

Labour's good society

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The Conservatives' Big Society is an attempt to move in on ground vacated by New Labour, but a good society requires more than rhetoric about volunteering.

I moved to the street I live in back in 1983. The recession had begun to have a devastating impact. The homeless were sleeping in the park over the road. For several years the house next door was inhabited by an unsteady procession of squatters, junkies and drinkers, whose chaotic and occasionally violent lives spilled over the wall into our back yard. We lived in a street but not in a community. The idea of society was amorphous and vague and existed 'out there'. The institutions which provided sources of authority and which united individuals were distant and unconnected to our daily lives. What was it people in the street belonged to? Our origins were scattered across the globe. We had no common life to share.

Today, thirteen years after the New Labour government was elected, the street, once filled with semi-derelict houses, is a much sought-after enclave for young middle-class families. It is richer, and liberal enough for openly gay households to find a home, and for a mosque to be able to establish itself in a disused pub. It is more private and, despite being safer, more fearful. The wealthier residents live as if on islands, their children pass from front door to car and do not venture down the street alone.

The street may not be typical of the rest of England, but in its ethnic diversity, its mix of housing tenure and its class differences it has been a microcosm of the social and economic changes of three decades of globalisation. The contradictory trends of cosmopolitan modernity and economic modernisation have all been played out here with great intensity. There is more tolerance of cultural difference, but it has been

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accompanied by the cultural devastation of the old working class, and grotesque levels of inequality. A culture of consumer choice and mobility has created a more transient society that has weakened the ties of kinship. People are more isolated and prone to loneliness. It is a neighbourhood of weak associations, where households can be separated by a chasm of unshared history and cultural meaning. Ties to kin stretch to Africa and India, or go no further than the front door. Taken together, our individual lives do not add up to something more than their sum. There is a freedom without belonging which emphasises a person's rights over their obligations to others. It leaves an intangible sense of dispossession; we are like strangers who do not feel at home; uncertain of who we are and of our relationship to the past we come from.

Since the financial crisis there have been portents of a return to the old social calamity that preceded New Labour and which it had only begun to repair. A homeless man lay slumped in a shop doorway, another sat leaning against a wall in a nearby road. A larger than usual group of youths established itself in the park opposite and began selling drugs, sometimes until 4am in the morning. A crack house opened in the flats next door, bringing with it a sudden, frightening plunge into the unpredictable and dangerous. Labour's anti-crime policies were effective in dealing with this. A court order cleared the park benches and an armed police raid closed down the crack house. But the Labour government over the years had proved to be less effective against the causes of crime, unwilling to defend society against the market forces of globalisation and so allowing the social ties of community to continue to be eroded. To compensate, it deployed the state as an instrument of authority, and tried to promote social cohesion to plaster over the damage.

In the 1990s the country started to confront the social calamity caused by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher. The centre ground of British politics began to reconfigure around sometimes unspoken anxieties about social disorder and a sense of the loss of belonging and community. In an era of selfish individualism and free markets, what was our relationship to society? Two political speeches, separated by a period of sixteen years can be seen as different attempts to answer this question. The first is Tony Blair's 1994, inaugural conference speech, which set out his vision of New Labour - 'This is my socialism. We are the party of the individual because we are the Party of community'.¹ The second is David Cameron's 2010 'Our Big Society Agenda' speech - 'Big Society, that's not just two

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words, it's a guiding philosophy'.²

Taken together they articulate the popular - and ambivalent - desire for both freedom and security that has been a feature of the political centre ground for the last two decades. People want change and new experiences, but they also want to sustain fixed customs and settled patterns of social life. The political centre ground has been constructed around a series of paradoxes: people desire 'a life of one's own', but at the same time they want to 'fit in' and have a sense of belonging to community and nation; people value self reliance and want to defend their self interest, but they also value the reciprocity of 'give and take'; a majority support a welfare safety net, but many think those claiming benefits are undeserving. These paradoxes vary in their intensity across class and region, but broadly represent a struggle to find a balance between liberal freedom and the interdependency of individuals; greater emphasis on one threatens to diminish the other.

Big or good society?

Neither Labour nor the Conservatives have found a political language that surmounts or synthesises this polarisation. Cameron's 'Big Society Agenda', with its three 'big strands' of 'social action, public service reform and community empowerment' is a response both to the laissez-faire legacy of the Thatcher past and Labour's own failures on social policy. It is an attempt to shift the Conservatives toward more traditional Tory concerns with interdependency and at the same time appropriate Labour's ethical language and its principles of fairness and mutualism. It taps into people's anxieties about things falling apart but steers away from involving the state in holding things together. Its aim is to reconfigure the centre ground and exclude Labour for a generation.

Labour finally woke up to the Conservatives' Big Society during the leadership contest. When David Cameron set out his 'great passion' for 'building the Big Society' in July 2010, David Miliband recognised the challenge. In his Keir Hardie Lecture in August, he argued that Labour lacked a creed - 'a strong idea of a good society and a life fit for a human being for all citizens'. It was the first sign that senior Labour politicians were recognising the changing political terrain and looking once again to Labour traditions for political renewal.

Blair's 1994 conference speech had been an earlier, similar exercise in

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revisionism. Drawing on his Fabian pamphlet *Socialism*, he identified two main strands of socialist thought - ethical socialism, allied to European social democracy, and 'a quasi-scientific view', based on the notion of economic determinism and 'usually associated with Marxism and parts of the Left grouped around a narrow view of class interests' (p2). 'The socialism of Marx, of centralised state control of industry and production is dead'. New Labour could establish its philosophical roots by giving ethical socialism 'content and clarity'.

Blair gave this politics the nebulous title of 'social-ism'. But it was short-lived. Once in government it drifted and nothing much came of it. Like the idea of a stakeholding economy two years later, ethical socialism created too many potential pitfalls. New Labour was a transitional political formation. To win power it had accommodated itself to an existing hegemonic order that had been the nemesis of its own collectivist traditions. It recognised the need for profound changes in Labour's approach, but it did not possess a movement or the political means to achieve transformational political and economic change. It governed on the back foot; a defensive position often of its own making. By 2005 Blair had abandoned his earlier politics. In his penultimate conference speech he embraced globalisation as a positive force for change: 'there is no mystery about what works: an open, liberal economy, prepared constantly to change to remain competitive. The new world rewards those who are open to it.' And while social solidarity remained essential, its purpose today, 'is not to resist the force of globalisation but to prepare for it, and to garner its vast potential benefits'.³ By arguing, in effect, that society should be subordinate to market forces Blair made a serious error of political judgement. By moving to the liberal right he abandoned traditional Labour supporters, along with the idea of an ethical commitment to mutual support. In so doing he pushed many of them off the political centre ground toward the emerging English nationalist and racist social movements, and allowed the opening up of a space to the social left of New Labour.

Cameron was quick to seize the opportunity. In the same year, a month before his election to Conservative Leader, he set out his 'pro-social politics' in a speech to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations. New Labour's abandoned ethical socialism was reframed into his idea of 'building a pro-social society'. 'There is such a thing as society' he agreed, but 'it's just not the same thing as the state'. The Conservatives were reviving the Toryism of Michael Oakeshott and Edmund Burke.

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In 2003, Greg Clark wrote 'Total Politics: Labour's Command State' (Conservative Policy Unit), a powerful critique of New Labour's centralising and managerial style of government. In contrast to Labour, the Conservatives trusted people and would push power from the centre back to local communities.

The following year Iain Duncan Smith established the Centre for Social Justice and began to give pro-social, anti-state politics a moral underpinning. The idea of a 'Broken Society' became central to David Cameron's efforts to modernise the Tory Party. The theme was already well rehearsed, as an increasing number of surveys and reports identified a new set of social ills, ranging from rising inequality, children's mental illness and work stress, to loneliness, loss of community, fear of others and a general perception of values and civic decency in decline. In 2006 Compass urged Labour to address these issues in its *The Good Society*, which argued that Britain was suffering from a 'social recession'. The idea of a social recession was subsequently incorporated by Jesse Norman in his book *Compassionate Conservatism* (Policy Exchange), and adopted briefly by Cameron. When his Quality of Life Policy Group under Zac Goldsmith and John Gummer published its 2007, *Blueprint for a Green Economy*, it borrowed directly from Compass, arguing that the good society must also be a green society.

Cameron began 'detoxifying' the Conservative brand with a series of speeches and interventions on issues such as 'compassionate Conservatism', social recession, the sexualisation of young girls, 'hoodie hugging' and green politics. In 2008 he wrote in *The Times*, 'the aim of the Conservative Party is nothing short of building the good society'. It would be as radical on social reform as Margaret Thatcher had been on economic reform. By 2010 Cameron was championing the Big Society. In his July speech he described it as people feeling free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities. But there was a grander historical meaning to it: 'It's about the biggest and most dramatic redistribution of power from elites to the man and woman in the street. It's about liberation.'

Cameron appointed Nat Wei, a former McKinsey employee turned social entrepreneur, as unpaid government adviser on the Big Society. Wei had made his name with the Shaftesbury Partnership, whose website proclaims: 'We architect solutions to chronic social problems and help our clients deliver them'. Its jargon expresses a mixture of volunteering and 'Philanthrocapitalism' - business thinking and market methods will save the world. Wei's own philosophy can be summed up

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in his maxim: 'in groups we learn what society is'. And this simplicity and woolliness is mirrored in the semi-official Big Society Network, set up by social entrepreneurs Paul Twivy and Martyn Rose. Twivy describes the Big Society as one in which, 'we as individuals don't feel small'. Everyone should feel empowered and supported. The aim of the network is to grow into a mutual of 15 million members by 2020.

The Big Society is a kind of existential reaction to the state's disempowerment of individuals and the lack of democracy in society. What drives it is a desire for community as an uplifting experience. Who could be against it? - but what does it mean? It is a term that lacks definition, and - more important - it lacks politics. The Big Society favours fairness, but turns a blind eye to its macro-economic causes. It calls for democracy, but offers no serious constitutional reform. It talks about mutualism and co-operatives, but remains committed to market transactions. It all seems to boil down to not much more than old fashioned volunteering. The charities will be its bedrock, but they depend on the government for 40 per cent of their funding: the Coalition public spending cuts will wreck their involvement from the outset. But in spite of this vagueness, and his Party's lack of enthusiasm, Cameron persists. His 2010 Conference speech pressed home the 'Big Society Spirit': 'It's the spirit of activism, dynamism, people taking the initiative, working together to get things done.'

Labour's response, like that of the Tory Right, has been a combination of contempt and incredulity. To many on the left the Big Society is nothing more than a naive and ill thought out scheme to obscure the Conservatives' true ideological objective of dismantling the state. But Labour cannot afford this complacency. Total managed expenditure (the official measure of public expenditure) under Labour governments increased from 36 per cent of GDP in 1999 to over 43 per cent in 2009, yet Labour failed to make political capital out of this massive social investment. No-one seems very grateful for the new schools and hospitals. This is partly because Labour rarely made the political case for the public sector and for its expansion of provision, and partly because of the way it managed public services. Its programme of managerialist and technocratic modernisation borrowed from the business model of shareholder value, the Benthamite reforms of the nineteenth century, the standardisation of Taylorism and the 'Lean' production system of Toyota. It pursued efficiency, 'value for money', and 'customer satisfaction', but it did not take sufficient account of the human relationships and trust that lie at the heart of

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public services. Its reliance on market-based reform in public sector organisations failed to devolve meaningful power to front-line services and their users. Its central state intervention and micro-managing of standards helped to distribute resources and effort equally across regions, but it failed to enhance democracy and to give people a sense of ownership. The market and the state were used as instruments of reform without democracy and without any transfer of power to people. All this meant that, with embarrassing speed, the Conservatives were able to detach Labour from its own achievements. By the sleight of hand that redefined the market failure of the banks as a crisis of public debt, Labour's spending in government has been successfully held up as irresponsible and profligate.

Cameron's Big Society draws attention to Labour as a technocratic, 'we know what's best' party, and robs it of its successes. Through a series of skilful manoeuvres in his 'war of position', Cameron uses Labour's own ethical traditions of mutual improvement, solidarity and reciprocity to begin reconstituting the centre ground around a centre right politics. And the coalition with the Liberal Democrats has only increased the potency of this strategy.

Labour has been slow to recognise the dangers. In government it had paid little attention to Compass's *The Good Society*, but it possessed the means to mount a substantial challenge to Cameron's 'pro-social' politics. Hazel Blears at the Department for Communities and Local Government had been putting Blair's long-forgotten ethical socialism into action. Her 2004 pamphlet *The Politics of Decency* (Mutuo) offered a thoughtful communitarian politics, arguing for a national effort to develop new social bonds to replace the ones we have lost: 'Public places would be returned to the public and community spirit and neighbourliness would be revived as widely shared virtues' (p7). The 2008 *Communities in Control* White Paper set out detailed policy ideas on community empowerment and participatory budgeting, linking them to social policy, political representation and local government. This could have offered the beginning of an alternative to New Labour's market state. But its passage through Parliament met with considerable Labour opposition, and its proposals were watered down and compromised. In September 2010, Peter Kellner, in a Demos pamphlet *The Crisis of Social Democracy*, identified Labour's lack of a coherent response to Cameron's Big Society as a defining failure of its politics.

Ed Miliband, in his inaugural leadership speech at the 2010 Party Conference, gave recognition to this problem. He called on Labour to 'inspire people with our

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vision of the good society'. The question that now needs addressing is - what is Labour's vision for a good society?

Social capital and community

Over the last couple of decades, social and relational life has been of increasing concern to government and academic policy-making circles. The concept of 'social capital' has been widely used to counter bias toward economic capital as an explanatory category in policy-making. This helped shape the Labour government's policy approach to community, and it has informed the language of the Big Society.

The exemplary and most often quoted work in this field is Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (Simon and Schuster, 2000), in which Putnam seeks to understand trends in civic disengagement in US society in the last third of the twentieth century. His sociology of integration is preoccupied with the search for a form of social capital that would enhance togetherness, solidarity and consensus: 'our economy, our democracy, and even our health and happiness depend on adequate stocks of social capital' (p28). His emphasis is firmly on promoting 'generalized reciprocity'. But there are problems with this notion of a social capital that is lacked by everyone in a similar way. In his earlier work Putnam had been willing to address the conflict and difference which undermine solidarity: 'Racial and class inequalities in access to social capital, if properly measured, may be as great as inequalities in financial and human capital, and no less portentous.'⁴ However any inquiry into differential relations of power remains undeveloped in his later work. Putnam excludes from his consideration social movements that challenge the political consensus; the dynamics of class and race receive only a cursory overview; and he fails to incorporate into his account the way cultural subordination and domination shape social relations. Society's problems are seen as lying in a generalised inability to engage.

Putnam is unable to answer the question of why social capital has not increased in the US despite greater participation in education, which in the past has been shown to increase civic engagement: 'Whatever forces lie behind the slump in civic engagement and social capital, those forces have affected all levels of American society' (p187). He can only offer lists by way of explanation: busyness, time pressure, financial pressure, urban sprawl, mobility. But these are only the elements of a larger picture. Putnam can see the trees, but he can't see the wood.

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In the end he can only surmise that the cause is generational and intensified by new communication technologies: 'television and its electronic cousins are willing accomplices in the civic mystery' (p246). Putnam lacks an analysis of how market transactions disentangle people from their social relations and disassociate them from one another in order to frame them as distinct consumers. Over the last three decades the spread of this disentangling and commodification has undermined relational and civic life. Nor does he recognise how increasing inequality eats away at the institutions and associations of social solidarity.

Putnam's understanding of social capital meshes well with third-way-style social democracy's depoliticisation of the realities of power and domination. One reason for its widespread adoption by state actors over the last decade has been its lack of challenge to the status quo. Access to social capital is not seen as something that is mediated by gender, race or class. It is seen as a neutral quality that can be developed internally within local areas. Thus local regeneration can help construct a sense of community and its integration into wider society. This politics of localism has had a number of consequences. Labour in government talked about community as if it was internally undifferentiated and without conflict and contradiction, and assumed that community pre-existed agency and structure. Policy was based on the fiction of an already existing 'community', or it was about reviving an ideal. It did not seek an understanding of what constitutes historically and economically situated communities, and of how they can be constructed afresh. And a view of community as conflict-free and homogeneous leads to an understanding of the local as the polar opposite of the global, rather than as being both formed by and forming of it. New Labour policies encouraged networks and associations in neighbourhoods to develop thick bonding and bridging capital. But the people the policies claimed to be helping were given the responsibility for change without any power. The macro-economic problems of globalisation, structural unemployment, deindustrialisation and low pay were met with micro-solutions relating to social cohesion - wielded by people who lacked the social capital they were expected to create. Localism alone is never enough.

Policies based on this understanding of social capital also exclude consideration of culture and the making of symbolic meaning. Culture shapes individual behaviour and experience. It is the raw material out of which individuals articulate experience, forge links and construct meaningful spaces in which to live. In cultures

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that are devastated by deindustrialisation life continues, but without the cultural symbols that once gave it meaning. People lose a sense of who they are, and they lose their defence against more dominant cultures that seek to re-describe them. This loss of self-description is humiliating, because it denies people the ability to maintain their dignity and honour. It creates the anger of the defeated, but also the shame and self-hatred of those unable to recover their self-esteem. Culture is today a site of political conflict. In this battle 'community' can become a bulwark defending a way of life - and social capital is the ordnance, made out of ethnic belonging and hatred of the other.

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Over the last three decades we have been witness to the development of a new model of capitalism and the revolutionising of its instruments and forces of production. The driving force has been the shift in capital accumulation from production-led growth to finance. When finance is ascendant and creative destruction is at its height, commodification and market relations are extended into society. Traditional associations and communities are broken up and dispersed. Social relations are reconfigured around new markets and new forms of production and consumption. Old ways of life disappear, or they lose their former pre-eminence and coexist with the new. This happens not just in social formations and economic structures, but within the cultural identities and the social being of individuals.

The financial crash has brought this period to an end, but the political consequences are still unfolding. The centre ground has begun to break into its contradictory elements and offers the prospect of new kinds of political realignments. Cameron's Big Society is an attempt to construct a new story out of these elements. Labour has to contest it by framing the elements into a different kind of story, one that resonates with people's experience and hopes, and puts forward a different idea of the good society. To do this it will have to reconfigure the centre ground. It has to begin from a very difficult position. Across Europe the decline of social democracy has been accompanied by the rise of cultural movements of the racist right. A disturbing number have already found their way into government via electoral coalitions. In Britain, the BNP is imploding, and the English Defence League is the new symptom of our cultural dislocations and economic crises. It is

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powered by a visceral embittered hatred for a metropolitan elite who it believes has heaped humiliation upon people and robbed them of their English identity and culture. Its wildcat network, patriotic support for the military and single-minded attack on Islam and British Muslims have made it a formidable street political force. 'Tommy Robinson', a former BNP member and one of the self styled leaders of the EDL, has described it as a 'community', and has framed its politics not around race but around democracy - 'While our troops are fighting for democracy in foreign fields, we're losing it here'.

The EDL is a small element of much larger politically disenfranchised forces that have been unleashed by the transformations in capitalism. Their language is not so much about class injustice as cultural dispossession; in this regard they are a 'civilisational politics' similar to Islamism. None of the mainstream political parties has shown that they understand this new politics of dispossession. Camped outside the political centre ground is a large element of the electorate, waiting for an English kingmaker to appear. Labour is held in contempt partly because of its failure to defend people against the destructive force of globalisation and the cultural losses caused by cosmopolitan modernity. It is currently in no fit state to counter a virulent, nationalist movement, but it needs to take on this English populism and its social conservatism and win back former supporters through restating its commitment to security for all. The risk of an insurgent culture war threatens Labour's existence as an English political force as much as its catastrophic election result in the South of England.

The Conservatives did not win the last election, and their answers to the problems we face are by no means certain of acceptance. The Coalition's Spending Review is a huge gamble with the economy. The next three years is the period of maximum danger for it, and the Big Society is an attempt to hold the centre ground during this time. Labour must create a politics that can win back people in the South and make common cause with the disenfranchised. The early years of New Labour - the pluralism, the ethical socialism, the stakeholding economy, the idea of a covenant of trust and reciprocity with the people, the powerful emotional language that reignited popular hope - created a powerful and successful story for Labour. These still resonate, but they are no longer enough. New Labour was an elite political formation that was wary of the people and distrustful of a popular democracy. The challenge for Labour is to build a cultural movement of radical

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democracy, with a vision of the good society that engages with people's everyday lives. It will have to be an organising force for popular democracy in every constituency in the country, developing alliances with a range of local and national cultural and social movements. The foundations of Labour's Good Society will be institutions that embed democracy in society and the economy, and are coupled with macroeconomic policies that secure for people living-wage jobs, decent homes and pensions, and a reformed banking system accessible to all. It is not yet clear how things will unfold, but it will be a long haul.

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Notes

1. Tony Blair's 1994 Conference speech: <http://keepTonyBlairforPM.wordpress.com/1994-first-blair-speech-to-conference-as-party-leader/>.
2. David Cameron's Big Society speech, http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/07/David_Cameron_Our_Big_Society_Agenda.aspx/.
3. Tony Blair's 2005 Conference speech: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2005/sep/27/labourconference.speeches>.
4. Robert Putnam, 'The Prosperous Community', *The American Prospect*, Vol 4, no 13, 21.3.93.