

# Perception deceptions



**John Tizard** reviews a book which will help local government reflect on its value and practices, and why public services cannot be modelled on the business sector, but should be responsive to service users and communities

When I saw a book with the title *Kittens are Evil – Little Heresies in Public Policy*, I knew that I had to read it to understand why a book on public policy should have such a provocative title.

I happen to like cats and kittens, but I also enjoy challenging orthodoxy and so the idea of slaying some public policy heresies was appealing. Could I tolerate the title to explore what was being slain as long as it was not a kitten? [Declaration of interest: I have no interest, other than the fact that I enjoyed the book].

It is a short book with eight individual chapters, written by a range of good public policy practitioners, including John Seddon, Kathy Evans, Simon Caulkin, Simon Duffy and Sue White. The authors each challenge a current orthodoxy pervading our public services, including local government. And collectively, they challenge the concept that the only way to secure better public services – whatever ‘better’ may be – is by the adoption of New Public Management (NPM) and acceptance of a neo-liberal ideology.

Local government has had to adopt NPM to some extent because central governments of all political persuasions have set performance management regimes and targets for local authorities and their services; at times compelled them to use competitive tendering to determine service providers; directed and legislated for them to undertake specified programmes; and in the last eight years, dramatically reduced their financial resources, enforcing local austerity and cuts programmes.

Government programmes commonly

contain words like holistic – but all too often, this is merely code for pressuring local authorities and others to address issues in silos and thus tackling the symptoms, rather than on a whole-system basis and addressing causes.

## A strong theme throughout is that ‘people are not robots’ and will not always act rationally or as public sector leaders would like them to

I am not going to argue that there weren’t some benefits, especially in the short-term from some of these central government interventions and directives, particularly those relating to performance management. However, the questions of how sustainable such approaches are and, as Toby Lowe argues, how long before local authorities and their principal people start to ‘game’ to achieve their targets rather than meet local needs and/or respond to local choices.

The authors challenge a range of specific policies and programmes with supportive evidence and helpfully also propose some reasonable alternatives. Critically, and in my view, quite rightly, there is a powerful thread throughout the book that public services cannot simply be modelled on the business sector.

Local government and the wider public sector too often adopts the language of business when this may not be appropriate and uses carefully crafted language to obfuscate or to spice up what otherwise

might be unpopular decisions and actions. Direct transparent honesty using the right words matters.

The authors are clear that public services should be responsive to service users and communities. I would go further and say

most services should be co-designed and co-produced, although I recognise this is not always possible. There is also a strong theme throughout that ‘people are not robots’ and will not always act rationally or as public sector leaders would like them to, even if they introduce incentives and try to nudge behaviours. I agree – people are people, and this includes professional public service staff.

It is hard to deny there has been a general acceptance (or probably an absorption) of the mantra of NPM and in many cases, of a wider neo-liberal approach to public services, even among politicians and professional executives, who will generally have a different core ideological, professional and personal set of values. I would not expect many readers to agree with every word or thesis in this book. I didn’t.

However, if by reading the book, local government and other public sector leaders and politicians stop for a moment and reflect on their values, their practices and

what may in reality be a lazy acceptance of contemporary orthodoxy, this would be a great and worthwhile outcome.

An additional chapter which addressed and challenged the conventional view held by many, that local government is only about effective and efficient service delivery or procurement and so technocratic managerialism should be dominant over politics, would have been welcome.

I have long argued that local government is government and not administration, making political choices and not simply following a managerial guidebook.

Politics has to dominate and overcome NPM. Where politicians are not ideologically neo-liberals, they should not act as such. They should both resist and push back – although I do accept that at local government level, they must also be pragmatic and act in the best (or least bad) interests of their communities.

The ‘dented shield’ is relevant – but so is principle. Politicians have to set their own boundaries and be accountable for doing so.

The heresy which such a chapter would have slain is the one that still behaves as if the ‘man or woman in Westminster or Whitehall knows best’, or that local governance must be granted to local places only on licence and not by constitutional and democratic right.

Local government could learn and re-think a great deal by reading what are less than one hundred pages, packed with provocation and evidence. Here lies the foundation for a new popular and people centric approach. ■

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