

Building a coalition for change

In the wake of Covid-19 there is an opportunity to build a powerful coalition for change that focuses on protecting and enhancing good practice in public services.



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It is a poignant irony that despite the many reports which played on the linguistic coincidence of a date and the concept of 20:20 vision, few if any predicted the event which will end up defining the year, and perhaps many years to come. To still be of value our Commission must be relevant to the huge challenges our country now faces.

Before Covid-19 changed everything, it was all too easy to see the period since the Commission reported as a catalogue of missed opportunities, policy reversals and general decline. Yet even before the crisis there were some important advances.

The devolution of power to Manchester and the way the mayor and combined authority grasped the opportunity reflected the Commission's advocacy of greater local power place-based collaboration. In the best local government examples of digital innovation and the use of deliberative methods we were seeing more responsive models of public service management and delivery.

In the ambitions and practices of visionary local leaders in places ranging from Wigan to Barking and Dagenham, we saw an empowering model of local governance, one which enhanced the resilience and creativity of local communities and citizens.

The question now is how the pandemic and its consequences, many of which are still to play out, will impact our vision of public services. The RSA has identified three conditions that help determine whether crises lead to long term intentional change:

- Did significant demand and capacity for change pre-exist the crisis?
- Does that demand increase during the crisis, and in the response do we see a different future being prefigured?
- When societies and institutions emerge from crisis, are there political coalitions and practical policies and innovations ready to take advantage of a greater openness to change and adjustment?

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At one level we can see this model playing out in relation to digital. Good practice was already out there in pockets, but the crisis has seen an accelerated levelling up. Councils and many parts of the NHS have had to catch up with those who had fully appreciated how digital transformation is about a lot more than technology. The question now is not whether public services are digital it is what to do about the places and people left behind when it is the default.

In terms of local devolution, the picture is much less clear. Local authorities have been vital to supporting vulnerable people particularly when they have been able to work effectively with local civil society and self-organising support networks. Global evidence suggests that countries with strong and competent local governance have managed the crisis better. Not only is local government more responsive, but it tends to be more trusted, something which could be vital in an extended transition period.

The big test will be the role accorded to cities and city regions in ‘building back better’. The 2020 Commission encouraged policy makers to see the synergies between social and economic policy. If we add the challenge of meeting the country’s net zero target we can see the scope for triple win policies like creating an army of new workers to retrofit houses, plant trees and improve public spaces.

Another key Commission idea may also be strengthened by the crisis and the demands of its aftermath. ‘Social productivity’ suggested that a core criterion for the effectiveness of public policy interventions should be the degree to which they enabled and encouraged individuals and communities to meet their own needs. The mass observation of lock-down has been described by President Emmanuel Macron as the greatest show of solidarity the world has ever seen. Although hospitals are in the front line, we know that tackling the pandemic is as much a social challenge as a medical one. The sensitivity of policy to public attitudes and behaviour and the importance of trust and adaptiveness have all been underlined.

Inevitably policy prescriptions will soon be divided into pre-Covid and post-Covid ideas. Yet, some of the core ideas of the 2020 Commission should be dusted down and repurposed for today’s challenges. The Commission argued for the step change we unquestionably now need in our ambitions and models of public services. But the hardest part of turning crisis to change is the final element – building coalitions ready to implement practical changes.

We need to articulate a vision for public services that inspires hope and shows how existing best practice prefigures a necessary future. We need to situate better public services in broader accounts of successful places in a post-Covid world and new relationships between state and citizen. We need to embed an agile, experimental, adaptive approach focusing not only on the change we might want but also where change is possible right now. At the RSA we refer to this as ‘thinking like a system and acting like an entrepreneur’.

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One of the last face to face meetings I attended before lockdown was with senior civil servants. When I asked them to identify the biggest enablers and barriers to thinking systemically and acting entrepreneurially they offered the same answer, ‘process’ or more precisely, respectively, bad process and good process. Covid-19 has shown how the organisational furniture of government often got in the way of genuine collaboration and reform. See, for example, how the remaining vestiges of the internal market were set aside in the NHS. Before the crisis we were also starting to see examples of new more informal, ideas-rich, networks. One Team Gov¹ is an example, as are other initiatives to bring officials at all levels together around the climate emergency.

After the decades when competition was seen as the primary driver of public service improvement, we have in the crisis seen the vital role of collaboration. If we can apply the same spirit to the transition and the world after Covid the noble aims of the Commission may yet be fulfilled. ●

1 <https://www.oneteamgov.uk/>