

The 'Big Society' and the politics of paternalism: Edmund Burke's influence on the government is clear

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Edmund Burke is thought of as the founding father of modern conservatism and has been cited as a source of inspiration for the government's 'big society' agenda. **Ben James Taylor** traces his intellectual legacy and its relation to government policies, noting how strongly evident his model of paternalism is in today's Tory party.



Edmund Burke is trending in the world of British politics. The eighteenth-century parliamentarian was described as the 'hottest thinker of 2010', and his popularity amongst the political class has soared ever since. The philosopher, Roger Scruton, has recently argued that the Conservative Party would find a 'believable philosophy' in Burke's work which could heal the Party's rifts and win back voters who are currently being wooed by Ukip. Further to this, Jesse Norman MP has stated that Burke's political insights can serve as a panacea for the selfishness and arrogance that Norman maintains have corrupted the modern world. According to a variety of thinkers and politicians, this panacea will be delivered through the 'big society'; a concept which is widely understood to be distilled from Burke's most famous text, [Reflections on the Revolution in France](#).

Proponents of the big society talk about fixing Britain's 'broken society' and developing greater levels of civic responsibility. They argue that the big society will achieve these aims by reimagining the role of the state and redistributing power from the centre to allow non-governmental organisations (including community and faith groups, charities and private companies) to take over the running of key public services. As David Cameron [explains](#), the big society is about 'community empowerment' and involves 'the most radical shift in power from central government to neighbourhoods'.

Burke is presented as providing the [intellectual foundations](#) for the big society. This claim arises from a seemingly civic-minded passage in his aforementioned *Reflections*, in which Burke states:

'To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind'.

The government's commitment to the big society is clear. David Cameron has described it as his 'guiding philosophy' and the government reiterated its belief in the concept both in its coalition agreement and its mid-term review. This commitment is realised through the government's Localism Act 2011, its public service reform agenda, the Big Society Network and the National Citizens Service programme.

Likewise, Burke's influence on the government is clear. Further to Norman's preoccupation with Burke, Cameron has repeatedly drawn upon Burke in his speeches on the big society – a move which has led commentators to label Cameron a 'Burkean conservative'. To an extent, we must applaud these attempts to cultivate a principled politics. Indeed, after the [style-over-substance](#) accusations that haunted New Labour, it is refreshing to see Conservatives



Edmund Burke: On a tall pedestal
(credit: ozz13x)

recommending and using Burke's thought to provide theoretical coherence to their policy agenda. As a consequence of his Reflections, in which he denounced the French Revolution in favour of an evolutionary political order founded in custom, hierarchy and an established church, Burke is routinely understood as a founding father of modern conservatism. Thus, again, we might applaud Conservatives' attempts to tap into their intellectual heritage. However, a note of caution is required before we can wholeheartedly endorse this effort. In short, if Burke's ideas are informing government thinking, then it is important to grasp the precise nature of this intellectual heritage so that we might be fully aware of the type of politics that it bequeaths.

Consider the wider passage from which Burke's 'little platoons' quote is lifted. In this section of Reflections, Burke condemns those members of the French nobility who supported the revolutionaries' drive for political equality under the banner of the rights of man. To Burke's mind, these 'turbulent, discontented men of quality' had selfishly sacrificed their class and the stability of their nation for their own personal advantage. Placed in its textual context, the oft-cited 'little platoons' exert thus functions as a rebuke to French aristocrats who had abandoned their station.

This rebuke makes more sense when we consider Burke's politics. Throughout his political life, Burke discouraged notions of public agency and instead held to a deeply paternalistic model of governance. His reluctance to furnish the wider population with a political voice stemmed from his belief that human beings are psychologically limited creatures who require the security of tradition and authority. For Burke, unshackling popular opinion from those customs and habits which guaranteed social discipline would mean unleashing an unpredictable force which could ultimately threaten the stability of civilised society – a possibility which was opened up to him through his experiences in the [Gordon Riots](#).

In Reflections, Burke revealed how the landed aristocracy performed a crucial cultural role to safeguard this paternalistic system. In short, owing to their education, their decoration and their social standing, the aristocracy formed part of Burke's 'pleasing illusions, which made power gentle', guaranteeing the social order by engaging feelings of admiration and attachment in the wider populace. As he stresses in his classic text, 'to make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely'. By disregarding their natural ties and abandoning their aristocratic 'platoon', the wayward French nobility had burst the bubble of the aesthetic illusion and Burke was at pains to remind their British counterparts of the disastrous consequences, should they feel inclined to behave in the same way.

How does this explanation help us to grasp Burke's intellectual legacy to contemporary conservatives? Admittedly, though blue blood courses through some MPs' veins, most conservatives do not now share Burke's aesthetic appreciation of the aristocracy. Nonetheless, Burke bequeathed a paternalistic understanding of governance, which remains central to conservative ideology. Behind the rhetoric of community empowerment, this paternalism is evident in the big society.

It is apparent in David Cameron's admission that the big society contains an element of 'bossiness' – a point demonstrated when Lord Wei, the government's then advisor on the big society, [advised](#) the rest of us that we spend too much time watching TV and not enough time participating in their big society. Moreover, it is equally apparent in key planks of the big society agenda. The much-vaunted Localism Act 2011 provided Westminster with over [one hundred new powers](#) with which to control local authorities. The Big Society Network, launched by Cameron as an independent charity for delivering big society goals, has been plagued by accusations that it [lacks political independence](#) and has recently been subject to scrutiny over its receipt of Cabinet Office funding. Although the [National Citizen Service](#) seeks to enhance the 'personal and social development' of 16 and 17 year olds, it fails to link volunteering to political citizenship and is therefore unlikely to improve the low levels of democratic engagement amongst [young people](#).

Finally, the government's flagship education reforms follow this paternalistic pattern. These reforms promised greater freedom: firstly, by allowing existing schools to convert to academies, thereby extracting themselves from local authority control and, secondly, by allowing the creation of 'free schools', which are run as independent trusts by private or community-based organisations. In practice, the academies policy has courted controversy over perceived political pressure, 'forcing' schools to make the conversion. Furthermore, despite its apparent keenness to

[respond](#) to local educational wants and needs, the government has actually been rather [reluctant](#) to sanction free schools that depart from the traditional model of educational provision. The franchise remains one genuine form of community empowerment. At the next general election, the people will indicate how satisfied they are with Burke, the big society and the politics of paternalism.

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