The Big Society - What's the big idea?[i]

Mae Shaw
Senior Lecturer
Education, Community and Society
University of Edinburgh

What's the big idea?
I want to start with three scenarios heard in recent days which I think illustrate the biggest idea behind the big society:

- £900 funding cut for travel costs for a local swimming club which makes it impossible to continue
- A 100% cut in funding for a local community's newspapers which have been going for 30 years
- An expected cut of between 23%-100% in funding for Women's Aid UK

What these examples have in common is that, on the face of it they would seem to exemplify the benefits and sustainability of self-help and voluntary effort. It would seem perverse, therefore, to be undermining the very fabric of what is advocated in the Big Society by cutting their funding.

But it is not perverse, according to a different kind of logic, because it is increasingly obvious that the big society has little to do with encouraging voluntary action and everything to do with creating a *legitimating ideology* for the withdrawal of the welfare state and the wholesale privatisation of public services. Margaret Thatcher represented the vanguard of free market ideology, it was consolidated shamefully by New Labour and is now embedded - albeit in the language of compassion - to an alarming extent in policy, politics and the public imagination.

To misquote Margaret Thatcher – there is no such thing as the big society. It is an ideological construct which operates at three levels which are intended to work together to create a coherent narrative or justification.

- Political – governance – power to the people – democratic justification
- Economic – cheap alternative particularly in the midst of an economic crisis ie everyone is in it together
- Ideological - change the ways we think about the state, democracy and citizenship.

At one level this is not new. There are clearly comparisons to be made to Victorian values of self-help and the undeserving poor, but more recent comparisons may be even more instructive. The community solution has been ideologically recycled in British policy since the 1960s as a response to various crises: to address the social consequences of economic restructuring, to give legitimacy to political programmes and to respond to social unrest and control dissent. A publication from 1977 charts the history of the Community Development Project introduced in 1968 ostensibly to find new ways of overcoming apathy and promoting self-help through poverty programmes – in the context of what was presented as the urban crisis: 'Britain's cities are rotting at the core'. That publication was entitled 'Gilding the Ghetto' – the

metaphor intended to convey the way that such programmes were introduced to spray over and disguise the realities of poverty – to manage the poor rather than to empower them. Whilst the metaphor today might more aptly be 'guilt in the ghetto', nevertheless, the language of self-help and popular empowerment is still harnessed to so-called reforms which are anything but democratically empowering.

What are the implications for public services?

The construction of the big society is predicated on a notion of the state as the enemy of the people. Discounting the public sector has become the default political language here and elsewhere. It has also become associated with notions of undesirable dependency (and obstructive and impenetrable managerialism, thanks to New Labour). In a mysterious way, the public sector has become characterised as self-seeking and expensive, whilst the private sector is presented as protecting the public good. The strategy of turning public relationships into market ones which has existed since the 1980s has aided this process, relying, as they do, on the primacy of sturdy competitive individuals who look out for and look after themselves. These notions of dependency and individualism are consistently reproduced through media images.

The provision of public services through the state has of course always been ambivalent – as another publication from 1979 put it, the state offers us services we need but it does so in ways which we don't need. At its peak, the welfare state did, arguably, do too many things *to* and *for* people and not enough *with* people. The universalism it represented was based on roles and relationships which have since been challenged or rejected. But this does not mean that the state should be abandoned - rather that it should be made more democratically open and accountable for its actions. In this sense, the state is a site of struggle over what it should mean and how its institutions should operate. It is not merely some alien force from which we should be liberated, but is rather the contradictory outcome of the different interests which seek to capture it. As a longstanding health worker said to me recently – the state is us! We've forgotten that. If public services are to be abandoned to unaccountable, unrepresentative and fragmented local groups, or worse still, the market, then there is no protection for the poorest and most marginalised from power.

We need to learn to think the state again. As Tony Judt asks: Why are we so sure that … progressive taxation, or the collective ownership of public goods are intolerable restrictions on liberty [and choice], whereas closed-circuit television cameras, state bailouts for investment banks, the breaking up of the NHS, foreign interference and wars are acceptable burdens for a free people to bear?' (p.153).

Turning down its Big Society status recently, the ungrateful people of Liverpool argued that 'The big society, voluntarism civic engagement – or whatever one wants to call it – needs to work in conjunction with an empowering state. It cannot be a replacement'. (Liverpool Echo).

What are the implications for communities?

On balance, most opinion would suggest that it will be disastrous for the poorest communities. There is deep concern about the forthcoming cuts and the effects they will have, added to increasing unemployment, reduction in benefits and so on. In this

context, community empowerment seems a very poor trade off for the universal rights, benefits and protection which will disappear.

The competition culture is already dividing community groups as, often longstanding, organisations try to undercut each other in order to keep going. It works against democratic organisation because it's too slow. The Community Development Exchange asks 'How can society, let alone a civil one, be built when the very bedrocks of past community activity are being ripped up by the cuts?' In addition, the anger, frustration and disillusionment of community activists is hardly going to create a positive context for voluntary effort.

There are other questions to do with representation [the usual suspects], accountability and capacity: I understand the private sector is already poised to respond where communities fail – what somebody has called 'parasitic communities within the community' – and indeed well beyond. One commentator has described the shift as 'wikipedia' governance – lots of opinions but no real authority.

The demonization of the poor which is routine fare in the media – what Gerry Mooney calls poverty porn – has also created divisions within and between communities. According to research only 25% of the population believe that as a society we should be spending money on social security benefits at all. Most of us apparently believe that the reasons for social inequality are that the poor are lazy and feckless and that the affluent are hard-working and responsible. This distinction erodes trust and creates suspicion, frustration and, increasingly, horizontal violence which is played out in public and private behaviour.

But there's also a wider question about fairness. 'Why should the weakest and poorest in society be expected to carry out the most significant citizenship roles there are whilst public money is used to bail out private financial institutions'? We are not all in it together by a long shot.

What are the implications for citizenship?
The Big Society is strong on empowerment and weak on equality. Citizenship is essentially concerned with rights and responsibilities. Deciding which is which is of course a matter of political judgement. Whilst equal rights to public services provided through public taxation which have been fought for by generations of activists are being eroded, the balance between rights and responsibilities has been fundamentally rebalanced towards empowerment - or responsibilisation. I was interested to note this week that one of the jobs of the new Big Society community organisers is to empower communities to take advantage of initiatives such as the 'right to buy' community assets and the 'right to bid' to run public services. For those interested in such things, the organisation which won the contract claims, with supreme irony, to be based on Freirian principles.

Floating off public services to the voluntary or private sector in this way leads instead to a small and maybe small-minded society - a fragmented society of neighbourhoods. Who mediates the competing, perhaps conflicting, claims of different communities? How does the small society share the responsibility not just for its own concerns and

destiny but those of the wider community to which it belongs? Who protects the interests of the invisible or the shunned?

If institutions of the state did not already exist they would have to be invented. And they will be reinvented – the state is not withering away. This is not about reducing the scope of the state, but restructuring it along market lines. The tragedy is that, once lost, services will be virtually impossible to disentangle from complicated market processes - as with PFI-funded projects - should there be a wish to bring them back once the mess is clear.

How should we respond?
The question is will things be different in Scotland? So far the big society is not a Scottish term (although empowerment initiatives, contracting out, cuts, assets-based approaches etc, would suggest that the foundations are being laid) and there is a danger of talking it into existence.

But the notion of a big society will have a recurrent struggle with the problem of public doubt and it will keep producing new sources of concern for a doubting public eg wholesale privatisation of NHS, attacks on wages, pensions etc. We need to think about how can we enrich and enlarge the sceptical capacity of the public before it is too late, if it is not already.

Tony Judt, in his book 'Ill Fares the Land' argues passionately that we need to act upon 'our intuitions of impending catastrophe' if that is what we feel, as so many do, and take to the streets. There is growing evidence of grassroots action against the cuts. Organisations like UKUncut have been very effective in exposing the real perpetrators of the crisis. Civil society organisations are vital.

But there is also a need to reclaim the politics of the state - to remind our elected representatives that they are exactly that and that their role should not be simply and apologetically to hand down the pain as it were, but to argue back up the line on behalf of their constituents. There is certainly no mandate for these changes in Scotland. The development of Local government was justified precisely on the basis that it would be more responsive to local need. Local councillors need to resume their political role – a role which has been virtually erased as they become and see themselves as disinterested 'stakeholders'. Democracy needs to be reclaimed as a collective political process which will produce consent rather than as a managerial procedure.

What I think would be worst of all would be if the big society as a big idea melted away, as indeed it might, but that the even bigger ideas which underpin it were allowed to gain further ground in Scotland. If this conjuncture forces us all to face up to the consequences of such an eventuality, then and only then, would I admit that the big society might represent an opportunity.

---

[i] From a presentation to Edinburgh Active Citizens Group 10th March 2011. For more information on this group see http://egfl.net/activecitizenship/index.html