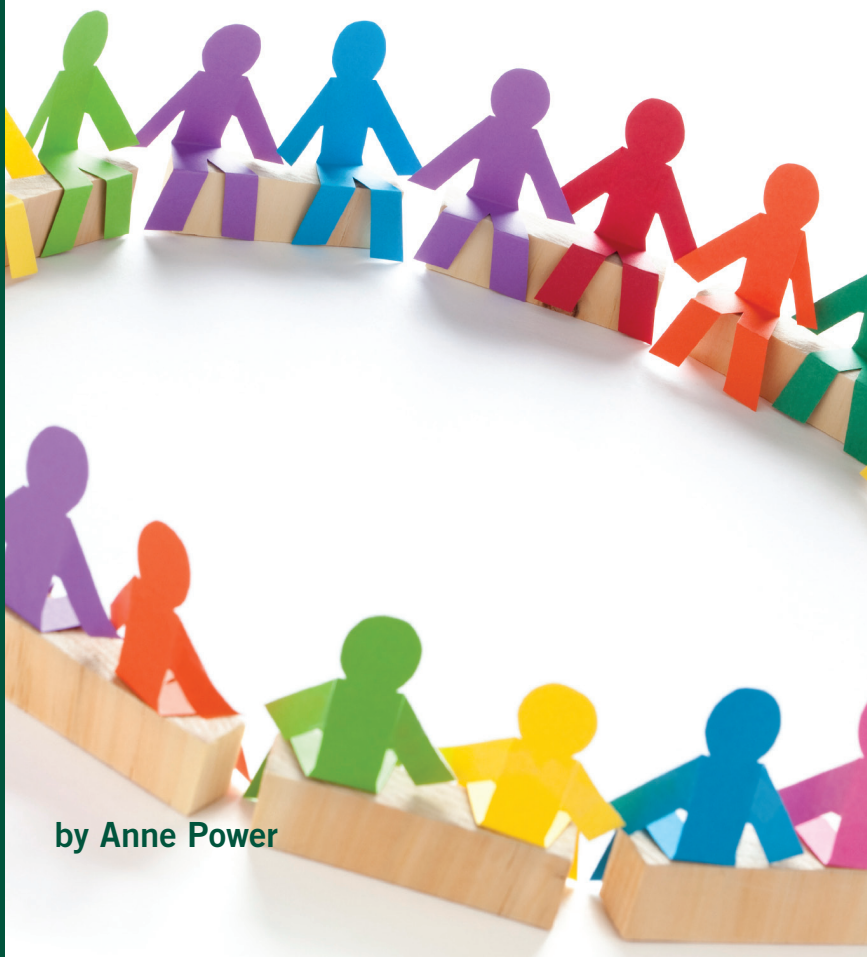


NEW PARADIGMS IN PUBLIC POLICY

The 'Big Society' and concentrated neighbourhood problems



 BRITISH
ACADEMY

POLICY
CENTRE

by Anne Power

THE 'BIG SOCIETY' AND CONCENTRATED NEIGHBOURHOOD PROBLEMS

A REPORT PREPARED FOR
THE BRITISH ACADEMY

by Anne Power

NEW PARADIGMS IN PUBLIC POLICY

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FOREWORD

Policymakers have become increasingly concerned with the potential contribution that citizens can make to meeting needs in their own communities. Current commitment to the 'Big Society' follows on from localism, the neighbourhood renewal strategy, social capital, priority areas, active citizenship and community development programmes. In this paper, Professor Anne Power draws on her extensive research experience to chart the history of community-centred policies in the USA and the UK during the past half-century. She shows that successful local engagement is not an alternative to government intervention but can only be achieved with carefully balanced and directed state support. Small-scale citizen-led initiatives require space in which to flourish. They also depend on a framework of law and accountability which permits community-based enterprises a formal identity, and on financial support so that they can achieve real changes. The concern is that faced in the short-term with recession, and in the longer term with the cost of providing services for an ageing population, governments find reliance on local resourcefulness much more attractive than the public spending necessary for success.

Governments face many challenges and, after all, this is what they are there for. Commentators identify problems facing public policy in the UK on many levels. Two themes are perhaps striking in the current context. One is the assumption that radical changes are needed. For a number of reasons we can't go on as we are. The other is that we are failing to find new ways forward that offer the potential to solve our problems. Public policy is stuck and it is much easier to state the problems than to answer them.

The papers in this series, *New paradigms in public policy*, to be published throughout 2011 and 2012, review some particularly difficult issues in public policy: climate change, recession and

recovery, population ageing, neighbourhood problems and the Third Sector, rebuilding democratic engagement and managing the demands of an increasingly assertive public. The series reviews current understanding of the issues, situated within academic theory-building, and discusses possible ways forward. Rather than advocating one best solution to these problems, we analyse a range of feasible scenarios. We also consider how the framing of an issue in current debate affects the chances of success in tackling it. Some problems benefit from being approached in new and different ways. The guiding assumption is that analysing and re-framing is what academics do best, and is the most helpful contribution they can make in the policy making process. In this paper the current assumption that 'Big Society' and localism are alternatives to government intervention rather approaches which can only succeed in the context of appropriate government support is called into question.

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July 2012

KEY MESSAGES

The aim of the 'Big Society' is to engage citizens in their community in a way that encourages local democratic participation while responding effectively to local needs. This paper is about the history of the ideas that precede these 'Big Society' debates, concerning the relationship between communities and individuals and the state. It argues that early models of mutual aid and co-operation were the precursors of, rather than alternatives to, the emergence of local and national governments. In modern economies, evidence suggests the need for a symbiotic relationship between community-level organisation and the state.

Undervalued community assets, such as social capital, have recently been recognised as decisive influences on the emergence of successful community-led initiatives. Community organisations and grass-roots social movements arising within communities have also played a big part in influencing government to take action on acute local social problems, in spite of the state's recurring ambition to adopt a hands-off approach. The American civil rights movement and European co-operatives illustrate this. Lessons from over-zealous activity by the state in post-war Britain, such as slum clearance and large-scale estate building, teach us that smaller scale, cheaper, more community-based but state-supported approaches to change, can work better than large-scale, heavy-handed, expensive, interventionist plans.

The 'Big Society' cannot survive in a vacuum. It needs not only citizen involvement but also a clear public framework. Current cuts in public spending risk undermining the long-run community infrastructure, built up over time in tandem with the evolution of the state. The right balance between a strong supportive public framework and the bottom-up, small scale endeavours of citizens to tackle local problems depends on the overarching role of government alongside the initiative, commitment and motivation of ordinary citizens.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHAT IS THE 'BIG SOCIETY'?

- The 'Big Society' was introduced by David Cameron in 2009 as a way of involving ordinary citizens in active communities, to tackle local problems, care for their neighbourhoods, and do things for themselves, rather than relying too much on the state.
- If it is to help disadvantaged communities, the 'Big Society' relies on an active but light-handed state, which is willing to support community-level action, while accepting responsibility for the over-arching framework of activity.

THE ROOTS OF MUTUAL AID

- The idea of the 'Big Society' as opposed to the 'big state' is not new. The current concept has its origins in the nineteenth century when co-operatives, friendly societies and mutual aid were essential survival strategies for the poor.
- Government structures were created to combat the appalling consequences of urbanisation, introducing public health laws, housing standards and sanitation systems. Yet the community-based social protection model was not immediately replaced and the co-operative ideal fuelled social movements in Scandinavia, Germany and other countries.
- Member-owned, member-run co-operatives offer an enduring model of the 'Big Society' activity, based on shared resources, pooled efforts, and fair distribution of benefits. Co-operatives flourish most in countries where the legal, regulatory and financial frameworks are firmly in place, such as Scandinavia, Italy and Spain.

A CRITICAL ROLE FOR GOVERNMENT

- In current policy debates about how to compensate for essential cuts in public spending to reduce the deficit, the aim is that voluntary and community-based organisations should help to create stronger communities that can do more to help themselves instead of relying on the state.
- In order to assess the potential for such a proposition to gain ground, it is important to understand the causes of dependence on state underpinning, and the interdependence that emerged in the nineteenth century and has prevailed since then between society and the state.
- A shared interest in achieving a common benefit appears to be deeply embedded within human beings, based on a level of social contact which engenders trust. Within complex societies, the state evolves as a broker, enforcer and framer of the very co-operation that small, local groups are best able to deliver.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

- The many forms of social and community linkage that help bind people together have been classified as 'social capital': the personal and group benefits gained from reciprocal co-operative relations.
- Successful urban communities not only rely on social capital but on an adequate standard of education, neighbourhood-level services, a social safety net which counters the extremities of poverty; and stable social and governance structures to ensure community survival. In other words, urban communities need light-handed, supportive, community-attuned, publicly funded basic services if social capital is to be sustained.

- As populations have become more diverse and social problems more complex, so too has community involvement and representation become more vital to government. This mutually reinforcing relationship is seen most clearly in Scandinavian countries, where local activism has been supported by a strongly regulated and well-funded welfare state system. David Cameron has praised the Scandinavian model and has drawn lessons from it, as have many other social policy thinkers and politicians.

LINKAGES – BONDING AND BRIDGING

- A large majority of people feel themselves to be both members of their local community and citizens of the wider society they live in. The linkages and underpinnings of modern society (often referred to as ‘bridging’ social capital) are as vital to survival as close community ties (‘bonding’).
- Work by William Julius Wilson suggests that structural economic changes, such as loss of manufacturing and other manual jobs, dominate urban conditions and drive poverty, family breakdown and skill mismatches, leading to long-term joblessness. It is hard to see how these problems can be overcome without state-level action to combat community impoverishment.
- Public spending cuts, falling disproportionately on more disadvantaged households and communities, may not achieve the goal of pushing citizens towards more self-reliance or greater equality of opportunity. They may simply unleash pent-up frustration, particularly among young people, unless real gains can be made in already hard-pressed areas – more homes, more child provision, more training, and more jobs. The riots of August 2011 indicate some of the underlying problems.

COMMUNITY ORGANISING

- A flagship project of the 'Big Society' programme is the proposal to train five thousand 'Community Organisers' to work across neighbourhoods throughout the country to identify local problems, local leaders and the scope to take local action. This ambitious programme requires significant state support. The success of the Living Wage movement in London, a model of community organising, on the lines envisaged by the government, is significant proof of the need for wider public structures, support and enforcement to foster cooperation between local communities and the wider society.
- There are twentieth century precedents for the current moves in Britain to instigate and support greater community involvement. In the 1960s when welfare states were at their zenith, many social movements emerged from the grass roots, opposing or at least challenging both the power and unfairness of state systems – anti-colonial movements, European students' movements, squatter occupations, and racial disturbances. Community movements took much of their inspiration from the American Civil Rights Movement in the United States, which in turn derived much of its force from its links with liberation movements in Africa and the Indian sub-continent, which related back to post-colonial Europe. These movements led to more participative approaches.

LEARNING FROM THE AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

- Responding to a powerful, grass-roots, citizen-initiated, -organised and -led civil rights movement, the American

government passed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, followed by the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Following the assassination of America's president, J. F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, under enormous political pressure, launched the US Poverty Programme in order to build the 'Great Society'. Federal funding was channelled to community-level organisations to place young talented community activists as organisers at the heart of community development.

- Many thousands of community-based projects sprang up all over the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many of the community organisers came from the 'ghetto' communities they were working in. These programmes were given immense latitude because neither local nor central government was capable of delivering, controlling or even monitoring them carefully. Nonetheless a shift took place in official thinking as a result, which survived the programmes themselves. While the idea of the Great Society did not last in the US, community-based organisations, constituted as non-profit social enterprises, have emerged in most low-income urban communities supported by a government-backed legal and funding framework. These often became powerful Community Development Corporations.

COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMMES AND RADICAL PROTEST MOVEMENTS

- The UK developed its own Community Development Programme in the 1970s, borrowing many ideas from across the Atlantic, which although short-lived, also served to raise public awareness of community conditions in the most deprived areas and regions of the country, promoting the idea that communities can do more to help themselves, with state support, if given the chance.

- An inherent problem with government support for community organising and community-based initiatives is that it can easily end up on a collision course with high-level decision-making, vested interests and overpowering wealth. At the worst extreme, this can generate alienation and violence, as riots in France in 2005 and in England in 2000 and 2011 illustrate. On their own, community-based organisations do not have the power, access or ability, in most cases, to change the way bigger decisions are made or to deliver the scale of intervention that is necessary.
- Some of the lessons from both the US and UK survived and influenced New Labour thinking of the 1990s. The most important was the value of reaching children early in their childhood through progressive and high quality pre-school education programmes involving parents, demonstrated by the long-lasting American pre-school programme, Headstart. The UK government launched Sure Start in 1999 in specifically targeted areas of high deprivation in order to develop a home-grown model based on this.

EUROPEAN MODELS OF COMMUNITY ORGANISATION

- In spite of similarities and a transfer of ideas there is a sharp distinction between the context of the American Great Society of the 1960s and the 'Big Society' idea of today. The aim of the Great Society programme was for state-supported and generously funded community-level action to make good the inadequacies of the state, in a situation where the US barely provided community-based services in poor communities. In Britain, we have built a complex welfare state with comprehensive coverage for many basic services. The government has chosen a path of extreme

decentralisation or localism as a way to make financial savings and force local communities to become more self-reliant.

- This distinction poses special challenges for the ‘Big Society’ idea. While the hope is that community organisers and volunteers, initially aided by government, will fill the gap, one problem with this approach is that it can unleash oppositional ideas, which is what sealed the fate of the Community Development Projects of the 1970s.
- There are emerging patterns of community organisation and public protest, which challenge the power of government, to prevent it becoming aligned with interests that are seen as contrary to community interests. The ‘Occupier’ protests in the US and UK, the Stuttgart 21 movement in Germany, the Indignados movement in Spain and the Living Wage Campaign in the UK have in different ways underlined the need for the state to respond and modify its way of working with citizens, while maintaining an active role in ensuring public well-being.
- These examples show just how complex modern government has become. In Europe, planned outcomes are increasingly challenged and changed through protests, because communities are integrated within the wider democratic system through comprehensive public services. As Europe is a crowded continent, this forces communities to reach compromises and compels governments to act in the name of cohesion. This generates a need for a *modus vivendi* in shaping outcomes in the UK, as well as elsewhere in Europe.

HOW COMMUNITY-BASED HOUSING RENEWAL PAVED THE WAY FOR THE 'BIG SOCIETY'

- Housing policy in the UK illustrates the constant shift in inter-play between the state and communities. Following the oil crisis of 1974, which forced the government to scale back on its most ambitious building plans, small scale, community-based renewal re-emerged as a counter to large, national slum clearance and council building programmes that had run continuously for 50 years, except during the Second World War.
- The government-funded Housing Action Area programme upgraded houses one by one in targeted deprived areas, working with existing communities. Housing co-operatives in inner London, Glasgow, and Liverpool grew up when local communities came together to secure public support for housing renewal under local community control in light of the failures of mass housing. These community-based housing organisations offer models of social organisation that are long-lasting, economically viable, and grounded in nineteenth century models of co-operation and mutual aid. There are around 250 of them in Britain today.
- A burst of community-led initiatives followed the housing co-operative and community-based housing association model, leading to adventure playgrounds, nurseries, summer play schemes and law centres – involving parents and other residents. These activities relied on a radical change in government style – no longer doing **to** people but **with** people – and the adoption of an enabling, supportive and framing approach, while retaining an important role for the state in ensuring financial, legal and governance probity. This essential underpinning provided diverse strands of a common framework, rather than oppositional structures and controls, agreed between citizens and government.

LEARNING FROM NEIGHBOURHOOD PROGRAMMES

- In a clear sequence of learning from the early co-operatives to the community development programmes to the community-based action projects of the 1970s, the housing co-operatives in deprived communities, and in large, publicly funded housing estates, generated considerable government interest and support.
- From 1979 to 1989, the government funded the Priority Estates Project (PEP) in order to rescue run-down, unpopular, large council estates through locally based management and maintenance services with full community involvement. The projects tackled housing conditions, tenant training, community provision, land reclamation, replanting, activities for children and young people, security and policing. They paved the way for widespread recognition that communities can do, and want to do, far more for themselves than public landlords had allowed. In Denmark, this localised model of housing management and control is universally adopted.
- At the same time, public spending cuts, radical privatisation measures and wider social changes provoked serious riots in deprived areas of inner London, Manchester, Liverpool, Bristol and Birmingham, leading to government support for many targeted neighbourhood, inner city and outer estate rescue programmes.
- One pre-condition of estate and area rescue was the training of local community leaders, organisers and representatives, to develop small-scale, local community enterprises. In 1991 the government backed the establishment of the National Communities Resource Centre for this purpose, learning from the Danish model of tenant training.

- In other words, the success of community-level initiatives in making good the deficiencies of the state depended not just on developing community capacity but on shifting the way government operated in relation to communities, while providing support.

COMBATING INEQUALITY AT COMMUNITY LEVEL – CUTS OR COST – EFFECTIVE SUPPORT

- The range of community-level organisations, services and structures at work today need relatively inexpensive but critical support in times of funding constraint, as in the 1970s and 1980s, but currently they are losing vital, low-level flows of funds due to local authority cuts under the new powers of localism.
- However in some local authorities, efforts are underway at community and neighbourhood level to prevent serious breakdown. For instance, the Islington Fairness Commission has grappled with the dilemma of how to implement centrally imposed cuts as fairly as possible, while simultaneously trying to protect the front-line and community-based services of which Islington has been a long-standing advocate. It is one of the three areas of the country with the most housing co-operatives.

CONCLUSION: EVALUATING THE 'BIG SOCIETY'

- There is little evidence that the 'Big Society', as opposed to the 'big state', will carry us through future challenges without an overarching public framework which includes steady low-level funding. The 'Big Society' can help address threats such as inequality, social breakdown and environmental limits, through widespread citizen participation, but the state has a key role in providing the framework for action and ensuring fairness on behalf of all its citizens.
- Three conditions emerge in modern, urban societies to allow strong communities:
 - the state is necessary as the over-arching broker of different community interests;
 - the state can redeploy public resources in favour of locally responsive services in disadvantaged communities and
 - the state can respond to citizens as they try and tackle complex problems within their communities.
- On their own, unaided, in disadvantaged and diverse urban areas, citizens are unlikely to manage. Conversely governments seem increasingly unable to deliver without strong communities. The two are interdependent.

1

INTRODUCTION: COMMUNITIES AND STATE ARE INTERDEPENDENT

In a period of deep economic uncertainty and rapid social change such as now, governments and citizens search out continuities and adopt well-grounded, widely accepted solutions to problems. The 'Big Society' was introduced by David Cameron in 2009 as a way of involving ordinary citizens in active communities: to tackle local problems, care for their neighbourhoods, and do things for themselves, rather than relying on an over-extended state (Cameron, 2009).

This paper argues that the state and civil society are intimately connected; if the 'Big Society' idea is to help disadvantaged communities, it relies on an active but light-handed state, willing to support community-level activity, while accepting responsibility for the overarching framework that community groups and social movements have sought. It also implies a less imposing, more enabling state (Osborne and Gabler, 1992). The logic of the 'Big Society' is underpinned by evidence that within different political contexts and different social settings, community action can develop new ways of organising the small-scale local services communities need, and which can deliver benefits far beyond what state systems *per se* achieve (Tunstall, Lupton, Power and Richardson, 2011). Most of the examples are neighbourhood-based because it is within small geographical communities that community action develops. Many of the strongest examples in this country are housing-based because housing policy has played such a powerful role in shaping neighbourhoods and communities in the twentieth century (Dunleavy, 1981; Power, 1987).

This paper shows that current political debates about the 'Big Society', localism and community organising have their roots in the small-scale, self-help activity of low-income

communities, which evolved in earlier periods of economic and social upheaval. It explores the continuity between many different strands of community organisation, highlighting the particular influence of the American 'Great Society' programme of the 1960s, inspired by the civil rights movement, as paving the way for radically different state approaches to impoverished urban communities, involving communities directly in shaping their future while providing strong backing from the state (Garrow, 1999; Lemann, 1994).

2

THE ROOTS OF MUTUAL AID

The idea of the 'Big Society' as opposed to the 'big state' is not new. The concept has its origins in nineteenth century conditions when co-operatives, friendly societies and mutual aid were the survival strategies of the poor, underpinning families and communities in the face of harsh social conditions and a brutally untamed factory production system (Owen, 1821). The devastation of the social fabric was the dark side of these small community endeavours. *The Cambridge Social History of Britain* (Thompson, 1992) explores the growth of clubs, associations, friendly societies, savings groups, and myriad less formal forms of mutual aid. It details the thousands of groups that formed in inner Birmingham, in northern textile towns and in mining areas, not just to pick up the pieces of the industrial revolution and its debris, but to provide congenial, solidaristic relief from toil (Birchall, 1997). Very often access to accommodation and work depended on established social networks, while co-operative savings groups and friendly societies protected the working poor from desperation and disgrace, such as not being able to pay for shoes or a family burial. The greatest drivers and beneficiaries of these innovative forms of association were the new labourers in factories, making good the reduced power of extended family networks and traditional hierarchies as people moved into towns (White, 2007). Housing, work and community interacted in nineteenth century cities and towns, as long factory hours, low wages and lack of transport required workers to live close to sources of employment (Briggs, 1968; Thompson, vol 2, 1992).

Rapidly industrialising and urbanising conditions that produced self-help 'caring, sharing' initiatives were so harsh that entrepreneurs at the helm of the new factory system favoured the creation of government structures to combat the appalling consequences (Briggs, 1968). As local government

emerged and central government imposed stronger controls over public health, sanitation and over-crowding, the community-based social protection model was not immediately replaced (Thompson, 1992). In fact, the co-operative model that evolved in early industrial towns in England encouraged similar social movements in different countries facing similarly difficult conditions. For example, most Danish social housing is run today on co-operative principles under clear government regulation (Czischke and Pittini, 2007). The Grameen Bank in today's poverty stricken Bangladesh is a co-operatively run, member-based social enterprise that is community based, with a majority of extremely poor women on its board, while working within the framework of international financial regulation (Yunus, 1998; 2007). Informal settlements in Latin America, Africa and South Asia are frequent hosts to similar, co-operatively formed associations (Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004).

Member-owned, member-run co-operatives offer probably the most enduring model of 'Big Society' activity, based on shared resources, pooled efforts and fair distribution of benefits. They are founded on trust, need and mutual interest. Important conditions for success that have been documented include transparency, restricted credit and dividends, education, wider community benefits, open membership and democratic decision-making. They rarely work when they are imposed and they require a wider legal and regulatory framework as the well-known Scandinavian and Basque models show (Birchall, 1997; Mondragon, 2010; Jones, 1986).

Many explanations have been offered for the strengths of co-operative forms of organisation. The most convincing theory for the frequent emergence of co-operation is that human beings are motivated by altruism as well as self-interest for reasons of survival – we succeed as social animals based on co-operation. Social structures, requiring mutually beneficial inputs and gains, have proved a highly productive way of managing human affairs

in many challenging situations (Ridley, 1996). Pooling resources for mutual gain is fundamental to survival. For example, by members saving small amounts each week, they accumulate capital, which is then used for the benefit of members in turn. It would be impossible for an individual to achieve this alone as co-operation both pools and reinforces effort, bringing social control into play. Benefits range from the purchase of basic necessities such as flour or fuel, to a rotating fund for essential equipment such as shoes, to support for widows, orphans or family members in times of unemployment. The pattern of solidaristic mutual aid was a foundation stone of the original Rochdale Pioneers in 1844 (Holyoake, 1857). The Co-operative Bank, which still operates on mutual principles, underwent a major growth spurt in the recent banking crisis and recession because in hard times people prefer to save with a trusted and sharing organisation. The Co-operative Group, still headquartered in Manchester, reveals the durability and social benefits that can derive from co-operation, embracing not only savings, banking and insurance, but consumer and producer co-operatives as well as community self-help of all kinds, including tenant co-operatives.¹

Co-operatives flourish in countries where the legal, regulatory and financial structures are firmly in place, such as Scandinavia, Italy and Spain. Mondragón, a small Basque town in the Pyrenees, is an impressive example of every type of co-operative. The high mountain valley became home to the now world-famous worker co-operatives, funded by the local co-operative savings and loan bank, the Caja Laboral, producing many successful consumer goods, and offering machinery and high-tech engineering, training, education, jobs and social underpinning to Basque society, which was deeply harmed by the Spanish civil war and nearly 40 years of authoritarian

1 For further information see www.co-operative.coop/.

government. The Basque language was outlawed, and the total lack of political representation found expression, not only in nationalism and violence, which the world has heard much about, but also in forms of mutual aid, saving, insurance and investment, which aided the Basque country's remarkable resilience during Spain's acute economic crisis, which began in 2007.² Spanish and Italian house building, predominantly in dense high blocks, is frequently organised through community-based savings co-operatives. In Italian cities, many social services are provided at community level within neighbourhoods through co-operative service organisations. There are many examples (Tunstall, Lupton, Power and Richardson, 2011; Bifulco, Bricocoli and Monteleone, 2008).

2 Observations supplemented by personal visit to Mondragón in June 2011.

3

A CRITICAL ROLE FOR GOVERNMENT

The idea of co-operation has re-emerged in the UK in recent times, deriving powerful and politically polarising rhetoric from the view that the state may end up damaging the altruistic, sharing and small-scale social relations on which society depends, should state systems become too dominant and overbearing in the social life of communities. On the other hand, if private interests come to dominate, they might undermine the solidaristic ideas of the welfare state itself, as Titmuss powerfully argued in attempting to create an essential balance between the individual, society and the state (Titmuss, 1970). In the present policy debates about how to compensate for essential cuts in public spending to reduce the public deficit, the aim is that the 'Big Society' should help to create stronger communities that can do more to help themselves without first turning to the state to help them. In the 'Big Society', communities know how to organise local events and services, they are involved in running local schools, they raise funds for local causes and help with children, families and young people in need of friendly, caring contact and support. But there are clear limits to how far this 'localist', hands-off approach can carry wider responsibilities on behalf of society (Hills, Le Grand and Piachaud, 2002). The limitations arise from the low internal capacity of many deprived communities, the lack of local resources, and the common need for overarching frameworks in complex urban societies. Asa Briggs argued this in his important study of Victorian cities and a recently published audit of the 'Big Society' in action suggests this too (Briggs, 1968; Slocock, 2012).

To grasp the implications of the 'Big Society', we need to understand not only the causes of dependence on state underpinning but also the interdependence that grew up in the

nineteenth century and prevailed since then between society and the state. Local social protection and social provision within communities need overarching government, both local and national, as early industrialists and co-operative thinkers recognised (Owen, 1821). For example, many vital underpinnings to education derive from parental and community support, but without the physical infrastructure, training, equipment, funding, links to wider knowledge, standards and myriad other contributions by the state, our education system in poorer, lower-skilled areas, would fail, as demonstrated in many parts of the developing world and in the United States (UNICEF, 2011; Economist, 2011c). Community-based organisations cannot displace or act as substitutes for the overarching role of the state on which modern nations rely for key aspects of social order and harmony, although it is true that some communities can play a bigger role. Robert Sampson, the eminent Chicago sociologist, argues this forcibly in relation to crime control and neighbourhood ‘efficacy’. A major role of effective communities is to activate the state and persuade it into a more, not less, proactive role (Sampson, 2004). The private sector, with its profit motive, cannot play such overarching brokering roles, although it can provide some of the services and indirectly some of the resources, which both the state and citizens need. The ‘Big Society’ is not about private and individual self-interest. It is essentially about the role of communities and civic responsibility, as Steven Goldsmith, Professor of Government at Harvard University, argues in his book about social innovation (Goldsmith, 2010).

The co-operative instinct, meaning mutual and shared interest in a achieving a common benefit, appears deeply embedded within human beings, based on social contact which engenders trust. The state evolves as broker, enforcer and framer of the very co-operation that small, local groups are best able to foster and deliver. In Scandinavian countries, admired by

governments of different political hues, co-operatives of all kinds are widespread and have long historic roots. The state plays a key role in creating the legal, financial, regulatory and supervisory framework for co-operative ownership, management, production and delivery (Scott, 1975; Jones, 1986).

4

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

It is hard to separate the evolution of co-operation from the idea that social and community networks help bind people together and form a recognisable kind of capital, termed ‘social capital’ on the grounds that these social networks have an asset value for the bigger society as well as the smaller, local community. The loss of social capital causes real harm particularly to families as the longitudinal study of two hundred families in low-income areas shows (Power, 2007).³ Where social and community networks exist, this valuable form of capital needs investment and protection so that it survives, expands and provides real and concrete, if hard to measure, value to communities (Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti, 1993; Halpern, 2004; Baron, Field and Schuller, 2000; Sampson, 2004). Yet it proves remarkably hard to achieve this balance between government support and community responsibility.

Academic studies have documented a remarkable decline in social capital in America that has alarmed policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic. But major studies by Peter Hall, Robert Putnam and others have shown that in many European countries social capital is higher (Hall, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Halpern, 2004). British society displays high levels of social capital in terms of voluntary activity, in the active role of grandparents, and in the level of cross-cultural contact, compared with the US (Maloney, Smith and Stoker, 2004; Halpern, 2004). It is one of the puzzles of modern European societies that community cohesion, social inclusion and attempts to equalise conditions are state driven, yet heavily reliant on community involvement and generally supported by the public (Park *et al.*, 2008). It is particularly interesting that many European

3 The ESRC-funded research Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion conducted a 10-year investigation into bringing up children in highly disadvantaged areas. See the CASE website for more information – <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/case/>.

countries encourage, allow and directly support independent social provision in health, education, social housing and other related fields such as social insurance. These arms' length systems often benefit from tax incentives, special savings and investment schemes and above all, clear legal frameworks, as the study of European housing systems revealed (Power, 1993).

As populations have become more diverse and social problems more complex, so community involvement and representation have become more vital to government, but more complicated to achieve. This mutual relationship between state and community is most transparent in Scandinavian countries, with their thousand year-old democratic and participative traditions of government, where a strong, overarching and all-encompassing welfare state works with and supports community-based co-operatives particularly in the housing, building and agricultural sectors. Scandinavian countries have more homogeneous populations than other European countries, as well as a stronger history of co-operative organisation. This encourages community involvement within a regulated and well-funded welfare state system (Power, 1993; Esping-Andersen, 1990). It creates many of the social benefits and low-cost outcomes that the current coalition government seeks. But prevention of social problems, while cheaper than crisis intervention, is not cheap upfront and it implies higher taxes to create widespread social wellbeing (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Early Action Task Force, 2011).

Social capital and Sampson's closely related theory of 'collective efficacy' can fail when structural economic changes, outside the control of local communities undermine local social organisation and when governments fail to protect and reintegrate fragmented communities into the new mainstream (Sampson, 2004; Wilson, 1987). Collective efficacy works where communities are connected internally and externally with the wider society. Both William Julius Wilson, the eminent Harvard

sociologist, and Robert Sampson of the University of Chicago, argue that harmonious and co-operative social relations are an important, even dominant, factor in achieving a low-crime, high-trust, open community, rather than a gated, guarded, exclusive community protected by high walls. Yet this kind of high-trust community may be particularly difficult to achieve in America's highly mobile and ghetto-prone cities without wider government support. It is also increasingly hard to maintain the necessary levels of social cohesion in Europe's diverse, and fast changing cities. Therefore as a powerful counter-weight to extreme polarisation across dense European cities, social integration and cohesion policies assume major political significance as community conditions deteriorate (Power, Plöger and Winkler, 2010; Economist, 2012). Successful urban communities not only rely on social capital but on education, on well-cared for environments, on preventive security measures and a reliably maintained public realm. In other words, they need supportive, community-attuned, publicly funded basic services if social capital is to be sustained (Tunstall, Lupton, Power and Richardson, 2011).

5

LINKAGES: BONDING AND BRIDGING

The gains that derive from the combined interests of state and community have led European governments to focus continuous effort on the integration of low-income and highly disadvantaged communities, often housing large concentrations of minorities, which are under strong negative pressures. Local people in such areas feel relatively powerless either to prevent or tackle local social problems without external support; yet these same communities also have less leverage on local government and on other agencies to secure local services in response to problems. For this reason governments frequently intervene proactively in an attempt to stem poor conditions in deprived areas (Power, Plöger and Winkler, 2010). Evidence from many countries shows that locally based services, closely attuned to community needs, can foster community bonds, social capital and co-operation, which produce mutually beneficial outcomes. In other words, successful community change and involvement depends on the synergy between state and community. The state needs to generate strong local support for programmes to better their community conditions (Power and Houghton, 2007).

The 200 families bringing up children in low-income urban areas, interviewed by the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion researchers between 1998 and 2008, show that parents want to be actively involved; control their immediate surroundings; be part of a community; know and trust their neighbours. But they rely on wider institutions to create the conditions for these micro-social links to flourish (Power, 2007). In other words, communities depend on government to succeed as much as governments depend on communities (Power, Willmot and Davidson, 2011). Evidence from the New Deal for Communities, Neighbourhood Renewal and Sure Start evaluations bears out these claims (Hills, Sefton

and Stewart, 2009). International evidence from an in-depth study of problematic mass housing estates in Europe presents a common pattern of local-scale, but government-backed interventions, responding directly to ground-level community needs (Power, 1997). The example of the Priority Estates Project in the UK, discussed below, will show how this combined or ‘patchwork’ approach can work to transform community conditions.

The ‘Big Society’ is clearly not just about small-scale, local community action; it is about bigger, wider connections, about society as a whole, and its responsibilities. A large majority of people feel they belong to the bigger society in which they live, alongside their local affiliations (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2008; Halpern, 2004). These wider linkages and underpinnings of modern society, often referred to as ‘bridging’ social capital, are as vital to survival as close community links or ‘bonding’ social capital. These connections give access to essential services such as education and health, but also provide links to new jobs. Yet social networks are highly unequal between communities. This cleavage is particularly sharp in the US where social scientists over decades have documented the impact of structural economic changes, weak government, rising inequality and racial separation on family and community stability, particularly among African-American communities, isolated in ghettos (Moynihan, 1965). William Julius Wilson’s detailed analysis of social breakdown in the poorest American ghettos suggests that its major causes lie largely outside the control of local communities (Wilson, 1987; 1997; 1999; 2006; 2009a; 2009b).

A powerful and detailed exploration of the link between poverty, ghetto concentrations, social breakdown, violence and joblessness, is the census-based study of US segregation along racial lines by Paul Jargowski (1997). He shows a relationship between people’s life outcomes and the social conditions that

surround them. One of his most important findings is the extent to which physical ghettos and ghetto conditions are entrenched, with their concomitant poverty and related problems. This thoughtful and evidence-based study supports Wilson's thesis that structural economic changes dominate urban conditions and drive extreme poverty, family breakdown, joblessness and social unravelling. Without external interventions it is hard to see how these barriers to progress can be overcome or how community empowerment and co-operative ventures can flourish. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the failure of public support in the US to counter the trend towards ghetto development has accentuated the decline and virtual collapse of many impoverished communities (Massey and Denton 1993). Many American commentators, including the current President Obama, argue the need for stronger government support for community (Katz, 2010; Obama, 2006). The US experience of acute polarisation has reinforced the idea of 'social Europe' (Power, Plöger and Winkler, 2010).

In UK government circles, both under New Labour and under the current coalition, theories around social capital, community and the 'Big Society' gained a strong foothold. But debates become quickly mired in the controversial and radical policies being proposed by the new government, where the 'Big Society' is in danger of being seen as a potential cost-saver, given the huge overall sums of money that flow through the various channels of the welfare state to vulnerable households to compensate for low earned incomes, lack of work, disability, lone parenthood, high rents, lack of affordable childcare or adequate public services. An even clearer threat is posed by cuts to the voluntary organisations and community groups that have received significant and increasing government support over the last two decades to provide many of the community-based services that the 'Big Society' wants to encourage in areas where

the state cannot effectively deliver (Stott 2011; Mulgan 2010). There are indications that the withdrawal of state funding is undermining the very idea of the 'Big Society' (Slocock, 2012).

Comprehensive welfare systems were set up to overcome the 'five great evils besetting modern society' and to underpin society's attempts at creating more equal opportunities for all citizens, following the hardships of two world wars and the bleak interwar years (Beveridge, 1942; Timmins, 1996). Yet the welfare state in this country is not nearly as generous as in most of northern Europe and it is increasingly means-tested, making for a dangerously wide poverty trap (Hills, 1996; 2004; Hills, Sefton and Stewart, 2009; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). The UK is already among the most unequal countries in Europe; shifting the burden of taxes, benefits and public service cuts so that those on the lowest incomes lose the most may not have the desired effect of pushing them towards more self-reliance or greater equality of opportunity (Browne and Levell, 2010). Using the 'Big Society' as a prop for public spending cuts simply unleashes pent-up frustration, particularly among young people, unless the new agenda is clearly focused on achieving real gains in hard-pressed areas – more homes, more child provision, more training, and more jobs. Events of summer 2011 suggest that this threat is real (Guardian and London School of Economics, 2011).

6

COMMUNITY ORGANISING

A flagship project of the 'Big Society' programme is the proposal to train 5000 community organisers to work across neighbourhoods throughout the country to identify local problems, local leaders and the scope to take local action. Amid considerable debate, the programme is being developed in association with community-based development trusts, settlements and community action centres, as a way of fostering more active citizen engagement in local problem-solving and stronger social enterprises to deliver needed local services (Locality, 2011). This large and ambitious programme is thus firmly rooted in well-established, asset-owning, community-based organisations. While the provision of community organisers in every neighbourhood indicates recognition of social disorganisation, it will not in itself resolve neighbourhood problems, given the resource constraints, the complexities and controversies, the time lags and costs involved in community organising itself (Citizens UK, 2011).

In order to understand the recent government interest in community organising, we need to explore its origins in the US. Saul Alinsky, the creative American thinker behind the current vogue for community organising, cut his teeth on the major problems of industrial closures, job losses and consequent impoverishment of inner-city Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s. His work demonstrated the critical role of the state in helping communities survive and flourish. His book, *Rules for Radicals*, explains how to collect a critical mass of support around burning issues that affect communities, and how to gain access to decision-makers in order to change the social, economic and political balance of power (Alinsky, 1972). The living wage movement in London, celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2011 as a successful Alinsky-modelled campaign, has so shifted the balance of argument in government that Cameron himself has

argued in favour of a living wage – an agreed rate of pay for the lowest paid significantly above the official minimum wage that low-skilled workers receive. This has been endorsed by the mayor of London and several local authorities as well as many big private and public agencies. Interestingly, the Living Wage Campaign, a model of co-operation among communities and between different levels of society, is significant proof of the need for wider public structures, support and enforcement. Fairness is a bigger issue than any single group or organisation in a multi-layered society holds within its grasp. It requires a public framework support that governments evolved to provide (Islington Fairness Commission, 2011; De Soto, 2007).

There is a clear overlap between social movements such as the Living Wage Campaign, community organising and the early models of co-operation we have discussed. In the 1960s when welfare states were at their zenith, many social movements – including anti-colonial and European students' movements, squatter occupations, and racial disturbances – emerged from the grass-roots, to challenge both the power and application of state systems as well as to propose alternative ways of providing services. It is ironic that over-zealous states, deciding on behalf of communities, unleashed forms of community action that have served as models of self-help, proving the need for citizen 'voice' within state systems such as health, housing, education and policing. However, the balance between state and citizen has never been easy to resolve. (Department of the Environment, 1977; Home Office, 1977).

Community movements took much of their inspiration from the civil rights movement in the United States, which in turn derived much of its force from its links with liberation movements in Africa and the Indian subcontinent (King, 1958). The Civil Rights movement coincided with many of the community organising ideas of Alinsky's programmes, particularly in Chicago (King, 1967). Radical community-

oriented change came about when a grass-roots protest movement grew on the back of humiliating discrimination, based solely on the grounds of colour. As recently as the early 1960s, a highly decentralised federal government system still accepted illegal exclusions from voting rights, applied to poorly educated black Americans in southern states. State governments also tolerated an explicit colour bar operating in public places (Garrow, 1999). The triggers of injustice, the marches, violence and victories are well known, but less known is the link to community organisation.

Following the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, at the peak of the civil rights movement, Vice-President Johnson, who then ran as President and won by a landslide in 1964, signed into law the Voting Rights Act. The American civil rights dream of a fairer society focused not just on racial inequality, but on the deeper causes of poverty, not just in law but also in communities (King, 1967). In fact Martin Luther King moved his base from the deep South to Chicago in 1966 in order to highlight the desperate condition of ghetto slums. The 'hard economics' of industrial job losses, without the buttressing of a comprehensive welfare state in a European sense, led to a level of social breakdown in black family life that undermined the value of the newly won civil rights (Wilson, 1987; Moynihan, 1965).

7

THE GREAT SOCIETY IDEA

Johnson, in the wake of radical Civil Rights legislation and under intense political pressure to change conditions in the ghettos, launched the US Poverty Program, under the banner of the ‘Great Society’. Its aim was to do within America what the Peace Corps and foreign aid were meant to do abroad, winning recognition for democracy and freedom by helping people out of poverty. Talented, committed community activists were paid as organisers, with generous federal support, to generate community change. Community development became a recognised, if indirect, arm of government. In practice the Great Society would be delivered through an army of community workers, many of them trained in ‘Alinsky methods’. Citizens UK, the Alinsky-inspired organisation that leads the Living Wage Campaign and other community development activity, derives its philosophy and methods from its American counterparts (Ivereigh, 2010).⁴

Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968 while his civil rights organisation, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was organising a ‘poor people’s march’ in support of Great Society ideas, intended to be the multiracial equivalent of the voting rights march on Washington five years earlier. His death provoked widespread rioting in virtually every northern city, devastating large tranches of inner-city ghettos and highlighting the appalling slum conditions and social inequalities prevailing in the heartlands of American freedom and progress, from Washington, DC, through Chicago to Los Angeles. These urban riots put the shortcomings of American public and social policy – housing, schooling, health, welfare systems – under the international spotlight (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968). They only served to accentuate the need for more concerted action (Kerner, 1968).

4 For further information see www.citizensuk.org.

Many thousands of community-based projects sprang up all over the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, employing community organisers, many of them coming from the ghetto communities they were paid by the government to 'organise'. They were supposed to build a sense of local ownership and belonging through churches, community centres, extra school programmes, community law firms and housing co-operatives. The intention was for the power of the people to counterbalance the limitations of the federal American state, still overshadowed by the legacy of slavery and its consequences (Marris and Rein, 1967; Malcolm X and Haley, 1965). These programmes were given immense latitude because neither local nor central government had the capacity, competence or know-how to deliver, control or even monitor community-level programmes (Lemann, 1991). Most of the anti-poverty programmes came to a rapid end as the initial funding ran out, and it proved difficult to show the lasting value or stabilising effect of such a disparate and politically controversial approach to change, releasing as it did the pent-up anger of young people from urban ghettos without an effective umbrella of basic public services (Davis, 1971; Malcolm X and Haley, 1965). However, certain lessons survived and influenced thinking on this side of the Atlantic, not least the Community Development Projects of the 1970s (Home Office, 1977) (see below). The most lasting and significant impact came from the Head Start programme, which by the 1990s demonstrated the long-term value of reaching children early in their childhood through progressive and high quality pre-school education programmes. Long-run evaluations, tracking the children of Head Start and the Perry Pre-School Program, showed how much children and their parents benefited from intense support and an integrated, holistic approach to early learning (Department of Health and Human Services, 2010; Gramlich, 1986; Parks, 2000). The families involved in Head Start were tracked over 10 years and

strongly attest to its value. The Program survived many rounds of federal government cuts, decentralisation of decisions and budget shortages, because of its proven value and popular support (Eisenstadt, 2011b; Waldfoegel, 2006). Sure Start, borrowing many ideas and methods from the Head Start programme, was launched in the UK in 1999 in specifically targeted areas of high deprivation, adapting many of these tried and tested ideas to low-income communities in this country. Moves to decentralise decisions to local governments have led to threatened closures of Sure Start programmes, as local authorities try to cope with budget cuts. However, local and national protests in defence of Sure Start suggest that the home-grown community based pre-school programme, underpinned by government support and community involvement, has won widespread recognition and support. It is too early to say whether Sure Start will survive in poorer communities in anything like the form that was originally intended. Early years programmes embody the essence of the 'Big Society' – state support and funding alongside community backing and involvement with transformational effects on family lives and citizen engagement (Eisenstadt, 2011b; Allen, 2011a; 2011b).

In spite of the early ending of the 'Great Society' programme, community organising, social enterprise, community-based housing and other social initiatives grew as alternative ways of improving community conditions, with direct state support (Housing and Community Development Act, 1977). Under successive American governments, community-based organisations, constituted as non-profit social enterprises, have emerged in most low-income urban communities and often become powerful Community Development Corporations (CDCs). They receive federal funds for some activities, provide housing and other services, generate revenue and plough proceeds back into the community. In spite of many disputes over their value and many local conflicts over their role, they

are powerful local actors in most major US cities, working in the highest poverty areas (American Assembly, 2007; Mcgahey and Vey, 2008). CDCs have fought to defend community interests against big developers, community displacement and plans that sweep aside community interests in favour of imposed solutions to community problems (Brandes Gratz, 1995; Power, Plöger and Winkler, 2010). The expansion plans for John Hopkins University in Baltimore offer one example of institutional interests overriding community interests, whatever the rationale. Columbia University's plans in New York offer another, even more sensitive, example because of their location on the edge of Harlem (Economist, 2007; 2008). The whole philosophy of community organising and community-based initiative is thus often on a collision course with high-level decision-making, vested interests and overpowering wealth. At worst, this can generate alienation and violence as the Black Power movement of the late 1960s showed (Jackson, 1971; Davis, 1971; 1974). At best, it can aid more measured, more attuned outcomes, as frequently happens in European examples (see below).

The problem is that community-based organisations on their own do not have the power or the access or the know-how in most cases to change the way bigger decisions are made or in practice to deliver the scale of intervention that is necessary. Barack Obama's background in community organising, his legal training, and his political engagement, link a deeply held community perspective directly with government responsibility and law-making (Obama, 1996). Now the first black president of the United States, he quickly recognised that community organising, parent protests, community school movements, local housing provision and job access need government action as well as community action (Obama, 2006). This takes us almost full circle in our discussion, reinforcing the lessons from American experience, and underlining the very different conditions in Europe.

8

EUROPEAN MODELS OF COMMUNITY ORGANISATION

Small is Beautiful by Fritz Schumacher (1973) is a book of unexpected power and resonance, whose title captures its central message that big, heavy-handed state action can be immensely damaging and that alternative, community-level approaches work better. The book helped to shape a whole generation of radical thinking around community values and the environment from the 1970s onwards. This community-orientated thinking was not unique to Britain, where the dominance of state control over most parts of the economy since the war drove a quiet revolution. Other parts of Europe, where there were more diverse forms of delivery, also experienced radical citizen-led initiatives, notably in Germany but also in other European countries (Czischke and Pittini, 2007; Jacquier, 1991).

The new approach was accelerated in the UK through the establishment of the Community Development Projects of 1976 to test the need and potential for bottom-up change. This programme uncovered such hostility to the 'local state' that the programme was quickly stopped (Home Office, 1977). However, the government's attempts at community-level structures of involvement and activity did not lead to a withdrawal, rather a reshaping of the role of the state in local communities. The government initiated a whole series of area-focused initiatives including the Urban Programme and its successors, which ran for many years (Robson, Parkinson, Boddy and Maclennan, 2000).

The UK was particularly affected by its ever more far-reaching neighbourhood demolition and new building programmes (Dunleavy, 1981). The International Monetary Fund (IMF), called to Britain to help solve the economic crisis generated by the oil crisis of 1974, encouraged smaller government, the divestment of state-owned industries and a halt to government-funded large-scale infrastructure projects.

Community-based alternatives emerged most clearly in poorer neighbourhoods where much of the large-scale action was taking place. House building, for 30 years after the war, had been one of the biggest political issues, fuelling ambitions far beyond Government capacity to deliver (Dunleavy, 1981; Power, 1987). As major national industries collapsed, so the mass-housing era ground to a halt, leaving a legacy of disrupted and blighted communities with intense ethnic and social polarisation and an unmanageable legacy of estates. The shift to refurbishment of existing homes in line with community priorities happened quite suddenly when it became clear that we could not go on spending in heavily interventionist ways to rebuild demolished slums. Many argued that a more incremental, community-based approach would work better, including many in government (North Islington Housing Rights Project, 1976). Small-scale, community-based action and services re-emerged not just in the UK, but across Europe after three decades of large-scale government action (Crossman, 1979; Wollmann, 1985).

Curiously, the 'Big Society' is in many ways a direct descendent of the ideas that flowed from this austere period. The government has chosen a path of extreme decentralisation or localism to reduce the power of a strongly centralised state. The Westminster government has devolved control of many decisions affecting local communities to local authorities or councils. The coalition government has cut regional funding, reduced local government funding and encouraged communities to take control. The hope is that community organisers, initially funded by government grants and trained through government programmes, will enable volunteers to take up the slack created by a shrinking public sector. Yet evidence suggests that the survival and positive contribution of multitudes of small community-based organisations depend on wider structures (Richardson 2008; Tunstall, Lupton, Power and Richardson, 2011; Slocock, 2012).

Community organising has gained a new lease of life as European governments have faced increasingly complex challenges. Modern urban communities are developing the potential to reshape government methods. The long-run protests in Stuttgart, Germany, known as Stuttgart 21, centre around a plan to demolish and rebuild a large part of central Stuttgart with exploding costs, causing major disruption over years and bringing mighty German interest groups into direct conflict with citizens, in the richest state in the Federal Republic. A strikingly diverse organising base, linked to the German Green Party, displays a now common pattern of community organisation, public protest, and confrontation with the combined power of government, developer interests, big finance and the police. The popular, grass roots, democratic movement has led to a historic victory for the Green Party in the state of Baden Württemberg where Stuttgart is the capital, showing the clear links between community interests and policy making. The still disputed compromise outcome is reshaping government thinking in Germany about the relationship of citizens to decision-makers, since a yawning gap has opened up between the interests of different parties to democracy (Kaiser and Windmann, 2010; Der Spiegel, 2010). What started as a local dispute became a major national controversy in 2011 and led to a change in the balance of political power in Germany (Economist, 2011b). This is similar to the events of the nineteenth century when various community-based societies grew into social movements that radically changed not only social conditions but also political structures, such as trade unions. In some ways it also mirrors the political changes brought about by the Civil Rights movement.

The example of Stuttgart shows just how complex modern government has become. In Europe, including the UK, planned outcomes are increasingly modified through protests because communities are integrated with the wider democratic system

through comprehensive public services. Europe, of which the UK is an integral part, is a crowded continent, forcing communities to reach compromises and forcing governments to act in the name of cohesion. Wars and authoritarianism in the twentieth century taught civil society and governments that they were interdependent, and that neglecting conditions at the bottom of society could lead to intolerable tensions and explosions. This applies in Britain particularly, because we are so urbanised, and because two world wars made our political and welfare systems more state-driven and more centralised than elsewhere (Titmuss, 1958; Timmins, 1996). At the same time, an extreme fear of fascism and of revolutionary movements has led to the adoption of publicly endorsed methods of participation in decision-making to close the gap between communities and government. Thus we evolved a strange combination of an over-centralised and bureaucratic state, with a strong base of community organisation and participative methods. This applies particularly to planning, affecting transport, industry, power generation, and most building projects (Park *et al.*, 2008; Hall, 1988; Briggs, 1986).

9

HOW COMMUNITY RENEWAL PAVED THE WAY FOR THE 'BIG SOCIETY'

Housing policy in Britain has often spear-headed community-level action and change. The ending of slum clearance and mass housing in the 1970s led to a generously funded neighbourhood renewal programme to restore confidence in former slum areas. The Housing Action Area programme began in 1974, targeting decayed groups of streets in inner cities earmarked for the now infamous bulldozer. Gentrification that earlier improvement programmes had encouraged was limited by grounding the programme street by street in deprived communities. Far from the grand sweep of redevelopment, each area, comprising around 500 'slum' houses in tightly packed terraced streets, would be upgraded house by house, as far as possible with existing residents in situ, using existing landlords where possible (North Islington Housing Rights Project, 1976).

Housing co-operatives in inner London, Glasgow, and Liverpool, drawing on the earlier traditions we have discussed, took root in the wake of the 1970s policy shift in favour of communities, and flourished because of public support for local community control following the failures of mass housing. These community-based housing organisations offer models of social organisation that are long-lasting, economically viable and state supported (Department of Environment, 1987a; 1987b; Cairncross, Morrell, Darke and Brownhill, 2002). They also rely directly on the shift from large scale to more sensitive, local-scale state intervention and support. The new community-led housing initiatives of the 1970s led to other developments, including adventure playgrounds, nurseries, summer play schemes, and law centres, all involved parents and other residents. These activities relied on a radical change in government style, no longer doing *to* people but *with* people, adopting an enabling, supportive and

framing approach. Other European countries provide working models of more localised and community-oriented housing provision and public service delivery than is typical in the UK (Power, 1993). They demonstrate how useful a diversified mix of social provision can be, not in opposition to the state, but as an alternative approach to developing communities with state support.

Providing a legal and financial framework of accountability for community-level organisations is time-consuming, but the added value of community and voluntary activities is most clearly seen in housing co-operatives and tenant management organisations, which emerged strongly in the 1970s and 1980s, because their activities have a clear funding stream and measurable performance (Newton and Tunstall, 2012). Housing associations, part of this voluntary movement, had been dormant for nearly a century but took on a new lease of life (Jones, 1985). Few would now argue against the shift from giant new housing developments that tore existing communities and social networks apart, to a more locally based and participative approach not only in Britain but across the developed world (Willmott and Young, 1957; Power, 1993; Pluntz, 1995; Crowson, Hilton and McKay, 2009).

10

LEARNING FROM
NEIGHBOURHOOD
PROGRAMMES

Some larger scale lessons about the balance between state and community derive from the Priority Estates Project of the 1980s which emerged directly from both the legacy of state housing and the legacy of community action of the 1970s (Department of Environment, 1981). As an idea it pre-dated the wholesale attack by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher on local authority powers, public ownership of all kinds and council landlord systems in particular. The Priority Estates Project was a Labour-conceived idea, drawing on the tenant co-operative models of Islington, Liverpool and Glasgow, to combat the sense of anomie and loss of community in large public housing estates, and to reverse the disrepair, environmental neglect and remote management that were the hallmark of run-down council estates. There were at least 5000 such housing estates covering at least 2 million homes in the UK. The original aim was to reverse the growing rejection of council estates under the banner of 'difficult to let' (Department of Environment, 1983). No less than one-third of the entire council housing stock was engulfed by these problems.

The Priority Estates Projects did not stop at housing management: they embraced tenant training, community provision, land reclamation and replanting, activities for children and young people, policing and security. They paved the way for widespread recognition that communities can do, and want to do, far more for themselves than state landlords had allowed. Ironically, local authorities did not want to 'lose their chains' and often resisted tenants' efforts to gain a bigger say in their own communities (Macey, 1982a; 1982b). But one of the strengths of the Priority Estates Project was that it was a public sector initiative, running counter to the large-scale

privatisation that was the hallmark of the Thatcher years. It was community-based, yet led directly to government backing for tenant management and community co-operatives as alternatives to council-controlled, poorly managed estates (Department of Environment, 1987a; 1987b). It did not involve privatisation of estates, which was deeply unpopular, but it proved that locally based alternatives to large-scale state-run services could be more economical, more attractive and more successful (Power and Tunstall, 1995; Tunstall and Coulter, 2006).

Meanwhile, political funding changes of the early 1980s created community tensions and conflicts that erupted in serious riots in deprived areas of inner London, Manchester, Liverpool, Bristol and Birmingham. This led the government to support many targeted neighbourhood, inner-city and outer-estate rescue programmes to compensate for the harm to local communities of government cuts, very much as Lyndon Johnson's Great Society tried to compensate for racial inequalities and social upheaval (Scarman, 1982).⁵ Government supported many creative, community initiatives to manage and deliver local services differently, with more community involvement, more decentralised budgets and local staff, helping communities, while modifying the role of local authorities in favour of enabling. This philosophy and method worked best in rented housing estates where social need was increasingly concentrated because there was a regular income stream from rents and a regular job to be done of ensuring the viability of estates (Department of Environment, 1981). This gave local government and community representatives a shared interest in making headway.

Surprisingly, the Conservative governments of the late 1980s and early 1990s not only embraced ideas of community

5 Lord Scarman visited the Tulse Hill Priority Estates Project in 1981 as part of his evidence-gathering for the Inquiry.

empowerment, but also the more radical co-operative ideals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in order to reshape the state and give communities the power to take over the running and even collective ownership of their homes (Glasgow District Council, 1986; Hambleton and Hoggett, 1987). Co-operatives, they quickly discovered, dominated housing and social programmes in countries as far apart as Sweden, Denmark, Spain and Italy (Power, 1993; Jones, 1985). Devolving real power through budgets and staff created community-oriented housing solutions that have worked in deprived communities for over 30 years in the UK and have a far longer history on the continent (Ambrose and Stone, 2010; Power and Houghton, 2007; Power, 1993).

Four critical conditions underpinned the neighbourhood housing programmes that succeeded in transforming community conditions in many Labour heartlands and strongholds (Power, 1989, Eldonian Community Based Housing Association, 2008; Department of Environment, 1987a; 1987b; Mainwaring, 1988) – community involvement, local budgets, locally based staff, and government support. These successful models worked within a legal framework, clear accountability, training and professional support. They were not stand-alone, but localised bodies operating within tried and tested rules, as registered co-operatives must do (Co-operative Group, 2012). Channelling the pent-up energy, self-help instincts and ambitions of citizens requires skills, expertise and wider links, but it offers significant benefits (Cairncross, Morrell, Darke and Brownhill, 2002).

Danish co-operative housing companies show that community-based services work when elected community representatives undergo training in basic organisational and community skills and responsibilities, since social housing companies by law have a majority of elected tenants on the board in Denmark. Preparation for the complex tasks of solving community problems requires a recognised system of training,

backed by funding support and public investment. The Danish national tenant training centre at Haraldskaer provides this kind of support and was an inspirational model for what followed in the UK. Thus in 1991 the British government backed the establishment of the National Communities Resource Centre outside Chester to give residents and front-line staff the know-how and confidence to tackle serious community problems for themselves. The National Communities Resource Centre offers training and support to around 5000 active community residents a year from deprived communities, mainly social housing estates, who want to solve local community problems.⁶ Working in troubled urban communities reinforces the need for training community leaders and community organisers to carry the responsibilities of local decision-making and local community enterprise, as an independent evaluation of the training programme shows (Turcu, 2011).

6 For further information about the National Communities Resource Centre see www.traffordhall.com/.

11

THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY-BASED INITIATIVES

Evidence supporting the value of community-based initiatives is far from comprehensive, given the small-scale of most community endeavours, but concrete evidence of cost saving and better outcomes, particularly in rented housing, persuaded New Labour, to adopt a community-based approach towards deprived neighbourhoods (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998c). The National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, developed by the Prime Minister's Social Exclusion Unit, drew on the evidence from the 1980s and 1990s that we have discussed in this paper to tackle unequal conditions (Social Exclusion Unit 1998a; 1998b; 1999a–c; 2000a–m). Meanwhile the CASE Areas and Families studies provide evidence of the gains on the ground made by the shift in approach that happened through the National Strategy (Paskell and Power, 2005; Power, Willmot, and Davidson, 2011).

Thus, there is no party-political division over the value of community-based approaches to solving community problems. There is no serious disagreement over the value of social capital and the contribution that community leaders can make to local community activity and services. There is multi-party support for co-operatives, community organising, mutual aid, and the non-profit voluntary sector. Community-based services, community empowerment and co-operation are universally accepted as helpful, in countries around the globe (Birchall, 1997). Yet community-level organisations, services and structures already at work in this country are currently losing vital, low-level flows of funds due to cuts by local authorities (Mulgan 2010). Passing responsibility down to local government, while imposing severe budget cuts, simply accelerates the withdrawal of support for communities however strong the rationale for keeping support in place (Sloccock, 2012). Community and neighbourhood-level interventions to prevent serious

breakdown demonstrate the lower costs of preventive support, compared with problem-driven remedies. The examples that have worked in the past and have been discussed here show this positive effect (Early Action Taskforce, 2012).

The Islington Fairness Commission, convened after a major local election victory by Labour in 2010 against the national trend, has grappled with the dilemma of how to implement the centrally imposed cuts as fairly as possible, and simultaneously how to protect front-line and community-based services, of which Islington has been a long-standing advocate. It plans to implement its commitment to the living wage for all low-paid staff it employs, by avoiding wastage of scarce and shrinking resources within the bureaucracy of local government. This includes reducing the salary of the new chief executive and other highly paid administrators. Interestingly, it has rediscovered the 1970s community-based model of tenant management organisations (TMOs) and tenant co-operatives which flourished on Islington's estates with council support, borrowing from nineteenth century co-operative ideas (Power, 1976). There are now 30 such tenant co-operatives in the lowest income communities in the borough, mainly on council estates, offering a model of community-based, but largely publicly funded, housing management services giving tenants a clear say, training, significant decision-making responsibility, some budgetary control, a route into work, many local social services, strong control over local conditions and over the decisions that affect them. These groups encourage other forms of community enterprise: support for the elderly, children's and youth activities, environmental care, community gardens and so on. Islington's TMOs outperform the local authority but operate with its support and within the framework of funding, fairness and integrity it lays down. Many examples of successful community provision that complement and supplement public services, but do not supplant them, illustrate this relationship (Islington Fairness Commission, 2011).

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**CONCLUSION: EVALUATING
THE 'BIG SOCIETY'**

There is more to the 'Big Society' than a political smoke screen for cuts; there are historic precedents, in the recent as well as distant past, for recognising the 'Big Society' as part of a long tradition of community organisation and social movements that have helped retain the viability of low-income communities in the face of damaging incursions on people's survival strategies, as new economic imperatives have undermined old ways of doing things. This surely applies today (Jackson, 2009). The links between the lowest levels of community-based action and the highest levels of decision-taking, with many connections in between, will eventually shape the outcomes from the current sense of upheaval. If public resources and underpinning shrink too far or too fast, community support organisations will be increasingly forced to withdraw. And then serious problems may become evident, like those that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s (Power and Tunstall, 1997) and like those that several major cities experienced in the disturbances of August 2011. If, on the other hand, lines of support and communication are opened up, then innovative new approaches to problem solving may emerge as they have in previous economic crises (Giddens and Diamond, 2005; Goldsmith, 2010).

There is little evidence that the 'Big Society', as opposed to the 'big state', will on its own carry us through the difficult challenges we face, which the other papers in the New Paradigms in Public Policy series raise, without major underpinning and an overarching public framework, which includes steady, if low-level, funding. Modern transport and mobility, the environment and energy supply, currency and finance, trade, health and education, housing, policing and security are all activities that communities depend on but cannot control or run independently; they require a steady, clear role for the state. At the same time there is every

reason to seize the chance to build more social capital where it is weakest, in the poorest areas, and to support its use value for many local purposes in all communities through the broad framework of the state.

There is no way that the state can withdraw from its overarching responsibilities, or that private interests, at whatever level, can adequately fill those roles, particularly in poor communities (Timmins, 1996). The tortuous American reform of health care, the sub-prime mortgage and banking crises, the euro zone crisis and steep energy price rises have shown just how vulnerable weaker members of society are, and how much we rely on co-operative action at government level as well as in communities (Economist, 2011d; 2011e). The need for the modern state is clear, but a different way of doing things is also vital, as the cuts will not disappear quickly. Communities will find ways to articulate their responses, and organise new ways of coping, which will put pressure on governments to change their way of doing things too.⁷

The 'Big Society' started out as an idea about the small scale at which communities function and organise their survival. This paper has argued that such an approach is based on long-run evidence about how society and neighbourhoods work. However, the more closely we examine the complementary functions of state and civil society, the more interconnected they become. Major challenges such as climate change, energy shortages and skills mismatches will rely increasingly heavily on community resilience and new kinds of community capacity (Hopkins, 2008). But they will rely equally on functioning states and on inter-governmental co-operation – in other words the 'Big Society' writ large (Stern, 2009; 2012).

7 For further discussion see podcast of *'Big Society' and social policy in Britain: A panel discussion* (2011), available at: www2.lse.ac.uk/newsAndMedia/videoAndAudio/channels/publicLecturesAndEvents/player.aspx?id=868 (Accessed 3 November 2011).

Hernando de Soto's seminal work, *The mystery of capital* (2007), illustrates the central importance of publicly accepted legal, financial and political frameworks to allow citizens to invest in and develop solutions to their housing and livelihood challenges. The institutions of the modern state provide the basis for the workings of the economy and society itself (De Soto, 2007). The 'Big Society' idea can help address some of our biggest threats: deepening inequality and its social costs; social breakdown in many areas; the environment and climate change. Only with widespread citizen participation can these problems be tackled, yet the state has a key role in amassing and redistributing both resources and power on behalf of all citizens, who, in turn, rely on strongly organised, well-informed and democratically answerable citizen groups, willing to give time and resources for the common good. The deeply complex, intangible but invaluable phenomenon of social capital, collective efficacy, co-operation, mutual aid, is put at risk, not only by an over-active state, but also by a hands-off approach to deep-set problems. As Steven Goldsmith argues in his wide-ranging study of civic entrepreneurship, we need both community-level initiative and a supportive government (Goldsmith, 2010). Community organising cannot deliver in a vacuum; communities rely on a response from powerful sections of society, and especially the state, to equalise conditions by distributing power, responsibility and resources fairly. When the gap between the top and the bottom of society grows too wide, then the response is too weak. Jared Diamond argues powerfully that this is a major factor in societal collapse and could affect modern, wealthy but highly unequal societies (Diamond, 2005).

In the move towards strong communities there are three conditions for success, which form our conclusions. Firstly, the state must recognise and reinforce its long-run role as broker of different interests in favour of common justice, the rule of law, enforcement of basic conditions, and equaliser, holding together

increasingly diverse and sometimes divided communities. We need to balance the power of citizens to form groups and to take collective action with the power and duty of the state to enforce openness and underpin these efforts, requiring detailed regulation, a clear, supportive legal framework and financial transparency, such as allows the Mondragon co-operatives and the Danish Housing Companies to thrive, even in periods of austerity.

Secondly, the state must redeploy public resources in favour of disadvantaged communities through locally responsive services devolving some decision-making to targeted community-level organisations, within a widely supported public framework of legal, regulatory and financial safeguards. Co-operatives, development trusts, non-profit mutuals and small local private enterprises, flourish with a strong framework of support, training and access to information requiring collaborative structures, as European countries demonstrate. This approach has enabled Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs) to grow in this country, making them currently the target of government interest in mutuals (Mutuals Taskforce, 2011).

Thirdly, citizens, in small community-based groups, cannot tackle widespread, complex and costly problems alone. They lack the power, the technical know-how, the resources and the broad consensus of support that is necessary. They need a supportive, responsive state. There are some problems that are simply beyond what any one group or series of groups can do, and require higher level governmental action (Stern, 2012). Getting this balance right has become the art of government.

The 'Big Society' encapsulates the core idea that we are social beings, that we relate most directly to local communities within local areas, that we need to tackle many local problems on a local scale, and that communities and individuals are capable of organising and delivering many basic forms of help

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within communities, without relying on the intervention of the state which is inevitably more remote, bureaucratic and insensitive to local problems than local residents. However, as individuals and members of small social groups, we are part of something bigger, called society.

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