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Remoulding Welfare Britain: The Philosophy of the Big Society in Cameron's Britain

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Abstract

Since the election of David Cameron as Conservative Party Leader there has been renewed interest in the functions and philosophies underpinning the responsibilities of the state. In 2008 David Cameron advanced the argument that Britain was 'broken'. During the subsequent 2010 election campaign he put forward a remedy seeking to 'fix' Britain. David Cameron's perception is that some social dynamics of our society are living without a comparable sense of social responsibility, seemingly devoid of any form of self control. Cameron's narrative was in part enhanced by the several days of rioting in 2011. The subsequent rhetoric of the senior Coalition partner was given rocket boosters in selling this argument to the electorate, and that only the solutions offered by the Big Society could tackle this divide in Britain's society.

Keywords: Big Society, Conservative, Liberalism, Localism, The State, Reform, Responsibility

INTRODUCTION

"The Big Society is what happens whenever people work together for the common good. It is about achieving our collective goals in ways that are more diverse, more local and more personal."
(Department for Communities and Local Government. 2010, p. 2)

The Big Society has become one of the most contested concepts in British Politics today. In part, this is because of its seemingly nebulous definition, although the thread of individual accountability and the retreat of the state is clear. On 14th April 2010 the Times Newspaper described the underpinning concept of the Big Society idea as an 'attempt to reframe the role of government and unleash entrepreneurial spirit' which Conservatives and Liberals ideologically subscribe to. Importantly, the social contract between the governed and the governors also requires accountability through the institutions of state (Flinders and Moon, 2011, p. 653). To fully conceptualise these two core ideas, we will present an argument that interrogates both the ideals underpinning individualism, linked to the effects of the Big Society.

The broad direction of travel underpinning some of the ideas behind the Big Society not only have their origins in the unmodernised Conservative Party but also loosely under New Labour. When New Labour came to power in 1997 we saw a series of politicised policies launched with the specific aim of tackling social divide across Britain. In the last decade there has been much debate on how communities function at a local level. Back in 1997 Tony Blair declared that New Labour was the party for middle Britain but at the same time Labour was warned that if 'we raise the standard of living of the poorest people in Britain we will fail as a Government' (Lister, 1998, p. 216).

New Labour perceived solving deprivation in Britain was through the concept of community governance and desire to encourage a stronger and cohesive relationship between central and local government. Governance in the broadest sense:

"involves venturing into broad debates about policy and administration, about politics and policy, about levels of government, about the states and citizens, about authority and legitimacy, and about what shapes cultures and processes of governance" (Healy, 2007, p. 15).

In essence New Labour wanted to bring a shift in power from central to local government creating more power to people meaning that local residents have more of a say on how their communities should be run. This would be achieved by a commitment to regenerate urban areas by resorting to social inclusion, neighbourhood renewal and

community involvement (Imrie and Raco, 2003). Nevertheless, this approach in practice has caused tensions between central and local government because on the whole central government have been reluctant to give substantial powers to local authorities causing a pattern of ‘control freakery’ behaviour. Furthermore, Syrett and North (2008, p. 247) have argued that community governance arrangements over the last 25 years have caused high levels of complexity and instability ‘alongside a well-established lack of devolved power at a local level.’ The aim of this article is to provide a conceptual understanding of the big society in relation to political changes in British politics. It involves a discussion of the contested concept of the Big Society in order to contextualise and help explain its relationship to political and social impacts.

THE BIG SOCIETY EFFECT

The terminology of the ‘Big Society’ has caused much criticism in the media and academic circles (Birchall, 2012; Ishkanian and Szreter 2012; Pharoah, 2011; Evans, 2010). One of the biggest problems with the idea of the Big Society is that the general public as whole do not understand what it means. This is evidenced when the idea of the ‘Big Society’ has been launched several times, firstly at the Manifesto launch in April 2010, secondly at the coalition launch in July 2010, in February 2011 and finally in May 2011. Furthermore this persistence by David Cameron of continually pushing the idea of the Big Society was admitted by a Whitehall source when they reported that ‘It won’t be branded as a re-launch because that would be an admission of failure, but it cannot be allowed to fail because it was central to Cameron’s manifesto’ (Maddox, 2011, p. 2). Moreover, there is a general agreement that the Big Society’s two main principles are: (1) the state should be smaller and (2) the general public should be more involved in the decision-making.

The vision behind the concept of the Big Society was first discussed in November 2009 at the Hugo Young Memorial Lecture, when David Cameron used this terminology as a platform which offered a solution to tackling Britain’s economic and social problems (Evans, 2011). At the 2010 General Election the Conservatives used this concept as a policy initiative as the Conservative Manifesto (2010, p. 37) states ‘The Big Society runs consistently through our policy programme. Our plans to reform public services, mend our broken society, and rebuild trust in politics are all part of our Big Society Agenda.’ Currently there is an accusation from the opposition that the Big Society concept is simply an attempt to hide Government spending cuts. According to Brindle (2011) the Big Society has developed ‘a growing sense that the brand is damaged goods, a vessel fatally holed below the waterline.’ This is also confirmed by the introduction of the Localism Bill the main aim of which is to decentralise power from the centralised state to local communities

The ideology of the Big Society originates from Phillip Blond, a political scholar, who is currently a director of the think tank ResPublica. Phillip Blond gained eminence back in November 2009 when he gave a speech on the Future of Conservatism. In that speech he argued for an advanced acceptance of the worthiness of ‘Civic Conservatism’ in relation to the state and an appreciation of the potential transformative impact of this on society.

THE THEORETICAL STANCE

Examining the Big Society from an ideological perspective it is comparable of the brand of Liberal Conservatism in ways of attitudes towards social and welfare formation. Moreover, Liberal Conservatism embraces a fixed set of rules based on tradition, authority and religion. In relation to this Glasman (2010, p. 61) has argued the Big Society debate has developed a political discussion that the left need desperately to join because ‘The Big Society addresses three issues that were major themes in its development: pervasive feeling of loss, anger and powerlessness.’ One of the first academic discussions on the big society is by Jesse Norman, Conservative Member of Parliament for Hereford and South Herefordshire. In the book Norman (2010, p. 4) ascertains the view that from an ideological perspective the concept does not form a base of ‘a left-or right-wing idea,’ moreover it forms the view that ‘it runs utterly counter to the state-first Fabianism of the modern Labour Party.’

The Big Society is the implementation of an *individualised* way of thinking. It is “a society in which individual citizens feel big: big in terms of being supported and enabled; having real and regular influence; being capable of creating change in their neighbourhood” (The Big Society Network, 2011). The Big Society eschews state-led collective action towards combating social problems. The Big Society is a philosophical framework for a practical realisation of substantial reforms of the provision of socially necessary services. The reforms seek to shift provision from the state (top-down) and instead towards more non-state groups (bottom-up). In this sense, the Big Society

relies upon a sense of altruism and an adherence to classical individualism, drawing upon philanthropic tendencies and nineteenth century concepts of *self-help*.

To argue, therefore the Big Society is simply means through which government cuts to public services and social spending can be conducted is to misrepresent the full significance of this undertaking. The Big Society aims to entirely reorientate social policy away from the state without undermining entirely its provision. Those who advocate the moves toward the philosophical undercurrents of the Big Society argue that it seeks to remedy the social damage of an entirely *laissez-faire* economic policy. “We have learned the lesson that all economic policy has social implications. We now need to relearn the converse lesson: the foundations of our economic prosperity are social foundations” (Norman, 2010, pp. 164-165). As such, the Big Society is not entirely an economic undertaking, although its existence suggests a *laissez-faire* approach to social policy. Indeed, exists to shift the provision of social responsibilities away from the state, whilst retaining the economic management role, whilst transferring *en-masse* social responsibilities to independent groups. In that sense, the Big Society is entirely a retreat from collectivist action against social inequalities and an embrace of individualist social provision.

It is important to note the nebulous concept of the Big Society is hotly contested and debated even within the Conservative Party. Since failing to win the general election in 2010, the Big Society has been partly held accountable for the Conservative's result. The individualism of liberalism has enabled the Big Society to continue as a policy within the current Conservative-led government, yet it would be facile not to acknowledge the non-specific characterisation of the Big Society has proven problematic electorally.

Its advocates argue that the Big Society is a historical reinterpretation of long standing traditions and institutions that have been part of the British identity since the Enlightenment. Indeed, the argument suggests that given Britain's historic commitment to freedom of the individual and a retreat from full state collectivism, the provision of socially necessary services should reflect this historic reality. Indeed, this extends to the suggestion that Britain's resistance to massive political change on a par with other European nations such as France during the Enlightenment demonstrates a conservative instinct in the hearts of the British electorate that is resistant to collective action or radical reform.

This argument implies a natural position in the hearts and minds of the British electorate for the individual aspirations of the Big Society. Indeed, during the 2010 general election this position appeared to be confirmed when “it [seemed] that the public would be encouraged to take the initiative on many social problems rather than simply leave them to the state to sort out” (Bale & Webb, 2010, p55). This suggestive individualistic tendency within the mindset of the electorate portrays the state as being inadequate in the delivery of social provision, preferring independent-of-state structures to emerge. Such a shift away from state-led social provision would imply a desire to retreat from the social progress of the twentieth century, thus enabling the post-war reforms to be seen as an exceptional period of social advance against a general historical backdrop of philanthropy and self-help. In addition, a significant consequence of this development would be the assumed acceptance of the electorate to forgo the ideals of equal provision, which implies a retreat to free market ideals in social provision. It must also be noted the individualism and social ideals underpinning the Big Society include a moral discussion. “It is principally about citizens having a moral obligation to undertake voluntary activity in the community and to take responsibility for their own individual welfare needs” (Kisby, 2010, p. 486). The moral dimension carries with it an implicit interpretation that collectivism and state-led social welfare is in some way *immoral* or that those lacking a drive for volunteering lack moral fibre. This introduction of morality into the Big Society produces a value subjectivism that differs from each individuals personalised understanding of social morality, thus leading the Big Society open to accusations of appealing to a very narrow definition of civil society.

It must also be noted that in the development of the Big Society, the state would not be retreating to a non-interactive position. Indeed, the state would adopt an underwriting role. Merely it would no longer be the *provider* of socially necessary services, reducing its role to that of an administrator. Those who advocate the Big Society would:

“use the state to help stimulate social action, helping social enterprises to deliver public services and training new community organisers to help achieve our ambition of every adult citizen being a member of an active neighbourhood group” (Conservative Party, 2010).

The scale of the task implies a reorientation of social welfare entirely away from delivery by the state and instead towards local 'social enterprises', thereby simultaneously removing the state from its position of provider of social welfare and creating a *market* in social services. An illustration of the retreat of the state from the provision of social services can be found by the government retreat from Sure Start. The Big Society relies upon the idea of voluntary provision, thus the Big Society Sure Start centres remain open but with funding cuts from £450,000 to £19,000 per annum (BBC, 3 April 2011). Advocates of the Big Society argue “there is enough money in the system to maintain a network of Sure Start Children's Centres, and provided new investment for health visitors” (BBC, 3 April 2011). Thereby the network of provision exists but without the services, which become the preserve of the Big Society. In addition, it could be argued that the emerging market in social service providers may enable competing groups to provide social services within the shell of Sure Start centres for the lowest funds required from central government. Such a development illustrates the means by which the state is retreating from its social responsibilities whilst promoting provision by independent-of-state groups. The result of such an action would lead to a substantial voluntary engagement of individuals contributing towards the social cohesion of their region.

Those who advocate the concept of the Big Society argue for a restructuring of public services to enable “charities and voluntary groups to play a leading role in delivering public services and tackling deep rooted social problems”, to promote the provision of education free from local authority control, a project to socially engineer “16 year olds to give them a chance to develop the skills needed to be active and responsible citizens” and also to reform the National Health Service to produce a choice-based provision, (*sic*) (Conservative Party, 2010, pp. 37-45). The Big Society, therefore is clearly a shift of focus of social provision towards independent-of-state groups in the belief that individuals would emerge through a philanthropic desire to provide social aid.

At the heart of the Big Society is the concept of social responsibility. It is a responsibility to which the state has become the focal point over recent decades. David Cameron argues that:

“If you want to achieve any of the things that we want to achieve in our country it’s not enough for the government to pass another law. Social responsibility has to be part of everyone’s life. Everyone has to play their part in building the country we want. In education you just can’t publish a great curriculum, you need parents to get their children to school on time, you need teachers controlling the classroom, you need businesses recognising they can’t endlessly promote sex and violence to children without them being affected. Everyone’s got their role to play. Responsibility is the most important word in politics” (Jones, 2008, pp. 140-141).

Social responsibility, for Cameron, is tied to individual responsibility. Through the Big Society, individuals can express their social responsibility by filling the void left by the retreating state. In order to achieve this shift in focus, it will require a paradoxical shift in thinking of individuals to think collectively. This paradox is built upon the assumption of altruism; an essential belief those participating within the Big Society will have a social conscience that can last the duration of time required by the provision of the social service. Indeed, as *the New Statesman* recalled “Oscar Wilde once remarked that the problem with socialism is that it takes up too many evenings’. The big society suffers from the same defect” (The New Statesman, 14 February 2011, p. 5). It is highly unlikely the Big Society would mobilise the required number of volunteers to successfully provide the level of social services previously provided by the state. The central flaw rests in the logistical operation required to maintain the scale of provision. Such an undertaking implies a sizeable, committed workforce for long hours which the average middle-class employee would be unable to undertake.

Also it must be noted, as Kisby (2010) does, that “the altruism Cameron favours applies principally to ordinary citizens; it doesn’t apparently require a significantly greater contribution to the public good by the super-wealthy” (Kisby, 2010, p. 485). For Kisby, those contributing their efforts to make the Big Society operate to an operable standard will be those best characterised as being middle-class and of modest time and means. This carries with it the conclusion the resulting replacement social service will not be of comparable provision to that provided by the state.

The Big Society also disregards equality. It does this by seeking a transformation of “government action from top-down micromanagement and one-size-fits-all solutions to a flexible approach defined by transparency, payment by results, and support for social enterprise and cooperatives” (The Big Society Network 2011). By disregarding the essential aspiration of social equality, existing divisions within social and class structures are likely to increase. In addition, the concept of *payment by results* demonstrates an introduction of damaging targets on social change that

misunderstand the full significance and scale of the social problems within a first world, developed society.

The Big Society is far more significant than providing much needed cover for extensive spending cuts to public services. Indeed, it can be argued that in more favourable economic times, the Big Society would have been pursued with at least comparable vigour. This makes the Big Society and ideological rather than pragmatic venture. In addition, it must be noted that “the Big Society has become so integral to Cameron’s premiership that it will almost certainly form one of the prongs of his re-election campaign” (The Spectator, 19 February 2011). This enables the conclusion to emerge that the Big Society is considered vital by those seeking to implement it. Therefore the ongoing significance of the Big Society as a broad ideological objective cannot be discounted. The key social significance of the Big Society will be the transforming effect upon social services provision. Given the emphasis to be placed upon volunteering and philanthropic structures, the principles of state-led equality will become less significant. Individualism will replace collective action as had been the case in the nineteenth century, and the Big Society will transform society in a manner that goes beyond its early remit.

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion is that the Big Society should be seen as an example of classic liberal individualism. In its current form, the Big Society, utilised at a time of economic austerity appears to the observer as a cover for cuts. But this is a simplistic understanding. Indeed, its impact will extend well beyond this loose interpretation and more towards enabling an ideological restructuring of society around self determination and a renewed role for the state as a manager rather than the provider. The consequence being a fundamental shift in the attitudes of the population towards individualism at the expense of the collective.

The idea also strives for the state to renounce its social responsibilities in the provision of social services. A social impact of this shift will be inequalities as deliberate policy, rather than as a by product to overcome, as appeared to be the case during the period of the so called political consensus towards combating social and economic inequalities.

The individualism of the Big Society is broadly independent of collective concerns. This individualism is a move away from the legitimised state action in the provision of social services of the post war period. The Big Society strives to give way to an active policy of individualised social and economic inequalities in the name of self determinism and freedom, creating a less equal society by design.

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