



# The Big Society in Context:

A means to what end?

Dr Guy Brandon  
Jubilee Centre

# The Big Society in Context:

A means to what end?

Dr Guy Brandon  
Jubilee Centre

Copyright © Jubilee Centre 2011

The author has asserted his rights under Section 77 of the Copyright, Design & Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the Author of this work.

First printed in 2011

Published by the Jubilee Centre  
Jubilee House, 3 Hooper Street, Cambridge CB1 2NZ

Freely available to download from [www.jubilee-centre.org](http://www.jubilee-centre.org)

Cover photo © Shaun Dunmall

All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, mechanical, electronic, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Jubilee Centre.

# Contents

Introduction	vii
Executive Summary	1
What is the 'Big Society'?	3
The Theology of Government	11
Measuring the Big Society	19
The role of the Church in the Big Society	25
Conclusion: towards a better society	29

# Introduction

The 'Big Society' is a new political initiative intended to decrease the size and scope of government with the effect of enabling local communities, families and individuals by passing power and responsibility to them. Thus, speaking in 2009, David Cameron promised 'We will take power from the central state and give it to individuals where possible... Where it doesn't make sense to give power directly to individuals, for example where there is a function that is collective in nature, then we will transfer power to neighbourhoods... Where neighbourhood empowerment is not practical we will redistribute power to the lowest possible tier of government...'<sup>1</sup>

The proposal raises several questions, for instance: Should government power and responsibility really be passed to local communities, families and individuals? Do local communities etc. have the capacity and willingness to take on additional power and responsibility? Is a bigger society necessarily a better thing? And what might a bigger and better society look like?

These questions remain unanswered and the coalition government seems content to allow different groups and individuals to read their own agendas into the Big Society script. While such an approach may appear to build political consensus in the short-term, when people discover that their concept of the Big Society no longer resonates with what the government eventually implements, in the long-term it is likely to result in feelings of betrayal and further disillusionment with politics.

This report therefore takes a step back from the whirlwind of day-to-day departmental policy-making to

address these more fundamental questions and to ask what can be learnt from previous 'Big Societies'. Many of the aims of the Big Society, it will be seen, seem to tie in with biblical ideals about the role of the state. However, a more critical analysis also reveals that the government could learn much about how to nurture a society that is not only bigger but also better.

Jubilee Centre argues that more needs to be said about the ends rather than just the means of Big Society, for it is the ends that really matter – for instance, poverty, inequality, unemployment, social mobility, family breakdown, and educational failure – and it is the ends by which its success will be measured, and by which we can direct its formation. Our analysis concludes that, while there are various areas that government currently impinges on unnecessarily, there are some tasks that only it can achieve adequately. The church has a duty to make sure government keeps to its remit of bringing about the necessary conditions for the common good to flourish.

At present red tape prevents people from volunteering and recent restrictions risk deterring those people who are typically found at the heart of local communities: namely, people of faith. In reality it is therefore highly unlikely that any Big Society ambitions can succeed without the help of faith groups. Motivated by a love of neighbour, Christians will want to take any new opportunities that arise to play a greater role in their communities, including starting social enterprises and bringing biblical principles and social transformation agendas to business. The church must also be prepared, however, to defend its own autonomy and help promote religious freedoms.

John Hayward  
Executive Director  
Jubilee Centre  
February 2011

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/11/David\\_Cameron\\_The\\_Big\\_Society.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/11/David_Cameron_The_Big_Society.aspx) (accessed 17/11/2010)

## Executive Summary

- Despite being the flagship Conservative election policy and later taken up by the Coalition government, the 'Big Society' initiative has been surrounded by confusion and is widely misunderstood by the public.
- The Big Society is ultimately intended to be the solution to the social problems of 'Broken Britain'; however, the means by which this will work have not been strongly articulated.
- In part, the confusion reflects the elusive and emergent nature of the initiative, and a language of process rather than targets; spending cuts have also led to a focus on fears about public service provision and the possible consequences of 'rolling back the state'.
- Christians and other faith groups are likely to be at the forefront of the Big Society initiative, since churches are already closely involved in their communities and have local knowledge, resources and volunteers. This means that it is of particular interest what the Big Society proposals mean for the Church.
- Political theology and a study of the principles of ideal government described in the Bible are helpful in both articulating and giving a rationale for the Big Society proposals.
- Biblical scepticism about government is based on the tendency for concentrated power to lead to the progressive abuse and disempowerment of its citizens.
- Principles of political theology most relevant to the Big Society are **subsidiarity** (the ideal of devolving power to the lowest appropriate level), which must be balanced against **solidarity** (the requirement for state intervention to look after the disadvantaged) with the intention of maintaining **human dignity** and, ultimately, promoting the **common good**.
- On this understanding, the task of government is to **create the conditions under which society might thrive through the direct [and most effective] action and responsibility of individuals, families and local organisations, rather than forcing change itself**.
- Understood in these terms, as a means of reducing government interference in the interests of strengthening the 'welfare society' – the erosion of which by unnecessary government intervention has led to the social injustices described in *Breakdown Britain* – the Big Society is an inherently biblical idea.
- Equally, the government should not be allowed to sidestep its responsibilities by passing them to third sector organisations. It is not just people and communities that need to 'take more responsibility' and 'act more responsibly': the state is also expected to fulfil *its* responsibilities.
- The government needs to give greater public clarity to what it thinks the Big Society objective actually involves – particularly whether it is talking about a **process** or its **ends**.
- If we create thousands more charities, social enterprises and armies of volunteers and community organisers but poverty and inequality are higher than ever before and figures for crime, educational failure and social cohesion are worse, then the Big Society initiative will rightly be judged a failure.
- Endorsement by Christians must be dependent on the detail of the proposals; faith groups must be free to carry out their work effectively rather than hampered by unnecessary bureaucracy and conditions to partnerships, or further restrictions on freedom of conscience.
- The Big Society is not just about volunteering. Christian involvement also needs to extend to starting social enterprises and bringing biblical principles and social transformation agendas to business.
- There are, therefore, many opportunities for churches, but several areas of concern remain.



# What is the 'Big Society'?

*"[The Big Society] explains how an ancient theory of human flourishing can be used to develop a far richer conception of human character and well-being. And it shows how that concept can be used to guide public policy today, in the Britain of the 21st century."*

Jesse Norman MP, "The Big Society", p.11

The 'Big Society' - presented as an alternative to Labour's Big Government - was the flagship election pledge of the Conservatives, adopted by the Lib-Dem/Conservative coalition in May 2010. Its ambition was to reduce the size, cost and interference of government, instead handing back power, responsibility and accountability to local people and communities:<sup>2</sup>

'We want to give citizens, communities and local government the power and information they need to come together, solve the problems they face and build the Britain they want. We want society - the families, networks, neighbourhoods and communities that form the fabric of so much of our everyday lives - to be bigger and stronger than ever before.'<sup>3</sup> The commitment was that this initiative will be adopted across every government department.

In a speech on 19 July 2010, David Cameron explained: '[B]efore I get into the details, let me briefly explain what the Big Society is and why it is such a powerful idea. 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. The Big Society is about a huge culture change 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.'

Key commitments of the Big Society, according to the government, include:<sup>4</sup>

## 1. Give communities more powers

- We will radically reform the planning system to give neighbourhoods far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which their inhabitants live.
- We will introduce new powers to help communities save local facilities and services threatened with closure, and give communities the right to bid to take over local state-run services.
- We will train a new generation of community organisers and support the creation of neighbourhood groups across the UK, especially in the most deprived areas.

## 2. Encourage people to take an active role in their communities

- We will take a range of measures to encourage volunteering and involvement in social action, including launching a national 'Big Society Day' and making regular community involvement a key element of civil service staff appraisals.
- We will take a range of measures to encourage charitable giving and philanthropy.
- We will introduce a National Citizen Service. The initial flagship project will provide a programme for 16 year olds to give them a chance to develop the skills needed to be active and responsible citizens, mix with people from different backgrounds, and start getting involved in their communities.

## 3. Transfer power from central to local government

- We will promote the radical devolution of power and greater financial autonomy to local government, including a full review of local government finance.
- We will give councils a general power of competence.
- We will abolish Regional Spatial Strategies and return decision-making powers on housing and planning to local councils.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/topstorynews/2010/05/big-society-50248>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/407789/building-big-society.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Details at <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/407789/building-big-society.pdf>. See further at [http://www.conservatives.com/news/news\\_stories/2010/03/~/\\_media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/Building-a-Big-Society.ashx](http://www.conservatives.com/news/news_stories/2010/03/~/_media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/Building-a-Big-Society.ashx)

[com/news/news\\_stories/2010/03/~/\\_media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/Building-a-Big-Society.ashx](http://www.conservatives.com/news/news_stories/2010/03/~/_media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/Building-a-Big-Society.ashx)

#### 4. Support co-ops, mutuals, charities and social enterprises

- We will support the creation and expansion of mutuals, co-operatives, charities and social enterprises, and support these groups to have much greater involvement in the running of public services.
- We will give public sector workers a new right to form employee-owned co-operatives and bid to take over the services they deliver. This will empower millions of public sector workers to become their own boss and help them to deliver better services.
- We will use funds from dormant bank accounts to establish a Big Society Bank, which will provide new finance for neighbourhood groups, charities, social enterprises and other nongovernmental bodies.

#### 5. Publish government data

- We will create a new 'right to data' so that government-held datasets can be requested and used by the public, and then published on a regular basis.
- We will oblige the police to publish detailed local crime data statistics every month, so the public can get proper information about crime in their neighbourhoods and hold the police to account for their performance.

These are questions of *how* the Big Society will be delivered. Less has been said about the ultimate *ends* of the initiative (or the reasons that the points above will deliver them), but tentative, tantalising glimpses of the desired aims are nevertheless evident, scattered between longer explanations of matters of process: 'Only when people and communities are given more power and take more responsibility can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all.'<sup>5</sup> We understand a 'bigger' society to be, amongst other things, one that is fairer and more equal. Those ultimate aims are ones that most people would surely agree with, and provide a framework within which to unpack and examine the effects and success of the various methods described above in delivering the Big Society.

### Big Society as an antidote to Breakdown Britain?

'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

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/407789/building-big-society.pdf>

communities, giving people the opportunity to take more control over their lives.' (Conservative Manifesto, 2010)

Supposedly, the Big Society 'was not conceived to deal primarily with poverty although many behind it believe it can ultimately be more effective at tackling it than Statism.'<sup>6</sup> However, it does appear that this was a large part of the context in which it originally arose, as the Conservatives' practical solution in power to their analysis in opposition of what was wrong with the country, articulated in detail in the *Breakdown Britain* report.<sup>7</sup>

'Broken Britain' was described in terms of five interlocking 'pathways to poverty': family breakdown, educational failure, worklessness and economic dependence, addiction, and indebtedness. However, the reasons for these aspects of, and pathways to poverty were rather more amorphous and difficult to quantify. Chief amongst the identified causes was the breakdown of 'welfare society' - those groups beyond the State that deliver welfare, including the family, voluntary and third sectors. These groups deliver far more than the state could ever hope to achieve, and yet government bureaucracy itself was blamed with hampering their effectiveness: 'too often their work is stifled both by central and local government which often appear incapable of recognising the key attributes of third sector organisations (TSOs) such as their independence, enthusiasm, innovation, commitment and diversity that are essential to their success.'<sup>8</sup> Critically, the report noted the government's preference in working with a small number of large TSOs - despite the effectiveness of smaller, more local organisations in providing personal services - on the grounds that 'they appear more professional and can better emulate the way Government operates.'<sup>9</sup>

The expansion of the welfare state - which accelerated under the preceding Labour government - was paralleled by the decline in welfare society, and the report's conclusion impresses the need to revive this. 'The interconnected nature of the pathways to poverty described necessitates an interconnected response. This must include scope for local solutions to be developed that are enabled rather than dictated by government. Strengthening the welfare society must be at the centre of the process of renewal. For too long governments have stripped responsibility from citizens and been indifferent to the important local structures that

<sup>6</sup> <http://natwei.wordpress.com/2011/01/03/new-year-in-shoreditch-our-poverty-versus-our-capacity-to-give> (accessed 19/1/2011).

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/default.asp?pageref=180>

<sup>8</sup> *Breakdown Britain*, executive summary, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20.



surround them and give them their quality of life. This is what Dr Dick Atkinson refers to in his excellent book, “Mending the Hole in the Social Ozone layer.” In this book he describes how when the bonds that tie people together, such as marriage, loosen, not only families suffer but whole communities decay as well. His description of the effect on Balsall Heath is an experience many will recognise around the country. He is right and this report seeks to show how this is happening to our families and communities on a worrying scale.<sup>10</sup>

In a speech made on April 27, 2010, David Cameron directly linked the size of government with the social problems described in Breakdown Britain, arguing that Big Society provided the only credible answer. ‘We have arrived at this point in our society for a number of reasons, many completely divorced from politics and what government does. But I am certain that government is a big part of the problem – its size has now reached a point where it is actually making our social problems worse. That’s because by trying to do too much, it has drained the lifeblood of a strong society – personal and social responsibility.’<sup>11</sup>

Finally, after nine months of government, came the clearest statement yet that the Big Society agenda is a direct response to the social problems of ‘Broken Britain’. ‘I think we need a social recovery because... there are too many parts of our society that are broken: whether it is broken families or some communities breaking down; whether it is the level of crime, the level of gang membership; whether it’s problems of people stuck on welfare, unable to work; whether it’s the sense that some of our public services don’t work for us; we do need a social recovery to mend the broken society and to me that’s what the big society is all about.’<sup>12</sup> Even then, this theme was not widely explored.

The Big Society has still not been clearly enough articulated to be certain of its aims. However, the proposed reduction in stifling bureaucracy and infantilising government interference laid out in the Big Society policy objectives (see above) is not expected to solve the country’s social problems *in and of itself*, but to *recreate the conditions under which people are free to help themselves and those around them*, and for community and third-sector organisations to carry out their objectives without obstruction from a well-meaning but heavy-handed state.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 106. Balsall Heath was known for crime, prostitution and dereliction in the 1980s, but was regenerated by a grassroots movement by local residents.

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/04/David\\_Cameron\\_Lets\\_mend\\_our\\_broken\\_society.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/04/David_Cameron_Lets_mend_our_broken_society.aspx)

<sup>12</sup> David Cameron, in a speech on 14/2/2011. See <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2011/02/pms-speech-on-big-society-60563> (accessed 16/2/2011).

## Criticism by third parties

Criticism for the idea of Big Society has been far-reaching, from politicians and media groups, in its cynicism over both the theory and the practice of it. Labour have warned that Big Society is simply a cover for what it believes are unnecessarily deep spending cuts, and that these are being made on ideological (the desire for small government) rather than pragmatic (cutting the deficit) grounds. Unions have suggested that Big Society is a front for privatisation and a cheap way of getting volunteers to take on the roles that were previously the responsibility of government – inevitably leading to substandard public services. Such criticisms have arisen despite David Cameron’s repeated claim: ‘This is not about trying to save money, it is about trying to have a bigger, better society.’<sup>13</sup> Others have stated that, rather than empower communities, it will lead to the poorest and most disadvantaged becoming even more marginalised.

In early February, Liverpool City Council pulled out of a Big Society pilot on the grounds that the coalition’s cuts were undermining the efforts and threatening the future of many community organisations.<sup>14</sup> In the same week, the outgoing executive director of Community Service Volunteers, Dame Elisabeth Hoodless – ‘a senior figure in the volunteering sector’ – also warned that cuts were ‘destroying’ volunteer numbers.<sup>15</sup> Some charities even began legal action against the government as a result of cuts they perceived as unfair.<sup>16</sup>

The electorate, too, although sympathetic to some of the issues that the Big Society idea sought to address,<sup>17</sup> found it a little too intangible and open to misinterpretation for it to have real traction – arguably one reason the Conservatives did not gain a majority. It was not poll tested until the month before the election, and when polls were carried out in mid-April, voters proved uncertain and unsympathetic.

We understand a ‘bigger’ society to be, amongst other things, one that is fairer and more equal.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., *The Independent*, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/cameron-says-big-society-is-not-about-saving-money-2029927.html> (accessed 3/11/2010).

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-12357450> (accessed 16/2/2011).

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/feb/07/cuts-undermining-big-society-charity-chief> (accessed 16/2/2011).

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., <http://www.thisisnottingham.co.uk/news/charity-launches-legal-action-ludicrous-cuts/article-3127473-detail/article.html> (accessed 16/2/2011).

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=2616>

‘Politicians of the young and slick variety are often accused of dressing up hollow ideas in alluring language. David Cameron, PR man-turned-prime minister, found a way of giving a promising set of ideas a lousy name. The “big society” was his theme for this year’s general election campaign. As a sign of how well it went down with voters, he now has to share power with the Liberal Democrats.’

– *The Economist*<sup>18</sup>

Many Conservatives themselves did not think that it should have been an election centrepiece.<sup>19</sup> Months after the election, Conservative MPs were still expressing uncertainty about what the ‘Big Society’ meant.<sup>20</sup>

Journalists also betrayed their difficulties in grappling with what it was all about. ‘A case in point is the widely respected *Guardian* columnist Jonathan Freedland, who used a July 2010 column to denounce the Coalition as a two-faced Janus with no clear narrative – rather than even consider the possibility that it could be acting in good conscience from a humane political viewpoint, albeit one which he did not appear to understand. A week later he was back in print on the same subject. This time he conceded that “there’s a good idea in Cameron’s ‘big society’ screaming to get out”, one which Labour would be ill-advised to oppose. Instead, he suggested, Labour politicians should mine their party’s own traditions and co-opt the idea for themselves. That’s a seven-day trajectory from denunciation to praise, whose total intellectual content amounts to the thought that the Big Society is a bad idea, or if it isn’t then it’s a Labour one. If this is its effect on someone as able as Jonathan Freedland, one might think, then the idea of a Big Society certainly needs urgent clarification.’<sup>21</sup>

It is no coincidence that some of the major architects of the Big Society have been Christians.

Making a direct link between the problems of Broken Britain and the solution of the Big Society has been one of the

coalition’s biggest challenges, and is a premise that has not been widely accepted – presumably one reason that the two ideas have not been clearly and consistently

connected by politicians trying to convince the public. Writing for the public policy think tank ResPublica’s blog, Samuel Middleton observes, ‘One of the causes of confusion was the contrast between the Big Society message and the Broken Britain narrative. The goal of the Big Society, enabled by government, was to heal Broken Britain and the “whole stew of violence, anti-social behaviour, debt, addiction, family breakdown, educational failure, poverty and despair [affecting millions]” it engendered. But the Big Society message failed to get across how these drastic problems were supposed to be solved by charities, social enterprises and an “army” of 5,000 trained community organisers.’<sup>22</sup> (Indeed, there are some suggestions that this narrative is not popular among some Big Society leaders, due to the negative message of Breakdown Britain, and that a more media-friendly positive – even ideological – message of decentralisation and empowerment is preferred; this inevitably raises the question of *why* such empowerment is necessary, and for what ends.) Again, David Cameron’s speech of 14 February 2011 brought some clarity to the idea by talking about responsibility at more length – another term that, like ‘Broken Britain’, can carry negative and unpopular connotations and risks recalling the disastrous ‘Back to Basics’ campaign of the mid-1990s,<sup>23</sup> but that is necessary in order to communicate the Big Society agenda effectively.

## Relevance

The theme explored in this report is what a Christian viewpoint and wider faith perspective can bring to the discussion. To what extent does the ‘Big Society’ as articulated by the coalition resonate with the pattern for government and society articulated in the Bible? What questions should we be asking of government in the light of this – and on what grounds should we be holding government to account?

For everyone, not just those of faith, there is relevance in the question of what the government’s ultimate role should be, and also what role faith organisations will play in this initiative. Individual churches and other faith groups are already well placed to take part in many of the activities that are expected, and many already do so. Since this will involve taxpayers’ money and the delivery – or reduction – of public services, ‘Big Society’ has relevance to all.

Faith groups are likely to be a key part of its ultimate expression, as has been regularly acknowledged by Conservative politicians. For the extent to which this is the case, we should note a five-year study by two

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.economist.com/node/16645093> (accessed 2/11/2010).

<sup>19</sup> <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/generalelectionreview/2010/05/the-big-society-agenda-is-an-exciting-governing-philosophy-but-it-should-never-have-been-put-at-the.html>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/politics/conservative/8121007/Even-ministers-dont-get-Camerons-Big-Society-idea-says-Tory-Tim-Loughton.html>

<sup>21</sup> Jesse Norman, *The Big Society: the Anatomy of the New Politics* (University of Buckingham Press, 2010), p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> See <http://www.respublica.org.uk/blog/2010/06/out-justice-can-big-society-fix-broken-britain> (accessed 3/12/2010).

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., John Major’s launch of the initiative at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/1993/oct/09/conservatives.past> (accessed 16/2/2011).

political scientists, David Campbell and Robert Putman, of the way in which religion affects American society. About this, commentator Toby Young wrote, 'It's safe to assume that a similar survey of British religious people would produce the same results and that, in turn, tells us something about the shape the Big Society is likely to take.' He went as far as to suggest that 'the willingness of people of all faiths to give up their time to help others may be Western society's best hope of civic renewal.'<sup>24</sup> Campbell & Putman's study concluded that:

'Forty per cent of worship-attending Americans volunteer regularly to help the poor and elderly, compared with 15% of Americans who never attend services. Frequent-attenders are also more likely than the never-attenders to volunteer for school and youth programs (36% vs. 15%), a neighborhood or civic group (26% vs. 13%), and for health care (21% vs. 13%). The same is true for philanthropic giving; religious Americans give more money to secular causes than do secular Americans. And the list goes on, as it is true for good deeds such as helping someone find a job, donating blood, and spending time with someone who is feeling blue. Furthermore, the "religious edge" holds up for organized forms of community involvement: membership in organizations, working to solve community problems, attending local meetings, voting in local elections, and working for social or political reform.'<sup>25</sup>

## Big Society precedents

The recent tradition of Big Society thinking in Britain includes David Willetts' pamphlet on Civic Conservatism (1995), David Blunkett's Scarman Lecture (2003), Labour's 'Together We Can' action plan (2005), and Hazel Blears' 'Active Citizens' speech (2006).<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, it's fair to say that the Big Society has never (in recent times) been road-tested on the scale the coalition proposes it, or in the same precise form, which relies on the internet to give people detailed information about their government and connect them with local initiatives. But are there previous examples of the Big Society? Many community projects and social enterprises can be cited in the UK and abroad, but have similar initiatives been tried on a larger scale in the past, or elsewhere?

**Scotland.** Experiments in community ownership include the Hebridean island of Gigha<sup>27</sup> which, in 2001, was purchased for £3.85 million by its 110

inhabitants, with the help of a loan from the Scottish Land Fund and Highlands and Islands Enterprise.<sup>28</sup> Projects there have included a wind farm to generate power and income for the community, a housing refurbishment programme, tourism, and other sustainable local businesses. After the coalition's Big Society policies were announced, Professor Jim Hunter at the Centre for History at the UHI Millennium Institute<sup>29</sup> raised Gigha and other areas of Scotland that have undergone similar processes as successful examples of Big Society, with the caveat: 'The key lesson for the UK Government's Big Society idea is that it works best when there is real and substantial partnership between local community and government. Big Society can work, but it requires real investment of government time and resources to support to [sic] transition to local control.'<sup>30</sup>

**Liverpool, Leeds and Middlesbrough.** The ippr study *Rebalancing Local Economies*<sup>31</sup> looked at 'matched pairs' of deprived neighbourhoods in northern cities, and why some fared better than others in regeneration and economic growth over a defined period. Finding that 'economic growth is necessary but not sufficient', the report stated that social networks 'provide an important part of the explanation for the differences between our improving and lagging neighbourhoods. The coming together of people in a place and the social networks that bind them and link them to people, places and organisations beyond the immediate neighbourhood are the building blocks of what we call 'community outlook'. The role of community organisations, shared history and community leadership all seem to be key factors influencing positive community outlook and improvement. In lagging neighbourhoods, negative outlook - often characterised by defensive and isolated identities and short travel horizons - would appear to be a barrier to some individuals seizing employment opportunities.'<sup>32</sup>

**The Church.** 'A man asked me recently: "What do you think of the Big Society?" So I told him: "The Big Society? The church has been doing it for over 2000 years!"' After the Comprehensive Spending Review was announced at the end of October, the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, spoke about the work the Church already does that is not qualitatively different from the 'Big Society' idea. Without letting government off the hook for its [predominantly secular, in this instance]

<sup>24</sup> <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/tobyyoung/100063761/dawkins-and-hitchens-are-wrong-religious-people-are-actually-much-nicer-than-athiests-according-to-magisterial-five-year-study/>

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/2010-11-15-column15\\_ST\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/2010-11-15-column15_ST_N.htm)

<sup>26</sup> As cited by Amol Rajan, *The Big Society*, By Jesse Norman, The Independent, 21/11/2010

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.gigha.org.uk/>

<sup>28</sup> See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/1628573.stm>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.history.uhi.ac.uk/>

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/politics/cameron-should-visit-gigha-to-see-the-big-society-in-action-says-historian-1.1049370>

<sup>31</sup> Available at <http://www.ippr.org/ipprnorth/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=779>

<sup>32</sup> Pp. 80-81.

responsibilities – running strong public services with taxpayers’ money – the Church provides a good model for the sort of society that David Cameron appears to be talking about:

‘There is nothing new in a set of Government policies that looks to encourage individuals and voluntary groups to be enabled, to be engaged within our community, to care for one another.

The Church of England knows all about volunteering. More people do unpaid work for church groups than any other organization. Churchgoers contribute 23.2 million hours voluntary service each month in their local communities.

‘The Church of England alone provides activities outside church worship in the local community for over half a million children and young people aged under 16 years, and 38,000 young people aged 16 to 25 years. Over 136,000 volunteers run activity groups

for young people which are sponsored by the Church of England.

‘The Church employs more youth workers than any other organization and is involved on a daily basis trying to make the lives of young people better.

What I am trying to say is that the Church understands the importance of volunteering and being active in our communities. As one of my predecessors, Archbishop William Temple said, “The Church is the only organisation that exists for the wellbeing and fraternity of its non-members”.<sup>33</sup>

Less has been said about its ultimate aims ... how our society might actually be different as a result.

## A Christian foundation to the coalition’s Big Society?

In its broad strokes, it seems that there is a great deal of similar territory between the biblical blueprint for society and the ideals suggested by David Cameron. Given this overlap of concerns, it is no coincidence that some of the major architects of the Big Society have been Christians. ‘Far more than Blond [Phillip Blond, ResPublica director and the ‘Anglican former theologian’], and not withstanding the crucial influence of David Cameron’s director of strategy, Steve Hilton, it was the slow, patient work of the Roman Catholic Iain Duncan Smith and the evangelical Philippa Stroud at

the CSJ that formed the ground out of which the big society vision grew. And it is another evangelical, Lord Wei, who is charged with implementing the big society as a policy agenda across all government departments. So the first thing for churches to realise is that the big society is as much an intramural discussion within the church as it is an external policy agenda to be responded to.’<sup>34</sup>

The idea of the ‘Big Society’ has – with some qualification – generally been endorsed by church leaders, perhaps most significantly Archbishop Vincent Nichols, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales:

‘His latest remarks are not an endorsement of the Tory party but, rather, a move away from state socialism and towards a non-ideological concept, the Big Society, whose localism has much in common with the Catholic notion of subsidiarity, by which decisions are devolved as much as possible.

‘There is no evidence that the archbishop’s warm sentiments towards the Coalition have been influenced by the latter’s willingness to help the Church organise the non-state aspects of the Pope’s visit next month. But it is indeed encouraging that, for the first time in decades, the leader of English and Welsh Catholics has expressed enthusiasm for the policies of a Conservative-led government that, like St Paul, recognises charity as the greatest of the virtues.’<sup>35</sup>

The *Church Times*<sup>36</sup> recorded a number of Christian groups which welcomed the Big Society initiative, though these qualified their support with questions around funding and conscience: ‘The Evangelical Alliance said the Big Society was “an immense opportunity for community service which Christians should not pass up”. The organisation’s director, Steve Clifford, said: “We are delighted that the Prime Minister has recognised the incredible work community groups are already doing, and want to enthusiastically encourage churches to accept his invitation to get stuck in.”

‘The Interim director of Livability, a Christian charity that works with disabled people, Adam Bonner, said: “This new emphasis on community work could prove a great way to highlight and develop the existing long

<sup>33</sup> John Sentamu. See <http://www.archbishopofyork.org/3018> (accessed 1/11/2010).

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/oct/07/big-society-church>

<sup>35</sup> See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/telegraph-view/7921756/Amen-to-the-Big-Society.html> (accessed 10/8/2010).

<sup>36</sup> ‘Caveats in Christian welcome for the Big Society’, issue 7688, 23 July 2010. See online at <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=98079> (accessed 16/8/2010).



term work that many churches and Christian projects are already doing and present further opportunities for involvement.” It remained to be seen, however, “whether there will be enough funding and support offered to implement this Big Society initiative”.

‘Dr Michael Nazir-Ali, the former Bishop of Rochester... offered a more cautious welcome to Mr Cameron’s speech. While he welcomed “a freer society where people are enabled to work for their local communities”, it was important, he said that the “beliefs and conscience” of Christian volunteers were respected.’ John Sentamu has expressed his concerns with the effects that the spending cuts might have, whilst stating clearly that the Big Society proposals are little different from what the Church has always done.<sup>37</sup>

## The ends and the means of Big Society

As noted above, much of the material published about the Big Society has been about *how* it will be done (devolving power from central to local government, supporting charities, etc) and what it will mean for people, communities and local organisations (responsibility, initiative, power). Less has been said about its ultimate aims – not in terms of the support it gives to individuals and community groups, but the more fundamental question of how our society might *actually be different* as a result. Big Society – despite occasional references to its formulation as a solution to Broken Britain – has generally been expressed as an ideological movement.

The Big Society has its origins in the thesis of Broken Britain, and has been conceived as the policies under which civil society might thrive and for individuals and communities to address social problems directly. Its aim is therefore not to force change, but to bring about the conditions under which transformation might occur. Nevertheless, desired aims have been noted on many occasions – sometimes in the language of fixing Broken Britain, sometimes more broadly in terms of fairness and equality. For example, ‘Only when people and communities are given more power and take more responsibility can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all’<sup>38</sup> indicates a commitment to reducing poverty and inequality, whilst initiatives that enable parents to open new schools, businesses help people to train for work and charities rehabilitate offenders are irrelevant unless they actually bring about improved standards of education, falling unemployment and lower crime rates.

These concerns were stated in the Conservatives’ election document, ‘Big Society, not Big Government’: ‘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.’<sup>39</sup> Because it is about creating a set of conditions for change rather than forcing an agenda, Big Society relies on individual and corporate responsibility and action, meaning that outcomes are almost by-products. From one perspective, the lack of targets is both an intrinsic part and the biggest flaw of the Big Society. It also raises questions as to how we measure the success of the proposals: do we look at outcomes such as crime rates, unemployment, and so on, or something less tangible, such as how easy it is to start new community initiatives?

## Study 1: Allia

Allia<sup>40</sup>, formerly known as Citylife, is a Cambridge-based charitable organisation that supports social enterprises and charities interested in sustainability and regeneration.<sup>41</sup> Allia raises money for these causes by means of five-year charitable bonds. Investors put their money into a bond, specifying the amount they want to give to their chosen cause, and the rate of return they would like (if any) at the end of the term.

A proportion of the money invested is donated directly to one of the causes endorsed by the organisation, with another small amount deducted for the organisation’s running costs (typically 2 per cent on the first £1 million invested and a further 1 per cent for any money above that).

The remainder is loaned to Places for People Homes (P4PH), a not-for-dividend Registered Provider of social housing: a large and stable property development company with very low credit risk. Since Allia are investing large amounts of pooled money, they can gain access to a better rate of return than individual investors would do directly. At the end of the loan’s term, the investment is repaid with tax-free interest, allowing Allia to return it to the original investors at the rate they specified.

Because Allia offers social rather than financial investments, rates of return are not as high as other forms of investment; however, it does allow investors to put their money to good use for a period of time, without donating it outright, and receive their original sum back at the end.

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.archbishopofyork.org/3018>

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/407789/building-big-society.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> See [http://www.conservatives.com/News/News\\_stories/2010/03/~/\\_media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/Building-a-Big-Society.ashx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/News_stories/2010/03/~/_media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/Building-a-Big-Society.ashx) (accessed 3/11/2010), p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.allia.org.uk>

<sup>41</sup> For further details of criteria for causes supported, see <http://www.allia.org.uk/fundraising/joining/who-can-join/>

Any ideal outcomes are, of course, complicated by the harsh realities of the £81 billion of public spending cuts that were announced in October 2010, to take place over four years. The reductions to front-line services and removal of this money from the economy, along with other factors like the rise in VAT (from 4 January 2011), will inevitably have consequences for crime, education, poverty and employment, likely offsetting some of the benefits of Big Society initiatives – if, indeed, they prove successful. This may be another reason why politicians

have avoided talking about specific targets. In addition, by its nature the Big Society is not intended to be a clear, structured top-down movement. Its ultimate expression will depend on the individuals and groups who get involved.

Fundamentally, however, the question we need to be asking is whether society is better, or just bigger: will the Big Society be the Right Society? For that, we need a framework to understand what principles and values the Big Society might manifest in practice.



# The Theology of Government

*“If there is something that society really believes needs to be done, then the government has to play that role because you can’t count on philanthropy – they’re always picking new things.”*

*Bill Gates, Radio4 Today, 28 January 2011*

Before engaging with the idea of the Big Society, it is worthwhile dipping into political theology to ask what kind of government – and society – the Bible presents as most desirable and fulfilling for humanity. Only then, as Luke Bretherton writes in the Guardian’s *Comment is Free*,<sup>42</sup> can churches ‘ask what a contemporary Christian socio-political vision is and whether the big society is an appropriate response.’ In other words, rather than judge the Big Society solely on the terms in which it has been articulated, we want to ask whether these are the right terms to begin with. If not, what might a Christian vision of ‘Big Society’ look like, and why are the values that vision embodies so important?

Both Old and New Testaments contain a large amount of commentary on the idea of government, whether explicitly, in the laws that established the kind of nation Israel was to be, or implicitly, in the criticisms directed at Israel and foreign nations for their respective failings. The Bible was, and remains, a deeply political as well as religious document.

Due to the restraints of scope, time and culture, however, the Bible does not give us detailed guidelines for government today. Political theology, including areas of Catholic Social Teaching and Reformed perspectives, is informative for how to bridge the gap between the Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman contexts of the Old and New Testaments, and the realities of modern government.

## Biblical ambivalence about government

The Bible was composed over many hundreds of years, during which time the Israelites experienced many different governments, from the harsh slavery of Egypt to the loose confederation of tribes in the period of the Judges, through the varied reigns of its own kings in the monarchy period to the aggression of Assyrian and Babylonian empires, the more lenient Persian administration and finally Greek and Roman occupations in New Testament times. Unsurprisingly, biblical views of the state and its requirements of its citizens are typically ambivalent – perhaps best

illustrated by Jesus’ carefully-phrased remark: ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s’ (Mark 12:17).

Jesus recognised that Caesar had a legitimate, but limited claim on the Jewish people: government was and is created by God (Romans 13:1) but it is also accountable to God. At his trial, Jesus acknowledged Pilate’s power over him – but also its source, which meant that it came with responsibilities (which Pilate ignored). “Do you refuse to speak to me?” Pilate said. “Don’t you realise I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” Jesus answered, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.” (John 19:10-11) Jesus implicitly recognised Pilate’s remit, which included the authority to exact the death penalty. However, he also warned that Pilate himself was subject to judgment by the source of his own authority.

As a human power, government leans towards corruption; the bigger the state, the more its tendency to oppression – as the Israelites found out under the all-powerful empires of Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, and even their native Solomon, whose forced labour became increasingly unpopular until, after his death, the Israelites rebelled against the threat of even worse brutalities under the next king and split the kingdom in two (1 Kings 12:1-24).

David McIlroy summarises ‘four key principles recurring throughout classical Christian political thought: (1) government is accountable to God; (2) government’s role is limited; (3) government exists for the public good; (4) the task of government is the wise execution of just judgment.’<sup>43</sup> He suggests that insisting on limits to government might be one of the most important services Christians can offer society – although the Church does not have a mandate to take over the state either: ‘Simply by being itself and by defending its own institutional independence, the church reminds government that its citizens have other, and sometimes higher, loyalties than their membership of a state. Indeed, over time the assertion of... the “doctrine of the two” [kingdoms: the secular and spiritual means of

---

<sup>42</sup> ‘Big Society and the Church’, see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/oct/07/big-society-church> (accessed 9/11/2010).

---

<sup>43</sup> God and Government, pp. 81-82.

God's rule] laid the ground for the much wider claim that many other social authorities exist which do not derive from the state and to which the state must defer: families, educational institutions and many kinds of voluntary association, for example. In that insight lay a vital foundation for what in the modern world we have come to refer to as the realm of "civil society" – that network of intermediate bodies that serve to curtail the predatory instincts of the state.'<sup>44</sup> One of the ways that citizens might shape the Big Society agenda, and one of the purposes of this report, is to help identify some of the appropriate limits to government.

In summary, the Reformed political theology viewpoint is that '(1) ultimate sovereignty belongs to God alone, (2) all earthly sovereignties are subsidiary to God's sovereignty, and (3) there is no ultimate (or rather, penultimate) locus of sovereignty in this world from which other sovereignties are derivative.'<sup>45</sup> The ultimate expression of this principle is that the state should only act if some public injustice would otherwise occur that no other agency was adequately equipped to address. As Augustine commented, the concern for justice is all that separates legitimate authorities from organised criminal gangs.<sup>46</sup>

The paradox is that a government that is large enough to do everything it needs to (but no more) is typically large enough to have difficulty avoiding the injustices that can often result from the centralisation of power. Jurisprudence professor Julian Rivers writes, 'Our challenge is that material equality seems to require big government, with substantial intervention and redistribution. The genius of the Old Testament law was that it simultaneously combined material equality with small government. How can we pursue a fully rounded conception of equality without constructing an unlimited state?'<sup>47</sup> Rivers cites the principles that the government should be subject to law; government power should be diffuse; and governments should be held to account.<sup>48</sup>

This biblical principle of scepticism towards government and government's own accountability to those it governs are compatible with the policy commitments made by the Coalition government,<sup>49</sup> firstly in the devolution of power away from a centralised state to local government, organisations and individuals, but also in the commitment to publish government data. There

remain questions about how limited government should be, and precisely which tasks it undertakes.

## Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is a body of Catholic teaching dealing with issues of social, economic and political justice, a number of areas of which are directly relevant to the Big Society debate. Perhaps most notable are the ideas of **solidarity**, **subsidiarity**, **human dignity** and the **common good**. Pope Benedict XVI explained these four things as organically linked and mutually supportive, summarising: '*Human dignity* is the intrinsic value of a person created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed by Christ. The totality of social conditions allowing persons to achieve their communal and individual fulfilment is known as the *common good*. *Solidarity* refers to the virtue enabling the human family to share fully the treasure of material and spiritual goods, and *subsidiarity* is the coordination of society's activities in a way that supports the internal life of the local communities.'<sup>50</sup>

### 1. Fostering responsibility requires the appropriate devolution of power

Obviously relevant to the Big Society initiative is the idea of subsidiarity. A logical extension of the biblical concern for big government's tendency towards corruption and a fundamental tenet of Catholic Social Teaching, the principle of subsidiarity broadly states that larger and more complex organisations should not do anything that cannot be equally well achieved by smaller, more local bodies. Thus power should be devolved to the lowest appropriate level, including the family and individual, if appropriate. This principle implicitly assumes the biblical assertion that we are all created by God, in his image, and as such are infinitely valued by him. Subsidiarity acknowledges our autonomy and dignity by ensuring that we are not disempowered by distant and centralising forces. In fact, the ethics professor Oliver O'Donovan 'goes so far as to suggest that it could be tyrannical for government to take action when private (i.e. non-governmental) initiative could address the issue equally well.'<sup>51</sup>

One important area of application of this is free-market economic policy, and the extent to which this should be balanced by government intervention. Subsidiarity requires that intervention should take place at the lowest possible tier of government, and that wherever possible autonomy and initiative should remain with the individual and with families.

<sup>44</sup> p. 89.

<sup>45</sup> Koyzis, David T., *Political Visions and Illusions*, (Downers Grove, IVP, 2003) p. 230

<sup>46</sup> *City of God* IV:4.

<sup>47</sup> Julian Rivers, 'The nature and role of government in the Bible' in *God and Government*, p. 51.

<sup>48</sup> Pp. 52-56.

<sup>49</sup> See e.g. <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/407789/building-big-society.pdf>, and 'What is the Big Society' section, above.

<sup>50</sup> See [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2008/may/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080503\\_social-sciences\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080503_social-sciences_en.html)

<sup>51</sup> *God and Government*, p. 87.

In his 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus* ('The Hundredth Year', so called due to its publication on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, a foundational document for Catholic Social Teaching), Pope John Paul II wrote of the implications of denying the importance of subsidiarity – ideas that would later be shared in language of the 'welfare society' in *Breakdown Britain*:

'By intervening directly and depriving society of its responsibility, the Social Assistance State leads to a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase of public agencies, which are dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking than by concern for serving their clients, and which are accompanied by an enormous increase in spending. In fact, it would appear that needs are best understood and satisfied by people who are closest to them and who act as neighbours to those in need. It should be added that certain kinds of demands often call for a response which is not simply material but which is capable of perceiving the deeper human need. One thinks of the condition of refugees, immigrants, the elderly, the sick, and all those in circumstances which call for assistance, such as drug abusers: all these people can be helped effectively only by those who offer them genuine fraternal support, in addition to the necessary care.'<sup>52</sup>

Subsidiarity therefore provides an immediate point of contact with Big Society, but it needs to be tempered with further context rather than accepted without qualification. Even taken in isolation, subsidiarity does not mean devolving power in every case. In some instances, the appropriate exercise of power may be at a higher level – nationally, or even internationally – than it currently is. Subsidiarity means that the state should only handle those things that cannot be dealt with as effectively at a more local, smaller or individual level. The other side of the coin is that there are things that only the state can achieve to a necessary standard, and it is right that it should be allowed the initiative to do so in the interest of the common good. For example, the unpredictability of snowfall in the UK means that local councils have to gamble whether it is worth making expensive preparations; it could be argued that planning should be centrally funded and administered, with equipment being regionally based. Similarly, in January 2011 the Department of Health raised the possibility of ordering flu vaccinations centrally (like almost every other vaccination), rather than allow GPs to order directly from the manufacturer, which can lead to

regional shortages.<sup>53</sup> In building the Big Society, is the coalition actually shirking some responsibilities, as well as undertaking unnecessary ones? It is not just people and communities that need to 'take more responsibility' and 'act more responsibly', as the Prime Minister put it on 14 February 2011<sup>12</sup>: the state is also expected to fulfil its responsibilities. One area in which this question becomes especially relevant is that of solidarity.

## 2. Intervention is necessary where injustice might otherwise occur

Solidarity is a concept that has variously been termed as 'friendship', 'social charity', a 'civilisation of love', and a 'preferential option for the poor.'<sup>54</sup> Ultimately it derives from the Great Commandment and Jesus' own concern for the poor and marginalised. Solidarity requires that the state should intervene and have some redistributive role in order to protect those who are unable to secure their own wellbeing.

One major application of this is the state's responsibility to provide for those who cannot support themselves. Welfare administration is one area in which the government must act, since it is the only party with the resources to collect tax from the whole country and distribute benefits to those who need them. Assuming the validity of this broad principle, however, there are still questions around the complexity of the system and the level of payments made, and whether these suggest that the state is either doing too much (see recent arguments around welfare reform on the grounds that it incentivises worklessness) or that it does not go far enough (see, conversely, recent arguments that many of the most vulnerable in society will lose out).

The two concepts of subsidiarity and solidarity are often held in tension, since the former reduces intervention to the lowest possible degree, but the latter requires it. The economist Philip Booth emphasises the broader but often misunderstood nature of solidarity and subsidiarity: these are not solely applicable to free-market economic policy, with relevance limited to the extent and remit of the state. Solidarity is not the preserve of the political authorities, a way of passing personal responsibility off onto those we elect: it is an attitude of the heart and a call to change our behaviour more than an organising principle of

One of the ways that Christians might shape the Big Society agenda... is to help identify some of the appropriate limits to government.

<sup>52</sup> §48.

<sup>53</sup> See <http://www.onmedica.com/newsarticle.aspx?id=5e74d318-ed75-4182-b728-eb4a7c83fef7> (accessed 24/1/2011).

<sup>54</sup> See *Centesimus Annus*, §10 and 11.

government. Similarly, subsidiarity may suggest that it is unjust for the state to deplete private wealth through unnecessarily high taxation; however, the flip-side of this limitation of state intervention is the personal responsibility to give freely. In practice, when properly understood, solidarity and subsidiarity rarely conflict or have to be balanced against one another.<sup>55</sup>

### 3. Human dignity and the common good are the highest goals

Writing in the same volume, broadcaster Clifford Longley proposes a simple rule to determine what claim,

Wherever possible autonomy and initiative should remain with the individual and with families.

if any, social and economic policies have to Catholic Social Teaching: they must first and foremost serve the common good, which he states is the highest good and CST's overarching moral principle. With acute (but implicit, rather than stated) relevance to the Big Society, he writes, 'If

[accounts of CST] are mainly concerned to develop and apply the concept, say, of subsidiarity, for instance to justify an argument in favour of small government or against the welfare state, then they are not faithful to the tradition because they do not set the common good as their fundamental governing principle, from first to last.'<sup>56</sup>

Thus solidarity and subsidiarity must be viewed in a broader framework – either that of economic policy alone, or of each other with no further context. Pope Benedict XVI elsewhere affirms that the '*principle of subsidiarity must remain closely linked to the principle of solidarity and vice versa*, since the former without the latter gives way to social privatism, while the latter without the former gives way to paternalist social assistance that is demeaning to those in need.'<sup>57</sup>

Thus, these two principles balance each other in the interests of serving *higher principles*: the common good, and maintaining the dignity of the person. As Longley observes, this suggests that any commitment to subsidiarity – a foundational theme for the Big Society – or solidarity – in terms of a welfare state – must be balanced against promoting the good of society as a whole, and protecting the dignity of the individual. Devolving power to local government, communities, organisations and individuals may be the right thing to do, but only if it serves the common good and the

dignity of the person in the process. This comes back to the tests we apply to assess the success or otherwise of the Big Society: is society better – fairer, more equal, less 'broken' – or merely bigger?

### Sphere Sovereignty: a complementary perspective on the limitations on the state

CST limits the power of the state because by nature it tends towards disempowering those groups and individuals lower than itself. 'In Roman Catholic social teaching, because the state is ontologically higher than the social formations, there is need for some measure to prevent it becoming overbearing and absorbing them into its own sphere of competence. Hence subsidiarity.'<sup>58</sup>

A different perspective was provided by the Dutch theologian and politician, Abraham Kuyper, who saw the state as a separate rather than intermediate body between God and other groups, charged with holding society's different components together. 'For Kuyper, society was made up of various spheres such as the family, business, science, and art, which derived their authority not from the state, but directly from God, to whom they were accountable. The phrase he used to denote this theory... was "sovereignty in the individual social spheres" now often referred to by English-speaking commentators as "sphere-sovereignty."<sup>59</sup> Kuyper's argument was that 'society should be understood as a moral organism, in the sense that it was held together by groups sharing common philosophical positions.'<sup>60</sup>

Although it is also one of these 'spheres' itself, in contrast to the other spheres, government was seen as something approaching a necessary evil – an agent of external intervention required only because society is otherwise prone to failure. Government is 'a mechanical remedy to the disintegration caused by sin.'<sup>61</sup> As in CST, however, government has duties to perform those tasks that only it can achieve adequately, in the interests of solidarity and the common good – namely 'its threefold obligation to intervene in society, in order to enforce mutual respect for the boundary lines between each sphere whenever a conflict arose between spheres; to defend the powerless within a sphere whenever that sphere abused its authority; and to impose taxes for the maintenance of national unity.'<sup>62</sup>

<sup>55</sup> 'Government, solidarity and subsidiarity', pp. 134-58.

<sup>56</sup> P. 162.

<sup>57</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, §58. See online at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html) (accessed 3/11/2010).

<sup>58</sup> Koyzis, David T., *Political Visions and Illusions*, (Downers Grove, IVP, 2003) p. 232

<sup>59</sup> Heslam, Peter S., *Creating a Christian Worldview*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998) p. 154.

<sup>60</sup> *Creating a Christian Worldview*, p. 155

<sup>61</sup> P. 157

<sup>62</sup> P. 158



## Summary

This brief overview gives some of the biblical principles which we might ideally see reflected in government policy. In short, state intervention should be limited, but not to the extent where government overlooks those duties to the disadvantaged that it can best carry out, because the overall and highest aim of government must be facilitating the common good – creating the conditions within which we can best exercise our responsibilities to that end, rather than exercising them all on our behalf. Thus the state should be expected to fulfil its responsibilities in areas such as national defence, international relations, and diplomacy – these can hardly be entrusted to lower bodies.

Rather than force transformation, however, the state's task is to establish its preconditions and hold together society's disparate components. This might include, for example, the need for government to stop businesses from 'contributing to unsustainable ecological damage; supplying dangerous products; selling loans to people who obviously can't repay them; and preventing people from having a weekly day off.'<sup>63</sup>

## A biblical precedent for the Big Society

As it was expressed in the Conservative's election manifesto and later adopted by the coalition, the 'Big Society' appears to reflect a number of biblical principles. The laws set out in the Torah, whilst falling short of articulating a systematic framework for Israelite society, presuppose a limited and accountable government that facilitated local and individual engagement rather than centralising power away from the people. 'Structurally, the Israel of the Torah had a multi-layered but non-hierarchical arrangement, in which particular authorities dealt with the issues most appropriate to them but where the emphasis was always on the responsibilities of the individual, family and locality rather than on kings and councillors.'<sup>64</sup>

This vision of government was in part a reaction to the Israelites' experiences under the highly centralised, bureaucratic and stratified – both economically and socially – society of Egypt, in which they had spent many years of slavery before the Exodus. To a lesser extent, this 'pyramidal' power structure was also true of the Canaanite city-states in the land they had been promised. The moral failings of Big Government are a running motif in the prophets' criticism of foreign nations, with Babylon in the Old Testament and Rome

(also under the symbolic/cryptic name of Babylon) in the New coming under fire for their respective empire building and the injustices that resulted.<sup>65</sup>

In contrast, 'The Biblical emphasis appears to be on localism. Distant authority alienates people and removes from them responsibility for their own lives. Heavily centralised power is easily corrupted.' Against Longley (see above), Spencer concludes that 'Subsidiarity, the principle that a central authority should perform only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a more local level, appears to be a thoroughly scriptural principle.'<sup>66</sup>

The ideal of such a decentralised government was one that was realised for Israel only temporarily and imperfectly, before the nation demanded a king (1 Samuel 8) around the end of the second millennium BC – beginning a process of increasing centralisation, bureaucracy, servitude and rising taxation to pay for it all. Nevertheless, the political structure of Israel in the pre-monarchic age provides an interesting parallel to the Big Society proposed by the coalition government:

'The power structure outlined in the Torah was multipolar, encompassing six independent sources of authority, each with its own geographic jurisdiction. These were the individual, the family, the community, the Levites, the tribe or region, and the nation, and between them they formed a network of concurrent authorities each instituted by God and protected, limited and empowered by the national constitution. Moreover, they each fostered a particular means for individuals to engage in the policies of the state.'<sup>67</sup>

Some of these six biblical jurisdictions – **individual**, [extended] **family**, **community**, **Levites**, **tribe/region** and **nation** – are directly paralleled by the same institutions today (such as the individual and the region); others may have broad reflections in modern-day analogues such as businesses and the third sector (community), and the Church and other faith groups (Levites).

## Further organising principles

Beyond the distribution of political power in early Israel, the nation's laws were designed to bring about a measure of equality and long-term economic independence. The Jubilee Laws in Leviticus 25 give each family the right to a piece of land forever, and therefore the means of production and independence. If families were forced to sell their land due to temporary hardship, they could reclaim it in the Jubilee

<sup>63</sup> Nicholas Townsend, 'Government and social infrastructure' in *God and Government*, p. 127.

<sup>64</sup> See Nick Spencer, *Apolitical Animal* (Jubilee Centre, 2003), p. 24. Cf. B. G. B. Logsdon, *Multipolarity and Covenant: Towards a Biblical Framework for Constitutional Safeguards* (Jubilee Centre, 1989).

<sup>65</sup> Cf. e.g. Isaiah 14:1-23; Jeremiah 50; Revelation 18.

<sup>66</sup> See <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/document.php?id=182>

<sup>67</sup> *Apolitical Animal*, p. 25.

year, every 50<sup>th</sup> year, thereby ensuring that more or less every generation was able to start afresh at some point. Simultaneously, the Sabbatical laws required the cancellation of debt every seventh year; along with the laws banning interest payments, these meant that long-term poverty should not have been a feature of Israelite life.

Faith initiatives place religious groups at the heart of their communities, bringing cohesion and regeneration in ways that distant government alone could never hope to achieve.

The Jubilee laws were also intended to give every family a social as well as economic stake in their communities, since they promoted rootedness; with the laws around interest-free loans and limits to servitude and economic exploitation, everyone was to be given the chance of remaining a part of the communities into which they were born.

Thus Israel's economic policy was fundamentally structured in such a way as to strengthen, not undermine families and communities. One challenge is to find similar ways of doing the same today. This is one task for which government must be entrusted and held to account. Taxes and benefits payments are unavoidably the government's responsibility, since only the state has the ability to administer these effectively and fairly. However, it also has the responsibility to do so in such a way that does not damage families and communities, which is not always the case. The so-called 'couple penalty' is one example – the cost incurred by many couples who live together, rather than apart. Similarly there are the oddities of the benefits system, which make it more financially attractive for some people to avoid work, therefore keeping them in poverty and reducing opportunities to play their part in society. (The government has recently discussed reforms in both of these areas, particularly the latter.) Other examples include any spending cuts which turn out disproportionately to affect families, especially the poorest.

### What it might look like

Taking these themes, there are certain things that we would always expect government to do. Issues such as national defence, taxation and benefits administration, international relations, and economic policy are best dealt with by the state. In other areas, we would expect the state to have less of a role, instead opening the way for more effective, local engagement.

In education, for example, the idea of the New Academies program is to give responsibility and accountability for children's schooling back to teachers

and parents, on the principle that they are more aware of individual and local needs than politicians in Whitehall. Similar initiatives have already been started but might be expanded in the area of criminal justice. Community courts combine knowledge of the local area and the needs of the community with access to treatment programmes, education, training, social services and other forms of support, in order to address antisocial behaviour and low-level, nonviolent crime holistically. More common in the US, they have been trialled here<sup>68</sup> but have not yet been widely adopted – despite their apparent success.

### Study 2: Victorian local government

In the 1860s Britain saw high rates of poverty and inequality, particularly in urban areas, along with poor quality public services and limited, apathetic local government. The country had recently become the first industrialised nation in the world, and free-market ideology that resulted from that transition had seriously compromised infrastructure and service provision.

In the decade between 1865 and 1875, local government was reinvigorated and revolutionised, eventually coming to spend more public money than central government. The following 40 years saw a huge reduction in urban poverty, improvements in health and education, and a parallel rise in civic involvement, particularly by local businessmen. The significant cost of the transformation was financed by long-term loans (spreading the financial impact of the investments) and indirect taxation, but also through subsidies from central government, which devolved responsibility to local government wherever possible.

Initiatives that worked well that were pioneered at the local level were extended nationwide by central legislation (such as free school meals in Birmingham). Although spending as a proportion of GDP doubled from 3 per cent to 6 per cent between 1870 and 1905, local government spending rose as a proportion of the total from 32 per cent to 51 per cent. Demographically, the changes were catalysed by an increasing engagement of the working classes, who had an interest in voting for regeneration.<sup>69</sup>

The re-centralisation of government, particularly over the past 30 years, seems to have brought with it a return of voter apathy and inequality.

<sup>68</sup> E.g. the North Liverpool Community Justice Centre, see impact analysis at <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/liverpool-full-report.pdf> (accessed 6/12/2010).

<sup>69</sup> See Simon Szreter, 'A central role for local government? The example of late Victorian Britain' at <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-01.html> (accessed 1/2/11).



Further initiatives between prisons, courts and the local community may also be developed; such links have been credited for reducing New York's prison population. 'In addition to the crackdown on criminal acts, significant funds were set aside for rehabilitation services and crime prevention. Rikers Island, the notorious prison in New York City, developed a systematic pre-release system linking inmates with a job, treatment and training programmes in the community. David Wilson, former chair of the Commission on English Prisons Today, concluded that New York City achieved its success by "diverting away from prison low-level, nonviolent offenders and investing heavily in a range of treatment to overcome their mental health, addiction, housing or other social problems. It has been done at both an individual and at a community level, and has in particular been driven by the courts."<sup>70</sup>

These describe some of the ways that public services are being integrated with their local communities' circumstances and needs, rather than being directed

centrally. As an example of how religious organisations can and have become involved at the local level, the East London Mosque is an illustration of how effective faith groups might be in the Big Society.<sup>71</sup> Situated in Tower Hamlets (which has the UK's largest Muslim population), the mosque and adjoining Muslim Centre has been involved in the regeneration of the area in recent years through numerous partnerships with the Primary Care Trust, Metropolitan Police, an interfaith forum and many other groups. The Centre offers many different services through these partnerships, including education (from nursery through to secondary school), health promotion and improving access to local health services, cultural and awareness projects, and help for jobseekers. Such faith initiatives place religious groups at the heart of their communities, bringing cohesion and regeneration in ways that distant government alone could never hope to achieve. We would hope to see many more such centres started by faith groups as part of the Big Society.

---

<sup>70</sup> <http://www.respublica.org.uk/blog/2010/06/out-justice-can-big-society-fix-broken-britain>. For more on the initiative, see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/feb/06/prisonsandprobation> (accessed 3/12/2010).

---

<sup>71</sup> Though the mosque has come in for some criticism too, not least for hosting al-Qaeda recruiter Anwar al-Awlaki.

# Measuring the Big Society

*“The real opportunity for the Big Society is not the policy options that smart advisers will pluck from innovation workshops to develop a social policy agenda on the home front. It is in linking it to the potential of a paradigm shift in thinking and ethics.”*

*Francis Davis, At the Heart of the Big Society, Standpoint, October 2010*

As stated in the preceding chapters, ‘Big Society’ as articulated by the coalition is not a specific set of ends in its own right, but a process: a ‘how’ rather than a ‘what’. This accords with the role of government from the biblical perspective, which is fundamentally about enabling citizens to take part in society, rather than taking initiative from them. Nevertheless, we would still expect defined reasons for this, rather than only the general assumption that subsidiarity would in and of itself lead to a better society.

The government’s apparent distancing of the Big Society narrative from that of Broken Britain leaves only ideological justifications for the initiative: ‘this is the relationship government ought to have with society’. The question of ‘why?’ inevitably remains, and there are few possible answers. If Big Society is not ultimately intended to lead to increased social justice, then what is its purpose?

The question, then, becomes ‘What are we ultimately trying to achieve?’ This determines how we measure it. Given the biblical concerns and ideals for government explored above, what outcomes should we hope for from the Big Society agenda? In addition, to what extent does the Big Society *as articulated by the coalition* meet these criteria for political and social justice, and do specific policies threaten to contradict the overall aim of a Big Society?

In his speech of 19 July 2010, David Cameron implicitly linked big government with the problems characterised by the Breakdown Britain report – either due to its inability to address these problems, or its complicity in making them worse: ‘For years, there was the basic assumption at the heart of government that the way to improve things in society was to micromanage from the centre, from Westminster. But this just doesn’t work. We’ve got the biggest budget deficit in the G20. And over the past decade, many of our most pressing social problems got worse, not better. It’s time for something different, something bold – something that doesn’t just pour money down the throat of wasteful, top-down government schemes. The Big Society is that something different and bold. It’s about saying if we want real change for the long-term, we need people to come

together and work together – because we’re all in this together.’

## Measuring the state’s enabling role

Because the government’s part in creating the Big Society is primarily confined to establishing the conditions under which citizens, local groups and communities can address social issues directly, it makes sense to measure the effectiveness of this ‘enabling’ role. Unfortunately, though, this is something that is not amenable to empirical study, since it is more a question of a change of culture and relaxation of bureaucracy: it represents the ability to do things that we would not previously have been able to do. Quantifying such a goal is inherently problematic, because it is ultimately about the quality of the relationships between different parts of society. Case studies will be of some help, and as different groups find it easier to start new initiatives we would expect to hear more reports of successful community programmes and social enterprises.

Some initiatives can more easily be measured than others, and might provide a broad picture of the ways in which different communities are changing. This might include the number of people engaged with social enterprises<sup>72</sup>, of new schools started by parents and other groups under the New Academies plan, or of local services such as post offices that have been taken over by community and voluntary groups. Other initiatives – for example, voluntary groups working with young offenders to reduce reoffending rates, charities that help drug addicts stay clean, and participation in community courts – might be assessed through a mixture of anecdotal and statistical evidence. However, what we are really looking at is a change of culture.

In a Cabinet Office seminar,<sup>73</sup> Lord Wei asked, ‘How will we know we have a big society?’ Amongst the indicators given were two that suggest such a change in

---

<sup>72</sup> The Annual Survey of Small Businesses UK 2005-2007 estimated that there were approximately 62,000 social enterprises in the UK, employing 800,000 people and contributing at least £24bn to the economy.

<sup>73</sup> 6 June 2010, see Powerpoint summary at [http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/pdfs/Building\\_the\\_big\\_society\\_lord\\_wei.pdf](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/pdfs/Building_the_big_society_lord_wei.pdf) (accessed 25/1/2011).

culture: ‘Focus on groups – Estimation of active community groups and group involvement’ (and, by extension, broader levels of involvement by individuals in the causes they feel strongly about), and ‘Longer term impact – Both in terms of positive and negative outcomes e.g. Increase in social capital and wellbeing, reduction in negative outcomes such as criminal behaviour etc.’

Criminal behaviour, although a useful cultural indicator, is more amenable to quantification by conventional means (see below). Wellbeing is a new area of study that is being undertaken by the government, with the idea of moving away from a solely GDP-based measure of national health. Since wellbeing is fundamentally affected by quality of relationships, this seems like a good indicator for the success or otherwise of the Big Society. The Office of National Statistics is to start measuring wellbeing from April 2011.<sup>74</sup>

To expand on these, we might also look at levels of involvement across social context (that is, how many strangers and people from different communities people engage with). In addition, there is the question of freedom of conscience, which lies behind individual involvement in the first place: if people feel unable to participate with the issues that concern them, they will not. Examples of this include the proposed roll-out in 2009 and 2010 of the Vetting and Barring Scheme (VBS) for anyone involved with schools in a voluntary capacity, or who routinely comes into contact with children in the course of their work – even in the presence of other adults. A number of authors who regularly visit schools stated

Quantifying such a goal is inherently problematic, because it is ultimately about the quality of the relationships between different parts of society.

that they would stop if the legislation was rolled out; as the author Philip Pullman asked, ‘Why should I pay £64 to a government agency to give me a little certificate to say I’m not a paedophile.’<sup>75</sup> (The scheme was later halted after a series of similar complaints.<sup>76</sup>) However, freedom of conscience is likely to be a continuing factor in the involvement of Christians and faith organisations.

Therefore, indicators of culture change we might look to in the future include:

- **Social capital and wellbeing**
- **Bridging social contexts**
- **Levels of involvement**, with implications for **freedom of conscience**

## Measuring the ends as well as the means

The Bible, however, is interested in the ends as well as the means of government. We might therefore also judge the ‘success’ of the Big Society by its concrete outcomes as well as its processes and less tangible results – not just the way that public money is distributed or how many state-run organisations have been taken over by local groups. A Big Society is one in which – despite reduced government spending to bring down the deficit, and arguably because of it – the social problems of Breakdown Britain are reduced.

Quantifying the effects of the Big Society initiative is not easy; by its very nature it is resistant to simple assessment. The Big Society is not a simple variable that can be measured like GDP. Further, the sometimes intangible qualities (‘trust’, ‘social cohesion’) involved are particularly vulnerable to external interference; other measures like rates of alcoholism and unemployment are not single-variable outcomes but complex phenomena that are affected by a wide range of factors. However, there needs to be some way of measuring the ultimate effects of this overarching coalition agenda in terms of social justice, and a number of proxies may be informative in doing so. In each case, it must be remembered that the measures are partial (that is, they can each illustrate only one aspect of the kind of society in which we would like to live), and in each case the highest principle of the common good must be remembered.

Chief amongst these measures might be figures for **poverty** and **inequality**.<sup>77</sup> Closely related to these is **unemployment**, particularly **youth unemployment**. These all point towards, in David Cameron’s words, a society of ‘fairness and opportunity for all.’<sup>78</sup>

**Government spending as a percentage of GDP** is an important measure of centralisation, and potentially of subsidiarity (note that GDP *growth* is not a criterion). However, it needs to be treated carefully because there is no set cut-off point that defines ‘Big Government’. In addition, this measure on its own is a black box that does not take account of the different components within the umbrella term ‘government spending’. In an ideal scenario, for example, public sector net debt would be zero, since government borrowing unjustly punishes future generations for the shortcomings of the past and

<sup>74</sup> See <http://www.ons.gov.uk/well-being> for more details.

<sup>75</sup> See, e.g., <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8153251.stm> (accessed 25/1/2011).

<sup>76</sup> See <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/media-centre/press-releases/Vetting-barring-scheme> (accessed 25/1/2011).

<sup>77</sup> See e.g. [http://www.publicservice.co.uk/feature\\_story.asp?id=13023](http://www.publicservice.co.uk/feature_story.asp?id=13023).

<sup>78</sup> See <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/407789/building-big-society.pdf>

**Table 1: Government expenditure (£bn) – total, central, local, local as proportion of total, and total as % GDP**

Year	Total	Central	Local	Local as % total	GDP (£bn)	Total spending as % GDP
2005	488	356	132	27%	1,254	39%
2006	503	362	141	28%	1,326	38%
2007	544	398	146	27%	1,399	39%
2008	576	421	155	27%	1,448	40%
2009	622	467	164	26%	1,396	45%
2010	661	488 (est)	173 (est)	26%	1,452	46%
2011	681	501 (est)	180 (est)	26%	1,520	45%

Data from <http://www.ukpublicspending.co.uk>

present ones (interest payments are expected to reach £70 billion in five years, or 10 per cent of all tax paid). Welfare spending, on the other hand, will always be non-zero (Matthew 26:11) – though it is hard to put a figure on how much it should be. The headline figure alone of government spending as a percentage of GDP does not take account of the relative weights of these and other subsections of spending. Neither does it recognise the moral tension between reducing the deficit and cutting other budgets to do so. As an overall measure, it provides a starting point – but no more.

There are further proxies for the health of society, some of which were directly referenced in the influential *Breakdown Britain* report.<sup>79</sup> These are relevant because social justice has been a stated aim (though perhaps an understated one) of the Big Society initiative: ‘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.’<sup>80</sup> However, what has not been made clear is the way in which the redistribution of power and control will impact on factors like family breakdown and addiction. It is probably fair to say that the link will be indirect and emergent, rather than simple and direct, since these are complex and interlinked problems.<sup>81</sup>

The five interlinking ‘pathways to poverty’ identified by the report were **economic dependence and worklessness, family breakdown, addiction, educational failure** and personal **indebtedness**.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> See <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/default.asp?pageref=180>

<sup>80</sup> See [http://www.conservatives.com/News/News\\_stories/2010/03/~media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/Building-a-Big-Society.ashx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/News_stories/2010/03/~media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/Building-a-Big-Society.ashx) (accessed 3/11/2010), p. 1.

<sup>81</sup> For example, money worries are recognised as being one of the major causes of relationship breakdown; improving employment rates might therefore also be expected to keep at-risk families together. Similarly, there are strong links between relationship breakdown and the educational failure of any children involved, and so a knock-on benefit might be seen here, too.

<sup>82</sup> See [http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/04/David\\_Cameron\\_Lets\\_mend\\_our\\_broken\\_society.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/04/David_Cameron_Lets_mend_our_broken_society.aspx)

Whilst some of these might be useful to gain an overall picture, others are only likely to change on a long-term timescale. As far as measuring ‘success’ goes, it is best to concentrate on measures that can be changed over the course of a parliament, or a decade at most, whilst recognising that some of the most important indicators such as family breakdown are broader trends which will take much longer to reverse.

Finally, it is worth noting that the real changes to society will only come through personal changes of heart which are not measurable by conventional methods. ‘But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.’ (Galatians 5:22-23)

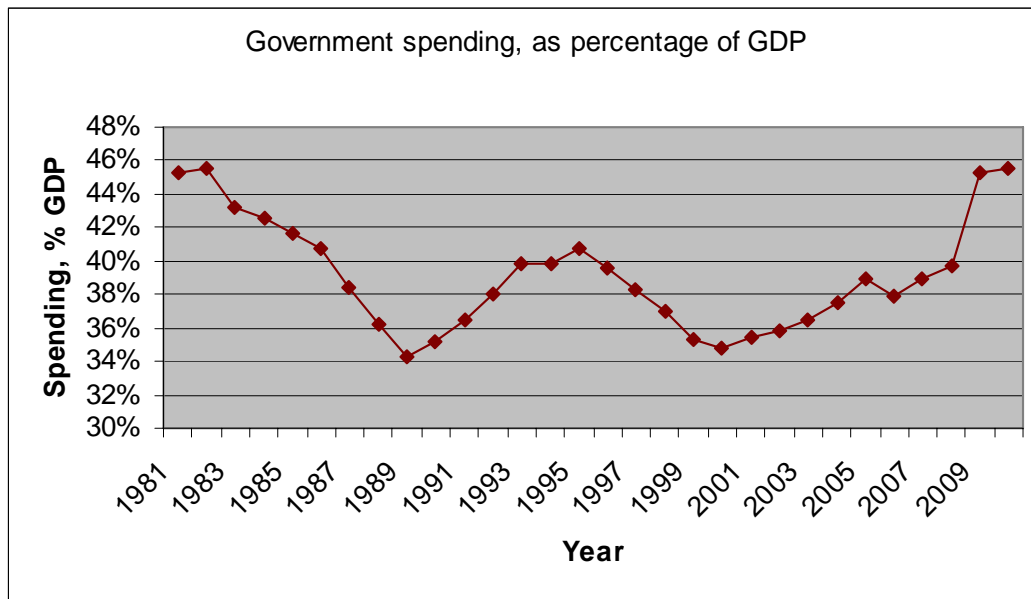
### **Government spending as a percentage of GDP: a starting point for subsidiarity**

After 13 years of centralising tendencies under Labour (public spending rose from 38% of GDP in 1997 to 45% of GDP in 2010, though was as low as 35% in 2000), and the longest and deepest recession since the Second World War (6.4% fall in GDP over six consecutive quarters), there is both a strong political and economic case for change in the approach of government. The *Economist* argued that even *after* the proposed cuts, the state will still be too big (41% in 2015, the same as in 2007-08 – before GDP dropped and borrowing rose).<sup>83</sup> As discussed above, the absolute size of the state isn’t the most important factor, and a target percentage is difficult to put forward, but what does seem clear is that at present the state is too big – not least because of the level of borrowing and the onus this places on future generations, as well as the degree of centralisation.

One factor we would expect to change as power is devolved to local government is the percentage of spending that takes place at this level. This has actually decreased slightly in recent years (see table 1, above).

As a wider picture, public spending as a proportion of GDP was fairly constant up to 2008. When the

<sup>83</sup> <http://www.economist.com/node/17309087>



recession hit and GDP dropped, spending as a proportion of GDP rose 5 per cent. It is projected to drop from 2011. Using 40 per cent as a rough upper benchmark for defining 'big government' (on the grounds that it rarely rose above this after the fallout from the 1980s recession under the Conservative government, and remained below this under Labour in economically prosperous times) and 35 per cent for a lower threshold for defining when the state is getting too big (on the grounds that this is roughly the lowest figure in the most prosperous times of the last 30 years), we would expect an emphasis on 'Big Society' eventually to tend towards the lower figure for spending as a proportion of GDP and would hope to see this trend established once the economy recovered. (However, it is even harder to judge a threshold for when the state appears to be getting too small.)

For comparison, there initially appears to have been no historical correlation between the party in power and public spending; however, the wider economic picture sheds more light on the figures. As revealed in the chart above, the last Conservative government reduced public spending 11 per cent after the recession of 1980-82, which then rose after the next recession of 1990-92; the last Labour government initially reduced spending 3.5 per cent (or, more accurately, increased it less than the growth of the economy, since there was never a real-terms decrease in spending), but increased it during a time of economic prosperity.

## Poverty and Inequality

Poverty and inequality are two key measures of fairness and the common good. Improving these are comparatively short-term measures that are independent of any spending cuts, since the reforms supposedly have these principles at their heart; the commitment is that

society will be fairer *because* society is bigger and government smaller, not despite it.<sup>84</sup>

**Poverty.** The importance and usefulness of poverty as a measure for the success or otherwise of the Big Society initiative is confused by the complexity of assessing it: what actually constitutes 'poverty'? In the UK, few people experience absolute poverty – not having enough food, shelter, healthcare or other basic amenities to survive<sup>85</sup> – and the term is generally used of relative poverty. One widely-accepted definition is having an income which is less than 60 per cent of the national median. Despite increased welfare spending, this has remained at almost one in five people for years. Since this is one of the government's chief definitions, and because it is easy to assess, it is the simplest measure for the purpose of this report. However, it is worth noting that the 60 per cent definition can be simplistic, since it only looks at income and not debt or assets (for example, someone retired with a comparatively low income but who owns a valuable property with no mortgage may not be considered 'poor'). This is also recognised by the government.<sup>86</sup> One partial solution is to account for housing costs in the figure (see below).

David Hirsch of the Rowntree Foundation states that some key features of poverty may be: Not having a High Street bank account; Having to spend more than 10% of income on energy bills; Poor access to transport, employment opportunities or healthy food.<sup>87</sup> There is also the question of child poverty.

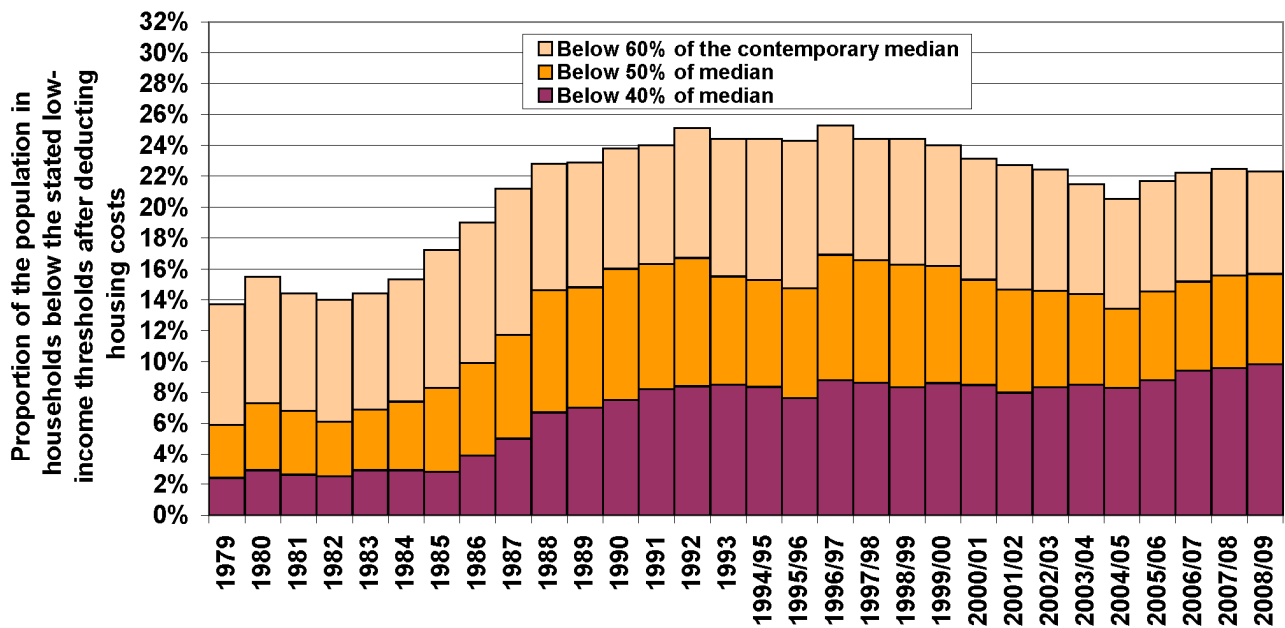
<sup>84</sup> See Cameron's commitment at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/nov/10/big-society-government-poverty-inequality>

<sup>85</sup> See, e.g., [http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/downloads/FP2P/FP2P\\_Notes\\_Poverty\\_Inequality\\_BP\\_ENGLISH.pdf](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/downloads/FP2P/FP2P_Notes_Poverty_Inequality_BP_ENGLISH.pdf), p. 1.

<sup>86</sup> See, e.g. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmselect/cmworpen/85/85.pdf>, pp. 24-25.

<sup>87</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/4070112.stm>





Source: Households Below Average Income, DWP (1994/95 onwards) and the IFS (earlier years); UK; updated Aug 2010

The chart at the top of the next page shows the proportion of the population in low-income households, measured at 40, 50 and 60 per cent of the median *after* housing costs, over the last 30 years:<sup>88</sup>

On all three measures, poverty levels have risen dramatically since the early 1980s, before improving slightly. We are now at something approximating a 20-year average. In 2008-09, 13.5 million people in the UK (22 per cent of the population) lived in households with income below the 60% threshold.

It should be recognised that this is a narrow, economic definition that does not take into account the broader relational factors to poverty. It also does not recognise how easy it is to manipulate the figures, simply by lifting a few people on the 60 per cent line just above the poverty threshold – creating a significant statistical effect without making a real material difference. However, money still matters, and it remains (like GDP) a useful starting point which measures like wellbeing can complement.

**Inequality.** Inequality is linked to poverty but refers to the distribution of resources in society. As well as income or wealth inequality, this may refer to access to services (e.g. health inequality) or other opportunities (social, educational inequality). Wage inequality is one of the easiest variants to measure, with some surprising results. Quoted in the *Guardian*, Professor of Human Geography Danny Dorling states, ‘In countries like Britain, people last lived lives as unequal as today, as measured by wage inequality, in 1854, when Charles

Dickens was writing *Hard Times*.<sup>89</sup> (Although this draws attention to the uneven distribution of wealth in the UK, it does not directly reflect on rates of absolute poverty, since we are clearly not as badly off as the poor in Victorian times.)

The share of income after tax going to the richest 1 per cent of people dropped by two-thirds between 1937 and 1979, from 12.6 per cent to 4.7 per cent. Since then it

### Study 3: Jimmy’s Night Shelter

Jimmy’s Night Shelter is a homeless shelter in Cambridge that has been running for 365 days a year since 1995. The shelter operates in Zion Baptist Church and offers homeless people a hot meal, a bed and a safe environment. Initially a provider of emergency accommodation, Jimmy’s now liaises with other local agencies, including housing, health and training services, in order to help their guests off the street permanently.

Since opening in November 1995, Jimmy’s has taken in over 4,000 people. In 2009/10 there were 399 different guests from 18 to 69, staying for anything from a few days to three months. It costs £1,190 per day to run the shelter, and after funding from statutory sources the shelter is reliant on donations for everything other than salary and building costs: food, heating, lighting, water, maintenance, administrative supplies, and money spent directly on individual guests.<sup>90</sup> The shelter is largely reliant on the help of volunteers.

<sup>88</sup> See <http://www.poverty.org.uk/01/index.shtml?2>, with thanks to Guy Palmer.

<sup>89</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/apr/21/danny-dorling-charles-dickens-social-inequality>

<sup>90</sup> See <http://www.jimmyscambridge.org.uk/index.php?section=40>



has risen again, to 8 per cent in 1990 and 10 per cent in 2000.<sup>91</sup> For 2004-05, the top 1 per cent of people received 13 per cent of total income.<sup>92</sup> Today, the top 10 per cent of people in the UK are more than 100 times better off than the bottom 10 per cent.<sup>93</sup> The income of the richest tenth is more than the income of all those on below-average incomes (i.e. the bottom five tenths) combined.<sup>94</sup>

The Gini coefficient, used by the OECD,<sup>95</sup> is a more nuanced indicator of inequality, since it measures

inequality across the income distribution. In the UK, income inequality increased sharply in the late 1980s and early 1990s and has remained broadly stable since.<sup>96</sup> It is well above the OECD average.<sup>97</sup>

These two measures – poverty and inequality – provide a crude measure of the impact of government policy on the most disadvantaged in society. Although in need of careful treatment, they are a useful starting point, particularly as the coalition's austerity measures start to take effect.

---

<sup>91</sup> See [http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cr/CASereport60\\_summary.pdf](http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cr/CASereport60_summary.pdf), p. 8.

<sup>92</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/7193904.stm>

<sup>93</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/jan/27/unequal-britain-report> (accessed 16/11/2010).

<sup>94</sup> <http://www.poverty.org.uk/09/index.shtml>

<sup>95</sup> <http://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=4842>

---

<sup>96</sup> <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=332>

<sup>97</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/markeaston/2010/01/is\\_inequality\\_iniquitous.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/markeaston/2010/01/is_inequality_iniquitous.html)

## The role of the Church in the Big Society

*“The problem is the churches have withdrawn. Where I grew up ... the Church played a very important role. The Church set boundaries. So did schools, doctors, district nurses. But the Church withdrew, the state became anonymous and society went into freefall. One of the things about the Big Society is to try to put those boundaries back. But the Church has to step up to the plate.”*

*Nadine Dorries MP, ‘The Churches Have Been Pathetic’ by Ed West, The Catholic Herald, 21 January 2011*

There is some ambiguity in government about the role that the Church will play in the Big Society. On the one hand – for good reason<sup>98</sup> – charities and faith organisations are expected to be at the forefront of community initiatives; on the other, although the government has pledged to support them in their work, there are limited funds available, and possibly strict conditions attached.

In February 2009, Hazel Blears gave a speech to the Evangelical Alliance, pledging support to faith charities. ‘[We] are starting a conversation about a “charter of excellence.” The charter would mean faith groups who are paid public money to provide services promising to provide those services to everyone, regardless of their background. And promising not to use public money to proselytise.’<sup>99</sup> Although she did qualify that this meant ensuring that the services provided were unconditional and inclusive, rather than stopping Christians talking about their faith in the course of their work, it still raised questions about how such a balance could be achieved in practice.<sup>100</sup> This balance is particularly relevant in the wake of a number of high-profile court cases and instances of disciplinary action in which employees have been disciplined for sharing their faith in the course of their work.<sup>101</sup>

---

<sup>98</sup> Churches and local charities are already closely involved with their communities and therefore have at least some of the necessary structures and expertise in place.

<sup>99</sup> See <http://www.eauk.org/lifebeyonddebt/blears-speech.cfm> (accessed 2/11/2010).

<sup>100</sup> The Coalition government’s ‘Compact’ document (see [http://www.compactvoice.org.uk/sites/default/files/the\\_compact.pdf](http://www.compactvoice.org.uk/sites/default/files/the_compact.pdf), accessed 10/1/2010), which gives guidelines for the way that government works with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), including charities, social enterprises and voluntary and community groups, states that the government must ‘Respect and uphold the independence of CSOs to deliver their mission, including their right to campaign, regardless of any relationship, financial or otherwise, which may exist.’ (p. 8)

<sup>101</sup> E.g. Nadia Eweida, whose refusal to cover her cross necklace at work led to British Airways suspending her and ultimately a court case (see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/6051486.stm>, accessed 22/11/2010); Caroline Petrie, a Christian nurse who was suspended for offering to pray for one of her patients, despite the fact that the patient herself had not complained (see

In a speech to Church of England bishops in September, 2010, Sayeeda Warsi characterised the last government’s attitude to faith organisations (perhaps most famously summed up by Alistair Campbell’s interruption in a *Vanity Fair* interview with Tony Blair, ‘I’m sorry, we don’t do God.’): ‘[T]hey misjudged the actual state of faith in our society – they thought that faith was essentially a rather quaint relic of our pre-industrial history; they were also too suspicious of faith’s potential for contributing to society – behind every faith-based charity, they sensed the whiff of conversion and exclusivity; and because of these prejudices they didn’t create policies to unleash the positive power of faith in our society... however things pan out over the next five years, I don’t want anyone to look back and say: “This government thought that people of faith were eccentrics or oddities.” Instead, I want this to be a new beginning for relations between society, faith and the state.’<sup>102</sup>

The same sentiment has been echoed by Eric Pickles.<sup>103</sup> Over the course of the next parliament, as faith organisations work to contribute to the changes to which the Big Society idea aspires, Christians have a responsibility to seize the opportunities that government claims to be offering them, whether in volunteering or in creating new charities and social enterprises, such as *The Big Issue*, Jamie Oliver’s restaurant Fifteen, and Allia (see Study 1, p.9). A society in which the state facilitates the social and community work that faith organisations already carry out would indeed be ‘bigger’; one in which government simply co-opts the resources and purpose of faith organisations for its own ends is surely the opposite.

Writing in the *Church Times*, Rev Dr Jeremy Morris raises the question of how to engender responsibility in a culture that is far more individualistic and self-centred

---

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article5675452.ece>, accessed 22/11/2010).

<sup>102</sup> [http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/09/Sayeeda\\_Warsi\\_The\\_importance\\_of\\_faith\\_to\\_life\\_in\\_Britain.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/09/Sayeeda_Warsi_The_importance_of_faith_to_life_in_Britain.aspx) (accessed 2/11/2010).

<sup>103</sup> <http://www.communities.gov.uk/newsstories/communities/1643068> (accessed 2/11/2010).

than it was a century ago when, long before the rise of the welfare state, churches were far more involved in their communities. '[C]hurches were complex, multifunction organisations, offering a range of leisure, educational, and welfare agencies. Parishes were carved up into districts visited systematically by rotas of lay people (mainly women), who could refer cases of hardship for special support, and keep an eye on community needs.'<sup>104</sup>

Since this was 'premised on a level of active church commitment as well as pervasive "popular religion," it raises questions about how to engender the same sense of responsibility - indispensable to the Big Society - in an age when church attendance is a fraction of what it used to be. Put simply, people are not used to volunteering on the same scale: self-interest, not self-sacrifice, is the rule now, and the 'motives behind the Big Society seem like little more than enlightened self-interest.'

'So there is a vacuum of values behind talk of a Big Society. Much is made of the example of Edmund Burke, who argued for the "little platoons". But it is rarely mentioned that Burke was a religious man who believed passionately in the social cohesion provided by Christian faith, and was sceptical that any society could hold itself together without religion.'<sup>105</sup> There is the continuing question, therefore, of how much people will want to engage with Big Society initiatives if there is no direct and obvious benefit to themselves. If this is correct (as is suggested by the relative levels of volunteering by those in faith groups compared with those who do not view themselves as religious<sup>106</sup>), then the success of the Big Society initiative will not just require the help of faith organisations: it will need actively to promote them.

Unfortunately, the Church's recent record on public engagement has been appalling, as its members have retreated from controversy on the big issues of our time - something recognised by Christians themselves.<sup>107</sup>

The call to action, then, is for Christians to engage wholeheartedly with the opportunities presented to them. As argued by Ben Metz in ResPublica's blog,<sup>108</sup> communities should be 'driv[ing] policy by demonstrating their capacity and overwhelming

enthusiasm for a new way of working, one which sees civil society as partners in the provision of public services' - rather than wasting the 'once in a lifetime opportunity' through the scepticism and fear that has so far characterised the public's reaction to the transfer of assets out of the public sector. There is clearly a strong desire for change and a willingness to act, as evidenced in the violent protests over university fees and other changes to the education system in December 2010. The challenge is for this to be expressed in positive action and engagement.

### Areas of need and opportunity

From the biblical perspective, the role of government includes 1) doing only those things that it can do best, whilst 2) ensuring that individuals, families, organisations and communities are enabled to carry out those tasks that they can do best. We all have a duty to support the government in these two things, and their engagement with the Big Society agenda will reflect that, either implicitly or explicitly.

There will inevitably be areas of need created by reducing public services. Solidarity in the political sphere means that government should not be allowed to sidestep its responsibilities by passing them to third sector organisations. However, solidarity in the broader sense of a personal change of heart (rather than solely a change of government policy) and a spiritual calling to love our neighbour<sup>109</sup> means that Christians nevertheless still have a responsibility to fill the gap left by spending cuts, and the opportunity to take greater roles in their communities in the process. How might churches and other groups help in these situations?

'Charity' (that is, simply giving hard-pressed individuals the difference) is no long-term solution, since it just pushes the problem one step further away and means that donors rather than taxpayers pick up the tab.<sup>110</sup> However, initiatives could be started by churches - which typically have buildings and facilities - and other groups that could save people money whilst involving them more in the community, and perhaps turning a profit too. For example, many churches have crèche facilities, which could be expanded to provide cheap childcare for workers who would otherwise find going to work prohibitively expensive.

<sup>104</sup> <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=98243> (accessed 10/11/2010).

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> See evidence from David Campbell and Robert Putman, quoted in 'Relevance' on p.7.

<sup>107</sup> See, e.g., Conservative MP Nadine Dorries on abortion, <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/features/2011/01/21/%E2%80%98the-churches-have-been-pathetic%E2%80%99/> (accessed 26/1/2011).

<sup>108</sup> See <http://www.respublica.org.uk/blog/2011/01/taking-ownership-public> (accessed 26/1/2011).

<sup>109</sup> Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:36-40. Cf. the Talmud's teaching that "All Israel is responsible for each other." (Mitzvah of Pidyon Shevuyim)

<sup>110</sup> The descriptions of fellowship in Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-37 were models practised amongst believers only. Whilst this presents a challenge to Christians to look after each other, and does not preclude giving to those outside the Church, it is not directly applicable here. Apart from anything else, limited resources means that this could only be a short-term solution if extended to society as a whole.

Identifying potential areas of coming need, the average national weekly household expenditure in 2008 was £471 (up 2.6% from £459.20). The four highest categories (totalling 48% of expenditure) were:<sup>111</sup>

- Transport: £63.40 (13.5%)
- Recreation and culture: £60.10 (12.8%)
- Housing, fuel and power:<sup>112</sup> £53.00 (11.3%)
- Food and non-alcoholic drinks: £48.10 (10.8%)

For the lowest income decile, average weekly expenditure was £153.70 per week (down 11% from £172.40), and the four highest categories (totalling 59% of expenditure) were:<sup>113</sup>

- Housing, fuel and power: £36.30 (23.6%)
- Food and non-alcoholic drinks: £26.40 (17.2%)
- Recreation and culture: £15.30 (10.0%)
- Transport: £12.10 (7.9%)

That is, the same four items topped the list, but Food and Housing are the most expensive categories for lowest-decile earners, whereas Transport and Recreation are the highest on average. Food costs are proportionately 59% higher for those in the lowest decile, and housing costs more than twice as high. This is due to a number of factors, not least that lower-income households tend to have fewer people living in them (1.3 people per household for the bottom decile, against an average of 2.4), and cannot take advantage of economies of scale.

There are clearly opportunities for church groups to help in a number of ways. These might be at a fairly abstract level – many churches, for example, already offer money ministries such as debt counselling and courses to help people manage their budgets. But there are also extremely practical ways in which they might be able to help: providing low-cost childcare to enable families to work; organising lift-sharing to reduce transport costs; running community meals that, due to their scale, are more economical than people eating alone; and providing spaces for people to meet and socialise. In practice, every community will be different, with varying needs, but these categories may provide a starting point for some ways in which church can reach out to their local areas.

More broadly, there are huge opportunities for churches to become integral parts of their communities. Many churches already run a wide range of projects and ministries in their local areas. In many cases, though, churches' activities could be expanded into new areas. The scope and scale of these will depend on a number

of factors, but churches have resources – including space, administrative staff and congregations themselves – that other organisations do not.

Some more ambitious initiatives might involve starting credit unions; housing public services like local post offices that would otherwise be closing;<sup>114</sup> even starting schools under the New Academies programme. We might also expect to see partnerships with local services, charities and businesses to provide further amenities – health advice clinics/drop-in centres, support and training for people looking for work, links with social enterprises and citizens' advice bureaux (which were originally conceived as a kind of 'Big Society' project in the 1930s and run from makeshift offices in churches, cafés and other venues).

On a smaller and more immediate level, many churches rent out their space to separate organisations. They could be more organised about this, making it church policy to ensure that as much space was used as possible at any given time rather than just opportunistically, in order to become more active centres of the community. Instead of just making this space available to third parties, volunteers and social entrepreneurs from the church staff and congregation could run groups themselves.

The extent of this will depend on the size and flexibility of the space available, as well as the demand and the capacity for organisation (a small, rural church building with fixed pews and few facilities will be in a very different position to a large inner-city church with several large spaces as well as the organisational capacity to administrate it).

To take the example of a big, inner-city church, depending on layout and fixtures the church is likely to have at least two or three large, flexible spaces (the main church building itself, and typically another hall and rooms where youth and other groups meet, possibly in separate buildings). In addition, there will be kitchens, childcare facilities and toilets. Aside from use by the church itself during the week, this presents enormous opportunities for wider engagement, potentially across six days (excluding Sunday), with morning, afternoon and evening projects. Just a few of these might include: parents and toddlers groups; craft mornings; IT and skills training for the unemployed; bike repair

The success of the Big Society initiative will not just require the help of faith organisations: it will need actively to promote them.

<sup>111</sup> See [http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme\\_social/FamilySpending2008/FamilySpending2009.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_social/FamilySpending2008/FamilySpending2009.pdf) (accessed 22/11/2010).

<sup>112</sup> Excluding mortgage interest payments, council tax or Northern Ireland rates.

<sup>113</sup> See table A6, p. 96-97.

<sup>114</sup> This has already occurred in some rural areas. See <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/yearreview/jun07/postoffices.html> (accessed 7/12/2010).

workshops; counselling space and space for therapeutic group work; a bookshop and/or library; community meals; EFL and other language classes; flexible office space for freelancers and small local businesses; a café and internet facilities; budgeting, debt and money management workshops; circuits/aerobics; self defence classes; WeightWatchers meetings; theatre; music; film; and youth groups.

Churches also have organisational resources to start up, and large numbers of people to get involved with, social enterprises and other grassroots projects, such as Streetbank<sup>115</sup>-style tools and skills-sharing networks; hobby and interest groups; organising car pooling, and transport for the elderly and disabled to get to appointments; and volunteer groups focused on specific areas of the community. Christian involvement also needs to extend to bringing biblical principles and social transformation agendas to business.

There are many examples of churches which already engage in this way with their communities. One large church in Tonbridge, Kent, estimates that 2,500 to 3,000 people use the church every week for activities including a day-care centre for older vulnerable people, a debt advice centre (see Study 4, below), drop-in

#### Study 4: Tonbridge Debt Advice Centre

Tonbridge Debt Advice Centre (TDAC, <http://www.tdac.org.uk/>), which is supported by the churches of Tonbridge and Sevenoaks,<sup>116</sup> was set up to offer a free and confidential debt counselling service. The service has been running since 2004, and is experienced in a broad range of financial issues from credit card debt to threatened eviction, as well as dealing with creditors and financial organisations throughout the region. The service seeks to address debt problems by contacting creditors directly and establishing a fair and manageable payment plans and solutions with them and, where necessary, helping debtors through the courts. The centre has over 50 trained volunteer advisers.

The work of the TDAC and similar organisations will become all the more important in the coming months and years, particularly since government funding has been discontinued for around 500 advisers currently offering free help – despite forecasts that an extra 200,000 people will seek debt advice this year.<sup>117</sup>

meeting space, parents and toddler groups, breakfasts and other meals.<sup>118</sup> The example of the East London Mosque (see page 17), which has helped to transform the local area through partnerships with public services and other groups, should serve as inspiration as to what is possible. As an example of what a smaller church can do, Zion Baptist Church in Cambridge<sup>119</sup> runs free English courses, a drop-in centre, toddler groups and a homeless shelter used by over 300 people per year (see Study 3, page 23).

This kind of community involvement is by no means unusual for churches around the country. The challenge will be for churches to continue the work they are already doing, possibly with reduced resources, and to access any opportunities to help them expand their ministries.

#### Drawing a line

Finally, for all the opportunities there might be, and in all the activities that churches already undertake, there is the need to avoid unnecessary interference from government. This is also an argument that applies more broadly to the relationship between the government and faith in the lives of individuals. The last government saw a rise in scepticism about the relevance and place for faith in modern society, along with increasing erosion of religious freedoms (which was disproportionately the case for Christianity). Elements of this government have suggested a reversal of this outlook – presumably not least because the Big Society simply won't work without the involvement of churches and other faith organisations, which already carry out so many community initiatives. What this means in practice remains to be seen. Ensuring genuine freedom of conscience for all, Christian or otherwise, is a prerequisite for volunteers getting involved in the causes they believe in most passionately.

The Church is potentially being presented with unprecedented opportunities through the Big Society agenda, but engaging with these must not be at the expense of compromising its purposes in the interests of short-term gain. Where the state genuinely tries to facilitate the work that churches and other faith groups do in the community, it is fulfilling its role. Where it merely tries to co-opt church resources, or places unacceptable conditions on faith groups in return for its support and thereby compromises their integrity and ultimate purpose, it is overstepping itself.

<sup>115</sup> <http://www.streetbank.com/>

<sup>116</sup> E.g. [http://www.tbc-online.org.uk/debt\\_advice\\_tonbridge.php](http://www.tbc-online.org.uk/debt_advice_tonbridge.php)

<sup>117</sup> See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-12330429> (accessed 1/2/11).

<sup>118</sup> See Tonbridge Baptist Church, <http://www.tbc-online.org.uk/>

<sup>119</sup> See Zion Baptist Church, <http://www.zionbc.org.uk/>



## Conclusion: towards a better society

This study suggests that ‘the Big Society’ is an extremely promising but widely misunderstood idea, and hopes to bring some clarity to the debate. Part of this uncertainty regrettably appears to be a reflection of politicians’ own confusion: Big Society is many things to many people, and inevitably these frequently caricature or misinterpret aspects of what is really intended – to the extent that such intentions can be known at all.

Using insights from the biblical model of Israelite society and from political theology, we believe that both the substance and rationale of a ‘Big Society’ can be more clearly articulated. Understood as the government’s initiative to reduce unnecessary state interference, instead passing power and responsibility to lower groups, and fundamentally **creating the conditions under which society might thrive through the direct responsibility and action of individuals, families and local organisations, but not forcing change itself**, the Big Society is an inherently biblical concept: this, from the perspective of political theology, is what government is ultimately for.

However, it is a long way from a brilliant concept to its effective application. Depending on its execution the idea could bring about societal transformation, or it could be disastrous (as promised by supporting and opposition figures, respectively). At present, the Big Society has only been articulated in its broad strokes. It sets out a process, and (with some searching) an ends and a mechanism, but few details. Perhaps most significantly, the link between Broken Britain and Big Society has been downplayed, presumably because the former is a negative portrayal of the country that was deemed unsuitable for an election campaign, and because the way that Big Society will fix our social problems is complex and difficult to articulate convincingly – especially, again, as an electioneering soundbite. However, if the initiative is not primarily intended to bring about increased social justice, it is hard to see what it is intended to achieve.

The question that people need to ask of the Big Society agenda is not whether society is bigger and government smaller (which, due to cuts, it almost certainly will be). It is a more nuanced question of what the state *does* try to do – which areas of government need to remain big, because only the state can best achieve these objectives – and *how* the state goes about empowering its citizens and organisations to carry out their work of bringing about the common good. It is whether the society we are working towards over the next few years is better – more just, more equal, less deprived, more empowered, with more room for individual freedom and

organisational ability to take part in their communities – or whether the ‘welfare society’ has not been able to fill the gap left by the retreating state, presumably resulting in deprivation, inequality, crime and other undesirable outcomes. If, in the interests of shrinking the deficit, we create thousands more charities and social enterprises and armies of volunteers and community organisers but, at the end of the parliament, poverty and inequality are higher than ever before and figures for crime, educational failure and social cohesion are worse, then the Big Society initiative will rightly be judged a failure.

The Big Society initiative presents two opportunities to Christians. Firstly, there is the prospect of social justice and transformation, of becoming involved with community initiatives and doing more of the work that so many churches already carry out. Secondly, there is the chance of helping to redeem the state for the purpose for which it was created. Writing in *God and Government*,<sup>120</sup> Tom Wright states, ‘Jesus has come not to destroy the world but to rescue it from evil, and if the structures of human authority are part of the good creation, the abuse of those structures constitutes a double evil.’<sup>121</sup> It is our responsibility to take part in the role that human authorities play in structuring society, even when those authorities do not acknowledge God. ‘The church now has a chance, granted the general decaying feel of Western democracy... to speak up about the big issues of justice, freedom, the very nature of government and democracy, the responsibility of all rulers not just to their own political backers or financiers but to those they rule.’<sup>122</sup>

There are things that the state can do better than voluntary and local organisations, and it must make sure that it does them (defence, international relations and administering tax and benefits fairly being some obvious examples). But it must also pave the way for others to do their jobs properly, not just handing over responsibility but ensuring that they are allowed and encouraged to work in the most effective way: criminal justice systems that take into account the background of the offender and needs of the community, as well as working with social services and training and support organisations; health service providers with knowledge of the area and links to local advice and help groups and other relevant services; schools that can tailor their curricula and broader programmes of education to their

---

<sup>120</sup> ‘Government as an ambiguous power’, pp. 16-39.

<sup>121</sup> P. 66.

<sup>122</sup> P. 79.

particular demographic and the situations of individual pupils. Churches, faith organisations and charities will inevitably be an important part of this: if it is genuinely going to work, then Big Society must enable these to do their work, rather than hamstringing them with red tape and political correctness.

### Final questions

At this stage, as the Big Society concept is still taking shape, perhaps the most useful questions that government can ask itself (and that citizens can ask of it in turn) are: what stops this or that organisation from carrying out its work more effectively? And if this falls within the government's remit, how can it help address this? For example, to what extent does unnecessary bureaucracy discourage people from volunteering – particularly in the areas of CRB checks (both the need for and the time it takes to process them); volunteering while on benefits (there has previously been inconsistency in advice, with some Jobcentres warning that volunteering for more than 16 hours per week may affect benefits payments; volunteering is not actively promoted as a choice); and restrictions on asylum seekers (who cannot volunteer in the public sector, and who are ineligible for CRB checks). Non-EU nationals need a work permit in order to volunteer.

As another example, are faith organisations free to do what they do best, particularly if this involves direct state interest? What effect does equality legislation have on the work of faith groups – to what extent does it restrict the organisation's choice of employees, and to what extent are they allowed to operate in accordance with their beliefs?

Finally, is government doing only those things that it can do best, or has it abdicated its responsibilities in the name of a small state ideology or bringing down the deficit? For example, will the reforms to the tax and benefits system really raise revenue and decrease the number of people living in poverty, or will some disadvantaged people be left behind?

The other side of this question is the part that Christians will play in shaping the Big Society. In recent years, the Church has withdrawn from public engagement. There are now, we are told, enormous opportunities for it to become more involved in its local communities, for its members to have more of a say in how the country is run and how public policy is shaped. Whatever the problems of the recent past and the reasons for their withdrawal from the public sphere, Christians now have a responsibility to take the opportunities being offered and make the most of them as a way of being salt and light in their communities and a witness to the world around them, or else to risk being further sidelined as an increasing moral and political irrelevance in the modern world.

'You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.' (Matthew 5:13-16)

*“This is the most rigorous interrogation of the Big Society idea I’ve seen so far. It takes the debate to a new level. I very much welcome the willingness to ask tough questions and press for more clarity. And I like the interweaving of biblical theme, Christian political ideas and policy detail. The link with Broken Britain analysis is excellent and key.”*

*Jonathan Chaplin, Director, Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics*

*“This report is essential reading for Christians who want to engage faithfully and wisely with the Coalition’s flagship policy. It identifies the contribution Christian thought has made to the vision of the ‘Big Society’ – and it asks important and searching questions about what would constitute success in its application.”*

*Revd Dr Angus Ritchie, Director, The Contextual Theology Centre*

## **About the Jubilee Centre**

The Jubilee Centre is an independent think tank based in Cambridge. Established in 1983, it offers a Christian perspective on a wide range of social, political, and economic issues. Related publications include *Apolitical Animal* (2003), available via the Jubilee Centre’s website, at [www.jubilee-centre.org](http://www.jubilee-centre.org)