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Big society: Losing the argument

The 'big society' strategies that Mr Cameron developed in opposition belong to an era that no longer exists

Editorial
The Guardian, Tuesday 8 February 2011

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The "big society" is an abstraction as well as a programme. Like all abstractions it can be vacuous and elusive. It means different things to different people. If it has an essential idea, however, it is still summed up in [David Cameron's](#) argument that while there is indeed such a thing as society it is not the same as the state, a piece of triangulation that enabled Mr Cameron to differentiate himself from the individualism of Lady Thatcher and the statism of Gordon Brown. The positioning was important; but there was more to it than tactics. Every strong political tradition in modern history – whether conservatism, liberalism or, lest the Labour party forget, socialism – has at one time or another had a vibrant place within it for community, solidarity and localism, often at variance with the central state. The span of ideas stretches from Saul Alinsky on the left to Edmund Burke on the right. New Labour never quite settled on its own version. Central to Mr Cameron's, however, is what he said in his [Hugo Young lecture](#) in 2009 – that strong and concerted government action can release the forces that make up the big society.

That's the theory behind the current government's programme. In many ways it remains an enticing one, not just for traditional critics of big government but also for all those who believe that social-ism (a formulation that Tony Blair flirted with in his early years as Labour leader) and the state are not interchangeable or coterminous. In practice, however, the big society strategies that Mr Cameron developed in opposition, and which he was still articulating in his lecture 18 months ago, belong to an era that no longer exists and have now been subverted by some of his government's own actions. Mr Cameron's vision of a state that would stimulate communities and neighbourhoods and encourage individual initiatives – all with the net objective of helping to shrink the unnecessary and over-mighty state – was predicated on a level of economic activity and tax revenue that would allow the battalions of the big society to supplement and then take over what the state was already providing. Those possibilities no longer exist. Today, a combination of coalition year-zero radicalism and deep cuts in public services mean that big-society programmes are being forced to carry a weight far greater than they can be expected to bear.

The latest evidence for this came in authoritative comments yesterday from [Dame Elisabeth Hoodless](#), director of Community Service Volunteers for the past 36 years. Dame Elisabeth believes the cuts have imposed too big a burden on the voluntary sector, forcing them to provide an alternative to state services rather than a supplementary network of support. All this comes at a time when many voluntary organisations are themselves struggling to make ends meet. Instead of encouraging new approaches and a new culture to evolve, as Mr Cameron intended, the government has forced councils to cut everything from libraries to Sure Start centres and then expected the voluntary sector to pick up the pieces. Liverpool city council, not one of Mr Cameron's fans, threw in the towel last week. But the independent-minded Labour MP Frank Field made the very same point yesterday about child poverty action.

Mr Cameron should take such critics particularly seriously. People like Dame Elisabeth and Mr Field come from the centre-left. But they are not Labour statisticians. They were open to the promise which Mr Cameron's social Toryism offered. In many cases, they still are. Now, though, they are increasingly despairing about what the coalition is delivering in practice. A combination of misplaced government urgency to do too much too soon, ill-thought-out projects and, above all, the scale of the cuts has weakened

confidence in the big-society offer. There is no evidence that the country is falling back in love with the big state, but Mr Cameron has failed to sell his alternative.

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