

The Big Society and the Conjunction of Crises: Justifying Welfare Reform and Undermining Social Housing

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**The Big Society and the Conjunction of Crises:
Justifying Welfare Reform and Undermining Social
Housing**

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The Big Society and the Conjunction of Crises: Justifying Welfare Reform and Undermining Social Housing

Abstract

The idea of the "Big Society" can be seen as culmination of a long-standing debate about the regulation of welfare. Situating the concept within governance theory, the article considers how the UK coalition government has justified a radical restructuring of welfare provision and considers its implications for housing provision. Although drawing on earlier modernization processes the article contends that the genesis for welfare reform was based on an analysis that the government was forced to respond to a unique conjunction of crises: in morality, the state, ideology and economics. The government has therefore embarked upon a programme, which has served to undermine the legitimacy of the social housing sector (most notably in England), with detrimental consequences for residents and raising significant dilemmas for those working in the housing sector.

Key words:

Big Society, governance, housing, crisis

Introduction

The creation of a coalition government between Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, following the 2010 UK General election, offered an opportunity to present centre-right politics in radically new form. Under the leadership of David Cameron, the UK administration deployed the concept of the “Big Society” as a guiding principle (HM Government, 2010) based on an extensive use of voluntary sector provision, radical reduction in state bureaucracy and the encouragement of local-level service provision (Boles, 2010). The Big Society focused on three main areas: public service reform, empowering local communities and engendering cultural change to support neighbourhood groups, charities and social enterprises (Conservative party, undated, 1).

However, these ideas have a long provenance within welfare and housing policy, where under the various guises of the “stakeholder society” (Hutton, 1996), the “Third Way” (Giddens, 1998), and latterly “compassionate Conservatism” (Norman, 2010) they have variously used models of new managerialism, resident involvement, neighbourhood governance and the enabling state. Thus, during the 1980s and 1990s housing was placed in the forefront of strategies to modernise local government (Malpass and Victory, 2010), to enhance the involvement of communities in management and service delivery (Power, 1996; Taylor, 2002), to promote responsibility (Flint, 2004a) and in the development of third sector institutions (Pawson and Mullins, 2010).

Despite the introduction of such locally-based initiatives to reform the governance of housing, complaints of unnecessary bureaucracy, hierarchical decision-making, policy centralisation and “control-freakery” continued to pervade practice (Wilson, 2003). Why, despite numerous attempts at transformation, have these criticisms been so persistent and in what ways did previous attempts at reform fail to achieve their objectives of empowering residents? To answer these questions, the first part of the article sets out the context for understanding the “rationalities” of the Big Society, through the framework of interpretivism and governance. The second part considers the development of welfare and housing reform, initially under New Labour governments, and extended by the Coalition government as part of its Big Society reform programme. The article contends that although there is considerable continuity with previous administrations, the distinctive feature of the Big Society is in its diagnosis of and solution to a series of moral, managerial, ideological and economic crises.

Theoretical Framework: The interpretive turn, regimes, networks and institutions

Scholars who have embraced the interpretive turn in urban policy place an emphasis on the extent to which ideas, institutions and interests play a role in shaping policy decisions as well as outcomes. Hence, “to understand actions, practices and institutions, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, beliefs and preferences of the people involved” (Bevir and Rhodes, 2004, 130). The rationalities of the Big Society can therefore be explored through a consideration of the role of ideas in shaping approaches to the governance of welfare. This section identifies three central approaches to interpreting contemporary developments in housing and welfare policy, namely regimes, networks and institutions.

Developed from the work of writers such as Jessop (1995) regime theory is concerned with “governmental and non-governmental actors mobilizing and co-ordinating the resources required to deliver their distinct but congruent agendas” (Davies and Pill, 2000). Within regime analysis local actors are depicted “as constrained by their environment (for example by fiscal and economic necessity), but also capable of reshaping their environment through cross-sectoral governing arrangements” (Mossberger, 2009, 40). Regime theorists have argued that the concept of growth was the central feature of urban policy, emphasizing the dominance of business interests and routinely excluding disadvantaged communities. However, one of the criticisms of regime approaches is that an over-emphasis on economic factors has tended to underplay the importance of cultural features and tends to have greater relevance to a US context.

In contrast, network governance was developed through the analysis of “wicked” or intractable urban problems where political power was seen as dispersed and “where no formal control system can dictate the terms of the relationship between these actors and organizations” (Chhotray and Stoker, 2009, 3). An emphasis on multi-actor and multi-level governing arrangements resulted in a fragmentation of governing capacity that required co-ordinational arrangements which could not be addressed through hierarchical mechanisms (Rhodes 2006). As representative mechanisms have declined new forms of policy and resource coordination, accountability and revitalization of democratic systems are therefore required which emphasised process, fluidity, openness and uncertainty. For writers such as Stoker (2004) these processes formed part of a “new interconnectedness” that often circumvented state control. As housing service-delivery has become increasingly inter-dependent on a range of public, private and voluntary organizations (as well as residents) this interconnectedness was therefore seen to play a vital role in determining the effectiveness of both service delivery and governance.

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Others have criticised networked governance institutions as neglecting inevitable conflicts of power, conflict and class relationships. Arguing they are very like the “modernist hierarchies they were supposed to replace” Davies (2011, 3), noted a “striking tendency for actually existing governance networks to subvert network governance” (5). On this analysis connectedness is itself a form of power and a potential medium of exclusion “replicating hierarchies, exclusions and inequalities and arguably aggravating endemic distrust” (Davies, 2011, 7). Echoing a Foucauldian emphasis on the interdependence of power and knowledge, networks cannot be seen as neutral or technical instruments, but contain the capacity to both facilitate empowerment but also as instruments of domination and coercion (see for example McKee, 2009).

A third theoretical approach is “new institutionalism” which considers “stable, values and recurring patterns of behavior” (Huntingdon, 1968) and foregrounds both formal and informal processes. Sociological institutionalism pays attention to the way that “the rules of the game” are influenced by the wide range of different interests and actors involved in the policy process. This lens is deployed to reveal the “ongoing interaction between individual actors and the institutions that constrain them” (Lowndes, 2009, 102) with individuals and institutions seen as mutually constitutive (ibid.) and embodying values and power relationships. Drawing a distinction between organizational and institutional change, the former refers to structural reorganization whereas the latter refers to new norms, incentives and sanctions alongside an associated “institutional software” of persuasive arguments and convincing discourses (Dryzek, 1996, 104). However, institutionalism provides a limited explanation of social change and as with the above approaches, discussion of governance failure is often absent in institutional accounts.

Table 1 illustrates the competing approaches to governance considered in this article

Table 1: Competing Perspectives in Urban Governance

| <i>Theoretical Approach</i> | <i>Regimes</i> | <i>Networks</i> | <i>Institutions</i> |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| Key interests | Coalitions | Partnerships | Rules |
| Main focus | Resource dependency | Trust and reciprocity | Legitimacy |
| Advantages | Focus on business interests | Focus on relational characteristics | Focus on formal and informal structures |
| Limitations | Neglect of culture | Neglect of conflict, | Neglect of change |

| | | | |
|-------------|----------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| | Complexity | distrust | |
| Key writers | Jessop Mossberger | Stoker Rhodes | Dryzek Lowndes |

As mentioned, these approaches have been criticized for not paying sufficient attention to the failure of governance systems. Thus, writers such as Jessop (2000) have noted that “a commitment to continuing deliberation and negotiation does not exclude eventual governance failure”, but “the criterion for such failure is not immediately obvious” (17). Failure is a central feature of all social relations as “governance is necessarily incomplete and as a necessary consequence must always fail” (Malpas and Wickham, 1995,40). One manifestation of governance failure may entail an inability to define objectives in the face of continuing disagreement about their validity for the various partners (Jessop, 2000, 17). Governance mechanisms therefore need to be considered through more nuanced interpretative explanations, which consider how power relationships operate within and across networks, institutions and regimes and their location within wider frames of meaning. As Bevir (2011) maintains interpretive theorists are likely to appeal to story telling (5) and therefore the next section considers the development of embryonic Big Society policies under Labour governments of the late 1990s and their later development under the Coalition government through a narrative of crisis management.

Influences on the Big Society: embryonic associationalism, housing and the “failure” of neighbourhood governance

As mentioned above, the Big Society agenda emerged initially in Conservative circles as a means of presenting an image of modernisation, freed from negative associations with Thatcherism and monetarist economic policy. The focus on the social marked a deliberate contrast with Thatcher’s rejection of society and also (in theory) recognized that the State had a legitimate role in developing policy and influencing local level developments. At the same time, the focus on community activism (and social liberalism) was designed to appeal to Liberal Democrats and to convince the electorate that the Conservative brand was no longer a “toxic” one (Hitchens, 2011).

At the same time, continuity can be identified between Labour and Conservative welfare policies (Deas, 2013) based primarily on neoliberal ideology, involving an overriding commitment to expanding markets, refashioning states and enrolling civil societies (Davies, 2011, 108). A “turn to the community” (Imrie and Raco, 2003, 6-7) under New Labour deployed the neighbourhood as a

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“focal point for cross-sectoral policy interventions” (Durose and Lowndes, 2010, 342), based on the assumption that people are most likely to engage with services and policy making at a very local level. Moreover, neighbourhood interventions were seen as particularly appropriate for disadvantaged communities where people’s choices were likely to be influenced by environmental factors and role model effects (Taylor and Wilson, 2006, 5; Smith et al., 2007).

Labour’s approach to the neighbourhood was underpinned by four main rationales (Lowndes and Sullivan, 2008). Firstly, a *civic* rationale associated neighbourhood working with greater opportunities for direct citizen participation, community engagement and resident empowerment (57). A second *social* rationale provided opportunities for developing holistic and inclusive approaches to governance and service delivery and to produce “joined up” local action to tackle “wicked problems”ⁱ such as social exclusion through “collaborative advantage” (Huxham, 1996) and “co-production” (Lowndes et.al., 1998).

A *political* rationale provided the third justification for neighbourhood level governance, emphasising the potential to improve accessibility, accountability and responsiveness in decision-making, based on the assumption that local people “have the networks, knowledge, the sense of what is actually possible, and the ability to make solutions stick” (Home Office, 2003, 1). Finally, an *economic* rationale emphasized how improvements in both efficiency and effectiveness could be achieved through neighbourhood working, offering opportunities for the “personalisation” of services, exploiting synergies and reducing bureaucracy, waste and duplication (Lowndes and Sullivan, 2008, 59).

However, this approach to governance has been described by Jessop (2004) as a “hollowing out” of the state, to convey the success of commercial actors to profit from government privatisation policies, a “rescaling and retreat from neighbourhood onto the terrain of privatism or “self-help”” (Davies and Pill, 2012, 2200). Labour’s approach to local governance was further criticised for its failure to meet its ambitious objectives. Thus, whilst ostensibly committed to devolving power, New Labour was seen “at the same time as having a strong and centralising and controlling approach to governing” (Flinders, 2005, 87). For example, the “Best Value” initiative was introduced in the Local Government Act 1999 to replace the previous Conservative Government’s emphasis on competition by stressing the importance of partnership and continuous improvement in service delivery. However, its emphasis on performance management, target-setting and monitoring was viewed as exercising a rigid and inflexible hierarchical influence over policies

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designed to empower residents (Geddes and Martin, 2000, 392). Similarly, evaluations of the New Deal for Communities (NDC) programme, an initiative designed to “put communities in the driving seat”, described it as operating “within a delivery mode laid down, funded, audited and controlled by the centre” (Beatty et. al, 2009, 247) where “government decides how the community will be involved, why they will be involved, what they will do and how they will do it” (Wright et. al., 2006, 358).

As a response to these failures of Labour governance, purportedly, a key objective of the 2010 coalition government was to reverse the process wherein “the once natural bonds that existed between people, of duty and responsibility” were replaced by “the synthetic bonds of the state: regulation and bureaucracy” (Cameron, 2009). According to Cameron (2010), the Big Society was thus designed to institute “a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility not state control” thereby breaking state monopolies and allowing charities, social enterprises and companies to provide public services (Conservative Party, 2010). The implication was that voluntary and private sector institutions should take responsibility for public services and provide greater opportunities for self-governance influence in decision-making. The Conservative Party’s *Control Shift* policy paper (2009) promised a radical shift of power from the state to individuals, “where power is decentralized to the lowest possible level” (Conservative Party, 2009, 7) alongside a removal of bureaucratic constraints, regulation and oversight. Hence:

For services which are used individually, this means putting power in the hands of individuals themselves. Where services are enjoyed collectively, they should be delivered by accountable community groups; or, where the scale is too large of those using a service too dispersed, by local authorities themselves, subject to democratic checks and balances (Conservative Party, 2009, 7)

Adopting the view that “centralisation has failed” (CLG, 2010, 4) the coalition embarked upon a programme described as “likely to amount to the most thoroughgoing attempt for a century to redefine the relationship between the individual, the state and public and private institutions” (Norman, 2010, 199). Housing was placed in the forefront of this transformation in governance with the reform agenda premised on the notion that that the sector was facing a unique conjunction of crises.

Rationales for the Big Society: Housing and the conjunction of crises

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Based on research conducted by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) amongst others, the 2010 coalition government maintained that a series of crises had developed in moral, managerial, economic and governmental structures, institutions. The Big Society was therefore presented as a determined response to this critical situation. An initial attempt to frame an agenda for reform can be seen in speeches delivered by David Cameron on the theme of “Broken Britain”, which represented the UK as experiencing an urgent *moral crisis*, manifested in worklessness, economic dependence, family breakdown, education failure, addiction and indebtedness (CSJ, 2006). Thus “the welfare society has been breaking down on the margins, and the social fabric of many communities is being stripped away” (CSJ, 2006, 14). Social housing was presented as the core of this moral collapse:

The main problem with the current system of social housing is its inflexibility – the way that the principle of lifetime tenure interacts with the scarce supply of social housing to make people reluctant to leave a council or housing association flat or house. This then narrows their horizons, acts as a brake on their ambition and defines them as a permanent member of a separate, subsidised class (Boles, 2010, 72).

This analysis of “Britain’s social recession” (Norman, 2007, 5) reflected earlier concerns expressed by Tony Blair’s governments and was most clearly visible in policies to tackle anti-social behaviour. For example introduction of anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs), breaches of which carried criminal convictions, saw these responses given legal status, with widely different impacts and have been seen as moves towards the governance of conduct and greater conditionality in welfare in the later Blair administrations (Flint, J., 2006), influenced by communitarian thinking (Etzioni, 1995) which promoted the need for an ethical underpinning to public policy with a focus on “pro-social behaviour” and individual “character” (Reeves, 2008).

David Cameron developed this moral theme, arguing that politicians should abandon ideas about “moral neutrality” and criticised the political classes for their “refusal to make judgments about what is good and bad behaviour, right and wrong” (cited in Reeves, 2008). The consequence was that the coalition government sought to “attack the underlying causes of social breakdown which are rooted in our culture, and relate to the way we raise our families, manage our communities and educate our children” (Boles, 2010, 62). A “territorial stigmatisation” was deployed to justify a highly judgmental and punitive attitude towards those living in social housing (Hancock and Mooney, 2012).

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Forcefully encouraged by a media climate which was particularly hostile to welfare claimants, immigrants and social housing tenants in general, the Conservative party found a receptive audience for a judgmental approach influenced by behavioural economics, “nudge” theory (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009) and underpinned by a doctrine of “libertarian paternalism” (Wells, 2010; John with Richardson, 2012). A key initiative was thus to provide incentives for social housing residents to limit their dependency upon welfare assistance in England and Wales (through the Welfare Reform Act, 2012). “Moral hazard” in the welfare system (Cameron, 2011) was therefore to be addressed through an assault on individual benefit dependency and worklessness, with a concomitant intensification of punitive conditionality (Wiggan, 2012). These reform proposals were intended to ensure that “no longer will people who gain a council house be able to leave their aspiration and ambition at the front door” (CLG, 2012). A pathologisation of working class communities (see Jones, 2012) indicated that the Big Society was intended to be a society with firmly established norms. Such arguments echoed debates in the 1980s about the existence of an urban underclass wherein welfare policy was not merely ineffective but also itself a causal mechanism for dependency and thus encouraging a “culture of poverty” (Murray, 1984).

Closely related to the theme of Broken Britain was the engineering of a *crisis of the state*, arguing that governance failure was a consequence of excessive bureaucracy and centralization of service delivery. Whilst New Labour’s had advocated neighbourhood governance through a “new localism” (Stoker, 2004) the coalition claimed that “Labour’s approach to top-down bureaucracy has crowded out social action and eroded social responsibility” (Conservative Party, undated, 3). Thus society was broken was “because government got too big, did too much and undermined responsibility” (Cameron, 2009b). Noting that “it was more government that got us into this mess” (Cameron, 2009b) a perceived linkage between elite politics and mass disaffection had resulted in a “wholesale collapse of British culture, virtue and belief” (Blond, 2010, 2). These features helped to shape the Big Society agenda through the development of voluntary and private sector agencies at the expense of local authority institutions. For the coalition the (mainly rhetorical) objective was to achieve the outcome wherein “every adult in the country becomes an active member of an active neighbourhood group” (5), thus marking a key differentiation from previous administrations.

These ideas have had a long gestation in both Labour and Conservative parties, although the latter was determined to oppose what was considered to be the “chaotic centralism” (Jenkins, 2004, 15) of the New Labour era. Furthermore, the view that “our political elites have been declared morally and politically bankrupt” (Boles, 2010, 21) led to the perception that “the only way to rebuild

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respect for our democracy and the institutions of government is to disperse power widely and make decisions as close as possible to the people affected” (Boles, 2010, 22).

What was thus distinctive about the Cameron government’s approach was the focus on a “radical, aggressive and seemingly regressive onslaught on public sector provision” (Kerr et al, 2011, 196). According to this analysis England was one of the most centralised Western democracies, with Whitehall decision-making increasingly distant from citizens (Travers, 2011, 10) and government was therefore committed to transfer decision-making power to people at as low a level as possible. This “modernisation with a purpose” (Cameron, 2006) adopted a zero-sum concept of the relationship between civil society and the state, whereby more “society” involvement equated to less “state activity” (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012, 32). Housing was therefore a prime target for policy intervention:

Those in social housing escape the realities of the housing market. They get access by providing their need is greatest, often pay little or no rent and get their home maintained in good order for free. But escape from the market is also to be excluded from it, and everything it offers in terms of choice, wealth and mobility. Social housing has come to reinforce inequality and social division in society; the poor more than ever have become ghettoized in social housing estates getting relatively poorer...living on an estate can affect your health, your ability to work, the type of education your children will get and your life chances (CSJ, 2008, 7)

A key recommendation of the government’s programme had been that security of tenure should be abolished “to end the stifling requirement that social housing tenancy be secure for life” (CSJ, 2008, 19). Hence, “social housing should be a transitional solution for younger families getting started in life and for people who face temporary hardship or misfortune and need the protection of subsidised accommodation while they get back on their feet” (Boles, 2010, 72). The coalition government subsequently adopted these proposals in 2011 with the requirement that the Affordable Housing Programme in England should introduce time-limited tenancies.

The third strand in this tapestry was a *crisis of ideology*. The solution to this crisis was to adopt a highly pragmatic approach, initially developed by Tony Blair in his “Third Way” modernisation of politics and the solution to this ideological crisis was through a strategy of depoliticisation. Characterised by what Oakeshott (1996) referred to as a “politics of doubt” rather than a “politics of faith” (Norman, 2010, 101), this “largely pragmatic politics of power” operates through depoliticisation, which does not mean an absence of politics but is designed to reduce risk of policy failure and establish new means of control at a distance (Kerr et. al., 2011, 200), thus altering

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market expectations regarding the credibility of policy making. Certain issues are therefore depicted as beyond the control of government (Flinders and Buller, 2006, 299) and thus serving to foreclose political debate (Swyngedouw, 2009).

Within this “post political” (Deas, 2013) ideological crisis, “micro-institutions” such as local charities and cooperatives were seen as the vehicles for public policy (Travers, 2012, 11), with local decision-making rather than political leadership being seen as the main form of accountability. Whilst the reforms privilege individual interests over the collective identities of communities (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012, 29) the Big Society is seen as distinctly collective in outlook as it promises to fundamentally change the relationship between communities and the state (Smith, 2010). This is seen as a significant cultural change – “where people don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face” (Cameron, 2010). Policy initiatives were consequently redefined as technical measures, unhindered by ideological considerations, although:

Of course the Big Society, like any political philosophy worthy of the name, has a line of argument within it. Indeed its argument is one that specifically recognizes the over-extension of the state, and the dependency and inefficiency, which that over-extension has caused (Norman, 2010, 201).

Significantly, the Coalition chose to introduce legislation, rather than publishing consultative White Papers, highlighting the way in which contrary to the non-ideological claims, the Big Society contained a complex mix of an “appeal to one-nation Conservatives, but with a strong presence of new right individualism and the nation of market competition, albeit driven through civic associationalism rather than market competition” (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012, 32).

The final strand in the Coalition government’s approach was to emphasise the severity of the *economic crisis*. Based on the assumption of mismanagement of the economy by the previous government, the Cameron government embarked on a programme of radical restructuring of the public sector, with housing taking the brunt of public expenditure reductions. The discourse of financial crisis can thus be seen “as a crucial weapon in Cameron’s armoury; a ‘preference-shaping’ depoliticisation tactic” (Flinders and Buller, 2006, 299) with “radical retrenchment of the public sector as the only plausible route towards reducing the deficit” (Kerr et. al., 2011, 196). Hence

there are cuts to be made which are welcome, wise and long overdue. There are others which are the deeply regrettable results of over-spending by the Blair and Brown

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governments, and it is one of the tragedies of the current circumstances that some good people and great organizations will be affected by the overriding need for government to take control of the nation's finances and reduce the deficit (Norman, 2010, 201).

As a consequence of this economic imperative, the government introduced severe capital expenditure reductions to social housing, including an end to social housing grant and allowing landlords to charge up to 80% market rents for affordable accommodation in England. Furthermore, the Welfare Reform Act 2012 introduced: restrictions on housing benefit payments to social housing tenants whose accommodation was "larger than they need" (the so-called "bedroom tax"); an increase in the local housing allowance in line with the consumer prices index rather than the retail price index and introduced for the first time an absolute limit on benefits paid (of £26,000 per year) (DWP, 2010; Mulliner and Maliene, 2012; Ipsos MORI, 2013). These proposals were justified in terms of both austerity and fairness (that those receiving benefits should not receive more favourable treatment than "working" households).

The Consequences of the Big Society

As the Big Society remains somewhat nebulous, the full implications of its application have yet to be determined with considerable public confusion about its role and purpose (see for example Rennard, 2011). Whilst a sceptical and hostile response to its introduction has led to some to question its continued relevance (see for example Coates, 2011) what seems clear is that hostility to the state and advocacy of community-based strategies is an enduring legacy of the Big Society programme. Moreover, neighbourhood governance provides a dominant motif for political debate across modern democratic societies (Stoker, 2010). Consequently, some tentative conclusions can be drawn about the likely trajectory of reform as well as the inevitability of governance failure. These consequences can be considered through the exercise of morality, the absence of the state as a mediating force, the neglect of ideology and the impact of austerity.

As discussed above, a *moral* dimension was an inherent feature of New Labour philosophy, delivered through the "softer technologies" of network governance – entrepreneurship, self-reliance and trust (Davies and Pill, 2002). The construction of new governing rationalities (ibid.) have been described as forming an essentially instrumental view that saw "community as a tool to be marshaled and controlled in support of government policy" (Dillon and Fanning, 2011, 30). Similarly, the promotion of neighbourhood working can be seen as potentially "part of a central government strategy to exercise further control over policy interventions and outcomes at the local

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level” (Durose and Lowndes, 2011, 346). The rationale underlying the promotion of active citizenship has therefore been the definition and mobilization of the powers and resources of existing agents to facilitate their own governance (Raco and Flint, 2001, 610) through constructions of individual responsibility (Flint, 2004b; McKee, 2008). The consequence is likely to be more intensive and authoritarian housing management practices.

New Labour’s approach to partnership working was extensively applied as a normative device for contemporary governance. However, partnership models have been strongly criticized, on the basis of a failure to communicate and “mutual incomprehension” despite sharing a common vocabulary. Hence although partners may have conflicting objectives the depoliticized and consensual nature of partnerships often meant that differences were not surfaced let alone debated (Davies, 2011, 63-4). This problem of mutual misunderstanding demonstrate the need for an “approach that recognizes the multiplicity of competing perspectives and the contingency of prevailing power relationships and institutional settlements” (Durose and Lowndes, 2011, 357). However, there is no indication that the Big Society will address these imbalances of power and the moral dimensions are likely to exacerbate the marginalization of lower-income groups, socio-spatial polarisation and the further stigmatization of social housing. A depoliticisation of poverty evident in the social exclusion debate serves to obscure underlying conflicts in poverty policies (Atkinson and Swanstrom, 2012).

These difficulties can only be intensified by the absence of the *state* as a mediating force. This implies that “institutions promising ‘democratic empowerment’ can often do symbolic violence to subaltern groups before any face-to-face contact takes place” (Davies, 2011, 64). This notion of symbolic violence echoes Foucault’s (1991) concept of “governmentality”, whereby governance places ever-increasing interest in responsibility; this is often seen as a three tiered model, working through ourselves, through others and through the state. In Foucauldian terms populations are ideally seen as self-regulating and thus “circumnavigating” state responsibility (Kerr et al, 2011, 202; McKee and Cooper, 2008). For example the abolition of key “bureaucratic” mechanisms, such as the comprehensive audit regime for localities, can be seen as realpolitic; a politically expedient manoeuvre wherein “there will be no high profile failures published by government, but only quietly deteriorating localities in the more socially and economically disadvantaged parts of the country” (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012, 36). As Gross and Hambleton (2007) argue “governance is less a creative process for solving societal problems than a mechanism for allowing the state to

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abdicate its responsibility for providing care and support...governance in the absence of strong government can lead to urban breakdown” (9).

A radical “anti-state” vision of localism was based on the liberal premise that state activity “crowds out” civil society, but research on UK local government shows that a vibrant civil society tends to go hand in hand with a vigorous local council: they are not alternatives or competitors” (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012, 32). Moreover, Bulley and Bulley (2012) argue that the extension of self-governance leads to the paradoxes of bigger not smaller government and greater, rather than less social control. This form of regulated freedom (Rose, 1999) creates new forms of difficulty. As Flinders and Moon (2011) comment too much accountability can be as problematic as too little (653) and the conflict between the centrifugal forces of devolution and localism with the centripetal forces of political accountability and public expectations is likely to be resolved in favour of “Bigger State” rather than a “Big Society” (ibid.). The coalition government lacks clear answers to how radical localism can be reconciled with traditional forms of accountability (Flinders and Moon, 2011) and reflect the “curse of the decentralizing Minister” – responsibility without power (659-660).

Thirdly a neglect of *ideology* can be interpreted as a form of neoliberal rationality through the exercise of soft power. This “post-political” approach to policy sees choices and actions as “essentially technical issues, devoid of ideological significance and determined on the basis on neutral, technocratic deliberation that marginalises contestation” (Deas, 2013, 76). Government at a distance (Davies, 2011, 71) tends to see adversarialism as taboo and the use of “modernisation” as a rationale for reform provides a term which acts as a synonym for “progress” committing politicians to no specific policies in government (Finlayson, 2003, cited in Kerr et al., 2011). However, as Massey (1994) has warned any attempt to assume a congruence of interests in geographical communities is bound to be problematic. Similarly, neighbourhoods are not autonomous collective actors able to impact upon public policy independent of the “tangled scalar hierarchies” that characterise contemporary governance (Brenner, 2004, 95). The pretence of ideological neutrality only serves to hide conflict and fails to address fundamental asymmetries of power and influence.

A continued marginalization of socio-spatial equity objectives (Deas, 2012, 12) and the “emphasis on actively dismantling (rather than reforming) parts of the state” (9) means that “any remaining commitment to ameliorating poverty tends for the most part to be vestigial” (ibid.). The *austerity*

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agenda further intensifies the “geography of inequity” (Sharpe, 1970) with little scope (or inclination) for redistributive mechanisms. Although many of the most controversial aspects of welfare reform (such as the “bedroom tax” or “universal credit”) have been newly implemented, research studies suggest significant regional disparities and increasing segregation between higher and lower-income households (Fenton, 2011; Hamnett, 2010). What seems clear is that the welfare reform programme will exacerbate the immiseration of social housing tenants. Moreover, given the inevitability of governance failure, there is no reason to think that the Big Society structures will prove any different from previous attempts at neighbourhood governance and are likely to result in greater centralization, a marginalization of disadvantaged neighbourhoods and more intensive management processes. For housing professionals, committed to resident welfare and tenancy support, their role in limiting access, providing conditional support and policing housing estates is likely to be uncomfortable, disorienting and profoundly unrewarding.

Conclusion: Interpretive governance, the Big Society and Housing

In conclusion, this article has considered a number of ways in which problems associated with the Big Society can be conceptualized. As can be seen each of these has advantages and disadvantages. Institutionalism offers the opportunity to consider both formal and informal relationships, regime theory focuses on economic features (particularly important within a neoliberal policy framework) and network theory emphasizes the significance of partnerships and relationships. Alternatively, Jones and Evans (2006) have written of the importance of both independence from state power while simultaneously working closely with it; these notions of “proximity” and “distance” which draw on Foucauldian theory (for example, Cruikshank, 1999; Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999) help to explain how local level actors (such as housing providers) benefit from their attachment to local authorities whilst simultaneously their (semi)-independence enables them to achieve objectives which would not have been possible under “traditional” (public sector dominated) governance arrangements. Within the context of crisis management, these conceptual underpinnings serve to frame the debates in broader context and to explain both the opportunities offered and limitations of the Big Society model.

The concept of the Big Society has deep roots; in Conservative philosophy, in the rationales for neighbourhood governance offered by the New Labour governments as well as a wider historical provenance (not considered here, but see Harris, 2012). The Blair and Brown deployment of civic, social, political and economic rationales for governance laid the ground for the later more radical

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measures introduced to undermine the concept of a social rented sector introduced by the 2010 coalition government. Whilst there has been considerable continuity between ideas propounded by Labour and Conservative governments, the differences are highly significant. Whilst drawing on an emergent new localism under Labour, the narrative offered by the Conservatives (and shared by their Liberal Democrat partners) interpreted governance as contributing to an amalgamation of crises, underpinning and exacerbating social problems and creating a narrative of urgency for reform. The “problem” of social housing was presented as a root cause of these crises and therefore, regardless of the public expenditure “crisis”, would inevitably be in the forefront of a significant retrenchment.

However, the libertarian features of the Big Society, with its commitment to self-governance sits uneasily with the more authoritarian aspects of this agenda, although this tension between the “free economy” and the “strong state” has been a familiar feature in Conservative thought (Gamble, 1994). Thus the presentation of housing as an arena featuring inherently bureaucratic and inefficient local authorities, containing “work-shy” and dependent tenants, contradicted the rhetoric of governmentality through self-help strategies and resident empowerment. At the same time the moralistic nature of the discourse facilitated an opposition between “strivers” and “shirkers” which reinforced the stigmatization of social housing. A continued emasculation of any commitment to social equality (Deas, 2012, 13) meant that assistance was targeted at “deserving” groups rather than those in the greatest need, in a further extension of neo-liberal economic and social policy. The benefit reductions presented in the Welfare Reform Act 2012 provided a further pathologisation of the working class and an immiseration of social housing tenants whilst a reliance on private sector funding offered considerable scope for the withdrawal of public sector subsidies. The consequences are likely to be severe for those still living in social housing and for those hoping to gain access. At the same time the implications for the professionalism of public sector housing workers, responsible for an increasingly marginal element of the welfare state, whilst presenting themselves as entrepreneurial and innovative executives is increasingly difficult to reconcile. The Big Society thus provides a fascinating study in the construction of political rhetoric and the “mobilization of bias” (Bachartz and Baratz, 1962), not only in England (where the impact has been most significant), but also with wider applicability to an international arena as neighbourhood governance is presented as an increasingly influential solution to social problems in an era of austerity.

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ⁱ The concept of a wicked problem has been used in public policy to denote an issue which is regarded as intractable, open ended and complex. It is the result of a combination of problems and has a range of different potential solutions. The development of 'joined-up government' under the 1997 Labour government was an attempt to tackle such problems.