Framing public services: political communication and the citizen-consumer

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Abstract

Increasingly interface between public and governments in the Western democracies is characterised by a citizen-consumer logic. The relationship is becoming less about the normative ideal of democratic politics and more about the logic of transaction, recasting the polity as a mere consumer of government-provided services. The communications practices government administrations now employ are indicative of this trend, demonstrating a new link between political communication and policy implementation. This paper explores a recent case of the citizen as consumer in the UK through the changing interface between the British Department for Work and Pensions and the public. It examines the so-called ‘pension debacle’, a case of significant maladministration. While the failure was ostensibly bureaucratic, the case demonstrates much about the power of communication frames.

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This paper explores the rise of the citizen-consumer as it relates to practices of government communication. It takes an example of public service provision in the UK to exemplify the link between frames of communication and the relationship between the public and the state. Recent trends in the UK civil service indicate a recasting of the idea of the citizen from
political figure to consumer. The United Kingdom's history of strong central government has facilitated an evolving interface between governments and citizens.

This paper contends that there is evidence that political communication in service delivery is not only indicative of interface (interaction) between citizens and governments, but that it is generative of structured relations. That is, communicative interactions position citizens as consumers rather than being just symptomatic of it. This is pursued through an examination of the so-called 'pension debacle', a case of significant maladministration by the British Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)\(^1\). During the 1980s and 1990s the government promoted potentially precarious private pension schemes, conveying the false implication that such schemes were guaranteed by the state. Many older workers joined these schemes often without realising the risk they were undertaking. Many schemes subsequently collapsed with the compensation costs projected to amount to several billion pounds. The frame in which the DWP cast citizens was undeniably as consumers of the service it provided. By contrast citizens understood the role of the DWP as more than transactional, accepting the advice of government in the more traditional sense of public interest. The mechanisms of communication (in this case information provided by the DWP and its predecessor) are revealing about how citizens were viewed by the DWP. While the debacle was ostensibly bureaucratic, the case demonstrates much about the rise of the citizen-consumer and the power of government communication.

**Political information**

Fundamental to an effectively functioning democracy are citizens who are able to make, if required, informed decisions about their own well-being. The presumption of a reasonably knowledgeable and capable populous underlies contemporary normative and functional accounts of liberal democracy (see Bimber 2003; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Page and Shapiro 1992). It is central to assuring that authority is legitimate and that it represents the will of the people. To exercise rights and responsibilities, people must understand the characteristics of those rights and responsibilities. To effectively choose leaders, the public must comprehend the programs that leaders propose. Democratic practice requires an 'informed' citizenry.

Political information is often purely instrumental. It is required to enable the system to function. In direct settings, citizens need to know what they are voting for or against, ensuring

\(^{1}\) Formerly the UK Department of Social Security.
a meaningful decision (Bimber 2003, 38). In representative democracies, citizens need a rudimentary understanding of the implications of political representation on their material well-being (Bimber 2003, 36). Moreover, the public needs information on the actions of government outside elections, to both ensure compliance and understanding of the impact of policy. The basic logistical challenges of disseminating relevant and timely information are in many ways the central challenge of political systems. From Rousseau’s general will to Burke’s parliamentary deliberation, the issue of information logistics enables but also constrains democracy.

To be 'informed' citizens need to have certain access to pertinent information. Modern democracies invest significant resources into ensuring that this information is available, especially so with the delivery of public services. In activities as diverse as being cautioned by the police (one of the most direct methods) to mass media based public information campaigns (as one of the most indirect), there are many ways that citizens can be coordinated, instructed and given pertinent information. This is true in regulating individual behaviour and in attempts to change it. Governments utilise many different techniques to keep citizens 'informed'.

Reframing the public

The contemporary political landscape in the UK is characterised by a shift toward a media centred form of democracy (Norris 2001; see also Meyer 2002). The Blair and Brown administrations have spent considerable energy on press relations and media management. The wide ranging marketing of government (Davis 2002) has helped reinforce the confluence between citizen and consumer. In highly individuated and complex contemporary democracies (Beck 1992; Castells 1996) the modes of communication between government and citizen are diverse, generating many different informational loops and expectations of actors. Governments now often engage in a process of listening to constituents using a ‘customer focused’ frame. The phenomenon of the ‘expert’ citizen (Bang 2003), the importance of unelected bodies the modern state (Vibert 2007), and the prevalence of advocacy democracy (Dalton 2006) have all undoubtedly contributed to this. Citizens are perceived as being much more proactive in dealing with government. The dismantling of the comprehensive welfare state in the UK sees the individual much more as an active agent in their interaction with government.

Government communications practices are a key component in this shift from public sector as primarily concerned with ensuring citizens' rights and responsibilities to public sector as
customer service deliverer. Public sector communication has thus taken on the logic of customer service in many ways. This potentially provides the reason for more open and democratic forms of communication as the relationship between citizens and governments change. As Graber (2003) demonstrates, the frame of communication used by a public organisation can help reinforce the relationship in even the most mundane of interactions. Governments dictate less and are forced to listen more. While there is space for dialogue, there is also impetus for the public sector to engage in marketing activity as it seeks to ‘sell’ itself (Garnett 1997). The logic of ‘customer focus’ is different to the older logics of public service.

A polity of consumers

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the culture and role of the British civil service began to change through a 'bureaucratic intensification' that emanated from within government, and was epitomised by the work of the Fulton Committee (McSweeny 2006, 27). While the professionalisation of the civil service was accompanied by the reassertion of independence in providing advice, it also ushered in an age of new public management. A hollowing of the state and adoption of business oriented practice for the civil service dramatically changed the way services were delivered, and citizens were perceived (Rhodes 1997, 88-111). This environment fostered a reframing of public service provision as business transactions.

The rise of the citizen as consumer can be understood in the context of the changing British civil service. While both the notion of citizenship and consumerism are highly contested, most agree that they encapsulate different modes of social practice. The melding of the two concepts certainly gathered momentum during the Thatcher years, reached a crescendo during the Blair administration’s strong emphasis on citizen-consumer choice (Root 2007). As Blair stated in 2004, 'Choice puts the levers in the hands of parents and patients so that they as citizens and consumers can be a driving force for improvement in their public services' (Blair, quoted in the Guardian 24 June 2004: 1).

In contemporary democratic theory the equality principle is central to the concept of a citizen (Held 2007). This involves the equality of vote and voice, of participation in democratic politics, and equality before the law. This is a horizontal relationship between citizens. Vertical power relations are understood to pertain between the citizen and the state, not between citizens. Democratic institutions and practices are supposed to support and develop the equality principle amongst citizens. In this formulation legitimate vertical power relations are only by consent. In this sense the citizen is a political construct (see Taylor 2004). Though
as Robert Putnam’s (1995; 2000) work on civic engagement and social capital demonstrates the bonds that tie citizens together in a polity can be very dynamic.

The consumer by contrast is formulated in economic terms. The practices and assumptions of the consumer are referenced to their commercial activity. They exercise their agency and freedom in the market place. The freedom to own and exchange property, and dispose of it as one wishes (to consume in any fashion), is the central defining characteristic of the consumer (Macpherson 1962). The idea of the consumer emphasises the individual freedom to exercise power through the use of money. As Clarke (2007) suggests the anonymity of market exchange, the equality of money and some basic legal restriction to facilitate the exchange, help produce the central freedom of the consumer – the freedom of choice.

The citizen-consumer

Both the model consumer and the model citizen are deeply embedded in Western democratic life. Both modes are part of the liberal social imaginary though often they are in tension with each other. The citizen is assumed to have some concern for the public good; the consumer is more focused on self interest. The consumer may be selfish, though not necessarily so. The tension between these two ideals is evident in their recombination.

The political citizen is part of the 'public interest', and is afforded rights and responsibilities helping insulate them from the imposition of the private will of others. The private individual is afforded a mutual indifference to enact her/his persona. Both models embody the shared ideals of liberty, freedom of individuality and equality, even if the exercise and emphasis varies in each. Clarke et al (2007, 3) note that the tension between citizen and consumer often plays out in a series of binary oppositions: state/market; public/private; political/economic; collective/individual; rights/exchange.

In that imaginary, the citizen strides forward, the bold embodiment of the republican tradition. She/he self confidently articulates political views, engages productively in public discourse and makes demands of the state as of right. Equally, the consumer forms judgements and makes choices, assertively pursuing self-interest and bursting free of social and political constraints (Clarke et al 2007, 5).

However, models of the citizen and the consumer do not always tally in practice. People are not as easily pigeon-holed in everyday practices and experiences. Actual citizen-consumers are a complex confluence of the two models. How this tension is manifest varies according to
the type of interaction. Clarke et al (2007) examine how this has unfolded across the UK public sector (see also Mann 2005). Slocum (2004) and Parker (1999) explore the creation of the citizen-consumer in environment campaigns and policy (see also Doubleday 2004). They argue that the creation of a citizen-consumer is driven by the citizen as consumer, feeding back into the interface between state and citizen. Spring (2003) argues that the idea is already well entrenched in many service delivery sectors such as education.

**Political communication and the citizen-consumer**

The citizen-consumer, viewed from the perspective of trying to promote effective state-public interface, poses several puzzles. If governments are communicating with citizens through a consumer frame, there is an implicit assumption that people have the capacity and interest to be able to adequately acquire necessary information to ensure maintenance of rights. This assumption in part comes out of research into information acquisition. A hypothesis of this approach is a calculus implicitly undertaken by individuals in assessing the value of new information (Taber 2003; Lupia et al 2000; Lupia and McCubbins 1998, 27). From this perspective people will only seek new information (or pay attention to available information) if it will derive some benefit for them. Research into patterns of adult learning demonstrates that this assumption is problematical in practice. While acquiring more information might be quite rational and individually beneficial, people only act rationally within certain bounds (Simon 1978).

While citizens are often not motivated to actively seek information themselves, research suggests that most people rely on 'information shortcuts'. Political communication research has identified a wide variety of information shortcuts. In some accounts, investigative media is key (Norris 2001), or elite opinion (Zaller 1992). Other research finds that party identification plays a key roll (Downs 1957), or campaigns (Lupia et al 2000), or bias toward ‘known issues’ (Calvert 1985). Vande Berg et al (2004) and Milner (2002) argue that key to ensuring that citizens are fully empowered through the use of media is the promotion of media literacy. However, in the case of more mundane public service provision, even information shortcuts may not promote adequate acquisition of information or they may be lacking altogether.

As Downs (1957) argues in the *Economic Theory of Democracy*, the relative benefit versus the cost that citizens derive from gaining information often means that they will only seek out what will keep them basically informed. While there are strong normative arguments that suggest the need to promote more active citizens (Milner 2002; cf. Putnam 2000), the fact
remains that in the comparatively rich democracies informational interaction with government is often a peripheral concern at best. Though it may be worrying that citizens have little or no interest in politics, of greater concern is that they will be apathetic in the seeking out details directly impacting upon their rights and responsibilities. More than this, there is a general lack of interest in public affairs (Dalton 2006). The US case has been extensively studied on this issue, with research showing very low levels of concern or comprehension of much of what government does (Dalton 2006).

For rational models of information acquisition, citizens are interested in the expected benefit discounted by the cost of attaining information; both directly and in terms of what acquiring the information will cause an individual to forego. In other words a cost-benefit analysis will determine whether attentiveness is desirable. The implication here is that acquiring more information may be undesirable and actively avoided. This conclusion is not striking in and of itself, as it seems intuitive. What is analytically valuable is that it makes explicit why political information is often undesirable, suggesting the possibility that people may have a preponderance to pay little attention to what governments say, even if it directly benefits them. Citizens have an incentive to ignore much government information even if the cost of acquisition is seemingly low (Lupia and McCubbins 1998, 29). The evidence suggests that the process of information provision can be significant to the relationship between citizens and government.

**Capable and engaged publics?**

Political communication is not only indicative of interface (interaction) between citizens and governments it is generative of the relationship. Access to information is a limited answer in promoting effective functioning democracies and empowering citizens in their interaction with the state. When the relationship between state and public conforms less to a citizenship model and becomes consumer-like interaction, then the circumstances in which the public seems to acquire information becomes increasingly important. Communicating (and more generally conceptualising) citizens as consumers places onus back on individuals to ensure they fully understand their own rights and responsibilities. While this may satisfy theorists who advocate minimal and legalistic models of the state, it does not necessarily match with the perception many citizens expect that governments will ensure they have the adequate information.

As the following case study of communication by the British Department of Work and Pensions will exemplify, the frame of communication adopted by governments toward their
constituency can have unintended consequences, highlighting the importance of seemingly innocuous interactions. By treating constituents as consumers, elites dictate less and attempt to engage in forms of dialogue more. For success, however, this relies on the assumption that citizens are alert and capable of furthering their own interests. Moreover, the potential for the public sector to engage in self marketing (Garnett 1997) further confuses the issue. The presumption that for government the interests of the public should come first becomes harder to defend, as citizens need to keep informed in the face of communication designed to persuade. The practice of political communication, at all levels of government and especially evident in service delivery, is indicative of how governments position their constituents.

Thus the case study highlights three core dilemmas presented by the phenomenon of the citizen-consumer.

- Can communication practices alone reposition the relationship between governments and citizens or are they indicative of more fundamental changes?
- Do citizens, when positioned as consumers, demonstrate the capacity to keep themselves adequately informed?
- Is there evidence of unintended consequences positioning citizens as consumers in the most innocuous of communication activities?

The 'pension debacle'

The morphing of model relations between the governed and governor has wide implications for policy generation and its subsequent communication. There is the perception that insights into what the public wants, above and beyond policy marketing, become crucial to the way that communication is handled (SCPA 2006, Q66). The obvious problem occurs in those instances where the public does not desire a particular policy or regulatory change. The conflict between perceived public want and the desire of the government further complicates communication practices in the UK (see Neuman 2007). When such a situation is coupled with a customer focused frame there is the potential for ineffective communication.

One case that demonstrates a shift in sentiment towards UK citizenry and the communication frame it entails is, as one MP politely called it, the 'pension debacle', where the UK government is in the process of paying (from 2008) several billion pounds worth of compensation to cover loss of pension entitlements. The Parliamentary and Health Services Ombudsman began an investigation into complaints from members of the public and trustees of certain occupational pension schemes in 2004 (PHSO 2006). Pension provision obtained through membership of certain private sector final salary occupational pension schemes
meant that the member would use the company scheme (often because the company offered to contribute) rather than other options. The Minimum Funding Requirement (MFR), which prescribed the level of contributions that a scheme had to hold, was meant as a part guarantee that if the scheme wound up prematurely there would be enough money left to pay a proportion of member entitlements (PHSO 2006). These complaints related to schemes that had ceased without sufficient funds to enable the ‘pensions promise’ for all members. In many cases once the pension had wound up members lost a considerable proportion (in some cases all) of the expected pension (House of Commons 2006).

The illusion of protection stemmed from a misunderstanding of how a scheme’s assets (and liabilities) were apportioned when a scheme failed or ceased (House of Commons 2006). In such a circumstance members were often left with little recourse if the MFR had not been met. Central to the accusations against the UK government was the recognition that, through a series of pamphlets and other means of communication, guarantees for the schemes had been implied (PHSO 2006; House of Commons 2006). Citizens who had had interaction with the DWP had clearly not been acting like consumers of a pensions advice service. This was particularly problematical because the UK government went to great lengths to promote the switch to private schemes, while not offering protection if those schemes wound up. The case highlights the tension between the responsibility to citizens and the responsibility to consumers, and the role of communication and communication frames in enacting these tensions. The nature of the communication appears to have at least in part structured relations between the DWP and clients, irrespective of the intentions of each.

The main accusation against the Department for Work and Pensions and the Occupational Pensions Regulatory Authority (alongside other government bodies) was that they had mislead the public in failing to explain the security of pension rights of members of final salary occupational schemes (House of Commons 2006). As the Ombudsman's investigation found, the government bodies failed to 'accurately, completely, clearly and consistently' explain these risks to clients (PHSO 2006, 4). Moreover the DWP’s failure to act, was despite warnings and recommendations from a number of stakeholders and experts. Chief amongst these warnings to government were those from senior members of the actuarial profession from May 2000 onward (House of Commons 2006). The Ombudsman argued that the government should have properly informed the public and should have been 'given as scheme members had no idea of the risks to their pensions if their scheme were to wind up' (PHSO 2006, 15). The main accusations were accompanied by a series of other incidences of maladministration. There was the perception that weakening the security provided by the statutory Minimum Funding Requirement has made the situation worse, and errors and delays
in processing has drawn out the wind-up of some schemes, compounding the problem in some cases.

**The power of misleading pamphlets**

The misinformation that had generated the complaints stemmed partly from a series of pamphlets that were issued by DWP over the course of a decade. These pamphlets had oversimplified the risks and implied that the private schemes were guaranteed by the government. For example, in January 1996 the then UK Department of Social Security published a pamphlet titled *The 1995 Pensions Act* (DSS 1995). It was a ‘brief summary’ of the ‘changes to state pensions, occupational pensions and personal pensions’ introduced by the 1995 Act. It said that ‘more detailed information will be published later’. According to evidence tendered to the Ombudsman it was a revision of an earlier pamphlet published in October 1995. It claimed that,

>'The Pensions Act introduced a new rule aimed at making sure that salary related schemes have enough money in them to meet the pension rights of their members. If the money in the scheme is less than this minimum level, the employer will need to put in more money within time limits. The minimum funding requirement is intended to make sure that pensions are protected whatever happens to the employer. If the pension scheme has to wind up, there should be enough assets for pensions in payment to continue, and to provide all younger members with a cash value of their pension rights which can be transferred to another occupational pension scheme or to a personal pension' (DSS 1995).

This was one of many subsequent communications that implied that the schemes were safe for members. Often the communication implied that the MFR would provide adequate protection for the majority of the pension itself. Though there was debate about the extent that the MFR should be replaced, there was no suggestion of an overall guarantee if the scheme did not have sufficient funds when the pension was claimed².

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² Indeed the wording of published materials and the perception of an extensive safety net had worried professionals from the first reforms after the Maxwell Affair. In 1995, the actuarial profession had written to the government expressing the view that ‘the term solvency was an inappropriate description of the test and was likely to mislead scheme members and others into believing that their benefits would be fully secure if their pension scheme wound up’ (PHSO 2006, 4.25). The mismatch between the government promotion and communication of the benefits of the scheme were consistently a hallmark of the inadequate information given to the public regarding the risk.
There was some recognition from the government and many other stakeholders over the next decade that the communication was being misunderstood. There were several revisions of the material, including one in 2001 titled *A guide to your pension options*. Its introduction stated that ‘these guides can give you helpful information, but only you can make decisions about your pension’ (PHSO 2006, 4.365). This guide in the latter sections dealt with occupational pensions. Signposted under the title *Should I join my employer’s occupational pension scheme?*, the guide notes that 'most members of an occupational pension scheme will be better off when they retire than they would be if they did not join it' (PHSO 2006, 4.366).

There was confusion amongst DWP staff as to the protections actually offered by the government, with the perception by many lower level staff that the government did offer protection (SCPA 2006, Q67).

The Ombudsman found that the administration and the role of the government had been party to the loss of anything but the basic government pension for many people. Of great concern was the 'lost opportunities to make informed choices' that a ‘lack lustre’ government communications effort had fostered (PHSO 2006). This was compounded by a deficiency in the provision of adequate information on how to take remedial action relating to their schemes funding position and thus how to ameliorate individual losses. The deceptively simple maladministration in information provision has had considerable consequences for many.

What is potentially analytically valuable in this case is that it shows that irrespective of the intention of either citizens or governments, how they communicate in seemingly mundane circumstances influences the relationships between the two. The pamphlets in this case framed citizens as consumers.

**Conclusion**

One reading of the ‘pension debacle’ is that it highlights the tension between ensuring that government communication is accurate on the one hand, and understandable on the other. Those in government argue that there is will 'always be trade-offs between accuracy and simplicity, especially when you come into things like pensions' (SCPA 2006, Q66). As the case demonstrates making such a trade-off can have dire costs. Suggestion that citizens should have sought more detailed information (asked for an adviser, researched the risks) appears the key mitigating factor as far as the government is concerned. This is quite telling of how the case can be understood in a broader sense. For placing the onus back on clients (coupled the content of the pamphlets and refusal to heed warning) suggests irrespective of how the DWP
saw its role and that of its clients, the communication in this case structured it in a consumer frame.

The DWP communication seems to have embodied the shift in focus from service provision to the citizen, to service provision to the consumer. A plausible explanation for maladministration across the period of a decade is that in dealing with the proactive citizen-consumer the DWP did not see itself as needing to mitigate the risk to the citizen but rather just that of the consumer. The consumer makes decisions to maximize utility and only requires enough information to achieve this. Welfare provision, as understood in the tradition of social democratic social steering, appears an anathema to cases such as the ‘pension debacle’.

The rise of the citizen-consumer is demonstrated through cases such as the ‘pension debacle’, where the reframing of the citizen pervades the logic of administration and communication. The case also highlights the uneasy relationship between both characters in the contemporary Western public. While this paper has not explored the wider implications of the hyphenation of the two faces of the polity (public and private), undoubtedly it will have some influence on notions of social risk, identity and inclusion.

There is evidence, as this paper demonstrates, that the communication methods of the British government promote the citizen-consumer as much as are indicative of it. While in this case communication practices alone do not seem to have repositioned the citizen as consumer, they were important to it. The activities of the DWP seem to have reinforced the norm they adopted for their constituents. What is most concerning about the case is that citizens have not demonstrated the capacity to keep themselves adequately informed about an issue that directly impacted their material well-being. In the case of the ‘pension debacle’ it appears that there was a perception by many affected that it was the place of government to ensure they were informed. This poses serious questions about the capacity of citizens to seek information from governments when framed as citizen-consumers.

**References**


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