



Public Service Futures

We are constantly being told that expanding 'choice' in public services is a good thing. But is it?

Conventional wisdom, in central government circles at least, argues that the way to improve public services is to introduce more choice into public service provision.

Let the fresh breeze of market – or quasi-market – forces blow through public service bureaucracies and, so the argument goes, inefficient and low-performing service providers will be forced to improve.

The mantra 'choice is good' lies, for example, at the heart of the Labour Government's current approach to reform of the National Health Service.

But what if citizens are more interested in quality than choice?

Before we consider the limits of choice in a public service context, consider, for a moment, that even in the world of retailing, modern leaders have already spotted the limits to choice.

Stuart Rose, new chief executive of Marks & Spencer, has decided to reduce choice. He recognises that choice in, and of itself, is not the answer to winning back customers. 'Do we need 23 varieties of tomato?' is the question he raised when he took up his duties in May.

His short answer is 'no'. He is now busy slashing back the number of product lines, and is working to focus the company on a smaller range of high-quality goods at attractive prices.

The key point is that Mr Rose recognises that there are costs associated with the provision of choice. He argues that customers want good quality and value for money, not choice per se. And if a leading retailer believes expanding choice is not the answer, where does that leave public services?

It should be obvious but, given current trends, it needs saying again. Public services are not private businesses competing in a market to attract customers.

Public services are far more important than that. They underpin the quality of life in modern society.

Janet and Robert Denhardt in their new book, *The New Public Service: Serving, Not Steering* (M E Sharpe, 2003), put it this way, 'Public servants do not deliver customer service, they deliver democracy'.

Because public services are not profit-seeking companies, they operate according to entirely different core values and principles. These values explain why many councillors and officers dedicate themselves with such enthusiasm to service in local government.

The Denhardts examine these values in depth, and argue that the dignity and worth of public service are being neglected in current debates. They argue that the focus on customers, as opposed to citizens, is narrowing our vision, and that the values of democracy, citizenship and the public interest



Choice is not always such a good thing. UK retail giant Marks & Spencer has just agreed to reduce the range of tomatoes it sells in stores, in order to focus on quality and value. Could this be a lesson for public services in future?

The limits of choice

For the latest in his series on the future of public services, Robin Hambleton argues that the concept of choice is not necessarily relevant to local democracy

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must return to centre stage. One of the important points they are making is that public service managers face different challenges from their colleagues in the private sector. If choice has its limitations in the private sector, it is even closer to the margins of significance in public policy.

There are, in my view, several reasons why the obsession with choice is holding back UK public services.

First, many public services are concerned with 'public goods' – they seek benefits for society as a whole, rather than simply for individuals and households.

High standards of public safety, attractive parks, clean public squares and streets, top-quality education, fair and well-run elections, and a safety net of social care – these are just some obvious examples of noble aspirations for a civilised society.

We, as citizens, want these values to be pursued by our elected politicians, since we benefit as a collectivity. 'Choice' between providers is irrelevant – these 'goods' – or benefits – are public. They are for everyone.

Second, political leaders and public managers are often concerned

certain groups receive priority ahead of others? Should some services be withdrawn in order to provide new kinds of service?

These are all political questions which can only be addressed through a democratic process.

Third, a range of important public services is designed to regulate behaviour and impose limits on the rights of individuals. In this context, the task of public service is explicitly to diminish the choice of citizens, rather than expand it.

Environmental health officers, social workers and town planning officers are just some of the local government professional community who work to improve local quality of life by implementing legislation which limits the choices of individuals.

And very important work it is too. Janet and Robert Denhardt have given these issues careful attention and conclude that we need to reframe current debates about public services.

'We want words like "democracy" and "citizen" and "pride" to be more prevalent in both our speech and our behaviour, than words like "market" and "competition" and "customers".'

They offer an attractive and lifting vision of public service – one that encourages public servants to look within themselves at the soul of what they do, and to consider afresh the meaning of public service.

At the heart of their position is the correct observation that public service is not an economic construct, but a political one.

This means the improvement of public services needs to be attentive not only to the preferences of 'customers' but also to the distribution of power in society.

Those who care about public services should, then, question robustly the present obsession with the 'choice is good' mantra. Leaders and senior managers need to be much more vigorous in initiating conversations about the value and nobility of public service.

Increasing choice has a part to play in service improvement, but it not be an end in itself – and, in many important areas of public service, it is irrelevant.

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