Rethinking Public Services

Peter Housden
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Foreword

This is a time of fundamental challenge to our assumptions about sustainable economic growth, wellbeing and citizenship. There is wide agreement that world-class public services combining excellence and equity are a core component of our necessary future, but how they should evolve to meet new conditions and grasp new opportunities remain open and urgent questions. Critiques and reformulations abound but there is a “stickiness” to the core assumptions and practices of government and a widespread sense of a lack of common endeavour across political, administrative and practitioner divides.

It is time for a fresh look. This is a participant’s account and its field of vision is particular. It draws on experience and engagement with public services in England and Scotland, particularly in education, the NHS and local government. It examines the questions of improvement and reform from the perspective of practice – looking at what actually happens in the best classrooms, in the most effective clinical environments and in outstanding service leadership. It uses the concept of a paradigm of improvement and reform to bring this experience to scale and to map a course for the future.

The focus here is on relational public services – where the citizen is an essential co-creator of the outcome, and outcomes are strongly influenced by inequality. Health, social care and education are infused with these challenges and the same issues run through early years provision, work with children and families, and much work across the justice system.

By their nature, these services resist linear accounts of cause and effect. In the charged atmosphere in which politicians operate, with its impetus towards drama, differentiation and decisive action, the plasticity of these relational services can be a real challenge. Practitioners are not insensitive to these pressures, but want to understand the government’s overall direction of travel and test its degrees of affiliation to their work.

To square this circle and to give a sense of purpose and clarity to work across many departments and agencies, governments have typically set out a paradigm of public service reform. These offer a bounded account of the public service improvement in the period ahead. These paradigms, too, are slippery. They are purposely reflexive, seeking to change the world they purport to describe. There is a need to attend to the actions and reactions they engender in the field and also to their silences and emphases, their omissions and tones of voice, for these affective elements are a core part of a paradigm’s motive force and structure its impact.

Paradigms travel readily across time zones: important moments of debate and renewal of public services improvement are presently observable across the Anglophone world. To some, these amount to a crisis. A paradigmatic crisis may appear as a trouble only to the cerebral, but the core argument of this paper is that the nature of its resolution will have significant effects on service outcomes and thus for wellbeing and growth in the nations concerned.

The purpose of this short provocation is to explore the dimensions of that crisis and its potential resolution. It examines the modern period as the UK governmental paradigm emerged from a distinctive view of the role of the state, enjoyed a period of hegemony and then began to experience the current moments of decay. In these situations, where the old cannot die and the new cannot yet be born, Gramsci told us to expect a great variety of morbid symptoms. The spirit of this contribution is more optimistic. It pays tribute to the huge progress made in public services in my working lifetime, to the positive and essential roles of government in securing that progress, and to the collective determination to secure further improvement.

Peter Housden
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Executive summary

PARADIGM AND PRACTICE

Thinking and practice on improvement and reform in relational public services are in urgent need of renewal. There is wide agreement on the importance of excellence and equity. The cumulative impact of demographic change, inequality and austerity are widely recognised. The ongoing digital revolution and the new agendas of place offer exciting opportunities and expose new risks. We are, however, at a point of stasis and division over method.

In searching for a way ahead, there is a rich quarry of experience on which to draw, both from the last decades and from emergent practice on the ground.

There is a need, however, for a robust conceptual framework to interpret this evidence and to provide a North Star for relational public services going forward.

Over a period of thirty years, governments in the UK have co-opted variants of New Public Management for this purpose. Analysis of this paradigm’s forms of operation, prescriptions and impact attest to important successes and the creation of lasting assets. But there are also signal weaknesses and structural flaws. It is time for a new beginning.

Developments in the field – in capacity, forms and practices – point towards a set of organising principles for a reformulation of the paradigm onto a broader base.

This is not the advocacy of flip-flop. A new paradigm must be anchored in democracy and respect the right of government to set levels of ambition, articulate its priorities and hold services to account. It should go further and welcome the creative potential of government – as an owner of risk, in creating strong authorising environments and in setting new directions.

There are perhaps three further criteria against which to test a new approach:

- It must sustain public confidence by absorbing the successful lessons and practices of the past and be able to respond to the full width of circumstance and performance in public services.
- It must command the respect of practitioners as their sustained creativity and commitment will be essential if the challenges of the current moment are to be surmounted.
- It needs finally to be coherent and tractable and thus provide a reliable guide to those involved in the leadership and stewardship of services and in the development of policy at all levels.

THE LESSONS OF NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

Sloughing off the complacency and despondency of the 1970s, successive administrations have developed a distinctive model of governmental leadership in the improvement and reform of public services.

Much has been achieved. The UK strains of New Public Management:

- contributed to a step change in outcomes for citizens in education, health and social care and in other relational public services;
- created a new architecture and business model based on choice and contestability;
- empowered frontline leaders and saw significant if uneven gains in their capability, confidence and resilience;
- reset expectations on tackling inequality and disadvantage;
- provided a platform for sustained public investment.

But time has shown that:

- The paradigm’s revealed preference for closely-monitored, high-stakes accountability against narrow performance measures is not a tool for effective system-wide management.
- Quasi-market mechanisms were expected to generate momentum for improvement in service quality and productivity and to reduce the need for onerous performance management.
- In health this has proved a chimera. Handling the surge in demand within defined cash limits in a system with high degrees of provider interdependency and a premium on local access have all contributed towards a closely managed service and led to tension with autonomous providers in the field.
- Quasi-markets have had greater rein in education where interdependency is lower and providers can turn customers away. But improvements in service standards remain patchy and uncertain. There has been no transition “from good to great” and levels of tension and dissent within the service are high, with significant difficulty in the recruitment and retention of high-quality staff.
- In the lee of New Public Management, a set of administrative practices has grown up which further serve to distance government from practitioners. Aside from an abiding centralism, there has been a tendency to render complex adaptive problems as technical challenges susceptible to simple “economic” analysis and linear forms of control. The generalist culture of the senior civil service has promoted a rapid churn of critical post-holders and has fractured understandings and relationships in the field. Borrowings from the private sector have been highly selective, with insufficient impetus in many relational public service environments to leading-edge understandings of innovation, customer services and workforce engagement.
**Drivers for Progress**

Seven challenges make this reformulation an urgent task.

1. Inequality is manifesting itself in new ways and there is evidence of a changing social temper on social mobility, poverty and exclusion.

2. The paradigm cut its teeth on services with an identifiable provider base and readily defined users. Challenges in public health, adult social care and in tackling the impacts of inequality are more diffuse and multifaceted. In these decentred services citizens, young and old, have their own agency and desires, and are active in multiple shaping environments.

3. Restraint on public spending will be a feature of the landscape into the foreseeable future. Conditions for the UK in the world economy post-Brexit will be challenging. A sound business model is thus required and an honest conversation on the impact of a reduced share of GDP devoted to public expenditure.

4. The opportunities flowing from the new political economy of place are there to be explored, both in the devolved administrations and in emergent city-regions. Connecting these structures and processes to sources of energy in communities offers scope for a step change in outcomes, but the current paradigm is particularly ill-suited to this task.

5. Digital enablement and Big Data applications are offering significant new opportunities in service delivery, in system management and in knowledge creation.

6. Knowledge of what works is widely available. We know more about creativity and innovation, the mobilisation of public service environments for improvement, and effective change management. Workforce practices from innovative design-led companies are ripe for emulation.

7. Incongruent practice abounds in government. Work in public health, children’s services and in the Troubled Families programme are practical realisations of a new approach. Practitioners there need to be encouraged to draw out its connections and disjunctures with established approaches to reform.

**A Paradigm of Co-production – Common Endeavour**

The appropriate foundation for a new paradigm lies not in a fresh theory of the state but in the lives of citizens. The unifying goal for public services should be to enable citizens to be, and remain, in charge of their own lives.

This implies a profound shift in our thinking and practice.

It requires an asset-based approach to mobilise the citizen’s energy, resilience and hinterland in the drive to secure personal autonomy – the process known in the trade as co-production.

This has to go beyond the circumstances and engagement of the individual citizen and requires systematic investment in social capital in pressurised communities.

Co-production is a collaborative process enjoining the citizen and practitioner. It thus requires the rehabilitation of the public service workforce from its current subsidiary and problematic status. Practitioners should become co-authors of public service improvement.

The paradigm will need to recognise the density and particularity of the environments it seeks to animate and approach the task with humility and a sense of enquiry.

It will not be starry-eyed on the realities of co-production. It will recognise that in many situations this will seem a far-off goal. Engagement, stabilisation and harm minimisation will be necessary intermediate steps. It will, however, never lose sight of the humanity and potential of the individuals it serves, or its high expectations on potential outcomes.

It will recognise, too, the inherent messiness and approximation of this world and the need for capable leadership in the system at all levels to focus effort and create the space for effective co-production.

In driving for excellence and equity, it will need to face squarely the challenges of inequality and social mobility in the modern world.

It should use the energy generated by autonomy, localism and devolution to create a new terrain for public service improvement and reform.

In this new world it should respect both institutional autonomy and the need for collaboration, with a rebalancing of incentives and posture.

It should enable its own evolution, building the capacity of systems to generate more of their own momentum for reform.

In all this, it should maintain a concentrated focus on practice – on the everyday delivery of service excellence and resilience within and across organisations. This should be the abiding preoccupation of leaders and managers at all levels and the metric of their success.

Its motive force should be a strong sense of will, of joint and several responsibility for outcomes and a drive for openness and transparency in the expectation of continued learning. It should address squarely the implications of this approach for political leadership practice.
Part I: The unconscionably long death of New Public Management

1979 AND ALL THAT

The modern story of public service reform in the UK began during the Second World War. A consensus emerged that meeting the expectations of peace would require a qualitative shift from the voluntaristic and parsimonious approach that had hitherto dominated public policy. After 1945 the full weight of government was necessary to reach accommodations with dominant interests to create the NHS and enable secondary education for all. But thereafter, in accordance with established custom, successive Conservative and Labour administrations granted operational autonomy to sectoral, local and professional interests. The debate on public services typically centred not on performance but on the quantum of resources available and their distribution. Questions of fundamental national import, including educational selection and clinical governance in the health service, were left in many and various hands.

As the UK economy faltered in the 1970s, this localist and professional paradigm became entangled with narratives of national decline and, not for the first time, the US came to the aid of British despondency. A new set of practices drifted across the Atlantic, centred on the reinvention of the state. The disciplines of the market place and the skills of business were to be brought to bear on public services. Choice, competition and contestability would become their animating force, rather than producer interests. Local and unit managers would be empowered and unproductive layers of administration pruned back. Governments in this new era would be “steering not rowing”. Thus was born the era of New Public Management.

Conservative administrations from 1979 onwards initiated a raft of major reforms in this vein. The Griffiths report inaugurated an era of more sharply-focused and accountable management in a new internal market in health. Kenneth Clarke later introduced a purchaser-provider split, self-governing hospital trusts and the principle that money should follow the patient. The schooling system was opened up to parental choice with published data on performance and enhanced rights of appeal. Under Kenneth Baker each school later became its own cost centre with powers over budget and staffing. Through this period, the introduction of new providers and the creation of structures and incentives to free schools from local authority control opened the way for greater competition and contestability.

These were groundbreaking reforms and it is interesting to watch here how a government goes about its business. The Conservatives’ implementation of this new playbook involved not only the hard edge of policy and implementation but also a shift in posture. Taking its cue from Jim Callaghan, government’s tone of voice towards public services became more sharp-edged. Ministers hailed the beneficial impacts of private sector leadership. Resourcing differentials were deployed to encourage migration to new organisational forms set at arm’s length from traditional structures. These messages were amplified in media briefings, opinion pieces and speeches but also by the government’s wider project. The sale of council houses, trade union reform and the privatisation of state monopolies were prominent in setting the broader context in these times. Thus did these approaches become consolidated in the mind of public policy as New Public Management.

The old paradigm had rested on the assertion of the disinterested nature of professional judgement, the distinctive nature of public service values and the need to ensure that services were tailored to local circumstances and temperaments. These arguments proved no match for a gathering consensus among national policymakers and commentators in favour of a more interventionist and market-oriented approach. The rout of “old localism” was part of a broader shift, but its case was consistently dogged by service quality issues, often associated with disadvantage and equity. Squeamishness about data placed its proponents on the back foot. Many councils and professionally-led organisations lacked the will and means to look objectively at standards and to act resolutely on the consequences. There were also problems in telling their story of improvement. If local discretion and professional judgement were such reliable keys to advance, how had they taken us to a place of decline and discontent? The excellence of the school improvement strategies being developed by Peter Mortimore was one thing: but how and where would they be implemented and on what timescale, if all were about local autonomy? It just wasn’t clear.

Labour’s promise of “investment and reform” made public services a core issue at the 1997 General Election. As they settled into government, three strategic choices emerged in health and education: to build on the Conservative architecture of reform, to lift levels of investment and to demand more in return.

In education the focus was on “standards not structures” with steady increases in funding, substantial programmes on literacy and numeracy in primary schools and a drive to raise standards in inner-city secondary schools. These measures had a striking impact. Primary standards rose markedly from 1998 to 2000; the number of weak and failing schools was substantially reduced; later there was a significant improvement in the performance of London secondary schools and a steady overall increase in the numbers of 16-year-olds achieving a clutch of higher GCSE grades.

This was an interesting variant of New Public Management. New Labour took the oars in an unashamedly dirigiste stance, administering self-styled “shock therapy” to lift the system onto a new trajectory. It also set its course at a sharp angle to traditional Labour practices and assumptions. The controversial chief inspector of schools was retained. Measures were taken to ensure the survival of grammar schools. The weakest secondary schools were named and shamed, and prominence was given to the catalytic role of the private sector in the City Academies and Excellence in Cities programmes.

These thrusts were underpinned by additional funding and a new regime of performance management in which schools and local authorities were set targets on pupil attainment, with...
the clear understanding that failure to meet basic standards would result in intervention. As the programme broadened into wider programmes of curriculum enrichment, a number of new grant streams were introduced, each with its own information and compliance requirements. Workforce reform, too, required new processes and administration at school level. And here, under pressure of widespread teacher recruitment issues, the professional enthusiasm for a new start, so palpable in 1997, began to wane. A sense arose among many head teachers that the regime was burdensome, over-directive and narrowly focused on test and examination scores rather than expressing the broader purposes of education, and that their attention was being improperly directed to specific groups of pupils at the threshold, whose success would enable new claims to be made about the efficacy of the overall programme of reform.

In health, an equally vigorous system of performance management was introduced under Frank Dobson. Lubricated by a step change in funding to bring UK health spending up to European averages, substantial progress was made in reducing waiting times, and performance improved in A&E. Treatment times were similarly improved and resourcing enhanced in cancer care, heart disease and mental health. But here, too, the early fund of goodwill began to dissipate as concerns grew about the arrangements to tackle underperformance in a regime of "targets and terror". As in education, the power of regulatory bodies and the overall regulatory burden became bones of contention. Concern grew at a lack of engagement by clinicians and, as Chris Ham put it, "a culture of compliance where opportunities for learning were crowded out by fear of failure". For all the success in securing improved access to health services for citizens, here was the spectre invoked by Wildavsky and compliance requirements. Workforce reform, too, required a step change in funding to bring UK health spending up to European averages, substantial progress was made in reducing waiting times, and performance improved in A&E. Treatment times were similarly improved and resourcing enhanced in cancer care, heart disease and mental health. But here, too, the early fund of goodwill began to dissipate as concerns grew about the arrangements to tackle underperformance in a regime of "targets and terror". As in education, the power of regulatory bodies and the overall regulatory burden became bones of contention. Concern grew at a lack of engagement by clinicians and, as Chris Ham put it, "a culture of compliance where opportunities for learning were crowded out by fear of failure". For all the success in securing improved access to health services for citizens, here was the spectre invoked by Wildavsky of practitioners "doing better and feeling worse".

The second-term Labour government embraced a new understanding. The NHS Plan published by Alan Milburn in 2000 introduced the concept of a "self-improving system". Its motive force would be provider autonomy through foundation trusts and quasi-market incentives. These would provide a systemic undertow in the direction of quality and efficiency and thus reduce reliance on tooth-and-claw management from the centre. As quasi-market forces exerted their pull, the need for such robust performance management would, it was implied, wither away.

This approach became the strategic overlay for the government’s reforms in education. City academies, created as special purpose vehicles to serve the most disadvantaged areas, were to evolve into a general form as "independent state schools", akin to foundation trusts. Open enrolment and encouraging successful schools to expand would allow the system to be shaped increasingly by parental preference and drive improvement throughout the system.

Michael Barber was here composer and conductor, with a Cabinet Office paper in 2006 and the 2008 White Paper on Public Services Reform giving a more developed voice to these themes. This next phase would enable services to move “from good to great” through the creation of self-improving systems less dependent on central direction and programmes and with a suite of interventions tailored to the particular stage of development of the service and institution in question.

These approaches were to be backed by the development and mobilisation of leaders within the system to drive change and improvement on the ground. Drawing on the work of the National College of School Leadership and Darzi’s work in the health service, the 2008 White Paper spoke of the need to “unlock the creativity and ambition of ‘public sector workers’ through a New Professionalism”. Central guidance, it was argued, could only reach so far – public service quality rested on frontline practitioners interpreting evidence and applying skills and resources to meet individual needs. There were nods here, too, in the direction of practitioner self-organisation and more organic developments beyond the reach of government. The first shoots of a sense of place were also visible, with the acknowledgement that local service communities were spanning boundaries and making things happen without official sanction or guidance.

This latter point is important. Schools, hospitals, primary care facilities and service units of all kinds enjoy a practical autonomy to define their character, make relationships and innovate. This pattern of development had been given a significant boost by the drive through the 1990s to create more autonomous schools and hospital trusts. In the later period of the Labour government, improvement collaboratives in health, the activities of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, the London Challenge and other ventures brought together leading practitioners in constructive and enabling contexts, with national improvement agencies giving force and added momentum to this work. The concept of heads, trust chief executives and leading clinicians as “system leaders” began to have some materiality.

But as John Dunford puts it, this organic growth created the paradox of a world divided into “the confident and the constrained”. Those with a sense of agency and empowerment made the best of the opportunities and navigated around hazards. Others remained trapped within a compliance culture and focused their attention on nationally-defined hoops. This experience in the schools sector found its echo in health. Whilst the top 10%-20% of GP practices used fundholding to positive effect, elsewhere the benefits were judged not to have justified the administrative costs involved. With greater freedoms accorded to high performers, this bifurcation had the potential to create a two-speed pattern of improvement in which the confident powered on, leaving the constrained unable somehow to break out of the circle of wagons.

There were also issues about change management. The propensity towards large-scale reorganisations of intermediate tiers in health over these years was a major distraction. In education, pressure for fresh initiatives to shape the agenda led to a proliferation of overlapping improvement schemes which were hard to understand and manage at school level.
There were also critical issues around capacity in the middle tier. Nick Timmins draws attention to “PCTs’ lack of skills, notably poor analysis of data and the poor quality of much PCT management”. In education, already highly variable levels of capacity in local authorities were further stretched by the scale and pace of demands on schools and children’s services.

To many in government, practitioner disaffection with the reform programme seemed disproportionate. Perhaps there had been insufficient early engagement, particularly to enrol a substantial subset of leaders in the field – head teachers, chief executives, clinical and nursing directors and others as the tribunes of change? In paradigmatic terms, however, we should be wary of loading too much weight on this argument. The lesson lies in questions of trust and of resonance – their degree of congruence with the lived experience of practitioners in public service institutions.

This is best illustrated in the area of service failure. A propensity to intervention was clearly justified. But the New Labour narrative was one of deficits in individual or institutional ambition, skill, diligence and nerve. The solution would be a summary change of leadership made with frequent recourse to the tropes or actuality of private sector intervention as the catalyst of change. This privileging of the private sector implied a hierarchy of expertise. The belief among frontline staff that sustainable improvement required a collective effort and multiple contributions over time was undermined by the ideology of super-heads, turn-round chief executives and academy sponsors who would cast the veils from their eyes. It was thus no accident that perhaps the most successful reforms of the early period were achieved in primary standards and through Patient Access Teams. Or that the most effective form of engagement with failing local authorities came through the Local Government Association’s concept of “sector-led improvement”, developed in partnership with the host government department. These were programmes that invested in capacity, gave classroom teachers, clinical staff, elected members and officers new skills and confidence, went with the grain of local leadership and had public impact.

It was also clear that even in its own terms, the new dawn of a self-improving system remained a long way off. For in a fully-funded NHS free at the point of delivery, a cash limit was inevitable and would serve to restrict the influence of market forces, especially as growth in public spending slowed. And in education, provider attitudes to market share were decidedly mixed. Incremental growth had its attractions and federated chains of schools were encouraged. But progress was slow. At local level, exclusivity, autonomy and specificity were prized and the instincts towards singularity remained dominant. In these circumstances, and with system performance distinctly uneven, vigorous performance management remained the order of the day and contributed to much professional cynicism and disdain as the government sought to defend its record.

In paradigmatic terms, it is thus important to ask what guided the choice towards the primacy of quasi-markets and hard-edged performance management, to the comparative neglect of engagement and long-term capacity-building. From the 1980s onwards, the drive for public services reform had set itself against a cosy world of professional and bureaucratic complacency, buttressed by trade union power and self-serving local interests. This combative world-view, amplified and reinforced by particular understandings of human and organisational behaviour, had become a crusade – and radicalism within it a badge of honour. Late-period New Labour endorsed the benefits of a more inclusive approach, but time did not allow this revisionism to be brought to any kind of fulfilment.

**A NEW DAWN?**

The Conservative Party went into coalition in 2010 with a well-honed critique of the established approach to public services. Greg Clark had written in 2003 of “the failure of the command state”, in which a target-dominated culture, oppressive audit and inspection requirements and rigid terms and conditions had driven an over-centralised approach which stifled local initiative, user involvement and local democracy. The 2011 White Paper amplified these themes with principles of choice, decentralisation, diversity, fairness and accountability. There were promises to “tear up the rule book that stops public sector staff doing the job as they see fit”, to “restore professional responsibility and discretion”, to offer public service staff new opportunities to innovate, improve and inspire, and to encourage public sector staff to start their own enterprises. David Cameron and Nick Clegg thus sought a restitution of “the ethos of public service” with a bigger role for the charitable and voluntary sector, and for mutuals and cooperatives as part of a burgeoning Big Society.

The overarching context of austerity created heavy weather for the government in gaining traction for these approaches. Benefit reform placed the government beyond the pale for many in the community and voluntary sector. The failure of the larger charities to consolidate their position by success in open tendering with the private sector caused further tensions. But in a series of initiatives headed by the academies and free schools programmes, the coalition pushed ahead in its determination to develop a more variegated provider landscape with additional support for the expansion of mutuals spun out from existing public service organisations. A raft of further measures gave new impetus to local accountability and the empowerment of communities. Support for educational disadvantage was focused through the “pupil premium”, and the partnership with local authorities on Troubled Families was further developed. UK government departments were significantly downsized and a vigorous programme of civil service reform inaugurated. The work of the Behavioural Insights Team in Whitehall prompted new thinking on means to secure policy objectives, a network of What Works centres was established to extend and support good practice in major services, the impetus of the previous government’s Total Place pilots on stronger integration in local areas was carried forward and a major initiative undertaken on the integration of health and social care through the creation of the Better Care Fund.
A major policy hiccup ran however through this first period of coalition government. Andrew Lansley came into the Department of Health with a radical vision embodied in a 50-page white paper produced a mere sixty days after the coalition was formed. It proposed that family doctors would take over the commissioning of care within a framework shaped by a new National Commissioning Board. Ten regional health authorities and 152 primary care trusts would be abolished. An economic regulator would drive an increased focus on choice, competition and a broader provider base. These “really, really revolutionary” reforms reflected the strong personal vision of the secretary of state for a wholesome redefinition of relationships in the NHS. Ministers were to give the new National Commissioning Board a mandate and then stand back from day-to-day management. A bill would limit “the ability of the secretary of state to micromanage and intervene” in the running of the health service.

The policy and legislative debacle that followed resulted in the departure of the secretary of state and significant modification of the proposals. And any immediate scope for the incoming secretary of state to stand at a further distance from the NHS was swept away by the shock of the Mid Staffordshire Trust. Robert Francis QC found serious failings there had resulted in “the appalling suffering of many patients”. A failure to listen and act on concerns registered by patients, relatives and staff had its roots in “an insidious negative culture”, which tolerated poor standards and disengagement from managerial and leadership responsibilities. His report was clear that the focus on reaching national access targets, achieving financial balance and the overriding desire to secure foundation trust status had shaped and contributed to an “utterly unacceptable” state of affairs.

The government accepted all the Francis recommendations and set in place a substantial and comprehensive response to address the identified issues of clinical leadership and practice throughout the NHS. As the incoming secretary of state, Jeremy Hunt gave great emphasis to inspection as the primary means to drive compliance with the new standards and expectations, creating new chief inspector posts for hospitals, primary care and adult social care. His style of working, with hands-on Monday morning meetings with the heads of the national agencies, could not be further from the Lansley vision. There was also less apparent enthusiasm for the development of the internal market or widening the role of the private sector.

Overall, the scale, width and intensity of the challenges facing the NHS came to feel qualitatively different to those of a decade before. The needs of an ageing population, deepening public health challenges and the creation of new care models put extraordinary pressures on performance and budgets as the new national agencies and relationships bedded in. The need to create a “common culture” in the NHS around patient care and the Berwick recommendations on patient safety struck a chord through the system and gave piquancy to Francis’s concern, expressed in his “one year on” report, at the “persistence of somewhat oppressive reactions to reports of problems in meeting financial and other corporate requirements”.

Over the same period in education, the incoming secretary of state, Michael Gove, moved with speed and certainty to stamp his priorities onto the system. He drove a sharp focus on the Academies programme, the creation of free schools and on curriculum reform. The departmental headcount was significantly reduced and a host of initiatives curtailed or brought to a close. But this was not a laissez-faire approach. Whilst the targets and data requirements of multiple initiatives had been swept away, the core performance of schools on tests and GCSE results remained the subject of rigorous scrutiny by Ofsted. Their judgements created thresholds for intervention and triggered requirements for structural conversion to Academy status in accordance with the policy ambitions of the secretary of state. The policy emphases of New Public Management remained very much alive.

**POLITICAL PRACTICE**

The conventions of accountability for public services in Westminster have been critical in shaping this environment. Three pillars are discernible:

- Issues of service quality in Tredegar continue to reverberate directly in Parliament. And local variations in service quality and availability are held up as self-evident matters of national concern.
- In the theatre of Parliament, where reputations and careers are made, specific and decisive action is the currency of choice. The culture of “something must be done” is firmly embedded.
- The interests of Number 10 and the Treasury and the number of ministerial and special adviser posts in the government build in a bias to action that can result in a plethora of subsidiary initiatives alongside flagship programmes of reform.

But there are deeper currents at work here in our politics that shape the approach to public services, the first a form of cognitive dissonance and one collectively consumed. Parliamentarians and the media know well what a messy and imperfect world we inhabit. But they ask the population to join them in a virtual universe in which government is all-powerful. In this steamy environment, policy distinctions are played up in the name of “differentiation”. Faux demands for certainty are made and ministers asked to provide “guarantees” and adopt other absolute positions almost, it seems, in order that “U-turns” can then be better derided.

These pressures are likely to attend governments evermore. The paradigm of New Public Management provides, however, a very significant framing device for such political practices – one of Manichean struggle. We have seen successive prime ministers grasp the sword of William Beveridge to confront their five modern giants.

**Bureaucracy:** services are held to be ensnared in red tape, overpopulated with managers and presenting an impersonal face to the public.
**Vested interests:** occupational groups defend their own corners and cannot be trusted to be objective in their use of evidence or sufficiently rigorous in self-regulation.

**Fatalism:** let no-one say this cannot be done – all is a matter of will, know-how and people of goodwill coming together.

**Old soldiering:** the battles of the past are behind us – this is a new world, look at these glittering examples.

**Political correctness:** let’s call a spade a spade and not be afraid of upsetting the tender-hearted.

This sword-in-hand leadership model is an important point of reference in government. It legitimises command and control regimes. It also seeks out its own in public services where iconoclastic and often controlling leaders are lionised. These are inimical messages and role models in building a spirit of common endeavour.

And thus, although its death has oft been foretold, all this feels very much like a continuing strain of New Public Management.
Part II: Moving forward

UNDERSTANDING WHAT WE SEE

This strong line of continuity should not, however, cast us into a paradigmatic night. Eau-de-nil arguments are heard to suggest either we are at an “end of history” moment or that no meaningful progression can be observed over thirty years of reform. Practice belies both propositions, yet there is a particular stasis to the debate. All manner of persuasive and grounded critiques exist with practical intent and import. They move well ahead the protestations of “old localism”, command much professional interest and some of their approach’s are licensed and understood in government. Public services in Scotland are cutting a new path and there is much exciting practice on the ground across the UK. But these formulations remain at the margins of political discourse, strategy formation and decision-making in the wider UK.

Paradigms are, however, reflexive – they change reality and not always in the way they intend. This plurality creates its own motive force. And public services themselves are always moving onto new terrain. Shifting patterns of demography, in the labour market and in economic geography, new technologies and sensibilities in society – all push us forward into different spaces with new possibilities.

How then could the tenuous links between established practice and new possibility be strengthened and the gaps in mutual understanding bridged? In proposing alternatives, the tendency here has been to reach upwards – to look to broad conceptual sweeps and new philosophies to take arms against the hideous present.

The intention here is different: it is to take a cue from ethnography and look closely at what actually happens in government and on the ground. This is not to succumb to such particularity that dialogue and learning are impossible. The work of John Law is particularly important in squaring this circle. The task is to understand paradigms as ordering devices with their fractured relation to different versions of reality and to be able to bring this wider knowledge into a practical, operational frame – into, in Laws’ words, “a freshly-negotiated order”.

Experience is valuable here. The last thirty years have provided an unparalleled insight into the way the government goes about its business and has its effects. There are perhaps five marker buoys drawn from that experience to guide thinking about its renewal.

A PARADIGM IN ACTION

A compound
A paradigm is an ordering device to enable abstraction from the messy and contradictory course of reality. It is itself dynamic and variegated, encompassing not only the government’s professed theory but also its enactment through a range of players at the centre and in and around departments and agencies.

A purposeful narrative
A paradigm tells a story. It casts heroes and villains and offers a view of the future. Its version of reality is designed to show that the government’s concerns and prescriptions are well founded, rational and deserving of support.

Paradigms have, however, to offer more than storytelling. They prove their mettle by providing clues to the solution of problems. A paradigm that loses this capacity becomes mere dogma.

Action and posture
Paradigms are traditionally conceived and defined in terms of actions – the measures they prompt – to create new structures and business models, and to manage performance.

There is a need to pay equal attention to matters of posture – the government’s tone of voice, points of reference, symbolism and alignments.

Questions of engagement, process and transition matter too. Much is revealed and much opinion shaped by the way things are done.

Reciprocity
A paradigm has to be understood not only in its own terms but also through the impacts it engenders in public services. Its capacity to learn in a symbiotic way from its own experience and practice and from that of others, including those in non-governmental spaces, is likely to be a key factor in ensuring the continued development of quality services.

Motive force
A core question is to ask how the paradigm intends that improvement will be sustained, in steady state and in transition. How are the downside risks of this choice assessed and mitigated and the full force of its potential realised?

Absence
We should really start to worry when the government expresses its policy rationale in public services in a number of broad phrases. As Keynes warned us, these are the moments when, masquerading as common sense, old ideas exert their grip unseen. It is important for accountability and progress that the government’s approach is rendered transparent and subject to engagement.

Pluralism
We should see the paradigm not as the singular creature and property of government but as a space in which different perspectives – different perceptions of reality, indeed – come together to secure shared goals. Tensions will abound and resolutions will be required, but this form of pluralism is a sign of strength and confidence in government not weakness.
SHAPING THE FUTURE

What, then, are the engines of necessary progress?

The first lies in the paradigm’s own emphases and occlusions. These have their roots in the inevitable hubris of government, the partiality of its world view and the nature of contemporary politics. All can serve to distort, obscure and distract. Clearing this fog and developing an open dialogue will create lasting assets.

The second rests in relative autonomy. Government does huge things. But it is by no means the only player – technology and professional practice develop; institutions and networks in the field have a life and associations of their own; and these factors interact to create new forms of practice and thinking. Governments, in their drive for universalism and a totalising narrative, continually sow the seeds of this new order by licensing and incorporating new and well-regarded methods. The restlessness and distractibility of government that can be so frustrating and debilitating elsewhere can here be an asset.

To harder-edged reformers, this encouragement towards self-awareness and renewal will reek of soggy compromise, as if the proposition were that government should become some kind of New Age lion ready to lie down with the lamb. The point here is that it must have a clear, rigorous and cold-eyed account of its own strengths and weaknesses. And then display the characteristics of an intelligent system – learning from experience, avoiding stereotypes, thinking flexibly and setting high expectations. It can then do that at which politicians excel – being ambitious, creating alliances, maximising zones of cooperation and containing areas of necessary conflict. With this end in view, government will find much of the scope for that newly-negotiated order already lying on the ground.

PRACTICE

The foundations of reconstruction lie properly in practice – an understanding of the nature of the transaction at the heart of effective public services. Here a fundamental shift is taking place. More and more, best practice across a range of public services is conceived on a relational plane in terms of enactments that are, in the jargon, co-produced.

Co-production is the shorthand for the co-creation of value in public services. It brings together three important ideas, each familiar in its own right.

The first is the spark that can fly across the space between the practitioner and the individual seeking their help. This is the universe of the teacher who inspires a lifelong love of learning, or the police officer whose intervention sets an individual onto a better path in life. These qualities and impacts lie above and beyond the simple provision of a service. They rest on the creation of a relationship between the practitioner and the individual characterised by mutual respect, belief in the potential to effect progress, and determination to overcome obstacles. Louise Casey calls this “a form of love”. Normann refers to this as ‘the moment of truth’ in public services delivery.

The second aspect comes from the individual – the knowledge, skills and resources they bring to be table which, for lasting impact, need to be mobilised, nurtured and extended. These processes are set within a framework of rights and responsibilities of the citizen, public service practitioners and the state – for example in the period of compulsory education, in different forms of incarceration or in a clinical environment. But whatever the context and however desperate the situation, mobilising the potential of the citizen is seen as the route over time to a positive outcome.

Third, there is an active mutuality to this task. Practitioner and citizen each bring to the relationship their position, resources, constraints, knowledge and awareness. The enactment of quality public services brings their energies together in a creative process. It is not an off-the-shelf, me-to-you transaction requiring little or nothing from the citizen.

Words matter here. It is a matter of citizenship. The notions of client, service user and customer have their value, but they tell an incomplete story. They do not engage the whole person. Nor do they point in the direction of quality and sustainability in tackling reoffending, in public health challenges and in enabling older people to lead healthy and fulfilling lives.

There is a category shift involved here. The focus moves onto citizens as rounded human beings with rights, responsibilities, needs and aspirations. Dignity, compassion, optimism, self-belief and resilience become central to the mission of modern public services, rather than desirable correlates of successful public service as currently measured.

A relational frame of this kind has important ontological implications for public services. It brings them together as an entity committed, as Dworkin would have it, to “building personal autonomy” – enabling people to become, and remain, the authors of their own lives.

The core proposition here is that the governmental paradigm should embrace and build upwards from this human interaction between citizen and practitioner, in all its density and particularity, to drive a moment of renewal.

Bringing co-production to the heart of public service improvement has significant implications. In many communities de facto co-production is taken for granted and the capacity to engage is widely distributed. In other communities, positive action is required to nurture the social capital on which co-production relies. As Julia Unwin puts it, kindness, generosity, the support elsewhere provided by families and neighbours, a sense of affinity, of belonging, liveability, happiness and love become the stuff of public services. The assessment and nurture of the infrastructure necessary to enable disadvantaged communities and individuals to participate in public services in this way become a strategic priority.
Co-production is not easy. It does not envisage a migration to the sunlit uplands of public services where citizens show unswerving commitment to all that public servants would wish for them. Relational public services by their nature involve conflicts and asymmetries of culture and ambition. Setbacks are many and a patient, resilient approach is essential.

So what’s new? These propositions are commonplace amongst practitioners and the public policy community, but they remain compartmentalised in governmental thinking – often within narrowly-defined approaches to procurement, to the creation of community assets and towards the responsibility of public bodies themselves to build social capital through their work and in their neighbourhoods. Vested interests and inertia at local and professional level play their part, too, in holding back the development of initiatives such as community prescribing and direct payments. The authority and impetus of government in this field could enable so much more to be achieved. It is an inherently cross-service endeavour. Employment practices, childcare provision, housing quality and levels of social capital formation become central to schooling and health. Government moves away from a silo-based approach in which public bodies are encouraged to focus on narrowly-defined outputs. It looks instead to use every available resource to build the networks of engagement, affiliation and support that will enable individuals to exercise choice and control in their lives.

A DIGITAL FUTURE
Practice is of course dynamic. A major force acting upon it at the present time lies in digitally-enabled developments in communications and the opportunities of Big Data.

The challenge of developing appropriate ethical, legal and commercial frameworks for these developments and the associated means of regulation and governance occupy citizens, corporations and governments across the world. In parallel, there are fundamental implications for the actual practice of co-production in public services.

These technologies expand possibility for the citizen, offering unprecedented access to information and control in the exercise of choice and consent. They give scope for citizens to own, record and share their experience in global networks and open the possibility of collective action.

They enlarge the space of interaction which the citizen shares with public service practitioners, breaking down physical barriers and allowing real-time monitoring and adjustment of treatment regimes.

They require practitioners to adapt their approaches and enable them to deepen and extend their own networks and resources.

In the space behind frontline practitioners, new possibilities are opened up in the management of performance and the orchestration of complex networks. The capacity of system leaders at local and network levels to understand and reshape their relationships and services is significantly enhanced.

As these systems relentlessly produce, store and interrogate data, they will generate new policy options for government at all levels and the capacity to manage performance in an ever finer weave.

Rates of innovation, evaluation and adoption of improved treatments and techniques are likely to continue to increase as new knowledge is created and disseminated.

These processes together move us ever further away from “vending machine government”, in which citizens put in taxes and defined and pre-packed services come out. The centre of gravity moves toward the moment of co-production. How and where government chooses to exercise its leverage in this space and fulfil its duties of accountability and stewardship become open questions.

A LOPSIDED PARADIGM?
The incorporation of co-production poses a challenge to governmental stances towards practitioners and leadership. The current approach is essentially coercive, with much talk of raising the bar, increasing the pressure and holding people to account.

An alternative approach in a new paradigm would be based on deep knowledge of the conditions under which practitioners are most effective in the process of co-production, and of the kinds of leadership and relationships that best enable and sustain that progress.

What does this involve? What would a new paradigm need to embrace?

THE SMELL OF SUCCESS
The task of co-production turns first of all on up-to-date knowledge, with practitioners as active learners reflecting on their own practice with citizens and with colleagues and drawing on external evidence and benchmarks to extend their skills.

These will be the skills particular to their chosen craft, but behind and making sense of the technical competencies is a set of generic capabilities fundamental to the process of co-production – particularly empathy and resilience, and the generosity of spirit and humility essential to effective teamwork.

These attributes become progressively more important as the public service challenge deepens. Together they enable the practitioner to work with the citizen to identify needs and aspirations, to tackle blockages and craft a plan of action. In doing this, they will draw on a wide variety of resources, including those of the family and networks of the individual and those available in the community. Evidence-based processes provide the bedrock, but what is being described here is a form of bricolage – a process in which intuition, improvisation and experimentation are critical.
professional tools. The development of personal, individualised services is thus a creative act, a process of assembly.

These processes of assembly do not take place in a vacuum – the context matters significantly. Tolstoy would recognise the point here: all successful public service environments are alike – a sense of positive energy is apparent the moment you walk in the door. This does not happen by accident. Even the smallest of these entities is a complex environment in which individuals have high degrees of dependency on each other and on the efficacy of the team ethos. The leadership drive is to provide shape, coherence and resilience, to develop and sustain that teamwork and the collective determination to succeed and to manage external relationships in a complex world.

Governmental thinking about public service improvement of course accommodates leadership. Although the high point of systematic investment in national leadership institutions is now behind us, significant programmes continue in the major services. But in ministerial speeches and grey literature, lopsided thinking reasserts itself. A narrow concept of leadership is deployed – at its weakest it is an amalgam of “inspiration”, cod lessons from the private sector and a preference for the iconoclast.

What practitioners need is a clear sense of purpose and a vision for the future. To know that the organisation is focused, organised and resilient, and that its processes are participative and fair. To work in an open, positive and supportive climate within the organisation and with their partners. For the organisation to be proud of its achievements but humble and determined to do better. To embrace the density and particularity of the lives of the people it serves. To accept messiness and complexity. To be determined that fixed attitudes and organisational boundaries will be surmounted.

Leadership for co-production also takes a particular view on motivation. Government focuses on the extrinsic motivation of public servants, particularly in terms of pay and opportunities for career advancement. Within the modern reality of public services, these are important matters of hygiene and there should be concern about any long-term weakening of relative financial reward. Matters of fairness are similarly important, recognising relative contributions and degrees of challenge, and providing reasonable opportunities for progression. At its core however, it is intrinsic motivation that drives these organisations forward. Public servants are motivated above all by the smell of success – those first signs of progress or a breakthrough with a child, a patient or a persistent offender – and an ingrained reluctance to admit defeat. These matters of professional pride and determination are at the heart of effective service delivery and its development.

We are a long way here from airy and exclusive notions of “public sector values”. But also from Julian LeGrand’s world of “knights and knaves”. The roots of motivation lie in particular material processes and conditions of the service provided. The argument is that a paradigm has to follow the grain of this model of practice and leadership. It requires the rehabilitation of the public service workforce – their removal from the naughty step – a fresh understanding of the nature and importance of leadership and a willingness to invest systematically in its development.

AUTONOMY

The space in which co-production is enacted has changed fundamentally in modern times as a result of the determination of successive government to empower frontline leaders.

This paradigm has, however, never been as single-institution focused as is sometimes alleged. Collaboratives of different forms were a well-developed characteristic of improvement under Prime Ministers Blair and Brown, interwoven and integrated with existing structures. These trends have been accelerated through the long-running (and inelegantly named) process of “disintermediarisation”, which in education has seen the role of the local authority progressively diminished. In the wake of successive reorganisations, local health economies have developed a wide range of network forms which weave in and across the formal requirements and relationships defined by government. The Dudley health economy has sponsored the development of digitally-enabled tools to manage the necessary interdisciplinary and intra-organisational complexity of local care pathways. UCL Partners brings together over 40 academic and NHS bodies to translate cutting-edge research and innovation into measurable health and wealth gains for patients and populations in London, across the rest of the UK and globally.

In these complex environments, local leaders face competing pressures in reconciling their individual objectives with the common good, and in managing the tension between competition and collaboration. But the emergence of these aggregates, along with developments of think-tanks and trusts of all kinds, and the extension of higher education, have created a much wider hinterland of public service in which leaders move and develop relationships. Their potential to create new knowledge, to develop innovative forms and to influence policy has never been higher. These affordances are now being fused with those of devolution.
**DEVOLUTION**

The story of devolution in the UK to 2010 was essentially one of halfhearted government – measures undertaken without feel or enthusiasm, to satisfy a slice of party opinion. But once enacted, these measures tend to gain their own momentum and the process has been dramatically accelerated in recent years. We have seen new settlements for Scotland and Wales, London using its powers and critical mass to consolidate its position as one of the world’s leading cities, and latterly the drive for localism and for enhanced devolution via City Deals.

Here again, government is not writing on a blank slate. Through a period of persistent attrition of powers and budgets, local government has retained a core intermediary and organising force. Its role in social care and children’s services has kept its important seat at the table in both strategic planning and delivery. Its powers in planning and economic development and its asset base make it the natural leader and convener of local interests in the drive for urban renewal and infrastructure development. Its neighbourhood and community safety duties have deepened its relationships with the police and justice system. Through the same period, high-stakes performance regimes in local government and requirements on procurement and value for money have driven greater focus and an emphasis on capability and reputation. In these ways, the critical mass of local government as a key partner has been retained. Working with education and health bodies, the police and the community and voluntary sector, forms of local leadership have been sustained and extended in local areas.

The experience of Scotland, too, is an important marker for the devolution project. The Scottish government is pursuing an inclusive growth strategy through a broadly-based outcomes framework and has embraced a suite of practices in public service improvement around prevention and an asset-based approach. A structured approach to improvement has been brought to scale and international recognition in NHS Scotland’s Patient Safety programme and latterly in a Scotland-wide Early Years Collaborative. A thriving Co-Production network animates community and voluntary sector practice in these spaces.

Those working in devolved contexts and local aggregates seek an intelligent, complementary and mutually respectful relationship with the national state. They recognise the challenge of their devolved power is to bring these formidable energies to bear on the major public services challenges, particularly in narrowing equity gaps. They know, too, that this will require new ways to empower citizens and communities, thus enabling new forms of co-production to be developed outside the sphere of traditionally defined services.

Scotland is again providing a useful laboratory. Although the government relies on orthodox performance management in the NHS, the institutional framework in Scotland is largely “unreformed”: market structures are absent; markedly fewer degrees of autonomy are accorded to frontline service leaders; and the new Cities agenda has yet to gather pace. In an interesting recent bridge across the two paradigms, however, the recent initiative on educational standards pays explicit homage to the data-driven and determined approach of the London Challenge.

Equity gaps and citizen empowerment will be central in the devolution of public health responsibilities in England and in the new forms emerging on health and social care across the UK. These developments are firmly now on the mainline of public services improvement and reform, with Manchester being invited “to develop a business plan for the integration of health and social care … making best use of existing budgets and including specific targets for reducing pressure on A&E and avoiding hospital admissions”.

This work also produces a further strategic challenges in commissioning. As responsibility for skills and preparation for work is devolved to local areas, Ewart Keep has drawn attention to the need for decentred commissioning models to draw in a wider range of employers and more community-based and locally accountable service providers. These imperatives are equally strong in public health and in social care. The development of community activities and general enrichment of the lives of disadvantaged individuals, families and communities will require particular strategies of this decentred commissioning through a variegated provider base.

There is real potential here. Such has been the energy and political capital invested in devolution, both nationally and in localities, that it is perhaps the most likely site of renewal and growth in the governmental paradigm of public services improvement and reform.

**PARADIGM POINTS**

In paradigmatic terms, under these devolutionary umbrellas, processes of assembly are being undertaken. In urban communities such as Leeds and Haringey we see an admixture of compliance with national regimes and the optimisation of their possibilities and innovation and inspiration from their own workforce and partners contributing to shape the pattern of local services. This is not delivered in kit-form by central government. It is assembly – creating new forms, new knowledge, new energy and new demands. The forms of association underpinning this work tend to be fluid and networked rather than defined by administrative geographies, and they rely as much on soft skills as formally ascribed powers. In furthering devolutionary projects, the nation state itself will need to marry the necessary disciplines of financial accountability and formal structures of engagement with these more fluid and enquiring relationships where learning is valued and credit is shared.

For the UK government this new landscape poses some familiar challenges in a sharpened form. There are:

- demands for increased agency of citizens in these complex and multi-tiered arrangements, extending their scope to hold local
Tackling the impacts of inequality is in many ways the acid test for public services improvement and reform. And particularly so in the UK at present, as inequality is presenting itself in new ways and has gained fresh significance in public debate.

In the postwar period, these debates rested on a tripartite conception of class with much interest in the permeability of the boundary between the working and middle classes, and in the anatomy of Britain’s ruling elite.

Fifty years on, the dynamics of our economy and society have been transformed and inequality expresses itself in manifestly different ways. Britain has become an outlier on inequality in the OECD. Income inequalities have been sharpened by the financial crisis and recession and are underscored by large and growing differentials in wealth. The driver has been the response of business, civil society and government to the challenges of globalisation. These practices, sentiments and permissions have played out in a reshaping of the labour market and in the creation of increasingly segregated communities and patterns of life and hence public service populations.

In late 2015, Mike Savage and his team offered a fresh conceptualisation of class in the UK, based not on income distribution and occupation but on economic, cultural and social capital and its distribution in generational and in spatial terms, with the possession and accumulation of housing wealth as a key vector.

In assessing social impact, Savage looks beyond the “super rich” – those of high net worth living increasingly separate and globally-interconnected lives – to encompass the next 5% in the distribution. In terms of income, assets, cultural capital and social networks, these “ordinarily wealthy” folk are an exclusive group. Through their ability to acquire and exploit particular forms of cultural capital, they and their offspring scale the meritocratic heights of the education system and occupational ladders. Michael Gove’s curriculum reforms were articulated in just these terms – to ensure that all children have the opportunity to engage in the necessary forms of abstract and disciplined thinking lest they become the de facto property of the advantaged. The patterns of residence and social engagement of the “ordinarily wealthy” are increasingly concentrated, and they are adept at protecting the character of their chosen social forms and spaces through activist engagement in governance structures and civil society.

Savage finds that relative social mobility has been significantly impacted by these social practices. These attributes and behaviours are not restricted to this fraction of the population but emulated by those with access to similar resources in variable measure in the intermediate social groups. Together these strategies – a form of capital accumulation in their own right – have created an ever more fiercely meritocratic society in which every advantage and opportunity is taken to advance personal and family interests. Those who start from the lower rungs of the ladder have further to climb and now face stiffer opposition en route.

At the other end of Savage’s spectrum are the 15% of the population “working in precariously short-term jobs and without recourse to stable occupational identities or careers, social protection or relevant protective regulation”. The group...
includes many migrants but is substantially composed of more indigenous and “local” groups. These are people with incomes of just a few thousand pounds a year and little in the way of savings or wealth. Rejecting the concepts of “the underclass” and notions of “worklessness”, Savage shows these individuals as being integral to the labour market, albeit in low-wage and transient positions.

The levels of stress that accompany these forms of life, often in pressurised housing environments and with legacies of poor health, are well understood. The challenges of providing a stable environment to bring up children and support their progress in school are similarly clear. Savage, however, draws particular attention to the cultural stigma attaching to this group and the ways this is used and represented elsewhere in society by more favoured groups seeking to differentiate their own position and ease their own anxieties of identity.

It is thus clear that, alongside questions of social mobility, the condition and social representation of the “precariat” – Savage’s preferred term – is now a defining parameter of the public service challenges in the UK. A changing social temper is evident. Debates about welfare have brought into prominence the proportion of the welfare bill going to support those in low-wage employment. Campaigns around the living wage have given a new sharpness to the discussion about zero-hours contracts and the fluctuation and insecurity of employment on these bottom rungs of the labour market. The impact of these employment pressures translates directly through to the quality of public services. Providers following market norms in social care have tended to press down on wages, conditions and models of service delivery, prompting complaint about impossibly short home visits and high levels of staff turnover which inhibit the development of both user trust and workforce skills.

How does the dominant paradigm of public service improvement and reform in the UK compute today’s issues of inequality? We have here to address both practices and posture – the ideological contexts in which they are presented.

There are a number of established practices: in education, support for mother and child in the perinatal period, parental leave, childcare and early years provision, additional funding and support at school, and a range of enrichment programmes outwith the mainstream curriculum. There is similarly a suite of interventions designed to remove barriers and ease access for young people and adults, particularly into higher education and latterly into high-status professions.

Governments have to make decisions about the nature, scale and range of these practices. The trade-offs they make will express their priorities and sense of limitations. The pupil premium thus sits alongside the reform of the welfare system. The framework within which the schools adjudicator regulates the actions of school governors reflects a balance being struck between competing interests in securing admission to popular schools.

There is a sense of inevitability here. In an open society, government measures can never be sufficient to counteract the impact of markets in their entirety. But in the modern age, facing up to the reality of inequality is uncomfortable. Governments are often happy to be cast as all-powerful, but in tackling the worst estates – a preoccupation of public policy for many decades – it is clear that our economy does not produce enough of the right kinds of jobs to enable, in the face of stiffening competition, more than a handful of their young to progress onto highly-paid employment. Nor does the temper of the times and sentiment of markets allow the state sufficient resources to tackle the degradation of the environment and repair the social and physical infrastructure of these communities in other than a piecemeal fashion. The same set of pressures holds back progress on affordable housing.

The point for us here is that these forces impact directly on the resilience and effectiveness of public services. As the housing market becomes more and more efficient at sorting neighbourhoods by social class and ethnicity, it creates public service populations with more narrowly-defined and homogeneous characteristics. In the moment of service delivery, providers serving disadvantaged spatial or client communities experience the pressures of their population groups. These working environments are thus more demanding, typically lack prestige and professional kudos and afford fewer career opportunities. Thus is inequality produced and reproduced in public service organisations just as it is among the populations it serves.

Practice measures – salary premia, housing support, incentives and initiatives to signal the importance and to give prestige to this work – are of structural importance to these services and institutions, as necessary counterweights to the operation of markets.

But posture matters, too. A signal achievement of the modern period has been to eradicate the determinism that used to invade practitioner discourse. The cry of “what do you expect from children like these?” was heard all too often in the days of postwar consensus, serving as an excuse for poor standards and a lack of challenge.

There are happily many examples, particularly in education, where individual institutions and programmes of improvement in disadvantaged areas have shown that, with the right strategy and sustained commitment, overall levels of attainment can rise and equity gaps fall.

The risk here lies in extension. The paradigm shades easily from these successes into a voluntarist presentation, with the implicit suggestion that the impacts of poverty and disadvantage are primarily a matter of application, attitude and choice. This voluntarism then finds its voice in the assessment of public services. Here the implication is that the systemic, population-wide effects of poverty can be wholly negated by effective public services. This leads onto the idea that a fundamental cause of inequality lies in poor public services. With higher aspirations
and standards everywhere – the argument runs – all this inequality would be behind us.

This is an example of paradigmatic occlusion – the shrouding of uncomfortable realities in service of the dominant ideology. Whilst here is no doubt that public service is far better served by this voluntaristic orientation than it is by determinism, it presents a paradox. Voluntarism is an essential spur to high ambition and purposeful action. But any occlusion of the plain facts of the production and reproduction of inequalities in public services does no service to their remediation.

The task for public service organisations and networks is shaped by both this ideological frame and the material reality of inequality. The challenge for an intelligent revision of the paradigm of public service improvement and reform is twofold:

- to acknowledge these realities and particularly to be open about cause and effect;
- to give proper recognition to the leadership and practitioner challenges inherent in serving areas of disadvantage.
Part III: Towards a common endeavour

The approach to public services improvement taken here does not proceed from philosophy or positions of value but from practice – the real conditions on the ground in which public services can enable citizens to become, and remain, in charge of their own lives. It has cited co-production, assembly and digital enablement as core activities in both public services practice and in the leadership of organisations and networks. It has suggested that the relative autonomy of frontline services, considerably strengthened in the modern period, has created a wide hinterland of collaboration, diversity and experience on which new formulations can draw. It has argued that the persistence of vibrant local forms of association, both organically and through local government, provides a rich soil for the coming together of these aggregates with the strong forces of devolution unleashed by the UK government.

The tasks now are to understand:
- where this leaves us in the search for self-improving systems;
- he forms of political practice and narrative congruent with this emergent paradigm.

SELF-IMPROVING SYSTEMS

We have to date been offered two visions of a self-improving system in public services.

The first relied on the forces of professionalism and sensitivity to local conditions. This construction satisfied professional constituencies and local interests but proved insufficient to prevent norm-referencing, inertia and wide variations in patterns of provision and standards. In addition, it did not provide a means for national government to give practical expression to its ambitions and concerns for public services.

The second emerged grew up as government, having taken full responsibility for public services, found that command-and-control approaches driven by expanding resource envelopes were unsustainable, and that vigorous performance management and accountability regimes could stifle professionalism and narrow the horizons of service providers. It placed thereby increasing faith in markets, believing that in the long run and with appropriate regulation they would best enable customer needs to be satisfied as providers responded to market imperatives, and that within such frameworks they would be able to protect the rights of communities and the disadvantaged.

Governments have concluded in parallel that a significantly wider roll-out of autonomous organisational forms and appropriate incentives would be required to give full effect to this more market-driven approach. In the interim the state would need to keep public services on their toes through vigorous performance management and accountability regimes.

Hence the current stasis. The risk here lies in attributing singular characteristics to complex phenomena. Whilst quasi-market models can introduce dynamism and promote an efficient allocation of resources, there are downsides. In a society that gives high degrees of freedom to citizens, where the economy and labour market generate significant inequalities of income and wealth, and where government provides autonomy for public service providers in regimes of high-stakes accountability, the affordances of the quasi-market model include:
- rent-seeking behaviours
- isolation and fragmentation among providers
- weak intra-organisational learning
- uneven development
- a dissipation of focus on the most disadvantaged
- a narrow institutional focus at odds with network development and wider community engagement.

Let us imagine for a moment that government acknowledged this position and decided to shift its posture and rebalance the incentives for providers. It would promote greater collaboration, a longer-term and richer view of service quality and institutional performance, and place stronger emphasis on building capability and a sense of common endeavour. In these circumstances, long advocated by many, could governments and the population at large once more rely on professionalism and local pride to ensure that priority targets were secured and costs contained in all units of service provision?

The answer is probably more than hitherto. Devolution to the frontline and improvements in professional capability and information systems make this more technically feasible. A stronger sense of common purpose would in parallel see the chosen priorities have greater moral force and traction.

There is no doubt, however, that performance monitoring and the capacity for informed support will continue to be required. These needs will be felt at institutional, aggregate, citywide and national level to develop practice, to assure the public, to respond to events and to support providers working with the most disadvantaged populations.

Much of this feels to be the spirit of Simon Stevens’ concept of “creative discomfort”. These complex systems, however rebalanced, require grit in the oyster. The challenge is to enable it to act as a spur to sustained improvement and lasting gains in capability. If the discomfort is not creative, it simply creates noise. It adds to the cacophony that drowns out intelligent challenge in the system and creates a bunker mentality in which cynicism and determinism flourish. Here again the paradigm runs the risk of obstructing its own objects.

HOW THIS MIGHT BE DONE DIFFERENTLY - TOWARD A PERFORMANCE PARTNERSHIP

There are perhaps five posture tests to be applied to construct a new partnership-based approach:
- transparency – the catalytic discomfort is set within a balanced account of the drivers and remediations of inequality, and of the choices the government is making;
NEW POLITICAL PRACTICE
The postwar history of public services improvement and reform shows clearly moments and periods where only the government’s vision, determination, persistence and craft proved capable of moving services forward. Across generations, particular ministers have kept close to practice and nurtured important developments in method even where these were at a tangent to the government’s programme. Andrew Adonis’s record shows clearly how politicians can, with profit, resist official demands for neatness and early closure. His mantra was one of establishing momentum – the system architecture and legacy issues could follow on. Politicians are better adapted to endure conflict and difficult relations over an extended period in the interests of the end point. They encourage officials to learn from diversity and noise as the sound of progress. David Miliband understood school improvement and made the imaginative connection between enduring workforce issues in education and the school standards agenda, and in doing so created an entirely new climate of relations with the trade unions. Matt Hancock today speaks of “radical incrementalism” expressed through cultures of continuous improvement, an open and agile environment and a collaborative stance in and across government and public services.

What is lacking here is a clear and confident account of government’s own role both in the politics of public services and in their leadership through departments and agencies, and one that would accord a valid and progressive role to other players. It is possible to articulate the balancing elements in role in all sorts of formal ways. Its spirit is illustrated here in a series of statements of posture. Imagine a political narrative which foregrounds the citizen and co-production is one in which:

- asset-based – the narrative respects the achievements and potential of the practitioners;
- co-production – practitioners are offered a place in shaping their own future and the system of which they form a part;
- resonance with practice – the system of performance management privileges the quality of their engagement with citizens in the moment of service delivery and uses agreed broad measures of effectiveness;
- assembly – the system recognises the necessity for service leaders in their aggregates to create their own space and to enjoy an intelligent dialogue with the state.

Citizen agency is fostered through all possible means. Choice, voice and scope for exit remain fundamental enablers. They are set, however, within an asset-based approach which respects and nurtures citizens’ resources and hinterland and does not shrink from defining expectations, boundaries and responsibilities.

A parallel approach is taken towards practitioners. Their skills, confidence and morale are first-order priorities. There is strong recognition of the importance of leadership at all levels to ensure focus in a messy and complex world, and to create the relationships essential to effective co-production.

Recruitment, job quality, engagement, talent management and succession planning become major preoccupations throughout the system to ensure public services attract retain and develop staff of the highest quality.

The density, vibrancy and engagement of community and voluntary organisations is a matter of priority. These organisations provide vital resources and resilience to processes of co-production, particularly in areas of concentrated disadvantage.

And it takes a village to educate a child. Our public service goals can only be realised by all sectors of society accepting their responsibility and playing their part.

We act swiftly on service failures but recognise their causes are likely to be deeply rooted and not solely the result of institutional shortcomings. Everyone must thus learn lessons. We are concerned not to be in the habit of legislating from worst cases.

You can’t inspect quality into a product. Long-term investment in capability is essential.

We refuse to think in stereotypes. Our task in public services is to get organisations and workforces – public, private and voluntary – working together for citizens and the common good.

Planes need pilots. Public services need leaders – alert, well-qualified, resourceful and highly motivated.

Whitehall rarely knows best. Our job is to be ambitious and open to learning from other cultures and administrations. To set priorities, secure the institutional structure and business model, and allocate resources. Then we let people get on with their jobs. Over-engineering in performance management and in legislation is counterproductive.

CONCLUSION
What are the practical implications of this approach? A paradigm which foregrounds the citizen and co-production is one in which:

- Citizen agency is fostered through all possible means. Choice, voice and scope for exit remain fundamental enablers. They are set, however, within an asset-based approach which respects and nurtures citizens’ resources and hinterland and does not shrink from defining expectations, boundaries and responsibilities.
- A parallel approach is taken towards practitioners. Their skills, confidence and morale are first-order priorities. There is strong recognition of the importance of leadership at all levels to ensure focus in a messy and complex world, and to create the relationships essential to effective co-production.
- Recruitment, job quality, engagement, talent management and succession planning become major preoccupations throughout the system to ensure public services attract retain and develop staff of the highest quality.
- The density, vibrancy and engagement of community and voluntary organisations is a matter of priority. These organisations provide vital resources and resilience to processes of co-production, particularly in areas of concentrated disadvantage.

Providers enjoy high degrees of autonomy to create spaces for co-production, to make relationships and to innovate. Their responsibility to their communities and fellow-providers is reflected in their governance and performance management arrangements.
Their performance is evaluated and managed within a systemic context, the parameters and processes of which are defined and themselves evaluated in partnership. The responsible secretary of state is the author and guarantor of these processes.

No a priori view is taken on the efficacy of particular sectors, forms of organisation or business models – the measuring stick is their potential contribution to effective citizenship and co-production. The paradigm sets its face against stereotypes and is instead alert to the affordances of different forms.

Government lays out its strategic approach to public services in a transparent form. This embodies its chosen paradigm and provides the basis for both ongoing strategic management and reporting, and processes through which the government and key players in the system can be held to account for performance and stewardship.

A strategic perspective is maintained on the landscape and processes of improvement and innovation, with particular prominence given to “street-level” practitioner innovation in and across workplaces.

Above all, the texture of relationships in the system feels different. There is plain speaking on performance and prospects but in a spirit of common and unending endeavour.

**FINAL WORD**

This should go to Atul Gawande. His words on “betterment” in medicine have important lessons for the quest of practitioners and politicians alike in public services as a whole.

“Betterment is a perpetual labour. The world is chaotic, disorganised, and vexing, and medicine is nowhere spared that reality. To complicate matters, we in medicine are only human ourselves. We are distractible, weak, and given to our own concerns. Yet to live as a doctor is to live so that one’s life is bound up in others’ and in science and in the messy, complicated connection between the two. The question, then, is not whether one accepts the responsibility. Just by doing the work, one has. The question is, having accepted the responsibility, how one does such work well.”

Peter Housden
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Contact:
Adrian Brown
adrian@centreforpublicimpact.org
centreforpublicimpact.org

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