

PUBLIC SERVICES: VOICE (MUTUALISM) OR CHOICE (COMPETITION)

The old word choice is back in fashion. But what are its new followers failing to say? The answer is obvious. “Don’t mention competition” is the unspoken imperative. The promise to give citizens choice carries with it the promise that services are likely to improve as a result. Many politicians believe this. Their reasoning is thus. Choice for citizens means insecurity for providers. Insecurity keeps providers on their toes. When providers must compete with rival providers and face closure if they fail, then they will work harder and strive more assiduously to find out what citizens want. The citizen’s “choice” thus becomes a means to an end; a state of competition whose inherent insecurity will push service providers into raising their game.

But when people say they “want choice” what they usually mean is they want to see improvements in services. “Give me a choice” is often a polite way of saying “listen to my voice”. The prospect that health and social care agencies should battle with rivals for survival not only alarms people, it is nonsense. Collaborative working between providers to create a new public environment where agencies and citizens pool resources for strategic ends will yield much better result.

We simply need to remind ourselves of Bevan’s maxim that

- **“for us (people and agencies working together) empowerment meant the use of collective action designed to transform society and so lift all of us together”.**

The key words are “collective action” not “competitive action”. Competition not only carries with it fragmentation of supply, it ultimately blinds providers to what should be their primary goal : the public good. It can also distort the citizen’s view that choice simply means being empowered as a consumer in the market place.

In the past, service providers have rightly been criticised for wielding an unequal weight of power within a relationship. Clearly there needs to be a more equitable balance between service providers and citizens.

The BIG post war mistake was to airbrush mutualism from the operating structure of public services, replacing it with a state model of “SERVICES IN CONTROL” that came to provide goods and services ‘for’ or ‘to’ people. By disengaging citizens, servicers providers as designers and deliverers failed to engage the creative input of service users. The citizen was relegated to consumer, a watchdog barking at the heels of the service provider. So how should this issue be addressed?

One political answer is to risk turning down another cul-de-sac by introducing choice and competition into public services, assuming that competition between drivers will improve service delivery. But a change of driver is not a fundamental change of direction. If we are heading in the wrong direction then changing drivers will not get us very far, apart from bitter arguments about who is best qualified to drive the rickety train. A better answer entails creating in the 21st century a modern version of mutualism in a renewed civil society. This means introducing mutualism into the operating structure of third and public sector agencies: citizens and agencies in **MUTUAL CONTROL** actively working together. This mutual model is the forgotten engine of change.

Mutualism taps into the vast but currently under-engaged assets that surround all public services, the citizens and communities that use them. The fact that community disengagement continues to rise is not due to a failure to consult or conduct opinion research. It is due to a failure to involve people, use the skills they have and thank them for the work they do.

Professor Michael Sandel in the recent Reith lectures reminds us that agencies must prioritise working with citizens to rebuild the architecture of civic life, suggesting that the virtues of democratic life – community, solidarity, trust, civic friendship – are not like commodities that are depleted with use. They are rather like muscles that develop and grow stronger with exercise.

William Beveridge said more than 60 years ago, now is ‘a time for revolution not for patching’. Revolution is the new conversation about introducing mutualism into the operating structure of service providers, patching is the old debate about who will drive the rickety train.