Northumbria Research Link

The Discourse of Local Partnership in the United Kingdom

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This paper considers critically the question of what constitutes 'local partnership', including the stated meanings and implicit power relationships within, for instance, public/private partnerships, specific projects such as Building Schools for the Future or the 'area partnership' arrangements within new English unitary councils. A number of meanings are deconstructed within this prevailing discourse of partnership, including the gaps between a notion of partnership as collaborative advantage, partnership as a means of central government imposing its solutions, partnership as patronage, and the language of partnership as a means of defining the world within a managerial perspective. The discussion then considers how the themes of the discussion can be addressed empirically, and turns to the experience of local governance in Scotland where it is suggested the discourse of partnership can in some ways be contrasted to the typical patterns of partnership in England. It is suggested that power relationships are different within the governance relationships of Scotland and of England. The paper concludes with a critical perspective on what the discourse of partnership now means, together with prospects for further research.

Local Partnership and Local Government

'Local authorities are now working both formally and informally with a wide range of partners to improve outcomes for local citizens. Partnership arrangements such as those underpinning Local or Multi-Area Agreements in England, Improvement Agreements in Wales and Single Outcome Agreements in Scotland can bring huge benefits for local citizens, but can also obfuscate responsibilities and decision-making'. (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2008, p 15)

In the constituent parts of the United Kingdom, partnership has become an essential aspect of local governance. It is not just a desirable addition for (eg) capital projects that could not be funded by the local authority alone, it is a central activity:

'Working with others in partnership to deliver both individual and jointly agreed outcomes is now a core requirement in delivering effective public services'. (ODPM, 2003, p 7)

Partnerships are now embedded, structurally, in UK local government. In England, from 2008, Local Area Agreements in the context of the new Comprehensive Area Assessment

regime were accompanied by stronger Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). The government's "practical guide for local strategic partnerships and planners" (2009b) gives updated guidance on the operation of LSPs. It spells out ways in which local councils can develop their strategic role in leading LSPS: specific aspects include co-ordination of services to address local Sustainable Community Strategies (SCS), "place shaping", community participation and the co-ordination of business investment.

But there are issues: significant practical challenges, even before the larger conceptual problems of partnership are tackled. Embedding the oversight of partnerships into local structures and processes, for instance, may be problematic:

'*The remit of overview and scrutiny committees in local authorities in England has been broadened to include partners to Local Area Agreements. But questions remain about the effectiveness of arrangements for ensuring accountability of partnerships. It has been suggested that there may be instances where there are trade-offs between delivering in partnership and effective accountability for local services*'. (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2008, p 15)

Government has recognised some of these operational problems in partnership working:

'*Whilst partners may spend significant amounts of time developing their business plans, agreeing and reviewing objectives, they often spend little or no time assessing the effectiveness of the partnership process they have entered into to deliver those objectives.*

Partnership working is frequently complex, time-consuming and difficult. Sometimes the difficulties will reflect little more than the 'discomfort' inherent in most partnerships and, once identified, can readily be ameliorated, solved or simply accepted and managed. Occasionally the difficulties – which may be associated with only one partner – will be so serious as to disable the partnership and require its re-constitution.' (ODPM, 2003, p 7)

However, help would seem to be at hand, for there is plentiful official guidance on partnership working from the UK government. When codified into a set of 'tools' – or even a whole toolkit – the impression is produced that this is a value-free process requiring technical management rather than the resolution of difficult questions about resources or political choices. This 'technical' approach to management of local partnerships is evident in much official documentation. The government-established 'Strategic Partnership Taskforce' (SPT), commissioned in 2001 and reporting in 2003, produced an "assessment tool" for self-assessment of partnership practice, summed up as enabling participants to "health check" the partnership around six stated "partnership principles" (ODPM, 2003, p 14):

1 Recognise and Accept the Need for Partnership
2 Develop Clarity and Realism of Purpose
3 Ensure Commitment and Ownership

4 Develop and Maintain Trust

5 Create Clear and Robust Partnership Arrangements

6 Monitor, Measure and Learn

Yet there is something more in this than a set of 'tools'. There is a strange combination of technical process on the one hand (an emphasis on measurement and monitoring) and vague intangibles on the other (trust and acceptance). In these two senses, it is close to the tenets of early New Labour modernisation with its dual, and sometimes uncomfortable, focus on hard-headed performance measurement alongside ethics and values.

Also arising from the SPT report were several specific 'Pathfinder' projects, where local authorities identified one initiative which they sought to have designated as a leading example of partnership working, with an emphasis on being more strategic.

'Partnerships are a key feature of New Labour policy. Both Labour governments since 1997 have produced a stream of legislation, policy guidance and moral exhortation, sometimes backed by ring-fenced funding, to develop partnerships. Much of the early attention was upon the NHS-local government relationship and, for the most part, upon public-public partnerships. Alongside this, there has been a plethora of new area-based initiatives, complementing or superseding previous economic regeneration strategies. These new programmes include Sure Start, Action Zones for Employment, Education and Health, New Deal for Communities, Neighbourhood Renewal, Community Safety and other smaller initiatives. All of this has shifted the nature and scale of partnership working, with greater use of public-voluntary, and public-private partnerships. It is within this evolving partnership context that the Strategic Partnering (Taskforce) initiative can be located.' (ODPM, 2003, p 47).

In a different sense, partnership has latterly entered into the discourse and rationale of structural reorganisation in local government. The newly created unitary councils in selected county areas of England have (re)discovered the joys of partnership. For example, Durham County Council, which became a county-wide unitary authority in 2009, adopted a guiding terminology of partnership. Established from 2009 within the new unitary county, and originally envisaged as being based in and around the main towns in the county, partnership was seen (after abolition of the local district tier of government) as a means of working with local people, with the council proposing that 'Area Action Partnerships would be an integral part of the unitary council providing a link between the council and local neighbourhoods in the county. They would be local decision making and consultation partnerships, listening to the views of local communities, and acting on what local people say'

Finally, the recently published overall evaluation of the entire local government modernisation process since the first Blair government also addresses partnership, under the heading of 'policies to increase engagement':

'*The research shows that the level of engagement between councils and other stakeholders has increased in recent years. Policy makers – at local and national levels – may wish to consider how best to ensure that they maximise the quality and effectiveness of engagement:*
• *policy makers at all levels need to be patient in their pursuit of improved outcomes through stakeholder engagement, as this is likely to require significant time*
• *in order that the right partners, at the right level, continue to engage, partnership machinery must be kept efficient, so that stakeholders only have to attend meetings where they can make a real difference*
• *there should be no further attempt to mandate collaboration, which is likely only to result in 'partners' doing enough to 'tick the box' but little more*
• *the Department may wish to consider how to ensure that local authorities are able to balance their accountability to central government departments with their obligations to their local partners*
• *central government also needs to understand the complexities of partnership arrangements and where possible further simplify reporting arrangements in order to reduce current confusion and lack of transparency*
• *similarly, councils and their local partners need to develop systems that enable local citizens to easily understand who is responsible/accountable for what and to hold these bodies to account, e.g. through public scrutiny or through accessible Public Service Boards*" (Bovaird, Downe and Martin, 2009, p 46)

When we start to consider partnership at more than the operational level, however, we begin to encounter some rather fundamental problems.

The Discourse of Partnership

Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1994) wrote in detail some years ago of business alliances - that is, of collaborative advantage between commercial companies - and she placed considerable emphasis on the partnership relationship rather than merely the process. She found three essential elements of successful partnerships: (1) "They are living systems that evolve progressively in their possibilities" (2) They involve "creating new value together" rather than just "getting something back for what you put in" and (3) "They cannot be "controlled" by formal systems but require a dense web of interpersonal connections and internal infrastructures that enhance learning" (Moss Kanter, 1994, p 97).

This is a remarkably lucid account of a living partnership, its strength reinforced by its simplicity. It is far removed from the predominant discourse of local public sector

partnerships today. It can be contrasted with, for instance, the report published by the Department for Communities and Local Government in 2009 which – following from a commitment made by government in its 'Communities in Control' White Paper in 2008 - reported on the findings of a panel into "redress" for local government "customers". Its introduction includes the following:

*"The challenge for all of us in the public sector is to deliver a seamless offer to the customer, joining up on our promise and delivery wherever possible, with partnerships which are designed for customer convenience" (*DCLG, 2009a, p i)

This is followed, perhaps not surprisingly, by a toolkit.

The Review also recommends that the government establishes a series of "Trailblazer pilots". (DCLG, 2009a, p 5). These would be used to test the toolkit.

Deconstructing this language starts to take us closer to the deficiencies of current partnership discourse. This discourse is not meaningless. Its meaning, however, is different from the literal meaning of the words being used. Therein lies the power, and the danger, of an all-embracing discourse. It assumes a view of the world into which we – as citizens or perhaps 'customers' – are co-opted. Alternatively, as critical commentators, we can resist co-option and describe the work of local councils and their collaborating organisations in a different way, perhaps politically, or in terms of critical analyses of organisational learning, or perhaps by reference to the sense-making activities of the actors involved. There are other discourses. Within these discourses are stated meanings and implicit meanings, and power relationships.

Huxham (2000) has discussed the bases of collaborative governance, of organisations working together to achieve what they could not do alone, aiming for a grasp of the conceptual factors underlying collaboration. As Huxham points out, many terms are used for this – 'collaboration', 'joint working' and many other words, including partnership – and these terms may have a contested meaning amongst both practitioners and academic researchers. More important than these specific labels, Huxham says, is the focus on what such arrangements are meant to achieve, which conceptually may include, for instance, certain instrumental advantages, or an ideological imperative connected with participation, or perhaps transfer of good practice (Huxham, 2000, p 340). The practical and conceptual purposes of collaboration are numerous. Although Huxham does consider power, it does not occupy a central place within the analysis. "Problems with power differences can extend

beyond the organizational level to the individual participants in a collaboration" (Huxham, 2000, p 350). The conclusion of the analysis is that collaborative relationships are likely, if "left to their own devices", to fail or at least to have significant problems, but "...if the moral imperative that there is no other way to tackle major social issues is accepted, their clumsiness for purpose is not sufficient reason for abandoning them. Rather, it provides the imperative for finding competent ways to manage them" (Huxham, 2000, pp 352-353).

The emphasis on 'moral imperative' sits at variance with the characteristic pattern of local partnerships, and again draws out attention to the importance of the prevailing discourse.

As an immediate practical example of the ability of the partnership discourse to mean several different things at once, it is worth considering the words of a letter from letter from Ed Balls, Secretary of State, to school governors in England, on 30th June 2009:

"Because schools will not be able to deliver the full [Pupil and Parent] Guarantee by acting alone, partnership and federation will be increasingly important so that schools can offer more to pupils and parents by acting together than they would in isolation".

This is a textbook example of partnership as collaborative advantage: educational institutions must work together in order to achieve more 'than they would in isolation'.

Although the words may be similar, the meaning has shifted in another part of the same letter:

"I firmly believe that the White Paper will truly create a system which reflects the needs of schools, teachers and pupils in the 21st century. I look forward to continuing to work in partnership with you to build this system"

Here, partnership is a gift of a beneficent government, working in a kindly partnership with its subjects, despite the enormous difference in power between the 'partners' (government, governors, parents, staff and students).

Indeed, power is a significant element in understanding the discourse of partnership, and deserves some further attention not only on a theoretical level, but as a concrete basis for empirical research, as discussed below.

Power and Partnership

How can we analyse differences of power and the way in which these impact on the theory and practice of partnership working?

Empirically, the different national governance arrangements within the UK are a promising point of departure. Power relationships within these arrangements are unequal. Different national contexts within the UK mean that the discourse of partnership is different, because power relationships are different. It can be argued that partnership is influenced by the national/devolved context, including the degree of centralisation within national and local governance.

If the discourse of partnership is mediated through the prevailing pattern of governance, it makes sense to look more closely at the nature of such governance. Partnership working in Scotland under devolved government has followed a rather different path from that of England. This is illustrated by the Single Outcome Agreement (SOA). The 'concordat' between national and local governments in Scotland provided, in 2007, a commitment to set up SOAs in each of the 32 Scottish councils, with a view to extending these also to the Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs). The SOA sought to replace the various systems in operation in Scottish local government with a more coherent regime for every council, based on an explicit set of national outcomes and indicators for Scotland, together with enhanced external scrutiny and performance management.

The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 had contained a number of measures consistent with this, its three principal elements being Best Value, Community Planning and the Power to Advance Wellbeing. The second of these is most relevant to our discussion. "Community Planning was not a new concept, partnership working had been under way for many years before Community Planning was given a statutory basis in the Local Government in Scotland Act and this experience informed the legislation." http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Government/PublicServiceReform/community-planning

This legislation illuminates the practice of partnership quite clearly. It places a duty on local councils to "to initiate, facilitate and maintain Community Planning, including consulting and cooperating with communities", it defines "core partners" as "Health Boards, the Enterprise Networks, Police, Fire and Regional Transport Partnerships", also covered by the duty to collaborate; and it places an obligation on Scottish ministers "to promote and encourage Community Planning". It is explicitly stated that the Community Planning Partnerships have a

reporting duty to "communities rather than to the Scottish Government."
http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Government/PublicServiceReform/community-planning

The legislation goes further than that in England, by making it possible (under Section 19) for the Community Planning Partnership to establish itself as a distinct corporate body. Although this has been discussed by some CPPs, none have yet been constituted in this way. It does however give a statutory basis for partnership which does not exist in an English context (notwithstanding the enhanced role of LSPs in England). The CPP has, explicitly, a strategic role, linking to the implementation of the Outcome Agreement.

In 2008, the Scottish government agreed SOAs with all local councils and with some of the CPPs. During 2009 new SOAs have been developed with the CPPs and these were formally agreed by government and its partners in June 2009.

Support for development of these arrangements is provided by the Improvement Service, broadly comparable in function to the Audit Commission in England. Interestingly, the Improvement Service itself is described by the Scottish government in partnership terms:

"Improvement Service is a partnership between the Scottish Executive, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE). It is a Company limited by guarantee with a budget of £4.5m over three years, provided by the Scottish Executive". http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Government/local-government/18777/14956

It would seem, then, that we have partnerships overseen by partnerships, all of them working happily in partnership. Does this mean that local governance in Scotland is an entirely consensual set of arrangements, distinct from the centrally-driven pattern in England? No. However, it can certainly be argued that the discourse of partnership in Scotland is *distinct from* that of England. The main difference – perhaps the explanatory factor - is around power and a different national settlement for governance. This central difference between Scotland and England is reflected in cultural differences in the manner of debate around setting up the SOAs and in different language. Partnership in Scotland does not have all of the connotations of partnership all too evident in the documentation from the Department for Communities and Local Government referred to above.

The key question is how this different language and discourse will influence practical outcomes and how the debates around potential delivery failure may have impact. A recent critique of SOAs in Scotland (Midwinter, 2009) begins to unpick the issues around the methodology of SOAs and the partnerships involved. Midwinter argues, around the

`concordat`, that "it is clear that widely differing interpretations of what has been agreed exist between players on both sides" (p.1). If these differing interpretations ultimately result in failures in delivery then issues of power relationships may appear. The rhetoric of the national settlement may present a very different story to England but as Midwinter contends "weaknesses of methodology and the extensive volume of paperwork generated by SOAs makes it difficult to see how this novel concept of joint accountability will be operationalised, particularly as central government has regulatory and oversight powers over local government. This makes a partnership arrangement dubious and it has been widely criticised since Layfield for blurring accountability" (p. 4). Partnerships in Scotland then, through the SOAs, may result in "a bureaucratic industry divorced from service delivery" (ibid., p. 4) due to a failure to integrate fully.

So while there is a different discourse in Scotland potentially the same issues may arise as in England. The partnership `industry` and its prevailing discourse may configure the views of partnership and inform the perceived solutions to any resultant problems. The `bureaucratic industry` may well default to foundationalist understandings of partnership working but these will be couched in a more consensual manner akin to interpretations of partnership as a `mutual benefit`. Any reconfiguration of partnership then is likely to be around extension rather than deletion and the reassertion of central control.

There is scope for empirical work in different parts of the UK to investigate partnership and power in different parts of the UK. Some existing research exists. For instance, Sullivan and Williams (2009) have referred to the difficulties of co-ordination associated with community strategies in Wales, identifying multiple purposes on the part of those involved. They suggest that empirically it is useful to analyse community strategies "on the basis of the purposes and models stakeholders attach to them" and presumably the same argument can be made for partnership working in a more general sense.

In summary, the pattern of partnership is distinct, and arguably more settled, in a Scottish rather than in an English context. The settlement reached for national governance in a Scotland allows for the possibility of partnership working between local and national actors, whereas, in England, the dominance of an overwhelmingly powerful UK central government establishes a discourse of partnership which is skewed from the start by central control or, at best, by central patronage and beneficence. Power is central in understanding this.

As an example, Building Schools for the Future (BSF) is the mechanism by which major capital spending on schools takes place in England. It is couched in the rhetoric of partnership.

"This is an exciting and inspirational programme. It is based on strategic partnership between all sections of the educational community" http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/resourcesfinanceandbuilding/bsf/aboutbsf/

BSF is 'delivered' through 'Partnerships for Schools', which itself links to private sector as well as government funding. BSF is also, explicitly, linked to development of the Academy programme with all of its highly contestable assumptions about the future governance and values of secondary education. The programme is centrally about different degrees of power. It is not a 'partnership' chosen locally as the best way of securing funding for rebuilding. It is the *only* way of securing that funding.

Conclusions

Partnership is not a meaningless word. However, its meaning may be spun, shaped or twisted by its use within a dominant discourse, propelled by an ideological imperative – typically, that of managerialism. Its meaning may also be altered by different relations of power. In our subsequent work, the argument of this paper will be developed in two ways: first, by extension of the analysis of discourse, toward a closer examination of and deconstruction of the typical meanings and language associated with partnership discourse, and, secondly, by empirical investigation of contrasting approaches to partnership. The former may suggest that practitioners are quite comfortable with an ironic use of partnership language, aware of its official usage alongside its practical meaning. sometimes for concrete reasons, as where a local authority takes over the running of a specific service from a neighbouring council under the guise of partnership rather than going through a tendering process against other providers. The latter may be carried out by concrete comparative study of the English and Scottish approaches to partnership working, as outlined in a preliminary way above. The contrasting national governance arrangements of England and Scotland exhibit different internal power relationships and there is a subtly different but significant discourse of partnership. The dominant paradigm of partnership in an English context is one that produces and reproduces highly unequal power relationships – local government remains a creature of central authority - meaning that, for instance, it is simply inaccurate on the mere level of everyday language to describe some initiatives – including BSF – as partnerships.

When one partner can exert power over another, it is not a partnership, especially where the more powerful body does not have a relationship of accountability to other participants. Accountability is thus another key consideration within the further analysis of this area.

While there is no heuristic purpose in using the term partnership to describe a relationship which is merely a commercial contract between public or private organisations, the discourse can of course have a political purpose in connoting, falsely, relationships based on trust and mutuality. The discourse of partnership also serves a political purpose in the sense of smoothing ideological differences within a language of co-working and common endeavour, thus achieving an ideological purpose of its own (that is, to deliver a neo-liberal agenda though management of the prevailing discourse)

In a superficial sense this is simply the language of managerialism transposed to the public sector, adding a veneer of business authenticity or perhaps demonstrating a grasp of current buzzwords and management clichés within the peer reference group. But this topic is about something more than that: it is a language within a prevailing discourse – of ideas, concepts and constructions – that describes a chosen world. This chosen world is one without political conflict or differences of view. It is a 'seamless' world – in partnership language, perhaps even a seamless offer - where there is implicit consensus about decisions, services and, more widely, about a common shared culture. Within this, partnership can be invoked to mean almost anything intended by the speaker.

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