



## Japan Local Government Centre, London

### Monthly Report for August 2010 (UK) – The Big Society

#### **Background**

The so-called 'Big Society' was first trailed in the run-up to the 2010 General Election as the 'big idea' behind a future Conservative Government under David Cameron and it has since become official HM Government policy, as part of the Coalition's Programme for Government.

The policy has its roots in a number of areas. Firstly, as part of David Cameron's modernisation strategy to 'decontaminate' the Conservative Party 'brand', the policy was advanced, particularly by chief adviser and Tory strategist Steve Hilton, as a means to overcome the public perception (as identified by then Chairman and future Home Secretary Theresa May) that they were seen as the "nasty party" in British politics (2002 Conservative Conference speech). Such perceptions arose from the statements made under previous Conservative governments, such as Margaret Thatcher's "no such thing as society" comments given in a 1987 interview, John Major's "if it's not hurting then it's not working" (on his economic policies) and Chancellor Norman Lamont's belief that high unemployment was "a price worth paying" for lower inflation. Secondly, the policy could be seen as in keeping with longstanding tenets of Conservative political thought and traditions, such as the emphasis on voluntarism and philanthropy rather than state action, central or local, to improve the lives of the less well off. The belief here is that the state is wasteful and encourages a dependency culture on its activities, whereas voluntary sector organisations have better insights into people's needs and the involvement of service users in their delivery enables a better focus and eliminates wasteful activity. While the British variant is firmly rooted in Tory philosopher Edmund Burke's concept of the 'little platoons' of civil society, the origin is more akin to Cicero's *societas civilis*.

The need for a 'big idea' in government has been present in British politics since the premiership of Margaret Thatcher and her 'shareholding (or home owning) democracy', whereas John Major preferred the so-called 'classless society'. Tony Blair alternated between the 'stakeholder society', the 'Third Way' and the 'Respect agenda'. The premiership of Gordon Brown was perhaps notable for the absence of any such 'big idea'.

Reaction to the policy has been understandably mixed. *The Times* hailed it as "an impressive attempt to reframe the role of government and unleash entrepreneurial spirit", while *The Economist* praised it as "The West's most daring government".

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The opposition Labour Party accused the government of “cynically attempting to dignify its cuts agenda, by dressing up the withdrawal of support with the language of reinvigorating civic society”, while its largest trade union affiliate Unite said that “The ‘Big Society’ is smoke and mirrors for an avalanche of privatisation under the Tories.” One journalist described it as “incomprehensibly vague” however, and many Conservative activists and MPs claimed they found it hard to describe when talking to voters during the election.

### ***Building the Big Society***

The five central principles of the Big Society cross-government programme were announced by Prime Minister David Cameron and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg on May 18:

1. Give communities more powers
2. Encourage people to take an active role in their communities
3. Transfer power from central to local government
4. Support co-ops, mutuals, charities and social enterprises
5. Publish government data

The work will be taken forward by Minister for the Cabinet Office Francis Maude, who said at the launch: *“Today heralds the end of Whitehall bureaucrats micro-managing public services – it’s not efficient and it doesn’t work. People know what is best for them and their community, and it is Government’s job to make this happen as cost-effectively as possible.”* The government also appointed Nat Wei, the founder of the Teach First programme, as a member of the House of Lords and as its adviser on the Big Society, working with Francis Maude. In August it announced a Big Society De-Regulation Taskforce under the chairmanship of Lord Hodgson to examine ways in which to reduce bureaucratic burdens on the third sector.

### **Make localism and the Big Society part of everyday life**

In its July 2010 Structural Reform Plan agreed with 10 Downing Street, the Department for Communities and Local Government outlined its five priorities as follows:

1. Make localism and the Big Society part of everyday life – *by decentralising power as far as possible: Trust people to take control of the decisions that affect them by devolving power closer to neighbourhoods, increasing citizen participation, promoting community ownership, lifting inspection burdens on councils and removing regional government*
2. Make localism and the Big Society part of everyday life – *by meeting people’s housing aspirations: Meet people’s housing aspirations by streamlining and speeding up the planning system, providing local authorities with strong and transparent incentives to facilitate housing growth, as well as making the provision of social housing more flexible*

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3. Make localism and the Big Society part of everyday life – *by putting communities in charge of planning: Give local people and communities far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which they live by radically reforming the planning system and offering incentives for development and growth*
4. Make localism and the Big Society part of everyday life – *by increasing accountability: Reinvigorate local accountability, democracy and participation by freeing local government from central and regional control, decentralising power, providing greater freedoms and flexibilities to local government and simplifying and deregulating local government finance*
5. Make localism and the Big Society part of everyday life – *by letting people see how their money is being spent: Let local people know who is spending their money and what it is being spent on by publishing financial and performance data online – ‘show me the money’*

The last part is a reference by Secretary of State Eric Pickles to the 1996 Cameron Crowe film *Jerry Maguire*, which he frequently cites as the inspiration behind his belief in government transparency.

### **Big Society Communities**

In his 19 July announcement on the next stage of the Big Society programme, David Cameron said that four ‘vanguard’ local authorities had been chosen to lead the delivery of the programme in practice. They are the London Borough of Sutton, the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, Eden District Council and Liverpool City Council. Their activities will be financed by a new independent Big Society Bank which will ensure that all money in dormant bank accounts is used for social purpose. The four pilots are:

- moving a community centre to a site chosen by the community; building a renewable energy generation project; a community buy-out of a local pub; providing community broadband access (Eden)
- transparency of local spending decisions; participatory budgeting for parks budget; delegating budgets to streets; devolving further powers to parishes (Windsor & Maidenhead)
- boosting volunteering at a number of key museums; creating a social enterprise to produce films and content for digital platforms; developing neighbourhood media and cultural activities in poorer areas (Liverpool)
- establishing greater freedom to implement sustainable transport schemes and influence the provision of local public transport; identifying ‘place shaping’ champions who can build good practice in greener living; supporting the creation of a project involving young people that invests in the local community (Sutton)

The Big Society Bank will be established by April 2011 and Co-operative Financial Services have expressed interest in undertaking the role.

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