New Partnerships and Output Politics

Introduction

We have seen that since the early 1970s central government has been unhappy with the service provided by local government. Margaret Thatcher was a severe critic of local government actions and it was no surprise that during her time as prime minister a number of measures were introduced to provide alternative sources of service delivery. This process was dramatic and hundreds of new agencies and quangos have been created. Removing power from local government has been hailed as part of a process of decentralisation, yet distinguished and far from hysterical observers of politics go so far as to argue that local democracy and accountability have been seriously challenged (Jenkins, 1995). Led by the powerful political force that was Margaret Thatcher, central government increased its control over many aspects of public life. That process has not been reversed by succeeding governments. Since New Labour’s election, what does appear to have changed is the government’s willingness to publish output targets and then report its progress (favourable or otherwise) towards their achievement, arguably giving a greater measure of legitimacy to its centralising tendencies.

This chapter begins by examining some of the changes in the British system of governance in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The creation of the new and extensive range of agencies, quangos and private companies which are now involved in the public policy process at sub-national level has introduced new key actors to local governance networks. After a brief outline of the ‘policy network’ approach, I address the question of how far such networks can be ‘mapped’ in any useful fashion. Without the safeguard of direct electoral accountability offered by local government, such networks may be unaccountable,
unrepresentative and dominated by the political concerns of central government actors. New Labour’s promotion of action zones promises greater community involvement in decision making and I assess the relevance of such claims. The argument that the policy process is now output driven and dominated by the concerns of central government is assessed by particular reference to Health Action Zones.

From government to governance

The long-held view that a public–private divide is, as far as community decision making goes, both ethically proper and desirable is one that still dominates much political discourse. Also, the proposition that legitimacy and accountability are best achieved via a formal representative process still prevails; certainly, the public and private sector elites interviewed for this book largely shared this view. The belief that decision making in the community interest should be both public and transparent is also deeply held. It is not only the belief in the desirability of such a process that still prevails, its continuing existence is often taken for granted by participants and observers. None of these beliefs stands up to empirical investigation when examining the local and regional political process in Britain. The political and structural changes of the late 1970s onwards have not adjusted the process of government – they have fundamentally changed its nature.

The changes during the last quarter of the twentieth century in the way Britain is governed have been influenced by a wide variety of social, economic and political forces, but two major developments of the 1980s have largely contributed to the current system of fragmented local governance; (1) the so-called ‘managerial revolution’ characterised most memorably by CCT and the ‘Next Steps’ programme, and (2) the spread of quasi-government which accompanied the Thatcherite reformist agenda of those years. The movement towards market-influenced solutions, emphasising what became known as New Public Management (NPM), has transformed the public sector (Hood, 1991; Rhodes, 1996). The driving force behind this agenda was new right ideology, which stressed (among other things) a need to reduce the size of the ‘budget-maximising’ state bureaucracy and a belief in the superior efficiency of the private sector. It could also be argued that a deep rooted dislike and distrust of local government drove some of the proponents of change. Although members of the Thatcher government reject this, as I have already noted there appears little doubt about the feelings of her and her closest acolytes (Jenkins, 1995, pp. 41–4).