

Two and a half years on from that 'Invitation to Join the Government of Britain', where is the Big Society?

Fiona Melville, London 29 November 2012

The centrepiece of the Conservatives 2010 Manifesto was the Big Society. Except it wasn't. It was the centrepiece of the Conservatives' entire modernisation project from 2005 onwards. It was rooted in the insight that the government, far from enabling and helping people, was in fact blocking them from living full and fulfilling lives. The Big Society as a concept is rooted in Conservative beliefs, of community, participation, contribution, helping the most vulnerable, and ensuring that people can live good lives in a good society in the way that suits them best.

How then are we where we are? Mention the Big Society in any political gathering these days, and you either hear sniggers or downright derision - particularly from Conservatives, but also from the left who believe it to be merely a cover for cuts, or, even worse, a smokescreen to enable some kind of apocalyptic and ideological abandonment of any and all government services.

It was recently suggested to me that, in a sort of Nixon going to China way, only Labour could in fact renew our institutions and our communities in a way that fulfil the aims of the Big Society. This is a fundamental misreading of Labour, of the Conservatives and of the British people. In a very shorthand way, which I accept many will disagree with, Labour want to level down, Conservatives want to offer steps up, and people generally want to do their own thing.

Labour have spent years trying to homogenise and flatten people into little grievance groups. To them, everyone needs the state to do as much as possible for them because only the state can make correct decisions.

My Conservatism says the opposite. It says that we want to support people where they need it but crucially we also want them to be able to achieve as much as *they* are capable of. That means being there when needed, offering a full suite of opportunity through good schools, good communities and good institutions that support where necessary but also push when needed.

The Big Society has consistently been badly explained, and it has been consistently undermined by vested interests complaining that their own special project has been ignored. But that is, in fact, possibly the best metaphor possible to explain what it is.

There are literally thousands of government funds, projects, taskforces and so on. I have been trying for years to find anything approaching a list; no luck. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is to look at the list of quangos which the Cabinet Office is examining. This [list of 177](#) is only a fraction of the total, and has already been reduced through closure or merger to around 70 (with more change to come). It's an extraordinary list of competing and sometimes contradictory organisations, doing things (or not – we don't know) that in many cases should not, for various reasons, be done by the state.

For years, governments have been judged on whether they spend money on something – with little to no post-facto examination of whether the programme has had the desired effect. Even more importantly, there has been no discussion of whether we as a society *want* to fund that spending – because governments refuse to explain what it actually costs us (and instead have borrowed and borrowed to fund their often very political but ineffective spending). And most fundamentally, there has been no discussion of whether the state taking over to provide one-size fits all projects has elbowed out better, locally sensitive solutions.

The point of the Big Society is not volunteering; it is not charity – though you'd be forgiven for thinking that, given the way that the Conservatives presented it during the election campaign. The point of it is to devolve power and responsibility and in many cases funding to the people best placed to decide how to do something.

The Conservatives' schools reforms are probably the best example of this. For years, parents who wanted their children to get an education that suited *them* were forced to move house to a particular catchment area or to go private – meaning that excellent education became more and more the preserve of the best-off, reducing opportunity and boxing people in. Free schools are set up by people with a vision of what education should be, and their leaders are required to do certain things, but largely left to deliver that education. If it's what parents want, their classrooms are filled (often to bursting – there are currently an average of eight applications to every place in some areas). But the big change is that, if schools do not deliver, they will close.

The same applies to the government's health reforms; as with the education reforms, they mean that if hospitals, surgeries or other providers do not deliver sufficiently high-quality services, they will lose their funding and close, meaning that the best performers are the ones that expand and drive up quality overall.

I would argue that it is – or should be – obvious that in today’s world, when citizens pay for something, they should be able to choose how that is delivered and expect that there will be a constant striving for improvement. Equally, that the services offered should be high-quality, and provide the best solution for the user. Also important, but in a different way, is that those who provide the services should be free to provide the best they can – so they should be free to innovate, and to personalise the services they offer to suit their users and their local community.

Another example is the government’s welfare reforms, particularly in housing. It is quite extraordinary that there was no cap on the amount one household could claim; it is equally extraordinary that households could claim enough to live in homes which were better than others in their area that non-eligible citizens cannot afford. It goes to the heart of how those who fund it see support for those who need it. We are a nation with a heart, we are pleased to help when needed, but it is unfair that those who do not contribute are funded by the rest of us to live better than we can afford to – and if a welfare system is seen as unfair, then it becomes divisive within society and harder for people to move out of it.

It is undeniably a welcome product that many of these reforms will in the long-term save money. But that is not the primary purpose. The primary purpose of the Big Society is that people are empowered, with information, tools and infrastructure, to make choices that make their lives better.

Actually, my favourite rationale for the Big Society isn’t about the big philosophical picture at all. It’s that people are overwhelmingly sceptical about anything that any government does. They don’t believe politicians. They don’t trust them. They don’t like them. And therefore (so they say) anything that takes power away from them is a great thing.

So the Big Society really means that politicians don’t control things any more, because people do. They can choose the right school for their child. They can choose their GP, their consultant, their hospital. They can choose whether they want to volunteer in their own community, or take advantage of others’ work (which is fine – otherwise why bother encouraging volunteers in the first place! If a service is not used it will not survive). They can choose how far they want to get involved in all sorts of things – from getting together to show that the demand is there for superfast broadband, to what priorities their police focus on, to what kind of bin service they want, to planting some flowers in their street, to how they run their businesses, to using social enterprises for their day to day needs...

The Big Society has had a tough time of it recently but it is, I think, inevitable that society is moving that way. Whether it's corralled into and called the Big Society or whether it just happens is irrelevant; what's important is that it means that we have chosen a better society for ourselves.

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