THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR IN TRANSITION

changing priorities, changing ideologies

Working in partnership with
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Preface

Since David Cameron first coined the term ‘The Big Society’ in his Hugo Young lecture of 2009 – and consequently and very publicly located the ideology at the heart of his stated Prime Ministerial ambitions to create a stronger society coupled with a smaller state - the voluntary sector has been watching with keen interest.

Some in the sector welcomed his announcements, noting that government – at last – was speaking our language. Could this be the long-overdue platform for the genuine co-production we had long been calling for?

Some looked askance at the idea, but kept their counsel. “Let’s see how it all turns out,” they seemed to be saying.

Others viewed the whole Big Society agenda with outright hostility, decrying it as a thinly-disguised fig-leaf for the brutal public service cuts they warned were on the way.

From the vantage point of almost two years, a significantly changed public service landscape and a great deal of media coverage and political commentary on the subject, it’s perhaps not an unreasonable time to ask: who was right? More importantly – is there a “correct” voluntary sector position to take on the notion of The Big Society? How should we be navigating a political and ideological territory which is undoubtedly hugely influential, regardless of one’s opinion as to its ideological veracity?

Unlike other reports on the subject, this publication doesn’t seek to answer these questions outright, nor to take a “position”, but rather, to stimulate thinking and necessary discussion.

BVSC’s own experience of dealing with a wide and diverse range of voluntary and community sector interests has made it clear to me that there is still no viable single response to The Big Society and how it relates to our sector’s interests, because the needs and perspectives within the sector are complex and wide-ranging, and because there exists the potential for a range of interpretations – and therefore a range of responses.

If anything, we need to be equipped to undertake an individualised and sophisticated analysis of what this political and ideological programme really means for voluntary action in Britain today, and how each can – and must – inform the other.

I was therefore excited to be approached by Newman University College with the idea of examining The Big Society in the context of the history of UK governmental
policies relating to the voluntary sector. Could such an analysis help us determine how best to influence the next stage of the idea’s evolution, in whichever direction that may lie?

BVSC was asked to source a range of perspectives on the subject from within our membership, and to provide space and time for the discussions which informed the research. These were fascinating to participate in, and it has been equally fascinating to see how they’ve illuminated this uniquely academic analysis.

We publish this in the spirit of opening up a debate which we hope will positively inform current and emerging voluntary sector policy and future history.

**Brian Carr**  
**Chief Executive**  
**BVSC, The Centre for Voluntary Action**
Introduction

"I think we need a social recovery, because, as I have said lots of times in the past, there are too many parts of our society that are broken, whether it is broken families or whether it is some communities breaking down; whether it is the level of crime, the level of gang membership; whether it's problems of people stuck on welfare, unable to work; whether it's the sense that some of our public services don't work for us – we do need a social recovery to mend the broken society.

To me, that's what the Big Society is all about. To me, there's one word at the heart of all this, and that is responsibility.

We need people to take more responsibility." [David Cameron 14th February 2011]

This project has its origins in a conversation relating to the uncertainty and trepidation felt by large parts of the voluntary and community sector [VCS] about the future following the General Election of 2010. It is a characteristic of these kinds of volatile and febrile policy environments that what is most feared is the unknown and the speculative. These fears are particularly heightened in the case of the VCS because of the relatively stable policy environment that existed for them over the 13 years of Labour government. During this time, although many would argue that things were far from perfect [and this will be explored later in the research], at least the direction of travel was known and the role the sector was expected to play had been made explicit in a range of Government documents¹. Those projects seeking central or local government support – either through core grant support or via the various contracting mechanisms – were able to plan ahead and even seek to influence the relationship with their key funders. And for those organisations not interested in seeking money from government sources, they too were given strong messages about the role they had to play alongside Government in building civil society and encouraging active citizenship.²

¹ See for example HM Treasury [2007] The future role of the third sector in social and economic regeneration

² See for example Dept. Communities and Local Government [2008] Communities in control: Real people, real power
The Labour Government’s strategy towards the VCS was one of the more tangible products of its commitment to the *Third Way* – an approach heavily influenced by the work of Anthony Giddens\(^3\) and his concept of the ‘Social Investment State’ which addressed the way in which ‘civic culture’ could be developed through a partnership between the public, voluntary and private sectors and which emphasised service delivery by the agency most competent to provide the service.

We will discuss later, in more detail, the way in which this approach to conceptualising the role of the VCS contained its own set of problems – not least the fear that it was a main road to the loss of independence and even, potentially, incorporation into the State machinery. However, it was also clear that the emergence of a role for the VCS driven by this very particular ideology would mean that Labour’s opponents would also be turning their minds to an alternative approach that would provide ‘clear blue water’ between the two parties.

The Conservative opposition eventually found their alternative in the notion of the *Big Society*, a terminology which was first coined by their leader, David Cameron, in the Hugo Young lecture of 2009:

> “Our alternative to big government is not no government - some reheated version of ideological laissez-faire. Nor is it just smarter government. Because we believe that a strong society will solve our problems more effectively than big government has or ever will, we want the state to act as an instrument for helping to create a strong society.

> Our alternative to big government is the big society.”

This is an idea that can claim to have at least some of its roots in the work of Phillip Blond\(^4\). Blond argues that we have been ill served by both the excessive and claustrophobic bureaucracy of the public sector and by the rapacious greed of the private sector. He calls for a rebalancing of the civil state based on the principles of ‘ownership’ – putting decisions about services and the responsibility for their proper and fair delivery into the hands of those who run them and those who are on the receiving end of them. Blond does not directly use the language of the Big Society but talks about the need to ‘mobilise the public’ in ways that are very similar.

However, it is *The Big Society* published in 2010\(^5\) and written by Jesse Norman, MP for Hereford, that sets out the most detailed case for this approach as part of a co-

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\(^5\) Jesse Norman [2010] *The Big Society ; the anatomy of the new politics* Buckingham : UBP
ordinated political and ideological programme – and this will be further explored in Section 2 of this report. However, it is fair to say that the wider public have struggled to understand the coherence of the message and remain widely sceptical of the idea. Levels of understanding within the VCS itself are not that much better and there is a common perception that The Big Society may well be a fig-leaf for cuts in the funding of public and voluntary sector organisations.

All of these issues will be picked up again in more detail later in the report but what is clear is that the policy environment in which the VCS has to operate is fundamentally driven by the dominant political ideologies of the day and that these ideas stimulate, shape and accelerate change in the way the sector operates. This report tries to capture the main trends in public policy towards the VCS over the past fifty years and seeks to identify the key ideas that have influenced the way voluntary and community groups have operated. Starting with what we call the ‘re-discovery’ of poverty in the late 1950 and early 1960s we examine the key political forces that produced some of the key campaigning organisations of that time. The report then focuses on the impact of the Conservative governments of the 1980s and early 1990s and especially the gradual move from grant aid towards service level agreements and a greater reliance on contracting with the State. We then seek to bring the story up-to-date by looking at the New Labour years and the emergence of the commissioning culture.

No policy exists in a vacuum and understanding this ideological heritage should provide a platform to analyse the most recent initiative, the Big Society, and help us to suggest the directions that the policy may take in the future and the kinds of threats and opportunities it represents for the VCS. We will be helped in this endeavour by a range of people who have worked in the sector at different levels and in different ways and who were prepared to be interviewed and provide us with a range of opinions about how they interpret the Big Society and what their hopes and fears are for the future.

The development of ideas like the Big Society proceeds at a rapid pace and can make documents like this look dated very quickly. However, we hope that in trying to give the initiative some historical context and in seeking out some universal messages about the impact changes in political ideology can have on the development of the VCS, we have given this piece of research a longer life in terms of its interest and relevance to the reader.

In January 2011 YouGov reported that 28% of people didn’t understand what Big Society meant and 68% thought it wouldn’t work. [http://today.yougov.co.uk/politics/Brits-baffled-by-Big-Society]
A word of warning

Finally, it is necessary to provide something of a health warning. Terminology and definitions are very difficult when dealing with issues relating to the voluntary sector. We have used the term ‘Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS)’ but would be the first to acknowledge that this kind of shorthand doesn’t adequately capture the enormous variety of activity that gets bracketed under that title. We have, therefore, largely accepted that when we talk generically about the VCS we are mainly referring to projects that have adopted constitutions of one sort or another, have functioning management committees or boards of trustees, seek funding from a range of sources, operate with a mix of paid professionals and volunteers and operate on a not-for-profit basis—essentially organisations that BVSC see as their core constituency. We are also not suggesting that the historical segmentation of the sector’s development that we have focussed on is the only way this could have been looked at nor that we have captured all the details. One of the key characteristics of the sector is that it is lamentably poorly recorded in historical terms and little has been done to build the kinds of archives that would allow historians the wherewithal to confidently trace developmental lines of activity. We have instead tried to capture (pace William Hazlitt) the ‘spirit of the age’ and locate the main political ideas that permeated the sector’s collective consciousness.
1960 – 1979 A new age of political campaigning

Background

In the introduction to their recent book, *NGO’s in Contemporary Britain*[^7], James McKay and Matthew Hilton note that the post-war political consensus on the development of the Welfare State fundamentally transformed the role and nature of the voluntary sector. Prior to this, they note, the sector had been ‘primarily concerned with the provision of social services’ [p4] but now, ‘in place of service provision, the sector became more engaged with it’s longstanding interest in the shaping of the broader socio-political agenda’ [p5]. This recasting of it’s role in the light of the growing range of welfare responsibilities adopted by the State was also given impetus by what is sometimes referred to as the ‘rediscovery of poverty’ [Lupton & Turok, 2004][^8] when a range of sociological studies published in the early 1960s refocused public opinion on issues of deprivation, slum housing and chronic ill-health. The pioneering work of Brian Able-Smith and Peter Townsend (1965)[^9] invited their readers to ask whether the assumption that the creation of the post-war universal welfare state had ‘abolished’ poverty was in fact true. Alongside the work of Able-Smith and Townsend, evidence from a range of studies in the early years of the 1960s, including the work of Audrey Harvey (1960)[^10] and Dorothy Wedderburn (1963)[^11], suggested that poverty and its impact had remained, despite significant improvements at the lower end of the income scale, a structural part of the social policy environment.

For a voluntary sector looking to redefine its relevance and justify its role in service provision through political action and campaigning, the emergence of academically

[^7]: James McKay and Matthew Hilton [2009] *NGO’s in Contemporary Britain* Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan


validated ‘causes’ around which to organise became a key factor in creating the identity of the sector over the following twenty years.

Speaking to power about poverty

Tanya Evans in her essay *Stopping the Poor getting Poorer: the Establishment and Professionalisation of Poverty NGOs, 1945-95* examines the decade between 1960 and 1970 notes that:

Many entirely new pressure groups were formed during this period including the Child Poverty Action Group [CPAG] in 1965, Shelter on behalf of the homeless in 1966 and the Disablement Income Group in 1965... [p148]

David Bull, an early CPAG volunteer captured the flavour of that period in his personal memoir of involvement published as part of Curtis & Sanderson’s collection *The Unsung Sixties*. Bull’s preliminary remarks start off by saying that the ‘intellectual challenge for our generation...was about poverty and the low take-up of welfare benefits.’ It was, he says ‘immensely exciting, very challenging to the received wisdom’ and for academics like him a political agenda he could ‘legitimately carry on in the classrooms.’ [p116]

What is clear from the rather fragmentary records of that period is that those people getting involved in the emergent voluntary sector projects were young, enthusiastic and politically motivated – even if they did not always express that political commitment explicitly. What was driving this activity was a feeling that the existing national political consensus around the scope, scale and effectiveness of the Welfare State had failed to live up to its promises. Far from delivering the population from poverty, deprivation and the consequences of living on low incomes over extended periods of time, the gap between the rich and poor seemed to be widening. The fact that this was happening from 1964 under the stewardship of a Labour Government gave the growing number of campaigns an added impetus because they attracted to them people who felt that their liberal or radical vision of society was not being met by the electoral process.

The emerging problem of unemployment was also radicalising those who were finding themselves excluded from the labour market and although the percentage of the workforce who were unemployed looks low in comparison to what we have

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12 Evans, T. [2009] *Stopping the poor getting poorer: the establishment and professionalisation of poverty NGOs, 1945-95* Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan

become used to, it was a significant issue for people who had grown up accepting
the notion of an economy based on full employment. Emerging in the late 1960s, the
Claimant’s Union took a deliberately militant non-Party political position. Jack
Grassby, writing about his experience of Claimant Unions in the North-East notes in
his blog, The Unfinished Revolution.14

The CUs arose naturally from the culture of that period - they
embraced grass-root direct action as an instrument of change; they
confronted the establishment and its values; they were nominally
apolitical; they represented an underclass in the face of what they
saw as capitalist exploitation; they sought revolutionary change.

By 1970 an analysis of the problems was beginning to take a more coherent shape
and the work of Ken Coates and Richard Silburn could be seen as articulating a
common position that would give the work of the anti-poverty NGO’s a clearer sense
of direction and mission. Their pioneering study of poverty in Nottingham – Poverty;
the forgotten Englishman15 – reaches a number of conclusions that still have
resonance in social policy debates today. In addition to a call for more involvement
of local communities in the planning and delivery of local services, Coates and
Silburn go on to point out that this, in itself, is not a sufficient response:

There are some problems, however, which, no matter how heavily they weigh
upon the community, are yet not of the community in a way which makes a
local solution possible. Poverty in most of its manifestations, is one such
problem.[p245]

In a passage which could have been taken from a current policy document, let alone
one written over 40 years ago, they say:

Clearly what is required is a systematic, simultaneous and integrated assault
upon all these areas of deprivation....Piecemeal reforms by bureaucratically
separate agencies can contribute little; the commitment that is needed is a a
wholehearted and comprehensive one involving traditional social welfare
measures, a properly conceived and heavily redistributive incomes policy, a
housing programme and ....the active encouragement of community-action
programmes which reactivate grass-roots democratic and collective
participation in decision-making at all levels.

14 See http://www.jackgrassby.co.uk/unfinished/
Whilst it is not possible to claim that Coates and Silburn provided any sort of manifesto for the various voluntary organisations seeking to tackle poverty and its consequences, the themes they identify have continued to play a significant role in the way the sector has seen its mission develop.

In Birmingham the issues of poverty uncovered in Nottingham by Coates and Silburn were just as pressing. Projects such as the Birmingham Settlement began to emerge from what Glasby [1999] describes as a ‘period of stagnation as a result of the economic stability of the 1960s’ [p14]. Galvanised by the sense of new movement and mission he goes on to characterise the Birmingham Settlement in the 1970s as a dynamic force:

This period witnessed a re-emergence of the Settlement movement in response to the growing awareness of the continued existence of poverty, an increased emphasis on community development, the impact of the civil rights movement, reductions in state welfare and an international economic recession.

Located in close proximity to Aston, Newtown, Lozells and Handsworth, Birmingham Settlement found itself once again at the heart of the battle against poverty and during the 1970s launch a number of key initiatives, including their money and legal advice services.

In another area of significant inner city deprivation on the south side of the city centre, the Sparkbrook Association launched its Family Centre in 1968. In many ways the Centre could be seen as the template for the Sure Start Children’s Centres that would come along 35 years later. There are clear echoes of our contemporary debates about the importance of family and family stability in the mission of the Association and this was captured in the speech given by Dr. Barrow at the Centre’s opening in 1968:

We seek to preserve the most important of all social organisations: the family because we know from experience, that without a secure and sane family life children cannot work effectively in school, men cannot work effectively in factories and offices and women can neither live nor work in home or workplace as they might. Bad families produce bad citizens.

One of the key issues the Association sought to influence was the provision of decent housing. Following the war and the subsequent bomb damage and slum clearances of the early 1960’s, the provision of good, affordable [and what we now

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17 See http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk/Learning%20Packages/Social%20Justice/social_justice_lp_03.asp
call] social housing was a key issue in many communities. The Citizen’s Advice Bureaux, which had been established prior to World War Two witnessed a massive increase in clients seeking advice about housing and their own records show that despite Government cuts in their funding at that time, queries about housing and the 1957 Rent Act represented a quarter of their total advice load.\(^{18}\)

The crisis in affordable housing and accommodation was exposed to the wider general public as a national scandal by the broadcast in 1966 of the now seminal fictional documentary *Cathy Come Home*\(^{19}\). Ultimately the broadcast would result in the foundation of Shelter,\(^{20}\) an organisation dedicated to political campaigning around the issues of homelessness and housing but a considerable amount of positive action was already underway prior to this and much of it led by faith and church-based organisations and the work of the Salvation Army during the 1960s was of particular significance.\(^{21}\) The early 1960s was a significant time for faith group activity and radicalism and many groups were influenced by a new active and community engaged theology that was reaching out into communities. New interpretations of the role the church should play were influencing behaviour – books such as John Robinson’s *Honest to God*\(^{22}\) were having a dramatic impact on the range of community activity churches co-ordinated. Faith-based organisations were also at the heart of the housing association movement and Trident Housing, which started life in Ladywood in Birmingham in 1965 [a year before *Cathy Come Home*] was a good example of this new mood. Inspired by the writings of a local vicar, Canon Norman Power, and his book *The Forgotten People*,\(^{23}\) these new housing associations would seek to put the needs of people before the whims of the planners. Kevin Gulliver’s history of the Trident family of housing associations\(^{24}\) paints a clear picture of those pioneering early days and the challenges that they were meeting.

\(^{18}\) See http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/index/aboutus/factsheets/ourhistory.htm

\(^{19}\) See http://www.bfi.org.uk/whatsontop/bfi_southbank/film_programme/septemberoctober_seasons/ken_loach/cathy_come_home

\(^{20}\) See http://england.shelter.org.uk/about_us/who_we_are/our_history

\(^{21}\) See http://www.salvationarmy.org/ihq%5Cwww_sa.nsf/vw-sublinks/5622F771BD70A75A80256D4E003AE0A3?opendocument

\(^{22}\) Robinson, J. [1963] *Honest to God* London : SCM

\(^{23}\) Power, N. [1965] *The forgotten people* Evesham : Arthur James

Speaking out about discrimination

Alongside the re-discovery of poverty in the early 1960s was a growing understanding that the impact of poverty was not equally shared across the population. Some people were much more likely to be in poverty than others – and this was particularly true for people from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities, many of whom were also new immigrants to the country. What was also clear was that the poverty suffered by these groups was likely to be more intense, longer lasting and more structural – the time they spent unemployed, in low paid work, in poor and unsanitary housing and unable to afford good and nutritious food was longer than that experienced by the indigenous white community.

The hardships these communities experienced have now been well documented and do not need to be rehearsed again here. However, one consequence of the discrimination and oppression that these BME groups suffered was to heighten their level of political awareness and to inspire their creation of campaigning and direct action self-help, pressure groups. Campaigns for social justice, anti-discrimination and equality grew rapidly during the 1960s, many of them gathering the support of white activists and the sympathy of white communities on the ground. However, it is difficult now to appreciate the depth of hostility and discrimination that many individuals from BME communities experienced and the intensity of the institutional racism that they endured. John Rex and Robert Moore’s *Race, Community and Conflict*, a study of Sparkbrook in Birmingham in 1967, was one of the first academic studies to open the door on the true nature of the problem and although much of the analysis and the language seems dated and crude by current standards it did however identify the way in which the voluntary organisations established by these oppressed groups were fulfilling a range of critical roles from supporting vulnerable individuals to advocacy at a political level.

The vitality of the BME-led voluntary sector can best be understood by exploring the sheer range of organisations that emerged in the 1960s. The Birmingham City Council’s local history website, *Connecting Histories*, lists well over a dozen Birmingham-based groups ranging from the trade union inspired Indian Workers Association, the welfare-centred Afro-Caribbean Association and the advocacy-based Lozells Action Centre.

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"interestingly I watched that programme about the Heath and Wilson governments the other day and the thing that was absolutely fascinating about it was the lack of any female representation in all of those big conferences …. suddenly I reminded myself why I got involved with that movement and why I had been very proactive.” [AH]

The discrimination faced by the BME communities in the 1960s was only one manifestation of this kind of injustice. The growing awareness that women too needed to find a voice against male domination and exploitation was also emerging in this period. However, it was until the end of the decade that key writers and political activists like Sheila Rowbothom would emerge to articulate a more rounded political vision for what would become known as the Women’s Liberation Movement. However, women’s projects dealing with issues such as domestic violence were beginning to find a voice and the late 1960s sees the establishment of Women’s Aid as a key voluntary sector agency:

Women’s Aid grew out of the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. As women came together, the issue of violence in the home as well as other forms of sexual and interpersonal violence to women became highlighted.  

The political and self-help groups created by BME groups and women’s organisations to combat discrimination and exclusion were heavily geared towards campaigning, awareness-raising and consciousness-raising. Whilst new and alternative service provision did emerge from this activity, the emphasis was very much on political action and often action outside the confines of traditional politics.

28 See http://www.womensaid.org.uk/page.asp?section=0001000100190004&itemTitle=Our+history
"we actually got domestic violence refuges up and running….. they were part of a huge agenda for change and I mean everybody was out…. [in] the 60s I was a hippy but there was no gender freedom in that ………. It was awful all guys sat around getting stoned and the women ran around doing everything. So by the time the 70s had come I was actually determined that I was going to have an education and get involved in the women’s movement. That was my first engagement with the voluntary sector and it was very politicised.” [AH]

**Speaking out about peace**

In many ways the template for this highly politicised, direct action-based voluntary sector was the influential peace and anti-war movements of the day. Fear of nuclear annihilation as a result of the intensifying Cold War had resulted in the flowering of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament [CND] which deliberately stood outside of the existing political establishment and made a virtue of direct action. CND’s breakthrough in the public consciousness can be traced to the famous ‘Aldermaston March’ in 1961 which was the culmination of a strategy laid by the philosopher Bertrand Russell to gain publicity from direct but non-violent action. The tactics used by CND, it’s self-marketing, it’s use of a distinctive logo and it’s direct appeal to the public shaped the thinking of voluntary activists interested in a wider range of issues beyond nuclear disarmament. But in many ways CND was the embodiment of the campaigning non-governmental, anti-establishment organisation that dominated the sector in the 1960s.

The extension of the anti-Cold War peace agenda which had been pioneered by CND into the environmental movement was also significant. Where one focussed on peace between people the other promoted peace with the planet and was again hugely influential in shaping ideas about what voluntary, non-governmental bodies should look like and how they should behave. As with CND, the environmental movement found common cause with anti-establishment voices and with radical politics and built their organisations with an international membership.
The Voluntary Sector in Transition: changing priorities, changing ideologies

The emerging human rights agenda

The association of the voluntary sector with radical and alternative politics was particularly a feature of the 1960s which carried over into the 1970s and early 1980s. Although the sector has always seen service provision as an aspect of its identity, the roots of its service delivery during this period lie in a belief that the government or the establishment were unable or unwilling to provide for people it could not or would not see as deserving or in need. In this respect, its service delivery was a political act – a challenge to established methods of getting things done or a direct uncovering of social injustice. It is fair to say that the relatively small scale service delivery it undertook was secondary to its core mission of political persuasion, advocacy on behalf of marginalised groups and holding existing providers to account for their decisions. Their focus was on using specific examples of injustice to inform the wider and emerging debate about human rights and to seek to persuade those with the hands on significant budgets to reprioritise their spending and include the otherwise excluded.

The identity of the sector during this time was also unequivocal – it was openly partisan and took the side of the powerless against those who wielded power in seemingly arbitrary or unfair ways. In order to achieve its goals it would seek to hold dialogue with governments, both national and local, and seek to persuade them that they should fund their activities – in the belief that dialogue and dissent were crucial to healthy and open societies. However, funding of this kind was always seen as a potentially double-edged sword and raised the question of whether independence of thought and action could be maintained when the focus of any campaigning action could easily be the institution who was also the paymaster.
1979 – 1997 Moving from oppositionalism towards accommodation

The history of the voluntary sector in the period 1979-1997 is characterised by a number of contradictory pressures and characteristics, these are obviously complex and interrelated but can be summarised as:

- An increasing politicisation of the sector and in some cases explicit oppositionalism;
- Increased dependence on the state as a source of funding and as a consequence of this an increased need to ‘target’ responses and services;
- Increased ‘professionalization’ in terms of services, structures and management systems;

The general election of 1979 is often constructed as a moment of substantive change in social policy with the final definitive break with the loose political consensus that had dominated policy since the creation of the post-war welfare state. This consensus saw the state as the primary provider of welfare provision with the voluntary sector conceptualised as a ‘filler of gaps’ in the system. As Lewis (1999) highlights from the 1970’s onwards there had been a critique from both right and left (including many within the voluntary sector) of state provision as bureaucratic and inefficient and as failing to meet the needs of a range of individuals and groups. This formed a key element of the Neo-Liberal critique of public services which it can be argued has dominated thinking in this area from Thatcherism, through New Labour to the ’Big Society’. In policy terms this resulted in an increasing perception of the voluntary sector as an alternative provider of services, justified by its perceived greater efficiency and responsiveness and closeness to the communities they sought to represent and serve. However the price to be paid for this greater role was to become more formally integrated through clearer accountability expressed through contracting for services and adopting management styles and strategies imported from the private sector.

In general terms the shift can therefore be characterised as a move away from a campaigning role and towards a focus on service provision - although it must be noted that in the earlier part of the period discussed here there was a very

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significant amount of campaigning work undertaken and many voluntary
organisations were integral to this. It is also the case that the growth of voluntary
sector over this period lead to a sector which was difficult to categorise in overall
terms and the sector is best thought of at the end of this period as a continuum
which includes at one end traditional campaigning organisations, at the other
organisations much nearer to what would later come to be called ‘social enterprises’,
as well as a range of organisations falling somewhere between these ‘poles’.

“(The voluntary sector) has changed quite dramatically in some ways and yet
in some ways it is still the same…I remember when Thatcher introduced the
business ethic in to the public sector and..[it] had a knock-on effect into the
voluntary sector…” (*G-B)

The political sector

The voluntary sector response to the 1979 election was, in some cases, to openly
oppose government policy as part of a broader alliance with elements of both the
Trade Union Movement and the Labour Party; with groups such as the Child Poverty
Action Group playing a leading role in the relatively unsuccessful attempts to
mitigate some of the more pernicious elements of welfare reform and the benefits
system. However as trade union reforms from 1980 began to have an impact on the
ability of trade unions to take on a broader political role, and particularly as the
Thatcher government grew in popularity after the Falklands war, the possibilities for
explicitly oppositional action became more limited. In particular as the Miners’ Strike
and its aftermath redefined both the role of trade unions and their perceived role in
wider society, collaborations with unions became more difficult. Furthermore, the
decline of those industries which had traditionally been the most unionised saw
trade unions themselves seek to begin the process of redefining their role. For those
parts of the voluntary sector which had developed close association with the trade
union movement this created a new series of challenges around how to seek to
influence policy.

The service sector

However, for many other voluntary organisations the early 1980s saw the
emergence of a different set of challenges. Organisations that were involved in the
direct provision of ‘services’ found the context in which they were expected to
operate in changing rapidly. Both within the sector and within government a view
emerged that the voluntary sector provided an effective way of challenging the state
monopoly on welfare services. Of course the voluntary sector had a long history in providing services, dating back to the Friendly Societies of the Nineteenth Century, and a particularly strong record of providing ‘model’ services which demonstrated emerging notions of good practice and how these might be provided in practice. The role of a number of local groups in developing alternatives to institutional care in the context of services for people with either chronic mental health conditions or learning disabilities was crucial in moving services towards the community focused model that is now considered standard practice.

It was the passing of the National Health Service and Community Care Act in 1990\textsuperscript{30} which proved a crucial step in this context. Firstly, this legislation made ‘Community Care’ the accepted framework for the provision of services but perhaps even more significantly it introduced the notion of a purchaser-provider split into policy and practice. This separation of responsibility for, on one hand, the identification of need and financial responsibility for services from, on the other hand, the actual provision of services on a contract basis, opened up the possibility for a range of voluntary and private organisations to become much more extensively involved in the delivery of services. However, it also made them much more tightly linked to government as they were now in a formal contractual relationship. The model which initially developed in the context of organisations providing care and support was later broadened in scope to cover almost all areas of service provision.

Within the wider sector this was mirrored by a shift from grant funding to either service level agreements or formal contracts. Furthermore the growing influence of managerialism with its emphasis on formal accountability, linked to defined and measurable targets, was also changing those elements of both local and central government who were now negotiating the contracts and service level agreements leading to a much greater formal emphasis on formal accountability.

By the start of the 1990s this new policy context was thoroughly entrenched leading, according to Smith (1996),\textsuperscript{31} to a loss of emphasis on association and community development and a greater emphasis on providing services to a defined group of consumers (or customers). This tension between being on the one hand a provider of defined services and on the other an advocate for development and change is an element which it can be argued becomes even more critical in the conceptualisation of the so-called Big Society.

\textsuperscript{30} National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990

It is in the late 1980s and early 1990s that many of the challenges that have faced the voluntary sector right up to the present day began to emerge. As already highlighted, one of these is the tension between being an advocate and at the same time a provider of services. But the challenges for those agencies which chose not to compete for services were also significant, especially how they identified alternative sources of funding which were not tied to the development of very specific projects or which were predominantly funded through the large charitable foundations. A further challenge which emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s was how far to seek to go in obtaining private and commercial funding. A useful example of this can be found in the changing role of Housing Associations.

**The changing role of Housing Associations**

A further policy which had a very significant impact during the period was the changing attitude to social housing. The period after 1979 was initially characterised by the introduction of the ‘right to buy’ for local authority tenants and the effective end of local authority house building. The provision of new social housing was now to be the responsibility of Housing Associations which had emerged in many cases as a response to specific local housing issues for particular communities. One of the main justifications for this approach (which prefigures the emergence of the ‘Big Society’) was the assertion that Housing Associations were both more in touch with, and had particular skills in, the building of local communities. Housing Associations had been expanding quickly during the years before 1979 helped by a generous funding regime but in the 1980s became the preferred provider. The claim by Housing Associations to be ‘community’ focussed effectively emerges alongside this expanded role possibly as a result of the criticism that some large scale Housing Association developments of the 1980s had created ‘ghettos’ by housing large numbers of disadvantaged groups together with little social or community infrastructure. Crucial to this shift was a series of reports produced by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation during the 1990s, especially ‘Building Communities’ (1993)\(^{32}\) which explicitly set out the case for an enhanced voluntary sector role in community development. The challenge which emerged for housing associations and which has proved to have wider ramifications right through to the present was to seek to become actively involved in community development when the proportion of their costs which was eligible for government funding was to steadily decrease - the consequence of which was an increase in federated or merged associations.

**The hidden sector**

Of course there were also many organisations, which existed outside the arrangements discussed thus far, seeking to provide services outside these formal

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arrangements. These have become known as organisations ‘below the radar’ and tend to be small operations that do not seek government or local government funds but are focussed on very clear, often local or client specific outcomes. One example of this is found in the attempts of Birmingham’s Afro-Caribbean Self Help Organisation to set up a Saturday school to provide a culturally appropriate education and which existed largely outside and in some senses in opposition to formal structures (Grovesnor et al. 2002).  

At the end of the period under discussion the role of the voluntary sector had changed in a fundamental way. In many important ways the sector had become much more integral to the provision of services and had a greatly enhanced ability to do this. Indeed, by 1999, a third of the total voluntary sector income came from contracts with government (Bennett 2008). However it can also be argued that some of the traditional strengths had been, if not lost, then at least radically modified: the sector had become less explicitly political and had also perhaps become less able to develop innovative and complementary models of practice. This on-going consolidation was to become further entrenched under ‘New Labour’

1997 – 2010 Modernisation and Reform – for what?

“It is by casting aside the rigid dogmas of the past, that we begin to see a new and exciting role for the voluntary sector – not an optional extra but a vital part of our economy, helping to achieve many of our key social objectives.”

Tony Blair, November, 1994

The Deakin Commission of 1996, together with the Labour Party’s own review led by Alun Michael in 1997, played something of a pivotal role in the development of the Labour Government’s approach to working with the voluntary sector. Central to the thinking was the notion of ‘the third way’. The emphasis was increasingly on a mix of state responsibility and market forces and the focus on ‘what worked’ rather than who was providing it. The notion of the voluntary sector being a ‘third sector’ was introduced as a new concept by the Labour Government – a label that has proven to be, at best, contentious.

Increasingly the voluntary sector was being seen as ‘cheaper’ and more effective than its statutory counterparts, whilst also being closer to grassroots, ‘hard to reach groups’ and ‘customers’ and so became an integral part of New Labour’s strategy for delivering public services along with elements of the private sector. Paul Boateng in his role as Chief Secretary to the Treasury proclaimed the sector to be ‘at the heart of this Government’s modernisation and productivity agenda.’

In 2001, Government expanded the existing Voluntary Services Unit within the Home Office and created the Active Communities Unit (later Directorate) with an underpinning aim of promoting ‘voluntary activity’. They also established a Social Enterprise Unit – a term applied to third sector organisations that traded as businesses with explicit social purposes and who reinvested any profits (and including a new legal entity known as Community Interest Companies). The emergence of this range of structures that were deemed to be part of the third sector

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35 Cited by Frank Prochaska (2005) New Labour and The Voluntary Sector The Social Affairs Unit,


lead to the creation of the Office of the Third Sector in 2006 within the Cabinet Office – a merging of the Active Communities Directorate and the Social Enterprise Unit and, later, including the Social Exclusion Taskforce, with the promise of a ‘Third Sector Public Delivery Action Plan.’ These developments were in a context of claims that the sector was being supported or enabled to develop a relationship reflecting their status as ‘equal partners’ - but in reality, alongside this rhetoric, many parts of the sector felt it was being primed to harness the aims and ambitions of a government agenda rather than their own.

The ‘Compact’

One of the recommendations of the Deakin report was that there should be a type of formal ‘concordat’ between public and voluntary sector agencies. A national ‘Compact’ was subsequently developed as a ‘framework for relations between central government and third sector organisations’ and this was subsequently promoted as a model for local Compacts. The general idea was to operate ‘fair’ practice in contracting relationships.

The ‘Birmingham Compact’ was launched in 2006 as a framework for relations’ between the Birmingham Strategic Partnership and the Voluntary and Community Sector, and was endorsed by BVSC, The Learning and Skills Council, The Eastern and North PCT, Jobcentre Plus, West Midlands Police, West Midlands Fire Service and Birmingham City Council. The Birmingham Compact was revised and re-launched in 2011 following a 3 month consultation, and is much more explicit about expectations. The latest version has an extended list of signatories now including Be Birmingham, The Diocese of Birmingham, Birmingham Chamber, Advantage West Midlands, The Environment Partnership, The Community Partnership and individual Directorates in Birmingham City Council in addition to the original endorsers.

The Compact was intended to change, or at least clarify, the rules of engagement between government and the sector, but its critics have continued to describe it as ineffective. Fifteen years on from the initial recommendation, it is difficult to find evidence of significant (if any) impact, and some have argued that it has been seen as of little or no importance within the Statutory Sector.

Partnership and Capacity Building – for whose benefit?

Pete Alcock of the Third Sector Research Centre highlight the criticisms and limitations of the Compact as a route to engaging with the third sector, including the

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40 Available at: http://www.bvsc.org/latest-news/refreshed-birmingham-compact-endorsed

41 See for example: http://www.vahs.org.uk/2011/09/the-compact-weve-lost-it/

perceived need to develop the capacity and capability of organisations to engage in partnerships.

The move from an emphasis on ‘who provides’ to ‘what works’ was presented as an ‘opportunity’ for third sector organisations to bid for contracts to deliver public services. This shift to reliance on contract funding required third sector organisations to acquire knowledge, skills and experience in procurement processes and contract negotiation.

It was in this context that the 2002 Treasury Spending Review identified that the ‘Third Sector’s’ ability to deliver public services was constrained by its ‘lack of capacity’. It highlighted five areas for ‘reform’ and made recommendations including the need to build capacity and involve the VCS in the planning and delivery of services and subsequently saw the announcement of the Future-builders programme with an initial funding pot of £125m going live in 2004 with an aim to ‘overcome obstacles to effective service delivery, to modernise the sector for the long term, and to increase the scope and scale of VCS delivery’. The intention was that frontline organisations would receive ‘investment’ that would enable them to build their capacity so that they could bid for public service delivery contracts. Income generated from those contracts would then be used to repay the investment. However, the programme was fraught with difficulties and confusion.

Change Up, was intended to provide funding to partnerships and consortia that would support frontline organisations in capacity building initiatives. The programme proved to be problematic from the start, being overly complex in design, the time allowed for organisations to develop partnerships was increasingly squeezed and so involvement became riddled with uncertainties and frustrations. Short timescales for the bidding process, delays in receiving payments and pressure to spend the money quickly were a common theme and complaint – somewhat ironic given that one of the claims of Change Up was that the needs of frontline organisations should be met by services that are ‘sustainably funded’. A new, non-governmental department was set up in 2006 to resolve some of the problems but problems did not abate, and indeed it seemed that new ones created with changes to structures and reporting lines.

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46 See information in House of Commons Public Accounts Committee Report of 2009 *Building the capacity of the Third Sector*
Peter Alcock\textsuperscript{47} argues that one of the consequences of the capacity building agenda was a potential split in the sector between larger well-funded organisations and smaller community groups. Larger organisations are seen as more likely to share the aims of the public funders and commissioners, whilst the smaller community organisations are potentially more likely to challenge – sometimes presented as ‘insiders’ (compliant and welcome partners) and ‘outsiders’ (challenging and potentially threatening opponents). He goes on to suggest that, although this may be a relatively simplistic analysis, there have been fractures, divisions and tensions that mean the idea of a single entity called ‘the Third Sector’ is a questionable construct and that the policy environment of the Labour Government was far more complex than straightforward notions of partnership, without recognition of different ideologies and models of partnership and support. The issues remains as to how far, if at all, the sector experiences a ‘more equal’ relationship as an active partner in influencing agendas, policy making and delivery of services.\textsuperscript{48}

**The National Lottery**

The history of how the sector has been funded is, inevitably, complex but one of the consistent characteristics has been uncertainty. An uncertainty that can, on the one hand undermine confidence and security, whilst on the other be a catalyst for creativity and innovation which in itself provides opportunities for new sources of funding. Pursuit of sustainable funding is a continual roller coaster ride and can become something of a holy grail for third sector organisations.\textsuperscript{49}

The establishment of the National Lottery in 1994 to distribute income from the sale of lottery tickets is worthy of some commentary. The idea that real people would be able to ‘contribute’ to ‘good causes’, and that this route to funding was essentially at arm’s length and separate from government agendas was, at best, contestable. Critics have argued that in reality this development became an inequitable source of funding that replaced that of grant aid. Organisations often felt they had ‘no choice’ but to apply for Lottery funding given the absence of other viable routes.

There were numerous issues regarding capacity to successfully complete the application process, whilst successful bids often had the effect of both giving credibility to an organisation (because the process itself was so rigid) whilst also creating perceptions that ‘we’re rich’. This was true in terms of how other grant makers, and also how other agencies (potential partners) perceived organisations, so it was something of a double–edged sword for many. Many of the difficulties were directly related to the fact that this stream of funding (often for larger amounts

\textsuperscript{47} See for example Peter Alcock (2010) *Partnership and mainstreaming: voluntary action under New Labour*

\textsuperscript{48} See for example Jane Lewis (2005) *New Labour’s Approach to the Voluntary sector: Independence and the meaning of Partnership*

\textsuperscript{49} BVSC (2009) *Commissioning and the Third Sector*
than available through most other grant providers or funders), whilst being seen as the ideal solution by some, was largely limited to project funding rather than core funding for organisations. This meant that organisations became far too reliant on Lottery funding and smaller organisations were encouraged to grow too quickly by applying for large amounts of initial funding that were not ultimately sustainable.

It has been argued that the National Lottery was instrumental in accelerating the move towards the ‘professionalisation’ of the sector. The need to demonstrate ‘robust’ systems, structures, documentation and practices shaped ideas of what constitutes a ‘competent’ organisation (and therefore safe to be funded) with a drive towards accountability and efficiency potentially working against understandings of community involvement and leadership – potentially contributing to a fundamental change in the identity of the sector.  

A culture of commissioning and contracts

“[ I chose to stay in the voluntary sector] because at least there is some kind of independence from the State… I know the voluntary sector is taking far too much money from the State……but on the other hand, what choice have they had?” (DG)

The foundations of the ‘contract culture’ that were laid in the 1980’s and 1990’s developed and gained momentum under the Labour Government, and consequently put continued pressure on voluntary organisations that served to impact on ideas of independence of the sector.  

The NCIA articulate the move from grant funding (the process where an organisation puts forward a proposal to deliver a service based on identified need) to commissioning (the process where government/local government decides what the service will be and how much there is to do it, whilst also predetermining outcomes and approaches – with the most important consideration usually being cost when comparing potential providers) in highly critical terms. Essentially commissioning is seen as ‘people getting what the government says they should get, not the service they need.’ It is project specific, and gives no account for ‘core-funding’ unless it is attached to specific activities.

50 For more detail see for example Rebecca McKinney and Howard Kahn (2004) Lottery Funding and Changing organizational Identify in the UK Voluntary Sector


52 See for example The National Coalition for Independent Action (2011) Voluntary action under threat: what privatisation means for charities and community groups
Linda Milbourne concurs that the changing nature of collaboration, and increasing emphasis on market led privatisation, has led to uncomfortable arrangements that alter the emphasis of the work and the roles in working with communities, usually with an increased emphasis on outcomes (eg Every Child Matters). Indeed, she argues the very nature of competing for contracts for numerous short-term initiatives, is potentially damaging, leading to a reduction in autonomy and undermining continuity in communities.

In February 2010, Birmingham City Council announced that it was ‘axing’ its grant aid funding to voluntary sector youth organisations, preferring to ‘contract out’ services, while citing ‘funding pressures’ as the drive. So leaving the local sector to move in to the territory of competitive tendering - competing against itself, and others, (local, regional, national and potentially international agencies) and opening the way for private sector delivery.

**Addressing Social Exclusion**

Throughout its thirteen years in administration, the Labour Government introduced a plethora of policies aimed at reducing ‘Social Exclusion’ (Sure Start, a variety of New Deal initiatives, Health Action Zones, Education Action Zones etc.). However, these types of initiatives tended to individualise outcomes, potentially attributing any ‘failures’ to excluded individuals and groups themselves. The definition of Social Exclusion as “a shorthand term for what can happen when people and areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, unfair discrimination, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown” continues the theme of perceived deficiency.

The Social Exclusion Unit placed increasing emphasis on the involvement of ‘users’ and wider community engagements, with the Office for the Third Sector highlighting the need to place ‘users and communities at the heart of public services.’ However, the ‘missing link’ in the capacity building agenda may well lie in the absence of any effective approaches to involving local communities (in practice rather than in theory). The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit supported the development of Local Community Empowerment Networks, in theory to harness the ‘capacity’ and influence of local people. Sadly, such networks largely failed to match their promise.

Communities thinking for themselves, challenging negative stereotypes and deficit assessments might be considered by some to be a first step in ‘fighting’ for themselves but this requires some critical distance between policy makers and

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53 Linda Milbourne (2009)


community based organisations\textsuperscript{56}. One of the legacies of recent administrations has been that this critical distance has at best been reduced or compromised, if not negated.

Some preliminary conclusions: responding to ideological change

- The identity of the VCS is contingent on the dominant political ideologies of the time in which it operates.
- Whilst the VCS is not a single, homogeneous entity, organisations within the sector have to respond to the policy and funding priorities set by governments.
- As a result, there are always tensions between the desire to remain a free and independent force capable of setting out views that may be critical of government and finding that this independence is compromised because the sector has become too closely associated with the status quo.
- The trend across several decades to become more ‘professional’ has led, in turn, to a sector where dependence on substantial amounts of direct funding [often provided by central or local government] has created an increasingly desperate need to constantly please or placate funding bodies in order to replicate income streams.
- For many years the claims made by the VCS, that they are unique because they are organisations that are closer to their clients and more able to contact groups of people marginalised by the State, were predicated on these organisations being seen themselves as political ‘outsiders’ able to apply pressure in a partisan way in favour of the voiceless.
- In recent years, however, their co-option into the State’s vision of integrated service delivery has put this status in doubt and potentially undermined one of the sectors unique selling points and key strengths.
- Competition for resources has replaced the ethos of co-operation and created a ‘marketplace’ from which funders can select winners and losers.
- Introducing the concept of ‘The Big Society’ threatens to take the VCS further into this labyrinth of co-option into the dominant ideology of the current Government. Section Two of this report will scrutinise what this might mean for the sector and how it might further impact upon it’s future role and its sense of its own identity.
Section Two

The Big Society: Ideas, attitudes and perceptions

Part One: Understanding The Big Society as a political idea

Antecedents of The Big Society

It has already been noted that the ideas behind the Big Society have evolved from a quite rich history of thinking about what capitalist, market-driven social democracies might look like in the future. These ideas occupy very different ideological space to those espoused by Leftist models of radical community engagement that challenge the primacy of the economic and political status quo and, at the same time reject the free market, laissez faire, models of the Friedman Right. At the heart of the social democratic models of social engagement are two key principles:

- That markets need State intervention in order to function fairly;
- Individuals need to be 'empowered' to better engage with, and influence, government policy.

In his influential iteration of this social democratic credo, Anthony Giddens, coined the term 'The Third Way' as a description of his view that some middle ground needed to be created between the Left and the Right. He refers to this discourse as the 'social investment state', signifying the need, as he sees it, to reconcile the power of the global market with legitimate social concerns for equality and justice.

Classical social democracy thought of wealth creation as almost incidental to its basic concerns with economic security and redistribution. The neoliberals placed competitiveness and the generating of wealth much more to the forefront. Third way politics gives very strong emphasis to these qualities,

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58 Friedman, M. [1962] Capitalism and freedom Chicago: UCP

which have an urgent importance given the nature of the global marketplace. They will not be developed, however, if individuals are abandoned to sink or swim...Government has an essential role to play in investing in human resources and the infrastructure needed to develop an entrepreneurial culture. [p99]

Giddens was also keen to address the notion of the `democratic deficit’, the perceived withdrawal of citizens from political processes. He sees the emergence of social movements and NGOs as important in terms of broadening discussions about what he believes modern governance should be all about but ‘the idea that such groups can take over where government is failing, or can stand in place of political parties, is fantasy’. 60 So for Giddens, the new Third Way social democracy needed a form of government more responsive to external pressure but not one at the beck and call of special interest lobbying.

The practical impact of Giddens’ work in terms of the voluntary and community sector was demonstrated in the early years of the 1997 [New] Labour government when it was invited into the ‘big tent’ and encouraged to become a partner in the development and delivery of the policies of that administration. As we have previously noted, significant amounts of money were made available to the VCS to become ‘more professional’ or to ‘build their capacity’ – their capacity in most cases to better deliver the government agenda.

In his critique of Third Way politics61, Bill Jordan traces the roots of the ideas expressed by Giddens into the global political forums of the Nineties and emphasises the importance of both the US and Australian administrations in proliferating the ideology which had been directly espoused by Bill Clinton and Paul Keating. Jordan argues that the Third Way failed as a concept for two primary reasons: it not only failed to curb the most dangerous aspects of the market but encouraged and joined in with the excess; and, it interpreted it’s role as the guarantor of social justice as a technocratic, law-making and essentially managerial function.

The idea that market relations uphold both freedom and the maximisation of welfare has been discredited by the banking collapse, and along with it the Third Way approach, with its emphasis on choices and incentives in all social relations. 62

60 Ibid P53


62 Ibid P17
Importantly, Jordan sees the failure of the Third Way as quintessentially a moral failing ‘that.. has stemmed from an inadequate and incoherent analysis of how ethical principles can be applied to the workings of a market economy exposed to global forces.’\textsuperscript{63}

This perceived ‘moral’ failure is important in understanding the development of the ideas that would emerge to replace the Third Way.

**Red Tory-ism**

The term ‘Red Tory’ is associated closely with the writings of Phillip Blond and the work of the think-tank Respublica. In his book, \textit{Red Tory}\textsuperscript{64}, Blond sketches out what he sees as an essentially ‘moral’ approach to reconciling the role of the State with a capitalist, free market economy. What marks Blond out as different to many other thinkers on the Right of the political spectrum is that he characterises both State \textit{and} private sector as having failed the citizen. He is, in many ways, seeking to return thinking to an almost late Victorian or Edwardian concept of what might constitute the ideal of social order. His recipe is a mix of traditional liberal thinking, Benthamite politics and theology in which, as Jordan, characterises it ‘subsidiarity … responsibility for collective issues of concern and provision should be devolved to the lowest feasible level of organisation, so that \textit{local and voluntary systems are always preferred to central and compulsory ones}.’\textsuperscript{65}

For Blond the alternative to Third Way politics involves the radical devolution of political power and a completely different approach to the financing of community organisations:

‘In order to put a virtuous society at the centre, we require not only a mutualist civil economy, but also a civil state in which professional responsibility has been restored to individuals and collegiate groups.’\textsuperscript{66}

Blond’s vision for an alternative structure remains, however, full of unanswered questions and deeply conservative assumptions about the way in which people will choose to behave. A radical reallocation of a nation’s resources and the devolution of political decision making requires the proposer to have clear ideas about exactly what a ‘community’ is and what makes it in any way cohesive enough to manage

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid P1

\textsuperscript{64} Blond, P [2010] \textit{Red Tory} London: Faber and Faber

\textsuperscript{65} Jordan p11

\textsuperscript{66} Blond op.cit.p239
these devolved responsibilities. It has to deal with issues of accountability, both in terms of how decisions are arrived at and how money is managed, and, it has to be immune to special interests or the systematic appropriation of functions by what Jordan calls ‘ruthless entrepreneurs, Mafiosi, ethic overlords or plain incompetents.’

And so whilst David Cameron’s 2010 election campaign had clear echoes of the influence of Blond’s thinking, his formulation of what The Big Society might be all about was something quite different.

The Big Society as a Conservative philosophy

The emergence in 2009/10 of the Big Society as a political concept around which aspects of a general election campaign could be built coincided with the emergence of the global economic crisis sweeping Europe and the USA. The ability of critics to associate austerity and cuts in public spending with the Big Society – characterising it as a ‘fig leaf’ to cover fundamental cuts in public services – has led to what can be described as a dismissive and superficial analysis of the core idea. However, it is clear that despite the lack of public understanding of the message, which has been referred to earlier in this report, it remains at the centre of the current government’s conceptualisation of it’s mission and is a more complex idea than has been popularly acknowledged.

In many ways it is only possible to understand the term ‘Big Society’ if we see it as one side of a coin whose reverse side reads ‘the small State’. However, this is not principally, as many critics have mistakenly believed, a desire for a small State because of economic hardship but a commitment to a small State driven by ideological belief. Indeed the journalist and novelist Jonathan Raban sees The Big Society as a fearsome assault on the welfare state in the Thatcherite Conservative tradition:

“Cameron badly wants to win the election, and a big idea, however tainted its source, however underexamined and ill-thought-out, is a useful thing to brandish at the electorate, especially if it provides a cloak of nobility and ‘ethos’ for the old Conservative ambition to take a cleaver and sunder the connection between the words ‘welfare’ and ‘state’.”

The most complete working out of the philosophy behind the Big Society is to be found in the writing of Jessie Norman, MP for Herford and South Herefordshire.

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67 Jordan p13


this exposition Norman contests the notion that The Big Society is in any sense ideological – claiming for it a wider more altruistic goal and that it’s focus is ‘the great giants of poverty, inequality, class division and lack of political imagination.’\textsuperscript{70} Clearly the reference to ‘giants’ is a deliberate attempt associate the Big Society with the report produced by William Beveridge in 1942 that led to the creation of the Welfare State. And, in many ways, the aspiration set out in Norman’s book amounts to exactly that – an attempt at a 21\textsuperscript{st} century reimagining of some core principles that might be used to replace the out-moded, expensive, and ineffective models of State welfare we currently live within. And at the root of Norman’s exposition of the Big Society is the fundamental belief that the State, by dint of it’s desire to regulate and centralise, disables the creativity, self-reliance and drive of individuals. Big, intrusive and over-weaning State involvement undermines the the ability of community to build bridges and to become ‘connected’ – and here too is a clear echo of the work of Robert Putnam and his concept of social capital\textsuperscript{71}.

In practical terms the manifestations of the Big Society have taken on an identity that is as strong in moral rectitude as in economic necessity. We must, the message goes, stop looking to the State to do everything for us. This is not only unsustainable financially, it is actively bad for us. It undermines our understanding of what living in a community means if we do not do things for ourselves; if we are not forced to come together to solve our problems at a local level we simply create dependency on the State – which is, by definition, prone to bureaucracy and impersonal indifference. The State retains an important function in terms of setting long term strategic political goals and in terms of providing key services like policing, defence and security, and can be called on to ensure the weak and vulnerable are not exploited, but beyond that it should step back and let the citizen – individually or collectively – make key decisions about what services they need and who should deliver them.

The role of the VCS clearly becomes central to this message. Volunteering and local action take a central role in this philosophy of enhanced self-help and the sector is seen as a way of harnessing and directing non-statutory activity for the common good. However, the VCS is also seen as able to play another role in this process – that of service provider of choice. In areas of public provision where directly employed government staff have ‘failed’ to deliver an adequate quality of service, or where it is deemed competition would improve provision, the voluntary sector is being invited to compete with the private sector as a delivery agent more sensitive to the needs of local people. This is presented not simply a value-for-money issue

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid p195

\textsuperscript{71} Robert Putnam [2000] \textit{Bowling Alone} New York: Schuster and Schuster
but as a practical manifestation of the principles of localism and citizen-organised self-help.

Perhaps unsurprisingly this narrative of the Big Society does not go unchallenged. It has been argued that the Big Society picks up on already well-established ideas and practices, usurping them for the service of a particular government agenda. Localism and popular organisation are deemed to be good and are encouraged, critics claim, but only if it’s manifestations are acceptable to the prevailing orthodoxies and for causes deemed appropriate by the Government. Faith groups, for example, are often cited as living examples of the Big Society ethos and their growth has been encouraged in a number of areas of social provision. By contrast however, trade union organisations – that have voluntary memberships in the millions - are routinely vilified and their activities curtailed or legislated against. Hilary Wainright, writing from a position on the radical Left argues that:

“The idea of self-organisation and challenging the paternalist character of the state has a long history in our contemporary times. It goes back to the movements of the 60s and 70s, which combined a challenge to authority with a wider social critique including a commitment to the redistribution of power and wealth. Those left libertarian traditions critiqued both the state and the corporate-dominated market. Regarding the state, they made a key distinction between public resources, which they defended and wished to see expand, and how these resources were administered, which they tried to transform and to democratise. These movements, the first products of mass education, said: hang on a minute, we want a say in how public money, our money, is spent, and how public institutions, like universities and the welfare state, are run.”

What Wainright is arguing in essence is that if the notion of the Big Society is to have legitimacy it has to be about the ability to challenge and critique power not simply about being better enabled to deliver an agenda pre-determined by the establishment. In other words, the Big Society, needs to be essentially disorderly – precisely the opposite quality imposed on it by successive governments.

She also identifies the problem of collaboration by the VCS with Government agendas:

“The Big Society is linked to Cameron’s aims to dismantle the redistributive state. In so doing, he is destroying the state’s ability to act against corporations and to control the banks. He is effectively seeking to destroy

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72 Wainright, H. [2010] The Left and the Big Society Red Pepper
public provision as it stands in favour of a marketization of public services, an exceedingly oligopolistic market that will squeeze out or dominate small efforts at self-help and charity. If you look at the reality of the charitable sector, big, corporate style charities are increasingly taking over, along with charities actually connected to corporations.\textsuperscript{73}

Clearly, the Big Society potentially takes even further the incorporation of the VCS into the establishment that began in earnest with the previous Labour administration and the politics of the Third Way. Whether this is a good thing or a bad thing is a matter of conviction and opinion and something that will be explored in more detail in the next section of this report.

Despite Jesse Norman’s protestations that The Big Society is an idea untainted by ideology, it is clear that attitudes towards it’s central tenets split down along largely ideological faultlines. At the heart of the dispute between Right and Left lie some key concerns about the size and role of the State, about the function of and meaning of activism and about which voluntary activities are legitimate and which are not. The level of public debate on The Big Society has not, by and large, addressed itself to this range of complex and nuanced ideas but the future of the VCS lies somewhere in the roll-out of this debate in the years to come.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid
Part Two : The interviews

In March 2011 BVSC circulated a general invitation (primarily through BVSC and VCS Matters mailing lists) for volunteers to be interviewed as part of this research process. Twelve interviews subsequently took place during May and June 2011. Our thanks are extended to the interviewees for their time and for sharing their experiences and opinions (a full list of those interviewed can be found in the Appendix).

All of the interviewees had significant experience of working in the Voluntary Sector in Birmingham and Solihull over a number of decades stretching back to the 1960’s, including both voluntary and paid capacities in a diversity of roles encompassing strategic development, campaigning, and direct delivery of services.

This section provides a summary of the key perspectives raised in the interviews covering four key themes:

- Perceptions of the Big Society as a concept
- The Big Society and the VCS
- Here to stay or gone tomorrow?
- Looking forward or looking fearful?

Perceptions of the Big Society as a concept

The interviews suggested that perhaps little analytical thinking had been applied to the idea of the Big Society. At one level it was presented as something of little relevance:

“I tend to switch off about that and just think I don’t want to know”,

or not very exciting:

“My reading would be that there aren’t many people who are getting excited about it...”,

whilst also being seen as vague and inaccessible:
"...I’ve read newspaper accounts of the Big Society, I’ve listened to speeches about the Big Society and I haven’t got a clue what it’s about and quite frankly I really don’t know what’s going on...”

More generally the view seemed to be that the Big Society was nothing new and was little more than a ‘rebranding’ exercise to describe a plethora of volunteering, and voluntary sector activity that has taken place for many decades:

"It’s nothing new, people have been doing volunteering and running organisations for years and years...”

Many of the interviewees situated their own experiences as firmly rooted in volunteering in their communities and in paid work in the voluntary sector and so could readily identify with a ‘getting involved’ approach

"...we did everything with the community and we just regarded what’s now called big society as ordinary community life...”.

Others were more sceptical about the intentions of the Big Society and the ideology behind it,

"I’m very sceptical as to the Big Society and it’s actual relevance to society as a whole...”

Making a feature of ‘The Big Society’ as a core policy whilst implementing cuts to public services and yet promoting voluntary sector activity was highlighted as contradictory (rather than two sides of the same coin). Alongside that, the idea that services could or should be delivered entirely by volunteers was described as naïve and unfair,

"I think the idea that we can run many of the services with just volunteers is naïve, volunteers aren’t free...I think it’s unfair to rely on a volunteer to run a service that’s actually being provided by a local authority or a government department...a volunteer should complement services...I think it’s trying to get something for nothing and then not valuing the people that are doing the paid work.”

A number of examples of employees in the sector recently being replaced with volunteer positions that had to execute the same responsibilities was noted and it was suggested that the emphasis on more volunteering was a

"veiled attempt’...[at the]...rolling back of the state, that’s what it’s really about”.

It was suggested that understandings, in terms of politics, ideology and impact, of what is meant by the Big Society would be exposed as the cuts to public services are implemented
"What I think will happen over the next year or two is that people will start to feel the impact of cuts in services and then when they realise there is not the Big Society to step in to, you know they are going along to the library and children’s centres and things have been reduced or disappeared, because I don’t think people properly understand right now how hard things are going to be, and I think Birmingham is going to be spectacularly disadvantaged…”

The Big Society and the VCS

"The assault on local government is something unprecedented in my lifetime.“

A perceived ‘blurring of boundaries’ about who does what and who is responsible for delivering services was a theme throughout the interviews. The idea was presented that larger voluntary organisations who had ‘already bought in to the agenda’ would in essence strive take up some of the slack with a continuation of the ‘professionalisation’ agenda in an effort to win contracts to deliver services. However, it was argued that such an emphasis inevitably weakens the position of the sector, waters down the capacity of organisations to be critical, and presents a real danger that many organisations will lose sight of what they were originally set up to do.

Ideologically driven policy implementation was identified as the driver behind reductions in local government capacity and in the cuts to services. This highlighted an expectation that the VCS would need to be more responsive to the needs of communities as ‘gaps’ in public services become clearer. There was a perceived push towards seeing volunteering in the sector as a route to employment (in a climate of growing unemployment), expecting more volunteers to deliver services but with less organisational capacity and funding to recruit and develop real volunteer opportunities

"...the voluntary sector doesn’t mean the volunteer sector and I think that’s where a lot of confusion is...I think it’s thought ‘oh voluntary, volunteers, free’ and it’s not…”

The professionalisation of the VCS was also seen to have marginalised volunteers who strive to be critical, innovative or independent

"...just thinking about those organisations that have been run by volunteers for a long time, some of the organisations have suffered through the regulations, the accountability, the form filling and everything else so in fact it’s worked against them...”
Here to stay or gone tomorrow?

The overwhelming view seemed to be that Governmental narratives about the Big Society are not being taken seriously. It was largely felt that the policy would, in essence, dissolve into the ether; either because it would either be seen as a simplistic piece of rebranding or because the concept of the Big Society was too difficult to understand.

"I don’t think we will hear of the Big Society in the future, but voluntary work will always exist"

and

"It has always been there, and always will be even if it’s not called the Big Society"

were representative of views expressed.

However, there was a definite undercurrent of opinion that although the 'tag will be short lived’ the underlying philosophy of the Big Society would have a more lasting impact.

Looking forward or looking fearful?

In general terms there appeared to be a sense of optimism for the future of the sector, largely because of a perception that the sector has always had to work against the odds, would continue to do so and would therefore outlast any political ideologies. This survival was seen as part of a process in which the sector has to continue to change and develop amidst periods of chaos.

The nature of the forthcoming period of change was seen in different ways, with some emphasis on perceptions of the sector becoming a ‘de facto’ arm of the public sector

"...I think we are going to be left with a voluntary sector that is increasingly going to be a bit like public services...”

"...the big voluntary organisations will survive, they will get contracts and then they will outsource them to the smaller ones...which then is not that much different to it going straight from the local authority down to the voluntary sector...”

This approach to survival was tempered for some by perceived threats of private sector encroachment, although it was unclear whether this fear is rooted in the
prospect of additional competition for contracts or in ideological or value based terms.

"I feel optimistic...because there is a huge opportunity. I fear the impact of the private sector because the government wants to force the pace of change. The third sector cannot mature fast enough to respond and the vultures are circling overhead with pound signs revolving in front of their eyes..."

There was also the view, that despite (or because of) the emphasis on contracting and service delivery to fill-in the ‘gaps’, the voluntary sector would of necessity need to reinvent itself.

"I think the voluntary sector has been seen off. Part of it has been seen off by the, you know, buy in to our service delivery, buy in to our contracts. And that will weaken its position undoubtedly, but I am absolutely sure something else will come up between the cracks."

More critical views on future developments were particularly concerned with the prospects for smaller organisations noting that the ‘bigger’ organisations will survive by delivering contracts but the smaller, and particularly user – led, organisations who work with heavily marginalised groups and are perhaps less favoured will have a harder future.
Part Three : Overview and summation

This research has been undertaken at a time of rapidly unfolding change in social policy. The level of cuts being experienced in public services is unprecedented and the Big Society initiative has come to represent the Coalition government’s attempt to find a way of refocusing services in the context of these reductions in public expenditure. As has been highlighted both in the analysis, the literature research and the interviews, at this point in the evolution of the idea, the concept of a ‘Big Society’ is frequently evoked but infrequently used with any precision. As a consequence its impact beyond policy rhetoric is hard to judge. Nonetheless there are substantive changes which are undeniable: all major political parties seem currently reconciled to long term cuts in public spending and the mantra of localism is also being used across the political spectrum.

For the voluntary sector these changes are likely to have a long term impact in terms of several key dimensions: firstly, there is the question of identity. In the version of the Big Society as envisaged by both Blond and Norman, there is an explicit and central role for community-led and organised groups who provide a bulwark against the overbearing state on one hand and the amoral market on the other. The voluntary sector has a long and honourable tradition of seeking to work in ways which promote the self-reliance and mutuality which this iteration of the Big Society claims to be promoting. However in the time frame covered by this review, this has always been conceptualised as complementary to (even in cases where it has been critical of) state provision. How will the sector choose to respond to the notion that voluntary and community groups become the only provider of services in a context where the overall level of services are being reduced?

Secondly, there is the closely related issue of the availability of funding. As already suggested, implicit in the notion of the Big Society there is a notion of voluntarism; of unpaid involvement which may sit uneasily with the professionalised sector which has emerged from the contract culture of the previous 30 years or so. How will the sector choose to respond to this proposed rebalancing and redefinition of its role?

Thirdly there is the issue of the political role of the sector. The Big Society is a political project driven by a set of assumptions about market organisation, the small state and individual responsibility. This raises a number of questions around whether the sector seeks to ‘sign up’ to this view and look for any opportunities that might be created, though a number of those interviewed did highlight the hidden cost of
volunteer activity. Alternatively to what extent is the sector and/or its member organisations willing and able to take an oppositional stance at a time when other funding streams may be difficult?

In conclusion then there are significant challenges at strategic, policy and practice levels, which result from the rapid philosophical shift of which the ‘Big Society’ is just one, albeit important and high profile manifestation. As several of those interviewed for this study highlighted living through periods of substantial change is nothing new for the voluntary sector, nonetheless the change here is substantive and likely to lead to some difficult and potentially uncomfortable decisions.
Appendix: Interview participants

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