

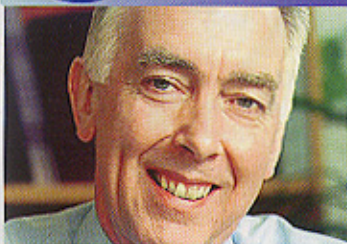
SERVICES

Vending machine or barn raising?

In the third in his series, Robin Hambleton looks at two different models for local government



Public
Service
Futures



What is the purpose of local government?

Is it there to provide stunningly good public services?

Or does local government stand for more than this – for a notion of community and democratic accountability as well?

At a recent conference on local democracy, organised by the Centre for Local Democracy at the University of the West of England, Bristol, the splendid Bill Barnes, research director of the National League of Cities (roughly the US equivalent of the UK Local Government Association), stimulated a good deal of debate by addressing these questions in a thought-provoking way.

He offered two contrasting views – the first was local government as a 'vending machine'. The second was 'barn raising'.

In the first model you put your money in the slot and expect a service to be delivered. This is the classic consumer model. The interaction with the vending machine is entirely impersonal – there's not even an opportunity for a conversation about the product being delivered. And it is, of course, entirely individualised.



Isolated consumers interact with a machine to obtain products for themselves.

Market enthusiasts will claim this is the dream local government should aspire to. They argue that people have no interest in interacting with the local authority, no interest in anybody else and no interest in the social consequences of their own behaviour.

Set against this conception is the idea of local government as barn raising. As Mr Barnes explained, back in the pioneer days, settlers on the prairie would help each other

build their barns. The community would build one barn and then move on to build the next and so on. This led to formidably fast construction but, more than that, the process was extremely powerful in building a caring and considerate community.

This is the classic citizenship model. The process is collective – benefits are enjoyed by individuals but the shared decision making and collaborative working builds solidarity. It is the opposite of impersonal as people work together. The model is driven by enlightened self-interest as

well as a desire to see outcomes that benefit the community as a whole.

Back in 1993 I enjoyed serving on the team that wrote the national guidance document *Fitness for Purpose. Shaping new patterns of organisation and management* (published by the Local Government Management Board, now IDEA). The report was based on the premise that local government has a vital role to play in achieving local political objectives and maintaining a vibrant local democracy. We wanted to stress, however, that local authorities face major strategic choices in how they

manage and organise their affairs – choices that remain today.

While we did not use the same colourful vocabulary adopted by Mr Barnes – perhaps we should have done – we did indicate that one major choice facing every elected council concerns the degree to which the authority should introduce market mechanisms into its operations.

As one option – analogous to the 'vending machine' scenario – we outlined a 'commercial approach'. Councils adopting this route focus their efforts on specifying and letting contracts. There are examples of US local authorities that have adopted extreme versions of this 'outsourcing' model. For example, Lakeview, California contracts out virtually all its services.

In *Fitness for purpose* we also outlined a 'neighborhood approach' in which power is devolved to areas within the authority to encourage the involvement of local communities. This is not quite 'barn raising' but it did envisage neighbourhood decision-making in relation to budgets and a high level of community involvement. Interestingly, area-based approaches of this kind are now much more prevalent in UK local government than they were ten years ago.

Vending machine, barn raising, something in between – the choice is yours.

Robin Hambleton is dean of the college of urban planning and public affairs at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His latest book (edited with Hank Savitch and Murray Stewart) is Globalism and local democracy (published in paperback by Basingstoke: Palgrave in 2003)