

PARTNERSHIP: NO ONE SAID IT WOULD BE EASY Ashridge Public Leadership Centre

Walter Menzies, Chief Executive, Mersey Basin Campaign

“Partnership” has entered the Local Government Association (LGA) magisterial list of “Top 100 banned words” alongside atrocities such as “beaconicity” and “peer challenge”. It has been described as an aerosol word – sprayed on everything, means nothing”. The Dictionary of Urbanism quotes “partnership: a loose connection of people and organisations with conflicting interests held together by the prospect of securing government money”. It is easy to point the finger at vivid examples of that. One of my own early partnership baptisms was establishing a Groundwork Trust with one of our more Stalinist local authorities. “Just remember one thing” a world-weary but prescient senior officer lectured me “...we’re totally signed up to this partnership...so long as you stick to doing what we want you to do”.

How do we make better places? “Partnership” is the answer, we are often told. But what are partnerships and how can they be made to work? Are there special ingredients in their leadership and management? Or is public sector “best practice” adequate? How do we improve partnership design, development and leadership?

Is the LGA’s reductive definition of partnership as “working together” adequate? No. Our economy, society and environment are dysfunctional. The sky is dark with black swans coming home to roost. Apocalyptic visions encircle. Climate change is inevitable. Our economic plight has been summed up as “the greatest episode of value destruction the world has seen outside two world wars”. Inequalities shame our country. And in the UK public sector, nerves are frayed at the coming prospect of public expenditure cuts. A wise, retired mandarin recently said to me in her measured way: “Perhaps the best way to sum up the inevitable is – slash and burn”.

This toxic state of affairs confirms that there is no workable alternative to the organising principle of sustainable development. Sustainable development demands the destruction of unnecessary sectoral and institutional barriers. New links and alliances must be forged and alternative solutions found. Business as usual is not a viable option. Partnerships are useful. Partnership working can contribute to the future of the planet and society. More must be achieved with less. Rocky Mountain Institute’s Amory Lovins: “Over the next decade our species takes its university finals. Get revising.” And that was ten years ago.

Partnerships are not the answer to everything. But there is compelling evidence from many years of attempts at partnership working that the whole can be made to add up to very much than the sum of the parts. The case of the cross-sectoral Mersey Basin Campaign is one of many examples.

In the new world of instantaneous, complex communications ecosystems, old models of information and intelligence transmission are redundant. Video killed the radio star. The interactivity of Web 2.0 is wiping out public sector monologues. Wikipedia gets more traffic than the BBC. Charles Leadbetter: “Web 2.0 brings back to life more communal and collaborative ways of working which were sidelined by industrial organisation in the twentieth century”. This revolution challenges those of us committed to the partnership approach with thrilling possibilities for innovation and creativity. Sammy, the Mersey Basin Campaign’s celebrity salmon, has blogged across World.

To appreciate the present state of partnership practice in the UK public sector, it is helpful to remind ourselves of its origins. Ecology and biology illuminate species interdependence and symbiosis. Systems thinking has a long history. A fast rewind to the early eighties is more directly relevant to public sector leaders: a number of drivers came together to fire the starting pistol on the regeneration partnerships bandwagon. Top-down Thatcherite rhetoric waxed lyrical about rolling back the boundaries of the state and privatisation of public assets. Bottom-up community action and partnerships were being noticed and analysed by David Wilcox and others in the media. The worst rioting in mainland Britain for a century and the parachuting of Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Heseltine, into Liverpool in the

wake of the Toxteth riots was significant. Heseltine vividly recounted his experiences at the Mersey Basin Campaign's final conference in 2009 under the heading "It took a riot".

Heseltine transformed Groundwork from a local-government led urban fringe experiment into the first government-backed regeneration partnership. Its first strap line was "partnerships for action". He initiated the Mersey Basin Campaign as an unprecedented 25-year programme. The common factor in these and other emerging initiatives was innovation, action and partnership across the sectors. Business leadership was thought to be a magic ingredient, sprinkling stardust.

A huge volume of water has flowed under the bridges of the Mersey as well as the UK's less interesting and provocative rivers since then. The concept of partnership working has without doubt shifted from the margins to the mainstream of public policy and delivery in central government, government agencies and local government. As Eamonn Boylan quipped: "There are people who can barely get out of bed without the thought of a partnership meeting to go to".

But the exponential growth in partnership working and the formation of partnership organisations has not in itself altered the deep-rooted cultural differences and suspicions between the sectors. Crude snapshots: the public sector is "rights driven", the private sector is "profits driven" and the voluntary sector is "values driven". In the real world, these labels are less and less meaningful. Boundaries are blurred and organograms are more elaborate. Charities trade, businesses dabble in "corporate responsibility" and the public sector enables and contracts. Each adopts the language of the others. Depressingly, all sectors commonly refer to "people" as "customers". One consequence of this fluidity has been the emergence - from these shifting sands - of intermediary bodies. Many are constructed as partnerships spanning the public / private / voluntary divides.

There are innumerable types of partnership operating at every level from global strategy through to neighbourhood delivery of essential services. Some are official. Others are bottom up. Some are area-based, others are thematic. Some command powers and resources, others are flaccid talking shops. There is no universally applicable definition. The International Business Leaders Forum (IBLF) with the Cambridge Programme for Industry has been working for years on partnership research and capacity building. In 1998, IBLF ventured: "Partnership is a cross-sectoral alliance in which individuals, groups or organisations agree to work together to fulfil obligations or undertake a specific task; to share the risks as well as the benefits; and review the relationship regularly, revising their agreement as necessary".

This is fine, up to a point, but fails to capture the chemistry, innovation, synergy and value added of unconventional alliances. Partnership theory remains very sketchy. It is remarkable that this continues to be a Cinderella area of research while we are drowning in torrents of material from business schools. Leadbetter again: "Open and collaborative models of organisation will increasingly trump closed and hierarchical models as a way to promote innovation, organise work and engage consumers".

What are the critical success factors for partnership working in the twenty-first century? The Mersey Basin Campaign is recognised internationally as an exemplar. Its 25 years experience provides useful insights.

Partnerships need leadership: there must be an unambiguous answer to the "take me to the person in charge!" demand. Leadership can emerge and manifest itself in many different ways. It may be formally bestowed (by appointment or election) or it may be unofficial. You know it when you see it. For a partnership to be more than a therapeutic talking shop, there must be leadership and direction. This must and should not demean the contributions of all partners. A good partnership leader will sweat blood to keep the partnership intact and maintain momentum through setbacks and controversies. And he will know when the time for decisiveness has come.

Partnerships need a shared vision. It may be ambitious, bold, long term. But it must be crystal clear. "The return of fish to the Mersey" is a classic example. A multiple bullet point waffle of

buzzwords from the LGA's banned words is not. The inclusion of "world class", "community" or "economic development" is always suspect and should be challenged. The temptations of mission drift and blurring of vision in the pursuit of funding must be avoided.

People are more important than structures. Progress is more important than bureaucratic process. Organisational structures, their construction, destruction and replacement can be a huge diversion from the task in hand. There are those in the public sector who derive enormous satisfaction and enjoyment from deckchair rearrangement. Others are overwhelmed with target compliance and the creaking machinery of central and local government. T. L. DeWinne: "the end of civilisation as we know it will not be brought about by nuclear holocaust or terrorist outrage but by bumbling bureaucracy". Resistance is the intelligent response. The best partnership people trust their judgement rather than box-ticking "toolkits" or lowest common denominator "guidance" imposed by Whitehall. Good people achieve remarkable things. They take risks and make a difference. They are almost always unsung in their heroism. If their singing is too loud, they are silenced by removal to safer territory.

Business is part of the solution. By definition, cross-sectoral partnerships include, in some shape or form, business. Those hardened by experience in the partnership front line know that the "public sector bad, private sector good" mantra is patently absurd. The reverse claim is equally absurd. There are few more excruciating sights than a captain of industry used to leading, keen to make decisions, anxious to get results, parachuted into a mainly public sector board and quickly lost - as if in a foreign country, unable to speak the language and without a map. The best learn quickly and bring valuable perspectives and insights. In progressive, successful companies, innovation is in the DNA. There is immense potential for innovation in the public sector. Partnerships are no different.

Partnerships need values. They need a unifying idea. There must be a foundation on which strategy, delivery, priorities can be built. Unfortunately, there are countless examples of flawed ideas on which partnerships are constructed. In the current climate, an instructive example is the discredited area of "economic development". Many, in both central and local government have not yet accepted that the plane has crashed. They have not yet accepted that there must be a higher ambition than increasing Gross Value Added despite the mountain of evidence that this is a perverted measure of the health of a region or city. Some of my colleagues on what I think of as the regional project – the renaissance of Northwest England – continue to believe that the big idea for the north is to be more like the south and that closing the productivity gap is the answer. It would be comforting if the combination of the worldwide economic episode of value destruction and the threat of catastrophic climate change connected so as to wipe out these false gods. It would be heartening to believe that the partnerships seriously committed to sustainable development would be the survivors and that enlightenment values prevail. Unhappily, this would be naive.

Partnerships need realistic timescales to deliver their vision. The Mersey Basin Campaign was set up with a 25-year timescale. This, though exceptional, turned out to be about right. Different timescales frequently fail to synchronise. There is *government initiative time* – typically quick fix, three or at best five years, here today, gone tomorrow. There is *geological time* – we tend not to dwell on the fact that we are no more than the ashes of long dead stars. There is *community time* – one measure is the length of a childhood. There is *ecological time* – environmental change, whether positive or negative, can be fast. We now know that the pace of climate change is outstripping *political time*.

Government matters. In a democratic state there is always the question of legitimacy. Few but the most politically aware and correct may care about membership, representation and legitimacy if partnerships deliver uncontroversial and beneficial results. When the balloon goes up and controversy rages, questions of legitimacy arise. "Who elected you? Who do you represent?" deserves an answer. This is not easy for cross-sectoral partnerships even those with the default position of token councillors on the board. Partnership governance must at the very least be transparent.

Partnerships need resources. These may be money, time, knowledge, connections or the ability to influence change. More often than not, a partnership needs a combination of these. The creative shaking of resource cocktails is where the voluntary sector has much to offer. Doing more with less, gearing cash, and corralling people with something to offer – this is meat and potatoes to voluntary organisations and NGO's. And size may not matter as much as might be expected. "If you think that small things can't make a difference, you've never been to bed with a flea".

Partnerships need to deliver. There must be tangible results. What would you show the international (or extra terrestrial) visitor? Where would they be taken? Who would they meet? You can't take a visitor to a strategy. Strategising is not enough. For years I have wheeled out as a cheap conference crack that the Northwest of England has more visions than Mother Theresa, more pilots than the RAF and so on. Actually, it is truer than ever. The strategy count is now off the scale. Partnership credibility correlates directly to tangible achievement on the ground.

Partnerships must develop ways of working that are fit for their purposes. If the public sector is adequate for the task – regulation, legitimacy and so on, there is no need for a partnership. Alternatively, if the private or voluntary sectors can deliver, the partnership is superfluous. How can a partnership possibly achieve more, add real value? There are as many answers as there are partnerships. One example from Mersey Basin Campaign experience is the ability to mediate – without financial or reputational axes to grind, without powers of any kind - bringing conflicting interests quietly and calmly together.

Partnerships must be professional. The quality of their work must be at least as good as the most capable partner. It is not sufficient to be passionate, committed and right, important though these qualities are. Professionalism in partnership leadership and management is not about self-interest, or the erection of defensive barriers of arcana and jargon. It is about quality in stakeholder relationships and management, building confidence and trust.

Partnerships must communicate. In our multi-media, multi-channel 24/7 communications world with social media expanding exponentially, smart communication is essential. Those who fail to be proactive in communications will be communicated against. They have only themselves to blame.

There is a growing body of experience in the art of cross-sectoral partnership working. Some of the most instructive lessons come from the failures. Like any other mechanism or approach, partnerships are at risk of manipulation and destruction by the cynical and unscrupulous. Time, energy and money may be wasted. Attention can be diverted from pressing and important business. Failed partnerships can leave innocent casualties on the battlefield. Is the school of hard knocks or the university of life the only response? Is that the best we can do? No. Here are some thoughts:

Whitehall: the policy makers of the future must be savvy in the arts of partnership policy, leadership and development. An immediate priority should be to ensure that all civil service fast streamers are introduced to partnership theory and practice. Their early experience should include exposure to regional or local level partnerships.

Local authorities: it has been estimated that there are more members of partnership boards in the UK than there are elected councillors. Partnership board work is more demanding than council cabinets. The national and local government machinery – must take the initiative to build the capacity of elected members so that they can contribute effectively. Parochialism and self-interest is the enemy.

Academics: there has never been a better time than after the crash to explore alternative organisational and management models. The business schools and public sector management researchers in our universities should start to seriously address the theory and practice of cross-sectoral partnerships.

Partnership leaders (both non-executive and executive): take heart! You are not alone. Above all else, refuse to suffer in silence the bored board. We are all capable of change and building our capacity. Reinvention of the wheel is not inevitable: there is so much to be learned from others.

“The best way to destroy the opposition is to make them your partner,” a private sector non-executive once wisely advised me in my role as a partnership chief executive. My experience has confirmed that he was right. In messy and cluttered institutional landscapes, successful organisations – and partnerships are no exception – occupy clear positions. Successful partnerships are quick to adapt to changing institutional landscapes while maintaining their focus. Some – like the Mersey Basin Campaign – decide when and how to time their exit in the best interests of their mission. Whether steeped in or dabbling on the edges of partnerships it is as well to remember the blindingly obvious thought that: if you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu.

Walter Menzies is chief executive of the Mersey Basin Campaign.