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The Changing Role of the Local State in UK Leisure Provision

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In the UK the public sector has had a long history of both providing leisure opportunities and also regulating and encouraging activities of other agents through legislation, enforcement and subsidy. What we seek to do in this paper is to address some of the recent shifts in public sector operation so that readers can perform a comparative analysis with recent developments in their own nation state. Our basic argument is that the experience of the last two decades has been characterised by:

- i. a gradual fragmentation of the 'leisure project'
- ii. a growing instrumentalism in public policy which increasingly deploys leisure in order to secure wider social goals.
- iii. an invasive centralisation of policy and a reduction of the power of the local state.

These processes are inter-related and are associated with a proliferation of more short-term pragmatic policies. These in turn find expression in more centralised project funding and contracting arrangements. The shift away from traditional leisure policy and towards a contract culture was centrally driven in the UK by iconoclastic neo-liberalist policies. They were the hallmark of Margaret Thatcher's years of governance (1979-1990). This policy direction has been continued, arguably refined and sharpened, by the three successive 'New Labour' governments of Tony Blair (1997-2006).

A Fragmenting 'Leisure Project'

During the past decades, UK academics have slowly lost confidence in leisure studies and in its traditionally social democratic credentials that provided coherence and direction to policy. In general terms, the first phase of '*leisure studies*' established the field of study when it appeared in the late 1960s and its policy mandate was then to establish and plan a 'leisure society' for all citizens to enjoy the social benefits. In the late 1970s, the second wave of critical '*cultural studies*' resisted the 'conventional wisdom' of leisure studies and the leisure society. Social democratic leisure policies were viewed sceptically as social control, with people reduced to client status. Local state leisure professionals were challenged as doing little to acknowledge divisions of class, race and gender in public policy. By the early 1990s, the third important phase was established in the wake of Thatcherism. It is best captured by the phrase '*pleasure studies*'. Now citizens had become consumers; research and policy debates were all about marketisation and postmodernity, particularly the impact of consumer and contract culture on leisure. At the start of the new millennium, we could suggest an emerging phase, as postmodern theories have come again with ideas that bypass the nation state, introducing debates about globalisation, McDonaldisation and Disneyfication. This latest phase might be defined as '*lifestyle studies*' as the leisure project becomes more and more instrumentalist, drawn into debates about risk society and policy debates around physical activity, exercise and health. Traditional leisure policy has gradually lost its holistic social democratic focus on citizenship and has now been refashioned, steeled to demonstrate its distinctive contribution to wider social targets around education, health, crime reduction and employment

The phrase 'the leisure project' appears innocent enough, but it can be usefully developed, without quotation marks, to capture the politics of leisure, leisure policy and leisure research. At any historical moment, the project may be positively pursued by interested parties, simply ignored by others as unimportant and irrelevant, or actively challenged and resisted by opponents. For those interested in past decades of leisure and leisure policy, the leisure

project sits comfortably within the social democratic tradition in politics. All major political parties, policy makers, interest groups, leisure managers and academics have shared and constructed a distinctive discourse to sustain the leisure project. In policy, there has been much ink spilt as how best to explain the formulation and implementation of leisure policies. Within this broad focus Ian Henry (1999) (2001) and colleagues (Mommaas, van der Poel et al. 1996) have made sustained attempts to introduce transnational analysis to inform debate both within the UK and the EU. One important factor in the fragmentation of leisure policies has been the growing influence of the nation state, as it struggles to deal with the paradox of globalisation and also local democratic deficits in public policies and provision.

These distinctive phases or versions of the leisure project in Britain over the past forty years have been discerned, yet previous histories of leisure studies have often concentrated solely on paradigmatic crisis and theoretical divisions. This account seeks in part to stress both commonalities and continuities in leisure studies and policies as well as remark on divergences and changes. The shared politics of the leisure project is certainly one of social democracy but in the light of Thatcherism there has been intense internal and external pressure to come up with viable new policy recommendations. As one would expect in social democratic politics, the elusive policy quest for 'identity', 'community' and 'citizenship' in the nation state is never far away. Nor are issues of social engineering, state intervention and regulation distant.

Differing versions of the leisure project represent and offer changing and diverse voices in the discourse about leisure. In the UK this can be mapped as a shift away from traditional leisure policies and a move towards a more instrumental and centralised contract culture. But shifts in the leisure project leave behind institutional frameworks and vested interests, legacies which generate inevitable tensions between central and local state. Local government reorganisation in the UK in the mid 1970s resulted in the emergence of many holistic leisure departments in local government around the country. Their driving rationale was localism. At the same time there were countervailing forces as regional and local bodies respond to the broad remit of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, which also includes responsibility for gambling, libraries, heritage, tourism and the licensing of alcohol and entertainment. During the Thatcher era a raft of new quangos¹ were introduced, in part to bypass and undermine the elected power of local authorities.

Increasing Instrumentality

Arguments of 'art for art's sake' or 'sport for sport's sake', or even general arguments about improving the quality of life, have tended to be drowned by strident voices demanding more transparent instrumentalism. Securing a political agenda has become increasingly significant in determining the allocation of public funds for leisure which, in absence of robust holistic defence has witnessed further fragmentation into its constituent dimensions, viz. sports, countryside recreation, arts and tourism. This has been typified by policy for sport (LGA, 1998; DCMS, 1999; Sport England, 1999)². 'Sport for sport's sake' has given way to the twin goals of winning medals and social benefits, the latter relating to the government's policy agenda on regeneration, inclusion, employment, crime reduction, and health. The same can be said for other cultural projects, as is clear from our evaluation in *Count Me In* (Long et al., 2002).

¹ QUANGO i.e. Quasi- Autonomous Non-Government Organisations such as Economic Development Agencies, the Audit Commission , OFSTED. OFCOM and so on), now referred to as Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs).

² Although the Secretary of State has argued that arts should be valued for their intrinsic merits, those involved in the arts and other elements of the DCMS remit are also expected to demonstrate the contribution being made to the social agenda.

This, allied to New Labour's mantra of evidence-based policy, has brought an increasing emphasis on the evaluation of leisure initiatives. On the one hand, as researchers, we welcome this while recognising the consequent (potentially diversionary) burden on project staff. On the other, the inevitable emphasis on measurable outputs may obscure the wider political implications and devalue more intangible benefits and long-term gains.

The Local State

In light of the instrumentality observed above, one of the main concerns has been how to deliver the national policy agenda at local level. There has been much debate about whether the government's social agenda is best delivered via area-based or people-centred initiatives and the role that local authorities ought to play in those (Atkinson, 2000; Berman & Phillips, 2000; Carley, 1999; Foley & Martin, 2000; Osborne *et al.*, 2003; Rhodes *et al.*, 2003; Williams, 2003). Of crucial importance has been the notion of using 'challenge funding' as a means of pressurising local authorities to comply with the priorities of central government.

With a few exceptions national government does not deliver goods and services at local level. It is dependent upon a local agent. Traditionally this has been the job of local authorities (Figure 1, model A), but more recently it has increasingly been some local partnership, albeit with the appropriate local authority playing a key role (model B). Other initiatives, like the disbursement of some National Lottery funds, have sought to by-pass local government entirely (model C). Thus, Osborne *et al.* (2003: 11) note that 'in England local government has to negotiate multiple relationships to maintain its position and influence'.

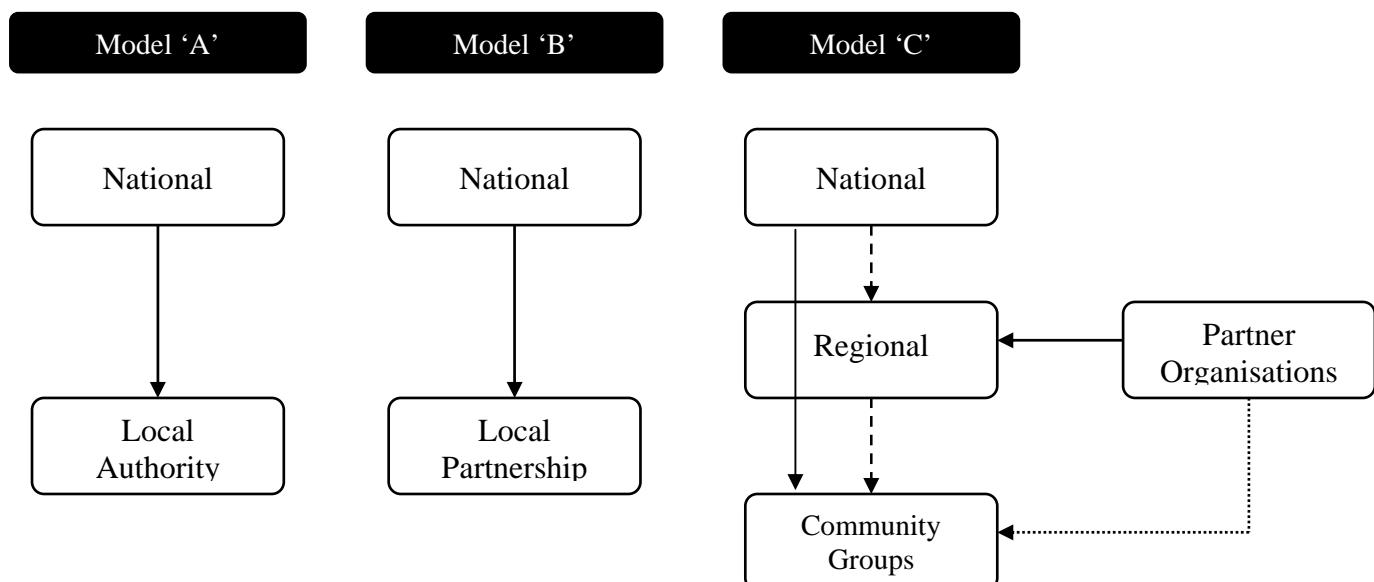


Figure 1: Different routes from national to local

In order to increase central control, more money has been distributed as funding for short term projects rather than in the traditional form of block grants for the provision of services. Organisations are obliged to seek funding by demonstrating how their proposed projects will satisfy criteria established by government departments and public agencies, including those responsible for disbursing National Lottery Grants. Of course this is the kind of relationship long established for providing public funding to voluntary (third sector) organisations. More recently this strategy has been extended to local government seeking money from the central state. Hence funding streams are more likely to be interrupted. This kind of

contractual agreement between central and local is being extended through Local Public Service Agreements and Local Area Agreements³.

Research by our colleagues (CLSR, 2003) revealed a growing concern that a nationally-driven agenda was insufficiently sensitive to the needs of community groups and that remote quangos and funding bodies could be unduly swayed by articulate skilful applicants rather than by local priorities and needs. These emerging concerns and difficulties have been further exacerbated by a labyrinthine system of short-term projects, funded by a contract arrangement arising from a competition for funds. This all contributes to a growing feeling of uncertainty and disengagement, and a growing 'democratic deficit' inside both national and local politics in the UK.

At the same time we want to question how social agendas can be addressed via a scenario in which national agencies provide funding direct to local projects (Figure 1, model C). In our analysis of the impact of one grant scheme on priority groups we identified a critical role for community networks and local authorities as community facilitators, particularly for groups that have been labelled as 'hard to reach'. To extend the reach further will necessitate a 'community development' approach. This involves people themselves actively defining both their needs and local solutions to satisfy those needs (AMA, 1989). It has to be about community self-help, mutually organised, with enabling agents or professionals. This can only be done at local level with a strong involvement by the local authority and its agents and by voluntary partners working 'on the street'. Benefits would accrue both to national government and to public agencies in terms of addressing the social inclusion agenda, and similarly to local authorities as a tool in local community building. The government sees such funding schemes as a way of making funding *directly* available to and benefiting local people, but there is clearly a case in stating more overtly the crucial role of local authorities and other community organisations as facilitators within the whole process.

Conclusion

It seems to us that if cultural projects are to receive public funding it is perfectly reasonable to ask what wider social benefits will accrue.

Certainly it is important to encourage innovation, but the current system appears to promote opportunism at the expense of developing a coherent leisure strategy to address local needs. The short-term emphasis of these arrangements is hardly conducive to supporting community development and regeneration, which necessarily involve long timescales to secure fundamental change.

Moreover, we should not mistake successful individual projects for a successful national policy. Not only are these necessarily partial solutions, but successful projects will be diverse and must be sensitive to, and dependent upon, local contexts.

If we reassert for the moment that one traditional goal of leisure policy is to deliver benefits to the most disadvantaged citizens in the nation state it requires local knowledge to assess how that might best be achieved.

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³ For information on LPSAs and LAAs, see:
<http://www.lga.gov.uk/Briefing.asp?lsection=59&id=SXEC4C-A77FEC87&ccat=829>
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