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Tony Blair: Consumerism and Community

The theoretical and historical discussion undertaken so far indicates that political, economic and social shifts by 1997 had combined to give greater power and significance to the individual as the consumer of public services. However, the Conservatives had not consolidated a consumerist citizenship regime by 1997, and were resistant to some of the inflationary pressures of consumerism in public services. When New Labour came to power therefore it found a transitional citizenship regime, with new charter rights for users and some extension of choice, but little sign that services themselves were being reworked around their users. Policy actors therefore had the option of moving more resolutely in the direction of consumerism, or of pursuing an alternative citizenship regime.

The three chapters that follow use content analysis of speeches and documents, along with interview data, to explore different aspects of New Labour’s approach to public services and assess how far it opted for the consumerist approach. The definition of a consumerist citizenship regime is as identified in Chapter 3: focusing on the individual service user; driven by the user’s subjective preferences; and utilising the standardisation or differentiation narratives of public service. A set of keywords are identified here to explore the language used to refer to the users of public services and the narratives constructed around them.

This chapter analyses the speeches of Tony Blair, who became Prime Minister after Labour’s election victory in May 1997. The next chapter explores the detailed policy aspects of the citizenship regime by considering government white and green papers. The citizenship regime at local level is the focus of Chapter 8. Together these chapters help to provide an insight into the extent to which a consistent consumerist solution set is being developed between levels of government, between...
services and over time. The chapter begins by discussing the measures of consumerism, building on the discussion of consumerism and public service narratives in Chapter 3. It then goes on to analyse the use of language in the 193 speeches made by Blair from May 1997 to December 2005.

**Developing measures of consumerism**

As discussed in Chapter 2, a key indicator of the citizenship regime is the discourse used by policy actors (politicians and bureaucrats) within central and local government. To understand how they frame the solution set it is necessary to understand the narratives they construct around public services. In particular sources need to be identified that test the following:

1. In the texts, how do policy actors refer to people: do they use service conditional or non-service conditional terms?  
2. In the texts, do policy actors accord particular weight to the subjective preferences and expectations of users, over other sources of knowledge?  
3. In the texts, do policy actors take a consequentialist position, prioritising individual utility maximisation over structural or ideological aspects of service delivery?  
4. How significant are the three narratives in the texts (standardisation, differentiation or coproduction) and what is the balance between them?

There are various potential sources for policy actors’ discourse on public services, including speeches, documents and interviews. To develop valid and reliable insights into the perspectives of policy actors it is helpful to make use of a diverse range of material. Validity in this context is best explained as ‘the extent to which a measuring procedure represents the intended, and only the intended, concept’ (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 112). Through triangulating different methods, each utilising different sources, it is possible to maximise the validity of the analysis, using the results of documentary content analysis and interviewing to corroborate each other, for example (Webb *et al.*, 1996, pp. 12–7; Davies, 2001, p. 75).

Here, content analysis of documents was combined with qualitative analysis of interviews and focus group data, to test for an orientation towards the service user and the privileging of the user’s perspective, and to probe the balance between narratives. Speeches of the Prime