

Introduction: what is Big Society?

Contemporary social policy in a historical and comparative perspective

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1 INTRODUCTION: POLICY AND RHETORIC

There can be no sensible commentary or meaningful debate about Big Society without full recognition that it ‘is a deeply historical concept’, to cite Matthew Hilton’s opening sentence in his chapter below. The aim of this volume is to create a dialogue between history, policy and practice, and to provide readers with a historically grounded, internationally informed, multidisciplinary answer to the question we pose in the title – *The Big Society Debate: A New Agenda for Social Welfare?*

The idea for the volume came about following a one-day workshop held in March 2011 at the London School of Economics titled ‘Thinking Critically about the Big Society’. The workshop brought together academics from different disciplines, practitioners from the voluntary and public sectors, and historians from the History and Policy network to discuss the underpinnings of the ‘Big Society’ agenda, the historical context from which this idea emerged, the effects of the Big Society in practice, its implications longer term for civil society, relations between state and non-state actors, and what lessons can be drawn from international experience. This volume continues that discussion and begins with the historical. The chapters in Part I provide the archivally researched contributions of professional historians, which are vital to critically inform and complement the chapters in Part II that focus on social policy and examine the challenges of operationalising the three key components of the Big Society agenda as defined by the Cabinet Office: community empowerment; opening up public services; and social action (Office for Civil Society, 2011a). Various chapters in this volume raise questions and problematise these stated aims. They examine the limitations and consider the challenges involved in translating these ideas into practice.

The opening chapter of Part I by Jose Harris is a crucial starting point for anyone who wants to know something of this term's historical provenance. As Harris makes clear, Big Society, whether its chief proponents such as Phillip Blond and Jesse Norman know it or not, is a term with longstanding, reverberating, transatlantic and cross-Channel historical echoes down the generations AS 'great society'. While classical forebears can be summoned, Harris chooses to focus on the modern ancestry of the term since the founding discussion in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* of 1759. She explores how this immediately bequeathed a formative ambivalence to the discussion, since Smith propounded, by turns, both the planned and organised great society and the free market alternative. Most frequently the precise term invoked has been 'great society' and theorists and politicians as unlike as August Comte and Graham Wallas before the First World War, Friedrich Hayek and Lyndon Johnson since the Second World War, have each laid claim to it as a term expressing the ideal society they aspired to create. However, Harris argues, notions of a great society were not explicitly invoked when the welfare state was designed and implemented during the 1940s. Perhaps, if Martin Albrow (in this volume) is right, philosophers, politicians and their advisors in Britain have only spent their efforts envisaging and exhorting the creation of a great or big society when they felt it was a desirable but unattainable dream, a safe exhortation. Uniquely, between 1939 and 1948 a variant of the planned version of the great society became practical politics and an implemented policy in Britain.

In the first chapter of Part II, Martin Albrow cogently argues that, as well as having a historical pedigree, albeit of a mongrel character, it is also the case that Big Society today 'has to be understood in the first instance as a rhetorical intervention'. It is a slogan for communicating with the general public and as such, he argues, we can be sure that David Cameron and his advisors, including the marketing and media professionals who dominate the new Big Society Network, will have decided on it only after the most rigorous consideration, since 'slogans in politics are as important as brand names for businesses' (Albrow).

Ever since David Cameron first introduced the idea of Big Society for the 2010 election campaign, he has had to defend and relaunch it a number of times. In spite of this, and contrary to what critics expected in 2010, the concept has had extraordinary staying power. It remains at the very heart of the government's agenda – rhetorically if not always in practice. Thus, if we accept the proposition that much forethought went into the decision of the naming of this idea, then why choose such an ambiguous, elusive and polysemic slogan? In focusing on its value as political rhetoric, Albrow argues that this is precisely one of its key functions: deliberate vagueness allows for flexibility in application so that Big Society can simultaneously signify different things to different

groups including, as we discuss later in this chapter, between the two partners in the governing Coalition.

This ambiguity was evident in the aftermath of the August 2011 riots, when pundits and policymakers proffered contradictory interpretations of how the riots and vigilantism were the ‘embodiment of “big society”’ (Williams, 2011) or that Big Society is exemplified by the post-riot, community led clean-ups (Ashton, 2011). Recognising the flexibility and elusive nature of this concept, rather than attempting to define Big Society with a pithy sentence or two here at the beginning of this volume, we believe it is more important to pose, in this opening introduction to the volume, a set of five key questions.

First, as it is informing government policy, we can ask what aspects of the British polity, in its broadest sense, does Big Society refer to? What does it seek to engage with and foster, or to disengage with, alter and shun? Second, as rhetoric, what political work does Big Society do for the Tory dominant partner in the Coalition, whose leader, the Prime Minister, has coined the term and continued to argue that advancing the Big Society is his ‘mission’ (BBC, 2011)? Third, we ask the question that always has to be asked of rhetoric – what of reality? How does the general viewpoint and vision projected by Big Society match up to the historical and contemporary realities which it invokes to justify its proposals? Fourth, we ask, what lessons can be learned from international experience? Since many of the policies advanced in the Big Society agenda have been implemented in other countries over the past two decades – and indeed, in some instances, with funding from the UK Department for International Development – we believe it is important to examine the implications of that experience in the context of the Big Society policy agenda in the UK. Finally, in view of the nature of the gap that is always there between rhetoric and reality, what are the chances of either the rhetorical or the policy success of this agenda? It could prove to be ineffective, even counterproductive policy, yet still count as a rhetorical success for the Tory-led Coalition government, notably, for instance, if Big Society succeeds with the electorate as a communication device, in masking its own policy failure, should that occur.

In this Introduction we integrate the discussion of the various chapters with reference to these five key questions to demonstrate the linkages between the individual chapters of the two sections on cross-cutting themes and issues related to the Big Society agenda. In addition to discussing the chapters produced by academics, we have also included two boxes in this Introduction that were written by practitioners as a way of enhancing our dialogue between history, policy and practice. The two boxes illustrate the issues ‘front-line’¹ practitioners from charities and campaigning organisations encounter when attempting to translate Big Society rhetoric and policies into practice.

2 THE UNIVERSE OF BIG SOCIETY: WHAT'S IN AND WHAT'S OUT?

To address the first of these five questions, Big Society, in principle, gestures to and invokes the importance for the nation's future of the entire gamut of institutions, associations and activities that lie between those of the tax-funded central state, the market and the elementary social unit of the family household (which sometimes – in a gradually increasing proportion of cases today – refers to a solitary individual). However, within that vast and diverse ecological social space, whose very name is contested (civil society, third sector, voluntary sector, non-profit sector etc.), there dwell many species and genera. These can be generalised into a set of phyla of institutional types each embracing a number of sub-variants, such as charities; pressure groups; leisure groups; mutual support associations; social networks. These phyla and genera contain many individual species, some of which have the characteristics of more than one of the more general categories. They range in size, scope, level of formality and professionalisation, etc. Some, but tellingly not all, of these organisational species are favoured by Big Society proponents, whose work and efforts they seek to support and promote.

Mr Cameron's speeches, drawing from the ideas of the main protagonists of Big Society, such as Phillip Blond, Jesse Norman, and Lord Nat Wei, have preferred to focus on the agency of individuals in their communities, the 'army of volunteers' in the locality, 'community' action and, of course, individual responsibility and empowerment. Among the preferred species of organisations, which include registered charities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), social enterprises and self-help groups, Big Society proponents favour, above all, individual citizen-volunteers doing good in their community, organising themselves and taking responsibility for sorting out their locality's needs. Just as the free market of neo-liberal, micro-economic theory throws up spontaneous order in the form of the optimal allocation of resources – because each buying and each selling agent knows their requirements better than a government planner – so, too, the defenders of Big Society contend that it is important to unleash the freedom of the individual citizens and 'unshackle' them from the 'unnecessary bureaucracy – red tape' and 'countless forms' so that they can 'make a real difference in their communities' (Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbotts, 2011; Office for Civil Society, 2011b). Although Phillip Blond, for instance, would no doubt protest that his version of Big Society would seek to empower the local as well as the individual, it is Mr Cameron's interpretation that counts, so far as policy is concerned.

There are several kinds of intermediary associations which also occupy that space between state, family and market, which Big Society is *not* seeking to invoke or support, notably the political organisations representing the sectional

interests of industry, employers and parts of the business community, the trade unions and the professional associations; while quangos are another such intermediary institution not intended to be included, as they are too close to Big Government, which is one of the key rhetorical antitheses of Big Society in Tory rhetoric. Finally, there is the most difficult phylum of all for Big Society, democratically elected local government. By definition, local government is not the Big Government of 'the central state'. However, the Big Society speeches of David Cameron so far have no place for elected local government in them, but proponents of the concept cannot continue to ignore the elephant in the room for much longer – sooner or later Mr Cameron will have to spell out where he and his government stand on the relationship between Big Society and elected, representative local government.

This is because, as Szreter's chapter shows, throughout British history during the last half-millennium, local government, while continuously evolving, has been experienced and understood as a chief bulwark of the local against overbearing central state interference and, frequently, as the single most important expression of local community and participatory citizenship. When it has worked effectively, responsive and respectful local government has provided the institutional basis for linking social capital (see box below) which, Szreter and Woolcock (2004) have argued, is critical for socially inclusive participation and civic activism in those many real-life communities where differences of power, authority and resources between individuals are commonplace and salient.

BOX I.1 SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social capital is itself a term with a complex conceptual history (Farr, 2004). It has been most vigorously promoted by Robert Putnam (2000), who defined social capital as inhering in networks and norms of reciprocity and trust. Putnam (2000, pp. 22–4) also adopted the distinctions between 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital originally proposed by Gittel and Vidal (1998). Bonding social capital refers to trusting and cooperative relations between members of a network who see themselves as being similar, in terms of their shared social identity. Bridging social capital, by contrast, comprises relations of respect and mutuality between people who know that they are not alike. Szreter (2002) and Szreter and Woolcock (2004) critiqued Putnam's formulation, arguing that it failed to address structures and inequalities of power and authority in both national societies and communities and that therefore a third category of 'linking' social capital was required,

without which the concept was theoretically incomplete. Linking social capital refers to the possibility of relationships of trust between members of a network who know themselves not only to be different in terms of social identity (bridging social capital) but also in terms of their institutionalised endowments of power and resources.

This is supposedly what the Big Society is all about in its claims that a ‘broken society’ now needs to be regenerated by voluntary participation and leadership in such fractured communities at the local level. Proposing that this should be done while ignoring local government makes little sense; proposing that it be done in place of elected and accountable local government begins to look like some form of vigilante alternative to democratic structures

A type of vigilantism emerged during the August 2011 riots when groups of men, armed in some cases with baseball bats, defended their shops, homes and neighbourhoods from looters. Journalists across the political spectrum lauded the Turkish men in Dalston and the Sikh men in Birmingham who defended their shops with baseball bats; one journalist even called them ‘turbaned avatars of Cameron’s Big Society come to stop the burning’ (Kain, 2011). They were far less enthusiastic about the group of white men, who called themselves the Enfield Defence League, who marched in Enfield wearing white T-shirts and chanting ‘England’ and ‘EDL’ (one presumes that in this instance they were referring to the Enfield Defence League and not the English Defence League).

One could play devil’s advocate and argue that these two groups, however different they may be, were in some way filling in the gap or picking up where the state was overextended. Whether we wish to cheer or denigrate these instances as examples of self-organised defence or dangerous vigilantism, one thing remains clear: these groups were based on narrow ethnic, religious or racial identities. As such, they are examples of bonding social capital rather than bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000, pp. 22–4). Big Society proponents, such as Lord Wei, would probably want to support only the latter (Ramesh, 2010). Not only was the social capital of these self-defence actions exclusive, in that it was constructed along narrow categories of identification and belonging, but moreover, it excluded others within the same community who did not belong to that specified group. Yet, if communities are to organise in their own collective interests, as is desired by Big Society proponents, then it is absolutely essential that connections are made not only within groups but more importantly *between* groups in a community (or indeed between communities); and also, Szreter and Woolcock (2004) would insist, between citizens and those in positions of power and authority within and from outside the communities. But it is no secret that such bridging and linking social capital is the most difficult to

build and, indeed, sustain; and the least likely to emerge spontaneously in the manner apparently envisaged by Big Society proponents. The recent experience of Hackney Unites provides an example of a community going beyond mere bonding social capital, but it also demonstrates how building such bridging and linking social capital in this locality required directed political self-organisation and a genuinely felt local common cause.

Hackney Unites works in one of the areas that was greatly affected by the riots in August 2011. Recognising and celebrating the diversity in Hackney, the organisation operates on the premise that the diverse communities in Hackney will achieve more working together than separately. Their work, which is described below, is to find the ‘cement that can bind a community together’. They attempt to find creative and constructive solutions to the social and economic problems in their community by finding ways to connect its diverse members. Since Hackney Unites is a ‘front line organisation’, we asked Jane Holgate and John Page what they thought of Big Society and how the policies underlying the Big Society agenda were affecting their work.

BOX I.2 HACKNEY UNITES: A ‘BIG SOCIETY’ INITIATIVE?

By Jane Holgate and John Page, Hackney Unites

In one of his many speeches attempting to launch the Big Society, David Cameron posed an unresolved question: ‘The Big Society demands mass engagement: a broad culture of responsibility, mutuality and obligation. But how do we bring this about?’ Hackney, East London, is perhaps not the place where you would instinctively look for a community organisation that might provide a model for the Big Society. Hackney has a history of dysfunctional local politics. It is a multicultural borough, with a significant gay and lesbian community. It is a borough of both ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’, where the median average income is above the national average, but it is the second most deprived Local Authority in England which has amongst the worst unemployment rates in the country, high levels of transience in the population (making stable communities more difficult to sustain) and, lastly, it is a borough where sections of our youth belong to a violent gang subculture. Today, in Hackney, culture is marked by its sheer diversity as people of different ethnic backgrounds, faiths, languages, histories of migration, incomes, jobs and hopes live side by side. What does the graduate, working in the City and living in Hackney until their

children are school age, have in common with the office cleaner, who may live 100 yards away and even clean the building in which the graduate works, but whose lives and opportunities are vastly different? Hackney Unites celebrates this diversity and operates on the simple premise that the diverse communities in Hackney will achieve more working together than separately. We ask, where is the cement that can bind a community together? The organisation has built an ethnically diverse leadership, worked in coalition with dozens of local groups, and mobilised hundreds of residents around specific issues. In short we have taken key steps towards developing a local culture of 'responsibility, mutuality and obligation'. More recently, and following the disturbances in London and elsewhere in the UK in the summer of 2011, we have redirected our activities to ensure that young people are more included in community organising and we have developed a training programme to provide the skills necessary to organise other young people around issues that are important to them.

Hackney Unites was founded in conflict and it is largely sustained by conflict. A collective sense of injustice, of threat and of isolation from the political process drives our work. Hackney Unites began life as 'Hackney Unites against the BNP', an initiative launched by local trade unionists seeking to encourage voter participation in the 2008 mayoral elections. The British National Party (BNP) had not tried to run candidates in the borough for many years and when their national membership list was leaked they had just 12 members in the borough. With less than a week's notice, the group was informed that the local paper had accepted an advert for the BNP. This was seen as a gross provocation as Hackney viewed itself as BNP-free. Eventually the group hit upon a novel and powerful plan. By using 'critical path analysis' and 'power mapping' techniques, we identified that the people with the power to stop this advert were the newsagents. The vast majority of newsagents in Hackney are from ethnic minority backgrounds who need no convincing of the poison that would be spread by the inclusion of an advert for the BNP in the local paper. We drafted a fax on behalf of newsagents which said in effect: I am a retailer upon whom you rely to sell your paper. If you run the advert for the BNP, then I am cancelling my order for your paper. The result was that many dozens of newsagents faxed the statement to the *Hackney Gazette's* publishers and they withdrew the advert. Not only

did they do that, but for all the other titles in their portfolio, they donated any money received to charity and stated they would not in future run the adverts. This was an early and powerful success for the coalition. Coming out of this two-year, anti-BNP campaign, the informal core of the group reached a consensus that the coalition was too valuable to be decommissioned and so the group was reconfigured as 'Hackney Unites' coalition.

This anti-racist work, which had been the conception of Hackney Unites, brought an eclectic mix of people together, including two employment lawyers, and a number of active trade unionists. Together they realised that they had the potential to do something along the lines of the American 'Workers Centres' where professionals provided free advice to vulnerable workers in sectors of the economy where trade unions were virtually non-existent. In exchange the workers agreed to participate in the organisation and to spread understanding of employment rights to their colleagues. In many ways this is Hackney Unites' key 'outreach' project. It has held surgeries in community halls, tenant halls, churches and for ethnic minority community groups.

Post-riots Hackney Unites is an example of how local activists, working together and utilising community organising strategies, can begin to create the solidarity that is inherent in the concept of a Big Society. Lauded by the TUC, by Searchlight educational trust and by the local Council for Voluntary Services, and working with over 40 local groups from across the political and cultural spectrum (including the local rugby club), Hackney Unites is a success story.

However, its very success perhaps underlines the contradiction in Cameron's Big Society. If community organising works because marginalised communities can be taught the skills necessary to exert ever-increasing power over their circumstances, then they will, inevitably, challenge the current government's agenda of rolling back the welfare state, deregulating industry and abandoning the social safety net. Hackney Unites shows not only what can be achieved, but also that, for community organising to work, it needs a target and an injustice that is deeply felt and widely felt. For communities like those in Hackney the widely felt and deeply felt injustice will be Cameron's attempts to redistribute wealth and power towards the already wealthy. The target will be Cameron's own policies. The only question is, when will he recognise that his Big Society will see the chickens coming home to roost?

3 STRATEGIC AIMS OF THE BIG SOCIETY RHETORIC

To move on to our second question, Big Society as rhetoric serves at least three strategic political purposes for the Conservatives in the Coalition government. First, it offers to the right and centre of the Conservative Party considerable continuity with the touchstone ideology of Thatcherism, in being against Big Government and the tax-hungry state; and in favour of the heroic, autonomous individual and their liberty to act economically and socially as they see fit. Second, it diverts attention away from government and towards the responsibilities of others during a programme of deep cuts to the public sector, which the Coalition adopted as its preferred policy choice (the alternative policy option being more gradual cuts combined with more steeply progressive tax rises on the financial elite and the financial services sector in order to pay for the deficit caused by those working in that sector of the economy). Third, in positively evoking 'society' it helps to keep the Lib Dems on board, creating the impression that the Conservative Party has truly changed, to the extent that it now discusses the mythic banned entity of Mrs Thatcher, for whom 'society' was a term altogether too close to the great enemy, 'social-ism'.

The rhetoric of Big Society is all about empowering individuals, communities and organisations, promoting greater responsibility, and access to information. But this assumes that every community and organisation is on a level playing field and that they have equal access to information, skills and resources with which to take over the running of services and programmes. This is hardly the case. On the contrary, asymmetries of power and of information affect how communities and associations mobilise, organise and even compete for funding. In an effort to address these asymmetries and to build local capacity, the government provided funding in February 2011 for the Community Organisers programme. The aim of the programme is to catalyse community action by 'igniting the impulse to act'. The goal is for the five thousand community organisers working for this programme to build capacity and empower local communities, by identifying local leaders, projects and opportunities. The assumption is that, once empowered and supported, the communities will be able to take advantage of Big Society initiatives, such as the right to bid to run public services (Office for Civil Society, 2011c).

Despite the Big Society rhetoric of 'unshackling' charities and 'igniting' people's impulse to act, the evidence shows that the spending cuts have often negatively impacted charities and, indeed, led to the curtailment of services and closure of many organisations (False Economy, 2011). Moreover, there is a big difference between participating in a local initiative, as opposed to bidding for a contract to provide a service. Many people working in the voluntary and community sector are angry and dismissive of the Big Society proposals and

initiatives, including the Community Organisers programme. They are angry not only because they are experiencing funding cuts, but also because of the emphasis on volunteerism within the Big Society agenda, which is presented as a strategy by which charities can compensate for the loss of paid staff. Many professionals working in charities argue that the assumption that volunteers can simply step in and take over the running of services or programmes devalues and belittles the skills, experience and knowledge of professionals. But, as Rachael McGill from the National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA) discusses below, despite their anger, in the current political climate third sector professionals and charities often feel compelled to buy into the rhetoric and to engage ‘as if they think it is a workable concept’. McGill argues that the strategy of saying one thing in public and another in private – and declining to openly challenge the ideology behind Big Society – means that many voluntary organisations are ‘colluding in their own demise, allowing the government to turn all activity that used to be called “charity,” “voluntary” or “civil society” into business’ – the alternative is that voluntary action simply disappears.

BOX I.3 THE IDEOLOGY BEHIND THE BIG SOCIETY: THE DESTRUCTION OF VOLUNTARY ACTION

By Rachael McGill, NCIA

The National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA) is a network of individuals and organisations who give their time on either a paid or voluntary basis to the professionalised ‘voluntary sector’, the more informal ‘community sector’, and/or activism and campaigning.

People get involved with NCIA because they believe there is a need to unite to celebrate, support and defend independent voluntary and community activity. They see our ability to challenge and change the world about us as increasingly constrained. Unless confronted, this threat to independent action will undermine our civil society, our political health, and the capacity of communities to get what they need for themselves.

This analysis of ‘big society’ is an edited extract from our policy paper ‘Voluntary action under threat’ (available to download on our website at www.independentaction.net). The paper gathers together evidence and arguments about the role of ‘big society’ in the government’s wider agenda: privatisation and the destruction of the welfare state and of voluntary and community activity as we know them. In place of any big commitment to supporting

the individuals and groups doing work for the good of 'society', we have documented big cuts, big attacks on the voluntary and community sectors, a big market, big government, big contradictions, big bigotry, big inequalities, big demands on ordinary people and big control: all big danger signals for those of us who care about community and social action to improve our world.

The 'big society' proposals are dismissed by nearly everyone you meet in the voluntary and community sector when they are talking off the record. In public, some organisations engage with the 'big society' as if they think it is a workable concept, lining up to help 'deliver' it, in the hope that they can grab a piece of the ever-diminishing funding pie. By declining to highlight the ideologically noxious thinking behind the 'big society', voluntary organisations are colluding in their own demise, allowing the government to turn all activity that used to be called 'charity', 'voluntary' or 'civil society' into business. NCIA urges those in voluntary sector organisations to voice their concerns openly, not to say one thing in private and another in public.

Much has been made of the possibility of services coming under community control through the government's Localism Bill. However, the 'right to challenge' included in the bill is specifically intended to open up the 'public service market'. In the absence of any genuine 'enabling and encouraging' of communities to take on services (in fact the reverse is happening as local charities and community provision are being decimated by cuts), it is the large corporate charities and the private sector which are taking on this role. The *Independent* reports that 'LSSI, an American firm which manages 13 public libraries across the US, has set itself a target to manage libraries in eight British local authorities by the end of the year and to capture 15 per cent of the market within five years.'

The government wants to institutionalise the idea that the preferred way to fund traditionally charitable activity is through social enterprise methods: loans and income generation through contracts, charging or trading, rather than grants or other public subsidies. These are the first steps towards ending government support for voluntary action completely. In the gap between what the state won't provide – determined by the cuts, and what the private or voluntary sector can't make money from, or raise money for – people will be left to make their own arrangements. Instead of being a public service that complements our welfare state, services like support to refugees will become something that happens only in

some areas because people do it for free. A return to the values of Victorian-style philanthropy will allow those with money to decide which resources are needed, to do what, according to their measure of what is most deserving.

Most community groups have no interest in delivering public services. Their vision of what is needed may not fit that of the government. A Third Sector Research Centre working paper found that most grass-roots community groups saw themselves as an 'important response to needs that were currently unmet either due to lack of resources, or the failure of the state and other agencies to identify or address need.' Getting involved in a local group to improve your community is different from taking responsibility for a social enterprise and bidding for contracts. Matt Scott, of the Community Sector Coalition, says: 'real devolution of power by communities would go beyond the opportunity to ... take over the running of a building ... if localism were to happen from the grass roots upwards we would see a rich diversity of informal community action, which inevitably takes years and costs money. The more likely scenario is that local community action will continue to decline, as always happens at times of economic hardship because the rational choice is to use one's time to seek paid work, not to volunteer.'

The 2008 Conservative Party green paper, *A Stronger Society*, quoted the architect of the welfare state, William Beveridge: 'people and organisations are ... more "vigorous and abundant" when given the freedom to act on their own initiative rather than when ordered from above.' It is difficult to see how cuts to their independent sources of funding and the exhortation to deliver services determined by the government will help community groups and organisations to do this. The Carnegie Commission said: 'Civil society associations can never be just providers of services ... their energy comes from values – of justice, equality and mutuality ... civil society thrives best when it has an independent and confident spirit, when it is not beholden to the state or funders, and when it is not afraid to make trouble.'

The 'big society' is certainly lazy and cynical policymaking (if good things happen the government will claim credit for having 'enabled' people to do things for themselves, if they don't it will be the fault of people for not being enterprising enough), but it is also much worse than that. Matt Scott says: 'if someone wanted to set the sector back not just decades but into the Victorian era they could not do better.'

Community groups that emerge for other reasons than to deliver services are a way for people with less power in society (most of us) to look out for each other and represent ourselves. If we feel we have no voice, the result is increased social strife in communities. This is why, historically, more enlightened governments and charitable trusts have given informal, needs-led local groups money and support which did not compromise their independence. If these groups are left out of the picture there is more space for those with the most money, time and influence to further their interests at the expense of everyone else's.

It is not just individual groups and services which are in danger of disappearing as part of the 'big society', privatisation and cuts. It is the recognition of, and support for, a whole sphere of human activity: the space in which people are free to do things, large or small, not because the government promotes them or because they will generate profit, but to try to change the world.

Kate Bradley's chapter provides a historical perspective on this in the area of youth work. Bradley finds that the invention of bespoke Big Society volunteer groups by central government and its supporters, such as the new National Citizens' Service, may already be doing positive damage by draining limited resources in a sector – youth work – where there is a long history of well-established, professional non-governmental activity. This dates back to the late Victorian East End settlement movement. Bradley is concerned that some of the established and experienced organisations in this important and complex sphere of social work, where tact and local knowledge are important and require much experience to build up, are now being replaced by well-meaning novice amateurs. Such volunteers have no professional accountability for their young clients – when mistakes occur, as they inevitably do with this vulnerable section of society, volunteers can simply walk away. In an era of cuts these new and untried Big Society initiatives may actually be crowding out, not complementing, established players in the voluntary sector.

As public sector funding shrinks, charities are being forced to seek alternative sources of funding including from charitable foundations, trusts and corporations. The funding decisions of these alternative sources are driven by and shaped by their own interests, conditions and objectives. As such, funding programmes for public benefit is not always their main priority. Cathy Pharoah's chapter outlines the emerging debates and discusses the proposed models for financing social ventures in the context of Big Society (e.g. Big Society Capital, etc.). She identifies some of the issues and implications that arise for funding

social welfare through the Big Society approach. The government's concept, she states, is that a successful Big Society is one where communities generate their own local solutions to meeting service needs rather than merely asking for more funding. The Coalition's vision, Pharoah writes, is that 'alternative models of financing will emerge as part of a cultural shift to stronger local empowerment and engagement in service delivery.' Yet, it is unclear whether these alternative financing models can be effective and sustainable in the long term. Not all organisations will survive, let alone thrive, in the new funding context. Small organisations in particular will be negatively affected by the loss or decline in statutory funding and will find it difficult to access alternative sources, including corporate funding. The latter, Pharoah demonstrates, are generally concentrated in particular areas of concern, such as cancer or animal welfare, or issues of concern to religious organisations and faith-groups, which can leave organisations that work on other and unfashionable problems, such as social welfare and special needs, in a precarious position.

Diana Leat's chapter grapples with a related topic – the role of philanthropic foundations in the context of Big Society. Leat questions how much the Coalition government really understands the philanthropic foundations they are trying to woo. She considers the role of philanthropy and foundations both in the UK and the US. Her chapter demonstrates how foundations tend to fiercely guard their independence and autonomy in decision making. Leat argues that although government may hope that foundations will provide funding for the programmes or services that will be affected by public spending cuts, the reality is that foundations often choose to fund in a range of rather different spheres, some of which include giving to their pet projects which may be of little policy relevance. Leat suggests that policymakers need to recognise that foundations have functions that are different from government and that they can do things that government cannot or should not do. Foundations are not – and show no signs of wishing to be – a substitute, supplement, or back pocket for the provision of public services.

Thus, even in its most basic aims and assumptions, there appears to be a major disjuncture between the rhetoric of how Big Society works and the reality of what is already happening on the ground.

4 HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY REALITIES

Thus, as we move from rhetoric, politics and professed aims on to our third question – of the historical and contemporary reality, against which to judge the concept of Big Society and its claims about a broken past, and its capacity to fix this and to engender a golden future of civic activism – we begin to encounter very significant issues and problems. As the chapters collected here

in both Parts I and II attest, there is such a yawning gap between the rhetoric and the reality in so very many respects that, if 'Big Society' was ever to be taken at all seriously by our legislators as a guide or talisman for divining the optimal social policies and service delivery pattern for Britain, it would likely have catastrophic consequences, so demonstrably does it fly in the face of both the recent and the long-term history of this country and, indeed, of many others (see chapters by Ketola and Ishkanian).

Big Society as policy proposition rests on two eminently empirically testable assertions about British society and its recent history. First, that Britain today is a broken society in which civic-minded participation is petering out and volunteering has come to an end. Second, that this is because of the growth of the overweening central state, particularly the welfare state and its bureaucratic social security budget, which has robbed British citizenry of its capacity for responsible independence. In the most simple rhetorical formulations it is claimed that philanthropy and voluntary associational activity have been 'crowded out' by 'Big Government', which appears to subscribe to a crude notion of a finite fund of 'altruistic' behaviour, which will disappear from civil society if 'monopolised' by the central state.

The historical chapters by Szepter, Charlesworth, Weinbren, Bradley and Hilton, and the comparative chapters by Ketola and Ishkanian, each demonstrate that this is the exact opposite of the reality of the way in which British society and many others have functioned and continue to do so. In fact, a high level or a dynamic trend of rising provision of tax-funded public goods and services mandated by the state tends typically to be associated with high or rising levels of citizens' participatory activity in the life of their communities. In part this is because all citizens have before them the practical lesson, embodied in both national and local governments' policies, that caring collectively for the whole community is a high cultural priority of this society and that all are expected to participate fully, with the greatest contribution necessarily coming from the wealthiest citizens through their taxes. The truth of this proposition is supported by a particularly long history in England (see chapter by Szepter).

The chapters by Charlesworth and by Fries each foreground the importance of two foundational Acts of Elizabeth I in 1601, one of which set out a mandatory framework of rate-funded local parish government for administering individual universal entitlements to welfare, while the other specified the proper purposes of charity trusts, which were also thereby directed to the relief of poverty and education of the poor. Thus, Tudor England was a global pioneer in creating an extraordinarily far-sighted legal framework, which sought to encourage the wealthy elites of all parishes to engage fully in their responsibilities toward the less fortunate in a growing market economy. The Elizabethan state both endowed the poor with inalienable legal rights to relief, to be paid for by a mandatory tax on the wealthy (rates levied on the value of land occupied),

while at the same time, and alongside this, directing and facilitating elites to use their surplus personal wealth for noble and charitable purposes. This policy is clearly premised on the opposite assumption to that of ‘crowding out’. The fact that it worked so effectively for centuries was due to the cogency of the incentive structure it thereby created for the wealthy: genuinely effective and well-designed charitable acts would not only bring honour to the wealthy but would also, to the extent that they relieved poverty, reduce the mandatory costs they incurred as the main financial contributors to the parish Poor Law fund.

The other testable assertion behind Big Society, the ‘declinist’ thesis – that since some point in the 1950s, 1960s or 1970s volunteering in British society has been falling away – is derivative from the influential ‘Bowling Alone’ thesis of Robert Putnam (2000), concerning the decline of ‘community’ or ‘social capital’ in the US since the 1970s. As Matthew Hilton’s chapter, reporting on his team’s important research programme shows, as far as post-war British history is concerned such a thesis is dependent on an anachronistic, a-historical and selective mis-reading of the course of civic activism since the early 1970s. There has been a decline in some face-to-face forms, as practised by traditional associations such as the Mothers’ Union, but there has also been massive quantum growth in new forms of citizen activism, demonstrating a trend of much increased trust in highly professional, media-savvy campaigning NGOs, which individuals are prepared to join, donate their financial resources to and attend their cultural and publicity events, in return for proven effectiveness, even on a global scale, in getting laws changed and their desired policies implemented. The internet and social media are only likely to boost this trend further.

The historical and comparative evidence assembled in these chapters indicates that what Big Society proponents castigate as Big Government, the enemy of civic participation, is often, in the context of a functioning democratic society like post-war Britain (or Sweden – see below), in fact the key facilitating framework for volunteering to flourish and to play its most valuable role – in independence from the parties in power in the central state – as innovator of complementary and supplemental goods and services to the state-provided, tax-funded universal basics. Hilton’s research indicates that in Britain since the 1970s its activist and participatory citizenry have become increasingly disenchanted, not with their own ‘broken society’, but with an increasingly broken state, which no longer provides the facilitating framework. Mrs Thatcher’s government declared war on local government in Britain, reducing its powers and funding so that it became largely a transmission mechanism for centrally planned government policies – a great irony from the administration that promised to roll back the state. Weinbren’s chapter documents a twentieth-century precedent: the distortion of the mutual Friendly Societies into the ‘approved societies’ of the central state, used after 1911 to deliver a national insurance policy on the cheap in the interwar decades of cuts and then recession. He

shows that when central government uses its power to co-opt localist, voluntary institutions as its hand-servants for carrying out unpopular tax-saving policies, this can have disastrous consequences for the institutions so used. For these same reasons, local government, the proud and independent bastion of localism for centuries in British history, has been in a parlous state for three decades since the Thatcher onslaught; and while New Labour fed town halls more resources for their last eight years in office, they did little to increase elected councils' autonomy over how this was spent.

Thus, Hilton documents how charities and NGOs have become ever more highly valued by citizens during the last three decades as their main hope to achieve their activist goals and to change society for the better, as they see it. They are valued for their independence from the Westminster governing establishment and its tarnished institutions, for their professionalism and disinterested vocational commitment to the cause in question, and for their capacity to extract change out of the lumbering political establishment, which to many in Britain seems only to serve the interests of a corporate oligarchy of tax exiles, personified by Lord Ashcroft of Belize, the chief funder of the Tory Party's election campaign. By contrast to these new organisations, Hilton sees local volunteers, which Mr Cameron wants to promote with the rhetoric of Big Society, as historical throwbacks not fit for purpose: apolitical, part-time do-gooders in the local community are of no interest to these participatory, increasingly virtually connected communities of networked citizens who want to voice their concerns and see them acted on. Yet NGOs, and other voluntary organisations, are not all-purpose 'magic bullets'. Their strength lies in campaigning for change and addressing gaps in provision, not in the routine delivery of social welfare services.

Having first, during the twentieth century, co-opted the Friendly Societies and then local government to do its bidding in difficult times, Richard Fries' chapter argues that it will be very difficult for government simply to co-opt the charitable sector to act on its behalf, as perhaps the most ambitious version of Big Society might aspire to do. There is not much scope for Parliament to bend charities to the executive's bidding through law and that leaves the purse strings as the only method. While this has been an effective strategy in relation to the approved societies and local government in the recent past – and Fries notes a worrying development in a recent trend, which has seen government increase subventions for charities to a historic high level of one-third of their funding – this is also a figure which will inevitably decrease over the next decade or so of government cuts, so that this form of leverage is likely to weaken not strengthen, at least in the short and medium terms.

In her chapter, Liz Richardson discusses how and why some policymakers, frustrated by the limitations of the traditional tools of exhortation and legislation, are turning to 'nudge' techniques, by which is meant the paternalist

attempt to influence choices people make through the ploys of behavioural psychology, such as placing healthy foods at eye-level, unhealthy ones on the less accessible shelves. Richardson examines the ethical and moral debates about the legitimacy of the use of ‘nudge’ and concludes that it is not yet apparent whether nudging has the capacity to deliver on the objectives of the Big Society agenda, which requires sustained behaviour change. She argues that while ‘nudge’ techniques can work in certain instances, the Big Society type activities, which require long-term volunteering, regular giving to charity and consistent engagement in the running of community services, need significant and sustained efforts on the part of those involved and therefore are unlikely to be achieved in this way.

Nick Ockenden, Matthew Hill and Joanna Stuart draw on the vast amount of research undertaken by the Institute for Volunteering Research since 1997 on recent patterns of volunteering in the UK to point out that the current government is certainly not the first to encourage enthusiastically an increase in volunteering. However, their evidence renders them sceptical of the expectation that volunteering will ‘deliver everything expected of it by the Big Society’. Volunteers will not automatically fill the gap left by a retreating state and a financially reduced local government. Moreover, evidence of stagnant rates of traditional volunteering suggests that the government’s aims to increase dramatically such volunteering are, at best, overly ambitious and may even exacerbate current inequalities amongst those who volunteer. They conclude that perhaps too much has been placed at the door of volunteering, which may have the potential to change some individuals’ lives, but is far from being a panacea for all of society’s ills.

Together, the historical and contemporary chapters assembled here to review the evidence on volunteering and civic activism fundamentally challenge the evidential basis for the two key assertions that underpin the Big Society’s diagnosis of Britain’s ills and how to remedy them. They also counsel great prudence, lest the established charities and voluntary associations of Britain see Big Society as an opportunity to deliver government welfare priorities in this era of public funding cuts, a move which, history suggests, may ultimately undermine their independence and *raison d’être*.

5 INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND LESSONS

For anyone familiar with international development, the policies of the Big Society agenda are eerily, some may even say frighteningly, familiar. Big Society policies are aimed at building social capital, empowering individuals and communities, enhancing civic or collective action and substituting for rolled-back state services. All of these policies have been implemented – but rarely with

much success – in many parts of the world, including in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, South Asia, as well as in the countries of the former Soviet Union. The first similarity between Big Society and development policies of the recent past is in the withdrawal and the shrinking of state-funded services. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, the rollback of the state was part of the anti-statist, neo-liberal sentiment that led to the implementation of structural adjustment policies (SAPs) by international donor agencies throughout developing countries. While donors hailed the potential of SAPs to stimulate economic growth and development, as Jude Howell and Jenny Pearce demonstrate, not only did the SAPs fail to stimulate growth but they also aggravated inequalities and diminished access for the poor to basic needs such as education and health (Howell and Pearce, 2001, p. 90). In the UK, the austerity measures and cuts to public spending are also being implemented in an effort, we are repeatedly told, to stimulate economic growth. Yet, after two years of cuts, the economy continues to stagnate as access to services also continues to shrink (e.g. the closure of Sure Start centres, etc.).

In her chapter, Ishkanian argues that the neo-liberal rhetoric of Big Society tends to valorise non-governmental activism and initiatives as a form of empowerment. While community-based self-organising can be empowering and rewarding, she contends that there are also instances where the curtailment or withdrawal of state services and support can have negative consequences, particularly for deprived communities and vulnerable groups. Ishkanian discusses how the neo-liberal reforms and ‘shock therapy’ policies implemented in the former Soviet countries left much suffering in their wake. Rates of poverty, unemployment, social inequality and social exclusion rose, while the cuts led to many people being left without services and support.

The second and related similarity between Big Society policies and those implemented in developing and transition countries is the emphasis on civil society and civic participation. Since the late 1980s, very large sums of money were spent by international development agencies on strengthening, building, and supporting the institutions of civil society, training civil society activists, and funding their projects as a means of promoting democracy, good governance, poverty reduction and development. This focus on civil society subsequently led to the ‘explosive’ growth of local NGOs (USAID, 1999, p. 3) because, while donors have recently broadened their definition of civil society, in the early 1990s civil society often came to be equated with NGOs (Howell et al., 2008).

Within the context of development, NGOs were expected to step in and fill the gap left by the receding state by delivering services more affordably, efficiently and accountably. They were also expected simultaneously to ‘scale up’ their work (Korten, 1990) by campaigning on behalf of their beneficiaries and promoting civic participation and activism. These are somewhat contradictory

aims and neither can be said to have been successfully met. First, time and again, NGO service provision in developing countries has been criticised for being characterised by problems of quality control, poor coordination and general amateurism (Lewis and Kanji, 2009, p. 92; Robinson, 1997a). Second, beginning in the 2000s, many social movements and grassroots organisations began to criticise NGOs for having become too distant from their beneficiaries and their specific needs and problems, de-radicalised and co-opted by donors and their well-meaning but often rigidly ‘western’ values (Howell et al., 2008, p. 83). This has meant that, while NGOs might be implementing projects intended to be socially beneficial, their work has become fragmentary, ‘apolitical’, and insufficiently responsive and adapted to local communities and cultures. The technicisation and depoliticisation of development aid has long been noted, and critiqued, by scholars who have demonstrated the short-sightedness of such approaches, which tackle the outward manifestations of a problem without addressing the underlying causes and structural factors (Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1994; Kabeer, 1994). Fear of losing funding leads NGOs to focus increasingly on narrow, technical projects and to avoid mobilising or criticising the broader social, structural or political inequalities that lie at the root of the problems they address (Ishkanian, 2007).

Finally, there are similarities between the Big Society agenda and international development in the area of social capital. Social capital has long attracted policymakers and donor agencies working in international development. One senior economist from the World Bank even identified it as the ‘missing link’ in development (Grootaert, 1997). One of its attractions lies in the promise it holds for filling in the gap left by the shrinking of government provision due to SAPs. The expectation, at least in the context of development, was that if international agencies and NGOs could support and foster the development of civil society and social capital, then we would witness a rise in local organisation and self-help. In other words, if social capital could be enhanced, then the poor and disadvantaged would be able to ‘pull themselves up by their own boot straps’ which, John Harriss argues, ‘is remarkably convenient for those who wish to implement large-scale public expenditure cuts’ (Harriss, 2002, p. 7). The idea that these empowered and networked individuals would have the ‘capacity to organise in their own collective interests, cooperate to perform collective tasks and achieve mutual benefits’ (Babajanian, 2008, p. 1299) led to the implementation of projects such as the World Bank’s Community Driven Development (CDD) programmes throughout developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and also in the former socialist countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in the 2000s. These projects, however, have yet to bear fruit. For example, in the countries of the former Soviet Union, despite investment in CDD programmes and other social capital enhancement projects, institutional and generalised trust, which

are essential for social capital, remain very low (Dudwick et al., 2003; EBRD, 2011).

Ketola's comparative chapter, which examines the experience of continental European and Scandinavian countries, provides a very important contrasting perspective for discussion of the relationship between public spending/taxation and volunteering. He demonstrates that Sweden, the high taxing big state, has also consistently been the 'big society', with highest levels of participatory volunteering. This is a direct empirical contradiction of the untested policy propositions of Big Society proponents. Against the counter argument that this might represent something unique about Sweden that can't be applied to Britain, Szeterer's historical chapter demonstrates that civic society and local activism have been at their most effective during periods when communities taxed themselves most progressively for their collective needs, paying particular attention to ensuring the wealthiest could not evade paying their full, progressive share, through taxation on land and urban property values. As Fries' and Charlesworth's chapters also indicate, only if linking social capital is facilitated by careful legal and institutional design by the central state can bridging social capital flourish in those many and typical communities where there are significant social inequalities.

6 CHANCES OF SUCCESS

Although it may be premised on a misleading representation of the reality of both modern and early modern British history, and therefore constitute a poor guide for future social and welfare policy, can Big Society nevertheless perform satisfactorily as political rhetoric? That would seem to depend partly on whether it proves adept for the Coalition government in both satisfying the right of the Conservative Party whilst simultaneously continuing to bind in the Lib Dems. But it may also be subject to intolerable pressures, in the discrepancy between the cosy world of do-gooding citizens, which it invokes, and the reality of a Britain becoming ever more unequal by the year.

In the UK, Big Society proponents also have high hopes for social capital but it is unclear whether initiatives such as the Community Organisers and the National Citizen Service will, indeed, inspire and ignite bridging social capital, collective action and volunteering. If trust in the state and the larger collectivity is absent, bridging and linking social capital will diminish, as witnessed during the August 2011 riots in Britain. Instead, we will see emerging in Britain, as has happened already in parts of the US, only what Szeterer calls 'segregated encampments of bonding social capital' (Szeterer, 2002, p. 613). This happens when diverse and mutually distrustful sections of society huddle together for mutual support, while the elites absent themselves fiscally, protesting the

disbenefits of higher taxation on the wealthy and engaging in institutionalised tax avoidance, which for some slips also into evasion and non-compliance. Indeed, this has now reached such a point that some mavericks among the wealthy elite, such as Warren Buffett, have broken ranks to join the calls of such civic society manifestations as the Tax Justice Network, in demanding more and better-enforced taxation on the wealthiest citizens in countries like the US and the UK. Even key opinion formers on the right, such as the *Telegraph* columnists Peter Osborne (2011) and Charles Moore (2011), the official biographer of Margaret Thatcher, have issued high-profile articles essentially endorsing the line of the Opposition leader of the Labour Party, Ed Miliband, that it is time for personal and fiscal responsibilities to be imposed on the new financial elites (Miliband, 2011b).

Governments around the globe are being confronted by angry citizens, who criticise politicians for imposing austerity measures and public spending cuts while continuing to subsidise and bail out the banks and corporations whose tangibly irresponsible behaviour led to the crisis in the first place. The Occupy Wall Street movement rapidly expanded and other protest movements have emerged, such as the St Paul's encampment in London; and already comparisons have been made between the methods used by this movement and those of the Arab Spring, which became an inspiration for many movements emerging around the globe. In this recent upsurge of protest activity the 'occupation' model was in fact first adopted by students in Britain in November 2010, protesting at the Coalition government's tripling of university fees, before – more successfully and momentously – it became the symbol of protest in Cairo's Tahrir Square from January 2011. Activists now use social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and BlackBerry Messenger, as well as YouTube, to organise, mobilise, connect and communicate with supporters locally and across the globe. And, as Matthew Hilton's research demonstrates, these movements of self-organised political protest, such as 38 Degrees and Avaaz, are becoming increasingly professional in their use of new technology. From the student movement led by 'Commander Camilla' in Chile to the *Indignados* in Spain and the strikes in Greece, each of these movements is challenging the status quo and arguing that the great majority – 99 per cent in some countries – is suffering due to the greed and folly of the 1 per cent of wealthy corporations and individuals. Their robust critique of the capitalist system is not unprecedented, but it certainly signals the end of the triumphalist discourse that began with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the other socialist systems in Central and Eastern Europe.

Profound changes are also emerging in Britain's political landscape. British citizens – particularly those most educated, from among whom all the evidence shows volunteers are most likely to be drawn – have lost confidence in local government to act independently for their communities because they know it

has so little discretion; they have lost trust in central government and national political parties to represent their interests, while the most recent revelations of the triple scandal of the bankers, MPs' expenses and the methods of the Murdoch media empire have only compounded that systemic distrust of all the formal institutions of central political power in Britain. However, it remains to be seen how the democratic and participatory forces of the real 'big society' of citizen social networks will develop. They are clearly something quite different from Mr Cameron's Big Society of politically safe, and anodyne, amateurish do-gooding; a misplaced nostalgia for an age of volunteering that never existed in the form that some proponents of the Big Society fondly imagine to have been the case. To ask amateur volunteers to take increasing responsibility for a range of serious social problems which, Mr Cameron must fully know, can only be exacerbated, both by rapidly rising unemployment and falling real incomes and by the withdrawal of government support for professional service deliverers, looks like an extraordinarily politically audacious attempt to place responsibility for the consequences of his own Big Government's policy choices on the shoulders of others. To answer the question posed in this book's title: if, beyond its function as political rhetoric, Big Society is supposed to be taken seriously as an agenda for the delivery of social welfare, it is a bid for the continuation and expansion of failed neo-liberal policies by other means, Canute-like in its refusal to learn from the past or to comprehend the present.

NOTE

1. A report commissioned by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, titled *The Big Society: A View from the Frontline*, highlighted the difficulties faced by 'frontline workers' and concluded that 'Government must work with civil society'. For the full report see <http://www.gulbenkian.org.uk/news/news/147-The-Big-Society--A-View-from-the-Frontline.html>.