

Reconfiguring the State under the Coalition: Shoring up state power through the Big Society

Emma Bell

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Le Royaume-Uni à l'heure de la coalition

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Introduction

- 1 On forming the coalition government in May 2010, David Cameron pledged to usher in not just a new government but 'a new politics', a new 'progressive partnership' in the national, not the party interest, whereby power is 'taken out of the hands of the politicians and placed in the hands of people'¹. The 'Big Society' was to provide the framework within which ordinary people could be empowered. Indeed, one of the key strands of the Big Society project was to be decentralisation, 'pushing power and control away from the centre and into communities and neighbourhoods'². Consequently, the State was to take a step back, to open up public service provision to a 'plurality of providers', 'enabling people and communities to exercise more choice and control over public services' and to get involved in 'voluntary and community organisations'³.
- 2 Yet, in practice, it would seem that the Big Society has not meant a smaller state. On the contrary, the State has continued to accumulate power, marking a considerable degree of continuity with the past. Just as the free economy needed the strong state⁴ to usher in an entrepreneurial society and to liberate the market from the constraints of labour and financial regulation, so the free and active citizen needs the strong state to enable him to participate fully in the Big Society and to force through a change of culture whereby citizens will learn to take responsibility for themselves rather than relying on the state. As Cameron put it, 'the big society is not just going to spring to life on its own: we need strong and concerted government action to make it happen. We need to use the state to remake society'⁵.
- 3 In a further point of continuity with the past, private interests are prioritised over individual and community interests as government has come to form a close partnership, not with the people, but with the private sector. This has not led to a weakening of the state but rather to its reconfiguration as it becomes an extension of the private sector, opening itself up to marketisation and doing all it can to favour the accumulation of private wealth. Meanwhile, real citizen activism which seeks to challenge current configurations of power is quashed.

Using the Big State to create the Big Society

- 4 As noted above, the Big Society is not something that the coalition government thinks will emerge organically and spontaneously from civil society. Rather, it is something which needs to be engineered. Hence, the State takes a leading role. It does so in two main ways. Firstly, when opening up public services to non-state actors, it is the government which determines which candidate is best placed to deliver these services. Contracts are awarded directly by the Government Procurement Service, an executive agency of the Cabinet Office⁶. The independence of this body was recently called into question when a government contract for road safety campaigns was awarded to an advertising company of which Francis Maude, Minister for Cabinet Office heavily involved in the Big Society project, was formerly a non-executive chairman⁷.
- 5 The independence of organisations involved in delivering Big Society projects is also threatened by their lack of financial independence. Charities in particular, many of whom depend on funding from local authorities, have seen their budgets cut drastically⁸ as councils struggle to manage their own budget cuts imposed by central government. The Localism Act 2011 was intended to give local authorities the power to raise council tax but this is in reality limited since central government will in practice set a cap above which council taxes cannot

be increased without holding a local referendum to approve the decision. Yet, even the power of local people was overridden here when George Osborne imposed a council tax freeze until 2016. This central interference over council tax has led Ferdinand Mount to declare that ‘within the Conservative Party in particular, the conversion to localism is often skin-deep’⁹.

6 Furthermore, private or voluntary agencies delivering public services are expected to work within a strict government remit: in some cases, such as in the delivery of offender rehabilitation services, these agencies will only be paid their full fee if they succeed in meeting narrow targets set by the government. Consequently, Edwards notes that ‘The institutions of the Big Society are ‘free’ only in the narrow sense that they are given—within the constraints of the requirements for tackling the broken society—managerial autonomy’¹⁰. A House of Commons Select Committee Report noted this contradiction between the discourse of freedom entailed in the Big Society and government control at the top, arguing that ‘The redistribution of power from Whitehall to communities, central to the Big Society project, will by its very nature necessitate a substantial change to Whitehall itself, and to the nature of government’¹¹.

7 The second way in which the government seeks to engineer the Big Society from above is via a process described by David Marquand as *kulturkampf* whereby it uses hegemonic means to bring about a significant cultural change¹². Marquand originally used the term to refer to a neoliberal crusade undertaken by the conservative governments in the 1980s and 1990s to change popular attitudes to economics and to morality. In economics, this entailed reversing the Keynesian common sense, regarding the need for the State to increase spending in times of economic crisis to prompt recovery and secure full employment, in favour of the new common sense of good household management according to which government, like the individual, should live within its means. This was matched by a cultural and moral revolution which sought to wean the British public off the state and foster a spirit of prudence and independence.

8 Although couched in different terms, the current coalition government is seeking to consolidate that revolution by emphasising the values of individual and community responsibility over state responsibility. An official Conservative Party document on the Big Society, often referred to as the Big Society Manifesto, declares:

The Big Society demands mass engagement: a broad culture of responsibility, mutuality and obligation. Achieving this will require a new national energy and commitment to social action. We recognise that government cannot achieve this alone – we need to encourage businesses, the media, social organisations and other bodies to lend their creativity and resources to bring about culture change throughout the country. A whole-country effort is required, and a Conservative government will take urgent action to help bring about this shift. We will make use of all available levers - institutions, funding, social pressure – to deliver culture change and build the Big Society¹³.

9 Responsibility thus emerges as a key element of this culture change and is regarded as a more important value than freedom, contrary to the discourse of the Big Society which values freedom from state interference¹⁴. The idea that government is prepared to ‘make use of all available levers’ to instil a culture of responsibility sounds rather coercive. This may seem surprising given that the government has embraced ‘nudge theory’ outlined in Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein’s 2008 book, *Nudge*¹⁵. According to the theory, people can be gently encouraged to change their behaviour via various unobtrusive interventions which are intended to be more effective than coercion or regulation. The idea seems to fit well with the notion of the Big Society and the small state whereby government should intervene only insofar as it helps individuals to make their own choices and take responsibility for their own lives. In July 2010, Cameron set up a ‘Behavioural Insights Team’, often referred to as the ‘Nudge Team’ to look at ways in which the theory could be applied to government policy¹⁶. The team devised a questionnaire known as ‘Signature Strengths’ which highlighted the strengths of jobseekers regardless of how they answered the questions in an attempt to boost their self-confidence and thus ‘nudge’ them towards the labour market.

10 Yet, this questionnaire was in itself coercive since it was reported that those who refused to complete it would risk losing their benefits¹⁷. Furthermore, its underlying logic was that unemployment is a rational choice – if only people can be encouraged to think differently, they will find work. This logic justifies the government taking an extremely coercive approach

towards benefits claimants, threatening them with a whole range of sanctions should they fail to find work. Indeed, the new Work Programme has notoriously imposed a series of sanctions on those who fail to comply with its requirements, ranging from a requirement to attend the unpaid four-week long Mandatory Work Activity Programme¹⁸ to having benefits cut altogether.

11 ‘Social pressure’ as a ‘lever’ of ‘cultural change’ has predominantly been brought to bear on the most disadvantaged members of society, on those who are deemed irresponsible, whose lifestyles are seen to lie outside mainstream culture. This is evident in the demonisation of benefit claimants who are frequently regarded by senior government figures as undeserving. For example, David Cameron, seeking to make political capital out of the Philpott case¹⁹, suggested that claiming benefits was ‘a sort of life choice’ since welfare discourages people from working and has created a ‘climate of dependency’²⁰. This rather authoritarian approach to cultural change has been couched in populist terms as ministers echo the mainstream media, pitting those who are seen to be deserving of state help against those who are not : the strivers against the skivers ; the workers against the shirkers²¹ ; and ‘hard working families’ against ‘people who won’t work’²². These are dichotomies which have little basis in reality²³ but appeal to a certain punitive common sense. It is in this way that the current coalition government’s project of *kulturkampf* is hegemonic : it appears to be led from below but is actually engineered from above. It is what Stuart Hall referred to as ‘authoritarian populism’²⁴.

12 Indeed, in many ways, the Big Society project is elitist. Whilst the conservatives promise to ‘give new powers and rights to neighbourhood groups’ which it describes as ‘the little platoons of civil society’²⁵, it is unlikely that these ‘platoons’ will have the freedom to act without central direction. Indeed, the military analogy suggests that the platoons will have a central leader who will impose strict discipline. Furthermore, if we look more closely at the original meaning of the term as it was used by Edmund Burke, to refer to the French aristocrats who had abandoned their traditional obligations, exhorting little platoons to rebuild society seems more like a direction to the elites to reassume their paternalistic obligations to remould society in their own image²⁶. As Barker makes clear, the notion of the platoon is vague and has the potential to be both elitist and exclusive: ‘praising the “little platoon” can sound enticing, but it is vital to find out first what the platoon does, who can join and who cannot, who the platoon commander is, and whether he has sealed orders’²⁷.

Shoring up the corporate state

13 It is important to understand the context in which the Big Society project has emerged. Although for the Conservative Party the idea has been seen as a way of marking a break from the past, of ‘detoxifying’ the party by shedding its ‘nasty’ image, it is also a way of masking the essential continuity between the coalition government and the Thatcher governments of the past (and the New Labour governments for that matter). Indeed, For Hall, the current conservative-led coalition government is much more Thatcherite than the Thatcher administrations ever were. It is, he says, ‘arguably the best prepared, most-wide-ranging, radical and ambitious of the three regimes which since the 1970s have been maturing the neoliberal project’²⁸. Indeed, in terms of the degree of privatisation, the favouring of the economic elites, the promotion of a culture of individualism and the dismantling of the welfare state, it is going further than Thatcher herself could ever have dreamed. For Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, the coalition is ‘rolling back the state to a level of intervention below that in the United States – something that is unprecedented’²⁹.

14 Despite numerous internal policy disputes within the coalition, it would seem that the Liberal Democrats, as New Labour before them, have become converted to the neoliberal project. Senior members of the party have moved further than ever before away from their New Liberal inheritance from Lloyd George and Asquith and closer to market liberalism. As Gray has noted, for Clegg and his fellow market liberals, ‘rather than being assessed according to standards of freedom and equality, the market became the fundamental norm from which any departure would in future have to be justified...If the coalition is a novelty in British politics, there is nothing that is remotely new in its ruling ideas’³⁰.

- 15 For partisans of this continuity thesis, the Big Society project is nothing more than a smokescreen for cuts, demanded as part of a neoliberal project of rolling back the state. Yet, neoliberalism as actually practiced in the UK has been about much more than cutting public expenditure – indeed under both the Thatcher and Blair governments, it continued to rise³¹. More importantly, neoliberalism involved a transfer of power away from the people and towards the private sector. If the Big Society is a smokescreen for anything, I would argue that this is it.
- 16 Although the Big Society is meant to involve a ‘plurality of providers’³², it has so far been dominated by the private sector. This is no accident but would rather appear to be a deliberate policy choice by the government which is committed to unleashing the private sector into new domains³³. Indeed, the Conservative Party manifesto in 2010 promised to ‘increase the private sector’s share of the economy in all regions of the country’³⁴, whilst Francis Maude declared, ‘there is a huge role for profit-making companies in our society and our economy’³⁵. Voluntary and charitable organisations have been squeezed out of the Big Society project in favour of the private sector³⁶. This was a problem highlighted by the House of Commons Public Administration Committee in its 2011 report on the Big Society project so far. The report notes for example that 16 of the 18 main contractors for services in the Work Programme are private sector companies³⁷. The dominant role of the private sector here is unsurprising given that civil society institutions are invited to compete for government tenders on an equal footing. As the TUC has pointed out, this means that these organisations are ‘in direct competition in an open market with private sector organisations that will compete with the advantage of economies of scale, greater access to commercial funding and the ability to undercut in price competition’³⁸.
- 17 The current government seems unconcerned about this problem and has done little to control the private sector despite grand electoral promises to ensure that ‘irresponsibility in the private sector’ will not ‘continue unchecked’³⁹. In practice, the coalition has been a staunch defender of private sector interests, arguing that boosting the sector is an essential tool in tackling unemployment. Measures in favour of business, such as reductions in corporation tax⁴⁰, are justified in terms of job creation⁴¹. Even the banking sector, widely recognised as being responsible for the current recession, is to be spared reform until 2019⁴². As Glasman has noted, there is a ‘very great timidity upon the Conservative side of the Big Society agenda in extending the critique of the state to a critique of the market’⁴³. For Kisby, ‘the altruism Cameron favours applies principally to ordinary citizens; it doesn’t apparently require a significantly greater contribution to the public good by the super-wealthy’⁴⁴.
- 18 Government’s preferential treatment of the private sector is also evident in its attempts to suppress any direct challenges to its power by ordinary citizens, in flagrant contradiction of the Big Society discourse which favours active citizenship. David Cameron declared in November 2011 that the Occupy movement could not be regarded as part of the Big Society⁴⁵ and he has done nothing to restore the right to protest that was eroded under the Blair government, despite promises to ‘restore the right to non-violent protest’⁴⁶. It would seem that active citizenship is only to be favoured in so far as that activism is narrowly constrained within parameters defined by the government.
- 19 This claim is supported by the proposed new lobbying bill which is currently making its way through Parliament. The bill is likely to severely restrict the political activities of third-party campaigning organisations, including charities and trade unions by seeking to regulate any activity which may *affect* the result of an election, whether or not there is specific *intent* to do so. This will principally be done by limiting the amount of money such organisations can spend in the year before an election (£ 390,000). Whilst this clause will apply to charitable organisations and private companies alike, the latter will continue to be able to exercise a disproportionate influence on government policy-making. Indeed, only third-party lobbyists will be forced to publish a full list of their clients whilst ‘in-house’ lobbying professionals working within large companies or lobbying organisations such as the CBI will be exempt from the new rules. In addition, the bill does nothing to control large donations to political

parties made by private companies⁴⁷. Consequently, the legislation would appear to further disempower citizens as political actors.

20 It is important to note at this point that the disproportionate increase in the power of the private sector has not been to the detriment of state power. If anything, it has allowed government to shore up its own power, revealing the Big Society as a sham. Indeed, state power has not been weakened but rather transformed. Instead of intervening in the market and society more generally in order to protect its citizens from the vicissitudes of the capitalist system, it now concentrates essentially on intervening to place the market at the service of the economic elites by opening it up to private interests. Importantly, the neoliberal state has moved beyond *government* whereby power is exercised by the state alone, to *governance*, whereby the state now governs in collaboration with a whole new variety of actors from the world of business and finance⁴⁸. These actors now form an integral part of the governing elite⁴⁹: neoliberal governance does not oppose the state and the private sectors. The two are not diametrically opposed but rather flip sides of the same coin. As John Comaroff points out, private enterprise has not replaced the state. Instead, the state itself has become a business, the primary aim of which is to encourage the accumulation of wealth⁵⁰. It is no longer the limit to the market, as the neoliberals feared and social democrats hoped, but is now an integral part of the market itself. Consequently, as Crouch has pointed out, ‘far from achieving the disappearance of state power dreamed of by libertarians, the privatizing state concentrates political power into the ellipse : a tight central nucleus, which deals predominantly with its peer elites in private business’⁵¹.

Conclusion

21 Far from placing power in the hands of the people, the discourse of the Big Society has provided a smokescreen for the further transfer of power to the private sector. Whilst the state may appear to be shrinking as responsibility for the delivery of key public services is further divested to the private sector, it has actually become ever-more powerful, driving through the cultural and economic changes necessary to favour the private accumulation of wealth. The coalition government is not so much about a coalition between the two major parties but rather about a coalition between the state and the private sector⁵². The Big Society has been the key tool used by current coalition government in its attempt to ‘remake society’ and consolidate the Thatcherite neoliberal consensus. Yet, whilst the British public appear to be more wedded to the values of that consensus than ever before⁵³, there are signs of cracks in the new consensus. There is certainly no consensus about the Big Society: public confusion about the meaning of the term persists and nearly three-quarters of people believe the project will fail⁵⁴. Furthermore, a number of recent scandals⁵⁵ have revealed the incompetence of the private sector and cast doubt over its ability to deliver better, more efficient services than the public sector. Most importantly, the failure to underpin the Big Society project by a drive to deliver social justice and to protect the voluntary sector from savage spending cuts means that the project is highly unlikely to convince people that they have been genuinely empowered. Real empowerment will only be possible under a new political settlement which seeks to curtail the power of both the state and the private sector.

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14 Edwards, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-101.

15 Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*, Penguin, 2008.

16 Thaler was recruited as an external adviser to the committee.

17 Shiv Malik, ‘Jobseekers made to carry out bogus psychometric tests’, *The Guardian*, 30 April 2013.

18 The Mandatory Work Activity Programme was introduced in May 2011. It is aimed at the long-term unemployed and entails up to 30 hours of community work per week for four weeks. Sanctions for failing to complete the programme are severe, ranging from loss of Jobseeker’s Allowance for three months for a first breach to a three year fixed benefit sanction for a third violation.

19 Mick Philpott was jailed for life in April 2013 after being found guilty of deliberately starting a fire which led to the deaths of six of his seventeen children. On account of the fact that he lived off benefits,

the Chancellor George Osborne, and much of the media, held Philpott up as the epitome of all that is wrong with the welfare system.

20 Christopher Hope and Rowena Mason, 'Benefits are not a life choice, says David Cameron', *The Daily Telegraph*, 5 April 2013.

21 Although these exact terms have not necessarily been used by ministers, they are implicit in many speeches. For example, in his 2012 conference speech, David Cameron implicitly referred to the strivers, declaring 'we are the party of the want to be better-off, those who strive to make a better life for themselves and their families – and we should never, ever be ashamed of saying so' (see David Cameron, 10 October 2012: <http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=324> [last accessed 16 July 2013]). Similarly, George Osborne in his conference speech two days earlier made a distinction between 'the shift-worker, leaving home in the dark hours of the early morning' and 'their next door neighbour sleeping off a life on benefits?' (see George Osborne, 8 October 2012: <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/politics/2012/10/george-osbornes-speech-conservative-conference-full-text> [last accessed 16 July 2013]).

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52 I'd like to thank Tim Whitton for making this point during the Q&A session at the *Observatoire de la Société Britannique* conference in Toulon, October 2013.

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À propos de l'auteur

Emma Bell

Maître de conférences à l'Université de Savoie

Droits d'auteur

Observatoire de la société britannique

Résumé

Entrées d'index

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