Blog: Knitting in boxing gloves

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Relationships between local government and MR Pickles and his crew continue to deteriorate. Greg Clark's call for a more mature relationship between central and local government and between local government and the voluntary sector must have raised some eyebrows in local government circles – if only for its extraordinary but entirely unconscious irony. I particularly liked 'any council contemplating cuts to the voluntary sector would be acting unreasonably if it simply handed down those cuts from on high'. As would , it could be argued, any government making cuts to local councils.

Mr. Clark makes the link between the voluntary sector and the Big Society. Like so many in government he knows the voluntary and community sector (VCS) is vital to achieving the Big Society but isn't quite sure how. The first problem David Cameron and his ministers have is that there isn't really a voluntary and community sector. The 'VCS' label encompasses an enormously diverse range of organisations and functions which have nothing in common. They range from multi-million pound businesses which are paid to deliver services - to local village football clubs. The whole 'VCS good' 'local authority bad' thing, which keeps cropping up in arguments about cuts, is based on a fallacy. There is nothing intrinsically superior about the VCS. True, many organisations do excellent work and deliver value for money but so do many local authority and health service frontline workers. Delivering services though a lot of disparate organisations may offer choice and help meet diverse needs but it may also be very inefficient - with no economies of scale and high management costs. The notion that the VCS is run by volunteers and therefore intrinsically more worthy than local authority services is another fallacy. It isn't. True, VCS organisations generally have volunteer trustees and volunteers (usually recruited, vetted, trained, supported and managed by paid staff) may deliver some services but the bulk of VCS services are provided by paid staff. Grass roots community activity is usually unpaid but even those groups may well be affiliated to and supported by national bodies, run by paid staff.

The really big point which Mr. Cameron and Mr. Pickles seem to be missing is the vital role local authorities play in supporting their local VCS. The only people who know how well the VCS is delivering in their area - who to invest in and develop, who to encourage to merge and who to decommission - is the local authority. The VCS is like a patchwork. Without the backing provided by the local authority through strategic commissioning and support there is nothing to stop the VCS becoming a rag bag of inefficient and unaccountable groups. Cutting VCS funding may be the right thing to do. Protecting local authorities' directly provided services may also be the right thing to do. Right or wrong, the only sensible place to have that argument is in the local area and the only people who have the legitimacy to make those decisions are local councillors.

While Mr. Pickles reviles local authorities and tries to stop them issuing their own newsletters (which might actually be helping to support the Big Society) both he and Mr. Cameron are missing the point. **Without the support of local government there will be no Big Society. Using centralist means to achieve a local Big Society is like knitting in boxing gloves - doomed to failure.**

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