

**Notes from presentation by Tom Bentley of DEMOS at the SPMC Conference
16th July 2003 at St Anne's College, Oxford**

NB. These notes were taken by a member of the audience and should not be taken as an accurate record of Tom's presentation.

Systems and governance: practical experiences at DEMOS.

Combination of new forms of policy ideas plus old systems ideas!

DEMOS has spread systems ideas more widely. A problem often encountered is one of familiarity - the basic challenge is to find ways of stimulating and growing communities of practice.

How has the political climate evolved since the Labour Government came into office? Geoff Mulgan introduced the idea of joined-up thinking. Nobody (in theory at any rate) is against this idea, but the Labour Government came into power with a pre-conception as to how good government could work.

Labour suffered from its previous political marginalisation and needed something to latch on to. The world had changed, in part due to the neo-Liberal assault - and Labour was trying to achieve some sense of coherence with the agencies they are supposed to govern. The result was the chimera of the Third Way, all spin and all over the place.... There was an immense problem of incoherence in many political projects. It is important to remember that politicians can only do their best. This determination demonstrates that good government can get results. Examples are taxation reform, the numeracy and literacy targets and the New Deal for getting young people into work.

However, achievements are being unravelled by circumstances and the Government is being forced into setting very specific targets. They are also facing many unexpected challenges: terrorism and global changes are but two examples.

The idea of joined-up government is intuitively powerful - but we have made little progress. Why?

Reasons include:

- working in wrong time cycles, they are constrained by numerous obligations and the need to be re-elected
- the fundamental tension between political objectives and the deeper, more complex processes needed to re-configure public service systems
- everyone wants joined-up government, but each constituency can see only their particular bit of the configuration.
- Culture, history and geography are all constraints.

At the summit meeting held on the previous weekend there were two parallel forms of discourse.

In the world of public management (ie universities) the story is one of very mixed experiences of small-scale forms of progress and innovation, leading to confusion.

Target -based government leads to a general concern that relying on targets is undermining other areas. But they have got themselves to a point in the cycle where there is great uncertainty as to the cure.

Target-based performance assessment management: What hopes are there from the approach adopted? The next phase is one of public renewal.

Question from audience: In what way was target setting delivered - is it the mechanisms employed rather than the approach which was at fault?

~What are targets? Some are good, as for instance the abolition of child poverty. Clear goals are essential for democratic legitimacy - the problem comes when targets are relied on too heavily. This distorts and undermines the processes of adaptation.

Comment from audience: Despite changing attitudes, the Treasury hasn't released its departments from targets - in reality, the departments are still desperately trying to meet targets.

Comment from audience: Power - there is a culture of rulers and the ruled. There is competition between departments, conflict between DEMOS and what it is trying to do.

The Treasury won't give up - but without being too naïve -he thinks that Labour got in because of its majority across the population. People who exercise power know that they have to exercise control by interdependency, by building alliances. The recognition that they overstepped the mark in the use of targets doesn't liberate us. The process of renewal cannot be polite or civilised. The right level of structures is needed to generate the right focus.

Question from audience: We are discussing 'systems'. How does what Tom Bentley says relate to systemic thinking? What link is there between target setting and systemic thinking? Is it possible to make targets more accessible and helpful?

Comment from audience: We have been talking about metaphors and language and how this is constructed - the use of the word 'target' implies something to be 'hit'.

'Targets' are a concept which is currently understood - whereas 'systems' isn't. But a successor might emerge as a synthesizing idea. Politicians need to find a way of generating outcomes which is valued by the public. 'Target' is not the answer - but how can we understand complex society communities? We need a different way of understanding a very complex system.

Public servants need to understand a complex adaptive system. They need to prioritise core internal values rather than taking instructions from above. How can we shape organisational progress and renewal towards worthwhile goals? Reliance on command and control are just visible manifestations. Organisational design reflects theories of knowledge - a set of assumptions - good policies can be made through cost-beneficial processes.

But systems thinking tells us that many outcomes will be uncertain. Complex policy theories divide into domains which can be dealt with - small units become disconnected, policies are not developed across departments .

Accountability for learning must be ultimately accountable to the House of Commons. We should be able to evaluate and account for the design of government in financial terms. Much is invisible in the public debate - the media do not feature politicians speaking of such things!

Comment from audience: This is a circular argument. Departments operate at macro and micro level; without mechanisms for adaptation. Therefore we cannot change! But organisational design is a systems issue.

Comment from audience: Knowledge sharing - knowledge equals power. How can this be overcome? People cling on to knowledge as power.

A key point is that, while people working in the government system find it frustrating, **most** find adequate accountability acceptable. The institutional furniture holds people back and approaches to learning to help people to adapt them are necessary.

By 1997 media expectation was that the think tank would be writing the new Labour policy script. But DEMOS started differently, connecting creativity with mainstream policy-making. They aimed to help solve problems with systems-based solutions of Jake Chapman's pamphlet for DEMOS. Work on systems failure was sent out to practitioners. The pressures on public services, and problems of adaptation have become compelling in the hands of practitioners. Analysis and process are needed to establish experiential learning.

DEMOS have taken concrete, visible policy problems such as the rates of improvement in schools, and helped to re-configure the current strategy for neighbourhood renewal. They are gradually finding that they are being drawn into seeing whether they can re-diagnose the nature of the problem, and shape the learning process.

There is potential for innovation networks in schools publications.

Analysis/articulation can be recognised from different points and systems-based processes are at the beginning of the stage in the process.

Comment from audience: 'Systems' - Tom Bentley used this word to describe chunks of the real world. Seeing the world as a system is OK, but revolution is now seen as a particular case. Learning to deal with the complexity of the world requires many different systems approaches. There is the problem of language and articulation rather than recognition. We need to recreate basic assumptions and need useful approaches to make things tangible for those who feel they haven't time.

Question from audience: How does DEMOS stimulate experiential learning?

They recreate experience to discover the perceptions of those working in it. Can we prompt people to recreate experiences for themselves? We need to link sets of concepts and test out their meaning in conjunction with practitioners.