

Beyond the Big Society

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Strengthening Society's Connection to Government

Introducing myself

- Worked in both civil service – public sector reform – and voluntary sector
- Civil Exchange devoted to helping two sectors work better together
- Big Society Audits 2012 and 13: reviews against Government's stated objectives

My key points

- Big society is controversial – but is not a new idea for political leaders in the UK
- It has a lot of potential and ought to be an idea whose time has come, given its relevance to challenges governments facing
- But this has not yet been realised, although some interesting and positive developments
- Rhetoric needs to be matched by a new model for the delivery of public services which invests in social value, promotes the social infrastructure of disadvantaged communities, and involves genuine dialogue between social partners about respective roles and goals

Three key strands in Big Society and earlier initiatives

- Community empowerment:
 - local people being given more control and influence, increased transparency, stronger communities and a strong and more influential voluntary sector
- Opening up public services:
 - To private and voluntary sector, making services more accountable and responsive to different needs
- Social action:
 - people involved in their communities through giving time, money and resources

Why?

- 66% trust charities 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal;' 38% church; 19% banks; 17% newspapers; 16% multinational and insurance companies; 16% government; 8 % political parties
- Decline in political party membership (conservatives, 3m in 1950s, now 130,000)
- Nearly 60% of people say not interested in politics but 55% gave to charity in last month
- Long term decline in social capital – especially low in disadvantaged areas

And challenges for public services

- Reductions in funding due to deficit reduction
- Increasingly on such a scale that complete restructuring is required
- Rising demand for services, particularly because of an ageing population
- Rising welfare costs and problem of “dependency”
- Individuals with multiple, complex problems, eg troubled families

Politicians look to civil society, 'between the government and the markets'

'Out of the reaction against the Left's over emphasis on government and the Right's blind faith in markets, a new more balanced approach has emerged, one that sees the individual enhanced by a supportive community and envisions a strong and effective civic society..' Gordon Brown, 2004

'The right were guilty of focusing too much on markets. The left were guilty of focusing too much on the state. Both forgot that space in between – society.' David Cameron, 2011

'So the bureaucratic state and the overbearing market will never meet our real ambition as a party, that each citizen can be liberated to have the real freedom to shape their own lives.' Ed Miliband, 2011

What's been happening?

Some positives but problems with
execution

Community empowerment

- **Increased local control?** – some positives: communities taking over assets – eg pubs, libraries, shops; community and neighbourhood budgets are opening up opportunities for experiments; but still highly centralised government system and mixed messages on localism (eg Academies are now controlled centrally)
- **Greater transparency and accountability?** – lots more information, but are services really accountable? More elected Majors and crime commissioners, but turnout low
- **Voluntary sector strength?** Key part of voluntary sector that receives state support – often local, specialist and working with disadvantaged groups - is facing rising demand for services as state withdraws services and facing loss of state income. Where does get contracts, organisations increasingly treated as service providers, with views on how to design services often not welcome.

Opening up public services

- **Diversity of providers?** Virtual private sector monopoly, £4bn of contracts with Atos, Capita, G4S and Serco; 60% of gov contracts with 100 suppliers. Fears “too big to fail.” Also public sector transfers to voluntary sector eg Canal and River Trust, mutuals, Academies.
- **Voluntary sector funding, accessibility to contracts, strong partnerships?** Voluntary sector estimated to lose £6.6bn between 2011-12 to 2017-18, leading to funding crisis for specialist organisations, voluntary sector contract share declining in key areas (eg employment, healthcare), partnerships/sub-contracting increasingly important but often not working
- **More accountable and responsive public services?** Public confidence still relatively high but high profile private sector contract failings; seeing ‘race to the bottom’ on price; NHS Trust model in increasing crisis, despite years of reform

Social action

- Levels of volunteering recovering, but only to pre-recession levels.
- Giving has been falling, affecting some more than others – eg 14% increase for universities and colleges.
- Experiments in raising money – eg encouraging social investment in charities – but small compared to the gap (some £6.6bn cumulatively) left by state withdrawing funds

A divided society – help not getting to the right parts

- Against all 3 goals, there is a significant socio-economic divide
- Huge gap between affluent and disadvantaged communities: eg 20% people in most deprived areas trust others, 75% in most affluent
- Cuts in public services have hit disabled and poor people disproportionately and voluntary sector support is struggling
- Massive differences in levels of political engagement and social action between affluent and disadvantaged communities

Three case studies that illustrate the problems and opportunities

Libraries

Social care

Food banks

Community Libraries

- Over 425 open or planned
- Deptford library: deprived part of Lewisham in London
- Library open longer hours, providing wider services
- No core funding or paid staff, 25 volunteers

Social care – “race to the bottom”

- Major reduction in preventative social care, hitting some of most vulnerable in society
- In 1992, 2% of social care by private/vol sector, 84% in 2009-10. Often largest providers owned by private equity firms eg Saga Homecare support 50,000 older people
- 60% of local authorities now commission 15 minute or less home care visits, in some local authorities, 75% of care is 15 mins. On survey of disabled people showed for 40% it is not meeting basic needs like washing, dressing
- NHS often bearing the costs, as people turn to acute care
- Low wages – HMRC found 88 of 224 employers investigated not paying minimum wage
- A false economy

Food banks

- Food banks, estimated 5000,000 now using them, partly because of failures in benefit system and reduced state support
- They are self sustaining, very local, volunteers, supermarkets sometimes donating food
- Providers have raised concerns about failures in the benefit system and questioned whether the state is doing its job – eg CEO of Trussell Trust, churches
- Have been criticised by Government for doing so
- Is this the Big Society?

Beyond the Big Society?

- Needs a clear, shared vision about a better society – not just political rhetoric. New vision starting to emerge from civil society itself in the UK
- Goals might be to tackle social problems and inequalities
- Investing in social infrastructure, particularly in disadvantaged areas
- Hearing voices of communities, helping them to shape services, not just turning them into delivery partners
- Recognising social value, not just as an add on, but the way of achieving value for money
- This would move away from current contractual model geared to lower unit prices and scale, toward local, innovative services that “reinvent” a more sustainable state