



Understanding Cities

Government and Privatisation

Jenny Robinson

In the studio with me today are Alan Cochrane and Michael Keith of Goldsmith's College, University of London, and former leader of Tower Hamlets local council. If I can start with you, Alan, perhaps you could tell us a little bit about the distinction between governments to governance and why we've seen a shift from forms of government to something that we're talking about now as governance?

Alan Cochrane

I think the notion of government, particularly when applied to the running of cities is quite a fixed notion; it's a notion which assumes fairly straightforward boundaries, fairly straightforward responsibilities being given to institutions which are identified normally in law but not always in a clear-cut legal way. But nevertheless key point being that government implies an institution which runs things, which does things in a sense from the top down normally. If you look at old text books of local government in Britain they very much emphasise a whole range of responsibilities which are organised through legal requirements, you have legal responsibilities to do this, legal responsibilities to do that, and you have departments which are structured around them. To some extent that's still true, but I think the important point is that it's increasingly been recognised that this isn't a very accurate description of what actually happens in the running of cities. One of the things that's become very clear is that actually there are a whole range of different institutions, a whole range of interests, a whole range of people, of groups, quite a fragmented set of relationships within cities, and it has to be understood that the way in which cities are run, the way in which cities organise themselves, reflects that fragmentation, and the task of governance, unlike the task of government, the task of governance is in some way to bring those different fragments together, to think of ways of enabling the fragments to work together, to exist together, to work side by side. It's about running things in ways which don't imply something that's topped down, that suggests that there is a need for partnership, for negotiation, for argument, and so on.

Jenny

So do you see this shift as being something that has been a response to the character of the city itself?

Alan

I think so although it's important to say that the notion of government is one that was used in describing the way that cities are run for quite a long time. I think it's partly about a recognition that cities are more complex phenomena than used to be imagined, certainly the writers and political scientists, it's a recognition of the fluidity, it's a recognition of the way in which social relations spread out across space, the way in which cities actually bring together a whole set of different people with different experiences, so there's a sense in which it's probably about changes that have taken place, that some of these things have probably happened, particularly in the context of globalisation in the mid-20th century and beyond but it's also a recognition, if you like, that some of the writing or some of the ways in which cities were written about, and the running of cities was written about, even in the past, was a bit inaccurate and didn't capture the richness of the relationships which existed.

Jenny

Michael, I wonder if you'd like to comment on what you think of this shift from government to governance – do you think that it's been a positive move in terms of managing cities?

Michael Cochrane

Well I think there's a degree of ambivalence here – as Alan was just saying that through time the actual forms of government and responsibilities of government have changed substantially, slowly but substantially, because if you look back to the last century, particularly in European and catalyst countries structures of government tend to reflect social concerns with particular kinds of problems that are going on in cities, so in the 19th century its views of health, its views of sanitation are at the fore, and you have structures of local government that tend to reflect those concerns. As that changes through the 20th century other concerns come more to the fore, other structures emerge so that in the last 25-30 years you get a governmental concern with the problem of families, the problems of certain social concerns that produces social services departments across the country, and so the structures change. And I think what we're seeing at the moment is both a change in concerns and a change in the way in which the responsibilities for those concerns are mirrored in the structures of government. I think you're seeing changes in concerns that reflect the increasing globalisation of cities so that, for example as refugees become an issue politically/nationally, they also become a concern at local government, and local government in the British case is given the responsibility for dealing with refugees, so it means that specific structures emerge in relation to that. But also I think there's a lowering of responsibilities in the shift from government to governance because whereas in a sense in the period from the 19th century onwards what tended to emerge were structures with fairly discreet, or at least rhetorically discreet powers there's increasingly a sense in which the institutions of government are being told that they share responsibilities so that, for example in terms of the criminal justice system, whereas the police were in the past fairly autonomous from other structures of government, they will increasingly sit down in partnership with local government, with local authorities, and I think this is potentially beneficial in the sense that if agencies that are in the public sector are working together and working together effectively, you might get more from less, and so there is a one sense in which that kind of working might be laudable. But also that displacement of responsibility is potentially problematic if you're actually looking for who is responsible for failing to conduct a particular criminal enquiry and you're told that it's somewhere between the housing department, and the police service, and the Crown Prosecution Service, then your right to redress as a citizen of a particular city becomes more complex. If you're a victim of racial harassment in one of British cities today you don't really want to be told that the responsibility for sorting out your problems is shared between four or five agencies, you want to go to one place and have that problem addressed, and so that potential displacement of responsibility I think is slightly problematic.