

The Big Society is an illiberal concept that promotes subjective moral beliefs and threatens to entrench private interests in public life.

Dec 15 2010

The Big Society has become one of the defining concepts of David Cameron's short term as Prime Minister. However, [Emmanuel Melissaris](#) argues that it threatens to promote substantive moral beliefs and private interests, to which not everyone is or ought to be committed, and thus it fails to abide by the very standards of liberalism and fairness that the coalition has set for itself.

Almost a year on from its inception, we are still in the dark as to what the 'Big Society' may be. The label seems to be attached to diverse initiatives and policies but we are yet to see the idea coherently and clearly articulated. So far it serves as the idea laying the foundation for what has been branded the '[new progressive politics](#)' and as a central ingredient in a new conception of the State. We are left with the potentially dangerous mix of a claim of overwhelming ambition on the one hand and a vague idea to support that claim on the other. This makes all the more urgent the need to clearly understand what the 'Big Society' is all about and to put it to proper scrutiny.

What counts as a community?

The coalition government wants '[society](#) – the families, networks, neighbourhoods and communities that form the fabric of so much of our everyday lives – to be bigger and stronger than ever before'. How does the government expect these agencies or communities to provide services and, in the course of doing so, 'empower' people?

For these agencies to be legitimated to provide services in a liberal scheme and empower free and equal citizens, they must be neutral in the sense that they must look for their justification to the foundational principles of that liberal scheme. Problems arise when these agencies embody or owe their cohesion to substantive moral beliefs or commitments, because such commitments should enjoy no justificatory force for public institutions in liberal States. Let us assume that the constitutive element of neighbourhoods is the formal and therefore neutral criterion of geographic proximity. (This is already too generous an assumption to make in view of the social homogeneity of localities or the reality of who the 'active citizens' are and why – but let us be charitable nevertheless.) This would encompass the devolution of administrative tasks but would not point to a different scheme of legitimation. The same cannot be said of families, which have long ceased to play a central role in social integration and are now exclusively moral, and deeply controversial, entities. Promoting the family as an agent of public policy already presupposes a new model of justification thus raising the suspicion that the 'Big Society' is illiberal by the very standards of liberalism that the coalition government sets for itself. The 'Big Society' promotes substantive moral beliefs, to which not everyone is or ought to be committed, in legitimating and organising principles of social cooperation.



Image Credit: The Prime Minister's Office

The problem becomes even more clearly defined when one considers the status of 'communities'. What is it that constitutes a community for the purposes of the 'Big Society' project? One option is that the 'Big Society' focuses on communities of need (on the assumption that need is clearly and easily separable from preference). In this case, how is the 'Big Society' different to the already familiar models of multi-tiered governance? The only difference seems to be that the state can absolve itself of the responsibility to fund and coordinate the relevant initiatives and policies. This makes governance cheaper, the public sector smaller (and the private sector proportionately larger).

The alternative proposition is that the 'Big Society' is about communities of interest or preference, which are more often than not identified with communities of means. Now, if the relevant interests are private – that is if it is only about groups of people sharing an interest, hobby or even belief – then the 'Big Society' again seems to be nothing more than a description of current arrangements under a different name. Unfortunately as these communities will be licensed to provide services and allocate resources, which in some cases (such as education) are considered definitively public, it is not hard to see how this can easily lead to ghettoisation and the creation of a multi-level system of essential services. This is not only blatantly inegalitarian but it is also potentially illiberal. As it could promote the interests of those with a financial head-start and disenfranchise the worse off. I say potentially because another condition needs to be present for this scheme to be illiberal, namely that 'Big Society' agencies are not regulated by public norms.

The legal nature of 'Big Society' agencies: public or private?

So will 'Big Society' agencies be public or private in character? Or will they be some type of hybrid association with characteristics unfamiliar to us as yet? The implications of this are of utmost significance.

If essentially private, 'Big Society' agencies will of course be governed by private law. They will therefore not be under the same duties of equal distribution as public agencies but will be bound by contractual terms setting out obligations and entitlements. And it is on these terms that they will be justiciable. They will also not be required to be democratic, unless their participants choose to be so, neither will they be subject to the requirements of the rule of law. Now consider that 'Big Society' agencies will be delivering essential services and allocating basic resources. I believe it is not hard to see how this scheme undermines the liberal ideal of the State as a collective guaranteeing freedom and equality and fairly distributing the resources necessary for all to pursue their idea of a good life unfettered from such forces and imperatives.

Big Society agencies here would also not be subject to the Human Rights Act 1998, which only regulates relations between the State and its agencies on the one hand and individuals on the other. This could be a roundabout way for the Tories to disentangle some parts of government from the inconvenience that is the HRA 1998. If so, this leaves the Liberal Democrats in an uncomfortable position.

If 'Big Society' agencies are essentially public in nature, therefore subject to public principles and rules, then the novelty seems to lie only in the vast proliferation of public services, which is contrary to the very aims that the government sets out to achieve. Unless of course they are envisioned as a different type of association gaining their legitimacy in different ways. If this is the case, we need further information and rather urgently too.

More power to local agendas and entrenched interests?

We are told that one of the requirements of Big Society is the publication of government data. For example, the government will ask the police to publish detailed local crime data statistics every month. Transparency is a conceptual and practical requirement of accountability. One can hold another accountable for the way they have acted on a duty only if the former knows whether and how the latter has acted on that duty.

But there is more to this than noble aspirations. Notice how the 'Big Society' seems to transform the standards against which police performance is assessed. These standards will no longer be determined by national policies drawn up by democratically accountable public servants – which does not mean that they cannot be sensitive to local peculiarities or needs. The job of determining them is deferred to local interest groups, with their own agendas and conceptions of what they consider as harmful to their 'communities'. The police will therefore serve these local agendas. And it will not be long before prosecutors succumb to the same pressure. Once again, the illiberal undertones of the 'Big Society' come to the surface. Rather than being a way of empowering people, entrenching and galvanizing their powers for equality and freedom, it promises to legitimize local, contested interests and entrenched power relations.

The LSE Public Policy Group's briefing paper (pre-put) for this event is [available here](#).

[Click here](#) to respond to this article.

Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

You may also be interested in the following posts (automatically generated):

1. [How far is too far in public-private cooperation?](#)
2. [Blame them, not us: how the Comprehensive Spending Review reflects the interests of the cabinet, and not the people](#)

3. [Life's not fair: the public's perception of cuts is what matters in the end](#)
4. [As the coalition government moves to create new public-private partnerships and sell off government assets, the QinetiQ privatization of 2006 is a case study in how not to do things 'transparently'](#)