

# Production values

## Building shared autonomy

**John Craig**

*The best solution is to do what the police say they need in order to protect the country from terrorism.*

Tony Blair, 3 Nov 2005<sup>1</sup>

*Public service reforms must be driven by the wishes of the users not the producers.*

Tony Blair, 29 Nov 2005<sup>2</sup>

Professionals have never been more important nor under more pressure. Professionals ‘profess’ – promise – to deliver work of high standards and their promises keep us healthy and safe every day. But the promise of professionalism is struggling for credibility. As an institution, it faces a problem of legitimacy affecting not only doctors and lawyers but the success of governments and the freedom of their citizens. To solve this problem, we need to replace a schizophrenic view of professionals with a compelling account of their place in the public realm.

Professionalism is the form of work identity through which people win security and status in their work. At the same time, professionalism structures the exercise of power in everyday life. Professionalism sees parents leave their children with perfect strangers. We let professionals drug us. We give them licence to split up families and we send people to prison on their word. In the

constitution of everyday life, therefore, distinctions between professionals and amateurs are more significant than those between executive and legislature or church and state.

In fact, we depend on professionalism more than ever. The professional mediation of competing demands increasingly trumps the political process. As fields from medicine to the arts become more specialised and separate, so politicians can seem to lack the deep knowledge and the legitimacy that judgement calls require. As a result, the burden of conflict resolution is shifting from political decisions to professional norms. Professionals play a greater role than ever in shaping our public realm and our daily lives.

More than the cleanliness of a hospital or the quality of resources in a school, it is the prompt, dependable work of professionals that is the key to our satisfaction with public services.<sup>3</sup> In the NHS, patients value the dignity and respect with which they are treated more than cleanliness, privacy or even the control of pain.<sup>4</sup> As a result, developing a compelling account of professionalism is crucially important both to government popularity and to the legitimacy of public authority.

Today, there is a danger that professionalism might become a victim of its own success, by outgrowing its own legitimacy. It is increasingly difficult for it to satisfy *either* individuals *or* society at large. In a society determined to make work pay, more individuals have strong career aspirations than ever before.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, as professionals grow in political significance, so there is greater scrutiny on their claims to status and expertise. Why are doctors able to deny people the right to die? What gives judges the right to interpret human rights? While professionalism has become *the* form of public mediation, the tensions this creates mean its own legitimacy is under threat.

The biggest barrier to renewing this professional legitimacy is the schizophrenia with which it is viewed. As professionals, people want autonomy and status but as consumers they expect slavish public servants, available 24/7. Equally, government is undecided whether to satisfy citizens as consumers or to work with them to *co-produce*

services such as health and education. It is caught, as analysis of government rhetoric shows, between presenting them as saints or sinners – neutral experts or producer interests.

New professional legitimacy and culture will not be generated by setting professionals free to do as they please or by enslaving them to government targets and consumer demand. It cannot be designed into services by government blueprint. The ‘choice agenda’ does not create the kinds of high-quality, challenging conversations from which new shared protocols can emerge. The modest form of empowerment that choice represents continues to tie both citizens and professionals too closely to the script.<sup>6</sup>

New rationales for professional action will grow from practical collaboration between professionals and members of the public themselves. Today, this collaboration is all but absent from collective decision-making and it is time for government to match the rhetoric of partnership with concrete policy action. By giving professionals and citizens shared interests in working together to set local priorities, build shared optimism or tackle system failures, government can renew its agenda for public service reform from where it matters most, the everyday encounters between professionals and those they serve. It is this that can open up the black box of professional work and deliberation. In the process, it can achieve three vital political objectives: rebuilding government’s relationship with the professions, tackling questions of work–life balance and investing in the legitimacy of public authority.

### **Understanding the professionals’ game**

The first task is to clarify our Janus-like approach to professionals. Today, government is torn between presenting professionals as neutral experts or producer interests. However, neither the selfless nor the selfish portraits of professionals can provide credible clues about how to respond to them in practice.

We should understand professionals not as saints or sinners but as they understand themselves – through their professions. Professional identity is constructed socially, through interactions with policy-

makers, the public and other staff. It is through this professional identity – the shared habits and ideals of doctors, lawyers and teachers – and the interactions that build them that we should understand professionals.

Prevailing policy fails to do this because it conceptualises professionalism as an asset to be sold. We should instead understand professionalism like we do a sport or game – as something that possesses those who play it. In cricket, for example, players anticipate the ball and move towards it not because they decide to but simply because that is the game. Similarly, as staff develop ‘a feel for the game’, so their professionalism structures what counts as important and significant<sup>7</sup> – it becomes an end in itself.<sup>8</sup>

As an example, consider what the metaphor of a game suggests about attitudes to change. Imagine suggesting to a group of cricketers that one might play instead with a tennis ball.<sup>9</sup> They would surely balk at the idea, but not by arguing from first principles. ‘It’s just not cricket,’ they would say. Similarly, communicating the idea that a profession might be *improved* is a slow and difficult process.

Equally, while government has long placed its faith in ‘pressure and support’ and ‘earned autonomy’, too often this comes across to professionals like trying to bribe a sportsman to throw a match. Organisations need to be able to address staff in the language of their own profession and to provide justifications that they will understand and value.<sup>10</sup> Engaging in terms of professionals’ ‘best interests’ is no substitute for engaging with their profession – policy can nevertheless sound like ‘an offer they can’t refuse’.

Employers of all kinds need to adapt to a world in which the challenge is not to build professional loyalty but to live with its excess. Today, professionals are more absorbed in the game of their work than ever before. Most importantly, as we shall see, they need to shape opportunities for professionals to derive satisfaction and validation by working with the citizens they serve. This is the way to foster a sense of professional security that can survive and flourish in times of change.

## **Meeting public challenges**

Alongside a new understanding of professionals, government needs a clear picture of the demands the public are making of professionalism. Where once professional authority seemed set in stone, today it has to be earned and this too must inform service design.

With the emergence of new technologies and the decline of deference, people have become more questioning of professionals than ever before. As individuals, we are more likely to check out the advice of a doctor online. As a society, we are more likely to share our intelligence about professional practice with both communities of interest and the national media.

This is happening for a range of reasons. First, consumer experiences in the private sector teach them to expect to access services when, how and where they choose. The imperative of personalisation – organising services around those they serve – increasingly impinges on all professionals. They must respond to clients well used to the idea that nothing is too much trouble. Second, as new divisions of labour continue to accompany economic growth, a growing proportion of work is paid work. As a result, some clients are becoming more passive recipients of the services they receive. Last, the internet revolution has begun to reverse the information asymmetries that used to be an inevitable feature of the relationship between professionals and clients. Alongside pressure from individual professionals, therefore, professionalism is under heavy pressure from society at large.

## **Helping professionals and citizens to work better together**

The crucial mistake of government policy is to seek to meet the demands of professionals or of the public in isolation. Policy-makers have a sense that they must either cast their lot in with professionals or in with the public, so that they oscillate between the mantras of ‘trust people’ and ‘trust the professionals’. However, the real challenge is to find design principles for services that bring professionals and

citizens together to resolve the tensions between them. New visions of professionalism will emerge not from legislation alone but from real work between professionals and those they serve. While every politician fears being a ‘statist’ or a ‘producerist’, we nevertheless need policies that address the needs of professionals *as well as* consumers.

Public services need to give professionals and clients a common interest in working together. Too often, we conceptualise public services as a boxing ring, and seek to support people by putting ‘choice advisers’ in their corner, before sending them into battle with professionals.<sup>11</sup> It is hardly surprising that this does not generate new terms on which their relationship can flourish. The location of public encounters with professionals should feel less like being in a boxing ring and more like getting stuck in a lift – where each side has to work to question their assumptions and make conversation.

Examples of these locations serve not as a blueprint for a new professionalism but as snapshots of the kinds of places from which it might emerge. In schooling, participatory budgeting gives teachers and parents greater freedom to pursue their aims, but only if they work together to agree priorities.<sup>12</sup> In the NHS, where investments can be made in sources of good health – from community gyms to walking clubs – doctors and patients can work together to improve health. In local authorities, where commissioning strategies can switch resources into prevention, all kinds of professionals and publics can unlock shared interests in self-help. Lastly, across the public realm, if we could assess the levels of hope and collective efficacy on a given issue, professionals could focus on public relationships as themselves vital resources in getting the job done.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, designing for a new professionalism would focus attention on a clear set of questions. How can social enterprises provide blank sheets of paper on which professionals and publics might re-cast their relationships to common benefit? How can new forms of local democracy compel professionals and communities to work better together? Lastly, how can a focus on prevention and self-help enable the autonomy of professionals and of those they serve to grow together?

As we at Demos look to find answers to these questions and to assemble this set of design principles, the essays in this collection provide an invaluable set of starting points. In particular, they show that the everyday encounters between professionals and citizens must help them to build relationships capable of responding to four challenges:

- the information revolution
- new personal demands
- the dilemma of corporate professionalism
- demands for cross-functionality.

### **The information revolution**

The information revolution is changing the terms of relationships between professionals and their clients.<sup>14</sup> As new opportunities allow people to become their own journalists, physicians and travel agents, so their attitudes to professionals are changing.

The paradigmatic example of this cultural motif seems to be the television programme *Faking It*, in which in three weeks a seamstress learns to pass herself off as a video director, a classical cellist as a DJ. Today, all kinds of professional authority are up for grabs. In medicine, for example, the tyranny of Google ranking means that official NHS advice must vie with that of Pampers and Mothercare for the attention of parents.

Professionals are responding to this trend in two key ways. First, they are opening up access to their ranks. For example, Teach First works as a kind of *Faking It* for education, with able graduates given ten weeks to learn the ropes before being placed in some of the most challenging classrooms in London. Equally, as our work with Careers Scotland shows, organisations are increasingly determined to grow leaders from within their own ranks. In the words of one proud Careers Scotland employee: ‘In terms of a professional, you tend to think of someone with a university degree, but I feel like I am a professional too. I’ve become a professional.’ Across our public services, people who used to be known as para-professionals – from

community safety officers to nurses to classroom assistants – are relishing new opportunities to join the professional ranks. How professions and professional associations respond to this new diversity is a key question for the future.

Second, a focus on enabling self-help is beginning to supersede the idea that professionals have all the answers. This is a point that Richard Reeves and John Knell and Charles Leadbeater make very powerfully in their essays. As Leadbeater argues: ‘Motivation is the new medicine.’ Enabling self-help implies not simply a shift in priorities but the development of a new professional vocabulary and skill set. Professionals have to be able to explain issues to their clients in terms that they understand and which invite questions and participation. They have also to learn to inspire clients to help themselves.

In his essay, Jay Rosen shows that journalism is firmly ahead of this curve as a crisis in journalism shifts journalists’ perceptions of their role. Where once journalists themselves were defenders of the public interest, today journalists increasingly seek to help the public to defend itself. As other essays in this collection show, where journalism is leading, many other professions are following. From career planning to the arts, a more equal relationship with the public is increasingly both a fact of life and a defining professional value.

### **New personal demands**

Zygmunt Bauman argued that ‘modern organisation is a contraption designed to make human actions immune from what the actors believe and feel privately’.<sup>15</sup> However, today our experiences of work have come full circle, with professional and personal values more closely connected than ever before. While for some this is a source of satisfaction, for others it can create stress and exhaustion. In order to support professional work, we need to help people to build new relationships between their personal and professional lives.

The fusion of personal and professional roles has been driven by demands from both employers and professionals. As systems of services have grown in complexity in recent years, employers have

sought to shift from mixes of rules-based and professional regulation to looser, values-led coordination. Today, fewer professionals have formal autonomy and few have been able to reserve the exclusive right of self-regulation. However, as Laura Empson points out in her essay, organisations have nevertheless sought to sustain a professional culture, focusing on informal professional ethics and norms.

At the same time, professionals themselves also seem to have worked with the grain of this shift. As work becomes more central to our ambitions, people are identifying increasingly closely with their professional roles. Equally, in the absence of formal control, a focus on informal values helps professionals to retain influence over how work is done, if not over what is done. In recent years, therefore, the idea that the personal is professional has been pushed by both staff and employers.

However, the result is that professional work involves more emotional labour than ever before – organisational coordination depends on winning hearts as well as minds. For example, as our research on teaching describes,<sup>16</sup> over any two-year period, 40 per cent of teachers will experience ‘major stress’<sup>17</sup> and in any given year 40 per cent of headteachers visit their doctor as a result of stress.<sup>18</sup> When professionals identify so intimately with their work, it can be almost impossible ‘switch off’ when it is time to go home. Work-related stress is growing across many professions and while we may work fewer hours, this does not mean that we are less exhausted.<sup>19</sup> From the former leader of a teachers’ union who recently broke down in tears on stage<sup>20</sup> to the teacher who remortgaged her house to keep open a unit at her school,<sup>21</sup> professional work tugs at the heart strings more than ever. As professionals begin to develop responses, they are shaping new opportunities for reflection and new rituals through which to share their emotional burden. However, as changing demographics begin to make recruitment and retention a key professional problem, policy-makers and employers will have to face this challenge too. Professionalism must satisfy consumer demand but we also need a sustainable professionalism, and the search for it is beginning to intensify.

### **The dilemma of corporate professionalism**

The rise of the knowledge economy is creating new common interests for professional staff and their employers. However, as these organisations encroach on territory from which they were once excluded they are generating both optimism and anxiety. In response, employers, professionals and citizens will have to re-cast their relationships.

In his essay, Tom Wilson describes the way in which small, professional unions are managing to buck the prevailing trend and secure rapid growth. As professional development becomes the key to the fortunes of both individual staff and to whole companies, he argues that unions may be finding a new purpose. Far from being a check on growth in the short term, unions may be instrumental in enabling long-term investment. Unions may become valuable to their members not for the rewards they secure today but for the opportunities they create for tomorrow. This suggests that trade unions and professional associations may find new ways to connect their members' interests with the public interest.

However, for Kipping, Kirkpatrick and Muzio, the idea that professionals might work in partnership with their employers forgets the huge power of multinational corporations. They argue that in the knowledge economy some firms increasingly win staff loyalty and commitment by 'mimicking' professional structures and practices. For them, while such partnerships create the experience of professionalism, they rob staff of any real power.

This dilemma of corporate professionalism is an extremely important one. For example, it is picked up in detail in our work on the futures of the career planning profession. As Careers Scotland looks to make the most of professional self-regulation in driving up the standards of its service, it is playing more of an active professional role. For its staff, the organisation is increasingly the site of professional dialogue. However, to legitimate this shift, it is also seeking to give professionals greater control of the development of best practice and organisational policy. This kind of negotiation

between professions and organisations will be of vital importance across many sectors in coming years. How far can trade unions and employers become sites of professional dialogue? And just when do staff feel that they have become professionals only in name?

### **Demands for cross-functionality**

Lastly, a whole range of professions are experiencing fundamental shifts in their centres of gravity. Numerous professions are increasingly defined as much by their locality and their client groups as by their expertise. While this is challenging terrain for professionals, it is opening up vital dialogue with those they serve.

As Estelle Morris and Keith Brumfitt make clear in their essay, the personalisation agenda depends on professional reform. Equally, across children's services, local responsibilities for workforce strategy and approaches to collaboration are enabling considerable national variation. As this grows the need for deep local reflection about what it means to be a teacher or social worker *in* Birmingham or *in* Knowsley, so we may be witnessing the birth of local professionalism. Just as professional dialogue is spreading into organisations, so it is advancing into local politics and policy-making. Michael Bichard addresses this directly in his essay, contrasting the way professionals approach this dialogue in local and national government. How far can professions bear local diversity? What new approaches to organisation might this diversity generate?

### **Growing professional autonomy**

As these challenges show, professionalism must contend with new sources of equality, personal stress, dilemmas of corporatism and pressures for diversity. However, professionals have long shown their ability to adapt, most often to avoid changes enforced from beyond their ranks. The challenge now is to unlock that adaptive capacity for the common good and we can do this by changing the circumstances under which they encounter the public.

For too long, government has felt that in seeking to deliver on its own promises, it must choose between casting its lot in with

professionals *or* citizens. This is a mistake that frustrates government's own ambitions and which systematically shuts down opportunities to re-cast professional relationships. These essays show the potential of finding ways to encourage people to work together to help professional and citizen autonomy to grow together. They suggest that a new professionalism will emerge not from the words of policy-makers or researchers, but from collaborative work between professionals and those they serve.

While finding a consistent and compelling account of the role of professionals is increasingly vital to public service reform, it may also be rising up the party political agenda. Recent reports have suggested a Conservative opposition looking to 'woo public sector professionals'.<sup>22</sup> Public sector professionals are no more loyal to the Labour Party than the population as a whole<sup>23</sup> and are also an important source of electoral credibility and governmental success. The race to establish a compelling political narrative about professionals may be beginning in earnest.

To win that race, policy-makers need to shape everyday encounters between professionals and citizens that enable them to grow their autonomy together. In the process, they can help people to develop new relationships with work, new approaches to the exercise of authority in everyday life and new energy in reforming public services. They must engage in a 'double devolution' that empowers citizens *and* professionals.<sup>24</sup>

## Notes

- 1 T Blair, speaking in the House of Commons, 3 Nov 2005.
- 2 T Blair, in a speech to the Confederation of British Industry, 29 Nov 2005.
- 3 MORI, *Public Service Reform: Measuring & understanding customer satisfaction* (London: MORI, 2002), see [www.mori.com/publications/rd/opsr.pdf](http://www.mori.com/publications/rd/opsr.pdf) (accessed 25 May 2006).
- 4 MORI, *Frontiers of Performance in the NHS* (London: MORI, 2004), see [www.mori.com/publications/bp/frontiers2.shtml](http://www.mori.com/publications/bp/frontiers2.shtml) (accessed 25 May 2006).
- 5 M Rose, 'Career outlook and reasons for having paid work, 1985–2001', 2003, see [www.bath.ac.uk/~hssmjr/trajex/download/execrep.doc](http://www.bath.ac.uk/~hssmjr/trajex/download/execrep.doc) (accessed 25 May 2006).

- 6 C Leadbeater, *Personalisation through Participation: A new script for public services* (London: Demos, 2004).
- 7 P Bourdieu, *Practical Reason* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- 8 In particular, professionalism is what Carse calls an 'infinite game', in which the point is not to win but to keep on playing. JP Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games: A vision of life as play and possibility* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987).
- 9 This example is based on that of the 'fourth strike' in baseball, in S Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- 10 Thanks to Dr Alan Finlayson for help in clarifying this point.
- 11 Department for Education and Skills, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*, 2005, see [www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/schoolswhitepaper/](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/schoolswhitepaper/) (accessed 25 May 2006).
- 12 J Craig, *Schools Out: Can teachers, social workers and health staff learn to live together?* (London: The Hay Group, 2004).
- 13 P Skidmore and J Craig, *Start with People: How community organisations put citizens in the driving seat* (London: Demos, 2005).
- 14 C Leadbeater and P Miller, *The Pro-Am Revolution: How enthusiasts are changing our economy and society* (London: Demos, 2004).
- 15 Z Bauman, *Alone Again: Ethics after certainty* (London: Demos, 1994).
- 16 Based on research with the General Teaching Council of England.
- 17 Research by Teacherline, quoted in C Bunting, 'Stress on the emotional landscape', *Times Educational Supplement*, 10 Nov 2000, see [www.tes.co.uk/section/story/?section=Archive&sub\\_section=Briefing&story\\_id=340592&Type=0](http://www.tes.co.uk/section/story/?section=Archive&sub_section=Briefing&story_id=340592&Type=0) (accessed 22 May 2006).
- 18 Research by the National Association of Headteachers, quoted in M Jarvis, 'Teacher stress: a critical review of recent findings and suggestions for future research directions', *Stress News* 14, no 1 (Jan 2002).
- 19 M Bunting, *Willing Slaves: How the overwork culture is ruling our lives* (London: Harper Collins, 2004).
- 20 See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4916004.stm> (accessed 25 May 2006).
- 21 Thanks to Emma Westcott of the General Teaching Council for this example. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/hampshire/4920430.stm> (accessed 25 May 2006).
- 22 P Wintour, 'Tories plan to woo public sector professionals with more freedom', *Guardian*, 12 May 2006, see [www.guardian.co.uk/guardianpolitics/story/0,,1773081,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/guardianpolitics/story/0,,1773081,00.html) (accessed 25 May 2006).
- 23 MORI, *Disaffected Labour* (London: MORI, 2005), see [www.mori.com/publications/sa/disaffected-labour.shtml](http://www.mori.com/publications/sa/disaffected-labour.shtml) (accessed 25 May 2006).
- 24 Speech by D Miliband to the National Council of Voluntary Organisations, 21 Feb 2006, see [www.odpm.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1163772](http://www.odpm.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1163772) (accessed 25 May 2006).