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Reflections on advising in austerity

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REFLECTIONS ON ADVISING IN AUSTERITY

John Clarke*

This book has explored the conditions, processes and practices of advising in austerity and this last chapter pulls out some of the key themes and issues from across the book. Perhaps the most significant theme concerns the pace and scale of the economic, social and political changes that form the context in which advice work is undertaken. In one sense, this is a banal observation – everyone who works in Citizens Advice has a direct grasp of the deepening social dislocations that have generated increasing demand for support and advice. During the last decade in particular, the range of those changes (and the resulting demand) has been particularly striking and a growing body of research testifies to the social consequences of ‘austerity’ politics and policies (for example Garthwaite, 2016). This study adds to that body of work in a distinctive way, revealing how particular individuals are experiencing the dislocations and seeking to find ways through them – whether it is Lucy’s problems in finding support for being

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homeless or Brian's encounters with a bullying employer. These are both individual experiences of troubles in austerity-driven Britain, but they are also exemplary moments of how policies have changed the sorts of public support available to resolve such private troubles. Both Lucy and Brian experienced the difficulties of trying to find support in a world of underfunded services (both public and voluntary). The book helps us to see 'austerity' as connecting three things: an ideology or way of thinking that legitimates particular sorts of policy changes, the profoundly unequal economic and social impact of contemporary transformations, and the assault on public spending and public services that has been underpinned by claims about the need for austerity. Citizens Advice is one of the critical places where all these things come together in the form of private troubles and the efforts to remedy them.

This brings a second significant issue into view because Citizens Advice, like many other organisations, is simultaneously trying to respond to the increasing demand for help and trying to cope with a turbulent policy environment in the face of shrinking funding. Both the national organisations and the local bureaux are expending increasing amounts of their organisational attention and effort on coping with this turbulence and trying to invent new ways of supporting themselves. Bureau managers, as we saw earlier, face pressures to become more 'entrepreneurial', finding new funding sources, bidding for new projects, and dealing with the demands and constraints that new funding sources bring with them. Bureaux face conflicting injunctions – to be more 'competitive' (winning bids against other potential providers) and to be more 'collaborative' (working in partnership with other organisations). They are also (as Chapter Three showed) facing pressures to 'modernise' and change their ways of working as the future for public services becomes defined as 'digital'. At the same time, voluntary organisations like Citizens Advice experience increasing regulatory pressures – to be more accountable, to keep out of politics, to deliver 'value for money', for example – and each of these brings new burdens and constraints. This is a fearsome nexus of pressures that place new stresses on organisations, take up managerial time and energy, and require those working in such organisations,

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particularly as volunteers, to adapt and adopt new ways of working. Voluntary organisations became a fraught focal point of the multiple pressures and expectations contained in the assumptions of the 'Big Society', espoused by then Prime Minister David Cameron – not least the belief that voluntary organisations could not just supplement public services, but could replace them.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the field of employment law. The book illuminates the ways in which what was always a challenging field of work for Citizens Advice has become increasingly difficult.

The research behind this book emerged from an interest in how legality and the assumptions and practices of the law intersected with, and were experienced in, areas of everyday life (Ewick and Silbey, 1998). Three important issues have stood out here. First, people in the UK have faced increasing difficulties accessing formal legal processes as new barriers are constructed. The reduction of legal aid provision and the charging of fees for some processes combine to put new material barriers between people and the law. Such barriers intensify the felt distance between ordinary people and the law – where the law is perceived as alien or not for 'people like us' (and is associated with a sense of powerlessness). Second, the research here points to the connections and disjunctions between people's sense of 'justice' (what is and is not fair) and the realm of law. We have seen people seeking legal remedies (at Employment Tribunals for example) for felt injustices and then finding a gap opening up between their sense of justice and the law's categories and judgments. This points to important questions for further investigation (where do ideas of justice come from? What are their social and political consequences?); for political and policy action (how might justice and law be reconciled?) and for those working in the advice field (how can we align people's desires for justice and their encounters with the law? How can we make justice more accessible and meaningful?). These last questions about practice also point to what the book has to say about the *work* of advice.

At the heart of what takes place in the advice process are acts of 'translation' in which advisers mediate between everyday lives and the framings, understandings and languages of law and policy (Freeman,

2009; McDermont, 2013). This research shows that this translation is always a double process: on one side, advisers have to work to translate the experiences and troubles of the person seeking help into the categories and framings of the law; on the other side, advisers must translate the law back into the life of the person seeking help. Without such ‘translation back’, people will be unable to make choices, exercise some degree of control or act on their troubles. This (as we saw in Chapter Nine) is a critical moment in the advice process – without it, people are merely receiving information. The moments of understanding, clarity and ownership that Samuel Kirwan describes can only come about through effective translations – of troubles into law, and of law into meaningful possibilities for action. This enriches the understanding of translation in studies of law, which have tended to focus on the first moment (translating things into legal framings) but here we can see how important the second aspect is. Equally importantly, the visibility given to ‘relational work’ as part of the advice process brings something important to studies of translation which have tended to neglect such dimensions.

Citizens Advice is, of course, not just about ‘advice’ but also raises a question of what citizenship might mean. The study asked volunteers, workers and managers who they thought the citizen in Citizens Advice might refer to. Often, they said they had not thought about it, but when pressed, there was one phrase that recurred frequently – ‘anyone who comes through the door’:

‘I personally think it’s anybody who walks through the door for advice is a citizen in Citizens Advice Bureaux. So it is anyone within society who basically needs our help, who comes through the door.’ (Rebecca: Specialist adviser)

This is, of course, some distance from the legal definition of the citizen (and the accompanying eligibility for citizenship rights). Instead, people from Citizens Advice were at pains to stress the principle of openness, refusing to identify any barriers to eligibility. They certainly knew that there were other, more formal, definitions of citizenship but

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regularly returned to the way that the needs of ‘anyone who comes through the door’ overrode such definitions:

‘No, the advice is open to anyone really who needs the advice because, at the end of the day, everybody who has come to the UK and it doesn’t matter for whatever reason or for however long, if they’re in a situation where they need help, they use the service. From this point of view, it doesn’t really matter if they’ve arrived last month and found themselves in a difficult situation so to have a service like this that’s open to anyone is absolutely amazing and can only be a good thing.’ (Alexandra: Generalist adviser in a semi-urban bureau)

Such comments point to the continuing social and political importance of ideas of citizenship that go beyond the current narrowing of rights, benefits and access in the UK (for example Dwyer and Wright, 2014). They are certainly of practical importance – for those who receive support (and for those who provide it). But we think that they are also of wider value: they demonstrate ways of thinking and acting in a citizenly fashion that are urgently needed. They stand out against the dominant tendencies of the period, the narrowing of citizenship, the shrinking of its rights and the increasing difficulty of claiming or being able to enforce such rights.

Like other voluntary organisations, Citizens Advice occupies an ambiguous space – such service-providing organisations are highly valued (not least because voluntary provision tends to be cheaper than public services), and they embody the Big Society principle of mutual support rather than the Big State. But organisations such as Citizens Advice also do campaigning work – and are staffed by people who hold views about citizenship that may differ from those currently dominant. This is one reason why voluntary organisations (in the UK and in many other places) have come under increasing pressure to ‘keep out of politics’ (Clarke, forthcoming). It is clear that Citizens Advice provides a space where alternative conceptions of citizenship and relationships between citizens have been kept alive in principle and in practice.

But the difficult question is: can these alternatives be sustained? This is not just a matter of whether the ideas persist in people's heads, but recognising that they emerge from, and are put into practice within, particular settings, patterns of relationships, organisational cultures and norms of conduct. These supports and settings matter for how people are able to think and act – what Shannon Jackson (2011), writing about the contexts of public art, calls the collective *infrastructure* of being able to think and behave in significant ways. The growing pressures on Citizens Advice put this ethos – and the infrastructure that sustains it – at risk.

The future is perilous, both for those who would use Citizens Advice and for the service itself. The experience of constantly striving to do more with less is not sustainable – either for the organisations or the people who work in them. We have already seen a decline in the number of bureaux through closures and mergers. There is a potential spiral of declining capacity, the displacement of a generalist service by targeted work attached to specific funding, a rise in the non-face-to-face forms of service provision (telephone and online advice) in place of the immediate encounters that volunteers and clients seem to value highly. Such changes challenge the infrastructure that has sustained citizenly ways of thinking and behaving. They do so at a dangerous moment, when the wider dynamics of social and economic dislocation create dangerous times for citizens and citizenly conduct.