



The Big Society Challenge

Edited by Marina Stott

Keystone Development Trust Publications

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The project would not have happened without the sponsors DTA, Bassac, Social Enterprise East of England and Lankelly Chase. Many thanks.

Nick Keay and team at Renaissance Creative have delivered yet again even with my brinkmanship with deadlines.

Thanks to the editorial and research team; Dennis Roberts and Jo Latchford (on placement from the Government Office of the East) for background material, Camilla McDermott (Editorial Assistant) and Marina Stott (Editor).

Neil Stott
Keystone Development Trust

Foreword

Elizabeth Truss MP

We have experienced a series of crises that have shaken public faith in the economy and our political system, from the global financial crisis to the parliamentary expenses row. The Big Society Challenge is a fascinating and timely review of the thinking and doing that is taking place in the post-crisis world. Of course the Big Society has been with us for many years in community groups, voluntary organisations and charities. However the internet age is making the Big Society possible in a way that it was not before. In a networked world, a new generation have a different concept of what is private and public. Information is freely available and operations are becoming more transparent. It enhances the traditional grapevine and network and gives new life to community groups and organisations. It also challenges hierarchy and secrecy. Communication is two way rather than top down.

We are at the endgame of the idea that everything can be optimised from the centre, that targets based on output will deliver results and that we are all part of a monolithic system. It is no longer assumed that experts and politicians can make technically correct decisions. To me it is about society being participative rather than a spectator sport. The nature of the Big Society is varied and will not result in the same outcome everywhere. I know some are concerned there is not a definitive blueprint but that is an impossible goal in a bottom up system.

As well as social change there is economic pressure: we are poorer than we thought we were. In The Big Society Challenge there is much speculation about how government spending reductions affect the Big Society. I believe the idea is independent of the level of wealth; it is about using resources in a wider sense and creating a sense of belonging. At present we waste far too much of our assets and talents. The power of the volunteer workforce can be used better. For example, The Abundance project is a volunteer organisation set up in Sheffield, as a response to the abundance of wasted food we see in every city in the UK. It is run entirely by volunteers and theoretically costs nothing to set up. Volunteers pick apples that would otherwise go to waste and then give them to schools and community organisations.

A key element is giving more powers to local communities, volunteers and grassroots movements. For example Network Rail own properties around the country such as Thetford Stationmasters House, which has a number of potential uses that could generate money and improve the transport service. The problem is at present that decisions are being made far away from those who understand the consequences.

In the UK we have a comparatively low skilled workforce (40% of our population has only basic skills compared with 34% in the US, 22% in Germany and 28% in France). There is an opportunity for businesses that have a huge stake in getting a more highly skilled workforce to work to improve this. Likewise, how can we get businesses and local

groups to invest in transport projects that will open up economic opportunities? We need an open approach to which groups and people can be involved in making things happen.

As well as maximising talents and assets, I think the Big Society also addresses the search for identity and a sense of belonging. People want to be part of something. A professionalised group of experts tends to prohibit participation. A new more open culture of government and society can increase it. There is a growing interest in events, community activities and participation. The Big Society Challenge is how do we use this interest and enthusiasm to seek a better society.

I congratulate Keystone Development Trust for bringing together so many voices to explore the issues surrounding the Big Society. I hope it will be widely read. I will certainly encourage my colleagues to do so.

8th December 2010

About Keystone Development Trust Publications

The Keystone Development Trust Publications series is aimed at understanding issues in challenging policy areas that have a direct impact on communities and promoting dialogue amongst practitioners, policy makers and academics. Keystone Publications are intended to be thought provoking interventions in policy debates, as well as reporting on primary research. The publications are co-authored by academics and practitioners, often with the support of volunteer researchers and editorial assistants.

Migrant workers, housing and growth in the Eastern region (2008) highlighted the issues around housing and migration as well as reporting on primary research with European migrants. *Workers on the Move 2* (2009) focused on European migrants and health and provided a review of what is known about migrant health issues in the UK as well as home countries health systems and issues. *Learning from the Past* (2009) concentrated on community building in new towns and communities. *Workers on the Move 3* (2010) reported on primary health related research with migrants. All publications are available at www.keystonetrust.org.uk. *Work Matters: Work, worklessness and community: A review of the issues* will be published in 2011.

The publications are produced by Keystone Development Trust, which delivers diverse social projects through generating income from its own not for *private* profit social enterprises as well as public and other funds. Keystone is a *community regeneration charity*.

Keystone aims to deliver projects which fill local people with **passion**, keep money in their **pockets** and create great **places** to live. The Trust aims to deliver;

- **Work** and preparation for work
- **Fun**
- community led **homes**
- **Extra help** for those in the greatest need

Note on sponsors



The **Development Trusts Association (DTA)** is the leading network of community enterprise practitioners working to help people set up development trusts, and help existing trusts learn from each other and work effectively. Development trusts are community owned and led organisations using self-help, trading for social purpose, and ownership of buildings and land, to bring about long-term social, economic and environmental benefits in their community. The DTA also works to influence government and others at national and local level, to build support and investment for the movement. www.dta.org.uk.



bassac is the British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres. It is the national umbrella body for community organisations that champion social justice in their communities and offer a wide range of services to local people. bassac supports them and gives them a national voice. www.bassac.org.uk

bassac and the DTA have developed a strong partnership with each other over many years, undertaking joint policy initiatives and delivering programmes together such as Communitybuilders and the Safer Homes Fund. Both are also founding members of the Community Alliance, alongside Community Matters. In November 2010, members of both networks voted overwhelmingly in favour of a merger, creating a new organisation that will build on the strong partnership of the two organisations and champion social justice, support community enterprise and serve a growing community-based membership. The new organisation will be in operation from April 2011.



Social Enterprise East of England (SEEE) is a membership and networking organisation for social enterprises and supporters. We **support and promote** the sector as an indispensable part of the economy and influence national, regional and local policy. Social Enterprises make a valuable contribution to the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the country. From 2011 onwards their role is even more important: SEEE members share the dual purpose of making money and doing good, and are working together to solve problems and building a better Britain in their local area. They value grounded discussions that separate rhetoric and reality and identify what social enterprise can bring.

SEEE is delighted to sponsor this publication which will inform and educate debate within the sector.

For more information about SEEE visit www.see.co.uk or our information portal about social enterprise and business issues visit www.seeewiki.co.uk



The Chase Charity and the Lankelly Foundation were established through the generosity of two separate entrepreneurs. The Chase Charity was founded in 1962 and the Lankelly Foundation six years later. After many years of working together, in 2005 the two Trusts resolved that they should take the next natural step and amalgamate to form the **LankellyChase Foundation**.

The Trustees recognise the many challenges which face our society and look forward to being able to respond to some of them, bringing a new clarity and focus to the compassion and creativity which have marked their work in the past.

Currently the Trustees concentrate their grant making in 5 programme areas: the Arts; Breaking the Cycles of Abuse; Free and Quiet Minds; Custody and Community; Local People Local Places.

Note on contributors

The Editor

Marina Stott is Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at Anglia Ruskin University where she teaches community development, neighbourhood renewal, research methods and social problems. Marina is currently researching 'redneck identity' for her PhD at Kent University. Previously Marina worked for Cambridge City Council's Community Development Service.

Contributors

Robert Ashton is a social entrepreneur, business speaker and author. His 12th book, 'How to be a Social Entrepreneur' was published in October 2010 by Wiley/Capstone. He is also a Trustee of Norfolk Community Foundation. Robert works with individuals and organisations seeking to deliver positive social change in enterprising ways. His innovative and creative approach to Big Society makes him particularly popular with those facing funding cuts. He also advises national policymakers and is a regular contributor to the Guardian's social enterprise network.

Andy Brady is a Senior Lecturer in the Ashcroft International Business School, at Anglia Ruskin University. Having worked in the public and private sectors, but most extensively in the voluntary and community sector in London, he set up the university's *3rd Sector Futures* initiative in 2008. Andy has been a director of Social Enterprise East of England (SEEE) since the company was founded, and is also on the board of Voluntary Sector Training, a social enterprise in Essex. He holds a Masters degree from the Judge Business School in Cambridge, and has published research on networks for social enterprise. Andy is also a visiting lecturer at the University of Cambridge.

Belinda Bell is a social entrepreneur with a background in establishing and supporting a range of social enterprises. She is currently Managing Director of Suffolk Circle, a start up social enterprise membership organisation for people over 50. Previously, as Founder of Foundation East, Belinda created a social enterprise that provides loans to financially excluded businesses and individuals from across the East of England. Foundation East also acquires and redevelops assets and has created ground breaking regional Community Land Trust. Belinda has particular interests in scaling and replication of social enterprises, the social finance market, social enterprises operating in the environmental sector and access to land both in the UK and internationally. She is an occasional lecturer at both the University of Cambridge and Anglia Ruskin University. Belinda holds a Masters Degree in Community Enterprise from the University of Cambridge and a Bachelors degree in Social Anthropology from Goldsmiths College, University of London.

Sylvia Brown has been Chief Executive of ACRE since 2001 following a long history within the Rural Community Action Network, whose member organisations support rural communities across England to develop and deliver a vision for their area. ACRE manages the national networks of local practitioners in community led planning and rural housing enabling and has been closely involved in helping shape opportunities created by the government's Big Society proposals. As a parish councillor and activist for nearly 30 years, Sylvia has direct experience of linking community led action into public strategies, particularly on planning policies and services that can help deliver sustainable communities. For 6 years, she chaired the Rural Forum for Wiltshire. As well as participating in a wide range of government and community sector groupings, task forces and alliances, she is currently a member of the Defra Civil Society Board, the Homes & Communities Agency Rural Housing Advisory Group and a founder member of the Rural Coalition chaired by Lord Matthew Taylor of Goss Moor. In 2007, Sylvia was awarded the OBE for services to rural communities.

Gabriel Chanan is a strategist, project designer and researcher on community engagement, empowerment and development. He directed policy and research at the Community Development Foundation (CDF) through the 80's and 90's and carried out pioneering European research on the role of local citizen organisations (*Out of the Shadows*, European Foundation, 1992) and on citizen involvement in regeneration (*Added Value and Changing Values*, European Commission, 1997). He was the main author of CDF's widely used guidance on the Single Regeneration Budget in the 90s. In 2003-4 he produced influential research for government on community involvement in urban development (*Searching for Solid Foundations*, ODPM, 2003) and measurement of community strengths (*Measures of Community*, HO/CDF, 2004). From 2005 to 2008 he was seconded to the Home Office and the Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG), working on community participation and empowerment. He has played a leading role in the movement to modernise community development (editing *The Community Development Challenge*, CLG, 2006), to create objective indicators of community strengths and to embed commitment to strengthening communities in public policy. Recent work includes, with Colin Miller, HCA's project on spreading community empowerment skills to all front-line professions (*Empowerment Skills for All*, HCA, 2009); guidance to local authorities on 'Thriving Third Sector' for the Office for Civil Society (2009); working with Community Places in Northern Ireland on regeneration and third sector developments; and with the DH-sponsored Health Empowerment Leverage Project. He was awarded an MBE for services to community development in 2009. In June 2010 he and Colin Miller launched the *PACES* website containing critical-friendly analysis of the 'big society', practical standards for community development and other products: www.pacesempowerment.co.uk.

Anna Coote is Head of Social Policy at nef (new economics foundation). A leading analyst, writer and advocate in the field of social policy, she was responsible for ground-

breaking work on health and sustainable development as Commissioner for Health with the UK Sustainable Development Commission (2000-9). She led the Healthcare Commission's work on engaging patients and the public (2005-8) and was Director of Health Policy at the King's Fund (1998-2004). Earlier posts include Senior Research Fellow and Deputy Director of ippr (Institute for Public Policy Research) from 1989-1998, Editor and Producer of current affairs television for Diverse Productions (1982-6) and Deputy Editor of the New Statesman (1978-82). She has written widely on social policy, sustainable development, public health policy, public involvement and democratic dialogue, gender and equality. Her recent publications include *Cutting It: The 'Big Society' and the new austerity* (nef, 2010), *Ten Big Questions about the Big Society* (nef, 2010), *21 Hours* (nef, 2010) and *Green Well Fair: Three economies for social justice* (nef, 2009).

Ben McCall is Chief Executive of Doncaster Central Development Trust CIC (writing in a personal capacity). Ben has 30 years experience as a volunteer and paid worker in the third sector.

Helen Haugh is a University Senior Lecturer in Community Enterprise at the Judge Business School, University of Cambridge and Deputy Director of the *MBA Programme*. Helen was previously a lecturer at the Centre for Entrepreneurship, Department of Management Studies, University of Aberdeen, where she taught strategic marketing, business policy, and management.

Tim Jones is the Chief Executive of Allia IPS. Tim is a Fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts (FRSA), an Associate Fellow at Saïd Business School, Oxford University and an Associate of the Chartered Insurance Institute. He holds the Certificate in Enterprise from Judge Business School, University of Cambridge and is undertaking post-graduate research at Coventry University on societal and personal well-being. He is a director of Future Business and of the North East Enterprise Bond and sits on the advisory board of the Welsh Talent Nurture Fund.

Katharine Knox is a Policy and Research Programme Manager at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation where she is responsible for managing work programmes on a range of themes including a programme on community assets. She is also responsible for the JRF's work programmes on climate change and social justice and housing and neighbourhoods. Katharine has previously worked in a research capacity for the Audit Commission and the Refugee Council as well as a brief stint in academia at the University of Southampton where she co-authored the first history of refugees in Britain.

Noel Longhurst is a Senior Research Associate at the University of East Anglia (writing in a personal capacity). His research interests encompass 'alternative' economic spaces, social innovation, sustainability transitions and countercultural places. His PhD research was undertaken at the University of Liverpool and he has previously worked in both the

social economy as both employee and volunteer, as well as a private sector regeneration consultant.

Colin Miller is a researcher and consultant on community empowerment and development. Throughout the 80's and 90's he was a community development practitioner then manager of the local authority team. From 2004 he was employed by the Community Development Foundation to research, support and disseminate best practice in community development. In 2005 he was seconded to the Civil Renewal Unit of the Home Office and a Policy Advisor specialising in community empowerment issues and worked closely with the empowering communities network. Since 2006 he has been a full time freelance consultant and has been involved in a wide range of activities and research relating to community empowerment and community development. He played a key role in the Community Development Challenge group that produced the *Community Development Challenge* (CLG 2006) and undertook ground breaking research into the provision of community development in local authorities. He was commissioned by the CD Challenge group to write one of the first books in the UK on the management of community development (Colin Miller, *Management: Towards Higher Standards in Community Development*, CDF 2008). His recent and current work includes (in partnership with Gabriel Chanan) a project for the HCA Academy on spreading community empowerment skills to all front-line professions (*Empowerment Skills for All*, HCA, 2009); and the Health Empowerment Leverage Project – HELP - funded by the Department of Health. In June 2010 he and Gabriel Chanan launched the *PACES empowerment* website containing critical-friendly analysis of the 'big society' and other products of their joint work: www.pacesempowerment.co.uk.

Heather Petch has been director of HACT – the Housing Action Charity (until March 2010). HACT works to improve the well being and living conditions of poor and marginalised people by working with housing providers local people and other organisations to deliver lasting change. Heather has a Masters degree in Social Policy from the London School of Economics and over 25 years' experience of the housing, homelessness and anti-poverty and community fields as a front-line adviser, board member, researcher, policy analyst, activist and director. Heather is a member of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations' National Assembly and writes a regular comment column in *Inside Housing*. In 2007 Heather was awarded an OBE for services to social justice.

Anne Power has been involved in European and American housing and urban problems since 1965. In 1966 she worked with Martin Luther King's 'End Slums' campaign in Chicago, and on her return to Britain, she lived and worked in inner-London, organising many housing and community-based projects in Islington, Hackney and Tower Hamlets. From 1979 to 1989 she worked for the Department of the Environment and Welsh Office, setting up Priority Estates Projects to rescue run-down estates all over the UK.

In 1991 she became founding director of the National Communities Tenants Resource Centre at Trafford Hall in Chester which provides residential training and pump priming support for people living and working in low-income communities in order to help residents tackle local problems directly, and is currently Chair. From 2000 to 2009 she was a Commissioner on the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC). She was awarded an MBE in 1983 for work in Brixton, and a CBE in June 2000 for services to regeneration and resident participation. Anne was a member of the government's Urban Task Force and sits on the Green Deal External Advisory Panel for DECC. Anne became a Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics in 1996 and is Head of LSE Housing and Communities, a research group based within the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion. She is author of many books, reports and articles on housing, cities, environmental problems and low-income communities.

Andrew Purkis is Chair of ActionAid UK and until October 2010 a Board Member of the Charity Commission for England and Wales. He also acts as a consultant and adviser. He writes here in his personal capacity only. He has previously been Chair of the Trustees of The Green Alliance, Living Streets and The Empty Homes Agency, and a Trustee of Contact A Family. He was educated at Highgate School, took First Class Honours in Modern History and subsequently a Doctorate of Philosophy at Oxford University. After six years as a fast stream civil servant in the Northern Ireland Office, he became Head of Policy and Assistant Director at the National Council for Voluntary Organisations from 1980 to 1987. He was national Director of the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (1987 to 1992); Secretary for Public Affairs to the Archbishop of Canterbury (1992 to 1997); Chief Executive of The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund (1998 to 2005); and Chief Executive of The Tropical Health and Education Trust (2005 to 2009).

Mark J Smith is Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Studies and in the Center for Citizenship, Identities and Governance at The Open University. Previously he taught at University of Sussex, Brighton University and Queen's University and has held various international positions including Visiting Professor of Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences at the University of Oslo. Based at the Open University since 1995, Mark's public engagement activities include contributions to policy vision for the Woodland Trust, UN and government sponsored events in Southern Europe, greening business and responsibility in Gibraltar, and his 'practical ecological citizenship' approach was adopted by the IUCN report on Governance for Sustainability. He is also a member of the ASA Climate Change Task Force in the USA, Honorary Fellow in Environment, Citizenship and Community Studies, Public Policy Consultancy Group at Anglia Ruskin University, and a stakeholder adviser on nonsource water pollution for the Environmental Management Authority in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. He has published on ecological theory, political participation and dissent, citizenship, environmental virtues and responsibility, the politics of obligation, corporate citizenship, human rights and

labour standards, phenomenology, ethnography, transdisciplinary research, and social movements in both developing and developed societies. Mark has examined movements and campaigns that would now be seen as 'Big Society' initiatives in North America, Europe, South Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. In particular, he has promoted the idea of ecological citizenship as a bridge between social and environmental justice and as an explanation of how 'clusters of injustice' emerge. Recent publications include *Environment and Citizenship: Integrating Justice, Responsibility and Civic Engagement* (Zed, 2008), *Environmental Responsibility* (Zed, 2009) and *Responsible Politics: Bringing Together Human Rights, Labour Standards and Environmental Sustainability* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

Jess Steele joined the DTA in 2007 to establish its unique practitioner consultancy service, the Pool, and has continued to develop new intellectual territory, ventures and programmes for the DTA. Her work bridges policy and practice. In a recent secondment to central Government she took the policy lead for assets and developed new policy and programmes to promote 'meanwhile uses' of empty town centre buildings and land. Previously, Jess was Deputy Chief Executive of the British Urban Regeneration Association, and also has a background as a community activist and entrepreneur in South East London; leading the award-winning 'Get Set for Citizenship' regeneration programme and establishing a range of local social enterprises. She has also published extensively on local history including '*Turning the Tide: The History of Everyday Deptford*'. Jess chairs the CREATE Consortium to promote the Community Allowance proposals to enable people on benefits to take up community regeneration work opportunities. She now lives and works from Hastings and is the Treasurer of the Hastings Pier & White Rock Trust.

Neil Stott is Chief Executive of Keystone Development Trust. Previously Neil was Head of Community Development at Canterbury City Council, Principal Officer (Community) at Cambridge City Council and a youth and community worker for a number of children's charities including Mencap, Elfrida Rathbone and Contact-a-Family in London. Neil is currently studying for a PhD at Brunel University. Neil is Eastern Region Chair of the Development Trust Association, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA), Senior Fellow of the Institute of Place Management (SFIPM), and Visiting Research Fellow at Anglia Ruskin University.

David Wood manages Rural Action East, which is the umbrella organization for the six Rural Community Councils of the East of England and a member of ACRE. Our aim is to build strong vibrant rural communities where local action can transform the outlook for rural quality of life. The Charity is interested in anything that impacts on rural communities and how to ensure they receive accessible services and a fair share of public sector investment. We are ardent supporters of community led planning and its application to urban neighbourhoods, towns and villages in pursuit of empowered and

engaged communities. Other work by Rural Action East includes support and advice to communities on climate change mitigation (carbon reduction); administration of grants; support for rural playing fields; and training to groups and individuals. David has led projects on market town development, community planning, access to ICT and support and application of an outcomes approach to projects. David represents Rural Action East on the East of England Rural Forum and Regional Empowerment Partnership.

Paul Tracey is Reader in Organizational Behaviour and Director of the Doctoral Programme at the Judge Business School, University of Cambridge. Prior to joining Cambridge Judge Business School, Paul was Assistant Professor of Entrepreneurship at Warwick Business School. He has also held posts at the School of Geography at Oxford University and the Centre for Entrepreneurship at the University of Newcastle.

Colin Wiles has worked in the affordable housing sector for thirty years. Until 2010 he was a housing association chief executive in Cambridge, but now works as an independent consultant. He is Chair of the Chartered Institute of Housing in the eastern region and an elected member of the National Housing Federation's regional committee. He also sits on the Board of Howard Cottage Housing Association. Colin is the author of numerous publications on housing and related issues and has contributed regularly to Inside Housing.

David Wilson was a Special Adviser to a Local Government Minister in the last Government having been Deputy Leader of the London Borough of Lewisham in the late 1990s. He now works in economic development in Norfolk and writes in a personal capacity.

Steve Wylor has been Director of the Development Trusts Association since 2000. Over the last twenty years Steve has worked for voluntary and community agencies and independent grant-makers. For example in the 1990s, working with homeless agencies, he ran Homeless Network, co-ordinated the Rough Sleepers Initiative in London, and set up Off the Streets and into Work. Steve is a member of various Government advisory groups on social enterprise, community organizations, and the third sector (Cabinet Office, DCLG, Ministry of Justice). Steve is also vice-Chair of the Social Enterprise Coalition, and Board member of the Adventure Capital Fund, the National Communities Resource Centre, and Thames Reach.

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Big Society in Context

Marina Stott

Anglia Ruskin University

“The Big Society is about a huge culture change... It’s time for something different, something bold... The *Big Society* is that something different and bold”

(David Cameron, *Big Society Speech*, 19th July 2010)

Just how much of a culture change is the Big Society? Is it really so different to what’s gone on before? What *is* the Big Society and what does it mean for the rest of us? This book is an attempt to answer these questions. This introductory chapter begins the quest by sketching out the development of the Big Society idea so far and some reactions to it. Previous attempts to involve and empower communities will also be briefly discussed to explore the contention that the Big Society offers nothing new, before outlining the structure of the book.

The following chapters from an array of contributors across different areas of expertise and practice will address the question of what the Big Society means for the rest of us. This book is by no means a definitive and exhaustive account of what the Big Society is, what it could be or what has been said about it. The Big Society is an idea that is still emerging, changing shape along the way. This book is an attempt to make some sense of that idea and contribute to what it becomes.

Genesis

The foundations of the Big Society can be seen in the Conservative Party’s localism paper, *Control Shift: Returning Power to Local Communities*, Policy Green Paper No.9 (The Conservative Party, 2009) in which Cameron calls for a radical ‘decentralisation to revitalise democracy and strengthen community life’. This was to be realised through a five pillar strategy in which power would shift from the state to local communities:

1. Giving local communities a share in local growth
2. Freeing local government from central control
3. Giving local people more power over local government
4. Giving local people more power to determine spending priorities
5. Removing regional government

Cameron argued in the annual Hugo Young Memorial Lecture that such a strategy was needed because the state had become far too big and rather than promote social solidarity had instead promoted selfishness and individualism (Cameron, 2009). This had undermined the development of responsibility and innovation, leaving communities that are disconnected, disillusioned and disadvantaged. Cameron draws upon the work of ‘*Red Tory*’ Phillip Blond to characterise the impact of the overbearing state:

the state ... has dispossessed the people and amassed all power to itself ... This centralisation of power has made people passive when they should be active and cynical when they should be idealistic. This attitude only makes things worse - the more people think they can't make a difference, the more they opt out from society.

Despite the expansion of the state and doubled public spending, the gap between rich and poor has widened, youth unemployment is up and social mobility has stalled (Cameron, 2009). Addressing such issues requires nothing less than:

radical decentralisation to reach every corner of the country...[which] will trust people to manage their affairs in a way that responds to local needs. (The Conservative Party, 2009:2)

The ideas underpinning Big Society can clearly be seen here in the *Control Shift* document although the concept itself had not yet been articulated. This was to come later in the Hugo Young Memorial Lecture in November 2009, where Cameron outlined the Conservative approach to tackling poverty and the need to ‘roll[ing] back the state’ in order to do so (Cameron, 2009). The role of the state would be reduced to ‘directly agitating for, catalysing and galvanising social renewal’ in helping create the Big Society – Cameron’s alternative to big government (ibid). Aside from mentioning a National Citizens Service for 16 year olds, there is little detail given to the ‘Big Society’ idea or any indication as

to how it might be implemented. This imprecision did not hinder Cameron's persistence in maintaining the Big Society as a key theme of the election campaign. Indeed, the phrase appears on the first page of the forward of the Conservatives' manifesto to capture the essence of the monumental change they offered.

From Big Government to Big Society

The Big Society plan was unveiled in *Building a Big Society* in March 2010 just prior to the announcement of a general election. In it, the Big Society is placed 'at the heart of the Conservative Party's vision for change' (The Conservative Party, 2010a:1) and the Big Society agenda developed across three priority areas comprising the following:

1. Public service reform
 - The creation of a *Big Society Bank* from dormant bank accounts to fund neighbourhood groups, charities, social enterprises and other non-governmental bodies.
 - A leading role for charities, social enterprises and voluntary groups in delivering public services and tackling social problems.
2. Community empowerment
 - Enable parents to start new schools.
 - Empower communities to take over libraries and parks, etc that are under threat.
 - Give neighbourhoods greater control over the planning system.
 - Enable residents to hold police to account in neighbourhood beat meetings.
 - These new powers and rights will create 'little platoons'.
3. Mass engagement and philanthropy
 - Develop the National Citizen Service for 16 year olds to enable them to develop the skills needed to become responsible and active citizens.
 - Increase philanthropy using behavioural economics to make volunteering and community participation something people do on a regular basis.

The new policies announced as part of the Big Society plan:

- Neighbourhood army of 5,000 full-time, professional community organisers who will be trained with the skills they need to identify local community leaders, bring communities together, help people start their own neighbourhood groups, and give communities the help they need to take control and tackle their problems. This plan is directly based on the successful community organising movement established by Saul Alinsky in the United States and has successfully trained generations of community organisers, including President Obama.
- A Big Society Bank, funded from unclaimed bank assets, which will leverage private sector investment to provide hundreds of millions of pounds of new finance for neighbourhood groups, charities, social enterprises and other non-governmental bodies.
- Neighbourhood grants for the UK's poorest areas to encourage people to come together to form neighbourhood groups and support social enterprises and charities in these poorest areas.
- Transforming the civil service into a 'civic service' by making regular community service a key element in civil servant staff appraisals.
- Launching an annual national 'Big Society Day' to celebrate the work of neighbourhood groups and encourage more people to take part in social action projects.
- Providing new funding to support the next generation of social entrepreneurs, and helping successful social enterprises to expand and succeed.

Source: 'Cameron Unveils 'Big Society' Plan', Conservatives.com/news/speeches

In the 2010 Conservative Party Manifesto (2010b) the Big Society was presented as the alternative to big government offering:

a society with much higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility; a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control. The Big Society runs consistently through our policy programme. Our plans to reform public services, mend our broken society, and rebuild trust in politics are all part of

our Big Society agenda. These plans involve redistributing power from the state to society; from the centre to local communities, giving people the opportunity to take more control over their lives. (2010b:37)

While the functions of the state would be significantly reduced or ‘rolled back’, there was still nevertheless a key role for the state to play in building the Big Society – that of enabler rather than provider. The state was essential in implementing the programme of bottom-up, community-led action that Cameron envisioned:

We will use the state to help stimulate social action, helping social enterprises to deliver public services and training new community organisers to help achieve our ambition of every adult citizen being a member of an active neighbourhood group. We will direct funding to those groups that strengthen communities in deprived areas, and we will introduce National Citizen Service, initially for 16 year olds, to help bring our country together. (ibid)

The Great Transition

Big Society transformed from a campaign ideal into a policy programme on 19th May 2010. During the official launch Cameron referred to his new vision of society as:

The start of a deep and serious reform agenda to take power away from politicians and give it to people (Number 10, online).

Although Cameron declared that building the Big Society was the responsibility of all departments of government, two ministers in particular are likely to play a key role in its implementation. Nick Hurd, Minister for Civil Society, will ensure it is easier to run a charity, social enterprise or voluntary organisation and strengthen the sector so it can contribute to building the Big Society in the way that Cameron envisioned. Greg Clarke, Minister for Decentralisation will ensure that bureaucracy and regulation do not stifle locally-led innovation or interfere with the [government-led] implementation of delivering bottom-up solutions to social problems (Clark, 2010).

The process of decentralisation is one of the methods required to deliver the Big Society. It was this method of decentralisation that Cameron focused on during the re-launch of the Big Society. In his *Big Society Speech* (2010) in Liverpool, Cameron

explained his vision of the new order in which a huge culture change was imminent and necessary. The society towards which we are striving is one where:

...people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace...

...don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face ...

...but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities.

It's about people setting up great new schools. Businesses helping people getting trained for work. Charities working to rehabilitate offenders.

It's about liberation –the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street

You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment. You can call it freedom. You can call it responsibility. I call it the Big Society.

(Cameron, 2010)

The beginning of the redistribution of power came with the announcement of four 'vanguard' communities during this re-launch speech where the process of decentralisation would start. They are:

- Eden Valley, Cumbria,
- Windsor and Maidenhead, Berkshire
- Sutton, Greater London
- Liverpool, Merseyside

These places represent the 'great training grounds of change' and will be helped in their endeavours by DCLG officials who will also assist them in identifying trained community organisers. They represent the 'first territory on which real and ultra local power is a reality – and the Big Society is built'; all simply because they asked for more power and control (ibid). And so the great transition begins (Lord Wei, 2010a).

If we are to believe the musings of the *'Red Tory'* Phillip Blond, who claims there is a 'massive demand from local communities to run public services' (in Hasan, 2010) and the architect of the Big Society, Lord Wei, who claims there are 'large numbers of people willing to get involved' (2010b), then this is only the beginning and there will be more demands for power and control and running services to come.

The Big Society Network

The successes of the Big Society are already being paraded online at the Big Society Network. In the 'Big Society in Action' section there are details on how to 'get involved' either as an individual by giving to charities through 'Just Giving' or setting up a Neighbourhood Watch Scheme; or as a group by saving a post office or community centre through the Asset Transfer Unit or turning an empty shop into one of these with the Empty Shops Network. Alternatively, you can simply suggest a project that is already well underway – a community-led, grassroots project that has grown organically and independently of the new re-imagined state rather than under government instruction (the Big Society Network, 2010).

The other crucial function this online presence serves is to tell the rest of us (and perhaps some Conservative party members, too) what the Big Society actually is:

We hope it does a better job of explaining both Big Society and the Network's role in it and gives a wider perspective on the panoply of Big Society discussions and actions going on.

The following is how the Big Society Network are currently defining Big Society:

The Big Society is a society in which individual citizens feel big; big in terms of being supported and enabled; having real and regular influence; being capable of creating change in their neighbourhood. Does our society pass this test at the moment?

People have interpreted the ideas and vision in different ways, but we see the core of the big society as three principles:

- Empowering individuals and communities: Decentralising and redistributing power not just from Whitehall to local government, but also directly to communities, neighbourhoods and individuals
- Encouraging social responsibility: Encouraging organisations and individuals to get involved in social action, whether small neighbourly activities like hosting a Big Lunch to large collective actions like saving the local post office
- Creating an enabling and accountable state: Transforming government action from top-down micromanagement and one-size-fits-all solutions to

a flexible approach defined by transparency, payment by results, and support for social enterprise and cooperatives

This is a bottom-up vision, not a government program dictated from the state to citizens. Big Society is about a cultural change where people “don’t always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities.” (my emphasis)

The flagship policies of this ‘bottom-up vision’ include:

- Big Society Bank – used to finance social enterprises, charities and voluntary groups.
- Training 5000 new community organizers
- National Citizen Service
- The Localism Bill – planning system reform to empower neighbourhoods and public service reform to enable independent employee owned co-ops.

Just below this information on the website is the following:

Note: The Big Society Network is not involved in the design or delivery of these policies; please contact the relevant government department for more information.

The Big Society Network is, according to their own website in the sections ‘Who Are We’ and ‘What is the Network?’:

‘a small team of citizens, social entrepreneurs, community activists and professionals; frustrated citizens.’

So, on the one hand, the Government is *not* responsible for the Big Society, it is to be ‘citizen-led’. Neither, on the other hand, are those very citizens, for and by whom the Big Society Network is being developed, involved in the Big Society. Just who is to be involved if not the citizens from Big Society Network and not the government?

Despite schemes such as the Big Society Network and Cameron’s best attempts at launching and re-launching Big Society, many have little or no idea what it actually is. An Ipsos-Mori survey commissioned by the RSA in September 2010 revealed

that 55% of people had not heard of the Big Society. Of those who had heard of it, 54% thought it wouldn't work in practice and 57% thought it was just an excuse for the government to make public service cuts (IPPR and PwC, 2010).

Some concepts and ideas burst onto the political scene or make some otherwise rather grand entrance and are enthusiastically embraced by all (or most) to permeate all areas of policy. In other words, they 'go viral' (Stott and Longhurst, this volume). For example, the *community cohesion* agenda was borne out of riots between communities living 'parallel lives' and quickly became embedded in policy and practice (Cantle, 2001; Institute of Community Cohesion). Similarly, the concept of *social capital* proliferated policy after lying dormant for decades and is now standard parlance in debates on how best to address poverty, disadvantage and inequality (see for example Halpern, 2004). While *social capital* experienced a somewhat less dramatic entrance than *community cohesion*, it was certainly no less influential and widespread. For the Big Society, there has been a much less remarkable reception, not just from the opposition as one might expect, but from Cameron's own cabinet members who have failed to embrace it with the same enthusiasm. It is an idea that only Cameron believes in (Burns, 2010).

The Big Society Reception

The notion of the Big Society has so far been met with scepticism, optimism, indifference and some confusion from politicians (even Conservatives!), practitioners, academics and the general public. A cross-section of these reactions are presented in the following chapters.

For the optimists, the Big Society may at last provide the opportunity for local communities to finally exercise some real influence over what happens in their locality (Wood and Brown, this volume). At the very least, there is an opportunity for some recognition for those already engaged in 'Big Society' activities long before they were defined as such (Wyller, this volume). The sceptics however, see the Big Society as a smokescreen for swingeing cuts across the public sector, leaving little option for anything other than 'DIY' service provision by local communities (McCall, this volume). Furthermore, once the cuts take hold, the ability of local communities, social enterprises or charities to realise the Big Society is significantly reduced (Coote, this volume) if indeed it ever existed (Purkis, this volume). The rest are trying to navigate their way through the Big Society wilderness without being devoured by the wildlife or getting hopelessly lost.

Opportunities

There are some who see the Big Society agenda as a welcome and long awaited opportunity to contribute to the creation of the ‘good society’, from the bottom-up (for example see Sir Stuart Etherington, 2010). Rather than see community-run services as a necessary response to spending cuts, the emphasis is on the aptness of reducing or fundamentally changing the functions of the state. This then releases opportunities for communities and community groups to do what they have [presumably] always wanted – to have more control and responsibility. For example, Big Society Works, established by former Sport England regional lead for Yorkshire Anne Ibrahim, sees the current era of financial prudence as the ideal time for capable communities to reach their full potential:

In short, fewer publicly funded services exposes a gap in the market for able communities to design and deliver their own. This is the biggest opportunity yet for communities to assert themselves, to demonstrate ownership and pride and take responsibility for creating a happy, healthy, inclusive community. (www.bigsocietyworks.com)

We are warned that we can ill afford to ignore this ‘untapped resource’ and miss the opportunity to design high quality public services. In a similar vein, David Halpern, Jesse Norman and Lord Wei also see this potential of communities lying just beneath the surface and support the shift towards subsidiarity.

David Halpern implores us to ‘give Big Society a break’ because he believes this is not going to be a ‘passing soundbite’. Writing in *Prospect* in August 2010, Halpern refers to his own recent publication *The Hidden Wealth of Nations* in which he asserts that the non-market reciprocity or ‘economy of regard’ which describes things such as exchanging gifts, looking after each other or making dinner, has been overlooked and reflects a significant amount of GDP if calculated in economic terms. This is illustrated on a neighbourhood blog where a contributor claims that if everyone swept snow off the pavement in front of their own home (approximately 8 meters), this could save the local council about £10 million (Ataubin, 2010). This ‘hidden wealth’ of reciprocity, relationships, and trust is being ‘unlocked’ across Europe already. For example, there are ‘patient hotels’ in several European countries where patients stay in what looks and feels like a hotel for the duration of their hospital treatment, chronic conditions. Friends and/or family members are taught how to clean wounds, put

in drip lines and manage their own treatment. They achieve better clinical outcomes at lower costs and score higher on patient satisfaction than conventional hospitals (Halpern, 2010b).

Jesse Norman is an enthusiastic cheerleader for the Big Society, presumably because he fundamentally believes in the spirit of the agenda, but also because he says finding an alternative approach is no longer optional. The state is no longer fit to fulfil the role of public service provider and we have reached the limits of the idea of the state as the remedy for social and economic failure. The matter is now pressing, mandatory. He claims that the Big Society is an idea which transcends conventional labels and political categories of left and right. A fundamental rethink on the very nature of society is needed. The new compassionate conservatism is that rethink and the way forward (2010:6-8). Norman asserts that the Big Society is being vigorously implemented and will amount to the most thoroughgoing attempt for a century to redefine the relationship between the individual, the state and public and private institutions - 'Conservative in inspiration and radical in execution – Disraeli would be proud' (2010:199).

This newly defined relationship between the individual, the state and institutions is underpinned by a Red Tory philosophy, promulgated by the Conservatives' philosopher-king and director of think tank ResPublica, Phillip Blond (Derbyshire, 2009). Indeed, ResPublica claims almost full credit for the birth of the Big Society idea and is not afraid to applaud itself for doing so (ResPublica, 2010a).

Red Toryism or communitarian civic conservatism as Phillip Blond describes it, seeks to redistribute capital and capacity more equitably throughout society and devolve responsibility and accountability to localities and communities through a process of decentralisation, which would reinvigorate civil society (ResPublica, *ibid*). Blond argues that both the left and the right have damaged society; the left by creating a 'benefits culture' of redundant, welfare-dependents wholly lacking in ambition or aspiration through state activity; while the right promoted self-advancing individualism through the market (Blond, 2010:15,291). These 'markets without morality' must be replaced with a kind of 'capitalism with a conscience' (Derbyshire, 2010). Perhaps more aptly, *capitalism with a local face*. The influence of Phillip Blond's *Red Toryism* is examined more fully by Mark Smith's chapter in this volume tracing the intellectual and ideological roots of Big Society.

The other key architectural figure in the Big Society blueprint is Nat Wei – now Lord Wei and government advisor on Big Society – who also co-founded the Big Society Network. Lord Wei keeps interested parties up to date on the ‘great transition’ from ‘broken society’ to the Big Society on his blog (Nat Wei’s Blog). In it, Lord Wei says he is struck by the number of ordinary people the Big Society idea has resonated with, despite it being a difficult idea to ‘get your head around’, the latter which he attributes to the ‘organic and evolutionary nature’ of the concept (2010c). This ‘evolution’ from ‘political concept to independent citizen-led movement’ to which Lord Wei refers will help remove barriers to mass participation, the lynchpin of the Big Society.

Lord Wei is sceptical of those who claim they are unable to participate because of a lack of time and offers a solution to the limitations of the 24 hour clock. However, in the first instance, Lord Wei insists that we (that’s you and me) actually *do* have time to participate, it’s just that currently we use this time for some inconsequential activity, such as watching television or during ‘Twixtmas’ (2010b). This is that period of time in-between Christmas and New Year when many cherish the opportunity to spend some much deserved time with their families, many of whom they may not have seen for some time given the dispersal of extended families in contemporary societies, and/or re-charge their batteries at the end of a long year of work. Such a rest is surely deserved, after all Britain has some of the longest working hours in Europe (BBC News, 2002; The Spectator, 2008). For ‘those who genuinely lack time, they can trade it’ claims Lord Wei (2010b). These are likely to be ‘single parents, busy working people or students’ who can ‘barter services...share childcare arrangements or caring for the elderly to save and release time’ (ibid). Even the time spent waiting in a queue or recovering from an operation could be harnessed according to Lord Wei. The opportunity to build the Big Society is there if only people cared enough to get involved (ibid).

Pragmatists

Straddling a kind of middle ground between the supporters and critics of the Big Society idea are those who take a more pragmatic approach. In the recent Spending Review, the Office for Civil Society (OCS) were allocated £470 million in total and an additional £100 million Transition fund for those whose funding streams look precarious. Many Voluntary, Community and Third Sector organisations will maximise the government’s offer of a key role for the sector across the three strands of the Big Society plan to shape and provide services where the state has failed

(OCS, 2010). For example, the DTA are already looking at ways to secure a more strategic position and have identified some areas of potential opportunities:

1. Access to public assets: Many public bodies and Local Authorities will be looking to dispose of their physical assets; sometimes on a massive scale. Whilst many will in fact be liabilities, some could find a new life in community ownership, there may be opportunities for local groups to acquire these assets. For expert advice around asset transfer contact the asset transfer unit www.atu.org.uk
2. Right to bid for running local services: Some development trusts could use this new right to take over a local library, a park or some other local service if they can demonstrate they would run it better than the Council.
3. Better opportunities to deliver public services: with a new recognition of social outcomes, and the government's commitment to supporting social and community enterprises we could see new opportunities emerge for social enterprises and development trusts to gain new access to public sector contract.

(Source: The Big Society Policy Briefing, October 2010, DTA)

Details of how these may be taken forward have recently been published in a jointly-authored paper by DTA Director Steve Wyler and Red Tory Phillip Blond, *To Buy, To Bid, To Build: Community Rights for an Asset Owning Democracy*. This outlines how best to enable local communities to take over the running of 'state' owned assets for the benefit of local communities. At its launch, it was praised by Charlie Elphick, MP for Dover and Deal, who is leading the attempt by local townspeople to bid for the Dover Port Authority "one of the most important papers I have read in the past 10 years" (ResPublica, 2010). Andy Brady (this volume) ponders the consequences for social enterprises of such a partnership.

Organisations, such as the Community Development Foundation see the Big Society agenda as an opportunity to draw attention to the work undertaken and how it can contribute to the Big Society. The Community Development Foundation draw upon the work of Gilchrist et al and the findings of an ESRC funded project – *Identities and Social Action, 2004-2009* to emphasise the importance of community development work in facilitating the social action that will underpin the Big Society (www.cdf.org.uk).

Others, such as ICoCo, have seen the Big Society agenda as an entrepreneurial opportunity to generate additional income. ICoCo is offering a service to local authorities and their partners to carry out an assessment of their activities to see if and how these contribute to the Big Society plan. This 'Gearing Up' package includes:

Gearing up for Big Society rapid action

A new two day facilitation package from ICoCo will help local authorities and their partners understand what the Big Society means, whether to engage with it and how to do so.

Facilitated in your locality, the **Gearing up for Big Society rapid action** package will provide a conceptual challenge based upon real practical issues in your local area.

It is also an opportunity for you to inform Central Government what Big Society means for you and to help shape the agenda.

In part we want to help you self-assess where you already measure up to Big Society. More importantly, we want to help you to gear up for Big Society and be able to contribute to a national bank of emerging knowledge and experience about what Big Society means at local levels.

We will post good practice and the emerging definitions and practice on the iCoCo practitioner portal and feed back what you said to CLG.

(Source: ICoCo www.cohesioninstitute.org.uk)

This expert assessment is carried out over a period of approximately two days by a team of three people comprising two ICoCo senior practitioners and one Local Government Idea and Development Councillor Peer, for a mere £3500 plus actual expenses. I wonder if this was what Lord Wei meant when he said that organisations needed a greater mix of funding sources?

There are some for whom this kind of aligning with the Big Society agenda does not sit well (see McCall, this volume) and for whom the whole plan gives cause for concern. Criticisms of the Big Society idea are plentiful and varied.

Concerns and Criticisms

Cameron has stated that he wants the Big Society to be the big idea by which people remember his government. People may indeed remember Cameron's Big Society idea, but not in the way he hopes. Like many other political concepts, there are criticisms that it is too abstract and vague and so means everything to everyone and therefore nothing. The Big Society Observatory blog asserts that the Big Society idea is so big and meaningless that it simply includes everything and everybody, except Labour (UK Regeneration, 2010). The Young Foundation fear that it will become 'little more than a label for a smattering of useful volunteering initiatives that probably would have happened anyway.' (2010: 28). It is a plan with no plan and doomed to fail without the support of a *formal framework of community development* and business support (Barratt, 2010). Even the Tories are not buying it claiming that no one on the doorstep understands it. It is an idea that refuses to 'take flight' (Freedland, 2010).

There are concerns from many that the Big Society agenda is simply an excuse for swingeing cuts, and cuts that would undermine what the Big Society plan is trying to achieve. Dave Prentis, general secretary of the union Unison, said:

Cameron's Big Society should be renamed the big cop-out. The Government is simply washing its hands of providing decent public services and using volunteers as a cut-price alternative. (Churcher and Williams, 2010).

The Charity Commission says that Cameron could be 'pulling the rug out from under' his own Big Society agenda with the savage cuts. Charities estimate losses of between £3 and £5 bn, increasing the risk of many going out of business (Boxell, 2010). The chief executive of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, Sir Stuart Etherington, expressed concern 'about the tidal wave of cuts about to hit the sector' which will 'have a detrimental effect on the services received by some of the most vulnerable people in our society'. The funding issue is the 'elephant in the room' (Churcher and Williams, July 2010). Anna Coote of NEF argues that the Big Society will leave the poor and powerless behind- 'Individuals who are already marginalised by poverty and powerlessness will be left behind by the Big Society, where everything hangs on how much power is assumed by which groups and businesses, to do what, for whom and how.' (2010). The Institute of Fiscal studies confirms that the poor will be hardest hit by the spending cuts being implemented by the government as part of 'rolling back' the state (Elliot and Wintour, 2010).

Of course the success of the Big Society is largely dependent on the volunteering and participatory capacity of the UK citizenry. Although several commentators already cited believe such capacity lies in abundance just under the surface, several studies suggest otherwise. The most recent of these is the Ipsos-Mori RSA commissioned survey referred to earlier and the one upon which Lord Wei relies to support his contention that the nation is waiting for a participatory opportunity (IPPR and PwC, 2010). While some of the figures in this survey seem promising, there are some questions of detail that arise. For example, it states that 42% of people would attend a regular meeting with their neighbourhood police team, but it doesn't say what constitutes 'regular'. Would these be weekly, monthly or annually? The implications and consequences of each are quite different. Also initially promising were the figures for those willing to participate in a neighbourhood watch scheme of 44%. Again, what precisely does 'participate' in this context entail? Does displaying a neighbourhood watch scheme poster in a window of one's home count as 'participation'? What Lord Wei does not mention is that across all areas that the survey looked at (education, public safety and social care) respondents would not be willing to do any of the options offered to 'participate' - 48%, 30% and 27% respectively. Only a paltry 2% would be interested in setting up a school (IPPR and PwC, 2010:10-18). This will not be what Education Secretary Michael Gove wanted to hear.

A consistent finding across many reports is that the biggest barrier to participating is lack of time, despite Lord Wei's assertion that we can 'create' more time (eg. Hansard, 2009, Low et al, 2007). For those juggling working long hours with child care responsibilities and many caring for ageing parents as well, to learn they are now expected to 'participate' or 'volunteer' in addition to this is likely to feel like a kick in the teeth. This seems like a contradiction to previous concerns that parents have not been spending enough time with children or supervising their activities, contributing to the creation of an ASBO nation (Squires, 2008).

Research by Thaler and Sunstein (2009) suggest that the key to encouraging participation is to offer the right kind of 'nudge'. In other words, finding ways of enabling and encouraging people to participate in ways that relate to how they live their lives today. Such a view resonates with past research on participation and barriers to it which recognise that people will participate at different points in their lives, for the purposes they choose and at different times. Different kinds of involvement may be appropriate at different times for different people and

the goal may not be community control, but rather collaborative, shared decision making (Jackson, 2001 in Taylor, 2003). Research by Ipsos-Mori in 2009 found that only one in 20 of the public wanted any involvement in providing services, one in four merely wanted more of a say and half just wanted more information. It is likely to be the usual suspects who participate and volunteer – those who participate in local decision making generally are more likely to be white, older, better educated, richer, middle-class males while volunteers were typically women, of higher social grades, in managerial positions, degree educated, and middle aged (Brodie et al, 2009).

Further criticism of the Big Society agenda comes from those asserting that there is nothing new in this programme. McSmith says that some of the ideas expressed by Cameron on mutual help would not have sounded strange to Victorian ears (July 2010a). Tessa Jowell dismissed the ‘Big Society’ as ‘simply a brass-necked rebranding of programmes already put in place by a Labour government’. She added: ‘Funding for a social investment bank and for community pubs was put in place in March, and residents have been involved in setting council budgets for a number of years.’ (in McSmith, 2010b).

Hazel Blears echoes the view of Tessa Jowell and argues that many of the ideas comprising the Big Society agenda have been ‘appropriated’ from her own 2008 Empowerment White Paper (Blears, 2010). This is a question on the lips of many – Is there anything new about the Big Society agenda?

Old Wine, New Bottles?

There is nothing inherently new in the Big Society idea. Even the phrase itself, ‘Big Society’ does not represent anything new, despite the suggestion from Cameron’s speech writer Ian Birrell that we have ‘Big Society’ simply because he could not think of anything better (2010).

The phrase was used in a report written by Liao Xun in 1986 in the context of political reform in China. The original paper was entitled ‘*Marx and Engels’s Thoughts on ‘Small Government’ and Current Economic Reform*’ and was expanded and revised before being published in 1988. Later articles and reports solidified Xun’s thoughts and ideas on ‘small government, big society’ in a book of the same title in 1991 ‘*Small Government, Big Society: Theory and Practice of Hainan’s New System*’ and *The results of Openness* in 1993. The model he proposes in this

report reads like a blueprint for Cameron's vision of the 'big society'. In it Xun proposes that the government be stripped of all but the most crucial of functions, and be responsible for only those that the individuals and organisations of 'civil' society cannot deliver. The 'small government' that Xun envisioned entailed the following departments and functions:

- Political Guarantee System
 1. General Department
 2. Administrative Supervision
 3. Personnel
 4. Law Department
 5. Overseas [Chinese] Affairs
- Social Service System
 6. Labour Welfare
 7. Physical Training and Public Health
 3. Education and Culture
 9. Minorities and Religious Affairs
- Development and Organisation System
 10. Trade and Industry
 11. Transport and Resources
 12. Agriculture
 13. Scientific and Technical Development
- Economic Supervision and Coordination System
 14. Economic Supervision
 15. Economic Planning
 16. Finances and Taxes
 17. Urban and Rural Resources and Environment

In addition, Xun proposed a provincial People's bank and a Statistical office, the latter intended to facilitate society's supervision of the government's economic work. These sound an awful lot like the Big Society Bank and the shift towards more transparency and accountability through publishing of government data. The crux of the notion of 'big society' for Xun is independent, autonomous self-management. Government functions will be reduced, bureaucracy simplified

and a great number of social and economic undertakings will be handed back to individuals, enterprises, social institutions and other social organisations. For Xun, the individual is the real building block and ownership of assets should be diverse – including state-owned, locally-owned, collective enterprises. Furthermore, Xun was striving for democracy at the grass-roots level and wanted to popularise the social autonomous organisations of villages and towns to promote the process of democratisation of power in local communities (Brødsgaard, 1998:190-196). The overarching theme of ‘small government, big society’ was appropriated as a key political concept by the new political leadership in the reform work. The Conservatives decentralisation green paper *Control Shift* draws upon lessons from abroad in promoting the shift of power from the centre to the local, referring to the USA, Germany, France and Sweden among others (2009:7). Given the striking similarities between Liao Xun’s big society idea and that of Cameron’s, it is surprising that Liao Xun’s work is not mentioned as the archetype of the current plan¹.

The Empowerment Paper that Hazel Blears accuses Cameron of ‘appropriating’ is *Communities in Control* 2008.² This aimed to pass power into the hands of local communities and give real control to a wider pool of active citizens (pg.12). Local councils have a strengthened ‘duty to involve’ local communities and promote democracy while communities are encouraged to become more active through volunteering, serving on committees, standing for election or running and managing local services and assets (pg.8-10).

This was the last for Labour in a long line of policies which sought to ‘empower’ communities and which began soon after Labour took office. The *Modernising Government White Paper* (1999) made a commitment to listen to local people and involve communities in decision making (para. 3.6, 3.7). Giving local communities more influence in decision making was identified by the Social Exclusion Unit in the *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal* (2001) as part of the solution to entrenched poverty and area deprivation (pg.43-53). A range of funding streams were established to help ‘empower’ communities and facilitate their involvement in Neighbourhood Management Schemes and Local Strategic Partnerships. The emphasis on community involvement and empowerment continued in the 2005 progress report *Making It Happen in Neighbourhoods* along with calls for it to continue in the creation of sustainable communities (2005:60-62).

The *Together We Can* (2005) strategy for civil renewal aimed to empower communities to work with public bodies to shape the policies and services that affect them. This, it argued, would engender a sense of ownership and belonging, reduce social tensions, crime and fear of crime and improve health and educational attainment (pg.4). Building on this and *Citizen Engagement and Public Services* (2005), David Miliband called for a ‘double-devolution’ of power from Whitehall to town hall to local communities and citizens to strengthen communities and promote equality (2006:8). The *Strong and Prosperous Communities White Paper* (2006) maintains the theme of empowering communities, pledging support for communities to have greater involvement in owning and managing community assets and more control over their lives (pg.32). This is done primarily through strengthening the role of local authorities and local councillors as representative bodies of the community (pg.32-36). The Sustainable Communities Act 2007 provides a channel for people, through their local authority, to ask central government to take action to promote sustainable communities. It starts with the premise that local people know best how to improve their area (LGA online).

Such a belief has long been asserted by those working closely with communities. Community development practitioners, many whose views are presented in the chapters that follow, assert that involving communities in meaningful ways makes a real and lasting difference and is the key to creating successful, cohesive, vibrant communities (Power, this volume). Indeed, there has been much talk of ‘empowering’ communities and many policies written, decade after decade, but little evidence of such talk translating into action. Even the Big Society idea itself, does not really represent the ‘grass-roots movement’ and power devolution it is purported by some to be (Lord Wei, 2010c). The Big Society is promoted as being a bottom-up, citizen-led and organic alternative programme to that of the previous government which relied too much on top-down, state-led policy. Isn’t the Big Society being implemented *by the government*? Doesn’t that make it inherently top-down? The irony seems lost on most who are eager to jump on the Big Society bandwagon.

Policy-makers and politicians seem determined as ever to start anew, ignoring what has gone before and always intent on reinventing the wheel. There are lessons to be learnt from the past, if only someone would take the time to look and apply them (see Stott et al, 2009). Will the Big Society agenda *really* be any

different? Will this be the policy that doesn't just 'talk the talk', but will 'walk the walk'? Time will tell.

Structure of the Book

This chapter has attempted to shed some light on the question of what the big society is and the degree to which it may or may not be different from previous empowerment agendas. It is likely that just as many questions have been raised as have been answered.

The following chapters will focus on what the Big Society means for the rest of us with each author providing a unique perspective from their own area of expertise and practice. These are interspersed with case studies of the Big Society in action, comprising projects and activities in existence prior to the emergence of the Big Society agenda, lest the government forget that they really did not invent the empowerment wheel.

Mark J. Smith gets things going with an exploration of the intellectual roots of Big Society and argues that interpretations of Big Society are shaped by political assumptions. Steve Wyler continues the theme of exploring the myriad of these interpretations in the context of the different ways in which Development Trusts can contribute to the Big Society. Anne Power purveys a history of community involvement in order to glean lessons for the present followed by Chanan and Miller who are also looking for ways in which the Big Society can work. Ben McCall takes a critical look at power and some of the inherent contradictions of the Big Society promise to devolve power. Katharine Knox examines Big Society in relation to ideas of 'sustainable communities' and research currently being carried out by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on community assets. Anna Coote explores what the Big Society agenda means for different groups and sectors and the potential opportunities and pitfalls that are afforded to each. Helen Haugh looks at some of the ways in which communities can exercise agency and the challenges to this. Neil Stott and Noel Longhurst develop this theme and examine the persistence of place-based poverty, arguing for the need to listen to local communities about what works and what doesn't. David Wood and Sylvia Brown continue the focus on 'community', outlining the particular challenges for rural communities. They call for recognition of the differences between the rural and the urban and the need for solutions to reflect this.

Moving away from the ‘community’ theme, Robert Ashton discusses Big Society as a state of mind, comparing it with Buddhism and says that it offers the chance for the re-birth of community. Paul Tracey too argues that it can offer opportunities for new forms of organisation and argues that organisations in general and the workplace in particular have been ignored so far in the Big Society discourse. Andy Brady asks what the Big Society agenda means for social enterprise, given the central role that such organisations are expected to play. What are the consequences of such a close alignment? In his second contribution Mark J. Smith draws attention to the issue of environmental responsibility and the lack of development around this area in the Big Society agenda, calling for partnerships to include environmental movements.

David Wilson welcomes the need for change and the renewed focus on empowering local communities but warns that it must move beyond rhetoric if it is to work. The chapter by Heather Petch marks the first of three that discuss Big Society in relation to the housing and the voluntary sectors from contributors Andrew Purkiss and Colin Wiles. The chapters from Belinda Bell and Tim Jones bring the focus onto money in the Big Society with their respective discussions on the Big Society Bank – a flagship policy of the Big Society programme; and on wealth and well-being, the latter a topic that Cameron has already expressed a keen interest in pursuing. The final chapter from Jess Steele offers a few final words on how we can make the rhetoric of the Big Society into a reality.

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Footnotes

- 1 Finding Liao Xun's work on big society was not difficult. It did not involve tedious hours trawling through archives in a dark, dingy library. On the contrary, it was located through a simple search ("big society") on Google Scholar during the initial scoping stages of research for this publication.
- 2 The following section taken from Stott et al 2009 *Learning From the Past: Building Community in New Towns, Growth Areas and New Communities*.

Chapter 2

The Intellectual Roots of Big Society

Mark J. Smith

POLIS and CCIG, The Open University

“The big society is like the Holy Trinity: if you’re asking questions about what it means, you don’t understand it” Stephen Bubb, Acevo (The Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations).

Introduction: whose Big Society?

While the idea has deep roots in both conservative and neoliberal thinking and gained some airplay in opposition, David Cameron outlined the basic assumption of the Big Society policy shift in July 2010 as redistributing power from officialdom to the people. The aim is to liberate volunteers and activist citizens from ‘petty regulation’ and unwarranted restrictions to help build strong and stable forms of community based associations. The idea is not new, nor has it been solely articulated with conservative politics and ideology. It speaks also to liberal self-help and socialist cooperative and mutualist traditions. Similarly even non-mainstream parties such as the Green Party may find room in the Big Society tent to create spaces for sustainable forms of localism based on community allotments, shorter food chains and forms of participatory democracy focused on environmental action. Then there is the plethora of third sector organisations, campaigns and initiatives that already provide many services based on volunteering that the ‘Big Society’ aims to promote. At first, even conservative activists described it as vague and intangible but on reflection that may be a reflection of the demand for output dominated policy proposals since the 1990s.

What all forms of ‘Big Society’ approaches appear to have in common is the fixed assumption that there is a clear separation between the state and civil society. This

liberal assumption, like many others such as *rule of law* and *due process*, has become embedded in conservative ideology by virtue of its status as a tradition. In the context of a Liberal-conservative Coalition Government focused on deficit reduction through public spending cuts, the boundary between public and private life is likely to shift. Certainly this happened in the 1980s, when Thatcherism attempted to roll back the frontiers of the state and redefine what should be seen as public policy. In the process, issues such as unemployment, homelessness, squalor, and industrial relations became seen as matters for personal responsibility and civil society rather than state intervention. While 13 years of New Labour have seen some areas of personal responsibility reabsorbed into policy making, it has also done so with certain conditions in a contract with the individual citizen concerned with both rights and responsibilities. For example, unemployment benefits being linked to active job seeking. Hence, over the last 70 years the boundary has moved back and forth considerably. This raises a new question, is the Big Society just another pseudonym for shifting the boundary so that some areas of public policy, particularly on welfare and care, become personal difficulties and matters of personal responsibility or does it represent something new questioning the boundary itself. We will return to this in the conclusion.

The ‘small platoons’ of the Big Society.

Traditional conservatism, sometimes called Burkean or ‘one nation’ conservatism after Disraeli, relies on what it believes is common sense. Many conservatives even reject the idea that they have an ideology at all. This kind of conservative thinking has an underlying distrust of individualism and abstraction, drawing more on intuition and custom. For instance, conservatives see rights and duties as being socially constructed, that is, they emerge in definite and concrete circumstances, rather than being the logical outcome of abstract principles. These concrete rights and duties emerge from the activities and customs of civil society, organised by the *small platoons* of voluntary associations. In addition, philanthropic actions by those who benefit from inequality are seen as central to maintaining the social fabric. In the case of the Big Society, for example, Cameron has not specified outcomes and objectives, merely that government can only facilitate what individuals, groups and communities wish to do. We can see this is the diverse projects highlighted by Francis Maude and Eric Pickles: the creation of a community centre, a community pub and continuation of local bus transport (the Fellrunner scheme) for Eden Valley; the attempts at greater transparency and accountability in local government and adopt-a-street scheme by Windsor and

Maidenhead Council; developing gardening projects in green public spaces and promoting householder gritting in the winter in the Borough of Sutton; and an opportunity to further develop volunteer support for National Museums Liverpool (NML) led by TV producer Phil Redmond. Even the proposals for the mutualisation of the Post Office can be couched in terms of the Big Society. These projects can all be seen as creating the means through which citizens and neighbourly associations seek their own ends. In practice, liberal and conservative approaches agree on a great deal, such as the institution of private property and the idea of self-help. However, liberals tend to see private property as an application of the general principle of individual freedom in the economic sphere, whereas conservatives see it as a tried and trusted principle that has come to be seen as a beneficial arrangement because it has functioned effectively in the past. The following four principles underpin conservative assumptions and values.

- **Prescription** – The assumptions and values that are given or laid down from the past are good and provide the cement through which the organic development of social forms can take place. History and tradition provide us with our moral values, sense of place and identity; thus they deserve our respect.
- **Prudence** – Leaders should behave like prudent gardeners not social engineers, that is, they should demonstrate extreme caution before violating the ‘natural order’. We should see the assumptions and values of conservatism as a guide to action rather than an abstract philosophy.
- **Presumption** – Any social institution that has existed for a long time is a product of trial and error and embodies the accumulated wisdom of generations. Decisions should respect the partnership of past, present and future generations, offering a multigenerational perspective.
- **Prejudice** – Instinctive reactions are wise and virtuous for they reflect the complex processes of socialization through which the social order is reproduced. If you think too hard, you will become confused and act unwisely. So, according to conservative thinking, all prejudices are virtuous.

There are, in addition, certain narrative features through which we can understand the main ideas of the conservative approach. As a way of thinking,

it draws heavily from the established institutional forms in everyday life. History is clearly very important but the way it is characterized draws upon the story of the ‘march of progress’ – what we have is a complex product of the lessons we have learnt from the past. Any attempt to wipe the slate clean and remake social institutions throws away the wisdom embodied in rituals, practices and institutions.

Perhaps the most cogent and lucid account of this attitude can be seen in the writings of Edmund Burke, who has remained a touchstone of conservative virtues since the eighteenth century. Burke himself was concerned about the institutional transformations that resulted from the French Revolution and the emergence of the abstract ideas of the rights of man. For Burke, all useful principles arise from tradition and habitual customs rather than reason, i.e. conservative thinking is anti-rationalist. For conservative approaches, the ultimate goal of tranquillity and order can only be guaranteed through continuity and the recognition of the natural basis of social inequalities. In one of Burke’s better analogies, he compared society to the theatre in which the most important people (including himself) were on the stage playing out their appropriate roles, while the audience (the unwashed masses) laughed and cried in response, awaiting the next twist in the tale with baited breath; meanwhile, God wrote the plot.

The most effective metaphors in conservative political discourse are articulated through the assumption that society has the features of a living organism and that its underlying principles are beyond the human capacity for rational explanation. This approach assumes that human beings are flawed (in some variations of conservatism we are tainted by ‘original sin’), so that any attempt to undermine the social fabric will create opportunities for human weaknesses, desires, aggression, stupidity and perversion to be unleashed. This pessimistic view of ‘human nature’ is perhaps the most abiding legacy of the conservative vision. Deliberate attempts to foster progress are equated with the cause of decadence and social decline; as George Murdock once stated, without the family there would be ‘sexual chaos’. Conservative thinking also ties change in one part of ‘the social’ to adaptations elsewhere, and suggests that social change should only be attempted in a piecemeal fashion, if at all. This approach assumes that the best innovations emerge as the unanticipated consequences of practices, not from deliberate rational design, a key feature of Big Society rhetoric. When people alter social institutions deliberately it is always for the worse. The most

important maxim of conservative thinking is to conserve the existing social arrangements and only reluctantly accept change, usually when it is long overdue and when a failure to initiate a limited reform programme would produce social discord. For conservatives, this cautious approach is a virtue, as Edmund Burke suggested: 'All government, indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue, and every prudent act, is founded on compromise and barter'. As a result, the radicalism of neo-liberal strands in conservative politics, to be considered next, has also run against the grain of much of conservative thinking and practice.

The radical edge of Big Society

While some neo-liberals hark back to the 1980s as a touchstone for policy (to quote Mrs Thatcher, 'there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families'), one particular set of intellectual ideas in this strand are very compatible with the Big Society theme- the social and political philosophy developed by Friedrich von Hayek. Unlike some neoliberals who assumed that Adam Smith's individual was a rational minimaxing actor constantly weighing up costs and benefits in a felicific calculus, Hayek recognised that perfect knowledge was an illusion, that knowledge was in fact unevenly distributed and widely dispersed. Moreover, he suggested that collective entities such as 'capitalism' or the 'economy' were incomprehensible. In short he argued that:

The concrete knowledge which guides the action of any group of people never exists as a consistent and coherent body. It only exists in the dispersed, incomplete and inconsistent form in which it appears in many individual minds.
(Hayek, 1952: 49-50)

This was Hayek's basis for addressing the coordination problem in market based societies, which he then applied to political and social institutions. This approach is a direct critical response to socialist claims that markets can be subject to political calculation in an efficient way in the early Twentieth Century. Drawing upon the idea of intersubjectivity, he suggests all individual actors develop through their relations of mutual discovery in a manner that could never be completely planned or anticipated. For Hayek, all attempts to improve the world based on altruistic motives would have damaging consequences, so it was better to create the conditions of a minimal state so that a spontaneous order could emerge. Having said that Hayek recognised that in conditions of market failure, public provision of services and infrastructure were necessary.

Markets are viewed as processes rather than as represented in the static representations of conventional economic theory. The emergence of competition is portrayed as a discovery procedure with the market as more than an exchange mechanism between isolated individuals. It is this conception of the economy as a catallaxy, as having a complex and binding social dimension that makes this approach relevant to the debates on the Big Society. So while Hayek starts from the standpoint of an individual, they are not seen as discrete entities purely concerned with self interest without regards for others. Instead, they are viewed as engaged in a process of mutual discovery through which everyone benefits and as a result of individuals entering communities, enemies become friends or at least become only adversaries (Smith, 2000, 2005; Smith and Pangaspa, 2008; Smith, 2000).

Consequently, we can see how this differs from the rationalist assumptions of free market advocates and individualistic anarchists (Nozick, 1974) of the 1970s and 1980s who tried to reject the very idea of society. Neoliberals, residing often on the right of the Conservative party, despite their scepticism and reservations, thus have the tools to assimilate the Big Society approach. As the neo-liberal sociologist, Peter Saunders, suggests:

Whether Cameron really thinks he can start to roll it back I don't know – I doubt he even sees the problem in terms of an ever-enlarging welfare state, and I have to say I am hugely pessimistic. If Thatcher couldn't reduce the size of the state (% of GDP taken by state was the same when she left office as when she came to power), I doubt any politician can. But this is what the Big Society is ultimately about: who will organise everyday life for the great bulk of ordinary (and still competent) people, politicians or the people themselves?

The portrayal of Big Society as having two sides – freedom from obstacles by central and national government and the capacity for individuals or groups of individuals to do what they want – draws upon the idea of creating the space for spontaneous orders to emerge. Hence the Coalition Government's focus on the need for a culture change in the relationship between the state and the people, where non-state actors solve their own problems rather than looking to political authorities to do it for them. The role of the state becomes solely helping people solve their own problems rather than acting on their constituents behalf. The vanguard projects in Windsor-Maidenhead and Sutton highlight this by focusing on removing regulations and controls that inhibit citizen action, while the Government has

promised legislation to promote the rights to buy services and facilities, bid to run services and build new facilities including businesses and homes.

There are some problems to highlight. The emphasis on rights is not matched with a focus on corresponding duties for activist citizens to consult widely amongst less active citizens. Active citizens are not always representative of all their neighbours. To hand powers to redraw local transport routes and levels of service to a self-selected citizenry may generate innumerable problems rather than more efficient outcomes. There is also the problem of projects being approved because they match the political objectives of the Coalition Government rather than the needs of communities. It remains important to consider the distribution of goods and bads that follow from changes in services from public to private control. Within the neo-liberal mindset, the idea of a spontaneous order is however distinguished from that of 'organization'. A spontaneous order provides a context for individual liberty to flourish and individual justice is maintained. Organisation involves a planned social order where social and distributive justice are outcomes (Hayek, 1973). For this strand of conservatism the latter is not on the agenda whereas for traditional or Burkean conservatism some degree of social justice can be acceptable if beneficial for the social order.

The new dilemmas of Red Toryism/Big Society

The Big Society project is portrayed by Cameron as a basis for radical social reform (as radical as Thatcher's economic reforms in the 1980s). Phillip Blond (Director of *ResPublica*) promoted the idea of the Big Society to cover the tensions between these two traditions, to provide a big tent where different intellectual traditions could feel comfortable. This 'Red Toryism' also aimed to carve out a new political space to disassociate conservatism from finance capitalism and a neo-liberal state. Indeed, the tent has become even bigger with the involvement of the Liberal Democrat Party in the coalition. It should be borne in mind that some of the Orange Book liberals have more in common with the neo-liberal strand of conservatism than traditional conservatism. For example, after some months in the coalition, Francis Maude considers himself more to the left of Danny Alexander. Blond's input has been especially focused on the weakening of community, the dis-associative tendencies of civil society and the growing sense of anomie (normlessness) in everyday life – usually caught by the slogan of the 'broken society'. Similarly, the Centre for Social Justice established by Iain Duncan

Smith has focused on bottom-up projects to counter the effects of poverty with some cross-party support. These initiatives seem to draw more from the Burkean concern to maintain or restore the social and moral fabric of society.

The neo-liberal imperatives, however, still have a dominant role in setting the parameters of public spending and the extent of cuts to reduce the budget deficit. These are likely to shape the context of the Big Society initiatives. Indeed, failure to produce substantive outcomes in this area will amplify the criticisms that Big Society is a distraction from the substantive effects of reduced state support for voluntary organisations. Indeed, as the following chapters will illustrate in areas such as housing, welfare, community regeneration and the environment, there are real tensions between the desire to reduce financial support and the need to facilitate projects (or renew old ones) with volunteer support. There will also be dilemmas generated by pressure for the Big Society initiatives to fill the gaps left by the retreat of state provision and, in particular, whether there are active partnerships between citizen initiatives and political authorities matched by the necessary funds.

Genuinely active partnerships work against the grain of there being a clear separation of state and civil society, and they challenge many conservative and liberal assumptions about who or what holds responsibility for 'social problems'. So it is here that some resistance to partnerships may be witnessed within the Coalition Government and where the voluntary sector may have to use its full powers of persuasion. We started with a quotation from Stephen Bubb and it is useful here to highlight another argument he develops. Bubb argues that the Cameron Government should not assume that the third sector will pick up tasks where the state withdraws and that any future alternative leader should fall into the trap of defending state action regardless of whether it could be better accomplished by the third sector – in short that a genuine partnership would go beyond such concerns. So in answer to the opening quotation from Bubb, the meaning of Big Society depends really on how you frame it in terms of your political assumptions. Here we have focused on how conservatives and neo-liberals frame the idea, but, as subsequent chapters will demonstrate, it can be rearticulated and redirected in ways that generate radically different outcomes. In addition, each policy area or set of issues may demonstrate that Burkean Conservatives, neo-liberals or Liberal Democrats may prove to be dominant in each case. Care needs to be taken to assess which Big Society assumptions are at work.

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Chapter 3

Building the Big Society: Solid Foundations or Shifting Sands

Steve Wylor

Development Trusts Association

On Halloween Night in 1987 Margaret Thatcher uttered the words which helped to define in many people's minds what Thatcherism actually stood for. "You know," she said, "there is no such thing as society". Now, twenty three years later, the political discourse has shifted, and on 18 May 2010, in their very first joint statement, Cameron and Clegg announced that "the aim of the Coalition Government is to build a Big Society."

There is much in the notion of the Big Society which commands admiration. It signals a determination, led from the front by the Prime Minister, that government has a role, even a duty, to create conditions for independent civil society to flourish. It is genuinely a Big Idea, representing a rejection of the command-and-control state, and equally of unbridled corporate greed.

But like many Big Ideas, it is capable of multiple interpretations, and it is no surprise that the Big Society has become a battleground for competing ideologies. Should Big Society imply a focus on individual responsibility, or on collective action? Should it represent a challenge to established power structures (as for example the term community organising might imply), or should it allow business as usual for banks and corporates and established institutions? Should it require state intervention and state investment to succeed, or should we now be looking to a new generation of wealthy philanthropists to finance social progress?

The battle of ideas is further intensified by the identification of the Big Society

with two other central but contested policies adopted by the Coalition Government: localism and public service reform. Localism for some implies the liberation of neighbourhood communities from constraint, conferring upon them the necessary resources and powers to determine their own futures – Soviets of the people in middle England! But for others the localism agenda stops firmly short at the Town Hall door, behind which professionals continue to exercise power, with a veneer of democratic legitimacy provided by elected councillors.

Equally, public service reform can imply very different things. Coalition Government proposals aim for a reduction of state delivery, and a far greater emphasis on customer satisfaction and on outcomes, including a demand-driven personalisation agenda and payment by results. But while for some the means to accomplish this is through transfer of services and assets from the state into independent ‘mutuals’ and social enterprises, for others it can only be achieved by a further acceleration of New Labour’s mass privatisation of the public realm.

This battle of ideas is, at its heart, a debate about the capability and potential for ordinary people, especially those living in low-income communities, to play a direct part in controlling resources and exercising power. For those who take the view that such people represent a liability (they are badly educated, they are economically unproductive, they are in effect *less capable than we are*) then Big Society becomes essentially a philanthropic and moralising effort. If so, the Big Society is unlikely to succeed, and we should expect, perhaps sooner rather than later, a reversion to previous government strategies of command and control by the state, or the abandonment of the underclass, as in the Thatcherite model. On the other hand, for those who regard such people as assets, or at least as potential assets, rather than liabilities, then the Big Society could, in principle, have much to offer, if only it can be built on firm foundations.

But what are those foundations? Do they already exist, or do they need to be built afresh? Some early indications from the new government, at least from some of those driving forward the Big Society idea, suggest that they believe that many of the existing foundations are rotten at the core, that the ground needs to be cleared, and a whole new infrastructure constructed.

Their plans are nothing if not ambitious. Web-based platforms will provide an unparalleled ease of connectivity, allowing mobilisation of immense numbers of

people for social good, something, they imply, that moribund civil society institutions have failed to achieve. A new generation of ‘social apps’ will emerge, an unstoppable proliferation of devices and tools, generated in response to market demands by people of goodwill rather than by so-called experts, creating a universal resource bank for social action. Community organisers, highly trained and independent of state funding, will facilitate local action and establish neighbourhood groups, acting entirely in the public interest, displacing the ‘usual suspects’ whose actions, they hint, are all too often determined by vested interests.

An important part of the new infrastructure is the Big Society Network, which claims that it will accept no government funding (although it does concede that initially it is operating from the Communities and Local Government Department offices, and has been staffed in part by civil servants on secondment).

There is always an excitement and energy in sweeping away the old and bringing in the new. And some of the fresh thinking does have potential to have positive effects. Lord Nat Wei’s description of the Big Society as ‘a society where people don’t feel small’ is evocative and persuasive, and anyone working in the community sector will recognise the truth that even well-meaning bureaucracies and professionals too often discourage and diminish people with whom they interact. There is surely value in any effort to reverse this, and to create the means for far more people, whatever their position or their starting point, to engage in efforts for the common good.

But the Big Society disdain for the ‘usual suspects’ is troubling. It brings risks. At the very least, unnecessary mistakes will be made, simply because of a lack of community experience. Furthermore, any attempt to create all afresh, to introduce new national and local infrastructure, to reject what already exists, vastly increases the difficulty and expense of implementing the Big Society ideas. So a key question is, does what already exists, or at least some elements of it, provide in fact a good foundation for Big Society to flourish, and to meet its objectives faster and more cost-effectively?

The 2010 survey by the Development Trusts Association provides one part of the answer. There are now 492 development trusts, independent community groups set up and run by local people in mainly low income communities, both urban and rural. Such organisations are aspirational, often inspiring, and in

driving forward local community-led solutions, addressing social, economic, environmental challenges, through a combination of community self-help, enterprise, and asset building, could be regarded as the best embodiment of the Big Society in action,

Crucially, these are more than single stand-alone charitable agencies: they also provide the means and opportunity for others to act. In the last year, development trusts attracted 19,400 volunteers. They also supported 10,800 other community organisations (with office space, venues for meetings, start up assistance, small grants, business advice, and so on). Are all of these the ‘usual suspects’? If so, there are certainly a lot of them.

Furthermore, development trusts are demonstrating cost-efficient routes to social good. They have proven that, even in the most economically challenging localities, community groups can reduce dependency on state subsidy. Annual earned income among development trusts has risen to £157m, a rise of 15% from the previous year, now representing well over half of all income of these organisations.

The development trusts movement has also demonstrated the ability of community organisations to bring land and buildings (often underused or derelict) into productive community ownership, transforming them into true assets. There now exists £565m of assets in community ownership within the DTA network, including shops, managed workspace, leisure centres, community woodland, cafes and restaurants, renewable energy, and so on.

Income from these assets and enterprises is reinvested back in the community, creating wealth in poor communities and keeping it there, generating from within the resources for Big Society action for the long term.

The practice of community enterprise and asset ownership is geographically widespread, extending from densely populated inner city areas, to outlying housing estates, to coalfields and steelworks villages, to coastal towns, to remote rural communities (in Scotland nearly two-thirds of the Western Isles are now in community ownership).

Development trusts are not alone. Their growth has been accompanied by a revival in recent years of other aspirational and effective community

organisations, dedicated to social change from the bottom up. Over a hundred members of the Bassac network (settlements and social action centres) provide a platform for local action, helping people do the things that matter most to them and to their communities. There are hundreds of community-run village shops and pubs in the networks supported by Plunkett Foundation and Co-ops UK, as well as the pioneering social firms (community-based enterprises employing people with disability) assisted by Social Firms UK.

Looking more widely there exists a vast array of building preservation trusts, community arts and sports organisations, civic societies, community associations, village hall committees. And of course there are also a great number of organisations established to serve a particular community of identity (people who are homeless, or those who have a particular health problem, or refugees, or people who are elderly, for example).

Many of these can be described as ‘community anchor organisations’, there for the long term, building connections and trust between different parts of the community, and between those in the community and those in the public and private sectors, facilitating conversation and collaboration, challenging where necessary, and getting things done in the interests of the community as a whole. Many of these are already practicing, day-in day-out, exactly what the new proposed army of community organisers is intended to achieve.

While it is unquestionably the case that some community organisations have become moribund, more concerned with their own survival than with their originating purpose, or serving a dwindling number of people, or failing to adapt to changes around them, this represents only a minority. Many more are continually reinventing themselves, while remaining true to their mission, making conscious and commendable efforts to travel a more entrepreneurial journey, redefining their operations, extending their reach, achieving remarkable things.

There is now so much high quality community enterprise, in so many places, that it is very difficult indeed to understand why the Big Society strategy seems so determined to ignore its existence. A determination even more astonishing in the face of the many and considerable challenges which the Big Society faces.

For a start, it would be naive to assume that the interests of local government and community groups always coexist happily, despite many outstanding examples of co-design and collaboration, and despite a recent succession of community asset transfers which has given confidence to the can-do optimists on both sides. It is not inevitable that proposals by community groups to take over town hall services will be welcomed with open arms by people whose power and status derive from the departments they control.

Timing is all, and in this case timing is difficult. The spending cuts are already leading to loss of funding for hundreds of community enterprises. Local authorities and other public bodies are finding it much cheaper and more comfortable to sacrifice their arms length suppliers rather than reduce their own staffing, with all the pain and cost involved. But unless this trend is somehow reversed, the outcome will be devastating: many of the very organisations needed to build the Big Society, to bring fresh community-led solutions, will simply not be there when the opportunity comes.

Above all, many see the Big Society as little more than a smokescreen for impending spending cuts. Without question, bitterness and frustration will be felt in communities as the cuts bite, above all in the poorest communities where cuts will hit hardest. It will be immensely difficult to channel negative community anger into positive community self-help, especially if the Big Society effort is championed by the very government which is driving through the unpopular cuts. Exhortations by ministers to take to the streets, not to protest, but rather to enjoy a Big Lunch, may not be well received when there is no food on the community table.

There is a real risk that the association of Big Society with a cuts agenda will be deeply damaging to what is essentially a good cause, and discredit it for a decade. This is exactly what happened to Care in the Community, introduced with the aim of closing down inhumane asylums and offering a higher quality of integrated care, but which quickly became associated with the abandonment of the most vulnerable in order to save money.

There is a lot at stake here. A failure to realise the Big Society vision is not just a problem for the advisors and ministers and officials charged with making it work. It is not just a problem for the Prime Minister who has set such personal

store by it. Much more importantly it is a problem for the can-do aspirational problem-solving part of the community sector which against all the odds has achieved so much. If the Big Society is built on shifting sands rather than solid foundations, if it is discredited, it will inevitably discredit the best community enterprises by association, however unfairly, prompting a swing of the pendulum back towards state municipalism or corporate greed. Development trusts and similar organisations would of course continue to work and to achieve great things, despite everything, as they always have done. But this opportunity to step up a gear, create a step change, and systematically transform communities across the country for the better and for the long term, would have slipped through our fingers.

Chapter 4

Small is Beautiful: Can Big Society Advocates Learn From Experience?

Anne Power

London School of Economics

This chapter about the intrinsic value of small scale community initiatives in the face of severe resource pressures covers five areas:

- a brief history of community leadership and action;
- political interest in community involvement;
- the challenges of inequality;
- current loss of public resources for community action;
- and community resilience.

The history of community leadership and action

In the late 1960s, in the wake of the American Civil Rights Movement, the triumph of small, marginal Black American communities over the most powerful, richest and unequal developed country in the world led to a new community movement across the USA that quickly spread to the UK and other parts of Europe (King, 1968). The community movement took much inspiration from the courage and tenacity of Civil Rights leaders. It was often led by women, invariably arising from low income areas, always struggling to take power from a lumbering state and reach into corners of society where the state couldn't reach. Community groups often plugged holes that public bodies were unwilling or unable to plug. Sometimes they simply didn't recognise the problem, as in the case of large scale clearance of slum areas, which public officials believed they were doing for the greater good of society.

London, Liverpool and Glasgow where community groups flourished, witnessed a rush of housing cooperatives, adventure playgrounds, community playgroups

and nurseries, community law centres, community cafes, food cooperatives, and so on. They also campaigned for more community control of everything that affected them. By the mid-1970s, most of these initiatives were receiving small grants from government, local councils or charities. They had only been 'self-sufficient' for a very short initial phase, often relying on student and community volunteers to set up projects. But the money they received from government was tiny, compared with equivalent costs of council services, such as nurseries, children's homes, housing estates (Hamilton, 1977).

The real value of the local services that community organisations created was huge – children kept out of care, young people kept away from crime, derelict houses restored and reoccupied, unused church halls repopulated, neglected and unpopular council estates repaired and loved again by their tenants. Many local people in local jobs got some training and plentiful work experience as a result, not to mention a sense of pride, confidence, motivation and achievement. Many highly educated and highly committed young graduates volunteered to help these groups and become community workers in the projects. They were attracted by a combination of the chance to make a contribution and the sense of belonging such groups engendered. They offered an alternative to big systems and impersonal bureaucracy.

The underlying philosophy of community organisations was captured in the best selling book, *Small is Beautiful*, by E.F. Schumacher (1973). It offered an insightful account of why governments and successful companies favour 'bigness,' and why the pursuit of 'bigness' was damaging to the human spirit. Large-scale systems often work against, rather than with or for communities, even when economies of scale were intended to help. Schumacher also recognised that the natural environment, on which all human life depends, was being irrevocably damaged by large scale development of all kinds, and that planet Earth would not withstand or sustain the kind of gigantesque interventions and impacts that overdeveloped Western economies created. As the book was written, the UK and other similarly rich industrial countries were heading straight into a major financial crisis of 1974, following the oil price hike of 1974. The writing was on the wall, and many saw the inevitable end of readily available energy, in particular oil, and of heavy manufacturing (Meadows, Meadows and Randers, 1972). Public investment in large scale projects, from road building to new universities and high rise estates, shrank to a shadow of its former scale.

Political Interest in Community Involvement

The testing experiences of the 1970s chime strongly today, with 'peak oil' ever more widely recognised, and continued industrial decline still causing job losses in the West; environmental pressures visible everywhere; public spending cuts and economic shrinkage are biting deeply across European and US economies. In the deep 1970s' recession, the government cancelled public programmes, such as house building, and turned its attention to existing communities, particularly in disadvantaged areas, where large scale demolition blight had wreaked havoc and where post war immigrant communities had flocked in the boom years of fast economic growth, filling the housing spaces left as traditional working class communities were re-housed into new council estates. Both the run-down housing areas crowded with newcomers and the unsettled new estates filled with 'dishoused' families provided a huge challenge to community organisers. The Labour government rushed to support community solutions, because the cost was far lower than the alternative of comprehensive public intervention. Council house building rapidly slowed, and the renovation of run down, blighted old terraces began, using new community-based vehicles, housing associations and cooperatives, as a condition for public support. Community involvement was a pre-requisite (Hamilton, 1977).

In the early 1980s, a radical Conservative Government, driven by a new recession and further economic troubles, cut public services, public investment, public ownership, and traditional forms of welfare. Community responses became more conspicuous and more strident. They often took the form of serious disorder – Brixton, Handsworth, Toxteth, Broadwater Farm, Notting Hill and St Paul's became bywords in the clash between frustrated young men, out of work, out of school and often out of their families too, and an edgy, defensive, poorly trained police force trying to keep control (Lord Scarman, 1982). There were also clashes with miners, print workers, social workers and teachers. The strife, which had been far more serious in US cities in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement, could only be resolved by a rush of 'pro-community', localised programmes, aiming to involve local people in shaping their own destiny. The argument was that by participating in services affecting them, citizens would encourage better decisions and better services. Participation would also strengthen communities and give people a stake, build skills and unleash untapped community resources (Power, 1987). In fact, many new community-led structures and initiatives from earlier decades had become part of mainstream government thinking, such as

parent involvement in schools, playgroups, and nurseries; housing cooperatives and tenant management organisations (of which there are now around 250 in England); community ownership of unwanted buildings; self-build housing, community gardens and allotments. These community efforts all required intense support and ‘hand-holding’. As in the previous decade, the 1980s chime with today, our problems and government responses; you could call these small early initiatives precursors of the Big Society.

People who have helped tenant cooperatives and tenant management organisations to take charge of their difficult estates, who have organised parent-run adventure playgrounds and nurseries, know just how difficult it is to release the necessary financial resources, to create the minimal requirements of safety, trustworthiness and transparency, and to tap expertise where necessary in accounting, surveying, building, supervising young people and children, accessing training, etc. There is no community-led short cut, and public frameworks as well as public underpinning are vital to progress in community-based services in marginal and highly disadvantaged areas. Inequality only serves to make these needs starker, so areas of the country with flourishing community organisations tend to have strong supports, some financial backing and visible local needs that can be realistically tackled, as opposed to wider structural problems such as inadequate transport links, loss of major employers or failing schools, all requiring wider action.

The challenges of inequality

Many political leaders and community activists on the left see the 1980s’ shifts in government thinking and support, from public to private, from universal to project-specific, as a betrayal of the post-war consensus that public redistribution through tax and spending, public compensation for job losses, minimum income through the welfare system and universal public services, were essential to a more equal society. Indeed, over the period from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, inequality had risen steeply, economic problems had multiplied, and free market growth, accelerated by the loss of public resources, had driven wealth creation at the top, at the expense of serious marginalisation at the bottom, where people often became poorer in real terms (Hills, 1995). This inequality was accentuated by new immigration from regions such as Africa, South Asia and South America.

The impressive legacy of all these community efforts was marred by deep, structural problems and by even more serious constraints. Problems seemed

particularly intractable in old industrial areas, in large council estates and many inner urban areas with high concentrations of minority residents, and Government efforts to ‘enable communities’ were unequal to the scale of the problems. Renewed disorders in the early 1990s affected 29 poor areas in all, proving that it was not enough simply to privatise public services, free the markets, and exhort communities to do more for themselves – the ‘on your bike’ attitude the government yearned to inspire (Power and Tunstall, 1997). Something more sophisticated was needed to transform ‘left-behind’ communities into powerhouses of new solutions and new leadership – more than just organising.

When New Labour came to power in 1997, after 18 years ‘in the wilderness’, the government was desperate to make its mark in important ‘Big Society’ ways. It wanted communities to be ‘at the helm’ of decisions in area programmes, it wanted more parental involvement and choice in schools, it supported community representation on regeneration and other boards; it introduced ‘community chests’ and ‘community forums’, it initiated devolution and ‘double devolution’; it encouraged ‘community asset’ ownership and social enterprise. Underlying all this was a clear commitment to reducing inequality – for example, “no-one should be disadvantaged by where they live”, and “end child poverty” (Hills, Sefton and Stewart, 2009).

Government was impatient with the slow pace of change, and with bureaucratic resistance. It argued that public disinvestment had impoverished much of our major infrastructure, such as railways, educational and health buildings. It therefore recreated a public framework of accountability upwards in order to reform the public sector through new targets, performance indicators and public audit (Hills et al, 2009, Toynbee and Walker, 2010, Power, 2007). Not all these approaches worked, but in the poorest areas there were measurable changes for the better, often helped by significant community inputs.

Policy operated within a growing economy with tax revenues aplenty and abundant available credit, fuelling public investment on an ever wider scale up to 2004, largely driven top down. But scant regard was paid to the inherent unsustainability and serious environmental impact of such large scale growth activities. The international financial crisis and the recession that followed, the crippling deficit incurred through the banking crisis and the stimulus package

to revive the economy, all led to a loss of confidence and the election of a new Coalition Government without a clear electoral mandate, and with difficult economic problems to overcome.

The current loss of resources for community services

The public sector will not fare well under the new government's pledge to cut public spending by one fifth over the current parliament (four years), while increasing as little as possible the burden of taxation on working households. Public services and their delivery bodies will bear the brunt of the cuts, but so too will many community level projects. The coalition has committed itself to driving down public sector financial support, and this will directly hit the 'voluntary' organisations that have increasingly run publicly funded services or stepped into service roles government over the last decade or so. Development Trusts often play this role. The Development Trust Association, founded as the umbrella support organisation for social and community enterprises, estimates that fully 60% of its members may lose significant revenue, including vital core funding. Voluntary organisations that receive more than 40% of their funding from the government will lose out heavily. The Young Foundation estimates that voluntary organisations will lose 40 to 50% of their overall funding this way (Mulgan, 2010). Many community activities and centres will fold, some have already, and the consensus is that worse is yet to come.

The current politically driven cuts will have a much heavier impact on the poor and on poor areas, because public services form a bigger share of overall resources in more needy areas. This makes a mockery of the Big Society. How can more sharing, caring communities, based on mutual aid, cooperation, neighbourhood activity and self reliance, as described in the Big Society speeches, emerge from the bonfire of support agencies, the shredding of equalising programmes and the loss of active support for community-level action?

Regardless of the harsh political rhetoric and disruptive restructuring of government that we are witnessing, the flow of resources, both public and private, was bound to shrink, and community initiative was bound to be rediscovered as the consequences of recession rippled through society, and belt-tightening became the order of the day. Many local services and activities can *only* operate effectively locally – housing repairs for example. We know that most people function within small and familiar circuits in their neighbourhoods.

‘Community’ has retained its meaning and hold on the public imagination, particularly for families in poor areas. Most importantly we now know that oil and all forms of fossil fuel and other primary commodities – such as steel, concrete, hardwood, even basic foods – are under growing pressures of population, environmental limits and sheer exhaustion. We have to make local communities more resilient – more able to withstand and overcome sudden shocks and loss of support systems – because such shocks are becoming more common as environmental problems grow (Hopkins, 2008).

Community action takes many shapes in complex, modern urban societies like ours – school improvements, more parks and play spaces, more community-based services and more micro-community projects that are actually community-driven, based on self-help and cooperative principles. But even these micro-scale projects require a helping hand, know-how and capacity building (LSE Housing and Communities, 2010).

Community Resilience

For all these reasons, linked to resource limits, political and economic uncertainty, the National Communities Resource Centre at Trafford Hall, Chester was founded in 1991, in the depths of recession, to train and support community leaders in organising local self-help action and problem-solving. Its work is underpinned by a ‘can-do’ philosophy and a ‘how-to’ approach to training. Over the last two years, Trafford Hall has developed a residential training programme to train community leaders in building community resilience in the face of climate change, targeting vulnerable groups and disadvantaged areas. The programme, called ‘Community Futures,’ tackles food growing and preparation, repairing, fixing and reusing unwanted ‘stuff,’ cycling and walking as local forms of transport, community gardens, choirs, cafes, camping and youth survival training. The programme promotes many other ideas and opportunities around cooperatives and mutual aid, ancient forms of social organisation that were widespread in pre-industrial societies all over the world, which took on new forms of community organising in the 19th and 20th centuries (Thompson, 1992).

The Big Society today tries to build on and recreate the learned experience of community enterprises and self-protection through the ages. It has to be seen as a lever for people to learn and re-learn local organising skills, release and discover

untapped energy, build on old ideas of interdependence and create new roles for the people who are often undervalued in the crude calculations of the market. For unless we can include marginal, low-income communities, unless we can revalue the physical and social assets of undervalued areas, there will be little enthusiasm among community leaders to work for the Big Society. By definition, the idea does not focus on individuals but in the common good; it does not mean individual consumption but collective benefits.

Conclusion

King penguins in the bitter Antarctic winter survive by staying close together, sharing that precious survival resource, warmth, and following a collective instinct to take turns in sharing the burden of biting cold. The analogy is not perfect and King Penguins are an extreme case, but our largely affluent and highly unequal societies can learn from this pattern of sharing to ensure equal chances of survival. If scarce resources are to help everyone 'survive and thrive,' including the poor, then everyone must be part of the sharing. Disadvantaged communities – maybe 20% of the total – can share their efforts and strengths too. They after all provide the most basic services in our system. This idea of sharing and of pooling limited resources, deploying them to support small scale, community level action, underlines the intrinsic merit in the Big Society idea. If we share the pain, we all gain. The Big Society means no less than a more equal society.

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Chapter 5

The Big Society: How it Could Work

Gabriel Chanan & Colin Miller

PACES:

www.pacesempowerment.co.uk

Introduction

The big society is an important idea which should be pursued and implemented irrespective of the rest of the political package. Presented as if wholly new, it is in fact a refreshment and amplification of a cross-party theme that has been building up for decades. All three main parties have made important contributions to it over the past generation (the Lib-Dems on local councils which they have led), and all three urgently need to take it forward in the period of economic retribution which began on 6th May 2010.

Since Labour and the Libdems had few clear ideas about local community invigoration in their 2010 election manifestos, and since it had dropped out of the Labour government narrative in the preceding two years despite significant strides up to then, macro political initiative on this issue currently rests with the Conservatives. The other parties must not let this rebranding stop them from making or supporting essential advances on community participation, both locally and nationally.

However, the portfolio of measures¹ put forward under the big society heading need to be carefully sifted if they are to work in the intended way. It would be futile to expect the policy to work if it is treated simply as a diversion from massive reductions in public services. There are voices on the left that will automatically define it as such, and voices on the right that would even welcome it as such. It will need to steer a careful course if it is not to be strangled at birth by these mirrored antagonists or evaporate into superficiality.

As a start let's distinguish the bona fide elements from the albatrosses. The acid test for each proposed action is whether it would lead to the inner strengthening of local community life. This has payoffs in terms of three interactive forces in communities: the growth of social capital, the enrichment of democracy and beneficial effects on public services. The public service effect cannot be achieved in isolation.

Communities cannot take over public services

Most of the policy does not rest on the idea of communities 'taking over' mainstream public services but that is how it is caricatured in much of the media treatment – and perhaps how it is understood by many people who might support it for the wrong reasons. Before the caricature is taken for reality, let us be clear as to why this massive oversimplification would rapidly lead to failure.

Very few people actually want to or are in a position to run a statutory public service. Even if they did, this would not amount to a takeover by a community but would simply shift any problems of service delivery and community engagement from a large organisation to a small one. This might have some advantages in terms of local identity and personal touch and disadvantages in terms of lack of necessary skills and systems. It would not automatically ensure a better or cheaper service or greater acceptability to the wide community of users.

Individual community organisations or social enterprises may want to bid for contracts to run some specialised element of a local public service. They already have the opportunity to do so when services are outsourced. This does not amount to the community running its own service. However well-rooted in its community, the bidding organisation is still only a tiny fraction of that community and faces the same issues of quality, meeting standards and user satisfaction as any other deliverer.

If part of a statutory service is taken over, it should meet with public standards and therefore has to carry with it a good deal of the bureaucracy that goes with that. Equally, if the provider, whether private or voluntary, receives full cost recovery, which they would need to do if the service is to be stable, there is not necessarily any saving to the public purse.

Communities can complement and co-produce public services

Quite different from this is the prospect of community groups *helping to manage* a public service or *developing their own non-statutory form of service with public sector support*. Each of these two alternatives has much wider potential application and does help the inner strengthening of the community.

The picture is radically different for these two other important forms of participation. The underlying principle for these is not the state offloading public services but state and people working together to ensure maximum value either from a public service or from a voluntary service initiated by a community group. It is this that will make public services more efficient and economical, and communities more capable, whereas attempting to offload services wholesale to local communities would cause chaos to the services and overburden and finally destroy community groups.

Most of the successful examples in this field, often put forward misleadingly under headings such as community control or ‘taking over public services’, are actually sharing of both power and delivery by a public service and a community organisation. Tenant management organisations, friends of parks groups, police-resident liaison groups and many others perform this cooperative function. The benefit is not only a better-run service but residents having a deeper experience of active citizenship and democracy.

Building up social enterprise as part of local economic development is another important objective linked with third sector development but is not a substitute for strengthening communities (see PACES paper on the Hidden Economy of the Third Sector).

Equally, for the purpose of spreading involvement, the practice of transferring underused or failing physical amenities to community groups has far less going for it than arrangements for community groups to help manage amenities. Groups which take on full ownership and liabilities of public amenities have to devote their main energies to making them work as businesses. Often they are quite soon forced to price out smaller groups which have little money to pay commercial rates for use of the service. The arrangement usually works better where groups help to manage and run amenities whilst the public authority retains ultimate responsibility and liability, and ensures that the service is available affordably for smaller groups.

Organising community organisers

Amongst the most important ideas in the cluster is that of mobilising a major new cohort of community organisers. But again the factors that will make for success or failure are in the small print. The notion that these workers should have to find their own funding reduces the idea to triviality, whereas they are actually needed to hold the whole of the rest of the policy together. It is these workers who must link the various components in neighbourhoods and localities and drive them towards the unifying goal of active cooperation between state and society.

There is no fundamental difference between the US concept of community organisers and the UK (and elsewhere) concept of community development workers. But whatever the label, rethinking and reorganising of the role is needed if it is to have major impact. Some of the necessary thinking and evidence-gathering has been taking place over the last few years and some is showcased on this website. What has been lacking, particularly in the last two years -after significant strides over the preceding ten – has been a high-level policy commitment.

Employment of such workers by non-state sources has the advantage of independence of political control, and where voluntary organisations or networks are in a position to do this they make an important contribution. However, this is not a simple or large scale solution. Half of such workers are indirectly funded by the state or the local authority and many are on short term or part time contracts². In many such positions in voluntary organisations it is also difficult to get the flexibility and resources to participate in the professional networks which are needed to build cumulative effect.

If community organisers have to find their own funding, in many cases they will either not materialise at all or they will be accountable to a cocktail of different funders having different criteria, priorities, reporting requirements and timescales. This would make it impossible for them to play a leading local role. They would also have to spend a disproportionate amount of their working time simply chasing the funding. This is already all too familiar for many community workers and is one of the main reasons why the existing role is less effective than it should be.

What is needed to make the big society work is not simply more community workers or organisers but a wave of 'super' community development workers with the status and training to be able to mobilise and coordinate a myriad of contributions to citizen empowerment from other voluntary and statutory front-line workers. This means that these individuals will have to be credible community involvement leaders in the eyes of other local workers. They will have to be genuinely experienced and gifted in this complex and demanding field. Our work for the HCA (see *Empowerment Skills for All* on the PACES website) shows that this is where the transformative potential lies, but this cannot be done on a shoestring.

This means that the role is not simply about supporting neighbourhood groups, though this is at the heart of it. It is also about managing the interface between those groups and the public services, guiding both to greater efficiency and effectiveness. Using the best of both UK and US sources, a new CD remit and curriculum should be devised, enabling the workers to play this pivotal role.

Funding and accountability

How then should this role be paid for and to whom should it be accountable? Instead of a notional 5,000 self-funding workers it would if necessary be better to start with a smaller cohort of properly paid workers with the experience, special training and authority to take a coordinating role, and who would have credibility with the thousands more workers who can contribute to this vision as part of their front line work on any social issue.

An initial cohort of 2,000 would provide a team of about 12 per principal local authority. This would cost about £100m a year. Some calculation of this kind must have been made in connection with the Tories' commitment to provide 4,200 new health visitors attached to Sure Start. Some of these might be able to convert into more generalist CD workers. But important community roles should not have to compete with each other for funding when sums in the multiple billions are still in the budget for capital projects like high speed railways and rebuilding of schools.

This key local coordinating role cannot be established without democratic accountability. These roles should therefore be linked into local structures such as neighbourhood management partnerships and community led planning. They

should operate as teams with a strategic cross-issue remit to ensure that they are not swallowed up into the establishments of large silos, and should be linked to a national unit with regional arms to ensure consistency of objectives and authority for their leveraging and negotiating role in relation to those big local departments.

Even – or especially – at the present time this should be a top priority investment. It should be linked to monitoring of cost benefits in terms of greater efficiencies and reduced costs to the mainstream budgets for local safety, education, health and welfare. With higher profile and status, and using the principle of mobilising complementary inputs from across the public services, it should be possible to make a decisive impact over five years. As the cost-benefits are documented, subsequent cohorts of these workers should be resourced.

Tweaking the details

Looking then at some of the individual components of the big society policy in this critical-friendly perspective we would make the following observations, using our criterion of whether each component would strengthen community life:

Item (our numbering)	Strength	Weakness	Qualification/condition of success
1.. Use cabinet office budgets to fund the training of independent community organisers to help people establish and run neighbourhood groups	Fundamental role in coordinating the other elements of the policy	Have to find their own funding. Inadequate focus on distinctive local coordinating role	Fund properly. Ensure the training and remit situates them in a pivotal relationship to existing community workers and other agencies. The coherence of the rest of the programme depends on them and should shape the design of their role, training and deployment
2. Every adult to be a member of a local neighbourhood group	Good aspiration	Danger of sounding obligatory	Make clear this is voluntary and is for their own satisfaction and to enhance people's own social capital not as free labour for government
3. Restore SureStart to original focus on helping disadvantaged	Good	–	Examine why this focus was lost and how to prevent it happening again. SureStarts and children's centres should be remodelled on the best existing examples of parent and community involvement
4. 4,200 new SureStart health visitors	Good	–	These are examples of the SureStart kind of front-line role with a health natural interface with the visitors community which can build trust, link with community organisers and help transform the morale of stressed neighbourhoods, ultimately saving significant costs. See Health Empowerment Leverage Project
5. 5% of local population can instigate a referendum	Could help to invigorate local democracy	Danger of factional use. Danger of decisions driven by a minority of the local population who are more aware of the process	Make clear that results would only have force if a majority of local residents (not just of those who vote) support them and if they have been proofed for not having adverse effects on community life in any neighbourhood of the local authority. See Conclusion point (i).
6. Local people can veto council tax increases	–	Likely to be used by better off people and could damage services for the less well off. Could cause havoc with service planning	

Item (our numbering)	Strength	Weakness	Qualification/condition of success
7. Community right to buy threatened amenities	May have merit as a last resort not a first one	Could encourage authorities to neglect or downgrade amenities in order to offload them	Oblige authorities to commission independent review of whether there is still a need for the amenity and if so reinstate and improve it. If need is dubious the community should be offered the right to help run the amenity in partnership with the authority. Failing that, the right to buy should apply
8. Right to bid to run any community service instead of the state		Too sweeping. No clear rationale.	Break down into analysis of types of service for which this might be appropriate and under what conditions
9. Potential for cooperative ownership of football clubs	Worth investigating feasibility and value		
10. End ringfencing of government grants to LAs 'so that funding can be spent on local priorities'		Could conflict with basic entitlements and lead to priorities chosen by sectional interests	Not compatible with essence of big society idea
11. Scrapping the hundreds of process targets labour have imposed on councils		Misconceived. Process targets have already been jettisoned in favour of outcome targets, which have also been reduced. Targets should be used sensibly not abandoned altogether.	Targets for community strengths in particular should be retained – volunteering, influence and thriving third sector, to make this area more visible, and in order to show that progress can be objectively measured and that cost benefits can be established
12. Ending the bureaucratic inspection regime that stops councils focusing on residents' main concerns		Misconceived. Inspection is now largely by a combination of universal criteria and local intelligence	

Item (our numbering)	Strength	Weakness	Qualification/condition of success
13. Encouraging the greater use of ward budgets for councillors	Good if used for participatory budgeting	Bad if used for patronage or compensation for poor main services	Use not only to encourage creative extras but as a learning mechanism for residents to understand and influence main budgets
14. Participation in social action recognised in civil servants' appraisals	Good		Not just experience of volunteering in a professionally-led voluntary organisation but provide guiding framework to ensure a positive and balanced experience including understanding dilemmas facing neighbourhood groups
15. Annual big society day to celebrate the work of neighbourhood groups	Good		
16. Funding from the big society bank to intermediary bodies with a track record of supporting and growing social enterprises	Good to access this source	No reason to limit to infrastructure bodies or social enterprises	Infrastructure bodies must demonstrate increased benefits and satisfaction of user groups. A percentage of the money should be used for grants to neighbourhood groups matched by tallying additional volunteering
17. Develop a measure of wellbeing that encapsulates the social value of state action	Potentially good	Unclear. Should it be 'the value of social action to the state'?	
18. Stimulate the creation and development of neighbourhood groups which can take action to improve their local area	Good. Fundamental to the big society concept		

Item (our numbering)	Strength	Weakness	Qualification/condition of success
19. Provide neighbourhood grants to poorest areas to ensure they play a leading role in the rebuilding of civic society	Good. Fundamental to the big society concept		
20. National citizen service programme for 16 year olds to develop the skills needed to be active and responsible citizens	Potentially helpful	Past schemes of this kind have often become simply directive schemes of youth volunteering	Learn from past initiatives of this kind to avoid pitfalls. Must be genuine element of influence and decision making if it is to lead to active citizenship
21. (Use the latest insights from behavioural economics to) encourage people to make volunteering and community participation something they do on a regular basis	Main idea is good	Initial phrase is superfluous and sounds doctrinaire	
22. Give parents the power to save local schools threatened by closure, allowing communities the chance to take over and run good small schools	Potentially useful under certain conditions	Could encourage LAs to offload schools. Misconception about 'communities' – only specific organisations can run an institution	Authorities should first have to show they have made every effort to retain and improve the school. Concern should not be limited to parents of existing pupils. Many lose interest as their children leave school. As explained in text, joint running by community groups and the public authority is usually more viable than 'taking over'. Schools should still be required to be 'extended', acting as a resource to the whole community, not just to parents of current pupils.

Conclusion: making it work

The components of the big society policy need to be configured into a coherent package, and gaps need to be identified and filled. These four elements at least need to be added:

- (i) Community proofing of new policy. All public policies should have to have a community impact assessment, similar to risk assessment or environmental impact assessment, to draw out their likely impact on local community life, and this should be considered before they are agreed. For example the introduction of 24-hour drinking with its disastrous effects on night-time town centre life might never have got through if it had been subjected to such an assessment.
- (ii) The extensive data now available on the profile of the community and voluntary sector at www.nstso.com (see *Thriving Third Sector* on the PACES website) should be analysed to show the position and concerns of neighbourhood and community groups. But the interface between such groups and the daily life of households and individuals remains extremely foggy. This needs to be illuminated if we are to understand how to fully animate the potential for community involvement. Research should also be carried out into the obstacles faced when neighbourhood groups are trying to set themselves up or which fail.
- (iii) An agenda for spreading empowerment skills to all workers who interface with local communities has been formulated and needs to be put into operation – see *Empowerment Skills for All*. It is only through this multiplier effect that a relatively small cohort of community organisers could have a nationally significant effect.
- (iv) The ‘Duty to Involve’ laid on public authorities in 2008 should be rebalanced so that it is not just about involving people in the functions of public authorities but about authorities getting involved in initiatives from communities.

Footnotes

1. i.e. in the Conservative election manifesto 2010
2. Peter Taylor, *Who Are the Capacity Builders?* Community Development Foundation, 2006

PACES May 2010 www.pacesempowerment.co.uk

Note: This paper is followed in January 2011 by a new paper on the PACES Empowerment website assessing the direction taken by big society policy in the first eight months of the Coalition government.

Case Study 1

Halifax Opportunities Trust

So far as I can see the Big Society presents nothing but opportunities for our community. We are an anti-poverty charity that is community based, owned and lead. We try to get people involved in anything we can that will lead to them and their families becoming proud and confident contributors to their local community and to society in general. Everything I have seen or heard about Big Society so far seems to be pushing in that same direction.

Last week I met with one of our best local employers. In the last year he has taken on 17 people we have put forward for jobs, people who had until then been unemployed. At the same meeting I listened to a young man who has found work after being on the dole for almost a year. He was full of passion about his new job and his future prospects and as always it filled me with pride and emotion. Whether its watching a mum read a story to her child in English for the first time or seeing a woman being presented with her first ever certificate or hearing from one of our dynamic businesses about the national contract they have just won, it always has the same effect on our staff, volunteers or Trustees. It reminds us why we do what we do and makes us feel good, we just never called it Big Society.

The life changing outcomes we see every day don't come out of the blue. They are the result of years of investment and hard work from volunteers and professionals alike, putting together community based services that are professional, accessible and consistent yet look so relaxed and welcoming. I think we are already behaving in a Big Society sort of way in our organisation and additional freedoms, the transfers of power and financial support being promised will mean lots more people can come on board which can only be for the better.

Barbara Harbinson
www.regen.org.uk

Chapter 6

Big Society and the Devolution of Power

Ben McCall

“The Big Society is the most radical devolution of power to individuals and communities ever seen.” (Cabinet Office, quoted in Townsend, 2010a)

This follows Hazel Blears’ “passing power to communities and giving real control and influence” (CLG, 2008).

Dyrberg observes that the concept of power remains unclear and untheorized, considering the frequency of its invocation (1997). He introduces a conception of power as “the ability of individuals to achieve their goals despite the resistance to the way in which a social order may be structured and reproduced” (ibid: 1) and goes on to describe two concepts: ‘power over’ and ‘power to’ (ibid: 2). However, he provisionally concludes: “So power is neither a *thing* (a resource or vehicle) or an *event* (an exercise of power): it is a *capacity*.” (ibid: 19)

Lord Nat Wei summarises Big Society: “One, building the capacity of citizens” (Ramesh, 2010) which is a rehash of the tired phrase ‘capacity building’.

The evaluation of the huge New Deal for Communities (NDC) experiment has concluded that the jury is still out about the profundity of empowerment. The NDC programme had the unique selling point of being ‘resident-led’, based on the critique of most previous regeneration being done *to* rather than *with* local people. To transcend this paternalism, NDC partnerships were to put ‘communities at the centre’ (CLG, 2010c). However, “many community representatives in partnerships still feel on the margins of power ... bearing the responsibilities of the state but without the means to fulfill these new expectations.” (Lowndes and Sullivan, 2004). Leggett describes these attempts to “include ... come up against

the structural inequalities that systematically exclude and disadvantage such groups.” (2005:152) This is consistent with my own experience, observing and hearing the testimony of resident Directors of my own NDC Board.

Notions of power in community regeneration are implicitly *temporary*, in terms of the state devolving some of its ‘power over’, which can be extended or withdrawn at will; and *naïve/disingenuous* in terms of residents of deprived areas developing the ‘power to’ lead. Indeed, Dyrberg acknowledges that the latter “can be biased towards conservatism ... functional for the reproduction of the social order by facilitating social and systematic integration.” (1997: 3) Unsurprisingly, functionalism dominates the mainstream discourse on regeneration, but this is more problematic when public policy claims to be ‘radical’.

Wei continues: “Two, encouraging national collective activity.” (Ramesh, 2010) This refers to a Big Society Day, to celebrate volunteering, a national ‘voluntary’ citizens service for young people and 5,000 new Community Organisers; all top-down and national, for a rhetorically bottom-up and localist agenda. This illustrates how ‘relaxed’ the Conservatives are with contradiction. However, it irritates the hell out of people desperate to collaborate:

DTA chair Michael Pyner complained that Government had failed to recognise the work already being done by trusts to “achiev[e] Big Society objectives” (really? No one told us that our work was being appropriated to legitimise Tory policy) and threatened to “fight if the Government continues to sideline, overlook and ignore us.” (Townsend, 2010a) This is a valid and common cry from the third sector, that government is obsessed with new initiatives and ignores or devalues existing work in their rush to repackage and claim the credit. And despite over half of charities, in a recent survey, thinking that the Big Society is really a smokescreen for cuts “John Low, chief executive of CAF, said: “There is clearly support from many charities for the Government’s vision of a Big Society and charities can play a big part in making it happen.”” (Townsend, 2010c) DTA chief executive, Steve Wyler continues in the same vein:

“The Big Society aspirations are admirable ... But what is missing is the recognition that there are thousands of community organisations that are already delivering the Big Society agenda.” (Townsend, 2010a)

Admirable? Even the Young Foundation, hardly partisan, calls the Big Society “a loose and rather baggy concept ... much criticized for vagueness” (Mulgan et al, 2010: 3) and “warns of the gap between the ambition of the Big Society and the modest proposals currently associated with it, and of the risk that cuts will fall most heavily on innovative social enterprises and small grassroots organisations rather than big public or private ones.” (ibid) What about citizens? Much more biting are Lister and Bennett who point out what the Government avoids (to which the DTA seem to acquiesce) linking the Big Society to broader social policy:

...[Cameron] avoid[s] paying attention to the role played by government social, fiscal and economic policies in the increase in poverty and inequality [in the 1980s] ... ‘Who made the poorest poorer? ... Who made inequality greater? No, not the wicked Tories ... you, Labour: you’re the ones who did this to our society’ ... Cameron’s taunt is breathtaking in its selective and misleading reading of recent history. Actually, Mr. Cameron, it *is* ‘the wicked Tories’ who ‘did this to our society’. (2010: 86, emphasis in the original)

Lister and Bennett go on to trash Cameronian Tory claims to be the new champion of the poor, including:

...Conservatives ignore underlying socio-economic structural causes of poverty in their focus on behaviour and culture ... [their] diagnosis of the problem of poverty is framed by the two tropes of ‘broken Britain/society’ and ‘big government vs. big society’ ... which place the main responsibility on the individual and on communities rather than on government. (ibid: 88)

The latter could also be said of New Labour, who pathologised deprived people and communities in a similar way (e.g. Byrne, 2005, Levitas, 2005) but simultaneously devoted significant resources to trying to tackle what they initially and rightly termed social exclusion (Munck, 2005). The really breathtaking thing is that the DTA and other parts of the third sector, are insisting that they be involved in delivering the programme that includes unjust attacks on their own people (Dorling, 2010, Leunig, 2010).

Wei’s third point: “a constant negotiation between the boundaries of civil society, citizen and government” (Ramesh, 2010) implies an understanding that there are boundaries, yet having an *Office for Civil Society* suggests Big Government.

Civil society is everything not of the state. Back to being comfortable with contradiction. This double-think and double-do, is *de rigueur* to the incredibly postmodern Conservatives. Red Tory (Blond, 2010) is another manifestation, including its shambolic, but depressingly effective attempt to capture language and meaning from the Left and third sector; and this hybridity suits its new configuration in coalition with the Lib-Dems perfectly.

Gramsci (1988) saw civil society as the site of struggle for the meaning of 'common sense' and hence the ability of the dominant group (which controls the state) to rule or govern with minimal need for coercion. Winning this battle by a process of moral and intellectual 'leadership' and the articulation of the interests of the majority who consent to their subordination, or at least do not actively oppose it – which he called 'hegemony'; but hegemony is contested and needs constant maintenance.

Hegemony is closely related to power, as it enables a minority to 'handle' a majority, or a majority to overcome the opposition of a powerful minority: neutralising or minimising the latter's power 'capacity' and super-charging its own. Counter-hegemonic forces challenge and come together in alliances to defeat the dominant group – often because that group's intellectual and/or moral leadership is in question, or because it has not met the interests of other groups – or remain disunited and fail. This sounds simple, but of course it is complex.

Simon (1991) reads Gramsci's description of power as knowledge plus interpretation, as a relationship – between citizen, the state (education, police, health service) and the media; but depends on perception: do we accept what we are told, what the hegemonic 'common sense' tells us what we should be or do? This creates resistance and the battleground is civil society. Gramscians, Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques compiled the *New Times*' critique of paternalist Labourism, amongst other things (1989) one of the influences on New Labour. After three Conservative election victories, Thatcherism was obviously hegemonic and a 'new settlement' was needed between state and civil society.

Although originating on the Left, people from across the political spectrum have used versions of this theory, including Nye (2004) who advocated 'soft' as a complement to 'hard' power, in the context of the global hegemony of the USA. He argued that over-use of hard power (military and economic force: coercion)

alienated people who otherwise could be the US's allies in, for example, 'the war on terror'. The Big Society uses Nye's 'soft power' to attempt to maintain the hegemony of the Right, by gaining consent of the majority (including a substantial section of the third sector) who otherwise might resist the public sector cuts and 'welfare reform'.

At around the same time, a rethink of UK conservatism occurred, in response to New Labour's 'high hegemony'. The Centre for Social Justice: CSJ, founded by Iain Duncan Smith, MP, was highly influential on Cameronian Conservative policy development (CSJ, 2010). Duncan Smith argued, after the conservative election victories in the USA and Australia – in contrast to UK defeats – that a majority of UK citizens, spread across all political parties held small 'c' conservative views and particularly the "socially conservative values of Labour's working class [sic] will cause that party's electoral coalition to fracture" (2004).

CSJ talks about "stable and prosperous working class communities of the 1960s and 1970s degenerated into sink estates trapping their tenants into lives on benefits from which few ever escape" (CSJ, 2008) with similar disingenuousness to Cameron's above, as if that had nothing to do with Tory policy and practice of 1979-97 (Hills, 1998).

The people involved, language used, alliances made and positioning of the CSJ is an exemplary exercise in proto-Gramscian strategy; where terms like 'poverty' and 'working class' are subtly redefined to wrestle meaning away from the opposition for their purpose. The neoliberal goal of reducing public expenditure and tactics of reifying *paid* work, marriage and individualisation of the problem, are clear (Gorz, 1999, Levitas, 2005, Young, 1999, 2007).

More recently, a more explicitly ideological force emerged, ironically via the former 'Blairite think tank', Demos; where Philip Blond briefly led their *progressive conservatism* project, but now runs his own outfit, Respublica (2010). CSJ proposes "incentives designed to reduce welfare dependency and enable the poorest families to begin to acquire assets and join the mainstream of society" (CSJ, 2008) which is similar to Blond's "...recapitalising the poor." (2010) He wants "everybody ... to own a little of something" (2008) is highly critical of monopoly capitalism and proposes many ways of giving more 'power to the poor'; but avoids capitalism's inherent monopolism, instability and tendency to

accumulate wealth in very few hands. Unlike CSJ, Blond prefers not to talk of class and criticises Thatcherism and neoliberalism. Indeed, his attack on liberalism – of left and right – may prove an obstacle to alliances with the ‘liberal elite’ the Tories need to capture, or marginalise (as Thatcher successfully did) if they are to achieve hegemony. However, he has the ear of Cameron, is wooing key parts of the third sector, which he eulogises (2010) and parts of which embrace him (DTA, 2010b).

Wei was made Lord Wei of Shoreditch by David Cameron. Space does not allow me to discuss the ‘power of patronage’ here, but as Foucault said, “in politics we still have not cut off the King’s head.” (1980) This enduring cronyism, integral to English legal and political order, is important to understanding the nature and shape of the present hegemonic group, which of course transcends party politics.

Similarly to Blond, Wei talks of ‘capitalising’ “an army of community organisers that will become the ‘catalyst’ for communities to band together and challenge the apparently arbitrary decisions made about public services in their name.” (Ramesh, 2010) This is so replete with contestable material, it is hard to know where to start, but on the latter point, it is questionable that Tory councillors will take kindly to empowered residents challenging their decisions.

The rhetoric is running away with itself. Wei talks glibly of “turn[ing] financial capital into social capital”, but the bottom line here is about the existing social order. Wei gives the game away by admitting inspiration from “George W Bush’s faith-based poverty-fighting [the mind boggles] partnerships between religious non-profit organizations [the spirit cringes] and government agencies.” (ibid) Big Society is fundamentally formalist and ‘conservative’ as it specifically does not challenge the existing order, but seeks to strengthen it and remove the sharpest contradictions in order to reproduce it.

Instead the contradictions are getting sharper. Are the cuts to government funding, including local government budgets and particularly ‘welfare reform’, going to “recapitalise the poor”? (Blond, 2010) Only in the neoliberal sense of wiping away the clutter of the state and public provision, to liberate the dynamics of the market and entrepreneurialism.

So why is the Young Foundation “suggest[ing] how the idea of the Big Society could become more rigorous, and how it could be translated into a practical programme for government, both national and local”? (2010: 3) Because it is led by the co-founder of Demos, former head of Blair’s Strategy Unit and part of the ‘captured’ third sector. He is far from alone, they are piling-in: RSA, IPPR, et al. Some resist the temptation to see the positive potential without the negatives, the best is NEF (Coote, 2010a, 2010b).

Big Society’s promise of ‘devolving power to individuals and communities’ is not only weak, it is empty. It is part of an intervention to strengthen the hegemony of the ideology that supports local and global inequality, an economic system that is inherently unstable (‘boom and bust’) that leads to periodic financial crises and the current ‘there is no alternative’ to cut the deficit at our expense, while telling us ‘we’re all in this together’. As a concept it does not try to ‘understand’ power because it has no intention of challenging and changing the current social and economic order, but seeks to win consent for it.

Of course the third sector should have a critical engagement with any government (within reason). There was debate and disagreement with New Labour over the past 13 years, but the third sector largely kept quiet because we thought it was the best we could hope for after the dismal previous 18 years. Where did that get us? More inequality, less social mobility and a society described as “broken” by the biggest bull in the china shop. It is time for our sector to rethink its critical engagement with the state and our *capacity* to influence civil society, for the achievement of our common aims.

This society is indeed ‘broken’ but not in the way the Cameronians conceive it. It is bust: economically, socially and morally. The Big Society is an *ideological* intervention by people who actually believe in the necessity of competition, the free market and that ‘our duty’ is to minimise the harm done to ‘the weak’ (preferably by self help and as long as ‘we’ don’t have to pay).

Neil Jameson, executive director of Citizen UK, “the man charged with nurturing the Big Society ... ‘If you are teaching people to want to be powerful, it makes sense to also teach them to pay for it.’” (Townsend, 2010b) Tell that to the banks: power without responsibility. ‘Culture of dependency’ could have been coined

for the ‘too big to fail’ finance sector, instead of for people and communities living hand-to-mouth.

Mutual banks and building societies did not require bailing-out by the state. The history of mutualism, of organized co-operation and reciprocity, is long and proud (e.g. Woodin et al, 2010). Are we really going to let the right get away with this ram raid on the third sector, this smash and grab of our language, our ideas, our practice – even our values? And so easily and with so little effort, ‘by hand or by brain’?

If power is a *capacity* (Dyrberg, 1997) that capacity is *will*: political will (Salamini, 1981). I was fortunate that my formative years were in the 1970s. Our counter-hegemonic culture said (albeit naïvely) “Anarchy in the UK!” We would have told Lordie young fogey where to stick his national citizen service. I still would, and you? It looks like, after 10 November 2010, today’s youth are not going to swallow ‘We’re all in it together’.

Supremely intelligent and partisan, so imprisoned by Mussolini’s fascism until his death:

“Gramsci asserts the primacy of will over intelligence ... [which] is pessimistic, while will is optimistic. Intelligence cannot imagine what has not happened in history ... will is optimistic in so far as it acts on the present, as it is, to transform it ... already hegemonic in the minds of those struggling for its realization.”
(Salamini, 1981: 218-9)

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Chapter 7

The Big Society and Sustainable Communities

Katharine Knox

Joseph Rowntree Foundation

The Big Society: what does it mean for communities and sustainable development?

The Big Society has been variously described as the ‘single most compelling idea of the new Government’, ‘a cover for the most dramatic cuts in spending anyone can remember’ and ‘a brass-necked rebranding of programmes already put in place by a Labour government’.

The concept is still developing in government and so the practical implications remain to be seen. However, the Conservative manifesto set out some of the key components of the Big Society as follows:

We will use the state to help stimulate social action, helping social enterprises to deliver public services and training new community organisers to help achieve our ambition of every adult citizen being a member of an active neighbourhood group. We will direct funding to those groups that strengthen communities in deprived areas, and we will introduce National Citizen Service, initially for 16 year olds, to help bring our country together (Conservatives, 2010).

Cameron reportedly stated his aim was to “turn government completely on its head... the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street” (BBC, 2010). Social responsibility rather than state control is the name of the game.

Some of the key components of the agenda proposed to date include: a Big

Society Bank to provide capital to support social investment; a programme of community action projects to get young people involved; a network of trained community organisers for neighbourhoods; four local authority pioneers – Liverpool, Eden Valley, Cumbria, Windsor and Maidenhead, London Borough of Sutton testing out ideas and approaches; with further possibilities around a community ‘right to buy’ assets, and a community ‘right to bid’ to run services.

Among the community sector, a number of the ideas involved are welcomed as they imply a greater role for the sector in shaping local services and a degree of community empowerment and opportunity. However, there is equally a level of scepticism and distrust as the Big Society’s corollary is the ‘small state’. With major public spending cuts underway, there are concerns that communities will actually suffer from reduced access to public sector funding to deliver some of their services and may be expected to deliver ever more for less as local authorities and other service providers cut back provision leaving further gaps in services and problems for them to pick up. There is already evidence of cuts to some funds that were in place to fund activity in areas that would appear to underpin notions of a Big Society, for example, on youth volunteering.

During the election, there also appeared to be little wider public buy in to the idea of the Big Society and concerns for example about who would really want or have time to get more involved in running local services. The limited interest in new free schools has been highlighted as evidence of this. Work by MORI has also indicated that the public are both interested in increasing local control but also want to see standards maintained across the country.

Overall, one of the key possibilities for communities is that they may be able to take a greater stake in their local area, through controlling assets (such as land, buildings or energy facilities) and taking on a greater role in running services. We can expect related legislation in the Autumn in the localism bill, which may cover the proposed rights (to buy and to bid) for communities. Critical here will be what real opportunities underpin any rights given. For example, what windows of opportunity may there be for communities to bid to take on assets, what will be expected in terms of the values they might have to pay for these and what is really up for grabs in terms of running services?

Community and mutual control of assets is clearly posited as a counter to state

control and the failures of the market. There is some appeal to this in light of low levels of satisfaction with public services, concerns over local democracy and low turnout at local elections, as well as the perceived failures of the current social and economic system to deal with key societal problems, including inequality. However, a JRF evidence review on the community assets agenda completed back in 2008 highlighted that this is contested terrain, with different parties often taking opposing positions on the merits of communities taking control (Aiken, Cairns and Thake, 2008).

JRF is currently conducting a research programme on community control of assets to ascertain how far communities taking on ownership or management of land, buildings and other assets can support a thriving civil society. Questions include: is community ownership of assets inherently good in itself or is it instrumental in delivering other agendas and achieving wider social goals, for example around community empowerment or neighbourhood regeneration?

Our first project has involved seeking to learn from historic approaches to community and mutual ownership. Our research highlights the rich legacy of existing infrastructure held in shared forms, with social, economic and environmental benefits. This includes the land that continues to be held in common ownership, as village greens established many years ago, or more recently established community land trusts and community woodlands. In addition, there is a substantial legacy of charitable, cooperative and other mutual organisations, many of which derive from the nineteenth century and came into being as a response to the poverty resulting from industrialisation and the need for social welfare provision prior to the establishment of the welfare state. The rich diversity of community organisations which have sprung up in response to local neighbourhood problems to meet the needs of the unemployed, provide childcare, youth services or other support services for more excluded groups are also a tribute to how communities themselves have sought to take action to address societal needs over the years (Woodin, et al, 2010). While the growth of the welfare state after the Second World War eroded some of the need that community and mutual forms had sprung up to fill, it appears now that the welfare state will be stripped back, increasing the demand for alternatives.

Community and mutual organisations and social enterprises certainly have a role to play if the Big Society is to come alive. However, we need to understand from

history the critical factors that may underpin success, including allowing time for community or mutual organisations to develop, the need for shared values to underpin their work and build a sense of belonging and the importance of democratic control (Woodin, et al, 2010). So we need to be cautious about how far the sector can be scaled up quickly as part of any current policy drive as well as the need for systemic support for this to be a real proposition.

Community control of assets also raises specific risks for some groups who become embroiled in problems with managing old buildings or facilities, which may distract them from their core mission, even while this control may offer the potential to improve the financial base of their community organisation. The JRF feels there is a need for a better independent assessment of the costs and benefits associated with current practice among community organisations and has therefore funded a research project led by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research which will report its findings in 2011 (Aiken, et al, due 2011).

A key risk now with public spending cuts is that there is an increase in the sell-off of publicly owned buildings, which are seen as a drain on resources due to their associated management and maintenance costs, including community centres, but if these are sold off will communities be able to respond?

There are a number of risks here. It is unlikely that the community sector can respond without finance and time for organisations with capacity to emerge. There will also be issues about which communities can respond – the free schools debate highlights concerns that it may be middle class communities who respond, potentially at the expense of more disadvantaged groups, and there is a need to consider who benefits from any changes to ensure that these are inclusive.

Longer term, there is a risk that where communities cannot respond to a sell off, key facilities may be lost to community use and become redundant – leaving the potential for a negative legacy for our welfare provision and the functioning of particular neighbourhoods.

However, there are also opportunities associated with the Big Society, particularly for dealing with challenges on the horizon. These may come in many forms. One of the areas recently opening up for debate has been how far the Big Society could support sustainable development.

However, undoubtedly one of the key current and future challenges faced by society is climate change and its associated impacts, which in the UK will include flooding, heatwaves and coastal erosion. If we are to meet the UK Government's target to reduce our emissions by 80% by 2050, in order to avert dangerous climate change, major action is required at all levels in society. The social justice implications of climate change are a core concern for JRF.

Communities could play a critical role in the transformations needed in society to address these challenges, for example, in supporting shifts in household energy use as part of climate change mitigation efforts. Indeed they will be essential in achieving change – over a quarter of UK emissions are attributed to households. Individuals' carbon footprints relate to a range of activities linked to how we live, primarily our use of energy to heat our homes, the energy used for personal transport and our consumption patterns, including all the goods and services we buy.

Initiatives like the current Transition Towns movement and Green Streets groups show that concern is spreading among local people about climate change and that community activity is already developing within many parts of the UK and beyond. This kind of local action can make inroads into local awareness raising and community action on specific aspects of climate change mitigation or adaptation, like developing local food growing schemes and supporting energy reduction measures.

However, community action will always come up against systemic barriers. While people at an individual level can take steps to reduce energy use, for example, by insulating their homes, assuming they have the willingness, means or support to do so, this collectively will still not add up to the actions needed to achieve transformative change, for example, in the national sourcing or overall structure of our energy provision.

New initiatives like feed in tariffs also rely on an injection of capital to enable renewable energy to be brought to the ordinary householder – something which is beyond many people's means. However, community action could also make advances here – as is being trialled in places like the Meadows in Nottingham. Community owned energy schemes may also be part of the longer term solutions needed to improve community resilience in managing energy supplies. There are

already a number of examples of community led actions to become more self reliant and shift to renewable sources of energy, particularly in Scotland, where rural communities have been pioneering different models including both outright community ownership of wind turbines or other renewables, and more complex joint ventures to develop schemes with the private sector which will lead to community benefit. But a critical issue remains the financial and institutional infrastructure in which these pioneers can operate, which will affect how far inroads can be made through local action and become more mainstream.

A strong state will therefore always be important to achieve change alongside community action, including on climate change. There will also be conundrums here for the state and for communities in achieving transformative change – how far do we need national leadership to make the scale of changes needed to alter our energy infrastructure and how much can local communities achieve, particularly where change is contested between opposing local residents?

Overall, the Big Society raises both challenge and opportunity. It has the potential to be appropriated by communities to support efforts to deal with some of the major problems faced by society, including the challenges of climate change and the economic challenges we now face with major debt, public spending cuts and the knock on effects we can expect from increased unemployment and social problems as jobs are cut.

However, as a contributor at a recent JRF seminar as part of our work on community assets noted: it is not simply a case of rolling back the state and expecting the community to rise up magically. With the current challenges faced in the UK, the relationship between the state, market and voluntary and community sector needs to be reconsidered, with proper consideration of the role of each. As a leading academic in the field remarked, ‘History tells us that those in power have not protected the interests of coops and mutuals. We cannot take the ability of the community sector to thrive for granted. I think this needs to be written into the constitution – a bill of rights for the community sector so it can thrive in the 21st century. If it isn’t it will be taken away’ (Dobson, 2010).

With the impact of public spending cuts still to be fully felt, we also need to maintain critical welfare services delivered to a high quality. We must not lose sight of the need for accountability for local service provision as key infrastructure

bodies like the Audit Commission disappear, national targets are removed and standards are increasingly localised. Social justice needs to remain at the heart of our concerns to ensure proper consideration is given to the needs of the most vulnerable groups in society.

So the challenges for communities will be how far they are willing and able to respond to the positive opportunities of the Big Society and equally to challenge the state where new initiatives may actually put societal welfare at risk and undermine our ability to develop sustainably and tackle the triple challenge of economic retrenchment, social upheaval and dangerous climate change faced at this current juncture.

For more information on the JRF's work on community assets please see the JRF website at www.jrf.org.uk

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Chapter 8

Big Society and the New Austerity

Anna Coote

New Economics Foundation

Overturning the welfare state

Beneath its seductive language about giving more power to citizens, the ‘Big Society’ is a major programme of structural change that aims to overturn the post-war welfare state. The key idea is to divest the state of responsibility for meeting needs and managing risks that individuals cannot cope with alone. Functions that have been funded through taxes and carried out by publicly owned bodies for more than sixty years are to be transferred to ‘civil society’ and exercised through self-help, mutual aid, charity, philanthropy, local enterprise and big business.

As a set of roughly sketched ideas, the ‘Big Society’ predates the Coalition’s plans for public spending cuts. But it makes the scale, speed and manner of deficit reduction politically possible. The Government could not have taken up its axe with such composed ruthlessness without a story to tell about how to fill the gaps left by a retreating state.

The story is a slippery one. We are invited to admire the mood music of the ‘Big Society’, not the practicalities. Who doesn’t want small, locally based charities to do more of what they do well? Who wouldn’t applaud the idea – in the Prime Minister’s words – of shifting from ‘state power to people power’? (Cameron, 2010a; see also Cameron, 2009) Who doesn’t feel it is time to shake up the rule-bound orthodoxies of the public sector? Amid the heart-warming generalities, the precise details are obscure. The plan is there’s no plan, according to some protagonists. As Eric Pickles put it, ‘the essence of the Big Society... is trusting people to know what needs doing, with Government enabling them instead of getting in their way.’ (Cabinet Office, 2010a)

Making it happen

That doesn't mean there's any lack of purpose. In fact, the Government is intervening heavily to realise its big idea. There are three core components: 'empowering communities', 'opening up public services' and 'promoting social action' (Cabinet Office, 2010c, p.6). A suite of government-backed initiatives is intended to help build the 'Big Society', including a 'Big Society Bank', 5,000 'community organisers', a 'Big Society Network', a national 'Citizens' Service', four 'vanguard communities', a rebranded government Office for Civil Society, and structural reform plans, with six departmental priorities including 'supporting the building of the Big Society' (Cabinet Office, 2010b).

Steve Hilton (2010), David Cameron's director of strategy, applauds the plan as 'ambitious to the point of recklessness.' Tellingly, he draws inspiration from *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, who champions a brand of conservative communitarians, urging the Republican Party to learn from John Ford's westerns about the 'social customs that Americans cherish – the gatherings at the local barbershop and the church social, the gossip with the cop and the bartender and the hotel clerk'. Electoral success, says Brooks (2009), depends on becoming 'the party of community and civic order'; he favours a 'conservative vision' in which 'government sets certain rules, but mostly empowers the complex web of institutions in which the market is embedded.' Hilton (2010) applauds this as 'a fantastic description of our values and political approach'.

The call to embrace community and civic order, American-style, has serious implications for the UK. What Cameron is proposing, says Hilton, is 'nothing less than to wean this country off its apparently unbreakable dependency upon the state, centralism, welfare, and rule from Whitehall: the corrosive habits of half a century.' (ibid)

Pooling or splitting

The idea of 'shared responsibility' features heavily in the narrative. In practice, however, this can mean very different things. One kind of sharing is to *pool* responsibility through the machinery of a democratic state that is collectively owned and controlled by the population as a whole. Another, which is clearly the Government's favourite, is to *share out or split up* responsibility between individuals, groups, localities and organisations in the private and voluntary sectors. Each scenario creates a very different set of relationships between citizens

and the state. From a secure lattice-work of links through the entitlements and services of the welfare state, we move to a set of tenuous horizontal connections between citizens and groups, outside the state. With this kind of sharing, how will the rights of individuals be protected, how will essential services be guaranteed, how will those who are poor, powerless and marginalised be defended against those who are better off, better connected and better able to promote their own interests? Private and third sector organisations cannot be expected to carry out these functions, as they usually serve sectoral or specialised interests, rather than those of the population as a whole. In short, the 'Big Society' is not about collective responsibility, or equal partnership, or mutual exchange, but replacement, even obliteration' of the post-war settlement (Coote and Franklin, 2010).

Impact of the public spending cuts

The story of the spending review, meanwhile, is shockingly easy to grasp: total cuts of more than £80 billion, with £18 billion sliced from welfare benefits and council budgets down by 27 per cent. Some 500,000 jobs are to go from the public sector, with 1 million job losses overall, according to Price Waterhouse Coopers (2010). A relatively meagre £470 million over four years is earmarked to help build the 'Big Society'.

Taken together, the spending review and the 'Big Society' add up to an audacious bid to replace paid with unpaid labour – on a massive scale. The claim is that this will bring social as well as economic benefits. Financial savings there may be, if only in the short term. It is hard to see where the social gains will come from.

Poor areas, which already rely more heavily on public employment, will suffer disproportionately. Women, who make up two-thirds of public sector employees as well as most unpaid carers, will take the hardest hit. Rising unemployment will have cumulative effects as people lose homes, pension rights and prospects for improving their lives, as well as earned income.

The newly unemployed will face a much tighter and more punitive benefits system and drastically pared-down public services. There will be more polarisation between and within neighbourhoods as changes to housing benefit put the poorest to flight in search of affordable accommodation.

These are the conditions in which the 'Big Society' is supposed to take root and flourish. Yet even before the spending review, the small charities and community based groups that are supposed to be its life and soul were already painfully squeezed, as council grants and contracts were scaled back. Against this background, they are expected to step in and vastly increase their activities, to help rising numbers of poor, jobless, insecure and unsupported individuals and families, who face accumulating problems they cannot deal with themselves.

All in this together?

The Prime Minister has claimed that shifting power from the central state to local communities is the best way to achieve 'fairness and opportunity for all' and has told us 'we are all in this together' (Cabinet Office, 2010d, p.8). But we are not all in it together on anything like equal terms.

Not everyone has the same capacity to help themselves and others. It depends on a range of factors, including education and income, family circumstances and environment, knowledge, confidence and a sense of self-efficacy, available time and energy, and access to the places where decisions are taken and things get done. All are distributed unequally among individuals, groups and localities. A combination of social and economic forces, working across and between generations, result in some having much more and others much less. While these inequalities persist, people who have least will benefit least from the transfer of power and responsibility, while those with higher stocks of social and economic resources will be better placed to seize the new opportunities. Many of those who are currently poorest and least powerful are at risk of being systematically excluded from any benefits that arise, in spite of the Prime Minister's declared intention that no-one should be 'left behind' (Cameron, 2010b).

Families, networks, groups, organisations, neighbourhoods and communities all have boundaries. These are determined, variously, by blood, law, friendship, duty, obligation, tradition, geography, politics, wealth, status and class. Inevitably, they include some and exclude others; indeed some build their strength on exclusivity. Resources are already shared unequally between these institutions. The Prime Minister says the 'Big Society' is 'about enabling and encouraging people to come together to solve their problems' (Cameron, 2010c), but there is nothing in the government's plans to encourage the inclusion of outsiders, to break down barriers created by wealth and privilege, to promote collaboration rather than

competition between local organisations, or to prevent those that are already better off and more dominant from flourishing at the expense of others.

Building this 'Big Society' depends crucially on people having enough time to engage in local action. While of course everyone has the same number of hours in the day, some have a lot more control over their time than others. People with low-paid jobs and big family responsibilities – especially lone parents – tend to be poor in discretionary time as well as in money (Burchardt, 2008). Unemployed people who are not caring for children or elderly relatives may have plenty of free time, but of course unemployment traps people in poverty, and one of the Government's main aims is to get them into paid work. Committing time to unpaid local activity would put many at risk of losing benefits that depend on actively seeking full-time employment. Part-time workers may have more time for civic engagement, but seldom earn enough to feed a family. Some people have to work all hours to make ends meet, or have no choice about when they start and finish each day.

Inclusion

According to a typography of participation cited by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, the 'formal volunteer is more likely to be female, of a higher social grade, in a managerial position, degree educated, and middle aged'; the 'voter/traditional public participant is more likely to be white, aged 65 and above, middle class, professional higher earner'; and the 'local-level public participant is more likely to be white, older, better educated, richer, middle-class.' (Pathways Through Participation, 2009) These patterns reflect current distributions of capacity, access and discretionary time. Replacing paid with unpaid labour will intensify them, widening social inequalities.

Inequalities could also be widened by the move towards local decisions and actions. Richer areas may do less to help disadvantaged neighbourhoods within their boundaries. Poorer areas may have fewer resources, hindering efforts to help their own communities. If powers to raise and spend taxes are devolved to localities, redistribution of resources between rich and poor areas becomes a lot more difficult. As citizens and local groups are pitched against each other to compete for diminishing resources, or for access to depleting services, there will be less cohesion in communities, more polarisation of interests and more social discord.

At odds with ‘civil society’

There are concerns, moreover, that the thrust of change is ultimately at odds with the character and purpose of many groups and organisations. The Government’s plans to support community-based groups involve (in Cabinet Office parlance) searching online for toolkits and resources, following signposts to infrastructure services, accessing skills from pro bono volunteers, applying for bursaries; local organisations are also encouraged to merge, grow and become more entrepreneurial (Cabinet Office, 2010c, pp.10-11). People usually choose to participate in community activities when they find them optional, small-scale, convivial and life-enhancing, but this seems altogether different: conditional, formalised, complicated and hard graft. The drive towards growth and commodification would seem to threaten some essential features of civil society, not least diversity, spontaneity and free spirit.

As the state retreats and small locally-based organisations face dwindling resources, who will be well-placed to step in to run services? The government claims it wants to encourage more social enterprises (businesses run primarily for social purposes), co-operatives (that are owned and operated by their members) and mutuals (where ownership is shared among clients or customers). Value-driven organisations with alternative forms of ownership are likely to multiply, although they may struggle and take time to establish themselves in the ‘Big Society’ market place. Larger for-profit enterprises with experience in government contracting are meanwhile limbering up.

The role of big business

The doors are wide open for big global corporations such as United Health, Serco, Capita, Accenture, KPMG, Price Waterhouse Coopers and Deloitte to take over state functions – whether by providing backroom support such as accounting, auditing, IT and management, or by running entire services in health, social care, education, employment, benefits and housing. Paul Pindar, chief executive of Capita, leading contractor for out-sourced government business, has told the *Financial Times* that he is ‘eagerly anticipating the forthcoming age of austerity’ and expects ‘a greater degree of activity over the next five years than in the previous five’. There was, he said, ‘a whole series of initiatives that could take place right across government where there are some relatively quick wins.’ (Gray, 2010)

How far will for-profit businesses change the ethos, purpose and outcomes of services, how will this affect actual or would-be service users, and what will be the cumulative effect on the quality of life and opportunities of those who are most in need? Commercial organisations whose main responsibility is to their shareholders are bound to put profit first. There is evidence that this does not always coincide with the interests of service users (National Audit Office and DWP, 2010).

As the big corporates move in, it is not clear how much room they will leave for all those small voluntary organisations with local knowledge and personal connections that are crucial for enabling citizens to engage and take action. If the monoliths of the public sector simply give way to a new set of big, impersonal providers with incentives to ‘pile high and sell cheap’, one wonders how in the world people will gain more control over what happens to them in their own communities. Where will we find the creativity and flexibility to respond to the wide diversity of local needs and circumstances? The big corporate brands have already stripped the individuality out of our high streets and given us ‘clone towns’ (Simms *et al.*, 2005; nef, 2010). It is not unlikely that that global business will do the same to local services.

There will be plenty of opportunities for things to go awry – with potentially disastrous consequences for people on the receiving end of ‘turning Government upside down’ (Cabinet Office, 2010a). Who will be accountable for what? It is hard to imagine how an indeterminate number of infinitely varied organisations can be knitted into an accountability framework, but without something along these lines, only those who can shout loudest or whip up the most colourful media outrage will be heeded.

Progressive potential

For all this, there are strong, sensible ideas at the heart of the ‘Big Society’ vision. Its progressive potential lies in encouraging citizens’ involvement and action, recognising that everyone has assets, not just problems, building and strengthening social networks, using local knowledge to get better results and offering ways of transforming the welfare state.

So one way of looking at the ‘Big Society’ is that it’s an opportunity to be seized. We should make the best of it by defining and shaping it ourselves.

First, we need clear goals. Why does government say it wants to push power down to neighbourhood level and why is responsibility for decisions and services being shifted away from the state? These are *means*, but what *ends* could they usefully achieve?

Social justice and well-being for all

The overarching goals of the ‘Big Society’ should be to achieve social justice and well-being for all. By ‘social justice’ we mean the fair and equitable distribution of social, environmental and economic resources between people, places and generations. By well-being, we mean a positive physical, social and mental state, which requires that basic needs are met, that individuals have a sense of purpose, and that they feel able to achieve important personal goals and participate in society (Michaelson *et al*, 2009). But well-being is only compatible with social justice if it is *for all*, by which we mean that conditions must be in place to ensure that everyone, regardless of background and circumstance, has an equal chance of achieving it (Coote and Franklin, 2009).

These goals must be anchored in a shared understanding of how plans for the ‘Big Society’ will help to achieve social justice and well-being for all, with rules of engagement that make sure these top-line goals are consistently pursued.

Secondly, the ‘Big Society’ must be for everyone, which means making sure that everyone has enough *capacity* to participate and sufficient *access* to networks, groups and other community-based assets, with paid and unpaid *time* more evenly distributed across the working population, especially between women and men. A slow but steady move towards a much shorter paid working week could help to spread opportunities for paid employment, as well as time for unpaid activities as parents, carers, friends, neighbours and citizens (Coote, Franklin and Simms, 2010). Special efforts will be needed to include those who are currently marginalised, and to support small local groups and voluntary organisations.

Building in co-production

Thirdly, we should make co-production the standard way of getting things done. There is no point shifting functions away from the state to independent organisations if the new ‘providers’ simply replicate the delivery models of the state. At their worst, these have given rise to a ‘them and us’ culture of dependency, where all-knowing professionals do things to and for passive and

needy recipients. Co-production offers a route to something much more empowering, effective, preventative and cost-efficient.

Co-production is closely aligned to some of the key ideas behind the 'Big Society', but goes further. It applies to the detail of shared decision-making and service delivery, and builds on extensive practical experience. It describes a particular way of getting things done, where the people who are currently described as 'providers' and 'users' work together in an equal and reciprocal partnership, pooling different kinds of knowledge and skill. In practice, co-production taps into an abundance of human resources and encourages people to join forces and make common cause. It builds local networks and strengthens the capacity of local groups. It draws upon the direct wisdom and experience that people have about what they need and what they can contribute, which helps to improve well-being and prevent needs arising in the first place. By changing the way we think about and act upon 'needs' and 'services', this approach promises more resources, better outcomes and a diminishing volume of need (Boyle *et al*, 2010).

Accountable and sustainable

There must also be clear lines of accountability and appropriate methods of assessment, redefining efficiency and success. What should count are not just short-term financial effects, but the wider and longer-term impacts on individuals and groups, on the quality of their relationships and material circumstances, on the environment and on prospects for future generations.

The 'Big Society' must be sustainable in environmental, social and economic terms. That means, for example, decarbonising services, planning for future generations and focusing on prevention. If it is to meet the economic, social and environmental challenges of the 21st century, it must be underpinned with a broader economy, a stronger democracy, and a strategic state. These ambitions are part of the 'great transition' to a new economy that frames the work of **nef** (the new economics foundation). The aim is to shift to a system where everyone is able to survive and thrive on equal terms, without over-stretching the earth's resources (Spratt *et al*, 2009).

Making it possible

However, all this depends on the Government radically revising its policies on spending cuts and welfare reform. It will need to find resources to keep

unemployment down, to substantially reduce poverty and inequalities, to guarantee essential services and to provide and sustain adequate support both for local government and for community groups and third sector organizations.

There are alternative ways of raising and saving funds, and of handling the current economic crisis, which have been discussed extensively elsewhere (for example see Dolphin, 2010; Wolf, 2010; Elliott, 2010). The story of the ‘Big Society’ may make the cuts politically possible, but if the plans set out in the 2010 spending review are implemented, they will make the best ideals of the ‘Big Society’ impossible to realise.

This chapter is based on “Cutting It: the ‘Big Society’ and the new austerity” by Anna Coote, published by nef (new economics foundation) in November 2010.

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Case Study 2

Highfields Community Association

Leicester is now one of the UK's most culturally diverse cities and whilst the city has suffered from social problems, local communities such as Highfields have for the last 30 years, taken a firm and positive stance on tackling discrimination and fighting for racial equality and social justice. A sustained programme of bringing together the different strands of the community through the Highfields Centre and involving everyone equally in decisions about the most important needs of the area has had admirable results.

Highfields Community Association (HCA) was formed as a registered charity in 1972, with the aim of providing a community-managed social, recreational and educational hub for all residents of the area, regardless of race, religion or nationality.

Highfields Youth and Community Centre was first opened by the HCA in 1974. The centre's original focus was primarily on social and recreational functions, but it has evolved over time to encompass a wider remit. As Head of Centre Priya Thamotheram, who has been involved with the association for over 29 years, explains: 'The Centre needs to be a place where people can be helped to move on as individuals, as families and as communities.'

The new Highfields Centre is a £5 million building providing state of the art facilities including a sports hall, gymnasium, aerobics studio, main hall, video and digital arts studios, a theatre and other community facilities. In January 2009, Leicester City Council (LCC) decided to enact steps to transfer the centre to community governance by HCA and since then, LCC, the centre's external funders and the HCA governing body have been putting in place the necessary actions to enable that transition to take place in late 2010.

Since its inception, Highfields Centre has had a determined outlook and its uplifting success story exemplifies the spirit of community against a backdrop of deprivation and institutional neglect. Despite the difficulties along the way, Highfields has emerged as a true community meeting point where different groups are able to work together, learn from each other and benefit jointly from services that affect everyone in the area. 'The centre's success,' as Priya sums up, 'has only been possible due to the tremendous support of the whole community.' Aiming high, working together and never giving up: Highfields shows successful Big Society in action.

Priya Thamotheram
www.highfieldscentre.ac.uk

Chapter 9

Community and Big Society

Helen Haugh

University of Cambridge

Introduction

Government interest in fostering social action, community engagement and public sector reform has found focus in the notion of the Big Society. Although lacking a succinct definition the Big Society can be loosely understood as referring to channelling the energies of community and voluntary groups into providing and delivering services locally. The claims for the achievements of a Big Society centre on the responsiveness of services to individual needs and their delivery locally. To meet these criteria pro-active involvement of individuals in societal institutions and community organizations is essential. The Big Society can thus be conceived of as a coalition of many small and active communities in which local people have a greater say in the decisions that affect their lives and more control over the services they use. A central construct in the Big Society is the promotion of the agency of communities through their direct participation in the creation, maintenance and management of institutions for cooperation at community level.

Interest in community activism has centred on discussions about social capital. Social capital is defined as a '*social structural resource*' (Coleman, 1990, p.302) and is rooted in a larger social structure (Lin, 2001). Social capital incorporates the current and potential advantages of networks and community group membership and has been examined in the context of individuals, communities and organizations. The aim of the Big Society is that these social resources be employed to satisfy a wide range of community needs. Through interactions with others trust, norms, expectations, obligations and shared information emerge as features of social organizations that improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions (Coleman, 1990). Structural social capital is revealed by an individual's connections to others, and the strength and resources

accessible from those connections. The strength and density of local ties are the foundation of civic participation (Wilson & Musick, 1998) and increasing communication in social networks has been found to be positively related to volunteerism (Wilson & Musick, 1999).

Government interest in social capital has increased as the connections between individuals bind members and communities together to make cooperative action possible (Cohen & Prusak, 2000) and shape civic involvement (McPherson, 1981). Creating a future society in which individuals are active members of communities requires government, society, organizations and individuals to review their expectations of, responsibilities to, and interactions with each other (Katsoulakos, 2006: 18).

Expectations

The legitimacy of government lies in the licence granted to it by the electorate to pursue policies on their behalf. Whereas citizens might expect corporations to pursue wealth creation their expectations of the functions of government and voluntary and community organizations tend to differ. In an era of diminishing public resources to fund expenditure on public services the Big Society makes explicit the government's expectation that communities participate in social action and value creation locally.

Responsibilities

The delegation by government of responsibility for social action and its acceptance by communities confers on them agency for the human process of value creation. Communities with high social capital tend to have frequent interaction which in turn cultivates norms of reciprocity through which individuals become more willing to help one another. The presence of social capital in a community suggests that local knowledge can be directed towards innovations for improving conditions for the community and services for its members.

Interactions

Putnam (1993) argues that horizontal networks, such as those found in communities, are the basis of civil society and public life. Considering social capital as a resource of social connections makes it possible to link it to participation in local community activities. In times of economic crisis and reduction in state provision of services and benefits, the responsibility falls to

communities to actively engage to ensure that local needs are met (Oliver, 1984). Community involvement in the Big Society will thus involve active citizen participation in supporting themselves and each other.

Participation

The Big Society places expectations on community organizations to take responsibility for involving local people in driving social reform forward. Normative structures and social capital are features of all communities however they will vary in terms of their effectiveness. The sustainability of community-led solutions will rest on active participation of citizens in community institutions, the creation of social value, and local accountability through inclusive governance structures. Individuals can participate in their local communities either as members or leaders (Smith, 1994; McAdam & Paulson, 1993) and training might be needed to ensure wide representation of community members and their interests. Family networks have been found to shape civic and social participation (Rotolo & Wilson, 2006) and the Big Society will have to reach out to families that lack previous involvement in community institutions. In addition, participation can be extended to the private sector and enable community organizations to partner with organizations to deliver services where they are needed most.

The role of government in making the Big Society happen will therefore require investment in resources to encourage and foster participation, experimentation to discover participatory models that work, and sharing knowledge about successful participatory models between different communities. The long term goal is that cooperative social activity will generate benefits for individuals, communities and society.

Challenges

To achieve the ambition of creating a Big Society a framework of policies and strategies to mobilise community participation will be required. However there are five challenges that will need to be overcome. First, citizens with the requisite skills and motivation to participate and succeed in local action will need to be involved so that the reservoir of latent capacity to volunteer is unleashed for public good. Second, the Big Society agenda must ensure inclusiveness that recognises the needs of all and ensures that the vulnerable and marginalised citizens are not excluded. This will involve ensuring a voice for all citizens. Third,

the Big Society creates an opportunity to change the balance of responsibilities between citizens, communities and the state and this should be carefully managed to ensure that resources flow to where they are needed and managed effectively and efficiently. Fourth, it will be imperative that appropriate performance metrics are designed to ensure that the full impact of the Big Society is measured. Although advances in measuring social impact have been made an accessible and universal framework has not yet been created. Finally, the Prime Minister's vision of the Big Society puts social enterprises at the heart of its implementation strategy since their community-led governance structures are instrumental for ensuring local responsiveness, representation and accountability. At present there are simply not enough social enterprises to fulfil the government's high expectations of their contribution and investment will therefore be needed to raise awareness of and diffuse sustainable social enterprise business models.

Conclusion

The premise of the Big Society is to foster local ownership of needs, problems and solutions. To be sustainable communities must be involved in deciding which services are needed and how they should be supplied. Increasing community participation will enable local needs to be identified and understood, problems to be examined in their local context, and solutions designed and delivered in response. The vision of the Big Society is that by strengthening social capital at community level, individuals, communities and society will prosper.

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Chapter 10

Big Society and Poor Places

Neil Stott & Noel Longhurst

Keystone Development Trust & University of East Anglia

Poor places persist. Poverty persists. Income inequality and poor life outcomes persist. Poor places tend to attract an inordinate amount of political, policy, media and academic attention. Attitudes to poor places vacillates between pity and vilification; they are a lightning rod for contemporary hopes and fears. Poor places are either home to the dangerous idle poor (hoodies, welfare spongers, chavs, Shameless, ASBOs and the workless) or the last bastion of a noble, impoverished and increasingly irrelevant working class. People in poor places need saving, containing or both simultaneously. Whether motivated by fear, guilt or goodwill public policy tends to label, prescribe solutions (carrot or stick) and expect the poor to organise their own way out of poverty. Big Society is the latest in a long history of political attempts to shift the relationship between people, places and the state; how might it make a positive difference in poor places?

The temptations of Big Society

The Big Society is a tempting concept. It resonates with a public who appear to distrust the big state and the market (Halpern, 2010) and politicians and public services caught between austerity and public demands. It also resonates with grassroots organizations attempting to deliver community led solutions to challenging problems. Coupled with the concept of localism, Big Society appears to validate long standing interventions based on community empowerment principles of ‘reciprocity, relationships, and trust’ (Halpern, 2010). It also appeals to entrepreneurial third sector organisations who see the enhanced opportunity to own and manage local assets and deliver services which are truly responsive to local needs and aspirations. ‘We are already doing Big Society’ is the cry from below; recognise us and pay us to do more! But do we have to be careful what we wish for?

We are torn. As community development practitioners elements of the Big Society concept, as expressed by the Coalition Government, offer a fundamental shift in the relationships between the citizen, local places and the state. As community *economic* development practitioners we see the new opportunities for asset transfers and social enterprise which enhance our ability to make a difference certainly appeals. If it is a choice between services disappearing which detrimentally impacts on local communities and stepping up, within reason we will step up.

However we have witnessed numerous big ideas on community, regeneration and place come and go with mixed and frequently transitory impact. Political will is often trumped by institutional resistance. Power is rarely decanted downwards and cursorily shared at best. Working with communities can be challenging, risky and time consuming; they don't always do what the state (big or little) wants them to do or think they should do and initiatives falter. The hallmark of top down interventions is 'who pays the piper calls the tune'. Rhetoric on communities in charge is rarely followed through. The big and little state has trust issues and finds it hard to let go. It is suspicious about everyone else's motivations. It defines success; usually in the form of disembodied metrics (bums on seats rather than the quality of the experience). It gets bored easily. We all move on to the next shiny new initiative. Politicians do like new. Political horizons are invariably short. New Governments do tend to have a 'year zero' mentality; coupled with ideology and revenge, it is a heady mix. Of course communities have very long memories. By choice, necessity or the lack of other options, many people have a long term, emotional commitment to places, poor or otherwise.

We also worry about timing and motivation. It is unfortunate that the Big Society debate is inextricably tied up with deep public sector cuts. The expectation that local community organisations run services on a voluntary basis or social enterprises can easily be perceived as 'a way to dress up cuts' (Halpern, 2010). The move from universal to particularistic services (Amin, 2002) dependent on local goodwill and free time appears to be ideologically and cash driven. Is it an attempt to turn the clock back to the imagined community of a rural 'jam and Jerusalem' or the London Blitz relying on a contemporary version of nineteenth century philanthropy? The problem is it is hard to pin down what Big Society actually is and how we are going to achieve it.

While clarity on what the Big Society means is illusive, it has not prevented considerable political and media discourse. Some concepts become very powerful and transform how public policy is formulated and implemented. Concepts (formed or ill formed) sweep the political and policy landscape like viruses. Witness how in recent years we have seen concepts like social capital, community cohesion and sustainability invade the body public and take on lives of their own. Often de-contextualised shadows of contested ideas that originated in academia (or think-tank sound bites overheard by novelty seeking politicians) they rapidly move from political discourse into policy statements, programmes and funding criteria. A form of coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) these state sanctioned concepts frame subsequent discourses, organizational legitimacy and access to resources. To access resources public or third sector organizations have at least to appear to play the game (amend mission statements or objectives, re-name departments) even if public statements are 'decoupled' from actual delivery; the old wine, new bottles strategy. Worse, most funding bodies follow suite and insist on knowing how you are building social capital or community cohesion. Worse still, we all follow like lambs because if we don't resources and legitimacy dries up. What usually follows is a belated (and lucrative for some) cottage industry attempting to put flesh to the conceptual bones through conferences, academic papers, books and the dreaded 'toolkits'.

Big Society is a viral concept. It has the potential to be the mother of all viral concepts or at least dominant until the next new big idea or Government. Big Society is a 'top down' viral concept; there is a degree of irony about the central state attempting to impose a big idea about how local communities should behave and organise themselves onto local communities. It could beach on the rocks of austerity or public indifference. Its originators could get bored or frustrated. Equally it could be the lens we all have to peer through. Every policy utterance, public pound, grant application and community project will have to be contributing to Big Society – even if we are not entirely sure what it is all about. Policy think tanks and academics will rush to add flesh, sell us books and the dreaded toolkits.

As community organizations and practitioners we have numerous strategies to deal with viral concepts including the 'ostrich', 'zealot convert', 'zealot opposition', 'cynical pragmatist' and the 'engaged pragmatist'. With Big Society we suspect the ostrich and zealot opposition approaches are for the independently

wealthy or suicidal organization. Zealously converting may appear like a winning strategy but expect to have to convert again in the future. The ‘cynical pragmatist’ will privately bemoan but publically engage for appearance, legitimacy and any whiff of cash. The engaged pragmatist understands that community impact and organizational longevity cannot be divorced from the policy platforms of the state. To make a difference one has to engage, but not on any terms. Engage in the debate and don’t acquiesce to policy ideas that will do more harm than good. Explain why some things will work and others will not. Adapt, adopt and improvise; make it work on your communities terms and explain how. If it can’t or Big Society plus austerity make it impossible to deliver local aspirations say so. Of course this strategy depends on a willingness of the Coalition Government to be open to critical community level friends rather than a dogmatic ‘we know best’. However, even the most inspired ‘engaged pragmatist’ are likely to struggle with delivering the Big Society in poor places.

Poor places, poor prospects

It is extremely hard work to make a tangible difference in poor places. Community activists and organizations have struggled for decades to organise, engage, deliver services and work in a myriad of partnerships. The British disease of constant institutional reorganisation makes ongoing engagement even more problematic (Mulgan, 2010). When fashionable they may get seats (albeit junior) at the table, when unfashionable (‘the usual suspects’) the big and little state carries on regardless. Examples abound of poor places ameliorating poverty, transforming lives and developing sustainable *local* social and economic solutions. But the deck is stacked against them.

Poor places are poor because of the lack of income in households. Poor places are poor due to structural shifts in the economy. While there are notable exceptions, poor places are fragile, fraught and fearful. Fragile because even small economic shifts impact harder on poorer than well off places, the margins are so much slimmer. Fraught because living on the economic margins is inherently stressful and fearful because even losing a little hurts.

The decline of the public pound will potentially hit poor places hard. With a squeeze on welfare, other public sector cuts at all levels and already challenged local businesses, the economy and community infrastructure of poor places is likely to become increasingly fragile. The ability of local people to organise

themselves and deliver Big Society volunteer driven services will be limited; not because of the rather patronising perceived lack of skills or commitment but time and money.

Income generation is understandably central to poor people's lives. Whether it is long hours in poorly paid jobs, long hours supporting others in poorly paid jobs (such as unofficial childcare) or long hours in areas of the grey or 'black' economy to make ends meet, time is precious.¹ Such work is also mentally and physically draining. Being on 'welfare' is equally draining. We are not sure who the people who deliberately choose 'welfare lifestyles' are, but if they do exist, it is not an easy option.

Volunteering is an *option* for the time and/or cash rich. Volunteering is already a *necessity* in time and cash poor places if you want to engage in local public forums, sit on regeneration boards, have a youth club, credit union or sporting activity. However, volunteers can be in short supply. Time rich volunteers in poor places tend to be the retired who form the backbone of much community activity.

Volunteering in more affluent places is smoothed by cash; the ability to pay for services, donate gifts and 'pull strings' to access private or public resources. It also relies on a resourced and supportive infrastructure such as The Scout Association, Mencap, volunteer centres and local authorities. In poorer places it relied on public grant, philanthropy or national regeneration schemes – as did any national, regional or local support infrastructure operating in such areas. Public grants are in freefall, philanthropic bodies are experiencing huge numbers of applications and national regeneration schemes on hold. The baby and bathwater are being thrown away in poor places.

With national regeneration schemes such as the Single Regeneration Budget (Tory) and New Deal for Communities (Labour) the 'poverty pound' flowed to the public, private, and to some extent third sector organizations. While good work was done, with notable exceptions, when schemes end projects stop and expensive infrastructure is hard to sustain. From a feast of community engagement and myriad professional interventions comes a famine. Long-winded sustainability strategies withstanding, the sustainability of big ticket regeneration projects is frequently a policy chimera. Sustainability strategies normally rest on a third sector

succession body or public mainstreaming. Unless the endowment (cash or property) was sufficiently commercially orientated the former may struggle to deliver². As for public mainstreaming if it happened (and not a slight of public accountant's hands) it is likely to be under threat. Poor places are often left with an exhausted volunteer cohort, service gains in decline and expensive community infrastructure to maintain. The key issues of poverty and place remain.

Top down regeneration has its place. The later SRB rounds tried to integrate interventions in place, economy and civil society. The NDC programme lasted ten years focusing on the poorest places. Without such cash injections poor places would be even worse off. Relationships were made between local people and public agencies, often trying but mainly for the common good. Other people's cash has an invigorating effect on all concerned. The problem is when it is turned off everyone except the local stalwarts disappears and the myriad community groups frequently return to a hand to mouth existence.

So time and lack of cash will make building on community activity in poor places hard work. Cash strapped infrastructure organizations may be unavailable to assist small groups. Community 'assets' in poor places such as community centres are often liabilities requiring public or grant support. Without both the prospects are poor.

The other issue is trust and power. The 2009 report *Balance of Power: Local and Central Government* by the Communities and Local Government Committee noted to the extent to which the UK retains an overly centralised state in comparison to its European neighbours. Indeed centralisation masquerading as devolution is another repeated motif in British politics (Mulgan, 2010). As yet, there is little convincing evidence that public bodies actually want to empower or decant power or actually have systematically empowered poor communities in a *sustainable* way. Local people are often dubious of endless policy initiatives and a mixed experience of dealing with agencies. The active minority may have had innumerable hours of support and training to engage with complex issues. The bloody-minded few may have usurped the very uneven balance of power between communities and public agencies; most negotiate, cajole and compromise. Engagement is usually on public bodies terms and timescales not local peoples. What is important to the majority may well not be on the agenda. When communities shout they are often seen as 'difficult'. What frustrates

communities the most is endless consultation and no action. A recent meta analysis undertaken by Keystone as part of yet another consultation exercise highlighted that local residents had been saying the same things to the same agencies for nearly twenty years. What might it take for the Big Society to break this dispiriting cycle?

Poor places, better prospects?

Before being accused of public agency bashing we are committed to the ideals of public service. Public agencies have a crucial role to play in protecting, promoting and providing services in and with communities. If we are arguing anything we are arguing for the devolution of more power to local authorities, and beyond to the neighbourhoods and communities they serve. Ensuring fairness, access for all and giving extra support to those who need it most are also essential. However, improving places and creating a bigger society requires teamwork between the public, private, third sector as well as local people. It requires time and patience. It requires trust and transparency. It requires cash and there are a number of different ways in which the Big Society could help generate new flows of money through poor places.

(i) Thinking in the longer term

It is common practice to deliver economic development projects with the private sector which are aimed to make a long-term financial return. Tax in, tax out in time through wealth and job creation. It is less common to endow third sector organizations with capital or assets to enable them to make long-term social and economic returns that are reinvested locally. Imagine if regeneration schemes were funded on the strength of plans to ensure the ongoing financial returns to poor places. Imagine if creating a 'cash cow' enterprise for third sector organizations was a legitimate element of such schemes. While self-sufficiency is a current mantra, the opportunities offered to organizations in poor places tend to be assets such as community centres, redundant churches, town halls or low-end managed work spaces which can rapidly become liabilities. Alternatively, following the model of community foundations and philanthropic trusts, endow and ring fence cash and support local community activity through the interest earned. Let's encourage more alliances between private sector and entrepreneurial third sector organizations. Better still let's design *local economic development vehicles* that combines the public, private and third sector to deliver long term social and economic returns. And let's give them longer to make a difference.

(ii) Developing trust, devolving power

Building trust requires mutual understanding, transparency and a willingness of the powerful to let go and take risks. It also takes time. No devolution of power can happen without a development process that prepares all parties. Mediation and conflict resolution has to be built in; someone has to play the 'honest broker'. Grassroots participatory democracy is a messy, complex and time consuming business. Few have the patience for it apart from the people who it matters to most, those without power and opportunity. Policies often *accumulate* rather than being *accumulative*. Instead of grand gesture policy let's have slow and steady which build incrementally on strong foundations. Understanding the difference between information, consultation and participation and when each is appropriate would be a start. Furthermore, the Big Society suggests an intention to shift from the former towards the latter.

For example, an explicit commitment to opening the (various) public books and using participatory budgeting to give communities a say over what they think is important would be an illuminating if challenging exercise. Indeed participatory budgeting is emblematic of the type of policy that should be central to any radical programme which is serious about the devolution of political and economic power. Such exercises not only close the gap between public services and the public but also have the potential to influence the way in which money flows through localities, perhaps helping a bit more of it to hang around. Similarly, devolving control over the procurement of goods and services opens up the possibility of locally owned social enterprises / cooperatives (or public sector spin offs) recruiting locally to deliver products and services.³ Such initiatives fit well with other progressive approaches to public service delivery such as co-production (Boyle and Harris, 2009). Embracing such participatory approaches would not only build trust between communities and agencies but would also show that there is genuine devolutionary intent behind the Big Society rhetoric.

(iii) Create new circuits of local finance

Although they appear to be ill served by the private sector, profits are to be made from the 'poor pound' by value supermarkets, cheap food and drink outlets and clothes stores. Tesco certainly think so. Tesco Metros are springing up on social housing estates across the UK. The problem is that much of this money does not stick in the locality. Community activists on the Marsh Farm Estate in Luton recently calculated the amount of money spent locally and argued that local

community enterprises could capture and recycle the wealth. Food, drink, entertainment and utilities could all be delivered by social enterprises. Equally, local entrepreneurs should be encouraged as well as common purpose local economic development vehicles.

However, the creation of new enterprises, whether ‘social’ or ‘private’ requires access to finance. The Government’s Credit Union Legislative Reform Order is therefore an example of the type of enabling legislation that will enable greater financial flows in poor places, particularly as credit union legislation in the UK is particularly restrictive. Developing such ‘alternative institutions of accumulation’ (Leyshon and Thrift, 1995) is an important way of getting more money flowing through poor places. More radical possibilities include allowing places to create their own currencies to facilitate trade and investment. Governments in other parts of the world, particularly South America, are experimenting with how complementary currencies can support small businesses and mitigate poverty.

Back in the UK, the fairly unheralded announcement of Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is an important step in devolving economic power to localities, giving councils the ability to borrow money for infrastructure development. Such infrastructure could in theory include assets for community-based organisations. Tantalisingly there were other examples of where such thinking could take us in the Coalition Government’s manifestoes. For example the Liberal Democrats talked about decentralising tax, along with Local Enterprise Funds and Regional Stock Exchanges to allow investment in particular places. It is quite staggering when you consider that apart from the odd example, there is, at present, no simple way for people or organisations to invest money in their locality.

Conclusions: Developing resilient community infrastructure⁴

Community infrastructure is an essential ingredient in achieving vibrant, cohesive and resilient communities. Community infrastructure combines *people, places and property*. Place and property provide the physical opportunities/limitations to community activity, people (community champions, activists & staff) provide the initiative, leadership and expertise. Without it, Big Society will struggle in poor places.

Place has an important impact on community infrastructure as it enhances or constrains community activity through available space to develop community

building etc. The socio-economics of place also influences the availability of time and resources, emergence of community champions and the levels of inter community cooperation or conflict. Although community activity can exist without community ‘property’, there is a symbiotic relationship between the amount of dedicated community space and the ability of communities to develop and deliver appropriate services.

The motivation and empowerment of local people to engage and develop community infrastructure is integral to any successful place. This can be enhanced or constrained by the above and the actions of public, private and third sector organisations. Supportive frameworks include access to expertise such as community development staff, access to resources for example in kind or grant and a participatory approach to civic governance.

Community capital is a term which combines Putman’s notion of social capital with human, physical and financial capital to give a holistic development construct applicable to community infrastructure. Community capital is the collective skills, knowledge and experience, facilities and organisations which ensure greater returns in the quality of life for all. To achieve community sustainability it is essential to *anchor* community capital locally to ensure sustainable returns. *Building* community capital focuses on ‘empowering’ individuals, groups and communities to tackle their own needs and issues; creating their own solutions, organisations or enterprises. *Anchoring* community capital is about creating sustainable opportunities such as training, jobs, or community spaces in social/public (or commonly owned and managed) assets or enterprises. Community capital is integral to achieving resilience in communities, especially those experiencing rapid change. Community infrastructure is a key ingredient in building community capital.

There is no getting away from the fact that building community infrastructure in poor places requires considerable support. Community capital costs money. However, as we have argued, there are a range of measures that could be taken under the rubric of the Big Society that would allow more money to flow around poor areas. Furthermore, it is the development of community infrastructure that can embed capitals (social, financial, community) within a locality and stop them from flowing out.

The social economy of Quebec is perhaps a tangible example of what (at least part) of the Big Society might look like. However, its success has not been built on the rolling back of the state. Instead, as we have argued here, it is founded on the engagement of the third sector as active partners, on the development of networks and infrastructure, and on access to dedicated finance (Mendell, 2009). If Big Society is about engaged or participatory democracy and local ownership and management of services it offers transformational change for poor places. If Big Society is about austerity and the retreat of the state with volunteers picking up the pieces it will be a retrogressive step. Big Society is the hot viral concept of the moment. If it is the only game in town we have to make it work but not on any terms. It is not year zero, poor places have long histories of community activism and have a good idea of what works and what doesn't. Let's listen.

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Footnotes

1. This statement does not condone illegality, rather to highlight the 'work' strategies of poor places. Leaving aside white collar crime, it could be argued that some more affluent people utilise the illegal labour within poor places for profit and recreation; drugs and sex work for instance.
2. See Stott & Tracey (2007) for a discussion on community enterprise in poor places
3. Keystone is working with Hact on the national 'Together for Communities' programme to look at housing association procurement and the potential for social enterprise.
4. This section draws on Stott et al (2009)

Case Study 3

Placed Based Working: Total Brandon

A new approach to Place Based Working is being trialled in Brandon, Suffolk where County, District, Town Councils and other partners such as BT, NHS and the Voluntary Sector are adopting a new approach to engaging with local communities and thinking differently about how we deliver public services in the town. This approach is characterised by a simultaneous multi-initiative push at town level, rigorous engagement of the people of Brandon and by working collaboratively with partners to achieve a definitive step change in the quality of service outcomes for the town.

Truly understanding the Place is critical. Research has highlighted the familiar characteristics of the town including low skill levels, high numbers of older people, a diverse community and few job opportunities. The softer intelligence gathered from staff, elected members and the community also offer a valuable insight into the issues faced at grass roots levels -particularly around low aspirations, levels of social capital and cohesive communities.

Council officers and other public sector providers are working closely with local elected members and with the Brandon community. Some officers have been relocated to Brandon for the duration of the initiative which includes a number of strands of work;

- **Healthy Living Centre**

Managing the co-location of two GP surgeries, library, children's centre, community cafe, community hall, meeting space, revenue and benefits access point, and other health services e.g. dentist/chiropractor and pharmacy as a social enterprise with involvement from the local community.

- **Brandon Country Park**

Exploring several opportunities to make the asset more viable including bike hire (run by a social enterprise) and community asset transfer.

- **Total Learning**

'Jump start' Brandon by focusing on all school children, parents, community groups, health services and by celebrating achievement across the community in intensive activity supported by research to assess the effects.

- **Connected Care**

As a result of local research employing researchers from the local community, a proposal to establish a shop front to join up services run by the community is being progressed.

- **Accessibility**

Involving local people in a comprehensive review of passenger transport in the town with a view to providing more flexible passenger transport services in the future.

- **Working with private sector partners**

BT are offering professional expertise in areas such as marketing, campaigns to drive awareness of this new approach, presenting at schools assemblies on personal development and raising awareness of career options, work experience, technology and business competitions, London 2012 activities to raise awareness of reaching the top, remote mentoring of students using the web for science, technology, engineering and maths, and providing educational based materials.

- **Engaging the people of Brandon**

‘Brandon Big Brother’ video pod used to benchmark community views, issues and aspirations. It will be used to monitor success of Total Brandon and to start a dialogue with the community about this new approach and encourage them to get involved.

- **Resource Mapping**

Map existing public resources going into the town to raise awareness of the level of investment in Brandon and use this to re-engineer how this money spent in the future, involving the community in those decisions.

- **Keystone Area Voluntary Organisations**

A campaign to bring together groups in the town and deliver a range of services and activities that help them find funding, develop skills and sustainability, and work together to create a strong, sustainable voluntary sector for the benefit of the whole community.

- **Parish Poll**

Inviting the community to come and vote at the Polls on a long standing parking issue and post any decision, support them in implementing the solution.

Chapter 11

Big Society and Rural Communities

David Wood

Rural Action East

and Sylvia Brown

Action with Communities in Rural England

In many respects, the ideas behind the current government's concept of the Big Society are nothing new. Many Civil Society Organisations (recently known as the Third Sector and more traditionally as the Voluntary and Community Sector) have been promoting its core ideals and principles for some time and campaigning for greater recognition and support for their implementation. Nowhere has this been more true than for rural communities and the organizations that support them. The *Rural* Big Society is well developed as a result of necessity inherent in the rural context. For decades, members of the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN) have focused their support on generating collective actions by communities to solve problems. A key message for government is to acknowledge this heritage, learn lessons from its successes and to build on its experience. In this way, the Big Society policy can be a *big* opportunity for all communities (urban and rural) to deliver the stated high aspirations of the politicians.

The Rural Experience

Much of the economic and, to some extent, the philosophical drivers behind the Big Society have existed in rural locations for some time. The very nature of rural communities, small, dispersed and geographically remote from main population centres, requires coping with lower economies of scale and higher delivery costs for all types of services. The result has been market failure in both public and

private sectors. The vacuum has traditionally been filled by more self reliance and civil activism, based on a culture of “*if we don’t do it, no one else will*”. Now this is about to be overlaid with a downward step change in public sector finance and capacity and a lower level of service will be experienced across the country, by urban and rural communities alike. Community action will not only be desirable but also a necessary response if the gaps are to be filled.

On the positive side, rural communities have a strong sense of place and pride in their market town or village. Rural residents have a sense of identity with their community and belonging to a distinctive location. In rural communities, there is usually no lack of a community desire to work together or shortage of community leaders (with support from their parish council) to take the initiative, provided they can be galvanised into collective action. Over £3bn of assets (halls, playing fields, green spaces, allotments, etc) are already owned and managed by rural communities. These enable social clubs to flourish and provide leisure and cultural activities. The halls also offer space for retail services and peripatetic health services. The very high level of volunteering per head of population in rural areas has been a necessary response to maintain levels of services that, in urban areas, have been largely delivered by the state. Given this foundation and with support from infrastructure Civil Society Organizations such as RCAN members, county associations of local councils (CALC) and Action for Market Towns, sustainable rural communities have prospered. Over time, these organisations have developed and refined their support services in ways that are suited to the challenges of creating the Rural Big Society. Communities have been supported to organise themselves, generate new volunteers, form constituted groups, access grants and actively engage with both residents and the public sector.

The final enabling factor of vibrant rural life is the distinctive nature of local government. Parish and town councils provide an important representative link between communities and local government at district and county or unitary level. Through their powers to own assets and raise revenue from a local precept, they are able to help communities, provide services and support management of local assets.

Although this is encouraging, there is no room for complacency. Public services cuts are likely to be more swingeing in rural areas compared with urban conurbations, which have concentrations of high priority users. The traditional sources of financial support for small-scale community led initiatives are

disappearing and investment in support services that have delivered successful rural community action in the past are under serious threat.

Implementing The Big Society

Local Planning

A stated adjunct to government policy is the test of ‘fairness’ – of cuts, services, opportunities, support. The worry for rural communities is a continuing emphasis on “*strengthening communities in deprived areas*” (Conservative Manifesto, 2010) and “*support the creation of neighbourhood groups especially in the most deprived areas*” (Coalition Programme, 2010). These areas are typically identified through the existence of a high concentration of deprived households as measured by the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). This emphasis on *Places* not *People* creates an in-built bias (unfairness) in favour of urban neighbourhoods which may indeed need and deserve support but not at the expense of equally deserving and similar numbers of deprived people living in rural areas. A more fair and accurate assessment would be to analyse deprivation at a higher spatial resolution such as Output Areas (OAs), which can reveal more accurately the extent and location of rural and urban deprivation and provide a fairer means to target support for communities (OCSI, 2008). As the planning system is decentralised, the use of the more detailed data (see www.rural-evidence.org.uk) will be important in the drafting of local plans and decisions on development and intervention.

The creation of sustainable rural communities still requires an enabling and supportive environment from the state, notwithstanding any existing community activity. Recent reports (Taylor, 2008, Rural Coalition, 2010 and EERF, 2010) have argued for changes to the planning system: for it to be enabling and supportive and for balanced and appropriate growth in rural areas. These concerns appear to have been recognised, though we wait to see whether the government’s proposals will deliver this at the grass roots.

Community Engagement

The proposed Open Source Planning system (Conservative Year for Change, 2010) and the forthcoming government bill on localism, refer to the concept of ‘*collaborative democracy*’. The challenge here is to ensure engagement by the whole community and for it to have the information, understanding and capacity to do so in a constructive and effective manner. As argued for above, balanced

appropriate development of rural towns and villages should be perceived positively by residents as benefiting them and their families. However, this is difficult to achieve in a case-by-case, piecemeal fashion. Through the creation of a Community Led Plan (CLP), a community can come together to identify its vision for the future; describing its priorities, the things it values and wishes to protect; the problems it wishes to overcome; and listing the actions necessary to achieve its vision (Rural Coalition, 2010). Produced over several months through a robust and inclusive process of consultation, the CLP provides a framework for community empowerment and engagement. The CLP can form the basis for collaborative democracy and provide a mechanism for community contributions to the drafting of Local Plans by local authorities. Covering aspects of social, environment and economic development, the CLP provides a reference framework against which a community can exercise (or not) its various '*Rights*'. It should be noted that the process of producing a Community Led Plan, although developed and proven in rural areas, is equally applicable and beneficial in urban areas and is readily transferable to the production of Neighbourhood Plans.

The local authorities will also be required to set targets for housing development including the proportion of affordable homes. This is a major and common problem for all rural areas where the affordability factor (cost:income) through a combination of high house prices and low income is often over 10 compared with around 3 in urban areas (NHF, 2010). There is a desperate need for affordable homes for young people and families as well as manageable, easy to heat, modern homes or sheltered accommodation for older people, who find themselves asset rich but cash poor. In this way, the overall demographic mix is improved, support networks of families and friends are preserved and a larger market for local retail services and schools is developed. The results of housing need surveys produced by Rural Housing Enablers should be used by local authorities in setting their housing targets.

The application of *Right to Build* to include development of mixed market and affordable homes and business units would help to provide, through cross-subsidies, the financial means to contribute to the affordable element of any development and to support community owned assets such as halls, shops, green spaces or even renewable energy schemes. Devolution of a proportion of the New Homes Bonus to the communities accepting growth would also support revenue costs of enhanced community facilities and services.

Finally, if provision of facilities for rural businesses is included in Local Plans, then (higher value) local jobs will be available, further enhancing the local economy and reducing the need for commuting to work. All this will help to 'green' rural communities through reduced emission of carbon from transport.

Local Services

In contrast to empowerment of communities and their engagement in planning decisions, the takeover of public or private assets or the commitment to deliver public services represents a higher risk and a need for greater capacity by the community. In order to take advantage of *Right to Buy* or *Right to Bid*, the community requires time to understand the benefits and problems; time to develop (hopefully) successful solutions where existing suppliers are failing; and time to find the money to buy and manage the services. The very process of producing a Community Led Plan acts to develop the capacity of the community and increase community spirit and desire to volunteer to support the community. All essential attributes for assuming asset ownership and service management.

The vision and associated actions in the CLP would identify if, and how, the retention of services fits into the desires and priorities of the community. With these prior considerations in place, a community will have the necessary foundation to respond as and if opportunities arise.

However, the finance problem still remains. The business plan for ownership of any public asset or commitment to a service delivery obligation must give the community flexibility to redesign the delivery approach, creating better value by integrating services and enabling use of volunteers and a community enterprise model. Such an approach would enhance the value of community halls and other facilities to their communities and potentially act as hubs for neighbouring parishes and villages. In this way, a commercially viable plan could be drafted while still maintaining service quality. Furthermore, the local authority should commit to using a proportion of its projected savings to supporting the community enterprise, especially during the early stages of the transfer of ownership.

Community Support

It is pleasing to note the recognition by government that creation of the Big Society will not occur spontaneously and that communities require a catalyst and ongoing support and help to develop their own capacity. The proposal to

train 5,000 Community Organisers reflects this understanding and will be particularly helpful in areas where capacity and cohesion are limited. However, in many rural areas, support structures already exist with well-tested methodologies that meet requirements. Crucially, these support structures have also secured the essential links between communities and the state, which are necessary to deliver a true co-production model of service delivery in rural areas (Bovaird, 2007).

For rural communities, the building blocks are in place in the form of town or parish councils, community groups, village hall management committees, etc. These are also able to draw on tailored support from external agencies such as the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN), Action for Market Towns (AMT), County Associations of Local Councils (CALC) and others. Rather than ignoring their existence and creating competition for limited resources, national proposals for providing support structures to generate the Big Society should look to enhance existing activity which would be more cost effective and have a quicker and more sustainable impact. In urban areas, where Community Organisers and the Community First programme will be focussed initially, the benefit and value derived from the CLP process should be considered as a cost effective model to build social capacity and enable community activism.

Conclusions

The ideas and concepts behind the Big Society could signal a significant statement of intent by national government to support many of the ideals and desires of communities and their supporting Civil Society Organisations. If carried through with genuine commitment at all levels of government and provided with the necessary support, Big Society should spark the creation of more engaged and active communities, with more individuals volunteering for the greater good. Together with the '*Rights*' described in the Open Source Planning document, and being taken forward by the coalition government in the Localism Bill, there is real potential. However, the details in forthcoming legislation must provide for practical mechanisms exploiting current practical experience and knowledge. Big Society must be truly bottom-up, with communities in control of setting their priorities and tackling their problems. It must not be a cheap alternative way for top down policies and service obligations to be delivered; in other words a community must have the over-arching '*Right to Decide*'.

There must be recognition that however willing are communities and individuals, there is a limit to how much time they have for community activity. Indeed, time is the most precious commodity and politicians must accept that things will not change overnight. Communities need time to come together and develop their capacity; time to discuss and decide as an inclusive group on priorities; and time to create their vision for their future.

Implementation of the Big Society must recognise the intrinsic differences between and within rural and urban communities and that different locations require different solutions. Support and investment must recognise the needs of people wherever they live and not just focus on localised areas which experience high concentrations of deprivation. Government must be interested in building a 'Broad Society', enabling and encouraging true local decision making.

Finally, ideas and investment must build on what is already there and has been shown to work. In rural areas, this means using existing community groups and Civil Society Organisations. It means investment in Community Led Plans and using them in a spirit of collaborative democracy.

The communities and their residents are ready and willing and with help will be able to deliver the Big Society.

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Chapter 12

Big Society – a State of Mind

Robert Ashton

It was Samuel Butler, writing ‘The Way of All Flesh’ in 1903 who pointed out that ‘all animals except man know that the main purpose of life is to enjoy it’. The book was in many ways an attack on Victorianism and not published until after his death. The son of a clergyman, he grew to despise the contemporary notion that pleasure was somehow sinful and that duty and sacrifice were more wholesome alternatives.

Looking back at that era, I guess most would agree that to selflessly sacrifice self fulfilment for the common good is not the recipe for Utopia. But then nor has the wanton and reckless pursuit of material gain of the subsequent century delivered widespread happiness. Instead the millennium celebrations provided an escape from a period where politically, culturally and economically it became acceptable to think only of oneself.

The paradox of this apparent recognition that Samuel Butler had a point was for me the 20th century decline in Western world mental health. Add in rising crime, the loss of any sense of family or community, encouraged by greater mobility, cheap alcohol and satellite TV and for many, a return to Victorian attitudes begins to appeal.

Many commentators would agree that the pendulum of civic participation has swung from one uncomfortable extreme to the other. In the space of four generations we have gone from responsibility to recklessness. So what is the solution?

Well according to our new Coalition Government, the solution is called 'Big Society'. But few if any pundits seem to really understand what that means. Accustomed to decades of self interest, everyone so far has interpreted the concept in a way that suits their own agenda.

This is both natural and understandable. The behaviour cannot be criticised, only challenged. That's what I plan to do over the next few pages. You see 'Big Society's strength is its flexibility. It is not a prescribed, top down, bureaucratic methodology. More a simplicity, purity and clarity, for those prepared to declutter their thoughts sufficiently to let the obvious flood in.

Big Society is like Buddhism

There, I've presented you with a challenging metaphor. But don't dismiss it, allow me time to explain. In fact let me, on your behalf, try to disprove the similarity so that together we can remain objective. For your peace of mind let me state that I am an atheist, so have no axe to grind on behalf of any faith philosophy. Reading on will not result in any road to Damascus moment. It's 'Big Society' I'm focused on here, nothing more and nothing less.

Buddhism to me seems to be built on what it isn't, rather than what it is. Just like 'Big Society' in fact. The quest for enlightenment is not guided by Holy writings or powerful global leaders. It is more something the individual searches for within themselves. It is about doing what feels right and recognising the interconnections that inextricably link us all to each other.

If you saw Alejandro González Iñárritu's brilliant film 'Babel', released in 2006, you will remember the story. A young shepherd takes a pot shot at a tourist bus from high on a Moroccan hillside. The repercussions, prompted by the unfortunate fact that his bullet struck an American tourist were global. An excellent illustration of the way even the smallest action can have far reaching consequences. Big Society is about creating lots of small positive actions that like that bullet; go on to have far reaching consequences. And so of course is the Buddhist ideal.

So the strength of Buddhism, and I'd say with 'Big Society' is that it has to start within each of us and grow out. It is the complete opposite of the old order, where we others make the rules, tell us what to do and tempt us with grants and

allowances. You need to become strong if you are to develop ‘Big Society’ because it means abandoning the comfort of top down governance. It also means losing the ability to pass the blame on to others when we do what deep down we know is wrong.

Big Society also has ‘four noble truths’

Buddhism, like life itself, is a journey, a quest for enlightenment. We are born because our parents made love. We had no control over that act. Slowly, as we mature and age, we search for meaning, purpose and place. In Buddhism that search for enlightenment explores our relationship with suffering. Each of the ‘four noble truths’ reflects on how we can control our human suffering.

The parallel with ‘Big Society’ emerges when you recognise that to the Buddhist, suffering is largely the result of craving for what cannot be. Deep down we would all like to be cosseted and protected by a mother state, freed from worry and responsibility. For many, nurtured at public expense within the benefits system, that position of Nirvana might have been reached. The cynic might also say the same about many employed in the public sector, but let’s not go there.

Perhaps any Buddhists reading this will forgive me for adapting their philosophy to summarise the four noble truths of ‘Big Society’. They are:

- Life is tough and never as easy as you’d like;
- Confronting challenge and doing something feels better than doing nothing;
- The collective impact of many modest actions can be world changing;
- ‘Big Society’ gets easier the more you participate.

Big Society is about valuing imperfection

Let me confess to a recent flirtation with one aspect of Buddhist philosophy. It is after all what has inspired this somewhat offbeat approach to the subject. As a child, I became fascinated by decay. I would hang things from a nail on the wall outside my bedroom window and watch as they rotted, rusted and disintegrated. I came to value the seeming randomness with which objects such as a broken alarm clock changed, weathered and acquired a lustrous patina only possible with the passage of time.

The Zen Buddhist concept of Wabi Sabi seemed to me to capture this perfectly. It encourages you to value the way things wear. For example a breadboard, used over generations will be worn from use, might warp with age and have acquired stains, scars and even scorch marks over time. Whilst some would discard it and buy a new one, others might marvel at the physical and emotional connection it provides with their past. 'Big Society' needs Wabi Sabi!

Why? Well we're at the end of an era of massive public expenditure and now need to make do with what we have, rather than always expect something new. Rules need to be relaxed to make this happen. Big Lottery funding for example has always demanded the purchase of new equipment rather than second hand and so have many Government building programmes. We have to become more realistic and pragmatic.

And here's another paradox; in an era when legislation demands equality and diversity be considered in all things, other rules are arbitrarily applied to exclude those unable to tick all the boxes. And of course falling outside the criteria are always those most deserving of support. Why else do we see people living here with good jobs and secure families deported because of a visa technicality or oversight?

Big Society often starts with rejection

Look at any successful entrepreneur or campaigner and you see someone whose passion has been sparked by rejection and inflamed by prejudice. Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone because both his mother and wife were deaf. Their communication challenges prompted his research in this area. Louis Pasteur was driven to research how disease spread by the tragic death of three of his own children from typhoid. And so too are today's 'Big Society' pioneers driven by their determination to overcome personal adversity.

Just as the Buddhist search for enlightenment is driven by a need for inner peace and self understanding, so today are people who don't see themselves as pioneers or entrepreneurs finding in their anger and frustration the strength and energy to 'do Big Society'. And that is surely how it needs to be for them to develop the passion they need to succeed?

Take the example of Karin Heap. Strong willed and single minded, Karin is Head Teacher at Chapel Road School in Norfolk. Her staff work with 64 of the

County's most severely disabled children aged between three and 19. It's a happy school, rated 'outstanding' by OFSTED. The last Government's 'Building Schools for the Future' programme promised a new £10m school. This would enable Karin to help more youngsters get a better start in what is always going to be a severely limited life.

Karin and her staff and Governors had been campaigning for a new school for years. They currently have around half the floor area needed and a campus only 20% of the recommended size for a school of their kind. She was far from happy when the prospect of a new school vanished shortly after the General Election.

But Karin is not someone who readily accepts defeat. I've been working with her to create a 'Big Society' solution. Together we have found a school site, potential ethical investors and a formula that would enable a school with more facilities than envisaged, at a lower cost to the public purse. What's more confronting the challenge has united the school and County Council in a way that a year ago would have been unimaginable. We have created what I expect to be a winning solution. That surely is what 'Big Society' is all about?

Big Society can be very enlightening

Just as the Buddhist develops a state of mind within which enlightenment can be found, so too will those willing to embrace the 'Big Society' philosophy become enlightened.

The Government's spending review, announced in autumn 2010 set the scene. Fiscal evidence of continued economic recovery warmed the enterprise landscape and early examples of 'Big Society' success pointed the way. As each crisp frosty morning dawned, so too did the growing realisation that things really are different. Society's aviary door is open and the birds inside have to grow to accept that the freedom now visible will be better than the regimented world they are poised to flee.

Everything those pioneers need already exists somewhere on the landscape. Legal structures abound that enable communities to own and protect assets in perpetuity. Organisational structures exist that will allow community investment, collective ownership and even true democracy, where all shareholders have one vote, irrespective of the size of their individual stake.

Sure there are some aspects of legislation that need changing, because they can hinder progress and hamper investment. But these are in reality few and far between and will quickly change as they become barriers to progress.

Big Society and social enterprise

For many, 'Big Society' and social enterprise are virtually synonymous. The social enterprise movement has certainly made bold claims of their right to lead the 'Big Society' transition from state to community control. But are the current stock of social enterprises good role models for the social entrepreneurs we need to deliver sustainable change? Regrettably in my view few make the grade and most survive only with subsidy and support. 'Big Society' surely cannot be sustained if we simply substitute one form of Government control for another? If we replace crude direct delivery by the state with crude, less accountable delivery by self appointed providers who also depend on Government money to survive?

'Big Society' success is more about attitude than process and those focused on process alone will inevitably be succeeded by those with attitude and a willingness to adapt. In my book, entrepreneurship is the attitude we need and social enterprise one of the processes available to those entrepreneurs.

The rapid growth of the Fair Trade movement from side street specialist to High Street corporate was fuelled by consumer demand for ethically sourced products. Big Society will spur the emergence of a new breed of entrepreneur, with rigorous, inclusive attitude focused standards such as the 'SEE What You Are Buying Into' label (www.SEEWhatYouAreBuyingInto.com) one of the front runners to provide the same level of brand visibility for qualifying organisations that the Fair Trade mark has given its members. SEE stands for social, ethical and environmental and sensibly, your ability to wear the label is dictated by what you do, not what structure your organisation has chosen to adopt.

Social Enterprise as a distinct genre of enterprise will in my view over time disappear. Its crucial role has been to highlight the way values and social impact need to inform and direct commercial activity. To paraphrase Phillip Blond, author of 'Red Tory' and arguably principal architect of 'Big Society', tomorrow, all enterprises will be social enterprises, but perhaps not quite in the form we see them now. That's not to devalue the current stock of social enterprises. They are

playing a vital role in showing others the way. But the message I read is to follow their example, not copy what they do.

Big Society – a state of mind

Just as the Buddhist starts their journey to self enlightenment by looking within themselves, so too must those setting out to do ‘Big Society’. Much of the greed, selfishness and unwillingness to think beyond the here and now we learned in the last century has to be unlearned. It won’t be easy, but it can be done.

You only have to look back to the turn of the last century to see the progress our society has already made. People now do not die in the street denied hospital admission, yet then many were. People no longer endure segregation and inequality because of their race or gender, but until fairly recently, to discriminate in this way was considered acceptable. And now rather than trying to keep up with the Jones’s, we have to pity their extravagance and show by our example that less material wealth can often deliver greater spiritual contentment.

The cynic will dismiss ‘Big Society’ as hype promulgated by a cash strapped Government desperate to offer hope to a fearful population. But even if this were true, the opportunity has been created for individuals and communities to take control of their future in a way unthinkable until the summer of 2010.

‘Big Society’ can, if embraced as a philosophy, adopted as a clarion cry for community re-building and accepted as a one way path to a new social order from which future Governments will be unable to retreat.

Like all journeys though, this one starts deep inside each individual one of us. We have to want to see the re-birth of community pride, of true social inclusion and of a nation where local people feel in control of their lives and care about those around them.

‘Big Society’ must start for us all by becoming a state of mind.

Case Study 4

The Zone, Plymouth

The participation group at the Zone is a group of young people who meet to discuss ideas for how they can get involved in the wider work of The Zone and the local community. The Zone is a community organisation that offers information, advice, counselling and other personal support services to 13-25-year-olds in the Plymouth area.

The group originally came together when they needed to fundraise for a sailing trip but since then they have met regularly to discuss other projects. They have advised on the redevelopment of The Zone's website and discuss with staff how improvements can be made to ongoing project work.

Throughout 2010 the participation group has met once a week with the local Marine Biological Association (MBA) as part of Project Discovery. The MBA wanted young people to promote the different marine places in the area and the participation group undertook to put together an activity plan, after visiting the beaches and other outdoor swimming facilities around Plymouth. The purpose is to tell their peers about what is on their doorstep – not only recreational facilities but also the opportunities for finding out more about the marine life locally.

Project Discovery has been followed by 'Blue Sound' – Marine adventures for 20-25 year olds, a programme of activities based around Plymouth Sound, including investigation of the marine wildlife, a clean up of the shoreline and creation of a snorkelling guide to the area.

After a break, the group is coming together again to decide what they want to do next, but they are keen to get involved in and generate all kinds of activities for involving young people in their community.

Ruth Marriott
www.thezoneplymouth.co.uk

Chapter 13

Organizations and Big Society

Paul Tracey

University of Cambridge

Building the “Big Society”: Not just stronger communities but new forms of organization

In this chapter I argue that the place of organizations in general, and the workplace in particular, has been ignored in the discourse surrounding the rather woolly notion of the Big Society. I suggest that organizational design, and more specifically people’s ability to exercise control and participate in decision making in their employing organizations, is fundamental to the ideals that support this concept and needs to be integrated into coalition’s vision for a new social order in the UK.

Policy documents detailing the ideas underpinning the Big Society paint a utopian picture in which local people have more power and greater access to information, allowing communities to build a better future for themselves, free from the shackles of government bureaucracy and interference. Only through this kind of local empowerment, we are told, “can we achieve fairness and opportunities for all”. Somewhat curiously, however, there is no mention of the role of organizations in the creation of this brave new world: most working adults spend around half the time that they are awake inside their employing organizations. As a result, the nature of the organizations that we work for, our role within them, and the level of autonomy that we enjoy, feed into our identities and sense of self. More fundamentally, fairness and equality of opportunity cannot be achieved without workplaces implementing practices which promote these ideals; ultimately it is through employment that social mobility takes place.

My central point is that the key level of analysis for building the Big Society is not (or at least not only) the community, but the workplace; creating the sort of society the coalition says it wants will necessarily involve persuading employing organizations in the private, public and third sectors to function in a different way – many employers recruit from a narrow pool of potential employees, and make it difficult for people selected into particular roles to radically alter their career trajectories. They also operate in a relatively hierarchical fashion with clear lines of reporting, and concentrate power in relatively few hands. Regardless of any changes to the ways that local people interact with different tiers of government, we will not feel more empowered as individuals or reduce social inequality unless we have different ways of organizing in the workplace.

But what might these new forms of organization – which allow for high levels of autonomy and responsibility while at the same time ensuring equality of opportunity – look like? One possibility is the concept of the “boundaryless organization”. This term was first used by the former Chairman of General Electric – Jack Welch – who wanted GE to feel more like a “family grocery store” than a multinational conglomerate, despite it being one of the largest companies in the world with a turnover of more than \$60 billion (Judge and Robbins, 2008). The idea of a boundaryless organization encapsulates the shift that has taken place in some sectors of the economy from an emphasis of formal to informal modes of control in organizations (Sitkin et al., 2010).

Three sorts of boundaries are minimized in this type of organization. First, internal horizontal boundaries, with cross functional teams used in place of formal departments. Second, internal vertical boundaries, with rigid chains of command stripped away and leadership allocated on a project by project basis to those whose skills and experience are considered most appropriate for the task at hand. Third, external boundaries between organizations and their stakeholders, with relationships between organizations and their key suppliers and customers underpinned by informal rather than contractual forms of governance. The result, at least in theory, is an organization where decisions are made on the basis of ability rather rank, and opportunities are made available to all organizational members regardless of formal position.

Perhaps the most high profile example of the boundaryless organizations is WL Gore and Associates, the US-based multinational best known for the

development of Gore-Tex outdoor clothing (Deutschman, 2007). Wilbert Gore, who founded the company in 1958, believed that too much bureaucracy stifled individual motivation and ultimately innovation. He set about creating an organization structure and culture quite unlike almost any other firm. Perhaps most importantly, he eliminated hierarchy and other status differences. There were to be no bosses, only teams. Indeed, the “b-word” remains conspicuously absent inside the organization. Moreover, none of the staff – or “associates” as they are known – has a job title, codified rank or formal position, and no one can be instructed to take on a particular task. Instead, workloads and project assignments are negotiated. Salary is decided by a committee, which looks at past and present performance as well as future prospects. These unusual work practices have been rewarded with stellar financial performance and growth, and led the firm to be named “the most innovative company in America” by Fastcompany.com in 2007. The firm has also ranked highly for many years in Fortune Magazine’s Best Places to Work survey in the US, UK and Germany. Indeed, virtually all the companies which rank highly in the Fortune survey have sought to break down traditional organizational boundaries in some way.

These ways of organizing are not a panacea, however. In an interesting article entitled “The New Boundaries of the ‘Boundaryless Company’”, Hirschhorn and Gilmore (1992) explain that authority, task, political and identity boundaries don’t disappear in the boundaryless organization; they still need to be delineated if particular activities are to be carried out efficiently. But because these boundaries are fluid and allow different people to take on different roles at different times and for different tasks, they do promote empowerment and autonomy in a way that more traditional structures do not.

It is my view that these forms of organization are fundamental to any progressive democratic system. If the Prime Minister is serious when he says that the Big Society is “about liberation – the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites ... to the man and woman in the street”, then his vision must incorporate a narrative about how the workplace should be structured. At present, such a narrative is conspicuously absent. Only by promoting alternative organizing structures in the workplace will he realise his vision for the inhabitants of the UK to “feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities”.

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Chapter 14

Social Enterprise and Big Society

Andy Brady

Anglia Ruskin University

Social Enterprise: should we be in the Big Society tent?

Introduction

The journey of the phrase ‘social enterprise’ from general ignorance to at least partial acceptance in the mainstream, perhaps owes as much to the power of government policy as it does to the elegance of the expression. While the Economist (2002) relished its ‘comforting European savour of “social”, plus the sharp American tang of “enterprise”’ the most relevant appearance of the term in that year surely came in the then Department of Trade and Industry’s strategy document (DTI, 2002), which spawned a micro-industry of its own in social enterprise support projects, research studies, and government legislation.

This chapter seeks to address two questions, both based on the assumption that Big Society will be incorporated into future government policy with the same degree of earnestness as social enterprise was between 2002 and 2010. Firstly, to what extent do the proponents of Big Society see social enterprise as part of their solution to ‘broken Britain’? Secondly, this chapter reflects on the reality for social enterprise under the Coalition, and asks whether it should position itself at the heart of Big Society, or whether it should move in an altogether different direction.

Eight years of social enterprise development

A social enterprise is defined, according to Peattie and Morley (2008), by possession of two characteristics: it trades in goods and services, but is set up

with the primary purpose of meeting social aims, rather than simply generating profit for shareholders.

‘Social enterprise: a strategy for success’ set out the New Labour government’s ambitious vision of “dynamic and sustainable social enterprise strengthening an inclusive and growing economy.” (DTI, 2002:7). The document committed the government to a series of actions in support of this goal, including:

- Introducing new legal structures
- Opening up contracts to deliver public services
- Improving business support
- Facilitate networking
- Promote training and awareness raising
- Strengthen boards of directors
- Examine the potential for replication
- Improve financial provision (debt and equity finance)

At the same time, the strategy acknowledged that there was little knowledge of the size of the sector, limited business or consumer awareness of social enterprises, and a need for improved ways of measuring and monitoring their social and environmental impacts – deficits which would all be addressed (at least partially) by various government actions.

The full report card on New Labour’s programme for social enterprise has not been written, and, given the more pressing priorities now facing those in the sector, we may not see it for some time. However, all but the most churlish of assessments would surely acknowledge that great effort was made, even if this effort was not always consistently directed, or necessarily reflected by enhanced social enterprise performance.

Judged by the sheer quantity of support measures – a series of high-profile conferences and other national events, a new legal structure (the Community Interest Company), grants for business support from accredited social enterprise advisers, programmes for social enterprise visits and ambassadors, publicly funded research via the Economic & Social Research Council, and a host of local initiatives, many led by newly-established social enterprise networks in the nine regions of England – the government delivered on its 2002 pledges in spades.

At the same time, our social enterprise review would have to acknowledge that much remained to be done by the time New Labour entered its death throes and the new Coalition government began to take shape in May 2010. This is perhaps true in all areas, though we have space to examine only two: awareness of social enterprise, and understanding the sector's true scale.

Despite the high number of government-backed initiatives aimed at promoting social enterprise, it has been suggested that by 2009, social enterprise was still not well known or understood, and that the sector was regarded as woolly, confused, small-scale, and grant dependent (OTS, 2009). The Social Enterprise Mark, launched later the same year, was designed to raise public awareness of the sector, but any viewer of the popular TV programme *Dragon's Den* on 6 September 2010 – the dragons reacted with incomprehension and some fury to a plea for investment in a Community Interest Company (Hampson, 2010a) – will acknowledge that the social enterprise model is far from established in the minds of many business people, let alone something that is understood by the general public.

After eight years, it might be expected that one thing, at least, could be established, namely the approximate number of social enterprises in the UK. Yet Lyon et al (2010) suggest that this number could, depending on methodology and definitions used, be anything from 16,000 to 234,000. The commonly quoted numbers – 62,000 social enterprises in the UK, contributing £24bn to the economy and employing 800,000 people (SEC, 2010) – are therefore perhaps best regarded as an attempt to make the sector 'real', rather than being in any sense definitive.

The Conservatives' approach to social enterprise

Social enterprises may have had an uncertain identity, and accurately assessing their number may have been a matter of conjecture, but David Cameron was keen to include them in his articulation of his own party's big idea. The pamphlet on Big Society (Conservative Party, 2010a) which appeared in the period before the 2010 general election, made specific reference to social enterprise no fewer than 33 times in just eight pages of text. As with New Labour, an increased role for social enterprises in public service delivery was one objective, and there were pledges to provide start-up grants, fund social enterprise support organisations, encourage social enterprise activity in poorer areas, and enable communities to

buy out assets currently under public sector ownership. The manifesto itself incorporated the same promises, along with a commitment to give existing public sector staff the chance to set up mutuals and co-operatives, thus empowering “millions of public sector workers to become their own boss and help them to deliver better services – the most significant shift in power from the state to working people since the sale of council houses in the 1980s.” (Conservative Party, 2010b:27)

Following the formation of the Coalition Government, a statement on Big Society was released: two of its five policy pledges had direct relevance to social enterprise:

- Give communities more powers (community rights, to buy publicly owned assets, and to take over public service delivery)
- Support co-ops, mutuals, charities and social enterprises (creation of new such organisations and helping them to deliver public services; introduction of a right to form employee owned co-operatives for public sector workers; setting up a Big Society Bank to turn dormant funds into “new finance” for third sector organisations)

(Coalition Government, 2010)

This was clearly a very different approach from the lead Coalition partner, a party whose 2005 manifesto contained not a single reference to social enterprise. As with much else in the Big Society basket, many of these new Coalition policies had their origins in the polemical work of Phillip Blond.

Blond on social enterprise

Red Tory, Blond’s wide-ranging assault on the negative legacy of both Labour and Conservative administrations, falls somewhat short of presenting a credible economic alternative to global capitalism, with confusing (and confused) references to new guilds, moral markets and northern Italy. However, there is some interesting material for those seeking to understand what social enterprise policies the Coalition may introduce, some of which is summarised in the box below.

Seven Blond Ideas on Social Enterprises

1. Returns from publicly owned banks' sale to be used as investment vouchers, giving poorer people a stake in social enterprises.
2. Asset transfer, allowing social enterprises to become less dependent on short-term grant funding and thus to plan for the long term
3. Promotion and encouragement of community land trusts, co-operatives and development trusts
4. Increased capital available for Community Development Finance Initiatives (CDFIs), which can then lend to SMEs, creating jobs and fostering enterprise
5. Oppose the establishment of a Social Investment Wholesale Bank [now taking shape as the Big Society Bank] in favour of point 4 above
6. Conversion of the Post Office into a chain of mutuals, at the heart of communities and co-owned by workers and customers
7. New social businesses (also owned by workers and communities) to deliver frontline public services)

(Blond, 2010)

As we have seen, many of these suggestions have begun to take shape in the early proposals of the coalition. Item 6, the Post Office mutualisation proposal, was presented to Parliament, as part of the Postal Services Bill, in October 2010. Item 7 has of course been modified to reflect the fact that existing social enterprises and charities might also wish to deliver more public services (as, indeed, might the private sector). To sum up, albeit in the words of a critic, Blond's 'fixed Britain' will be one in which:

"The tyrannous state will shrink as it surrenders most of its functions to charities and co-operatives in which every member has his own financial share. A spirit of rediscovered mutuality will sweep across the land." (Raban, 2010:33)

Social enterprise on the up?

With Coalition backing, and with enthusiastic ideas generation from Phillip Blond and his ResPublica think tank, there would appear to be only one trajectory for social enterprise: untrammelled growth. However, the importance of context can never be underestimated, particularly a context where £81 billion of public sector cuts are being unleashed. This is particularly relevant as 39% of social enterprises receive half their income from contracts with statutory bodies (SEC, 2009).

The contrast between policy aspiration and austerity measures began to be pointed up almost immediately, as illustrated by a *Social Enterprise* magazine list of ten 'Big Society Cons' (Hampson, 2010b), ranging from the withdrawal of funding for community pubs (contradicting the policy on asset transfer), to the lack of funds earmarked for the Big Society Bank (£100m as opposed to the £400m first mooted).

The abolition of Regional Development Agencies in England, which provide over £1.5m worth of annual funding to social enterprise support networks, along with news that the Capacitybuilders support programme was to be scrapped, and reductions in funding for national partners of the Office of Civil Society, cast further doubt on exactly how long the Coalition's love affair with social enterprise would last.

The Comprehensive Spending Review itself offered a £470m settlement for Civil Society, including £100m of transitional funding to support organisations which would later be able to deliver public services. Yet what is most striking in this document comes when analysing the discourse: there are 16 mentions for voluntary and community sector, and just 1 for social enterprise. Either social enterprise is being airbrushed from policy, or it is being conflated with the voluntary sector. The latter view is supported by an examination of the Office for Civil Society web pages. Social enterprise (which is this department's responsibility, as it was in its previous incarnation as the Office of the Third Sector), is included not as a separate entity, or even under the Civil Society heading, but *under* (and therefore part of?) the Voluntary Sector (OCS, 2010)

Where next for social enterprise?

How should social enterprises approach Big Society? It is a concept far from popular with MPs, and opinion polls suggest that less than half the public have even heard of it (IPSOS MORI, 2010). Big Society and the way it is being discussed has strong links to charitable and voluntary sector models, presenting a risk of social enterprise identity (far from established in any case) being subsumed into very different approaches. The use by the Coalition of other 'polite' terms such as 'Civil Society' and 'civic society organisation' only add to the mix in which social enterprise is being diluted. Labour has contributed further to this confusion with its own calls for a 'Good Society'. There is, of course, a risk of Big Society being quietly dropped, or being seen as a smokescreen for cuts in spending and privatisation of public services, in which case social enterprise may be discredited if too closely aligned with the concept.

One possible response is to run a mile. Social enterprises are businesses, and they could orientate themselves more strongly towards the private sector, and those parts of government which deal with it. Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), which will take on many of the functions of Regional Development Agencies, will be formed by local authorities and local businesses (Pickles and Cable, 2010), although there was a 'voluntary sector add-on' after protests from umbrella groups (Spinks, 2010). Might Business Innovation and Skills also be a more logical government department for social enterprise support than the Office for Civil Society (recalling the origin of Labour's own social enterprise strategy in the DTi)? Partnership with, and orientation towards, the private sector, is certainly something social enterprises and their support organisations could actively pursue in the light of this changing context.

On the other hand social enterprises have strong links with the wider third sector, and in many cases are both charities *and* social enterprises. It seems probable that some funding, both for individual organisations and for support structures, will follow the Big Society agenda, and leaving this arena entirely would surely be ill-advised. Leaving the other foot in the civil society camp would, then, seem advisable.

The ideal response then, is one that reflects social enterprises' dual purpose of making money and doing good: position themselves correctly in relation to the private sector and to voluntary and community groups. Of course, this can, and

will, be done by individual enterprises, but there is a final point to be made. The survival of social enterprise as a concept, and its virus-like jump from one governmental species to another, is of great significance, given it was only articulated in policy terms in 2002. Building an identity, however fragile, and increasing the sector's confidence has only been possible with the support of the social enterprise networks which have been established over the last ten years. Social enterprises should recognise this, and call for continued funding for those organisations which represent them, connect them with each other, and provide them with direct support. The tricky task of positioning one's own enterprise correctly in the new landscape will perhaps be made easier if done in conjunction with others in the sector, and understanding and acceptance of the term 'social enterprise' may continue to grow as a result.

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Case Study 5: Community Ventures (Middlesbrough) Ltd. “People First”

Our Coalition Government’s plans for the Big Society aim to reduce the size of government and increase “people power” – personal responsibility and joint action. Its roadmap is about promoting social action, empowering local communities and opening up public sector contracts to give Third Sector organisations greater involvement. Lord Wei, the government’s advisor on Big Society, suggests that “a Big Society is one where people don’t feel small”.

However we read that public opinion is yet to be convinced, some seeing Big Society as a red-herring and a way of justifying public spending cuts. These cuts are feared to leave large parts of the country struggling to deal with the disappearance of essential local services. Teesside is an area which the media have labelled as an area least likely to cope with cuts.

At this time the biggest ask of our Third Sector will be to continue to provide the services many vulnerable people depend upon and function without the grants and public sector subsidies it has been weaned on for many years. Community Ventures Limited – a Middlesbrough based group of six Social Enterprises is well placed to weather the storm and can prove that community and charitable aims and sustainability can be achieved without public sector subsidy.

CVL overcame a difficult start when first established in 1989 with many important management lessons learned. It has also become competitive through cutting its teeth on public sector procurement and in winning work ahead of commercial competitors. CVL now maintains a steady growth and ongoing success in the delivery of contracts with public and private sector clients.

CVL’s group of six social businesses provide employment for local people in good quality jobs and through gift aiding profits from these businesses back to its Charity, it enables the provision of services which contribute directly to people-focussed community services. The group includes Complete Security (Europe) Limited which employs over 70 people delivering a wide range of commercial contracts for public and private sector clients.

CVL's other subsidiary social enterprises provide a range of consultancy services and are already leading the way in helping others work towards the Big Society including the public sector and third sector charities, voluntary and community organisations and social enterprises. This also includes developing self-sustaining funding streams for Third Sector organisations and providing tailor-made business support for potential and developing social enterprises. Chris Beety CVL's Chief Executive says "Our consultancy services are highly regarded throughout the public and third sectors in the North East and increasingly in other UK regions but we do not lose sight of our roots and the need to play our part in strengthening our local community".

CVL shares the ethos of Lord Wei that Big Society is about a society where people don't feel small. Through our growth and success CVL has and will continue to put people first in plans for everything we do.

Chris Beety
www.cvl.org.uk

Chapter 15

Environmental Responsibility and the Big Society

Mark J. Smith

POLIS & CCIG, The Open University

Introduction – the transformed political landscape of the environment

The state of the environment is perhaps one of the least developed aspects of the Big Society programme so far. Notionally, the Coalition Government is committed to wildlife protection, enhancing both green spaces and wildlife corridors to counter biodiversity loss, flood protection, household energy conservation and more recycling with the long term aim of a zero waste society. Yet, unlike personal responsibility on welfare and crime, environmental responsibility largely evaporated from the Conservative Party conference. This is especially important given that the conference focused on volunteering and citizen action as central themes in the Big Society initiative. Perhaps this was a result of the residual but significant hostility to environmental action by many conservative supporters as well as scepticism about climate change expressed by many representatives of the neo-liberal strand of conservative thinking (see chapter 2 this volume). In particular, Nigel Lawson and Peter Lilley have been especially vocal in their opposition to the climate change agenda. The movement towards a low carbon economy is seen by some conservatives as a restriction on free enterprise and an intrusion into private lives by the state. Other conservatives, such as Tim Yeo, view climate change as a business opportunity for UK companies but also propose fundamental tax reform to offer incentives for greater energy efficiency in business, transport and at the household level.

The reform of the Quango (Quasi-autonomous Non-governmental Organisation) sector will also have significant impacts on the form and functions of agencies with an environmental remit but at this stage it is difficult to specify

precise impacts. Some abolished Quangos such as Cycling England have indirect environmental as well as health impacts. Within the remit of the Department of Environment and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), the reorganisation of the Environment Agency and Natural England will result in staff reductions and alterations to its functions. DEFRA will now focus solely on sustainable food, biodiversity and supporting a green economy; so a variety of Quangos which do not do so will go elsewhere or have their functions absorbed by the department, including the Expert Panel on Air Quality Standards (merging with the Department of Health's Committee on the Medical effects of Air Pollution), the Commission for Rural Communities and the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution. Notably, this will impact on the quality of expert advice that leads oversight of the environmental impacts of industry and agriculture. Similarly, the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) closed advisory boards on carbon abatement technologies and on renewable energy. In terms of scrutiny of government actions on the environment, in July 2010, DEFRA withdrew funding from the Sustainable Development Commission. These decisions were made on the basis that they did not provide a technical function on an impartial basis or require independent action to establish the facts.

Perhaps the most worrying proposal is that of DEFRA to sell half of the 748,000 hectares of woodlands owned by the Forestry Commission although such a move could create opportunities for some charity organisations to conserve vast areas of natural Britain in the process. Caroline Spelman (2010), the Secretary of State for DEFRA, has indicated

We are committed to shifting the balance of power from 'Big Government' to 'Big Society' by giving individuals, businesses, civil society organisations and local authorities a much bigger role in protecting and enhancing the natural environment and a much bigger say about our priorities for it. We envisage a managed programme of reform to further develop a competitive, thriving and resilient forestry sector that includes many sustainably managed woods operating as parts of viable land-based businesses. (Letter to MPs, 2010)

The initial rumour that half the land owned by the Forestry Commission could be privatised including many Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) has now become most of the owned land in England; for any sale of land in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland will be subject to decisions of the devolved

administrations in each case. The Public Bodies Bill opens the way for a total sell off in England if the Government deems this necessary and sufficient buyers exist. There is as yet no public confirmation of the extent of the sale or of whether SSSI will remain in public ownership. It is also certain as a condition of sale that many current restrictions on land use for these woodlands will be removed to allow for commercial development. Potential Big Society partners such as the RSPB and the Woodland Trust are also concerned that the sale price for ancient woodlands will not reflect its social and environmental value including its recreational uses. Besides the question of irreplaceability, this decision also places in peril the strategy developed by the Woodland Trust to increase the proportion of land in the UK devoted to woodland to 40 per cent by the end of the century. While such voluntary sector organisations as the Woodland Trust as well as bodies such as the National Trust will no doubt bid for parcels of woodland, there is no guarantee that they will be successful against private companies or individual bidders. Spelman has indicated that public rights of way will be maintained and something akin to the licensing system for felling timber will continue.

Nevertheless, within the 2010 spending review the Department of Energy and Climate Change retained annual funds of £3 billion from 2011 for addressing climate change despite deep cuts in other areas. Included in these areas are £1 billion investment in carbon capture and storage and £200 million on low carbon technologies. So with attention directed either to state led initiatives such as major infrastructure investment projects or the responsibilities of households and individual citizens to use less energy and reduce non-recyclable waste, the scope for association based activities which are central to the Big Society have been squeezed. In fact there are many ongoing activities which have embraced localism that could be additionally supported and encouraged through the Big Society programme. Some activities need community based action such as clean-up campaigns on common land, urban parks or on beach fronts, as do allotment societies and local food networks, often in partnership with local businesses. Organisations such as the Woodlands Trust and the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers have long records of effective community based action to maintain habitats but also to improve their recreational value by improving access. Indeed, the Green Flag Plus Partnership (comprised of BTCV, Keep Britain Tidy and Greenspace) have run the Green Flag and Pennant Awards for the Communities and Local Government Department, to highlight environmentally oriented community schemes for many years. In short, the Big

Society policy should not be assessed by how it re-labels pre-existing initiatives but in how it adds value to them in terms of scale and scope.

The meaning of environmental responsibility

A general definition of what it means to be responsible is to have regard for others in one's own actions, whether this is individually, as a group or collectively across nations and continents. The idea of responsibility also implies being accountable for our decisions and activities. With accountability usually comes a degree of trust, whether of individual citizens, of organisations or of representative bodies such as national governments. Sometimes, responsibility can also be understood in a negative way, synonymous with being a burden (for instance, pejorative understandings of a citizen's responsibility to pay taxes). Responsibility is associated with the obligations and duties that agents have towards others. However, it is important to distinguish between duties and obligations in order to understand who has responsibility and of what kind. Obligations are the broader ethical intuitions that exist in a community, informing how we regard the interests of others; in other words, they represent 'the presence of ties that bind one agent to another or other agents and things, taking account of the various ways in which an agent feels they owe obligations' (Smith and Pangsapa, 2008, p. 82). If we focus on the 'ties that bind' in an environmental context then this implies two things: that there is a prior agreement that environmental harms inflicted even at a distance deserve some kind of remedy, and that citizens understand why certain actions (or their avoidance) need to take place. You might notice some different kinds of responsibility here.

In turn, obligations inform the more formalised duties that are subject to legal enforcement. Duties often have a stronger moral or legal force than general obligations in that they are seen as indicating some aspect of compulsion, such as the duty to serve in the armed forces during periods of national warfare. However, it is hard to imagine a duty that does not resonate with and draw upon the obligations in a particular community. Obligations are expressions of what is 'taken for granted' within their cultural context, and are necessary for duties to be stable and relatively uncontested. For example, if the 'duty of care' that applies legally in EU member states lacked underlying informal commitment from a set of obligations then it would be ineffective, as is often the case where there are fly-tipping problems. In this sense, duties can be seen as a subcategory of obligations. As a result, being off-duty does not free a citizen or any other actor from obligations, for being off-

duty just states that certain assigned tasks are no longer required without question within existing legal constraints. To re-emphasise, obligations have an informal importance in everyday life that is not covered by duties.

In business contexts, responsibility is often tied to questions of liability, so that responsibility is limited by the terms of an agreement (such as a car insurance policy that exempts the insurance company from liability in situations where the insured driver has been in an accident whilst using a hand-held phone). In this way, although the word 'responsibility' can open up greater potential for individual citizens, voluntary associations and institutions to act in environmentally beneficial ways by identifying their obligations, it can also act as a basis for restricting exactly the same thing by limiting their liabilities. Environmentalists differ as to where they think the boundaries of liability lie. Some emphasise that human activities should be informed by the responsibility to protect all forms of life and their support systems (i.e. soil, water, nutrients, atmospheric conditions and symbiotic ecological systems). Others focus more on the responsibility to support human quality of life, both in the present and in the future. Many statements concerned with environmental responsibility, particularly the mission statements of businesses that accompany codes of responsible conduct in relation to social and environmental issues, tend to treat environmental responsibility as the end result of a process rather than framing what they do. This means that environmental responsibility operates within the terms of serving the company's own needs to improve productivity and meet legal requirements such as those limiting pollution discharges, which tends to leave social and environmental concerns as matters of company altruism. Unless there is an explicit acknowledgement of the external effects of its activities by the company in question then the justification for responsible conduct becomes a matter of public relations and brand recognition. One of the problems here is that environmental issues are not made an integral part of the company's operations or of the mindset of all its decision makers and other operatives within that corporate structure. Simon Zadek (2000) suggests that it is a matter not just of consulting a range of interests, but also of institutionalising the process of being responsible as part of the consultation process and reviewing the activities of the company against rules of responsible conduct on an ongoing basis.

Consequently, environmental responsibility has meaning in terms of a wide range of human practices, ranging from reducing the impacts of our lifestyles to

changing business activities and participating in political decisions. It can apply to all actors, can be understood in different ways by those actors, and can imply a greater or lesser commitment to take a proactive approach to environmental protection or even ameliorate the harmful effects of past human activities. By breaking down responsibilities into duties and obligations this helps us distinguish two related concepts – entitlements and rights. The latter may include a farmer’s right to unpolluted land, a worker’s right to safe working conditions, or a citizens’ right to a clean water supply. Entitlements provide us with capacities to act, whilst obligations indicate that we are constrained by considering the effects of our activities on others. Rights and duties are, respectively, the codified and embedded manifestation of entitlements and obligations. If we assume that citizens are simultaneously bearers of entitlements and obligations, some of which may be more formally or legally prescribed as rights and duties, then we have a more flexible way of thinking about responsibility as composed of both the obligations and the duties that pertain to a particular environmental issue. Table 1 summarises these concepts.

Table 1: Responsibility in context

	Capacities to act (enablement)	Liabilities to others (constraint)
Informal	Entitlements	Obligations
Formal	Rights	Duties

It is often assumed that rights are intimately connected with duties for all members of a specific community – for example, the idea that rights to private property are counterbalanced by duties to avoid harm to the property owned by others. This assumption of reciprocity has its roots in the liberal tradition of negative liberty, that citizens have the right to do as they please so long as they do not adversely affect other citizens; if they do, then those other citizens have the right to seek redress through the due process of law. Alternatively, or additionally, the state can regulate the behaviour of citizens. This concept of state–citizen and citizen–citizen relationships is now often seen as universal. However, it emerged in Western societies – it is culturally specific. In other contexts, such as Buddhist legal systems, citizens also have an obligation to forgive the actors that have harmed them.

The concept of reciprocity is applied in the territorial spaces of nation states and local governance. For example, if a company located in the UK pollutes its local environment, the members of the community affected have the right to environmental quality and are justified in expecting the company concerned to have lived up to its duty of care in terms of waste management. Similarly, the company has the right to engage in profit-making activities and can cite its obligations towards maintaining employment levels in that community – that higher employment levels come with a trade-off in terms of some forms of limited pollution.

Indeed, one of the most consistent findings of studies of environmental regulation is that communities in single-industry towns are much less likely to engage in environmental action against the company in question. Moreover, in some cases local communities have mobilised to defend the presence of highly polluting industries with adverse working conditions, such as chemical facilities, nuclear power stations, steel plants and coal mines. However, it should not be assumed that the relationships between entitlements/rights on the one hand and obligations/duties on the other are always reciprocal. For example, when considering climate change, citizens in distant societies affected by rising sea levels do not have obligations to Western citizens because the flow of harm goes completely the other way. So it is arguable that globalisers have obligations to the globalised, even though we are not talking about the possession of rights or entitlements by the globalised or whether they have some kind of legal standing within the political communities of developed societies.

Who will be the environmental actors in the Big Society?

In Big Society projects there can be a whole range of responsible actors, including individual citizens, households, streets and locally organised groups (such as neighbourhood associations or community groups), private companies, and voluntary organisations ranging from local conservation groups to the many NGOs that operate across national, regional or even global terrains (with some, such as Friends of the Earth, operating across all these terrains). Beyond the individuals and groups traditionally seen as involved in civil society, there is a host of agencies that could be described as having institutional responsibility to foster Big Society initiatives, including schools, universities, hospitals and health authorities, political parties and policy-generating organisations (including think tanks). There are also political institutions within the apparatus of the state at

local and national levels, including those in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the state. Despite the bonfire of Non-Governmental Public Bodies highlighted earlier, a significant number will remain and could play a role too. Then there are agents that operate at an intergovernmental level – state governments, international organisations, and transnational civil organisations such as transnational corporations, NGOs and activist networks. There is also a range of regional associations (including the EU as a regional economic integration organisation) and free-trade organisations (such as WTO, NAFTA and ASEAN), as well as financial bodies such as the World Bank, the IMF or (as a regional example) the Asian Development Bank. These also have the capacity – if not always the will – to act in responsible ways.

This brief list of (potentially) responsible actors highlights the first problem that campaigners for environmental (and indeed social) responsibility face – responsibility is usually distributed among a range of actors and the precise mix will often depend on the environmental issue in question. This is shown particularly clearly when we consider responsibility in relation to the issue of climate change. The activities of citizens, companies and states in developed societies, according to the current scientific consensus, are responsible for a variety of effects that vary in significance depending on the vulnerability of people located in different places. However, it is becoming more accepted that Western consumers and businesses have responsibilities to distant strangers who will feel the effects of rising sea levels, desertification and unpredictable storm patterns, and it is important to clarify the character of these responsibilities in terms of obligations and duties. This represents a departure from the rights-centred approach discussed previously, which tends to treat responsibilities, obligations and duties as the same and often as the residual effect of rights and entitlements.

In the same way, present generations are increasingly accepting responsibilities to future generations. Consider the long-running debate on future generations since the 1970s and its presence in key statements such as the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Since future generations are not members of the present political or moral community, it is problematic to think in terms of a reciprocal relationship between present and future generations. For a start, we do not know the preferences of future generations – or indeed, what they will be like. One traditional conservative

account drawing on Burke's multigenerational partnership suggests that obligations to future generations depend on whether they share our social ideals, in the same manner that foreign aid has often been distributed (Golding, 1972; see Reynolds et al, 2009). This implies we should be more concerned with immediate successors rather than more distant future generations. There are significant problems with this approach for some environmental issues such as biodiversity loss, deforestation and water quality will have impacts for up to around eight generations while the costs of nuclear waste will impact much further into the future. In addition, while present generations can clearly have an impact on future generations, future generations cannot affect the living except in terms of our reputation. Thus whilst it is arguable that future generations cannot be said to have rights, it is widely accepted that present generations have obligations towards them. On the basis of this, the debate has centred on which future generations should be considered and what obligations we should have.

If we take the climate change example again, it is arguable that citizens' primary responsibilities have been focused on limiting the impacts of their present lifestyles through energy conservation measures and avoiding future purchase decisions that increase their energy use. Sometimes this involves acts as mundane as not leaving light bulbs switched on or the TV on standby, but it can also feature in the major decisions that citizens face during their lives, such as choosing their preferred means of transport or buying a house. Nevertheless, this could be seen as 'too little, too late' as it leaves the impacts of previous decisions untouched. Environmental movements also place a great deal of emphasis on change in terms of ethics, policy and action. Since the citizens of some countries produce considerably larger amounts of greenhouse gas emissions than others, this means that some societies will have to transform more than others in order to achieve effective change.

The magnitude of the task of reducing greenhouse gas emissions in developed societies means that the necessary changes have to include a combination of citizen-led and institution-led initiatives. This suggests that effective environmental action needs to coordinate activities in both the state and civil society, (or alternatively in both the public and the private domains), transforming our understanding of both in the process.

Consider the question of coastal environments, where citizens and local householders can participate in organised activities to maintain environmental quality, such as through beach cleaning activities and joining campaigns such as Surfers Against Sewage. However, the responsibility for coastal defences and beach water quality depends on a range of state and non state organisations including private water companies. Even when examining action at the household level where we would expect citizen and family environmental responsibilities to be prioritised, conservation measures for domestic heat retention and solar energy often depend on subsidies from public bodies such as local councils, while household waste disposal involves local, national and EU regulation of private waste disposal companies alongside householders systematically sorting their waste. The same need to recognise institutional context could be said of developing local food chains from allotment and small holding community farms. According to the Commission of Rural Communities (2010) consultation exercise on the Big Society, individually and community owned food producers are setting up retail activities for vegetables and in some cases bakeries. It is arguable that such developments predate the Big Society programme; that is they are simply a function of changes in markets as localised consumption has assumed greater importance. This can also be seen in local currency systems such as the Totnes or the Lewis Pound schemes. Similarly, many charity organisations geared to meeting social needs for low income families already provide local support through activities such as furniture and household good recycling – activities that could be designated as having an important environmental dimension.

Conclusion: the small platoons of green society

Conservation practices and the multigenerational approach clearly have deep roots in conservative thinking (see chapter 2 on traditional and neo-liberal conservative thinking), and there is much potential in the Big Society initiative to develop new projects that will mitigate environmental problems. It is arguable that the English countryside landscape and land uses are shaped by series of historic agreements and compromises between different interests that are reflected in features such as the placing of roads, pathways, hedges and woodland areas and expressed through song, poetry and literature (Scruton, 2006). However, even though David Cameron has pledged to establish the ‘greenest government ever’, there remain important reservations as to the decisions made by the Liberal-conservative Government in its first months in office. Indeed some decisions

such as the sale of Forestry Commission lands could impact on environmental quality and recreational use in very negative ways. Effective environmental action also depends on developing genuine partnerships between political authorities and civil society actors. If a strict neo-liberal conservative approach is adopted then the removal of state facilitation and support in the expectation that private actors will fill the gap is likely to lead to severe disappointment. In some cases, unsustainable activities may replace sustainable ones. To take up the woodland sale example again, charity or not-for-profit organisations concerned wholly or partly with woodland conservation and access rightly argue that if they had the funds to be participating in the purchase of £2.5 billion of land they would already be doing so. In addition, many private sector ‘for-profit’ organisations will be reluctant to bear any addition social and environmental costs that undermine the bottom line. In short, there is a real danger that existing and ongoing activities will be portrayed as a filling the gap caused by withdrawals of central state and local authority funding on a range of environmental matters when they are doing nothing of the sort. While the Big Society has caught the political imagination, one of the most pressing issues of the Twenty First Century, the environment has been peripheral to the projects so far proposed under its auspices. In one exception, the Borough of Sutton, one of the vanguard projects, has a proposal for improving green public spaces in an urban and suburban context – to produce spaces that are clean and safe but not necessarily green.

In addition, the focus to date has been on citizens having rights to set up schemes rather than recognising the obligations and duties that we already have to our neighbours, other citizens, communities and to wider society. While we are used to hearing about rights and entitlements, responsibility is now one of the key buzzwords of the early 21st century. Barack Obama has called for:

a new era of responsibility – a recognition that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly.

Responsibilities, obligations and duties are commitments that we are now more willing to embrace rather than reluctantly accept. At a personal level, citizens are increasingly seen as having personal responsibilities to recycle household waste, maintain a healthy lifestyle and avoid behaviour that is harmful or annoying for their neighbours. This is different from how personal responsibility was

understood in the Thatcher and Reagan era when neo-liberal ideas framed policy. In the 1980s and 1990s personal responsibility for housing, finding a job or educational success was seen as a private issue rather than a matter for government intervention. As a result, 'social problems' such as homelessness, squalor, educational failure and poverty were no longer matters that politicians were obliged to automatically address (in short they were privatized as personal difficulties). However, the new responsibilities of citizens, such as sifting and sorting waste, buying fair trade products, limiting carbon use or contributing to conservation through local voluntary work, involve activities that contribute to society rather than suggest society does not exist. There are still dangers that states will try to pass responsibilities to their citizens simply as a means to avoid action on policy commitments. However, it is widely accepted that the most effective outcomes are delivered by partnerships. These kinds of partnerships between political authorities and local communities, citizens, NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations), environmental movements and private corporations should be the focus for the Big Society.

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Chapter 16

Local Government Members and Big Society

David Wilson

Former special adviser to Local Government Minister

Governing a Big Society

As a lifelong Labour supporter and a localist before it became fashionable to use the term, you might expect a degree of scepticism about David Cameron's big push on the Big Society idea. However, my experience of working in Whitehall as a Special Adviser, and, perhaps more importantly, seven years as a locally-elected councillor in a South London Borough, has convinced me that the renewed focus on empowering people within local communities is the only way to secure long-lasting positive social change and civic renewal in this country. Call it Big Society if you want – we do need big changes in how we govern ourselves.

The question is – have we got the local community leadership with the right skill-set and frame of mind to embrace the Big Society concept and let it fly? And, more to the point, are there enough influential Ministers and officials who are brave enough to make the necessary changes in policy and funding to inject this new approach into the Whitehall bloodstream and release energy at local level with no power to control the direction it takes.

Blair – and some of the policy thinkers around him at the time, including Ed Miliband, got this. Gordon Brown, I am afraid it is all too clear to see now, did not – to his (and Labour's) cost. Simply growing the apparatus of the State without enabling local people to shape it and bend it to their needs was a flawed strategy and unsustainable. The structural impact of the spending review and the direction of travel which the coalition Government takes will give a

clear signal as to whether David Cameron believes what he says about the Big Society. It will also indicate whether he has been able to persuade his councillors and Ministerial colleagues that this is more than a catchy election campaign slogan to mask a dismantling of the public sector. Giving power away takes the courage of your convictions. Devolution was part of that process and is unfinished business in England. We need devolution down to the very local level where politics and government most resonates with people. Big Society cannot work on a plain above the everyday experience of real people in the real world.

In government and politics, as in other walks of life, local identities increasingly matter. In a globalised world we are seeing a growing desire to protect and enhance difference – in our communities – to live more sustainably, cherish our local heritage and value ‘place’ because it is a strong part of what makes us who we are. People want our politics to reflect this renewed emphasis on the local. Elected Mayors grow in authority not just because they are directly-elected (though this does force greater visibility and accountability and prise open party selection processes) but because they are of a place. If they do not adequately stand up for their local community and properly reflect it they can and will be kicked out. This is the lifeblood of our democracy which is sapped if elections don’t make a visible local difference. Nor should political reform be restricted to our large cities. Smaller communities – like my village in West Norfolk, need vibrant democracies too. It is far easier to get people to engage when they can see the difference they are making on the ground.

Mutuality is infectious – if I let my allotment get overgrown I am bound to fear the withering look of my neighbour Sue, the allotment secretary and driving force behind the allotments in the first place, more than a letter from the Council. Participation is no panacea. My youngest son was disillusioned when our Village plan did not adequately reflect his and his friends desire to see more sporting facilities in the Village, but the consultation process at least enabled him to speak directly to the Parish Councillors and taught him a salutary lesson in effective lobbying. With largely uncontested elections, many parishes can afford to ignore much of their community – a directly elected parish mayor with elections actually contested to decide how your money is to be invested locally – could not. For those who argue that we are all too complacent these days I would point to the countless community campaigns to resist inappropriate

development or keep their local school or pub open as evidence that activism is alive and well – it is our form of government that is not keeping pace with the public's desire for participation.

It is not only on the Archers that lively debates are held in the pub or the school car park about important local issues – our representative democracy should adequately reflect this level of debate and not effectively close it down through remote and largely unaccountable systems of local government. It is not an accident that people prefer their most local of news outlets as more trustworthy.

In rural England, while Counties have strong local identities, it is at the micro-level – of market town or village – that people recognise and expect local authority. Sadly, our district councils often do not reflect these identities and as a result are often perceived as irrelevant and remote. The budget-driven amalgamation of councils will do little to improve this situation.

Thetford, in Norfolk where I work, is a prime example of this tension. It has a resourceful Town Council that is ambitious for the Town but literally powerless to influence the District Council on the key strategic decisions that matter for the future prosperity of the Town. As a result the Town lacks effective leadership and is held back from making progress as they are the poor relation in an amorphous and remote District and local people never feel that their voices are properly heard. In the absence of legitimate authority, a burgeoning third sector in Thetford has grown up to represent a disparate and disenfranchised community of long-standing working class residents and new migrant worker arrivals. How much better would it be if Thetford had an elected Mayor with a strong mandate and real budgets to bring to bear in discussions with the historic County and central Government and in a constructive dialogue with the community. A government of the people of Thetford, by the people of Thetford, that the Town's most famous son Thomas Paine would celebrate.

To sort out structures is one challenge – and they do matter. It will be harder still to change the culture and working practice of our locally elected representatives to fully unlock the Big Society. Our local politicians need to understand that they are elected not to rule over their communities or even to engage in some process of benign representation where only they know best – they are there to serve. Above all, in this age of deafening viral noise from a

multiplicity of outlets, those we elect need to re-learn how to listen and be open to meaningful dialogue.

One of the politicians from this current generation I most admire is Jack Straw. I worked for his front bench team briefly in the early 1990s. He is no saint. I don't agree with everything he says. But he was – and is – a brilliant listener. The reason? Like me, he has a hearing difficulty which forces him to pay more attention, to listen harder, to be more attentive to what others are saying. I think this makes him a better politician and he is prepared to pitch up in Blackburn's town centre to listen to his constituents and argue with them in a mature and responsive way. In a similar vein, Nick Clegg rightly gained plaudits and political momentum during the televised Leaders debates because he actually listened to the questioners and responded to their specific questions. A mature politics which is at once self-deprecating and has a large dose of humility.

Now that liberal Conservatism is back in fashion I think this quote from that great liberal Conservative Edmund Burke is particularly apposite. In his *Speech to the Electors at Bristol at the Conclusion of the Poll*, noted for its defence of the principles of representative democracy, he issues a stern warning which I believe should now be issued to all those seeking elected office in our post-duck-house democracy:

‘... it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion, high respect; their business, unremitted attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures, his satisfactions, to theirs; and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own.’

The acid test of the Big Society will be how far the Government is ready to shape a style of politics that enables this kind of political culture at all levels – accepting and embracing dissent, listening and changing course with humility where proved wrong, a mature engagement (Burke's ‘most unreserved communication with his constituents’) that moves beyond rhetoric and faces up to difficult choices. If we can move in this direction then we could genuinely begin to say that, in David Cameron's words, we are all in this together.

Case Study 6: Growing Together

Local food growing on under-used housing land, play areas, and schools is challenging, but can be immensely rewarding to our society. It brings people together, encourages more community responsibility, improves mental wellbeing and diets, and provides produce locally.

There's a growing band of individuals, organisations and community groups who are doing this in all kinds of innovative self-help, mutually supportive ways, says Helen Firminger of Bankside Open Spaces Trust (BOST) in London.

“BOST staff work with local people, who are active in managing and making decisions about how to improve parks, housing land and open spaces. We fundraise to help realise plans and we work closely with other partners, such as the local authority and the police, to deal with problems and make the most of opportunities. We put our residents in charge and provide professional support to help them get where they want to be. To me, that's already localism at its best.”

BOST provides safe plots and support for communal vegetable growing on local housing estates, adventure playgrounds, schools, and community centres. It helps people to manage these by running gardening groups for families, local schools, minority groups and anyone with an interest in growing plants and produce, and makes sure everyone who wants to is involved by going door-to-door and running involvement events.

This way of working doesn't come cheap, however, and is certainly not a free option. The biggest thing needed to help move the community forwards is long term investment in this professional support.

BOST has worked with dozens of resident groups and schools to develop a green vision for north Southwark and Lambeth. It provides the knowledge, expertise, support, advice and training, which empowers individuals and communities to develop skills and productive growing spaces – from shared areas to vegetable growing on tower block balconies.

“My ideal scenario to create thriving communities – call it Big Society if you like – where local people have a much stronger role in setting the parameters of local facilities, would be by allowing for a greater voluntary input of time, with fewer hours committed to work.” This wouldn’t be achieved by massive unemployment, but by increasing the number of part-time workers, with greater quality of life achieved through greater engagement by citizens in their local community.”

Through its long term commitment to its immediate community, Bankside Open Spaces Trust is seeding a belief in the power of communal action, critical to developing small-scale, neighbourhood organisations, best placed to promote sustainability and self-sufficiency and contributing to a decent society for all.

Helen Firminger
www.bost.org.uk

Chapter 17

Housing Associations and the Big Society

Heather Petch

Hact

Walking The Walk – Where Do Housing Associations Fit Into The Big Society?

Back in 2006, when the Housing Action Charity (HACT) surveyed the approaches that housing associations were making to the opportunities presented by the National Housing Federation's "In Business for Neighbourhoods" initiative, we found three main responses.

First there was a large group of housing associations who were principally concerned with their core housing business. Where they were involved in neighbourhood work they concentrated on employment and training programmes and developed them for their own tenants.

A second group of housing associations recognised the importance of neighbourhood working. Their Boards understood that this protected their housing investment in those deprived neighbourhoods where such investment was a risk. These housing associations adopted a D-I-Y approach, advertising for staff to enable them to set up their own community development and neighbourhood renewal teams.

The last and smallest group were those housing associations who recognised both the importance of neighbourhood work but also the value of partnering with the voluntary and community development organisations that were already active in many such neighbourhoods. These organisations didn't want to be housing organisations themselves and were nervous when housing associations seemed to want to be community development agencies.

Following the publication of HACT's two reports – “An Opportunity Waiting to Happen” and “Supporting the First Steps” HACT developed projects that looked to promote and encourage partnerships between housing organisations and voluntary and community led groups defined within the community sector as “community anchors”. As it did so, it found the new Coalition Government building on the foundations laid by its predecessor and actively promoting “localism” through which it sought to transfer power from the centre to Local Government and thence, it hoped, to the little platoons of voluntary and community effort that it labelled the “Big Society”.

HACT found the discussion moving its way. After the publication of its two reports, HACT had proposed that if there were to be an engagement of the voluntary and community sectors in programmes that sought to devolve power away from the centre, to pursue localism, then there would be need for robust support structures to make this a reality – to translate words into deeds. The Big Society would need some neighbourhood bedrock, some sound foundations on which to build.

Where might this bedrock be found? HACT proposed that the foundations could be created by bringing together two of the strongest social enterprise movements in the country, the housing organisations – housing associations and ALMOs – and the “community anchors” promoted by the Community Alliance (Development Trusts Association, Community Matters and BASSAC) which promote citizen led neighbourhood transformation through the development of sustainable asset based community organisations.

HACT recognised that the distance and at times nervousness and even distrust between these two different ‘sectors’ meant they had developed at arms length from each other – on parallel tracks, each with their own networks and access to Government. Increasing size had led to suspicion about the commitment of a minority of the social housing organisations to the poorest neighbourhoods. In turn, a few of these housing organisations criticised voluntary and community groups as seeing housing associations purely as a source of money to tap into rather than legitimate and trustworthy partners in progressing real neighbourhood action.

But HACT believed that the benefits of building these partnerships were real. It wasn't just an aspiration. It did not rely wholly on the begging bowl, on

continuing substantial Government funding. HACT argued that such partnerships built on investment that had already been made. Housing Associations, in the audit of their spending in 2007, invested over £400m in neighbourhood programmes in support of their core housing business. £270m of this was from their own reserves, from the surpluses derived from their housing programmes, and this provided leverage of external funding. Whilst the current cold economic climate may slow down such programmes, the assets and revenue streams enjoyed by housing associations justifies the NHF's claim that "we were here yesterday, we're here today and we'll be here tomorrow".

Many community organisations, too, had developed significant resources. The largest, for example London's Coin Street Community Builders and Bromley-by-Bow have physical assets and are substantial businesses by any reckoning. In contrast, the Balsall Heath Forum in Birmingham, one of the partnerships supported by HACT, is an example of the many community groups with rich social capital, a significant level of community activity and sustained local support that would be interested in building an asset base. Balsall Heath's progress has been recognised by the Government in its according it Vanguard status. The Balsall Heath Forum recognises that all around the country, groups of citizens are awakening to the fact that in future years, self help programmes and the development of organisations that are designed, developed and managed by residents will be an essential building block towards coherent and deliverable neighbourhood strategies.

Will there be a demand for these partnerships? If the experience of the £70m Communitybuilders programme is any guide, there is a huge pent up demand for these community and neighbourhood initiatives. Communitybuilders has received hundreds of contacts from community groups, defined for the purposes of the programme as "community anchors" seeking to build an asset base, to undertake feasibility studies for new ideas, and to develop new services. Many of the housing organisations are exploring what such partnerships might mean in terms of developing appropriate systems for engagement and in assessing the changes to their organisational culture this may require. It's in these initiatives that the Big Society means something more than the isolated efforts of individual volunteers, however worthy they may be.

HACT knows that already such partnerships are being developed. "Together for Communities" is a programme developed between HACT and the Community

Alliance that has been allocated £525,000 from the Communitybuilders Fund in the financial year to March 2011 to explore, develop, extend and learn from a number of “exemplar” partnerships that connect these two social enterprise “families” that, by working together, can help translate warm neighbourhood words into concrete and observable deeds.

Are housing associations up for the challenge? Can they walk the walk? In his recent report, Andrew Purkiss refers to a key question posed by Julia Unwin, Chief Executive of the report’s co-sponsor, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation; “Do housing associations exist principally to provide good services to paying customers – an extremely important aim in its own right – or do they exist for a wider social purpose: to build social capital and work for people and communities in need?” HACT fervently believes that the answer is both. A bad landlord cannot be a good neighbour. But equally, housing associations must not just talk about the importance of a social purpose, they must actively engage as partners in its delivery.

D-I-Y is still alive and kicking if the latest trends are to be believed. These suggest that some housing associations are planning to seek to replace the loss of intermediate income by establishing “client” social enterprises that it will commission to deliver its housing services, ignoring the body of expertise that exists within the current established social enterprises. So the struggle to build real and effective neighbourhood partnerships is still a live one.

Housing associations are operating at ever widening scales. On one hand are the national giants of the movement, raising many millions through bond issues for new building, rescheduling of loans and, hopefully, funding some neighbourhood work. At the other are some of the smaller associations concentrating on their housing business but equally aware that they can be influential players in the neighbourhoods in which they work. At the moment the many millions that the NHF has identified, is invested by housing associations in neighbourhood work that too often resembles a scatter gun approach, with worthy individual projects developed in isolation from one another.

Some housing associations claim that they are “doing the Big Society already”. And some are, making powerful alliances with other organisations in the voluntary and community sectors. HACT is learning from these pioneers and

will publicise its findings in the spring of next year. Others talk the talk but in practice have work to do both in improving the quality of their housing service (where Andrew Purkiss notes their underperformance compared with ALMOs), and in relating to the wider needs of the neighbourhoods in which they work. The trick will be to recognise that success in one mission will lead to success in the other.

Case Study 7

Holy Island: Small Society, Big Impact

Small society – Big impact

Back in the mid 1990s the crisis in affordable housing brought together a handful of residents on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne. They knew that for years every house which came up for sale was bought as a holiday home. They knew that the island was aging; young families were leaving and the school was about to close.

After enlisting the support of the Rural Housing Enabler they set about finding a solution. They formed a charitable Trust and joined the DTA. They then made a valuable friend in a London based Charitable Foundation who helped them buy some land. The grant giver also helped pay for the construction money along with a bank loan. The volunteer board knew what they wanted to achieve – nothing was going to stand in their way. In the first week of the construction period the builder went bankrupt – so they just found another one and got on with the job.

In 1999 local residents moved in to five high quality homes. For the next ten years the Trust managed the tenants without a letter of complaint or a one week void between lettings. The impact was marked; school numbers rose and the threat of closure was lifted, one of the fishermen – now with a proper home – expanded his business and two of the residents married – the first wedding on the island for decades.

In 2006 the Trust planned another scheme. The back garden of a large island house was purchased and attempts made to raise the capital required to build four more homes. At the time, the then Housing Corporation had made a statement that their social housing grant could be used by community trusts. The Trust had a gap in their funding which needed filling so they embarked on an unknown and untested journey.

In early 2009 a Homes and Communities Agency grant offer arrived for £212,000 of a £650,000 scheme. It contained 356 impenetrable pages. Numerous hurdles were put before the Trust – they needed to find a “development partner” – a housing association who knew about building houses;

so they found one. They needed to redesign various aspects – although they already had planning consent. They needed bonds against this and guarantees against that. The list went on and on. By this time it felt like half of the national HCA were involved. They were as determined as the Trust volunteers to make it work. In January 2010, four new tenants moved in – the island Postie, a couple running one of the island pubs, fishermen and shop workers. Young people and children – just what the island needed.

The Trust board always believed that the big challenge they took on would have national implications. They knew they could build and manage affordable community housing – they had been doing it for ten years. They just wanted to show people the added value of the scheme being community led. In September 2010, the scheme won the HCA and Regeneration and Renewal Rural Housing Award. The citation noted the Trust’s “commitment and passion” in helping the island’s families stay on the island. The citation ended, “The judges hope that this initiative inspires other community-led bodies to provide rural affordable homes”. Today, around 20% of island residents, and 50% of the schoolchildren live in Trust accommodation – a big impact in such a small society.

Dick Patterson
www.holy-island.info

Chapter 18

From Small to Big: Housing Associations and the Big Society

Colin Wiles

Wiles Consulting

Housing Associations and the Big Society

"I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it. 'I have a problem, I'll get a grant.' I'm homeless, the government must house me.' They're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also to look after our neighbour. People have got the entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations. There's no such thing as entitlement, unless someone has first met an obligation."

Margaret Thatcher 1987

A former Conservative Prime Minister said there is no such thing as society. The present Conservative Prime Minister says there is such a thing as society and that it should be big!

So how should housing associations react to the challenges of the Big Society? Should they stick their heads in the sand and hope the coalition government will crumble? Or should they enthusiastically embrace the concept and place themselves at the front of the queue to work with the government in realising its vision?

The fact is that most housing associations have been doing the Big Society for years, and the new agenda offers associations the chance to place themselves

close to the heart of government thinking, so long as they follow a proper strategic course.

For the purposes of this chapter, let's assume that Big Society means: small government, decentralisation of power and capital, voluntary and community effort, social enterprise, mutual aid, co-operatives and self-build, combined with less red tape and more initiative. In short, it means people and communities taking control of their own lives and destinies. Notwithstanding, that there is a certain paradox in central government telling people to take control of their own lives, the principles behind the Big Society sit at the centre ground of British politics and few could argue with the basic concept. Who could possibly argue that individuals and communities should have *less* control over their own lives? The notion of the Big Society, or elements of it, has been brewing in political circles for many years. Its roots can be traced to, among others, Adam Smith, Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. In the nineteen eighties, the Conservative minister Nicholas Ridley set out a vision of local government where a handful of bureaucrats met annually to hand out contracts to the private sector. More recently, think tanks such as The Institute of Economic Affairs have campaigned long and hard for a bigger role for civil society organisations. The Centre for Social Justice is behind current welfare reforms and Direct Democracy first coined the term "localism" in a 2002 paper.

Profile of the housing association sector

Housing associations are now big players on the national stage. They now own more affordable homes than local authorities – 9.7% of the national total in England – and provide a home for around 5 million people.

The global accounts (TSA, 2010) produced by the sector regulator, The Tenant Services Authority, provide a snapshot of housing association activity. Associations own assets worth £94.6 billion and their turnover is around £12 billion – more than the national transport budget. The sector has the financial muscle and geographical spread that allows it to create and maintain happy, healthy and prosperous neighbourhoods across large swathes of the country. In 2009, the breakdown of stock in England was as follows: (CLG, 2008/09).

	Homes	Percentage
Local Authority	1,819,696	8.1%
Housing Associations	2,195,195	9.7%
Other Public	73,698	0.3%
Private rented and owner occupied	18,475,654	81.9%
Total	22,564,243	100%

Housing associations have a significant presence in the housing market, buying and selling properties and land and working with national and local developers to build new homes. Their procurement practices have a significant impact upon the economy, particularly at a local level where many hundreds of people may rely upon a large local housing association for employment. In addition, housing associations are engaged in a whole range of social enterprises and community development that go well beyond the traditional concept of bricks and mortar. This is nothing new. Early pioneers in housing emphasised the importance of community development and self-sufficiency. Ebenezer Howard, the pioneer thinker who created the first garden cities and laid the ground for the new towns, had a vision of self-sufficient communities, free of state support, where land and property rents supported a local welfare state and where food and other services and products were produced locally. This was the Big Society in action one hundred years ago.

There are 1,700 active housing associations, of which most have fewer than 250 homes but over 390 associations own more than 1,000 homes, representing more than 95% of the 2.2 million homes in the sector. The largest associations have between 50,000 and 100,000 homes and 60 associations have over 10,000 homes. These largest associations manage 44% of all homes.

The sector as a whole has low level of debt and therefore the capacity to build more homes and to meet more housing needs.

Facing up to the Big Society

So how can housing associations respond to Big Society thinking? To begin with, associations possess a number of features that work in their favour:

- They are non-profit making bodies run by volunteer Boards, often with charitable status.
- They have a strong presence in neighbourhoods and communities and a commitment to place-making and social enterprise.
- They are non-public bodies (although this is disputed by some) and independent of the public sector.
- They have a strong track record in unlocking assets and using private finance. Over a period of decades the level of public investment in each of their properties has declined.
- They provide over 2 million decent homes for 5 million people – and a decent home is the building block of an independent, trouble-free life.
- They have a “can do” attitude to problem-solving and are free of many of the bureaucratic shackles that beset the public sector. They are also lightly regulated.

All of these strengths should make associations attractive agents of change in the eyes of the government.

On the negative side, associations have a number of presentational difficulties that they will need to address if the government is to treat them as serious partners.

The image of housing association “fat cat” chief executives will need to be addressed by Boards and the sector as a whole.

Associations are seen by some as being too reliant on state funding through social housing grants and housing benefits. Associations will need to show that they can manage the transition to lower levels of grant funding and the threat to income streams posed by housing benefit reform.

Many associations have spread too far and wide and are seen as remote absentee landlords by some politicians. This growth has often been the product of the egos of chief executives and Boards and has had little to do with common sense or service delivery. Associations will need to look seriously at stock rationalisation and ensure that housing management is local and responsive.

Some politicians believe that housing associations create poverty rather than cure it — that they “warehouse the poor.” Associations will need to provide evidence that their work is having positive Big Society impacts – for example by proving that communities under their management are healthier, happier and more prosperous.

Housing associations will also need to learn a new language to chime with coalition government thinking. Forbidden words, the words of New Labour, include: stakeholders, regional infrastructure, targets, inspection regimes, centralism, top-down, tick box systems, health and safety. New “approved” words include: decentralisation, civil society, civil organisations, voluntary effort, local initiative, bottom-up thinking, and personal responsibility.

The coalition government is shaping up to be the most radical government since the nineteen eighties. Already during 2010 the government has announced the abolition of a number of quangos associated with housing and planning. The Audit Commission is to be abolished and the Tenant Services Authority is to merge with the Homes and Communities Agency, with both organisations having a reduced role. These changes are likely to result in lighter touch regulation for housing associations and a reduction in funding for new homes. Traditional social housing is unlikely to receive any direct grant up to 2014. Structures such as the regional assemblies and the regional development agencies have gone or are going and this means that regional house building targets have been swept away. Instead, local people will have a greater say in approving new house building. As a result, housing associations will have to fight hard to get across the message that balanced and successful communities need affordable housing. Meanwhile, local authorities will be reviewing their functions, with all non-statutory services in the firing line for cuts. This too will present particular challenges for housing associations who may have to pick up the consequences of local cuts.

The world in 2011 is going to be completely different from the world of the last twenty years. Housing associations are uniquely placed to respond positively to the challenges of this new world, but they will need to put their house in order if they are to be successful. As Neil Stott argues (chapter 10), it is tempting to be sceptical of any government that promises to decentralise power and resources. In the short to medium term, however, we have to assume that the government

mean what they say. If the Big Society is the new big idea, then housing associations have little choice but to plunge into the concept and hope for the best. Not to do so could put them at odds with government and its institutions for years to come.

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Chapter 19

Big Questions for the Voluntary Sector

Andrew Purkis

To take over or not to take over?

Introduction

Part of the Big Society vision is to replace monolithic state service providers with a variety of private and third sector organisations. I am not talking in this article about small-scale, niche or localised services, but about mass and generic ones. Press reports about Suffolk Inc, aiming to outsource virtually all service provision, are only an extreme example of what the policy intends. Francis Maude told an ACEVO audience in November 2009 that “the voluntary sector had to expand dramatically”, and George Osborne has spoken of his party’s “ambitious plans for much bigger involvement of the third sector” in delivering public services (ACEVO, 2010).

By far the most important driver of this aspect of the policy is the desire to restrain public expenditure and roll back the state, but it is also linked to assertions that the voluntary sector can deliver better value for money for any given amount of spending. Osborne told the same audience that “he was a believer in the third sector’s ability to deliver better outcomes for public service users and “enormous savings” for the public purse”. The same claims about superior value for money and transformational change are made enthusiastically by some voluntary sector leaders (ACEVO, 2010).

We are all familiar with generalisations that voluntary organisations are more flexible, innovative, able to work across bureaucratic boundaries, have greater understanding of their users, and mobilise volunteers and charitable resources, and that for these reasons they are likely to do a better job. But do they? And

what happens to the voluntary organisations that take over mainstream state services from state bodies – in what sense do they remain “voluntary” organisations, and does it matter? These are big and pressing questions for voluntary organisations who are being invited to step in and play their part in the Big Society vision.

Does it Work?

The evidence about the effect of voluntary sector take-over of mainstream public services rests on a patchy and inadequate research base, but certainly does not support the claim that it brings transformative change for the better.

A study by the National Consumer Council (NCC) in June 2007 into “Users’ experience of the Third Sector” examined a sample of employment services, domiciliary care for elderly people and social housing. It compared user experiences across voluntary, state and private sector providers. The conclusion was that it was not possible to generalise about the relative benefits. The third sector did better than the others in employment services, but the private sector came out best in domiciliary care for the elderly. “User-responsive delivery was least likely to occur in social housing, where there is little difference in user experience between the two sectors (voluntary and state) we looked at”. The authors concluded that “Third sector delivery is distinctive in employment services where the third sector tends to provide a highly personalised and responsive service to a defined client group. In other types of service that are more generic, such as social housing and domiciliary care for older people, third sector delivery is not particularly distinctive” (National Consumer Council, 2007). Unfortunately, the Big Society agenda does not make such distinctions.

The Audit Commission in turn had a look at the results of commissioning from the voluntary sector in 2007, and concluded that despite “the often-claimed assumption that the sector adds value...there is no evidence either for or against the argument that, at an aggregate level, voluntary organisations provide better or worse value for money in the provision of public services than either public or private sector providers” (Audit Commission, 2007).

Reviewing the evidence in July 2008, the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee reported that they were unable to corroborate the claim that voluntary organisations can deliver services in distinctive ways

that will improve outcomes for service users. Indeed, “User focus is not unique to the third sector, and indeed what little research there is suggests that this user focus can be lost when organisations provide services to a large, general population” (Public Administration Select Committee, 2007).

Another, more recent study was undertaken by the Office of National Statistics in association with the NCVO and others, into “Measuring Outcomes for Public Service Users (MOPSU)” (2010). This was a sophisticated assessment of user satisfaction across different sectors (public, private and voluntary) in the provision of care homes and of early years education. The conclusion was absolutely consistent with the other studies: “There was no significant difference in outcomes between care homes in different sectors”, and “There was no systematic difference in outcomes between early years providers in different sectors”.

Hence, all the general studies of this subject conclude that *there is no evidence* to support the belief that in general voluntary organisations can be expected to provide better value for money than their public and private sector counterparts in public service delivery. On the contrary, such generalisations are discredited: there is no significant difference in outcomes as between the different sectors.

The Evidence from Housing Associations

Are they better for Users?

It is odd that the debate about the role of voluntary organisations in service delivery does not often integrate the experience of Housing Associations (HAs), which represent the biggest take-over ever by the voluntary sector of erstwhile state services and assets in the whole of Europe. It was in order to share the timely lessons of that experience that I was supported by the Baring Foundation and The Joseph Rowntree Foundation in producing a recent report called “Housing Associations in England and the Future of Voluntary Organisations” (Purkis, 2010).

The big growth of a powerful minority of HAs (most of which remain small: 84 per cent own less than 250 homes) began with the Housing Act 1988, part of a previous political agenda to roll back the tide of municipal socialism and diversify the ownership of state assets. In addition to grants from Government for developing new social housing, largely denied to the state sector, and which accelerated through the 1990s, there was major growth in HA borrowing from the private sector, plus more development of housing for sale as well as rent. In

addition came the first wave of stock transfers, with a mixture of regulation and financial incentives to persuade, at first, many of the leafy shires to part with council housing and make it over to new HAs called Large Scale Voluntary Transfer Organisations (LSVTs). The second wave of more urban stock transfers followed after 1997. Today, council housing is a thing of the past in half the local authorities of England, and roughly half of the 2.5 million homes in the HA sector are owned by LSVTs. The gross book value of HA properties in 2008 was £85.2 billion, its turnover topped £10 billion and its borrowings were up to £35 billion.

So the first question is: what has this momentous change done for housing tenants? In particular, what evidence is there that HAs are better than their state counterparts, the Arm's Length Management Organisations (ALMOs), that were set up by many local authorities as an alternative to stock transfer for the purpose of delivering reform and improvement?

There is no persuasive evidence that HAs do better on tenant satisfaction or empowerment than state bodies, when the latter have access to comparable resources.

Over the four years to 2007/8, the percentage of traditional HAs classed by the Audit Commission's inspectors as Good or Excellent was only 31 per cent. LSVTs did a bit better at just over 50 per cent, but the state-owned ALMOs did much better still. A recent ALMO document explains: "At the end of March 2009 there were 20 ALMOs with three stars from the Audit Commission, which compares with four among housing associations (over the same period from 2004, and with a much larger number of HA inspections)...One of the reasons for this has been the commitment from all ALMOs to involve tenants much more closely in their work than was the case before ALMOs were established. This starts at board level, but extends down to many aspects of service delivery. And this is reflected too in higher proportions of tenants who say they are "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with ALMO services than is the case for either conventional council housing or for housing associations" (National Federation of ALMOs, 2009). Results for tenant satisfaction, choice and empowerment of transferring mainstream housing management to the voluntary sector, as distinct from reformed council housing or state-owned ALMOs, have not been transformative even where they are identifiable at all (Purkis, 2010).

Why should all these consistent research results be a surprise? Perhaps the point is that when voluntary organisations play to their particular strengths, they can indeed be expected to produce distinctive results, but when they try to take over mass services, they tend to stop playing to their strengths. Why should a voluntary organisation inherently be any better at managing a large maintenance contract than a public or private sector organisation? Or why should a voluntary organisation be better at being a customer-led business than a commercial body?

The Experience of Housing Associations

Wider lessons for Voluntary Organisations

Direct user satisfaction is, of course, not the only criterion by which to judge the take-over of mainstream public services by third sector providers. Let us consider the wider potential benefits to society that the voluntary sector can bring by way of work across bureaucratic divides, campaigning and enriching democratic society, and stimulating volunteering and charitable giving.

On the plus side, HAs do use a small proportion of their surpluses to offer services “beyond housing” in neighbourhoods. All of them can show some inspiring work of this kind, which is often based on enlightened landlordism: it is easier to maintain a good quality estate if the tenants are employed, have money to pay their rents, are not involved in vandalism and anti-social behaviour, so the HA may engage with these issues either directly through its neighbourhood staff or in collaboration with other organisations. But the picture is mixed. HAs are still seen first and foremost as landlords, and this conflict of interest limits what they can do directly in such fields as debt counselling. They may increasingly need their surpluses to fund any new development, and there is also an ethical issue about the extent to which the rents from tenants, which is where the money comes from, should be used to fund services that should arguably be being provided by the state. The Housing Action Trust (HACT) conducts excellent campaigns to try to cajole HAs into a more wholehearted approach to being “community anchors”, acting collaboratively with other community groups and agencies, but it is often a story of uphill battle and unfulfilled potential.

On the negative side, individual HAs have virtually withdrawn from campaigning about the issues they see affecting their tenants every day. The silence is deafening. The chief of one of the biggest HAs told me: “We cannot

bite the hand that feeds us. The National Housing Federation is there to say the things that we don't dare say for ourselves." So much for the independent role of the voluntary sector. They provide no voice for their 5 million users. The National Housing Federation campaigns usually as a trade body on issues of interest to its member HAs. So they campaign strongly, in association with the private sector house builders as well as Shelter, on the need for more affordable social housing, but only exceptionally about the needs of HA residents.¹

Most larger HAs have also virtually vacated the fields of charitable fundraising and volunteering, and they are market leaders in paying their Trustees. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is far removed from the traditional distinguishing hallmarks of the voluntary sector.

Perhaps the most serious issue is the loss of effective independence in many dimensions. HAs accepted that, in return for being put in poll position as the preferred provider of social housing, they would be heavily regulated by Government in a heavily managed market. Government provided the grants and laid down the rules, often in micro detail. Government paid most of the rents via housing benefit, and regulated the level of rents. The "independence" of HA Boards was rigorously circumscribed, and in general they jumped when the Government said "Jump". True, they were allowed in return to decide how to use their surpluses and to borrow in the private market on the strength of their assets, which local authorities are not allowed to do – a classic unlevel playing field that disadvantaged the state services. But this "independence" is of a strange kind. Not only is it closely circumscribed by Government regulation and influence, but it is understood among private investors that the Government actually stands behind the HAs and that if they get into financial trouble, the Government will bail them out or instruct another HA to take them over. That is how they obtain such favourable rates from the private sector lenders.²

Big Questions for Voluntary Organisations

Here are some resulting Big Questions for voluntary organisations wondering whether to accept the Big Society invitation to take over mainstream state services;

- Bearing in mind the generally discouraging results of research summarised here, have you good reason to suppose that you will be able to provide better services to users if you accept such an invitation?

- If you take on big scale public services, will you continue to play to your distinctive strengths as a voluntary organisation, or will you be trying to rival public or private sectors in activities where they are equally or more accomplished?
- How heavily regulated and influenced by Government will you be?
- Will you be able to maintain a non-negotiable space for independent determination of your own priorities, drawing on your basic values, underpinned with sufficiently diverse funding?
- If not, are you willing to contemplate, over a period of time, kissing goodbye (as most HAs have done) to your campaigning contribution on behalf of your users, to charitable fundraising and volunteering?
- If you use your freedom to borrow from the private sector in order to fund public services, are you sure that the Government would stand behind you if you were to go bust? If not, what would happen to your users?

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Footnotes

1. Honourable mention should be made of one successful campaign about high charges for pre-payment energy meters by utility companies, but this was an exceptional campaign funded by an external charitable trust.
2. See the quotation from Moody's Investors' Service, in Andrew Purkis, *op cit*, p.12

Case Study 8

Clean Up of Cricklewood, London

The news that NorthWestTWO Residents' Association had won the Bronze Award for Brent in the Capital Clean Up Campaign for its "Clean Up Cricklewood day" in June 2010 was the culmination of a project involving local residents' associations, local businesses and Cricklewood Homeless Concern. Together, as part of the Cricklewood Improvement Group (CIG), they wanted to make the Cricklewood area a vibrant and attractive place to live and work. This was the Big Society in action: local citizen-led regeneration of the community with citizens taking a proactive, collective approach.

CIG wanted to show that the community was proud of its area. Brent Council, the Big Tidy Up and Capital Clean Up supported the project, which was also a great opportunity to teach local children about the importance of protecting and looking after the environment.

The street clean up is one part of CIG's programme of events over the coming 12 months. It was set up in 2009 by local residents keen to create a Cricklewood town centre management group as a vehicle for positive and progressive change in the area. The initiative, led by Cricklewood Homeless Concern, is further evidence of the ambition of local residents to improve their community for the benefit of those that live there, for local businesses and for visitors. The project will be working with residents from Brent, Barnet and Camden to ensure that the Broadway is a place of opportunity, safety and welcome.

Along the lines of the usual town centre management projects, the CIG programme is significantly different in one key respect: "It is not driven by local council in partnership with local business. It is driven by local people who then decide what role they want other stakeholders, such as council and businesses to play," says Danny Maher of Cricklewood Homeless Concern. "We're already working in a way that encourages people to take responsibility and be accountable – you could call it the Big Society – and we feel that we have the knowledge and skills to support local people to take charge of their own destiny."

Danny Maher
www.chc.org.uk

Chapter 20

The Big Society Bank

Belinda Bell

Banking for Good? The Big Society Bank

The Big Society Bank is a central plank of the government's plans for creating the Big Society. Whilst the overall vision includes a heavy emphasis on voluntarism and community activism the Big Society Bank represents the recognition that operationalising this cannot be fuelled by goodwill alone. Developing an enabling infrastructure will require some real, hard capital.

The purpose of the Big Society Bank is to increase the flow of funds to a whole range of non-profit organizations including charities, social enterprises and public sector spinouts. The government expects the Bank to lever in hundreds of millions of pounds to such organizations.

Here we reflect on where the ideas underpinning the Bank have emerged from, how it is envisaged to work in practice, and how it fits into the broader landscape of the existing social investment marketplace.

History and development

The good news is that the Bank is not an idea that emerged hastily mid-way through an election campaign. It is an adaption of an initiative of the previous government which has been under development for several years. Gordon Brown introduced the Dormant Bank and Building Society Account Act in 2008 which gave the government the right to collect and distribute unclaimed money from accounts after 15 years of dormancy. Governments across Europe have introduced legislation to allow them to access these funds which provide both a one-off 'windfall', and also an ongoing flow of funds year on year. Whilst Brown

intended to use these funds for a variety of social projects, Cameron has said they will be used solely to fund the Big Society Bank.

The Co-op Bank is currently administering the process of collecting the funds, but it has not been a simple business getting this far as understandably concerns of the public had to be addressed. Only accounts where there has been no customer activity at all for a 15 year period are eligible to be classed as dormant and a safety mechanism is in place to ensure that people can reclaim funds that are theirs, even after this time. The Co-op is planning to have the first tranche of funds ready to pass on to the Bank by April 2011.

So with the systems in place to retrieve the money from these unused accounts one of the big unknowns is soon to be revealed – how much money is there? Whilst there has been extensive speculation of this in reality it is extremely hard to estimate. The British Bankers Association estimates £400m and some estimates are far, far higher.

Converting cash into social impact

The Big Society Bank then will have significant resources and it is tasked with exploiting this capital to contribute to building the Big Society. Here the discourse of the Big Society has subsumed that of the Labour government, but in practice the intentions are the same: to increase the flow of finance to social enterprises, charities and other civil society organisations.

There are a number of existing financial intermediaries that operate in this market place providing finance to social organisations. Usually known as Community Development Finance Institutions (CDFIs) they vary significantly and include regulated banks, regionally-focused loan funds, and the Social Investment Business – an independent organisation which administers several government funds.

The Big Society Bank will not provide finance to the end-users itself, but will invest in CDFIs as distribution channels that will onward invest into the frontline organisations. This is known as ‘wholesaling’ funds. As a wholesaler the Big Society Bank will invest in the existing CDFIs through providing loans or more likely long term ‘patient’ capital investment.

It will then be left to the CDFIs to use these funds to further their social missions. They will identify and assess opportunities to invest in third sector organisations and these organisations will create direct social value. It needs to be clearly understood that the funding from CDFIs to frontline organisations will not be in the form of grants but in repayable loans or equity investments.

It has been suggested that the Big Society Bank could invest in innovative new products such as Social Impact Bonds, through a SIB intermediary. SIBs have been designed to raise private investment to fund social initiatives. If the initiatives are successful the investor gets paid a return, if they are not, the investors lose their money. The first SIB offer is anticipated to be oversubscribed.

The Bank will only be a link in the chain of social value creation. The nuts and bolts of Big Society building will continue to be undertaken by existing frontline third sector organisations, social enterprises, charities and so forth whose ranks are likely to be augmented by an increasing number of public sector spin-out social enterprises.

Is there a market?

Is there a need for new funds to support these organisations? Access to capital has been constantly highlighted as a barrier to growth by the sector. However, we should be wary about what is meant by ‘capital’. Very often this implies access to grants and many civil society organisations operate models that are only suitable for funding through such grants and donations. In the years ahead it is likely that such grant-dependent organisations will increasingly either struggle or adapt their business models.

Organisations further along the ‘enterprising’ spectrum are more likely to need capital in the form of loans and to be prepared to take the associated risks. CDFIs are reporting increasing demand for loans with one such organisation, Charity Bank, set to double its lending this year.

However, demand remains weak for equity investment which is how larger sums are usually invested. Taking equity investment involves letting go of total control of the enterprise. A £3m social enterprise fund at Triodos Bank was recently closed due to lack of demand and a lack of ‘investment ready’ opportunities.

Therefore it is fair to assume that funds originating from the Big Society Bank maybe onward invested patchily initially, as the social finance market is changing rapidly. There is a sense that there is increasingly rapid creation of social enterprises with aspirational growth plans which in due course will lead to increased demand. From the supply side, mainstream sources of finance have become very conservative in their approach. However there is a burgeoning social investment market and it is crucial that any new institution – particularly one with significant funds – does not ‘crowd out’ its development.

Making it work

Currently the proposed date for the Bank to begin operations is April 2011 however very little detail has yet emerged of how the Bank will operate in practice. The government is taking soundings from the wider sector but it is still at the stage of internal consultations. An April start date can only be seen as optimistic and the fear is that in trying to meet such a deadline proper consideration will not be given to the best use of the opportunity.

As well as its own direct impact the Big Society Bank is intended to strengthen the broader social investment field and influence significant additional funds to flow into the sector from other sources. The previous government was accused of distorting the social investment market through the creation of a number of funds which are now rolled into the Social Investment Business which manages over £170m. These funds tend to be channelled to high risk enterprises, to be offered on below market terms and significant grants are often in place to support loan or equity investments alongside business support packages.

The creation of a Big Society Bank offers an opportunity to absorb the Social Investment Business and to begin to wholesale its funds to other intermediaries. This will lead to increased capitalisation of the new institution, reduce any distortion of the market, and chime well with the coalition government’s attempts to minimise initiatives.

Over the next several years social investment intermediaries will receive support from the Big Society Bank and have a chance to further establish themselves and demonstrate both their sustainability and social impact. Nick Hurd, the Minister for Civil Society, has recently indicated that the Big Society Bank won’t necessarily be a ‘bank’ in the sense of being regulated as a bank and therefore it

could gradually play a less interventionist role and act as a simple channelling and distributing mechanism for further dormant bank account funds as they become available.

Hurd has also raised the possibility that the Big Society Bank does not necessarily need to be a permanent institution. Whilst such an open approach is refreshing it is hard to imagine that the Bank will ever be in a position to not continue to play a role in overseeing the use of such significant public resources by independent intermediaries.

Conclusion

Creating a Big Society Bank is potentially a fantastic and appropriate use of money from dormant bank accounts. It is right that it should be positioned as a wholesaling institution and its operations will strengthen and help to build the existing financial intermediaries and the broader social investment market. Funds flowing to social enterprises, charities and others will fuel the creation of significant social value.

The Bank is part of a long game, which has already been under development for some time through the building of CDFIs and the introduction of the necessary legislation. Observers inside and outside government should note there is likely to be a further considerable time lapse between the Bank receiving funds and the funds reaching frontline organisations. Whilst the purpose of the Bank is to support the Big Society agenda it is not and cannot be the Bank's role to influence how these organisations ultimately use the funds.

Chapter 21

Money in a Big Society: Well-being and Wealth?

Tim R T Jones

Allia IPS

More than 40 years ago, during his 1968 Presidency Campaign, Robert F Kennedy made a speech that was to become famous. He headlined it 'How to Measure a Nation'. It could have been written yesterday and headlined 'Big Society': -

"We cannot measure national spirit by the stock market average or national achievement by the Gross National Product. For the Gross National Product counts the money spent on cigarette advertising and air pollution and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and gaols for the people who break them. It includes the destruction of our forests to make way for a chaotic sprawl. It swells with equipment for the police to put down riots in our cities, and while it is not diminished by the damage these riots do, it goes ever upwards as new slums are rebuilt on the ashes. It counts the terrorist's rifle and mugger's knife and television programmes which glorify violence in order to sell goods to our children.

Yet if the gross national product measures all of this, there is much that it does not include. It measures neither the health of our children, the quality of their education, nor the joy of their play. It measures neither the beauty of our poetry, nor the strength of our marriages. It is indifferent to the decency of our factories and the safety of our streets alike. It measures neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our wit nor our courage, neither our compassion nor our devotion to country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worth living, and it can tell us everything about our country except those things that make us proud to be a part of it."

42 years later what has changed? Why is it that financial measures of personal resources are the ones so important to people and their politicians? Why do people still buy lottery tickets, aspire to more wealth, lower taxes? Do we kid ourselves about what will make us happy? Do we kid ourselves about what we want our financial institutions to do for us?

The ‘Easterlin Paradox’ (1974) is the now well-rehearsed notion that the average reported level of happiness does not vary much with national income per person (beyond incomes sufficient to meet basic needs, that is).

Frank’s 1999 research confirmed that rapidly increasing personal expenditure on the improvement of one’s relative standing (by the purchase of ever more luxurious cars, expensive jewels, boats, homes) brings no lasting happiness – yet society’s investment in education, infrastructure, environment and community matters declines.

Layard (2003, p1) points to the conundrum that, in spite of the fact that they may not have become any happier people continue to aspire to increase their incomes. Surveys in developed countries continue to confirm that happiness levels have not increased even though “we have better homes, more clothes, longer holidays and better health.”

His explanation for this hinges on two things (p5): “habituation and comparison”.

Habituation (or hedonic adaptation) is the notion that humankind adjusts to things both good and bad – for instance that the novelty and enjoyment of the new car, new house, whatever, wears off – or that an unhappiness wasn’t as bad as expected – that ‘time heals’.

Comparison is the notion of adjusting what we want in light of what other people have – keeping up with the Joneses.

The constant desire for more income is likened to a rat race; it is our perception of loss of *relative*, wealth, status or income that causes genuine unhappiness and why happiness increases so little when countries get richer: watching others ‘get ahead’ faster than oneself leads to unhappiness.

His view is reinforced by Deaton (2007, p4) who found “recent growth in national income, unlike income itself, lowers average life satisfaction.”

Daniel Gilbert’s book ‘Stumbling on Happiness’ won the Royal Society’s 2007 General Book of the Year Award. In it he asserts as a scientific fact that happiness can only be felt in the moment. The human brain, he says is an extraordinarily poor judge of the impact of our present actions on our future happiness: in short, our future happiness will be just about the same as it is now – notwithstanding our efforts to achieve more of it.

Hedonic or Eudaimonic Well-being

While Greek philosophers were promoting the pursuit of hedonism, Aristotle was arguing that true happiness comes from “pursuing a life of virtue – doing what is worth doing”. Ashcroft and Caroe (2007, p10)

Hedonic well-being can be thought of in terms of pleasure attainment / pain avoidance. Eudaimonic well-being focuses on meaning, self-realization and the degree to which a person is fully functioning. (Ryan and Deci 2001). It is about fulfilment, positive experiences, achieving personal potential and living a “good and meaningful life” Ashcroft and Caroe (2007, p 1)

Current psychologists (e.g. Sonja Lyubomirsky) are finding that, in any case, 50% of our happiness is beyond our control – a result of our genetics and upbringing. Just 10% or so comes from our circumstances – the things we have, including our income. Forty percent, Lyubomirsky says, comes from our attitude of mind, our friendships, and our activities in terms of hobbies, sport and community.

All said and done, this is no more than the common sense of our parents and generations before them. To pursue hedonism alone achieves nothing and may be deeply harmful to oneself and society. Well-being must be a balance between pleasure and achievement, flourishing and happiness.

Do we know or have we forgotten what influences Well-being?

The Conservative MP Gary Streeter acknowledges that dominant political debate about economic success – or “endless material advance” as he calls it – ignores all those components necessary to a “balanced quality of life that do not relate

to economic well-being” (Streeter 2002, pp 4-5). What then, are these components necessary to a balanced quality of life and are they, in fact, linked to well-being economically or otherwise?

Paul Allin of the Office for National Statistics (Allin 2007) acknowledges that GDP may have been interpreted as a proxy for societal well-being but is now seen as an “incomplete measure” of the quality of life. He reports (p 46) that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has worked with others to develop a common understanding to describe well-being:

“Well-being is a positive physical, social and mental state; it is not just the absence of pain, discomfort and incapacity, it requires that basic needs are met, that individuals have a sense of purpose, that they feel able to achieve important personal goals and participate in society.”

NEF (the New Economics Foundation) makes eight well-being policy suggestions to government:

1. “Measure what matters: produce a set of national well-being accounts
2. Create a well-being economy: employment, meaningful work and environmental taxation
3. Reclaim our time through improving our work-life balance
4. Create an education system to promote flourishing
5. Refocus the NHS to promote complete health
6. Invest in early years and parenting
7. Discourage materialism and promote authentic advertising
8. Strengthen civil society, social well-being and active citizenship”

Marks, Shah and Westall (2004, p 4) in research for the New Economics Foundation developed a 3-part model of well-being:

- one part social – the sense of belonging referred to by Keyes and Haidt (2003)
- one part life satisfaction – the subjective sense of “satisfaction, pleasure and enjoyment”
- one part “personal development and growth, autonomy, fulfilling potential and the feeling that life has meaning”.

The “biggest message”, they say (p 6), “of the whole body of well-being research is that as a society we now devote too much time to increasing our standard of living and not enough to fostering our relationships.”

How odd then, that today we should be discovering afresh that ‘money doesn’t buy happiness’?

Time for a better way to utilize financial capital

There is unprecedented interest in alternative economic spaces and banking models, in social finance, social investment, social capital, social responsibility – in short, in societal well-being.

Encouraging citizens to save more than they earn must be pre-requisite to sustaining any society (the provision of health, social care, education, pensions not least). The post credit-crunch recession is, I contend, the opportunity and the imperative to look through the lens of societal well-being at the availability and mobilization of private capital. It is the opportunity to develop an approach:

- that is ‘Safe’, where people do not fear the loss of their savings
 - which provides ‘interest’ or ‘dividends’ measured not only in absolute financial terms but also in well-being terms
 - where ‘carpet-bagging’ cannot happen; where mutuals such as Building Societies no longer demutualise on what was, at best, a misplaced belief that Banks would perform better and, at worst, no more than straightforward greed without risk
 - that enhances relationships – that provides connection with and between savers, community and cause
 - that is modeled more on the concept of ‘company’ (Latin: cum pane – to share bread) than on financial organisations structured to take bread from the mouths of our succeeding generations
 - that is governed by trustees under charity law, with the objective of maximising operating efficiencies and customer satisfactions for the benefit of social and community well-being but where trustee selection is a democratic process of one member, one vote
 - that can offer to pay its savers in dividends of their choice where they wish: for instance carbon credits, gifts to charity or LETS such as the Totnes Pound.
- Yet one that costs the Exchequer the same, or less than, other capital funding alternatives and that can deliver sufficient quantum to be relevant.

The Charitable Bond – Allia’s approach

The pursuit of societal well-being and the mobilization of financial capital whilst having regard for its impact on social capital are the drivers behind the expansion and wider roll-out of a Charitable Bond programme across the UK from Allia IPS – the charitable organization formerly known as Citylife.

Allia issues charitable financial instruments in England and Wales (referred to as Citylife Corporate Social Bonds in Breakthrough Britain, the policy recommendations to the Conservative Party of Iain Duncan Smith’s Social Justice Policy Group – see page 29 Vol 6). These Bonds pool subscribers’ capital into secure social assets (e.g. affordable housing) and repay after 5 years certain. Their yield is released up front and, instead of funding bonuses or dividends for private profit, it funds civil society through employment and enterprise initiatives, social finance, venture philanthropy, donations to third sector organisations or whatever other public benefit their subscribers require.

The big issue facing UK civil society from March 2011 – when public sector funding for the third sector begins to really feel the squeeze – is that philanthropy is under pressure too. Donations are falling while social needs are as great as ever and won’t be falling any time soon.

The big question then, is how do we get the money to fund grass roots community projects and Big Society alike?

There is a limited pot of ‘surplus’ money in the economy that could be donated.

Social enterprise is a brilliant way of redirecting existing (but perhaps falling) expenditure to drive more social value from it. But that’s not the same as creating new funds. And social enterprise requires new sources or working capital to finance the liquidity needed to take on the delivery of these services – how readily available will that capital be? What’s more, social enterprise cannot address every kind of social issue – whoever heard of making an enterprise out of, for instance, the Samaritans or Childline? There are 180,000 charities in the UK – are they all to run charity shops on the high street? Of course they are not.

What charitable bonds do is to *increase* the amount of funds available for philanthropy because they tap into peoples’ savings rather than their spending, and into organisations’ capital rather than revenue accounts.

The principle is simple. Bondholders invest their money in a charitable bond, and choose the cause(s) and the interest rate they want. Allia donates part of their money straight to their chosen charity and the rest is lent to an AA rated non-profit social business: which means the money is just as safe in the Bond as in the average high street bank. After five years the social business repays its loan with tax-free interest. This works out at exactly the right amount to return bondholders' money at the interest rate they selected. So bondholders get a secure, fixed-return social investment, while their chosen causes get an up front, tax-free yield. The difference between the Allia bond model and a banking model is that Allia is a trustee-governed charitable organization that, unlike a bank, pays no tax to government, no bonuses to staff and no dividends to shareholders. In fact it exists not to make a financial profit at all – instead its business is to make a Social Profit.

That's what I call a better way to mobilize capital. And, given the financial benefits to the Exchequer that will be derived from greater funds going to civil society there is precedent for government to incentivise the flow of these funds. A truly Big Society needs to consider incentives to encourage investment in charitable Bonds that deliver against agreed government policy (as recommended by Ian Duncan Smith in *Breakthrough Britain*). Government could:

- incentivize bondholders with tax relief (as it does with CITR for example);
- guarantee Allia's loans to social housing providers or other agreed public benefit asset classes
- provide liquidity to enable easy-in / easy-out deposit account type of access to bonds
- encourage public sector pension funds to hold charitable bonds as part of their asset portfolio.

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Case Study 9

Big Society in Action: Shoreditch Trust

Shoreditch Trust is already actively demonstrating a commitment to a stronger civil society by empowering local communities, addressing inequality and promoting cohesion. Our approach has always recognised the value of the state, in the delivery of its statutory and non statutory functions. However we strive to challenge the role of the state and influence its future role, acting as complementary partners through responsive, creative and innovative service provision whilst at the same time advocating for communities to become more resilient, informed contributors to society. The three case studies identify areas of our Community Investment programme that illustrate these values.

Shoreditch Festival

Shoreditch Festival 2010 saw a total of over 25,000 visitors over the three day event, we also worked with nearly 700 participants (excluding stall-holders and caterers), of these, over 400 of the performers were young people, the majority of whom were from the local area. The festival employed 18 volunteers as event stewards.

Objectives include;

- Tackling physical, economic and psychological barriers to arts attendance
- Stimulating social inclusion through arts and culture, creating civic pride, enhanced community participation and capacity development through the provision of volunteering opportunities;
- Brokering partnerships between institutions, service providers and the local community; locating the cultural offer within a borough and regional context;
- Encouraging awareness of environmental issues as well as promoting our approach to environmental sustainability;
- Promoting Shoreditch Trust and our work.

We also have specific aims surrounding *World in Motion* (the Sunday activity that focuses upon young people) that include:

- Encourage young people to value creativity and innovation
- Develop creative and critical learning across the art forms in terms of skills development, knowledge and understanding

- Offer young people the opportunity to develop and produce their own work in a supportive, but professional environment
- Encourage a broader experience and appreciation of “culture”
- Raise aspiration and confidence in young people through positive activities
- Provide opportunities for young people to share a performance platform with professionals
- Provide sign posting for young people wishing to make a career in the arts

The World in Motion Day at Shoreditch Festival is specifically focused upon the activities of young people. The Sunday saw a total of 490 performers, 75% of which were young people.

StarLit Children’s Literature Festival

StarLit takes a new approach to encouraging children to develop a passion for literature and reading, self-expression and creative writing through a unique festival model to:

- Encourage young people to read and provide opportunities to access literature resources
- Raise aspiration and confidence in young people through positive activities
- Establish a creative dialogue between artists and young people
- Provide creative learning environments that enable experience of literature in many
- forms, represented by different artists, their work and their performance or activities

Starlit complements statutory provision enabling young people to interact and engage with literature in new ways. Starlit has provided approximately 6000 school children with copies of different book titles to read followed by the opportunity to meet the creators of each title. The children choose a complimentary book to take home from the festival bookshop. The value of in-kind resource contributed by the mobilisation of a strong network of volunteers is huge.

The festival has engaged approximately 100 volunteers drawn from corporate partners in the city and local creative industries. Many of the reading groups that precede the festival are led by volunteers and great value is placed by the children on being introduced to new learning mentors.

Bump Buddies: Maternity Peer Educators

This aims to reduce infant mortality among disadvantaged communities. Hackney's infant mortality rate is higher than the London average. The scheme focuses on African, Caribbean and Turkish/Kurdish communities.

'Bump buddies' are trained local volunteers providing information and support to pregnant women, on healthy nutrition, smoking cessation and breast feeding. The Project has 56 volunteers working with 560 vulnerable women. Many of the volunteers come from ethnic communities targeted by the programme able to use their own informal community networks to extend the reach of the programme.

Bump Buddies has been recognised by NHS City and Hackney, as providing a valuable means of engaging with vulnerable groups, as confirmed by a City of University evaluation in 2008. It does not alleviate these bodies from their requirement to provide mainstream support, instead it encourages greater service access, through a trusted intermediary who when evaluated 90% of clients trusted to provide a positive service. Our monitoring has also demonstrated several positive health outcomes, including increased breastfeeding rates, better attendance at antenatal classes and a reduction in emergency hospital admissions for new babies.

Micheal Pyner

www.shoreditchtrust.org.uk

Chapter 22

Jericho Road

Jess Steele

Development Trusts Association

On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will only be an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's history.

Martin Luther King

The Coalition Government is busy drafting legislation to 'give' a series of rights to local communities. After many years of the rhetoric of 'community empowerment', the cliché that 'local people know best' and the fundamental failure to do anything practical about it, this new language of community rights has to be welcomed. Whether it has any more impact than its predecessor is yet to be seen. But we will not wait to see if they mean it this time: we must *make* it true.

In the real unequal world, where we need to exalt the valleys and lower the mountains¹, rights are not legislated by government. The Equal Pay Act did not close the pay gap, anti-discrimination laws do not end prejudice. In his Civil Rights Message on the day the Alabama National Guardsmen were called to enforce the rights of two black students to attend the university, JFK said that Congress had to act but that civil rights would only be achieved by the human decency of every American citizen. He also famously acknowledged that "those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable." Given the parallel shock-and-awe of spending cuts, welfare raiding

and mass asset disposal his words are more relevant to us than they have been for twenty five years.

Community anchors – independent, neighbourhood-based organisations led by local people – have a long history and an impressive geographical spread across the United Kingdom. They are committed to social justice through collective social action, creating local wealth and keeping it local, building resilience for themselves and throughout their communities. This is a well-networked movement of *bi-focal* organisations that care about and support each other across the country as well as dedicating passionate energy to their own fine-grain patch and its people.

This movement is the foundation of the Big Society, the good society, the Great Society. It is collective local action that will transform the Jericho Road, and it is the bonds between localities that will make sure this is not an isolated right won by the few, but a control-shift that genuinely enables people in any neighbourhood, however high their mountains or low their valleys, to get on with what needs doing. This is not a bid for *power-over*, for ‘communities at the helm’ of big budget regeneration – we know that time is over, for what it was worth. This is a demand for *power-to*, for groups of local people to be allowed to make our own change, using whatever resources we can collectively marshal. The challenges ahead are undeniably frightening and the opportunities are hard to grasp before they slip away. We need co-ordinated practical actions across a range of fields, and we also need a clear way of agreeing and explaining what we are trying to achieve. Below are a few suggestions.

Rights & Resilience – community-based responses to the Big Society

We need a campaign to achieve *control-shift* and make real the community rights that would make a real difference;

Listening

- Feeding and recording public and sectoral debates about community rights – using all the technologies available.
- Hearing directly from community anchor organisations how the proposed community rights could work or fail, and what else needs to be in place.

Voice

- Promoting the voices of community anchor organisations in describing the potential impact of new community rights.
- Speaking truth to power; that legislating to allow communities to do a thing does not get that thing done and on its own would promote inequality because those with access to resources will make it happen and those without will lose again.
- Advancing the distinctive voice of the development trust and social action movement, stressing the crucial importance of collective responses and resilient local organisations.

Action

I suggest we begin a long list of actions that will make progress on community rights and here are three to start that list;

- Develop *Buy Bid Build* – a one-stop service to support local community action, a national access point for information, advice, assistance and investment, driven by local demand.
- Develop *The Interface* – a hands-on development & investment vehicle to support multiple asset transfers with a mission to maximise the social and financial value of the assets and to build community aspiration and capacity to take them over at the right time.
- Promote the *Community Allowance* – the 8th Principle of 21st century welfare reform must be *communities*. Welfare policy should recognise the role communities play or could play in the individual's transition to work. Welfare spend should be an investment in communities as well as individuals. The Community Allowance is an immediate, affordable win-win-win solution.

References

John F. Kennedy, (1963) *Civil Rights Message* June 11

Martin Luther King, (1967) *A Time To Break Silence*

Footnotes

1. Isaiah 40:4 "every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain." A favourite text of Martin Luther King (see King 1967)

'The Big Society has been conceived as a utopian space in which new forms of popular participation will emerge; it is also seen as a smokescreen for spending cuts and entrenching inequality yet further. In this timely collection, the authors of the *Big Society Challenge* bring their experience of a wide range of community initiatives to bear on this emerging agenda.

Practical proposals for organic forms of community growth, an awareness of the complexity of the state and a canny insight into the volatile world of the Big Society pervade these essays. The book offers hope for a democratic future'

Tom Woodin, Institute of Education, University of London

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