

For a society to be truly ‘big’ it must have universal dimensions which sustain and cultivate solidarity and equality

*The Government’s notion of the ‘Big Society’ has been subject to much criticism. **Rodney Barker** argues that the doctrine is rife with contradictions and that for a society to be truly ‘big’ it must have universal dimensions which sustain and cultivate solidarity and equality.*



Is Big Society rhetoric just that, a froth concealing the reality beneath. There are clear contradictions between what the Cameron government says it wants, and what it does. Voluntary action is valued in the rhetoric, and deprived of funding in practice. Choice is applauded in education whilst the ability of 16 year olds to exercise that choice is undermined by the abolition of Educational Maintenance Grants. But even if the rhetoric were dismissed as mere deception, deception is always easier if the deceiver believes it themselves.

Fitting the evidence round the policy is not the monopoly of Blairism, and Nelson is not the only person to put a telescope to a blind eye and declare ‘evidence, I see no evidence’. What the actions of the present British government reveal is not a deceptive function of rhetoric, but the overwhelming power of ideology to digest evidence. Economic policy illustrates this most clearly with a Chancellor who insists he is not drowning but waving. There is no mileage in the distinction that conservatives have used so often in the past between ideology and common sense, or between rationalism and cautious empiricism. Unless you are the most rigid of representative positivists, you are a rationalist in that evidence is sifted and shaped according to ideology as much as if not more than vice versa. Conservatives are, and always have been, as ideological as anyone else. The question to ask of political rhetoric is not what arguments people use or what principles they invoke, but where do they want those arguments and principles to take them. What kind of world do conservatives who speak of a Big Society, hope to live in?

The crucial word is ‘big’. The big society is comprehensive and uniform in one crucial respect; it depends on individual choices made on the basis of individuals’ command of material resources; that is the function of money, in reducing all choices to a common coin. A big society may not be uniform in its outcomes, but it is uniform in its principles and powers of choice. And those who invoke Burke and the little platoon should remember that a platoon is not a feature of an anarchist commune, but of a uniform military hierarchy. That is where the contradictions swiftly emerge: markets are a way of reducing everything to common and individualised, socially fragmented coin, and create their own uniformity of criteria, subverting a variety of principles of choice.

The simple juxtaposition of either unrestrained markets or regulation and planning has been challenged by the activities since 2011 of Occupy, and by the slow realisation of the ecclesiastical hierarchy that whatever is rendered unto Caesar, some things still need to be left to God, so that even if we don’t return to the medieval church’s condemnation of usury, everything has its proper place, and there is no one currency for deciding everything and allocating everything. The values and principles for providing cars and computers are not the same as those for providing health care. The Good Samaritan did not ask to see the victim’s credit card before deciding to give first aid.

The opposition of society to state is a befuddling diversion. In each case, as a good socialist pluralist such as Tawney recognised, the question is what is the appropriate function, who should perform it, under what conditions and with what criteria. However big a society is by virtue of its uniformities, to be healthy it must also be a rainbow society. For social life to exist, there have to be common elements, and dimensions of life where people are equal, and where therefore the patterns of provision reflect the need and the provision in question, not criteria from other dimensions such as wealth or social position. Three dimensions are of primary importance for equal treatment:

1. Before the law: no tax privileges.
2. In sickness and in health: universal provision funded by universal contributions.
3. Education, realistically available to all.

Within that framework there can then be diversity, a big society as the framework for a multitude of little ones. Such an agenda is distinct from multiculturalism: people occupy different roles for different aspects of their lives, and do not inhabit any one collective culture or way of life. As members of a public national health service they are all fellow citizens, as members of faith groups or of none, they are part of particular, non-universal associations. There is no one in society who can represent them in their entirety but themselves.

Whilst Cameron's conservatism goes for the universality of the market in which, following the linguistic coup of the Thatcher years, we are all reduced to being nothing but customers, it undermines or fails to cultivate the three equalities of law (tax); physical care (health); and flourishing (education). The objection to the modern state from the right, and from liberals or at least from economic liberals, is that it is too big, it regulates and controls and co-ordinates too much. The belief is that the more comprehensive and universal a set of arrangements, the less detailed as to substance they should be and the more a matter of procedures, of facilitating rather than prescribing. But that is an objection which rests on an aversion to bigness and prescription in all their forms, and not just to states. If it is maintained consistently, it must apply just as much to society. That then provides an argument against a simple belief in the universal superiority of markets and profit seeking. That may be the best way of producing a telephone service, but not the best way of providing health care. A big society in that case is desirable only if it is an enabling context for lots of small societies, and small societies moreover, which operate on a great variety of principles, some commercial, some hedonistic, some religious.

For society to be 'big' it must have universal dimensions which sustain and cultivate solidarity and equality. For it to be free it must have many small and diverse components performing other functions. The way to achieve that is not to see government and society as antagonistic alternatives, but to recognise the necessary symbiosis between the two, and to discover, and continually be alert for, the ways in which diversity in one dimension or function can only flourish if there is universality in others, and to recognise the role of citizenship and the state in achieving such a way of living, a pluralism of both ends and means which is both flexible and attuned to cultural variety, and committed to realistically sustained equalities.

For a further treatment of these issues see the chapter 'Big Societies, Little Platoons and the Problems with Pluralism' in the Political Quarterly special issue [Retrieving The Big Society](#).

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