

# THE 'BIG SOCIETY': CONSERVATISM REINVENTED?

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The 'big society' is the most significant ideological theme to have emerged within the UK Conservative Party in recent years. If there is such a thing as 'Cameronism', it is 'big society' that defines it (as David Cameron happily acknowledges). But what does the 'big society' mean? Why has so much prominence been given to the idea, and, in particular, what does this tell us about the continuing importance of political ideology? How, if at all, is the 'big society' linked to conservatism? Finally, is the 'big society' an attempt to reinvent UK conservatism, or merely to re-brand the Conservative Party?

## **What is the 'big society'?**

The notion of the 'big society' was the central ideological theme in the Conservative Party's May 2010 general election manifesto. Although 'big society' thinking can be traced back to the 1990s, and to early attempts to develop a non-Thatcherite, or post-Thatcherite, brand of UK conservatism, such thinking gained growing prominence once Cameron became party leader in December 2005. But what is the 'big society'? Although the term has attracted considerable controversy - not least because of allegations that the Conservative-led coalition has used it as a ruse to disguise spending cuts - the idea itself has a relatively straightforward meaning.

As used by Cameron and other leading figures in the coalition, the 'big society' refers to the transfer of power and responsibility for providing some key services from the state to community groups and charities, particularly ones that operate at a neighbourhood level. Society therefore gets 'bigger', in the sense that citizens get more involved in their communities, by, for instance, volunteers taking over the running of post offices and libraries, parents setting up 'free schools' and charities taking over public services. The 'big society' project therefore seeks to open up public services to new, and often community-based, forms of social organisation. This goal is also reflected in the proposal that employee-owned cooperatives should be encouraged to take over the work of public agencies, hence the idea that the 'big society' is constructed on the basis of the 'John Lewis model'.

In all its forms, however, the 'big society' has an unmistakably anti-statist character. The 'big society' is contrasted with 'big government'. From this perspective, government is the enemy of society, in that, as it has expanded, it has (supposedly) robbed citizens of their sense of civic responsibility and rendered them impassive. The 'big society' is therefore merely only one side of a 'big state, small government' coin. As Cameron put it, 'There is such a thing as society, it's just not the same as the state'. This critique of 'disempowering' government is based on two assumptions. The first of these is that 'rolling back' the state will lead to an upsurge in volunteering and civic activism, as charities, community groups, employee-owned cooperatives and suchlike assume a wide role; and the second is that such bodies will be able to deliver services both more efficiently (more cheaply) and more effectively (more responsively to the community) than the state. The purpose of this article is not to test these assumptions, but rather to examine where such thinking comes from and how it is being used.

## **Why ideology refuses to die**

Why do politicians feel the need to develop such 'big ideas'? Why have Cameron and the Conservative sought to articulate their goals and beliefs by setting out an ideological vision, in the case, one built around the 'big society'? The short answer to this question is that ideas matter, and that ideology – despite frequent proclamations of its death - continues to play an important role in politics. But what is that role? Ideology serves at least two important purposes in modern politics: as an intellectual framework and as a marketing device.

### **Ideology as an intellectual framework**

Ideology provides politicians, parties and other political actors with an intellectual framework within which they operate. This is ideology as a 'world view'; ideology as a set of ideas, beliefs and assumptions that shape how people understand the world and, thereby, structure their goals and actions. The UK economist, John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946), thus wrote that, 'Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back'. Ideology, in this sense, can never die because all of us are its prisoners, all of us look at the world through a veil of theories and presuppositions. Our actions cannot, therefore, be understood without reference to this 'ideological dimension'. Moreover, the importance of this dimension of politics is often overlooked, not least because politicians and others are commonly unaware of the extent to which they are the slaves of 'academic scribblers'. This is what the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) meant when he referred to ideology as the 'common sense' of the age, highlighting the extent to which ideological beliefs are embedded at every level in society, in its art and literature, in its education system and mass media, and in everyday language and popular culture.

### **Ideology as a marketing device**

However, in its second role, ideology is an all too conscious creation. This is ideology as political projection, ideology as a marketing device or electoral tool. This aspect of ideological politics has become more significant due to the greater importance of the mass media in politics and the linked trend in favour of personalised leadership (often seen as the 'presidentialisation' of UK politics). Leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair were particularly adept (at least in the early part of their careers) at projecting themselves in ideological terms, hence the rise of 'Thatcherism' in the 1980s and, from the mid-1990s onwards, of 'Blairism'. Both Thatcher and Blair presented themselves as the ideological consciences of their parties and government. Their command of the 'vision thing', as it is sometimes called, helped to cloak their pursuit of power in a moral purpose and also appeared to give their policy programme a sense of focus and direction. Thatcherism therefore served to bolstered Thatcher, just as Blairism bolstered Blair. However, not all politicians are so adept in articulating, or even embodying, an ideological vision. One of the key failings of Gordon Brown was that he struggled to develop or project a coherent ideological vision, damaging his credibility as a leader and making his premiership appear, at times, rudderless. In placing an emphasis on the 'big society', Cameron has demonstrated both that he is the 'heir to Blair' and that he has learnt at least one of the lessons of Brown's failure.

Nevertheless, simply articulating an ideological vision does not in itself either bolster leadership or ensure electoral success. Ideology as a marketing device is effective in two sets of circumstances:

- It has to be rooted in, or at least to be consistent with, the ideas and beliefs that in practice shape government policy. Ideology as a marketing device must therefore correspond to ideology as an intellectual framework. When the two are divorced, the former risks being viewed as a possibly fairly crude exercise in re-branding. This is what happened, for example, in the case of George W. Bush's avowed commitment to 'compassionate conservatism'.
- An ideological vision has to resonate with the public at large, in the sense that it articulates widely held concerns or aspirations. In many ways, this helps to explain the potency of Thatcher and Thatcherism in the 1980s, but it also sheds light on the difficulties that confronted the Conservative Party from the 1990s onwards, as attention increasingly focused on the electorally less attractive features of Thatcherism.

### **Edmund Burke: the father of the 'big society'?**

As 'big society' themes gained greater attention, interest grew in the ideas of the British statesman and political theorist, Edmund Burke (1729-97), commonly viewed as the father of Anglo-American conservatism. This occurred particularly because of his reference in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) to people's love of the 'little platoon' they belong to in society. Community groups, charities, neighbourhood and other organisations were quickly thus reinterpreted as examples of society's 'little platoons'. Two things, nevertheless, distinguish Burke's thinking from the idea of the 'big society' as used by Conservative politicians and theorists in the twenty-first century. First, when Burke used the idea of the 'little platoon' (which, anyway, is a military metaphor) he was referring to the social 'subdivisions' into which people are born. The 'little platoons' are therefore organic groups, such as families and social classes, and it is by no means clear that Burke would have used the term to refer to the charities or voluntary groups that are the focus of 'big society' thinking.

Second, the social and political purpose of the 'little platoon' was, for Burke, quite different from that of 'big society' groups and organisations. Burke was essentially a theorist of social conservatism. He highlighted the extent to which psychologically limited and dependent human beings seek security in things such as tradition, authority and a common morality. In this view, the 'little platoons' (however understood) are the glue that hold society together and make human life tolerable. By providing a focus for allegiance and affection, and by strengthening our sense of belonging, the 'little platoons' help us to know who we are and what is expected of us. Such thinking, however, does not explain why or how community groups, charities and voluntary bodies are likely to spring up and take over responsibility of delivering services that were once delivered by the state. This expectation is based on assumptions about people's appetite for civic activism and, crucially, their human sympathy and sense of altruism. In this sense, 'big society' thinking goes well beyond social conservatism and, perhaps, more closely resembles forms of socialism. Indeed, the real ideological home of the 'big society' may be the mutualism of anarchist thinkers such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-65).

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| <b>Key terms</b> |
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**Christian Democracy:** An ideological tradition within continental European conservatism that is characterised by a commitment to the social market rather than the free market, reflected in effective social provision designed to maintain social cohesion.

**Civic conservatism:** A form of conservatism, rooted in social conservatism, that calls for a transformation of the civic culture to counter-balance what are seen as the 'excesses' of state control and the free market.

**Civic society:** The realm of autonomous groups and associations; a private sphere independent for public authority and therefore the state.

**Communitarianism:** A political philosophy that holds that the self or person is constituted through the community in the sense that there are no 'unencumbered selves'.

**Ideology:** A more or less coherent set of ideas that provides the basis for some kind of organised political action.

**Mutualism:** A system of voluntary, mutually beneficial and harmonious exchange, in which individuals and groups bargain with one another, trading goods and services without profiteering or exploitation.

**Social conservatism:** A form of conservatism that is based on an organic model of society, highlighting the fragility of society's network of relationships and the need to uphold these through duty, tradition, established institutions and a common morality.

**Thatcherism:** An ideological tradition associated with Margaret Thatcher that is combines a neoliberal belief in the free market and self-reliant individualism (economic Thatcherism) with a neoconservative emphasis on order, authority and discipline (social Thatcherism).

## **The rise of civic conservatism**

Much of the thinking that has gone on within UK conservatism since the 1990s has focused on attempts to develop a non-Thatcherite or post-Thatcherite brand of conservatism. This acknowledged the fact that the removal of Thatcher in 1990 had not dealt with an underlying 'Thatcherism problem'. This was the problem that, by virtue of its association with greed, personal self-seeking and a perceived lack of compassion, the Conservative Party had come to be viewed as the 'nasty party' (term coined in 2002 by the then Conservative chairman, Theresa May). This 'nastiness' was encapsulated in Thatcher's oft-quoted statement that, 'There is no such thing as society'. Conservative thinkers who sought to address this problem commonly did so by proclaiming the need to resurrect and strengthen civil society. This placed an emphasis on neither the state nor the individual, but rather on the institutions that stand between the state and the individual.

David Willetts (who was to be appointed minister of state for universities and science in 2010) thus argued in *Civic Conservatism* (1994) that the free market should be placed in the context of 'the institutions and values that make up civil society', whilst also highlighting, as he saw it, the threat posed by the advance of the state to the 'network of voluntary groups'. Similar ideas were later advanced by Phillip Blond in *Red Tory* (2010), and have since been championed by his think-tank, ResPublica. The essence of 'red Toryism' is the attempt to fuse a 'red' commitment to catering to the needs of the disadvantaged and advancing economic justice, with a 'Tory', or social conservative, belief in tradition and what Blond called the 'politics of virtue'.

### **Why civic conservatism?**

The attraction of civic conservatism is that it helps to break, or at least weaken, the link between conservatism and Thatcherism. Instead of being the vehicle for advancing the market, self-striving and 'rugged' individualism, conservatism could embrace (perhaps re-embrace) the ideas of social belonging and civic engagement. In many ways, civic conservatism reflects the growing influence, especially since the 1980s, of communitarianism. Communitarians argue that the community is the principal source of an individual's values and identity. In this light, they have warned against the damage done to the public culture of liberal societies by their emphasis on individual rights and liberties over the needs of the community. One example of this is the emergence of an alleged 'parenting deficit', which was explained in terms of the growing tendency for parents to place their own wants over their duty to provide guidance, support and discipline for their children.

Civic conservatism can also be seen to have been influenced, especially in the writings of Blond, by the Christian Democracy that is practised in Germany and other parts of continental Europe. Christian Democracy is rooted in Catholic social theory, which focuses on the social group rather than the individual, and stresses balance or organic harmony rather than competition. Christian Democratic parties can be seen to practice their own version of the 'big society', in that they have traditionally emphasised the importance of intermediate institutions, such as churches, unions and business groups, bound together by the notion of 'social partnership'. Such thinking has also made them far less susceptible to the attractions of free-market economics than have been the conservative parties in the UK and the USA.

### **Conservatism reinvented, or more of the same?**

This, nevertheless, highlights the difficulty confronting Cameron in trying to embrace civic conservatism and develop the 'big society' into an ideological project, rather than using it simply as a means of 'detoxifying' the Conservative brand. Civic conservatism may be viewed as an anti-statist philosophy, insofar as it calls for a transfer of power and responsibilities from the state to civil society (even though Christian Democrats tend to view the state and civil society more as partners than as opponents). However, civic conservatism is, to some degree at least, also an anti-market philosophy. In strengthening competition and encouraging the pursuit of material self-interest, the market cannot but undermine our sense of community and social belonging. This is why both communitarians and Christian Democrats have been critical of the economic liberalism that underpins the Thatcherite brand of conservatism.

To fully embrace civic conservatism, UK Conservatives therefore have to develop a new economic model, in particular one that places less emphasis on the free market. However, there is little evidence from the first year in the life of Conservative-led coalition that this is being done. Indeed, the deficit reduction programme, the hallmark of the government's strategy since May 2010, exhibits clear Thatcherite features. Not only does it reflect a strong commitment to balanced budgets and a rejection of the neo-Keynesianism practiced under Brown, as well as by Obama in the USA, but in emphasising spending cuts rather than tax increases it will also involve a significant contraction in the responsibilities of the state. The 'big society' may therefore merely be an attempt to give the core Thatcherite desire to 'roll back' the state an ideological make-over. It may thus serve to consolidate Thatcherism rather than replace it. As Blond put is, 'If he is not careful, Cameron risks presiding over the incoherence of a recapitulated free-market economics allied with a compassionate and impotent version of socially concerned conservatism'.