

John Major's Citizens Charter - fifteen years later

John Mullen

► **To cite this version:**

John Mullen. John Major's Citizens Charter - fifteen years later. Raphaële Espiet-Kilty et Timothy Whitton. Citoyen ou consommateur ? Les mutations rhétoriques et politiques au Royaume-Uni, 2006. hal-02536967

HAL Id: hal-02536967

<https://hal-normandie-univ.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02536967>

Submitted on 8 Apr 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

John Major's Citizens Charter - fifteen years later

John Mullen, Université de Paris 12 Val de Marne

When John Major was chosen as leader of the Conservative party after the fall of Margaret Thatcher, he faced a number of problems. He shared the same philosophy as his predecessor of defending the “free market” against the state, and reducing the costs of social services. Naturally, this approach included the consideration that users of public services were best served by being treated as customers or consumers. Yet the Conservative government was less confident about its general project, after the massive civil disobedience and rioting over the poll tax which had helped precipitate Thatcher's fall (Adonis et al. 1994).

There was a general demand for change, both in content and style. Some of the ideas of ten years earlier, of popular capitalism where all citizens would be shareholders and house-owners had faded - the shares having been rapidly sold off to large companies, and the stock of council housing being so low that many young couples had great difficulty obtaining somewhere to live.

Mr. Major had, moreover, only a short time in which to win the following elections, and had, from a personal point of view, some need to be seen as other than a stopgap Prime Minister in a period of decline of the Conservative government.

He was ferociously attacked by satirists and adversaries, much more than Thatcher was. The best humorists in the country competed to mock him as the grey man from the suburbs, boredom incarnate, who shopped at Marks and Spencer's, tucked his shirt into his underpants, had to write down his cash card number, and loved only cricket and garden peas (Cf for example *Private Eye*, 1992 and Steve Bell, 1993). He was often presented as being out of touch with the modern world. Though less inclined than Margaret Thatcher to use the royal ‘we’, his famous declaration on the nature of true England did not help this image: “*Fifty years on from now, Britain will still be the country of long shadows on cricket grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and ‘old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist’*”¹.

Lastly, it seemed to Conservative leaders that aspects of the public services which it was politically impossible to privatize as such were ripe nevertheless for a consolidation of the free-market approach.

The Citizen's Charter initiative was an important part of John Major's response to this situation. The result was to contribute in the short term to a successful strategy. He won the 1992 election, assuring that the Conservative project could be carried further, and also (inadvertently) allowing Tony Blair the time to complete his transformation of New Labour.

Public lists of promises

The Citizen's Charter was thus one campaign inside the general trend of Conservative policy for public services, translating the new situation of the Conservative government, and showing elements of continuity and of change compared with the Thatcher years. In his autobiography in 1999 John Major gives his account of the birth of the charter:

¹ Speech to Conservative Party Council, 1993. Quoted Sunday Herald 07 February 1999. Here, a quotation is used from George Orwell's book, *The Lion and the Unicorn* but in quite a different way than its author had intended.

We had to end the excessive focus on financial inputs rather than service output. I knew that if I could achieve this it would be a huge gain - for taxpayers and service users alike...

As part of the information revolution, we decided that standards for every service should be published, both as a benchmark for improvement and to show the public what they could expect. So too, and in clear, comprehensive detail, should results. I wanted to see reports on performance placed in public libraries and newspapers. These would show, on a range of key measurements, how local services were doing. Relative success would be a source of pride. I intended also to provide incentives for good performance, through more performance related pay. Relative weakness would be a point of pressure on failing management to upgrade standards. Ideally, there should be financial sanctions for service failure. What is more, I wanted improved complaints procedures and to ensure that members of the public got redress, and explanation, an apology or even compensation when things went wrong.

I set out these ideas in some detail in a speech to the Conservative Central Council on 23 March 1991. It was there I used for the first time the phrase "Citizen's Charter" and undertook that with it we should look systematically at every part of public service to see how higher standards could be achieved. I did not much like the name "Citizen's Charter"; with its unconscious echo of revolutionary France, it had a faintly alien ring to it. At one point I thought of calling it "the People's Charter" but such populism was thought to be risible and likely to be taken as a gimmick.... So Citizen's Charter, more stuffy and formal, became its name (Major 1999:251).

We can see here that the word "citizen" was not an easy one for Major to use, and in general it is not a word which has the same everyday normality as a word like "citoyen" in France. As for the word "charter", its most immediate echoes for the English are of the UN Charter, of the Magna Carta, of Charter 88, all initiatives claimed as guarantees against war and tyranny. This certainly gave the tone Major was looking for.

The position of the apostrophe (Citizen's Charter, not Citizens' Charter) is of no small importance. The Charter is intended to guarantee *individual* redress and quality of service, not the involvement of organized civil society in the conception and management of public services. The ideal is consumerism, not "participatory democracy", the citizen as individual consumer, not politicized and mobilized. Fascinatingly, although in Major's own writings the apostrophe never moves, in many documents, even official ones, the plural form is often found, as if there were (conscious or unconscious) resistance to the purely consumerist ideal of the Charter².

The originality of the Citizen's Charter

To what extent was the Citizen's Charter a new idea? The proposal for a public list of expectations, promises, and rights to redress seems to be relatively original and has been imitated since in other countries and in parts of the private sector. However many of the practices and ideas linked to the charter have their origins in the private sector.

The **explicit comparison of best practice** between organizations or companies - the idea which inspired the league tables of schools and later will inspire those for hospitals is very similar to the idea of "Benchmarking", developed by Xerox at the beginning of the 1980s to ensure their company was ahead of the competition. (Institut d'Innovation Informatique pour l'entreprise, 2001).

² See for example <http://www2.halton.gov.uk> and <http://www.youthinformation.com>

The development of **standardized and measurable process** in industry and later in services probably began with the foundation in 1946 of the International Standards Organization, but it developed in particular from the 1970s on. We will see later that the Charter is used, through the chartermark programme (a special award for organizations giving a high level of service to consumers) as a quality guarantee in a similar way as ISO 8000 and 9000 are used in private companies.

Management by Objective first became popular in the private sector in the late 1960s (Odiorne, 1965). **Performance pay** (“merit pay”) became more and more common in the private sector in the 1970s and the 1980s and moved, much more slowly, into the public sector in a series of countries (Marsden, 2003). Both of these concepts are central to the Citizen’s Charter initiative.

Two other elements are to be noted. Apart from the private sector practices just mentioned, the Charter fits with developments in forms of *organization* in private companies. The increasing influence of chain groups, franchises, and other more complex forms of economic relationships, where direct managerial control is often replaced by carefully drawn up contractual duties, bonuses and sanctions, is a move in the same direction as the Charter. Secondly, the Charter takes up developments in requirements on employees who are in relation with the public. More formal dress (suits and ties for men), name badges, and uniforms are all on the rise in the public sector in this period, and each will be at times included in the various sectorial Citizen’s Charters.

Extracts from some of the first charters:

If you need to call an emergency ambulance, it should arrive within 14 minutes if you live in an urban area, or 18 minutes if you live in a rural area, or 21 minutes if you live in a sparsely populated area.

On London Underground, if you wait more than 20 minutes for a train, you should receive a refund voucher.

Contractors of road repairs will incur a financial penalty if they cone off more of the motorway than is strictly needed to do the repairs (HMSO, 1991).

A named qualified nurse, midwife or health visitor will be responsible for your nursing or midwifery care.

Public Servants should not be anonymous. In future those who come into contact with the public will be expected to wear name badges and to give their names on the telephone (Welsh Office 1991).

Parent’s charter:

The first Parent’s Charter was issued in 1991. It signalled the start of an information revolution to extend parental choice and raise standards. It promised parents five key documents:

- a report on their child’s progress at least once a year;
- regular reports on their child’s school from independent inspectors;
- performance tables for local schools;
- a prospectus or brochure about individual schools; and
- an annual report from the school’s governors³.

Good Councils :

³ Government website www.dfes.gov.uk

- make sure all the Housing Officers who meet the public wear name badges;
- have answering machines to take messages when there is no-one in the office;
- have a comfortable, private office for you to discuss your business, with a no-smoking area if you do not like smoke;
- make it easy for people with children to see council officers, for example they provide some toys for children to play with while the parents are waiting, and they make sure the toilets are clearly signposted (HMSO 1991).

An implied criticism of Thatcherism?

Although, as we will see, there is a large measure of continuity with Thatcherism in the Citizen's Charter, John Major's autobiography presents it also as a way of dealing with problems Thatcher had not managed to solve. Indeed to present such a measure, in 1991, after twelve years of Conservative government, as an urgent and revolutionary yet common-sense measure was implicitly a criticism of Thatcher's policies.

So it is that Major claims to have first got the idea for the Citizen's Charter after a four-hour visit in 1985 to a Benefits Office.

For all of that time there were never fewer than a hundred unhappy people queuing to see the handful of stressed clerks dealing with their enquiries, and there were only thirty seats in the room. The office, I learned, had a staff turnover of more than a hundred per cent a year (Major, 1999: 90).

According to Major, his idea for the Citizen's Charter was due to the fact that he had had a more modest background than the majority of his Conservative colleagues:

When I was young, my family had depended on public services. I have never forgotten - and never will - what the National Health Service meant to my parents, or the security it gave despite all the harsh blows that life dealt them (Major, 1990:246)

He contrasts this attitude to that of many of his (unnamed) Conservative colleagues who "*saw the National Health Service as an embarrassing problem, ever demanding money, not as the source of national pride it is and should be.*" He says he was angry at "*the lofty views of well-cosseted politicians [who] made little use of the public services in their own lives, and had no concept of their importance to others*" (*Ibid.*)

So he presents himself as to the Left of Thatcher and what he denounces as "the Tory right". At the same time he assures us that the Labour party knew only how to throw money at problems, not to improve efficiency so as to improve services. The consumerist approach is presented as the missing, key element.

John Major saw the Citizen's Charter, once it was established, as a sort of crusade, and he would often use the term "revolution". The play on words in the full title of the government booklet presenting the Charter is quite significant : *The Citizens Charter: Raising the Standard.*

The organization of the Charter reflected its nature as a consumer-oriented initiative. A special committee, dependent directly on the Prime Minister was set up to develop the charter. They reassured the treasury that there would be no more spending involved. A seminar with top managers from the public sector and private companies such as Marks and Spencer was set up to exchange ideas. A panel of advisers under the chairmanship of the Chief Executive of the giant pharmaceutical company, Boot's, was also established.

The reception of the idea on the Right

A section of the neo-liberal Right welcomed the charter as a major step forward. The Adam Smith Institute published a long study “Blueprint for a revolution” on the charter in 1992: “*The Charter revolutionizes the relationship between the citizen and the state by turning it into one of explicit and enforceable contract*” (Madsen 1992:61).

Madsen goes on to express hope that the charter will be a beacon for the world: “*a Citizen’s Charter for public services could well become the normal means by which most countries seek to control an overgrown and unresponsive public sector*” adding “*overgrown*” to the “*unresponsive*” implicit in the Charter approach. (*Ibid.*:10)

The Conservative manifesto for the general elections of 1992 certainly presented the Charter as a Big Idea:

The Citizen’s Charter is the most far-reaching programme ever devised to improve quality in public services. It addresses the needs of those who use public services, extends people’s rights, requires services to set clear standards - and to tell the public how far those standards are met. (Conservative party manifesto 1992:15).

Strangely enough, the magazine *The Economist*, in general an enthusiastic supporter of Thatcherism and in particular its plans for the public sector, was unimpressed. “*To get noticed, the Charter has to be sold as a big idea. But it is not really a big idea at all, more a mishmash of old ideas and new wheezes*” (*The Economist*, 1/2/92).

Continuity with the Thatcher years

It is important not to forget the strong elements of continuity with Thatcher’s politics of the Major government. The Citizen’s Charter was presented from the beginning as just one of five principles necessary to move Britain forward. Others included continuing the privatization of nationalized industries such as British Coal, British Rail and the rest of British Telecom, continuing to encourage people to own their own houses, and strengthening Britain’s interests inside Europe. The Citizen’s Charter was thus in part a *repackaging* of a number of policies already in place, with the addition of more public, more systematic lists of promises. It may have allowed more of a sense of coherence to Conservative policy in the public sector and a capacity to appeal to people who were not necessarily ready to hear explicit defence of market values in the Thatcher style.

Political criticism of the charter

Left-wing critics did not hesitate to mock the charter and its various lists of promises. The establishment of a special telephone hotline to allow people to phone in if they believed that motorway repair companies had coned off and closed down more of the motorway than was strictly necessary to do the repairs became a symbolic target for satirical attacks on the charter. In his autobiography, Major replies to some of these criticisms, insisting that any list of promises is easy to mock:

Some scoffed at what they said was the pettiness of the programme. This was always nonsense. Laying one brick may be a trivial endeavour, but lay enough and you have built a mansion (Major 1999: 260)

Another frequent criticism was that many of the charters appeared to have a special skill for stating the obvious. The idea that toilets should be well-signposted is rather uncontroversial, but, many argued, the need was not for a formal public promise to signpost toilets. Similarly, many argued that passengers were not demanding monetary compensation for late trains, but simply more investment in an ageing railway system to ensure that trains could arrive on time.

Others on the Left criticized the charter for its lack of originality, and for its ineffectiveness. In 1995, the Labour MP Mr Henderson made the following speech in Parliament:

The citizens charter is a useful concept, which dates back, my history books tell me, to Herbert Morrison of the London county council in 1921. He promised the citizens of London a charter on local government services. Increasingly, the Government are stealing ideas from the Labour party's manifesto-- [*Interruption.*] Yes, yes. Many of the ideas which the Government now propose, where there is revisionism from the days of Thatcher, are often taken from common-sense ideas in Labour party manifestos, and the Citizen's Charter is one of them. Indeed, the citizens charter concept was adopted by at least two Labour-controlled councils in the 1980s--Lewisham and York, which provide excellent services, according to the Government's own audited figures, to the people of those communities--long before the Prime Minister came forward with his proposals a year or two ago (Hansard 13/01/1995 col 367).

The effectiveness of this kind of initiative was bound to be controversial. Major claims it as a success, but regrets that:

The Citizen's Charter failed to catch the public imagination as it should have done with the sheer scale and breadth of its attack on old-fashioned working methods and poor public service. We were so quiet about our revolution that few noticed the wall being scaled (Major, 1999: 261).

In Parliament, one of his fellow Conservatives, Mr Jackson claimed:

In other European countries there is a keen awareness of the dilemmas - of the need to control public expenditure while meeting rising expectations of quality in public services. Our approach is seen as interesting and innovative in that direction... We in Britain pioneered privatisation around the world; now we are taking the lead around the world in the improvement of public services (Hansard, 23/11/1992 Col 603).

Labour commentators were of course much more negative. Ivan Henderson again:

What has been the effect of the cones hotline which we see advertised on motorways as we drive around the country? In the last 12 months of its operation, 11,500 calls resulted in just five sets of cones being removed to some other location. Is not that a symbol of so much that is wrong with the Government's approach? [...]

What of charterline? [...]

After 10 months of the project and £500,000 worth of expenditure, it was found that the charterline was receiving just 25 calls a day and that each call was costing £68. After all the trumpeting, as I understand it, the line had to be scrapped. I believe that the Government are currently considering whether it should be reintroduced.

Is that not clear evidence that hype, advertising and the false promises of Planet Portillo do not improve public services and that real changes are needed? If that does not happen, charters like the CSA charter are not worth the paper they are printed on.

I do not doubt that there are improvements in citizens' procedural rights. Some additional information is available. However, the main test of whether the citizens charter has been effective is surely whether public services are better. Are people receiving better, quicker and more effective treatment in the National Health Service? Is our education system improving, with higher standards of education for all our children, young people and adults? Is our transport system providing a better service? Is it tackling congestion problems in our cities? Is it tackling the problems of obtaining the necessary investment to provide transport in future? Are the public receiving the public services that they want? (Hansard 13/01/1995 Cols 368-370)

This does not mean of course that the Charter had no effect. Certainly it was around the Citizen's Charter that the question of hospital waiting lists was first brought into the public eye in specific and measurable terms, and although all the figures are subject to dispute, it seems clear that the longest waits for hospital operations had been very much curbed between 1990 and 1996. Further, the systematisation of complaints procedures and redress mechanisms begins in this period and continues up to the present day, with a very significant rise in the volume of complaints and redress activity (cf other papers in this volume).

Major shows in his book that he is very proud that certain elements of his charter initiatives have been taken up or even developed further by New Labour. He naturally sees this as a vindication of his ideas. Talking - in 1999 - of league tables, he claims "*Few would now question*" that "*standards should be publicly set and measured*", while "*before 1991, such a system was considered unthinkable*". (Major 1999:261)

From Major to Blair

By 1997, a few dozen charters had been produced (a selection is listed in appendix A). These public initiatives were run alongside internal reforms towards classic quality management, such as the Public Sector Benchmarking project (Cf Cabinet Office 1998). Following what was rapidly becoming standard practice in British public services, several were produced in different languages: copies of the *Parent's Charter* and the *Charter for Further Education* were available on audio cassette and in Braille, as well as in Bengali, Chinese, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, Turkish, Urdu and Vietnamese.

Despite the 1997 decision by the Labour government to "relaunch" the Citizen's Charter, it does not today have a strong presence in the political debate, although several of its mechanisms have been maintained or even extended. When the term "charter" is heard today, it may be cited by the Conservative party as an excellent idea which has been ignored by Labour, or by the Labour authorities to signal that their concern for public service "consumers" is still high.

Thus a 2003 leaflet available on the Conservative Party website states:

The Patient's Charter Launched by the Conservatives in 1991 [*has been*] ignored by Labour since 1997. The Charter put patients at the heart of the health service - this week the Health Minister cancelled the launch of their Patient's Charter. ... (www.conservatives.com).

New Charters are, nevertheless, still introduced from time to time. In 2002, for example, a series of local charters for people in long-term care were produced. Here is an extract from the Birmingham Long term Charter⁴:

We will treat you with courtesy and honesty, and respect your dignity. As a service user or carer you have the right to:

- Be addressed by the name and title of your choice, for example Mr, Mrs, Kaur, Singh, Begum;
- Be greeted without undue delay when you first arrive;
- Expect clean, smoke free and draught free areas in all offices and other premises;
- Have your privacy respected in dealings with staff.

Another recent example is the travellers' charter produced by HM Customs, revised after a survey in 2001:

Our Traveller's Charter says that our uniformed officers will wear identity badges. We will give an explanation if travellers have had to wait for over 10 minutes to pay for charges due in the red channel.

We will offer to explain how the charges are worked out.

We will give a receipt for any payment made.

Our Traveller's Charter also states that we will offer to help to repack bags if we have unpacked them⁵.

Chartermark

Although the main emphasis of the Charter was promises to users and redress for dissatisfied ones, a subsidiary part, which has continued to today, is the Chartermark programme. Following the example of Quality certification programmes in the private sector, it aimed both to reassure users that the service was performing well and to propose processes (often in the form of checklists) to help rationalize management inside the service.

This quality certificate could be awarded to public service establishments if they requested it. Initially, few did, and though several hundred Chartermarks were given out in the first year, they have not become a common sight at all. Nevertheless, the establishment of an official Quality mark was essential to emphasize that private sector methods such as Quality management were to spread rapidly and definitively to the public services.

Chartermark continues, at a low level to enjoy the support of the Labour government. In October 2003, Tony Blair in his speech at a ceremony awarding Chartermarks declared:

The future success of our public services depends on people like you. People on the front line who do a crucial job - and want to do it even better. The local heroes of our schools, hospitals, job-centres and other services. One message stands out from your Charter Mark success. Where there is a spirit of enterprise and a readiness to change and innovate and to put the customer first - then the customer benefits⁶.

⁴ www.birmingham.gov.uk

⁵ <http://customs.hrmc.gov.uk>

⁶ www.chartermark.gov.uk

As the Chartermark website informs us, any organization may apply:

Your organisation can be a government agency, a hospital, a police force, a local authority, a prison. It can be a primary school, a Jobcentre, a museum. Charter Mark holders include a dog-catcher, a canal lock-keeper and the local crematorium⁷.

Applicants have to prove their commitment to quality of service, and to transparent redress mechanisms. They also have to pay a fee, as they would for other kinds of Quality certificate in the private sector:

Charter Mark is a worthwhile investment of time, effort and money. Yes, there is a charge. Our aim is for the scheme to become as widespread as possible across the public sector and in order for this to happen it must be run on a cost recovery basis, charging a fee at a level comparable to other quality initiatives. We believe that the benefits to your customers and workforce make this investment a worthwhile one⁸.

For £175 a half day, managers can attend a training workshop to understand how to improve their chances of gaining a Chartermark.

League tables

The acceleration of the use of League tables - openly published comparative data for public services - was very much part of the Citizen's Charter. Major did not invent these, but he increased the use of them and made them more well-known.

In Education, these League Tables have remained controversial. Clearly they represent an openly consumerist approach to education and are aimed at "increasing parental choice". In the first years it was unclear as to how this could be achieved even in theory - if there were in a given town 500 places at the "best" secondary school, the fact that parents had more information about the schools couldn't increase the number of parents gaining a place for the child in this reputedly "best" school, though it could change the social composition of the school somewhat, a premium being gained by those - generally middle class - parents who are better at "playing the system". Later, under Blair, with the new, much more radical approach of closing down schools which fail the Quality evaluation criteria and opening new schools under new management, the full rein of imitation of market influences in the public sector is released. In this way its supporters could argue that the supply of education is altered by the League table and Quality evaluation processes.

The Blair governments have had to take into account criticism of the League Table system for schools. The fact that in 2001 the Welsh assembly decided to abolish the publication in Wales of school league tables was a sign of the tension around this issue. One of the responses of the government was to invent new "value-added" league tables⁹ which instead of measuring exam results, measure rather the improvement of the pupils from one set of standard tests to the next. This measure was however insufficient to convince teaching trade unions of the usefulness of the tables¹⁰.

It seems that, twelve years later, the language used in the press to describe Mr. Blair's initiatives on public services is that of "naming and shaming" "failing schools" etc. The

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ For a recent example see :

http://www.accringtonobserver.co.uk/education/w/59/59956_primary_school_league_tables.html

¹⁰ *The Independent*, 04/12/03.

discourse is more confident, and perhaps more populist, than Major was prepared to present. This is also reflected in the extension of League tables to hospitals, introduced under Blair in 2001.

The other element of the Citizen's Charter which has survived is the establishment of inspectorates for public services which are not linked to the service in question - OFSTED for education is the best-known example. Many of these inspectorates include managers from private industry, and inspection can even be completely contracted out to private companies, so again we see the importance given to the introduction of private sector values and mechanisms.

Union resistance to elements of the Citizen's Charter

Naturally, trade union priorities in the public sector have been to work against privatization, against attempts to marginalise trade unionism, and for the improvement of wages and working conditions. The Citizen's Charter has not been at the centre of the trade union agenda. Nevertheless, a number of elements have given rise to industrial action. In particular merit pay, the wearing of name badges, and the question of security screens in offices have been the cause of strikes.

The idea that public service users are customers, and should therefore be received as customers are (name badges, no security screens etc.) and that the employees need motivating by performance pay are integral to the Charter approach.

By far the most important example of conflict was that of the long strikes in the Benefits Agency and the Employment agency in 1996 and in 2002. In 1996 the Agency decided that some employees would work in benefits offices without the traditional glass security screens. The consumerist vision of the government contrasted with the attitude of trade unionists who underlined the not infrequent violent attacks (often by people coming in for emergency money) on public servants. A long strike resulted in a compromise according to which existing employees had the right to refuse to work in screenless offices. This right however did not apply to future recruits to the service.

A few years later in 2001, the agency decided to generalize the removal of security screens. The longest strike for fifteen years was the result. Fifty seven centres were on permanent strike, and other offices were brought out on rolling strikes. In total there were three hundred thousand strike days on this issue over six months, with a peak of forty thousand strikers on the 12th and 13th December 2001. The strike was relatively successful, since the right to refuse screenless offices was extended to the whole workforce.

Performance pay has also been a source of conflict. Seen by the new public sector managers as important for motivation, it is seen by trade unions as undermining workers' capacity for collective action in support of their demands. Inside the public sector the unionized employees have often been able to limit the application of merit pay. Indeed in many sectors the element of merit pay remains purely symbolic, and the establishment of the merit pay system is more an ideological imperative than a practical possibility. It is quite common for performance pay bonuses to be earned by all workers in a department, the aim of distinguishing between employees being thus neutralized.

These and many other conflicts reflect, in contrast to the advancing consumerist and free-market ideology of both Major and Blair governments, a parallel radicalizing of public sector trade unions, which culminated recently with the election of a new generation of left wing trade union leaders who have become to be known to journalists as "the awkward squad". The most notable examples are Mark Serwotka of the Public and Commercial Services Union, Tony Woodley of the Transport and General Workers' Union, and Andy Gilchrist of the Fire Brigades Union.

Conclusions

No doubt the Citizens charter participated in general moves within society towards explicit contracting, in areas as far apart as the franchising of restaurants or of production, and the relationship of the pupil and parent to schools (parents and pupils are now often asked to sign behaviour contracts with their schools). It seems likely, though more research is needed, that in the same period that private sector methods of management were being applied in the public sector, these methods were also gaining considerable ground in the voluntary sector. Charitable and non-governmental organizations of today are much more 'professional', and make more use of private sector know-how (management methods but also lobbying methods, fundraising methods etc.) than they did twenty or thirty years ago.

The Citizen's Charter allowed John Major to affirm his "big idea", and to give new packaging and a certain easily explainable coherence to the neo-liberal ideas he shared with Margaret Thatcher. But it also enabled him to develop the ideas of neo-liberalism in particular in connection with those parts of public service which could not in the immediate future be privatized, due to practical difficulties and political opposition. In addition, it allowed him to show publicly a certain responsiveness to fears about deteriorating public services. It suggested strongly that if service was unsatisfactory, the government were doing something about it, and that the fault lay not with the government but with the non-customer orientations of public service workers, a culture defended by trade unions, left wingers and other usual suspects.

The project in its original form seems to have been largely forgettable and forgotten in Britain, but certain elements of it, such as league tables and chartermarks have become long term characteristics of aspects of public service. This has happened despite the fact that over the last few years, it seems that the New Labour government has abandoned the idea that it is possible to continuously improve public services without significantly higher levels of public money.

From the early years of the Citizen's Charter, John Major was proud that:

The Citizens charter unit [was] visited by representatives of governments from around the world interested in how the toolkit we had put together could be applied to their own domestic problems. (Major 1999:259)

And indeed citizen's charters appear to be more popular in other countries than in the UK. The whole idea has taken off in a big way in India, in Hong Kong, in Japan in Jamaica, and in Australia¹¹.

¹¹ www.ecustomerserviceworld.com

Bibliography

- Adonis, A., Butler D., Travers T. 1994, *Failure in British Government : The Politics of the Poll Tax*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Bell, S. 1993, *If... Bottoms Out*, Arrow, London.
- Cabinet Office, 1998, *Next Steps Report 1997*, (Cm 3889), The Stationery Office, London.
- Hayek, F. 1944, *The Road to Serfdom*, republished 1994 University of Chicago press, Chicago.
- HMSO, 1991, *The Citizens Charter: Raising the Standard*, (Cm 1599) HMSO, London.
- Institut d'Innovation Informatique pour l'entreprise 2001, *Benchmarking*, IIIIE, Paris.
- Madsen, P. 1992, *Blueprint for a revolution*, Adam Smith Institute Research, London.
- Major, J. 1999, *The Autobiography*, Harper Collins, London.
- Marsden D. 2003, *Performance-related Pay of Government Employees: Assessing Reforms across OECD Countries*, OECD, Paris.
- Mullen, J. 2004, "Your benefits office is closed due to industrial action - le conflit social au ministère de la sécurité sociale 1979-2003", in, *Les Services Publics Britanniques*, sous la Direction de Gilles Leydier, Presses Universitaires de Rennes.
- Odiorne, G. 1965, *Management by Objectives: A System of Management Leadership*, New York, Pitman.
- Private Eye, 1992, *The Secret Diary of John Major aged 47 ¾*, Bath, Corgi.
- Welsh Office, 1991 *Patients Charter for Wales*.

Note on internet sources : In academic work, the use of reliable and stable sources is indispensable. Nevertheless for official documents in particular, the Internet has become a key resource. In this article, we have limited the citation of internet sources to government websites, whose reliability and stability is of a high level, except for two or three websites cited as source for peripheral detail.

Appendix A : Charters issued before 1997 (Cabinet Office 1997):

Charter for Court Users

Jobseeker's Charter

Road User's Charter

NHS Patient's Charter

HM Customs and Excise: Taxpayer's Charter

HM Customs : Traveller's Charter

Inland Revenue : Taxpayer's Charter

Northern Ireland Child Support Agency Charter

Court's Charter for Northern Ireland

Social Security Agency (Northern Ireland): Customer Charter

Social Security Benefits Agency: Customer Charter

Child Support Agency Charter

Social Security Contributions Agency: Contributor's Charter

Employer's Charter

Training and Employment Agency (Northern Ireland): Customer's Charter

Sixty nine other organizations had published declarations of charter standards, without publishing a charter as such.

19.11.2005



CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE