

There is no crisis of civic participation: the Big Society risks undermining the integrity of both state and civil society

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David Cameron's Big Society idea is ambitious but its implications are far from straightforward. [David Lewis](#) argues that the government's attempt to reshape relationships between citizens, state, and market may rapidly become a political liability and burden voluntary groups and charities with responsibilities that they may be unable to deliver on.

In July 2010, David Cameron outlined [the Big Society](#) idea, with its three central components: volunteerism and philanthropy, localism and community empowerment, and public sector reform. He emphasised 'a huge culture change' that would include a 'dramatic redistribution of power from elites', so that people do not always turn government to provide solutions to their problems but instead 'feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities'.

The idea draws on a rich mix of recent and no-so-recent traditions of policy thinking, from the Thatcherite privatisation agenda and Philip Blond's [Red Tory](#) 'progressive conservatism' to the American political scientist Robert Putnam's call for reversing the decline of civic life and building 'social capital' and the communitarian ideas of Amitai Etzioni. It even reaches back as far as eighteenth century thinker Edmund Burke's 'little platoons of family and civic association' and Victorian philanthropy.



Credit: Conservative Party

But why has the Big Society idea emerged now? Research from the University of Birmingham shows that the [crisis of civic participation is a myth](#), since data shows relationships between state, civil society and citizens have remained fairly stable with healthy levels of volunteering, participation in social movements and a consistent growth in voluntary organisations. And Tory MP [Francis Maude](#) has stated that the Conservatives

would have moved in this direction regardless of the financial crisis, indicating a deeper political agenda. Ideas for further rolling back the state therefore need to be viewed with suspicion. They raise serious questions of deteriorating local service quality and accountability, and the further growth of what Geoff Wood has called the 'franchise state'.

Supporters point out that the Big Society idea can help cash-strapped government become more efficient in a time of austerity, while empowering people at the same time. A recent [BBC Radio 4 programme](#) highlighted how local government in Liverpool, a city with some of the largest cuts in the country, aims to keep local sports centres and libraries open by placing them in community trusts. Blond cites the [Sandwell Community Care Trust](#) that was taken out of local authority control in 1997, and now spends more on frontline care and less on administration.

For critics, the Big Society is a 'smoke screen' for an ideologically-driven decision to make drastic cuts and finally drive home a comprehensive privatisation agenda. For example, Tim Stevens, Bishop of Leicester, recently predicted in an [article for the Guardian](#) that many 'faith groups', though willing to help, would often be unwilling to step in to fill the gaps in care left by cuts in state spending. He worries that the Big Society will further burden the most vulnerable and leave social care in the hands of 'amateurs'. Changing procurement rules for local authorities is already lowering the bar for provider quality and accountability requirements. Voluntary sector organisations too are increasingly asking how they fit in to this Big Society, since many rely on public funding. Last October, Lord Wei, one of the government's Big Society 'gurus' set off a row with the sector by attacking 'big charity' as [unresponsive](#).

Cutting both state *and* third sector and simply expecting people to do things for free is not a viable strategy. For co-ops and mutuals to work properly, they will need long term financial and training support. Relying on volunteers is likely to accentuate inequalities. For citizens to run schools and other amenities, it will be middle classes with the time and resources to do so and the more vulnerable in society may lose out. An additional burden will fall on women's unpaid employment to provide more 'free labour' in their local communities. Despite the promise of local spaces for citizen action, one of the government's flagship '[free schools](#)' set up by journalist Toby Young is set to occupy a prime west London site that will mean it will displace more than 20 longstanding voluntary groups working on issues such as homelessness, refugees and young offenders who already use the building.

In many areas it may still be too early to say how the Big Society idea will pan out. Increased employee-owned businesses, community development initiatives and reinvigorated mutualism may well be useful. But if the Big Society is a recipe for comprehensive state withdrawal, then there are likely to be very rough times ahead. The idea risks undermining the integrity of both state and civil society. The point of the voluntary sector, or civil society, is that it is a non-directed space in which people organise themselves in pursuit of both their own and wider public goals. The Big Society implies a set of wrong-headed values – most people want to use sports centres or libraries, not run them. When the national health service was set up in 1945, it was because the Big Society of its day – the diverse and patchy landscape of private and charitable healthcare providers – was judged to be hopelessly insufficient to meet the needs of the population. Passing over a set of responsibilities from citizens to state, to which the state can be held accountable, is at the heart of the contract between government and its citizens and is to be undermined at our peril. Cameron's advisers [Steve Hilton and Philip Blond](#) will have to work even harder to try to rescue an idea that is turning into a rallying point for political opposition and public discontent.

David Lewis will be speaking at the LSE Public Lecture, Big Society and Social Policy in Britain: a panel discussion on Thursday 27 January. Click [here](#) for more details.