

David Cameron may finally have found community spirit amongst the riot clean up, but recent events spell the end for his Big Society fantasy

Following the looting and vandalism in areas across London on Monday evening, hundreds of people came out to help clear up the mess and put their neighbourhoods back on track. [Amy Mollett](#) writes that this example of 'Big Society' spirit is admirable, but the damage caused by disengaged, angry, and bored young people shows that the Prime Minister's dream of a Big Society is over.



Hundreds of local residents gathered outside Hackney Town Hall on Tuesday morning in an effort to start cleaning up the streets after the extreme vandalism and looting that took place in Hackney Central the previous night. After watching with shock and disgust the events of Monday evening, residents came out in support of the local area, ready with brooms and bin liners. Some lived on the nearby Pembury Estate, but many others came from streets and areas not affected. Similar acts of kindness and concern happened in other areas of the capital, mostly organised through the Twitter account [@riotcleanup](#), which now has nearly 90,000 followers.

Credit: Andy B

Such positive community spirit displayed through the voluntary clean up operation across London may be characteristic of David Cameron's flagship policy idea, the Big Society. [Re-launched](#) for the fourth time in May, community engagement, social action, and helping people to come together to improve their own lives serve as the key areas of the agenda. National support for the volunteers who spent their day helping to put right the damage in the lives of others certainly falls under this. Some media reports live from the clean up were praising "the Big Society in action", that if everybody pulled together, the community would be back on its feet in a short time.



However, it is unlikely that the commendable clean up efforts mark the beginning of a resurgence in the belief of Cameron's idea. The sparks of big society rhetoric are ignoring what should really be focused on here: that Cameron's dream is over and lies in the ashes of the burned out buildings.

Residents questioned in anger and disbelief why young people were destroying their very own community, their own local shops, barbers, off licenses, and independent businesses. If this was a way of showing anger at the police after the death of Mark Duggan, then why take it out on their own high streets? But as Camila Batmanghelidjh [pointed out](#), whether their actions were connected to Duggan's death or not, many of those responsible for the damage do not feel that they actually belong to *any* community or society. In boroughs where more than [half of youth centres are closing](#), [youth unemployment is rising](#), and negative experience with police is repeated through the generations, many children and young adults feel that the community has nothing to offer them. David Cameron could not have received a clearer message that we're not all in this together.

It is feelings of isolation and anger which Cameron and others should turn their attention to once the damage to the streets is repaired. In a [recent blog post](#), Tony Travers noted that "Haringey Council will need assistance in returning Tottenham to normal as quickly as possible". This is true, but normal is not good enough. Normal will continue to breed the same feelings of dispossession and violence, and the "parallel antisocial communities" that Batmanghelidjh discusses. The government needs to go way beyond normal in order to avoid repeating the scale of recent events.

When it was first launched, the Big Society was criticised as an austerity measure in disguise, cutting funds to charities and organisations which carry out essential community functions, and instead emphasizing the

importance of voluntary action, which costs the government nothing. It should now be obvious that cutting services which young people make use of for good reason is part of the larger problem. Some will ask why the government should reinvest in areas that have been torched and damaged by young people, and I hope that the defence of reinvestment is just as obvious.

The violence and destruction of the last few days is not acceptable, but some of it can be explained. The Big Society, if it ever meant anything to anyone, certainly means a lot less now.