

Labour's answer to David Cameron's Big Society is the Good Society. So what would it mean in practice?

Blog Admin

One of the innovations touted by the Conservatives 'Big Society' plans is for mutualisation, where public services are provided by worker-owned enterprises. However, in this model both service users and funders are excluded. Ahead of the LSE conference 'The Big Society and the Good Society' next week, [Maurice Glasman](#) builds on Labour's 'Good Society' concept with his 'Blue Labour' policy; where the governance of new public and private mutuals will involve the workforce, service users, and local authorities or the state.



The local council elections and AV referendum indicated the enduring strength of both the Big Society and of conservatism. David Cameron has staked his political reputation on the idea that this was not Thatcherism redux but something significantly different.

The coalition's argument is that public sector reform and fiscal conservatism do not require the disintegration of solidarity and society but are preconditions for their renewal. By strengthening local solutions, mutualising public services and training civic leaders, responsibility and power can be redistributed.

Labour's response to this is the Good Society. Its three core features are reciprocity, mutuality and solidarity. The general orientation is towards pursuit of the common good through a balance of interest in corporate governance in public and private sector institutions.

The Good Society is built upon a concept that asserts our fundamentally social nature. Relationships are vital to human flourishing and growth and these need to be nurtured by a range of civic institutions. This view of 'the good life' couldn't be further from the eponymous 1970s sitcom and Felicity Kendall's retreat from the world in Surbiton.

It is based on the idea that a person finds meaning in their life through supportive relationships, without which we feel powerless and isolated.

Everyone needs something they are good at and the Good Society puts the stress on vocational rather than transferable skills. The idea of vocational excellence is central to this, along with a belief in apprenticeships and peer reviews.

There is far more to meaningful work than money and self-interest; it is the way we serve and change the world. The workforce is at the heart of this. The Good Society stresses its importance in the private as well as the public sector. This is very different to the Big Society agenda, which does not recognise that capital seeks the highest rate of return and thus creates great pressure to turn both humans and nature into commodities.

Democratic association has, of course, been the way that people have resisted the domination of monied interests. That is the meaning of the labour movement both historically and in the context of the Good Society.

To understand what is at stake here, look at the idea of corporate governance. The Big Society offers two ideas of corporate governance for the public and private sectors. In terms of the state, it prefers a form of mutualisation, developed by [Julian Le Grand](#), in which public services are provided by worker-owned enterprises. There is no balance of interest in the governance of the service provider, and users and funders are excluded. State-funded services have no representation on the board. This is in contrast to the Big Society view of private sector corporate governance, in which the worker has no status at all and managerial sovereignty prevails.

Our 'Blue Labour' approach brings the two together. Reliance on managerial sovereignty is both wasteful and ineffective and does not engage fully the innovation, creativity and vocational energy of the workforce. It is a contractual and assessment-based model that focuses too much on procedure and not enough on developing relationships.

Instead, a third of the mutual boards should be elected by the workforce. Another third should be represented by users (the involvement of users is an important part of community organising that needs to

be undertaken to strengthen society and give voice to disorganised people). The final third of the board should be the local authority or the state, which has a legitimate interest in procedure, wider social goals and its integration into government policy.

In the case of free schools, where all power is with the parents, our approach would be to split this equally between parents, teachers and the state. Then there is a common good between the parties, negotiated by engaged interests.

All of this involves a redistribution of power, but no extra spending. It would develop leadership, generate solidarity and improve delivery. The Good Society is the politics of the common good in action.

This article first appeared in [Public Finance](#) on 31 May.