

EMPOWERING THE CITIZEN

The first day of summer time was a quiet morning in the Melbourne bayside suburb of St Kilda. There were a few stray stragglers from parties chilling out but most of those enjoying their breakfasts had got up late and found a table to sit outside. Some were browsing the craft market on The Esplanade. A few brave souls were heading for Luna Park's big dipper. It was, I dare say, a normal crowd for a busy Sunday. Peaceful and relaxed, people chatted, read the Sunday Age, told their children to sit still and patted their dogs. You could have found the same scene in thousands of other locations around Australia.

This typical Sunday morning bore testimony to the virtues of Australian democracy. Its gentle ordinariness exhibited that which is best about our way of government is when government is least evident. The legislative and administrative framework which set the tone of St Kilda's civil society – the individual property rights which underlay the market economy; the institutional underpinning of public safety; the legislative protections to freedom of speech and of expression – was all far better because none of it was apparent.

Of course, the apparent absence of government was a veneer. The market stalls and coffee shops would have been required to seek trading licences and make development applications and to have complied with their legal obligations with respect to workplace relations, occupational health and safety, workers compensation and public liability. If I had asked the shop owners I'm pretty confident that they would have complained of excessive regulatory red tape and the burden of payroll tax. Nevertheless, for those of us sipping coffee under a thin St Kilda sun, governments and councils and the public servants who worked for them, were doing a fine job: they were out of sight, out of mind and not interfering too obviously in the way we wanted to live our lives. Australian democracy was at its best.

Democratic governments, of course, have an implicit contract with their citizens. We sign nothing but we know the deal. We give government our loyalty (I'm talking here of the state, not of the particular politicians who wield government power at any time by virtue of the ballot box): in return we, the citizenry (who are far more than occasional electors) are promised security – not just defence and law enforcement but economic and social support in times of need. We trade off personal liberty for protection.

Yet Sunday in St Kilda can be deceptive. Not all is well with the balance of rights and responsibility in Australia. In two decades as a Commonwealth public servant I came to learn how hard it was, even at a

time of unparalleled economic prosperity, for governments to ensure that all individuals were enabled to live the good life. After twenty years the goal of achieving equal opportunity for all (the implicit purpose of many education, training, health, housing and welfare programs) sometimes seemed as far off as ever. Worst of all, and billions of dollars later, the gap of relative disadvantage faced by indigenous Australians remained wide and deep.

In part, no doubt, it was because some of the government programs I administered – and helped to develop – were mis-targeted, ill-advised, wrong-headed or short-sighted. Yet as I reflect the failure I discern something more profound. It goes to the heart of the way we do government. It helps to explain why so often in public policy the very best of intentions can result in the very worst of outcomes.

Whatever the details of the program and no matter whether it is delivered by Commonwealth or State governments, the fundamental flaw in design is remarkably similar. The inherent weakness prevails even when service delivery is outsourced to nonprofit organisations or private sector businesses. There is still little individual choice in the ‘competitive’ market for public good.

So often support is provided as welfare payments, with those who receive them being characterised as beneficiaries or recipients. If people are treated as dependents they will rapidly learn dependence and the helplessness which accompanies it. They become cases to be managed rather than citizens to be engaged. The rights they receive from government are poorly matched with the responsibilities that they have as citizens. The programs designed to combat social exclusion end up reinforcing it.

There is an alternative. Governments, and the array of overlapping bureaucracies which oversight the implementation of their policies, can become less ‘visible’. The state can become less intrusive and governance become more collaborative and networked. Most importantly, citizens – individually or as part of a local community – can be empowered to make their own decisions. They can be given the opportunity to enjoy the same freedom they have in choosing where to drink coffee. They can exercise the judgment that sustains and nurtures self-reliance.

Is it really possible to put citizens in control of the support they receive from governments? Categorically the answer is yes. Both overseas and in Australia new approaches are now being designed and trialled that allow individuals to personalise their programs and self-manage their publicly-funded budgets. There is a better world beyond government payments, subsidies and concessions. There is an alternative future in which government programs are built around the needs of the citizen rather than designed for the convenience of administrators.

People with a disability or who are facing the challenges that accompany ageing or who suffer long-term mental or physical health conditions can, with the help of their families and carers, make their own decisions on how government support can be tailored most efficiently to their particular needs. Those who are seeking work or looking to upgrade their training or seeking to improve their education can exert greater control over the pathways they choose and the organisations they wish to help them.

Communities can take greater responsibility and exert stronger management over the childcare centres and public schools that serve them. Neighbourhoods can design and implement their own safety and community justice programs. In small but important ways these things are beginning to happen.

The new possibilities are not without their dangers. Decisions need to be informed. Risks have to be managed. Funding must be publicly accountable. Those who are least able to make decisions on their own behalf should be assisted and, if they wish, able to opt out.

At the very least, however, there are two significant benefits in giving people the opportunity to ‘co-produce’ the services they use. First, involving the public in planning the way in which they will organise their own entitlements and obligations provides governments with a far better understanding of how people perceive their needs. Co-production is a great diagnostic tool. Second, giving people control over their own government budgets almost certainly means that they will use public funds more carefully: individuals rarely spend the money of others (least of all governments) as wisely as they spend the money that they perceive is their own. Individual funding is an effective mechanism both for improving outcomes to individuals and increasing the overall effectiveness of services funded by government.

Of course, those who seek to make decisions on how to structure government to their needs will require help. They will want to be able to access the expertise of public administrators, social workers, clinicians and case managers. They will continue to require advice from doctors, nurses, lawyers and educators. They will benefit from training in financial literacy. They will seek continued support from the community organisations which advocate on their behalf.

Unfortunately assistance often becomes control. The ever-present danger is that those who wield professional power (and I include public servants) can feel uncomfortable – even threatened – by allowing individuals to determine their own destiny and by making, on occasion, their own mistakes.

Those who require the support of government to live lives to their potential – the needy and the jobless, the elderly and the frail, the homeless and the sick – are not helpless. They become passive only under

the weight of an administrative system that imagines that it knows best what to do for them. They are helpless only in the face of an opaque network of jurisdictional barriers, bureaucratic silos and demarcated programs that are organised around the convenience of governments and public services rather than centred on the citizen. They have knowledge and skills born of their experience. They have a strong personal incentive to spend time planning how best to harness public support to their private ambitions. They have skin in the game.

Enabling individuals or communities to organise their own government services is inherently challenging. However, the risks are worth taking. There is an opportunity for us to revitalise participatory democracy and to renew the nature of civic engagement. By giving individuals and communities the opportunity to direct public funding on their own behalf, the value and capacity of citizenship is reaffirmed. There is an opportunity to 'hollow out' the state and to create new forms of network governance based on collaboration between many more participants, engaging in person or online.