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# **Enter the transformational leader: network governance, and the micro-politics of public service reform.**

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## **Abstract**

It is widely acknowledged that network governance is an increasingly significant feature of modern states. This paper focuses on the cultural processes of attachment and identification that are formed in the spaces opened up in the 'differentiated polity' (Rhodes, 1997) of network governance. It explores the constitution of new subject positions - as 'transformational leaders' - for senior public service managers. The empirical data, drawn from group discussion and interviews with senior public service managers in the UK, highlights tensions in the ethos of office produced by state modernisation, and suggests ways in which 'transformational' identities might be influential in shaping the micro-politics of policy delivery.

## **Introduction**

There is now an extensive literature on the ways in which citizens in 'modern' welfare states are being constituted as active, responsible, self governing welfare subjects (e.g. Dwyer 1998, 2000; Giddens 1998; Gilbert 2002; Johansson and Hvinden, 2003; Petersen et al 1999) This paper opens up a different field of enquiry: that of the technologies of power through which public service 'leaders' are constituted as the proactive agents through which state policy is to be delivered in the post-bureaucratic era of dispersed state power. Earlier work has highlighted the constitution of professionals and bureaucrats as managers (Clarke and Newman 1997; Cutler and Waine, 1994; Pollitt 1993) or as entrepreneurial actors (du Gay 2000). This paper explores the intersections between network governance and the constitution of 'transformational leaders'.

Theories of governmentality have developed the Foucauldian conceptions of governing 'at a distance' by constituting governable subjects (Foucault 1980, 1991). In particular the work of Rose (1993, 1996, 1999) has alerted us to how apparently 'free' actors are subjected to new discursive processes. In modernising states power is apparently delegated to managers with high degrees of autonomy to develop the best ways of delivering policy outcomes in line with a government's political goals and aspirations (Pollitt et al, 1998). Such delegated power is regulated by a range of direct government controls (audit and inspection, funding regimes, the threat of the removal of powers for 'failing' organisations, and so on). Overlaid on these regulatory strategies are a panoply of discourses - globalisation, consumerism, transparency, delivery, joined up government, 'what works' and so on - through which public service actors are constituted as actors responsible for the delivery of modernisation.

The governmentality perspective alerts us to how public service leaders might be constituted as 'empowered' but at the same time also be subjected to new strategies of control; and how their role is to carry out the cultural work of responsabilising other staff in order to ensure the delivery of policy in a context where direct control by government may be weak. However O'Malley et al 1997 criticise theories of governmentality for overlooking the diverse ways in which governmental rationalities are played out among the governed, while Rose allows for the possibility for creativity and experimentation on the part of human actors (1999 p283). There is, then, a need to explore how governmental strategies are enacted, negotiated or contested in specific sites. This paper explores the ways in which public service managers draw on cultural resources, including government discourses, as strategies of legitimation both for the enhancement of managerial power and for 'local' and 'social' forms of agency. It addresses three questions about the ways in which the spaces created by 'network' governance are inhabited:

1. What forms of subject position for public service actors are called into being by the discursive practices of 'modernising' governments?
2. How do such actors inhabit the shifting policy/practice landscape? How are new and more traditional attachments and identifications overlaid on each other, and with what consequences for social practice?
3. In what ways do they deploy political and policy discourses, and how can this process of deployment be understood in terms of theories of cultural production and reproduction?

These questions are explored in turn in this paper. The data is drawn from two sources: group discussions on three leadership programmes during 2002-3; and 21 interviews with senior managers (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> tier) charged with delivering modernising reforms. These were not a representative sample of senior public service managers, but a purposive sample of those most closely involved in the government's programme of modernisation. They include senior staff from government offices of the regions; assistant chief executives, departmental directors and policy officers from local government; directors of partnership bodies and zonal initiatives; chief executives and senior managers of voluntary sector bodies, housing associations and charities; senior managers in health authorities, hospital trusts and primary care trusts; police superintendents; chief and assistant chief probation officers; and senior civil servants, the latter usually linked to some form policy innovation or partnership initiative that involved collaboration with local agencies. I begin by tracing how these actors were positioned in the changing policy landscape in the UK.

## **1. Network governance and transformational leadership**

'Governance' is a term that has become central to analyses of shifts in the role of the nation state, in the process of policy making and policy delivery, and in the nature of power and influence in the public policy system. Briefly, it is argued that the power of the nation state has been eroded and that governance processes are now characterised by

multi-level interactions between different tiers within and beyond the nation state. These network based forms of coordination, it is argued, are displacing hierarchy and markets as the dominant mode of interaction (Kooiman 1993, Pierre and Peters, 2000; Pierre 2000; Rhodes 1997). However a narrative that suggests a shift from hierarchy or markets to networks is flawed; there are as many continuities as shifts. So called 'Third way' governance, for example that of New Labour in the UK, involves significant continuities with the neo-liberal reforms of the 1980s and early 1990s, not least in its determination to transform nation and people to fit them for a globalised world requiring workforce flexibility, business deregulation and the reform of the welfare state. Nevertheless the focus on joined up government, social inclusion, democratic renewal, public participation and a 'modernised' policy process that involved stakeholders from outside government can all be viewed as signaling something rather different from both the hierarchical governance of social democracy and the managerial and market based governance of the 1980s and 1990s. The 'something different' is hard to pin down with any precision because of the ways in which different governance regimes are overlaid on each other. Modernisation produces an uncomfortable mix of these different governance regimes, each with its distinctive assumptions about the nature of power and authority and about the relationship between government and governed, state and public sector (Newman, 2001). Such a mix creates conflicting pressures that are played out in the micro politics of policy delivery.

How do practitioners resolve such dilemmas? What 'ethos of office' guides their decisions and choices? To understand this it is necessary to look at how such actors were constituted within the programme of reform. Each governance regime constructs its own image of the ideal practitioner. The hierarchical regime is based on the primacy of the traditional administrator, offering neutral and objective advice, administering state resources according to the bureaucratic rules of central or local government, and accountable upwards to ministers or local politicians. This form of discursive interpellation rarely figures in policy documents on modernisation, but is strongly invoked whenever some form of mistake or failure is picked up by the press, parliament, select committee or local scrutiny panel. The market regime constructs a rather different image of the entrepreneurial manager. Business efficiency, consumer responsiveness and performance improvement are constructed as the key 'success criteria' against which managerial actors are judged. Leadership is linked to organisational 'turnaround' to achieve competitive positioning. Network governance is overlaid on these two regimes in rather uncomfortable ways. Here the practitioner is constituted as facing outwards, building partnerships and engaging communities for the purpose of delivering 'joined up' and sustainable policy outcomes. The release from the bureaucratic ethos of office, coupled with the emphasis on policy outcomes, opens up new forms of social agency.

It is here that the notion of transformational leadership in public services becomes significant. This discourse that gained increasing pre-eminence in public services in the 1990s and early 2000s in the UK, where a number of policy documents called for a strengthening of public leadership (e.g. Performance and Innovation Unit 2001; Office of

Public Service Reform 2002). The discourse of leadership in these documents was constructed in and through a number of binary divisions:

- between the 'forces of conservatism' and proactive, committed leadership
- between 'failing' and 'successful' organisations
- between stasis and transformation
- between the notions of an old 'uniform' and a new 'diverse' management cadre <sup>1</sup>.

The discourse of transformational leadership assumed an authoritative status because of its twin associations with the US (from which most of the literature derives) and with business. These associations invoke images of individual dynamism, risk taking and entrepreneurship that have strong affinities with the Labour government's espoused values, fitting well with its social as well as economic goals.

It does, however, have significant implications for public services. The bureaucratic principle of the separation of office from personal preference that underpinned the development of the public sector calls for an absence of personal enthusiasms. This is antithesis of leadership discourse, a discourse that is predicated on the visibility of the leader's embodiment of characteristics such as integrity, vision and charisma. Strong values are viewed as an asset that transformational leaders deploy in fostering cultural change. Rather than a separation between the person and the office, the person is integral to, and a key resource in, the office itself: he/she is its very material and spiritual embodiment. But how might the emphasis on organisational mission and personal values be aligned with the political goals of the party in office? How far does the idea of the public service manager as a 'servant' of government, or of the wider public good, conflict with the idea of personal 'mastery' found in the leadership literature (e.g. Senge 1990)? More prosaically, how can public service leaders set out to engage in long term programmes of 'transformative' cultural change in the context of frequent policy shifts associated with the relatively short life cycles of Ministerial office? Given the tensions between managerial freedoms and political control it is perhaps somewhat surprising that any government should seize on the idea of transformational leadership quite so emphatically as has New Labour; yet this idea is entirely consonant with the style of Blair himself. The accomplishment of the shift from 'old' to 'new' Labour has many symbolic resonances with the business literature's depiction of the transformation of old, ossified, bureaucratic companies into mission driven, customer focused, flexible enterprises.

The discourse of leadership was readily incorporated into the modernisation programme for public services in the UK (e.g. in its Fresh Start and New Start schemes predicated on the supposed power of an individual leader to 'transform' failing schools and hospitals). There was also a proliferation of public service leadership programmes (sponsored by the Cabinet Office, the NHS and other parts of government as well as by independent providers), all based around the idea of building a cadre of transformational leaders that might invigorate public service change. The leadership programmes on which the

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<sup>1</sup> 'diverse', in this context, does not primarily signal social diversity (around, say, gender, ethnicity, age) but the opening up of the civil service to people from 'outside', i.e. secondees and new appointments primarily from the business world.

empirical data in section 2 is drawn included elements designed to foster emotional intelligence and promote 'affective' (rather than cognitive) forms of attachment between 'leaders' and 'followers'. They emphasised the power of the symbolic person of the leader in the process of forming such attachments. They also promoted personal reflexivity through 'therapeutic' techniques such as 360 degree appraisals, coaching groups and action learning sets. The constitution of this new leadership cadre was, then, to be realised through an array of 'therapeutic' technologies: "The significance of psychology within advanced liberal modes of government lies in the elaboration of a know how of the autonomous individual striving for self realisation" (Rose 1999 p 91). This is the very stuff of leadership, where an emphasis is placed on the affective and symbolic aspects of person-hood rather than on a set of distinct management competencies. In turn such leaders are charged with, in Rose's terms, exercising their powers in order to "nurture and direct" the individual strivings of those over whom they have authority (ibid).

Such leaders were viewed as key agents in Labour's struggle to deliver on their targets and electoral pledges ('delivery' being a more proactive reworking of bureaucratic notions of implementation). Their position is significant for a number of reasons. First, they are both the carriers of state power (as agents for the delivery of government policy) and powerful actors in their own right (by virtue of the status of managerial knowledge in neo-liberal regimes). Second, the act through networks that transcend the policy/delivery divide (Marsh, 1998). Third, they are actors who have to improvise as they negotiate tensions produced by the structural contradictions of the 'Third Way' (Fairclough 2000, Johnson and Steinberg forthcoming; Lewis and Surrender forthcoming; Newman 2001). As such, the ways in which these actors construct and resolve the dilemmas they face, the forms of power they deploy and the cultural resources they utilise in the process, are important subjects for empirical analysis.

## **2. Mapping the dilemmas**

I want to begin by looking at data from three public service leadership programmes. In each, a number of repeated themes emerged as those attending spoke about their personal experiences. These included the frustrations of partnership working, the growing complexity of the tasks they face, the difficulties associated with involving communities in decision making, and so on. As part of a discussion on how such issues might be handled groups were asked to identify the 'ethos of office' that informed their approach to working in today's public services, paying particular attention to questions of accountability and the values that shaped their decision making processes. Ethos of office was explained to the groups simply as 'the principles that shape how you go about your job'. The extracts that follow are based on reports from groups to a plenary session. The first comes from a group of civil servants:

"We want to offer professional, objective advice to politicians – we want to be remembered as true professionals. But all of that is around doing the right thing for the customer – its about being customer focused.

But then it starts to get a bit muddy – what about when the advice can't be so clear cut. Like the case of the asylum seeker who has been here for 30 years and is told he has to go back home. These are much more difficult. So then its about integrity – being fair and equitable.

But perhaps, dare I say it, its about not being the typical civil servant doing the elected politician's will – we are involved in shaping the agenda.

At the end of the day its about making a difference, about leaving some sort of legacy”

Here we can see a number of dilemmas being played out. The first paragraph suggests the importance of being 'true professionals', professionalism here being defined as the classic civil service ethos of office based on offering objective advice to politicians. But it also refers to being 'customer focused', reflecting more managerial, customer oriented values. In the second paragraph, dealing with the difficulties that arise when general policies are applied to particular cases, we can see these being resolved in a traditional way by recourse to concepts of administrative justice (being 'fair and equitable'). The classic 'neutrality' of the civil servant was an asset much prized by the group. It represented what one member (who had clearly read some social theory) termed their distinctive 'cultural capital' in an era in which their authority was being challenged by inroads from others, including political advisers and managers seconded or appointed from the private sector.

But in the plenary discussion members of this group felt that this neutrality was being assaulted (their term) by the politicisation of the civil service, a process that was exposing them to greater visibility and a heightened sense of personal vulnerability. Life was getting more risky as the classic ethos of office was being challenged by the weakening of boundaries between administrative, managerial and political roles. However the administrative ethos of office was also being questioned by these managers themselves. This is evident in the third paragraph which talks about them 'not being the typical civil servant doing the elected politician's will', 'shaping the agenda', 'making a difference' and 'leaving some sort of legacy'. Here we can see a form of transformational leadership - though not necessarily that envisaged by government enthusiasts of the concept - at play. In discussion it was emphasised that this was not about being 'political', defined by them as party political, but was about a public service ethos that transcended the concepts of neutrality and included concepts of social, as well as administrative, justice.

This is more strongly expressed in the second extract, from a group comprising local government, housing associations and social care organisations:

“We thought it was about how to make a positive and lasting difference, but also enabling others to have done so. Which means you have to be seen as challenging, creative and proactive – um... and you also need to be highly transparent in the way you work.

We had quite a debate about being passionate and committed to your job – and the more we talked about it the more we thought we were a bit humble... and thought we should not be so humble. We have to have an element of self-righteousness. If you are working to certain values you have to believe in them and you need to be quite forceful about them, and that comes back to the issue about being prepared to lead. If you see a just cause then you should be prepared to stick your neck out and lead on it.

And I think what stands out to us in the group is that if people are seen to get things done, if they deliver, that probably counts for more than anything, actually. `You can have all the right values, treat people in the right way, but at the end of the day if you don't deliver it's a waste of time."

Here there is a much stronger sense of social values linked to a sense of pro-activity and a willingness to take risks (being 'prepared to stock your neck out and lead on it'). But this extract too suggests a number of dilemmas. One is about the tensions that arise when people are working with a strong set of personal values involved in 'treating people in the right way' but also want to deliver results, implying a more pragmatic approach. A second operates around accountability. The managers in this group talked about wanting to be 'challenging, creative and proactive'. None of these orientations implies a good fit with hierarchical models of accountability. These managers were all working through multi-level, multi-agency networks where accountability is complex and diffuse, and were struggling with how to construct *their own* ethical concept of accountability. After talking about the passion they brought to their work ('making a positive and lasting difference') and about their desire to be creative and proactive, they hesitated and then added the rider about needing to be 'transparent in the way you work'. This dilemma, then, is between being mission driven (implying passion, enthusiasm, commitment) on the one hand, and allowing yourself to be held in check by the systems and procedures that are designed to ensure accountability in order to defend the system against the 'wrong sort' of passions, including those driven by individual self interest. The idea of 'being transparent in the way you work' was a construction through which individuals sought to resolve that dilemma for themselves as well as to legitimate their action to others.

The third group comprised managers in professionalised services, namely the health and probation services. The extract begins with their view of their role in the policy process:

"Policymakers should be created from those who have implemented policy and there is a much stronger connection between the two – through evaluation and change in the policy learning from what is happening on the ground. Effectively you need to live policy not just implement it"

This part of the extract reflects the group's response to the unprecedented levels of policy change flowing from government that have characterised the modernisation process for both services. The next section nicely captures the current complexity of accountability:

"Most people thought that they were accountable to stakeholders/users – a number of us thought we should be accountable to the users of the system, that's what we are here for, the users should be able to benefit from the stuff that we do, that's our job. This is very different from what you might call the constitutional view of accountability, that is accountability to the electorate through ministers. Its also different from the practical accountability that we all have through line management. But then there is the mindset – and that's about accountability to those we are delivering to. For most of us in health that was the end user, but for probation it was the wider community.

So the values that should guide actions where you have some discretion really come back to that – generally people felt that our actions should be guided in terms of what benefits the end user. We want to be judged by the impact we have on users and the community at large"



Here both administrative and managerial concepts of accountability are being displaced by an ethos of office based on accountability to users and communities. This is consonant with Labour's own rhetoric - but perhaps not its practice (Newman et al, 2004).

Each of these accounts provides clues about how actors were making and remaking the meaning of what being a public manager is about. The accounts can perhaps be dismissed as normative constructions - what actors hoped to move towards, an idealised ethos of office, with no clear links to behaviour and practice. To move beyond this normative emphasis the next section draws on interview data which shows how actors provide *retrospective* accounts of social action.

### **3. Shaping the agenda : narratives of social action**

The idea of 'transformational leadership' suggests a proactive approach to the managerial role, such that can be traced in the extracts in section 2. To what extent, then, can the new cadre of leaders be viewed as agents reshaping public services? What are the stories they tell, and how do they resolve - or fail to resolve - the dilemmas that are rooted in the conflicting imperatives of their role? In this section I draw on narrative accounts of the process of implementing Labour's programme of reform. At first I approached these interviews with a series of relatively structured questions, but it soon became apparent that the initial opening question - "Tell me about your role in Labour's programme of modernisation" - elicited such rich material that I decided to simply capture their stories as they unfolded. This meant drawing on the techniques offered by narrative analysis. Narratives may be defined in temporal terms, as structured around a plot (Ricoeur, 1992); as "accounts which contain transformations (change over time), some kind of 'action' and 'characters', all of which are brought together within an overall 'plot'" (Lawler, 2002, p 242). The accounts collected for this project suggested various degrees of 'emplotment', but the narratives tended to have no clear resolution. This did not undermine the approach - narrative theory suggests that individuals use narrative to make sense of a chaotic and unordered reality. As Gergen (1994) comments, narratives are conversational resources, constructions open to continuous alteration as the interaction progresses.

In these conversations, it was possible to trace resonances between the discourses of respondents and of New Labour (for example the discursive couplings of globalisation and the need for change, or of social exclusion and the need for joined up working) suggesting the possible presence of what Fairclough (2002) terms a 'genre chain'. But although there were discursive resonances, there were also more material factors that disrupted the possibility of close identification with government itself. For example inspection and audit, central components of Labour's approach to modernisation, were frequently cited as a hindrance to progress (because of the imposition of centrally determined and inflexible criteria of judgement) and as a distraction from the 'real' business of leadership (visionary and enabling rather than mechanical and hierarchical). Many spoke of their early excitement when New Labour had come to power, and their expectations of change. But there was evidence, by the spring of 2002, of both a deep

frustration with Labour's centralising approach and of an emerging disappointment with its political agenda - as one respondent put it, the "absence of the big idea". The accounts told of the manipulation of the 'what works' agenda by government to impose politically favoured policies, thus undercutting the managerial commitment to rationality and Labour's own commitment to evidence based policy. Many spoke of their experience of struggling with the uncertainties created by shifting policies and competing agendas. They depicted a growing concern about the tensions between the governments stated goals of collaboration and partnership and the intensification of centralising strategies of control. They also spoke about the impact of these imperatives on their own sense of what being a 'good leader' was all about:

*"What you know is good practice gets thrown out of the window because of the speed of change - meeting targets has meant paying less attention to change management"* (Director, pilot Primary Care Trust)

*"With people on the ground - doctors, receptionists - you can get views about how to improve services - but they are not enabled because those around them [i.e. managers such as this speaker] are so bogged down in targets that they cannot see beyond them...I can visualise how things could be different, but trying to get people to share that is hard when on the one hand I want to enable and empower people, and on the other I have to make sure we deliver"* (Senior manager, NHS)

The fragmentary and sometimes contradictory nature of experience was illustrated in the frequent juxtaposition of the themes of 'confusion' or 'loss' on the one hand, and 'freedom' and 'excitement' on the other. Many narratives combined elements of consideration and toughing it out, bravery and caution, optimism and pessimism. This complexity suggests that it is by no means possible to conclude that the powerful conjunction of modernisation and leadership discourses were being 'effective' in producing new subjects. However it is possible to see how identities were being reconstituted:

*"I am coming out of the silo - I feel quite humble going around- I am on a journey of discovery. In my new [corporate] role I end up in all sorts of different places - but there is something fundamental about working more with communities and trying to deliver what they tell us. In a few year's time the landscape be completely different".* (Local Authority policy officer)

*"I no longer feel that I work for social services - it has given me a new orientation, a new lease of life"* (senior social services manager involved in multiple/inter-locking partnerships)

*"In some ways it is quite exciting grappling with all this - is the voluntary sector an agent of the state or is it trying to bring about change? I feel that I'm involved in a struggle for the future of the sector"* (Chief exec, voluntary organisation involved in providing services for disabled people).

*"There is a lot of uncertainty in the modernisation agenda ...But we are becoming better at what we do - reducing size has led to us becoming more focused and more strategic. I am now enjoying what I do - there has been a psychological shift for me. I had the sense of something... people look to you .... you transform who you are. I realised that I had some insight that other people didn't - it allowed me to get a better grip, to take some decisions I had been putting off"* (personnel director, police authority).

*"In the last few years I have worked on a lot of new initiatives - the bread and butter management of probation is not something I do anymore - and I don't think I could ever go back to it" (senior probation officer)*

Each of these suggests some form of transformation - transformed organisations, transformed personal lives, transformed career routes, transformed allegiances. All signal shifts in the capacity for social agency. I want to highlight three forms of agency that were evident across a number of different interviews: *managerial assertiveness; pushing the local; and expanding the social*. Each provides a partial (albeit unstable) resolution to some of the dilemmas highlighted earlier in this paper.

### *Enhancing managerial power*

As noted earlier, network governance, based on the dispersal of power and the weakening of hierarchical modes of accountability, provides the basis for the further 'empowerment' of managerial actors. In seizing this power, many of my respondents tended to replicate themes from Labour's own discursive repertoire: the requirements of globalisation, the imperatives of consumerism, and the opportunities offered by new technology. Each were used to legitimate the need for radical organisational change and to minimise potential opposition from staff:

*"Changes are not drive by politicians but by the world we live in - by globalisation., technology, finance. The challenge for the public sector is to recognise that the nature of the organisation needs to be changed" (Chief Executive, Civil Service Agency)*

*"We are using public/private partnerships to drive down costs - we can't achieve this it with the culture in this organisation. We are using best value reviews as a tool or a reason or an excuse for moving services out to the social economy (Assistant Chief Executive, Local Authority)*

The first of these quotes suggests a close affinity between the discourse of government on the one hand, and this civil service leader on the other. In the second, we see one example of the consequences of the affinity between modernisation reforms (best value) and managerial agency (outsourcing). In both cases, we can see managers drawing on political or policy discourses to drive through changes that might otherwise have been resisted or blocked. They were addressing residual tensions between hierarchical governance and managerial power by pushing the agenda of organisational transformation. This is a familiar theme (see Clarke and Newman 1997) and is not pursued further here.

### *Pushing the 'local'*

Other accounts expressed a determination to shape change in a way that was consonant with local (organisational, professional or community derived) goals and values. This was frequently expressed in the language of 'repackaging' organisational strategies to conform to the government's imperatives while also delivering local change agendas. The 'local' here can be understood not just in a spatial sense but as symbolically condensing a range of attachments and identifications constituted around a 'we' that is 'other' to government. The idea of 'doing what we want to do' while 'satisfying politicians' was a recurrent theme. Many of the respondents were very well aware of the tensions

within the modernisation programme and were explicitly managing them by appropriating some elements of Labour's discourse and using these to create leverage. New articulations were formed where two seemingly opposed sets of values or goals were - albeit partially and conditionally - reconciled.

For example, narratives from the health service were often structured around the interaction between government priorities and local adaptations. The tensions between national agendas and 'what patients want', between central prescription and local innovation, and between 'what we know' and 'what we are being told' were repeated themes:

*"This (being a pilot site for the modernisation of the NHS) is where the nuts and bolts will really kick in - it's about saying how do we make this different. We have to set out how we could redesign the service to enable us to hit the targets. This may be different from what patients want.... There are a lot of conflicts between what you know and believe will make things better from a local perspective and what you are being told. ...But we are not enabled by constraints placed on us from a national perspective - also by the lack of confidence from the centre in our ability to deliver. They see things as the only way to make things happen is to force through more targets."*  
(Senior Manager, NHS)

The next section of the same account suggests ways in which these tensions were being managed; about how space within the national agenda for local goals was negotiated:

*"If you pull things out - you can find targets that might enable us to focus on wider determinants, that give it (local priority) some legitimacy - but you have to look for it. ....We are looking for evidence within government priorities to legitimise issues that will make a difference to local populations"* (ibid)

This health authority had developed its own innovation within the government's agenda of enhancing public participation, but its approach had led to conflict with the Department of Health:

*"We developed a priority scoring tool to guide decision making - We are using patients, staff and carers on planning group forums to help shape priorities. This was about how priorities within national targets, but we are also testing against local targets - sexual health, dentistry, learning disabilities.....This caused a huge amount of excitement, and shot right up to the DoH - they were horrified that it was about prioritising the National Plan - we had to repackage it."* (ibid)

The idea of 'packaging' (and if necessary 'repackaging') local innovations in a way that made them appear to comply with national requirements was not exclusive to the NHS, but was evident in interviews with Local Authority, Police and some devolved agencies of the Civil Service. It represents a form of resistance to the pull of hierarchical forms of power in order to expand the capacity of local systems to move towards self governance.

### *Expanding the social*

One of the distinguishing features of the Labour administrations has been the relatively high emphasis on finding long term solutions to complex problems that cut across organisational and departmental boundaries. Here managers/leaders are charged, not with delivering a specified policy output (e.g. cutting hospital waiting lists, improving detection rates) but with developing local strategies in partnership with others to deliver policy outcomes on complex problems (preventing ill health, reducing the public's fear of

crime). But the more a government is oriented towards policy outcomes, rather than organisational outputs, the less it is able to exercise control through hierarchical channels. Complex goals necessarily involve more room for agency on the part of policy and managerial actors operating across organisational and bureaucratic boundaries and building alliances between different tiers of governance. Such actors confront a field of plural goals, multiple stakeholders and conflicting values and aspirations. Many of my respondents were actively struggling to manage the resulting tensions, but at the same time exploiting those very tensions to enlarge the space for agency around 'social' agendas.

In doing so they selectively amplified elements of Labour's own narrative - those concerned with social exclusion, public involvement, community capacity building, preventing ill health, restorative justice and so on – while downplaying others. This did not free the respondents from the imperative to deliver the whole policy agenda. But in doing so the order of dominance was subtly re-worked to foreground responses to deep seated and long-term social problems. For example one local authority chief executive deployed the discourse of 'joined up government' to install a model of consultation that rested on an expanded concept of the public realm, a concept that explicitly challenged the dominance of both professional and consumerist models of how to respond to the problem of falling school rolls:

*"We need to consult with people on issues that are real and that affect their lives.....What we decided to do was to go into the community and have a dialogue - what we wanted was to see the whole picture. The picture was not just about falling school rolls but about regeneration, transport, crime and a whole host of interconnected issues...It's about social justice for the whole community, not just playing one group of parents off against another" (Local Authority Chief Executive, 2002)*

This extract deploys new Labour's own language of 'joined up' or 'holistic' government, but rejects the discourse of consumer choice instead arguing for a decision based on a collective concept of 'social justice', a concept drawn from outside Labour's lexicon at this time. She was both appropriating some aspects of Labour's discourse but also coupling them with counter discourses. Other accounts show actors appropriating themes in Labour's policy agenda in order to legitimise new ways of working across organisations and new forms of relationship with communities, adapting the government's agenda to support, reinforce or realise social democratic goals. And, like New Labour, respondents tended to have a Fabian belief of the power of managerial and scientific expertise to bring about fundamental social change. An 'expansive' – or even colonising – conception of public leadership was, then, rooted in the possibilities offered by Labour's own discourses.

## **Conclusion**

The data presented in this paper are suggestive rather than conclusive. This is not an account of how policy goals are being distorted not of how managers who developed their careers in the climate of managerialism are now adopting new identities as public service leaders. Rather it suggests some of the ways in which public service actors

exercise agency in the context of dispersed and fragmented fields of governance. This takes us beyond the concept of agency that is dominant in the governance literature, based on a model of 'resource dependency' emphasising instrumental rationality, exchange and interest bargaining (e.g. Rhodes 1997). This produces a "thin" conception of the person: a conception of the individual as subject to pressures to conform to rules, norms and expectations implicated in the structural forces to which they are subject. Identity, in such conceptions, is little more than the internalisation of structural requirements. To counter this Woods draws on Weber's concept of 'inner distance':

"Inner distance consists of a self conscious adherence to certain ethical values in the face of the immense daily pressures to conform to rationalised and disenchanted world, and a degree of self mastery that resists loss of 'personality' under the relentless pressure of the demands of routine" (Woods 2003 p 151).

This suggests the possibility of an ethos of office that transcends bureaucratic norms, rules and organisational forms. The three extracts in section 2 suggests how actors were engaged in reworking traditional rationalities - based on the bureaucratic ethos of office - to deal with the dilemmas raised by the current contexts in which they were working. Their attempts to produce a statement of an ethos of office for public service leaders were full of inconsistencies, evident for example in the different concepts of accountability that they deployed. However what stood out was the idea of wanting to 'make a difference' through their work. In section three we can see the ways in which this idea of making a difference was being enacted. The accounts suggest ways in which practitioners were constituted within, but also themselves deployed, government discourses. While some used these as a means of enhancing managerial power, others saw themselves as adapting or deploying official discourse to pursue 'local' goals or expand the social dimensions of public policy. They were able to do so in part because of the shifts in governance resulting from Labour's own reforms. Patterns of relationship and hierarchies of knowledge were being reshaped, and new spaces and sites of action that could not be controlled from the centre were opening up. These spaces were formed out of a double process of change: the emphasis on delivering policy outcomes through networks, coupled with the new emphasis on 'transformative leadership'. The latter meant that actors were discursively positioned as the agents as well as the objects of change.

The accounts suggest a number of different forms of cultural practice, each deploying or partly reworking Labour's own narrative through a process of articulation whereby a particular concept or idea is detached from the discourse in which it is (temporarily and conditionally) situated and sutured into an alternative framework of meaning. This creates space for the active and creative subject, and for struggle and resistance as contests over alternative meanings take place. Here the discourses of globalisation, consumerism and modernisation were frequently deployed to counter practices associated with professional and bureaucratic power. But governmental discourses were also constantly being reworked and re-combined. As Foucault comments "discourse can be both an instrument and effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (Foucault 1991 p101). The

discourses of social exclusion, public involvement, community capacity building, preventing ill health, restorative justice and so on formed potential points of such mobilisation. While central to the New Labour lexicon, these were capable of forming new articulations with concepts drawn from other social, political or professional vocabularies.

Such processes cannot be reduced to a quasi-functionalist account of actors pursuing their self-interest, as in the classic accounts of bureau-shaping actors (Dunleavy 1991). They are better understood as processes of cultural positioning and attachment. So, when 'modernising' leaders engage in a process of selectively appropriating the discourse of modernisation, and suturing elements of that discourse into other frameworks of meaning, is this a 'transgressive' act, or are they engage in acts of social and cultural reproduction that support existing hierarchies of knowledge and power? Public service leaders can be viewed, by virtue of their institutional positions and the normative processes of cultural adaptation that they have undergone to achieve those positions, as the embodiments of state power. But the transformative discourse of leadership provides an enlarged space that allows actors to self-author, to evoke new identities that draw on a wide range of socially available discourses, within but also beyond the lexicon of Government policy. This processes of self-authoring - or generativity - "fills up the space between transgression and reproduction" (Holland and Lave, 2001 p19).

It is the small, everyday acts of generating meanings, appropriating and reworking governmental discourses and shaping new patterns of allegiance and identification that inform the micro-politics of state modernisation. However the space for 'transgressive' subject positions is limited, not only by the determination of a government to deliver reform but also by wider tensions in the politics project. The Third Way represented an attempted resolution between the neo-liberal agenda of economic restructuring on the one hand, and the possibility of social transformation to redress the very ills - of social fragmentation and individualism, of urban and rural decay and rising inequality - that neo-liberalism had helped to create. Notions of a new public service leadership have been inserted into that space, managing the contradictions between centralisation and decentralisation in Labour's policy agenda, and negotiating the tensions and lines of fracture at the heart of the new Labour project itself. As such, my respondents are perhaps redefining the conditions of possibility for what it means to be a public service worker. But however powerful new discursive formations might be, they are unlikely to be able to resolve these contradictions or to successfully confront embedded, institutionalised - and often coercive - forms of governmental power.

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