

## Mending “Broken Britain”: From the Respect Agenda to the Big Society

**Judi Atkins** argues that David Cameron’s conception of a ‘broken Britain’ and the Big Society have ideological underpinnings that suggest that he is best seen not as the ‘heir to Blair’, but as the ‘son of Thatcher’.



Addressing the Centre for Social Justice in 2006, David Cameron argued that ‘we have to show a lot more love’ towards disaffected young people. Although subsequently derided as his ‘hug a hoodie’ speech, Cameron’s words signalled a departure from his party’s traditionally punitive stance on law and order. This was a blatant attempt not only to seize the centre ground from New Labour, for whom ‘tough on crime’ had gradually taken precedence over ‘tough on the causes of crime’, but also to build a new consensus on this issue. Cameron based his approach on an account of ‘broken Britain’, which borrowed heavily from New Labour’s narrative of social exclusion. However, a closer examination of Cameron’s rhetoric reveals that his conception of Britain’s problems and his solution to them – the Big Society – are rooted firmly in Thatcherite ideas.

As leader of the opposition, Cameron repeatedly promised to mend our ‘broken society’. This term encapsulates a variety of social ills, including high crime, family breakdown, chaotic home environments, and drug abuse. These are the same difficulties that New Labour associated with social exclusion and, by presenting them in list form, Blair and Cameron were able to assign to them a single cause.

While Blair blamed a lack of respect that stemmed from the crude individualism of the Thatcher governments, Cameron attributes these problems to a decline in personal and social responsibility. This, he argues, was caused by excessive state interference in people’s lives, which had sapped responsibility and undermined innovation. The same argument also appears in [Mrs Thatcher’s 1976 party conference speech](#) where she contended that Britain’s ‘positive, vital, driving, individual incentive’ had been ‘snuffed out by the Socialist State’.

For Blair and Cameron, the only solution to Britain’s problems was cultural change. Through its Respect Agenda, New Labour advanced a model of active social democratic citizenship, in which strong communities are founded on reciprocal rights and responsibilities. Central to this strategy was the inculcation of civic virtues – good manners, a respect for other people, their privacy and their property, and an awareness that the rights of all citizens come with responsibilities – in those individuals who behave anti-socially. To this end, [claimed Blair](#), government needed to work in a ‘more coherent, integrated way, across departmental boundaries, and with all the agencies – public, private and voluntary’ to tackle social exclusion and promote ‘respect’.

To a large extent, the ‘Big Society’ is a continuation of the Respect Agenda, in that it emphasises strong values and greater responsibility. It also seeks to diversify the provision of public services. As the [2010 Conservative Party manifesto](#) puts it, ‘we will redistribute power from the central state to individuals, families and local communities’. By promoting social responsibility in this way, it continues, a Conservative government could ‘rebuild shattered communities and repair the torn fabric of society’. Unlike New Labour, however, Cameron’s Conservatives envisage a far smaller role for the state, which is captured in the phrase ‘the Big Society, not big government’. This is consistent with the long-standing Conservative (and Thatcherite) commitment to roll back the frontiers of the state which, its proponents claimed, would allow individual initiative to flourish.

Since 2010, Cameron has spoken of a ‘Big Society spirit’ of ‘activism and dynamism’ and, in his [2011 party conference speech](#), he suggested that it is inherent in the British people:

*'Some say that to succeed in this world, we need to become more like India, or China, or Brazil. I say: we need to become more like us. The real us. Hard-working, pioneering, independent, creative, adaptable, optimistic, can-do. That's the spirit that has made this United Kingdom what it is: a small country that does great things; one of the most incredible success stories in the history of the world. And it's a spirit that's alive and well today.'*

These qualities bear a striking resemblance to the 'vigorous virtues', which Shirley Robin Letwin lists as 'upright, self-sufficient, energetic, adventurous, independent-minded'. Letwin explains that Mrs Thatcher viewed a deficiency of these virtues as the main danger threatening Britain in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and perhaps held parts of the British establishment – such as the BBC, the trade unions, and local government – responsible for their decline. The Thatcherites also believed that 'British society should be organised in such a way that individuals who do practise the vigorous virtues have room to flourish', and that this would ultimately restore Britain's position as a 'self-sufficient and respected island power' (1992, pp. 33-4, 36-7). These beliefs are echoed in Cameron's claim that greater personal and social responsibility, in conjunction with a smaller state, is the starting-point for building a better Britain.

Overall, it appears that the Big Society is at its heart a Thatcherite project. Indeed, it is worth noting that the remit of the Big Society has expanded significantly since the formation of the Coalition. Prior to this time, it was presented as a solution to the problems of 'broken Britain'. However, it now encompasses the provision of a range of public services, as Cameron's ['Big Society' speech of 19 July 2010](#) makes clear.

So I ask [local communities]: 'what powers do you want? What more do you want to be able to do?' It's by asking those questions that you arrive at so many of this coalition's most transformative ideas. New powers for local communities to take over the running of parks, libraries and post offices. More powers to plan the look, size, shape and feel of housing developments. Powers to generate their own energy and have beat meetings to hold police to account. These ideas signal the most radical shift in power from central government to neighbourhoods.

So, although Cameron's narrative of 'broken Britain' and the Big Society owes much to New Labour, its ideological underpinnings suggest that he is best seen not as the 'heir to Blair', but as the 'son of Thatcher'.

**This is seventh in a series of posts by contributors to the recent 'Conservatives in Coalition Government' conference organised by the [Political Studies Association Specialist Group for the study of Conservatives and Conservatism](#) and the [Centre for British Politics at the University of Hull](#). The views expressed are those of the author alone and not those of the Political Studies Association or the University of Hull.**

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