

## Best Value and the politics of pragmatism

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### English

This article frames and highlights critical themes emerging from the contributions to this Best Value section: that Best Value possesses subtle, and not so subtle, political, organisational, strategic and governmental dimensions. Drawing on these themes we develop our own argument that, during Blair's first term, Best Value was presented as a potentially enlightened 'user-friendly' tool for the expression of diverse social and organisational interests. Increasingly, it is emerging as yet another of a long line of retrograde managerial techniques. The pragmatism of Best Value is becoming more overtly bound up with government centralisation, support for neoliberalism and the private finance initiative.

### Français

Cet article expose et souligne les thèmes critiques qui émergent des contributions faites à ce concept de *Best Value* (rapport qualité/prix): que ce concept possède à la fois des dimensions politiques, organisationnelles, stratégiques et gouvernementales subtiles, et d'autres pas si subtiles. S'inspirant de ces thèmes nous développons notre propre argumentation, c'est à dire que durant le premier mandat de Tony Blair, *Best Value* était présenté comme un outil potentiellement éclairé, facile à utiliser pour l'expression des différents intérêts sociaux et organisationnels. De plus en plus, il apparaît, jusqu'à présent comme une autre longue ligne de techniques de gestion rétrogrades. Le pragmatisme de *Best Value* est de plus en plus ouvertement lié avec la centralisation du gouvernement, le support pour le néolibéralisme et l'initiative financière privée.

### Español

Este artículo enmarca y subraya temas críticos que surgen de las contribuciones a esta sección del Mejor Valor: este Mejor Valor posee dimensiones sutiles y no sutiles políticas, estratégicas, gubernamentales y de organización. Basándonos en estos temas desarrollamos nuestro propio argumento el cual, durante el primer trimestre de Blair, el Mejor Valor fue presentado como una herramienta potencial comprensiva 'fácil de utilizar' para la expresión de diferentes intereses sociales y de organización. Cada vez más está surgiendo como otra larga línea de retrogradadas técnicas de directivo. La pragmática del Mejor Valor está cada vez más abiertamente unida a la centralización del gobierno, al apoyo del neoliberalismo y a la iniciativa de fondos particulares.

**Key words:** managerialism • modernisation • governance • discourse

## Introduction

Best Value was part of the first raft of public policies introduced by the New Labour administration of 1997. At the time it appeared to signify a break with the past. Specifically, and in the context of UK local government, it appeared to signal a break with the 'private good/public bad' assumptions which had underpinned the policies of privatisation and compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) of previous Conservative governments. It is now over four years on from the end of Conservative rule and Labour has just achieved another landslide victory. It is an appropriate moment then for a special themed section of *Policy & Politics* devoted to an assessment of this early piece of Labour policy making, for a close examination should enable us to discern to what extent and in what ways the Labour administration of 1997 announced a new trajectory compared to its predecessor. Taken together the articles in this issue provide us with a multi-dimensional picture of Best Value – as a technique for stimulating organisational change, as a strategy for service evaluation, as a means of intervention in public sector labour markets and as an approach to changing local political cultures (ie how local elected politicians think about the job it is they have to do). And as we move out from the contingencies of organisational change to the attempt to grapple with structural interest groups such as organised labour and local party politics we inevitably also move towards bigger political questions – not just whether it works or has produced change but in whose interests it has worked and what the cultural and political effects have been. So, this article will start with the specific and contingent and move out to the bigger questions with the aim in mind of being able to detect something of the big picture in the smaller brushstrokes of quality management which lie at the heart of Best Value considered as a technique for stimulating organisational change.

## Best Value and continuous improvement

As Lewis and Hartley note in this issue (pp 477–96), concepts of continuous improvement drawn

from Total Quality Management (TQM) lie at the heart of Best Value. Best Value appears a simple management tool (its rhetoric of challenge, consult, compare and compete has the feel of a jingle on a commercial radio station), to be used by any sensible, reflective person who is committed to making things better in a variety of settings. It draws on a commonsense, apparently *reasonable* appeal to different interests, mediating these interests by drawing on 'soft' discourses of Human Resource Management (HRM) and TQM. It stresses 'quality' and 'excellence' in public service delivery while 'empowering' and responding to local communities.

Total Quality Management is a well-known private sector technique for harmonising production, marketing and service systems as a means of enhancing responsiveness to consumer demands. Quality assurance is a component of TQM, involving all staff in checking and monitoring products and services. Interestingly, it is a combination of US and Japanese ideas about work and human relations, which played a pivotal ideological role in the restructuring of the Japanese economy after the Second World War (see Clegg, 1990). As a modified *modernising* project with its plea for embracing 'change' (Newman, 2000), the 1999 Local Government Act has formulated Best Value in terms of continuous improvement of organisational practices and procedures with the ultimate aim of enhancing both economy and efficiency but above all *effectiveness*, where effectiveness has been construed primarily in terms of service quality.

So far, so different; considered in terms of its connections to wider discourses of organisational learning Best Value seemed to pick up from some of the more progressive and culturalist approaches to management as opposed to the harsher and more prescriptive aspects of New Public Management with its strongly neoliberal leanings. The emphasis on involving a range of stakeholders in the common pursuit of quality also resonates with Labour's broader political agenda of social inclusion. Best Value places an emphasis on consultation with a range of interested parties, including business rate payers, service users and anybody else who may have an interest in council policies. It constructs a local community of interest committed to service

improvement, a microcosm of Labour's consensual appeal to 'the nation' with its people united in wanting to make Britain a 'better', more economically productive and hence socially inclusive place. In this sense TQM provides the organisational counterpart to the communitarianism which underpins so many of Blair's social values. So, unlike the Conservatives with their emphasis on economy, efficiency, competition and individualism, Best Value appears to focus on a commitment to quality built on ongoing deliberation orchestrated by local councillors but involving a diverse range of local stakeholders; Bovaird and Halachmi term this orientation 'community and local governance' (p 452).

But most of the articles in this issue also detect a different orientation within Best Value, quite at variance with the first. This seems to draw on 'harder' discourses which give emphasis to prescription and competition. Both Bovaird and Halachmi (pp 451–63) and Martin and Davis (pp 465–75) note that the early emphasis on the local determination of Best Value during the initial pilot phase began to give way to an increasingly centralising approach. Within three years local authorities had become swamped by over 200 centrally prescribed performance indicators. 'Comparison' became a synonym for the crudely simplifying and mechanistic technique of 'benchmarking'. And both in turn have become tied to the sanctions that accompany failure and the rewards that accompany excellence. Inexorably, it seems, the pursuit of quality via organisational learning and stakeholder dialogue has become sucked into practices of competition. Geddes suggests that while the pressure towards contracting out under Best Value may not be as intense as under CCT, the scope of Best Value, applying to all council services, is far greater. For this reason Geddes sees a great deal of continuity between Best Value and its Conservative predecessors, so much so that he is drawn to describe it as 'child of CCT'.

## Best Value and managerialism

Managerial discourses are clearly cultural as well as technical (Maile, 1995), tending to work as a vehicle for the dissemination of political ideas. Managerialism therefore appears to be apolitical. But this apoliticism in fact conceals a set of

political values which regard questions of 'means' purely instrumentally, as something quite unrelated to ends (Hoggett and McGill, 1988). This instrumental rationality has been in evidence throughout the history of the British welfare state from the application of scientific management to bureaucracies via the Webbs (1944) (who regarded it as a suitable means of creating a politically neutral and efficient administrative system) through to experimentation with corporate management and community development in the early 1970s (Cockburn, 1977) and on to the restructuring programmes of the 1980s, particularly as they related to attempts on the part of Thatcher's administration to create an enterprise culture (Keat and Abercrombie, 1992). Different managerial discourses and styles tend to be drawn upon by different governments at different times. As Clarke et al (2000) note, managerialism tends to combine a variety of management styles, from neo-Taylorist forms which are designed to enhance productivity and generate greater efficiencies to more recent introductions of 'new wave management' which reference team working and the creative potential of employees. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find both extremes introduced simultaneously, as occurred in the Benefits Agency in the early 1990s (Foster and Hoggett, 1999). Again we find elements of both combined in the Best Value regime which says that it desires, simultaneously, continued efficiency measures and cost savings and the inclusion of all 'stakeholders', including workforces at the frontline of services in the drive towards continuous improvement. Best Value, in true third way style, therefore appears to look both ways, both soft and hard – the managerial counterpart of Blair's 'tough love' approach to social policy.

Best Value therefore partly draws on the managerial discourses introduced by both Thatcher and Major, harnessing and modifying them for a central government agenda which at first appeared *facilitative* rather than prescriptive. The White Papers on 'modernising government' assumed automatically that we had learned and accepted the general principles of managerialism, that resources are limited and that they need to be managed carefully. Clarke and Newman (1997) identify the discourse of 'change', which in true modernising style construes change as an

inevitable and self-evident 'good', with New Labour's usage of managerialism and see it as an attempt to demobilise dissent expressed over government policy. You cannot stand in the way of progress. What was associated with the neo-Taylorist practices of CCT, the attendant employment casualisation and intensification, now appears to give way to broader, more enlightened 'ethical' management principles which engage with employees and local communities to encourage their 'self-improvement' and in so doing help to 'drive up standards' not only of local authority services, but the local social environment in which the local authority operates.

Again, then, we can see a link between Labour's preferred managerialism, with its emphasis on continual improvement, and its social policy. Blair's election campaign prioritised continued commitment to creating a culture of 'self-improvement', where the poor were promised a share of the nation's prosperity through the creation of a new meritocracy. This is a culture in which we shall all be included – indeed, under the 'welfare to work' regime sanctions will be brought to bear on anyone who refuses this invitation to be included. Thus inclusion becomes an obligation rather than a right.

## Managerialism and centralisation

The centralising thrust of Best Value is noted by a number of contributors to this issue. Clearly regarded in terms of national interest, the 'Best Value regime' is a statutory requirement with the powers of the Secretary of State being strengthened and processes of scrutiny being evident in the broadened powers of auditing (see Clarke et al, 2000). The widened powers of the Secretary of State enable him or her to determine guidelines, to set targets for and intervene in groups of authorities and individual authorities. The Secretary of State is able to produce guidelines on exactly *how* authorities should consult, undertake performance reviews and so on. The 2000 Local Government Act also proposed centralising the Secretary of State's significant powers and discretion to act on authorities who are failing to comply with the requirements of the Best Value regime. The Local Government Act can therefore be seen as part of that continuing, cen-

trally driven attempt to improve the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of local authorities first inaugurated by the Audit Commission (Travers, 2001). It is the government, not local government, which can safeguard local interests. It is (still) the centre that knows best.

The work of the Audit Commission, Best Value Inspectorate, Ofsted and all the other inspectorates signifies a fundamental change in the notion of accountability in the UK. Accountability has itself become managerialised and centralised. Performance indicators have become the new currency of accountability, not votes gained and seats lost. There is an assumption that political models of accountability no longer work (at least at the local level), that the electoral process no longer has an impact on local councils. It is but a short step from here to saying that it does not really matter whether those entrusted with exercising local governance are elected or appointed; thus, despite its pre-1997 rhetoric, Labour has made no attempt to reform the quango state. As Martin and Davis note in this issue (pp 465–75), under the new governance, accountability is ensured through a panoply of centrally prescribed performance indicators which are then linked to rewards such as marginal forms of new autonomy and those related to the 'power of well-being'. Martin and Davis use the concept of 'centralised decentralisation' to capture Labour's approach to the organisation of the state's activities. Our own view is that this concept was more appropriate as a way of capturing the logic of the Conservative reforms of the late 1980s (Hoggett, 1991: 249). By the mid-1990s there were increasing signs of both centralisation and formalisation (Hoggett, 1996) within the state apparatus. Labour's victory in 1997 seems to have accelerated this process, particularly the spread of formalisation (ie of the audit state).

The point is that in the UK the processes of managerialisation, formalisation and centralisation have gone hand in hand. Local government is increasingly becoming a 'policy-free zone' and the role of local authorities (like many of their non-elected local counterparts) is to deliver centrally determined policies in a strategic way. Strategy-speak therefore begins to fill the corridors of town halls up and down the country, just as it already dominates the internal language of local public spending bodies (Hoggett and Greer,

1999). Given continued tight centralised control over expenditure, strategy increasingly focuses on the innovative use of resources at local level and this is what Best Value seems to be largely about. It is certainly not about the encouragement of new local policy initiatives, nor is it about challenging traditions of uniformity in service provision. A bit like the typical high street these days, Best Value supports an appearance of diversity which actually conceals standardisation.

## The managerialisation of local politics

The stress which Best Value places on performance management puts councillors in the position of monitors of services. Generally the stipulations of the Best Value regime, particularly if considered in the context of the broader local government modernisation agenda, serve to reshape relations between local authorities and their publics and relations between local councillors and their parties. *Political* processes are being reshaped as *management* processes. Martin and Davis (pp 465–75 of this issue) describe this in terms of the incorporation of local councillors into the emerging strategic management model of Best Value.

At the operational level, Best Value appears to be the best that can be achieved in terms of representing local interests and reviewing practices to reflect those interests, on behalf of a government whose broader calling is to ‘save the taxpayer money, to keep interest rates down and to create jobs’. The TQM framework of continuous dialogue and feedback between managers and service consumers changes the nature of local political process, shifting attention away from the role of local politicians in determining policies affecting local services (now largely evacuated to central government), and tightening the relationship between service executives and central government in dialogue with reconstituted citizens. Unfortunately for this project, evidence so far suggests that service users are not inspired to participate in discussions about service delivery etc (see Martin and Davis, pp 465–75; Lewis and Hartley, pp 477–96). Increasingly these days one hears of consultation fatigue; for many people invited to engage in consultation about local services it must seem like

being asked to participate in fiddling as Rome is allowed to decay. However, the principle of applying TQM techniques to policy areas remains a central plank of New Labour’s modernising project because it plays a pivotal role in continued efforts to change the culture, not only of the welfare state, but of local politics. Not least, it is an attempt to deal with some of the fragmenting and complex organisational issues which arise in the context of a proliferation of regulations and interorganisational relationships between the public, private and voluntary sectors (all of which is the direct consequence of policy choices made by successive governments). It might be regarded as a way of drawing citizens, consumers, politicians and managers into processes of ‘governmentality’ (Ling, 2000).

‘Managerialisation’ (Clarke et al, 2000) tends to be a dynamic process which is capable of pulling people into a preoccupation with organisational design, marketing, market research and monitoring. The new breed of non-executive councillors become recast as citizen advocates whose role is to enhance community feedback to the local authority thus promoting organisational learning (there is a direct echo here of Cockburn’s (1977) account of the role of community development workers under the Corporate Management model of the 1970s). Of course, part of the issue here is the degree to which Best Value serves to reconstitute citizens as consumers and taxpayers. In the process, use is made of certain versions of participative democracy (Newman, 2000) such as citizens’ panels, focus groups, neighbourhood forums and community planning techniques. But, as Chandler (2001) has recently noted, “this is therapeutic politics because the aim of ‘giving a voice’ to local people is primarily designed to give individuals a feeling of greater inclusion and sense of community” (p 11). Participation is no longer about power over policy and resource questions but about social inclusion (or rather, being given the feeling of inclusion) and effective feedback. Just as Labour has tamed its own party activists, so it seeks to tame potentially unruly citizens. As Cochrane (2000) argues, this reflects a general tendency to undermine the power of local politicians and is related to a broader series of changes which have affected local government since the 1980s. What is distinctive about the

Best Value culture is the extension of management principles, from the narrower questions of improving the efficiency of local services (breaking down bureaucracy and allowing local citizens to have a say on local performance) to a perspective which challenges the whole ethos of public service provision and representative local democracy: “The management emphasis on responsiveness and consultation, and on inter-agency working (or, to use the political rhetoric favoured by the Blair government, ‘joined-up working’) effectively undermines the traditional role of local politicians” (Cochrane, 2000: 133). This is not to say that we are against the Habermasian ideal of generating local discursive communities, but when one hand of government exhorts local authorities to promote extended forms of deliberative democracy while the other continues to deny the same authorities effective autonomy over policy and resource issues then this is a recipe for promoting cynicism about the very principles that the government apparently espouses.

## The pragmatics of Best Value

Commonsense assumptions about the virtues of management in allocating limited resources, delivering services and responding to public needs is at the root of the Best Value regime. Ironically it appears *more* commonsense than the commonsense notions of household management promulgated by the Conservatives. The technical concerns with cost cutting and efficiency associated with the highly individualistic enterprise culture of the New Right is tempered by reference to human values and need, collective aspirations and efforts to succeed in the modern globalised world. This is part of a moderate third way approach which attempts to mediate between what is pictured as the rather evangelical and intense rhetoric of Left and Right (see Fairclough, 2000) and in so doing appeals to a diverse, but nationally coherent, social base.

Issues of quality are fundamental to the Best Value approach, quality being broadly defined in terms of what appears to work. It has been associated with Blair’s pragmatism encapsulated in the phrase ‘what counts is what works’. This is in itself potentially riven with tensions and contradictions which are bound up with the

question of ‘what works for whom?’ (see Waine, 2000). Best Value has to be located within a broader Labour discourse of modernisation which appeals in post-modern style to concepts of social diversity and the notion of a plurality of differing localised interests (which cannot necessarily be reconciled or unproblematically prioritised) while, at the same time, in modernist style it appeals to standardised accounting and formalised management procedures. The third way promises us that we can have it ‘both ways’, but in local government and the health service at least this seems to be a straightforward deception; it is centralisation and uniformity that seems to be triumphing and there is nothing very new or modern about this.

The pragmatics of ‘what counts is what works’ seems set to be enshrined at the heart of Labour’s second-term commitment to public sector reform. What seems to be on the cards is the wholesale externalisation of the management of everything from primary care to corporate services within local government. Geddes (in this issue) concludes that Best Value has become a way of “legitimising and de-ideologising externalisation”, (p 506) and usefully draws attention to the way in which Best Value is becoming entwined with Private Finance Initiatives and public-private partnerships. We can be clear about one thing: the public sector workforce is one stakeholder who is not to be included in the question “what about the workers?”. Geddes notes that the impact of Best Value has been a continuation of the erosion of the wages and conditions of employees, and, given the degree of their representation in the public sector labour market, this hits women workers in particular. It is instructive to situate the British experience in the context of the recent 10-country European study of public service quality initiatives (Pillinger, 2001). The study traces the intricate connections between the quality of service on the one hand and the quality of working life on the other. While not denying the real conflicts that exist at times between the needs of users for more flexible and responsive services (which might, for example, include the need for 24-hour services) and the needs of workers, the study nevertheless clearly demonstrates that a valued work force is more likely to welcome flexible working practices than one that feels under threat, disparaged and com-

paratively unrewarded. Among its recommendations it urges governments to establish standards “on working conditions, working hours, equal opportunities and pay, with reference to collective bargaining and in-service contracts where services are contracted out” (Pillinger, 2001: 129). In contrast to this idea of a “high-commitment/high-quality” workforce, successive UK governments have pursued a “low-commitment/high-output” strategy (Hoggett, 1996). But of course the problem is that such a strategy, in conditions of relatively full employment, is unsustainable. Given the emasculation of British trades unions, public sector workers have had no alternative but to vote with their feet – hence the recurring recruitment crises in nursing, teaching and elsewhere. Suddenly, Labour has become the ‘teacher’s friend’. But it will take more than sweet talk to properly address the cynicism and demoralisation of the public sector workforce which is touched on by Geddes. At some point in time the myth of ‘getting more for less’ which has dominated government thinking over the last decade will have to be abandoned. Labour’s second-term commitment to ‘public sector reform’ appears to do little more than repeat this tired old propaganda as if, compared to the private sector, public services were still a playground for skivers, fat cats and neanderthals.

Despite the rhetoric of sustainability, when it comes to thinking about the fabric of the welfare state and local government, neither Labour nor Conservative seem capable of imagining the long-term impacts of the policies that they pursue. The full question is not just ‘what works for whom?’ but ‘what works for whom and over what time span?’. UK governments seem incapable of understanding that collapsing public infrastructures are the direct outcome of their own choices, specifically their choice to restrict public sector spending to levels which, as a percentage of GDP, place us below all of our European Community neighbours excepting Portugal and Greece. Viewed through the lens of management accountability the problem has always been the failure to take the issue of ‘effectiveness’ seriously. Even Best Value fails on this point, for by reducing effectiveness to quality, it fails to take into consideration the long-term and systemic impacts of choices about service provision. Lewis and Hartley (pp 477–

96) begin to approach this issue when they explore dimensions of ambiguity and indeterminacy in public services and the deployment of ‘obligation’ and ‘authority’ in notions of ‘publicness’. In other words, to conceive the public sphere simply in terms of public programmes and services is to overlook the fact that much of this sphere is also about government and the facilitation of self-government (no system of democratic government could survive for more than 24 hours if the self-governing foundation of society went on strike, so to speak). Take the public park as an example. To reduce the park to a set of services (grounds maintenance, arboriculture, security, etc) and then to pretend that we can remain studiously agnostic about who provides such services denies the holistic and systemic quality of the ecosystem that constitutes the park (and, having been thrust asunder by such pragmatics, neo-Liberalism, aghast at the consequences, then seeks to repair what it has damaged by ‘joined up’ management). But it also denies the self-regulating publicness, and the fabric of rights and obligations, contained within the social space that the park represents. Using our own local park as an example, contracting out of grounds maintenance replaced a dedicated and integrated work team who identified with the park as both a natural and social environment with a Taylorised, uncoordinated and low-commitment labour force for whom the work was simply ‘a job’. Consequent disappearance of a number of (no doubt high-maintenance) flower beds, declining standards of cleanliness, etc in turn impacted on the social system of park users who took less care of its physical fabric and were less able to preserve aspects of the social space of the park as ‘safe’ rather than ‘wild’. Paradoxically, several years of this downward spiral eventually necessitated a massive input of additional resources – wholesale replanting of damaged shrubs and trees, replacement of virtually all park benches, etc (this is called ‘throwing money at the problem that you have just created’).

The point of this illustration is to indicate how questions of ‘effectiveness’, more so even than questions of quality, take us into the realm of complex systems of social and material interdependencies where, unlike our crude example above, relations of cause and effect are

rarely linear. The very things which are most of value about a park such as this are the very things that cannot be grasped by the rationality of an accounting system because they are not discrete but entangled, not external (number of times grass is cut) but internal (commitment, identification, etc), and not synchronic but diachronic (unfolding over time). To believe, as the pragmatics of 'what works' implies, that there is no inherent difference between public and private – that a park (or school) would somehow remain public even if every aspect of service was provided by an offshoot of a French water company – is to abandon the terrain of *effective* government, understood as that which is necessary to facilitate the continuation of a sustainable, transparent and accountable self-managing public sphere.

### 'Keeping up appearances'

As the currency of performance indicators spreads across the public sector, a target loses its meaning as something one might set oneself to develop one's capacities, and becomes an imposition to which one has to conform (because of the rewards and sanctions attached to it). As a consequence all of us, in higher education no less than in grounds maintenance or building control, become adept at impression management, at keeping up appearances. Indeed at times one is tempted to wonder whether Blair is not fully post-modern after all, concerned with the appearance rather than reality or rather hoping to confuse us into believing that the appearance is the reality.

Against the reality of a crumbling public sector infrastructure, Best Value operates as both a series of technical and organisational practices, bound up with rethinking the machinery of local government, and as a kind of 'brand name' for a cheap but 'good value' shopping experience. It both stipulates the implementation of specific procedures and draws on highly ambiguous discourses which straddle managerialism and communitarianism. Rather than pursuing broad political goals, framed by questions about the nature of the society in which we live and how that might evolve, the softer dimension of Best Value managerialism draws on HRM theory to accommodate the social by, for example, elevating the importance of 'teams' working towards

common goals, while minimising the political scope of the social through the emphasis on pragmatism. Pragmatism, by definition, highlights *practical* engagement with problems that present themselves on a daily basis. An appeal to plural identities and changing social needs, of individuals *dealing with* their daily lives in the *modern* world – these practical, lived experiences, converge with the practical needs of modern business, partly through the discourse of equal opportunities and 'partnerships' where businesses *work with* local communities and their representatives. Best Value presents as a series of techniques to be deployed in dealing with the *practical* requirements of different interest groups. It is also an ideological phrase, reflecting a New Labour preoccupation with values (Plant, 2001). The interesting role of values for a recast social democratic party lies in the fact that they are no longer tied to class interests. According to Plant, "social democratic parties have to reach beyond class interests if they are to be successful politically and in so doing they have to define their purposes in terms of values rather than interests" (Plant, 2001: 557). Thus Clause 4, a statement of class interests, became replaced by Labour's 'statement of values'.

The very phrase 'Best Value' combines multiple meanings and is to some degree a shifting signifier, this being made possible because of the ways in which it combines with other key phrases and vocabularies. Fairclough (2000) argues that the ways in which political meanings are fused often entail equivalences being drawn between two values. The case of Best Value is a good illustration of the ways in which contractual and moral discourse are elided: "moral discourse is combined with contractual discourse which interprets the distribution of rights and responsibilities metaphorically as a 'contract' or 'deal' between the individual and society" (Fairclough, 2000: 39). It often includes references to duty. On the one hand, the commercial contractual relation is referenced in a phrase we might see on any supermarket shelf; it is one which appeals to individual commonsense decision making about the appropriate spending and prioritisation of limited household resources. Best Value as a catchphrase might be understood and engaged with by anybody of any social class, although in popular consciousness it is easy to

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associate it with a variety of discount shops and supermarkets specialising in bulk buying of non-branded items like Londis (which indeed has this very catchphrase), KwikSave or Iceland. This today is the 'best' that local government can aspire to. In this sense, the local authority executive and local politician are being reconstituted as market researchers, who must busily collate subjective opinions about services provided by local government 'shops' and suppliers. They too, like any efficient service manager, will be attuned to consumer demand.

Fairclough draws attention to the ways in which key vocabularies are collocated, the "co-occurrence of words in a text" which serve to change or modify their meaning (Fairclough, 2000). The collocation of 'value' (a term which Fairclough registers as occurring 64 times in Blair's speeches between 1997 and 1999) with 'best' is instructive. Best might already be regarded as a modification of 'excellence'. In one sense, best is 'good enough'; it is the highest one can achieve within a set of 'realistic' circumstances.

Best Value is also a nominalisation (Fairclough, 2000: 162). Nominalisations are interesting in terms of their ideological character. They involve, according to Fairclough, "the representation of a process as a noun". As a noun, reference to diverse social practices are obfuscated. In other words there is no reference to the ways in which decisions about the appropriateness of 'Best Value' have emerged historically or politically. The mixed messages of Best Value reflect the broader tendencies of centralisation and decentralisation within modernisation. For example, the government has shown itself to be grappling with reconstituting ideas of nation within a culturally diverse setting. It tends to swing from utilising discourses which accommodate diversity (through reference to stakeholder interests for example) – to those which suggest the diffusion of practices and ideas formulated by the few in the interests of the many. The diffusion of appropriate 'best practice' is an obvious example of the latter.

Best Value is both a commercial term and a moral one, which effectively combines moral obligations with the need to make cost savings. It highlights the significance of values in a political terrain which poses as non-ideological. For

those who are optimistic about the communitarian inflection of Best Value, public debates are limited by the neo-liberal economic commitments of an increasingly centralised government. The Best Value regime, as various contributors to this issue have highlighted, is characterised by powerful stipulations and sanctions, these serving to limit dialogical political or public engagement. As Fairclough argues, the New Labour governance is partly a product of language, one which is 'promotional, rather than dialogical' (2000: 12). In this regard, New Labour has a tendency to draw equivalences between its own values and those of the country – a tendency which appears to be becoming more pronounced as time goes on. According to Fairclough,

Whereas in the earlier Labour corpus 'values' differentiated parties and people, in the New Labour corpus the values of the Party are the values of the nation. The point is evident in the adjectives that modify 'values' in the New Labour corpus, where meanings of tradition and commonality predominate. (Fairclough, 2000: 48)

Fairclough proceeds to identify these modifying adjectives which include 'basic', 'clear', 'common', 'decent', democratic, 'enduring', 'shared', 'strong', 'traditional'. 'Best' is now added to the list, an adjective which, the whole thrust of debates in this issue suggest, ties all that is 'British' with the achievement orientations of the modern business world.

## Conclusion

We have explored two themes in this article. We have examined Best Value on the one hand as a style of policy making and on the other as a discursive construction. With regard to the first, for a moment in time Best Value seemed to have promised something different. It seemed to give emphasis to an approach which was local, bottom-up and committed to the engagement of a diversity of local stakeholders in ongoing conversations and arguments regarding the best ways of improving the quality of public services and perhaps also the quality of local governance (to the extent that there was recognition that the two are actually inseparable). One might say, well

this was still managerialist. In reply it could be said that while this may be so it was certainly a progressive managerialism at work here, one in touch with something of the looseness and organicity of post-bureaucratic, perhaps even postmodern, organisational forms and with the social diversity of contemporary society.

But the moment seems to have passed to be replaced by an approach which is centrally driven, prescriptive and mechanistic. In other words, typically bureaucratic – archetypically modernist rather than postmodern. Indeed, in the 2001 general election Labour found itself outflanked not only by the Liberal Democrats but also by the Conservatives who were able to pose as proponents of more hands-off and decentralised styles of public governance and management. Unless Labour undergoes a serious change of heart, and despite its rhetoric, we seem to be very much back to rowing (Peters, 1997) rather than steering. It is as if all the lessons learnt over the last thirty years about bottom-up policy development and emergent strategy, and the inevitability of discretion and the role of judgement in street-level welfare governance, have been lost. The normative and technical reasons for believing that the project of standardisation and uniformity is both ill-conceived and unworkable should not, at the beginning of the new millennium, have to be repeated ... the words ‘tragedy’ and ‘farce’ spring to mind.

As a discursive construction Best Value has been formulated to appeal to diverse and conflicting interests. Although distinctive in its association with New Labour’s modernisation project, it also continues a long line of ostensibly depoliticised managerialist solutions which emphasise practical or applied know-how to some of the highly political and fundamental contradictions of the welfare state as it undergoes repeated reconstructions to satisfy economic demands. These contradictions remain, albeit in a form which is undergoing continual modification in the face of economic and cultural globalisation.

The potential longevity of Best Value as an effective political discourse must now be assessed in the light of the re-election of Blair’s government. We argued earlier in the article that Best Value was effective because of its ambiguity, thus allowing for a range of political

interpretations. Its combination of commercial, consumerist, political and socially inclusive discourses is becoming increasingly unstable in the context of the government’s ever more pronounced advocacy of a neoliberal agenda – epitomised by the government’s enthusiasm for the public–private finance initiative. Here the role of the state in ‘building’ markets (Sbragia, 2000), rather than sustaining a self-managing public sphere or redistributing wealth is becoming particularly clear. As a discourse then, the pragmatism that Best Value and public–private partnerships draw on is in danger of being stretched to breaking point, the suspicion being that the pre-1997 ‘private good/public bad’ assumptions never actually went away. There are signs that the reluctant consensus between the Labour leadership, its own backbenchers and the trades unions is breaking down around this very point. The need to re-establish and make a concerted and systematic case for the distinctive nature of the public sphere has never been so urgent. It just seems very sad that such a case now has to be made out to a Labour rather than Conservative government.

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