Public Management Review

Public-Private Partnerships: A UK case study

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Abstract

Partnerships between the state and organized civil society are examined in one area of policy, 'social exclusion', in one part of the United Kingdom, England. The question of the various objective served by partnership working is explored, followed by a review of the policy context at national and local level and the changes introduced by the Labour Government elected in 1997. The work of the Social Exclusion Unit is then reviewed, critical issues identified and performance evaluated. A lack of connectedness is diagnosed and a number of explanations – and potential remedies – considered.

PUBLIC–PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS
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Key words
Partnership, civil society, exclusion, modernization, accountability, community

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INTRODUCTION

This article deals with certain attempts that are currently being made in the United Kingdom to promote partnership between different agencies operating from within the public sector, those located in the market; and, increasingly, people and organizations from civil society. These attempts to produce co-ordinated social polices and deliver them by means of partnerships extending outside the state have combined traditional methods of economic and physical ('land-use') planning and distribution of resources with approaches through new-style managerialism.

Partnership, in the sense in which I am going to employ it, means formal relations between the state at national and local level and organized civil society. In practice, the concept of partnership can cover a wide variety of different forms of organization or relationship. Partnerships can be distinguished by the ways in which they have been created – top-down or by spontaneous generation from below, by the functions they are expected to perform, the scale at which they operate and the nature of the outcomes they can deliver, both for partners and citizens. One recent illustration of this variety is the 'Ladder of Partnership' evolved in case study work undertaken for the UK Improvement and Development Agency, which shows different partnerships performing functions ranging from exchange of information (at the bottom of the ladder) to full collaboration based on shared resources at the top   (Gaster *et al.* 1996: 9).

In the present case, I have chosen to concentrate upon partnerships in one policy area, social exclusion, in one part of the UK, England. This is partly in order to provide focus and also because, as I shall show, there is substantial practical experience to draw upon there. I have also used as evidence my personal experience of partnership working at different levels within a single English city in order to draw out some themes about the relative effectiveness of different ways of addressing social exclusion by use of partnership-related policies. Such working involves situations in which technocrats and bureaucrats meet democrats; in which the agendas of community groups and government departments have to be reconciled; an arena in which individual and collective interests come into conflict and where short-term political calculations come up against the challenge of producing long-term social and economic changes on the ground.

In ideal terms, the objectives for such partnerships can be seen as being to help reconcile greater efficiency with enlarged democracy, making government both more 'modern' and more responsive, meeting consumer demands while improving accountability, balancing individual goals and collective interests in pursuit of the common good. Seen from this perspective, the key question must be whether introducing civil society directly into the equation through active participation in partnership can improve the prospect of attaining these goals.

CONTEXT

Issues around partnership in this sense have emerged in a number of developed societies and can be seen as a 'post-welfare state' issue, in that it reflects a common experience in fully evolved welfare systems, especially in Western Europe. After the period of stability and increased prosperity of *les trentes glorieuses* between 1945 and 1975 ended, these societies fell out of love with the state and ceased to believe in its ability to deliver efficient and good quality public services. The growth of partnerships can be seen (perhaps over simply) as a way of addressing that situation: calling in other partners – first, in the immediate aftermath of the disenchantment, the market and subsequently the third sector of associations and voluntary bodies – to address the perceived failure of the state, especially in the field of welfare. The consequence has been an extensive restructuring of agencies and reconfiguration of relationships to accommodate the shift in functions produced by redistribution of responsibilities away from the state, both local and central. ('Dismantling old-style public assistance and substituting welfare pluralism.') To that extent, we are talking about a common set of developments, which have been helpfully tracked by the OECD's PUMA project.

But generalizations about these developments soon founder in the face of the political, social, legal and cultural diversity of the countries concerned. As is well known, there have been attempts to group different developments at national level into a limited number of constructs, based on approaches to welfare in those countries (see Esping-Andersen 1990). However, these are contested terms, criticized as oversimplifications and subject to modification as policies evolve. They also fail to reflect fully the character of relations between different actors – state, market and civil society – and the ways in which their differing roles interact at various levels of intervention.

To take only the most obvious example: there has been very wide variation in the role of the state and its status as partner. For example, the United States has never exhibited any great affection for the state, especially at the federal level; partnership experience there has been structured by that mistrust (Moulton and Anheier 2000). In the former Soviet Union and its satellites in East and Central Europe during the post-war period, the state was first dominant to such an extent as to exclude all prospect of partnership in any developed sense, then so weakened after the transitions of 1989/90 as to become largely ineffective as a partner (though even here the generalizations need modification). The consequences have ranged from what has been described in the USA as 'third party government' (Salamon 1987) to anarchy in the former USSR (Rose 1999).

Business as a partner also assumes widely different roles. There is a sharp contrast between the attitudes in the United States in the 'third sector' towards business, described in Shore's *The Cathedral Within* (1999) as against traditional 'European' suspicion of mission-drift in the voluntary world from too close engagement with the commercial world and its values (e.g. Beveridge 1948). However, state–business

partnerships are well developed in many western European countries and have recently begun to feature more prominently on the public policy agenda in the UK as instruments for funding and delivery of services and constructing new facilities (Fabian Commission 2000).

There have also been crucial changes in the status of civil society as a partner, as most developed societies move towards a situation in which all three sectors share the role of providing public goods, if in different constellations in different circumstances. Like Leporello in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, the third sector has acquired ambitions and does not wish to remain simply a servant. But there is a price to pay for the change of role. By becoming more closely engaged as partners, third sector organizations may put at risk the qualities that distinguish them from other players. As Adalbert Evers puts it, they 'cannot continue to demonstrate what the added value of being third-sector based is for the way they proceed and for the services they provide – in terms of social qualities which commercial competitors would not be able to provide' (2001: 223)

The character of the debate around the sharing out of the responsibilities also changes as the shape of new initiatives is increasingly being determined by tests of efficiency rather than ideology. Most countries appear to be moving towards a project rather than a policy-related approach as regime within which organizations of all kinds operate becomes increasingly rule-bound and contract-specific (Moulton and Anheier 2001). Evers comments that:

> at the level of regulatory policies and policy concepts throughout Europe, a specific type of welfare pluralism has taken shape, which defines the third sector as an additional type of provider whose future depends on the decisions of the consumers. If voluntary providers give better services, their better performance in the social markets is the source of their further existence, to be guaranteed by the mechanisms of what is seen as a kind of 'consumer democracy'.
>
> (2001: 220–1)

All these developments have helped to produce a wide variety of new forms of partnership working across Europe, with different structures and objectives. In the discussion that follows, I concentrate on those partnerships in England whose work relates directly to social exclusion. But I am well aware that other partnerships exist for different purposes, from whose experience different lessons can be drawn.

THE ENGLISH CASE

Before going on to discuss the practicalities of implementation at the local level, some context about national policy development in the English case might be helpful. In the recent past, the political construct known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and

Northern Ireland has had to accustom itself to becoming a federal system, with a degree of dispersal of power and authority from the centre in London to other countries in the UK, especially Scotland. So generalizations about partnerships and social exclusion at the national level are intended to refer mainly to England – policies on social exclusion in Scotland are significantly different and have been implemented in distinctive style.

Developments in partnership at national level

One of the consequences of the period of structural reform through which the UK passed in the 1980s was the very substantial increase in poverty in absolute terms and in inequality in distribution of income and wealth (Commission on Social Justice 1994; Hills 1996). There were persistent problems of residual poverty, linked to factors like the steep decline in manufacturing activity, consequent high unemployment, geographically concentrated, low wages (especially in the female workforce), restricted access to home ownership and pressure from demographic changes – the increase in the proportion of dependants in population. This period also saw the emergence of civil unrest and an increased level of persistent criminality on local public housing estates. All these developments had their parallels elsewhere in Europe.

The Conservative government's approach to these issues was essentially to bring in the market to redress the failures of the state through a series of policies designed to unlock enterprise. Partnership at central government level was forged with large businesses and their leadership, driven down to localities by special agencies created outside existing administrative structures and taskforces composed of civil servants and individuals selected as exhibiting enterprising characteristics – and businesslike behaviour, which were presumed to be absent from the public sector and its culture. Elected local government was largely excluded from this process which was inherently centralist and founded on giving priority to activity based on market models (Ross and Osborne 1999).

In oversimplified summary, these policies failed to deliver (Deakin and Edwards 1993). In part, this failure was simply a function of the economic cycle. But it seems clear that there were also other factors at work – lack of consent on the part of those for whom the exercise was ostensibly being conducted was certainly one of them. There was also debate about the legitimacy of initiatives not subject to democratic accountability (though how far this criticism enjoyed any popular support is not so clear). What was entirely clear, however, was that planning, in any traditional sense, was no longer part of the equation. The state's job was to be simply to hold the ring – minimal regulation designed to safeguard competition and the rule of law – and allow the not-so-hidden hand of the market to provide the solutions.

Social exclusion

At this point, the notion of *social exclusion* enters the debate. This emerged from experience of European poverty programmes and dissatisfaction with oversimplified definitions that failed to capture the totality of the experience of being poor (and also from some low politics on the part of member countries). By broadening the focus of action and introducing cultural, psychological and political factors, this approach necessarily implied the need to introduce a more diverse range of policies and underlined the importance of co-ordination between different policy initiatives.

Ruth Levitas' acute analysis (1998) offers three discourses of social exclusion and explores what they imply in terms of the policy instruments that would have to be deployed. The form she encapsulates as 'RED' sees the root cause of exclusion lying in inadequate financial resources; the second, 'SID', with lack of access to labour markets; and the third ('MUD') to cultural factors – inability or unwillingness of the excluded to act on their own behalf. The Conservative government's approach consisted of a mixture of SID and MUD, with an increasing emphasis on the latter as influences from the United States made themselves felt during the later period of the Major government (Murray 1990).

These policies also mandate action at different levels. RED is a policy which will normally be implemented by central government, through employing its powers of taxation (though it can also be the result of other approaches – neo-liberal policies have marked distributive effects. SID requires a combination of policies set at the national level and implemented by a whole range of agencies inside and outside the state at the centre and in the locality. MUD is an approach that relies largely on churches and other faith bodies to provide the moral stiffening for policies laid down in rhetorical terms and sustained by locally based institutions, at the parochial level (and its equivalent in terms of other faiths). This line of argument – around the 'remoralization' of the poor – was also influenced by communitarian discourse and concerns about threats to community cohesion and the capacities of organizations in civil society (Putnam 1993; Etzioni 1995). It served to underline the importance of building up a community sector capable of addressing these and other issues.

The approach of Labour

By the mid-1990s, as Levitas shows, there was an increasingly sympathetic response to this approach within the Labour Party as the leadership adjusted to what was seen as the imperatives of the market system and began to reach out for new allies. The social exclusion approach provided an acceptable form of discourse and offered the opportunity of sweeping up all those who should potentially be involved in any effective programme of action into what became known as the 'Big Tent' of New Labour. This allowed the Party to distance itself from RED and the public perception

that the welfare system consisted mainly of providing 'handouts' for the undeserving (compare this to Tony Blair's repeated emphasis on rights needing to be balanced by responsibilities and the importance of providing 'a handup, not a handout').

This approach was put into practice upon the election of the Labour government in 1997. The formal instrument was to be the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) established in the Cabinet Office with a direct line of responsibility to Blair, as the new Prime Minister. This was unusual both in its location at the centre of government outside the traditional departmental machinery and in its manner of working through Policy Action Teams (PATs) recruited in the large part from outside government. Initial activity centred on analysis that would provide an effective focus on geographical areas and the fine grain of local intervention. But there has been an equally important emphasis from the outset on direction from the centre about the form that action should take and what the criteria for success would be.

This approach also posed in an acute form the problem of effective co-ordination, the Prime Minister's personal support for the new initiative notwithstanding. There is in any case a deeply entrenched tradition in British governance of separate action taken independently by individual central government departments. In this instance, the SEU had from the outset two powerful competitors operating explicitly in the area of social exclusion: the Treasury (under the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown) and the newly formed Department of Environment, Transport and Regions (DETR) headed by the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott and responsible for urban, regional and local government policies.

The implementation of new policies

It was clear from the outset that an effective assault on social exclusion could not be mounted at the neighbourhood level alone. Action would be needed at all levels if these problems were to be seriously addressed. Immediate initiatives were taken by the Chancellor to promote economic regeneration, with a particular emphasis from the start on measures specifically designed to facilitate re-entry to the labour market – the New Deal, in which the voluntary sector was actively engaged as a partner. This has been, in Levitas' terms, a straightforward SID policy; but there have also been elements of RED, lightly disguised, in the Chancellor's policies on enhanced benefits for the working poor and their children and in the introduction, for the first time in Britain of a minimum wage.

In parallel, new policies introduced by the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, have focused on physical regeneration and the implementation of the strategic Single Regeneration Budget programmes, first introduced under the previous administration but now substantially modified in three directions – first, by the removal of the element of direct competition between areas which was a feature of Conservative policies and second by a change in the content of policy away from the purely physical,

'cranes on the horizon' approach pursued previously to a more balanced set of economic and social priorities. Finally, and most significant for my thesis there has been a new emphasis on policies at the regional level.

Initially, regional policies were managed by the decentralized arm of central government in the 'government offices in the regions' but increasingly regional policies are being delivered by newly created unelected bodies. Regional planning, abandoned under the Conservatives, has re-entered the scene. Debate on priorities in this area has been sharpened by devolution at national level and the emergence of new institutions in the devolved countries that have chosen to address these issues in different ways. This has led to increased emphasis on regional action within England – the setting up of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), some decentralization of activity to government offices in the regions as part of the attempt to create a regional tier of activity that draws on both the resources of central government agencies and the strengths of the locality and can engage the market in so doing. In his recent critique of this approach Robson (2000) has drawn attention to the ambiguities of the role of these agencies, which may, as critics assert end up merely creating a 'partnership of partnerships'.

The logical alternative to regional planning introduced top-down by unaccountable bodies might seem to lie at the level immediately below the regions, in elected local government. The expectation among local authorities was that the election of a Labour government would shift the emphasis back to democratic accountability and provide an element of partnership in shaping new programmes as well as in delivering them. That expectation has not been satisfied in practice. There has been a substantially increased central government investment in special policies and programmes that address issues in and around social exclusion; but the form and content of these policies has been essentially *dirigiste*: policies have been 'rolled out at the centre' and structured in ways that reflect the interests and responsibilities of government departments and the ministers in charge of them. These have produced an elaborate pattern of cross-hatching on the ground (*'sur le terrain'*), generated by separate interventions setting up a whole series of new zones with tsars to supervise them, targets to be met and performance indicators to be produced, all wrapped in a tight cocoon branded as providing 'Best Value' – New Labour's distinctive theme for local administration. (Under this approach, councils have to review all their services over a five-year period; these are subject to central inspection with the sanction that failing services may be handed over the third parties to run.)

For local government itself there has been a 'modernization' agenda and its application – the introduction of elected mayors and cabinets. Essentially, this is about structural change, not the content of programmes. There has been a streamlining of functions (a progressive withdrawal from social housing) and the development of an enabling role, moving towards a system of community governance, co-ordinated by councils exercising oversight of policy formation and planning rather than taking responsibility for implementation (Department of Environment, Transport and

Regions 1999). Partnership is an essential element in this approach – which also raises critical questions of accountability.

The work of the Social Exclusion Unit

The new approach promoted by the Social Exclusion Unit therefore lies alongside a plethora of other new policies introduced over the first three years of the Labour government (1997–2000). Over that period, the issue of co-ordination between different levels of activity and different agencies operating at those different levels has been posed in acute form. To use current New Labour jargon, the key question has become: are these policies properly 'joined-up'? Even within government, there are doubts: the Cabinet Office itself has commented critically about 'initiatives causing confusion, not enough co-ordination and too much time spent negotiating the system rather than delivering' (Hetherington 2000).

The SEU's own work (1998) has eventually produced a *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal* (DETR 2001), which is now in place: its major objectives are to force up standards in housing, health, employment, education and public order in deprived neighbourhoods by setting ambitious targets, using funds allocated from the Treasury's spending review, co-ordinated by a neighbourhood renewal unit in the DETR. The means by which the programme is to be implemented puts special emphasis on management at neighbourhood level and specific funds placed at the disposal of communities.

The concept of *Local Strategic Partnerships* is presented as one of the key ideas which will unlock the potential of participation and unblock the obstacles. Thus:

> The idea is to encourage a mechanism that would help core public services to achieve their individual targets for deprived areas via joint working. LSPs would provide the mechanism to help services to work with each other, with communities and with the private and voluntary sectors. They could also help to simplify some of complexity of existing planning and partnership requirements.
>
> (PAT17 report: 77)

Policy on social exclusion therefore involves as a fundamental principle partnership between community in a variety of forms and agencies of various kinds operating within the neighbourhood. This form of partnership does have a past history, which goes back to experiments in the 1970s. That history is often one of conflict and there is a legacy of suspicion, still detectable twenty years later (Gaster *et al.* 1996). But the principle of closer collaboration on a local scale was resuscitated in the 1990s and formalized as partnerships embodied in local compacts between local authorities and local voluntary bodies (Osborne 1999; Taylor and Craig 2001).

It should be stressed that there are important elements of flexibility within the SEU initiatives – the laying down of precise (overprecise, critics would say) numerical

targets for performance, which has been one of the notable features of other programmes, is less rigidly applied in this context. Nevertheless, the matching of available financial and human resources to needs in the locality remains a tricky operation, at best and one that raises in acute forms issue of leadership, accountability and responsiveness. It is also vital here not to lose sight of the importance of spontaneity as an operating principle in civil society at local level and the role of organization not just in innovation but also in challenging orthoxodies and where necessary opposing polices and campaigning against their implementation.

So how can these different strands of policy and practice to be brought together? They represent different tiers of action, in terms of the geographical level at which intervention is focused and engage different actors. The situation is in constant flux as new initiatives are invented and implemented and the role of regional institutions is first downgraded and now (2001) strongly emphasized. The recent *Urban White Paper* (DETR 2000) represents an attempt to coordinate by using geographical focus but setting up a series of policy networks that link these different levels of action. This reflects the architecture of the New Labour Big Tent, now fully extended in place: a kind of meta-partnership with government providing the guyropes to connect different segments – and hold the tent down.

COMMENTARY

My own experience on the ground has been at a variety of levels – a strategic city-wide partnership, a policy-specific approach to regeneration; local community-based action and the search for democratic accountability. It has led me to conclude that there are important questions thrown up by this type of intervention which have to be addressed as policies are developed, if a balanced approach is to be sustained. For example:

- Can effective partnerships be introduced top-down; and if so how is the process best managed?
- What forms of structure and means of accountability are appropriate (or necessary) in such partnerships (the question of management)?
- How far is community involvement in partnership (the so-called bottom-up approach) practical (or even desirable)?
- Do 'asymmetries of power' necessarily compromise relationships entered into on a partnership basis?
- Can or should partnerships develop an identity of their own – even to the point of becoming legally and constitutionally established as separate entities?
- Finally, how can relationships be constructed between different levels of activity,

without introducing stultifying additional levels of bureaucracy? And who will co-ordinate the co-ordinators?

In order to answer these questions satisfactorily, ways have to be found of relating the different levels of activity described earlier in this article more closely to one another. Old-style, 'rational' planning organized in hierarchical tiers where, in theory at least, each system fits inside the larger one above it in a series of Chinese boxes will no longer serve. New-style, 'inclusive' policies require a more flexible approach in which resources will be deployed at different times and places and the pattern of provision adjusted to meet demands for the base of the system as well as from on top. When introduced at the local level, this approach is sometimes described as 'community governance'. It depends for its success, as several commentators have pointed out, on developing a degree of mutual trust which allows initiatives to be taken by individual partners, provided that they fit within a set of commonly accepted values (Ross and Osborne 1999).

But this approach is being promoted by a government that is hungry for results and obsessed with measurement of the minutiae of performance and in thrall to notions of leadership derives from private sector models. Devolution of responsibility threatens this form of control and cuts across the style of management on which it depends. As Rod Rhodes has observed, the Labour government fears what it has itself facilitated. In this climate, to attempt to insist on the importance of local democratic account-ability can too easily be presented as 'inefficient' and the consent of the community, however, defined, too often taken for granted.

Furthermore, in real life, far from Whitehall, communities are often profoundly conservative in their attitudes and their closer engagement with policy development can result in resistance to change and even in extreme cases conscious discrimination against minorities, variously defined. Yet it is also important to remember that the right to refuse to engage with policy making – or even implementation – is an important safeguard for civil society.

This lack of connectedness might matter less if there were a coherent philosophy to which all participants at their various levels in the enterprise could be expected to adhere and which would provide the common values on which partnership can be based. But the determined pragmatism of the Labour government has so far precluded that. To be in favour of social inclusion is no more than being against sin: and to welcome partnership as a way of securing it does little more than state the obvious. Hard issues of potential conflicts if interest – between the individual and collective concerns, in particular, still remain to be addressed. Only recently has Gordon Brown shown signs of being concerned with wider questions of long-term social objectives rather than questions of efficient delivery of services and effective distribution of resources. His call for 'civic renewal, grounded in tackling injustice through opportu-nity and building civic strength through responsibility' (Brown 2000: 11) is based on

a firm commitment to devolution of power, first to regional and then to community level. It remains to be seen how the various strands will be connected.

CONCLUSIONS

First, I offer some provisional answers to the six issues I set out above, based partly upon practical experience. This is often messy and does not necessarily lead to clear-cut conclusions (see Hexham and Vangen 2000). The application of these lessons outside the particular circumstances in which they have emerged must also be limited. But, nonetheless, taking these issues in turn:

- *Top-down partnership initiatives*. These have some strengths here in terms of setting goals; but there is a risk of 'lowest common denominator' consensus – and also dangers if groups try to move ahead without keeping some key members (see Hexham and Vangen 2000 here). There is a need to tailor tasks to the capacity of the organization – the influence of personalities is inescapable here. There are dilemmas of selection (and probable elitism) against inclusiveness; effective size against 'transparency'. The brief should be sufficiently loose to encourage a degree of innovation and allow scope for change as circumstances alter.
- *Accountability*. The plenipotentiary or delegate issue – do individuals represent their agencies and have authority to deliver them or are their actions subject to ratification outside – or are they mere observers? The problem of potential 'capture' of participants often preoccupies smaller organizations. Participatory democracy mandates a different approach (and working class social democratic organizations have traditional methods of coping with this not brought into play in present circumstances). The accountability of permanent staff employed by partnership bodies is also potentially problematic – a 'strong' management structure may cut across the partnership ethos of consensus operation.
- *Community involvement*. The engagement of communities is a keystone of the current government's approach. But it raises issues around the validity of identification of communities as the basic building block and the consequences of competition for access to scarce resources. Other issues include religious groups and their claims: providing access for groups not territorially concentrated or defined. For communities themselves, however defined, there remains an issue of how far engagement is justified – past experience here is not altogether reassuring (consultation fatigue, overlay of repeated experiments without sustained commitment). All this is well addressed in the Social Exclusion Unit's first report. One reason for abstaining is in the next key issue:
- *Presumed asymmetries of power*. It is often argued that partnership can never be a genuine exchange because the state (or in some instances business) possesses a near monopoly of power and resources. This lies behind much resistance to the

notion of formal co-operation ('cooption') and entering into agreements – compacts in current UK terminology. In practice, this seems less evident than might be expected. The vulnerability of state partners (especially local government under pressure from the centre). And there are other sources of power and authority – the capacity of civil society organizations to employ media and bring pressure to bear through political machinery ('backbench' councillors are one means of engagement).

- *Independent identity.* There is a risk of a 'new magistracy' moving from meeting to meeting and institutionalizing what should be interim measures addressing specific needs. However, there are counter-arguments for continuity (embodied in that peculiarly British invention, the 'standing conference'?). Occam's razor ('entities are not to be needlessly multiplied') is not a bad principle!
- *Linkages.* The 'joined-up governance' issue remains a central problem, and not just for government itself. There is ample evidence from regeneration work at local level of lack of connections between new government initiatives and their regional level equivalents. Carley (2000) has shown how the absence of a coherent framework to which all partners can subscribe has compromised the success of previous initiatives.

Finally, there are the broader issues with which this article began. Does our experience to date enable us to say with confidence that civil society organizations have unique characteristics that mean they will bring added value as partners to policies directed towards the socially excluded or designed to regenerate deprived areas? Certainly, it has been claimed that they provide assets for such partnerships that cannot be obtained from the state or through the market (Evers 2001: 223). Does the evidence support this contention? Is it possible to go on from this to argue that they are also able to help secure a more effective means of 'joining up' policies on the ground – by providing, in the currently fashionable term, 'bridging' as well as 'bonding' social capital (Putnam 2000)? Do they, third, help to promote a 'better' form of democracy – a participative rather than merely representative form, in which a superior form of accountability emerges as a natural consequence of the closeness of the providers to the consumers of services? Finally, can civil society organizations, in taking on the role of innovative and responsive suppliers of services to the excluded, combine that role with the wider civil society function of calling agencies dealing with the excluded to account for the quality of what is being provided?

The evidence currently available does not yet allow clear-cut conclusions to be reached. The risks are well known: for example, sectarianism among civil society bodies, especially faith-based groups and disregard of individual or minority rights. There are dangers of clientelism (the darker side of networks and trust) in the way in which they operate. If such bodies are to be engaged in partnership working for the common good – and the view that they should be is now virtually universal – then much must turn on the terms of engagement and the willingness of governments both

central and local to take risks and allow partnerships to develop in different patterns to accommodate local circumstances. In such a scenario, the state may facilitate (by capacity building) but cannot engage in detailed direction. On this, the evidence so far is contradictory. Good intentions have been loudly proclaimed; and the Labour government achieved in 2001 a second full term in which they can translate promises into practice. Five years further on we should be better able to judge whether government, central and local, has had the confidence to allow processes to develop naturally – and on occasion fail – or whether the Old Adam of central control has reasserted itself.

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