



The Big Society

THE BIG CON AND THE
ALTERNATIVE

By Andy Gregg
and Mike davis

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Introduction - Big Society or citizen power

David Cameron's 'Big Society' - now into its third launch - is a corruption of the socialist idea of building from the bottom. It has a centuries' old pedigree going back to at least the English revolution and the idea of people taking power. It was the Levellers who championed the ideas of votes for all and participatory democracy and Gerard Winstanley's Digger activists who saw the common land as a treasury for all to cultivate and live upon.

Although 19th century Chartists fought for democracy and universal adult franchise some set up land cooperatives and followers of Robert Owen sought to build communities in the emerging world of British industrial capitalism that were based on co-operation, mutual aid and profit sharing. New Lanark was seen as the model community where housing, work, social care and recreation were integrated in a cooperative community.

Friendly Societies mushroomed in the 19th century in rural and urban areas. These were essentially havens from the ravages of the badlands of industrial capital and pre-welfare society where poverty and the iniquities of the workhouse were the reality for millions of sick, elderly or unemployed. Working class in composition, members would contribute small amounts to a common fund which could then be drawn upon in times of need. Funerals, Christmas, marriage, periods of unemployment or sickness would be a time when the society would provide.

But friendly societies provided much more than financial relief. For members there was also the conviviality and fellowship of regular meetings and the experience of office serving the local community. In 1891 it has been calculated that at least four million male adults on mainland Britain were members of self-managing town and village friendly societies (D. Neave *Mutual Aid in the Victorian Countryside 1830-1914* (1991)). Accounting for just fewer than half the male population over the age of nineteen compared with a trade union membership of 1,501,083 and cooperative societies with 1,153,916 member's friendly societies were the big society of the 19th century.

Local co-operative societies, associations of consumers, were another strand of civil society organisation, developed from below to support working class welfare. Largely concerned to offer quality food and domestic goods at reasonable prices co-ops offered a share in the profits through the dividend with membership also conferring rights to a say in the running of the organisation. The Co-op Bank and credit unions can be viewed as other elements of this bottom-up self-help movement.

Friendly societies developed alongside trade unions which performed similar functions. Unions drawing in over 12 million members by the 1950s could be viewed as the biggest voluntary mutual aid societies ever formed. Trade unions that ventured into the realm of workplace management and questioned issues beyond remuneration and conditions – this was particularly the case during the great syndicalist agitation before and immediately after the First World War, are the voluntary organisations par excellence.

Tory critics might allege that these organisations are all about selfish vested interests. To an extent this is the case. Most unions were formed during a time when the state was failing to care for the needs of the most vulnerable, when the workhouse or asylum was the plight of the sick and unemployed and capital ruthlessly exploited labour. Trade unions today have continued to exist both as lobbyists for state provision and mutual organisations benefiting their members. Modern trade unions not only look out for the interests of their members but have taken solidarity action for others as the miners' strike

in support of nurses in the 1980s, workers taking action against deportations or the Iraq war testify. They also provide holiday services for members - campsites and holiday homes alongside residential care, insurance and legal advice. The entire labour movement could be viewed as an attempt on the part of the working class to develop its own big society or self-help, mutualist society in the absence or inadequacy of state provision.

EP Thompson's seminal *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) vividly portrays friendly societies as having a significant role in the formation of working class culture. Moreover these early 19th century societies were the product 'neither of paternalism nor of Methodism, but to a high degree of conscious working class endeavour.' The discipline and experience of self-government was vital for the growth of independent working class culture and institutions.

Eschewing patronage and the 'degradation of charity' most were committed to mid-Victorian social order and its values but they did not surrender their independence. Many were instrumental in the development of schools and libraries, laundries and sports clubs and other institutions for self improvement. They received no support from the Liberal/Tory state and often had to fight for their existence against hostile legislation.

The institutions of this alternative civil society created by industrial and agricultural workers underwent profound change and faced a powerful challenge with the emergence both of the Labour Party - and particularly its Fabian/Webbian top-down gradualist wing - and Gladstone's and Chamberlain's social liberalism.

Most of the socialist left embraced the idea that the 'state' should fulfil many of the aims of the friendly societies and clubs. The National Insurance Act 1911, pension provision and Education Reform Acts meant that sickness, old age and schooling provision for the working class was increasingly recognised as a sphere of operation for the state. The experience of a command economy and the devastation of the First World War gave the concept of a so-

cial liberal state a further boost. So from schools to pensions, health care to sickness and unemployment benefits the state began to usurp the functions of self-help and mutual aid. Friendly society membership declined as the Fabian/social liberal model of top-down, paternalistic, professional and increasingly bureaucratic state provision grew in scope.

With the triumph of the Russian Bolsheviks in the Revolution of 1917 hopes for a liberated civil society in which workers and peasants took control of their own lives and services through democratic soviets or councils died amid the economic and political stringencies of 'war communism'. The seeds of an austere 'top down' statist socialism were sown in the writings of Lenin and other Bolshevik theorists drawing on the more authoritarian features of Marx and Engels (see AJ Polan, *Lenin and the End of Politics* (1984)).

It was no accident that Sidney and Beatrice Webb's monumental study *Soviet Communism - A new Civilization* (with no question mark in the early editions) lauded the Stalinist state system. Sidney, the author of the Labour Party's 1918 constitution and a key policy theorist held fast to an elitist view of socialism as something brought to the workers by a professional corps of enlightened technocrats and synonymous with the state.

The upshot of both Labourist socialism and the Stalinist interpretation of Marx was that the state became the supreme arbiter and provider of the good society. For much of the 20th century this was the norm.

Anarchists and libertarian socialists, including some early founders of the Labour Party, have sung the praises of a bottom-up socialism but were drowned out by the dominant Fabian/Stalinist/Leninist chorus, echoed by Mao following the post-second world war Chinese revolution. Early 20th century British Marxist theorists like GDH Cole and Harold Laski, who had done much to popularise a mutualist, bottom-up socialism seemed to lose their voices following the defeats for the trade unions in the 1920s. However, a reading of Cole's *Guild Socialism Revisited*, *Self Government in Industry* or *Chaos and Order in Industry* or Laski's *Liberty and Modern State* illustrates a

strong participative democratic, active citizenship model of socialism locating a central role for workers by hand or brain in the management of social institutions.

The First and Second world wars had meant that command economies and warfare/welfare states became the default position for social provision. Schools and social housing run by the local state, health services by local quangos and the national state, transport by national bodies alongside numerous nationalised industries. From parks, pools and pavements to lidos, loos and libraries local government became the managing agency. Although many of the services were bureaucratically run there was nonetheless a form of local accountability. Local politicians could be thrown out and policies changed.

Not until the final quarter of the 20th century with the 1970s financial crisis did the post-war social state consensus begin to falter. Tony Crosland announced in 1975 that 'the party is over'. He meant that sustained funding for the welfare state was at an end. Meanwhile Margaret Thatcher and Sir Keith Joseph were busy preparing the ground for a huge deconstruction of the post-war welfare state settlement. This would involve extensive marketisation and privatisation of public services and state industries. The process began in earnest in 1979. Many commentators, including *Chartist*, have monitored the fall but David Marquand in *Decline of the Public* (2006) provides one of the best analyses of the insidious hollowing out of the public sphere.

Of course the public sphere is not synonymous with the democratic sphere and the chief weakness of the welfare state – whether run from the arms of Whitehall civil servants – local quangos or town hall officers, has been a certain bureaucratic remoteness. Marquand characterises the process begun in the dying years of the Callaghan government, through Thatcher and Major's 18 years of Toryism and Blair's New Labour as being market mimicry and state control. This toxic combination weakened and undermined what remains of the public sector and presents the left with an enormous challenge.

During this period of sustained onslaught on the public realm the left has concentrated on the quantitative side of provision and little on the quality or processes through which the provision is made. Reams have been written against the 'cuts', cogent arguments have been made for provision based on need, for progressive taxation and redistribution to fund provision. Much less has been said about the nature of the provision. This has exposed a weakness in the alternative. A weakness David Cameron and his ideologues like Philip Blond and the Red Tories, have sought to exploit.

Coming to the rescue some see Maurice Glasman's Blue Labour as Ed Miliband's response. Recently ennobled Glasman advocates a social change based on family and community with nostalgic echoes of earlier 20th century decades when neighbourhoods and religion were stronger social glue. Much of Glasman's thinking is evident in the London Citizen's Assembly which has campaigned effectively for a living wage and regularisation of immigrants without status through the Strangers into Citizens initiatives.

Whilst Blue Labour contains much that appears similar to a bottom-up co-operative approach advocated here there is a lack of focus on class and the economic means to achieve empowerment. At a time when the Anglo-American model of neo-capitalism is facing near collapse it is evident to many that what is required is a collectivist economic and political management, as a basis for decentralised forms of government, including municipal management and mutualist organisations. Instead with Blue Labour we have a focus on depoliticised neighbourhood self organisation as a basis for future political organisation. It is no coincidence that Philip Blond and Lord Glasman are close friends. (See D. Bowie, 'The Struggle for Labour's Soul', *Chartist* 253, Nov/Dec 2011). There is an odd coincidence of ideas here.

The benefits of a bottom up movement for change, connecting with trade unions, cooperatives, voluntary organisations and local councils, get lost in an amorphous community, which, judging from some recent statements from Lord Glasman, would work best without further immigration.

The Occupy Wall Street and Occupy LSX movements currently spreading across the financial centres of the world can also be viewed as popular bottom-up initiatives, like UKUncut, which highlight the daylight robbery of the big banks and corporations and their responsibility for the current economic malaise. The people, many young, involved in the protests demonstrate the anger, creativity, enthusiasm and determination to make a change. The challenge is for the Labour Party to take up the calls of these grassroots movements to refashion a democratic politics for wealth redistribution and systemic change.

Many would agree the left needs an alternative economic strategy which breaks from neo-liberal orthodoxies. But equally it needs a new politics built on the values of mutualism and cooperation and inspired by the idea that to really cherish an institution people need to have a stake and a say in that institution. We need a model of active citizenship and civic responsibility that can rebuild communities, promote inclusion and trust and overcome the sense of alienation that manifested itself in the 2011 summer riots. So it's necessary to relearn, to rediscover and prefigure again organisational forms that build on the creativity, ideas and views of working people in their communities. People have views on the kind of schools, housing, parks, libraries, social support systems, health care, communications, transport and cultural activities they want. Workers have views about how their company could be run. Teachers, students and parents have views about how their school or college should function. Tenants and residents have plenty of ideas about housing. Young people too have a right to be involved in shaping the kind of youth provision they want and have a voice in the wider services they need through local youth councils and parliaments. Labour and the left must find ways to reconnect with this potential creativity and facilitate active citizenship.

Why participative democracy?

Participation by citizens in political decision-making is more than a protective adjunct to a set of institutional arrangements. It also has a psychological effect on participants ensuring a continuing inter-relationship between the

working of institutions and the attitudes of individuals inter-acting with them. Participation creates a sense of social responsibility, a sense of ownership, identity and control. In this sense it has an educational effect. Co-operative forms of organisation both transform the individual but they are also more productive. They also help shape the outcomes, meaning they are likely to be more appropriate for the user. This approach directly challenges the market idea that has dominated Labour thinking for last two decades.

*“ The argument of the participatory theory of democracy is that participation in the alternative areas (to national government) would enable the individual better to appreciate the connection between the public and private spheres.’
‘ The ordinary man (sic) might still be more interested in things nearer home, but the existence of a participatory society would mean that he was better able to assess the performance of representatives at national level, better equipped to take decisions of national scope when the opportunity arose to do so and better able to weigh up the impact of decisions taken by national representatives on his own life and immediate surroundings.”*

(C. Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970))

Pateman has written extensively on the benefits of active participation showing how engagement can transform both support and understanding and reinforce democratic practices.

Cameron’s Big Society

Before outlining a modern alternative let us take a closer look at Cameron’s vision. It is easy to dismiss the proposals as a cover for cuts. In many respects his ideas are just that. But we also need to address them on their own terms. To do so effectively means questioning the Labour Party and the left’s long embrace of statism and paternalistic provision.

Cameron’s Big Society has two essential components: localism and volunteering.

He launched the idea at Liverpool Hope University on July 19th 2010 declaring his Tory vision meant a dramatic redistribution of power ‘from the elite in Whitehall to the man and woman in the street.’ His Big Society would end the days where capable people became passive recipients of state help’ and communities were ‘soulless clones of one another.’ He rebutted the charge that the plan was a cover for cuts saying it was ‘not about trying to save money, but about trying to have a bigger, better society.’ On a BBC Radio 4 broadcast later that day Eric Pickles, the Communities Secretary contradicted Cameron by saying big society was about getting more for less (BBC Radio 4 - World at One).

Already the contours of the ideological planks were evident. How convenient that the state was oppressive and remote. This was another justification for cutting it back. Of course the thousands of jobs sacrificed would mean a huge empowerment for those about to become unemployed. And the weight of all those civil servants removed from benefits offices, Customs and Excise, Inland Revenue, and local councils would be a huge liberation for the long-suffering eponymous ‘man in the street’.

Nonetheless, despite the apparent bafflement of many Tory backbenchers, Cameron persists with his Big Society agenda. He wanted the abandonment of the ‘top down, top heavy, controlling approach of Labour’. Liverpool, Windsor, Maidenhead, Eden Valley in Cumbria and Sutton in London would become the vanguard areas, getting help to set up local projects.

At the Liverpool launch Cameron outlined three strands:

- *Social action for which government had to foster a culture of voluntarism and philanthropy;*
- *Public service reform-; getting rid of centralised bureaucracy; and*
- *Community empowerment -‘ communities with oomph, neighbourhoods being in charge of their own destiny.’*

Alongside this was to be a Big Society Bank with £60m of reserves and a Big Society Czar, Lord Wei, who lasted a little over six months in his post. The terminology is resonant of socialist language: substitute workers for neighbourhoods and empowerment for 'passive recipients'. But ultimately it is empty rhetoric.

There are certainly also echoes of the language of Victorian philanthropy and the views of Samuel Smiles on self-help. Further on in this pamphlet, Andy Gregg unmasks the myths behind these arguments. We can summarise here two major flaws. First, if we are talking about volunteering and voluntary/community organisation, then funding is needed. This is precisely what is being removed. Sir Stuart Etherington CEO of the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NVCO) is 'very concerned about the tidal wave of cuts about to hit the [voluntary] sector'. In February Dame Elizabeth Hoodless, outgoing head of Community Service Volunteers said spending cuts are 'destroying the country's volunteer army.' Six months later the Guardian reported charities were fighting for their survival. A survey produced by the TUC sponsored 'False Economy' campaign reported on the scale of the cuts. It identified 190 groups that were closing in Birmingham while another 174 were being lost across London. Hardest hit were children and young people's charities with more than 380 organisations hit nationally. ACEVO warned that up to £750m less was available this year with a further loss of £250m from VAT rises. Peter Kyle, acting ACEVO chief executive identified £1.4bn of government funding cut from charities this year rising to £3.1bn by 2013 with only a paltry £100 million 'transition fund'.

In July it was announced that 90% of 40 contracts in the Work Programme had gone to large corporations like SERCO, Ingeus Deloitte and A4E. Charities having failed to win bids are likely to be subcontracted to these private sector giants, effectively subsidising their profits through their volunteer hours. A year into the Coalition government there had been an overall drop 1600 charities from the national register; So much for boosting volunteering.

There are still 2500 community organisers to be trained to magic voluntary groups out of a hat. Perhaps it is no surprise to learn that reputable training organisations like Citizens UK and Timebank UK – both of whom might challenge the cuts - were not contracted for the training.

One area of success under the New Labour regime of Blair and Brown had been the Youth Opportunity and Youth Capital Funds. Here was a real investment in localism and voluntary activism. For the first two years this had been a £120m national pot to fund youth-led initiatives to expand things to do and places to go for young people. A further two years of the project until 2010 saw an even larger national grant awarded. The scheme spawned thousands of innovative youth projects around the country instigated and managed by young people. In many areas the 'reach' of existing youth services was doubled or trebled engaging hundreds of young people in projects ranging from arts and music to sports and leisure. This was a model of active citizenship that helped promote inclusive communities and engage disaffected young people. With most projects ended and youth unemployment running at 20% plus, little wonder young people were at a loose end over the summer of 2011.

It is hard not to condemn Cameron's Big Society as a big con. The localism part is certainly risible. Voluntary organisations exist in a symbiotic relationship with local councils. While independent fund raising is necessary and important to validate the legitimacy and value of a voluntary group, additional funds from the local authority or national bodies like the Arts Council have been an essential part of the funding streams. Inevitably, the first victims of the 28% cuts in local authority budgets will be the voluntary sector.

Furthermore, if localism is to mean anything it should mean elected Local Authorities are free to use local council tax to raise revenue. For the second year the government have frozen council taxes thus removing the primary means local councils have to offset the impact of the draconian cuts. Of course, councils might choose not to raise council taxes, but at least they should be free, if localism is to mean anything, to raise them and answer to their local

electorates at the ballot box.

If we look at schools reform we can see that the money now going to 'free schools' is being taken from the maintained schools budgets. Local Authority schools, with devolved budgets, are struggling to retain let alone recruit staff. And whilst governing bodies are democratic to the extent that parents, teachers and local authority reps can serve on them, with free schools the line of accountability is either directly to the Secretary of State for funding or to non-accountable self-appointed groups. The Tories' Localism Bill will accelerate a 30 year process of eroding the independence of locally elected councils, denuding them of more responsibilities and transferring money and decision-making to private companies whose primary aim is profit.

This process is writ large when the National Health Service is considered. Not content with the internal market - which has seen many services like cleaning and catering outsourced - the government now aims to turn whole hospitals and health facilities and GP practices over to the private sector.

This is a far cry from the principle of empowerment. However, there is an alternative. It is not a return to the world of Victorian charities and wealthy benefactors running soup kitchens for the poor. It can be seen in Britain's rich tradition of cooperation, trade unionism, community action and self help. The John Lewis Partnership is one example of a mutual organisation. Staff enjoy the benefits of profits, for example, in 2007 the 'partners bonus' was worth nine weeks pay with a total value of staff benefits being £300m. The Partnership has a big non-contributory final salary pension scheme, with discounts, subsidised holidays, dining rooms and societies.

However, the Co-operative movement with its many retail stores, provides a dividend to all members (shoppers and staff) the Coop bank, funeral societies and other outlets provides an ethical trading model, purchasing fair-trade products and promoting cooperative principles going back to the Rochdale pioneers. Beyond the Coop there is a myriad of producer and retail coops alongside arts and cultural groups run on profit sharing, ethical and collectivist principles.

"Co-operatives range in size and operation, however the majority of them are small 'local' enterprises with small turnovers. The principle of the equitable sharing of wealth ensures that the 'big boys' in the co-op family support smaller family members and so on down the line. Through the 'divvy', loans and grants, or through financing business support organisation, policy groups, banking education and training, a range of services assist economic survival... There are 4,735 UK Co-operative businesses which provide in excess of 237,000 jobs, £27.4 billion in assets to the UK economy..."
(Jenni Boswell Jones 'Social reasons for doing business'. *Chartist* 237, March/April 2009).

We have talked about the role of trade unions as the biggest civil society organisations. A further example of unions playing a creative role is illustrated by the successful campaign of UNISON members in Newcastle between 2000 and 2002 against the outsourcing of the council's 'back office' and customer services. A combined union and management plan to keep and transform the service 'in house' created a new council department called 'City Service' which embraced ICT, housing and council tax benefits, exchequer services and running the 'one stop' customer services centres. The changes improved services to the public and made savings that were allocated to frontline services in adult social care. (H Wainwright and M Little: *Public Service Reform, but not as we know it* (2009)).

There are a few glimmers of change in Labour policy. The proposal to have a worker representative on company boards coming from Ed Miliband is a faint echo of the worker's control arguments propounded by Bertrand Russell and the Institute for Worker's Control. However, it was a shame when Miliband was Energy Minister in the Brown government he did not embrace the idea of a worker's co-op at the axed Vestas wind turbine factory on the Isle of Wight, where over 400 jobs were lost.

If the Labour and trade union movement are to effectively meet the challenges of the 21st century it will be necessary to build on the rich tradition of co-op-

erative and mutualist organisations, to plan out and embrace a new relationship with the voluntary and community sector and campaigns like UKUncut, to enable the ideas and creativity of bottom-up organisations to percolate through to the highest levels of government. It will also mean facilitating the ideas of public sector workers, local government officers, teachers and others, harnessing best practice and showing an alternative and more democratic model of running public services.

Our ideas of social transformation to revitalise an active civil society are of an entirely different order to the shallow and meaningless talk of 'big society'. Participation and democracy are the keywords. This pamphlet sketches out some of the key battle lines for the contest with the Coalition over the kind of society we want to see. It requires that the democratic left undertake a deep review of practices and views that have held sway for several generations and which have seen a leftist mechanistic, state-centred top-down collectivism combine with a pernicious marketisation to drown out the creative voices of active working class citizens and communities developing alternatives.

The Paradoxes of the Big Society

Introduction

The Big Society has been a dominant theme for Cameron and his close followers since before last May's election. Various attempts have been made to define Big Society in such a way that it could be identified and measured but most of these & lack any rigour at all. As far as it is possible to determine them the major components of the approach can be adduced as being:

- *Public service“ reform” – privatising and“ voluntarising” state services*
- *Localisation– transferring power from central government to local communities*
- *Volunteerism*
- *Publishing government data and“ cutting bureaucracy and regulation”, ending Labour’s“ target-driven” culture*

- *Supporting charities, social enterprises, mutuals and coops*

Its cheerleaders see the Big Society initiative as being...

“ A progressive, innovative strategy... based upon the principles of empowering communities, redistributing power and fostering a culture of volunteerism...(sharing) the government’s vision of a society where volunteering and community spirit become second nature”.

The Big Society Network describes its approach as one driven by“ ...anger and frustration at the recent behaviour of both the City and Westminster and relatively powerless to change them. We are often anonymous taxpayers without a real sense of how our money gets spent. Most of us try to be reasonably good citizens but our influence seems very small”.

There are a number of paradoxes with the notion of Big Society set out below. In the year since the 2010 election and after at least four attempts to launch or relaunch the initiative, few people are clearer now than they were when Cameron launched this strange mixture of 'Red Tory' ideas. The specially appointed Big Society Tsar, Lord Nat Wei has resigned from the post on the laughable grounds that he couldn't afford to continue volunteering. The four vanguard Big Society local authorities have all had different problems introducing the concept and Liverpool (the only urban and relatively poor one of the four) has pulled out altogether because of the scale of the cuts to local authorities. A policy vehicle that has been as vague, often risible and downright dishonest as the notion of Big Society would usually have already been consigned to the dustbin of history. It is therefore worth asking why the approach has been so surprisingly resilient and why Cameron is so convinced that the concept will allow him to simultaneously detoxify the Tory Party brand at the same time as accomplishing a more radical attack on public services and the poor than that carried out under Margaret Thatcher.

I start my analysis of the Big Society by pointing out a number of paradoxes with the concept and then go on to compare Big Society to a much more

comprehensive, radical and far reaching attempt to remodel the citizen's relationship to the state - the Great Society launched in 1960s America by President Johnson.

Big Society is organised chaos

In an article in *the Telegraph* (28/12/2010) Michael Gove compared the Government's approach to Big Society to Maoism. He appeared to be alluding to the Government's ceaseless push for "revolutionary" change. He hit the nail on the head rather better than he realized. The Big Society is indeed a revolutionary movement launched from the countryside - although it is more Oxfordshire after a short stroll than Yunnan Province after the Long March - coupled with a hatred of urban intellectuals and nostalgia for purity and community.

Eric Pickles, the local government secretary, leaves no doubt about what that message is. "We are going to shake up the balance of power in this country. We are going to change the nature of the constitution. Be in no doubt about our commitment to localism. I know I look like an unlikely revolutionary, but the revolution starts here".

Nick Boles is the Conservative MP for Grantham and Stamford and an arch-Cameroon. In his book, *Which Way's Up: the Future for Coalition Britain and How to Get There* he describes what he calls "Big Bang localism" - a radical decentralisation to "dismantle some of central government's most wasteful bureaucracies". Subsequently he gave this theory colourful expression by talking of "injecting a form of chaos" into local communities. Francis Maude, the cabinet Office Minister responsible for Big Society has promised a "future that is chaotic and disorderly". What the Hell is Going On?

They don't really want to define or measure it

Cameron and other leading Big Society followers in the Government have consistently failed to define exactly what they mean by the notion. Its philo-

sophical forbears (David Blond and ResPublica) are equally vague. The real benefit of the concept is that it can't be measured and in practice it acts as a broad enabling concept under which a whole variety of sometimes contradictory policies and prejudices can be found. It is the theoretical equivalent of blancmange - it is so deceptively sweet it must be bad for you, it can adopt almost any shape you want it to and most importantly it still wobbles! Such vagueness is not an accident. Big Society sets itself totally against Labour's culture of top-down target setting as well as planning laws and regulation of all types. Another advantage of fudging the question of measurement is that it avoids the need to draw harsh statistical attention to the effects of the cuts and the growing levels of inequality throughout society. It is therefore difficult to tease out particular evidence of what success would look like for Big Society. Questions about how "Big" society should be made little sense. Instead of evidenced outcomes, the success of the approach will be "felt" rather than seen. Otherwise unmeasurable indicators - such as social cohesion and social capital - are sometimes trundled out to try and answer this question of measurement but this amounts to little more than the substitution of one secret code to clarify another.

The Tories have distanced themselves from what they consider to be the top down, bureaucratic and statist New Labour targets. Duncan Bowie in his *Chartist* articles sets out the Big Society approach to planning controls and points out the dangers of deregulation and much of the Tory approach to the localism agenda D. Bowie 'The ideology of Localism' and 'The dangers of Localism', *Chartist* 251 and *Chartist* 252). The Tories have introduced a kind of contempt for measurement against targets coupled with the abolition of numerous quangos and NDPBs that have been used to control measure or regulate different aspects of society. To take just one example, earlier this year, DCLG announced that it would no longer be collecting data from supporting People. According to its website:

"...the Department wishes to reduce the time-consuming and expensive burden of numerous data reporting requirements imposed on local authorities [which then commission services locally] by central government".

This is likely to have disastrous results for vulnerable people – but we will no longer be able to measure just how disastrous.

This approach is paradoxical and surprising. In the last year, there have been countless news stories about outcomes-driven contracts — from social impact bonds to payment by results arrangements — which require charities to use data to demonstrate the difference they've made. David Cameron has also announced plans to measure “national wellbeing” and made a commitment to open data. All these things require charities to get a grip on good monitoring and evaluation.

One of the most worrying of all of these attempts to deregulate are the increasing attacks on equalities and the Equalities and Human Rights Commission. The notion of ‘equality’ that has done so much to improve life in the UK for a wide range of those groups who have so often been discriminated against is now under serious challenge along with an attack on multiculturalism. Instead a much more facile and individualised version of “fairness” is now put forward as the new commonsense – ‘it’s not fair that I should have to pay higher taxes to send someone else’s children to University’. This notion of fairness is a key part of the larger attack on solidarity and social cohesion. The rich can increasingly look after their own and those who cannot afford to go private can go hang.

Leading ‘Red Tories’ Philip Blond and John Milbank argue that a synthesis of old Tory and traditional left ideas is the only way to achieve a ‘genuinely egalitarian society’. Their response to the National Equality Panel's report was to question the whole basis of ‘equality of opportunity’. According to them the “rhetoric of egalitarian opportunity means that everyone who doesn't succeed is defined as a failure. Such contempt reinforces inequality”. Who are these individuals defining people as ‘failures’ in this way? The authors assert this without any argument and then continue with the bizarre premise that “equality of opportunity is...wholly synonymous with a market without morals and a meritocracy without merit”. They then make weird platonic appeals to “virtue”

as their key concept - but of course they fail to say what they mean by it:

“...the more we seek to link social and economic prestige with virtue, then the more we can hope for good financial and political leaders possessed of compassion and integrity”.

A circular argument if ever there was one. (‘No equality in opportunity’. *the Guardian* 28/1/10). However, what they fail to remember is that it is precisely those ‘masters of the universe’ who recently wrecked our economy who are best at linking their own riches - their social and economic prestige - with their own virtue. Indeed, this is effectively what ‘greed is good’ means in the modern era. The Red Tories, instead of challenging this, actually end up by celebrating “a hierarchy of excellence” which looks uncommonly like Britain's current class structure.

The demise of the Audit Commission and Central Office of Information, significant cuts to the Charity Commission, and NICE, as well as RDAs mean the end not only of the possibility or regulation but also a serious restraint on the possibility of any significant redistribution between areas of comparative richness and poverty.

Big Society purports to be about the community and society but is actually about the individual and the family. Nat Wei described Big Society as being “Primarily about citizens taking more control” and that the true test of Big Society will be a real shift of power and control to ordinary citizens. However, at the same time Big Society sets out to decimate those aspects of our social welfare and state apparatus that seek to redistribute power and resources between rich and poor. The question that we therefore have to ask is who benefits from this change of power and control? It will certainly not be for the poorest and most marginalised whose protection under equalities legislation or welfare provision will be lost. It will certainly not be those who rely on public services and are unable to choose to spend money they don't have on privatised alternatives.

The Big Society is little more than a rather polite, version of the Tea Party that has swept across the US. It starts from exactly the same basis: Private = Good, Public = Bad. It believes that we can only be free if we are in competition with each other in a free market. Therefore all regulation is inherently bad ('socialism'). Far from being a Big Society this is a recipe for an eventual war of all against all. A dreadful Hobbesian dystopia.

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We are already doing it

If the Big Society notion of 'active citizen involvement' actually means anything then surely we are already doing it. Community activism and local volunteering are nothing new. Civil Society organisations are perhaps more developed in the UK than anywhere else in the world. The Red Tory and Big Society principle that civil society has been co-opted and endangered by the overreaching state as well as the predatory market just isn't borne out on the ground. Indeed, I will go on to argue that a number of features of the Big Society are likely to threaten the independence of civil society despite the claim it set-up to avoid this very occurrence.

Hundreds of thousands of voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations are already working effectively at a local level and around communities of neighbourhood and identity. Big Society and government cuts are

actually likely to make these organisations less resilient rather than more active. Many voluntary and community groups are already losing huge amounts of funding and this leads to the next paradox:

Big Society = big cuts = smaller civil society

Big Society is all about providing the ideological defence against those campaigning against cuts in public services at local, regional and national level. Despite all the rhetoric that Big Society will improve the conditions for success for smaller and more local voluntary organisations, all the evidence is of massive cuts to the charitable sector as local authorities, and other commissioning agencies cut back on their spending. Many of those involved in campaigning against these big cuts are civil society organisations. There is lots of evidence that the ConDem government is much less tolerant of dissidence amongst civil society organisations than was New Labour. Many Labour MPs come from voluntary sector backgrounds and after nearly two decades of work developing relationships and policy with the sector there was a real understanding of the importance of the independence of the sector and the need for groups to be able to campaign (where appropriate) against local or national government even though these may be funding them. This relationship was enshrined in the "Compact" between government and the voluntary sector developed over the years of the Blair and Brown Governments. There is little evidence of a similar understanding amongst the new Tory Government. One of the many key agencies that were abolished as part of the Bonfire of the Quangos was the Compact Commission which oversaw the functioning of the Compact which was empowered to intervene in national, regional or local breaches of these agreements.

Along with cuts to funding and increasing numbers of voluntary groups going to the wall, it is likely that the remaining medium-sized and larger voluntary sector organisations will become increasingly co-opted by the Government as well as by the private sector. This runs totally counter to the rhetoric of strong and independent civil society organisations that are supposed to lie at the heart of Big Society.

Big Society = Big Contracts

Big Society spokespeople like Francis Maude and Lord Nat Wei have argued that the changes brought about by Big Society will operate most effectively at the local and neighbourhood level. Francis Maude said that this level of the “microscopically granular” was the level at which change would happen. Many have interpreted this as likely to lead to support for smaller, more community based voluntary and civil society organisations. Actually, this is far from the case. Aggregated contracts for public services mean that many contracts will be far too large for civil society organisations to bid for. This is the very opposite of the microscopically granular. These large contracts are going to private sector firms like Serco, Veolia, A4E, Arriva etc rather than voluntary agencies who are reduced to being sub contracted or even subcontracted. Out of 40 prime contractors for the Work Programme announced in April 2010 only one was won by a voluntary organisation. Payment by results will also privilege larger private sector organisations rather than smaller charities that are unlikely to have the cashflow reserves to be able to wait months for payments and to cross-subsidise and loss-lead so as to win contracts.

This will change the whole relationship between the voluntary sector, the state and the private sector. In the years of new Labour, local authorities and other commissioners were used to the important independence of the civil society organisations that they commissioned or grant funded. These relationships were regulated by the Compact which recognised the importance of voluntary groups as whistle blowers and critical friends. It is unlikely that Serco or Group 4 will look so gently on charities they subcontract if these same organisations represent their clients in a way that is critical or demanding. The independence of the large parts of the charitable sector is thus under threat and its ability to speak truth to power likely to be more constrained than for many years.

Big Society = Little England

Big society is a nostalgic and rural view of society. David Cameron says that he tracks the original idea to his thinking in his Dad’s garden in Witney – small town Oxfordshire. Four initial ‘vanguard areas’ were selected to run pilots: Liverpool, Merseyside (withdrew from pilot in February 2011), Eden, Cumbria, Sutton, Greater London, Windsor and Maidenhead, Berkshire

With the exception of Liverpool these represent some of the most well off, rural or suburban areas in the UK. Even some months after the launch of these vanguard areas the local voluntary sector coordinating bodies in three of the areas reported that there had been no contact with them from the local authority leads. In reality there has been surprisingly little effort made to involve the organised voluntary sector in Big Society approaches at a practical level. Government has however made it clear to all the larger agencies funded as Office of Civil Society strategic partners, that they must promote and support Big Society.

I can see how Big Society might work in Eden, Sutton and Windsor as I can in Witney – like Cameron’s father, my mother lives there. If a library is closed down by West Oxfordshire Council I can imagine a group of willing volunteers trying to run it for a few months for nothing. Witney – yes possibly – but I can’t see how it will work in Wigan or Warrington, Walthamstow or Watford. Actually, the Big Society seems to be having real trouble even in Witney with the news that the only youth centre in Witney is about to close down following a sharp drop in public donations and local authority cuts (‘PM’s favourite big society youth centre faces closure’ – *the Guardian* 25/6/2011)

Nostalgia isn’t what it used to be

As well as being “Maoist” there are weird streaks of anarchism and even Leninism (All Power to the Parishes) about the notion of Big Society. Both “Red Toryism” and its more recent (and equally incoherent) mirror image “Blue Labourism” share a deeply ingrained nostalgia for a pre-Lapsarian England, They both hark back to a time before the creation of the Welfare State

and the “bureaucratic and statist” NHS. Descriptions by Phillip Blond of the society he envisages can look a bit like Ambridge – “nuns cycling to communion through the early morning mist” in John Major’s immortal quote from George Orwell. Blond is quite explicit that he hankers after an England that died out with the industrial revolution. Blond sees himself as providing a critique of modern secularism as well as the modern state. He writes in praise of the “medieval network of a predominantly horizontal communal and social order, exemplified by the church but also including guilds and agrarian communities organised around differential property relationships”. Sadly, he believes, this ideal condition of society was destroyed by the rise of powerful monarchs and states. Another way of characterising his beliefs would be: ‘In Praise of Feudalism’ or (as *The Independent* 25/11/09) notes: ‘Back to the Middle Ages’. This is nostalgia taken much too far!

Blond’s cure for the ills of “broken Britain” prioritises the family and marriage as central to the nation’s health. He also believes that rolling back the state so as to transfer assets to the middle classes as well as the poor is the key to a solution. In a recent article in the *Evening Standard* (30th June 2011) Blond tells Alison Roberts that Big Society has started to go wrong because the Government “has not thought it through radically enough”. For Blond “it’s not really about volunteering and philanthropy, its about changing the agenda for those at the bottom of our society. The great missing middle of the Big Society is the economics”. He suggests that cabinet infighting, massive cuts and the Tories’ failure to grasp the point of Big Society is leading to the policy’s increasing incoherence. What he fails to acknowledge is just how resistant the Tory party usually is to any attempt to protect the poor. He fails to understand how beguiling they are likely to find the parts of his approach which speak of a Arcadian “Merrie England” but how dispensable most of them will find his desire to radically change the status quo. Instead of the “horizontal communal and social order” of Blond’s nostalgic imagination – replete with guilds, mutuals and cooperatives, will end up with a much more traditional desire to restore the English rural class system enshrined in the hymn “the rich man in his castle the poor man at his gate – GOD made them, high or lowly and ordered their estate.”

The Perils of Localism

The localism agenda that might look attractive at first sight will on current indications merely magnify the differences between those neighbourhoods that are doing very well thank you, and those poorer localities that are already far behind in terms of resources (whether in social or actual capital). Spouting about localism and empowerment without a real redistribution of resources is a lame joke rather than a viable policy.

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The architecture critic in *the Observer* (19/12/2010) sets out why the Government’s localism bill is bound to lead to trouble. Eric Pickles, he says, “seems to have an idea of a ‘community’ as being a harmonious entity, sharing common aims and hopes, and civilised ways of resolving differences”. The reality is far from this and there are bound to be feuds and bitterness as well as eccentric decisions when communities (i.e. parishes and villages) are given the right to produce their own development plans and propose or veto housing developments within their boundaries; a NIMBYism charter by any other name. The correct term for this kind of policy is “atomisation” rather than “localism”. Without the countervailing pressure of Government ensuring that views and interests beyond the parochial get some sort of look in, chaos will ensue. Of course, the Government has said that they see “chaos” as a positive product of the Big Society approach - a necessary by-product of their ideological desperation to destroy as much of the State as they can. It is bound to lead to a post code lottery where the rich areas prosper and the poorer areas sink.

Unacknowledged nostalgia can be a fatal component in bad social planning. This is another case where it is worth ‘being careful what you wish for’. The notion of localism can so easily descend into parochialism just as community can descend into communalism - a war of tribe against tribe; all against all.

Only active and viable state institutions (in partnership with civil society) can provide a counterbalance and check on this tendency as well as providing the kind of material and monetary support for some of the most deprived neighbourhoods - without which they would collapse in ways that could bring everything else down with them. Parts of the US are already in this kind of catastrophic tailspin. Blond's good intentions (if such they are) would only make this hell more likely to happen here in the UK. Only the state is able to regulate and redistribute resources away from the richest to some of the poorest areas. Without such strategic intervention a very different and even more dangerous atomisation would break out between different neighbourhoods or localities setting those with fewer resources in direct competition with each other as well as the richer ones. In this sense Blond's approach is akin to a kind of communitarian anarchism.

It is no surprise that the key arguments underpinning Blond's Red Toryism are more theological than logical. He is an unusual convert from Catholicism to the Church of England and religion is at the root of all his political beliefs - including his opposition to abortion in all but extreme cases and his rather stuffy critique of permissiveness.

Ideological or a way of avoiding ideology?

The notion of the Big Society must be understood as the death-knell of the Welfare State as we have known it. In seeking to reduce the deficit over only 4 years by making massive cuts the Government is subjecting the UK to round two of the shock doctrine, otherwise known as Thatcher's unfinished business. In the process it will seek to break up any remains of the solidarity that still resides in our political culture and substitute for it an impoverished and attenuated notion of "community"

Big Society is the Tories way of using 'the community' (including voluntary and community organisations) to dismantle the welfare state. It achieves this directly by getting Third Sector organisations to join the private sector feeding frenzy as the NHS and public services are forced to sell themselves off to

the lowest bidder. The voluntary and community sector is simultaneously being used as a smoke screen to make it look like this is a cuddly and humane process rather than a selfish and destructive pillaging of the real social capital that we stand to lose - our welfare state.

One of the consequences of us being so vague and ambiguous when we use the word 'community' has been the ability of both New Labour and the Tories to hijack the term and set it against the notion of public and state provision. As the marketisation of so much of our public services proceeds ever faster we are increasingly losing the vocabulary to identify and discuss what is actually happening to us. This is a very dangerous development for all of us on the Left but in many ways we have played into the Tories' hands because of our unthought out fetishisation of the concept of community. Similarly, the voluntary and community sector has had little to say about the way in which New Labour has used the concept to disguise and collude with its attack on public services. There is a real danger that "cooperative councils" will end up offloading responsibility to local people ("communities") rather than really unlocking their participation and involvement in a model of mutual service provision that is really responsive to different local needs and that builds a really inclusive solidarity rather than a vacuous sense of community.

Big Society notions of 'choice', 'fairness' and 'community' look unexceptional, commonsensical and cosy but in fact carry a deep ideological content as well as having dangerous practical consequences. The greater the attack on public services by the market - whether by direct privatisation or 'voluntarisation' or through the rich and middle classes opting out of them - the more unequal and unfair our society will become. Appeals to community and localism and indeed the notion of Big Society itself, are just smokescreens that can be handily used to disguise this process.

The Big Society actually represents an atomisation of our society and could easily descend further into an anomic and chaotic locality-based version of the devil take the hindmost. The state and localities need to be kept in some sort of balance. Whilst it is true that many aspects of the UK state were too

centralised under New Labour, the pendulum could be about to swing so far to the opposite extreme that there will remain no effective mechanisms to allow for equitable distribution or redistribution between rich and poor families, localities and regions.

The Tories and Liberal Democrats have successfully managed to deploy an impoverished notion of 'community' so as to mount a direct attack on both the state and society. The notion of community they seek to impose and which they see as the locus for involvement and voluntary activism is a notion of community that may make sense in Witney or even parts of Notting Hill. In Hackney or Tower Hamlets, Worthington or Wigan however, it is likely to be seen as a largely middle class joke – cutting local services on which poor people rely (both as recipients and producers, clients and workers) whilst encouraging local people to compensate by getting together to volunteer to provide them for free. It amounts to little more than a kind of glorified neighbourhood watch scheme and is being used as a smoke screen to hide the withdrawal of resources and public service from the hardest pressed neighbourhoods. Of course the one sort of cohesion that they clearly don't want to stimulate is the kind of collective action which people in their localities and work places are likely to take when they realise what a con-trick this Big Society nonsense really is.

Big Society – the end of the Welfare State?

The Big Society might seem at first sight to carry echoes of the Great Society - the massive attempt by President Johnson in the US in the 1960s to address urban poverty and racial discrimination. What is becoming rapidly clear is that it actually represents its exact opposite. On every index the idealism of the 1960s in the US or of the Welfare State in Britain from the late 1940s is set to be replaced by its opposite in the Big Society whether in terms of fairness, income distribution, gender and racial equality, investment in the arts and sciences, access to legal advice, spending on health and education and so on.

The Great Society was an ambitious and partly successful attempt to move the US out of a looming slump by seeking to address inequality and stimulate demand. Perhaps the only similarity between the Great and Big societies is that the US is currently embroiled in an unwinnable foreign conflict in Afghanistan just as it was in the 1960s in Vietnam. Sadly it was the increased expenditure on the Vietnam debacle that hobbled and then reversed much of the Great Society in the US.

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Expenditure on schools and other public projects was a key feature of the early welfare state as well as of the US in the 1960s but contrast this with the current demise of capital spending on school buildings by the ConDem government and their refusal to support industrial employers such as Sheffield Forgemasters. The Welfare State and particularly the NHS was introduced at a time when the country had a national debt quite as large as today's. In the US, Medicare and Medicaid, whilst not perfect, were at least launched as a safety net for the old and the poor as a key part of the Great Society. By contrast the coalition government is now smashing up the National Health Service despite its pre-election promise that there would be no more major upheavals in the health area. Access to the Law for all was a pivotal part of the Welfare State. Similarly, the first attempts to fund legal services for the poor as part of President Johnson's "War on Poverty" were launched in the US. Currently in the UK we see the final death-throes of Civil Legal Aid, as well as cuts to Housing and Welfare Benefits on a scale that could be described as a new 'War on the Poor'. Even the US 1960s investment in the Humanities and the Arts contrasts with huge planned cuts by the ConDems to Museums, Libraries and Arts organisations. The demise of Regional Develop-

ment Agencies as a way of stimulating employment and economic growth as well as the destruction of regulatory bodies like the Audit Commission will make any serious attempts to share the pain across the regions and between localities impossible.

Affirmative Action in the US in the 1960s resulted in a more than halving of the numbers of African Americans defined as living in poverty. This was mirrored in the UK in the 1960s by the Race Relations Act and real advances in a climate of multiculturalism. By contrast the Big Society has taken no firm steps to ensure that massive public sector cuts won't systematically damage both women and ethnic minority employment and hard pressed black and minority ethnic communities. Cuts to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and constant attacks on multiculturalism are all part of the project to return nostalgically to a pre-immigration England which never really existed. The prospects for social cohesion in this new 'Big Society' are truly dire. Just look at the proposal to cap Housing Benefit in London which seems likely to result in an even more comprehensive social and ethnic cleansing of the richer parts of the City than that achieved by Shirley Porter's corrupt 'Homes for Votes' scandal on Westminster City Council in the mid 1980s.

The localism agenda that might look attractive at first sight will on current indications merely magnify the differences between those neighbourhoods that are doing very well thank you and those poorer localities that are already far behind in terms of resources (whether in social or actual capital). Spouting on about empowerment and community without a real redistribution of resources is a lame joke rather than a viable policy. This type of communitarianism is the philosophical equivalent of Morris dancing or 'Scouting for Boys'. It is a way of avoiding the real issues of inequality, discrimination, class and exclusion that continue to scar our society. It is certainly not the kind of theoretical background on which one might base any sort of sensible social policy towards dealing with the serious issues that actually face us in the real world.

At times Big Society proponents even proffer the weird and naïve view that somehow if we all got together as individuals in our local 'communities' to share festivals and have "Big Lunches" then divisions of class and race can mysteriously be overcome. Don't get me wrong. I'm not against street parties, festivals and cultural shows as such. I am just not convinced that by eating samosas together we are really going to build sufficient social capital to overcome the real differences in power and status that do so much to injure our fractured and unequal society. The notion that a society in the middle of being blown apart by huge market forces can be put back together by 'a bit of shared quiche and a few games of pavement Twister' is just a silly conjuring trick to amuse or bemuse the revellers even further. Big Society is bread and circuses for the 21st Century.

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