

A New Paradigm in Social Policy? Introduction to the British Flagship Agency Report

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In looking for ‘flagship’ agencies which had been innovative in tackling social exclusion, the British SOSTRIS team was faced with an abundance of choice. Drastic cutbacks in the welfare state, the socially destructive effects of de-industrialisation and high unemployment, and the enforcement of a pluralised ‘contract’ culture in welfare had given rise throughout the years of New Conservatism (1979-97) to widespread concerns with urban poverty, and to a range of new initiatives in the field of social policy. In ‘*Goliath: Britain’s Dangerous Places*’, Bea Campbell reports that ‘in the Nineties many estates in Britain were being galvanised not by political parties but by traditional charities which were modernising their social base and their professional practice...Several were filling the space left behind by the political vacuum’ (1993, 251). Political systems, she argues, had become estranged from everyday life. Thomas (1996) identifies the shift in context for voluntary organisations as from ‘social democratic corporatism’ to ‘neo-liberal localism’ (Thomas 1996).

The speed of change only accelerated under the New Labour Government, elected in May 1997. For despite the new government’s pledged straitjacket on welfare spending, there were expectations of social change, and a New Labour focus on social exclusion permeated programmes concerned with unemployment, crime, the worst estates, and education. Links between business and the social sector continued as a lead theme in urban regeneration, but with a new emphasis on ‘people’ rather than buildings, on ‘social capital’ and ‘sustainability’. The New Deal and Welfare to Work programmes all included counselling and personal advice, a ‘weak form’ of person-centredness, which aimed to promote individual choice and responsibility. For as Driver and Martell (1997) put it, New Labour’s ‘communitarianism’ and emphasis on civil society is threaded through with ‘liberal conservatism’. Exploring the spectrum of values which underlies approaches to communitarianism, they characterise New Labour’s orientation as : conformist, conditional, conservative, prescriptive, moral, and individualised, whereas it might have been pluralist, less conditional, progressive, voluntary, redistributive, and corporate (p43).

This characterisation of New Labour ‘community’ orientation as ‘liberal conservatism’, which is made from the standpoint of political philosophy, omits from view other aspects of policy from view, such as the new emphasis on ‘social entrepreneurship’ or ‘social enterprise’, or ‘partnership’ and ‘joined-up government’. These concepts, which apply to all sectors of welfare, all express a common aim of reconfiguring resources and people to generate greater social value (Leadbeater and Goss 1998, 15). They also contain a tension between an economic or cultural emphasis, as does the concept of ‘social capital’, at least as it is used in the British context. At a large conference on ‘Social Enterprise’ held in London in January 1999, the term ‘social capital’ was used almost exclusively in an economic sense, concerning community-based financial services and third sector investment and business. In this rendering it focuses on the new interface between the business and social sectors. Leadbeater and Goss, by contrast, define ‘social capital’ in cultural terms, arguing that ‘building social capital is a cultural strategy’. This definition is more closely aligned with Continental usage: ‘the quality of contacts people have and networks they plug into, and the norms of trust, reciprocity and goodwill, sense of shared life across the classes, and capacities to organise that these ties afford.’ (Perri 6 1997, 8). According to Perri 6, a member of the Demos think-tank which works closely with New Labour, dealing with social exclusion demands a ‘more holistic, more preventive, and more personal model of government’ (p5), and intervention not just in labour market institutions, but ‘further back in the causal chains that bring about social exclusion...in particular...drawing on (the) *informal* social systems and influencing “cultural lenses” - aspirations, time horizons, attitudes to risk’ (p8).

The three agencies chosen for investigation by the British team of Sostris researchers reflect these tensions and debates, although each has emerged at different time-points, and is differently positioned

within welfare apparatuses. A separate report on each agency follows. The purpose of this introduction, having situated them within a common contextual frame, is to draw out points of comparison between them, and to discuss their work in the light of SOSTRIS findings and policy discussions. The British SOSTRIS team held two policy meetings, one in April 1998, and the second, which was held jointly with the IPPR (Institute for Public Policy Research) in February 1999. It is these meetings which are reported on in the third section of this introduction.

The Three Flagship Agencies

The three agencies are as follows:

The Foyer Project is a new public sector partnership agency, providing combined accommodation and training for 210 young homeless people on a contractual basis. Its facilities opened in 1996.

The Camden Refugee Education project began in 1992, in response to the needs of the rapidly growing number of refugee children. Based on work in schools within the local education authority, much of its achievement has come from networking outside that service.

The Bromley-by-Bow project, which began in 1984, developed its activities from a church building. While building its community base, it has sought ambitious sponsorship, and while often locked in conflict with public sector services, it has by now gained recognition as an important, mainly arts-based, model of health and welfare delivery.

The historical lineages of these projects within British welfare traditions and their current 'scripts' are most varied. The Foyer idea, imported from France, has been welded into Thatcherite Anglo-Saxon liberalism, with its emphasis on individual responsibility. This Foyer's emphasis on contract and control, which is facilitated by electronic security systems, and its 'rational' and 'efficient' problem-solving of 'new' youth homelessness, is strongly reminiscent of Jeremy Bentham's social engineering and 'panopticon' designs. Here the script has been handed down from national agencies, hurriedly received following an opportunistic bid for competition funding by a local housing association. With such political backing, it could be argued that the Foyer movement 'has' to succeed, although the obstacles were considerable. That aside, within the three years of its existence the Foyer has rapidly found its own feet, and has succeeded in making strong legal and financial amendments to the national script. Solving the initial problems has involved intensive partnership work, mainly at Board level, but also nationally, through the Foyer Federation, and through training partnerships with major enterprises. In terms of biographically-sensitive work, however, it remains a challenge. For while the combining of life skills, and vocational and accommodation training is in a sense 'holistic', the Foyer's method does not pay much attention to 'personal' work. Biographical transitions are to be achieved contractually and through the disincentive of returning to the street, rather than through the active promotion of reflexivity and relational skills. It would be intriguing, and important for policy, to evaluate the outcomes of this approach in terms, for example, of civic competence or parenting skills, a few years on.

The Refugee Education Project (REP) has had an entirely opposite bottom-up development, working and advocating from practice around emerging needs towards the policy level, responding to the vicissitudes of legislative and administrative change rather than engineered by it, bearing the pressures of being situated between a local authority and the community. The script is self-generated by the project leader and fellow-workers, through a process of collaborative networking, sustained by the collective values of social democracy and community politics. Perhaps its lineage lies in non-conformist commitment to social improvement and public services. However, its script is also very 'modern'. The complexity and diversity of refugee needs can only be addressed by a process of flexible networking and partnership between services - yet this is the direction all services must take if they are to serve the needs of a more differentiated society. By using and presenting the refugee community as a resource, emphasising its resilience and capacity for learning, and its assertive contribution to local political culture, REP is modelling the government's own 'best value' policy, while exposing the political barriers which may cut

across the mobilisation of social capital (see also Lister (1998). A great puzzle to the REP workers has been why the Social Service Department, which was generally much more favourable to REP than the Education Department, perhaps because REP's case-work approach resonated with 'old-style' social work, should be so antagonistic to 'advocacy' work. Far from upholding a 'citizenship' approach to rights and empowerment, the Social Services Department repeatedly refused to provide anything for refugees beyond minimum legal requirements. This is the powerful residualist undertow which follows from spending restraints and the downgrading of mainstream services, and which makes a mockery of government pretences to citizenship approaches to social inclusion. Despite the rhetoric of social reform, refugee groups in Camden, which is undoubtedly one of the more generous and well-endowed local authorities, say that their members feel like 'ghosts in the landscape', and that they have 'lost a generation' to youth unemployment and crime, not to mention mental illness.

Much of REP's work is in a biographical vein, both with refugees and with staff, working with biographical resources to make transitions, to generate mutual understanding between children, parents and teachers, and giving space to provide emotional support. As in the Bromley-by-Bow project, REP understands that 'giving space' must be accompanied by containment, guidance and monitoring. The dangers allowing space to be monopolised for personal reasons is illustrated from refugee work in a secondary school, in which a particular teacher took the lead role in refugee work, orienting it strongly towards therapeutic support. Her specialist role was disempowering to others, who then withdrew from the work, leaving her overwhelmed. Without her, there was noone to carry on the work at all, and all along a wide range of non-therapeutic additional needs, which many other teachers might have helped with, were neglected.

The Bromley-by-Bow project, much the 'oldest' of the projects, has also written its own 'emergent' script. Its emphasis on cluster groups and leadership, artistic creativity and 'allowing space', derives from a wealth of sources and traditions - the Bible, earlier self-help and mutual traditions in welfare, the Settlement and Arts and Crafts movements, liberation theology. But also pragmatism, and listening: 'the treasures of listening are at the centre of all human life'. Asked to characterise their work, Germaine Greer defined it as 'inside out' rather than 'outside in', and as based on identifying creating 'eddies and flurries of energy which draw in and sweep up others'. Artists and craftworkers are critical in this mobilisation of 'creative juices'. Just because of its fifteen years of existence, this project is able to show the 'long distance' which members of a demoralised community have to travel to become actively engaged - a time span which will certainly require the 'sustainability' which the government is now talking of. The project also shows the depths of social division underlying patterns of social exclusion, especially those of mental illness and racism (both of which abound in the area), but also those arising from drugs networks, and from hostility to 'do-gooders' and agents of 'correction' such as youth workers, teachers police. The gender divide lies not far behind: it is far more difficult to involve young men than women. The project's principle that everyone belongs and everyone has something to contribute, involves working across major social rifts.

The Bromley-by-Bow project operates with both the financial and social definitions of 'social capital'. Partnerships operate reasonably collaboratively with local services, have been conflictual with local public authorities, and are spectacularly successful with private business. The report shows how the context of Thatcherism pushed the project towards the business sector, and how much such links have flourished since, although whether the aspirations of corporate society are so easily compatible with those of civic society remains a matter for debate. But 'partnership' also denotes the project's relationship with the community, in shared ownership and shared membership structures (of the health centre and as a registered charity), but also in knowledge of and insight into significant incidents in the community, by working alongside people over many years. In the project's view, such 'partnership', which challenges notions of democratic representation and accountability, is a much surer way of diagnosing needs than formal exercises in 'consultation'.

From its inception, the project was pitted against ‘the Sargasso Sea’ of bureaucratised welfare and self-serving professionalism, which was seen to produce rather than alleviate poverty. The same diagnosis applied to the churches. Its redefining of ‘work’ and ‘time’, aided both by a spirit of vocationalism and sheer enjoyment of the project’s life and activities, together with involvement of families and friends, perhaps also make the project a difficult partner for public services.

The Bromley-by-Bow project, even more than the other projects, has benefited from the ‘revolutionary biographies’ of its leading members. It has also recruited into leading positions a number of community members, who have also in a ‘revolutionary’ fashion transformed their lives through their involvement in the project. This often took years of apprenticeship and personal growth as volunteers.

The following table summarises whether the three agencies work with ‘biographical resources’ of service users and staff, whether they seek to mobilise ‘social capital’ in a financial or social sense, and at what levels they are engaged on ‘networking and partnerships’.

	Foyer	Refugee Education Project	Bromley-by-Bow
biographical resources	- <i>(contractual relations)</i>	+	+
social capital	<i>financial</i>	<i>social</i>	<i>social and financial</i>
networking/partnership	<i>inter-agency and cross-sector</i>	<i>inter-professional & with community</i>	<i>multi-level</i>

All the projects expend untold energy in negotiating funds and managing uncertainty, and in arguing and demanding more ‘joined-up-government’. It has been a major achievement of REP in particular to mobilise long-term commitment out of short-term funding, but a constant struggle against precariousness also involves risks of burn-out. Much creative work is destroyed by lack of funding, and a great deal more perhaps never mobilised, because its agents have no appetite or aptitude for the financial entrepreneurship now required to gain funding in Britain. The Bromley-by-Bow project, perhaps because of the privileged funding position it has achieved, is able through its work to show the immense resources which socially-oriented regeneration requires.

The Method

The three studies were undertaken by different researchers, as is reflected in the authorship of the reports. The fieldwork for each took about two months, and was conducted in the Summer or Autumn of 1998. The narrative interviewing approach, the observation work, and the workshops which launched the analysis of the ‘lived’ and ‘told’ story of each agency, are specified in the reports. The ‘biographical data’ or chronological history of the agencies, on which the analysis of the ‘lived story’ was based, is included as appendices. Much of this was derived from documentary materials. Initial analysis of the ‘told life’ was based either on a section of a policy document or on a segment of narrative text. A whole day workshop was spent on each agency, but beyond that the analysis mainly continued by a conventional content approach, supplemented by further discussions with leading figures. Feedback comments and suggestions have been received from all the projects.

The Policy Meetings

The first policy meeting brought together researchers and practitioners working with biographical and case study methods. It took place at the end of Phase I of the SOSTRIS project, which had been concerned with biographical case studies, when the researchers were somewhat tentative, even defensive, in presenting detailed case studies as a viable basis of policy discussion and ‘evidence’.

The main points of discussion were incorporated in the *Summary of Findings* which is appended to this report. Key themes included the empowering effect of working from the subject’s frame of reference, the possibility by that route of unearthing ‘the real problem’, which is often very different from the ‘presenting problem’, and the value of biographical case studies in sensitising professional practice. The implied need for flexible and well-coordinated referral systems was emphasised, as was the importance of validating the personal experiences of professionals themselves, as a basis of being sensitive to the needs of others, in a process of ‘positive mirroring’. There was discussion of the richness of biographical experience and understanding of other community members among community leaders or ‘social entrepreneurs’, and the importance of their mediations between professionals and service users, since most services ‘have no idea who or what they are dealing with’. The celebrating of community leaders’ lives could serve as useful models of individual and collective confidence building, and making connections with wider, often more collective frameworks of understanding, could also be immensely helpful in coping with personal difficulties.

By the time of the second policy meeting, in February 1999, much water seemed to have passed under the bridge, and Labour’s New Deal programmes were getting into swing. This meeting, entitled ‘Towards a New Paradigm in Social Policy’, brought together social policy academics, practitioners, and policy makers and researchers in an open and inquiring exchange, with discussion of the findings of both phases of the SOSTRIS project, presentations on the use of biographical methods in community nurse training and in urban regeneration work. A keynote paper by Professor Andrew Cooper defined the ‘biographical turn’ in social research as counterposed to the continuing and desperate attempts by government to regulate and control an ever more differentiated society, a society in which concepts of universalism and equality also sit uneasily. This was taken up in the discussion, and by the two discussants, Zena Peatfield from the Cabinet’s Social Exclusion Unit, and Charlie Leadbeater from the think-tank Demos, in terms of the need at all levels of government and social practice to ‘let go’ and ‘make space’, to tolerate ‘messiness’ and take risks, but without abandoning responsibility. Social professionals are all too often ‘disempowered buffers’ who may ‘be kind’, but do not really ‘listen’ to what they hear, because they have no space to act on information they collect or to use their own creative initiative. Vast quantities of ‘passive understanding’ lie unused in the ever-tighter climate of regulation and quantitative ‘performance review’. Senior managers, and especially civil servants and politicians, may find it very difficult to make such a transition. Andrew Cooper drew an analogy with the anxious but ultimately creative process of tolerating ‘not knowing’ in psycho-therapy, and the importance for such a process of confidence in the proven authority of the techniques being used. That the dominance of ‘hydraulics’ in the language of social engineering, itself identified an obstacle to more flexible and creative forms of thinking, repeatedly reappeared in our own discourse, was a source of some amusement. And there was a rich discussion of differences in functioning and scope for innovation and ‘risks’ between the public and private sectors. The point was made that the norms of ‘entrepreneurship’ and risk taking are easier to adopt in the third than in the public sector, which does not decry the need to ‘go on trying’.

Issues of resourcing were not so discussed, but hung in the background as another decisive issue. Mike Rustin raised the possibility of an obligatory 5% share of profits being donated to the voluntary sector, which is a modest figure, given low rates of taxation in Britain, and the fact that, despite the public fanfare, business donations to charity currently amount to a mere 2% of profits. The issue of whether the high-profiling of ‘flagship agencies’ does stimulate or only further detracts from the status and funding of the public sector, was also not discussed.

There was also much discussion of the centrality of case studies in social and political life, often at pivotal points in policy change, and the way that defensiveness concerning the ‘scientific status’ of case studies is

almost peculiar to sociology (Rustin 1999). Convincing ‘stories’ are a key resource in entrepreneurial narratives, just as they are in the life and self-presentation of the Bromley-by-Bow project (see report). Another important role for biographical case studies lies in their capacity to provide insights into complex social dynamics, at collective as well as individual levels, and to contribute to ‘social accounting’, identifying patterns of *social* loss and gain, which have become overshadowed by economic criteria in policy thinking.

Another theme concerned the potential for biographical methods not just in training social professionals, but in fashioning new instruments of evaluation on holistic work, to identify and measure ‘outcomes’ as opposed to ‘outputs’, and to trace and understand processes of personal and social change. The eagerness of practitioners to develop such qualitative tools remains unmatched on the funders’ side. Certainly an emphasis on the development of ‘social capital’ and ‘best value’ implies an urgent need for new methods of evaluation.

Conclusion

There was therefore much greater consonance between the biographical approach and findings of both phases of the SOSTRIS project and the policy discussion than we had anticipated. It also seemed clear that the research can make a valuable contribution to ‘state-of-the-art’ discussion of welfare developments in Britain, and that a much more fluid and creative relationship between research, practice and policy is emerging.

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