

October 2012

# Government designed for new times: An interview with Matthew Taylor

Matthew Taylor, a top political adviser to former UK prime minister Tony Blair, explores “social productivity”: the ability of citizens to develop innovative services together with government.

## **What is social productivity?**

The idea of social productivity is that one of the criteria—possibly the key criteria that we should apply to the effectiveness of public services—is the degree to which they enable people to meet their own needs, individually and collectively. So the starting point for this idea is that there is a gap, and a growing gap, between the kinds of aspirations that people have for the society they want to live in and the trajectory which current behavior and current thinking places us upon.

And so the notion of social productivity is it helps us to close that gap by encouraging people to do the things they need to do to meet their individual and social aspirations, and not to wait, as it were, for the state or even the market to meet those needs. Because it's very clear that there will be many needs that will neither be met by the state nor the market and that it's going to require greater citizen initiative to meet those needs.

I think there are two different arguments for a more engaged model of public-service delivery, in which citizens are much more partners in achieving shared outcomes. The first is a pragmatic argument, which is to say we simply are not going to be able to meet people's needs unless people make a greater contribution—unless people move from a position of dependency to a position of coproduction, as it were.

The other argument, actually, is that this is good citizenship—that it isn't good to live a life in which, as it were, services are delivered to you as a passive consumer. That people get a lot more out of public services, a lot more out of life, actually, if they feel that they have a greater degree of autonomy and are taking more responsibility in shaping the services that they receive and the lives that they lead.

There have been many people arguing for a more coproductive way of thinking about public services—engaging the public in designing and delivering those services—for some time. And there have been many innovations. It's not something that I'm calling for; it's something that I think is happening. The question is how quickly does it happen?

### **Citizens in action**

Often, when I do speeches around the notion of social productivity and citizen engagement, I start with a question. The question I ask is, which is the public service in the UK which has probably gone on the most profound journey from being one that is simply delivered by the state to passive citizens to one which is coproduced? And I very rarely find anybody who can give me the answer.

Actually, the answer is refuse collection, where ten years ago, in most places, people just put all their rubbish into a bag and stuck their bag in the dustbin, and the council took the rubbish away. Now, in more and more households, we sort paper and glass, and we might have a compost heap in the garden. Probably, now people spend more time managing their rubbish than the council spends managing their rubbish. And as a consequence of that, we've seen a steady, impressive rise in recycling rates in the UK. We're not as good as some countries, but those rates have risen.

They've risen as a consequence of a collaboration between a council committed to recycling and households taking on that responsibility, as well. Moving to health, a good example there is the whole area of an expert patient program, based upon the idea that patients with long-term, chronic conditions—and, of course, this is the big driver of rising health costs—are the people with the greatest insights into how services could be shaped in order to provide maximum independence.

And also, crucially, these people, the patients, have the power to influence other patients' behavior in a way which possibly the state—because it has more difficult relationships, often, with people—didn't. I think one of the really interesting questions here is how you persuade groups that represent citizens, whether they're patients or parents or whoever, to move from a traditional mode, which is demanding resources from the state, instead to move into a mode of working with their own constituents to say, "How can we actually collaboratively develop services which are affordable but better in meeting our fundamental desire?"—which, in most cases, is a desire for greater autonomy.

### **Tapping "hidden wealth"**

I think the big question that has not yet been answered—and it's a huge question—is whether or not interventions which engage citizens through codesign, coproduction, [or] a social-productivity model deliver better outcomes, for less money or for budgets which are frozen.

In a way, we simply have no choice but to go down the route of better releasing what sometimes is called the "hidden wealth" that lies in communities—the desire in all of us to have a greater degree of autonomy and our desire to be good citizens and to support our neighbors and our families. If we don't tap into that, if the state doesn't draw on that hidden wealth, well, we're simply going to see a fraying of the fabric of public provision, which will have bad consequences not only, I think, for society but also, ultimately, politically, because it will undermine the kind of consensus that exists in market democracies around the deal in those societies, which is that they are free economies but they're also economies which look after the disadvantaged and provide a framework of services.

So I think the stakes are incredibly high. And the question is not *will* we develop new ways to engage citizens and to help them to share the burden of meeting shared objectives; the question is, simply, how will we do that? Will we do it effectively, and *how* quickly will we do it? And will we do it in time for a new, actually more effective, more progressive public sector to emerge before the cuts lead to a kind of fragmenting? □

**Matthew Taylor** is chief executive of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA), a London-based nonprofit organization dedicated to finding innovative solutions to social challenges. Prior to this appointment, he was chief adviser on political strategy to the prime minister. This interview was conducted by McKinsey & Company.