

BIG Society

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The Coalition Government hopes the Big Society agenda will help to replace 'big government'¹, to mend 'our broken society'² and to help to cut the size of the public deficit. Getting people at local level to take more responsibility and do more to help themselves and their neighbours is seen as an alternative to action taken by state institutions and public services. Poverty, unemployment and inequalities are signs of social breakdown and these, according to the David Cameron, are best addressed by shifting power, control and responsibility from central state to families and communities.

Drawing from traditional conservative thinking, the 'Big Society' is not a new idea. Indeed, many of the policies associated with the 'Big Society' are recycled from past Conservative manifestos, as well as overlapping on territory staked out by New Labour – for although the Labour Party has argued that David Cameron's 'big society' is no more than a 'fig leaf for savage spending cuts',³ all three political parties have supported the idea of community empowerment in recent years.

In opposition, the Conservatives centred their criticism of Labour's social policy on the 'Breakdown Britain Report'⁴ from The Centre for Social Justice. The report led a narrative that Britain was broken due in large part to a lack of civic engagement, neighbourliness and civil society mobilisation, coupled with an abundance of crime and a government bureaucracy which was stifling local action. Thus the Big Society was pitched as the remedy for the 'broken society'. The notion was also seen as a good opportunity to further 'detoxify' the Conservative 'brand'.

Within the 'Big Society' ideology many have acknowledged that, however vague and inconsistent its concrete recommendations, it presents room for a genuine attempt to move beyond the "bureaucratic statist interventionism of the last government".

It has often been said that the modern state has gone too far in attempting to regulate away risk - as can be seen in what are regarded as the excesses of the 'Vetting and Barring Scheme', with its requirement that virtually anyone who comes into contact with children through a school or a charity, has to be vetted by the state, or the way in which protocols and reporting burdens discourage social workers and police from exercising judgement and take up so much time.

Drawing on evidence from organisations such as The Young Foundation, (which has worked with community groups, social enterprises and parish councils in Wiltshire,

¹ Cabinet Office (2010) 'The Coalition: our programme for government'

² D Cameron (2010) "Mending our Broken Society"

³ <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2010/07/society-bank-reserves-cameron>

Sheffield, Birmingham, Suffolk and many other places around the country) which is already developing and delivering innovative responses to local needs, it has been widely agreed by councils and public agencies that drawing on local knowledge and users' experience can do much to improve public services.

It has been argued that this type of community and user involvement will become increasingly important as widespread spending cuts force local authorities to make difficult decisions about service priorities.

Moreover, a report published by the RSA has suggested that at community level there are numerous untapped resources - such as strong social networks veiled from policy makers and service providers.⁵ As such many regard The Big Society as way of obtaining a deeper understanding of *existing* community assets and how to foster and mobilise them – whether this is simply by providing space for sports groups or sheet music to a community choir.

Cameron has been clear that there is a role for the state in supporting community, the 'state will assume a new role as an agitator for social renewal'.⁶ Yet despite this rhetoric, many believe that spending cuts threaten to break the 'Big Society' before it has even had time to take root.

The New Economics Foundation says the voluntary sector faces an impossible task in filling the void left by the state. *Cutting It: The Big Society and the New Austerity*, claims the speed and scale of cuts will result in a poorer society because voluntary organisations will not receive enough support.⁷ Third sector organisations get significant proportions of their funds from local councils and as these councils are now being forced to cut up to 30 per cent of their expenditures, this will hit the third sector's ability to deliver on Cameron's Big Society vision, the NEF report suggests. With other donations falling as a result of the recession and likely to worsen with the VAT rise in January; many third sector organisations are facing turbulent times, claimed the RSA.⁸

The report also points out that the circumstances that make participation in the Big Society possible are not equally distributed across society; as such, those who have more to start with will benefit the most. Budget cuts impose an even heavier burden on networks and groups, particularly in disadvantaged neighbourhoods by reducing the resources available to them. Cuts to programmes like Sure Start, the Future Jobs Fund, the scrapping of free school meals for 500,000 low-income families, the freezing of child

⁵ <http://www.thersa.org/projects/connected-communities> RSA 'Connected Communities Project'

⁶ <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php/site/article/9308/>

⁷ Anna Coote, *Cutting It: The Big Society and the new austerity*, published at the RSA, Thursday 4 November 2010

⁸ *Ibid* n. 6

benefit and the cut in housing benefit and the VAT rise have led to concerns that society will be even less able to focus time and energy on grassroots change.⁹

Many regard The Big Society as Cameron's attempt to fulfil a much cherished goal of the conservatives – cutting back the state. In spite of this, most would agree that the agenda contains common aspirations, in particular the removal of the bureaucracy and red tape that has been seen as a barrier to community action. Yet even advocates of The Big Society agenda concede that building a stronger society at the same time as cutting public spending is an ambitious aim.

⁹ The Budget: 2010

http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_188581.pdf