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The Rise and Fall of the Big Society in the UK

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1 Introduction

The resignation from Parliament in September 2016 of David Cameron, former UK Prime Minister and advocate of the 'Big Society', provides a suitable opportunity to reassess this once influential idea. The Big Society seemed at the time of the 2010 UK general election and in the early years of the coalition government to offer the prospect of a new relationship between public sector and 'third sector' of voluntary, community and neighbourhood organisations. It was not entirely new, following as it did efforts under New Labour to recast these relationships, including the establishment of the Office of the Third Sector. As Alcock, Kendall and Parry note (2012: 349) the "...policy legacy of the New Labour era...was...one in which government sought systematically to raise the profile of policy engagement with the third sector". But, if not new, the Big Society was newly articulated as a politically high-profile statement about the future of public services. In continental Europe, services including education and the broad area of social services have long been run by denominational or other voluntary organisations. Yet in the UK the remit of a Big Society did not succeed or endure and was barely mentioned in the 2015 general election, the final Big Society audit having been carried out earlier that year. No-one would now suggest, for instance, that the removal of responsibilities for children's services in Birmingham announced in May 2016, in which they will pass from local authority to a trust, is an example of the Big Society at work. It is seen instead as a failure of the local state. This gives a clue to the nature of the Big Society as something arising from a long-term change in the relationship between public and private and between public and third sector toward a permanent position of complexity. Such complexity persists, with an unpredictable outcome in a country where sectoral boundaries are not clearly defined and the Big Society is yesterday's political phrase.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the role of the Big Society within the complex pattern of contemporary service provision. It will be argued that although the Big Society was more than a mere slogan, its relevance was transient and it has had little impact on practice, precisely because of the complexity of service provision and its uncertain relationship to the values of public service.

2 Public and Private

Historically it has been assumed there is a clear boundary between private and public sectors, alongside, in policy terms, a clear distinction between responses based on the State or on the free market (eg, Loney et al, 1987). The assault on public provision from the 1979 general election onward presaged a growing place for the private sector organisation in providing what was previously the domain of the local or central State. In Western liberal democracies the State

retreated in favour of the market. Globally, the State provision of former communist countries in Eastern Europe, or the still notionally communist China, has given way to private sector industry and private ownership. Superficially, this suggests a unidirectional and straightforward move from public to private and the question is posed of whether there is a discrete public sector organisation anymore. We suggest that there is a distinct and identifiable public sector organisation which continues to be distinguished from the private sector in its overall funding, its legal structure and powers, its ownership, its objectives and, not least, its values. The first four items on this list are matters of empirical fact, formally defined, but the fifth may require more consideration and is open to a more nuanced debate in relation to the Third Sector. It could be argued that the values of the public organisation – predicated crucially upon an ethic of public service – are the factors which, aside from legal and structural factors, truly differentiate public from private sectors. This might be countered by pointing out that services such as housing, health services and education could be, and manifestly are, provided by the private sector too. Yet there is a fundamental difference. The public authority providing child care, education or another service does so as an end-in-itself, whether according to a statutory requirement or a permissive power. The private organisation doing the same thing does so in order to make a return on investment: if it did not, it would go out of business. Public provision is, at heart, separated out from the pure market, an echo of the simple State-vs-market debates of previous decades

Private producers also produce public goods. It may not matter much to a service user if a bus or train service is in public, private or community ownership so long as they can afford a ticket and can arrive at the intended destination. Similarly it may be irrelevant to those receiving services that the provider is motivated ultimately by the need to make a return rather than some abstract ethic of public service. Yet it would suddenly become highly relevant if the private provider went out of business, as in the case of Southern Cross residential homes which faced a financial crisis in 2011 when landlords of all 752 of its care homes decided to leave this private care group. In such an example, the difference between public and private sectors suddenly becomes quite stark: just as clearly differentiated as it has ever been, and especially so for the vulnerable people receiving care. The consequences of not being part of the local public sector would be immediate and real in their impact on staff and on children. The economic meltdown of economies around the globe from 2008 onward has also demonstrated that, in extreme circumstances, the boundaries of private and public sectors remain real but fluid. The global economic crisis demonstrated that the public sector, underwritten by government and public money, performs a rescue function in relation to private organisations that are otherwise heading for failure, bringing social disintegration in its likely wake. The most striking example is the degree of public money devoted to the rescue of private sector banks in countries around the world, irrespective of national ideologies. Several years later, major sections of the banking industry across the West remain in public hands as the private sector demonstrates its lack of capacity to take on the ownership role it previously exercised. The history of the Northern Rock building society which passed from mutual status to private sector, then nationalisation, before private ownership once more demonstrates sectoral fluidity.

The public-private sectoral boundary remains complex. Local authorities, the National Health Service and government departments depend upon private money as well as public funding. Local public services, such as environmental services, may be provided by private contractors, a situation that now seems uncontroversial but was contentious when first introduced in the 1980s in the form of

Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) and was later reinforced through the processes of Best Value. UK governments, of different party-political affiliation, were now committed to the private provision of local public services. Today, local leisure services may frequently be provided by leisure trusts (a diverse group of organisations which includes charitable bodies and social enterprises or other ‘third sector’ forms) rather than directly by local authorities: such trusts are not ‘new’ (having existed since the early twentieth century), but their recent growth has been rapid. Housing services in England may commonly be provided by Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs), established in 2002 during the New Labour years – again, not directly by the local authority itself. In short, a range of what are still understood to be public services are provided by organisations beyond the accepted boundaries of the public sector: these providers include private companies as well as a variety of trusts, arms-length management bodies, charitable organisations and community-based organisations. The public organisation itself remains significant in many circumstances as the commissioning body - procuring the services from contractors who have to provide a service to a specification – but not as the direct provider.

3 Origins of the Big Society

Prior to the 2010 general election in the United Kingdom, third sector organisations were already active participants in collaborative public service arrangements including the Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) which were significant vehicles for ‘joined up’ planning and delivery at local level, frequently led by the host local authority (Fenwick, Johnston-Miller and McTavish, 2012). Between 2006 and 2010, the Office of the Third Sector, resourced by government, sought to develop an active third sector within the overall pattern of public services. This third-sector theme was taken up within the broad Big Society of the coalition government formed in 2010.

Westwood has argued that the Big Society served as “an expression and a home” for theories of social capital: the notion that relationships of trust, solidarity and shared values in communities can be mustered for social good (2011: 691). Jesse Norman, Conservative MP, characterised the Big Society as a new way of looking at the relationship between the individual and the State (2010: 6). It references debates about the passive or the active self and about Amartya Sen’s approach to human capabilities (Norman 2010: 129). For Norman, the Big Society is consistent with a compassionate conservatism which thoroughly rejects any idea that the State knows best. For him it goes considerably beyond any idea that State services should be transferred to the third sector (2010: 201): it includes that, but is fundamentally a radical conservative idea, and one, he says, with a long pedigree. The problem here is that Norman gives a scholarly account of something that will not quite bear the weight of his analysis: the Big Society may in principle be something that is a powerful strand of compassionate conservatism but, in practical terms, it amounted to much less.

Norman also claims that the message of Wilkinson and Pickett’s groundbreaking *The Spirit Level* (2010) is far more supportive of a Big Society than is generally thought to be the case. The book is a critique of inequality and of its implications across many areas of life (including health, education and other aspects well-being), spelling out in fine empirical detail how the index of health and social problems is greater in more unequal societies like the UK (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010: 174). But for Norman, the *Spirit Level* is also a critique of the State’s inability to remedy this state of affairs.

How then is effective public service to be enacted in the context of shrinking State funding and reducing direct State provision? This problem was dealt with in the Thatcher era through straightforward privatisation: as the State pulls back, so private companies step in (eg Shaw, Fenwick and Foreman 1994). New forms of service provision arose represented by a Third Sector which seemed to offer the prospect of public services unencumbered by increased direct taxation, presented in a language of public service appealing to many across the political spectrum. Yet this was illusory.

There were and are problems in defining what this Third Sector is: comprising voluntary organisations, charities, community enterprises, co-operative organisations, philanthropic initiatives and social enterprise and entrepreneurship. The consequent difficulty, in both theory and practice, was that the nature of the Big Society was never wholly clear; it was woolly and vague. But that – like all winning political messages – was its attraction. It relied on an emotional, sometimes unstated, appeal that Government was too big and that Society (contrary to Thatcher’s belief that there was no such thing) was not big enough. This reflected “the Coalition’s belief that depending considerably on the state has taken away individual personal responsibility, increased bureaucracy and led to community breakdown” (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012: 30).

4 Complexity

However positive the political rhetoric of public, private and voluntary realignment may be, it is evident that public and private sectors do not always work happily alongside each other. It is also clear that placing the private sector in the lead role may prove to be staggeringly unsuccessful, as these two examples demonstrate:

- In 2010 Suffolk County Council began what has come to be known as the ‘Suffolk experiment’ wherein the ‘Big Society’ would be enacted as practice: most services would be outsourced, direct spending cut back massively, and jobs disappear, leaving only a ‘virtual council’ in place (Tizard 2010). By 2011 the plans already were starting to unravel. Political leadership within the ruling Conservative administration changed. There was personal tragedy as well as professional crisis amongst managers. Subsequently the controversial Chief Executive, who had driven through the initial experiment, would also depart. The political leadership retreated from what it described as a ‘revolution’ in the organisation and delivery of local public services.
- A different example from Edinburgh similarly demonstrates that public and private sectors may not always re-align happily (Accounts Commission 2011). Work began on the city’s tram project in 2009. After much delay and costs that far exceeded the original construction price, the surviving project has been significantly cut back, from two major lines to one line, linking the city centre to the airport. “The one line tram system, running 8.7 miles from Edinburgh Airport to York Place in the city centre, opened in 2014, five years late and around £400m over the original budget”. (Scottish Construction Now 2016). The original contractor is no longer involved. There has been substantial reconstruction of some sections that were earlier deemed to be complete. Different commentators will offer different explanations about why the Edinburgh tram project went so drastically wrong: initial failures in

specification and pricing, private sector failure, political failure amongst Edinburgh city council's several competing parties, or the role of the Scottish government. Whatever view is taken, and notwithstanding its eventual completion in a truncated form, it is an example of failure, and one that points to the problematic relationships between public and private sectors. These relationships do not fall into place automatically or smoothly and this is a key lesson of the new dynamics of public service.

This new dynamic is not to return to outmoded debates of State vs private sector, but to emphasise the lasting complexity of public policy provision. The Big Society was one passing response to an ever more complex system of public service. We are now in an era beyond modernism and the assurance of 'big' solutions whether of the Right or Left (Fenwick and McMillan 2010). We make sense with what we've got. Complexity is the key theme. There is not a linear path to be followed, for the world is complex and even chaotic (Geyer 2003). The Big Society had its moment but that is all it could be.

5 Reshaping Boundaries and Understanding Complexity

The issue can be addressed in the language of values. A public service ethic potentially links the third sector and public sector closely together on the normative level, bound by certain values of common endeavour. However, the concept of a distinctive ethic is not without its problems. Greener (2013) for instance correctly reminds us that a distinctive public service ethic can be viewed negatively as well as positively. So there should be no idealised notion of how the values and ethic of the public organisation are perceived. Indeed, perception is a key term here, and one which is likely to vary between societies and cultures, or in the same society at different times. The perception of 'public sector' in Western European countries is not the same today as it was in the 1970s. Political and economic change has modified public perceptions of the public sector and, in some countries at least, amplified its negative connotations. Indeed it is a major element of a conservative political narrative to weld 'public sector' firmly to inefficiency, waste and idleness, its staff protected from something conjured up as the real world. Indeed, beyond Western Europe, there is no doubt that in parts of the world 'public sector' corresponds to delay, inefficiency and corruption. The idea of a warm and fluffy public service ethic would be greeted with derision.

"Thus the Big Society, as conceived here, is not a mere political slogan. It is a so far largely instinctual attempt to tap into and release...latent social energy" (Norman 2010: 8).

The optimistic tone of Norman's comments was not borne out by political developments, and, in retrospect, the seeds of the Big Society's decline may have been there from the start. Parry, Alcock and Kendall (2010: 31) report the view that even in 2010 it "didn't play well on the doorstep". Its meaning was less than clear. At present, public service reform continues unabated: the growth of devolved regional governance in England; the uncertain rise of directly elected mayors; the atrophy of local government; and the transfer of successful State enterprises (such as the East Coast mainline) into corporate private ownership. This is the complexity of practice, mirroring the theoretical complexity that replaced old and now outmoded distinctions between public and private, State and market. Governing such complexity is the key current task of public policy, and it is one requiring resilience and new skills and knowledge beyond the old paradigms (Chandler 2014). The

present reality is more complex and muddled than that of a Big Society edging out the state; there is instead a diffused response to a complexity in which the state itself is changing.

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