

'Haldanegate', the Big Society, and the Elephant in the Impact Room

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Whilst readers of this blog will predominantly be social scientists, many will have heard the rumblings from their colleagues in the humanities over allegations in [The Observer](#) at the weekend. [Professor Peter Mandler](#) of the University of Cambridge was quoted as claiming that the government had the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) “over a barrel”, and was demanding that they prioritise work on the [‘Big Society’](#), otherwise it would withdraw £100m of funding.

Such a move would be counter to the hallowed (but [misunderstood](#)) [Haldane principle](#), which draws a line in the sand between political priorities and independent research. If the allegations were true, the government had clearly overstepped the line and was using the Council to produce research to justify and explain a contested political agenda.

There was a [quick response](#) from the AHRC. It “unconditionally and absolutely refutes the allegations”, and “did NOT receive our funding settlement on condition that we supported the ‘Big Society’, and we were NOT instructed, pressured or otherwise coerced by BIS or anyone else into support for this initiative.”

The Council had a point: its [‘Connected Communities’](#) initiative had been bubbling under since 2008. In addition, Professor Mandler was quick to point out that he had been misquoted: he had been talking about the [British Academy](#), not the AHRC. However, the blue touch paper had been lit, and the Twittersphere exploded with claim and counter claim. Before too long the spat spawned its own name: ‘Haldanegate’, implying a delicious combination of irreverence, scandal and hysteria.

[James Sumner](#) of the [University of Manchester](#) produced a measured (and hilarious) [overview of the timeframe of ‘haldanegate’](#), whilst [Research Professional](#) wrote [a piece](#) (in issue 365) arguing that, rather than running counter to Haldane, the idea of research serving the needs of government was there from the start. What was different here, as Sumner said, was that the ‘Big Society’ was a *party* political initiative.

The story throws up a number of issues, and neither the government nor the AHRC come out of it smelling of roses. Firstly, Whilst the AHRC has effectively refuted *the Observer* claims, there’s still the question of how the Big Society ended up in its [Delivery Plan](#) (pdf). Yes, granted it thought of the idea first, but it wasn’t slow to adopt the language of Cameron to sell the initiative. [Iain Pears](#) lists the five mentions of the ‘Big Society’ in the *Delivery Plan*:

- ‘...Connected Communities will enable the AHRC to contribute to the government’s initiatives on localism and the ‘Big Society’...’
- ‘...recent speeches on the ‘Big Society’ have made use of key behavioural or evaluative concepts that can be difficult to pin down...’
- ‘... We will focus on issues such as the ‘Big Society’...(and) national security (with the Security Services)...’
- ‘... The contribution of AHRC plans to the ‘Big Society’ agenda are described in section 2...’

- ‘...In line with the Government’s ‘Big Society’ agenda....the AHRC will continue to support...’

In some ways it is worse that the Council’s arm was not twisted: instead, it seems to have offered itself up willingly to the service of Cameron’s Conservatives. Note how closely ‘Connected Communities’ is tied – albeit by a civil servant – to the Big Society in this Communities and Local Government [slideshow](#) (pdf).

It all smacks of AHRC short-termism, and a lack of care for the community it represents. As Pears says, “research done under the aegis of the Big Society will have a shelf life of a year or so – as temporary, disposable and as forgettable as the concept which gives it birth [*remember Blair’s Third Way?*]. Academics should not be, and do not consider themselves to be, cut-rate consultants for hire, but this is how the AHRC’s stance appears to cast them.”

Secondly, how hallowed is Haldane? Despite the vociferous defence, it looks increasingly threadbare. What if, as in this case, it is the independent research funder that wants to tie itself to government and not the other way around?

Finally, there’s still the question of Professor Mandler’s allegations over the British Academy. [He has said](#) that it had been the BA, rather than the AHRC, that was pressed by government. But the BA, and all the blog commentators, seem to have been quiet on this one. Sure, the BA’s a small scale funder, but it prides itself on being the national body for the humanities and social sciences, and having an ‘independent and authoritative’ fellowship. This should be followed up with Mandler, and his claims studied.

More relevant to this blog, perhaps, is the elephant in the impact room: how to engage end users, but keep your hands clean. After all, the AHRC’s serenading of Cameron could be seen as an excellent example of impact, of engagement, and of informing and affecting end users. However, both parties have come out of this badly: the AHRC is discredited, and the government appears to be interfering with independent research. If the funders can’t engage with the end users effectively, how are individual researchers expected to do so? This is a particular issue for social scientists, many of whom are undertaking research on issues of policy. If they are required to have close and effective ‘pathways’ to those who will use the research, perhaps even having a user on a project’s advisory committee, lines can become dangerously blurred. Haldanegate has been a wakeup call to all those sailing the murky waters of impact; be careful where – and how – you dock.

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