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Purchasing Outcomes: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Contracting Out Social Services in New Zealand (2008 – 2016)

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Abstract

The contracting out of social service delivery by the New Zealand Government to the non-profit sector has significantly altered the social service landscape. This study explored the ideologies that have supported contracting out under the Fifth National Coalition Government (between 2008 and 2016). Through analysing political discourse used publicly by this Government in media releases and speeches, this research explored how discourse reinforced the state's approach to contracting out service delivery, and asked what impact the introduction of purchasing outcomes approaches has had on the contracting rationale. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, this research found that neoliberal ideology has continued to drive contracting under the Fifth National Government, with purchasing outcomes presenting no real challenge to the status quo. This study also identified the significant impact social investment has had on social services under this Government, and its role to reinforce neoliberal and neo-conservative ideology. The power dynamics inherent in contracting have also continued under the Fifth National Government, with discourse used to retain the Government's position as the ultimate decider of funding and services. This study highlighted a clash between economic and social objectives, with the neoliberal ideology of the contract state conflicting with the ideology and objectives of non-profits. The importance of political discourse for protecting the status quo was identified, and questions raised about how discourse under this Government has been used to label social service clients as vulnerable. A review of the contracting approach to social service delivery is called for to challenge the barriers of ideology and discourse which prevent alternative models from being implemented. This study also calls on the Government to review how it works with other sectors, and identify ways to collaborate and manage the inherent power dynamics.

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