Chapter 1

Introduction: The Big Society in Context

Marina Stott
Anglia Ruskin University

> "The Big Society is about a huge culture change… It's time for something different, something bold... The *Big Society* is that something different and bold"
>
> (David Cameron, *Big Society Speech,* 19th July 2010)

Just how much of a culture change is the Big Society? Is it really so different to what's gone on before? What *is* the Big Society and what does it mean for the rest of us? This book is an attempt to answer these questions. This introductory chapter begins the quest by sketching out the development of the Big Society idea so far and some reactions to it. Previous attempts to involve and empower communities will also be briefly discussed to explore the contention that the Big Society offers nothing new, before outlining the structure of the book.

The following chapters from an array of contributors across different areas of expertise and practice will address the question of what the Big Society means for the rest of us. This book is by no means a definitive and exhaustive account of what the Big Society is, what it could be or what has been said about it. The Big Society is an idea that is still emerging, changing shape along the way. This book is an attempt to make some sense of that idea and contribute to what it becomes.

Genesis

The foundations of the Big Society can be seen in the Conservative Party's localism paper, *Control Shift:* Returning Power to Local Communities, Policy Green Paper No.9 (The Conservative Party, 2009) in which Cameron calls for a radical 'decentralisation to revitalise democracy and strengthen community life'. This was to be realised through a five pillar strategy in which power would shift from the state to local communities:

1. Giving local communities a share in local growth
2. Freeing local government from central control
3. Giving local people more power over local government
4. Giving local people more power to determine spending priorities
5. Removing regional government

Cameron argued in the annual Hugo Young Memorial Lecture that such a strategy was needed because the state had become far too big and rather than promote social solidarity had instead promoted selfishness and individualism (Cameron, 2009). This had undermined the development of responsibility and innovation, leaving communities that are disconnected, disillusioned and disadvantaged. Cameron draws upon the work of '*Red Tory*' Phillip Blond to characterise the impact of the overbearing state:

> the state ... has dispossessed the people and amassed all power to itself ... This centralisation of power has made people passive when they should be active and cynical when they should be idealistic. This attitude only makes things worse - the more people think they can't make a difference, the more they opt out from society.

Despite the expansion of the state and doubled public spending, the gap between rich and poor has widened, youth unemployment is up and social mobility has stalled (Cameron, 2009). Addressing such issues requires nothing less than:

> radical decentralisation to reach every corner of the country...[which] will trust people to manage their affairs in a way that responds to local needs. (The Conservative Party, 2009:2)

The ideas underpinning Big Society can clearly be seen here in the *Control Shift* document although the concept itself had not yet been articulated. This was to come later in the Hugo Young Memorial Lecture in November 2009, where Cameron outlined the Conservative approach to tackling poverty and the need to 'roll[ing] back the state' in order to do so (Cameron, 2009). The role of the state would be reduced to 'directly agitating for, catalysing and galvanising social renewal' in helping create the Big Society – Cameron's alternative to big government (ibid). Aside from mentioning a National Citizens Service for 16 year olds, there is little detail given to the 'Big Society' idea or any indication as

to how it might be implemented. This imprecision did not hinder Cameron's persistence in maintaining the Big Society as a key theme of the election campaign. Indeed, the phrase appears on the first page of the forward of the Conservatives' manifesto to capture the essence of the monumental change they offered.

From Big Government to Big Society

The Big Society plan was unveiled in *Building a Big Society* in March 2010 just prior to the announcement of a general election. In it, the Big Society is placed 'at the heart of the Conservative Party's vision for change' (The Conservative Party, 2010a:1) and the Big Society agenda developed across three priority areas comprising the following:

1. Public service reform
   - The creation of a *Big Society Bank* from dormant bank accounts to fund neighbourhood groups, charities, social enterprises and other non-governmental bodies.
   - A leading role for charities, social enterprises and voluntary groups in delivering public services and tackling social problems.

2. Community empowerment
   - Enable parents to start new schools.
   - Empower communities to take over libraries and parks, etc that are under threat.
   - Give neighbourhoods greater control over the planning system.
   - Enable residents to hold police to account in neighbourhood beat meetings.
   - These new powers and rights will create 'little platoons'.

3. Mass engagement and philanthropy
   - Develop the National Citizen Service for 16 year olds to enable them to develop the skills needed to become responsible and active citizens.
   - Increase philanthropy using behavioural economics to make volunteering and community participation something people do on a regular basis.

The new policies announced as part of the Big Society plan:

- Neighbourhood army of 5,000 full-time, professional community organisers who will be trained with the skills they need to identify local community leaders, bring communities together, help people start their own neighbourhood groups, and give communities the help they need to take control and tackle their problems. This plan is directly based on the successful community organising movement established by Saul Alinsky in the United States and has successfully trained generations of community organisers, including President Obama.
- A Big Society Bank, funded from unclaimed bank assets, which will leverage private sector investment to provide hundreds of millions of pounds of new finance for neighbourhood groups, charities, social enterprises and other non-governmental bodies.
- Neighbourhood grants for the UK's poorest areas to encourage people to come together to form neighbourhood groups and support social enterprises and charities in these poorest areas.
- Transforming the civil service into a 'civic service' by making regular community service a key element in civil servant staff appraisals.
- Launching an annual national 'Big Society Day' to celebrate the work of neighbourhood groups and encourage more people to take part in social action projects.
- Providing new funding to support the next generation of social entrepreneurs, and helping successful social enterprises to expand and succeed.

Source: 'Cameron Unveils 'Big Society' Plan', Conservatives.com/news/speeches

In the 2010 Conservative Party Manifesto (2010b) the Big Society was presented as the alternative to big government offering:

> a society with much higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility; a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control. The Big Society runs consistently through our policy programme. Our plans to reform public services, mend our broken society, and rebuild trust in politics are all part of

> our Big Society agenda. These plans involve redistributing power from the state to society; from the centre to local communities, giving people the opportunity to take more control over their lives. (2010b:37)

While the functions of the state would be significantly reduced or 'rolled back', there was still nevertheless a key role for the state to play in building the Big Society – that of enabler rather than provider. The state was essential in implementing the programme of bottom-up, community-led action that Cameron envisioned:

> We will use the state to help stimulate social action, helping social enterprises to deliver public services and training new community organisers to help achieve our ambition of every adult citizen being a member of an active neighbourhood group. We will direct funding to those groups that strengthen communities in deprived areas, and we will introduce National Citizen Service, initially for 16 year olds, to help bring our country together. (ibid)

The Great Transition

Big Society transformed from a campaign ideal into a policy programme on 19th May 2010. During the official launch Cameron referred to his new vision of society as:

> The start of a deep and serious reform agenda to take power away from politicians and give it to people (Number 10, online).

Although Cameron declared that building the Big Society was the responsibility of all departments of government, two ministers in particular are likely to play a key role in its implementation. Nick Hurd, Minister for Civil Society, will ensure it is easier to run a charity, social enterprise or voluntary organisation and strengthen the sector so it can contribute to building the Big Society in the way that Cameron envisioned. Greg Clarke, Minister for Decentralisation will ensure that bureaucracy and regulation do not stifle locally-led innovation or interfere with the [government-led] implementation of delivering bottom-up solutions to social problems (Clark, 2010).

The process of decentralisation is one of the methods required to deliver the Big Society. It was this method of decentralisation that Cameron focused on during the re-launch of the Big Society. In his *Big Society Speech* (2010) in Liverpool, Cameron

explained his vision of the new order in which a huge culture change was imminent and necessary. The society towards which we are striving is one where:

> …people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace…
> …don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face …
> …but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities.
> It's about people setting up great new schools. Businesses helping people getting trained for work. Charities working to rehabilitate offenders.
> It's about liberation –the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street
> You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment. You can call it freedom. You can call it responsibility. I call it the Big Society.
>
> (Cameron, 2010)

The beginning of the redistribution of power came with the announcement of four 'vanguard' communities during this re-launch speech where the process of decentralisation would start. They are:

- Eden Valley, Cumbria,
- Windsor and Maidenhead, Berkshire
- Sutton, Greater London
- Liverpool, Merseyside

These places represent the 'great training grounds of change' and will be helped in their endeavours by DCLG officials who will also assist them in identifying trained community organisers. They represent the 'first territory on which real and ultra local power is a reality – and the Big Society is built'; all simply because they asked for more power and control (ibid). And so the great transition begins (Lord Wei, 2010a).

If we are to believe the musings of the *'Red Tory'* Phillip Blond, who claims there is a 'massive demand from local communities to run public services' (in Hasan, 2010) and the architect of the Big Society, Lord Wei, who claims there are 'large numbers of people willing to get involved' (2010b), then this is only the beginning and there will be more demands for power and control and running services to come.

The Big Society Network

The successes of the Big Society are already being paraded online at the Big Society Network. In the 'Big Society in Action' section there are details on how to 'get involved' either as an individual by giving to charities through 'Just Giving' or setting up a Neighbourhood Watch Scheme; or as a group by saving a post office or community centre through the Asset Transfer Unit or turning an empty shop into one of these with the Empty Shops Network. Alternatively, you can simply suggest a project that is already well underway – a community-led, grassroots project that has grown organically and independently of the new re-imagined state rather than under government instruction (the Big Society Network, 2010).

The other crucial function this online presence serves is to tell the rest of us (and perhaps some Conservative party members, too) what the Big Society actually is:

> We hope it does a better job of explaining both Big Society and the Network's role in it and gives a wider perspective on the panoply of Big Society discussions and actions going on.

The following is how the Big Society Network are currently defining Big Society:

> The Big Society is a society in which individual citizens feel big: big in terms of being supported and enabled; having real and regular influence; being capable of creating change in their neighbourhood. Does our society pass this test at the moment?
>
> People have interpreted the ideas and vision in different ways, but we see the core of the big society as three principles:
>
> - Empowering individuals and communities: Decentralising and redistributing power not just from Whitehall to local government, but also directly to communities, neighbourhoods and individuals
> - Encouraging social responsibility: Encouraging organisations and individuals to get involved in social action, whether small neighbourly activities like hosting a Big Lunch to large collective actions like saving the local post office
> - Creating an enabling and accountable state: Transforming government action from top-down micromanagement and one-size-fits-all solutions to

> a flexible approach defined by transparency, payment by results, and support for social enterprise and cooperatives
>
> *This is a bottom-up vision, not a government program dictated from the state to citizens.* Big Society is about a cultural change where people "don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities." (my emphasis)

The flagship policies of this 'bottom-up vision' include:

- Big Society Bank – used to finance social enterprises, charities and voluntary groups.
- Training 5000 new community organizers
- National Citizen Service
- The Localism Bill – planning system reform to empower neighbourhoods and public service reform to enable independent employee owned co-ops.

Just below this information on the website is the following:

> *Note: The Big Society Network is not involved in the design or delivery of these policies; please contact the relevant government department for more information.*

The Big Society Network is, according to their own website in the sections 'Who Are We' and 'What is the Network?':

> 'a small team of citizens, social entrepreneurs, community activists and professionals; frustrated citizens.'

So, on the one hand, the Government is *not* responsible for the Big Society, it is to be 'citizen-led'. Neither, on the other hand, are those very citizens, for and by whom the Big Society Network is being developed, involved in the Big Society. Just who is to be involved if not the citizens from Big Society Network and not the government?

Despite schemes such as the Big Society Network and Cameron's best attempts at launching and re-launching Big Society, many have little or no idea what it actually is. An Ipsos-Mori survey commissioned by the RSA in September 2010 revealed

that 55% of people had not heard of the Big Society. Of those who had heard of it, 54% thought it wouldn't work in practice and 57% thought it was just an excuse for the government to make public service cuts (IPPR and PwC, 2010).

Some concepts and ideas burst onto the political scene or make some otherwise rather grand entrance and are enthusiastically embraced by all (or most) to permeate all areas of policy. In other words, they 'go viral' (Stott and Longhurst, this volume). For example, the *community cohesion* agenda was borne out of riots between communities living 'parallel lives' and quickly became embedded in policy and practice (Cantle, 2001; Institute of Community Cohesion). Similarly, the concept of *social capital* proliferated policy after lying dormant for decades and is now standard parlance in debates on how best to address poverty, disadvantage and inequality (see for example Halpern, 2004). While *social capital* experienced a somewhat less dramatic entrance than *community cohesion*, it was certainly no less influential and widespread. For the Big Society, there has been a much less remarkable reception, not just from the opposition as one might expect, but from Cameron's own cabinet members who have failed to embrace it with the same enthusiasm. It is an idea that only Cameron believes in (Burns, 2010).

The Big Society Reception

The notion of the Big Society has so far been met with scepticism, optimism, indifference and some confusion from politicians (even Conservatives!), practitioners, academics and the general public. A cross-section of these reactions are presented in the following chapters.

For the optimists, the Big Society may at last provide the opportunity for local communities to finally exercise some real influence over what happens in their locality (Wood and Brown, this volume). At the very least, there is an opportunity for some recognition for those already engaged in 'Big Society' activities long before they were defined as such (Wyler, this volume). The sceptics however, see the Big Society as a smokescreen for swingeing cuts across the public sector, leaving little option for anything other than 'DIY' service provision by local communities (McCall, this volume). Furthermore, once the cuts take hold, the ability of local communities, social enterprises or charities to realise the Big Society is significantly reduced (Coote, this volume) if indeed it ever existed (Purkis, this volume). The rest are trying to navigate their way through the Big Society wilderness without being devoured by the wildlife or getting hopelessly lost.

Opportunities

There are some who see the Big Society agenda as a welcome and long awaited opportunity to contribute to the creation of the 'good society', from the bottom-up (for example see Sir Stuart Etherington, 2010). Rather than see community-run services as a necessary response to spending cuts, the emphasis is on the aptness of reducing or fundamentally changing the functions of the state. This then releases opportunities for communities and community groups to do what they have [presumably] always wanted – to have more control and responsibility. For example, Big Society Works, established by former Sport England regional lead for Yorkshire Anne Ibrahim, sees the current era of financial prudence as the ideal time for capable communities to reach their full potential:

> In short, fewer publicly funded services exposes a gap in the market for able communities to design and deliver their own. This is the biggest opportunity yet for communities to assert themselves, to demonstrate ownership and pride and take responsibility for creating a happy, healthy, inclusive community. (www.bigsocietyworks.com)

We are warned that we can ill afford to ignore this 'untapped resource' and miss the opportunity to design high quality public services. In a similar vein, David Halpern, Jesse Norman and Lord Wei also see this potential of communities lying just beneath the surface and support the shift towards subsidiarity.

David Halpern implores us to 'give Big Society a break' because he believes this is not going to be a 'passing soundbite'. Writing in *Prospect* in August 2010, Halpern refers to his own recent publication *The Hidden Wealth of Nations* in which he asserts that the non-market reciprocity or 'economy of regard' which describes things such as exchanging gifts, looking after each other or making dinner, has been overlooked and reflects a significant amount of GDP if calculated in economic terms. This is illustrated on a neighbourhood blog where a contributor claims that if everyone swept snow off the pavement in front of their own home (approximately 8 meters), this could save the local council about £10 million (Ataubin, 2010). This 'hidden wealth' of reciprocity, relationships, and trust is being 'unlocked' across Europe already. For example, there are 'patient hotels' in several European countries where patients stay in what looks and feels like a hotel for the duration of their hospital treatment, chronic conditions. Friends and/or family members are taught how to clean wounds, put

in drip lines and manage their own treatment. They achieve better clinical outcomes at lower costs and score higher on patient satisfaction than conventional hospitals (Halpern, 2010b).

Jesse Norman is an enthusiastic cheerleader for the Big Society, presumably because he fundamentally believes in the spirit of the agenda, but also because he says finding an alternative approach is no longer optional. The state is no longer fit to fulfil the role of public service provider and we have reached the limits of the idea of the state as the remedy for social and economic failure. The matter is now pressing, mandatory. He claims that the Big Society is an idea which transcends conventional labels and political categories of left and right. A fundamental rethink on the very nature of society is needed. The new compassionate conservatism is that rethink and the way forward (2010:6-8). Norman asserts that the Big Society is being vigorously implemented and will amount to the most thoroughgoing attempt for a century to redefine the relationship between the individual, the state and public and private institutions - 'Conservative in inspiration and radical in execution – Disraeli would be proud' (2010:199).

This newly defined relationship between the individual, the state and institutions is underpinned by a Red Tory philosophy, promulgated by the Conservatives' philosopher-king and director of think tank ResPublica, Phillip Blond (Derbyshire, 2009). Indeed, ResPublica claims almost full credit for the birth of the Big Society idea and is not afraid to applaud itself for doing so (ResPublica, 2010a).

Red Toryism or communitarian civic conservatism as Phillip Blond describes it, seeks to redistribute capital and capacity more equitably throughout society and devolve responsibility and accountability to localities and communities through a process of decentralisation, which would reinvigorate civil society (ResPublica, ibid). Blond argues that both the left and the right have damaged society; the left by creating a 'benefits culture' of redundant, welfare-dependents wholly lacking in ambition or aspiration through state activity; while the right promoted self-advancing individualism through the market (Blond, 2010:15,291). These 'markets without morality' must be replaced with a kind of 'capitalism with a conscience' (Derbyshire, 2010). Perhaps more aptly, *capitalism with a local face*. The influence of Phillip Blond's *Red Toryism* is examined more fully by Mark Smith's chapter in this volume tracing the intellectual and ideological roots of Big Society.

The other key architectural figure in the Big Society blueprint is Nat Wei – now Lord Wei and government advisor on Big Society – who also co-founded the Big Society Network. Lord Wei keeps interested parties up to date on the 'great transition' from 'broken society' to the Big Society on his blog (Nat Wei's Blog). In it, Lord Wei says he is struck by the number of ordinary people the Big Society idea has resonated with, despite it being a difficult idea to 'get your head around', the latter which he attributes to the 'organic and evolutionary nature' of the concept (2010c). This 'evolution' from 'political concept to independent citizen-led movement' to which Lord Wei refers will help remove barriers to mass participation, the lynchpin of the Big Society.

Lord Wei is sceptical of those who claim they are unable to participate because of a lack of time and offers a solution to the limitations of the 24 hour clock. However, in the first instance, Lord Wei insists that we (that's you and me) actually *do* have time to participate, it's just that currently we use this time for some inconsequential activity, such as watching television or during 'Twixtmas' (2010b). This is that period of time in-between Christmas and New Year when many cherish the opportunity to spend some much deserved time with their families, many of whom they may not have seen for some time given the dispersal of extended families in contemporary societies, and/or re-charge their batteries at the end of a long year of work. Such a rest is surely deserved, after all Britain has some of the longest working hours in Europe (BBC News, 2002; The Spectator, 2008). For 'those who genuinely lack time, they can trade it' claims Lord Wei (2010b). These are likely to be 'single parents, busy working people or students' who can 'barter services...share childcare arrangements or caring for the elderly to save and release time' (ibid). Even the time spent waiting in a queue or recovering from an operation could be harnessed according to Lord Wei. The opportunity to build the Big Society is there if only people cared enough to get involved (ibid).

Pragmatists

Straddling a kind of middle ground between the supporters and critics of the Big Society idea are those who take a more pragmatic approach. In the recent Spending Review, the Office for Civil Society (OCS) were allocated £470 million in total and an additional £100 million Transition fund for those whose funding streams look precarious. Many Voluntary, Community and Third Sector organisations will maximise the government's offer of a key role for the sector across the three strands of the Big Society plan to shape and provide services where the state has failed

(OCS, 2010). For example, the DTA are already looking at ways to secure a more strategic position and have identified some areas of potential opportunities:

1. Access to public assets: Many public bodies and Local Authorities will be looking to dispose of their physical assets; sometimes on a massive scale. Whilst many will in fact be liabilities, some could find a new life in community ownership, there may be opportunities for local groups to acquire these assets. For expert advice around asset transfer contact the asset transfer unit www.atu.org.uk
2. Right to bid for running local services: Some development trusts could use this new right to take over a local library, a park or some other local service if they can demonstrate they would run it better than the Council.
3. Better opportunities to deliver public services: with a new recognition of social outcomes, and the government's commitment to supporting social and community enterprises we could see new opportunities emerge for social enterprises and development trusts to gain new access to public sector contract.

(Source: The Big Society Policy Briefing, October 2010, DTA)

Details of how these may be taken forward have recently been published in a jointly-authored paper by DTA Director Steve Wyler and Red Tory Phillip Blond, *To Buy, To Bid, To Build: Community Rights for an Asset Owning Democracy.* This outlines how best to enable local communities to take over the running of 'state' owned assets for the benefit of local communities. At its launch, it was praised by Charlie Elphick, MP for Dover and Deal, who is leading the attempt by local townspeople to bid for the Dover Port Authority "one of the most important papers I have read in the past 10 years" (ResPublica, 2010). Andy Brady (this volume) ponders the consequences for social enterprises of such a partnership.

Organisations, such as the Community Development Foundation see the Big Society agenda as an opportunity to draw attention to the work undertaken and how it can contribute to the Big Society. The Community Development Foundation draw upon the work of Gilchrist et al and the findings of an ESRC funded project – *Identities and Social Action,* 2004-2009 to emphasise the importance of community development work in facilitating the social action that will underpin the Big Society (www.cdf.org.uk).

Others, such as ICoCo, have seen the Big Society agenda as an entrepreneurial opportunity to generate additional income. ICoCo is offering a service to local authorities and their partners to carry out an assessment of their activities to see if and how these contribute to the Big Society plan. This 'Gearing Up' package includes:

Gearing up for Big Society rapid action

A new two day facilitation package from ICoCo will help local authorities and their partners understand what the Big Society means, whether to engage with it and how to do so.

Facilitated in your locality, the **Gearing up for Big Society rapid action** package will provide a conceptual challenge based upon real practical issues in your local area.

It is also an opportunity for you to inform Central Government what Big Society means for you and to help shape the agenda.

In part we want to help you self-assess where you already measure up to Big Society. More importantly, we want to help you to gear up for Big Society and be able to contribute to a national bank of emerging knowledge and experience about what Big Society means at local levels.

We will post good practice and the emerging definitions and practice on the iCoCo practitioner portal and feed back what you said to CLG.

(Source: ICoCo www.cohesioninstitute.org.uk)

This expert assessment is carried out over a period of approximately two days by a team of three people comprising two ICoCo senior practitioners and one Local Government Idea and Development Councillor Peer, for a mere £3500 plus actual expenses. I wonder if this was what Lord Wei meant when he said that organisations needed a greater mix of funding sources?

There are some for whom this kind of aligning with the Big Society agenda does not sit well (see McCall, this volume) and for whom the whole plan gives cause for concern. Criticisms of the Big Society idea are plentiful and varied.

Concerns and Criticisms

Cameron has stated that he wants the Big Society to be the big idea by which people remember his government. People may indeed remember Cameron's Big Society idea, but not in the way he hopes. Like many other political concepts, there are criticisms that it is too abstract and vague and so means everything to everyone and therefore nothing. The Big Society Observatory blog asserts that the Big Society idea is so big and meaningless that it simply includes everything and everybody, except Labour (UK Regeneration, 2010). The Young Foundation fear that it will become 'little more than a label for a smattering of useful volunteering initiatives that probably would have happened anyway.' (2010: 28). It is a plan with no plan and doomed to fail without the support of a *formal framework of community development* and business support (Barratt, 2010). Even the Tories are not buying it claiming that no one on the doorstep understands it. It is an idea that refuses to 'take flight' (Freedland, 2010).

There are concerns from many that the Big Society agenda is simply an excuse for swingeing cuts, and cuts that would undermine what the Big Society plan is trying to achieve. Dave Prentis, general secretary of the union Unison, said:

> Cameron's Big Society should be renamed the big cop-out. The Government is simply washing its hands of providing decent public services and using volunteers as a cut-price alternative. (Churcher and Williams, 2010).

The Charity Commission says that Cameron could be 'pulling the rug out from under' his own Big Society agenda with the savage cuts. Charities estimate losses of between £3 and £5 bn, increasing the risk of many going out of business (Boxell, 2010). The chief executive of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, Sir Stuart Etherington, expressed concern 'about the tidal wave of cuts about to hit the sector' which will 'have a detrimental effect on the services received by some of the most vulnerable people in our society'. The funding issue is the 'elephant in the room' (Churcher and Williams, July 2010). Anna Coote of NEF argues that the Big Society will leave the poor and powerless behind- 'Individuals who are already marginalised by poverty and powerlessness will be left behind by the Big Society, where everything hangs on how much power is assumed by which groups and businesses, to do what, for whom and how.' (2010). The Institute of Fiscal studies confirms that the poor will be hardest hit by the spending cuts being implemented by the government as part of 'rolling back' the state (Elliot and Wintour, 2010).

Of course the success of the Big Society is largely dependent on the volunteering and participatory capacity of the UK citizenry. Although several commentators already cited believe such capacity lies in abundance just under the surface, several studies suggest otherwise. The most recent of these is the Ipsos-Mori RSA commissioned survey referred to earlier and the one upon which Lord Wei relies to support his contention that the nation is waiting for a participatory opportunity (IPPR and PwC, 2010). While some of the figures in this survey seem promising, there are some questions of detail that arise. For example, it states that 42% of people would attend a regular meeting with their neighbourhood police team, but it doesn't say what constitutes 'regular'. Would these be weekly, monthly or annually? The implications and consequences of each are quite different. Also initially promising were the figures for those willing to participate in a neighbourhood watch scheme of 44%. Again, what precisely does 'participate' in this context entail? Does displaying a neighbourhood watch scheme poster in a window of one's home count as 'participation'? What Lord Wei does not mention is that across all areas that the survey looked at (education, public safety and social care) respondents would not be willing to do any of the options offered to 'participate' - 48%, 30% and 27% respectively. Only a paltry 2% would be interested in setting up a school (IPPR and PwC, 2010:10-18). This will not be what Education Secretary Michael Gove wanted to hear.

A consistent finding across many reports is that the biggest barrier to participating is lack of time, despite Lord Wei's assertion that we can 'create' more time (eg. Hansard, 2009, Low et al, 2007). For those juggling working long hours with child care responsibilities and many caring for ageing parents as well, to learn they are now expected to 'participate' or 'volunteer' in addition to this is likely to feel like a kick in the teeth. This seems like a contradiction to previous concerns that parents have not been spending enough time with children or supervising their activities, contributing to the creation of an ASBO nation (Squires, 2008).

Research by Thaler and Sunstein (2009) suggest that the key to encouraging participation is to offer the right kind of 'nudge'. In other words, finding ways of enabling and encouraging people to participate in ways that relate to how they live their lives today. Such a view resonates with past research on participation and barriers to it which recognise that people will participate at different points in their lives, for the purposes they choose and at different times. Different kinds of involvement may be appropriate at different times for different people and

the goal may not be community control, but rather collaborative, shared decision making (Jackson, 2001 in Taylor, 2003). Research by Ipsos-Mori in 2009 found that only one in 20 of the public wanted any involvement in providing services, one in four merely wanted more of a say and half just wanted more information. It is likely to be the usual suspects who participate and volunteer – those who participate in local decision making generally are more likely to be white, older, better educated, richer, middle-class males while volunteers were typically women, of higher social grades, in managerial positions, degree educated, and middle aged (Brodie et al, 2009).

Further criticism of the Big Society agenda comes from those asserting that there is nothing new in this programme. McSmith says that some of the ideas expressed by Cameron on mutual help would not have sounded strange to Victorian ears (July 2010a). Tessa Jowell dismissed the 'Big Society' as 'simply a brass-necked rebranding of programmes already put in place by a Labour government'. She added: 'Funding for a social investment bank and for community pubs was put in place in March, and residents have been involved in setting council budgets for a number of years.' (in McSmith, 2010b).

Hazel Blears echoes the view of Tessa Jowell and argues that many of the ideas comprising the Big Society agenda have been 'appropriated' from her own 2008 Empowerment White Paper (Blears, 2010). This is a question on the lips of many – Is there anything new about the Big Society agenda?

Old Wine, New Bottles?

There is nothing inherently new in the Big Society idea. Even the phrase itself, 'Big Society' does not represent anything new, despite the suggestion from Cameron's speech writer Ian Birrell that we have 'Big Society' simply because he could not think of anything better (2010).

The phrase was used in a report written by Liao Xun in 1986 in the context of political reform in China. The original paper was entitled '*Marx and Engels's Thoughts on 'Small Government' and Current Economic Reform'* and was expanded and revised before being published in 1988. Later articles and reports solidified Xun's thoughts and ideas on 'small government, big society' in a book of the same title in 1991 '*Small Government, Big Society: Theory and Practice of Hainan's New System'* and *The results of Openness* in 1993. The model he proposes in this

report reads like a blueprint for Cameron's vision of the 'big society'. In it Xun proposes that the government be stripped of all but the most crucial of functions, and be responsible for only those that the individuals and organisations of 'civil' society cannot deliver. The 'small government' that Xun envisioned entailed the following departments and functions:

- Political Guarantee System
  1. General Department
  2. Administrative Supervision
  3. Personnel
  4. Law Department
  5. Overseas [Chinese] Affairs

- Social Service System
  6. Labour Welfare
  7. Physical Training and Public Health
  3. Education and Culture
  9. Minorities and Religious Affairs

- Development and Organisation System
  10. Trade and Industry
  11. Transport and Resources
  12. Agriculture
  13. Scientific and Technical Development

- Economic Supervision and Coordination System
  14. Economic Supervision
  15. Economic Planning
  16. Finances and Taxes
  17. Urban and Rural Resources and Environment

In addition, Xun proposed a provincial People's bank and a Statistical office, the latter intended to facilitate society's supervision of the government's economic work. These sound an awful lot like the Big Society Bank and the shift towards more transparency and accountability through publishing of government data. The crux of the notion of 'big society' for Xun is independent, autonomous self-management. Government functions will be reduced, bureaucracy simplified

and a great number of social and economic undertakings will be handed back to individuals, enterprises, social institutions and other social organisations. For Xun, the individual is the real building block and ownership of assets should be diverse – including state-owned, locally-owned, collective enterprises. Furthermore, Xun was striving for democracy at the grass-roots level and wanted to popularise the social autonomous organisations of villages and towns to promote the process of democratisation of power in local communities (Brødsgaard, 1998:190-196). The overarching theme of 'small government, big society' was appropriated as a key political concept by the new political leadership in the reform work. The Conservatives decentralisation green paper *Control Shift* draws upon lessons from abroad in promoting the shift of power from the centre to the local, referring to the USA, Germany, France and Sweden among others (2009:7). Given the striking similarities between Liao Xun's big society idea and that of Cameron's, it is surprising that Liao Xun's work is not mentioned as the archetype of the current plan[1].

The Empowerment Paper that Hazel Blears accuses Cameron of 'appropriating' is *Communities in Control* 2008.[2] This aimed to pass power into the hands of local communities and give real control to a wider pool of active citizens (pg.12). Local councils have a strengthened 'duty to involve' local communities and promote democracy while communities are encouraged to become more active through volunteering, serving on committees, standing for election or running and managing local services and assets (pg.8-10).

This was the last for Labour in a long line of policies which sought to 'empower' communities and which began soon after Labour took office. The *Modernising Government White Paper* (1999) made a commitment to listen to local people and involve communities in decision making (para. 3.6, 3.7). Giving local communities more influence in decision making was identified by the Social Exclusion Unit in the *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal* (2001) as part of the solution to entrenched poverty and area deprivation (pg.43-53). A range of funding streams were established to help 'empower' communities and facilitate their involvement in Neighbourhood Management Schemes and Local Strategic Partnerships. The emphasis on community involvement and empowerment continued in the 2005 progress report *Making It Happen in Neighbourhoods* along with calls for it to continue in the creation of sustainable communities (2005:60-62).

The *Together We Can* (2005) strategy for civil renewal aimed to empower communities to work with public bodies to shape the policies and services that affect them. This, it argued, would engender a sense of ownership and belonging, reduce social tensions, crime and fear of crime and improve health and educational attainment (pg.4). Building on this and *Citizen Engagement and Public Services* (2005), David Miliband called for a 'double-devolution' of power from Whitehall to town hall to local communities and citizens to strengthen communities and promote equality (2006:8). The *Strong and Prosperous Communities White Paper* (2006) maintains the theme of empowering communities, pledging support for communities to have greater involvement in owning and managing community assets and more control over their lives (pg.32). This is done primarily through strengthening the role of local authorities and local councillors as representative bodies of the community (pg.32-36). The Sustainable Communities Act 2007 provides a channel for people, through their local authority, to ask central government to take action to promote sustainable communities. It starts with the premise that local people know best how to improve their area (LGA online).

Such a belief has long been asserted by those working closely with communities. Community development practitioners, many whose views are presented in the chapters that follow, assert that involving communities in meaningful ways makes a real and lasting difference and is the key to creating successful, cohesive, vibrant communities (Power, this volume). Indeed, there has been much talk of 'empowering' communities and many policies written, decade after decade, but little evidence of such talk translating into action. Even the Big Society idea itself, does not really represent the 'grass-roots movement' and power devolution it is purported by some to be (Lord Wei, 2010c). The Big Society is promoted as being a bottom-up, citizen-led and organic alternative programme to that of the previous government which relied too much on top-down, state-led policy. Isn't the Big Society being implemented *by the government?* Doesn't that make it inherently top-down? The irony seems lost on most who are eager to jump on the Big Society bandwagon.

Policy-makers and politicians seem determined as ever to start anew, ignoring what has gone before and always intent on reinventing the wheel. There are lessons to be learnt from the past, if only someone would take the time to look and apply them (see Stott et al, 2009). Will the Big Society agenda *really* be any

different? Will this be the policy that doesn't just 'talk the talk', but will 'walk the walk'? Time will tell.

Structure of the Book

This chapter has attempted to shed some light on the question of what the big society is and the degree to which it may or may not be different from previous empowerment agendas. It is likely that just as many questions have been raised as have been answered.

The following chapters will focus on what the Big Society means for the rest of us with each author providing a unique perspective from their own area of expertise and practice. These are interspersed with case studies of the Big Society in action, comprising projects and activities in existence prior to the emergence of the Big Society agenda, lest the government forget that they really did not invent the empowerment wheel.

Mark J. Smith gets things going with an exploration of the intellectual roots of Big Society and argues that interpretations of Big Society are shaped by political assumptions. Steve Wyler continues the theme of exploring the myriad of these interpretations in the context of the different ways in which Development Trusts can contribute to the Big Society. Anne Power purveys a history of community involvement in order to glean lessons for the present followed by Chanan and Miller who are also looking for ways in which the Big Society can work. Ben McCall takes a critical look at power and some of the inherent contradictions of the Big Society promise to devolve power. Katharine Knox examines Big Society in relation to ideas of 'sustainable communities' and research currently being carried out by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on community assets. Anna Coote explores what the Big Society agenda means for different groups and sectors and the potential opportunities and pitfalls that are afforded to each. Helen Haugh looks at some of the ways in which communities can exercise agency and the challenges to this. Neil Stott and Noel Longhurst develop this theme and examine the persistence of place-based poverty, arguing for the need to listen to local communities about what works and what doesn't. David Wood and Sylvia Brown continue the focus on 'community', outlining the particular challenges for rural communities. They call for recognition of the differences between the rural and the urban and the need for solutions to reflect this.

Moving away from the 'community' theme, Robert Ashton discusses Big Society as a state of mind, comparing it with Buddhism and says that it offers the chance for the re-birth of community. Paul Tracey too argues that it can offer opportunities for new forms of organisation and argues that organisations in general and the workplace in particular have been ignored so far in the Big Society discourse. Andy Brady asks what the Big Society agenda means for social enterprise, given the central role that such organisations are expected to play. What are the consequences of such a close alignment? In his second contribution Mark J. Smith draws attention to the issue of environmental responsibility and the lack of development around this area in the Big Society agenda, calling for partnerships to include environmental movements.

David Wilson welcomes the need for change and the renewed focus on empowering local communities but warns that it must move beyond rhetoric if it is to work. The chapter by Heather Petch marks the first of three that discuss Big Society in relation to the housing and the voluntary sectors from contributors Andrew Purkiss and Colin Wiles. The chapters from Belinda Bell and Tim Jones bring the focus onto money in the Big Society with their respective discussions on the Big Society Bank – a flagship policy of the Big Society programme; and on wealth and well-being, the latter a topic that Cameron has already expressed a keen interest in pursuing. The final chapter from Jess Steele offers a few final words on how we can make the rhetoric of the Big Society into a reality.

References

Ataubin, (2010) Discussing big society without using the words 'big society', *Neighbourhoods* [blog] 4th November available at: http://neighbourhoods.typepad.com/neighbourhoods/big-society/. Accessed: 13th December 2010

Barratt, H., (2010) 'Big Society' Needs Formal Framework to Succeed, Says IPPR' *Regeneration and Renewal* 21July available at: http://www.regen.net/news/ByDiscipline/Economic-Development/login/1017686/. Accessed 1st December 2010

BBC News, 2002 *Long Hours A National Disgrace* 4th February available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/1799518.stm. Accessed 1st December 2010

Birrell, I., (2010) 'Big Society? Let Me Explain', Comment is Free, *The Guardian* 9th October available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2010/oct/08/big-society-i-wrote-speech accessed: 13th December 2010

Blears, H., (2010) 'Big Society is just clever branding', LocalGov.co.uk 16 November

available at: http://www.localgov.co.uk/index.cfm?method=news.detail&id=93333 accessed 13th December 2010

Blond, P., (2010) *Red Tory: How Left and right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It* London: Faber and Faber Ltd

The Big Society Network, available at: http://www.thebigsociety.co.uk accessed 7th December 2010

Boxell, J., (2010) Cameron attacked as charities face cuts, *Financial Times* 24th October available at: http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/101d6bf6-dfaa-11df-bed9-00144feabdc0.html#axzz17zw9uydh. Accessed 1st December 2010

Brodie, E., Cowling, E. and Nissen, N., (2009) *Understanding participation: A literature review* NCVO available at: http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ 2009/09/Pathways-literature-review-final-version.pdf Accessed 13th December 2010

Brødsgaard, K., State and Society in Hainan: Liao Xun's Ideas on 'Small Government, Big Society', Brødsgaard, K and Strand, D (eds) (1998) *Reconstructing Twentieth-Century China: State Control, Civil Society and National Identity* Oxford: Clarendon Press

Burns, P., (2010) The Big Society? Or the Big Excuse?, *Patrick Burn's Blogs* [blog] 2nd November available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/patrickburns/2010/11/the_big_society_or_the_big_exc.html. Accessed 1st December 2010

Cabinet Office, (2010) *Nick Hurd Appointed Minister for Civil Society* Press Release 18th May 2010 CAB 061-10 available at: http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/newsroom/news_releases/2010/100518-hurd.aspx. Accessed: 15th November 2010

Cameron, D., (2010) *Big Society Speech* Number 10 available at: http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2010/07/big-society-speech-53572 accessed 13th December 2010

Cameron, D., (2009) *The Big Society,* Hugo Young Memorial Lecture November 2009 available at: http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/11/David_Cameron_The_Big_Society.aspx accessed: 13th December 2010

Cantle, T., (2001) *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team* Home Office

Clark, G., (2010) 'Growing the Big Society' CLG 27th July available at: http://www.communities.gov.uk/speeches/newsroom/growingbigsociety accessed: 13th November 2010

Churcher, J. and Williams, M., (2010) 'PM denies 'Big Society' is excuse to cut spending' *The Independent*, 19 July available at: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/pm-denies-big-society-is-excuse-to-cut-spending-2029927.html. Accessed 1st December 2010

Community Development Foundation, (2010) *Review – Identities and Social Action: What does it Mean for the Frontline?* CDF

The Conservative Party, (2010a) *Building a Big Society*

The Conservative Party, (2010b) *The Conservative Manifesto*

The Conservative Party, (2009) *Control Shift:* Returning Power to Local Communities, Policy Green Paper No.9

Coote, A., (2010) Cameron's Big Society will leave the poor and powerless behind, *The NEF Blog,* [blog] 19th July New Economics Foundation, available at: http://www.neweconomics.org/blog/2010/07/19/camerons-big-society-will-leave-the-poor-and-powerless-behind. Accessed 1st December 2010

Derbyshire, J., (2009) The NS Profile: Phillip Blond, *New Statesman* 19 February available at: http://www.newstatesman.com/society/2009/02/red-tory-blond-liberal accessed: 13th December 2010

DTA, (2010) *The Big Society Policy Briefing* October 2010, DTA

Elliott, L. and Wintour, P., (2010) Budget will hit poor harder than rich, according to IFS report, *The Guardian* 23rd June, available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/jun/23/budget-welfare-poor-ifs-report. Accessed 1st December 2010

Freedland, J., (2010) 'The problem with David Cameron's 'big society' is that the Tories don't buy it', Comment is Free, *The Guardian* 6th October available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/oct/06/problem-david-cameron-big-society accessed 13th December 2010

Halpern, D., (2010a) *The Hidden Wealth of Nations* Cambridge: Polity

Halpern, D., (2010b) 'Give the big society a break', *Prospect* 24th August 2010 Issue 174

Halpern, D., (2004) *Social Capital* Bristol: Polity Press

Hasan, M., (2010) The sham of Cameron's "big society", *New Statesman* 18th November available at: http://www.newstatesman.com/uk-politics/2010/11/local-government-cuts-society accessed 13th December 2010

Hansard Society, (2009) *Audit of Political Engagement 6* available at: http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/publications/archive/2009/04/01/audit-of-political-engagement-6.aspx Accessed: 13th December

iCoCo, (2010) *Gearing up for Big Society rapid action* Institute of Community Cohesion available at: http://www.cohesioninstitute.org.uk/AboutUs/Services/BigSocietyRapidAction. Accessed: 11th December 2010

IPPR and PwC, (2010) *Capable Communities: Towards Citizen-Powered Public Services* IPPR and PwC

Lord Wei, 2010a The Great Transition: What it Means for Voluntary and Community Organisations, *Nat Wei's Blog: Observations on Social Reform, Big Society and Shoreditch* [blog] 7th November available at: http://natwei.wordpress.com/2010/11/. Accessed 11th December 2010

Lord Wei, 2010b Unlocking Hidden Wealth Part 1- Finding Time, *Nat Wei's Blog: Observations on Social Reform, Big Society and Shoreditch* [blog] 24th November available at: http://natwei.wordpress.com/2010/11/ Accessed 11th December 2010

Lord Wei, 2010c Navigating the Big Society Part 1, *Nat Wei's Blog: Observations on Social Reform, Big Society and Shoreditch* [blog] 9th September available at: http://natwei.wordpress.com/2010/9/ Accessed 11th December 2010

Lord Wei, (n.d.) *Nat Wei's Blog* available at: http://natwei.wordpress.com/. Accessed 1st December 2010

Low, N., Butt, S., Ellis Paine, A. and Davis Smith, J., (2007) *Helping Out: A national survey of volunteering and charitable giving* Prepared for the Office of the Third Sector in the Cabinet Office by the National Centre for Social Research and the Institute for Volunteering Research NatCen

McSmith, A., (2010a)The Big Society: a genuine vision for Britain's future – or just empty rhetoric? *The Independent,* 20 July 2010 available at: http://www.independent.co.uk/ news/uk/politics/the-big-society-a-genuine-vision-for-britains-future-ndash-or-just-empty-rhetoric-2030330.html accessed: 13th December 2010

McSmith, A., (2010b) Cameron's Big Society attacked as 'a cover for spending cuts', *The Independent,* 20 July available at: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/camerons-big-society-attacked-as-a-cover-for-spending-cuts-2030334.html. Accessed: 13th December 2010

Norman, J., (2010) *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics* University of Buckingham Press

Number 10, (2010) *Government Launches 'Big Society' Programme* Press release 18th May available at: http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/latest-news/2010/05/big-society-50248 accessed: 13th December 2010

OCS, (2010) The Cabinet Office available at: http://www.strongercivilsociety.org.uk/. Accessed: 11th December 2010

ResPublica, (2010a) *ResPublica Ideas from ResPublica Reports at the heart of government policy* 21 November available at:

ResPublica, (2010b) *New ResPublica report explores how local communities can purchase assets and run them for community benefit* Available at: http://www.respublica.org.uk/articles/buy-bid-build-community-rights-asset-owning-democracy. Accessed: 11th December 2010

Sir Stuart Etherington, (2010) *Cass Lecture: Building a Better Society* NCVO available at: http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/policy-campaigns-research/big-society/cass-lecture-building-better-society/cass-lecture-building-bet accessed 13th December 2010

The Spectator, (2008) Longest Working Hours in Europe!, *Coffee House* [blog] 4th September available at: http://www.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2059501/longest-working-hours-in-europe.thtml. Accessed: 11th December 2010

Stott, M., Stott, N. & Wiles, C., (2009) *Learning from the Past? Building community in new towns, growth areas and new communities*. Keystone Publications. Keystone Development Trust

Squires, P., (2008) *ASBO Nation: The Criminalisation of Nuisance* Policy Press: Bristol

Taylor, M., (2003) *Public Policy in the Community* : *Public Policy and Politics* Hampshire: Macmillan Palgrave

Thaler, R. and Sunstein, C., (2009) *Nudge* Yale University Press

UK Regeneration, (2010) The Big Society Now Means Everything, *Big Society Observatory* [blog] 9th October available at: http://ukregeneration.org.uk/category/influencing/bigsociety/page/2/. Accessed 13th December 2010

Wyler, S. and Blond, P., (2010) *To Buy, To Bid, To Build: Community Rights for an Asset Owning Democracy* ResPublica

The Young Foundation, (2010) *Investing in Social Growth: Can the Big Society Be More Than a Slogan?* The Young Foundation September 2010. Available at: http://www.youngfoundation.org/files/images/YF_Bigsociety_Screen__2_.pdf. Accessed 1st December 2010

Footnotes

1 Finding Liao Xun's work on big society was not difficult. It did not involve tedious hours trawling through archives in a dark, dingy library. On the contrary, it was located through a simple search ("big society") on Google Scholar during the initial scoping stages of research for this publication.

2 The following section taken from Stott et al 2009 *Learning From the Past: Building Community in New Towns, Growth Areas and New Communities.*