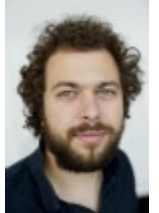


The opposition between 'open public services' and the 'big state' is a misleading one

Many of its advocates see the open public services agenda as an essential means through which to ensure accountability in the delivery of public services. However [Dan Silver](#) argues that this understanding rests on assumptions which are fundamentally problematic. Rather than seeking accountability through the dismantling of the 'big state', we must look to redesign our institutions using much more radical understandings of what democratic accountability entails.



Democratic accountability is an important means through which public policy can be informed by its process of implementation, providing the opportunity for those subjected to a policy to be able to consider its justifications and review it, creating the possibility for modification and subsequent improvement. This depends on connection between those agencies delivering public services and the public, entailing an obligation for explanation and a role for sanctions.

However, this connection is currently being undermined by the coalition government, who are enacting a range of public policy initiatives which represent a transformation of the welfare state and a redefinition of governance in the UK through a shift towards 'open public services.' This includes the emergence of new providers of public services which are not connected to traditional democratically accountable structures. This can lead to increased difficulty in identifying a responsible actor within the multi-level and multi-sector arrangements – a problem identified by Bovens as the 'problem of many hands.'

Choice and competition, which is an essential aspect of open public services, is seen by government as a key means through which to achieve accountability. The government suggest that they will create an 'open playing field,' in which voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations compete with private sector corporations. However, this is not an equitable market, as many VCS organisations simply cannot compete in a commissioning process that prizes efficiency above all else (even after the Public Services (Social Value) Act). Therefore, by adopting a 'sector neutral' approach, the private sector becomes much more prominent in the 'marketplace' of public service delivery.

Graeme Hodge and Ken Coghill [point out](#) that 'privatization itself is not necessarily antithetical to cultural values that require democratic accountability.' Indeed, proponents argue that it leads to more accountability as private sector companies are more responsive than the monopolies of public sector bureaucracies because citizens are free to choose the most effective agency to deliver public services. Indeed, choice has largely become an unquestioned norm in public policy.

Choice in public services is intended to [promote more responsiveness](#) – the motivation to meet the demands of citizens is believed to mirror a supermarket meeting the demands of its customers. However, this '[supermarketisation of public services](#)' is not sufficient for democratic accountability. Indeed, even if responsiveness were achieved, [it is not the same as accountability](#). As Mulgan [observes](#) – the citizen 'has no general right to demand the private provider offer services that meet...perceived need.'

The strategy of 'exit,' in which service users choose another provider, and which is offered as the aspect of sanctions in the accountability relationship, is not as simple as within the wider market economy. Many services are not fungible goods – people often do not 'choose' to consume public services. Public services are fundamentally different, in that demand is something that requires management, not stimulation. Therefore conceiving of a model in terms of supply and demand does not capture the true picture.

Market-based forms of governance bring the norms that structure capitalist markets into public service delivery, and privatise relationships of accountability based upon the individual consumer-citizen. This

changes the nature of how service delivery is held accountable by the public.

Accountability as a consumer is relatively weak and not the same as democratic control. It is based upon a marketised social relationship that does not include an obligation for the service delivery organisation to justify their actions to those affected stakeholders in society. Democratic accountability is replaced with market-based processes.

Contractual accountability is part of a [market mode of governance](#) that is centred on the relationship of property rights driven by competitive pressures. Jane Mansour has [argued](#) previously on this site that accountability is undermined as contracts are not being enforced appropriately. However, the problem is deeper than this – we need to situate open public services within a more fundamental assessment of the marketisation of the public sphere.

Contractual mediations of relationships and the notion of choice are situated within a wider dominant discourse that constructs property rights in ways that are [‘inseparable from a more general human right of liberty’](#), and which is combined with [the idea that the market is the best means to preserve it](#). This interpretation of property rights rests upon preconceptions of how society should operate, and obscures the unequal social and economic power relations that define property.

This is based on the notion of a [‘rational economic man,’](#) an assumption about how people naturally behave that supports the notion of a consumer-citizen, who will act with greater responsibility and choose the most effective and efficient option.^[1] This construction leads to the logic that allowing capitalist markets to operate in an unfettered fashion will bring the greatest good to the greatest number of people; therefore a more minimal state is seen as inherently both more democratic and more efficient. Such minimal state logic, although tempered, is reflected in the current transformation of the welfare system, as revealed through the Prime Minister’s statement that: [‘brick by brick, edifice by edifice, we are slowly dismantling the big-state structures.’](#)

But is this really the most effective means to ensure an equitable or democratic society?

The financial crisis of 2008, which for many has discredited the dominant model of financial capitalism, has been maintained by those currently in power. It has been reconstituted as a debt crisis caused by government deficits. This has led to significant changes in government fiscal policy, which will define politics and policy for years to come, and provides further credence to the minimal state approach as enacted through austerity and seen through erosion in the distributive role of the welfare state, and the increasing dominance of market-based accountability.

More fundamentally, the focus of the minimal state is predominantly on the economic realm, whilst it neglects the role of the social and political spheres. Through an implicit rejection of the intervention of government, there is essentially an erosion of the public sphere on a very fundamental level. Discursive arenas for democratic accountability that involve communities in decision-making are replaced by relations that are structured along the lines of the market economy. This results in a privileging of concerns about efficiency, and the restriction of debate about the efficacy and equity of policy, as well as the justice of existing social structures.

Schumacher [argues](#) that we need to disabuse ourselves of the orthodoxies inherited from the nineteenth century, which includes the positivism and rational economics that is apparent within the market mode of governance. As Habermas has [identified](#), this leads to a dominance of market relations, and so therefore undermines the public sphere as an arena of discursive relations. Open Public Services provides a model of government that deepens market governance in the UK. The mechanisms that are provided through choice and competition are distinctly market-based forms of accountability and are not sufficient for democratic accountability. This weakens the discursive public sphere, leads to the potential for more inequitable decisions and undermines the connection between delivery of public services and democratic control.

The alternative is not the Big State, but a critical re-design of institutions which involves a more radical conception of democratic accountability. Through engaging in critical reflection and drawing together the disciplines of governance and deliberative democracy, it is possible to develop a normatively robust

model of deliberative democratic accountability that rests upon the analytic core components of public justification, equal participation and democratic connection to public service delivery. This would augment the local state, but also ensure that there is room for more coproduced policy within the decision-making process, which values the knowledge of people living in poverty. Such an approach can create the conditions for an effective and accountable welfare state that promotes active equality at a local level.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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