

CREATING THE "BIG SOCIETY"

"Big Society" fails because successive governments have failed to understand the difference between "neighbourliness" and "welfare services". Neighbourliness is not dependent on the different levels of public spending governments legitimately make; it is however affected by the strategies they adopt.

For over 40 years I have watched governments routinely advocate a "Big Society" by whatever name and end up with service providers (charities, councils, social entrepreneurs) arguing about expenditure and the good "neighbour" is forgotten.

They have all had a genuine aspiration to encourage neighbourliness and citizenship but this "Social Capital" as it is called is in decline, as is well documented. Fewer people play an active role in community or interest organisations and informal networks are diminishing.

Belonging to large membership organisations is now more about magazine subscription rather than active involvement in a local group. Electronic networks are qualitatively inferior to face-to-face friendship.

Keeping an eye out for each other's children, borrowing a cup of sugar or working-class solidarity are valued but the word "voluntary" is misunderstood.

Neighbourliness happens without payment and is categorised as "voluntary". Politicians and staff assume this means the "voluntary sector". This leads them to local and national charities and similar.

This strategic flaw means that the focus is on the services these organisations provide, rather than considering what factors in the social and physical environment make people more likely to be neighbourly.

Charities have a fine record of undertaking innovative work but it is different from neighbourliness or citizenship. It also means the debate becomes about "value for money" or "services on the cheap".

With neighbourliness no "service" is offered in the conventional sense. When people naturally help each other, they do so spontaneously and without any reward or recognition. We know that when people attend faith communities, sports clubs and interest groups they benefit from increased "social capital".

People are neighbourly because it is what being human is about NOT because they have decided to be a "volunteer" or to take part in "voluntary action". They do not usually call themselves "volunteers" as this would suggest a sense of detachment which has no place in any real sense of community.

Trying to measure (as opposed to valuing) specific outputs or offering rewards for “Big Society” tasks devalues the basic humanity of neighbourliness.

It also will value the wrong things. The hedonist who helps out once a month by making the tea for a charity can be said to be a “volunteer” and the output can be measured. But the carer for family members who can be relied on to help out when a neighbour needs it, always mucks in at their local sports club or sports organisation is not “a volunteer” and their contribution is more difficult to measure. It’s one reason why carers are so undervalued.

Figures which try to define what percentage of the population is involved in “voluntary activity” are misleading. It is difficult for anyone to go through a week without being neighbourly even if it is something as simple as giving a stranger directions.

The problem is we know insufficient about what it is that makes people more likely to be neighbourly or communities to be more caring.

I know from my research into children’s play that where traffic is restricted children play out more and parents talk of “keeping an eye out” for each others children. It is very noticeable that where children can play out in front of their homes such as in short cul-de-sacs or on communal space the feeling of neighbourliness is better than in similar busy streets in the same area. It is not fear of stranger danger that makes the difference; it is the dominance of the car which limits neighbourliness.

My experience is that the attitude of Local Authorities has changed. When my staff contacted Local Authorities in the late 70s, nearly all of them had a policy of encouraging neighbourhood based playschemes during the summer holidays. This did not always involve giving any grants but there was a usual expectation that groups of parents should be given encouragement to run activities for children in their neighbourhood.

The Youth Service had this similar assumption. They were called Youth and Community Workers and there was a belief that helping people in communities to organise locally was beneficial. There was not one “solution” but just the belief that people getting together and organising things for themselves would bring benefits not just of whatever was organised but also of community well-being or what we would now call community cohesion. There would also be benefits to the individual, the increasing empowerment significantly increasing their personal development.

In the same way increased feelings of neighbourliness and also the personal development of those involved were at the heart of the Pre-School Playgroups movement. These benefits were overlooked by Government, who merely wanted to assess them on service delivery and educational development and therefore diminished the PPA and its playgroups.

Government and Local Government need to move away from use of business techniques which treat people as customers, passive recipients of council “services”. Such techniques reward the provision of (privatised?) services and discourage the building of communal and shared responsibility.

They encourage a “can’t do” approach to local community activity (often using health and safety as an excuse) rather than a “can do” approach which looks to overcome bureaucracy. “Royal” street parties happen regularly, it is better to prepare an A4 “How to” sheet rather than having David Cameron telling people to ignore their Local Council.

When children could play out unsupervised they took responsibility for organising themselves from about 8 years old onwards. By 16 they were competent and eager to take responsibilities in their local organisations. We have allowed the car to prevent them playing out and developing those competences.

We have a proud record of social entrepreneurs who raise money from business and trusts for innovative services yet to pretend what they do can be rolled out to build a “Big Society” is to ignore the economics. To develop any one of these services nationwide would cost about the same as primary schools cost – amounts way beyond what most communities could raise, and even further beyond what trusts and business could sponsor. A national youth service of 8 weeks for all school leavers would cost at least 24 times what the current youth service costs.

The “Big Society” therefore cannot depend on social entrepreneurs no matter how dynamic a few heroes are.

We need to understand more of how we create both the physical and social environment in which people feel sufficiently secure, empowered and valued to be more neighbourly, more active citizens.

A more neighbourly society is also likely to be more relaxed about paying taxes for the common good.

A more neighbourly society is one in which people will wish to take responsibilities in voluntary organisations, school governorships and all those other opportunities offered by a civil society.

It will be a slower process than supporting a few high profile facilities which Ministers can announce but is actually what people want. They will always put a high value on living in places, which are neighbourly, and want to belong to organisations where everybody plays their part.

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