

To dream the impossible dream?



© ANDREW AITCHISON/PICTURES/CORBIS

Is David Cameron's "Big Society" an unattainable dream, invoked in times of austerity as a way of reigning back the state, or an inspirational idea that will help mend our "broken society"? **Armine Ishkanian** is co-author of a new book that puts the idea to the test.

At the height of the August 2011 riots in the UK, a group of white men, calling themselves the Enfield Defence League (EDL), marched in Enfield wearing white T-shirts and chanting "England" and "EDL". While the armies of local people with brooms and mops cleaning up after the riots were lauded as the Big Society in action, commentators were far less comfortable about the EDL. But both can be seen as examples of individuals taking action to protect their communities and both raise profound questions about the nature of UK prime minister David Cameron's Big Society.

To address some of the many emerging issues being raised by the Big Society agenda, I organised a workshop

on "Thinking critically about the Big Society" in March 2011 together with Dr Hakan Seckinelgin (LSE) and Professor Simon Szreter (University of Cambridge and History & Policy). This brought together academics from different disciplines, as well as practitioners from the voluntary and public sectors, to discuss the underpinnings of the Big Society agenda. I have since worked with Professor Szreter to produce an edited volume, *The Big Society Debate: a new agenda for social welfare?* (2012), which seeks to take this discussion forward.

Defining the Big Society is not easy. Launching the idea in 2010, the government stated that the aim was "to create a climate that empowers local people and communities, building a big society that will 'take

power away from politicians and give it to people'". The Cabinet Office has outlined three key components of the Big Society agenda – community empowerment, opening up public services, and social action.

The first chapter in the book, written by Jose Harris, seeks to place the idea in a historical context, and traces its modern ancestry back to Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), where he set out his ideas for a "great society" alongside a free market alternative. Whether proponents of the modern notion of a Big Society, such as Philip Blond and Jesse Norman, know it or not, the term itself has longstanding, reverberating, transatlantic and cross-Channel echoes. Theorists and politicians as unlike as August Comte and Graham Wallas before the first world war, and Friedrich Hayek and Lyndon Johnson since the second world war, have each laid claim to it.

One of the most interesting of Harris's observations, however, is that notions of a great society were not explicitly invoked when the welfare state was designed and implemented in the 1940s. Indeed, the idea was

not mooted in the 1942 Beveridge report, the 70th anniversary of which will be commemorated by LSE this year. Published five years after Beveridge had stood down as director of LSE, the report sought to slay the “giant evils” of squalor, ignorance, want, idleness and disease and laid the basis of the welfare state. Martin Albrow elaborates on Harris’s point in his chapter on funding and the Big Society, by observing that politicians and their advisers in Britain have only spent their efforts envisaging the creation of a great or Big Society when they have felt it to be a desirable but unattainable dream, a safe exhortation. Uniquely, between 1939 and 1948 a variant of the planned version of the great society became practical politics – and the term was effectively redundant.

When talking of the Big Society, Cameron prefers to talk of volunteers, favouring charities, non-governmental organisations, social enterprises and self-help groups. Left out of the debate are trade unions, professional organisations and, most crucially, local government. Sooner or later Cameron will have to spell out where he and his government stand on the relationship between Big Society and elected local government. As Simon Szreter argues, over the last 500 years local government in Britain has been seen as a bulwark against overbearing central state interference and, frequently, as the single most important expression of local community and participatory citizenship.

If Big Society is indeed to mend the “broken society”, then it will need to be regenerated by voluntary participation and leadership in fractured communities at the local level. Proposing that this should be done while ignoring local government makes little sense; proposing that it be done in place of elected and accountable local government begins to look like some form of vigilante alternative to democratic structures, Szreter contends.

Indeed, the example of the EDL is troubling evidence of a type of vigilantism emerging during the riots. While journalists across the political spectrum lauded the Turkish men in Dalston and Sikh men in Birmingham who defended their shops with baseball bats – with one journalist even calling them “turbaned avatars of Cameron’s Big Society come to stop the burning” – all were far less comfortable about the EDL.

Whether we wish to cheer or denigrate these instances as examples of self-organised defence or dangerous vigilantism, one thing remains clear: these groups were based on narrow ethnic, religious or racial identities. Yet, if communities are to organise in their own collective interest, as is desired by Big Society proponents, then it is absolutely essential that connections are made not only within groups but more importantly between groups in a community – and it is no secret that such links are the most difficult to build and to sustain.

Nevertheless, it is just this that Hackney Unites, an organisation that began life as “Hackney Unites against the BNP”, seeks to do. Hackney Unites has worked in the

wake of the riots to bring diverse communities together and has drawn on the skills of professionals living in the borough to provide free legal and employment advice to vulnerable workers. Two activists from the organisation, Jane Holgate and John Page, argue in the book, however, that, as communities organise, they start to question the very underpinnings of the Big Society: “If community organising works because marginalised communities can be taught the skills necessary to exert ever-increasing power over their circumstances, then they will, inevitably, challenge the current government’s agenda of rolling back the welfare state...”.

This is an argument familiar to academics and practitioners working elsewhere. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s structural adjustment policies were designed to roll back the state in many parts of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, South Asia and the former Soviet countries. From my research in former Soviet countries, I have found that not only did these policies fail to stimulate growth, but such “shock therapy” policies instead left much suffering and inequality in their wake.

Governments around the globe are being confronted by angry citizens who criticise politicians for imposing austerity measures and public spending cuts while continuing to subsidise and bail out the banks and corporations whose irresponsible behaviour led to the crisis in the first place. Profound changes are also

emerging in Britain’s political landscape, with the development of challenging citizen social networks. It remains to be seen how the democratic and participatory forces of this other “Big Society” will develop. But they are clearly something quite different from Cameron’s efforts to call forth politically safe, anodyne and amateurish do-gooding. ■



Armine Ishkanian is a lecturer in NGOs and development in the Department of Social Policy at LSE. The March 2011 workshop “Thinking critically about the Big Society” was funded by STICERD.

The Big Society Debate: a new agenda for social welfare? by Armine Ishkanian and Simon Szreter is published by Edward Elgar (May 2012). To coincide with its publication, the Department of Social Policy is holding a public lecture on 19 June 2012. Ralph Michell, Faiza Chaudary, Dr Armine Ishkanian and Professor Simon Szreter will examine the ideological underpinnings of the concept of Big Society and the challenges it poses for those involved in translating it into practice. For more information see lse.ac.uk/events



ALUMNI VIEWPOINT

Maria Crastus on the Big Society



I graduated from LSE in 2007 with a BA in Geography, and have gone on to work on environmental issues. Most recently I have produced a report for Natural England and the London Biodiversity Partnership on the Big Society agenda and how this is likely to impact on efforts to improve biodiversity. In particular, I have looked at the Biodiversity Action Plans of London boroughs and how Big Society attempts to decentralise power might work alongside these plans.

My starting point was that the Big Society agenda could benefit biodiversity because it seeks to involve individuals and community groups in worthwhile local initiatives. However, my interviews – with environmental groups and those working to promote the plans in local boroughs – found that we are a very long way from seeing any evidence that the initiative will bring about a major shift in behaviour, especially

if the government framework and the skills needed to oversee the enhancement of biodiversity in the UK are being broken down. Over the spending review period 2011-16, several local authorities are likely to lose their biodiversity officers and withdraw their funding for a considerable number of the conservation organisations that work in their boroughs.

Alternative funding sources will come under ever greater pressure as they are subjected to an increase in demand from larger numbers of organisations. In such circumstances, it would be meaningless for third sector organisations to have more people being prepared to volunteer with them if they did not have the resources to facilitate and coordinate the voluntary work.

My report came to the conclusion that, if the aim of the Big Society is that the state should offload its costs and responsibilities in terms of biodiversity onto the third sector, then it is misguided and will harm efforts to improve biodiversity.

Maria Crastus (BA Geography 2007) is a journal and newsletter feature writer.