

Active citizens and the therapeutic state: the role of democratic participation in local government reform

David Chandler

English

The Local Government Bill and the White and Green Papers informing it claim to deliver an agenda of democratic renewal. The reforms promise to reconnect local councils with local communities through a process of political renewal, a new statutory duty of community-wide consultation and the encouragement of active citizenship. This article assesses whether the plans for increased popular engagement in consultation processes actually develop democratic accountability, and suggests that, although the current proposals may institutionalise new links between government and community groups and individuals, they will provide little local control over policy making.

Français

Le projet de loi du Gouvernement Local, et les différents livres Blancs édités à ce sujet, prétend délivrer un programme de renouveau démocratique. La réforme promet de rétablir la communication entre les conseils municipaux et les communautés locales par le moyen d'un processus de renouvellement politique, un nouveau devoir défini par la loi pour une consultation communautaire générale et l'encouragement à une citoyenneté active. Cet article évalue si les projets pour un engagement populaire croissant dans les processus de consultation développent réellement une responsabilité démocratique, et il suggère que malgré le fait que les propositions actuelles puissent institutionnaliser de nouveaux liens entre le gouvernement, les groupes de la communauté et les particuliers, elles donneront très peu de contrôle local sur la prise de mesures politiques.

Español

El Proyecto de Ley del Gobierno Local y los documentos White y Green que los informa, pretende lanzar una agenda de renovación democrática. Las reformas prometen reconectar ayuntamientos locales con comunidades locales a través de un proceso de renovación política, un nuevo deber estatutario de amplia consulta comunitaria y la situación de una ciudadanía activa. Este artículo examina los planes para el aumento de la participación popular en los procesos de consulta, para ver si realmente desarrollan responsabilidad democrática. El artículo, también sugiere que aunque las actuales propuestas pueden institucionalizar nuevos vínculos entre el gobierno, los grupos comunitarios y los individuos, proporcionarán poco control sobre las decisiones políticas.

Key words: New Labour • participation • democratisation • citizenship

Introduction

The New Labour local government reform agenda sets out a radical vision of democratic renewal, ‘bringing government back to the people’ through giving a greater say to local communities and greater freedoms to local councils. Modernised local authorities have been promised new powers which will better reflect their policy-making freedoms, greater accountability and enhanced local leadership role. Within local authorities, elected councillors “will have greater freedom and a greater impact on the direction of the council and the services it provides” (DETR, 1998b: para 3.13). The new ‘open and in-touch councils’ will be able to empower local communities radically, giving them “a real choice about how they are governed locally ... [which] will give local communities real influence and power” (DETR, 1998b: Foreword; para 2.9).

For some commentators, the democratisation proposals are seen as merely the latest in a long line of local government reforms, with many observers being cynical in the face of the promise of change (Boyne, 1999; Leach and Wingfield, 1999; Tam, 1999). Others have welcomed these reforms as a positive move away from passive notions of consumer choice, epitomised by Citizen Charter initiatives under Conservative rule, holding out the promise of increasing popular accountability in decision making (Elcock, 1998; West, 2000). This article analyses the reform proposals’ claims to enhance local democracy and empowerment through a consideration of the momentum behind local authority reform. Reform is placed within the broader context of central government attempts to address problems of social cohesion by rebuilding institutional linkages and, in the process, recasting the relationship between the state and society through the development of ‘active citizenship’.

A new role for local government

The Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) and central government launched the local government reform proposals as part of “the rebirth of democratic local government” a project seen as “vital to building a modern Britain and a decent society” (DETR,

1998a: Preface). The government’s local democracy agenda highlights the need for a “radical refocusing of councils’ traditional roles’ and for a “fundamental shift of culture throughout local government” (DETR, 1998d: Foreword). The implications of opening up local government to popular involvement will include not only the restructuring of local government, but also a ‘radical change’ in local councils’ relationships with their communities and with central government itself (DETR, 1998a: para 1.7).

This fundamental modernisation of local government is believed to be a necessity to tackle the problems of social disengagement with community affairs, the ‘culture of apathy’ and low turnout at local polls. Support for government initiatives at a local level is seen as more important than ever before, the government even declaring that reinvigorated local government is vital if it is to deliver its manifesto pledges “on the ground where it matters” (DETR, 1998a: para 1.6). Today, organised party politics have little purchase on the rest of society; in fact there is large-scale alienation from, or at minimum an indifference to, political institutions (Giddens, 1994: 109; Beck, 1998: 4). As leading New Labour theoretician Anthony Giddens concludes: “Political ideas today seem to have lost their capacity to inspire and political leaders their ability to lead” (1998: 2). With the government at Westminster increasingly seen as distant from people’s lives, New Labour’s local government reforms seek to restore the links between the state and society, by “bringing government to the people”:

The basic fact is that we all live somewhere and we all have local loyalties ... [this] makes local democracy the best system ... It draws strength, purpose and dynamism from local need, local loyalty, local experience and local knowledge. (Labour Party, 1995: 3)

The government’s need to get ‘in touch’ is not merely a reflection of the decline of national politics and the lack of popular involvement with political parties. The problem of articulating a national ‘vision’ also reflects the fragmentation of other collective, associational links between the state and society, from the falling membership and influence of trade unions and working

men's associations to the decline of the established church and the Women's Institute. The political repercussions of the collapse of these collective institutions were raised in the 1980s by communitarian theorists who warned that "markets and contracts ... do not create any social cohesion in and of themselves. They require and use up the active identification of citizens with their communities as 'social mortar'" (Beck, 1998: 13). The policy advocates of the Third Way share the communitarians' focus on rebuilding social cohesion, advocating a proactive and interventionist set of policies on behalf of both the central and local state. Today, the interventionist project of recreating 'social solidarity' through recasting the relationship between the state and society is often termed democratisation (Held, 1993; Giddens, 1994, 1998). For leading German social theorist Ulrich Beck:

The answer is: only by upgrading the local area of democracy, the towns and cities ... All of this presumes, among other things, a repoliticization of municipal policy, indeed a rediscovery and redefinition of it by mobilizing programmes, ideas and people... (1998: 16)

The local state is cast in a new, much more socially engaged, position in this perspective, playing a crucial role in government attempts to create new points of contact and links with a more individualised society. Prior to the White Paper on local government reforms the desire to institutionalise local authority involvement in community-level initiatives was already clear. The Health White Paper and proposals for Health Action Zones placed requirements on local authorities to promote local involvement. Similarly, the Crime and Disorder Bill required local councils to obtain the views of the public about the level and pattern of crime and argued for widespread consultation about strategies for reducing crime and disorder (DETR, 1998e: para 1.3). The Local Government Bill extends this process further, with the government instructing local authorities to play a leading and coordinating role in bringing different agencies together. The new reform proposals call for "consultation and participation [to be] embedded into the culture of all councils" (DETR, 1998d: para 4.6). This

change in culture extends local government involvement with community participation projects being developed by other private and public bodies (Martin, 1998: 5).

In order to fulfil this cohering role the government requires councils to develop "a comprehensive strategy for promoting the well-being of their area". There will be a new statutory force behind this interventionist vision in the "duty to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of their areas" (DETR, 1998d: para 8.8). This strategy is to involve institutionalising partnerships with a wide range of agencies and organisations (DETR, 1998d: para 8.21):

- local people, individually and collectively through community groups, local women's organisations and residents' associations;
- local business community;
- voluntary groups;
- private organisations;
- public bodies (eg executive agencies of government, the new Regional Development Agencies, Training and Enterprise Councils and National Health Service bodies).

Local councils are to play an 'enabling' role, shaping policy through the development of 'strategic partnerships' in different policy areas, with powers to address a much broader variety of concerns, issues as variable as sustainable development, social exclusion, transport, health, crime, education and training (DETR, 1998d: para 8.5). This enabling role, facilitating the involvement of different public, private and voluntary organisations, all with distinct remits and responsibilities, may facilitate policy coordination, although the gains for local democracy are less obvious, as the networked agencies will maintain their own lines of accountability (Duffy and Hutchinson, 1997; Tam, 1999: 29). The new interventionist role of local government does not stop with networking existing groups. A DETR guidance paper concentrates solely "on public participation that is deliberately stimulated by local authorities" (DETR, 1998e: Introduction). The DETR aims are ambitiously laid out: "We want to see any culture of indifference about local democracy dispersed, and local people taking a lively interest in their council and its affairs"

(DETR, 1998d: para 1.21). A key problem is that only a small percentage of the population is involved in collective groups even at a local level. A further stage in this process is the attempt to involve the uninvolved, to create and promote the model of the 'active citizen':

In a society where tradition and custom are losing their hold, the only route to the establishing of authority is via democracy. The new individualism doesn't inevitably corrode authority, but demands it be recast on an active and participatory basis. (Giddens, 1998: 66)

Local government democratisation aims to create new institutional forms linking the state to a much more atomised and fragmented society, providing new mechanisms of social cohesion. Giddens, for example, considers ways of reintegrating society through "forms of democracy other than the orthodox voting process" in order for governments to "re-establish more direct contact with citizens ... through 'experiments with democracy' – local direct democracy, electronic referenda, citizen's juries and other possibilities" (1998: 75). Local authorities had already made major strides to increase involvement and consultation prior to the current reform proposals. In 1997, 85% had undertaken public meetings or issued consultative documents, and virtually all councils had schemes providing feedback from service users (DETR, 1998d: para 1.1). Most local authorities had already taken up more innovative proposals for participation: around 50% had focus groups; approximately a quarter had visioning exercises, some user management of services and interactive websites; and around one in five already had citizens' panels or were experimenting with citizens' juries (DETR, 1998e: para 1.1).

For the DETR this, already extensive, use of innovative approaches to community involvement was still not adequate, and the consultation documents stress the "need to develop deeper ways of involving communities" (DETR, 1998e: para 1.2). The DETR's *Guidance on enhancing public participation in local government* urges local authorities to "go out to the public" and work at "extending invitations to non-joiners" through building community capacity. This

interactive approach is to include citizenship education, community development and targeted initiatives aimed at young people or other groups who are difficult to involve (DETR, 1998e: para 3.2).

As the DETR states: "Local government matters" (DETR, 1998a: para 1.1). However, it does not matter in the way it did in the past: "There is no future in the old models of councils trying to plan and run most services" (DETR, 1998d: Foreword). Local councils are no longer centrally responsible for raising revenue and for the direct provision of services. Local authorities have languished for the past two decades, increasingly marginalised politically and reduced to administering central government budgets (Jameson, 2000). Since 1979, over 200 Acts of Parliament have taken powers away from local authority control, while the locally raised share of council spending has fallen from 50% to less than 20% (Labour Party, 1995: 7, 15). David Beetham and other commentators have, in fact, urged central government to enhance local authority autonomy as a precondition for democratic renewal (Beetham 1996; Gray and Jenkins, 1999: 38).

Local authorities matter today, but not because the government has decided to overhaul the funding relationships that force local councils to rely on central government spending priorities and accede to a wide range of central targets set by statutory regulation. In fact, central government's administrative regulatory control over local authorities is set to be enhanced through the current batch of reforms. Local authorities matter because, with the collapse of mediating associational links between the state and society, they are seen as vital in establishing new points of contact and coherence. The fragmented nature of modern society means that, to fill this vacuum or facilitate 'joined-up government', links have to be constituted on a local level by proactive local state bodies. In effect, these reforms attempt to revitalise the shaky relationship between the citizen and the state through the renovation of local political institutions (Gray and Jenkins, 1999: 33). As Gerry Stoker notes, local authorities are well placed to play this new role because of their institutional permanence, providing "a solid frame for developing the long-term commitment associated with networked,

integrated action” (1996: 205). The proposed changes to local government are intended to turn local authorities into a mechanism for social cohesion, to “help councils to engage with their local communities more effectively” (DETR, 1998d: para 4.1):

The Government has a clear vision of successfully modernised local government. It will be characterised by councils which once again engage directly with their local communities. Such councils will actively promote public participation. (DETR, 1998a: para 1.8)

More participation, less democracy

The Local Government Bill develops a new set of structures at local authority level and a new set of institutional links between central and local government and between local government and the wider community. The local government reforms are being promoted as empowering for both local communities and local councils. The government makes much of letting local people decide the new arrangements:

Asking people how they want their community governed is not enough. It is right for local people themselves to take the decisions about new forms of local governance which involve such radical change as introducing new elections. (DETR, 1998b: para 2.9)

Councils can choose between three models: having a directly elected mayor with a cabinet; a cabinet with a leader; or a directly elected mayor with a council manager. Resistance to modernisation, under these choices, is seen as merely endorsing the urgency of the proposed reforms. Reluctance to take up the reform programme is seen by the DETR as reflecting a ‘paternalistic culture’, demonstrating a concern with ‘protecting vested interests’, or, yet worse, as indicating the existence of an “inward looking culture [that] can open the door to corruption and wrongdoing” (DETR, 1998d: Ch 1). The preferred choice of the government is for one of the options involving a directly elected mayor.

A local authority can call a referendum for an elected mayor, the government can order one itself or 5% of the electorate can petition for a referendum. These proposals mean that the local electorate will be involved in deciding on the form of local government that they are to have. However, there is to be no local say, by the elected councils or directly by the electorate, on the abolition of the existing local authority system. If the electorate rejects the proposal for an elected mayor, the government expects local authorities to adopt another of the proposals (DETR, 1998b: para 2.16).

The choice between these three models is described by the DETR as opening “up a much richer variety of local democratic structures” (DETR, 1998d: para 3.28). However, this ‘rich variety’ is to be strictly regulated under the Local Government Bill and statutory instruments which will specify the ‘key broad parameters’ of any new constitution, including the requirements of political and officer positions and their roles and relationships (DETR, 1998b: para 3.6). In order for local democracy to be safeguarded, local councils’ freedom to decide their own timetable for change will be limited by the government’s proposal for “reserve power to tackle cases of abuse or inertia”:

Where a council has developed proposals with a timetable but is failing to act upon them, or has neglected to develop any proposals at all, the Government will have the power to require the council to hold a referendum asking the local electorate to support one of the approved models. (DETR, 1998d: para 3.33)

Even where the council itself decides to hold a referendum the government will have the power to lay down the detailed proposal for a new form of local governance, the form of wording, the time of the referendum and other procedural matters (DETR, 1998b: para 2.13).

The new structures being imposed at local government level effectively split local government in two, institutionalising a sharp distinction between the executive and representative roles. As the DETR states: “These benefits are the greater, the more the representative role and the executive role are separated” (DETR, 1998a:

para 5.14). Under each model there is a strong executive, responsible for policy preparation and implementation. The executive would number as few as three, under the council manager form, and a maximum of ten councillors or 15% of the council under the other forms. The executive, which will not have to reflect the political balance of the authority, will receive greatly enhanced powers, with a directly elected mayor able to veto a council decision and overrule the council in order to impose a balanced budget.

One area where there will be no choice is the abolition of the old committee system. The government reform proposals claim that the committee system ‘weakens local accountability’ by not providing effective leadership; this being one factor discouraging people from voting, as it was not clear who within the council was making the decisions (DETR, 1998b: paras 1.10, 1.19). The committee system was also held to be undemocratic because the important decisions were often made by political groups ‘meeting behind closed doors’ (DETR, 1998a: para. 5.4). This system meant that councillors wasted too much time in meetings where they had little influence, the amount of time spent also being a major deterrent to those with family and work commitments (DETR, 1998a: para 5.27). Instead, the committee system will be replaced by one or more overview or scrutiny committees, overseeing the work of the executive. This will cut back the time the majority of councillors spend in council meetings, and clarify policy responsibilities, with the executive councillors having responsibility for decision making and defending council policy to the public, while the backbench councillors have the lead responsibility for scrutiny as informed representatives of the people. The new scrutiny committees will:

...review decisions taken by the executive and how it is implementing council policy, and make reports and recommendations, including proposals for changes to policies or practices, to the executive or council as appropriate. (DETR, 1998b: para 3.19)

While the executive councillors spend time in stuffy policy-making meetings, the ‘backbenchers’ will be attending residents’ meetings and

holding more local surgeries. The majority of local councillors, freed from their role in policy making, have an ‘enhanced role’, their efforts refocused “on becoming the engine for public participation in decision-making” (DETR, 1998b: Postscript). The DETR believes these councillors “will be accountable, strong, local representatives for their area”:

They will bring their constituents’ views, concerns and grievances to the council through their council’s structures. Their role will be to represent the people to the council rather than to defend the council to the people ... Each councillor will become a champion of their community defending the public interest in the council and channelling the grievances, needs and aspirations of their electorate into the scrutiny process. In-touch local councillors, aware of and responsive to the needs of those they represent, will have a greater say in the formulation of policy and the solving of local problems than they could have within current committee structures. (DETR, 1998d: paras 3.42, 3.43)

While it is a positive step to encourage councillors to be more aware of their constituents’ needs their representative capacity is at the same time being diminished. Perversely, it is the ‘in-touch’ councillors that will have much less say in policy formulation (Rao, 1999: 267). In fact, calling the non-executive councillors ‘backbenchers’ is clearly misleading as it invites unwarranted comparisons with the parliamentary division of members’ roles (Brooks, 1999: 50). In the House of Commons, backbenchers are involved in decision making and have to ratify proposed legislation by majority vote; they do not merely scrutinise policy that has already been agreed. It would be considered highly undemocratic for the government to try to “break the attendance culture” of MPs, yet, in the cause of ‘local accountability’, this is precisely the declared policy for local authority council members (DETR, 1998d: para 3.56).

The ‘community champions’ will be responsible for organising and getting involved with local community consultation schemes. Area Based Neighbourhood Committees and

Community Forums as well as Interest and User Group Forums will be encouraged to form part of, or feed in to, the scrutiny structure and will help inform a number of consultation initiatives. Greater community involvement and policy-making openness potentially marks a positive improvement on the closed world of pre-meeting party caucuses of the past. However, there is a fundamental difference between the, at least formal, political accountability of the old committee system, where councillors voted on policy, and the new regimes of scrutiny and consultation which involve no final accountability over policy-making power. Councillors involved in scrutiny may have the right to interview executive officers and commission reports, but can only make recommendations for the executive to consider. The change in status of the majority of local councillors is statutorily enforced by the government requirement that overview or scrutiny committees will not be able to take decisions or exercise responsibilities on behalf of the council (DETR, 1998b: para 3.18). The more 'in-touch' backbench councillors may be the people's representatives but apparently can only represent the people by being freed from the onerous task of policy making and political accountability that goes with it.

Central government, in fact, looks set to acquire greater regulatory control over local authorities, through the process of 'empowering communities'. This apparent contradiction is starkly highlighted in the new statutory duty on councils to consult and engage with their local communities over producing a community plan and the provisions of Best Value (DETR, 1998e: para 1.3). This is portrayed as a transfer of decision-making power away from the centre, yet, under the statutory duty of consultation and new policy frameworks, this will further undermine local authority autonomy through creating a whole host of new centrally regulated monitoring regimes.

Best Value, replacing Compulsory Competitive Tendering, is a top-down managerial imposition with a rolling programme of reviews comparing service delivery between local authorities. Under the new monitoring programme of the Audit Commission, Local Government Authority, Improvement and Development Agency and the DETR, central government regulation

will be an ongoing process, emphasising continuous improvement towards national targets in quality and cost and efficiency (Sanderson, 1998). The minimum target set by the Best Value regime is that, within five years, standards should be consistent with those of the top 25% of all local authorities at the time the standards are set.

Opportunities to spend will be tied to results through the Best Value scheme and the 'beacon councils' initiative. This new initiative will "take account of performance in service delivery against national and local performance targets and performance indicators", and also "have regard to inspectorate reports and auditors' statements on financial management" (DETR, 1998d: para 2.21). Each local authority will have to set annual targets for quality, efficiency and cost consistent with these targets. However, given the disparities in local authority performance it seems unlikely that many councils will be able to achieve the targets set, with less well-off councils being even less likely to benefit from additional funding. These centrally defined targets have been criticised as even more likely to "distort local authority behaviour and undermine local democratic accountability" (Boyne, 1999: 4). In fact, as several commentators have noted, diversity and freedom in local government service delivery can only be reduced by the DETR focus on national auditability (Brooks, 1999: 51). Just as Best Value gives little leeway for local variation, the content of local authority performance plans, which summarise council objectives and communicate them to the public, will equally be tightly prescribed by the government itself (Boyne, 1999: 5). While the government centrally determines the service delivery targets and performance plans, it seems clear that the DETR's concern, that these targets should include a statutory duty of community consultation, has less to do with policy content than with promoting local involvement. To meet the consultation requirements, local authorities will have to convince the new Best Value inspectorate and the Audit Commission "that they have a high level of support from local people and the business community" (DETR, 1998d: para 2.21).

Conformity with central government administrative priorities involves more than target-setting and monitoring regimes. There will

be the creation of new disciplinary bodies which will be part of the ‘new ethical framework’ (DETR, 1998c) and, in addition, the government has pledged to act wherever authorities fail to remedy clear performance failure in respect of government Best Value targets. From the DETR’s perspective, local accountability is to be ‘reinforced’ through these additional government powers and the statutory imposition of Audit Commission and inspectorate requirements (DETR, 1998d: para 7.49). There is a sharp irony in additional powers being acquired by central government in the struggle to enforce greater local accountability. The government is introducing new legislation “to take new powers to support flexible and constructive intervention” involving a wide range of regulatory mechanisms (DETR, 1998d: para 7.47):

- imposing an action plan and deadlines for specified improvements;
- imposing external management regimes;
- putting out services to competition;
- removing services from local authority control entirely;
- transferring responsibility to another authority or third party.

The additional powers of regulation in the hands of central government do not contradict the concerns of Third Way theorists and policy makers. In a fragmented and directionless society the decentralisation of power could only increase tensions and difficulties for central government. Every New Labour paean to local involvement and active communities ends with a rider that brings the state back in and institutionalises government regulation at an even greater level than before. Giddens, for example, emphasises that devolved authority “can lead to fragmentation if not balanced with a transfer of power ‘upwards’” (Giddens, 1998: 78). Beck warns against any “rational–democratic self-misunderstanding” that is bound to arise among the political class:

Politics must not be merely rational in a democratic society, it must also be emotional. Efficient solutions are important, but so are passions, the ability to listen ... Community spirit, which many obviously miss so painfully, is formed only in the

symbols created and affirmed in public speaking and listening. (Beck, 1998: 16)

What is being devolved downwards and outwards is symbolic participation and consultation, not power or accountability.

The therapeutic meaning of democracy

Several commentators have criticised the new range of ‘consultation’ exercises proposed by the government, highlighting the emphasis on technical forms of involvement over institutional change (Brooks, 1999; Sanderson, 1999). The government, for example, has widely flagged up the use of referendums, believing that councils “should see and use referendums as an important tool to give local people a bigger say”. However, apart from their instrumental use to impose the executive/backbench division they will be ‘neither obligatory or binding’ and purely intended for consultation purposes (DETR, 1998d: para 4.8). The DETR guide on participation techniques adds a long list of other potential mechanisms to be used by local authorities, such as: complaints/suggestions schemes; service satisfaction surveys; other opinion polls; interactive websites; citizens’ panels; cooption to scrutiny committees; question and answer sessions with the public; consultation documents; public meetings; citizens’ juries; focus groups; visioning exercises; service user forums; issue forums; shared interest forums; area/neighbourhood forums; and user management of services (DETR, 1998e: Box 1). These schemes all attempt to involve and create active citizens but none of them give those involved any greater control over policy making.

These schemes for greater democratic participation focus more on involvement than on enhancing accountability. This is understandable considering the central role of elections in the democratic process. However, what is more problematic in this regard is the downgrading of local elections to merely an extension of these new involvement strategies. To enhance the level of local participation, the government favours annual local council polls. In ‘fallow’ years, in which there are no elections for local councillors, the government plans other elections, for

example for directly elected mayors, or the assembly of the Greater London Authority (DETR, 1998d: para 4.11). A new system of gerrymandering will take place to reorganise local wards, not to ensure a certain electoral outcome, but to ensure that people have an equal opportunity to participate:

This requires the same number of councillors in a ward or electoral division as there are elections for the council in any four-year period. The Government will therefore take a power to direct the [Local Government] Commission to take this criterion into account when reviewing a council's electoral areas ... to redefine electoral boundaries to increase the proportion of the electorate involved in each local election. (DETR, 1998d: para 4.15, 4.16)

This is very different to the traditional understanding of democracy, which was concerned not with how often people voted but with their capacity to hold representatives accountable for policy. When the vast majority of local councillors are essentially full-time community workers, not accountable for local authority decision making, it would appear impossible for them to stand for re-election on the local authority's policy record. This turns local elections into little more than personal popularity contests, doing little to encourage wider policy debate. This could well explain why the White Paper sees local representation in entirely separate terms to policy accountability. According to the DETR most elected councillors fail the representative test as they "do not reflect the make-up of their community – only a quarter are women, only half are employed or self-employed and ethnic minorities are seriously under-represented" (DETR, 1998d: paras 1.13, 3.59–3.61). Even the representative nature of elected local councillors is understood by the DETR in terms of 'inclusion' more than policy accountability.

The discussion of the 'democratic renewal of local politics' has little to do with democratic content. While it is possible for democratic accountability to be enhanced through more inclusive approaches to policy making, this should not be assumed prior to a study of the institutional relationships involved. Unfortunately, even

critical commentators focus on the shortcomings of the reforms at the level of inclusion rather than considering the relations of democratic accountability (Pratchett, 1999; Sanderson, 1999). Josie Brooks, for example, fears that "'participation' and 'consultation' are at risk of being used interchangeably" (1999: 52). However, this misses the point that both participation and consultation relate to levels of individual engagement or involvement rather than mechanisms of accountability.

The focus on the level of individual 'inclusion', as opposed to the broader relationship of accountability of power holders, is a potent demonstration of the shift from a political understanding of democracy, as a collective decision-making process, to a therapeutic one, concerned with an individual's subjective perspective. James Nolan's recent book *The therapeutic state* provides a substantial US study of government institutional experimentation that seeks to connect with society at the individual level (1998). He sees this as a two-way process as policy makers are responding to the fact that fewer and fewer people relate to government through the collective perspective of social goals and interests. As preoccupation with individual feelings shapes perceptions of the political sphere "the citizen recedes and the therapeutic self prevails" (1998: 6). His approach indicates that the real benefits of involvement in consultation are to be seen in terms of individual expression rather than collective decision making.

For New Labour strategists, the links with an increasingly fragmented society can only be built through a variety of 'subject-led', 'community-centred' initiatives. The concern for active citizens to gain 'recognition' and the 'equality of esteem' revolves around involvement rather than political accountability or policy changes. This is therapeutic politics because the aim of 'giving a voice' to local people is primarily designed to give individuals a feeling of greater inclusion and sense of community. In this respect, government thinking closely follows the approach of the influential political theorist Jürgen Habermas in focusing on individual inclusion over collective accountability, stressing the importance of 'communicative' or 'dialogic' democracy. This perspective shifts the focus of the political framework away from the representation

and aggregation of individual interests towards an emphasis on the value of individual self-expression in shared participatory dialogue (Habermas, 1984). The emphasis on ensuring that all individual voices are heard is astutely recognised by Anthony Giddens as a “democracy of the emotions” (1994: 16). Communities are created not by involvement in a collective political project or through some other form of social engagement but through the collective expression of individual feelings.

The government is reluctant to make voting compulsory, but the trend is for people to have less and less choice about democratic participation more broadly. This is because democratic ‘inclusion’ is seen as a central mechanism in the re-creation of social bonds. This new importance is reflected in the fact that the Government Advisory Group on the Teaching of Citizenship and Democracy recommends that citizenship education in schools should be compulsory from the age of five. No one should be ‘un-included’ under this new approach; the government auditors will be monitoring local councils asking ‘who is missing’ from their consultation lists and the new monitoring framework specifically calls for the inclusion of ‘hard to reach’ groups including rural communities, single parents, young people and special needs groups (DETR, 1998e: Box 9). This helps to explain why the government is so keen on interactive technology that offers new ways to get ‘in touch’ and involve individuals, as well as groups, through new points of contact with people at shopping centres and libraries, and even in their own homes (DETR, 1998a: para 4.26). The discussion around the benefits of new technologies for democratic ‘inclusion’ illustrates the central problem (Percy-Smith, 1995). Even if it was possible for the government to get ‘in touch’ with more people, it is questionable whether these new mechanisms could substitute for old forms of social cohesion.

Drawn together through ‘social exclusion’ initiatives, the ‘hard-to-involve’ will be enmeshed in new sets of direct and indirect links to local government and other regulatory bodies. However, these forums and associations, established by local authority consultation mechanisms, have only a limited capacity for deliberation, restricted by the policy framework and monitoring needs of council managers and central government.

Some commentators argue that, despite these limits, the mere fact of involvement will help to educate local people in ‘civic values’ and ‘community responsibilities’, or at least enhance their sense of self-esteem and self-worth (Phillips, 1994, 1996; Barnes, 1999; Pratchett, 1999). To the individual benefits at this moral or emotional level should of course be added the very real advantages that can accrue to newly ‘included’ groups and individuals in terms of public recognition and access to resources. However, the members of these new therapeutic ‘communities’ will share little sense of the active, collective engagement that was part and parcel of involvement in autonomously organised grassroots community associations.

There is a difference between individuals being actively brought together through enthusiasm about some collective project, such as a campaign around local services, and the passive gathering of individuals, by local councils, for the purposes of education, voting or consultation exercises. Active and engaged citizens cannot be created by government fiat or the proliferation of council-established ‘citizen forums’. Political engagement and community commitment can only be generated by engaging people’s active side. The wide range of citizen committees organised around areas or issues engage the passive side of individuals, whose only connection is the use of a facility or service, or that they share the same age range or postcode. Because the aim is to feed back opinions and ideas for the council to act on, the views of individuals are neither challenged nor tested, and there is no need to reach a collective agreement or to take the arguments out to the community. This process feeds passivity and institutionalises an individual perspective rather than challenging it.

This is a far cry from citizen activity to involve the community politically, encouraged by liberal democracy theorists, such as Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill (Mill, 1998: 229; de Tocqueville, 1945: 2: 124). Establishing a forum and calling it a ‘citizen group’ may be auditable by the Best Value inspectorate but has nothing in common with autonomously organised citizen groups which, in the process of actively winning support for their objectives, have to clarify and test out their ideas, and involve and engage with the local community.

Whether a citizens' panel, established by a local authority, has 200 or 2,000, or even 20,000, members it cannot, of itself, create or develop any collective community interest, any more than filling in a customer satisfaction survey at a particular supermarket creates or reinforces any community bond between shoppers. The new local authority structures may bring people together and may keep people 'in touch' with government but they cannot overcome the atomisation and fragmentation that lies behind the government's concern with the "rebirth of democratic local government". In fact, the new forums and consultation groups, through the promotion of democratic participation as little more than consciousness raising and customer feedback, are more likely to institutionalise a network of passive individuals than create or empower active citizens.

Conclusion

It would appear that the government's claim that the Local Government Bill restores 'a new democratic legitimacy' to local authorities is open to question, considering the restriction of policy-making powers within the council and the greater mechanisms of monitoring and centralised regulation available to central government. The streamlining of administrative procedures may speed up decision making but it restricts further the control of local people and local councils over policy making.

This article suggests that increasing the accountability of local people in decision-making processes was not, in fact, the central motivation behind these reforms. Government exhortations for greater participation in local authority affairs and the encouragement of active citizens can be better understood within a context of the desire to establish new mechanisms of inclusion and involvement as a means of social cohesion. Even considered from this perspective, the reform proposals seem unlikely to be able to meet the desired aims because "a new brand of involved and responsible citizenship" cannot be created by government fiat. In fact, the more democratic participation is seen as a tool of social policy, designed to address questions of social cohesion, the less likely it is that politically engaged citizens will emerge.

References

- Barnes, M. (1999) 'Researching public participation', *Local Government Studies*, vol 24, no 4: 60–75.
- Beck, U. (1998) *Democracy without enemies*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beetham, D. (1996) 'Theorising local democracy and local government', in D. King and G. Stoker (eds) *Rethinking local democracy*, pp 28–49, London: Macmillan.
- Boyne, G.A. (1999) 'Processes, performance and best value in local government', *Local Government Studies*, vol 25, no 2: 1–15.
- Brooks, J. (1999) '(Can) modern local government (be) in touch with the people', *Public Policy and Administration*, vol 14, no 1: 42–59.
- de Tocqueville, A. (1945) *Democracy in America*, New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- DETR (1998a) *Modernising local government: Local democracy and community leadership*, London: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.
- DETR (1998b) *Local leadership, local choice*, London: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.
- DETR (1998c) *Modernising local government: A new ethical framework*, London: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.
- DETR (1998d) *Modern local government in touch with the people*, London: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.
- DETR (1998e) *Guidance on enhancing public participation in local government*, London: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.
- Duffy, K. and Hutchinson, J. (1997) 'Urban policy and the turn to community', *Town Planning Review*, vol 68, no 3: 347–62.
- Elcock, H. (1998) 'The changing problem of accountability in modern government: an analytical agenda for reformers', *Public Policy and Administration*, vol 13, no 3: 23–37.

- Giddens, A (1994) *Beyond left and right: The future of radical politics*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, A. (1998) *The third way: The renewal of social democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gray, A. and Jenkins, B. (1999) 'Democratic renewal in local government: continuity and change', *Local Government Studies*, vol 25, no 4: 26–45.
- Habermas, J. (1984) *the theory of communicative action, volume 1: Reason and the rationalization of society*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Held, D. (ed)(1993) *Prospects for democracy: North, south, east, west*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Jameson, H. (2000) "'Threshold turnout" proposed', *Municipal Journal*, 21–27, January: 11.
- Labour Party (1995) *Renewing democracy, Rebuilding communities*, London: Labour Party.
- Leach, S. and Wingfield, M. (1999) 'Public participation and the democratic renewal agenda: prioritisation or marginalisation?', *Local Government Studies*, vol 25, no 4: 46–59.
- Martin, S. (1998) *Achieving best value through public engagement*, Paper No 8, Warwick/DETR Best Value Series, Coventry: Local Government Centre, University of Warwick.
- Mill, J.S. (1861, reprinted 1998) *Considerations on representative government*, edited by J. Grey, Oxford: Oxford World Classics, Oxford University Press.
- Nolan, J.L. (1998) *The therapeutic state: Justifying government at century's end*, New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Percy-Smith, J. (1995) *Digital democracy: Information and communication technologies in local politics*, Research Report No 14, London: Commission for Local Democracy.
- Phillips, A. (1994) *Local democracy: The terms of the debate*, Research Report No 2, London: Commission for Local Democracy.
- Phillips, A. (1996) 'Why does local democracy matter?', in L. Pratchett and D. Wilson (eds) *Local democracy and local government*, pp 20–37, London: Macmillan.
- Pratchett, L. (1999) 'Introduction: defining democratic renewal', *Local Government Studies*, vol 25, no 4: 1–18.
- Rao, N. (1999) 'Representing the people? Testing assumptions about local government reform', *Public Administration*, vol. 77, no 2: 257–71.
- Sanderson, I. (1998) Beyond performance measurement? Assessing 'value' in local government, *Local Government Studies*, vol 24, no 4: 1–25.
- Sanderson, I. (1999) 'Participation and democratic renewal: from "instrumental" to "communicative rationality"?'', *Policy & Politics*, vol 27, no 3: 325–41.
- Stoker, G. (1996) 'Redefining local democracy', in L. Pratchett and D. Wilson (eds) *Local democracy and local government*, pp 188–209, London: Macmillan.
- Tam, H. (1999) 'Communitarian ideas and third way politics', *Local Government Voice*, vol 3, no 2: 26–9.
- West, T. (2000) 'Igniting the new agenda', *Municipal Journal*, 28 January–3 February: 20.

David Chandler
Policy Research Institute
Leeds Metropolitan University, UK