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## ABSTRACT

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The release of the Final Report of the Lyons Inquiry into Local Government in England, entitled *Place-shaping: A Shared Ambition for the Future of Local Government* was a significant milestone in the debate on local government reform. Drawing various strands of political theory and political economy, as well as the hotly contested policy process in the transition from Thatcher to New Labour, the Inquiry placed municipalities at the centre of a vision for a revitalised England and offered a model of reform – 'place-shaping' – that was greeted enthusiastically by a suite of players in its own political milieu. Place-shaping is a sophisticated piece of rhetoric and policy making and can be seen to have relevance far beyond its own jurisdiction. This paper traces its theoretical antecedents alongside developments in the debate on local government in England. Despite its broad appeal, we argue that problems familiar to local government such as rent-seeking, diminished accountability, exclusion and cost shifting will be heightened rather than resolved with any take-up of the place-shaping agenda.

**Keywords:** Lyons Inquiry, place-shaping, devolution, leadership.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

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Local government across the developed world has experienced increasing difficulties in determining its role in contemporary society. Typically, the subject of local government rises to political prominence when the need for reform is driven by financial concerns (see for example Shah, 2006; Dollery, Garcea and Le Sage, 2008). The impetus for the recently completed Lyons Inquiry into local government in England was indeed to examine financial arrangements between central and local government. Nevertheless, through the course his work, which included three Reports (Lyons, 2005; 2006; 2007) the head of the inquiry, Sir Michael Lyons, took into account almost three decades of contentious reform processes and public debate in England to revisit the role of local government in contemporary society. In the work of the Inquiry, this role was couched mainly in terms of economic and social development; there was also, however, pressure for explicit political reforms to address what a privately financed report referred to as England's 'democratic deficit' (Power Inquiry, 2006) and to implement administrative reforms to rid local government in England of what Davis (2008, 5) labelled 'the deeply embedded culture of central control freakery'.

This significant body of work and rapid-fire policy formulation represents a potentially important watershed for scholars of local government across the globe and thus invites scrutiny. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the Lyons Inquiry resided in its development of the concept of 'place-shaping' in local governance and the ramifications this has for policy formulation generally. Place-shaping was constructed by Sir Michael Lyons from various extant strands of work in a range of fields, including political theory, political economy and economic geography, as well as local government studies. This paper attempts to critically consider the concept of place-shaping and to explain the implications of this for any take-up of a place-shaping or indeed similar agenda. We argue that the combination of Lyons' emphasis on the twin principles of devolution and leadership on the one hand, and his reading of political theory on the other hand, led the Inquiry to recommend what we will describe as a specific modality of politics resonant with the principle strands of reform under New Labour. Nevertheless, place-shaping is a significant extension to this body of work for three reasons. First, due to its re-statement of the theory of political economy based in the theory of fiscal federalism first advanced by Tiebout (1956); second, due to its fundamental re-emphasis on the idea of 'place' as the basis of both economic development and political identity; third due to its endorsement of a theory of politics grounded in demands for radical value pluralism (Gray, 1993) beyond a distributive framework (Young, 1990) and with direct antecedents in tradition of English pluralism. Moreover, this theory of politics also incorporates an account of leadership based in ideas of republican virtue ethics.

While a variety of voices – including the current (ascendant) Conservative opposition – have endorsed the general direction of Lyons' work (Cameron, 2009)<sup>1</sup>, we offer an alternative account of Lyons' theory based on a critical

exposition of his deployment of political theory and political economy, arguing that there is room for caution in any endorsement of the place-shaping agenda.

The paper itself is divided into six main parts. Section 2 outlines the content of the idea of place-shaping advocated by Lyons alongside a brief discussion of the Inquiry's specific reform proposals. Section 3 examines the continuity of place-shaping with local government reform in the English context, as exemplified by Stoker's (2003) idea of 'Networked Community Governance'. Section 4 unpacks the distinct features of place-shaping, examining Lyons' emphasis on the idea of 'place' in relation to its deployment in economic geography and urban studies. Further, we examine Lyons' implicit engagement with both postmodern/post-liberal political theory and the tradition of English pluralism stretching from Mill to Hirst, as well as the Inquiry's general emphasis on leadership. Section 5 puts forward four specific criticisms of Lyons' model of place-shaping centred on the issues of rent seeking, accountability, equity and cost-shifting. The paper concludes in section 6 with some broader observations.

## **2. PLACE- SHAPING: ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND BEHAVIOURAL REFORM**

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'Place-shaping' is the term the head of the Lyons Inquiry into Local Government in England, Sir Michael Lyons, gave to the broad thrust of his recommendations for local government reform developed through the course of the Inquiry from 2005 to 2007. Rather than tackle his brief, namely 'to search for a sustainable solution to the problems of local government finance' (Lyons, 2005, 3) at the level of policy *per se*, Lyons -- who wrote all three reports of the Inquiry in the first person -- proceeded to frame the concerns of the Inquiry far more strategically and theoretically, developing what he termed 'key questions and future work under my extended remit'. These were identified as: (i) the strategic role of local government; (ii) devolution and decentralisation; (iii) managing pressure on local services, and (iv) scope for new agreement between central and local government. His answer to these strategic questions was a suite of specific policy recommendations with respect to central-local finance relations, but more interestingly a broad approach to revitalising economic development and political processes that he termed 'place-shaping'.

Place-shaping is initially defined innocuously enough as 'a strategic role for local government' (Lyons 2005, 6) that is nevertheless underlain by eight fundamental principles:

- 'Building and shaping local identity;
- representing the community, including in discussions and debates with organisations and parts of government at local, regional and national level;
- regulating harmful and disruptive behaviours;

- maintaining the cohesiveness of the community and supporting debate within it, ensuring smaller voices are heard;
- helping to resolve disagreements, such as over how to prioritise resources between services and areas, or where new housing and development should be located;
- working to make the local economy more successful, to support the creation of new businesses and jobs in the area, including through making the area attractive to new investment and skilled workers, and helping to manage economic change;
- understanding local needs and preferences and making sure that the right services are provided to local people through a variety of arrangements including collective purchasing, commissioning from suppliers in the public, private and voluntary sectors, contracts or partnerships and direct delivery; and
- working with other bodies to respond to complex challenges such as natural disasters and other emergencies' (Lyons, 2005, 31).

These axioms denote the principal content and policy directions of place-shaping itself, namely away from viewing local government as an (instrumental) provider of services, toward fulfilling a combination of political roles that involve not just resource allocation, but issues of identity and community formulation and in particular in fostering economic development. As such, place-shaping is a positive endorsement of what we will refer to as the re-politicisation of local government in the directions of community empowerment and devolution.

In the first of Lyons' reports (Lyons, 2005) place-shaping is mentioned a mere 3 times; by the third, (Lyons, 2007) however, it appeared 176 times, with reform to funding becoming subordinate to Lyons' own agenda<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, the definition of place-shaping was fleshed out in the *Final Report*:

The term place-shaping covers a wide range of local activity – indeed anything which affects the well-being of the local community. It will mean different things in different and at different levels of local government, informed by local character and history, community needs and demands, and local politics and leadership. The powers and freedoms which local government can exercise are an important part of enabling councils to play this role. However, I am clear that effective place-shaping is as much about the confidence and behaviours of local government as it is about statutory powers and responsibilities. (Lyons, 2007, 174).

In the course of his work, Lyons deployed a series of related arguments upon which to found his idea and subsequent policy recommendations. The strong role for local government in economic development is based on 'devolution', defined

as both 'devolving more power to the local level and reducing the level of central prescription' (Lyons, 2007, 2). To this end, Lyons reiterated the theory of public expenditure and tax assignment first advanced by Tiebout (1956), endorsed by Hayek (1960) then developed within a public choice framework by Buchanan (1980) and Oates (1990) (although Lyons himself credits the theory to just Hayek, Buchanan and J.S. Mill). Based on the assumption that local knowledge is intrinsically superior to non-local knowledge, devolution is both allocatively efficient and efficient in reducing the transaction costs of government. Further, the assumption of superior local knowledge also entails that local government 'is ideally positioned to support the development of social capital, social innovation and community cohesion' (Lyons, 2006: 5-7). These arguments are coupled with a theory of comparative economic advantage between places with a view to revitalising the economy outside of the south-east corner of England: The vision is of vibrant, developing, economic regions with a strong sense of history and local identity that are nevertheless 'cosmopolitan' in character. In addition to creating competition amongst themselves (thus fostering innovation) this difference acts as a guard against bad local government based citizens' voicing their preferences with respect to local policy, and potentially exiting to live elsewhere. Moreover, this theory of local economic empowerment was buttressed at the level of policy by a strong argument for garnering greater income at the local level<sup>3</sup> as well as playing a *primus inter pares* role among public, private and non-profit sectors in local economic development (Lyons, 2007, 181).

This view of political economy was continuously reinforced with an emphasis on the idea of place itself (or what in the quote above Lyons refers to as 'local character and history'). While the justification for this emphasis is *prima face* economic, Lyons continuously stressed the both the liberal political dimension of this idea and its contribution to individual and collective identities:

The need for local government to have space and flexibility to act on local preferences and choices is strengthened by the fact that, while people have sought to define measures of well-being, there is no single definition or blueprint for how governments should act to improve it. Indeed, there are significant risks in any one person, or central government, or an inspectorate, defining and measuring well-being as an indicator of success, because all individuals, and all communities, are different (Lyons, 2007, 56).

This claim against central prescription and endorsement of the idea of difference and self determination for communities is designed to encourage, but is also dependant upon, facilitating political reform initiatives based on 'strengthening leadership and expanding the opportunities for local people to influence local decision making' (Lyons, 2007: 2). Lyons' specific policy recommendations to encourage leadership included direct elections for three models of executive leadership, which were subsequently endorsed in the ensuing Department of Communities and Local Government White Paper of 2006 (DCLG, 2006, 3). Nevertheless, the emphasis on both political and managerial leadership, as well as community empowerment and engagement<sup>4</sup> was more general, as signified by the of 'double dissolution' or 'devolving more powers to local government, and at the

same time devolving more powers to individual citizens and bodies closer to them' (Lyons, 2006, 48). Further, Lyons prescribed that a vision for local economic development be articulated and 'owned' by the community well into the future – Lyons (2007, 174) stating that local government ought to 'have a sense of where a place should be in five, ten, 20 and even 30 years' time'.

The Inquiry continually emphasised what Lyons himself (2007, 352) called 'changing behaviours', in the sense of a prescribing a willingness to participate in place-shaping agendas, urging 'that local authorities develop a sense of powerfulness and capability to perform the place-shaping role' (Lyons, 2007, 352). This approach was strongly endorsed within its own political milieu, with the Local Government Association stating of Lyons' *Final Report*: 'This boils down to helping people make a better life for themselves' (LGA, 2005, 2), and the then Minister for Communities and Local Government, Ruth Kelly, (DCLG, 2006, 1) stating:

This White Paper is on the side of individuals and families who want to make a difference, both to their own lives and to the communities in which they live. Our vision of revitalized local authorities, working with their partners, to reshape public services *and the citizens and communities that use them* (emphasis added).

This idea of behavioural reform, when set alongside the theory of political economy, the theory of local politics based on an increased role for both political and managerial leadership, form the core content of the idea of place-shaping. Outside the milieu of local government policy in the English and British contexts, this degree of prescription and its round endorsement by industry and government as well as a range of think tanks (see for example, Sorabji, 2006) appears extraordinary. Yet placed within the rhetoric of Labour's Third Way Britain generally and more specifically in the context of the vexatious issue of local government reform, its 'bootstrapping' tone is familiar enough. In order to explore place-shaping more fully and to critically assess it, we need to know from whence it came. This forms the third section of the paper.

### **3. PLACE- SHAPING AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM: TOWARD 'NETWORKED COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE'**

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The idea of place-shaping forms part of a substantial debate on local government generated in the English and British context which can be dated from what Lyons himself (2007: 40) calls 'the economic difficulties of the early 1970s'. Since this time, local government in England has been locked in to what we will refer to as a logic of necessary reform -- the costs of local government providing services that constituents were accustomed to became too high in the face of declining tax receipts due to the overall economic slowdown, and this formed the basis of the 1976 Layfield Inquiry into central-local financial relationships (Stoker, 2003, 21)

and importantly, the ensuing debate – a fact that Lyons (2007, 40) explicitly recognised some thirty years later.

The impact of the Conservative governments on local government, and the reaction that it provoked, are difficult to overstate. What Stoker (2003) labelled as 'local governance by default' was brought about by a combination of successive policies, the principle goal of which was financial austerity, but which had far-reaching consequences. While the specific details of these policies are of background concern in this context<sup>5</sup>, Stoker (2003, 41-43) drew three general conclusions about the effect of these reforms. First, the fundamental legitimacy of local government was seriously eroded (primarily due to the complexity of arrangements put in to place); second, the 'probity' of these new arrangements was highly questionable, particularly with what Skelcher (2004, 29) has called the 'agencification' of services away from a sovereign local authority. Third, the political accountability of the system was significantly compromised. Even if assessed by the criteria of its own model, or what Haus and Sweeting (2006) have recently labelled 'user-preference democracy', the reforms were extremely damaging, with a significantly smaller proportion of people voting in local council elections.

The counterattack by scholars of local government was sustained. Jones and Stewart (1983) argued that local government made a contribution to liberal democracy by (i) diffusing and decentralising power; (ii) providing policy diversity such that competing solutions to problems are trialled and (iii) acting as a guard against centralised bureaucracy (Chandler, 2008, 367). Nevertheless, the task of reaching for a fundamental justification of the continued existence of unitary, multi-purpose municipal authorities was undertaken by relatively few (see, in particular, Young's (1984) impassioned essay). Rather, scholars of local government moved toward an increasing engagement with New Labour's agenda of what Newman (2001) labelled 'Modernising Governance'. The extent of this engagement is difficult to overstate, Stoker (2003, 2-3) stating:

'[T]he study of local government has in some ways become wrapped up in the reform process as academics try to make sense of the case for change and the virtues of the emerging system'.

Moreover:

I cannot claim the sole authorship of any of New Labour's policies (which is some relief) but I cannot deny that I was involved in discussions about them (Stoker, 2003, xiv).

As such, over time, the defence of local government moved from discussions based principally in normative considerations to those based on the design of local government as a technique (our phrase) of New Labour (see for example Stoker, 1999; Stoker, 2000; Chandler, 2007, 282-3). While New Labour took issue with many elements of the reform process introduced by the Conservatives, there was broad recognition that there was no going back. As Blair (1998, 1) stated:

'The days of the all-purpose authority that planned and delivered everything are gone. They are finished'<sup>6</sup> New Labour's ideas were still based in the neo-liberal critique of the (local) state – committee-centred municipalities were still viewed as bias toward being self-serving and paternalistic rather than customer orientated, and New Labour embraced the approach that the most efficient way to achieve change was through the market (as opposed to the ballot box) (Stoker, 2003, 54-57; Chandler, 2007, 317-8).

The approach to the economic dilemma of service provision pursued by Labour from 1998 onwards recast these techniques of management and financial accountability within a service provision framework that Stoker (2003, 51) labelled 'entrepreneurial welfarism'. While some of these new techniques – for example the replacement of compulsory competitive tendering with New Labour's Best Value regime – proved initially to be deeply unsatisfactory (Wilson, 2005, 166), the broad thrust of policy had several key features, including a shift away from the redistribution of income to the redistribution of life chances within a more inclusive (moral) framework; an emphasis on civic responsibility ('There is no assumption that the state will pay but rather that the state will use its legal authority to ensure that someone takes responsibility for meeting welfare needs') and an emphasis on restoring state capacity and flexibility to create 'joined-up' service provision (Stoker, 2003, 52). In effect, the problem of service provision was dealt with by pushing aside what some, post-Thatcher, had labelled a 'democracy versus efficiency' argument (Goldsmith, 1990; Vetter and Kersting, 2003), to fold participation, and in particular the idea of community empowerment, into decision-making about service delivery via mechanisms adjacent to as well as inside elected authorities. As such, local government was significantly augmented, yet the principle values residing in its existence, namely, that it was inherently more responsive than central government and as such it could provide an appropriate level of service provision (Jones and Stewart, 1985, 5-10) were preserved.

While government *policy* was directed toward seeing local government improve and then deliver greater autonomy, there were other strands of thinking within government that emphasised a far more radical role for public organisations at the municipal level as denoted by the idea of 'community empowerment'. For some, reforms in this direction were premised on thoroughly mutualist and Fabian ideas, with Blears (2003, 1) arguing:

Decentralisation and mutualisation should be the guiding principles of public service reform. Key parts of the public services should be made into mutual organisations owned and controlled by local people and by their users.

This is indicative of the 'broad church' that could be accommodated by New Labour, inclusive of different forms of ownership structures such as public interest companies and industrial provident societies (Blears, 2003, 18). Nevertheless, the schism between those in favour of greater devolution from the centre and what New Labour was delivering, up to and including the variations in

policy detail between Lyons' own work, the 2006 White Paper and the ensuing *Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007*, is ably captured by Kelly (2008, 546):

[T]he enduring memory of New Labour's reform of local government is of a bossy administration obsessed with overly complicated bureaucratic performance measurements, and seemingly incapable of trusting localities to manage their own affairs...'.

The rift between government on the one hand and advocates of local government on the other has thus largely been in terms of the degree of perceived genuine devolution of authority, with the debate centring on competing conceptions of autonomy (see, for example, Gurr and King, 1987; Goldsmith, 1990; Pratchett, 2004). As such, Davies (2008) lamented the qualitative distinction between the Lyons Inquiry's final recommendations, the 2006 White Paper and the resultant Bill (Davies, 2008). Nevertheless, the game had fundamentally changed, and a new model of local government, with altered justifications and an altered political economy had been both inscribed and enacted. It is local governance, but more specifically 'Networked Community Governance' that for Stoker (2003, 26) is 'the end goal' of New Labour's reform process, and as such it is important that its contents are made explicit.

Stoker's Networked Community Governance is characterised by several key ingredients that form both a precursor to, and rest inside Lyons' place-shaping agenda. First, it is distinctly 'beyond' elected local government in the sense that a range of actors, including those controlled by central government, the private sector and most importantly partnerships, have a role in both service delivery and decision-making (Stoker, 2003, 16-17). Second, it is also 'beyond' local representative democracy by including local pressure groups, and accountability to these pressure groups and service users through panels and boards (Stoker 2003, 18). Third, Stoker (2003, 18) noted 'the rise of multi-level governance', which signifies a shift away from the two-way relationship between central and local government to 'a wider web of intergovernmental relations'. Finally, Networked Community Governance is characterised by what Stoker described as 'the search for fiscal fudges and value for money'. In the face of fiscal austerity due both to a rise in demand for services and a limit on government's ability to raise revenue, 'the focus of governance is, in part, about the search for solutions to manage the tension' through different methods of working such as partnerships and contracting out (Stoker, 2003, 21).

Thus the reforms to local government prior to the Lyons Inquiry reflect Lyons' reforms at the levels of economy, politics and most importantly at an ethical level. At the same time, this reform process saw the fundamental erosion of the (structuralist) categories of economy, polity and the ethical at the level of policy: New Labour bundled these categories together in its overall approach. Yet the dissatisfaction with central targets and the overall level of oversight remained, and it is to this that Lyons' more foundational approach is a response to.

## 4. THE (POST) MODERNITY OF PLACE- SHAPING: GLOCALISATION, RADICAL PLURALISM AND CIVIC REPUBLICANISM

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### 4.1: The centrality of 'place':

Indeed, place-shaping is 'busy', and to that extent it reflects and endorses both the portrait of Networked Community Governance advanced by Stoker. But it is also an advancement beyond this portrait/ideal of mere complexity to a defence of localism as precisely that: an ideology. With his emphasis on 'place', Lyons implicitly relies upon a profound epistemological assertion; one that has formed the basis of a particular stream of political geography. In his groundbreaking work in this field, for example, Agnew (1987) suggested that modern social science intrinsically privileged categories of description, analysis and prescription specifically designed to generalise *across* time and space – the individual, class, nation, – with 'place' being viewed as significant only in traditional societies and as such normatively inferior. Drawing on the work of Goffman (1972), Giddens (1979; 1981) and others, this semantic and conceptual de-valuation of place was overturned in Agnew's own project of constructing a realist, 'antithetical' political sociology, (Agnew, 1987, 16) re-privileging place as a mode of analysis. While Agnew's initial aim may have been to reassert 'a priority to causal validity *in* places rather than generalising *across* places', and 'to *push* local history through to the present', (Agnew, 1987, 2) his project has spawned a significant literature (see for example Agnew, 2008; Featherstone, Lash and Robertson, 1995) underlying recent developments in planning theory and practice, such as New Urbanism, centred on the idea of sustainable communities (see, for example, Godschalk, 2004; Sheppard 2009). Lyons was aware of these debates (Lyons, 2007, 55). Moreover, the specific phrase 'place-shaping', or alternatively 'place-making' has subsequently entered the literature of urban studies, where the emphasis on the idea of place is coupled with an emphasis on ideas of identity, community and aesthetics, prescribing a role for local government that is specifically 'beyond' service delivery (see for example Boland and Coleman, 2008).

Beyond service delivery place-shaping may well aim to be, but the goal of economic development is nevertheless paramount. In this we are alerted to the relevance of the idea of glocalisation to the work of Lyons. According to Robertson (1995, 25), the theory of glocalisation proceeds from the observation that the narrative of globalisation creates a tendency to think 'in a rather casual way [about] very large-scale phenomena' and to de-privilege, both methodologically and politically, narratives not attached to the globalisation story. Moreover, (and proceeding from a critique of Giddens), glocalisation recognises that much of what is local is constructed elsewhere and vice-versa. In the context of urban and regional development, Harvey (2002) has noted that the shift 'from managerialism to entrepreneurialism' as the basis for urban governance has

achieved a remarkable cross-national consensus. While Harvey (2002, 460-1) noted that the pull toward serial reproduction of similar forms of urban redevelopment is strong (particularly in an endeavour to capture what he refers to as 'command and control functions of capital'), projects such as those aimed at revitalising cities across Britain ('Leeds, Bradford, Manchester, Newcastle and Stoke-on-Trent') rely upon the inherent difference of each place: 'Each is able to offer a host of structural reminders of just what made them great in the first place.

The examples of place-shaping that Lyons sprinkles through his work are remarkably akin to those offered by Harvey (see Lyons, 2007, 184-186). Further, we have seen that the idea of place-shaping both resonates with and has driven a re-emphasis on the idea of place, to a point where it is given a deeper significance; one which has as its *raison d'être* economic development, but one that involves profound claims to identity and, we suggest, a postmodernity in its turning away from the nation-state and from the theme of mobility generally.

#### **4.2. Radical pluralism**

These claims about identity are coupled with a statement of radical pluralism in Lyons' work that, we assert, sees place-shaping extend the arguments of its direct lineage in local government studies. To reiterate: '[W]hile people have sought to define measures of well-being, there is no single definition or blueprint for how governments should act to improve it (Lyons, 2007, 56). At one point Lyons (2006, 6) adds a caveat to this,, however this caveat is subsequently significantly compromised by both the theoretical emphasis on pluralism in the *Final Report* and (more explicitly) the policy recommendations with respect to local government finance, including the abolition of ring-fenced grants for education, extension of rate bands and his advocacy of the introduction of local income tax in the medium term (Lyons, 2007, 209-346).

As such, the moral requirement to attempt to accommodate radical value pluralism in conditions of post-liberalism (Gray, 1993) is attached to an argument that at least significantly challenges (if it does not overturn) what Iris Young (1990), in her theory of justice founded in difference, referred to as 'the distributive paradigm'. Young's (1990, 20- 22) argument was not one about the putative evils of welfare dependency (although arguably, it could be read as unwillingly assisting this stance). Rather, her objection was that distributive justice presupposes an institutional context, and that this institutional context will inherently form biases. On the contrary, justice ought to be reconfigured around the issues of 'decision-making structure and procedures, division of labour and culture' (Young, 1990, 22). Again, Lyons does not cite the arguments of Gray, Young and their ilk. It is clear, however, that the Inquiry was very much in step with these ideas in political thinking, taking these ideas to the level of policy.

Nor is this pluralism strictly postmodern or post-liberal. We ought to note the strong thread of English pluralism that is resonant in Lyons and the problematic

tensions within this pluralism that are also reflected in the work of the Inquiry. In his recent discussion of the legacy of Paul Hirst, for example, Mark Wenman (2007, 802-04) noted that as an identifiable body of political theory, English pluralism, principally the work of G.D.H. Cole, John Neville Figgis and Harold Laski, is defined against both Hobbes' idea of the absolute sovereign and Hegel's ideal state, combining the ideas of voluntarism, individualism, pluralism and group rights, such that individual freedom ('unlike the atomised individualism of social contract theory and utilitarianism') 'is realised in groups and associations that make up the fabric of modern civil society'<sup>7</sup>. While Wenman takes Hirst to task for his corporatist *telos* (our word) and his valuing of industrial production over his own theory of associative democracy, he does argue that 'in keeping with Cole and Laski's approaches, the normative core of Hirst's theory of associational democracy was an advocacy of negative liberty and pluralism: 'the basic idea that "as many of the affairs of society as possible" should be "managed by voluntary associations" as a means of defence against centralised forms of power' (Wenman, 2007, 805)<sup>8</sup>. For Hirst (1997, 33) this was also a defence of radical pluralism:

Voluntarism would also make social provision and social governance less conflictual. Communities would be free to establish their own services in conformity with their own values, subject of course to certain minimum standards. Each subcommunity could craft the forms of education, healthcare and so on that it desired. Each group would govern itself for its own purposes. Individuals would be free to leave and join other associations, and the law would protect such freedoms.

Again, this is remarkably akin to the arguments of Lyons some thirty years later. Yet it is by no means unique. As Wickwar (1970, 33) has pointed out, this plural, and also voluntary nature of local government in England was just as striking and definitive in the nineteenth century as the recommendation for it in the twenty first.

While Paul Hirst may have looked at institutional forms other than local government for the articulation of his associative democracy, English pluralism, and liberalism generally, has historically been engaged with the issue of local government. Chandler has recently argued that justifications of local government in Britain have been principally expedient rather than ethical, the latter defined as 'one which values an institution or activity because it fulfils a morally desirable purpose in itself, regardless of its value to other organisations' (Chandler, 2008, 356). Chandler provides a narrative detailing how this type of justification has been progressively qualified, yet by his own account, a number of individuals have come very close to providing an ethical basis for local government, principle of which was Joshua Tomlin Smith, who grounded a theory of individual liberty with the freedom of association and strong anti-centrist sentiments. As well, Chandler pointed out that the Fabian tradition exemplified by the Webbs strongly defended 'the principle of neighbourhood', which Laski (1938, 411) then re-stated as a defence of local government:

Neighbourhood, in other words, makes us automatically aware of interests which impinge upon us more directly than upon others. We find that those interests differ in quality and character from the interests of other neighbourhoods... [A]dministration from without lacks the vitalising ability to be responsive to local opinion... [a]nd such government is bound, almost inevitably, to aim, not at variety, but at uniformity... It cannot grasp, in other words, the genius of place.

It is in the passage above that the justification of local government moves from the sum of interests that can be weighed, assessed, rationally calculated and adjudicated, toward what above we have called a political ideology of localism and in which the work of Lyons has its clearest antecedent.

It may appear understandable for a theory of pluralism to coalesce with a strong defence of sub-national, democratic government. Yet it is the tensions within early English pluralism that are of interest here. Wenman (2007, 804) asserted that 'the English pluralists theorised the relationship between the individual and their social group (s) in distinct ways.' On the one hand, Figgis endorsed the idealist, organicist, *Gemeinschaft* idea of the group, leading to a positive conception of freedom. On the other, Cole 'warned against the use of "the organic analogy" for theorising associations; Laski siding with him and Hirst brilliantly dismissing the idea of a 'corporate personality' as 'a bit of bad metaphysics' (Weinman, 2007, 804). The work of the Lyons Inquiry stands in a series of interesting relationships with this tension; yet it is resolved in favour of the heightened role for a particular kind of leadership.

### 4.3. Civic republicanism

We have seen that place-shaping, both as rhetoric and as a programme for reform, rests upon two interlocking ideas: first, devolution, commensurate with a 'deep' or epistemologically realist account of pluralism leading to a theory of liberty through civil association, and secondly leadership. It is difficult to overstate the role that Lyons gives to leadership in his theory of place-shaping. In the busy world of network community governance, the visibility of leadership is an important component of political accountability (Lyons, 2007, 185). It is also vital to both administrative reform and economic development, so much so that in response to Lyons' second *Interim Report*, the 2006 White Paper stated: 'leadership is the single most significant driver of change and improvement in local authorities' (DCLG, 2006, p.3). A full consideration of the application of theories of leadership as an instrument of reform to local government lies beyond the scope of this paper. However, we can note in this context the burgeoning role that both studies of leadership and leadership training facilities have in the field of local government. In his *Final Report*, Lyons draws on the work of the IDeA Leadership Academy and the Leadership Centre for Local Government to develop his ideas of leaders conceived of as 'opinion formers' over and above their role as representatives. Both these institutions, as well as programmes such as the Leeds Castle Leadership Programme, fully endorse the role of place as articulated by Lyons (see, for example, Leadership Centre for Local Government), and this

emphasis (in turn) is embedded in the pedagogical rise of leadership to the extent that one commentator has observed 'Leadership is currently invested with such significance that in many business schools leadership development is rapidly replacing management development as the focus of training – or more commonly the two are convoluted' (Coulson, 2007, pp. 1-2).

In seeking a foundational account of leadership in his *Final Report*, Lyons attempted to develop a particularly English justification of strong local government and strong local leadership, asserting that 'powerful local self-government was seen as something that separated Britain from the rest of Europe, particularly France. To this end, he quotes *The Times* of 1855 as noting that 'local self-government is the most distinctive peculiarity of our race and has mainly made England what she is, while the nations of continental Europe are still held in tutelage by their rulers' (Lyons, 2007, 55). Nevertheless, his examples from political theory are those from an emergent United States. He cites Thomas Paine approvingly: 'Great part of that order which reigns among mankind is not the effect of government. It has its origin in the principles of society and the natural constitution of man (Lyons, 2007, 51), and quotes de Tocqueville from *Democracy in America* approvingly: '[de Tocqueville] saw municipal independence as "a natural consequence of the principle of the sovereignty of the people"'.

Commenting on the relationship between English pluralism and the anti-centralist, participatory tradition in the context of the United States on the other, Chandler (2008, 366-7) has noted that some, such as L. J. Sharpe, saw 'that there was some merit in de Tocqueville and [subsequently] Dahl's view that smaller local authority allows more individuals to participate seriously in the political process than the populous nation state'. Ultimately, however, the expedient reason for local government, namely, that it 'makes a contribution to the efficiency and democracy of the nation as a whole' prevailed in the English context. However, this view of local government as expedient is clearly not the one that Lyons requires for place-shaping; on the contrary, he finds the American model appealing. Yet this model of leadership is problematic. To begin with, the extent to which de Tocqueville wholly embraced what he saw in the young American colonies is highly questionable (see, for example, Tocqueville, 1953, 92). Indeed, the model of politics, and in particular leadership, embedded in the American (republican and Puritan) idea of an anti-centralist, self-governing community has its own logic. In the context of English local government, endorsing this idea of leadership – and politics more generally – implies a fundamental shift; one which has been cautioned against. As Goldsmith (1990, 22) rather politely expressed it:

Without wishing to suggest that local government in the United States remains clientelistic or patronage-based, representation and defence of local interests, linked together with the strong persistence of localism as a force in national politics, remain important duties for local elites and elected representatives.

Laski, some fifty years earlier, was more forthright:

Localism, also, lends itself a little easily to the sinister influence of powerful persons or bodies within a given neighbourhood; the record of American cities, and even of American states, is a plain lesson in this regard (Laski, 1938, 413).

Moreover, J.G.A. Pocock, commenting on the Florentine concept of virtue and the Atlantic Republican tradition, put it this way:

It is a Machiavellian Virtue, in the sense that the civic does not always accord with personal morality, but it is a real and classical virtue nonetheless ... the passions now appear as the pursuits of private and particular goods ... virtue is the passion for pursuing the public good, with which the lesser passions may compete, *but into which they may equally be transformed* (Pocock, 1975, p. 472. Emphasis added).

Quoting Pocock as we have done above may appear a long bow to draw. Yet the observations of Laski and more recently Goldsmith make us aware that in the English context at least, the problems of localism that accompany a model of leadership based on the American example were thoroughly familiar to those who looked across the Atlantic. It is to these problems, and to other issues with the place-shaping model, that we now turn.

## **5. CRITICISMS OF PLACE- SHAPING**

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When we speak of 'rent-seeking' in the modern context, images of gratuitous kick-backs to officials spring to mind -- municipal officers in charge of development applications, for example. However, Pocock's reading of republican virtue -- a not insignificant one as far as the history of political thought goes -- recognises that this is a far more subtle process; a process where over time particular interests will come to dominate, where the private interests become public. This may perhaps be justifiably so, yet in a context where strong leadership crosses the boundaries of political, administrative and commercial responsibilities -- as it does in place-shaping -- these relationships are at best complex and, more realistically, problematic.

This problem is related to the problem of accountability in the place-shaping model. To this Lyons is attuned<sup>9</sup>, but displays an admirable faith in his own suggestions, arguing that within devolved and more powerful local government structures accountability is (on the contrary) improved by individuals' increasing engagement with municipalities and greater information flows: 'Where people know who is in charge, they know who to call to account' (Lyons, 2007, 179). The *Final Report* explicitly endorses the DCLG's mechanism of Community Calls for Action (CCfA) (Lyons, 2007, 191) and prescribes Local Area Agreements (LAAs) as mechanisms of (mandated) community participation. Yet there are a number of arguments to suggest that these kinds of mechanisms will not be enough. First, community networked governance is, as we have seen, an extremely 'crowded pitch' involving different kinds of service delivery relationships -- joined-up

government, public-private partnerships and shared services across and between government tiers – all existing outside the sphere of accountable municipal government such that accountability is rendered problematic. Second, the place-shaping idea of accountability relies upon individuals becoming involved in place-shaping itself – to actually constitute the ‘bottom-up pressure’ required of the model that has been broadly endorsed in the English context. Yet it is by no means clear why this situation will necessarily eventuate.

This alerts us to the third problem with Lyons’ agenda: Some individuals simply will not be unable to become involved. Nor will this lack of involvement be randomly allocated: Place-shaping implies the resources to do precisely that, and for many this engagement is simply outside their logistical capacities. To deploy Gellner’s (1994) phrase, place-shaping will not provide ‘the conditions of liberty’ for all. Further, the question of equity is not merely one of the distribution of resources (the distributive paradigm that Iris Young (1990) found so loathsome) but one of being able to contribute to the process of resource allocation.

Finally, one of the principle aims of the reform proposals is to reduce the financial transaction costs of local government by scaling back targeted accountability procedures to central government and devolving responsibility for a certain amount of service provision. This nevertheless presupposes a willingness by individuals to invest much of their own time in local government and to forego other activities which accrue other rewards. Nor do these transaction costs fall merely in the realm of private desires, but also (and one would suspect in large part) to commercial activity.

The four problems listed above – rent seeking, accountability, equity and the transaction costs of place-shaping – are political in the sense that involve trade offs between, and indeed compromises to competing values. Yet place-shaping is also problematic when we assess the sum of these trends. The primary problem is the tendency, both within Lyons’ work and also the associated literature (with the notable exception of Pratchett, 2004) to regard devolution as intrinsically democratising. While Giddens (cited in Chandler, 2008, 368) has suggested that this is not the case because devolution has the propensity to ‘add layers of local bureaucratic power to those that exist at the political centre’, in the discussion above we have suggested that, under place-shaping’, there is a distinct possibility the opposite will prevail, namely that local power will be concentrated to the extent that closure can be exercised and as such significant resource capture can (and in all probability will) occur. Moreover, as Davies (2008, 7) stated in relation to the 2006 White Paper: ‘This proselytising style sets in stone the political agenda for local government. It offers no space for dissidence, the central measure of political freedom’.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

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There is, of course, an alternative interpretation to this: Lyons offers us a distinctly liberal (and anti-bureaucratic) vision of politics that recognises that issues of culture and identity are eminently relevant and that revolves around the twin principles of genuine devolution and leadership applicable to the broader populace as well as political and administrative elites. Yet there are a number of reasons why a critical perspective on any place-shaping agenda is warranted. First, as we have seen (and notwithstanding the differences between Lyons' work and others in his milieu) in the English context place-shaping met with considerably uniform approval. Yet devolution is by no means merely the handmaiden of empowerment. As Crook and Manor (1998: 1) have pointed out: 'The devolution of power, responsibility and sometimes resources on to democratically elected councils at local or intermediate levels [has] appealed to different sets of people who often disagreed on other issues'. Included in these groups are both 'neo-liberal economists' and 'advocates of competitive, pluralist politics' – the combination that, broadly speaking, has made up the Third Way agenda and Lyons' extension of it. However, devolution can also be viewed expediently. In the context of what Habermas (1973) labelled 'legitimation crisis' and Young, (1984, 11) in his defence of the unitary, multi-purpose authority, less prosaically referred to as '[government] overload', the latter stated: 'Local Government has an important part to play in this particular school of statecraft by helping to maintain a sense of the possible and by ensuring that government's own reach does not outrun its grasp too far... Pluralism is good for governments too'. If place-shaping, and more generally 'Networked Community Governance', is doing anything, it is doing this.

In this vein, it is fair to ask to what extent Lyons' endorsement of viewing municipalities as firms competing for customers/residents on the one hand, and his endorsement of multiple sites of political and financial engagement on the other, contradicts one another. Moreover, we would do well to note that the view of competing local governments proffered by Tiebout, Buchanan, Oates and others does rely on 'voice' being exercised, and in a context where voting in local government elections regularly sits at around 30 per cent, and where the idea of compulsory voting as an enforced civic responsibility is rarely seriously discussed compared with the voluminous literature in the area of local government studies generally (for recent exceptions, see Keaney and Rogers, 2006; White and Young, 2007) this theory is markedly undermined. Indeed, it is legitimate to ask to what extent individuals wish to be involved in a myriad of political processes, rather than enjoying the relative freedoms away from politics.

Finally, as Stoker (2003, 1) has noted, 'The British reform process is a focus for international lesson-drawing, admittedly as much as for what not to follow, as to what to emulate'. As such, as the general pulse of place-shaping runs through local government theory and practice globally, we would do well to bear in mind not so much the policy detail, as this will transform in other contexts, but the general thrusts of place-shaping as a theory of local government, and politics

more generally. Yes, place-shaping is an appealing combination of ideas. But this does not mean that the broad trajectories for policy it suggests – its advocacy of devolution, its elevation of leadership, and in particular its subtle letting go of an idea of equity based on the idea of equality, rather than difference, ought not be critically reflected upon.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Within the Conservatives' 'progressive conservatism' framework, Cameron (2009) has spoken of the 'redistribution of power', the 'devolution of power' with an explicit endorsement of the principle of subsidiarity ('we should start by pushing political power down as far as possible, whenever possible') and an increase in both individual power and local power.

<sup>2</sup> By the end of the third Report, Lyons (2007, 211) stated: 'Reform of the local government funding system should aim to do two things. Firstly, [it] should compliment my recommendations on the changes to the function and role of local government. Secondly, it should address those aspects of the current funding system which may act as a barrier to local choice and effective place-shaping'.

<sup>3</sup> These suggestions included that council rates ought not be subject to capping, that councils ought to be allowed to charge for waste services, that a supplementary (local) business tax be allowed, that the plausibility of a tourist tax be investigated and that Local Income Tax (LIT) be considered in the 'medium term' (Lyons, 2007: 260-72).

<sup>4</sup> This emphasis on leadership was reinforced by the White Paper placing a duty on local authorities to develop Local Area Agreements (LAAs) with local stakeholders. As well, Community Calls for Action (CCfAs) mechanisms were introduced, by which members of the community can ask that a particular issue be addressed by Council (DCLG, 2006, 35-37).

<sup>5</sup> These policies included structural reform toward a unitary system of local government, such that 'in 1974 there were 1,855 local councils with an average population of 29,000. By the 1990s this had been cut back to 521 with an average of 106,000 inhabitants, and by 2002 there were only 442 local authorities ... with an average population per council of some 128,000 - 4.4 times larger than the position in the early 1970s. (Wilson, D., 2005, 161-2). Further, own-source funding was reduced from approximately one half to one quarter of municipalities' budgets (principally with the removal of the Business Tax rate from local to central government control in the 1990-91 financial year), the subsequent monitoring of expenditure that this then allowed through the creation of several new regulatory bodies, the explosion in the number of appointed bodies to administer basic services such as education and water, fire services, police and housing, and the wholesale introduction of New Public Management (NPM) to what was left (Stoker, 1999; Stewart, 2000; Stoker, 2003). These latter techniques, inclusive of the introduction of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT), performance targets, a stronger role for municipal managers and the crucial introduction of the purchaser/provider split, all formed benchmarks by which municipalities could be assessed (see Wilson, 2005, 164-165).

<sup>6</sup> Harvey (2002, 457) makes this observation: 'If, for example, urban entrepreneurialism (in the broadest sense) is imbedded in a framework of zero-

sum inter-urban competition for resources, jobs, and capital, then even the most resolute and avant-garde municipal socialists will find themselves, in the end, playing the capitalist game and performing as agents of discipline for the very process they are trying to resist'. John Gray (1993, 44) is more reserved, but reaches the same conclusion: '[T]he debacles of Thatcherism and Reaganism suggest that, for us, the enterprise association state is an historical fate, which we may indeed strive to temper, but which we cannot hope to overcome'.

<sup>7</sup> The Pluralist's argument against absolute sovereignty is at once both an epistemological and a normative claim, that is, *because* individuals and groups have innate differences and can form civil associations, absolute sovereignty ought not to reside in one sovereign state. Wenman makes this clear: 'According to Figgis, the Hobbesian theory of sovereignty – with its assumption of a mass of atomised individuals presided over by a central state authority – "is simply unable to account for the 'whole complex structure of civil society'".

<sup>8</sup>.Wenman (2007, 806) also noted the tendency of romanticising medieval society and politics in the tradition of English pluralism *writ large*: 'All three theorists were attracted to the "formalised differentiation" of medieval society'; and Hirst 'insist[ed] that we require "a new theory of the distribution of power" 'that resembles "the medieval *Standestatt*" with its "grants of distinctive powers and rights to specific institutions and their members"'. Lyons, too, takes time to indulge in this romancing (Lyons, 2007, 45-46). Yet it is precisely this idea 'formalised differentiation' that Ernest Gellner, (1994, 9) in his last and most passionate book, cautioned against:

The objection to the ancient city is not so much that it prefers positive liberty (fulfilment) to negative liberty (absence of external constraints), but that its crucial defects preclude the possibility of formulating the contrast. It thrusts onto the individual an ascribed identity, which then may or may not be fulfilled, whereas a modern conception of freedom includes the requirement that identities be chosen rather than ascribed.

<sup>9</sup> Lyons cites The Young Foundation in this regard: 'Community control over finances, services and assets brings with it the threats of fragmentation, mismanagement of public goods, the politicisation of neighbourhood issues, and the potential for localised power to create or exaggerate community divisions (The Young Foundation, cited in Lyons, 2007, 185).

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