

A better big society how Labour can make the 'big society' its own

George Howarth MP and Graham Kendall

March 2011

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Why the big society should transcend party politics

There is a story about a Conservative minister overheard talking to the chief executive of a leading charity at the 2010 Conservative party conference in Birmingham:

CEO: ‘What’s the big society all about then?’

Minister: ‘You!’

CEO: ‘In that case can I have some money to fund my project please?’

Minister: ‘No, that’s the whole point.’

It would be too easy for the centre-left to dismiss the big society simply as a smokescreen for the coalition to impose massive public spending cuts. This would be a mistake. Progressive politics is grounded in a diverse range of civil and state institutions working for individuals, as well as for the common good. Dismissing the idea of the big society without offering an alternative vision risks ceding ownership of the notions of society and collective action to the coalition and thereby assigning to the historical dustbin the alliance of community activism with the labour movement that has been so

important throughout the past two centuries. Moreover, to jettison our collective understanding and experiences of the rich ecosystem of social institutions would delay Labour's renewal and potential.

We need a considered and constructive critique of the right's thinking on the big society. This has two important purposes.

First, as the coalition seeks to implement unprecedented cuts, we need a coherent response that mitigates damage to local communities. Second, the centre-left needs to articulate an alternative approach. Ed Miliband was right to begin his

“Labour now needs to engage with possibly the most powerful aspect of the coalition's approach to the big society: its articulation of empowering individuals and local communities”

leadership by saying he would not oppose every government measure. Of course, making that statement of intent is the easy part; the bigger challenge is to construct a rationale to inform a coherent policy response that resonates intuitively with the public.

There are many strands that feed into this response: it needs to begin by encapsulating what is commonly understood by the big society. It must also consider the context of public spending cuts. In government, Labour increasingly came to be seen as not being on the side of ordinary people. Whether or not this was fair, Labour now needs to engage with possibly the most powerful aspect of the coalition's approach to the big society: its articulation of empowering individuals and local communities. This includes the underlying philosophy of the big society and its implications for how we deliver public services in the future: how localism and individual choices impact at a national level, a fuller understanding of the 'post-bureaucratic age', and lessons from the successes and failures of the Blair and Brown administrations. Critically, while we

all welcome a system that produces winners, we need to understand how to respond to changes that also lead to losers.

To date, the Labour party has given out mixed messages on the big society ranging from outright dismissal to cautious engagement. These different approaches risk giving the Conservatives the opportunity to make all the political running. There is a real danger that core principles of equity and universality may be lost if the centre-left does not engage. This could have significant consequences for the most vulnerable because they stand to lose most from a big society from which they are excluded.

Alan Milburn has in the past made a clear case that Labour started winning elections when it moved from being the champion of producer interests to the champion of consumer interests. Labour needs to remember this lesson, and not just so that it starts

winning elections again. There is common ground shared across all parties and it is certainly welcome that the Conservatives have moved beyond Margaret Thatcher's famous assertion that 'there is no such thing as society.' It is clear that by stating 'there is such a thing as society,

it's just not the same as the state' immediately after being elected as Conservative party leader in December 2005, David Cameron has moved on from Thatcher's analysis. It is just less clear exactly where he is heading. It is worth remembering that around this time there was a broad consensus between the Conservative and Labour frontbenches on many policy areas which would soon vanish following two key developments: Gordon Brown's ascendancy to

“ Alan Milburn has in the past made a clear case that Labour started winning elections when it moved from being the champion of producer interests to the champion of consumer interests ”

the premiership and the financial crisis. With this perspective, it becomes less surprising that the big society can bear more than a passing resemblance to the Blairite reforms of around this time – but without the promise of universality or access to public funds, and arguably with more local and individual choice and ownership.

Conclusions:

- Progressives need to engage in the debate about the big society – after all, it draws on many of the lessons and achievements of the centre-left.
- Part of Labour’s story needs to be about empowering individuals in the context of their local institutions and national structures.
- The big society is, or at least we should demand it be, more than a smokescreen for cuts.
- A coherent understanding of the big society needs to learn from the successes and failures of the Blair-Brown years, and this includes thinking about the relationship between users and providers of public services.
- We should press for answers to the question: is the big society large enough to include the most vulnerable?

What is the big society?

Most people seem to have a fairly intuitive grasp about what we mean by individuals and society, but, when asked what is meant by the big society, numerous answers come forth. You really can take your pick: a theory of institutions; a story of empowerment; more of an analysis than an approach; the call to volunteer; a rationale for public sector cuts; a big con or just total confusion. Against this background noise, it's easy to sympathise with the MP Tim Loughton who, with welcome honesty, has stated he simply has 'no idea' and suggests that most of his Conservative peers share similar views.

It would be easy for the centre-left to adopt a cynical view that the big society was initially a PR initiative to detoxify the Conservative brand and has latterly evolved into a smokescreen to hide the worst of the cuts. Although seductive, this view should be rejected because the foundations of the big society draw on a long tradition of community activism that has delivered huge benefits and spans the political spectrum. In the context of the current public sector budget cuts, we hope this does not turn out to be the triumph of hope over experience.

There seem to be two complementary emerging strands of thinking on the big society from the coalition and those most closely aligned to its agenda.

One strand focuses on the philosophical elements of the big society, talking in terms of an analysis rather than a programme. For example, Matt Leach of the thinktank ResPublica says that the big society is ‘not, and this is critical, about outsourcing public services to civil society organisations or indeed others ... [nor is it] about short-term changes in public spending’.¹

The other strand, more consistent with the approach taken by Cabinet Office minister Oliver Letwin and the coalition, is significantly more interested in practical applications focusing on the role of civil society, the third sector and delivery of public services. This latter approach carries more political risk because it is more tangible. And, though most advocates of the big society talk about a long-term transformation in thinking – something that is closer to a generational timescale rather than the lifetime of a single parliament, the reality of government is that the impact of policies is, fairly or not, judged in terms of weeks and months.

“The big society is effectively, or at least in part, a theory of social institutions”

Sitting somewhere between these strands is Conservative MP Jesse Norman, who talks about the big society as ‘a political philosophy which thinks that there are unimaginable reserves of social energy lurking beneath society and that government can play an important role in liberating them, helping people to help themselves and developing social capital’.² He goes on to articulate the big society as the missing link in a Burkean tradition that creates a theory of institutions, be they churches, schools or clubs, that give individuals meaning. So the big society is effectively, or at least in part, a theory of social institutions. There is little here that would be controversial from any part of the political spectrum, though Norman does add that Labour has placed too much

1. Matt Leach at the King's Fund Conference, 29 October 2010, www.kingsfund.org.uk/multimedia/matt_leach_on_health.html

2. Guardian Politics Weekly podcast, 11 Nov 2010

reliance on the state so that the value of these wider institutions is diminished. It may be a fair criticism to say that Labour did not always strike the optimum balance in government, though the question then becomes how best to enable transformation at a local level in a way that is responsive, led by citizens and responds to all – including the most vulnerable.

It would clearly be an oversimplification to say that non-state organisations are a new development. Vast amounts of the public infrastructure are already provided by volunteers (eg magistrates) and voluntary organisations (eg end-of-life care through hospices and Macmillan nurses). It is also clear that every government in living memory has at various times extolled the virtues of civic participation. A key question is, therefore, what does the big society bring that is new to the role of civic society?

The definition proposed on the government's official big society website³ states:

‘the big society is a society in which individual citizens feel big; big in terms of being supported and enabled; having real and regular influence; being capable of creating change in their neighbourhood’.

So it seems that the government defines the big society as empowering individuals; encouraging social responsibility and creating an enabling and accountable state. It is as hard to imagine a contemporary politician of any hue arguing against these aims as it is to imagine a condemnation of motherhood and apple pie. So for the big society to have real meaning, it must be more than this, and when we listen to key government proponents, its practical realisation is clearly in the realm of public service commissioning and provision.

3. www.thebigsociety.co.uk

The extent to which the government actively wants to frame the big society in these terms – commissioning and providing public services – is not clear, and for good reason: in an era of cuts, too close an association runs the risk of leaving the big society as little more than a caricature. Yet this is the clearest practical manifestation of the big society in the government’s policy agenda. The rhetoric of personal and local empowerment is closely followed by questions of service provision: Andrew Lansley’s promise to create ‘the largest social enterprise sector in the world’,⁴ and Michael Gove’s self-acknowledged ‘Blairite’⁵ approach to free schools clearly fit at the heart of the government’s vision of the big society.

It is also significant that, despite the term big society, the government’s definition stresses the individual’s influence upon society rather than as a mutually interdependent relationship between individuals and their communities. With nudge theorists describing themselves as ‘libertarian paternalists’,⁶ there is perhaps an opportunity here for the centre-left to build a more coherent model of the big society that moves away from a paternalistic top-down choice architecture to a more dynamic model of individual and community empowerment.

Conclusions:

- There is a risk of the big society being all things to all people.
- The relationship between society and individuals is more mutually interdependent than acknowledged by the government’s definition of the big society.
- The government’s definition – one of individuals that feel big enough to influence and exert control over their community – is worthwhile, but needs to become more practically focused for it to have real meaning.

4. Source: Hansard 12 July 2010: Column 662

5. Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/apr/25/michael-gove-interview>

6. Thaler & Sunstein: Nudge, 2008

Who is in the big society and what impact will this have on public services?

If we take a definition of the big society to mean empowering individuals, existing civic society and new structures to take more responsibility and control – often working together for mutual benefit – then lessons quickly emerge from the past, and we rapidly find ourselves coming up with some surprising conclusions.

The big society is not a new phenomenon: it has a rich social history with many antecedents. Philanthropy and mutualism in the 19th century directly addressed some of the evils and societal challenges of that time. Cooperative societies, building societies and charitable trusts were established as a means of providing wholesome food and decent housing, and to relieve sections of society in distress. Moreover, they have survived the test of time. More controversially, perhaps, we would include trade unions as being rooted in a similar tradition: providing a degree of protection in the workplace for workers through solidarity and collective organisation.

In the second half of the 20th century, new adaptations of those earlier approaches emerged. Credit unions, housing cooperatives

and worker-owned enterprises were logical applications of traditional mutualism which arose to address more contemporary challenges.

At the same time, philanthropic approaches developed to become much more professional in terms of targeting needs, fundraising and managing change. The third sector also developed a more muscular approach to lobbying and campaigning, with organisations – in some cases almost exclusively – adopting the stance of a spokesperson for groups in need in society.

It therefore follows that we should consider trade unions and other cooperative groups as part of the big society: this is clearly not necessarily a definition that would be at the forefront of the minds of most of the Conservative frontbench, but it is logically consistent with thinking on the subject. It also poses challenges for the trade union movement, not least whether and how to provide resources to members and their families to effect positive social change in the face of significant public sector cuts.

If we go back to the government's definition of what's big about the big society – empowering individuals to effect change in their community – we also find ourselves facing another surprising conclusion. This definition must include scope for traditional state delivery mechanisms where they are responsive to local needs. While it is true that innovative players in all sectors often come from new organisations, there is no cast-iron rule that traditional public sector providers can't innovate and deliver responsive services. In fact, there are numerous examples of public sector innovations that sit comfortably alongside their third and commercial sector peers. This poses two big challenges: for the traditional public sector, they must prove their mettle by demonstrating a relentless focus on the needs of their users, while the government must base its reforms on

an approach that is genuinely neutral when it comes to providers. Quotas for any type of provider miss the point: they could just as easily lead to a great provider displacing a good provider while leaving woeful services nearby completely untouched. Instead, the aim must be to ensure there is no hiding place for poor provision and ensuring all services are responsive regardless of provider type. This gives opportunities for all organisations, including incumbents – as long as they are strong.

There will be many from both sides of the political divide that disagree with this conclusion – it is uncomfortable because it favours the interests of individuals over providers, regardless of their ownership. It is also uncomfortable because there are examples, past and current, from

all parties’ policies where practice infringes the principle that the best should always be chosen. And it will reveal deficiencies in all sectors. But the reason why this argument is so compelling is that it will also improve local and individual power and experience – and that, at the end of the day, is the most important measure.

“Quotas for any type of provider miss the point: they could just as easily lead to a great provider displacing a good provider while leaving woeful services nearby completely untouched”

As well as traditional notions of provision, the big society also has notable similarities with earlier debates about communitarianism, stakeholder societies and the third way. Where the big society is at its most promising it goes beyond those discussions in that it also pays attention to ownership of the specification of services. This means notions of choice, voice, commissioning and ownership become central. If individuals and close networks have a greater say and ownership, the logic runs that services will be more appropriately

shaped to their needs. It also follows that provision that users do not value will fade away, so improving efficiency and avoiding waste. While both of these assertions are not entirely straightforward because of challenges of representation and incumbency, they are nevertheless welcome.

This raises a number of fundamental questions including how to:

- plan strategically to respond to major demographic changes;
- ensure sustainable growth in the diversity of providers;
- balance local responsiveness with economies of scale; and
- foster and make space for successful innovators.

Strategic planning, when done well, can be a critical factor in successful public service delivery over the long term. Of course, when done badly, it can lead to a terrible mismatch between supply and demand that is hugely inefficient and that all too often lets down the most vulnerable people in society. The implication of the big society could be to duck this challenge and defer decisions down to the smallest, most local groups. This will work fine for some decisions, but not for all.

Too often in the past, approaches to public services have bounced between two polar opposites: rigid central planning or its ideologically driven rejection, leading to a severe inability to prepare for future demand. Both approaches are flawed.

Fundamentalist free market approaches to public service delivery that deny strategic planning miss an important point about how commercial markets work in practice. Markets as a whole may not plan, but large companies operating within them certainly do. They recognise the need to plan to develop services and products that scale internally to their customers' needs and they frequently enter into strategic alliances to

bring in essential capability. Consumers make their choices not directly on the basis of which company has the best plans, but on the products and services that those plans produce. Hence competing, alternative models of production and service delivery evolve until new disruptive innovations come along that change the delivery dynamic, often beyond recognition. A similar approach is needed in public services where providers work to facilitate strategic planning within a variety of service models shaped around users' needs.

Attempts to replicate markets in public services have also struggled with what's sometimes termed 'market exit', finite resourcing and transaction costs. Specifically:

- Disruptive innovation can be an extremely powerful driver for change, but this is only really effective in a dynamic market where exit is a realistic scenario.
- Finite resourcing implies top-up payments.
- Large volumes of small group-led transaction costs are unsustainable. In turn, this creates an inexorable pressure towards significant consolidation. While this may be a good thing economically it completely transforms the big society dynamic by which individuals are putatively to take control.

All three of these pressures will become far more acute as the financial pressure of public service cuts begins to take effect.

The extent to which the coalition is committed both to ensuring a greater diversity of providers and to realising the benefits that could flow from them is unclear: on the one hand, the government has said that funding for the big society will increase as money becomes available to pump into prime community projects. For example, in response to criticisms about cutting funding for local projects

since the election, Letwin stated that ‘there will be more funding available for community groups whether it is in the form of the big society Bank or other funding streams ... we will see a larger ecology of social enterprise groups and communities coming together to determine their own lives.’⁷ Yet in the absence of a concerted effort to the contrary, the inexorable dynamic towards market consolidation will surely dominate, leading to ever-larger providers. Already in health we see a nascent market in commissioning advisers, and there are numerous large education providers considering their options in response to the rollout of the free schools initiative. There are good reasons for market consolidation and it is absolutely vital that public services continue to be able to take advantage of economies of scale. The difficulty is whether and how the big society as currently conceived can help ensure that sensitivity to individuals’ and local needs matches the required provision.

As well as challenges about organisations’ ability to scale sensitivity to local requirements alongside provision, there is a question about whether targets are the best way to achieve pluralism. The spending review’s goal to set ‘proportions of appropriate services across the public sector that should be delivered by independent providers’⁸ miss the point about being responsive to local sensitivities. Arbitrary targets will do little, if anything, to ensure local communities benefit from genuinely responsive services. This approach risks the worst of both worlds: acting as an artificial spur to raising market share for unresponsive providers, while creating a de facto cap in areas of innovative, highly-valued services supplied by new providers.

Conclusions:

- The big society is not new; there are many historical lessons to be learned from earlier movements.

7. http://www.publicservice.co.uk/news_story.asp?id=14622

8. Source: 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review, p. 34

- There are many potential merits of getting more individuals as well as new and existing community groups more closely involved in scoping, shaping and providing services. But we need to be clear about what is different from previous incarnations such as the stakeholder society, drives to increase volunteering, and the third way.
- If the big society is to work we need more understanding of who is included. This may well lead to some surprises – a key challenge is for trade unions and traditional public services to tackle threats to their existence by proving to be innovators in service delivery.
- If the big society is to realise its objective of empowering individuals and local communities, then attention needs to be paid to scalable mechanisms to ensure responsiveness to local and individual needs – targets for market share are not the answer.

The big society and cuts in public services

The prime minister has gone to great lengths to separate the big society from public sector cuts. Yet when the big society is about individuals working collectively and in new structures to fulfil functions which have hitherto largely been performed by the public sector, and we are simultaneously facing unprecedented cuts in public services, it is, at best, overly optimistic or perhaps naive to expect that the public will distinguish between the two.

The perception of the big society and cuts in public services being intertwined is already being reinforced by significant examples of third sector organisations receiving sizeable reductions to their budgets as a result of the spending cuts. Charities have seen contracts slashed in order to relieve ‘serious financial pressures’,⁹ and on the very day that the detail of unprecedented local government budget cuts were announced, the communities and local government secretary, Eric Pickles, launched the localism bill trumpeting the big society as a means to deliver ‘more for less’.¹⁰

While it is very often true that necessity can be the mother of invention, widespread budget cuts in public services will not inexorably lead to new solutions emerging. There are many opportunities which are not filled by the market (regardless of whether the market is

9. <http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/news/rss/article/1038242/York-primary-care-trust-angers-charities-demand-pay-back-150000/>

10. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-11980367>

commercial, voluntary or public sector-owned). The reason for this is simple: the market will naturally and quite reasonably gravitate towards viable ventures. To be financially sound almost always means being either scalable or with sufficiently sustainable niche interest. It is therefore quite conceivable that a big society approach can work for relatively mainstream interests, but it becomes harder to visualise viable scenarios that will provide solutions for high-cost, low-volume needs. Government-sponsored provision has played a particularly important role here, and it is key that it be retained.

It would be disastrous if the big society were to morph into the deprofessionalisation of public services; as loathed as public sector administrators have become in recent years (and politicians of all

parties must bear responsibility for this) there is substantial evidence to show that effective professional management of public services leads to better outcomes. If enthusiastic, well motivated, but untrained individuals are to play a more

significant role in the commissioning and provision of services then they must have access to skilled and experienced expertise or we risk huge and unacceptable variation in the quality of future service provision. In turn, this would undermine any attempt to move towards public services being delivered on a more open trust basis (see the next section on the post-bureaucratic age).

If the big society boils down to simply a veneer to justify public sector cuts then it will be profoundly counter-productive: genuine opportunities to improve society will be lost and disillusionment and frustration will follow as well as significant drops in quality.

“It would be disastrous if the big society were to morph into the deprofessionalisation of public services”

The pupil premium is an interesting example. In principle, it should be easy to gain a consensus on the need to target resources at the most deprived pupils, especially at a time of extreme public expenditure cuts. If the big society is about empowering individuals, then support through education for the most deprived can easily be articulated within the big society narrative, especially when framed in the context of free schools. But there is a practical problem: there is increasing evidence that the distribution mechanisms and overall cuts to education and local authority expenditure will result in the most deprived pupils losing out, despite the rhetoric of the pupil premium. We hope it will not play out in this way, but if it does then there is a risk that public cynicism will grow.

Conclusions:

- The big society must not be allowed to become a veneer for public sector cuts. If it does then all political parties will lose out and, more importantly, so will the most vulnerable members of society.
- Real resources need to be channelled both to the most vulnerable and deprived as well as to mechanisms to support the big society.

The big society as a means to empower individuals, and implications for universality

It is important to acknowledge the transformative impact that giving real power to people to change their situation can have on those individuals. Many of those who became involved with housing associations in the 1980s found it to be a life-changing experience with implications that went far beyond the original reasons to become active. These opportunities for personal growth are a key part of the big society and should be welcomed.

The downside, of course, is that those who end up most engaged quite understandably promote their own collective interests. Hence owner-occupiers ended up with a greater stake than tenants. It is far from clear that thinking to-date on the big society has even begun to address these markedly different potential outcomes.

Similarly, it has been widely pointed out that it is easy to see how the big society would be sufficient to address challenges in Witney, but similar solutions would only begin to scratch the surface in Knowsley. The depth and breadth of deprivation, as well as access and experience to education and resources, including quality time, is of critical significance. The inverse care law (which dictates those

most in need of services are least likely to have access to them) is particularly apposite here.

There are different elements to this: the availability of time and willingness to volunteer varies significantly. Polling evidence¹¹ gives a mixed and slightly counterintuitive picture. While sustainable volunteering logically requires a reasonable amount of free time, there is evidence to show that busy people are more likely to volunteer. Either way, there is a risk that the big society will largely, though by no means exclusively, become the domain of those who already recognise they have a stake in society. If the big society is to realise its full transformative potential then it needs to include and reach beyond those who have traditionally formed the bedrock of British volunteers. To sustain this approach over the long term, then, we need to find ways to ensure that those who are volunteering for the first time, perhaps as a means to find a route back to employment, are encouraged to continue their wider contribution beyond the point at which they find a job. We also need to be clear in our thinking: voluntary sector services and volunteering are different, though related. While there are many voluntary sector organisations that run valuable sustainable services, it is far harder to build long-term provision on the back of short-term volunteering.

So is it reasonable and legitimate to want to opt out of the big society? There are many perfectly reasonable motives why people may not be the active citizens envisaged by the big society. People vary in how busy they are at different points in their lives – a single parent bringing up a family on a minimum wage is unlikely to have either the time or resources; some may not feel appropriately qualified to make the decisions required to shape local services; others may be unable through ill-health or care commitments to extend their range of activities.

11. <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/newsevents/blogs/thebigsociety.aspx>

If we relate this back to commissioning and choosing services, how do we ensure that services which are not the pet projects of those individuals and community groups most actively engaged in the big society, but nevertheless offer real value to those most in need, are not decommissioned? There is a real challenge here that neither the left nor the right has fully addressed: the left's kneejerk

“The left's kneejerk solution has too often been to take commissioning power away from end users”

solution has too often been to take commissioning power away from end users. This is far from ideal: at best it results in benevolent paternalism which can be shown to work, but is equally prone to provider

capture and commissioning services that genuinely are of little value to anyone. The right's kneejerk solution is also problematic: individual choice certainly empowers those who are most articulate – there is a fair amount of evidence that this tends to act as a driver for improved public services more generally – but there is very little evidence that those who are already most in need will be able to get their voices heard. There are ways to address these challenges, but it is not clear that the big society as currently articulated offers solutions.

So what we mean by universality in this context is the right and, crucially, the ability of all to play a role in society and have equitable access to services that meet their needs. This is different from the debate on means testing and universal access to benefits. As important as that discussion is, the real test of the big society will be how it responds to the most vulnerable: just as there is real potential for the big society to provide access to appropriately personalised services, so it risks becoming the very thing that denies those who are most in need.

Conclusions:

- There is something extremely valuable about individuals and community groups becoming more actively involved in both choosing and providing services. There are numerous examples of individuals who have become more involved in the local community and thereby found a route to realise their full potential. This is undoubtedly a good thing.
- The big society needs to encapsulate an explicit commitment, accompanied by appropriate incentives, to equity and universality. Without this commitment, backed up with real incentives, there is a real risk that the big society could reinforce the inverse care law.

Conclusion – towards a better big society

During the process of drafting this paper, the big society went through challenging times. It has seen severe criticism from outgoing director of Community Service Volunteers Dame Elizabeth Hoodless about the impact of cuts; the highly symbolic withdrawal of Liverpool council from a pilot project; and a rearguard action from Downing Street in the form of a £200 million boost to the big society Bank as part of the government's deal with the banks – no doubt welcome, but small beer in the context of the spending review's hit of £4.5 billion on charities' income as estimated by the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations.

As the political flak has intensified, the concept of the big society has begun to shrink: it has become less about how to empower individuals within the context of society, and instead more focused on the role of the voluntary sector and volunteers. As important as this is, it is only a fraction of the original picture and we are at risk of losing something valuable as a result.

There are good reasons why Labour may want to move away from the language adopted by Cameron in framing the big society. Nevertheless, the central concept of individual empowerment to change society is important. Labour's policy review is taking place

within the context of an electorate where almost 60 per cent say that Labour is seriously out of touch with the views of ordinary working people. If Labour rejects the notion that individuals should have greater power and say within the community then it will continue to be perceived as out of touch.

So what must be done, and how does this analysis translate to concrete policy implications for Labour?

The progressive insight that individual empowerment has a mutually interdependent dynamic with society is key. If we combine this with a recognition that empowerment needs to be universal, then guiding principles for policy renewal start to emerge. It also becomes easier to navigate how to decide when to oppose and support the coalition.

On core public services, this analysis leads to challenging conclusions. As well as being a key mechanism for enabling social mobility, education is potentially the most powerful vehicle for individuals to improve their ability to influence their society. The withdrawal of the educational maintenance allowance, which is focused on ensuring those in most need have access to continued education, is a direct attack on universality and, by extension, the concepts central to the big society, and so it is right that Labour should oppose its withdrawal. However, we need to be more careful when it comes to free schools. Labour must support the principle behind free schools if it is serious about giving parents and children more power. The mechanisms by which the coalition has chosen to divert funds away from other schools in real need remains a legitimate

“Labour must support the principle behind free schools if it is serious about giving parents and children more power”

concern and Labour is right to engage with it, but that should not be confused with outright rejection of the principle.

On health, Labour introduced groundbreaking reforms in the 2001 NHS Plan to give service users far more control in their treatment and choice of providers. For many practical and institutional reasons this has only ever been partially implemented, but Labour must never retreat from this position into a situation where it argues for anything less than the best possible care for patients. There remains a view within certain elements of the health world that patients are unable to make decisions about good quality care and should therefore be represented rather than have direct power. But the public will rightly reject any pandering to the notion that they are incapable of informed choice.

So while Labour should support the right to choose – and we must remember that the rich have always had choice in services – there are, of course, many areas of the proposed health reforms that are legitimate areas for Labour opposition. There is currently enormous variation in the quality of primary care provision by GPs. Some practices offer exceptionally good care and responsive access, yet others simply do not. While it would be legitimate to criticise PCTs for the failure to get to grips with this unacceptable variation, it is deeply lamentable that the government is forcing through an unprecedented and hugely expensive top-down reorganisation of the NHS. The increasing opacity of the confused and overly complex new structures and accountability mechanisms threaten to reduce the power of patients and their families to influence and change the new system.

These examples are practical manifestations of how Labour should respond if guided by core principles that flow from the notion of increasing individual power as part of a mutually interdependent relationship with society. These principles include:

- **Responsiveness.** Services and public policy based on real needs of individuals, which may change over time as society, technology and individual circumstances evolve.
- **The right to choose public services.** One size does not fit all. Wherever possible, individuals should be able to choose service providers and different models of provision according to their needs.
- **A range of providers.** If our organising purpose is to achieve positive social change, then surely we should grasp the big society nettle to become more involved in the running of our institutions and services. This includes traditional public sector organisations, but in an ever-increasing plural and consumer-driven world it must also extend to other models of public service delivery and ownership.
- **Opportunities for individuals to participate in many different ways.** There are numerous examples of people who have found a route to realise their full potential through becoming more involved in their local community. Yet volunteering cannot replace professionalism. As even the government's big society 'tsar', Lord Nat Wei, recently found, volunteering can sometimes be incompatible with 'having a life'. More significantly, professionals who run services have, or at least should have, significant training, expertise and capacity which is often beyond the scope of even the most committed volunteer.
- **Consumer over producer interests.** In the course of public service reform there will be many occasions where potential conflicts between consumer and producer interests arise. Wherever possible it is best to find a mechanism to align interests, but when push comes to shove, consumer interests must triumph.

- **Equality of access and universality.** Only by ensuring equality in theory and practice to opportunities to influence and access services can we create a genuinely progressive society.

The big society and Labour's response to it is a potentially defining difference between the centre-left and the Tory-led coalition. We have, in this pamphlet, tried to highlight the principles which should guide our response. If Labour holds to these principles as it conducts its policy review, then it can be confident that a set of policies will result that best represent the interests of the electorate. Only by sticking to the self-discipline of such a principle-based approach can Labour be confident of winning back the trust of the electorate and so begin its journey back to government.

Progress

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