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New Localism, Old Retrenchment: the 'Big Society', Housing Policy and the Politics of Welfare Reform

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Abstract

This article considers the ideology underpinning the 2010 UK Government's welfare reform agenda in order to foreground what we see as the contradictions of new localism and the 'Big Society' programme as it relates to housing policy. The article has three sections. It begins by discussing some of the methodological challenges that arise in interpreting contemporary policy and the value of an historically informed approach to understand the wider 'politics' underpinning the 'Big Society' programme. To support our argument, the second part of the article traces the 'localist' agenda (mainly focused on England and Wales) back from the 1960s to the defeat of Labour in the 2010 general election to show how both Conservative and Labour administrations deployed localism as a justification for welfare reform and in the process created opportunities to extend the marketisation of social policy. The third section of the article considers the contemporary period, in particular reforms presented to parliament in 2011 that, if enacted, will provide new avenues for powerful interest groups to influence decisions that hitherto have been mainly the preserve of local government. The conclusion provides a summary of the key policy implications and theoretical issues that arise from the analysis.

Keywords: 'Big Society', Localism, Housing Policy, Welfare Reform

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We need to turn government completely on its head. The rule of this government should be this: if it unleashes community engagement, we should do it; if it crushes it, we shouldn't (Cameron, 2010).

Introduction

Our aim in this article is to analyse the politics of housing through a consideration of the arguments underpinning the 2010 UK Government's welfare reform agenda, highlighting what we see as the contradictions of the 'Big Society' programme in relation to housing policy with particular focus on the concept of localism. Whilst these contradictions will be all the more apparent because of a combination of expenditure restrictions and hostility to government intervention, we contend it is important to critique some of the foundational claims made in support of the 'Big Society' to reveal both the inconsistencies in policy, the ideological basis of claims being advanced and to identify the impact of localism in housing practice. We argue that it is not possible to interpret contemporary housing *'in hard times'* without considering a wider historical context; in particular policy needs to be understood within the context of widespread discontent at the role played by local government, offering discursive space for the supporters of the 'Big Society' to pursue a reform agenda aimed at the dismantling of the post-war welfare settlement, implemented (in England and Wales) through the rubric of new localism.

The article has three sections. We begin by discussing some of the methodological challenges that arise in interpreting contemporary policy and argue that an historical context is essential in understanding new localism and the ideology underpinning the 'Big Society'. The second part of the article traces a localist agenda from its emergence in the 1960s to the defeat of Labour in the 2010 general election. We show how both Conservative and Labour administrations deployed localism as a justification for the modernisation of the welfare state and in the process created opportunities for market-based reforms. The third section examines the conjunction of the 2008 financial crisis and increasing levels of poverty and marginalisation, with the narrative of a Big Society and localism deployed to justify a radical restructuring of housing policy in 2010. It is in this section that we turn our attention to the contemporary period and consider the reforms presented to Westminster. As we show,

these reforms include: major reductions in housing subsidy, an end to security of tenure for social housing tenants and absolute limits on benefit entitlement in the UK, combined with planning legislation in England designed to reduce local authority decision-making (CLG 2010a and b). Finally, in the conclusion we set out the policy and theoretical issues that arise from our analysis.

Understanding contemporary policy making

What are the best ways of understanding contemporary housing policy? There are obvious methodological pitfalls that confront all of us trying to write about issues that are current, not least the difficulty of discerning what is important from that which is less significant. It is all too easy to become transfixed by newspaper headlines and government policy announcements which at the time might appear newsworthy but turn out to be ephemeral and of little long term consequence¹ (Jacobs 2001; Cole 2006). We confronted this problem in our assessment of the wider implications of the so-called 'Big Society'; an idea underpinning the legislative programme presented to Parliament following the 2010 General Election, under a Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government. The idea for a Big Society is premised on a depiction of a 'Broken Britain' (Cameron 2009) in which profligate welfare spending has undermined traditional ethical constraints (Prime Minister's Office, 2011). Not surprisingly, the 2011 urban disorders in England were cited as evidence of a 'feral' urban underclass (Clarke, 2011) and also as a 'wake up call' to the middle classes and a time 'when the inner city finally came to call' (Duncan Smith, 2011). For the government the solution to this broken society was to pursue locally-based solutions rather than relying on an inflexible, hierarchical and bureaucratic central state. 'Seen from a neutral perspective such an idea appears uncontroversial; for example 'localism' has widespread appeal, who after all would want to oppose policies that appear to move decision making to a more local level? However, a more critical examination of the concept requires more searching questions to be asked about the impact and durability of such ideas. For example, will proposed policies result in significant long-term changes for housing policy? To what extent do policies represent a radical and enduring departure from earlier interventions? How significant are expenditure restrictions that target the welfare state and social housing in particular? Which groups are most likely to be affected by these changes?

¹ Much of the immediate analysis that has sought to explain the summer UK riots provides evidence to support the argument we are making here.

It is worth asking whether there is a need to revisit social class theory to consider these questions. Some of the insights provided by class based analysis have been insightful; writers such as Jessop (2002) and Peck and Tickell (2002) for example, have highlighted the way that interest groups have sought to capture new markets within the welfare state. There is also scope for learning from cognate disciplines; psychologists have used the term 'cognitive polyphasia' (Moscovici 2000; Jovchelovitch 2002) to note how we often want things that are contradictory and our capacity to maintain values that conflict. There is evidence from Stella Creasy's (2006) research that antipathy towards the local state need not be based on actual experience but is acquired through socialisation and media constructions.

In our view, a basis for making an assessment of contemporary policies is to situate them in a wider historical trajectory. It is for this reason, that our article starts off by making explicit the continuities with earlier policies; in particular the interventions in relation to public housing that were undertaken by both Labour and Conservative administrations over a 30 year duration.

We contend that it is appropriate to view the latest initiatives as a continuation of neo-liberal market based reforms that were pursued in the 1970s and 1980s to transform the role of the state. The analysis provided by Nikolas Rose (1999) is apposite here; the strategy underpinning neo-liberalism he writes 'is not to seek to govern bureaucracy better, but to transform the very organisation of the government bureaucracy itself and, in doing so, transform the ethos from one of bureaucracy to one of business, from one of planning to one of competition, from one dictated by the logic of the system to one dictated by the logic of the market' (Rose 1999: 150). Rose and more recently Judt (2010) have argued that governments have adopted the values of entrepreneurialism in order to acquire wider legitimacy and fend off criticisms of inefficiency. Seen from these perspectives, the notion of localism, whilst outwardly collectivist, is infused by an individualistic, neo-liberal ethos. In order to substantiate these claims we consider in the next section how the idea of the Big Society and more specifically the concept of localism have been applied in housing contexts and explore the implications for groups most affected by proposals to reform the welfare state.

Tracing localism; continuities with the past

Presented as a core modernising idea of the 2010 Coalition government, the 'Big Society' has been closely associated with the Prime Minister David Cameron, using the narrative of 'Broken Britain', to justify radical restructuring of welfare. The concept of a 'Big Society' encompassed a number of features including:

- Redistribution of power from a central state to local communities and individuals through the idea of localism;
- Emphasis on community empowerment through offering opportunities for devolved decision-making;
- Promotion of the voluntary sector, including greater philanthropic activity and the involvement of civil society organisations in welfare policy;
- Greater transparency in information and hence increased accountability in public services (Cabinet Office, 2010; Lawless, 2011; Wells, 2011).

From the government's perspective such a programme offers opportunities for residents to wrest control of neighbourhood decision-making away from local bureaucrats and rectify the mistakes associated with previous state-sponsored urban policy initiatives (Norman, 2010). In contrast, we argue that the Big Society is best understood as a proxy term to convey legitimacy in developing policy initiatives dating back at least to the 1960s. Described as an 'ideology which pretends it is not one' (Scott, 2011, p.132) as the Big Society depicts localism as a new and modernising force in housing and urban policy. However as we show, localism has a long tradition, appealing to both centre-left and centre-right; an ideological ambiguity that has proved useful in serving particular class interests whilst avoiding major controversy. Often presented in negative terms as an alternative to 'big government' the provenance of localism can be traced back to the writings of Edmund Burke and his concept of 'little platoons'² as a defence of civil society, the liberalism explicit in the writings of John Stuart Mill and the critique of government advanced by Marx's contemporary, the anarchist Pierre Joseph Proudhon.

The fact that localism has been supported by both the right and the left as a way to critique

² For Burke the central unit was the family and this was a notion with a strong resonance for conservative thinkers

aspects of the state explains the ease with which contemporary governments have been able to justify what would in other circumstances be a divisive policy agenda. Thus, in the 1960s localism came to be associated with writers who were dissatisfied with hierarchical state institutions and local-level bureaucracies (see for example Ward, 1974). Post-war slum-clearance programmes (implemented through large-scale demolition and rebuilding), were seen as emblematic of an unresponsive bureaucracy, culminating in urban blight, ignoring the interests of local residents, devastating local neighbourhoods and discriminating against minority ethnic groups (see for example Dunleavy, 1981; Holmes, 2006). Local authorities were viewed as practicing a paternalistic form of 'public landlordism' (Cole and Furbey, 1994), including the imposition of 'oppressive and regulatory' tenancy conditions (Gallagher 1982: p. 137). As writers such as Power (1987) have shown, housing estates were constructed in peripheral areas, lacking facilities and amenities and allocation decisions (to house those in the greatest need) resulted in high concentrations of deprivation in neighbourhoods containing substantial levels of social housing (Murie, 1997). The link between social housing and deprivation was exacerbated by the Right to Buy, where the most desirable council properties were purchased by more affluent households (Murie and Jones, 2006) leaving less popular accommodation under local authority ownership. Problems caused by concentrations of deprivation were further intensified by political neglect, poor management and a lack of investment (Cole and Furbey, 1994).

A localist agenda was given added impetus by a critique of urban policy, drawing on the work of Jane Jacobs (1961). Her analysis of visionary planning influenced Labour government policies in the late 1970s, through the development of small-scale rehabilitation programmes (as an alternative to large-scale demolition and slum clearance programmes). Consequently the government advocated the development of Housing Action Areas, a Community Development Programme (Atkinson and Moon, 1984) and assisted in the expansion of a new, modernising voluntary housing sector (supported by the establishment in 1964 of a centrally funded Housing Corporation) that 'tended to see the local authorities as part of the problem to be tackled' (Malpass, 2005, p.144). The growth of a cooperative movement in the 1970s and the introduction of community based housing associations in Scotland helped to establish the idea that locally based solutions enabling wider community control in decision-making provided a model for effective housing policy (McKee, 2009, Clapham, and Kintrea, 1993). These approaches formed part of an emerging localist vision, which was adopted as a key feature of housing policy, despite continuing tension between

encouraging small-scale, voluntary activity and a centralist need to control resources (Burns et. al., 1994).

Thatcherism and housing reform

Conservative housing policy in the 1980s was based on a market-driven reform programme, based on a virulent hostility to collectivism, epitomised by Margaret Thatcher's famous assertion that 'there is no such thing as society' (Thatcher, 1987). Local government in particular was subjected to intense hostility, with left-leaning Labour authorities castigated for their profligacy and poor standards of service provision. Conservative administrations engaged in a radical programme of demunicipalisation and privatisation (Kemp, 1989), adopting the principle of an enabling state and resulting in new forms of local governance based on quasi-markets (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993). This model of local authorities as strategic enablers, with direct provision devolved to voluntary sector agencies can be seen as an antecedent to the later ideas of Big Society social policy.

An ideological critique of the state developed into an argument that government intervention itself was the cause of social problems (see for example Dennis, 1997; Marsland, 1996) Throughout the period of Conservative administration, public housing was therefore portrayed as dysfunctional and reinforcing welfare dependency (Green, 1998)

At the same time, new forms of 'urban professionalism' withstood pressures for change in housing policy (Dunleavy, 1980, pp.112-119) whilst critics castigated functionalist public housing, designed by 'Brutalist' architects which it was argued produced propensities towards crime and anti-social behaviour (Coleman, 1985); the cumulative impact of these processes was to create a sense that council housing was facing a severe crisis (Audit Commission, 1986).

This profusion of criticism led to the development of a new orthodoxy in housing management, based around the central concept of resident involvement, often advocated by writers with a background in resident activism (see for example Power, 1987). At the same time, whilst fundamentally centralist administrations, conservative governments under both Thatcher and Major also introduced localist housing reforms; for example Tenant Management Organisations as an alternative to local authority management;

although it has been argued that these reforms were motivated primarily by a desire to reduce local authority powers rather than the empowerment of residents (Carr *et. al.*, 2001, p.161). Nevertheless these changes helped to generate an influential localist discourse in housing policy, resulting in a range of resident involvement initiatives, supported by research studies and good practice guidance from the Priority Estates Project (DoE, 1981), Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS, 1989) and Chartered Institute of Housing (Cooper and Hawtin, 1998). Such initiatives helped to establish key a consensus in housing practice (in England and Wales) that service delivery should be locally based and should involve resident groups in decision-making.

We would not wish to suggest that there were no problems with the management of public housing or the ways in which local authorities operated. However, government policy was highly selective in its citing of evidence and based on ideologically based on deep-rooted antipathy to public sector institutions. As Holmes (2006) argues

Many of the criticisms of high-density systems-built flats and the failure of local authority management were fully justified, but it is also important to recognise that there was a deep, class-based animosity to council housing which had been displayed from its early years (p.40).

The considerable successes that local authorities had in meeting need, in providing popular, well-maintained properties therefore tended to be overlooked in favour of analyses which emphasised social problems associated with 'badly designed, poorly built and hard to live in' council housing (Malpass, 2005, p.94).

The government's hostility to local authorities saw changes introduced in the Housing Act 1988 to remove their role in direct housing provision and replaced by a strategic enabling role. The introduction of private finance encouraged the wider development of voluntary sector provision (through a reinvigorated housing association sector) and the development of stock transfer mechanisms further reduced numbers of council-owned accommodation (Pawson and Mullins, 2010). More significantly, wider structural changes (such as concentrations of poverty and inequality)) meant that council housing became increasingly viewed as a form of safety-net, residual welfare provision. What Lowe (2011) describes as the 'slow death of social housing' was marked by its contraction in absolute terms, combined with a restriction in access to groups experiencing high levels of social disadvantage (Murie, 1997). .

New Labour and new localism: 1997-2010

The election of a Labour government in 1997 saw an increased focus on the problem of social exclusion in housing whilst the rubric of localism continued to serve as a convenient mechanism to criticise local government service provision *per se* under the post 1997 Labour governments. Based on the model of an 'enabling state', 'new localism' aimed at a devolution of power and resources away from centralised control and towards front line managers, local democratic structures and local communities. New localism was seen an appropriate tool to deal with the complexities of multi-level governance, allowing for a more engaging form of democracy and enabling the dimensions of 'trust, empathy and social capital to be fostered' (Stoker, 2004a, p.118).

New localism offered a community-based rationale to legitimate neighbourhood-based strategies under the Blair and Brown Labour governments. A 'participative communitarianism' (Carr et.al., 2001, p.161) was developed through area based strategies in England such as the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (NSNR) and the New Deal for Communities (NDC) programmes; interventions which adopted the language of community empowerment, social citizenship, engagement, mutualism and reciprocity. A 'double devolution' also maintained that service provision is most effective when decision-making is made, through community governance at a neighbourhood level (Mulgan and Bury, 2006). These policies applied to England and Wales. Nevertheless, similar discourses informed policy vehicles in Scotland – through the establishment of Social Inclusion Partnerships (now Community Planning Partnerships). There was therefore a strong emphasis on community regeneration at local scale with housing playing a key role in these processes (McKee, 2008; 2009). By the early 2000s new localism was portrayed 'as a main organising principle of sub-national governance' and 'a means of improving democratic accountability, providing a local mandate, and producing inter-agency approaches to localities' (Morphet, 2004, p.293).

However, the rhetorical commitment to localism was deceptive; the Labour governments of 1997-2010, operated in accordance to neo-liberal principles and economic rationality (see Pawson and Jacobs 2010). Hence policies such as 'Best Value' – a mechanism designed to modernise local government - could be better understood as a form of 'new centralism'

(Lowndes, 2003), whereby localist rhetoric was constrained by Ministerial target-setting and standardised performance indicators. Indeed writers such as Stoker (2004b) have argued that New Labour's devolved governance programme shared the characteristics of a lottery, creating a dynamic for change by encouraging instability and a space for innovation. Nevertheless, New Labour continued to exhibit a strong level of support for the Third Sector as demonstrated by the 'Quirk Review' (CLG, 2007) on community ownership of public assets. Within a housing context this support led to the encouragement of community mutuals in stock transfer and the establishment of community land trusts (Bailey, 2010).

In practice, Labour's attempt to modify local government fell short of expectations - levels of inequality were not materially affected (Power, 2009) and Neighbourhood Renewal initiatives delivered highly variable results (Beatty et. al., 2009); despite the rhetorical commitment to community governance the NDC programme was primarily a top down initiative, defined and driven by central government (Lawless, 2011, p.57). Moreover, the Blair premiership in particular was marked by an emphasis on individual responsibility over rights-based discourses with conditionality used as a key principle in welfare provision. Strategies to prevent anti-social-behaviour illustrated a more stringent application of welfare policy (see for example Flint, 2004 and 2006) and whilst proposals to introduce 'commitment contracts' as tenancy conditions were not implemented, they indicated how government thinking was evolving. 'Flexibility' in tenure arrangements was advocated by a number of housing commentators (see Dwelly and Cowans, 2006) and these ideas were later used by the Coalition government to inform their welfare policies.

On reflection we can see that the narrative in place to justify new localism was predicated on the neo-liberal assumption that the housing welfare state had categorically failed; reinforcing the notion that government intervention had exacerbated rather than alleviated housing problems. The assumptions underpinning the post-war welfare state: that locally elected representatives would provide the most appropriate governance mechanism; that planners were best-placed to identify housing need; that architects were capable of designing good quality municipal accommodation and that local authority staff were best-placed to manage service delivery were effectively discredited in favour of a localism masquerading as 'anti-politics' (Judt, 2010); a process accelerated by the 2010 General Election.

New localism and austerity: the emergence of Big Society housing policy

So far in this article we have sought to show how localism emerged as a long-standing theme in housing policy, which was appropriated as an ideology to discredit the legitimacy of welfare state provision with public housing increasingly viewed as in need of radical reform. Localism in various guises was seen as the optimum approach to break up monolithic and remote forms of bureaucracy; a model adopted by both Conservative and Labour governments. We have highlighted the reform process to illustrate how the current government agenda has been shaped by these earlier interventions.

In the substantive part of this article we turn our attention to the deliberations of the 2010 UK government, to put in place a new local agenda based on the assumptions underpinning the 'Big Society'. Justified by the claim that spending programmes were unsustainable because of the high level of debt incurred by the government following the global financial crisis (Smith, 2010; Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011) David Cameron (before becoming Prime Minister) outlined his vision:

The size scope and role of government in Britain has reached a point where it is now inhibiting, not advancing the progressive aims of reducing poverty, fighting inequality, and increasing general well-being. Indeed there is a worrying paradox that because of its effect on personal and social responsibility, the recent growth of the state has promoted not social solidarity but selfishness and individualism...we must use the state to remake society (Cameron, 2009)

A 'compassionate conservatism' or 'Red Toryism' (Blond, 2010) was deployed to construct the 'Big Society' vision which permeated proposals for housing reform (as presented in the 2010 Decentralisation and Localism and the 2011 Welfare Reform Bills) and when enacted promise to have profound impacts for housing policy and the role of local government. The 'Big Society' social policies were to be achieved through three main methods: decentralisation (or localism), transparency and providing finance (although the latter condition has proved particularly problematic). The government initially established four 'vanguard communities' as pilots for this programme (although Liverpool City Council withdrew from the programme within less than a year in protest against spending restrictions) (Butler, 2011) and the initiative was due to be supported by an independent 'Big Society bank' (with promises to secure £10bn a year social investment from private sources); implementation of this latter proposal has been delayed by a year (*The Daily*

Telegraph, 15/6/11). Inevitably, the big society agenda has been met with a considerable cynicism:

The big society idea seems to be one of two things. At best, it is essentially empty, nothing more than an encouragement to citizens to do 'good deeds' in the community; nothing particularly objectionable but equally lacking in substance and destined to have a minimal impact on public policy. At worst, it is dangerous, a genuine belief that charities and volunteers, rather than the state, can and should provide numerous core public services (Kisby, 2010).

Is this depiction of the 'big society' relevant for assessing the Coalition's current programme? In order to consider this question it is helpful to turn attention to the government's housing and welfare reform programme.

Decentralisation, localism and welfare reform: the impact for housing

Described as 'the most radical reform of social housing in a generation' (CLG, 2010) the programme set out in the Localism Bill 2010 and Welfare Reform Bill 2011 involved a range of proposals designed to realise the Big Society's objectives through a reduction in welfare dependency, increased incentives to work and a diminution of the role of the State in housing provision. Benefit dependency has been addressed through the introduction of absolute limits on individual entitlements to benefit to ensure that no household receives more than the annual median income (HM Treasury, 2010). Social landlords are offered increased flexibility in the allocation of housing, including an end to security of tenure, with the introduction of time-limited tenancies (CLG, 2010a). Conditionality forms a guiding principle to these reforms and is emphasised in proposals to introduce a new universal credit to replace the existing complexity of benefit arrangements; the objective is to 'reintroduce the culture of working households where it may have been absent for generations' (DWP, 2010, p.3).

The role of the State is reduced by imposing 80% market rents on new tenancies, which will serve to make many areas (such as inner London) unaffordable (Fenton, 2011) and The government has also announced an end to new direct grant for social housing, with local authorities forced to rely on self-funding mechanisms (with more affluent local authorities likely to benefit).

At the same time the Big Society theme is emphasised in proposals to offer opportunities for a wider spectrum of resident involvement and the government's promise was that the reforms:

will put in place principles that will signal the decisive end of the old-fashioned, top-down, take-what you're given model of public services...the grip of state control will be released and power will be placed in people's hands. Professionals will see their discretion restored. There will be more freedom, more choice and more local control (Cameron, 2011).

These proposals signified a pronounced hostility to government intervention and represent an attempt to institute neighbourhood based decision-making processes. Significantly these proposals have been introduced at a time of severe welfare retrenchment; the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review announced a 60% cut in capital expenditure on social housing, combined with policies to increase rent levels and reduce benefits (HM Treasury, 2010). The reform proposals have been widely criticised for their potential to accentuate poverty and inequality; they have been described as 'perhaps the most radical reshaping of the British welfare system since its introduction post-1945' (Hamnett, 2011, p.147) and marking the 'death of social housing' (Brown, 2010). In particular the likely result of reforms to the Housing Benefit system, in high demand areas such as London, will be to intensify the spatial concentration of disadvantage and increase social segregation between higher and lower-income households (Fenton, 2011,p.4; Hamnett, 2010). The wider impact of welfare reforms is likely to affect lower income groups disproportionately and to be geographically concentrated in old industrial and mining areas in the North of England, Scotland and Wales as well as parts of inner London (Hamnett, 2011, p.149).

The lack of an evidence base for Big Society policies presents a severe limitation; where evidence is available of other community-based interventions, there has been only limited success alongside significant problems of intra-community strife, a lack of engagement and considerable doubt about the ability of community representatives to provide effective responses to housing problems (see for example Lawless, 2011). Overwhelmingly, the main objective of the programme has been to reduce public subsidy; Housing Benefit has long been a target for government ministers keen to reduce government expenditure on housing. This individualist agenda was endorsed by a number of local authorities, seen as flagship boroughs in practicing a 'new Conservatism', based on a radical outsourcing programme and minimal public provision (Booth, 2009).

In portraying 'emancipation' and 'liberation' from the State as an ethical code (Barnett, 2011, p.27) Coalition government social policies can be seen as responses to isomorphic pressures – being more concerned with presentation and legitimacy than a willingness to transform decision-making processes. The Localism Bill in particular when enacted is likely to provide greater opportunities for powerful interest groups (such as property agencies) to influence the policy process. For example it not difficult to envisage some private sector developers encouraging local residents to oppose to social housing developments in the areas where they are active or businesses engaging in undertaking paid campaigns to denigrate local government services in order to establish new opportunities in the running of services (Parvin, 2009).

Locality-based participation assumes a commonality of interest and identity, resting on 'un-gendered, un-racialised and non-antagonistic conceptions of the "public"' (Hughes and Mooney, 1998; Newman, 2001, p.136). Furthermore, it is unlikely to acknowledge the validity of challenges to dominant norms and discourses and may seek to marginalise opposition as 'unrepresentative' (Newman, *ibid.*). What these critiques all highlight is the contradictions between a localist agenda and the need for central governments to retain a measure of control, illustrating the tensions between community and individualism and between efficiency, local control and equity (Walker, 2002).

A romanticised and idealised notion of the local can ignore social, political and economic conflicts which are not capable of simple resolution through compromise and bargaining: 'Some tensions – over land use, say – may be permanent, and we must not pretend that devolution is a universal recipe for reconciling all claims' (Walker, 2007, p.5). Other critics have viewed new localism as 'a forceful call to arms through which local (and, in some cases national) political-economic elites are aggressively attempting to promote economic rejuvenation from below' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002, p.342).

We suggest that localism can therefore be criticised on three main grounds. First, that it can simply lead to a reinforcement of local elite groups, thereby threatening minority interests. For example Parvin (2009) has argued that the advocates of localism are guilty of 'the myth of representation', namely that elected politicians should always adhere to the wishes of those that elect them. In contrast representatives on occasions are required to take difficult

and unpopular choices; in such circumstances minority interests will need to be safeguarded. This defensive politics of the local can be seen in urban politics generally through the control of elites (Dahl, 1974); in their discussion of decentralisation initiatives in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, Burns et al (1994) observed how certain groups attempted to gain control of meetings, aiming to set agendas and preclude others in taking part in decision-making processes. Proposals to evict council tenants where family members have been involved in rioting or looting, following the 2011 social disorder in English cities, illustrates a continuing revanchist tendency in urban policy, where the lowest income groups are disproportionately penalised for their involvement in anti-social or criminal activity.

Second localism can be viewed as a zero-sum game in which the result is unproductive competition, producing territorial winners and losers. This 'territoriality' results in 'new rural geographies of value' (Marsden, 1999, p.507) reflecting asymmetrical spatial distribution of assets and competencies. The politics of localism can thus be problematic and contradictory, illustrating Ash Amin's distinction between a politics *of* place and a politics *in* place (Amin 2002, p.397). Here a 'spatial fetishisation' in accounts of socio-spatial embeddedness tends to exaggerate the autonomy of the local and raising the question as to what scale the 'local' should operate within. Given that there will be multiple and overlapping communities, the notion of a consensual community based (Big Society) social policies is highly problematic. The third substantive problem with localism is the view that all problematic aspects of politics reside within the state; new localism in particular overlooks the ways that majorities can exert power through stigmatisation and prejudice. The experiences of other community-based initiatives (such as the NDC) shows that 'the narrative in some areas was dominated by conflict and tensions, often driven by race' (Lawless, 2011, p.58). There is a binary split at play here which purports that the state is bad and the community good. New localism will open up a political space for commercial interest groups to pose as community representatives. A weak state will effectively privatise many of the problems that are widely recognised as collective issues. So for example, homelessness and problems in the rental market will be less conspicuous, buried from the gaze of politics and effectively seen within the sphere of the individual, often associated with deficiency in character, if not amorality.

For those writers (such as DuPuis and Godman, 2005) sympathetic to the communitarian aims of localism, a 'reflexive politics of localism' is possible where conflict is openly expressed, in similar terms to the 'deliberative' politics of writers such as Habermas (1984)

or in a planning context Healey (1997). Localism can thus result in two different scenarios (Coaffee and Johnston, 2005). The first of these can be termed 'institutional void or ambiguity' Hajer (2003), referring to an incapacity to deal with emergent, complex policy issues. The result is a vacuum of power, to be exploited by knowledgeable agents. Alternatively there may be a move towards what Bentley and Wilson (2003) categorise as 'adaptive states' characterised by learning, openness, innovation and leadership. This latter scenario represents that antithesis of the 'desire for institutional neatness and blind application of best practice from elsewhere' (McInroy, 2004, p.14). Seen from the vantage point of previous experiences (for example Wilson, 2003; Pratchett, 2004; Coaffee, 2005) governments inherently distrust uncertainty and; institutional ambiguity therefore appears to be the more likely outcome of a radical welfare programme (which has prioritised severe public expenditure reductions). As Wilson (2003) argues the local political arena is characterised less by multi-level governance than by multi-level dialogue with sub-national actors participating but rarely as major players in shaping policy outcomes. Dialogue should not be confused with influence and 'earned autonomy' is not the same thing as more democracy (Wilson, 2003:342-343).

Conclusions

This article has situated localism in the context of neo-liberal policy making since the 1970s. Localism, as we have argued, has been deployed by politicians as a way to justify interventions designed primarily to undermine the role of local government. Following David Harvey (1996), we contend that localism is in no sense an innocent term: rather it provides an ideological narrative which can introduce reactionary politics and 'nativist' sentiments. An 'unreflexive localism' (DuPuis and Goodman 2005) supplies a basis for both utopian and visionary aspirations, as well as a romantic mode of anti-politics. In short, localism has been used as a mechanism to both include and exclude particular groups, forms of political engagement and ways of life. In our view, localism effectively serves as a rationale for a form of politics that will make it easier for elites and powerful groupings to pursue their agenda in disputes that relate to social housing and private development. Localism is seductive in that it offers a form of 'consensus politics' that elides the everyday conflicts and contestation of political discourse. As noted elsewhere, the Big Society agenda 'pays almost no attention to social and economic differences between places' and the 'withdrawal of the

state through public expenditure cuts is only likely to exacerbate these differences' (Wells et al, 2011. P.104).

In contrast to its expressed aims, locally-based decision-making can be controlled and managed by small unrepresentative elites masquerading as community focussed groups; this propensity for elite decision-making is exacerbated by the 2010 welfare reforms allowing those groups with access to material resources to dominate the policy process The appeal of localism is premised on depoliticised notions of community, neighbourhood and engagement that overlook the degree to which these neighbourhoods are themselves sites of conflicts in relation to resources and power.

A number of concluding points can be made. In term of practice, models that see state failure as a given are liable to over-statement. In the same way that the state is never wholly positive, it can never be an entirely negative presence. The policy adopted by Coalition Ministers is therefore liable to result in unintended consequences. Distinctions between the voluntary sector and the state are not mutually exclusive; the relationship is constantly evolving and adaptive, implying the construction of a false distinction between public, private and voluntary sectors.

Following from this point the emphasis on localism collides with policies to substantially reduce government spending. If localism has a role, it needs to be supported by public infrastructure to ensure against abuse, the dominance of local elites and to guard against asymmetrical power relations. The current UK government demonstrates little understanding of these issues in spite of their rhetorical commitment to a form of 'compassionate conservatism'.

In our view, there is contradiction at the core of localism that can be stated in terms of theory and practice. In theory, localism has widespread support but leads to practices that are iniquitous and problematic. The ideological ambiguity of localism has proved attractive in principle, but in practice a collectivist commitment to community governance conflicts with an individualistic agenda of deregulation; hierarchical state agencies will often need to intervene when inevitable conflicts arise. The emphasis on resident involvement and community decision-making severely underplays the inherent social, political and economic conflicts, which must be played out within an arena of democratic politics. Consensus is

rarely achieved, particularly when decisions are being made about the availability of scarce resources; housing is therefore a key area of community conflict as much as a site for cohesion and capacity building. A 'pragmatic localism' (Coaffee and Johnston, 2005) may be a more appropriate response to contemporary challenges 'where models of change are replaced by ingredients, menus, frameworks of alternative service delivery...' (p.174). Crucially this requires government safeguards to protect against abuse and protection for vulnerable groups to ensure social justice and democratic citizenship. Despite the plethora of guidance emanating from government endorsing localism, there is little sign that these issues have been heard. We envisage a set of difficult challenges for the government in pursuing a localist agenda. Much will depend on the extent to which the government is able to apportion blame on local authorities to deflect hostility for inevitable cuts in services.

In theoretical terms, the relationship between market, state and community forces is, in our view, likely to be reshaped by a new localism that will see a reconfiguration and shift in forces. The marketisation of local government is likely to fracture further an already weakened local state. As for community forces, it may well be the case that resistance to local government expenditure cuts will lead to new oppositional groupings coalescing around specific issues (for example: libraries, neighbourhood centres, leisure facilities or housing renewal projects). The outcome of these configurations will depend on the overall state of the economy. If the economic conditions improve, we can anticipate that opposition to expenditure cuts will rescind. Whilst there is undoubtedly a class dimension to these processes, as Barnett (2005) has noted we have to be cautious and not rely too extensively on abstract theorisations to explain the deliberations of politics and welfare reform. Explanations of social change that take insufficient account of the local and historical contexts in which politics is enacted will only have limited heuristic utility.

What can we learn about the politics of housing from our discussion of localism and the 'Big Society'? In terms of methodology it is important that we make reference to historical processes to uncover ideological assumptions behind policies that are presented as simple or 'common-sense' solutions. In addition we need to avoid a singular conceptualisation of the role of the state and recognise the competing narratives at play. The support for localism and the promotion of a 'big society' agenda has only been possible because of the antipathy and perceived failure of local state provision; a binary has been established which posits an 'in touch' local community against an 'unresponsive and inflexible' local state. We argue that

a class analysis provides a useful lens but recommend a measure of caution in seeing the contemporary housing scene entirely within this optic as the 'politics' of housing contains a complex combination of processes. The concept of 'cognitive polyphasia' might be a useful way of understanding the obvious contradictions that arise in support for localism but opposition to the outcomes that might arise from its implementation. We need to understand more the role of the media and how popular constructions of politics take hold. The success of new localism will, in all likelihood, hinge on the tenacity of the government to convince sufficient numbers of the electorate that the reforms are judicious and more democratic than centralised forms of decision-making. The 'Big Society' ideology and the localism agenda can be viewed as an attempt to throw a veil of legitimacy over what otherwise would be seen as a highly divisive ideological programme. Moreover, given the social and economic context for housing provision, rather than ushering in a new era of consensual localism, it would be more accurate to describe government policy as a vehicle to erode further, the basis of welfare state provision.

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