Community engagement: can the big society mend broken britain?

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One of the campaign slogans of the Conservative Party in the recent general election was their commitment to the creation of a new 'Big Society' in Britain. This was contrasted to the 'big government' that they associated with the Labour administration, which they suggested was crowding out independent citizen and community action, and which in any event would be unaffordable in the foreseeable future given the deficit in public finances. The Big Society was therefore a leitmotiv for citizen and community action. It was also seen as a potential response to another Conservative election call, the identification of social problems as evidence of a 'Broken Britain'. The Big Society could be the solution to a Broken Britain.

In practice there was anecdotal evidence that the Big Society concept did not work well as an election slogan, in part because many people did not seem to understand what was meant by it. Also the notion of a Broken Britain was seen by many as presenting rather too negative image of the country, and has not been so widely employed since the election. Nevertheless the new Coalition Government have made clear their commitment to the promotion of the Big Society idea , with the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and other Cabinet members insisting that it is now 'at the heart' of public sector reform and spelling out in a little more details what they mean by this.

Some of the commitments are rather general – moving away from centrally driven, top-down, services and empowering professionals, communities and citizens to take policy planning into their own hands. But some are more specific – show-casing volunteering in a national 'Big Society Day', developing a National Citizen's Service for 16 year olds, giving public sector service workers and users the opportunity to establish their own social enterprises to deliver services, and establishing a Big Society Bank to make loans to charities and social enterprises to help them to grow and prosper.

At the heart of the new government's expectations, however, is a new engagement with communities, to encourage and support local citizens to be proactive in seeking and implementing solutions to local problems. And the government recognise that this will not necessarily happen organically. They have talked about training a new generation of community organisers to support the establishment of neighbourhood groups, and have even quoted the example of US President Barack Obama's earlier work as a community organiser in Chicago. Certainly communities and citizens will need support if a new engagement with them is to drive any major new response to social problems and the delivery of social services – although anticipated cuts in publicly provided services may also provide a negative stimulus to this.

Such commitments to community engagement are not so new, however. Previous governments in the UK and elsewhere have sought to advocate and promote the empowerment of local citizens with Community Development Projects, Community Anchor schemes, and many more. And much has been achieved in these; but generally only when a wide range of public and private agencies are also travelling in the same direction. Community engagement needs to come from agencies like health trusts, police forces, retail outlets, and even universities – and not just from government trained community organisers. A wider embracement of community engagement may lead to a more active and empowered citizenry, although whether this can mend all the problems in a Broken Britain may prove a challenging ask...

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