

# A quiet revolution: opportunities for local futures in the UK

## Jamie Saunders

*Jamie Saunders is a local government policy officer focusing on sustainability, foresight, community planning and governance in a local authority in the north of England. He is an adviser to the Permaculture Association – a UK charity promoting sustainable design – and was involved in the production of the Local Government Association's Futures Toolkit for Local Government.*

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**Abstract** Central Government in the UK has opened the door to futures work at a local level through the modernisation programme for local government. It has created conditions for local governance which are strategic and futures-orientated. This raises challenges and opportunities for developing expert and participative futures research to inform local thinking, decision making and action. It also opens the institutions, structures and processes at a local level to the inherently uncomfortable and destabilising thoughts of what the future may hold within an interconnected and turbulent world. This work appears to be a quiet revolution in the making, creating major opportunities for foresight, futures research and anticipatory management at a local level and for developing processes that focus civic attention on a regular basis on long-term challenges and implications for personal, corporate and political action.

## Context: towards a new constitutional settlement

In 1996, Geoff Mulgan and Perri 6 wrote, “at the moment fear and uncertainty are leading to some strange reactions. We have few institutional frameworks for serious thinking about what the future is bringing.” This article tracks the emergence of institutional frameworks for local futures and takes as a starting point the arrival of New Labour in government in the UK in 1997. It seeks to explore the role of futures research, foresight and anticipatory management at the local level of government and governance in the UK.

With its manifesto in 1997, New Labour not only renamed itself but also set out measures to create a “new” Britain, in their words a nation fit for the twenty-first century.

Tracing the development of this work back to pre- and post-1997 government thinking and planning – the Third Way – work on civil society and social capital and on the impact of global drivers (and of dealing with the opportunities and risks of “the new world disorder” (Healey, 1996)) can be seen to have influenced a government reassessing the role and purpose of government itself. Many of these trends may have affected whichever party formed government, but New Labour appear to have grappled with the notions of multi-tier governance – of “decision division” (Toffler, 1970) – within a “network society” (Castells, 1997) and of the place of individuals within a turbulent and uncertain world. Tony Blair (1996) set out the importance of:

... political reform and modernisation, to make our government fit for the twenty-first century. If we want to create an active civil society, the system of government has to be one that shares power and responsibility with the people ... Institutional reform will not revive faith in politics in and of itself, but it will help. To be fair, disillusion with politics is not just a British phenomenon, but a more generalized one. People have learnt not to trust their leaders: they have come to think politicians are in it for what they can get out of it ... It is crucial for the Labour Party to build trust and then retain it. That is why it is



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important to only promise what we can deliver ... Radical policies require patient politics ... That is why I take an unashamedly long-term view of political strategy as well as economic and social change ... there is now an emerging common agenda ... around two points ... first, that we have to navigate our way through a world of economic, social and political change, and this make new demands on the policies as well as the style of government; second, that, unless we can unify our country, we will not be able to modernise it in the way that international and domestic changes demands. Renewal and cohesion go hand in hand.

Indeed, not only was vision and long-termism central to the incoming government, it has played out to varying degrees of success in addressing long-term challenges such as macro-economic stability, social exclusion and other policy areas. It has also come in a time of unforeseen surprises and danger, ranging from the events of 11 September 2001, flooding events, the implosion of the national railway network and impacts of the foot-and-mouth disease. Within this context, work can be seen as being supported to develop foresight at a national level and to capitalise on its benefits for managing political risks and for enhancing economic, social and environmental well-being.

Examples of this foundation for greater futures work can be seen to be emerging against the backdrop of public policy creation for long-term goals and the requirements of maintaining office including:

- the Foresight programme located within the Department of Trade and Industry, with its particular focus on the potential impacts of science and technology;
- the New Horizons programme with the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs;
- the Cabinet Office “forward strategy unit”/strategic futures work; and
- the New Labour Party instigated “Forethought” programme (to focus the political party on long-term challenges) and National Policy Forum Consultation activities[1].

Against this backdrop, the Government has set out and implemented threads of what it considers to be required to “modernise” the state, central government and other aspects of social, economic and environmental policy and practice. It is this that calls for governments to address “the burning need to shoulder new responsibilities, adapt to new methods of governance and re-establish their legitimacy in a totally transformed environment (the network age)” (Howell, 2000).

Indeed, its stated aim within the modernisation of government is to make government policy making more responsive, outward and forward looking – at least five years into the future (Cabinet Office, 1999). The government has also secured measures to counter “centralized government” with the decentralization of government being seen as “essential if power, wealth and opportunity is to be in the hands of the many rather than the few” (Blair, 1996).

The devolution of power to tiers below Whitehall may be debated with counter evidence of the centralist tendencies of London-based office holders. However, with the emergence of the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, regional development agencies and assemblies (if not as yet full regional government though the Regional White Paper 2002 is due shortly) a sub-national, regional tier can be seen.

The development of a sub-national infrastructure has been supported by a specific focus on the local – on local government, on parish and town councils and on neighbourhoods (especially as a vehicle for addressing deprivation and urban regeneration).

The requisite variety of personal, neighbourhood, local, regional, national, European and global layers of infrastructure, policy, action may cause confusion and a lack of clarity but it also creates a dynamic tension of debate and learning about how to support national “progress” in the twenty-first century. It creates an open-ended public process that can be seen as at the heart of delivering political manifesto promises and potentially securing sustainable development.

The Government is clearly supportive of futures research for its own ends. It also appears focused on shifting attention to outcomes – end results and practical longer-term achievements – and the experiences of quality of life for individuals and communities.

### **Outcomes and adaptation in the “infinite game”**

The prominence of outcomes in public policy can be seen as trying to focus on and give attention to the so-called “wicked issues” for:

the core problem for government is that it has inherited from the nineteenth century a model of organisation that is structured around functions and services rather than around solving problems ... To solve complex problems that cut across these boundaries, new approaches are needed. Government needs to become more holistic, achieving greater integration across the public sector. It also needs to become more preventative, shifting the balance of effort away from curing problems ... towards preventing them ... Prevention is only the first stage towards more anticipatory government. More exactly, prevention is concerned with negative goals of government, with the reduction and elimination of risks. Anticipation is also about positive behaviour and making government more strategic (Perri 6, 1997).

It is interesting to note that a dominance of long-term outcomes and indicators could be one of the biggest traps for government and for foresight and sustainability activities operating within the context of creating and delivering time-limited demonstrable “progress” for short-term media and election purposes. It also raises questions about the government’s reliance on “what matters is what works” and on evidence-based policy making; for from a futures perspective, an evidence base as currently promoted will indicate what did, or did not work, somewhere in the past. It will not be a definitive guide to what will work somewhere else in the future – best and good practice may need to be

seen as something to take into account when forward planning rather than as something to copy. Futures research, especially about time paths, options and potential consequences, could therefore be seen as an additional and vital component of the evidence base for decision making in any organisation or tier of government/governance.

In thinking long-term, it may be that:

... it is the outcomes which prove to be so very much more complicated and so much less amenable to neat solutions and to popping into ideological compartments. Indeed, "outcome" may be the wrong word to use. What a network which accommodates infinite and constantly changing variety implies is that no system ever crystallises or reaches intellectual completion. All situations become open-ended and amenable to negotiation and adjustment. In practice this means that our institutions and civic order, our relationships with each other and with society and government, can be built upon real-life diversity and myriad individual and group circumstances. In doing so they can deliver far more relevant and supportive policies than those depending upon the broad, misleading and static aggregates of the past (and present), and on the facades of bogus uniformities, which were (and are still) used to govern people (Howell, 2000).

Public office historically was predicated on the promises of representative democracy – of greater certainty and control, of ideological positions delivering firm promises to electorates, of "quick-wins", of playing clear "finite games" that meant that democracy was a "good enough" solution as a social system for collective action problems (and better than some of the alternatives).

Our view of democracy may have to address the challenge of "creating processes and institutions that can muddle through turbulent spells and avoid systemic rigidity and collapse. History tells us that muddling through is best done by democracies, and arguably best by federal ones. Democracies rarely achieve optimal outcomes, but more importantly avoid calamitous ones" (Christie, 2002). Indeed, Dator (1998) argues that it may be necessary to look again at the notion of democracy itself and consider designing new political systems to enable governance for futures and future generations and avoid the discounting of the future in decision taking.

Therefore there is a need to operate within the "infinite game" (Carse, 1994) and to see that we need a mindset that has no end point destination but rather focuses on the journey: the continuation and sustained evolution of life on planet Earth – sustainability, perhaps. Playing short-term finite games to win (even with 5 or 20 year time horizons) – based on "outcomes" – without seeing the infinite game (centuries and millennia) may act counter to operating within a dynamic, complex and evolving natural living system, with human beings as a core determinant of how that shapes up both for our species and for the other aspects of life and its life support systems as they are currently understood (see Brand (2000) – "pace layers of civilisation"). It may also strengthen the position of those who view process and the

means of change as more worthy of attention than end-goals and public policy "carrots-and-sticks".

Indeed, the static nature of the debate may illuminate why some of the debate around public policy and sustainability is couched in terms of certainties and fixed debates from either the optimistic or pessimistic schools.

The notion of either/or and of the need to re-frame our thinking from dichotomies such as optimist/pessimist or indeed central/local is revealed by the following:

The conventional wisdom is that people in local units make better collective decisions about taxing, spending and services because they are in closer touch with local needs. How can the centre possibly know local needs better than local people themselves? ... But wait. When we talk about services local decision making can be capricious, short term and selfish. Local capacity – and willingness – to pay differ from place to place. Municipal government imploded in the late 19th century because ratepayers refused to pay rates – not because of wicked centralists ... In the 20th century it was failure by local decision makers – or a deliberate refusal to levy the rates to pay for the spending – that forced the intervention by the centre to provide housing, social and medical care, child protection and schooling ... A country of 46m people cannot be run from the centre, and central government has had local arms for many years. There have to be vehicles for the expression of local sentiment about those issues that are genuinely local (Walker, 2002).

So to deal with the fuzzy future (Kosko, 2000) and with whether there are "genuinely local" issues any more, recognition should be given to the creative tension and the inherent ambiguities arising from central and local relations, the rise of the individual identities and other forms of social structures and processes for collective decision making or decision making about the share commons. These issues of locations of power are currently at the heart of vigorous discussions taking place regarding the future of Europe and local and regional issues arising from the European White Paper on Governance (see LGIB, 2002).

Overall though the debate appears to be less a question of central versus local, or even global versus local, but rather trying to deal with complexity and "connexity" – the state of interconnectedness in which "it may still look as if it (the world) is made up of separate and sovereign individuals, firms, nations or cities, but the deeper reality is one of multiple connections" (Mulgan, 1997).

If however, these measures are seen as part of "a multi-layered debate over the actual content of sustainable development for each country, city and region" (Castells, 1997) then the emergence of local governance and well being form a core component of a wider system of social ingenuity in the twenty-first century.

Homer-Dixon (2000) writes that:

... social ingenuity is supplied by people at all levels of society ... much of it consists of ideas for solving various kinds of collective action problems ... We need social ingenuity to set up and maintain public and semi-public goods ... social arrangements – social ingenuity, essentially – are immensely important ... The challenges we face ... are tangled, dynamic and barely understood. Our responses to them require careful deliberation. When we reduce

these challenges to angry dichotomies ... we limit our ability to supply the social and technical ingenuity we need.

This redefines the roles and responsibilities of the various tiers of the state but also the roles and responsibilities of sectors of society from citizens (subjects) to business, to public sector to “civil society”.

It may be that:

... the public sector will only start to generate more value on the public's behalf when it becomes better able to learn, adapt and innovate ... Democratic societies need an engaging and compelling account of their future that captures the popular imagination ... A narrative that is going to grip the public imagination will not be about how we cut costs, make profits or compete more ferociously but about how we create value, realise potential and unlock talent, in financial, social and human terms. We need to show how societies can combine innovation and inclusion, knowledge capital and social capital, to generate lasting value ... a revived sense of civic purpose and an ethic of collaboration will be as central as markets and competition in the knowledge era (Leadbeater, 2000).

Developing a sense of civic purpose that is more forward-looking can be seen as part of a quiet revolution played out behind the headlines of economic stability, crime, health, transport, international affairs and newspaper and television coverage.

### **The emergence of the local**

As part of this wider modernisation programme of reform of the public sector and of government itself, the Government has instigated specific and tactical measures to modernise and transform local government and to develop a framework for local governance for well-being and sustainable development within this wider modernisation of this nation-state. It also indicates, along with a regional role of the Foresight programme, how either by design or default, futures methods are being spread beyond the domain of central government and the national level.

The Local Government White Paper 1998, *Modern Local Government in Touch with the People* (DETR, 1998), put the marker down for a comprehensive package of reform programmes for local government. This can be seen, with hindsight, as having been tactically fragmented into manageable components of “reform” rather than a fundamental “big bang” approach to local modernisation. However, the cumulative effects of the Local Government Modernisation Agenda (LGMA), led by the Department of Local Government and the Regions (DTLR), are creating a major period of transition at the local level which is playing out in a multitude of diverse ways due to local circumstances and other factors. A recently commissioned review of the LGMA by DTLR sets out to academically review the whole impact of the reform measures with a timetable through to 2007 (Cardiff University, 2001).

A synopsis of where central government see local government can be seen in the following by Local Government Minister Alan Whitehead (2001):

Local government is not merely local administration – local government's position as an elected body is key to what it does. As such it can do many things which cannot be achieved by central government.

Local government can champion community interests in dealings with other local authorities, central government, quangos, private bodies etc.

It can act as an ambassador to promote the area and attempt to bring events, facilities or businesses etc. to the locality – experience from overseas has shown that no town or city has been successful without strong local leadership.

Local government has a key role in promoting the growth of social capital within their area. By this I mean the encouraging the various voluntary organisations, clubs, charities, sporting groups which hold our communities together – research has shown that strong social capital has a serious impact on the well-being of a community, often in unexpected ways.

Local government also – of course – has a hugely important role in the delivery of key local services – local government can understand the local context and tailor appropriate solutions to local problems – effective local democracy will ensure that councils are held to account for the services delivered by the consumers of those services.

Local government provides subsidiarity in decision making – some decisions are seen as having legitimacy because they are made at an appropriately local level.

The existence of local government also imposes checks and balances on the actions of central government.

Because there are a multiplicity of local authorities across the country, they can try approaches that are different from those of central government, and from each other – the successful ones may be transferable to other areas.

In fact, this transitional period, if “transition is the state that change puts people into” (Bridges and Mitchell, 2000), is both a critical time for those at a local level and also for those interested in promoting and supporting the use of anticipatory, foresight or futures work. This transition is also one in which the majority of attention is given to building horizontal social capital – of understanding, relationships and trust – and one in which building social capital vertically between the personal, local, regional, national and beyond may prove equally critical.

It also comes at a time when the notion of social capital is being complemented by that of “intellectual capital” – the “organised knowledge that can be used to produce wealth” (Stewart, 1998) – which is increasingly perceived as a critical foundation for organisations and society in managing its affairs. The appreciation of futures material and the development of foresight capabilities can be seen as part of the intellectual capital of organisations and communities. The connection between ingenuity and intellectual capital can be made and the options put by Homer-Dixon (2000) of either making the world simpler or increasing ingenuity to meet social demands become critical to quality of life and sustainability.

The 1998 White Paper also illustrates the current debate and tension around the purpose and function of local government – as a local element with the provision of nationally framed public services or as a mechanism and legitimate tier of “reformed” government. While the two may not be completely disconnected, the competing objectives of service management as opposed to local community

leadership and governance appear to require clearer thinking and more attention to the relationship between the two. Mumford (2001) argues that “juggling two work objectives that are not compatible with each other” causes a “double-bind” – an extreme tension or stress – and that it might be possible to see that administration of public services to short-term targets against the long-term governance of an area might be such a double-bind that requires extremely careful thought and handling. This “double-bind” can be seen within the title of the 2001 Local Government White Paper, *Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services* (DTLR, 2001b).

The Local Government Act 1999, as a delivery mechanism of reform, focused very much on the service delivery aspects of local government with the creation of the “best value” regime and clear messages about ensuring the quality and performance management of local services (HMSO, 1999).

While, however, the Local Government Act 2000 (HMSO, 2000), was primarily discussed in terms of its impact on political arrangements, the split of the executive decision-making function from the representative and newly created public interest scrutiny activities and on the proposals for elected mayors may have opened the door for greater local futures work. The new constitutional and political arrangements for local government can be seen as seeking to enable better governance in localities: the outstanding question will be “what will build on that legal foundation and create better governance?”

### **Creating better governance**

Part I of the 2000 Act placed a new duty on local government, without currently any additional centrally identified resources, to promote or improve the social, economic and environmental well-being of their areas and to “contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in the UK”. As such it cross-references *A Better Quality of Life the Strategy for Sustainable Development for the UK* published in 1999, which makes explicit that sustainable development is about “ensuring a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come” and hence provides a values context regarding future generations and meta-generational equity at a local level.

The Local Government White Paper 2001 can be seen as setting and reinforcing the “reform” agenda:

Resources are finite, and communities’ views and priorities can diverge and conflict. Consensus cannot always be reached, and so choices and compromises have to be made. That can mean creating winners and losers, trading short-term losses for long-term gains, or foregoing one set of opportunities in order to exploit another. It also means making strategic choices for future generations not just dealing with immediate interests and issues. Democratically-elected councils provide the means for expressing and resolving these conflicts, for ensuring that differing points of view are heard and understood, for promoting understanding, and for making tough choices. Councils are then responsible for explaining those choices

and will be held to account for them by local people. Councils – unlike any other local organisation – are designed specifically to play this role.

This role in strategic oversight, long-term responsibility, arbitration and conflict mediation can be seen as marking out a basic reorientation – a revolution – of local government and its core purpose in the UK in the twenty-first century.

The Government have also stated that the agenda of local community leadership, through community planning and partnership action at a local level, takes Local Agenda 21, the local framework for contributing to global sustainable development, forward as a primary objective of the modernisation of local government (Local Government White Paper, 2001, paragraph 4.22) (DTLR, 2001b). Much of the work in Local Agenda 21, since 1992, and indeed work surrounding sustainable development has either been focused on specific problems of the present or based on developing consensual and preferred visions of a sustainable future. For instance, “it is this idea of vision that makes Local Agenda 21 a coherent initiative and more than just a collection of projects. Every Local Agenda 21 process should at some point explicitly address the question ‘what do we want this area to be like in the future?’” (LGMB, 1996).

This view of vision and of positivity – of confidently setting out the destination of travel – is strongly echoed in the *Statutory Guidance on Preparing a Community Strategy* (DETR, 2000) and this makes explicit reference to community leadership that develops “a long-term vision for the area” and explicitly takes “account of the needs of future generations”. This guidance also suggests that a community strategy takes a 10-15 year view and explicitly refers to “a long-term sustainable vision for the area”. The guidance (DETR, 2000) while suggesting a 10-15 year time horizon for “a long-term vision” also allows for local discretion in the timeframe for community strategies: “The timeframe is something that can only be decided in the light of local circumstances and following the articulation of communities’ aspirations.” It may be possible eventually to talk of thousand-year future histories for localities.

There are signs that the notion of coping with the “indeterminacy of the future” – of needing to assess and re-assess the destination – is starting to enter thinking and guidance at least in some arenas, for instance in the Local Government Association (LGA, 2000) complementary guide on “Preparing community strategies: issues and advice”, which in material in support of “establishing a vision” included reference on “futures and community planning”. In addition, the LGA has released a futures toolkit for local government to support the development of local capabilities in considering the possibilities of the future more effectively (LGA, 1999).

The government’s guidance sets out the requirements for strategic plans for localities drawn up in partnership through a community planning process – of shared commitments,

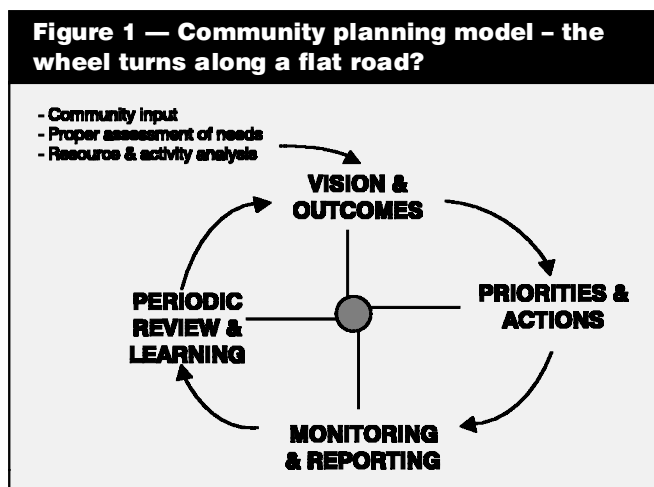
delivery and learning – which contain local developed visions, action plans, monitoring and reporting and review. Indeed, the reality is that:

... many of the issues facing local communities today – health, community safety, the environment, social inclusion, unemployment, regeneration – can only be tackled effectively if the wide variety of public, private and voluntary sector organisations involved at local level work together. No single organisation acting alone has the complete answer – but working together gives us the best chance to maximise our combined effort, avoid duplication and make the greatest impact on our communities (Beecham, 2000).

Community planning is increasingly being seen as the main vehicle for strategic coordination and planning in localities. As such it can be seen that a rational and logical approach to planning is being promoted by government with local government playing a pivotal role in the community planning process and in ensuring delivery of positive improvements to quality of life.

Figure 1 illustrates this cyclical process expected by government to operate in localities. It also illustrates how this can be perceived as essentially operating within relative stability and a linear world view – for as the planning “wheel” turns then progress is made and reviews occur periodically. This simplest of machine metaphors suggests the possibility of control and of predictability – make the wheel turn and progress will be inevitable. Operating in a natural, dynamic system may require an appreciation of environmental scanning and foresight to create a more resilient strategic community planning process for local areas. Continuous alertness and attention, preparedness and strategic continuity planning activities may be required to cope with environmental changes, surprises and “unknown unknowns” (Homer-Dixon, 2000).

Overseeing this process reveals the shift from local government as “controller” to enabler and facilitator of social change, of overseeing collective decision making and action – governance – and having a role to fulfil in meta-governance (the “governance of government and governance” (Jessop,



2000)). In meta-governance, the ability to scan the environment for emerging trends, threats and opportunities, to look for and anticipate the drivers of change appears to become fundamental to effective community leadership.

If governments “provide the ground-rules for governance” (Jessop, 1999) then local government reform and clarity of purpose is essential for the spread of futures-orientated local governance across the UK as a whole.

It also suggests that local government has a clear community leadership function in which

... perhaps the main function of leadership ... is not to supply ingenuity but to help our societies resolve their deep conflicts over values, wealth and power ... the real problem is our inability to resolve key political struggles over what we want, where we should go and who should benefit ... Great ingenuity is usually needed to design, implement and operate the political institutions ... that enable society to deal with their political struggles ... Moreover, when these political institutions fail, the resulting conflict among social groups diverts the attention and absorbs the energy of leaders, bureaucrats and decision makers of all kinds and the day-to-day management that is vital to the smooth running of society is then neglected (Homer-Dixon, 2000).

These community planning activities, being placed on a statutory basis, can be seen as formally encouraging a form of deliberative or participative democracy at a local level to complement the traditional representative democratic structures and processes. This is reinforced by the government’s promotion of partnership working and creditable local strategic partnerships in many places throughout England (DTLR, 2001a).

A re-clarification of local politics, more akin to Crick (1962) may be required, in which:

... politics can simply be defined as the activity by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share of power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and survival of the whole community, within a political system being that type of government where politics proves successful in ensuring reasonable stability and order.

Politics is all about drawing hard lines and backing them up with the force of law ... A hard line in politics depends both on fiat and force ... The state supplies much of society’s demand for hard lines ... It gives more licence to those in power because it lets them draw lines through wider spheres of action. It gives logical wiggle room. This is the fuzzy version of the Golden Rule: Those with the most power tend to draw the hard lines ... We draw hard lines through fuzz ... The technique is quick and dirty but often gets things done ... (Kosko, 2000).

Adams (1998) reinforces the implications of bringing time into the considerations of societal decision making and human development:

Politics tends to be understood with reference to space and matter, that is the defence of the realm and territory as well as the distribution of a country’s resources and wealth. Time, in contrast, is an implicit aspect of the political process ... regulations, policies and their effects, however, invariably exceed ... temporal boundaries ... in the context of inescapable indeterminacy of outcomes and contested futures ... This has discomfiting political consequences ... politics and policy operate in the realm not of science but contested values and morals ... By highlighting the fact that many actions (associated

with technological advance, scientific certainty and control, global markets and trans/national politics) are characterised by indeterminacy and timelags of unspecifiable duration, the timescape perspective developed here assists the move away from the futile socio-political insistence on proof and certainty.

But the challenge of operating locally within a inter-dependent world means that “quick and dirty” decisiveness may have to take account of wider world changes – be outward looking – but also think of consequences and liabilities – be forward focused like never before. Addressing time-politics can thus be seen as part of the drivers of “modernisation”.

As Mulgan and Perri 6 (1996) commented on the need for institutional frameworks for serious thinking about the future so the development of well-being, sustainability and governance at a local level opens significant challenges and opportunities for not only thinking about the future but also for developing futures research as an input to decision making in the present and acting as if the future mattered.

Also called into question is whether the notions of “strong leadership” – as in control rather than “clear and effective” – and “serious futures” will transpire against more provocative futures thinking that is able to think the unthinkable and speak the unspeakable – and be challenging, creative and playful in considering the turbulence of the present and possibilities of the future. Ackoff (no date) suggests we need to work in communities – as social systems – in which “the whole exists to serve its parts . . . The whole is not a mere aggregation of the separately designed and controlled parts – it is a ‘coming together’ of the parts into a whole. This means that a corporate plan [community strategy – author] should not be an aggregation of plans separately prepared by its parts, but that the plans of the parts should be derived from and coordinated with a plan for the whole” and a “democratic social system cannot be conceptualised as either a machine or an organism; it must be conceptualised as a community. This is a transforming concept . . . A community provides the facilities, processes and infrastructure that enable its members to pursue their objectives and enable the community to serve its other stakeholders. Those who manage a community are subject to control by and accountable to those who are managed. This is why those who govern communities are referred to as ‘public servants’”. Acting as “public servants” within local places needs to take account of social relations as, “local places do not have a single, pre-given identity because they are constructed out of the intersection and the articulation of multiple social relations” (O’Riordan, 2001). This view and the style of how solutions should be shaped is reflected in the Local Government White Paper (DTLR, 2001b):

Successful councils ensure that the voices of all get heard – not just the most vociferous, powerful or well-established. They assess the problems faced by different groups and tackle discrimination and disadvantage wherever it is found. They enable individuals, families and communities to find and develop solutions to their own problems, provide the resources and opportunities to help them do

so, and work with others to contribute to those solutions. They stand up and speak out for all local people . . . it means safeguarding the interests of future members of the community. Many decisions made now will have long term implications. These need to be identified, understood and designed into local policies.

Whitehead (2001) illustrates government’s view on the legitimacy of representative democracy and:

. . . the importance of the role of the elected councillor . . . their validation at the ballot box puts councillors in the position of being able to mediate between the demands of different areas of the community. Experience has shown that there is a limit to the extent to which arguments as to how to allocate resources between different priorities can be solved by consultation, focus groups etc. – local authorities are in a unique position in being able to arbitrate between needs of community as a whole and the needs of various interest groups or smaller geographical areas within their jurisdiction.

Thus local government is perceived as having a clear role to play in strategic mediation and arbitration and a responsibility to think and act in terms of the wider public interest incorporating long-term implications and sustainable development. This context offers a chance for the public interest – already somewhat under strain as a notion – to broaden and encompass a civic responsibility towards “our common future”.

It may be that, as Mulgan (1997) writes:

. . . even the most democratic societies still need leaders who stand above and beyond the communities and interest groups that make them up . . . In general, it takes less effort to deal with things through simple rules than complex ones . . . But if a society finds that as it becomes more complex its subsystems are becoming stronger and its integrative systems, like religion, morality or politics, are becoming weaker then this is a cause for worry, since it suggests that problems or challenges that cut across domains will be left unsolved, and that no one, and no institution, will take responsibility for the whole system. This is why, even in the most egalitarian society, there is still a need for some hierarchy and authority, for someone to see things from the perspective of the whole.

In those places where formally constituted local strategic partnerships exist or where existing cross-sectoral strategic structures are active the infrastructure for collective problem solving and strategic planning can be seen as taking forward the notion of “community government” (Stewart and Stoker, 1989) beyond purely local government in and of itself.

This leads to the concept of local governance – “forms of collective decision-making at a local level . . . through a network of agencies” (Goss, 2000) – which provides a concept within which futures work can be seen to be in fertile territory at a local level. Through our structures and processes of local governance and the requisite hierarchy of civic leadership the debate and shaping of the future will evolve. Local governance, rather than local government, may hold the prospect of a more widely owned and shared process for strategically muddling through, of continuous negotiation and adjustment, when set within the concept and values of sustainability.

Mulgan (1997) continues to shed light on the role of local authority and local strategic partnership model proposed by

Government within local governance, which may be seen to be explicitly placing responsibility for the local-whole on those organisations, in that:

... complex adaptive systems need some hierarchy of organisation because challenges, may be beyond the capacity of subsystems to respond ... The role of higher authorities is not to engineer the system, or to monopolise power and knowledge but rather to perform the roles that lower elements are unable to perform: watching out for threats, averting disasters, resisting parasites and taking responsibility for the future.

To see things from “the perspective of the whole” and with “taking responsibility for the future” means that the gauntlet has been thrown down to localities: it will be interesting and perhaps critical to see if it will be picked up. Not least because these changes are seen as stemming from an imposed regime from central government rather than arising from the “hidden” drivers of glocal (global and local) real-world change that led the government to experiment with measures designed to reform and modernise. Changes brought in with a clear political purpose and expected to assist in creating outward and forward looking and responsive institutions, may indeed be leading to introverted, short-termist and embattled organisations facing demands which they are not capable of or supported to create within the life of a parliament. So whilst the logic behind the quiet revolution may be reasonable, what Higgins (1978) called the “seventh enemy”, of “individual blindness and political inertia” may resist or adapt the change to suit the existing status quo.

This reform agenda – a quiet revolution – in localities also raises questions about how the needs of future generations will be taken into account and probably as importantly who will speak for future generations who have no voice as they are not yet born. Mediation and arbitration will be an emerging agenda for government for just as the present is contested so too is the future, with personal, group and organisational desires, expectations and opinions likely to create an arena of contested futures as well as a contentious present.

For as Prugh *et al.* (2000) suggest, “sustainability – which is ... a dilemma of collective action – is first and foremost a political challenge ... What sort of politics will most enable humanity to choose its future?” and consider the legacy, with all its positives and negatives – being left to future generations.

### **Conclusion – working in the “white spaces”**

The “white space” concept, derived from the work of Hamel and Prahalad (1994), those “opportunities that reside between or around existing ... definitions” can be seen to offer the mindset of being able to work between the boundaries of the known and unknown, and act upon the boundaries between the past and the future, the personal and collective, the local and beyond, government and the rest.

As more is revealed about the whole system of life it may be that the most productive and effective work will take place in the “white spaces” – acting on the boundaries between components of a system – and in pursuit of the whole systems aim (to continue to evolve, or to ensure a more sustainable future, perhaps).

This “quiet revolution” in localities appears to affect all parts of the system of government and governance and may cause indeterminate ripples through space and time. For those in local government it is they and their partners who may face this sooner rather than later; however, attention is still predominantly focused on the headlines and problems rather than the transformative processes and responsibilities.

Gratton (2000) talks of “living strategy” which covers “three basic tenets that differentiate people from money and technology: we operate in time; we search for meaning; and we have soul.”

It may be that these tenets offer a guide to developing futures-orientated community planning.

### **We operate in time**

Our current behaviour is influenced by the memory of the past and by the beliefs of the future. Human development progresses through a shared sequence as skills and knowledge may take years to develop and attitudes and values are resistant to rapid change.

### **We search for meaning**

We strive to interpret the clues and events around us, we actively engage with the world, to seek a sense of meaning – to understand who we are and what we can contribute. Over time groups of people create collective viewpoints, a sense of shared symbols, which may be events or artifacts and are important in creating a sense of meaning.

### **We have a soul**

Each of us has a deep sense of personal identity of what we are and of what we believe in. We can trust and feel inspired by our work – and when we do we are more creative. We can dream about possibilities and events. We can choose to give or withhold our knowledge – depending on how we feel.

We could also see this work and reform of local government set against Gratton’s “three Ps” of corporate strategy:

- (1) purpose;
- (2) process;
- (3) people.

### **Purpose**

In which local authorities promote a civic purpose that develops the notion and importance of the public interest to encompass “our common future” and provides a values system that has an image of a dynamic, evolving and evolutionary sustainability. Mulgan (1997) argues that such a purpose requires “a very different model of leadership, which does not simply pull the levers at the top, or command ... in

times of trouble . . . Its role in other words is to steer when steering is necessary, but also to strengthen the capacity of citizens and communities to govern themselves.”

Cumming (2001) writes of the role of leaders in creating “value systems” in which charismatic and principled leadership has “two characteristics”, which are key; “an ability to create a strong sense of direction for the organisation and the people in it and the vision to create the values that need to go along side this direction”. As such local government and those other community leaders can develop a value system of responsibility to the future and to the legacy to future generations, illuminated by the UNESCO *Declaration on the Responsibilities of Present Generations Towards Future Generation* (UNESCO, 1997)

### Process

With local authorities playing a key role in developing the processes and supporting structures, organisations and skills within localities that strengthens a “learning society” able to develop foresightful ingenuity, intellectual capital and sustainable solutions.

Beecham (2000) argues that the challenge to local government is:

... to take a fresh look at community leadership – the potential benefits for councils, their partners and – most importantly, the local community. We do not pretend that this will be easy, or can be delivered overnight. This new role means councils will need to think carefully about the meaning of leadership. In a context of growing partnerships, this does not necessarily mean taking centre stage. Sometimes it is about creating the right environment for others to act. Councils cannot call themselves leaders if they are not in constant touch with the people they are supposed to lead . . . Community leadership is ultimately about councils creating opportunities for citizens to exercise more control over their own lives and to take direct control of their own futures.

### People

With local councils supporting leadership within a wide range of people and organisations and striving for clarity, effectiveness and relative coherence in the shaping of localities, in which “part of community leadership should involve councils creating the context where other leaders can grow and develop” (Beecham, 2000).

Leadership can be seen as embracing continuity and change, and attempts to explain and support individuals and communities in understanding the future, its challenges and opportunities, as leaders “will be expected to illuminate, to see a little further beyond the edge of now, to have confidence in their own assessments and be bold enough to respect the virtues, qualities, truths and values which it is their duty to maintain . . . this ability to peer out into the darkness and make some sense of it, so as to help people at least prepare a little for what is to come, is the prime quality by which aspiring and incumbent leaders should be judged” (Howell, 2000).

In developing leadership and long-termism, futures research “can change priorities and attitudes within

organizations, and bring fresh meaning to the present” (Glenn *et al.*, 2001).

And if local futures work considers possible, probable and preferable futures then we may at a local level “increase our chances by widening the range of alternatives we consider” (May, 1996):

- possible futures – artistic creativity;
- processes for imagining anything that could happen in the future;
- probable futures – scientific investigation;
- processes for assessing what is most likely or probable to happen;
- preferable – political choices;
- processes for deciding what is most desirable or preferable;

Community planning opens out the potential to be futures-orientated, to draw people and organisations into the debate about personal, local and wider futures. It forms an emerging part of the complex and rich picture of local life within a global system and helps to ensure that “governing and governance itself should be dynamic, complex and varied” (Kooman, 1993, cited in Jessop (2000)).

A view from the government can be seen as still focusing on “effective local government” and on local democracy:

The quality of life, prosperity and health of local communities depend on robust and effective local government. Local democracy is the key to sustaining effective local government, as well as playing an essential part in the constitutional framework of the country. It is up to all of us – central government, local government, local and national parties, and individual private citizens – to do what we can to sustain and promote effective local democracy (Whitehead, 2001).

While there appears a critical role for a healthy local democracy, especially one with a greater futures-orientation than before, the test will be in the wider appreciation and shared effort to act in the public interest, work for our common future and develop sustainability as a guide rather than a destination and in developing clearer thinking about what is actually meant and practised in terms of democracy and governance and how they form part of the problem or solution to dealing with turbulence and unpredictable futures. It will also raise further questions regarding the notion of active citizenship and whether an “open and honest dialogue” (Charan, 2001) about an uncertain future and the support that might entail will help individuals accept their responsibilities to our common future.

Geddes quoted in Gordon (1990) stated that “civics as an art has to do not with imagining an impossible no-place where all is well, but making the most and the best of each and every place”.

Indeed “civics” may be seen as a foundation for considering the evolution and resilience of each and every place to evolving circumstances, in which:

... at its best, futures research can change priorities and attitudes within organizations, and bring fresh meaning to the present. But its recommendations are not always politically convenient, and a

much-heralded report can be just as discreetly shelved. A key role for futurists is therefore to inspire decision-makers with alternative futures and choices, demonstrating their technical feasibility, and warning of the consequences of inaction. But behind every corporate decision there is a battle for hearts and minds – and they have rules of their own (Glenn *et al.*, 2001).

The “quiet revolution” opens the up the potential to develop a futures edge – a critical advantage through illuminating the choices of the present in the light of possible futures – locally to ensure that “futures considerations should dwarf the present” (Brand, 2000) and offers futurists in the UK opportunities to engage in local governance and local government in the “battle for hearts and minds”. A councillor when confronted by a report on the Local Government Act 2000 commented that he was now expected to operate with “half a map and no compass”. The map perhaps covers the experienced past and futures research offers the potential to challenge the “tyranny of the present” and to sketch out more of the last great wilderness – the timescape ahead – through the tools of foresight. It could open up the potential to develop local “Institutions of Foresight” (Slaughter, 1995) within localities and make explicit and conscious the possibilities and options ahead arising from present day activities.

Such a futures-orientated reform may come to have implications for elected members, officers, local, regional and national political parties, for local and central government policy makers and advisers, for consultants and futurists amongst many others. It can be seen to open opportunities for future-proofing within local government in:

- *community and political leadership* – through the role in overseeing local governance and decision making and with democratic legitimacy;
- *the role of democratic accountability* – through the newly created overview and scrutiny arrangements having a role in policy development and options appraisal, not just historical reviews;
- *the democratic representation of people and places* – through advocacy of positive changes from the present to the future;
- *the democratic overview of public service delivery and provision* – through ensuring attention on regenerative and preventative public services alongside maintenance and curative ones.

All local government will be subject to individual annual comprehensive performance assessments (CPA) as a result of the Local Government White Paper 2001. One of the prime questions this CPA will ask is “what is the local authority trying to achieve?”. It will be interesting to see how many answer “governance for sustainability” or “meta-governance of the future” as a response.

This work sought to illustrate how central government in the UK has opened the door to futures work at a local level through the modernisation programme for local government.

It has created conditions for local governance that is strategic and futures-orientated. There are significant challenges and opportunities for developing expert and participative futures research to inform local thinking, decision making and action. This agenda also opens the institutions, structures and processes at a local level to the inherently uncomfortable and destabilising thoughts of what the future may hold within an interconnected and turbulent world. It also challenges mindsets and the intellectual capacity to be able to move beyond delivery, performance management, customer focus and continuous improvement as the mantra for local public service and towards foresight, governance, the public interest and radical innovation.

In addressing “white space” opportunities, it may be that greater attention can be placed on what can or might be rather than what is or what has been and on constructively and collaboratively designing the future. It may be this work that makes the revolution move from quiet and behind the scenes to front-page news and further connects governance, futures and sustainability in the localised responses to the “modernisation” and to the United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development in September 2002. ■

#### Note

- 1 Of particular relevance to this paper is the consultation document on “Democracy, citizenship and political engagement” which is now out for discussion with a deadline of 3 October 2002 and seeks to frame policies for a third Labour term of office. <http://www.labour.org.uk/lp/new/labour/docs/NPFCONSULTATIONDOCS2002/DEMOCRACY.PDF>

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