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Citizens, Doing It for Themselves? The Big Society and Government through Community

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Since its launch, David Cameron's flagship Big Society agenda has attracted hostility and incomprehension in roughly equal measure. An important criticism of the Big Society is that it contains a rather confused view of motivations. In attempting to correct an overmighty state, the Big Society urges involvement in different ways: through market mechanisms (where profit is the prompt to action), increasingly, through 'nudges' and, finally, citizen exhortation (where civic duty is the motivation). These represent, I argue, dissonant views of the individual and what motivates them, with the former two representing 'anti-political' positions, as they discourage debate, contestation and authorship. Yet, placing it in a longer line of initiatives aimed at prompting greater levels of citizen engagement and responsibility, I argue that the Big Society represents the most recent iteration of a process that has a much longer heritage in British politics. Governments from the late 1970s onwards have sought to mobilise citizens to take on ever greater responsibilities. From this perspective, attempts to mobilise citizens, particularly through incentives and nudges, should be seen less as prompts to civic participation and more as diverse governance techniques to prompt self-government and responsibilisation.

Building from comments and concerns about a 'broken society' or 'broken Britain' (BBC News, 2008), in November 2009, David Cameron outlined his notion of 'The Big Society'. Since then it has been subject to a fair degree of ridicule, incomprehension and invective. In this paper, I seek to take the basic thrust of the Big Society seriously. As I will argue, looked at in a longer view, the Big Society represents the most recent attempt to mobilise citizens to take responsibility for activities that would formerly have been seen as the preserve of the state. After considering some basic features of the Big Society agenda, thus reflecting on quite what it is, the argument proceeds in two stages. The first is to note that there is a seemingly contradictory view of the individual within the Big Society framework. In parts, individuals or groups are seen to be eager to engage in greater civic participation, and thus

exhorted to do so on the basis of civic virtue, as their civic responsibility. Yet other parts of the framework draw upon material incentives, (profit) or psychological prompts (or 'nudges') as the means by which to stimulate and prompt civic participation. The second section seeks to place the Big Society in a slightly longer historical view, seeing it as a present-day incarnation of a process with a longer heritage, namely one which seeks to mobilise and responsibilise citizens. Drawing on the governmentality literature, I argue that some aspects of the Big Society, particularly those reliant on incentives or nudges, might better be seen as encouraging not citizen engagement and participation, but citizen performance. The aim, in other words, is not for citizens, groups and organisations to participate in authoring, contesting and debating policy, but rather to prompt them to perform certain roles (without debate and input into quite what these roles should be). The article concludes by arguing that the dissonant view of the individual within the Big Society framework is likely to create headwinds for it and make success for this ambitious programme, less likely. It also suggests that a more thorough civic renewal should eschew the anti-political techniques of incentives and 'nudges'; the latter look less like attempts to stimulate citizen participation and more like diverse techniques to foster citizen self-government and responsibilisation.

1. Situating and defining the Big Society

Much of what David Cameron, the Conservatives and the Coalition have said about the Big Society 'has provoked bafflement in some quarters and cynicism in others' (Edwards, 2012, p. 1). One Conservative described the 2010 manifesto, which was heavy on Big Society rhetoric, as 'a bit wonkish', and suggested that people are not interested in the kinds of civic participation the Big Society envisages (Collins, cited in Singleton, 2010). Voters, on the other hand, seem to view it with a mixture of scepticism and befuddlement. Many view it either as a cover for spending cuts, or a gimmick (Rentoul, 2011). It has also attracted strident criticism from the left (Toynbee, 2010).

Amongst this wave of scepticism one might be tempted to accept the charges that this is nothing substantial. Yet, Cameron (2010*a*) has doggedly stuck by the concept, describing it as 'his great passion' and there are, as we shall see below, nascent policies which are beginning to give some shape and substance to the concept. Furthermore, the idea has attracted a number of Labour politicians. Maurice Glasman, leading figure of the 'Blue Labour' movement (Glasman *et al.*, 2011), has echoed many of the Big Society themes, and former Foreign Secretary David Miliband has suggested that Labour 'should be for the Big Society', arguing that it was part of Labour's 'political identity'(cited in Kirkup, 2011). Meanwhile Ed Miliband, despite overt hostility to the Big Society discourse [describing it as 'a cloak for the small state' and preferring instead 'the good society'

(Miliband, 2011*a*)], argues that the current fiscal situation necessitates (re)thinking about how to deliver on social justice issues (Miliband, 2011*b*). There are some suggestions that Labour will seek to incorporate their own version of the Big Society in their next election manifesto. John Cruddas, leading Labour's policy review has said that dismissing such policies would be a mistake, and that instead, Labour should seek to 'develop our traditions of reciprocity, mutualism and co-operation' (cited in Eaton, 2012).

In addition to the political capital invested in the idea, JP Morgan estimates that the global social investment market, whereby private funds are invested in charities, social enterprises and voluntary organisations, could be worth up to $1 trillion over the next ten years (Evenett, 2011). If the perception is that the state will no longer be able to provide social justice in a traditional sense, then this suggests that some combination of private sector and third sector will increasingly be tasked with this role. Indeed, this perceived need is intensified by claims that the austerity agenda may well last until 2020 (Winnett, 2012). The Big Society concept may appear flabby and lacking in precision, but it seems that amongst political and financial elites its direction of travel and overarching themes are likely to be pertinent for some time.

Yet assuming that one should take the notion of the Big Society seriously, still leaves hanging the question of quite what the Big Society *is*. Jesse Norman, who has written the fullest and most thoughtful exposition of Big Society ideas in his 2010 *The Big Society: The Anatomy of the New Politics*, refers to the Big Society as more than a political programme. It is, he suggests, 'a set of interlocking ideas, even a philosophy' (Norman, 2010, p. 195). Similarly, Cameron suggests the following:

> Big Society – that's not just two words. It is a guiding philosophy – a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility not state control. It includes a whole set of unifying approaches – breaking state monopolies, allowing charities, social enterprises and companies to provide public services, devolving power down to neighbourhoods, making government more accountable. (Cameron, cited in Smith, 2010, p. 828)

In the Hugo Young lecture given in 2009, Cameron was rather more detailed about the philosophical underpinnings of the Big Society approach. He argues that government has grown to the point where rather than aiding social goals, such as the reduction of inequality and poverty, the size of the state inhibits such aims. The reason for this, he claims, is that the state has become so large that it removes the need and desire for individuals and communities to do things for themselves. He refers to 'this paradox at the heart of big government', whereby in

an attempt to create top down systems of social care, the state has inadvertently undermined solidarity and produced a process of individuation:

> What is seen in principle as an act of social solidarity, has in practice led to the greatest atomisation of our society. The once natural bonds that existed between people – of duty and responsibility – have been replaced with the synthetic bonds of the state – regulation and bureaucracy. (Cameron, 2009)

A critique of the role of the state is something of an ever present in Big Society thought (Norman, 2010) and also in similar lines of thinking such as that of self-styled 'Red Tory', Philip Blond. Blond argues that society has suffered at the twin hands of an overmighty state and a rampant market (Blond, 2010). Norman (2010) too shares a concern in blind faith in what he terms 'rigor mortis economics' (pp. 59–77). He states that the view that individuals are solely motivated by self-interested acquisition of benefits and minimisation of costs is 'profoundly and dangerously inadequate' (Norman, 2010, p. 50). Instead, he argues, we should recognise the importance of thicker ties that bind, such as culture, identity and belonging (Norman, 2010, p. 103).

Yet the solution to these problems is not a simple retreat of the state. Cameron argues that it is mistaken to assume that alternatives to the state will simply spring up. Rather, he suggests, 'we must use the state to remake society' (Cameron, 2009). The overall aspiration of the Coalition in this venture is to encourage citizens to seek to do more for themselves, in concert with others in their community and to look rather less often towards the state to provide for them. In order to achieve this 'huge cultural shift', there are three 'strands', backed up by three 'techniques'. The three 'strands' are social action, which involves attempts to 'foster and support a new culture of voluntarism, philanthropy, social action' (Cameron, 2010); public sector reform, which involves reducing bureaucracy, and opening up public services to new providers and finally, community empowerment. Three techniques are subsequently discussed which 'galvanise' the three strands. These are decentralisation of power away from central government, transparency, by providing information to the public and lastly, finance, whereby those who provide public services are paid by results and also establishing lines of credit for smaller providers to 'bid' for such social provision (Cameron, 2010).

As stated above, there are the outlines of some nascent policies which aim at delivering on this ambitious agenda. One of the more visible ones has been the creation of the Big Society Bank, rechristened Big Society Capital, which has access to £400 million of money from dormant bank accounts and £200 million from high street banks in order to lend to 'socially orientated financial organisations' (Cabinet Office, 2011). It is on track to commit £50 m of investment in its first year and is looking to double that in 2013 (Jervis, 2012). Further initiatives include the

establishment of vanguard areas which are charged with coming up with innovative proposals which 'embrace Big Society principles' (CLG website, n.d.). Initiatives here include parish organisations purchasing land for affordable housing, a community group running a pub, 'adopt a street' proposals and participatory budgeting process (CLG website, n.d.). Other initiatives include the National Citizen Service, where in 2012, 30,000 16 year olds get the opportunity to spend 3 weeks of their summer holiday engaged in community activities (Directgov, n.d.) and the training of 5000 community activists (Alcock, 2011).

Whilst one might question the overall coherence of these measures (and indeed, their success), there clearly is *something* actually going on around the Big Society agenda; it is not simply rhetoric. However, as alluded to before, a number of criticisms are made of this programme and agenda. Some take issue with its implementation, arguing that it is nonsensical to cut funding to voluntary organisations whilst calling for greater civic engagement (Pitt, 2011). Others take issue with one of its core assumptions that the state crowds out civic engagement. Were this to be the case, it is argued, we should expect to see those countries with the smallest, least interventionist states with the highest levels of civic engagement and those with the most encompassing states to possess the lowest levels of participation. This is not what empirical data suggests; indeed, much of it points in the opposite direction (see Künemund and Rein, 1999; Curtis *et al.*, 2001; Rothstein, 2001; Kumlin and Rothstein, 2005; van Oorschot and Arts, 2005; Kääriäinen and Lehtonen, 2006; Stadelmann-Steffen, 2011).

Digging a little deeper at the rationale of the Big Society programme, one can identify two important issues. The first is that this urge to greater civic engagement is premised on some rather problematic, perhaps even incoherent, assumptions. The Big Society sometimes views its objects as altruistic and replete with civic virtue (such that they are eager to engage in greater civic and political participation), yet in other places, seems to imagine that less idealistic motives need to be utilised to encourage such engagement, and thus seeks to incentivise through profit mechanisms, or more recently, 'nudges'. Such incoherence looks puzzling and problematic from the perspective of stimulating civic and political engagement, as it contains different rationales for engagement; some make money, some do it almost without thinking, in response to 'choice architecture' (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008), some do it because they actively want to.

The second key point to be made is that if we view the Big Society not as a novel or new programme, but rather a novel iteration of a process and idea that has a much longer heritage in British politics, we may see some elements of it less as an attempt to create, enhance or support a civic republican citizenry, and more as an attempt at what Rose refers to as 'government through community' (Rose, 1999, p. 176). In this view, those aspects of the Big Society agenda which focus on incentives and 'nudges' might be seen more as varying techniques for stimulating a range of

community initiatives of self-government, rather than as attempts for broader and deeper civic engagement. This dissonance, between civic virtue, and anti-political incentives and 'nudges' is likely to place significant headwinds to the ambitious project for civic renewal and engagement.

2. What sort of citizens live in the Big Society?

One difficulty for the Big Society framework concerns the model of citizenship that underpins, or perhaps better, underlies (for it is rarely made explicit) the Big Society framework. Much of this is premised, as mentioned, upon the assumption that an over-dominant state 'crowds out' civic engagement and participation from citizens. In this context, the state (and perhaps the market) needs to be limited, and citizen responsibility and participation encouraged. This is, in some ways, fairly classic communitarian territory. It speaks against the atomisation of a liberal society without a shared common purpose (indeed, prominent communitarian thinker, Michael Sandel has spoken positively of the Big Society; see Grant, 2011).

Yet, alongside this communitarian emphasis upon the importance of (organic) communities and the responsibility of citizens lies an assertion of republican values. A thread of republicanism's concern about the liberal emphasis on privacy and individualism, and the lack of emphasis on public virtue and the (participatory) duties of citizenship (see Dagger, 2002), certainly seems to run through the parts of the Big Society agenda. Furthermore, arguably, the conception of freedom which the Big Society envisages/advocates seems close to the republican ideal of self-government. Indeed, Norman (2010, p. 127) refers to human beings as 'bundles of capabilities' who are 'striving for self-expression through the exercise of those capabilities'.

The republican emphasis on participation and self-government can go in two different directions; it can be seen, along Aristotelian lines, as an end in itself, or an instrumental end, to ensure the protection of democracy and individual liberties (see Rawls, 1988, p. 272). The Big Society seems to position itself closer to the former, than the latter, as arguably, the effective functioning of a constitutional democracy does not extend to parents running schools, or individuals being charged with the maintenance and upkeep of public services. Thus, the Big Society framework seems to be closer to a notion that it is through such activities that individual citizens actualise their 'higher' selves and thus that participation constitutes a good in and of itself. For example, Cameron talks of a 'liberation' entailed by the Big Society.

> When I go up and down the country and speak to council leaders, social entrepreneurs and local activists it's clear to me that there is a real hunger out there to do more – to take on more responsibility and have more control. (Cameron, 2010)

The underpinning of such communitarian/republican thinking is one where the (political) community is prior to the individual and that freedom consists of self-governing actions which protect the community (which is prior to the individual and their needs/goals) (MacIntyre, 1984; Etzioni, 1995). The critique of rights, the emphasis on obligations and participation all lie in tension/disagreement with more liberal ideas of individuality, freedom as negative non-interference and so on.

Yet, some aspects of the Big Society framework (particularly the second 'strand' discussed by Cameron above, of public service reform) seem to promote a much more liberal conception of the individual and freedom. In claiming that there is a need to open up public services to other providers, Cameron (2010) states:

> [I]n its place we've got give professionals much more freedom, and open up public services to new providers like charities, social enterprises and private companies so we get more innovation, diversity and responsiveness to public need . . . We believe in paying public service providers by results. It encourages value for money and innovation at the same time.

Similarly, when thinking about the realisation of the Big Society agenda in policy terms, Norman (2010, p. 198), amongst other suggestions such as empowering civil society institutions, advocates 'a large scale programme of state decentralisation . . . deregulating key markets such as housing and introducing greater competition into the benefits system and the NHS'. The perception is that state provision is inefficient (although rarely spelled out in Big Society documents, this is presumably, based on some variant on public choice theory) and that private enterprise, rewarded by profit, is more efficient.

In emphasising the importance of profit as a motivation, Cameron and Norman here are appealing to a rather different sort of individual, one motivated not by civic virtue, or by concern with the common good, but by self-interest and profit. Here, citizens are *homo economicus*, rational self-interested utility maximisers, who seek to increase their (personal, or private) gain, whilst minimising their costs. Such citizens are very different to the ones depicted above, the ideal citizens of the Big Society who derive their pleasure and freedom from the common good and self-government. This is echoed by Bamfield who notes that there are both libertarian and communitarian strands at work. These two strands, she argues, lie in tension with one another. While market competition points towards individual self-interest, communitarianism suggests more generalised and embedded norms of interaction: 'In theory at least, the libertarian urge to diversify provision and individualise forms of civic engagement would seem to pull in the opposite direction from the communitarian desire to bring people together' (Bamfield, 2012, p. 162). Some have pointed out that such inconsistencies threaten the success and viability of aspects of the Big Society agenda. Leeder and Mabbett (2012)

analyse the free school programme and note that private companies, amongst others, can gain contracts to run free schools. They point to the potential divide between for-profit providers who will seek to enhance margins and profit and those who proposed the school, who are likely be hostile to reductions in the quality of provision in order to cut costs. There may be overlap with parents and promoters of free schools, to ensure excellence—but the government's appeal to these for-profit companies is, in the end, one of self-interest. Thus, parents are invited to establish schools for the good of the community; private companies are invited to participate to make money.

More recently, the UK government has become attracted by ideas originating in behavioural economics, associated with 'nudge'. Under New Labour, individuals were to be responsibilised and 'incentivised' (Clarke, 2005). Thus, public policy was frequently designed to encourage certain forms of behaviour through (material) incentives. Tax credits, unemployment benefit all work to encourage certain forms of behaviour through the provision of material reward (6 *et al.*, 2010). Yet ideas associated with behavioural economics, which claim that individuals are not fully rational actors and frequently make flawed and biased decisions (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009), have gained particular prominence and question the effectiveness of material incentives. At its heart, nudge theory suggests that individuals make their decisions based not solely on rational utility maximising calculations, but due to other factors such as routine and various stimulae, such as the ordering and wording of available choices. Thus, for proponents of nudge theory, individuals will not always respond to material incentives. But the structuring or presentation of choices, can, they argue, influence people's behaviour (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009). They therefore advocate the power of non-regulatory changes, many of which come under the term 'choice architecture'. They adopt the term 'libertarian paternalism', to attempt to capture this combination of guided, but, they argue, still 'free', choices (Thaler and Sunstein, 2003).

Such ideas about nudge began to come to prominence in British politics in a 2004 report 'Personal Responsibility and Changing Behaviour', co-authored by David Halpern. The report and its ideas did not gain that much traction, until 2010 and the Coalition Government. Halpern now heads up the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), which has sought to apply insights from behaviour economics and nudge theory to public policy. Indeed, Cameron has stated that public policy should make greater use of such techniques. 'Our government will be a much smarter one, shunning the bureaucratic levers of the past and finding intelligent ways to encourage, support and enable people to make better choices for themselves' (see also Cameron, 2011*b*; Dolan *et al.*, 2010). Yet the contributions of the BIT have been around the margins, on issues ranging from loft insulation, to the paying of fines (Bell, 2013). There has been little direct influence on the Big Society agenda, although a good deal of discussion (Cotterill *et al.*, 2012). One

Big Society initiative from the BIT is a pilot project in Windsor and Maidenhead, one of the Big Society vanguard areas, which seeks to encourage people to volunteer. Under the scheme, if people volunteer to help elderly people with tasks such as shopping and gardening, they gain credits which can be redeemed in a variety of ways, such as access to leisure facilities at discounted rates (Windsor and Maidenhead Council, n.d.). The reasons for the relative lack of crossover between the Big Society agenda and the BIT may reflect the limited nature of the Big Society agenda, or it may reflect the fact that adjusting behaviour on loft insulation take-up is much easier than reviving or instituting large-scale civic engagement. Indeed, the example above arguably invokes incentives as much as choice architecture and nudge.

The above examples show how the principles underlying the Big Society agenda, in containing different understandings of human behaviour, lead to confused incentives. In certain areas, such as the 'reforming public services' strand of the big society programme, private companies motivated by profit are seen as more effective at delivering social care and social interventions, *precisely because of* the price mechanism. Companies are only effective *because* they are selfish and seek to maximise their own personal gain (in doing so, being more efficient). In others, individuals are 'nudged' towards undertaking roles that are seen to be socially and politically desirable. Yet much of the Big Society framework depends and relies on a much more altruistic and conscious view of human nature, one which rejects precisely the *homo economicus*, or behavioural, rationales. There is little to be gained, in a direct, financial, sense by joining a community action group, running a free school, being part of the National Citizen Service or volunteering in a more general sense. These are activities, which in a narrow sense, are *irrational*. Indeed, one rationale for engaging in these activities, is, as discussed above, against self-interest and because doing so is one's responsibility and constitutes freedom, conceived as self-government.

From a behavioural economics perspective, we are led or nudged towards certain forms of action which are considered to be socially desirable not because this is what we want to do, from some deeper desire to actualise political subjectivity, but because the choice architecture selects for this outcome. In this, civic virtue is unconscious and unchosen. We do what is 'right' because it is the path of least resistance. Arguably, this has affinities with what Ferguson (1994), in terms of development, termed the 'anti-politics machine'. Here the expert implements their programme designed to improve the livelihood of the abject and in doing so, renders a host of political questions as technical problems amenable to interventions. Li (2007, p. 8) further suggests that such a process 'limits and shapes what improvement becomes' and thus takes on an anti-political character. In terms of British politics, as Kenny (2009, p. 156) argues, absent in conceptions of nudge is 'the real-life dilemmas about agents, institutions and mechanisms'.

For its advocates, libertarian paternalism is a 'relatively weak and nonintrusive type of paternalism, because choices are not blocked or fenced off' (Thaler and Sunstein, 2003, p. 1162), but rather encouraged. Yet even if we accept that such paternalism is 'weak', it lies in stark contrast to the more republican understanding of freedom that some elements of the Big Society agenda espouses. Freedom as self-government is very different from the negative freedom of being able to choose from a range of (bounded) choices. Pettit (2002, p. 340) argues that republican freedom is the absence of domination conceived of as 'subjection to an arbitrary power of interference on the part of another'. In this sense, there is a tension, if not outright contradiction, between the republican strands of the Big Society rhetoric and the technical prompts to action of incentives and nudge. As Bamfield (2012, p. 161) notes:

> [W]hen it comes to empowerment, instead of all adhering in the same direction, the medley of different elements do not necessarily have the same view about the nature of freedom and the conditions for realising it, and so may pull in different directions when it comes to specifying how the relationship between state, citizen and intermediary institutions should be redrawn.

3. Big Society: governmentality and community

Yet whilst the Big Society's inconsistency around its view of individuals and whether they are eager for participation, should be exhorted, 'nudged' or (materially) incentivised may represent what Ryner (2010, p. 556) refers to as 'an "architectonic deficit"'[1], dismissing the Big Society as a rhetorical non-event, doomed to be short lived, would be premature. I would argue that it forms the most recent specification of a process with a longer heritage (Kisby, 2010; Pattie and Johnston, 2011; Pathak, 2013). Since the mid-1970s, arguably, successive British governments have sought to mobilise citizens and the broader societal sphere, to take on (if not the design of, then the delivery of) ever more of what was once seen as the preserve of the state. A central theme of the Big Society agenda is an emphasis upon responsibility. Yet this emphasis is far from new. In 1980, for example, Thatcher spoke of the need to limit the role of the state and to encourage greater citizen participation and responsibility; 'The first principle of this government . . . is to revive a sense of individual responsibility. It is to reinvigorate not just the economy and industry but the whole body of voluntary associations, loyalties and activities which give society its richness and diversity and hence its real strength' (cited in Rose, 1999, p. 138).

[1]Interestingly, Ryner's reference to architectonic deficit is to the Third Way and specifically, to the two maxims 'no rights without responsibilities' and 'no authority without democracy'; his argument is that the former undermines the latter.

This emphasis on responsibilities finds further echo in New Labour discourse and the oft-invoked 'no rights without responsibilities' motif. A key emphasis for Blair and Brown was that citizens who were not prepared to put into the system, in the form of work, should not expect to get anything out of it, in the form of benefits or social care (see Driver and Martell, 1997). It is arguable that much of the Big Society agenda is captured by Giddens' two Third Way slogans 'No rights without responsibility' and 'no authority without democracy' (Giddens, 1998). Thus, the New Labour years were marked by a great attention and focus on encouraging individuals to take responsibility for an ever greater array of aspects of social and political life (Barnett, 2003; Clarke, 2005; 6 *et al*., 2010). For example, in 2003, the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit noted the need for 'new thinking on the balance of responsibility between government and citizens' and pointed to 'greater personal responsibility for behaviour, [as] key in the long run to improving outcomes in health and education, welfare and the environment' (cited in 6 *et al*., p. 428).

This, I would argue, places the Big Society agenda within a larger shift in the ways government is conducted, sometimes captured as a shift to governance (Pierre and Peters, 2000). Indeed, a wide body of literature now examines the ways in which citizens are increasingly responsibilised to take care of their own well-being. Literature around health, pensions, welfare, security and crime all trace the increased invocation for citizens to do more (see Andersen, 2007; Belfrage, 2008; Jarvis and Lister, 2010; Watson, 2010). Yet, where arguably, the Big Society does perhaps differ, or at least marks a novel iteration, is in the ambition and scope of the emphasis on responsibilisation. Individual citizens are called not only to provide for their own safety, health and well-being, or even that of their families, but also for the community in which they live, and arguably the entire state.

> To me, there's one word at the heart of all this, and that is responsibility. We need people to take more responsibility. We need people to act more responsibly, because if you take any problem in our country and you just think: 'Well, what can the government do to sort it out?', that is only ever going to be half of the answer . . . Take crime: yes, government's got a huge role . . . But actually, we will never crack crime unless . . . we all decide that these are our streets and our communities, and we have a role to help make sure they are safe. (Cameron, 2011*a*)

The implication of the above is that citizens should look to themselves not only for their own well-being, but for that of their community and indeed, the state. As we shall see, below, a perceived gradual progression towards governance from a distance has long been a concern of the governmentality literature (Miller and Rose, 2008). Garland, explicitly addressing the theme of responsibilisation (1996, p. 452) argues, it 'involves a number of new techniques and methods whereby the state seeks to bring about action on the part of "private" agencies and

individuals—either by "stimulating new forms of behaviour" or "stopping established habits"'. As with the governmentality literature, these discussions of individual responsibilisation seem to capture the shifting emphasis towards individual provision of one's own welfare.

Foucault's notion of governmentality, or 'the way in which one conducts the conduct of men' (Foucault, 2008, p. 186) has gained increasing attention as a way of thinking about contemporary governance. Rose (1999, p. 3) argues that it is an approach that 'refers to all endeavours to shape, guide, direct the conduct of others . . . And it also embraces the ways in which one might be urged and educated to bridle one's own passions, to control one's own instincts, to govern oneself'. Governmentality, certainly as taken up by scholars such as Rose, refers to an approach which seeks to examine the ways in which and by which individuals within a political entity, might be motivated to regulate their own behaviour. A key insight and focus of this approach is that the modern state increasingly relies on techniques of governance where the individual governs their own conduct. Thus, not only is the individual 'responsible' in some sense for their well-being (a rather general invocation) but that various behaviours are instigated or discouraged and services, goods and outcomes that may once have been seen as the responsibility of the state are increasingly to be provided by individuals and social formations and organisations beneath the state;

> the ideal of the 'social state' gives way to that of the 'enabling state'. The state is no longer to be required to answer all society's needs for order, security, health and productivity. Individuals, firms, organizations, localities, schools, parents, hospitals, housing estates must take on themselves – as partners – a portion of the responsibility for their own well-being. (Rose, 1999, p. 142)

In one sense, this approach is based around freedom, as it relies on citizens themselves to make autonomous choices about social goods, but also contains strong elements of responsibilisation. Individuals may be free from the yoke of government, but they are responsible for a larger realm of issues (see also Barnett, 2003).

The notion of community has become important to governmentality studies. The community, in contrast to the social, is a different space or plane of government, less singular and solidaristic, more fragmented and particular, and thus constructed as less subject to singular control (Rose, 1996). The political landscape is replete with the language of community, from the community cohesion language of the New Labour years (see Donoghue, 2013), to community policing, through to community counter terrorism (Spalek, 2012), and many more stops along the way, the term has achieved a prominence verging on ubiquity. Rose argues that this shift to focus on community, what he calls 'government through community' (Rose, 1999, p. 176) brings into being a sector which can be used to prompt new

modes of self-regulation, with 'novel programmes and techniques which encourage and harness active practices of self-management and identity construction, or personal ethics and collective allegiances' (Rose, 1999, p. 176). Ilcan and Basok (2004, p. 130) similarly refer to 'community government', as a way by which government defines and shapes communities to encourage certain types of participation and behaviour.

This concept of government through community brings to an analysis of the Big Society agenda a recognition that whilst the Big Society framework is ostensibly focussed on less state intervention, we should not mistake this for less government, understood in the broad sense of the word. Certain elements of the Big Society, I would argue, represents the latest iteration of a process to govern society through community, and through ever greater guidance of conduct and involvement of citizens in the provision and delivery of social goods. As such, whilst the state may play less of an overtly directive role, in terms of command and control, policies ranging from free schools to citizen anti-terrorism awareness campaigns (Jarvis and Lister, 2010) seek to engage, mobilise and responsibilise citizens for various activities.

Whilst greater civic engagement may be thought of as a positive development, especially for those of a more civic-republican mindset, one might draw a distinction between attempts to responsibilise citizens (of which the strands of the Big Society reliant on incentives and nudges are perhaps the most obvious form) and a participatory, republican model of citizenship, which some, at least rhetorical, aspects of the Big Society appeal to. Isin draws a distinction between 'active' and 'activist' citizens. The former are not involved in the authorship or creation of activity, they 'follow scripts and participate in scenes that are already created', whereas the latter are creative and have authorship and input to their activities (Isin, 2008, p. 38). Such a distinction is, I would argue, apposite for the Big Society as the use of incentives and nudges could easily be seen as a programme or series of initiatives, which invites citizens to participate in an already scripted scene, to use Isin's terms. Rose, noting that attempts to construct citizen subjects are not novel, coins the term 'ethico-politics' to capture the perceived attempt to govern through (moral) exhortations as to right behaviour. He points out that at one end of the spectrum of 'ethico-politics' lies a 'will to govern', which seeks to micro-manage the population and the citizenry. This 'will to govern'

> seeks to govern a polity through the micro-management of the self-steering practices of its citizens. Rather than endeavouring to make forms of life open to explicit political debate, it attempts to technically manage the way each individual should conduct him – or her-self and his or her relations with others to produce politically desired ends. Ethico-politics operates at the pole of morality to the extent that it

> seeks to inculcate a fixed and uncontestable code of conduct, merely shifting the loci of authority, decision and control in order to govern better (Rose, 1999, p. 193).

This point connects to the discussion about incentives and 'nudge'. Thus, we might see elements of the Big Society's which invoke paternalistic libertarian nudges and (material) incentives, less as a means by which to revive civic engagement and a form of republican participation which seeks to engage citizens as authors of their own rules, regulations and processes, and as something more towards the pole Rose identifies above. In this context, both nudges and material incentives (despite their different background assumptions) both bear upon not greater civic engagement, but performance and 'self-control practices'. This is not to suggest that other parts of the Big Society framework automatically represent an attempt to create 'activist' citizens, but that these are a little more ambiguous[2] and, unlike incentives and nudges, have a degree of potential to stimulate deeper political engagement. Neither nudges nor incentives can be considered as political forms, seeking as they do, to 'quietly' alter behaviour, without overt debate/discussion. Indeed, they look more like an attempt to open up, and widen, a space of governance and deepen a range of techniques which enhance the governance of the self. As such, the Big Society's more expansive civic republican facets lie in tension with these 'anti-political' strands. This tension suggests difficulties for realising some of the more ambitious Big Society goals.

4. Conclusions

Although many have sought to ridicule the Big Society, this article has sought to take the idea and the nascent policies which underpin it, seriously. Whilst many have pointed to problems and flaws in its design and its underpinning assumptions, in this article, I have argued that the Big Society suffers from a seemingly contradictory view of what motivates citizens. In some parts, it seeks moral, civic exhortations, yet in other places, the profit motor is seen to be the way to engage wider, non-state, activity and engagement. The Big Society urges people not to look to the state for all the answers, whilst in other places citizens are paternally 'nudged' in the 'right' direction, by a beneficent state.

The strands of the Big Society that focus on incentives and nudges in particular aim, I would argue, not at civic participation (viewed as a realm of debate and contestation), but rather civic activation (viewed as a realm of performance of prewritten scripts, a space of technical management). Both material incentives and

[2] It may be, for example, that initiatives to introduce participatory budgeting have *potential* to stimulate a deeper process of citizen engagement. They may not be successful in this, but there is clearly more room for deeper democratic and political engagement than lies in nudges or incentives.

'nudges' can be considered as anti-political ideas that neither encourage nor allow for contestation and debate. Whilst this cognitive dissonance need not be a wholesale barrier to (effective) policy, it results in different messages, techniques and strategies about citizen mobilisation. Why should I 'do my bit' from my swell of civic pride, whereas that person needs to be paid to do so? Are citizens to be creative and participatory in their actions, or follow, passively, pre-determined actions?

This incoherence suggests that the Big Society has significant headwinds attached to it. Opponents of the notion may think this a good thing, but there is a wider issue. As I have argued, whilst it might be tempting to see the Big Society as a gimmick, placing it in a slightly longer context suggests that government policy has been moving in this direction for some time. The collective party political agreement on austerity, along with suggestions that this will last beyond the lifetime of the 2010–2015 Parliament, mean that largesse and resources are unlikely to be showered on state institutions for some time. Whether it is the Big Society, the Third Way, the Good Society or some other concoction, politicians are likely to continue to place more emphasis on citizens to provide for their own, and society's welfare. Any such effort to succeed requires a much more consistent engagement with what motivates and prompts people to partake in civic activism, and a rethinking of how government institutions can support that. To suggest that profit is the appropriate motivation for some, whereas general civic exhortations will do for others; and to suggest that the state knows best, but that citizens should not always look to the state represents a double standard and an incoherence that is unlikely to stimulate the kind of social transformations envisaged. Yet if such ideas are to remain part of government policy and discourse, it may be the case that citizens and the wider political arena may need to engage with the sorts of ideas the Big Society represents, rather than scoff at, or dismiss them. There may also be a need to try find ways to accentuate the 'activist', open and political elements at the expense of the technical and 'anti-political'.

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