



Where Next for Progressives? Power and the new state

Summary of the main points from Seminar 3 in ippr's *Where Next for Progressives?* Series

In the third *Where Next for Progressives?* seminar, participants considered New Labour's take on the state and society, where it has left the politics of power, and how progressives should approach these questions in the period ahead.

This note covers the highlights of that discussion. As ever, there was not universal agreement on every point.

New Labour on the state and society

In the general election of 2010, the promise of the Big Society beat the offer of the Big State. The centre-left now finds itself – perversely, as far as it is concerned – beleaguered by the Coalition on the issue of empowerment. This is because New Labour's approach to putting power in the hands of people was largely top-down ('you *will* be empowered') and technocratic (e.g. Local Authority Strategic Empowerment Officers). As a result, citizens, who felt little ownership of this agenda, were not mobilised by it. The Big Conversation never really happened. And ordinary people are no more empowered than they were 13 years ago.

But if new Labour didn't put power in the hands of citizens, whom did it empower? Not local government, that's for sure. 'Double devolution' often bypassed local authorities, giving (sometimes unwanted) responsibility direct to communities. Local elections were seen as relevant only in as much as they related to national ones. Councils were discounted, not treated as important democratic institutions in their own right.

The honest answer is that New Labour empowered public service managers: the professional practitioners of the new management culture. This class was feted, and remunerated handsomely. This in turn contributed in the public sector to a cult of heroic leadership, e.g. the superhead who turns around the failing school, which both reflected the celebrity culture of the day and paid scant regard to the lived experience of those at the whim of these state-employed heroes.

All of this was, in the end, about risk aversion. Genuine devolution of power to the local level means some things will go wrong. And it may be that in our highly centralised political culture it will still be the Minister who gets the blame. But '100% risk-free' is a false prospectus. And underestimating and distrusting the public is never going to be a recipe for an engaged or empowered citizenry.

The politics of power

In one sense, the market is, fundamentally, a decentralising instrument: Thatcher's sale of council houses transferred assets from the state to the individual. But, in the long run, it undermined communities and served big business as right-to-buyers were in turn bought out by multinational property developers. In fact, genuine empowerment is a collective exercise, antithetical to the atomising, consumerist models of choice and contestability which saw New Labour seek to mimic the market in public services.

Now, the Coalition, having paid attention in opposition to what has been happening in the world around them, is crowdsourcing via Facebook for ideas of how to cut the nation's deficit and asking anyone and everyone to suggest the laws they would want to see repealed. It may be easier to let go of power at the start, and we may yet find that no one has time for the Big Society, but there is no denying that the Coalition is laying claim at least to the rhetoric of coproduction.

A progressive agenda

A progressive response to where we find ourselves might focus on the spaces in between society and the state: on relationships, docking points and networks. And it might do more to acknowledge that these spaces are located in places, with their own traditions and institutions, which themselves both shape and define. Cultivation of a sense of place, of communities of geography as well as of interest or identity, is politically fertile ground. It was too often rejected, even feared, by New Labour: Gordon Brown vetoed from No 10 government funding for St George's Day celebrations. In particular, the notion of 'total places' has a lot going for it, with local government acting as convenor, holding the ring.

Local government needs to be more artful, responsive, permeable; not leaden and managerial as it has been. It needs to be valued for its democratic legitimacy and its grassroots innovation. And opposition parties need to nurture it now, rather than simply ask how they should 'do' localism when in power.

We also need to get the basic mechanics of formal participation right. Some people do not know how to vote, never mind run a cooperative. A sense of agency requires both knowledge and confidence: 'who do I talk to?' and 'what difference would it make?'

But it is in the fusion of these two, the organic and the mechanistic, the relational and the transactional, that a rich progressive future lies. Community development workers may sometimes have been mad, but they were human and real. Town Hall committees may be dull, but they are organised and they have a mandate. By fusing the two approaches, reconciling community campaign and party machine, progressives will be in a better position to argue for their values in every locality, where, in the end, all such battles are fought.

Moving forward, progressives need a theory of power that is distributed, coordinated and legitimate; a model of change that is owned as much by people as by politicians; and a principled commitment to subsidiarity, rather than an electorally unappealing ideological attachment to a state of a certain size.