

# Managing democracy: localism in crisis.

## From dissent to incorporation, dilution and fragmentation

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### ➤ Abstract

This paper is concerned with the role of community development within local democratic practice. It draws on PhD research interviews conducted in the London Boroughs of Greenwich, Lewisham and Newham which examine the relationship between community development and local government in the light of the Modernising Local Government Agenda, and related policy, with specific reference to the 'democratic deficit'. At a time when issues of power and voice have rarely been more strongly exhorted from the centre it is timely to reflect on what has been achieved and what front line community workers are experiencing. What emerges is a disconnect between official policy and actual implementation; whilst democracy has been recognised as important it has not been deepened and there is evidence to suggest that recent policy has at times had damaging consequences for community development, the wider third sector and civil society. Such an inversion may well be inevitable and predictable given the organising slogan of, for example, Operation Black Vote, that 'power is never given'. The community development profession and

wider civil society movements are therefore presented with a choice of increasing fragmentation, revisiting fears of a 'death of the social' (Rose, N 1996)<sup>1</sup> or organising from outside of the invited space of central and local government and pursuing a more agonistic, truer democratic practice (Mouffe, 1993)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Within a rather short period of time, what began as a language of resistance and critique was transformed, no doubt for the best of motives, into an expert discourse and a professional vocation – community is now something to be programmed by Community Development Programmes, developed by Community Development Officers, policed by Community Police, guarded by Community Safety Programmes and rendered knowable by sociologists pursuing 'community studies' (Page 332).

<sup>2</sup> 'A healthy democratic process calls for a vibrant clash of political positions and an open conflict of interests... (because) pluralist democracy contains a paradox ... (it) will always ... be a democracy 'to come', as conflict and antagonism are at the same time its condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of its full realisation' (pages 7-9).

## ➤ Introduction

The narratives of local workers and activists presented in this paper describe recent local government modernisation policy that has had an enervating effect on local democracy, the third sector and the community development profession. Inasmuch as this covers the timescale of the current New Labour government it is unavoidably a small and large 'p' political judgement. 1997 clearly presents us with a new era, and as reflective practitioners on the cusp of massive public sector shrinkage and the possibility of a new government it is timely to take stock.

The background to my paper draws on a range of professional and academic research experiences at a local, regional and national level. In particular it is based on my PhD research at Goldsmiths College (2005 onwards) and the voicing of dilemmas experienced by those engaged in community development, government policy and local governance as practised in three neighbouring London boroughs (Greenwich, Lewisham & Newham) around local government modernisation. As a researcher and practitioner I have sought to know 'what works' in relation to a shifting, often contradictory field of policy, by using ethnography to look at the 'concrete experiences and places that are the tools people use to spell out the word 'society'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Colin Robson - Real World Research (Blackwell 2004)

## ➤ **Community development connects to democracy**

The context of local democracy offers a unique opportunity to assert the role of community development in a way that protects and affirms its value base.

Community development is understood as a distinct process, skill set and discipline which has attempted to ‘unleash the potential<sup>4</sup>’ of both failed regeneration and resident involvement in local democracy (the ‘democratic deficit’ found in local government). When community development and modernisation are held together and closely observed, the degree to which synergies are achieved or obviated can be taken as a proxy for wider democratic health. Community development can be seen operating in the heartland of our society, enhancing and deepening democracy, or isolated as a distrusted variant of capacity building, with an interesting tradition superseded by newer thinking – empowerment, social enterprise et al.

Those interviewed felt community development had become less radical in recent years. The reconstruction and recent updating of community development would seem to soften many positions (e.g. the Community Development Challenge, DCLG 2006). But for the bulk of the community development movement the profession remains a tightrope to be navigated with care, and retains edginess and determination to challenge that is unlikely to sit comfortably within any established institution (Banks, S & Orton, A 2007)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Marilyn Taylor – Unleashing the Potential (JRF 1995)

<sup>5</sup> ‘The community development role has always been one of ambiguity and contradiction but the modernisation process adds further layers of complexity’ (CDJ January 2007)

The Standing Conference for Community Development (SCCD), that became known as the Community Development Exchange (CDX) undertook an extensive process of national debate which resulted in a strategic framework for community development (2001). It asserted that community development 'strengthens democratic processes, opening up political debates and procedures to disadvantaged communities' (and) (t)hat people become more aware of issues which affect their lives, and more determined to take action to address (them)' (page 8). Community development not only connects to democracy but nurtures and actualises it.

The SCCD definition of community development locates it within a radical tradition – 'it is about building active and sustainable communities based on social justice'; it is based on values of social justice, participation, equality, learning and co-operation and commitments which include 'reversing inequality and the imbalance of power relationships in society' (page 5). However because democracy is a contested term, this radical interpretation is merely one of many possible positions and inevitably meets with opposition and forms of resistance which the community development profession and wider movement are ill placed to counter. Often the profession is unable to recognise the scale of the challenge that such values and commitments bring in their wake because more immediate short term imperatives take precedence. By taking on a social and structural analysis, community development becomes a political practice, one that is inherently progressive and therefore vulnerable to reactionary and opposing forces that identify their interests as being threatened. Governments across the political spectrum have deployed emancipatory rhetoric but as Tony Benn (2005) has said: *'No one in power really wants democracy because democracy will challenge their power structures and their authority so anyone who comes out with a democratic idea is dismissed as*

*unrepresentative or as unrepresentative or a trouble maker or an extremist and in this way the flow of democratic debate is extinguished’.*

R H Tawney described democracy as an ‘unstable compound’<sup>6</sup>, his meaning being that it opens up questions of degree, how much democracy is desirable and how far do we go in ensuring it translates to issues of equality and social justice?

With its ‘Year Zero’ approach, the claims of the New Labour government and in particular the Social Exclusion Unit and Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, can be interrogated in relation to modernisation, democratisation and the devolution of power (localism), notably by Nirmala Rao (2000). She sees the 1998 White Paper (In Touch with the People) as a ‘fundamental critique’ (page 1) of the previous regime, and notes that government slogans by themselves change nothing. Rao notes the ambiguity and different usage of democratic renewal as deployed by New Labour: firstly as a set of responses to identifiable problems such a low turnout, secondly as a sign of loss of faith in institutions and thirdly as a new type of political system. She notes that it is not clear how the three inter-relate and warns of the potential to confuse ‘modest improvements in turnout with actual shifts in beliefs, behaviours and outlook on political life’ (page 3).

More than a decade later, the warning of ramping and hyping up appear prescient.

The modernising agenda is scrutinised through the ‘gaze’ and fortunes of community

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<sup>6</sup> He wrote: “That democracy and extreme economic inequality form, when combined, an unstable compound, is no novel doctrine ... Democracy is unstable as a political system as long as it remains a political system and nothing more, instead of being, as it should, not only a form of government but a type of society. To make it a type of society requires ... the conversion of economic power, now often an irresponsible tyrant, into a servant of society, working within clearly defined limits and accountable for its actions to a public authority”. Tawney sums this up with the striking metaphor, “Onions can be eaten leaf by leaf, but you cannot skin a tiger paw by paw: vivisection is its trade and it does the skinning first”.

development workers and activists as a site of conflict and contradiction that can both block movement and inspire it, albeit as alternative and countervailing force. It is argued that the change of local governance and government structures does not of itself alter the power differences inherent in partnerships, or lead to more effective performance, whether in terms of services, governance or social cohesion. The deeper cultural and small and large 'p' political factors have been greatly underestimated in shaping and often delaying democratic outcomes as the 'local' asserts its own counter narrative, rooted in asymmetries of power that transcend central planning. The research goes on to audit progress and claims made by institutional and more critical policy sources, analyse issues arising and identify ways forward that allow stakeholders to negotiate a new agenda.

➤ **In their own words:**

In interviews with community development workers and community activists across three London boroughs a wealth of hard experience and critical insight emerged that has vital implications far beyond the community development profession. They point to a fundamental failing in the transmission of policy and thwarting of wider community development and democratic objectives which has become a cultural norm. It is in the nature of activists and workers to be dissatisfied and the sharpness of their criticisms are often sidelined at a local level because, to date, they have raised questions that create discomfort amidst a highly pressured environment. However what is being described by them is a local culture, a way of being, acting and dealing with the world that is both dysfunctional and in denial. In *Esprit de corps* (2001) Quirk writes from the vantage point of being a council chief executive that at

times we are all 'good people trapped in a bad system' but he underestimates the effects of dissonance and impairment. For those interviewed within and outside of these councils, the gap between the walk and the talk has long since parted company. It is a situation that underpins how and why things happen at a local level and whilst painful, fractured, emotive and often unreasonable, has an element of inconvenient truth that makes or breaks what comes afterwards. Five themes are identified from the interviews that exemplify the tensions exhibited:

- Community development as a profession in permanent crisis facing mostly insurmountable battles within and without
- Policy around democracy and empowerment being widely seen as contradictory and skewed to a managerialist agenda
- Councils and councillors seen as severely limited in what they can achieve
- A sense of frustration and culture of fear pervades many interactions with the community
- Solutions clearly articulated around the value of collective action as a counter to institutional interventions

## ➤ **Community development is a profession in permanent crisis**

Community development and social change rely on actors who can seize opportunities to nurture and sustain it. These change agents in turn exist within a culture which impacts on their performance in ways that enable or inhibit. The thrust of comments recorded inscribes the latter as a recurrent theme - a sense of security, consistency and encouragement is routinely lacking.

In particular the job is seen as expensive and time consuming therefore a liability. As the profession has become detached from its radical tradition, lacking a passion and political awareness, the role is inherently unstable and risky with regard to career development. And increasingly community development has become transformed to consultation debates on forms of service delivery with other alternatives trivialised. Finally a view is often expressed that if local councils are to embrace the role and value then explicit protection is needed to ensure workers have the space in which to operate, without being closed down by pressures that emerge when demands are made by newly empowered and assertive communities.

### **Community Development doesn't come cheap**

*"It don't come cheap and it isn't quick. You don't get any quick fixes with community development and ... if you want to build something on shifting sands that will stand up for a year, eighteen months until the next initiative comes along and then that can be allowed to fall by the wayside and you set up something new then that's fine, (but) that doesn't do our communities any good"*

## **We're losing what community development is**

*I think community development's changed a lot from when I trained as a student, back in the late 70s ... it's a lot less politicised now, people are coming in now see it differently... I think community development work is seen as expensive, you know too much resources, time consuming and actually why would you want to do it anyway, you know? And I feel, I think we're losing what community development is about ... community development is much more than consulting on decisions already made, a cheap way of delivering services, talking with three community representatives and saying their responses are the voice of the community, it's ... not a numbers game, it's not quick*

## **CD as an unstable job**

*We're living in a society where we need to be paid and you are living in a society whereby if you want to move on and move into another job you need to have pleased those that are going to give you the reference, that's for sure ... So therefore, who in their right minds going to become a community development worker?*

## **Community development – tamed and constrained**

*Community development in this borough is ... constrained, tamed and ... has to be re-invented as local people's right to talk about the services that should, would or are delivered to them and the form in which they are. There was a moment where was had a chance of breaking out of (there.)... The relationship between the authority, its*

*partners and the people who live out there is based on: this is what we want to do to you, this is what we had to do to you, yeah, this is what we have done to you or this is something we're interested in you having a chat with you about what you'd like us to do to you. And I don't think that's the basis, you're not going to rebuild civic society on.*

### **Community development is trivialised**

*Community development work to me is long term, it takes, you put a lot of resources, you sometimes have to put in a lot of effort and resources if you really truly want to get people independent. And I think it's just a really, really, difficult thing to do and I think it's been completely trivialised. ... And then sometimes you think gosh am I really out of step? ... and I just, I feel we're kind of losing that because I started working in the early 80s you know where it was much more, we were much more radical, ... and you just think that's all going, ... we don't want people to be critical, we don't want people to actually control their own lives, we don't want that. Actually truly no government actually wants that. How cynical is that? I just feel that they don't want that*

### **Protecting state led community development**

*I was never a great supporter of the voluntary sector because I saw it as a Victorian do-gooders paradise, but ...I have become much more aware that we do need ... a voluntary commitment of people that are dedicated (to) ... developing their communities and we're not going to get that through the present structures of local*

*government ... you're a local authority, you create 70 community development workers, you do not expect them to create a revolution in your borough. You do not expect people to be knocking on your door saying I want so and so changed, what they want is a quiet managed society through its community development work. So when we look at that it's almost needs to be like legislation to say community work means this, this, this and this and as an authority you're committed to support it.*

➤ **Policy around democracy and empowerment are seen as contradictory and managerialist**

In addition to the concerns voiced by community development workers in relation to the environment they operate the policy backdrop also conditions what the goals are and what can be achieved. Whilst there is a plethora of policy at any one time the issues of deepening local democracy and community empowerment were fixed on as particular aporia whereby the rhetoric and the reality struggled to connect. Officially the stated intention of both, which are intrinsic to localism, is that more democracy and more power is being offered up from both central and local government, for a period described as double devolution<sup>7</sup>.

What workers and local activists described was that such policies were often a contradiction in terms, leading inevitably to partial results, if not outright failure and causing many to question whether the actual intention was something else altogether – namely the consolidation of existing power. If after having repeated

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<sup>7</sup> David Miliband MP – speech given on 21<sup>st</sup> February 2006 at the NCVO annual conference

similar experiences over a number of years such conclusions are drawn we should consider they are likely to be drawn from principled idealism rather than solely a retreat into cynicism.

Contradictions and avoidable confusions were seen to exist around the deployment of democracy as a means to an end rather than an end in itself, with the end being quality public services. The deeper point being that by framing agenda of democracy before the event, it ceases to be democracy which is necessarily far messier. Exhortations to empower and give power were seen as nonsensical; power could only be won or lost. Modernising was understood to have a dual agenda, superficially to soften resistance by deploying a seductive transformational rhetoric whilst pursuing an instrumentalist agenda using community engagement as a means to an end. Typically the expansiveness of democracy and empowerment is truncated into a managerial operation. The calibration shifts from difficult to measure perceptions of wellbeing and the ability to influence, to service outputs and the money spent or saved on them.

### **Better services through democracy**

*I think a straw person has been held up around democracy and democratic involvement which is an unsaid prejudice, ... a taken for granted assumption that through involvement, through participation, through democratic engagement you will get better services... it's a flawed concept... I've always supported democratic processes because it's the kind of world I want to live in, I don't believe you necessarily get better decision making, ... what you get is what you get*

## **You can't redistribute power**

*You can't redistribute power... Power comes from power centres. In a community a community must come up from the ground and gain power and win it and fight for it. It cannot be given. If you could give power away we wouldn't have any political problems in the world. But you can't, it's a ... law if you like, of community development; power cannot be given.*

## **You can't give people democracy**

*You can't just suddenly out of the blue (as) ... a .. centralistic organisation ... say to people, we're going to give you democracy. Not on, not on... in terms of its implementation, to me it's the opposite of democracy... To me it's all too formatted so that's my starting point um. In terms of how it's affected me, it's actually had what I presume to be the opposite effect of what the government wanted but maybe it's had the right effect because I don't want to take part in it y'know because it doesn't allow me to ask the questions before I'm told what the formula is, the formula is clear, the process is clear so therefore I haven't got any form of ownership in that, if anything now I've been taken out of the free speech, democratic society where I could say what I want within reason into a much more carefully thought out future development so for me, I'm not really into it, I'm not into it at all.*

➤ **Councils and councillors are seen as severely limited in what they can achieve**

Having weathered the tests of modernisation council's key role has been described through recent local government legislation (LGA 2006, Empowerment Action Plan 2007) as community empowerment<sup>8</sup>. However the central / local relationship remains heavily weighted to the centre, and as the Widdicombe Commission described (1986) 'local government has no right to exist'<sup>9</sup> because Parliament is sovereign. The strange powerlessness of local government is commented on by activists and workers as a recurrent theme amidst the aura of having an apparent monopoly of local control. The lack of ultimate agency afforded to the Town Hall has knock on effects which cascade to the very local level. If Town Halls are thwarted and treated with suspicion the distrust is likely to be contagious and permeate downwards.

Councillors were widely seen as irrelevant to key decisions, appointed and rewarded on the basis of party loyalty rather than wider community efforts. Councils' room for manoeuvre was severely curtailed though understandably not broadcasted by local politicians anxious to gain kudos from local communities. For some of those interviewed, the real democratic deficit began with the lack of recognition for the role of the local state, which was forced to operate more as a defensive management committee than as the personification of revived local democracy.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Community Empowerment is local government's core business' Sir Simon Milton from the introduction to An Action Plan for Community Empowerment: Building on Success 2007 page 4

<sup>9</sup> 'It would be wrong to assume that constitutional convention amounts to or derives from any natural right for local government to exist. It is a convention based on, and subject to, the contribution that local government can bring to good government. It follows from this that there is no validity in the assertion that local authorities have a 'local mandate' by which they derive their authority from their electorate placing them above the law' (paragraph 3.6 page 46) The Widdicombe Enquiry 1986

## **The limitation of councillors**

*For me the first round of meetings with the councillors, ... completely sheepish and uncritical to the point of actually denying the knowledge of what's going on, you know "oh if they are doing so it must be right" you know. Ah well you are there to scrutinise (and) ... I am coming here to ask what is going on you know you tell me you don't know ... I did probably lose patience very quickly because I thought that they were woefully inadequate... there's a lot of good people and there is a big number of filling, ... people elected... on loyalty, that's it, the capacity to be uncritical... what's a councillor for, is it just to give out contracts?... (I) actually think that they are pretty small structure that should not claim to be what it is not... the council is claiming to be you know community ... it is not even a good landlord*

## **Councillors: profession or community service?**

*Once upon a time councillor's were unpaid. They became Councillors because of an issue in their area, they became Councillors because they were natural leaders in their areas, they became Councillors because they had passion, right. Now it's a profession ... is it a profession or is it serving your community? Local councils become feeder schemes... People become a Councillor, they're interviewed by those of a same mind, they're passing through a system and they eventually become MPs, that's the route. Those that don't have that incentive to move in that way die by the wayside and they're the ones that are locally committed with the passion, so ... therefore your opposition goes.*

## **The council as voluntary sector management committee**

*In local government and in most state services, whether provided through the authority or a marketised voluntary sector ... people don't have any real power, ... I see the local authority as being a very sophisticated voluntary sector management committee and in the same way that most ... management committees are about ... be(ing) legally accountable about what's being done in their name with very little room for manoeuvre in terms of policy, practice or resource allocation. I'd say the same with the local state, yeah? So I think that's the real democratic deficit is the power deficit. The actual this is a chunk of money for you lot to work out what you're going to do with and take the consequences for.*

### **➤ A sense of frustration and culture of fear**

Workers and activists constantly described the world as they experienced it, as distinct from more glossy interpretations that predominate from the communications departments from town hall and Whitehall. The starting point reflected frustration and fear that cried out for recognition and is included here as a reality check. In an obvious sense how people feel matters, not least because it shapes what they are able to achieve but also because it communicates outwards and is picked up by the communities themselves in terms of congruence and trustworthiness.

The blocking of community demands was a universal experience that fuelled a sense of rage and heightened confrontation. Often aggressive behaviour became internalised throughout an institution as a default position, a climate of fear became normalised and difficult to break down. Spaces for partnership when they existed, of

which the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) as partnership of partnerships stood out, were invariably contained or cleansed of spirited community sector input with little expectations for the chances of redress.

### **People being messed about for years**

*When I started campaigning, I started meeting people (who had) ... been involved for many, many, years in engaging with the council... especially pensioners and ... and the picture that comes out is really of people being messed about for years with techniques, (they) were never told what's happening and delays and changes of plans and at the end you lose because they can just change the focus and move on and leave you behind and there is a professionalism local government you know of building public relationships agendas and ... because the council's supposed to do much more than they can do there's a lot of people who are left out, they are left out and they are cut out from any discussion altogether. That's a fact you know and that's why I say it as it is.*

### **A culture of fear**

*There's this real culture of fear and I know that this person whose harassing us is harassing us because (they're) getting harassed by bosses who are getting harassed by the chief executive whose got a lot of pressure on him ... how do you, you can't, I can't break that unless I've got some in with Gordon Brown or would Gordon Brown be horrified that this is going on, would he care, I sometimes ask myself?*

### **Local Strategic Partnerships**

*Government Office for London know that there is no 3<sup>rd</sup> sector representation on the local strategic partnership, there's no community sector representation on the local strategic partnership, so where's that bit of jigsaw then? Where's that bit of the partnership? And it doesn't exist and what are they doing about it? Nothing. So, you know, all the work that we did, ... has just disappeared ... that was the only decent part of the strategic partnership was actually us as the third sector being able to say to the local strategic partnership, no hang on a minute ... what about the community, why aren't they having any money?*

➤ **Solutions: the value of collective action**

Those interviewed had no difficulty in identifying their own solutions and seeing spaces for movement. Democracy as a space for independent community organising was key, whereby a countervailing sets of views and cultural norms could emerge outside of the cloying tendencies of officialdom. Solutions came from within communities, based on their own terms, as traditional community development work has long espoused. Principles of collective accountability trump models of contractual obligation but demand a greater believe and trust in local people as the authors of their own lives, entitled to act and even fail, in the same way that professionals before them have tried and failed. This right, at the very local community level, is articulated as a basic human right, not a community development luxury but something pivotal to what it means to be a part of democracy, a value that people have lived and died for. The only means of securing this right was through acts of bravery by the voluntary sector and related actors, the willingness to publically challenge being the only guarantee of both self and wider partnership

respect. Finally an awareness of seeing ideas was felt to be lacking sufficient recognition among workers and activists. Just as many of the barriers experienced were created by sets of ideas that harden into received wisdom, community development and related activity had the ability to develop new thinking to go beyond existing constraints. Community development workers who are able to galvanise local communities easily achieve significant political capital which creates a privileged position which in turn demands reflection and willingness to be held accountable.

### **Doing democratic based work**

*It seems to me the key components of any notion however flawed of attempting to do democratic based work is: are you prepared to accept that problems are structural rather than (based on) individual pathology? Are you prepared to accept that the people on the receiving end of the problem have at least as much insight and at least as much ability to be part of the solution as outsiders? And is there a way of getting across a culture ... of ... principled compromises, which is what are we prepared to set aside in order to work together? And ... the fourth one working towards the notion that your representatives and your spokespeople are elected and recordable and accountable.*

### **Collective action**

*I think there's a lot of purchase or potential purchase around the community democracy ideas. For me the spaces still remain around the little bits of places where you can actually get people to acknowledge, that it's about collective struggle,*

*it's about collective organising, and it's around ways of making the people involved in that work accountable and responsible to each other i.e. not someone else will do it on your behalf ... but I think the barrier (is the view) that (says)... local people are thick, local people will let you down, local people will fuck it up as opposed to professionals who (are) ... given the space to carry out their professional prejudice*

### **Community democracy is a basic human right**

*To have a democratic voice, a community voice, it's a basic human right. And I will always say justice, equity, to have an opportunity to have your say is a basic human right. That's what we fought for in the war and men are losing their lives for in Iraq and Afghanistan and if that is not the reason then we ought to be shot ourselves. There is nothing this council does that would convince me that they believe in community democracy... they never, never would accept that they would have to shift and change.*

### **Being brave enough to take action**

*It's not all about finance I know but I mean all of us are attending ... the local area agreement partnership board meetings and we don't know why we're going because we aren't listened to, can't influence anything, so why are we there? Well we're there because they know that we have to be there so our view is well actually if we're not there then actually somebody from GOL might so woaah! Hang on a minute where are the voluntary sector and, and, we're also looking at whether we're going to do that with the Compact, but it is about being brave enough to take action and it's being brave enough to say enough's enough we are not playing your game anymore*

## **Ideological reproduction**

*We mistake our personal space as being something that everyone else has got, whereas actually I think our personal space is ... essentially because our work is around ideology, we're workers around ideological re-creation, in the same way that teachers, anybody that's dealing with ideas and the way that people view the world... I've only been able to look at the question the other way round, ... what space have I got to open up the kind of conversations and do the kind of work that I want to do. So for me the answer to the question is that how has the theory and practice of youth work, community work, the community sector and the voluntary sector changed in order to be acceptable in the current political economy?*

## **Trading credibility for long term change**

*Everybody knows that the majority of people don't have a relationship with anybody whose real and we know that anybody who manages to furnish anything that looks like a relationship with the great unwashed is going to buy themselves straight away a lot of political, social and professional credibility. It seems to me the trick is to how you use or how you work being that honest which is on the one hand being part of a culture that's predicated on quality assurance frameworks, outcomes, all the rest of it, whilst knowing that your own piece of work and your own whatever is being judged on sense of smell, y'know. It seems to me we're all caught in that dynamic all of the time, ... I think that's why notions of democratic engagement, community democracy*

*stuff, youth democracy stuff, has got some purchase because it enables people to do a bit of why they became a councillor, why they became a service director, why they became a community worker, why they became a youth worker, because suddenly you see something that's genuinely open and you've got room to manoeuvre, you've got room to explore. The majority of us then don't use that in a thought out way to challenge the ... culture that we're part of*

## ➤ **Conclusions**

There are some simple questions that can be asked with regard to the last 11 years:

- Is local democracy in better health?
- Is the wider voluntary and community sector thriving?
- Is the community development profession and community development practices more generally, in a good place?

Whilst straightforward yes or no responses are never wholly adequate, neither is unnecessary prevarication – we should be able to have something definitive to say on this matter that comes down on one side or the other. Whilst it might seem premature to reach critical conclusions, the stakes are very high and without a debate within our sector that polarises issues into clear choices and ways forward nothing is learnt. We need to create new alternatives based on a critical evaluation of the present and recent past. This is to create space for our own agency and take

ownership of the rather than wholly condemn what is a complex set of cross sector interactions and behaviours.

Three interrelated bases exist: local government reform, the third sector as an independent entity, distinct from the state and the market, and community development as a contested yet key practice of facilitating change and challenging oppressive practice. These bases link together for better or worse in defining the fabric of much local community life so what happens to them in isolation and as synergies matters, never more so than at a time of recession.

At the heart of the modernisation drive of recent years local practitioners have reported a gap between what the words have said and what has been enacted and this dissonance has tended to create an alternative stories with words that describe a hidden history set apart from official discourse. For those interviewed the official discourse is not able to galvanise change, is not believed, and compels people to distrust the solutions that are offered, because learnt experience tells them is that they should not be taken of face value – power is not given to local communities, partnerships are not equal etc. Listening closely to workers and their interaction with local people this dissonance was frequently at the centre of what was said.

Alongside this corrosive and exhausting heartfelt experience was also, for them, time and again, the theme of democracy, in its fullest sense, as a bridging theme. A longing for things to connect with core values of participation, equality and fairness.

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