

Big Society – a fig leaf for privatisation and cuts

“Only governments can provide adequate basic public services”Here’s what Bernard Davies from NCIA said of the Big Idea coming out of the other Coalition, when he talked to North West community activists at their conference in Manchester in September 2010.

“My starting point for the Big Society unashamedly looks at its political and economic contexts. It’s impossible to take the notion of ‘a Big Society’ simply as a given, either as an idea or as call to action. Central to that context is a major financial crisis – the worst at least since 1930s – brought about by an elite of bankers and other powerful financial interests and by governments across the world who willingly gave up their responsibilities for regulating them.

Now however the blame is in effect being laid on everyone else – in particular, even as profits and bonuses in those financial areas again rocket, on up to 800,000 public sector workers who are being told it is they who must lose their jobs. And why? Because, not the banks and financial institutions, but they and their services are inefficient and wasteful – even though, from the start of Thatcher era in the early 80s right through Blair/Brown era, the public sector has been regulated and indeed micro-managed to a degree which would make free marketers see red if this were applied to them.

Nonetheless, what we are constantly being told is that the only way to dig selves out of what is purportedly a deep financial hole is to, for example, take £2B out of the £9B Department of Justice budget. This apparently is equivalent to the whole prison service budget and the whole court services budget – though actually, it seems, and without hurting the most vulnerable, most of the ‘savings’ will come out of the legal aid budget.

The PR campaign to convince us all this is necessary, unavoidable, has been so powerful that it has allowed absolutely no room for considering alternatives. Such as scrapping Trident which the government estimates would save between £15B and £20B – but which Greenpeace claims (including VAT) could save over £30B. Meanwhile, a senior university academic calculates that a one-off 20% tax on the richest 10% who already own over 40% national wealth would immediately dramatically reduce the deficit.

Still however the only solutions on offer are those massive cuts in public services – accompanied by the transfer of as many as possible of the state’s responsibilities to the voluntary and community sector and to volunteers.

In fact this is no more than what many influential voices in Coalition government have been demanding for decades. As Francis Maude, the Cabinet Office Minister, reminded us recently in a Guardian interview, one of Margaret Thatcher’s biggest mistakes was not pushing her reforms to (that is, run-down of) the welfare state vigorously or quickly enough. And, as the Prime Minister let slip in a public question and answer session recently, even when we’ve got rid of the deficit, we should still not expect any increases in public spending. Clearly the motivation here is at least ideological as much as it is economic.

However, if that’s your policy – if that’s what you’re determined to do and why – you need a cover story. Which brings me at last to the ‘Big Society’. What we’re being told about this is

that it's the big idea, essential for replacing big government and the big state. To quote the PM:

"... huge culture change ... the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from the elites of Whitehall to men and women in the street."

And how is massive shift to be achieved? By encouraging greater volunteering and philanthropy – such as enabling local people to buy out their local pub, recruiting volunteers to keep museums open, speeding up local broadband access provision. Some of this is to be supported by money from dormant bank accounts – what the Prime Minister described as ... "hundreds of millions of pounds of new finance to some of our most dynamic social organisations." Welcome though such money will be, it nonetheless has to be seen alongside that suggested 2 billion pound cut in the budget of Department of Justice.

It also has to be seen in the context of state support for the voluntary and community sector which is being run down relentlessly and ruthlessly – for example:

- £1.2 billion for local council's grant programmes immediately stopped by Department of Community and Local Government;
- An £11M cut in the budget of Office of Civil Society itself – just as it replaced New Labour's Office of the Third Sector;
- £9M taken out of the V budget for youth volunteering;
- £4M gone with closure of the London Development Agency;
- A 60% cut in Croydon's voluntary sector contracts;
- A £500,000 cut in Leeds Health Authority's support for Mind;
- A cut in support for the Sussex Autistic Society which forced it into insolvency.

Looked at from the perspective of the National Coalition for Independent Action, there are three conclusions to be drawn from all this.

1. Only governments can provide adequate basic public services like health, education and social services to say nothing of a benefits system – accessible to all, sensitive and responsive to their users and adequately funded out of taxes.

A strong case certainly exists for a debate on the form of those services – in my own specialist field of youth work I have been arguing for that for years. However that is very different from saying that, in a highly complex modern society like ours, anyone but the state can provide these crucial services of the standard and size we need.

2. Therefore, however strong and vibrant small local community groups – or even large professionalised regional national voluntary organisations – might be, they cannot possibly replace these services.

This is especially true in what we're now told is a new age of austerity when more and more people will be scrabbling for jobs and a decent income, negotiating the maze of (hugely reduced) benefits; desperately trying to hold onto somewhere to live; worried what kind of education their kids are getting and worried about what kind of care they'll get in hospital and as they get older. This is not exactly an environment for motivating massive new voluntary activity.

3. It is not anyway the role of voluntary and community sector to take over these roles – that is, allow itself to be co-opted into policy agendas set entirely or largely by the state and so work simply to the state's values, purposes and managerialist ways of running things.

For, it is important to remember, when we talk about ‘the voluntary and community sector’ we are not just talking about a set of organisations and services. We are talking about a defining feature of a democratic society – one of ways in which citizens, as both individuals and in concert, act as they choose to act, and as they choose to act, as they exercise their personal and collective freedoms. In doing these things, their aims will not necessarily be those of state institutions, nor will they necessarily want to do things in the way the state does them. Indeed they may – openly or implicitly – want and need to act in ways which are critical of the state and its purposes and approaches and thereby as an essential counter-balance and an explicit counter-force to it.

In fact this independence of thought and autonomy in action is one of the ultimate tests of just that liberation which the Prime Minister talked about in his Big Society speech in Liverpool. It would be as well therefore for the Prime Minister to remember the well directed criticism of the Labour Government in his own party’s ‘green paper’ on the voluntary and community sector, appropriately entitled *A Stronger Society: voluntary action in the 21st century*. Published in 2008, it thus long preceded any suggestion of the need for a Big Society:

“It has too often regarded charities and voluntary groups as bodies that are to be instructed, rather than trusted.”

He might also want to recall what the Charity Commission said in its evidence to the party quoted in the report – that:

... “an uncritical involvement with the Govt’s agenda could amount to a slow leaching away of a charity’s assets.”

And also the report’s quotation from the architect of the modern welfare state, William Beveridge:

... “vigour and abundance of Voluntary Action outside one’s home, individually and in association with other citizens, for bettering one’s own life and that of one’s fellows, are the distinguishing marks of a free society.”

To saying nothing of Beveridge’s other ‘key insight’ quoted in the report –

... “that people and organisations are ... more vigorous and abundant when given the freedom to act on their own initiative rather than when ordered from above.”

The rhetoric of the Big Society has by now bedded itself deeply, not just in the Whitehall village and its wider political debates and in the everyday taken-for-granted language of the media. It has also already been inserted into the thinking and language of the voluntary and community sector itself, especially, it seems, the corporate national organisations and some of the second tier local and regional bodies. Yet, as I started by urging, it and the assumptions on which it rests are much too important to be taken at face value. They need to be excavated and challenged; their realities exposed and examined critically; their possibilities tested against those realities. And so, if any of this analysis – the Coalition’s analysis – touches your own, take one of our leaflets, check our website, email our co-ordinators, come to one of our open Assembly meetings as they start to move around the country. The Coalition is definitely not offering anything big. But you might just that way meet some like minds, find a bit of extra inspiration at a time of low morale, link up with some allies for working out tactics and, particularly if you’re from the voluntary and

community sector, defend your independence against these latest efforts to incorporate you.”

Footnote

One important criticism made of this presentation afterwards by local community activists was that it failed to highlight what is probably the main long-term aim of the Big Society strategy: the privatisation of public services.

Bernard Davies