Is the Big Society a Big Con?

David J. Hunter
Centre for Public Policy and Health, School for Medicine and Health, Wolfson Research Institute, Durham University, Stockton on Tees, UK
Address correspondence to David J. Hunter, E-mail: d.j.hunter@durham.ac.uk

Views are sharply divided on the extent to which the Big Society is a mere facade—a nice slogan but essentially vacuous—serving to mask the dismemberment of the public realm, or whether it heralds the dawn of an exciting, vibrant new age of community activism. Will 1000 flowers, in the shape of cooperative ventures and voluntarism, flourish or will they simply perish, victims of the freeze on spending and service cuts? At this time no one knows the answer.

Much of the appeal (and conversely the scepticism) surrounding the Big Society concept lies in its slipperiness and vagueness. It can mean what you want it to mean, although it generally seems from recent public opinion surveys that few people have much of a clue. For some supporters of the Big Society a stronger, and thereby healthier (in the sense of wellbeing) civic society, will emerge. For others, it means a weakening of an overbearing and overweening central state which, in the absence of the dependency culture it has spawned, will release untapped community potential. And for those of a more romantic persuasion, the Big Society holds out the prospect of realising the hopes of those, such as the guild socialists back in the 1920s, who dreamed of a society made up of worker cooperatives, mutual societies and community run services. What we now call social enterprises or community interest companies are echoes of this nirvana.

The Big Society plays to those seeking to shape the post-bureaucratic state with its antipathy to big government. In its place lies localism and ‘nudge’ thinking aimed at incentivising people to act in their own and society’s long-term interest.1 As a consequence, the notion of the public realm has become discredited. It is significant that the most prominent adviser to Cameron and his ministerial colleagues, Richard Thaler, is an American academic and proponent of ‘nudge’ thinking reared in the tradition of suspicion about big government and who shuns a role for legislation or regulation directed at telling people what to do.2

All of which poses a problem for public health as it has evolved. Public health, after all, is by definition about the public realm. That is its raison d’etre and what distinguishes its practitioners from those who deal with individuals and their needs. But complicating the picture further is what the public think. With all their fine talk about localism and community empowerment, are politicians reflecting the public’s wishes and preferences or are they (wilfully or otherwise) ignoring important caveats which suggest a more nuanced approach might be in order?

Interesting insights into the public’s mind (or rather minds) can be found in a report produced for the 2020 Public Services Trust by Ipsos MORI.3 While it seems the public want a more flexible, context-specific relationship with government they also look to government to play an enabling, protective and sometimes authoritative role while respecting the public’s autonomy. The balance of power in the relationship will shift in different circumstances. How far the individual takes an active role, even a leading one, will depend on the nature of the community, the complexity of the needs being addressed (e.g. child protection/health), the type of the service required, the length of time needed for the service to be provided and so on. The survey also found that the public believe there is room for government to enable, encourage and enforce behaviour change as part of a supportive relationship between citizens and the state. There is also evidence that people, believing that they can influence services if they need to, may be more important than actually getting involved in practice in a ‘hands on’ capacity.

If there is any salience to be attached to this much more qualified and richly textured assessment of the place of the Big Society and government in the post-bureaucratic state then it gives grounds for optimism that there remains a powerful role for public health and that it should not be bypassed or marginalised by Big Society bravado. There is nothing in the Ipsos MORI survey that the most skilled...
deliverers of public health are not already aware of and heed in their work.

In the increasingly complex and heterogeneous world we inhabit things are rarely straightforward or easily compartmentalised. Paradoxically, for the Big Society to prosper the role of government is critical. The most ardent enthusiasts in the third sector acknowledge that without government support at local and national levels, their future would be a precarious one and many would not survive. Indeed, we know this to be true as the spending cuts bite.

Perhaps most interesting of all is the survey finding that not all issues policy-makers consider important and in need of major reform are shared by the public. The public demonstrate more awareness than their elected representatives of how complex systems demand complex solutions and not simple ones. The Big Society may therefore be something of a Big Con after all.

References