

16. Evolving the future

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Late in 2006, the Australian federal government published an advertisement in the *Australian*, the country's national newspaper. It announced a new agreement on social security between the Kingdom of Norway and the Government of Australia, beginning on new year's day 2007. The agreement begins: 'Wishing to strengthen the existing friendly relations between the two countries, and resolved to coordinate their social security systems and to eliminate double coverage for workers, the parties have agreed . . .'

If I meet pension requirements in Norway, I can still receive the benefit if I then move to Australia. If I have worked in both countries, I can add together the years and put them towards entitlements in whichever country I retire in. While the systems remain separate, it becomes possible to personalise my participation in them.

This kind of activity is growing. It illustrates how greater interconnectedness across the world prompts collaboration between governments – separate sovereign entities – in order to solve shared problems and make life easier and better for citizens. Social insurance and welfare, for so long conceived as the product of different nation state systems, are becoming internationalised. The governments do not merge their schemes, or try to run them in exactly the same way. But they agree that time spent working and paying taxes in one country can be treated as equivalent to doing the same in another.

As bilateral agreements between specific governments add up, they

slowly contribute to the formation of an institutional environment – a space shaped by rules – which can be far bigger and more significant than any one of its formal elements.

These are collaborative relationships *between* governments, but the same principle applies to collaboration within societies, and within governments themselves; the state is not a single, monolithic entity, but a proliferation of organisations, teams, interests and centres of power. Collaboration between government and society, and between states seeking peace, wealth and security, is as old as states themselves. It is part of the process through which governments have emerged,¹ but it is becoming more important for three linked reasons.

The first is the growth of connectedness, or connexity.² If every problem is connected to something or someone else, then collaboration to solve it is logically necessary. Second, networks, especially the internet, make collaboration easier, cheaper and therefore more diverse and wide-ranging through a range of tools, practices and cultures.

Third, reform of the state over the last 30 years has, as Sue Goss points out, pluralised and multiplied the number of agencies involved in public service provision. Privatisation, contestability and decentralisation mean that, where government is seeking to create a public good, it is increasingly likely to do it through collaboration with organisations in other sectors. Changing citizen expectations – of less deference, more flexibility and better service – reinforce this shift.³

Vertical and lateral

We as citizens have become used to an image of government which is separate from the rest of society, defined by its coercive nature and its martial roots, logically distinct from the worlds of market and civil society. There are good reasons why governments should be perceived as such, and why they should want to be – to achieve the impartial administration of justice, for example, and to maintain the monopoly on the legitimate use of force by avoiding the capture of power by specific interests in society.⁴

In fact, the need to collaborate is designed into government as a result of democracy and constitutionalism. The separation of powers into distinct, independent entities is the ultimate political design principle for collaboration. It seeks to ensure that no one agency or clique can impose its own priorities wholesale. To put boundaries around institutional authority, we need defined functions and vertical powers. To create solutions across complex fields, they need lateral relationships and capabilities.

Combining these effectively leads to successful government. The consequence is that successful politics and policy require persuasion, bargaining, compromise, sharing of benefits and, even if indirectly, learning between different players and territories.

This need to combine specialisation and integration, command and consent, competition and collaboration casts fresh light on the value of federal systems of government, and points to why they have emerged as a way to balance the competing interests and identities of separate communities with the interests and needs that they simultaneously share. As Robert Wright wryly notes:

In 1500 BC, there were around 600,000 autonomous polities on the planet. Today, after many mergers and acquisitions, there are 193 autonomous polities. At this rate, the planet should have a single government any day now.⁵

But while the force of history encourages unification, the merger process has been accompanied by enormous growth in the lateral connections and relationships used to manage across and between governments, giving them adaptive flexibility alongside economies of scale. As a result, institutional design has an enormous impact on how a given system solves collective problems. Federal systems such as the US, Swiss, Canadian and Australian, designed pragmatically to give a self-balancing weight to different constituencies, can encourage both competition *and* collaboration between members of the same federation with positive-sum consequences.

Renegotiating the terms of federation, in order to achieve

structural reform which creates positive-sum economic and social effects, provides us with a clear example of the benefits, and the difficulty, of achieving collaborative governance. Australia's current National Reform Agenda, in which federal and state governments of different parties have committed to negotiating shared investment in reforms designed to boost the long-run capabilities of the Australian population through human capital, regulatory and infrastructure investment, provides a working example.⁶

Beyond the current options

All these reasons help to explain why governments have moved significantly towards a fresh emphasis on collaboration in the last decade – an emphasis that is moving from a policy focus on improving 'service' towards the issues of personalisation and co-production that require more radical redesign of services and new organisational forms.

The organisational designs which government can draw on to pursue these relationships are also expanding in range, from contract management and Memoranda of Understanding to joint ventures and a range of network designs. Sir Michael Barber, pioneer of public service reform, recently argued that there are essentially only three models of reform – command and control, quasi-markets and a 'combination of devolution and transparency' – in which governments delegate to or contract with service providers and then hold them accountable.⁷

But there is a much broader range of system models and reform options available if you recognise the range that can evolve, or emerge, from different combinations of Barber's three basic types. If you build an architecture for collaboration, as well as competition and control, and recognise that the strategies of *all* organisations are likely to evolve in response to changing conditions, then a far more diverse range of possibilities comes into view.

This broader view allows us to recognise the range of platforms that government can use to offer services, and the combinations of organisations that can be involved in them. Goldsmith and Eggers, for

example, identify channel partnerships, information dissemination networks, supply chains, service contracts and ‘civic switchboards’ on their spectrum; the burgeoning science of networks could provide many more.⁸

Yet even this range does not cover what is arguably the most important area for the future of public services: the role of government in shaping an environment through which *citizens themselves* can collaborate and produce various kinds of good. This matters because the social and economic conditions that drive collaboration reinforce the need for governments to go beyond their current institutional options.

Citizens innovate through collaboration

These are the conditions that lead Yochai Benkler to advocate social, or ‘commons-based’ production as the most important new way to meet diverse human needs. The same set of broad changes leads Charles Leadbeater to emphasise the possibilities of mass creativity, or ‘We think’, in which many institutional and economic barriers to collaborative problem-solving are broken down and collaboration for mutual gain can happen on mass scale and at great distance in everything from the organisation of work and the production of energy to the provision of education.⁹

Benkler argues that this shift allows many more ways for people to meet their own needs by creating services, activities, culture for themselves. He also maintains that these production processes inevitably draw on the resources generated by the creativity of others. These resources are the ‘commons’ from which we find raw materials to shape our own personal efforts, as well as the comparisons and sources of inspiration which we use to ground our sense of who we are and what we want.

Social production is happening already; in informal networks of learning, social care and work coordination, in sports clubs and local health centres where shared social activities contribute to wellbeing and to better health outcomes. It is intertwined with the architecture of professional service delivery, and often obscured by the collection

of statistics which highlight only the more formal processes.

The dominant institutional frameworks through which public responses to human need are pursued – the competitive field of the market and the command-based domain of the state – are too narrow for the reality created by an evolving society. That is why partnership and joint venture have become part of the government repertoire. But crucially, the new forms of production can evolve into larger-scale structures capable of supporting mass-scale activities, and therefore competing with the scale of industrial production or of government procurement, but using quite different rules of participation. As Benkler puts it:

These architectures and organisational models allow both independent creation that coexists and coheres in usable patterns and interdependent cooperative enterprises in the form of peer-production processes.¹⁰

Traditionally, the scope for activity driven by ‘non-instrumental’ motivations is ascribed to the civic realm and third sector of non-profit, non-governmental organisations (and to the private realm of family and friendship networks). But the boundaries of this category are fuzzy, ranging from the tiny to the multinational, and intersecting with state funding and market trading in numerous ways. The emergence of collaborative production means that such ‘social production’ processes can be intertwined with activities and institutions that are grounded firmly in both market and state, not hived off artificially into a catch-all category of third or community sector organisations.

The significance of this shift for the shape of what we currently call public services is huge, given the stage that public service reform has reached in many countries. The monolithic, catch-all provision of the past is widely recognised as an undesirable platform for the future. But the current range of reform options, particularly those focused solely on the privatisation of services and assets and shifting the burden of risk onto individuals, is equally unpalatable.

Yet in countries which are ageing, diversifying and shifting further towards service-based economies, new ways to intertwine productive economic capacity with social investment are urgently needed. The greatest need is exactly at the interface between self-provision by individuals and families and formal service provision.

This is partly because the pattern of human need is shifting, in wealthy industrialised societies, in ways that make the traditional methods of paying for public services unsustainable, and the traditional methods of organising and regulating them ineffective. As the burden of disease shifts towards the chronic, and the nature of work becomes intertwined with the expectation of continuous learning, new patterns of production for these goods are needed which can simultaneously personalise and replenish the commons on which they draw. This should be the goal of the collaborative state.

A glance at some of the other pieces in this collection, and at Demos's past catalogue, shows that this is exactly what is happening, from below, in the field of public service provision. Collaborative service design by organisations operating together in local areas is the foundation of effective co-production between citizens and government. The collaborative state has to include those organisations and networks that can mediate between individual need and universal rules; it is through that process of mediation that service can be personalised, responsibility shared and value co-created.

But two great historical barriers stand in the way of the ability of governments to practise and promote collaboration across all their functions. The first is that the establishment of modern, reliable, professionally run states rests on the ability to prevent corruption, which is a form of illicit collaboration. This means that many of the protocols, routines and instincts of government are dedicated to screening out unwanted contact, or channelling it through dedicated routes, reinforcing what can be experienced from the outside as rigid and opaque.

Second, government grew through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries around the idea of functionally based, professional services

in which expert knowledge was organised into separate units – silos – and governed through vertical chains of hierarchy and accountability.

An unholy alliance of history, accountability and power combine to hold this approach in place. Of course, preserving accountability to parliament and encouraging responsible use of public budgets is important, especially in complex systems. But there is a simpler reason for the stasis, one which public servants and politicians can rarely own up to in public: the struggle for power. One former Conservative cabinet minister remarked to me soon after the 1997 election that trying to reform Whitehall departments meant dealing with ‘feudal baronies’, a remark that chimes uncomfortably with Henry Tam’s observation that the barons have become postmodern under New Labour.

While political power is measured by the size of the departmental portfolio, and civil service careers progress towards the pinnacle of hierarchy through control of ever-expanding chunks of organisation, the tendency towards organisational co-production at the top of government is always going to be limited. This, of course, is well known, but how to overcome it is not. It matters not so much because everything depends on these tiers of government, but because they reinforce a culture and a set of assumptions which weaken the possibilities of collaboration elsewhere.

Officially, government still lives in a Newtonian world where every reaction produces its own absolute effects, which should be separable and measurable in isolation from all other activities. In this world, policy rationally sets the objectives of delivery organisations, allocates resources, management control and accountability, and the outcomes of, say, a hospital reorganisation or a crime reduction target should be achieved through the vertical transfer of instructions and incentives down and up the chain of command.

This tendency is reinforced by the ‘principal–agent’ mindset of the New Public Management, in which the strategic task is always to establish who is really in charge, a precondition allocating ‘operational’ accountability. But as Charles Sabel argues, the separation of strategy from execution is repeatedly undermined by

the realities of implementation and the fact that the operators are usually those with the greatest circumstantial knowledge about how things work.¹¹

The erosion of these assumptions is part of a much deeper shift in our understanding of the nature of organisations, away from the attempt to make them work like machines following commands, and towards a view of more complex sets of relationships, in which people act for a mix of motivations and where change arises from both conscious, formal decision-making and from a constant process of adaptation, adjustment and improvisation.

Beyond this shift, as Sabel points out, ‘the canonical form of this organization is federated and open’. While higher level organisations (parliament, government departments) set general outcome goals and boundaries of action, the ability of the overall system to find effective solutions, and to adapt successfully to changes in the external environment, depends on the ongoing interaction between rule setting from above and lesson learning, in the light of experience, from below.

As Sabel argues:

These federated organizations respond to the problem of bounded rationality not primarily by decomposing complex tasks into simple ones, but rather by creating search networks that allow actors quickly to find others who can in effect teach them what to do because they are already solving a like problem.¹²

A collaborative state is one that can reshape its own actions, investments and architecture around this search for continuous improvement through learning.

Evolving the future

But can government really embrace such a future? Private firms are arguably far more comfortable in a Darwinian world, not least because survival of the fittest is an accepted principle. Can the art of

governing develop into the capacity to design rules and project goals for complex sets of organisations, learning systematically from their efforts and designing regimes for collaboration that maximise the public value they create?

The range of current practice suggests that collaborative innovation is rich, varied and growing. The growing difficulty of maintaining traditional service models will continue to prompt innovation from below. Much harder to achieve, though, is the adaptation of large-scale institutional architecture. But even here the future of collaboration is more likely to evolve from the growth and spread of new practices than from wholesale structural change imposed from above.

The key is to understand how to use policy design and the management of implementation to model, incentivise and then learn systematically from patterns of collaborative action. As these approaches become more visible and more successful, the feedback they create on what succeeds needs to be channelled systematically into the recurrent decision-making cycles such as budget allocation. Unfortunately, the connections between evidence, practice and budget allocation remain weak in most systems.

But opportunities to reshape the state through collaboration abound. There is no reason, for example, why American cities, Australian states and the EU should not collaborate to develop solutions to climate change through carbon trading; it is already beginning to happen. Equally, it should become a core part of government's role to co-design and invest in the architecture, enabling the wider public realm of institutions and organisations to collaborate in ways that make co-production, or social production, a visible feature of everyday life.

Governments can do this by:

- redesigning public procurement processes to encourage federations and network-based consortia to come forward with innovative solutions to cross-cutting public needs
- experimenting with changed departmental structures

- based more heavily on teams and projects, which reward effective cross-organisational collaboration and make senior managers accountable when it fails
- adjusting parliamentary accountability regimes to seek evidence of learning and intelligent explanation, rather than mechanically searching for proof of the gap between rule and reality
 - building ‘open architecture’ designed to make collaboration easier by helping public agencies, firms, civic organisations and so on to find each other on the basis of working on similar problems
 - investing in modelling and forecasting techniques which examine the behaviour of complex fields of agents adapting to various conditions and environmental changes, rather than the limiting assumptions of classical economic theory or the linear predictions of traditional implementation planning
 - seeking to design public agencies capable of taking a long-term, population-based approach to the outcomes they seek, for example in preventive health care, and rewarding them with assets and new responsibilities in return for long-term outcome improvement
 - building ‘learning systems’ which seek to nurture and scale up innovation through rapid cycles of design, application and feedback across groups of organisations working on a common problem, and rewarding consortia that come up with successful innovations.

The collaborative state mixes up many roles, powers and assumptions that have held for more than a century of modern government. But the forces undermining these modern myths have already been unleashed. Reformers are already seeking new routes through which to achieve large-scale change, and new models for collective provision in diverse societies. These new patterns, driven by both collaboration and competition, will emerge from below.

Policy, regulation, funding and learning systems then have a huge impact on how they are taken up and spread, and who gets access to the value that they create. Collaboration, pursued with discipline, is the route to the redesign of our large-scale services and governance structures. The challenge of leadership is to focus it on the problems that government exists to solve.

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Notes

- 1 R Wright, *NonZero: The logic of human destiny* (New York: Vintage, 2001).
- 2 G Mulgan, *Connexity: How to Live in a Connected World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1997).
- 3 S Zuboff and J Maxmin, *The Support Economy: Why corporations are failing individualism and the next episode of capitalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).
- 4 Recent events in Thailand and Northern Ireland, one a swift takeover of government by the army, the other a reconstitution of policing to break with a past marred by collusion and systematic bias, show the ongoing relevance of such risks.
- 5 Wright, *NonZero*.
- 6 The Victorian government, for which I work part time, is a leading player in these negotiations.
- 7 M Barber, 'Reform of our public services is a test for managers', *Financial Times*, 27 Sep 2006, available at www.mckinsey.com/locations/ukireland/publications/pdf/FT_RP2363.pdf (accessed 13 Mar 2007).
- 8 S Goldsmith and D Eggers, *Government by Network: The new public management imperative* (Cambridge, MA: Deloitte/Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation, Harvard University, 2004), available at www.rppi.org/netgovfinal.pdf (accessed 11 Mar 2007).
- 9 See www.wethinkthebook.net/home.aspx (accessed 13 Mar 2007).
- 10 Y Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks* (London: Yale University Press, 2006).
- 11 C Sabel, 'Beyond principal-agent governance: experimentalist organizations, learning and accountability', WRR discussion paper, 2004, available at www2.law.columbia.edu/sabel/papers/Sabel.definitief.doc (accessed 11 Mar 2007).
- 12 Ibid.

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