

The Big Society and the third sector

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Introduction – The Big Society discourse

The Big Society was a central feature of Conservative Party policy planning in the run up to the 2010 election, and in particular was promoted by David Cameron himself, who first mentioned it in his Hugo Young speech in 2009, and repeated it in an election speech in 2010. In practice the idea received a mixed reception in the election campaign itself and it was not the centre piece of the Party's campaigning. Nevertheless, shortly after the election and the formation of the new Coalition Government, Cameron again took the lead in launching the Big Society as a policy initiative in the garden of No.10 Downing Street in May 2010, with the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg. Here Cameron confirmed that the Big Society would be at the heart of public sector reform, and would be based on ideas coming from the ground up and not the top down. At the same time a policy paper, *Building the Big Society*, was published by the Cabinet Office outlining some of the priorities for policy reform, and was followed later by a string of other papers aimed at strengthening what the Government now called Civil Society.

Central to the new Government's early support for the Big Society was a broader political discourse on the nature of public life and the role of government. The Big Society was contrasted implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) with the 'big state' of post-war welfare reform, which had stifled individual and community initiative and responsibility, and had become politically, and economically, unaffordable. The replacement of top-down state control with bottom-up community innovation was championed in a later Cameron speech in July 2010, when he launched a 'Community Vanguard' initiative in four local areas (Liverpool, Windsor and Maidenhead, Sutton and Cumbria's Eden Valley) to provide support for local people to take control of their own services, such as shops, pubs or broadband deliv-

ery; and where he referred to the Big Society as his 'great passion'.

Although it was, and has remained, closely associated with David Cameron, the Big Society has had a range of other proponents and supporters both inside and outside Government. For instance, Nick Hurd was appointed as Minister for Civil Society within the Cabinet Office; and, shortly after the 2010 election, Cameron elevated Nat Wei to the House of Lords to be an unpaid advisor on the Big Society. Conservative MP Jesse Norman lent his support publishing a book on the subject, which sought to trace the idea back through traditional Conservative thinking over two centuries (Norman, 2010). Outside of government the Respublica think tank, led by Phillip Blond, supported the Big Society as an alternative political direction between (the failures of) the big state and the global financial market (Blond, 2009); and the Big Society Network was funded by the Government and the Big Lottery Fund to promote community based initiatives.

The Big Society discourse promised to extend beyond Cameron and the Cabinet Office therefore, and to champion a new approach to non-government collective action. It also coincided, of course, with the introduction of the massive cuts in public expenditure announced in the 2010 Spending Review; and this led critics, such as the New Economics Foundation, to suggest that in practice it was little more than a fig-leaf to cover the yawning gaps that would be appearing in public services (Coote, 2010). For Cameron in particular, however, the Big Society was not just about government cuts, it was about a new political rhetoric for smaller government, which a Conservative government ought to be promoting whatever the economic context.

However, it was within the political discourse in particular that the Big Society failed in practice to achieve traction, and over the course of the following four years was gradually removed from its high profile in political exchange. First, it is important to recognise that the Big Society was in practice only ever an English political initiative, with Cabinet Office responsibility for civil society now devolved to the separate administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; and in the 2011 elections in these countries the Big Society did not feature significantly, even in Conservative campaigning.

Over the following years its profile in England waned too. In 2010 it was mentioned four times by Cameron in his Party Conference speech. In 2013 it was not mentioned at all. Its supporters began to fall away. Nat Wei quit his role, claiming that he could no longer afford to dedicate his time to such voluntary activity. Jesse Norman fell from favour after twice voting against the Government in the Commons. Respublica lost financial support and political influence. And the Big Society Network was investigated by the Charity Commission and the National Audit Office for misuse of public funds. Key political commitments also failed to materialise. A Big Society Day, mentioned in early policy papers as a national focus for voluntary and community action, was dropped; and the Vanguard Communities were also quietly side-lined – although not before Liverpool had publicly withdrawn, claiming that cuts to local authority budgets meant that supporting local action was no longer really feasible.

Civil society and the third sector

That the Big Society should turn out to be something of a passing fad should not be much of a surprise – big ideas rarely last long in political discourse. More important perhaps, especially for social policy, is what happened to the policy changes initiated under it. Here the focus was primarily on the third sector, which might in practice be expected to deliver the bottom-up, non-government, collective action that would make the Big Society work. In fact the Coalition Government did not like the term third sector, preferring instead to use 'civil society' to refer to

this – including retitling the Cabinet Office section led by Nick Hurd, the *Office for Civil Society* (OCS).

The Cabinet Office (2010) policy paper outlined key commitments here:

- Making it easier to run voluntary organisations
- Making it easier for organisations to work with the state
- Getting more resources into the sector.

These were, however, rather like 'motherhood and apple pie'; and they contrasted to some extent with the significant cuts to the support for the sector which had been developed under Labour. Indeed virtually all of the new programmes introduced by Labour (Alcock and Kendall, 2011) were curtailed and support for the 'strategic partners' within the sector was phased out. Although it has been the cuts to local authority budgets which has had the most far-reaching effects on third sector organisations more generally, with around two-thirds of public funding for the sector coming through local government.

Despite this there were some new policy initiatives led by OCS. A Red-tape Taskforce explored ways to remove barriers to local community action; and a Mutuels Taskforce sought to promote the floating-off of public services to independent organisations set up by former public workers, under what was called the 'Right to Provide'. Funding of around £2m was provided to kick-start the training of 5000 local community organisers; and £50m for community first grants was used to co-fund local endowments. The largest new programme run by OCS, however, was the National Citizen Service, which aimed to provide short term volunteering opportunities for 16 year olds in their summer vacations. These were fully funded and delivered by selected volunteer providers; but inevitably could only reach around 30,000 young people each year (out of an age cohort of around 750,000), and in practice did not even reach target numbers in the first few years.

Although the new government were keen to distance themselves from previous Labour policies, in fact some of the more important civil society policy developments continued ideas and trends developed under Labour. Big Society Capital, the social investment bank eventually established to seek to bring commercial investment income into third sector organisations, had been planned by Labour, as had the 'mutualisation' of public services under the Right to Provide (called the Right to Request under Labour). Most significantly the Coalition continued Labour's policies of extending the contracting-out of public services to third sector providers. In 2011 a White Paper proposing plans to *Open Public Services* was published, outlining commitments to increase the role of non-government providers across a range of public services. This was followed by new guidance on commissioning for public agencies and the passing of the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, which was supposed to promote the use of social value assessments in the commissioning of services.

Significant public service programmes have been contracted-out since 2010, most notably perhaps the *Work Programme* from the Department of Work and Pensions, and more recently probation services from the Ministry of Justice. However, in the Work Programme in particular it was private companies, rather than third sector organisations, who secured most of the major contracts, largely because only they had the financial capital and organisational scale to take on the risks of contracting. Despite the existence of the 'Social Value Act', there has been no attempt to define what this means or to use it to promote the role of third sector providers in public service commissioning; and more generally it has been market competition rather than voluntary and community action which has been at the forefront of the Government's public service reforms.

This exposes some of the serious contradictions that underlay the Big Society and third sector policies of the Coalition Government. Competition for public service contracts is inevitably going to be driven by market principles, in particular if the government is not prepared to intervene to steer or control commissioning

practice. This was exposed in the debates surrounding the passing of the 'Social Value Act' (Teasdale et al., 2012), most notably by one of the Conservative members of the House of Lords (Lord Bates, 2010), who pointed out that: 'There is a paradox at the heart of the 'Big Society' message namely that it can be identified as desirable by legislators, but it cannot be legislated for. For if we legislate for the Big Society then it is no longer society which expands but the state'

This is a telling indictment of Big Society politics, and does much to explain why in practice it has been so difficult for the Government to deliver on the political rhetoric of non-government action. More significantly perhaps, it reveals a fatal flaw in the thinking behind the Government's strategy more generally. As Evers (2013) has argued, we cannot really separate the public and voluntary dimensions within civil society. They overlap in practice, with some independent providers becoming hybrid, quasi-public bodies; and they overlap in principle because many third sector organisations rely on support from, and collaboration with, public agencies. As result the response of much of the third sector to the declining role, and scale, of public support has not been to rush forward to create a new bottom-up Big Society, but rather to campaign against the cuts in public expenditure which in practice are hurting them and those they seek to support and protect.

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