Introduction: the Big Society

In May 2010, Britain’s new coalition government took office, committed to introducing the ‘Big Society’. It was an idea that David Cameron had chosen to make his defining offer to the British people, since being elected leader of the Conservative Party in December 2005. The phrase was a self-conscious neologism, an attempt to distinguish Cameron’s Conservative Party both from what was characterised as New Labour’s statism, and from the Conservative Party’s own hitherto unsympathetic public image. As a concept, the Big Society was embraced and derided, adopted and rejected in equal measure across party lines: it raised the suspicions of many more traditional Conservatives, while the left were divided between those who saw it as a cover for cuts to public spending, and those who wished to embrace community activism as a long-term way of revitalising their political fortunes. And yet, the novelty of the phrasing and the mixed reaction to the idea notwithstanding, the Big Society is in many ways a contemporary expression of longstanding ideas, embedded within much older debates over the respective roles of voluntarism and the state in British society.

In constructing his notion of the Big Society, Cameron melded liberal, conservative and progressive critiques of contemporary Britain, in order to demonstrate to the widest possible audience that current ways of doing things were irretrievably broken. From traditional Conservatism, he took the idea that the state had become too large, an overbearing presence that was stripping people of their sense of personal and social responsibility. He invoked a golden age of community and kindness, which had been smothered by the expansion of big government. From liberalism, Cameron introduced the idea that in its bloated form, the state was no longer accountable to its citizens, and thus co-opted civil libertarian concerns over surveillance and unchecked state power into his overall theme. From the left, meanwhile, he used the failure of the progressive dream against the centralising, Fabian bureaucracy the public were invited to see before them, while distinguishing himself from Thatcherism by asserting that the Big Society could be no simple exercise in rolling...
back the state. Society would not automatically flower in the ground vacated by
government.

Instead, government was needed to coax society back into life. The state, it
was conceded, had made enormous progressive strides, at least up until the late
1960s. But in recent years, social mobility and progress had stalled, despite ever
larger amounts of taxpayers’ money being spent. The logic was that a different
approach was now needed, in the face of state failure. Decentralisation, transparency
and accountability were to be the methods. The means would be found in social
entrepreneurs, community activists, and by giving people once again the means
and encouragement to participate in the running of their country. The relationship
between the state and society should be reversed, the overbearing master being
transformed into the faithful servant.

The idea of the Big Society takes its place as the latest in a long line of critiques
of the relationship between society and the state. It is relatively unusual amongst
these narratives in that it deliberately seeks to borrow from a variety of political
traditions. At the same time, it is entirely typical. Its central premise is that things
were once different, society was once ordered in a better way, and that somehow
government and citizens have since lost the path of righteousness. In other words,
the Big Society is normative in that it takes a particular time and place, real or
imagined, and argues that diversions from this norm are necessarily wrong. The
first part of this chapter briefly reviews how common such thinking has been
amongst those who have thought and written about voluntarism, campaigning
and participation. As will be clear, the evidence base for assessing the wide range
of voluntary activity is not ideal. However, such evidence that does exist suggests
that change, not decline (or even revival) is the key to understanding the reality of
social activism in Britain. The main part of the chapter is given over to reviewing
the evidence that does exist and concluding that ultimately, activism reflects the
society from which it comes. As society changes and develops, so does activism.
Change is the key.

Tunnel visions

Commentary on associational life, volunteering and citizen engagement is
dominated by four broad concepts. Firstly, there is a conservative critique that
sees the advance of the state in the twentieth century as having stifled voluntary
and informal activity. Secondly, and in some ways complementing the conservative
critique, there is a body of literature that champions the importance of associational
life to liberal democracies, and which has recently focused on the question of
whether associational life has declined since the mid twentieth century. (The impact
of both of these schools of thought can be seen in the concept of the Big Society.) A
third school of thought, much of it coming from a more radical perspective, looks
to the social changes of the mid century, particularly increased levels of affluence
and education, and detects a more confident, critical citizenry. And finally, there is a
diverse body of work on apathy and disengagement, which argues that people have
become detached from the traditional processes of engagement and accountability