

We need to start thinking more in terms of ‘society-centred governance’

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*‘Society-centred’ governance eschews the false rhetoric of citizen-centredness to more accurately describe what it is that governments actually do, writes **Dennis Grube**. A new ‘society-centred’ governance that would reflect the reality that political hard choices require a wider policy-making lens than ‘citizen-centred’ governance allows.*



That most difficult to define class of person—‘the citizen’—has supposedly never had it so good. The citizen in the twenty-first century is not just a part of the polity in western democracies—they are at the very ‘centre’ of it. Citizen-centred governance is ubiquitous. It infuses public service documents, shapes political rhetoric and helps to define citizens’ expectations of their governments. Democratic theory has always told us that power in a democracy comes from the people—so what could be wrong with placing those same people at the very centre of government thinking?

My core argument here is twofold: first, that ‘citizen-centred’ is an unhelpful rhetorical flourish which provides no explanatory purchase for what is actually happening on the ground in terms of policy; second, that citizen-centred rhetoric disaggregates society down to the smallest possible unit, encouraging an individual service mentality that delegitimises the need for governments to make decisions in the wider national interest. I conclude by advocating for a new ‘society-centred’ governance that would reflect the reality that political hard choices require a wider policy-making lens than ‘citizen-centred’ governance allows.

Putting the citizen at the centre suggests a level of empowerment – of making citizens partners in government. ‘Citizen-centred’ policy documents make clear that their focus is in fact much more on efficient service delivery than on the embrace of participative modes of decision-making. Anyone who has ever tried to negotiate her or his individual policy outcome in a government one-stop shop knows the futility of such an endeavour. ‘Citizens’ in these situations are really ‘customers’—no more and no less. The suggestion that there is a special relationship between a citizen and her or his government that is consummated at a service counter is fanciful.

That is not to say that reforms to service delivery are unnecessary or unwelcome—and in many cases they have made dramatic improvements. Rather, I argue that this has very little to do with citizenship and much more to do with customer service and administrative efficiency. Both may be laudable goals, but they should not be confused with participative notions of citizenship. The label ‘citizen-centred’ is a convenient rhetorical frame that allows governments to capture their desire to appeal to the individual sentiments of voters—to reassure each individual that their viewpoint matters—when in reality the policies that underlie the rhetoric are about something else altogether.

If a concept such as ‘citizen-centred’ governance is to have any purchase beyond the limited benefits of smoother customer relations in government service delivery, then surely it must suggest ways to help policy-makers grapple with complex problems. It must, at a conceptual level, provide some guidance for how to proceed when making decisions about strategic priorities and the allocation of scarce resources. Conceptually, ‘citizen-centredness’ places government in the position of having to try to please everybody, when in reality they simply cannot do so.

Take for example the ongoing debate about the location of children’s heart surgery services in England. This debate has seen passionate advocates argue in defence of the services available to their local communities; citizens telling the government that they need services available locally. The flaws in the review process have seen the government grant a temporary reprieve as a new review is instituted. But the decision-makers have made it clear that in the end, the services will have to be concentrated in fewer centres to ensure a high quality of service. The only way such a hard choice can ultimately be resolved is for a decision to be made in the wider interest of the society as a whole—

as measured in health outcomes and fiscal costs. No amount of participative citizen-centred rhetoric enables a government to avoid the final and divisive decision that will see some citizens and groups of citizens lose access to a local service that they desperately wish to keep. Every time governments close any service—from schools to post offices—they do so not because it is local citizens who desire it, but because the wider interest suggests that there is something unsustainable in running half-empty schools or under-utilised post offices.

Towards ‘society-centred’ governance?

Policy-makers understandably never tire of the search to somehow make public policy less contentious in a democracy. ‘Citizen-centred’ governance in theory promises to strip the politics away by giving citizens a greater sense of ownership in their own governance. But when it comes to hard choices, the cosy embrace of citizen-centred decision-making quickly gives way to the national interest.

The fact remains that public policy making in a democracy is complicated. It’s hard. It requires the weighing up and balancing of often competing interests and the cooperation of a vast array of stakeholders, as network governance theory has explained. A new ‘society-centred’ governance would acknowledge this complexity rather than trying to pretend it can be swept away by focusing on individual citizens. ‘Society-centred’ governance legitimizes the need for governments to make decisions in the national interest once all competing local interests have been listened to and weighed up. In the end, that is what democratically elected representative governments on either side of the political spectrum already do. ‘Citizen-centred’ rhetoric simply works to mask this reality.

Thinking more in terms of ‘society-centred governance’ is not about an ideological choice between the left’s traditional championing of the collective and the right’s traditional championing of the individual. It is rather about recognising the reality that whilst governments of all stripes rhetorically embrace citizen-centric goals, they ultimately make decisions in the wider national interest when faced with complex choices. ‘Society-centred’ governance eschews the false rhetoric of citizen-centredness to more accurately describe what it is that governments actually do. It is about making the rhetoric match the reality of the hard business of policy-making.

*This post is an extract from a longer article first published by the author in *The Political Quarterly* 84(3), 371-9.*

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Author

Dr Dennis Grube is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Government and International Relations at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. He has research interests in British political history, political rhetoric, and contemporary public administration, and is the author of *At the Margins of Victorian Britain: Politics, Immorality and Britishness in the Nineteenth Century* (I.B. Tauris, 2013) and *Prime Ministers and Rhetorical Governance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

