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Public Participation and Collaborative Governance

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Abstract

This paper draws on the findings of a study within the ESRC's Democracy and Participation Programme. It explores the processes of participation within deliberative forums – such as user panels, youth forums, area based committees – developed as a means of encouraging a more active, participating mode of citizenship and of improving welfare services by making them more responsive to users. Our findings open up a number of issues about constraints on the development of 'collaborative governance'. To understand these constraints, we suggest, there is need to locate participation initiatives in the context of government policy, to explore ways in which such policy is interpreted and enacted by strategic actors in local organisations and to examine the perceptions of members of deliberative forums themselves. Our findings highlight the constraints on the 'political opportunity structures' created by the enhanced policy focus on public participation, and the consequent limits to 'collaborative governance'. We discuss how governance theory and social movement theory can each contribute to the analysis, but also suggest productive points of engagement through which each of these bodies of theory might enrich the other.

Introduction

Beresford (2002) notes two fundamental contradictions in public participation: enhanced political interest, but public dissatisfaction; official priority but very limited achievements and resourcing. In order to make sense of this situation he calls for an enhanced focus on the ideological, political and socio-economic relations of public participation, especially in social policy. This paper contributes to the analysis by exploring how far the increase in public participation initiatives in the UK under New Labour represents a shift towards a more collaborative form of governance.

The current emphasis on public participation can be situated in conceptions of governance that result from the transformation of modern states. There is now an extensive literature on the 'hollowing out' of the nation state and the emergence of multi-level governance (Rhodes, 1997; Pierre and Peters, 2000). Complex social

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issues – such as social exclusion, inequalities in health, community regeneration – elude traditional approaches to governing through hierarchical instruments of control, while growing social differentiation has made the task of governing more difficult. Kooiman (1999, 2000), argues that in such societies no government is capable of determining social development. The role of the state shifts from that of 'governing' through direct forms of control (hierarchical governance), to that of 'governance', in which the state must collaborate with a wide range of actors in networks that cut across the public, private and voluntary sectors, and operate across different levels of decision making. Public administration and social policy literatures variously describe the ways in which governments – in the UK, the USA and across much of Western Europe – have attempted to shift the focus towards various forms of co-production with other agencies and with citizens themselves through partnerships, community involvement and strategies of 'responsibilisation' (Balloch and Taylor, 2001; Barnes and Prior, 2000; Dwyer, 1998; Glendinning, Powell and Rummery, 2002; Rouban, 1999).

In such conditions representative democracy is viewed as insufficient as a means of reconnecting citizens with governing institutions and processes:

> Contrary to the classic form of 'government', contemporary governance is not imprisoned in closed institutions and is not the province of professional politicians. Though rarely defined with precision, it refers to patterns of decision making taking place in a larger set of institutions, with a broader range of actors and processes. One of the ambitions of those who defend this new concept is indeed to enlarge the accepted notion of civic participation beyond the well established and constantly declining procedures of representative democracy. (Magnette, 2003: 144)

There has been considerable interest, among both policy networks and academics, in public participation and deliberative democracy (Burns, Hambleton and Hoggett, 1994; Dryzek, 2000; Elster, 1998; Fishkin, 1991; Lowndes *et al.*, 1998; Stoker, 1996). In part this is viewed as potentially overcoming the decline of interest in party politics, and in part because representative democracy is viewed as too hierarchical, bureaucratic and party bound to be able to deal effectively with questions of identity in a multi-cultural and global/local world. Bang suggests that the current dilemma arises not only because of the decline of formal political participation in mature democracies, but also because:

> democratic states lack governance capacities simply because they are attuned more to coping with abstract problems . . . and conflicts of interests in the democratic regime . . . than to handling concrete policy and identity problems [project politics and politics of presence] (Bang, 2002: 1).

It is precisely in this domain of 'project politics' (how to engage citizens in helping solve *particular* or *local* policy problems), and the 'politics of presence'

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(how to enable citizens to voice their *interests, experiences and identities* in the deliberative process), that deliberative forums – the focus of this paper – is situated.

The research project

The paper draws on a research project titled *Power, Participation and Political Renewal* within the ESRC's Democracy and Participation Programme. The project ran from 2000–2002 and explored the development of 'deliberative forums' through which the state attempts to engage citizens in dialogue about policies and services: for example area-based forums within local government, user forums in health, senior citizens or youth forums, and a range of community or identity-based organisations that the local state draws in to consultation exercises. The research was based on two major cities in the UK.[1] Within each we began by mapping the field of initiatives across local government, the health service and community organisations, and then used this as the basis for selecting 17 case studies for detailed study. In each we interviewed public officials and citizen participants, and observed the process of deliberation within the forums themselves. We also conducted interviews with a number of senior officials and local politicians responsible for policy development in each city. This paper introduces data drawn from interviews with these strategic actors in local government and health authorities (Sections 2 and 3), and from officials and citizen participants in forums themselves (Section 4). The findings open up a number of issues about the way in which such forums are situated in the policy context of 'New' Labour; about the factors that shape how government policy is interpreted and enacted by public sector organisations; and about how the process of participation is assessed by local actors. Our findings also raise broader theoretical issues which we consider in the final section. We begin by exploring how the policy context at both national and local levels is fostering new forms of collaboration between state and citizen.

1. The policy context

New Labour discourses and policies suggest that there is an important shift taking place towards more collaborative style of governance. The language of policy documents is replete with concepts of partnership, collaboration, capacity building and local involvement (DETR, 1998, 2000, 2001; DoH, 1998, 2001; Home Office, 1991, 1997, 1998; Social Exclusion Unit, 1998, 2001). The policy reforms for the health service, local government and other sectors are oriented towards fostering active citizenship, overcoming social exclusion and promoting public participation in decision making. They also suggest a new form of collaborative contract between state and citizen based on concepts of responsible and active

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citizenship. Finally policy documents offer an image of a modernised public services in which organisations involve their users and local communities in decision making on local services and policy priorities.

These policy discourses are reinforced by the establishment of new institutional mechanisms that shape the form and process of public participation. Many of these focus on locality as a site of new forms of engagement between the state (in the form of public sector agencies) and citizens (as consumers, users and communities). Many also contain an element of compulsion in the form of a requirement for participation to be demonstrated in bids for funding, and to be reflected in new organisational and community governance arrangements. Best Value, a key instrument aimed at improving service quality, specified the need to consult with users and the public. In the NHS, citizen representatives were included on the boards of the new Primary Care Trusts, and national and local forums were established to involve patients and citizens in deliberation about health care decisions. Public participation was also evident in the new arrangements established to 'join-up' local governance processes, with community representation on Local Strategic Partnerships.

This policy context provided a powerful incentive to local organisations to develop new ways of engaging in dialogue with citizens. As a result there was a proliferation of policies and strategies designed to enhance public participation on specific policy issues. The mandatory focus on consultation and participation in a number of pieces of legislation concerned with the modernisation of public services also acted as a spur to action. However many initiatives built on earlier developments, including those linked to community development and urban regeneration, and those based on the inculcation of a more consumerist or user responsive climate for public services.

Three themes from the national policy context proved to be particularly important in shaping local responses. One was Labour's emphasis on neighbourhood and locality in the emerging multi-level governance system of the UK. A second was the emphasis on democratic innovation. This included the introduction of new political management structures in local authorities but also directed attention towards more participative forms of democracy, including deliberative forums. A third was Labour's particular emphasis on policies directed towards enhancing social inclusion and building social capital. While the public participation initiatives we studied had a very diverse set of origins and orientations, these themes suggest the significance of the developing policy context and ideological climate for understanding the response of specific organisations.

Responses to questionnaires at the mapping stage of the project suggest that most public sector organisations were introducing new policies and strategies. There was considerable emphasis on participation in organisational 'visions' and in statements of aims and objectives. Both the NHS and local

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government organisations highlighted, in their responses to our questionnaire, their commitment to and pride in new initiatives designed to encourage public involvement in decision making. We found senior staff allocated new roles to champion participation alongside their more traditional responsibilities. And we found a plethora of newly created deliberative forums alongside initiatives to draw established voluntary or community groups into closer 'partnership' with public sector organisations.

The pattern of initiatives differed somewhat across the two cities, reflecting their different political cultures. Although both cities had a significant proportion of black and ethnic minority population, one gave this much more pre-eminence in its attempts to engage with a differentiated public, while in the second city there tended to be more emphasis on poverty and social exclusion. In both cities there had been efforts to establish local forums linked to decentralised local government structures, but in one this had a much longer history. But across the two cities we selected some forums based on geography (such as neighbourhood forums), some on services (e.g. the users forums established by health and social services), some on issues (e.g. Local Agenda 21 groups) and some on presumed communities of identity (for example, senior citizens forums, youth forums). We also included initiatives that cut across these categories; e.g. a minority ethnic group forum established by a health authority, or the lesbian and gay forum set up by a police service, and included forums whose history was linked to autonomous social and political action (including links to 'new social movements') as well as forums sponsored by statutory bodies.

2. Shaping strategies

In this and the following section we draw on data from strategic actors: senior public sector officials and local politicians with specific responsibility for fostering public participation in health and local government, and managers with oversight of the initiatives within which specific case study sites were situated. We include data from these officials because of their significance in multi-level governance. First, they have an important role in creating the 'political opportunity structure' (Tarrow, 1994) for local citizen engagement in so far as they have a role in interpreting government policy, developing local policy or shaping the ways in which policies are implemented and enacted. Second, their conception of 'the public' with whom they are engaging is likely to be significant both for *which* citizens are drawn into participation and for the constitution of citizen roles and identities within deliberative forums. Third, they are powerful actors within the organisations they manage, and their actions – and personal commitments – may have important consequences for how institutional resistance is met and for how the outcomes of participation are translated into new policies and practices.

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Shaping opportunity structures

The effect of national policy was viewed as a generally positive spur to participation, for example through the requirements that participation or consultation was built into regeneration programmes, best value and other initiatives. Some of our respondents spoke of this as creating a climate of compulsion that sometimes had perverse consequences in terms of producing short-term and inappropriate strategies for engaging the public, but others viewed government policy as a positive catalyst for change:

> There is a move from government, pressure from government to modernise local government. And that means that you have got to clear your lines of communication with the local community. You can't do these sort of rotten borough of a gentlemen's club of councillors, and generally being fall guys for remote civil servants. (elected member)

Here we can see a local councilor engaged in a positive response to the modernising reforms for local councils, talking about opening up communication with citizens and modernising the image of the council in a way that ministers would certainly approve of. But in the second half of the quote we can see a clue about how the participating local community might be viewed as strengthening the hand of the local council against 'remote civil servants'. This theme was echoed elsewhere as interviewees spoke of the difficulty of – but also the possibilities offered by – the task of balancing central policy injunctions imposed from the centre against local views and priorities elicited through consultation exercises:

> I think it hinges on where people [i.e. officials] feel that their accountability lies. It's an interesting dilemma, that on the one hand, the national priorities are set by the national democratic process, and all the surveys say that what people want is to wait less time for health care for example. And yet when you actually get into debate locally, that doesn't always necessarily appear to be what people want. That's the dilemma, that's the bit that puts local organisations into an almost no win situation, where they may be asking local communities what they want and how they want [them] to deliver services, but they may be out of step with national priorities in the way they're articulated. There's the sense of a possibility that it can be a major disappointment on all sides. (Director of Public Health)

Several officials spoke about the distinction between the capacity of participation to influence decision making in the locality and at the strategic centre of public agencies. In local government we found a plethora of neighbourhood forums, ward committees, local advisory groups and so on. However the councils in each case retained the power to decide which issues were 'local' and which were 'strategic', with control over the latter being retained by the centre. One interviewee spoke about how the services that 'report' to the ward committees had been increased and went on to describe how 'they focus on things like refuse collection, play facilities for children . . . Not necessarily the housing or things like that, but really specific local things' (manager at the

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corporate centre). Later he acknowledged the public's desire to deal with the whole of council services at local forums, not just those officially devolved, and spoke of the difficulty of securing the involvement of officers from 'mainstream' services.

This raises the question of how 'the local' is defined: many services that are delivered locally (housing, education) are constituted as being outside the bounds of local deliberation. As one interviewee expressed it, 'If we are devolving services to wards, why not education?' Several spoke of their attempts to transcend the local and particular by feeding information to the centre:

> We've got a lot of action plans at the moment, such as best value, lots of things going on in the department and a major role that we have taken on recently is communicating with the whole of the department to find out what users and carers are saying about a particular service and our role now is to accumulate all this information as well as the stuff that we are doing with all those groups that we have got going and also through the fundamental service reviews and all the stuff that is going on at the moment, gather information and put it together in a report on a quarterly basis, we've just done one. . . . That goes to our departmental management team where the assistant directors and directors decide on action to be taken at that meeting, so it's got quite a high profile. [One of the directors] also comes to the carers forum so that there is quite a high profile manager there and she takes issues back to the management team. So I think that has changed the way we relate to users and carers over the years. Because I felt that it wasn't going anywhere except to local area teams which was useful but it needs to have a more strategic approach. (Manager responsible for user and carer involvement in a Social Services department)

This quote is interesting for at least two reasons. First, for the rather breathless list of multiple initiatives, some government led (Best Value), some corporate, others departmental and yet others unit led. Second, for the dissatisfaction with 'the local' as a site to which reports on user involvement were directed. These lines of potential fragmentation were here being addressed by an attempt to develop a more 'strategic' approach to link users and carers much more to mainstream planning and decision-making processes.

But taking public involvement to a more strategic level raises a number of challenges. In the health service, for example, despite multiple initiatives and considerable successes, there was an expressed dilemma about how far public involvement could go:

> If you were to look at the planning processes we have and check did we physically have people who were users and carers in these forums? Yes, we do. Could we demonstrate where users and carers or members of the public had actually influenced the way we do things? And I can show you project based initiatives like that. But I can also tell you that in the service and financial framework, aside from the broad priorities of the City, then the public are not involved in 'so is it £500,000 for cardiac and a million for cancer, or vice versa?' Do you know what I mean? I suppose what we haven't really resolved yet is how far does public involvement go? How far does the public say 'That's your business, it's not for me to decide'. In fact, when you push

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people into priority setting, there comes a point where they say 'that's your judgement, that's what you're paid to decide'. (Director of Public Health)

Similar points were made by a local authority member but from a rather different standpoint – that of the need to balance different political views and interests by making judgements:

If you are running a government you have got to take into account the balance of opinion and necessity. You can't simply go on public consultation. Public consultation should influence you in the arguments that are being put forward. (Local authority elected member)

This rational view of the difficult balance to be struck between representative and participative democracy was undercut somewhat in this respondent's characterisation of other elected politicians – 'especially those who have been here a long time' – as viewing public consultation as unnecessary because 'we can't modify our decision or aim in view of what the public are telling us'.

So different sources of legitimacy – professional knowledge, managerial authority and political representation – were used, often in combination, to produce a tendency for 'strategic' decisions to remain distant from the plethora of public consultation and involvement initiatives that were in place. But this rather stark conclusion masks deeper processes of personal and institutional change. One respondent spoke about her 'journey' over many years of learning about community involvement, a journey that meant she brought specific commitments and skills to the task of engaging the public. She described how the organisation took a central requirement – the production of a health plan – and used a commitment to community involvement to 'do it in a different way'. Another respondent – from the health authority in the other city – spoke about how his personal commitment to participation and involvement had been able to be expressed more strongly as a result of Labour's policies, and indeed had led to his promotion to the strategic role he now held. This suggests that central government policies on participation, while not necessarily bringing citizen and user voices closer to the centres of decision-making power, were producing a culture change as some strategic actors seized policy opportunities in order to introduce new ways of working and used the enhanced legitimacy afforded to the participation agenda to bring about change.

3. Constituting 'the public'

In talking to us about how they were responding to government policy strategic actors invoked particular images of the 'participating public'. The interviews variously suggested representations of the public as passive consumers; as a naive, childlike and clamorous public; and/or as lacking skills, capacities or trust. The public also tended to be differentiated into groups around binary divisions, a differentiation that had consequences for the legitimacy afforded to some voices.

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Consumerist images were sometimes used to explain the passivity of the public when asked to participate:

> A lot of what the council does is very routine. It's routine maintenance. And you know if I [need] routine maintenance on my car, I don't expect to go along and have a consultation meeting with the Toyota agent for [the city] and then with the maintenance manager. I expect the car to go in, they charge me a reasonable amount of money, and the car gets properly serviced and maintained. A lot of people [hold this] view definitely in street services. Which is most of what the council means to most people. They view it that way. So, it's not surprising you get low turnouts in local elections and the like. (Elected member)

The public was often viewed in terms of consumers wanting more services to be offered or more resources to be spent locally. The task of councillors or officials, in these representations, was viewed as being that of injecting realism into the process: that is, of helping people to understand why major (or in some cases minor) change was not possible. 'Government, any sort of government, is limited by the real world and has to get a practical output' (elected member). The image of the public here might be likened to that of the child clamouring for goodies and the council, as responsible parent, attempting to educate them into the realities of limited resources and the difficulty of changing existing programmes. Sometimes this was produced by the way in which consultation was conducted: for example an invitation to young people to contribute to a decision about how a fixed amount of money should be allocated to improve an area had an open agenda that resulted in responses that were viewed as 'completely unrealistic'. But this image of the public also flowed from deeper, more entrenched attitudes. Asked about variations in the response to public participation across the council, an elected member replied:

> some departments have got very poor attitudes towards the people we address as customers I suppose. It's almost as if they view themselves as administrators of the peasantry. You find this in the housing department. Now the housing department is under pressure because they are administering to a people who think that £40 or £50 a week rent is a fortune and should provide them with marvelous accommodation. And that problems with nuisance neighbours should be solved overnight by simply chucking them out on the street. So housing are under pressure. They are expected to deliver an impossible agenda to people who don't appreciate its impossibility. And I think this tends to shape their attitude [to consultation] . . . I think it is a natural defensive attitude. It is an old civil service attitude. (Elected member)

A rather different set of concerns related to the presumed *skills and capacities* of the public. One repeated image was that of a public that required 'skilling up' in order to be able to participate effectively. One interviewee described how 'we are trying to give people the confidence and skills to participate' by developing training modules on topics such as how the council operates, how to participate in meetings, how to produce minutes on a word processor. This list suggests that the orientation was towards enabling the public to operate within the norms set by the bureaucracy, rather than enabling bureaucrats to hear and respect the experience

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that participants bring to the process of participation. That is, it suggests a process of possible *incorporation* of the lay public into official institutions.

Only a minority of the strategic player interviews spoke of the skills that the public bring to the deliberative process:

> I think that users and carers have got more expertise and skills than they have been given credit for in the past, um, I think ideas that they come up with are quite often money saving ideas, quite often the department spends a lot of money, bureaucracy could be cut through and dealt with much more quickly. (Social services manager)

This respondent also talked of the possibilities of future change, towards more of the service being out-sourced. This, she felt, might 'empower' some groups of users by enabling them to compete to run services through self-managed trusts. Others spoke, not of an absence of skills and capacities among the public, but of absence of trust between the public and officials and the need for organisational development:

> People talk about community and development but I think the big area is actual organisational development. And the work we have going on in {x} is beginning to articulate that quite a lot. Some communities are actually very [articulate] and what they need is public sector organisations to talk to. (Health service respondent)

There is a stark contrast between views of the public as needing 'capacity building' or 'empowerment', on the one hand, and of public services needing fundamental cultural change in order to engage with the public effectively. The dominant discourse of the officials we interviewed reflected the former rather than the latter.

The final set of images we want to deal with in this section is of *a public differentiated into categories around binary divisions*. One such was between an implicit norm (the white, able-bodied public) and special groups (black and minority ethnic groups, disabled people, the socially excluded and so on).[2] Here only the special groups were named: the norm was defined in opposition to them rather than explicitly articulated. A more self-consciously articulated set of divisions were constructed around notions of the 'general public' or the 'whole community', on the one hand, and the 'usual suspects' or 'gatekeepers' on the other. Such divisions were usually based on the characteristics of the public themselves (e.g. the reluctance of the general public to get involved, or to the self-promotion of gatekeepers and the 'usual suspects'). However one interviewee, with a background in community development before moving to the strategic centre of a local authority, spoke of the role of the public sector in creating such divisions:

> In the 1990s they [the council] realised they were not going to develop and regenerate unless they took communities with them. They started to get strategic and to get exclusive – they engaged with odd people, in a very particular way. They engaged with people who became the great and

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the good, who then became another level of bureaucracy as far as the community went. Fairly uninformed people engaging – the concept and understanding of what involvement was about was absent from that strategic framework. (Local authority equalities officer)

The way in which the old style of consultation worked had had, she argued, either no impact or a detrimental impact: 'It was an engagement in which officers were not nurturing the engagement, they were sucking it dry' (ibid.). This suggests the importance of analysing the dynamic interface between public bodies and the public they seek to engage with, rather than viewing institutions as somehow separate from the public they seek to draw into deliberation. We pursue this further in the next section.

The quotes we have included in Sections 2 and 3 can be read in different ways. For our purposes, they suggest a number of factors that shape the political opportunity structures created by public participation. First, they highlight the importance of the policy context itself: how this both fosters new sites of engagement and collaboration, but also introduces tensions between national policy priorities and local views and priorities. Second, they suggest how this tension may be replicated in public service organisations themselves as they seek to create a 'strategic/local' boundary that limits the structure of participation opportunities. It is this boundary that determines which issues can be considered by public participation and at what level; and which issues remain the province of politicians, managers and professional experts. The distinction between local and strategic is a constructed distinction that delineates the boundaries of new forms of dialogue between state and citizen, and that enables powerful state actors to resist inroads into their power and autonomy. The quotes also suggest the importance of understanding how the notion of the participating public is itself socially constructed (Barnes *et al.*, 2003). The public is, in official discourse, split into a number of different categories (e.g. willing/unwilling to participate, 'usual suspects' or 'real' members of the general public). These are however not natural properties of the groups concerned, but are constituted by the way in which the public is conceptualised, addressed and mobilised.

4. The process of engagement: accommodation, deflection and incorporation

The interaction between the policy climate, the ways in which this is interpreted and enacted in local organisations, and the constructions of 'the public' that officials bring to the process, produce constraints on the process of engagement and dialogue in the forums themselves. Such constraints were strongly expressed in interviews with citizens and officials participating in local forums. Citizen participants spoke of their profound frustration with the capacity of public bodies to respond to their concerns. There were many accounts of issues raised but not being taken up, and of the time-lag between issues being raised and

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any response being received. This was often construed as 'fobbing off' – what might be interpreted as a process of deflection. This was sometimes combined with a process of accommodation – the appearance of response to the views of deliberative forums, but a lack of anything tangible in terms of outcomes. Respondents complained about lack of feedback from official bodies inviting comments on proposals as to whether the comments had been taken up; and about the lack of transparency in public bodies, so that it was hard to know where responsibility for action on particular issues lay. There was also dismay about the practice of presenting citizens with a number of options to debate, all of which are viewed as undesirable.

We can also see suggestions of a process of incoporation whereby citizens were drawn into an organisation's own discourses and institutional practices through repeated cycles of exchange. Many respondents were well aware of the constraints that public agencies worked under – of funding, of capacity, of having to meet central government targets, and often 'made excuses' to us for the lack of action. Some nevertheless felt that more could be done to overcome the constraints:

> I think it [the reluctance to respond] is partly, as I said, cultural, in a sense that it hasn't been seen as important or of primary importance to address service user views, in terms of service changes. They've been led by money, by other government requirements, by departmental plans, they've not been led first and foremost by what the service users want . . . And the other thing is just the bureaucracy and the inertia of changing things. (Citizen participant, social services forum)

Officials also expressed frustration with the lack of tangible outcomes from the deliberative process.

> There is a new enthusiasm but it won't be sustained if there isn't some evidence that it is deliverable, or it actually achieves it. And the Department unfortunately is notoriously bad at those kind of delivery mechanisms. We have lots of good policies but it's putting them into practice. (Officer, social services forum)

However for some officials, the idea that deliberation within local forums might lead to change in organisational practice was not readily understood. The following is an extract from a representative of a statutory organisation attending a local area forum:

> [Interviewer] 'Has anything ever happened in the [forum], a discussion, an issue, that has made a difference to the way that you do things, that your organisation does things?'
> [Respondent] 'No. Nothing comes out on that one.'
> [Interviewer] 'Why do you think that is? Is it that the issues haven't been discussed? Or because people are involved in those [consultation] initiatives elsewhere?'
> [Respondent] 'There's nothing been raised. I can't think where you're coming from with that one.'
> [Interviewer] 'I suppose what we are trying to find out is whether what's happening [in the forum] has actually impacted on the way organisations deliver their services.'

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[Respondent] 'It would because . . . if there is anything that's an issue [for our organisation] I have obviously raised it. . . . but its not something I can solve, that's obviously something that has to be addressed by higher up, and it's mentioned and gone through. [But] there's been no major change to anything . . . It's just working together.'

This exchange is illuminating in a number of ways. The respondent initially failed to understand the question about whether the local forum had had any impact on change in the service ('I can't think of where you are coming from on that one'). The possibility of change was not on his agenda. When pushed, he did claim to have passed issues back to his superiors. However he did not see his role as one of problem solving but of passing things up a hierarchy. He acknowledged that no actual changes had taken place as a result of this, but implied that this nevertheless fitted into a view of local consultation as one of 'working together'. And as many citizen respondents commented across our case study sites, this notion of working together – of partnership between agencies and the public – was a profoundly unequal partnership.

However elsewhere we can see officials torn between their new identification as forum member and/or champion of participation on the one hand, and as a member of the sponsoring organisation on the other. In these circumstances officials tended to distinguish themselves from 'others' who were resisting change. The following extract is from an interview with an official who was a member of a forum set up by a NHS Trust:

[Respondent] 'There's resistance at Board level.'
[Interviewer] 'On what grounds?'
[Respondent] 'Being uncomfortable. Who are these people, why are they coming in? The same thing you know, the image [of involvement] is there in the sight but suddenly you are trying to bring it into the main business of what this organisation is, and that's very difficult to swallow. That's because they know that the [forum] is [only] monitoring now, but tomorrow it will be something else. And they question why is so much power being given to those individuals [forum members]. They are not anything to do with the Trust really, so who are these people?'

This extract illustrates a number of common themes. One is the acceptability of an image of involvement – especially one that only touches the periphery of an organisation – but the difficulty of allowing involvement to influence the core business. This reflects the 'strategic/local' distinction discussed in Section 2. The second, interwoven, theme is the reluctance of organisations to relinquish power to those constituted as 'other' or 'outside' – in this case outside the closed circle of powerful professional and management groups in the NHS. This resonates with the idea of a 'clamorous' public mentioned in Section 3. The case study from which the above extract was taken illustrates a third theme: the complex organisational politics that surround such initiatives. Here the forum was referred to as 'the chairman's baby': 'because it is the chairman's favourite subject so you

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find you include it in whatever you do'. But there was a perceived gap between this symbolic acknowledgement and the core business of the organisation:

> It's very difficult for the Trust, particularly with the senior directors, managers, operational directors particularly have had problems here because the policies are made but when you come down to operational level, people are not practicing those policies . . . It's almost like we have the Board and we have everything else – It's still not integrated as much as I would like, I'd like it mainstream.

However the institutional constraints were not just seen to lie in local organisational responses but also in government policy and practice. Another respondent – again from health but in a different city – spoke about the limits to participation created by the time frames involved in government funded projects:

> I think in some circumstances it's the dilemma about being timetable driven. You know, this does limit it to be information giving . . . very front end of the ladder.[3] So even when people know there should be more, the timetables . . . limit what you can actually do. Because we don't necessarily have a pool of skilled people on whom we can draw quickly. So you actually get a confusion – its not malicious, I'm sure its not – but it is described as consultation, community involvement, community action or whatever, and its actually at best information giving. You know, there is a lack of clarity, honesty, understanding about what you can actually get from different types of mechanisms for engaging the public. It is not always consultation just because you get them in a room. (Interview with respondent involved in health promotion)

The impact of top down performance regimes was also a repeated theme:

> The big [tension], when you are involving local people in decision making, will be the tension between top down, centrally driven targets and performance indicators. And the need to deliver on those. And you organise your services around those. And at a local level, [participation] is supposed to be about a local identification of needs. Which is bottom up. And that's where you actually need the skill of someone to be very honest about what is within the scope of the consultation and what is outside of it. (ibid)

When asked for an example, this respondent spoke of how her Primary Care Group had identified all of the national service frameworks for their targets and their priority areas. A group of local people had identified learning disabilities as an area they wanted to tackle, but that this was not included. 'It didn't get in. And neither would it.' The 'neither would it' was unexplained but suggests something about the ways in which government policy interacts with local norms to shape the processes of institutional deflection and accommodation described in this section.

The quotations in this section replicate some of the themes identified at the end of Section 3. In particular they suggest how the tensions between government targets and local priorities, together with the effects the tight time-scales produced by the policy-implementation cycle, limits the process of participation and deliberation. They also highlight the diversity of responses, shaped not only by individual agency ('the chairman's baby') but also by the

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specificity of organisational cultures and the different decision-making structures of health and local government. But they also suggest common points of interest and identification between official and lay forum members, structured in part around mutual frustration with the process of battling against what was variously termed the 'resistance' or 'inertia' of statutory bodies. In the next section we try to go beyond these 'common sense' explanations and look at the contribution of both governance theory and social movement theory to the analysis.

5. Beyond resistance and inertia? Theorising the constraints

This paper began with the proposition that the expansion of new forms of engagement between state and citizen might be viewed as evidence of a new form of collaborative governance that can respond more readily to complex, diverse and dynamic societies. The data presented here illustrates the multiple ways in which the field of social and public policy is being opened up to new forms of interaction between state and citizen. But it also highlights the constraints on the development of collaborative governance. Sections 2 and 3 suggested that such constraints are formed by limited opportunity structures, and section 4 noted the processes of institutional deflection, accommodation and incorporation that take place in the interactions between state and citizen. Such processes represent a much more active set of dynamics than those captured by popular conceptions of individual resistance or organisational 'inertia'.

Elsewhere we have analysed these processes in terms of the frameworks offered by 'new institutional' theory (Sullivan *et al.*, 2003). Here we want to explore the contribution of governance theory. As suggested in the introduction, much of the governance literature suggests that a fundamental shift is taking place in modern societies, variously labeled as a shift from governing to governance, from hierarchies to networks, from representative to deliberative democracy, and from direct control by the state to strategies designed to engage civil society in collaborative governance. Central to governance theory is the idea that state power has become 'de-centred' and is now exerted through plural institutions in a dispersed system of power and authority – what Rhodes (1997: 7) terms a 'differentiated polity'. One of the consequences is that governance theory is extremely helpful in analysing the multiplication of sites and networks through which state actors encounter non-state partners, communities and citizens. Although there may be conflict within such encounters, the literature suggests that action is negotiated through networks characterised by relationships of co-dependence and reciprocity. State actors are dependent on citizens and users to participate in dialogue with them in order to ensure the responsiveness of their policies and practices, but also for the purposes of legitimation. Citizens are dependent on some form of interaction with state actors in the context of their growing disaffection with politicians and political parties. Users are dependent

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on feedback mechanisms through which they can express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with services in the absence of their capacity to use market signals. These co-dependencies may be un-recognised by the individuals concerned, but help explain the frustration and powerlessness expressed by many of our respondents, both officials and citizens. In these terms the failure of the system to adapt to the new conditions of co-dependence, including the failure of democratic channels to respond to growing citizen differentiation and reflexivity, might be viewed as a form of *governance failure* (Bovens *et al.*, 2001).

However the governance narrative of a shift to reciprocity and co-dependence fails to capture the continued significance of the state as an actor (see Jessop, 2000; Pierre and Peters, 2000). As one of the authors of this paper has argued elsewhere (Newman, 2001), the UK Labour government can be characterised in terms of a number of different, and mutually conflicting, regimes of governance. It has attempted to introduce collaborative governance strategies in order to help to solve a number of 'cross-cutting' social problems through policies emphasising partnership, participation and local capacity building, as addressed in the initiatives described earlier in this paper. However these developments have been subordinated to other policy imperatives linked to a highly managerial form of governance based on a plethora of goals, targets and performance improvement strategies. It has also extended forms of direct control from the centre through an intensification of audit and inspection regimes, coupled with the specification of national standards for local services. Each of these involves an extension of control from above that creates institutional constraints and limits the capacity of participation initiatives to shape policy and practice from below.

The conflicting regimes of power and different norms and practices flowing from these multiple and overlaid models of governance produces tensions within the public policy system. In turn these produce conflicting imperatives for local actors – encourage participation from below but ensure you deliver on the targets imposed from above, even where these are in conflict with local views; engage in long-term capacity building but also demonstrate short-term performance improvements, and so on. They also open up potential lines of conflict between actors, for example between those at the 'strategic centre' of organisations and those involved in 'local' forums (see Section 2). As well as producing conflict *between* different actors, such tensions may also produce conflicting allegiances and identifications *within* individual actors. This was evident in interviews with many officials who, as forum members, were caught between their accountability to the organisation that employed them and their growing commitment to the lay members with whom they were interacting.

New forms of governance, then, do not displace the old but interact with them, often uncomfortably. From this perspective the constraints highlighted in this paper can be viewed, not as an example of individual resistance or organisational inertia but as examples of the way in which key tensions in the

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governance of the UK are being played out. Public participation initiatives are sites in which processes of co-option and containment may be present. They are sites in which inequalities of power – between officials and the public, between statutory and voluntary/community organisations – are negotiated. They are uncomfortably situated in a dynamic field of changing relationships between central and local governance and between representative and participative democracy. In these conditions any move towards collaborative governance is likely to encounter difficulties.

However this is not the whole story: to understand the dynamics of change we need to inflect and enrich governance theory with concepts drawn from other perspectives. The concept 'political opportunity structure' that we have used here was developed within social movement theory to signal the degree of openness or closure of political access to social movements and political protest (Tarrow, 1994). This concept is helpful because of the attention it pays to the interaction between social and political agency and existing institutions. Such interactions are central to our analysis. The dispersal of power creates new sites for social action: in our case studies, the process of modernisation was offering a new organisational environment and new sources of legitimacy. Across the public policy system new forms of interaction were emerging between officials, local politicians, local citizens and service users that could not easily be controlled by the centre. Our data show how the new climate was enhancing the legitimacy of officials with a commitment to, and often history of, community action or user empowerment. At the same time contact with groups with origins in social or political movements was helping to change the cultures and practices of the organisations they engaged with.

However in discussing the potential and problems associated with the concept of political opportunity structure, Della Porta and Diani (1999) distinguish between 'objective' reality – in our case the creation by state agencies of new opportunities for public participation – and the social construction of that reality. Changes in the political opportunity structure are, they argue, unlikely to have any effect unless they are perceived as being important by those concerned – here by officials, citizens and service users. Our approach has been one that emphasises the importance of studying how the meanings that actors ascribe to participation influence both the processes and outcomes of citizen engagement. The cultural codes and representations suggested, for example, in the analysis of official constructions of the participating public noted in Section 3, create a *symbolic* dimension to the political opportunity structure, a dimension that may create – or limit – the capacity of deliberative forums to engage with questions of difference and engage with a politics of presence. At the same time this symbolic dimension is also creating a shift in the sources of legitimacy on which public bodies draw. Actors – both lay and official – were able to draw on this symbolic resource to push the deliberative agenda forwards.

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Social movement theory has limitations as well as strengths in terms of the analysis of our data. Empirically, its relevance appears to be limited since only a minority of the forums we studied had direct links to such movements. However the data we gathered on the background of both officials and citizen participants suggest that prior links with community action, social movements, trade unions, voluntary organisations and other forms of social action has an important impact on the perspectives that actors bring to the process, if not the content, of deliberation. Theoretically, social movement theory tends to focus on the analysis of factors underlying cycles of political protest rather than participation in largely state initiated forms of dialogue where there are stronger possibilities of incorporation. However it is attentive to questions of agency and the dynamics of change.

We want, then, to suggest that our study offers fruitful points of engagement between the social movement literatures and governance theory, particularly at four points of intersection. The first, and most significant, concerns questions of the state. Most writers in the social movement tradition tend to operate with a sharp distinction between state and society – actors are either 'inside' or 'outside' the state – and to view the state itself as a rather monolithic entity comprising the traditional divisions of executive, judiciary and legislature (but see Melucci, 1996). The focus on a dispersed state or differentiated polity could provide a fruitful line of development. The second point of intersection concerns analysis of 'the social'. Here governance theory could benefit from greater attention to the social dimensions of the state–citizen relationship, not least to questions of social diversity and difference and the complexity of questions of social identity and agency. Writings from the social movements tradition have developed important analyses of how to link questions of democracy to notions of difference (Young, 1990; Phillips, 1993, 1995). Fraser's analysis of processes of inclusion and exclusion in the public sphere is also very helpful in illuminating the co-option and incorporation that take place where the governance system fails to engage with what she terms 'counter-publics' – groups or networks based on common interests, experiences and identities that have the capacity to challenge official norms and assumptions. Questions of difference have only been hinted at in this paper (in, for example, the analysis in Section 3 of how strategic actors constitute the public through binary categories, creating a distinction between a general public and 'special groups': black and ethnic minorities, young people and so on) but have been more fully developed elsewhere (Barnes *et al.*, 2003; Newman *et al.*, 2002).

The third, related point of engagement between governance theory and literature linked to new social movement traditions concerns the role of politically marginalised groups in the process of service and policy development (Barnes, 2002; Barnes and Bowl, 2001). Here service users are conceptualised very differently from the 'clamourous public' or 'demanding consumers' suggested in

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this paper, but as 'experts' whose knowledge and experience can contribute to the development of new policies and practices. The links between this perspective and the idea of 'collaborative governance' are potentially strong, but as yet unrealised. A fourth point of engagement, however, concerns the analysis of points of *conflict* that arise in the development of dispersed and multi-level governance. Here Davina Cooper's work offers cogent analysis of the new lines of conflict around space, identity and belonging that are erupting into governance systems (Cooper, 1998). The questions of difference, dissent and conflict highlighted in these literatures are of central importance, but are rarely addressed in the governance literature (Newman, 2002, 2003). Such questions have much to contribute to development of governance theory, and to the development of new, and perhaps more challenging, forms of collaborative governance appropriate to complex and diverse societies.

Notes

1 These are presented anonymously here since the interviews with 'strategic actors' on which we draw in this paper might otherwise be attributable to specific individuals.
2 These distinctions differed somewhat across our two cities, with, in one, social exclusion being linked to poverty and, in the other, to 'minority ethnic communities'.
3 This refers to Arnstein's ladder of participation – Arnstein, 1971.

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