market. Further: not only is the service free, but there is a net outflow of funds and resources to the supposed "customer". (73)

In their hastiness to press the advantages of consumerism – responsiveness to users, efficient linkages between supply and demand – ministers often fail to confront their limited applicability in a public sector context. A rare engagement with these issues came in Gordon Brown's recent statement, which explained how inevitable informational imperfections and asymmetries in the area of health care mean that the patient cannot be equipped to take decisions about diagnosis and treatment and seek out the best product at the lowest price. "Not only is the consumer not sovereign", he argued, "but a free market in health care will not produce the most efficient price for its services or a fair deal for its consumers" (74). Brown did not extend this analysis beyond the example of health, but others have made similar points in relation to other services. Harry Brighouse, for example, sets out the inescapable market imperfections where education is concerned: the supply of schools is highly limited; costs of switching schools are high; the costs of bad schooling are largely impossible to recoup; no one is perfectly informed and good relevant information is very hard to come by; and schools are not "price takers" as firms are – peer group forms part of the "product" so the "suppliers" may seek to select their customers (75).

Choice is often assumed to be a good in itself. There are reasons to be sceptical, however, about its value in practice. As David Prior, John Stewart and Kieron Walsh say,

It is unlikely that choice will be valued very highly simply for itself, as opposed to what it may mean for obtaining better service. Research for the Citizen's Charter showed that people ranked choice lower than finding out what citizens want and giving them more information about service. Choice is only likely to be wanted if it is between valued alternatives. (76)

Sally Tomlinson has argued that in education the overwhelming demand from parents is not for choice, but for a good local school for their children (77) – some parents may indeed favour more political ways of “expressing” this “preference”: “In Dulwich, south London, children travelled to 40 different secondary schools, and local parents had formed an association to demand a new local comprehensive” (78). Colin Crouch argues that expansion of parental choice in education has actually reduced it, as popular schools introduce forms of selection that restrict access. He cites Audit Commission figures which show that “since the introduction of parental right to choice, fewer parents had been able to secure their first choice of school than before the reform” (79). Martin Bright and others have noted that “even middle class parents are losing out in the fierce competition for state schools high up in league tables” – the plea to the government, then, is “Don't force us to play the free market in schools. Just build a good local comprehensive for our kids.” (80)

The assumption that the expansion of complaint is an adequate way to ensure high quality public services is also problematic. Research into complainants indicates that low income service users are the least likely to complain if they feel that service levels are inadequate. Moyra Riseborough found that service users are often afraid to speak out because they rely on personal relationships with care professionals and any criticism of these individuals would affect the personal service that users receive (81). Martin Blackmore found a similar pattern with complaints to the Citizen's Charter Complaints Task Force: “Some respondents did not complain through fear of recriminations, especially if they were vulnerable service users. Complainants tended to be from higher socio-economic groups.” (82)

Complaints are often based on the failure to meet established performance targets. Yet the use of such indicators to give users a guide to service

quality can be highly problematic. Nicholas Deakin points to “criticisms of the way standards have been set arbitrarily, without public consultation. Meeting them does not represent an objective achievement but satisfies an assessment of the minimum politically acceptable level of performance” (83). An illuminating National Audit Office study published last year, *Using Call Centres to Deliver Public Services*, found that

Quality of service is largely assessed ... in terms of the speed with which calls are answered and resolved courteously to the satisfaction of the caller. There is very little monitoring or assessment of the extent to which the advice provided was accurate and complete. (84)

Where service users do become skilled complainants, there is a risk that they have a distorting impact. The Association of Community Health Councils for England and Wales (ACHCEW)’s Commission on the Future of the NHS chaired by Will Hutton found that

In the absence of adequate, strong democratic structures the public is using the NHS’s undeveloped complaint mechanisms or even the courts to seek redress of grievances ... Together these trends raise the risk that litigants could exercise a disproportionate influence over policy and could undermine the capacity for rational, collective decision-making that ought to be at the heart of the NHS. (85)

This insightful formulation points to more fundamental reasons why consumerism is a problematic basis for reinvigorating the government-citizen relationship.

Consumerism can’t work

David Marquand has argued persuasively that Labour’s original post-war settlement fell apart in the 1970s because of an entrenched “possessive individualism” in British society and the absence of a public domain within which our identities as interdependent, social beings could be expressed and negotiated.

“Keynesian social democracy” – the “governing philosophy” of the post-war period – had broken down ... because economic change had exposed its fundamental weakness: that it was a philosophy of public intervention, without a notion of the public realm or the public good. Because of this, it could not provide the moral basis for the hard choices that had to be made when the economic turned cold; as a result, the public sector became a battleground for predatory private interests instead of the instrument of a coherent public purpose. (86)

The entire New Labour project developed as a response to this historic failing of post-war corporatism. But if its programme to reconnect people and state and rebuild support for a social democratic settlement merely replaces sectional producer interests with individual consumer interests, it may prove equally brittle and self-undermining.

Consumerism is a model that prioritises the individual over the community, encourages passivity, downgrades public spaces, weakens accountability, and privatises citizenship. In T.H. Marshall's own words: “There is little that consumers can do except to imitate *Oliver Twist* and ‘ask for more’” (87). This is not only restrictive of citizens' domain of action. It may also be a problem for a government. If the nature of consumer demand is that it is limitless, the result may be a citizenry that expects public services to match their private sector equivalents without recognising the constraints that limit public provision. As Polly Toynbee has pointed out, “If people are not involved emotionally in the politics of making public services work, they will just demand ever more and the ballot box becomes the customer complaints desk” (88). If citizens are assumed to operate on the basis of self-interest then where is the basis for solidarity and sacrifice which underpins a political community?

Rather than delivering a satisfied and pliable citizenry, consumerism may be fostering privatised and resentful citizen-consumers whose expectations of government can never be met. It presents government and the state as a realm utterly detached from the individual, rather than a realm that the individual is a part of and an active participant in. This constitutes a tactical mistake by a government which appears to have adopted a consumerist

approach on the assumption that this would maximise customer satisfaction. In this light the negative opinion poll ratings and low levels of trust for government noted in Section 2 seem less perverse and more a direct result of the consumerisation of citizenship. T.H. Green, one of the Liberal Idealists writing in the late nineteenth century, puts the point well:

That active interest in the service of the state, which makes patriots in the better sense, can hardly arise while the individual's relation to the state is that of a passive recipient of production in the exercise of his rights of person and property. While this is the case, he will give the state no thanks for the protection which he will come to take as a matter of course, and will only be conscious of it when it descends upon him with some unusual demand for service or payment, and then he will be conscious of it by way of resentment. (89)

The other side of this damaging privatism and passivity is the failure of a consumerist model of citizenship to account for the distinctive role played by public goods. As Bill Jordan puts it, "Public goods are not alternatives to marketed goods, just supplied to individuals in a different way. They focus on the life we live together, and the interests we share in this being of good quality" (90). To use Marquand's words, "the notion of public goods, in the plural, is incomplete without a notion of the public good in the singular" (91). Levels of public service provision reflect collective goals rather than individual need, and cannot be collapsed into customer satisfaction scores. Robin Cook put the point well in a recent speech:

Political choice is about more than just choosing a good manager, it's a choice about the kind of society we want to live in. It is important we deliver good hospitals and good schools as an expression of our values that divide us from the Right. That is a matter of ideology, not of management. (92)

There is no room for ideology in a consumerised vision of citizenship. There is no sense of a shared project on which consent for government depends. The consumerisation of citizenship damages not only the interests of service users and the community, but the very presumption of a political basis to democratic governance.

7

Alternatives to consumerism

Consumerism is becoming a hegemonic project. From a combination of messages – consumerism is what the public wants; it empowers service users; it is the only way to improve services – comes the presumption that consumerism is not only desirable, it is inevitable. Consumerism is presented as the only viable option.

Ministers assert that consumerism is the best and only way to empower the individual and to improve services. Tony Blair insists that “Competitive pressures drive up quality, efficiency ... Choice leads to higher standards” (93). This is contrasted with the unresponsive public bureaucracies of the past: “Reformist centre-left parties have nothing to fear from breaking down monolithic ‘one size fits all’ structures in the public services, when these are an obstacle to higher standards and aspirations.” (94)

A point made by Zygmunt Bauman in a discussion of consumer society in general is apposite for government-sponsored consumerism:

The strength of the consumer-based social system, its remarkable capacity to command support or at least to incapacitate dissent, is solidly grounded in its success in denigrating, marginalising or rendering invisible all alternatives to itself except blatant bureaucratic domination. (95)

The government's promotion of a hegemonic consumerism makes the process of identifying alternatives a difficult one. The claim that we are better off as active consumers of public services than as passive clients is of course appealing. But it ignores more activist forms of citizenship based on community involvement rather than bilateralism. These two elements – active citizenship and community – provide the starting point for a richer conception of citizenship, though the route is full of potential wrong turnings.

Active citizenship has been an ideal for both Labour and the Conservatives, yet it has too often been seen as a substitute for the state rather than

complementary to it. The vision presented is one of citizenship without the state, in which all the active content of citizenship takes place in depoliticised local voluntary work and the discursive and contesting aspects of citizenship are absent. In this version, as Madsen Pirie puts it, "Citizenship ... becomes not what people do to discharge their civic responsibility, but how they treat other people." (96)

Community involvement has again been popular with politicians from both the left and right, but they often have little to say about inequalities between communities and the problems that poor communities may have in marshalling resources. The language surrounding community lacks specificity. What is the community we are talking about? How grounded do people feel in their local communities? In practice people may identify with communities of interest more strongly than communities of area, yet it may be difficult to mobilise people who are not neatly contained in a geographical location.

Recent community-focussed initiatives show the potential for simply utilising consumerist techniques on a community wide level. The government's Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, overseen by the Social Exclusion Unit in the Cabinet Office, has been criticised for its "managerialist" approach to neighbourhood renewal. Helen Sullivan argues

Within the Strategy communities are considered essentially as consumers and potential providers of local services rather than as citizens focusing on local needs in the widest sense ... [I]n the National Strategy, elected local government is understood as a service-providing body like any other with little clarity about any potential role for local elected members. (97)

A more positive way forward may be the concept of "co-production", according to which:

wherever possible the producers and consumers of public services should be the same people. "Co-production" of public services means that citizens ... are not passive consumers of what professionals or specialised organisations provide, but a crucial part of the production process. (98)

Hood gives the example of citizen militias as early forms of co-production. In contemporary debate the concept is usually attached to initiatives such as home-school contracts in which parents and teachers work together to ensure that children complete homework. Similarly, doctors and patients can work together on preventative care and home treatment: Blair's Progressive Governance article talks of "adopting radical approaches to self-health." (99)

But we should be aware that co-production may have more or less inclusive elements. There is a danger that it too may individualise the relationship between government and citizen, and be a substitute rather than a complement to state activity. Notions of patient self-care, for example, may be a way to discourage people from seeing doctors, privatising problems and increasing pressure on family carers. In this light, co-production becomes DIY welfare – an IKEA model in which the welfare state skimps on staff and money and users are left to do-it-themselves. Co-production alone can tell us little about the terms on which communication and consultation between government and citizens should take place.

Voluntarism too can be a sound foundation for citizenship but only if it is more than private philanthropy. The right and wrong turnings of voluntarism were vividly evidenced in the US by the contrast between Reagan and Bush's youth volunteer programme – "Points of Light" – and Clinton's "Americorp" initiative. As Benjamin Barber, political philosopher turned Clinton advisor, explains,

[The Reagan/Bush] take on voluntarism privatised service, individualised the servers ("heroes", "points of light"), and reduced a potential "citizen education programme" to a "government isn't necessary" programme ... Clinton's dedication to service came from other wellsprings – from sources steeped in civic spirit, where service entailed learning social responsibility and, far from being a surrogate for government, was a way to engage young people in citizenship. (100)

If active citizenship and the community are to be the basis for an alternative to consumerism – utilising models of co-production and voluntarism – we need to avoid the wrong turnings of individualism and statelessness. We

need an explicitly political account of linkages between citizen and the state. An alternative ideology to consumerism must turn on a sense of belonging to a political community with shared interests.

Here modern variants of the civic republican model have a lot to offer, based as they are on the concept of the citizen “as someone who plays an active role in shaping the future direction of his or her society through political debate and decision-making” (101). Republican citizenship centres on the *res publica*, the “things of the public”. It recognises citizenship and public participation as a good in themselves, rather than as instrumental means to other ends. As Prior, Stuart and Walsh note:

The premises of collectivity and obligation underlying the civic republican approach are in effect the opposite of those which shape the consumerist position. Citizens are seen as having meaningful existence only in the context of social networks, bound together by the ties of membership, loyalty and mutual obligation. (102)

The civic republican ideal does not specify an institutional form, but its emphasis on the public *good* rather than on public *goods* ensures that it must utilise techniques that allow more than an aggregation of sectional interests. The Citizens’ Jury model is one that could be extended, given the scope for participants to become informed on policy questions and to interview witnesses before reaching conclusions. It is limited, however, by only involving a small number of participants. Moving away from consumerism is also about recognising the distinctive nature of public goods and the need to use distinctively public criteria to judge their effectiveness. A recent discussion paper from the Cabinet Office’s Strategy Unit raised the notion of “public value” as an alternative to market models of efficiency. Under this model the performance of public services is judged on the basis of public deliberation rather than aggregation of satisfaction scores, and involves criteria such as distributional equity and due process rather than simply value for money (103). However this paper represents only the views of its authors, and has yet to be picked up by policy-makers.

Co-production considered in the context of civic republicanism becomes a much more productive and political basis for communication, consultation

and service delivery. The republican position *starts* from the assumption that people will be involved in political debate about policy objectives, rather than tacking consultation onto a closed and private policy-making process. It presumes a public sphere in which this debate can take place, rather than assuming that information is passed down from government to a passive citizenry. There is a need for caution here, of course, lest we assume that all citizens want to spend their Saturday afternoons engaged in debate at the town hall. But, as David Miller points out, the republican conception of citizenship need not impose such requirements:

What it requires is something weaker: that it should be part of each person's good to be engaged *at some level* in political debate, so that the laws and policies of the state do not appear to him or her simply as alien impositions but as the outcome of a reasonable agreement to which he or she has been party. (104)

This is a degree of participation which matches the reality of a citizenry that shies away from excessive political involvement, yet asks to be involved in deciding issues that will impact upon their lives – particularly at local level.

It also would require that community initiatives be closely linked to local political structures, avoiding the managerialism of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy. It is an approach to citizenship that could be reflected in a range of policy initiatives from education to policing. Representation of users on the boards of Foundation Hospitals might be a positive step if linked to local elected government to ensure that it isn't a move towards further fragmentation and depoliticisation. The mutualism that has been invoked in defence of Foundation Hospitals has a long Labour tradition, but early exponents such as G.D.H. Cole had a much more political vision:

I want the society in which I live to be self-governing in a very real and positive sense. I want as many of the citizens as can be induced to take an active part to share in the work of government and administration; and I want the forms of government to be so devised as to encourage as many people as possible to take an interest in it and to make the voices of those who are interested as effective as possible in shaping public policy. I want to apply that principle not only to politics in the narrower sense, but to every kind of social activity that affects the common welfare. (105)

8

Conclusion

The consumerist approach has a strong hold on government. In the speeches, policy documents and service guidelines emanating from the centre of government, the language and practice of consumerism are pre-eminent.

It is significant that when Rhodri Morgan, First Minister of the Welsh Assembly, sought to differentiate his position from that of the government in Westminster he did so by rejecting consumerism. "We're more interested", he said, "in community values than consumerist values. Our attitude to the future of the health service is not about how much competition, how much out-sourcing, how much consumer choice." (106)

The consumerisation of citizenship threatens to hollow out the concept of citizenship, removing all that is political and participatory, and privatising the public domain in practice even where not in form. It is thoroughly inadequate as a way of resolving conflict and tensions within society, assuming as it does that all public demands can be met by a service-with-a-smile state. Kieron Walsh diagnoses its limitations well:

The central questions of politics, the nature of punishment, the organisation of health and education, foreign relations and the formation of law cannot be settled on the basis of consumers' expression of wants. Politics is irredeemably a moral undertaking and what is efficient comes second to what is right or good for the social community. (107)

Consumerised citizenship may be attractive when compared with a passive clientelism in which people take what they are given and are grateful for it. But this is a misleading comparison, its target a straw man. If compared to the promise of a robust and active participatory citizenship, consumerism becomes a flimsy and redundant concept.

Notes

- 1 Nicholas Jones of the BBC has been particularly energetic here with his books *Soundbites* and *Spin Doctors* (1996, London, Indigo), *Sultans of Spin*, (2000, London, Orion) and *The Control Freaks* (2001, London, Politicos).
- 2 Anthony Barnett, for example, argues that Blair has instituted a form of "corporate populism", in which "Downing Street ... manages party, cabinet and civil service as if they were parts of a single giant company whose aim is to persuade voters that they are happy customers who want to return Labour to office." Barnett, A, (1999) 'Corporate Control', *Prospect*, February, p27.
- 3 Heater, D, (1991) 'Citizenship: A Remarkable Case of Sudden Interest', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 44, p141.
- 4 Cabinet Office, (1991) *The Citizen's Charter: Raising the Standard*, Cm 1599, London: HMSO, p4.
- 5 Blair, T, (1996) *New Britain: My Vision of a Young Country*, London, Fourth Estate, p215.
- 6 Blair, T, (1999) *The Third Way: New Politics for the New Century*, London, Fabian Society.
- 7 Crick, B, (2000) *Essays on Citizenship*, London, Continuum.
- 8 Blunkett, D, (2001) *House of Commons Hansard*, 17 December, col. 76W.
- 9 Mortimore, R, and Elgood, J, (2001) 'What does the general election tell us about consumers?', MORI, <http://www.mori.com/pubinfo/rmm-res2001.shtml>
- 10 MORI Political Monitor, 'Satisfaction Ratings 1979-Present', <http://www.mori.com/polls/trends/satisfac.shtml>
- 11 Alexander, D, (2003) 'The potential of progressive politics', *Renewal*, 11:1, p79.
- 12 Rees, AM, (1995) 'The Other TH Marshall', *Journal of Social Policy*, 24: 3, p342, quoted in Low, E, (2000) 'The Concept of Citizenship in Twentieth-Century Britain: Analysing Contexts of Development', in Catterall, P, Kaiser, W, and Walton-Jordan, U, (eds), *Reforming the Constitution: Debates in Twentieth-Century Britain*, London, Frank Cass, p179.
- 13 Gabriel, Y, and Lang, T, (1995) *The Unmanageable Consumer: Contemporary Consumption and its Fragmentation*, London: Sage, p174.
- 14 Aristotle, (1992) *The Politics*, London, Penguin; Rousseau, JJ, (1973) *The Social Contract*, London, Everyman; Dewey, J, (1927) *The Public and its Problems*, Athens, Ohio, Swallow Press; Arendt, H, (1959) *The Human Condition – Part II*, New York, Doubleday.

- 15 Marshall, TH, (1992) 'Citizenship and Social Class', in Marshall, TH, and Bottomore, T, *Citizenship and Social Class*, London, Pluto Press.
- 16 Esping-Anderson, G (1990) *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Cambridge, Polity.
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