

Pragmatic localism uncovered: The search for locally contingent solutions to national reform agendas

Jon Coaffee *, Nicola Headlam

Planning and Landscape Discipline, School of Environment and Development, Faculty of Humanities, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, United Kingdom

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Abstract

This paper analyses the complexity and attempted pragmatism of current practices surrounding the management of current local government policy reform in England. In particular, it focuses on the tensions and contradictions between a national policy dynamic which seeks to encourage locally contingent solutions to be developed for localised problems, and the centralising tendencies of the national state which result in ‘blueprints’ and ‘models’ being developed for local policy delivery and a requirement to meet centrally derived targets. These assumptions are explored through the experiences of local government attempts to introduce innovative and experimental praxis in line with the complex cultural and political changes of ‘modernisation’ agendas advanced by the UK government. This is being rolled out by an overarching project of ‘new localism’ – an attempt to devolve power and resources from the central state to front line local managers, sub-local structures and partnerships and to deliver ‘what works’. It is argued that new attempts at subsidiarity should be more flexible to local conditions rather than directed by national policy and that greater discretion and freedom should be given to local managers to achieve this task. Using the concept of ‘pragmatic localism’ and grounded examples from a recent initiative – Local Area Agreements – it is highlighted that there are signs that local state management of national policy could be becoming increasingly adaptable, enabling managers to deal with the fluid nature of ongoing public policy reform, although this is far from a completed project with many factors still constraining this change process.

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The project of harmonizing ideals and practical realities often falls to the organs of public administration. Because this task involves the application of general and fixed concepts (policies, law, standards) to particular and fluid practicalities (situation, circumstances, persons), those in public administration need strategies to deal with unusual or problematic cases. Pragmatism seems to offer such a strategy (Hildebrand, 2005, p. 345).

The real challenge is for politicians and public servants to change their perspective and to see the world

in a way that opens up the doors to more effective ways of working (Sorabji, 2005, p. 12).

1. Introduction

Pragmatism, philosophically speaking, is ‘a belief that the only way of establishing truth is through practical application to establish what works out most effectively’ (Haywood, 2000, p. 88). This conception of pragmatism is based on a view that learning occurs through experimentation and in more post-modern terms, the rejection of universal concepts and meta-narratives which order and explain knowledge in board terms. As Zanetti and Carr (2000, p. 433) argue of pragmatism: ‘the core of the philosophy was the belief that individuals must act continuously

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: Jon.Coaffee@manchester.ac.uk (J. Coaffee).

in an experimental fashion, testing beliefs and concepts against existence. Pragmatists rejected transcendent absolute ideas that could not be confirmed by experience and action’.

Pragmatism has evolved as a key philosophical organising concept because of a core question faced in every society – how to balance idealised values with the practical realities of implementing such values (see for example Hildebrand, 2005).¹ Whereas in recent decades conceptual ideas of pragmatism have received a good degree of attention in the social sciences, applied examples of such pragmatism as they occur in everyday practice have proved more elusive. This is an important gap given the founding principles of pragmatism in the late nineteenth century where ‘propositions could only be judged by the result produced when put into practice’ (Zanetti and Carr, 2000, p. 433).

In recent years, philosophical pragmatism has been increasingly utilised within studies of the public sector in an attempt to help explain, and make sense of, an increasingly complex and multi-scalar world and to ‘offer some inspirational guidelines for the practice of humanistic geography’ (Smith, 1984, p. 353). Within this context, this paper explores both the concept and practice of pragmatism as developed in the management of complex local government policy reform in the England over the past decade, highlighting the barriers to such pragmatism *in situ*. In particular, it focuses on the tensions and contradictions between a national policy dynamic which seeks to encourage locally contingent solutions to be developed for localised problems, and the centralising tendencies of the national state which results in ‘blueprints’ and ‘models’ being developed for local policy delivery and a requirement to meet centrally derived targets. This analysis will also unpack key tensions and contradictions which occur as a result of attempts to embed pragmatism within the wider framing of state policy: *first*, through the development of a broad underlying political mantra – the third way (Giddens, 1998; Blair, 1998) – representing a compromise position between the ideals of democratic socialism and laissez faire capitalism; and *second* through attempts to rescale the state by developing more effective relationships between the centre and locality which would allow the increased decentralisation of power and responsibility to local governments, but within prescribed limits – so-called new localism.

In this analysis, the concept of ‘pragmatic localism’ will be utilised to describe the desired state of affairs in local government policy and its relationship with central government. This idea has developed in recent years as a response to attempts by central government to deliver locality focused policy programmes combining innovation, creativ-

ity and flexibility alongside a system of central ‘guidance’ focused upon performance management and ‘best-value’ targets. The argument here is for:

Pragmatism over prescription in local government policy – for a so-called ‘middle way’, which is inclusive of ‘top and bottom’ and acknowledges that you can have a local initiative and individual empowerment without the local state ‘letting go’. Such an approach should have fewer targets and closer consultation with stakeholders to develop ‘quality-based routes to excellence’ as well as giving greater managerial discretion and flexibility to those in charge. In short, the argument is for a far more nuanced, ‘pragmatic localism’ where ‘models’ of change are replaced by ‘ingredients’, ‘menus’ and ‘frameworks’ of alternative methods of service delivery and community capacity building, which are selected according to local circumstances of place and not centrality prescribed targets (Coaffee and Johnston, 2005, p. 174).

The paper will argue that such attempts to manage change pragmatically, through the transformation of existing management and governance networks, is impeded by locally embedded institutional practices and political allegiances which affect how national policy guidance is interpreted and actioned on the ground. Here pragmatic change is intertwined with broader issues of public sector reform and cultural change.

This idealised concept of pragmatic localism provides a framework in which to explore particular policies developed within an overall period of reform and modernisation in the UK, and the reinvention of the central state which is occurring alongside change at other scales. In particular the process of transforming local urban governance through the embedding of a set of new principles intended to stimulate local partnership working and improve subsidiarity will be addressed. It is argued that this key reform is both premised upon implicit and explicit ideas of key managers and administrators acting pragmatically to balance a host of competing and often contradictory priorities to deliver ‘what works’ (Southern, 2001).

The rest of the paper is divided into five main sections. The first section will review the contribution of philosophical pragmatism to public administration, and in particular local government. The next two sections will subsequently highlight the various ways in which pragmatic ideas and programmes have been developed in local government policy in the previous decade. The following section will, in a more detailed way, present an emerging narrative of how pragmatism has been embedded within the particular policy frame of attempts to rejuvenate central–local government relations through developing Local Area Agreements (LAAs) – seen as a mid-range policy combining visionary strategy with the requirements for evidence based policy. The final section, the wider implications, for pragmatic localism praxis will be noted and linked to current and emerging national government priorities.

¹ There are numerous summaries of the philosophical nature of both classical pragmatism and its newer post-modern equivalent, neo-pragmatism (see for example Diggins, 1994; Hollinger and Depew, 1995; Dickstein, 1998) a detailed discussion of which lies beyond the scope of this paper.

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