

The English Big Society

The Big Society has been at the centre of David Cameron's political philosophy, since well before he became Prime Minister in 2010. Despite scepticism within and beyond his party, it became a core theme in his election campaign and has remained so ever since. Indeed, continued doubts as to the value and substance of this policy focus have been met with no fewer than four relaunches to date. So why has the Prime Minister pinned his colours so firmly to this particular mast? And what does it offer – particularly at a time of economic uncertainty?

In this article, I unpack the rhetoric of the Big Society. I ask how it compares to policies that have gone before and what it might offer. I then review the challenges that it faces, before considering what the future might bring.

What is the Big Society?

The Big Society, for David Cameron, is about putting more power into the hands of ordinary people. His analysis is that people in English society have become too dependent on the state. He aims to change this, by encouraging people to get involved in their communities and giving them new powers to take control of local services, assets and planning decisions, so that they can shape their lives and the places where they live. These new powers are enshrined in the Localism Act, passed by Parliament in the autumn of 2011. His government has also set up a number of new programmes to support communities in becoming more active, including a Community Organisers Programme, which aims to train 5000 community organisers, a Community First programme that will invest in locally led plans, a Business Connectors programme which will encourage businesses to get more involved in their communities and a number of volunteering programmes. It plans to create a Big Society Bank to invest in community and social enterprise, drawing on dormant assets and pledges from the major banks. Through the Big Lottery Fund, a non-departmental body sponsored by government, a further £200 million from the National Lottery is being invested in local communities over the next 10 years, with a view to developing a sustainable approach to meeting local needs and aspirations. The government is also encouraging social enterprise and the mutualisation of public services.

The philosophy behind the Big Society has deep roots in the Conservative Party that Cameron leads. It draws on Old Tory¹ ideals about the importance of 'small platoons' in building the ties and obligations on which society is founded as well as on One-Nation Toryism, which stresses the obligations of the privileged to the poor and dispossessed. It reflects long-standing Tory distrust of the power of the state but also owes something to concerns old and new about the cultural consequences of industrialisation (nef, 2011; Blond, 2010). In its emphasis on the responsibility of the individual and its desire to limit the powers of the state, it continues key themes that underpinned the Thatcher government of the 1980s. However, it makes a stronger commitment to the role of civil society alongside the market than did the Thatcher government. Cameron's commitment to the Big Society also contrasts with the individualist ethos of his predecessor, who famously commented that 'there is no such thing as society and that responsibility should lie with individuals and their families' (Thatcher 1987).

Despite the claims made for it as a new direction in policy, the Big Society also shares common ground with the policies of the New Labour government that held power for thirteen years up to 2010. Community empowerment and devolution of powers were a priority for that administration, which also promoted the transfer of assets to local communities, as well as considering the idea of releasing dormant financial assets. New Labour was also committed to the radical reform of public services, with a much greater role for the voluntary and community sector (VCS), mutualism and social enterprise.

However, as I have argued previously (Taylor 2011), there are two crucial differences between the Big Society and its New Labour antecedents. One is the economic climate in which the Big Society is being introduced; the second is the Tory commitment to shrinking the state. Any government elected in 2010 would have had to implement austerity measures, but while the central theme of New Labour policy was partnership, the Conservative majority in the coalition is ideologically committed to limiting the powers of the state, with the VCS – and, of course, the private sector - offering rather than acting as a partner. This, along with the scale and speed of the public spending cuts that the coalition government has introduced, is having a significant influence on the way the Big Society is perceived and its likely impact on the VCS.

¹ Tory is a colloquial term for the Conservative Party, based in its seventeenth century origins.

What does the Big Society mean for the voluntary and community sector?

There are aspects of Big Society policy that might be welcomed by the VCS. Giving people more control over their lives is an attractive idea in principle, along with the coalition government's commitment to reducing the bureaucracy and central control that bedevilled many New Labour programmes. New policies and programmes bring with them new energies and new ideas and have the capacity to revitalise community energies. Many will welcome new opportunities to provide services as well as opportunities for new corporate models based on mutuals and social enterprise.

But the welcome so far has been muted. The unprecedented scale of the budget cuts that central and local government are expected to implement has fuelled suspicions that voluntary organisations, volunteers and people in local communities – particularly the poorest communities - are being used to substitute for the state. Government has in the past been a significant funder of voluntary and community organisations, providing just over a third of its income in 2006/7, for example, and charity chiefs have warned against cutting this support when the sector is needed more than ever. There are significant variations across the country and across the sector but a study by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations estimates that, overall, cuts at central and local level will amount to 8 percent each year (Kane/Allen 2011²), at a time when the impact of the austerity measures on personal household budgets and local public services means that demands on voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) are likely to increase. Particularly vulnerable is the sector's infrastructure. The New Labour programmes that supported this part of the sector have been closed down and all funding for national infrastructure bodies – already heavily cut – will end in 2013. Nor is the impact purely financial. The capacity within both central and local government to work with the VCS is likely to be significantly reduced by cuts. The Office of the Third Sector (renamed the Office for Civil Society) has reduced in size, while those in local government who have experience and skills in working with the VCS are unlikely to be a priority for local authorities facing unprecedented reductions in their central government funding, even though their skills and understanding will be needed now more than ever. Local ecologies will also be affected by cuts in public services while the disappearance of those VCOs who cannot survive will affect the delivery networks on which those who can depend. Competition for ever-scarcer funding will also affect relationships between organisations, while the capacity in local communities to take up new

² For real-time information on the cuts to the sector, see www.voluntarysectorcuts.org.uk

opportunities and rights will be highly variable. The resulting Big Society may instead be unequal and fragmented.

Will the new opportunities in the service market fill the gap? The auspices are not good. The market tends to go to scale and the complexity of procurement processes often rules out all but the largest and most professionalised organisations. Procurement processes also tend to focus primarily on price and rarely acknowledge the values that many VCOs seek to bring to services. There is of course scope for subcontracting, but a recent study of one flagship government programme gives considerable cause for concern (NCVO, 2011). Of the 18 contracts awarded, only two went to voluntary organisations. Many more were named as potential subcontractors, but this does not guarantee any work. Those who have not yet received any referrals fear they have been used as 'bid candy', only to be dropped by the prime contractor once the contract is secured. And while there is some evidence of good practice, there are also reports of financial risk being passed down the line to those organisations least able to bear it. There is little confidence that safeguards built into the prime contractors' role will be put into effect. Meanwhile, recent high profile failures in corporate sector social care – with one major provider going under, a second forced to close residential homes because of serious, potentially criminal mistreatment of residents – raise major questions about accountability, quality control and what happens in the case of provider failure, as well as the dangers of 'creaming', i.e. avoiding the most challenging clients in order to reduce risk. There are fears, too, that cuts to advocacy services could lead to less transparency and less support for the most vulnerable service users (Action for Advocacy, 2011).

The cuts follow an era of increased government funding for the VCS and maybe it is unrealistic to expect this to continue. Indeed, there are those who feared that, under New Labour, partnership with the state threatened the independence of the VCS (see, for example, Scott 2011; ESRC 2007). Its programmes were criticised by some as being 'top-down', over-controlling and bureaucratic. The Big Society aims to address this and support bottom-up action, including action that is critical of the state. Its Community Organisers Programme, in particular, seeks to draw on some of the more radical traditions in community development, to empower communities from the 'bottom up' (www.locality.org.uk/projects/communityorganisers/). How far its government sponsors will accept the kind of creative disruption that this implies, however, remains to be seen. Its critics see it as one more example of communities being expected to substitute for the state and even question how independent it really is (see, for example, Scott 2011). But there are signs that civil society is becoming active in ways the government may not

feel so comfortable with. Government austerity measures have been met by a series of public demonstrations and riots, while the Occupy protests around the world attest to new forms of public action and growing concern about the operation of the capitalist economy. If current government policy does presage a return to independence in at least some parts of the VCS, this may not be the somewhat rosy state of affairs that the Big Society rhetoric suggests.

Conclusions

Many in the English VCS would argue that we already have a Big Society in this country, with a healthy voluntary sector and a tradition of community activity. It may well be that there is a need to stimulate new types of activity and, in an age of austerity, new ways of resourcing voluntary and community action. But the failure of current policies to acknowledge the important role that the state has played in funding, supporting and stimulating this kind of action may well undermine the foundations on which a Big Society must be built. In recent contributions to the debate, commentators have argued that more substance needs to be given to the Big Society agenda and that more, too, needs to be done to change the way that people in England think about citizenship, reintroducing values of autonomy, responsibility and solidarity (Rowson/Mezey/Dellot 2012). If so, it will be essential to move beyond the ideological divides of the recent past, and to fundamentally rethink the relationship between state and voluntary and community action for the twenty-first century, not as separate or even competing alternatives but as interdependent and symbiotic entities.

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