

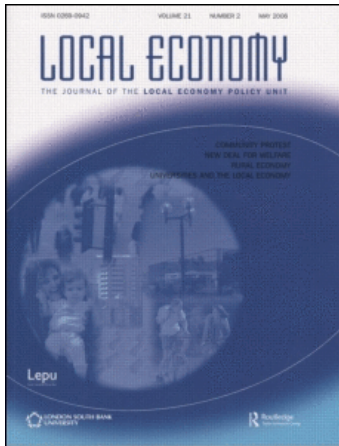
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Introduction: The Future of Local Economic Development

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FEATURES

Introduction: The Future of Local Economic Development

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In May 1999, Mike Geddes and I published a article in *Local Economy, Evolution and Conflict in Local Economic Development*, in a special issue to commemorate the life of Sam Aaronovitch, the founder of the journal. The article sought to trace and analyse the debate over the direction of government policy looking as we said ‘at the conflicts between new right and new left approaches in the 1980s and the ‘New Centrism’ that has emerged from this struggle in the 1990s’.

We argued in that article that the principles for local economic development that came out of ‘new centrism’, (the balance between competition and collaboration; the importance of supply conditions, especially training; partnership; a strengthened regional context; and the increasing importance of ‘sustainability’ and community economic development) all embodied significant tensions and conflicts.

As the ‘Blair’ period, which was characterised by Antony Giddens’ ‘Third Way’, ends and we move into the ‘Brown regime’ it is timely to re-examine the issues we raised. Is the Brown agenda, set out in the recent sub-national review (HM Treasury *et al.*, 2007), likely to resolve these tensions and if so what does that mean in terms of who will benefit from future policy direction? Furthermore what does it mean for the role of the economic development officer, particularly those on the left with a concern for social justice?

This article is divided into three sections and serves as an introduction to the other articles in this special issue of *Local Economy*, which look at

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policy towards cities (Ivan Turok), labour markets (Alex Nunn and Steve Johnson) and new approaches to developing softer outcomes such as building networks, partnerships and institutional capacity (Graham Haughton and Phil Allmendinger), and the *In Perspective* section, which looks at the future role of economic development practitioners from a variety of those currently involved in the field. The first section of this article looks back at ten years of the Labour Party and the 'third way' agenda and the tensions we originally identified and asks what has happened in these. The second section outlines the Brown era and lists the policy changes that are to be anticipated as a result of the sub-national review. The final section of this article identifies where I believe there is still scope for progressive policies within local economic development.

Looking Back Over 10 Years of New Labour

The Dominance of Neoliberalism

In 2004 Antony Giddens sought to justify his influential term 'the third way' by claiming it was just a label to cover all attempts to find a 'revisionist social democracy':

The Third Way, as I have always understood it, is simply a label for the renewal of social democracy. Centre-left parties across the world have revised their doctrines in the light of social and economic changes: the disappearance of socialist utopias, globalisation, the development of a service economy and ageing populations. In the face of these, the First Way – classical social democracy, based on Keynesianism and traditional statism – has become largely obsolete. The Second Way – Thatcherism or free-market fundamentalism – proved a disastrous alternative. The aim of Third Way thinking – revisionist social democracy – is to create policies for the centre left that respond to these changes. (Giddens, 2004)

Interestingly Brown has only used the term 'the third way' once over the last ten years (Lee, 2006). Its vagueness and failure to provide an intellectual framework for a left-centre approach may be the main cause of his rejection. But more significantly those on the left studying New Labour's record have shown that the last ten years have been dominated by neoliberalism and that, despite the rhetoric, policy development has been very close to Thatcher's free market fundamentalism. Neoliberalism is here taken in the wide sense of a 'framework of disciplinary political authority that enforces market rule over an ever wider range of social relations throughout the world economy' (Brenner & Theodore, 2002, p. 14)

At a recent seminar on Labour and Planning organised by Tim Marshall and Andy Inch (see <http://www.pnuk.org.uk/newlabour.htm> and forthcoming *Planning Practice and Research*) Stuart Wilks-Heeg (2007) from Liverpool University argued that New Labour had succeeded in successfully implementing failed Conservative neo liberal policies. He gave four examples.

- The 1998 Education Act sought to introduce grant maintained schools and City Technology colleges but only succeeded in creating 15 City Technology Colleges. We now have proposals for 128 city academies by 2009.
- The 1988 Housing Act promoted large scale voluntary transfer of housing estates but by 1992 only 1.9% (15) had transferred contrasted by 2006 when 148 authorities had transferred their stock.
- The 1988 Local Government Act introduced compulsory competitive tendering but 80% of service provision remained in house. Now with the emphasis on choice, contestability, value for money and pressure through the comprehensive performance assessment, privatisation is accelerating.
- The Conservatives introduced the private finance initiative (PFI). The scheme was moderately successful in health and transport but only one local authority signed a PFI scheme under the Conservatives. In total 34 PFI schemes were agreed in the ten years 1986–1996, worth £2 billion. Since New Labour came to power the scheme has been revamped and in the following ten years, 1996–2006, 549 PFI schemes were agreed worth £51 billion including many local authority PFI schemes.

This argument has also been made strongly by Stuart Hall (2007, pp. 119–120):

New Labour's long-term mission seems to be, broadly, the transformation of social democracy into a particular variant of free-market neo-liberalism. . . . In the first phase of the so-called neo-liberal revolution, Thatcherism installed the enterprise culture and 'market forces' at the heart of society, in the effort to dismantle reformist and redistributive 'welfare' habits and expectations. An economic logic organized around 'the market' became entrenched as the new social discourse, the sole measure of efficiency and social value. New Labour has taken this first phase as its platform, expanding 'marketization' as a general approach not only to the public services, but to the 'modernization' of the public sphere and all the wider institutions of civil society and social governance – spheres traditionally associated with Labour – which have hitherto evaded the full rigours and disciplines of a market logic.

Alan Finlayson (2003) has looked particularly at the use of the term 'modernisation' by New Labour as a conceptual hook to reconcile a neoliberal analysis (putting growth high on the agenda) with social democracy. Modernisation was linked to metaphors of nature – it was something you have to adapt to, you need to 'modernise or die'. But it was also a 'historic opportunity' to be tackled by 'new' Labour. Finlayson points out that there is a fundamental contradiction between these two uses of modernisation – how can modernisation be something you have to live with and at the same time be an active innovative policy? But, despite this contradiction, the terms 'Modernisation' and 'New' have served the government well for, like motherhood and apple pie, you cannot be against modernisation. After ten years, modernisation is now fading as a

metaphor but increasingly there is an appeal to hegemony: 'You can't possibly think/believe!' Stuart Hall argues that this hegemony has been achieved by using consumer choice and diversity as levers to prize the state open for creeping privatisation and conceptualising the government, on the Tesco's model, as a 'delivery' system. Delivery becomes the function of government undermining the very notion of a public sphere or a 'public interest' and what remains are apolitical matters of the technicalities of administration, the delivery of services and the 'governance' of society.

Crispian Fuller and Mike Geddes (forthcoming 2008) have drawn on Peck and Tickell's (2002) concept of 'roll-out neo liberalism' with the state seeking to further embed neoliberalism while also trying to address the contradictions and tensions arising from it. Haughton and Allmendinger in their article in this special issue pursue a similar theme when they talk about 'metagovernance' with the nation state reworking and rescaling responsibilities across the tiers of governance and retaining control through its strategic selectivity about who it lends powers to, on what terms and how it chooses to redraw and redefine its distribution of powers over time.

Yet despite the dominance of neoliberalism and marketisation and the broad policy orientations towards privatisation, workfare employment policies and a market bias, the tensions we identified in our article ten years ago have not diminished. New Labour does still hanker over a reduction in child poverty, an end to discrimination and saving the planet from climate change.

Continuing Tensions

Alex Nunn and Steve Johnson in their article in this special issue argue that competitiveness is seen as fundamental but that New Labour has dealt with the tension between competitiveness and collaboration by seeing collaboration and networked governance as a way of delivering competitiveness. This theme is picked up in Graham Haughton and Phil Allmendinger's article in this special issue, which argues that the very process of partnership and collaboration creates its own pressures for conformity, if not unity, in agreeing which behaviours and visions are deemed acceptable to the majority of partners. So it could be argued that there is no longer a tension between competitiveness and collaboration. Collaboration is now used to further competitiveness. This is also being promoted by Multi Area Agreements (MAAs) and by the agenda for shared services and two tier pathfinders which are likely to result in further privatisation.

While this overall trend is both important to observe and certainly underpins how New Labour has tried to address the tensions, some tensions still remain. It is clear that 'place making' as the key function of local government sets a very competitive agenda and is very far away from previous definitions that centred on the welfare role of local government.

However, this does not sit easily with government aims to reduce the differential growth between regions. As Ivan Turok argues in his article in this special issue, there are tensions 'between focusing on core cities as new-found drivers of contemporary growth' rather than older less competitive towns and cities and between encouraging London as a world city and encouraging development in the North. The results is a growing divide between rich and poor with less and less room in the south for those households who are neither rich nor poor who have either moved elsewhere, or become poor (Dorling *et al.*, 2007).

There has been a significant shift in the tensions between flexible labour markets and good quality employment under New Labour with emphasis on work as a way out of poverty linked to improved working rights and conditions: the minimum wage; tax credits; maternity and paternity leave; part time employment rights; reforms to the regulation of the transfer of public employees with pensions and working conditions covered for local authority workers; and the introduction of trade union learning reps. However, half the children in poverty are in a household with an adult in work (Palmer *et al.*, 2007) and work is clearly not always offering a route out of poverty. Furthermore, there is considerable churn at the bottom end of the labour market into and out of employment (job outcomes for mandatory New Deal participants have fallen to 40% for under 25s, and under 30% for over 25s; Simmonds, 2007) with problems of debt exacerbated by the benefits system failing to deliver benefits as soon as someone falls back into worklessness. Alex Nunn and Steve Johnson talk about 'flexicurity' with the attempt to create employment opportunities through competitiveness rather than job security. This focus on employment is underpinned by the focus on cities (see Turok's article in this special issue) and the RDA target of an 80% employment rate and a skills target rather than any target on pay or on reducing unemployment. There is still not enough attention to the aspects of the Freud report that called for long-term support to raise employees out of in-work poverty and poor quality employment continues to drive people to seek incapacity benefits support. So the State's spending on tax credits and incapacity benefits continues to undermine investment in competitiveness.

And despite the increase in the employment rate over the last ten years, at 74.7% (National Statistics) for the three months to November 2007, it is just below the rate it reached in 1972–75 and 1998–90 (Bivand, 2007). And despite 700,000 (17%) children being lifted out of poverty since 1998/99 (on the after housing cost figures), the government has missed its target of raising a quarter (one million) of the children out of poverty by March 2006 and progress is now stalling. The social exclusion task force is now concentrating on four groups who are victims of exclusion (prisoners, children in care, those with mental health problems and those with learning difficulties) rather than looking at the processes that exclude such groups in the first place.

We have argued that the tensions around competitiveness and collaboration have been addressed by trying to use collaboration to further competitiveness, but the tensions between sustainability and economic development have not been addressed at all. In the performance criteria set for RDAs and for local authority economic development there is no measure of sustainability. The climate change agenda and the economic development agenda run in parallel lines (Jones, 2007a) and if they meet economic development tends to dominate. The shifts in planning policy to facilitate major infrastructure investment, to respond to housing demand, to be demand-led and to favour development of all kinds, but most particularly, of course, for economic development, are evident.

The Brown Era and the Sub-national Review

Although Gordon Brown has not used the term 'the third way', one can anticipate a continuation of roll-out neoliberalism. The analysis of Gordon Brown's ideological stance has emphasised two aspects.

Firstly Gordon Brown has highlighted the superiority of the British reformist agenda with the emphasis on the individual and moral virtue (Lee, 2006) drawing on the work on Adam Smith who came from his home town. Matthew Watson (2007) has shown how Brown, in introducing asset based models of welfare and in his focus on social responsibility, draws on Smith's theory of moral sentiments, which focuses on how man can learn to live harmoniously and to flourish in a commercial society. But while Adam Smith argued that you need self command and moral tutoring to avoid self interest dominating in a market society, Brown argues that the self disciplining financial agent is pursuing their own self interest. He therefore individualises society's interest. But there is a contradiction in his approach. For assets to be profitable you need high returns: a rising stock exchange and rising house prices. Yet these high returns to assets increase inequalities and social exclusion and tie investment into rising land values rather than increasing productivity.

In addressing the problem of productivity Brown has directed policy to business growth and here lies his second ideological stance. As Stuart Hall argued above, his emphasis on the need to foster a dynamic economy and make markets more efficient has focused the function of government on delivery and an apparent politically neutral form of market managerialism. So while his use of Adam Smith leads to rhetoric about redistributing power from the state to the individual, his policy has in fact been centralising and technocratic. These tensions are evident in the Review of Sub-national Economic Development and Regeneration (SNR), 2007. The reforms proposed in the SNR and linked policy papers can be grouped into three categories.

Regional Governance Changes

The regional governance changes reveal strong centralisation even though this is being done in the name of greater accountability. This argument is dealt with in more detail in the viewpoint in this special issue by Tim Marshall, which focuses on the democratic deficit that is being created. Regional Assemblies are to go and planning and housing powers will be passed to Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) who will now be responsible for a single regional strategy by 2010. There is theoretically greater scrutiny of RDAs but this is meant to be led by leaders of councils on top of their day job of running the council and on top of the drivers for greater collaboration through MAA (13 sub-regional areas have been given the go ahead to negotiate MAAs by June 2008) and shared services. In the meantime there is no doubt about the centralisation of accountability. A Minister has been given responsibility for each region and there are likely to be Parliamentary Regional Select Committees (Maer & Parry, 2007).

Stronger Sub-regions to Deliver the Economic Agenda

RDAs are being tasked to delegate (not devolve) their budgets to sub-regional partnerships but only to do this where these partnerships can deliver on RDA targets. The key target is Gross Value Added (GVA) per hour worked – a productivity target linked to Brown's growth agenda that has no relationship to quality of life for residents (particularly as it is a workplace data set not related to where people live), sustainability or reducing inequality. The other RDA targets (employment rate, skills, Research and Development; business start up) are also strongly linked to a growth agenda.

So sub-regional economic development is meant to deliver economic growth. Some of the issues in delivering this agenda in areas with less competitive urban centres are highlighted in Ivan Turok's article in this special issue. It may be partly as a result of this tension that sub-regional and local action is being focused on worklessness, which is one of the local performance indicators (employment and worklessness; education and skills; investment in infrastructure; creating an attractive business environment and narrowing the gap), despite its absence from RDA targets. The worklessness agenda is rising up the political agenda and, as argued above, is a key tension in government policy where spending on incapacity benefits is seen as holding up investment in competitiveness. To reach the government's 80% employment rate it would be necessary to help a further one million Incapacity Benefit claimants into work, plus one million older workers and 300,000 lone parents. The new welfare to work regime will focus on this task and City Strategy Pathfinderers funded by the DWP to join up services on worklessness are already active in 15 pathfinder areas. There is a move to merge funds and commissioning. Clause 4 in the Further Education and Training Bill gives the Mayor in

London the power of oversight and direction of LSC funds. This clause can be used by other regions to go to the Secretary of State and request similar powers. It is likely to figure in MAA proposals. One of the battles that will emerge in this new institutional space at the sub region is how to make the LSC, New Deal and Jobcentre Plus accountable to local partners and join up with local programmes and to monitor providers, including the third sector, rather than just deliver delegated programmes from RDAs and central government departments.

Local Government is being Asked to Take a Stronger Economic Development Role

Local authorities are being given significant new powers to encourage them to focus on economic development. This reflects the drive for growth mixed with the attempt to increase social responsibility, decrease worklessness and increase local entrepreneurship. These national drivers can only be delivered at the local level. Underpinning the new powers is a new duty on upper tier local authorities to do an economic assessment. There are major new responsibilities in the skills agenda. The school leaving age is currently being raised to 18 and there are proposals for funding of £7 billion for 14- to 19-year-olds to be devolved to local government.

Much of the agenda is to be clearly business-led. Local government will be encouraged to set up local employer-led skills and employment boards linking the skills and jobs agenda. They are being encouraged to set up city development companies and we have an *In Perspective* piece by Ian Bromley in this special issue on one of the first such companies in Sheffield. Employment Partnerships have involved 209 employers (January 2008 figure) in making job pledges and these now need to be implemented at the local level. Several have also made skill pledges which also need to be implemented locally. The LEGI funding (to promote entrepreneurialism in deprived areas will continue), as will Business Improvement Districts.

And to encourage growth and overcome reluctance to promote development, economic development is to be incentivised. The new financial instruments are linked more closely to economic development, growth and infrastructure development despite the reduction in LABGI (a payment to local authorities who achieve above target growth in business rates). Supplementary business rates are to be introduced and there is the new Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) proposed in the Planning Bill; and on 4 December there was the announcement of the £732 million Growth Fund allocations are part of the Growth Areas and Growth Points programmes. PPS4 brings a stronger economic development focus to the planning agenda.

But government has still got an eye on mitigating the inequality that follows from a simple drive for business growth. Neighbourhood

Renewal Funding is to become the Working Neighbourhood Fund (WNF) with £2 billion funding to some 50 local authorities. The DWP deprived areas fund in City Strategy Pathfinder areas is being aligned with the new WNF (see DWP website: http://www.dwp.gov.uk/welfarereform/support_pathfinders.asp).

All these changes are likely to be in place by 2010/2011. So far a few local authorities have grappled with City Strategy Pathfinders and many, both in and outside the pathfinder areas, are not aware of or engaged in this programme. The agenda above calls for skills in economic assessments, skills in linking the neighbourhood agenda and worklessness; skills in negotiating with business, skills in drawing together complex funding streams and programmes, an understanding of the skills and employment agenda and how these can be brought together, project appraisal and management and an understanding of the levers and drivers of the local authority and its partners. Money is being given to the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnerships to build capacity but there remain concerns about the scale of the task. If local economic development cannot rise to the challenge it is clear that the RDAs and business agenda will dominate delivery. The viewpoint by Tim Marshall in this issue reflects this concern. So what is the future of LED? It is to this we now turn.

The Future of Economic Development

This article has emphasised the dominance of the neoliberal agenda within the future of local economic development. But this does not mean that local economic development officers will have to reinforce this trend. As Doreen Massey argues:

‘Neoliberalism’ is sometimes written about as though there is an automatic transmission belt from some ethereal sphere of greater forces to ‘how it plays out on the ground’. It is not so. There are indeed pressures and constraints, often of immense power but there are also agents who play along, or resist, or struggle mightily. There is room for political intervention. (Massey, 2007, p.30)

The three articles in this special issue also identify the opportunities and scope for optimism.

Firstly, as Turok argues, the whole place-shaping agenda and duty to carry out an economic assessment provide an important basis for ensuring that economic development is not just business-led. Local authorities will want to involve residents in their place shaping and can choose to enhance the less powerful voices that address the wider impact on the business growth agenda. Presenting business with information about environmental issues, worklessness, low pay and job churn, the congestion implications of not linking place making and local job access etc can in itself provide a strong challenge to a pure neo liberal agenda. Graham Haughton and Phil Allmendinger argue that local economic development officers need to hold out for performance targets and evaluation frameworks that reflect this

wider view of economic development. Doreen Massey (2007, p. 32) would like to see the debate about place shaping going even further and not only addressing how to undermine the constraints of the global economy in the interests of local residents but also challenging the way large global cities reinforce those global neo liberal inequalities on other less competitive urban centres: 'This means, for example, not only tackling the causes of inequality and climate change in London, but also taking responsibility for its role in producing these problems worldwide.'

Secondly Alex Nunn and Steve Johnson welcome the rhetoric of integrating the employment and skills systems and argue that it will be a key challenge for local economic development to turn this into a reality and one that provides genuine help to break the 'no pay-low pay' cycle of poverty. This new agenda and increased flexibility in employment programmes has also been welcomed by Inclusion (Simmonds, 2007) arguing that the increased 'work-first' approach will need to be balanced with new measures to improve retention bringing together a number of different agencies and funding stream all acting on different parts of the system.

This brings us to the third area of opportunity, the institutional reform. On the one hand there is the increased centralisation driven by the RDAs and their performance targets. However, there is also an emphasis on the local and sub-regional as the only arena where these different agencies and funding streams can be pulled together to meet the needs of specific individuals and local communities. The new focus on local economic development is widely welcomed by the practitioners who have written for *In Perspective* in this special issue. Graham Haughton and Phil Allmendinger suggest that the new 'soft spaces', with functional rather than administrative boundaries, provide considerable opportunity. They see the economic development officer as a broker playing a key role in the way in which different types of relationships are constructed and conducted across variable geographies. The extent to which local priorities are given space in these new relationships is still open to negotiation.

Graham Haughton and Phil Allmendinger also see a growing importance for liveability issues, the 'soft infrastructure' and this brings us back to the sustainability and economic development agenda. Just because the government has failed to join up these two agenda it does not mean that they cannot be joined up locally. Volume 22 Issue 1 of *Local Economy* on the environment and local economic development contained a set of articles and *In Perspective* case studies showing precisely how these two agendas can be brought together. Jackson (2007) looked at using strategic environmental assessment to deliver sustainable local development. Subsequently Jones (2007b) has published a very useful and thoughtful article, *Greening Growth*, which argues for constructing a system of integrated environmental and economic accounts. It calls on local authorities to widen the duty to produce an economic assessment to include an inventory of local environmental assets. The proposed benefits,

in monetary terms, of any development could then be set against any environmental costs, also expressed in monetary terms.

While the government's neoliberal agenda will limit what can be achieved, the new focus on local economic development opens up some opportunities. Local authorities continue to have a number of levers they can pull in influencing this agenda. They are the legitimate representatives of the local community and can ensure all voices are heard and policy is not simply business-led. They are meant to scrutinise the RDAs. They can influence the shape and agenda of local networks and partnerships and how they are going to assess their effectiveness. They have planning powers; influence over transport provision; can influence local job quality through procurement and commissioning; can work with employers to deliver locally the national skill and job pledges; they will have significant influence on the skills agenda; and, with the local hospital, they are usually the biggest employer in the area. They have the potential to bring the place shaping agenda together with the employment and skills agenda in a positive framework that will bring real benefits to local people. This is the challenge that faces the future of local economic development.

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