

Citizens' power: a missed opportunity

For meaningful reform of public services, we need to go back to the public.



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Each of the three fundamental shifts advocated in our 2020 Public Services report envisaged a new role for citizens:

- 1 a shift in culture prescribed a new conversation with a more responsible public;
- 2 a shift in power sought devolution of decision-making to people and places; and
- 3 a shift in finance demanded a transparent focus on outcomes for people.

All seemed so possible at the time but, sadly, little of that has happened.

Instead, we see factionalism and social media banter amongst the like-minded, leading many to wonder whether we are creeping towards the death of debate and even democracy. We see ever-increasing centralisations of power to a social and economic class that has sussed how to harness the 'voice of the people' through nationalism and fear. And we see frenzies of political dirt-throwing about numbers of schools and buses and nurses and police, instead of meaningful plans for better learning, transport, health and safety.

Public service leaders today can help recover the ground lost over the last decade. They can help construct what political theorist Benjamin Barber has called 'communal liberty', in which citizens participate actively in the decisions that affect their lives.

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A key responsibility for those managing public services lies in the urgent need to ready citizens for a real shift in power, through more intelligent public discourse about the impacts of public policy and the realities of local service provision. This can be done by crafting a more active co-productive relationship with citizens than many current public service delivery models allow.

Citizens too often are treated as objects of service delivery decisions, rather than as active participants in the changes that directly affect their lives. The consequence is apathy, disillusionment and even anger – but perhaps most wasteful is the failure to harness the energies of citizens as actual co-producers of their own well-being.

Of course, there are differences and divisions in belief and values among citizens, service organizations and politicians. But if civil society is to be strengthened, each must be enabled and informed to develop good understandings of the issues that influence social well-being, to express opinions and concerns, and to take decisions jointly.

In addition to readying themselves for the uncertainties beyond Brexit and budget cuts, providers of public services must work to develop the contribution of their citizens by educating them, supporting and including them in more informed discourse and harness them to co-produce improved outcomes.

The key challenge for public services leaders today must be to help build the powerful public that public services are meant to serve. ●