

We do not know if voluntarist and localised bodies can realistically compete with the financial might of multi-national private firms and existing public agencies

In recent years British Conservatism has sought to elaborate its own understanding of social justice as part of a broader project to 'de-toxify' its public image. [Ben Williams](#) argues that this has had important ramifications for the Conservative social policy agenda, leading to a spirited attempt to revive the values of voluntarism and its functionality as an alternative source of public service provision to the formerly hegemonic and centralised state.



An ultimate and pivotal aim of the new generation of 21st century Conservatives has been to reform and modernise the party's social policy agenda, namely in relation to the intricacies of specific spheres such as Education, the NHS and welfare benefits reform. In adopting such an approach they have sought to utilise new and diverse means of service delivery, detached from the centralised state and they have instilled such associated policy initiatives with a specific localist angle, ensuring that they are located within an overarching model of governance that aligns with the broad theme of a de-bureaucratized '*leaner state*'.

In practical terms this suggests that public services traditionally provided by central government could be fragmented, outsourced or sub-contracted to potentially more efficient and devolved bodies. While this approach has echoes of the New Right's neo-liberal agenda for public service provision during the 1980s, an expressed and re-emphasised desire of the post-2010 coalition government has been for the reinvigoration of a decentralised model of the state that is not about dismantling institutions on purely ideological grounds. It instead seeks to maintain a compassionate tone and to devise a pro-active, strategic and co-coordinating role for a more limited state that can continue to function effectively in practical terms also. This approach has in turn sought to encourage the emergence of a revived civil society and the empowerment of individuals and communities, while evolving from and genuinely transcending the post-1945 model of universalism.

This socio-political approach has manifested itself in practical terms under the auspices of the so-called 'Big Society', reflecting a concerted and focused agenda to instil greater innovation and 'progressive' new thought into the provision of social policy. This has occurred via a diverse range of providers from across the public, private and third sectors, with such an ambivalent term as 'progress' reflecting an optimistic approach that '*things could get better, problems were not intractable and things weren't just inevitably getting worse*' as David Willetts MP put it to me in an interview conducted in September 2012. The aspirations for such a socio-political agenda are succinctly contained within two key documents produced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. These are the White Paper '[Open Public Services](#)', alongside the [2011 Localism Act](#), both of which focus on choice and control, decentralisation, diversity, fairness and accountability, a range of vocabulary that symbolises a collective dynamic to promote the mantra of '*collaboration and diversity in the provision of public services*'. Within the wider context of rising financial costs within the provision of welfare and social policy, both documents appear to form the bedrock of the government's ongoing programme of public service reform for the remainder of its proposed term of office up to 2015. Although how successful such 'progressive social conservatism' has actually been in reality has been open to some [scepticism and criticism](#) as the coalition government has evolved.

The state vs. voluntarism as a vehicle for social justice

Alongside the unerring drive towards achieving improved levels of economic efficiency, progressive innovation and streamlined bureaucratic performance within the government's delivery of key social

policies, the need to achieve outcomes perceived to be positive and constructive (such as the pursuit of a fairer society or the achievement of greater social justice) have also been prominent aspects within the contemporary social policy debate. This has been particularly so in the post-Thatcher political climate from the early 1990s onwards, given the criticism that the divisions between rich and poor grew considerably during this particular period under governments of both major parties, continuing a socially divisive trend that began during the 1980s. However, the means and methods of achieving such 'socially just' ends have been the subject of significant political conjecture, with the competing yet overlapping roles of the state and the voluntary sector, and the need to strike an appropriate balance between their key functions, appearing as integral features to this specific political dialogue.

Such key terms and concepts associated with social justice have been broadly associated with the left of the political spectrum and were exploited by New Labour to its political advantage from the mid-1990s onwards. Partly as a consequence mainstream British Conservatism has attempted to re-invent and de-toxify its image in the early years of the 21st century, and many pragmatic right-of-centre politicians and think-tanks have sought to adapt to and re-mould the tone of this more leftist vocabulary, seeking to develop their own version of social justice and initiating innovative and electorally attractive policy responses in the process. This has instilled an appropriate fusion of influences behind this modern Conservative social policy agenda, and has exposed some key motives behind the formulation of such policies. On the one hand this acknowledges the influence of the vigorous ideology of the 'New Right' and its more radical critique and proposed reforms of the bureaucratic state. On the other hand it also accepts the need to cautiously embrace an approach that is aligned with gradual 'Burkean' tendencies, which instead seeks to maintain aspects of the existing state and its associated community values where both practical and appropriate.

This latter influence accepts the need to maintain and preserve the existence of key public institutions and services which have the necessary capacity, utility and flexibility to be able to function within a more limited and peripheral role for the state. This embraces the view that British society and its overall political structure is an evolutionary and organic entity which therefore seeks to maintain and conserve the best aspects of the existing social order while continuing to develop and improve in terms of its functionality. This has been evident in the context of contemporary Conservative attempts to adopt a renewed and high-profile enthusiasm for delivering quality public services in a more original and decentralised manner. This is an approach that symbolises the focus of modern Conservatism that seeks to emphasise and align with the communitarian and associated altruistic values of wider society. In therefore seeking to utilise and adapt traditional and viable public institutions, such a socio-political approach has ultimately sought to utilise the energy of charitable activity: the vibrancy of voluntarism alongside more emphasis on private sector providers in preference to state power where possible. This has been summarised by David Willetts in an interview with me earlier this year as follows:

'Conservatives believe that voluntarism is a good thing, and sometimes the state can be an obstacle to effective voluntarism, but at other times such voluntary organisations need support from the state. Your value system has to be that voluntary support comes first.'

Such concerted attempts to revive the values of voluntarism and its functionality as offering an alternative yet complementary source of public service provision to the formerly hegemonic and centralised state, has therefore been central to attempts to create a re-imagined or revised role for the post-war state within this more devolved approach to social policy. However it remains a subject of some conjecture as to whether smaller voluntarist and localised bodies can realistically and effectively compete with the financial might of established multi-national private bodies and existing public agencies in the supply and provision of quality public services while maintaining adequate value for money for the taxpayer

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About the author

Ben Williams is currently undertaking a part-time PhD at the University of Liverpool focusing on how Conservative Party social policy has evolved and developed since 1997. His studies also focus on specific trends and influences in party policy-making in this area, as well as assessing the significance of ideology in shaping such policy both in opposition (1997-2010) and in government from 2010 onwards.

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