



Understanding Cities

Divergent Agendas

Jenny

So we have both a sense in which attempts to negotiate shared agendas provoke conflicts and differences, and sometimes even taking things through law courts or lawsuits and really big battles that are fought over defining these agendas; on the other hand we kind simply have a pessimistic view of those kinds of relationships that we also can see them as more fluid, opening up more opportunities for perhaps a more democratic form of governance, and could I perhaps ask you as a final sort of question to comment on whether you think that in the shifts to governance we're losing something in terms of conventional forms of democratic accountability, or whether you think that in opening up government to different agencies, and different individuals and associations, we have more of a sort of possibility for democratic accountability?

Michael

I think there are gains and losses. I think there is a real danger that there is a particular romantic nostalgia about some hidden time which local government structures have worked, and I think it is very difficult in any political sense to defend in the British example a local government structure where there are appallingly poor turnouts so that the mandate for the legitimacy of the government structures of themselves are highly questionable frankly, and the degree to which local authorities in the British case, in British cities, have related to the local communities is I think, at best, not something that people would want to go to the death on. Having said that, at the same time as people shift responsibilities to these very much more complex partnership-type arrangements, there is a sense in which I think there's a new localism that emerges, again in the British example, but also in examples across Western Europe and North America the same, there's a kind of lowering of expectations of the state, so that if you look at some of the writing around the Third Way in Britain I think that one of the things that you see emerging is a transfer of responsibilities to a localised level, however you see those new structures of governance, which also brings with it a lowering of expectations as to what is deliverable I think, part of the history of the second half of the 20th century in the capitalist nations was a sense in which the state was responsible for progress, that there was a sense in which the state was responsible for economic change, and I think one of the things that is emerging as the kind of highly problematic forms of economic growth become more politically contested is that states are beginning to shed the responsibility for economic change in such a way that increasingly it becomes quite easy for national governments to have local governments that they can turn to their electorate and say well you need to look to a lower level of democratic responsibility, so I think there are quite serious pluses and minuses to the changing agenda in terms of how you define democracy and democratic intervention in that sense.

Alan

I think I broadly agree with what Michael has just said. I think I might be slightly more positive about elected local government of the traditional form, not because I disagree with some of the problems that he identified, but because it does seem to me that there was some sort of inbuilt notion of accountability there, so there was an expectation that you can go and see still to some extent your local councillor and give her or him a really hard time because of something; it's relatively clear to know that you can do that still. There is an understanding that some of the organisations, some of the departments that are associated with local councils have to be relatively open whether, you know, social services departments can't get away with certain things, housing departments can't get away with certain things; it is expected that they will operate in certain ways. Having said that, I wouldn't want to exaggerate that because I know that there are social services departments who've done

dreadful things, there are housing departments that have done dreadful things, that have behaved in quite bureaucratic, centralised, dictatorial, paternalistic, all sorts of bad ways, but I think there is something about the existence of elections which means it has a slightly different take. On the other hand, having said all that, I mean I end up in any case moving very close to what Michael was saying because I do think first of all that the complexity of the new system does make it difficult to see where you can go, who you go to, at which time, so there are difficulties around that. You asked about possibilities and it seems to me that there are, however, some possibilities in the new sets of arrangements which one ought to be trying to develop and one ought to be thinking about more fruitfully, more positively. In other words, it's not just a question of saying we've gone from something which wasn't very good but maybe it was better than what we've got now, maybe it wasn't, but actually to say this is a direction that we're moving in – are there opportunities here, are there things that one can benefit from, are there ways in which we can see different democratic possibilities, the emergence of different sets of relationships which allow us to think in different ways about how we live in cities, and I think there are some signs of that, I think it is possible to say that if we begin to think of ourselves as being part of quite extensive networks, being part of different sorts of groups, not just locally but also nationally and maybe even globally, so we're not just talking about, it seems to me, necessarily the local but we might also be part of much broader, bigger movements, but actually realising that we are part of different structures for different reasons, we're not just men or women, we're not just working class or middle class, we don't just, you know, I don't know, think of voluntary organisations that one might be in, that we're not just parents, we're not just children, we're not just football supporters, we're not just part, and so on, in a range of different interests that we might have, it becomes possible for particular purposes for different reasons to work together to see whether one can actually participate in forms of governance through those organisational networks, thinking of things that we can in some cases do ourselves, and some cases do with other people, in some cases challenge what some of the other institutions are doing, and other cases go along with them and ally with them. I mean one can see in the discussions in some of the things that happened in Sydney, and I'm talking about the role of Mardi Gras in Sydney and that, you know, those sorts of things also need to be thought about as part of politics, as part of governance, as part of change in the way in which we think about how we live our lives, so I think there are possibilities, it's not straightforward, some of the possibilities can be cut down, can be narrowed, and we can fail to grasp that we might be marginalised in a whole range of different ways, but there are possibilities I would argue.

Jenny

Well ending on a note of agreement then, thank you very much both of you for joining me here today.