

## Blog: Does a 'big society' demand a limited localism?

Posted on Wednesday 4th May 2011

By Professor Helen Sullivan - Professor of Government and Society

**The impact of local authority spending cuts on the voluntary sector has provoked demands from the sector for special treatment and exhortations from the Secretary of State and his ministers for councils to cut their own 'bureaucracy' before cutting funding to voluntary bodies.** These reactions demonstrate how two key policies - 'big society' and 'localism' – are in opposition to each other. Hitherto central government's policy statements had presented both policies as two sides of the same coin. The Government's Essential Guide to Localism claimed that 'Decentralisation is the biggest thing that government can do to build the Big Society'

And yet, closer examination of Government action suggests that realisation of the 'big society' is contingent upon a limited localism, one in which both local government and citizens play more marginal roles.

**The implications for local government are evident from the numerous policy announcements of the Secretary of State and his ministers.** While the Essential Guide promotes local government as 'vital' and the promises of a new general power supports the Secretary of State's claim that for local government 'the world will be your oyster', other developments suggest otherwise. These range from; front loaded spending cuts, centralising changes to education and planning, requirements on key cities to hold referendums on elected mayors and the proposal to introduce directly elected police commissioners. Directions about what councils may not do continue to flow from the Secretary of State. These actions suggest a Government that is significantly more resistant to the idea of a free and autonomous local government than the rhetoric of 'localism' would suggest.

**'So what?'** you may say, central government has always taken power to itself from local government simply because it can; this Government is doing no more than previous ones. And like the previous New Labour administrations this Government has concluded that 'empowering citizens' requires it to act on behalf of citizens against the alleged 'centralising' tendencies of local government. So perhaps we shouldn't read too much into this - except to note the continued erosion of local authority – and should focus instead on how these actions and others are supporting the generation of a 'big society' by appealing directly to individuals and communities, voluntary organisations and other civic actors.

**According to the Essential Guide The Big Society is what happens whenever people work together for the common good.** There appear to be three key elements to this; 'big citizens' who are civic minded, neighbourly and prepared to work for the common good, self-governing communities of different kinds growing from the bottom up to support this work and services delivered by a range of organisations all focused on meeting community needs.

Practice to date suggests some limits to this vision. Notwithstanding the 'big society bank' and 'community champions' to support civic engagement, policy announcements linked to public service reform have focused on a 'thin' rather than 'big' conception of citizenship, emphasising the citizen as an individual consumer rather than a community member. This is evident in the emphasis on personalisation and choice, individual budgets or 'credits' for use in purchasing public services and the focus on incentivising individual behaviour change. **The consumer ethos, rather than increased democratic accountability, is driving the proposal to introduce voting to change suppliers of services.** The idea of giving communities more power to enable them to develop as 'self governing' is also limited in practice. The proposals for 'neighbourhood planning' have been undercut by the Chancellor George Osborne's Budget declaration of a presumption in favour of sustainable development, while the proposal to grant communities influence over council tax levels is limited to decreases to proposed council tax levels.

**Without a clearer connection between actions to promote civic engagement and reforms to local public services the 'big society' risks becoming merely an extension of a consumer experience, and without a recognition of the tensions between the 'big society' and 'localism' agendas, local government's future role will be confined to one of mediator in the local public service market.**

Comment and read more of INLOGOVs blog posts at: [inlogov.blogspot.com \(http://inlogov.blogspot.com/\)](http://inlogov.blogspot.com)

[Privacy](#) | [Legal](#) | [Cookies and cookie policy](#) | [Accessibility](#) | [Site map](#) | [Website feedback](#) | [Charitable information](#)

© University of Birmingham 2015

