

The Big Society five years on

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'We need a social recovery to mend the broken society. To me, that's what the big society is all about' (David Cameron, 2011).

Introduction: The Big Society idea

The big society's origins lay with Philip Blond's Red Toryism, which proclaimed that over the previous three decades both the New Labour Left and the Thatcherite Right embraced a form of liberalism that disintegrated the communitarian basis of society, producing 'an authoritarian state and an atomised society'. Blond reserved extra opprobrium for the role of the state in the destruction of associative forms of community organisation (such as friendly societies, trades unions, mutuals), but he was also critical of the corrosive effects of extreme neoliberal individualism on community association.

In the concept's journey into a political project, via Jesse Norman's anti-'Fabian paternalism' take on the idea, David Cameron's Conservatives dropped the neoliberal market critique, focusing their ire in the slogan 'big society, not big government'. This was seen as a corrective for the notion of the 'broken society' and as a personal mission of David Cameron. It was a central theme in the Conservatives' 2010 election campaign, and also attempted to de-toxify the Tory brand by disassociating Cameron from Margaret Thatcher's infamous 'no such thing as society' legacy, by recognising a version of 'the social'.

A deeper examination of the concept revealed two strands to the project: Red Toryism and libertarian paternalism (Corbett and Walker, 2013). The Red Tory strand sought to reclaim an idealised conservative communitarian vision of organic solidarity, voluntarism, self-help and natural hierarchy, where the intermediate institutions of the family and 'little platoons' safeguard a Disraelian paternalist society. On the other hand, libertarian paternalism (associated

with Thaler and Sunstein's 'nudge economics') was enthusiastically embraced by big society acolytes as 'compassionate economics'. This is a free market perspective which recognises the inability of people to act rationally in the market. The approach attempts rather awkwardly to marry the libertarianism of consumer choice with state paternalism in promoting welfare, by 'nudging' people towards desired ends.

The thesis of the big society is that people can be 'nudged' into retaining the public services that they most desire, using their 'freedom of choice' to become empowered by setting up public or voluntary sector mutuals, co-operatives and social enterprises. Otherwise, formerly publicly-provided services would be left to the market as 'big government' is downsized.

The Big Society in action

Once in power, Cameron occasionally repeated his commitment to the big society, despite the quiet downgrading of the concept as the Government focused its efforts primarily on the neoliberal austerity strategy of cutting public funding and reducing taxation. There was, however, early policy change on big society themes. The *Open Public Services* White Paper provided three key objectives: to improve public services while reducing expenditure; to devolve powers and autonomy to individuals and local communities; and to open up public services to new providers. Similarly, the *Localism Act* legislated for devolution of decision-making over services to communities and individuals. Further, the Behavioural Insights Team was set up to devise 'nudge' policies, and the Big Society Network was established as a consultancy-type organisation for the furtherance of the project.

Despite moderate success for the National Citizen Service, which seeks to instil the values of volunteerism amongst 16 and 17 year olds, the

ambitious objectives for creating community co-operatives and increasing local control by voluntary organisations of functions previously performed by the state have been compromised by austerity. A key part of this was the capitalisation of the Big Society Capital social investment bank with around £200 million in order to harness social investors in big society projects. Big Society Capital commissions the wholesale of projects to organisations which expect to see financial returns, suggesting a social investment market from which profit can be extracted, extending the reach of private companies and increasing a reliance on loans, rather than the state, by voluntary and community organisations.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in 2012, as the austerity agenda began to bite, Blond wrote in the *Observer* of the death of the big society ideal, citing the uncritical embrace of market solutions as part of the problem: 'Make no mistake: a radical Toryism has been abandoned, the once-in-a-generation chance to redefine conservatism on something other than a reductive market liberalism has been lost'.

The consequences of allowing private companies to compete with voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) and local communities for the provision of public services that have been offloaded from state responsibility are clear. The 2013 Big Society Audit produced by Civil Exchange remains positive about the efforts of VCOs, but points out that outsourcing public services is 'dominated by large private sector companies'. In 2012, Civil Exchange reported that 90% of prime big society contracts had been won by private companies. A tendency towards monopoly is emerging, as £4 billion of outsourced public sector contracts are with just four private companies; Atos, Capita, G4S and Serco, and concerns about a lack of choice, competition and transparency, and a 'race to the bottom' in both standards and working conditions have been raised.

According to Civil Exchange (2013), many VCOs are 'experiencing financial difficulty due to rising demand and falling income'. For example, in the North East in 2013, 56% of voluntary organi-

sations relied on cash reserves to support their activities and nearly 25% had no reserves left. £6.6 billion is estimated as the cumulative loss of public funding by 2017/18 by Civil Exchange. In addition, the rise in food banks reflects an increasing reliance on VCOs to provide essential support to people in vulnerable circumstances, a deep and widely-held concern reflected by a cross-party parliamentary inquiry into hunger in Britain in 2014.

Even though volunteering has risen back to levels prior to the financial crisis, this is controversial given the 'increasing use of compulsory volunteering in welfare programmes'. Moreover, Civil Exchange also identifies a 'big society gap' along class lines and between geographical areas, along with disproportionate negative effects of cuts felt by disabled people, lower trust felt by ethnic minority people, and 'worrying' levels of political disengagement. This indicates that the potential benefits of the big society are weighted towards the more privileged, a reflection of the continued rise in inequality in Britain. Civil Exchange reflected in their final Big Society Audit in early 2015 that rather than uniting and improving society, these trends have produced a more divided society.

This suggests that the neoliberal ideology driving the Coalition Government's programme has won out, and while the big society concept at face value appears to address the sense of social dislocation, it actually creates 'a vocabulary for the promulgation of a neoliberal fantasy in which social equality is disregarded as a policy objective. It offers an idealised view of the community and ignores power and conflict' (Jacobs, 2014: 11). While community groups are elevated in the rhetoric, private businesses continue to profit from the dismantling of the functions of the public sector. The big society has provided a key justification for shrinking the public realm and putting formerly public concerns at the mercy of private interests.

Conclusion

The big society has been used to reassert the 'crowding out thesis' last employed in the 1980s by Thatcher. Where previously it was the market

that was being crowded out by the state, this time it is civil society. However, all the evidence of the big society thus far suggests that 'society' has really served as a proxy for the neoliberal market and private profit. This indicates that, far from mending the 'broken society', the big society is contributing to increasing damage to the social fabric of Britain.

The bankruptcy of this ideological project has not been recognised by the largest political parties, with more of the same public sector cuts and welfare state outsourcing promised for the next parliament by the Conservatives under the guise of a 'long term economic plan', and Labour's 'Tory-lite' offer of slower deficit reduction, with some concessions to addressing rising inequality, such as minimum wage increases, 'mansion' taxes and freezing increases in utility bills. This suggests that mainstream right and left wing parties continue to operate within a neoliberal framework.

Piketty's (2014) analysis of inequality moves beyond neoliberalism and recognises the fundamental requirement for a significant redistribution of wealth and opportunity in society. This could become part of a political project to better promote community empowerment, local autonomy, social justice and sustainability. A democratic economy underpinned by worker-ownership, land-value taxation, strong legislation against corporate tax avoidance, nationalisation of utilities and public transportation, mutualisation of the housing market, significant green investment, supported by a citizens' basic income, can help to make the economy serve society, not the other way around (Sayer, 2015). This would be a better strategy to realise the big society's professed aims of community empowerment and localism.

These are amongst a raft of alternative proposals, notably present in some of the Green Party's proposed policies, which are being developed to counter the failed thinking of recent political projects. The task for those who are concerned with empowerment, sustainability and social justice is to develop a social policy and political programme, both nationally and internationally, that articulates these ideas.

References

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