In Search of Society? The Limitations of Citizen-Centred Governance.


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Democratic governments have spent much of the last two decades attempting to recalibrate their governance systems around a single focal entity: the citizen. The all-pervasive rhetoric of citizen-centred governance has seen policies conceived, delivered and evaluated in terms of the satisfaction levels achieved by individual ‘citizens’. This paper will argue that by disaggregating societal interests down to the smallest available individual unit – the citizen – policy makers have created unrealistic expectations of individual participation, leading to public distrust when ‘citizen-centred’ rhetoric does not match reality. Simultaneously, the focus on individual outcomes has narrowed the policy-making gaze away from wider society-level measures that could create more robust policy options in the face of ‘hard choices.’ The result – paradoxically – is that the more government focuses on pleasing the individual citizen, the less trusting those citizens are of government’s ability to deliver meaningful outcomes.

That most difficult to define class of person – ‘the citizen’ – has 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?

This paper sets out to probe the conceptual underpinnings of the ‘citizen-centred’ rhetoric that has assumed a dominant place in policy frameworks over the course of the last decade in particular. It will ask what ‘citizen-centred’ actually means, and analyse some of the ways it has been manifested in the policy settings of governments. The core argument of the paper is twofold: Firstly, 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; and secondly, that citizen-centred rhetoric disaggregates society down to the smallest possible unit, encouraging an individual service mentality that delegitimizes the need for governments to make decisions in the wider national interest. The paper concludes 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.

The conceptual starting point for this paper is the well known saying which is used to critique those who are seen as excessive lovers of detail: that they ‘can’t see the forest for the trees’. Citizen-centred governance asks policy-makers to focus their gaze on the needs of individual citizens rather than the larger community or society of which they are a part. The implied premise of citizen-centred policy-making is that if you meet the expectations of individual citizens, and tailor government to their needs, you will simultaneously solve the problems of the whole. As the ‘tragedy of the commons’ (Hardin, 1968) so clearly illustrates, meeting the needs of every individual citizen can in fact irreparably damage the society of which they are a part.

Many public documents relating to ‘citizen-centred’ policy-making do recognize that there may be times when the rights of individual citizens might have to give way to the rights of other citizens. In other words, there may be times where the individual will must be superseded by the collective will. The problem with this formulation is that it retains at its base the starting point that government’s first responsibility is to meet the needs of individual citizens, and that it’s only where that is not possible that the communal good must prevail. What I argue here is essentially that this formulation privileges the individual over the communal, and as a result encourages reactive individually-based policy-making that is of limited help when confronted with complex public policy problems. The ‘society-centred’ governance which this paper argues for, essentially flips the citizen-centred formulation on its head. ‘Society-centred’ governance has as its starting question: What is in the best interests of society as a whole? It then disaggregates down from that starting point to the individual citizen to ask how government can minimize unfair impacts on individuals when shaping policy in the wider interest.

**What does ‘citizen-centred’ mean?**

‘Citizen’ is a word with a long and illustrious history. It has connotations of belonging; of being connected by unseen ties to the protection and benefits that flow from attachment to an identifiable larger and benevolent entity. To quote sociologist Gerald Delanty: ‘Citizenship has been held to imply membership of a polity and is defined by the rights bestowed by the polity on the individual. In the most general terms, citizenship involves a constitutionally based relationship between the individual and the state’ (1997, p. 285). In the mass of literature on citizenship, some argue for a wider definition that expands beyond formal definitions of the relationship between an individual and the state to embrace notions of community. For example, in the United States the preamble to the *Responsive Communitarian Platform: Rights and Responsibilities* advocates for the preservation of ‘...institutions of civil society where citizens learn respect for others as well as self-respect;
where we acquire a lively sense of our personal and civic responsibilities, along with an appreciation of our own rights and the rights of others’ (cited in Etzioni, 1993, pp. 253-254).

Regardless of whether models of citizenship are individually based or communitarian in nature, under each the citizen must be willing to engage to some extent with the state because citizenship comes with obligations or responsibilities (Safran, 1997). Whether through serving on juries, or voting in elections, or volunteering for the country fire service – citizens are connected in a reciprocal bond with the state. The theory of citizen-centred governance asks executives and legislatures to acknowledge this by thinking less in hierarchical terms, and more in horizontal ones. Under ‘citizen-centred’ approaches, governments exist not simply to serve themselves or even to serve the amorphous leviathan of the state; rather governments exist to serve the needs of their citizens.

Citizen-centred concepts have manifested themselves in modern policy settings in essentially two guises. The first – and by far the most widespread guise – is the use of citizen-centred language in support of the need to provide citizens with more accessible and efficient avenues for connecting with government. Government is presented as having become too unwieldy, too bureaucratised, and too difficult for individual citizens to navigate their way through. The answer has been to create citizen-centred departments with a shop-front mentality that allow citizens to approach their government essentially as consumers – the same way they might approach a department store in a shopping mall. Citizens who need to access a number of government goods and services are increasingly able to do so at a single location (see Kernaghan and Berardi, 2001). They can perhaps pay their driver’s license, council taxes and television license all at the one counter, without having to shop around the different government agencies responsible for administering those services.

The second guise – which has appeared in more of a patchwork of different forms – is the use of ‘citizen-centred’ rhetoric as the justification for more collaborative and deliberative decision-making at the local level (see Guarneros-Meza et al, 2012, pp. 7-9). For example, in developing policy for local schools, government might look for and invite feedback from citizens who have a stake in that school. Wider consultation might even involve an element of co-production in adopting local suggestions for some inclusions in the curriculum, or how to shape the playground layout. Regular consultation mechanisms may even be set up for government to periodically hear feedback on how policy changes have worked on the ground.

Both guises of the citizen-centred concept implicitly suggest that great significance attaches to the idea of ‘citizenship’ in policy-making. Modern scholars have developed definitions to try and differentiate the ‘citizen’ in public administration from her or his near cousins – the ‘customer’, the ‘client’, and the ‘consumer’ (Dutil et al, 2007). Each term carries its own connotations of the relationship between the state as service-provider and the people it is providing those services to. A client is to be nurtured – someone who is given time and care, whose individual problems are discussed and assessed and for whom solutions are
then proposed. Think, for example, of the relationship between a lawyer and client, or a doctor and their patients. A ‘customer’ is an altogether more fleeting and transactionally-based soul – people who wander into a service, give their customer number, receive their service, and then get back to the business of their day. A consumer is a customer who has the luxury of a choice of services provided by a competitive market, and therefore has the power to drive service improvements by the consumption choices they make (see Martin and Webb, 2009).

Clearly, ‘citizen’ has come to be considered the most substantial of these attachments. Dutil et al suggest that ‘Citizen refers to the conceptualization of the public as active and vocal participants in political deliberations about the design and delivery of governments services’ (2007, p. 78). By putting citizens at the centre of their deliberations, policy-makers have privileged the term as the one that can make individuals feel the most valued. A ‘citizen’ is at once more substantial and more elusive than a ‘customer’ or ‘consumer’. Policy documents and government rhetoric across many jurisdictions have tried to give shape to this by outlining what is meant by citizenship, and justifying its central role in modern conceptions of how public services should be administered. Recent examples in Wales, Canada, Ireland, and Australia have set out the importance of having citizens at the centre, and have tried to spell out what that actually means.

The Welsh Assembly’s ‘Citizen-Centred’ principles start by ‘putting the citizen first’, defined as: ‘Putting the citizen at the heart of everything and focusing on their needs and experiences; making the organisation’s purpose the delivery of a high quality service’ (WAG, 2010). For the Irish Government, through its 2008 Transforming Public Services report, ‘putting the citizen first’ is about drawing citizens into being a part of the solution to problems by altering their own behaviour to support policy goals in areas such as obesity or crime prevention:

An increasing number of complex public policy issues require the active participation of citizens as active agents of change in order to achieve the desired policy outcome. This is the case, in particular, when issues require a change of societal behaviour. There are a growing number of issues of this type, ranging from international issues such as global warming to national issues such as obesity prevention, to local issues such as ‘safe streets’ or community development. This more complex environment requires new forms of consultation and ways of working. (Report of the Task Force on the Public Service, 2008, p. 14)

In other words, ‘citizen-centred’ is conceptualized partly as citizens taking more responsibility for their own actions.

In the antipodes, the 2010 Ahead of the Game reform blueprint for the Australian Public Service talked about more ‘citizen-centred’ service delivery, designed to improve the experience of citizens as customers of public services (Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration, 2010). This emphasis on service delivery, rather
than wider ideas of deliberative democracy, echoes the focus of citizen-centred rhetoric in Canada. Canadian policy-making has used ‘citizen-centred’ notions to focus extensively on improving what we might call ‘customer satisfaction’ with government services.

Over the last two decades, the citizen-centred principle has launched a world-wide movement to make government services more transparent, accountable, responsive, efficient and effective. Its rallying cry is that government must get beyond the “silos” and become more horizontal or holistic in what it does to meet the needs of citizens. (Ambrose et al, 2006, p. 6)

Graham and Phillips, in their 1997 article that was published on the crest of the citizen-centred wave in Canada, argued for a wide definition of citizen-centred.

Government practices that encourage on an ongoing basis the exercise of full citizenship and its attendant responsibilities can be said to constitute citizen-centred government. Mutual respect and attentiveness to the respective roles of government and its citizens play an important part in bringing citizen-centred government to life. (Graham and Phillips, 1997, p. 256)

They differentiate this ‘mutual respect’ approach from the efficiency focused customer-service revolutions of the 1990’s, and argue that ‘citizen-centred’ should be about something more than just the way government services are delivered.

From a public-administration perspective, we can look for evidence of governments’ commitment to citizen-centred government in the practices used to engage citizens between elections (often called “public participation”) and in the way in which they handle transactions with members of the public (often called “customer service”). (Graham and Phillips, 1997, p. 257)

‘Citizen-Centred’ and Democratic Theory

Theoretical investigations of the basis of citizen-centred governance find their foundation in democratic theory. Elite-driven theories of democracy have been contrasted against the possibilities provided by citizen-centred approaches for encouraging more deliberative and participative forms of democratic interaction (Hartley and Skogstad, 2005). In democratic theory, elite models of top-down democracy, with a strong executive-dominated state at their centre, are seen as limited in their ability to engage with citizens, and indeed are unconvinced of the desirability of doing so (Thompson, 1970, pp. 22-26; Biegelbauer and Hansen, 2011). Deliberative forms of democracy – with their emphasis on collaboration, participation and horizontal governance structures – are seen as providing greater opportunities for participation by non-elites (see Stephan, 2000; Boyte, 2011). In many ways the distinction between different branches of democratic theory when dealing with the ‘citizen-centred’ concept sets up a false dichotomy which hinders rather than helps the utility of the citizen-centred label.
I argue here that the theoretical justifications in fact mask the inconsistencies in the rhetoric of citizen-centred policy-making. Where citizen-centred policies have been about improving service delivery, they have been much more about a customer-service approach than anything approaching some kind of model of collaborative or deliberative governance. ‘Citizen-centred’ policy documents - with specific examples to be discussed further below – make clear that their focus is much more on efficient service delivery than on the embrace of communal modes of decision-making. Anyone who has ever tried to negotiate their individual policy outcome in a government one-stop-shop knows the futility of such an endeavor. ‘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 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.

Secondly, even if ‘citizen-centred’ governance were to be given its broadest conceptual interpretation – allowing for a more participative and deliberative form of policy-making – its usefulness for negotiating the complexity faced by modern democratic governments would be limited. The rhetoric of ‘citizen-centredness’ disaggregates needs and interests down to the individual, when no government is actually able to meet needs and interests at the individual level. Nor is it necessarily desirable that they seek to do so. ‘Government’ is comprised of a unique set of institutions. It has an obligation not only to look after individual citizens, but also the communal ties that bind those individual citizens together (see Pegnato, 1997).

The genealogy of the citizen-centred approach derives from the business and management reforms of the 1980’s that encouraged corporations to put the customer front and centre in everything they do (see Pegnato, 1997; Swiss, 1992). The customer was king, and management approaches had to reflect that new reality. It seems like an easy enough process to encapsulate the same private sector ‘customer-at-the-centre’ mentality into government world-views by simply supplanting the word customer with the more significant word ‘citizen’. The inclusion of ‘citizen’ is meant to capture the unique relationship that a citizen has with a state.

But in reality, ‘citizen-centred’ does not establish the special relationship that it promises. Its management-speak, transplanted into government thinking, but without the necessary conceptual underpinnings to actually be transformational. In business, the customer is
always right. In governance, individual citizens simply cannot always be right (Pegnato, 1997). Citizen-centred governance documents allow for this by suggesting that at times the rights of individual citizens might need to be superseded by the collective rights of citizens. But the inability to effectively differentiate between the two situations is one if it’s key rhetorical weaknesses. The word policy-makers are looking for – when thinking of citizens as a collective – is surely ‘society’ itself.

In service delivery terms, citizen-centred approaches have largely mirrored the customer-centric approaches of the private sector. There has been an emphasis on service charters, administrative efficiency, and the increasing measurement of customer satisfaction (Howard, 2010). This approach is best exemplified in the recent Canadian experience. The 1999 creation of the inter-jurisdictional Citizen Centered Service Network in Canada privileged the need for bureaucracies to more clearly be able to test the quality and delivery of their services against a recognized objective standard. The resulting Citizens First Surveys, which continue to be conducted by the Citizen-Centred Governance Institute, have created sophisticated, although not uncritically received, ways of measuring whether citizens are pleased with the service they receive (Howard, 2010). Canada is far from alone in this regard. The customer service satisfaction survey is now a ubiquitous component of public sector life, ranging from surveys of the level of trust in the police force (New Zealand Police, 2012) to the Civil Service People Survey in the United Kingdom. Governments’ desire for statistical data to show that their democratic populations are pleased with them seems to be insatiable.

**Citizen-Centred Policy Frameworks**

A wide range of governments have adopted the terminology of ‘citizen-centredness’ into their policy frameworks. The frameworks discussed below provide a sample of how ‘citizen-centred’ ideas have manifested themselves in different jurisdictions.

**Wales**

The Welsh Assembly has infused its governance in the past decade with a desire to craft a more inclusive model of policy-making and service delivery than that which emerged in England following the introduction of New Public Management (NPM) approaches (Martin and Webb, 2009). The Welsh Government has committed to a set of citizen-centred governance principles that it wants to see applied throughout the Civil Service in Wales. Various Welsh departments and agencies have been reviewed to see how well their practices match these principles (see for example WAG 2009a and 2009b). Some – like the NHS in Wales – have also proceeded to map their own practices using citizen-centred ideas as their guide (www.nhswalesgovernance.com).
Welsh political rhetoric on a citizen-centred approach has emphasized the need for equality of access to government services. For example, at the 2012 Welsh Labour Party Conference, First Minister Carwyn Jones said: ‘Let me state for the avoidance of doubt, that I strongly believe in accessible, high quality, citizen-centred services for all – not choice for the few. Publicly funded, publicly provided and free at the point of delivery’ (Jones, 2012). The Welsh framework of citizen-centred governance principles sets out seven key points that should underpin the public sector’s approach. Rather than providing a guide on how to engage citizens, the seven points are more focused on efficient service delivery and incorporate few pathways towards deliberative or participative democracy. Concepts such as ‘innovative delivery’, ‘achieving value for money’, and understanding the ‘delivery chain’ are all constructed as part of delivering ‘a high quality service’ (WAG, 2010). The only aspect that departs from this list of widely accepted efficient administrative principles is the ‘Engaging others’ category, which asks Welsh Civil Servants to work ‘in constructive partnerships to deliver the best outcome for the citizen’ (WAG, 2010). Significantly, even this point does not suggest that partnerships should be with citizens themselves, and remains focused on citizen outcomes rather than citizen inputs. So whilst there has been a political emphasis in the Welsh approach on equality of access, the language of the seven point policy framework remains focused on traditional NPM concerns such as efficiency, effectiveness and value for money.

Some scholarly work is already indicating that there is an inherent tension in the Welsh approach in having a system that positions itself as ‘citizen-centred’ but delivers few opportunities for participative democratic engagement. To quote one recent study:

Our research highlights an important tension between representative and participatory democracy which adds a second layer of complexity to the assemblage of consumerism and democracy...Fundamental to these tensions are the conflicts between the wishes of a particular community and the wider interest – as diagnosed by elected representatives – at the local and national scale. (Guarneros-Meza et al, 2012, p. 15)

**Ireland**

The citizen-centred approach in Ireland was embraced by the Cowen Government through its paper *Transforming Public Services: Citizen-centred, Performance focused*. Writing in the report’s foreword, Cowen emphasized that citizen-centred policy was all about delivery – a similar ‘outcomes’ focus to that exhibited in the Welsh documents.

The focus must be on delivering for the citizen at every stage of the lifecycle, building services around the citizen and business user, changing systems and structures and utilising technology to meet this objective. (Report of the Task Force on the Public Service, 2008, p. 2)
The foreword then went on to frame this citizen-centred delivery within the classically NPM approach of performance measurement and management flexibility.

The Task Force has identified a number of steps to unleash the potential within the public system. Chief amongst these is an emphasis on setting performance-related targets in every area and empowering individuals to lead and manage – in tandem with robust measurement systems that will hold organisations and individuals to account. Secondly, it is clear that we will need a substantial freeing up of our ability to redeploy people and money to priority areas across professional, organisational, sectoral and geographical boundaries. (Report of the Task Force on the Public Service, 2008, p. 2)

The citizen-centred approach has received some support from the Irish private sector too. For example, a recent online magazine article records the views of Ernst and Young’s Head of Government Services Colm Devine on the future direction of Irish government.

A “citizen-centred strategy helps break out of the silo mentality,” he proposes. Walking from one government department to another, Devine notices that “there are various connection points where the many areas of government speak to each other. However we don’t have an integrated service focused on the citizen; it has never been designed that way.” (Eolas, 2012)

In summary, the Irish focus remains very much a service efficiency one, rather than being based on ideas involving broad citizen input into policy-making.

Canada

The Canadian experience of citizen-centred government at the national level has from the outset been focused on the same service-delivery goals that are apparent in the Welsh and Irish approaches alluded to above. The heart of the Canadian project of improving customer satisfaction with service delivery has been entrusted to the Institute for Citizen-Centred Service. The institute provides six reasons for why ‘citizen-centred’ service is the right description, rather than ‘client-centred’ or ‘customer-centred’, including:

The delivery of government services should be conceived and executed from the "outside-in" - not inside-out - with the needs, perspectives, improvement priorities, and satisfaction of Canadians foremost in mind. An "outside-in" perspective will therefore lead us to pay attention to citizens' service improvement priorities and needs, and to their levels of satisfaction with individual services. In a citizen-centred approach, citizen satisfaction becomes the criterion for success, and the basis for results measurement in public sector service delivery. (http://www.iccs.isac.org/en/about/service.htm)
This approach unambiguously posits ‘citizen satisfaction’ with government services as the foundation of a citizen-centred approach to government. The flipside of course is that - by definition – a dissatisfied citizen is a sign of failure. There is also the commensurate lack of discussion about participative or deliberative democratic processes that could be used to improve government services. It is rather a reactive, customer-service style approach to measuring satisfaction, notwithstanding the use of the ‘outside in’ terminology.

The Institute also argues that ‘citizen-centred’ is something that goes beyond private sector ‘client-centred’ approaches.

Even more important, the clients of government services are not "just" clients, as they might be in the private sector. They are not just consumers of government services. They are usually also taxpayers and citizens, that is: bearers of rights and duties in a framework of democratic community. As taxpayers and members of a civic or democratic community, citizens "own" the organizations that provide public services, and have civic interests that go well beyond their own service needs. (http://www.iccs-isac.org/en/about/service.htm)

The flaw in the argument is not that citizens don’t have a different relationship with the state than clients or customers – clearly they do – but rather that this status has no practical effect on the type of service that is offered. It is customer service that happens to be provided to citizens, which does not of itself qualify it as a higher form of ‘citizen-centred’ service.

**Australia**

Following his election as Prime Minister in late 2007, Kevin Rudd gave a speech to the entire Senior Executive Service of the Australian Public Service in April 2008. As part of that speech, Rudd indicated the need for a more citizen-centred approach.

This can help us with the challenge of making the different parts of government join up, and ensure that services are not just delivered efficiently from the Government’s perspective, but effectively from the citizen’s perspective. (Rudd, 2008)

In 2009, the advisory group examining the future needs of the Australian Public service released its discussion paper, *Reform of Australian Government Administration: Building the World’s Best Public Service*. The discussion paper was followed by the final reform blueprint - *Ahead of the Game* – in 2010. The 2009 discussion paper listed characteristics of successful public services as including a ‘citizen centric philosophy—enabling citizens access to government, improving consultation and providing a citizen centred approach to service delivery’ (Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration, 2009, p. 11). Significantly, the advisory group considered that a citizen-centred philosophy was
something that stretched beyond the outcomes-focused performance management of service delivery.

Even with the above foundation for policy excellence in place, we consider a final essential ingredient for high performance as a public service is the paramount principle of focusing on citizens in the formulation of policy advice. This can mean making sure that citizens’ or clients’ experiences of engaging with the program, service or regulation resulting from the policy intervention is at the forefront of the policy maker’s mind. This will involve, where possible, actively engaging citizens and stakeholders in the policy formulation process so that their perspectives and ideas are taken into account. In many cases, it will involve weighing up benefits for one group of citizens against costs imposed on another group. (Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration, 2009, p. 20)

Overall, what the above policy documents suggest is that the language of ‘citizen centredness’ has served as useful shorthand for seeking to characterize the changes necessary to make government agencies more accessible to their users. To the extent that citizens need to interact with government services, having the ability to do so through more unified government service windows undoubtedly provides some benefits to citizens in their capacity as ‘customers’ or ‘consumers’ of government services. This however falls short of justifying the use of the ‘citizen’ tag to suggest there is something special about a government service – something that lifts the interaction into the realm of discussions about ‘citizenship.’

**Citizen-Centred approaches and Hard Choices**

Whatever its claims to encapsulating a central role for citizens in the work of their government, citizen-centredness also lacks the conceptual power to help governments solve complex public policy problems. ‘Citizen-centredness’ is unable to conceptually enlist the help of citizens in making the hard-choices of democratic government. Conceptually, ‘citizen-centredness’ places government in the position of having to try and please everybody. When it comes to improving standards of service in hospitals or schools, this might be a desirable and easily universalized goal. But when confronted with realities where there are a divergent range of citizens’ interests, it becomes less useful. I set out below a single-case study to illustrate these problems in practice. Single case-studies methodologically are useful for providing thick descriptions of particular events that can help to suggest hypotheses to be further tested through broader studies. In this case, it is useful for illustrating the limitations of citizen-centred approaches to policy-making when faced with a complex mix of local and wider interests. The opportunities to actively and
genuinely place the citizen at the centre in a deliberative and collaborative sense when faced with such dilemmas are limited.

A ‘Hard-Choice’ Case Study: The Murray-Darling Basin

The Murray-Darling river system winds its way through four different States in mainland Australia. Running from Queensland in the north, through New South Wales and Victoria to finally end up at the sea in South Australia, the Murray-Darling Basin has for centuries acted as Australia’s agricultural foodbowl. The last two decades in particular have seen the environmental strains on the river system become all too obvious. In the face of years of drought and fears of irreversible environmental damage, successive Australian governments have been faced with the need to take policy action to rescue the river system (see Crase et al, 2011; Crase, 2011). In doing so, those governments have come face-to-face with a fundamental clash of interests between farmers who rely on the river system for their irrigation water and conservationists concerned with protecting the river system’s biodiversity values.

On 25 January 2007, at the beginning of an election year that would see him removed from office, Prime Minister John Howard gave a keynote address to the National Press Club in Canberra on the topic of national water security. Australia had been in the grip of a long and devastating drought cycle for much of the previous decade, which had seen water levels in the Murray-Darling drop alarmingly. A blame game culture was seen to persist between the four sub-national governments involved as to who was most responsible for the decline of the river system and what action was necessary to rectify it. Howard used the reality of the drought to frame the need for extensive governance reform in how the river system was run. He announced a 10 point action plan, and placed at its centre the creation of a new approach to running the river system, coupled with the demand that each State refer its powers over the rivers to the national government to overcome the problems of parochial interest.

In the final analysis, however, the core problem is that the different states have competing interests. The South Australians resent, as they have for more than 150 years, the level of diversions by Victoria and New South Wales. The Queenslanders feel they were late to the party in developing irrigated agriculture and want to catch up. The New South Welshmen downstream complain that their overland flows have been diverted to cotton farms. As long as integrated water systems are being managed piecemeal by governments with competing interests, the execution of even the best national agreements will remain challenging and contentious. (Howard, 2007)
The Government subsequently established the new national Murray Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) under the *Water Act 2007*.

The MDBA’s core task was to produce a plan that could find a way to effectively address the complex problems of the Murray-Darling. It released an initial report – styled as an initial ‘guide’ to the eventual Murray-Darling Basin Plan – in October 2010 (MDBA, 2010). The guide indicated that there would be significant reductions in water available to irrigators in order to restore the water flows in the system. The ‘guide’ was immediately attacked by farmers’ groups concerned that the proposed plans would undercut the ability of local farming communities to survive. Danny O’Brien from the National Irrigator’s Council expressed disgust, and was quoted in news reports as saying: ‘Fair dinkum, if a high school kid put this document up for a school report, they’d get a D-minus…After 18 months and at least three delays, we are totally perplexed as to why this paper looks like something written the night before school’ (Townsville Bulletin, 2010).

In tandem with the release of the guide, the staff of the MDBA toured regional towns as part of the consultation process. The turnout of concerned citizens was very high, with the result that some were locked out of consultation meetings. Copies of the report were burnt in protest in towns such as Deniliquin in Victoria and Griffith in New South Wales. At the latter meeting, a horse’s head was hurled at staff members by angry protestors (Herbert, 2011). Following a sustained period of public anger by local communities living along the river system, the Australian Minister for the Environment, Tony Burke, sought legal advice on what the MDBA should take into account in preparing its final blueprint. The legal advice suggested that the MDBA could and should take economic and social factors into account when assessing the impact of changes to water allocations, rather than focusing only on what was necessary environmentally.

The MDBA has been reported as saying that the Act requires a focus on environmental issues first, with limited attention to social and economic factors. For this reason I sought legal advice from the Australian Government Solicitor to determine whether the interpretations referred to publicly by the MDBA matched the requirements of the Act….It is clear from this advice that environmental, economic and social considerations are central to the Water Act and that the Basin Plan can appropriately take these into account. (Burke, 2010, pp. 3-4)

The chair of the MDBA, Mike Taylor, resigned in the face of this ministerial interpretation of the MDBA’s role, and a new round of consultation with local communities was undertaken by the new chair Craig Knowles. Seen as more open to consultation with farmers, the new management of the MDBA were able to move the process along to the point where the final plan was signed off by Minister Burke in November 2012. According to press reports, irrigator groups were happy that some concessions to their concerns had been made, but argued that the plan remained conceptually flawed in wasting water by allowing it to simply
flow out to sea (Vidot, 2012). Conservationists condemned the plan as not having done nearly enough to protect the environmental health of the river (Vidot, 2012).

The Murray-Darling situation is complex public policy issue by any measure. Yet, if concepts like ‘citizen-centred’ governance are 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. Insofar as that can be interpreted as a need to focus on meeting the needs of individual citizens, the concept provides little guidance in the face of hard choices like those faced in the Murray-Darling Basin.

If one looks at the problem from the perspective of ‘citizens’, one sees a multiplicity of views. To the farmers enraged by the perceived loss of their livelihoods and the weakening of their communities, they see the government as selling out their interests. If government puts those citizens at the centre of the policy process they would produce an outcome in their own economic self-interest that is unlikely to protect the environmental needs of the river system. To conservation groups, the inability of the Murray Darling Basin Authority to guarantee many more thousands of mega-litres of improved flows is an abandonment of the system’s environmental needs. They argue that governments are selling out to appease the narrow localised interests of irrigators. If government puts these citizens at the centre of its thinking, it faces tremendous political backlash from local communities willing to go to the wall in what is perceived as a battle for their own survival. Citizen-centred governance therefore provides no framework upon which governments can build a defensible rhetorical formulation for what they are doing in such hard cases. Where citizens have such divergent interests, they self-evidently cannot be usefully placed at the centre of the policy process.

Critics could rightly say that the problems with the Murray Darling Basin are as much about failures in intergovernmental relations in a federal system like Australia as they are about the difficulties of finding a balanced policy approach. Nevertheless, the same difficulties can be found wherever policy-makers come up against policy problems that necessitate a hard choice in the wider interest that will lead to significant local anger. Similar disputes can be seen in discussions over the expansion of London’s Heathrow, or the selection of the route for the new high-speed train from London to the north of England. Such policy problems exist in every democratic jurisdiction in which governments need to avoid voter anger in order to look after their own prospects for re-election. The language of citizen-centred governance cannot conceptually help democratic governments in these situations, and may in fact undermine the trust of citizens. On the one-hand governments are saying that citizens are at the centre of policy-making, but on the other hand they then go ahead and impose decisions on citizens when hard choices have to be made. Citizen-centred perspectives can neither explain nor avoid the necessity of making a hard choice.
Towards ‘Society-Centred’ Governance?

As an approach to more efficient service delivery ‘citizen-centred’ policies perhaps make sense, but are in fact a misnomer because they have little to do with citizenship and everything to do with customer-relations. As an approach to policy-making, ‘citizen-centred’ simply can’t deliver on its conceptual promise. On the one hand, deliberative or participative approaches are notably lacking from overarching policy rhetoric in ‘citizen-centred’ policy frameworks. On the other hand, even if they were spelt out, they would arguably provide governments with little comfort when faced with a hard policy choice. As a philosophy, ‘citizen-centred’ has become a rhetorical container for whatever governments wish to put in it. Conceptually, it disaggregates interests down to a citizen level where it does not help to explain or justify society-wide decision-making. At best it promises something that it cannot deliver and at worst it de-legitimizes governments’ need to make hard choices in the wider national interest.

Policy-makers understandably never tire of the search to somehow make public policy less contentious in a democracy. ‘Evidence-based policy’ had promised to strip away the emotion and allow decisions to be made based on science rather than politics. As a multitude of complex policy problems have shown – like climate change for example – keeping the politics from ‘contaminating’ the ‘evidence’ is not that easy. ‘Citizen-centred’ governance in theory promises to strip the politics away by giving citizens a greater sense of ownership in their own governance, making them collaborators in government. Undoubtedly this can work for some less contentious, broadly-based policy areas in which wide consultation can try and produce some level of community consensus. When it comes to hard choices, the cozy embrace of consensus is more difficult to find. As the fierce popular reaction to austerity measures in Europe demonstrate, citizens are not easily convinced that they are at the ‘centre’ of their government’s policy-making when faced with hard choices.

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 (see Rhodes 1997 and 2007). A new ‘society-centred’ governance would acknowledge this complexity rather than trying to pretend it can be swept away. ‘Society-centred’ governance allows 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 Minister Burke did in arriving at the final plan for the Murray-Darling Basin. Once all the competing interests had been considered and weighed up, a decision in the wider societal interest had to be made.

This is not to say that elite-driven democratic models of decision-making are the only option for dealing with hard policy choices in the twenty first century. Consultation, negotiation and compromise with local communities and interest groups remain central to policy-making. But the final imperative is always to arrive at a decision, and society-centred
governance legitimizes the role of governments in making that final judgement in the wider interest. And the ultimate control mechanism that will tell governments whether they have made the right call or not already exists through national elections. The system of representative parliamentary democracy has evolved precisely because it is the least worst system democrats have so far found to allow hard choices to be made, whilst making sure governments are democratically accountable for them.

By promising ‘citizen-centred’ approaches to governance, governments are rhetorically depriving themselves of the space to make the hard choices that lie at the heart of democratic governance. Citizen-centred governance by definition suggests to the voting public that each of them has the right to expect that government will do what they want them to do. If the citizen is at the centre, then how dare governments seek to override their wishes in the national interest? Rhetorical contradictions of this kind can only serve to further ingrain and potentially even institutionalize distrust in politicians, and dissatisfaction with the democratic processes of government.

‘Society-centred’ governance draws a wider view that the best way to ensure a high quality of service and living for all is to apply a broader public lens to stop the magnification of localized concerns into national issues. The state is by definition the only stakeholder whose understanding and resources are large enough to create a ‘society-centred’ framework. And the state is the only stakeholder with the democratic legitimacy in a representative parliamentary democracy that can claim to have the right to speak for the good of the whole. ‘Society-centred’ governance understands the realities of modern network governance – of the ways and means through which policy is made and implemented in modern democracies – and concludes that government remains the stakeholder most capable of guiding and shaping those processes.
REFERENCES


