

Is civic society really in decline?

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The 'big society' assumes that government alone cannot solve complex social problems. Instead, by expanding the opportunities for civic participation, it is hoped that an active citizenry will play a greater role in tackling problems that affect communities. The package of policies is predicated on the notion that there has been a decline in civic participation and that this can be attributed to the dependency culture encouraged by 'big government'.

However, our Briefing Paper demonstrates that civic participation is not in decline. Indeed, it is currently vibrant. Membership of trade unions, political parties, churches and traditional women's groups has fallen, but membership of new social movements, non-governmental organisations and pressure groups have flourished.

The expansion of the welfare state has not weakened civic participation. At times, the state has promoted and strengthened the voluntary sector, it has acted as a spur to further voluntary initiatives and it has itself expanded in response to the claims made by the voluntary sector. Over the last century, the two have expanded side by side: they are not alternatives.

Clearly, the nature of membership and participation has changed. Rising affluence and access to higher education has meant concern about public issues has increased. We now increasingly opt to support civic groups through arms-length, 'cheque-book' activism. This is a calculated decision. Many social issues have been left to the realm of experts and many problems are just more complex. They simply cannot be tackled through traditional forms of associational life. It makes sense to support groups that are better able to bring expertise to expertise.

The government ought to be aware that the voluntary sector is not an entity that can easily be controlled, especially to fulfil the role of a retreating state. Attempts to direct its activities are likely to fail and possibly to backfire, especially if sectors call on the state for further intervention or argue that voluntary effort alone is not enough.

The vibrancy of the sector can be embraced, and its comparative advantages exploited, but not in a manner that sees it as an alternative to state provision. Indeed, its cheque-book supporters might readily switch their allegiances if this is the role envisaged for civil society.

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