



CHAMPION FOR THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR COMPACT COUNCILLOR ANDREW CURTIN

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I have divided this report into two sections;

1. Preventing a smaller society.
2. Recommendations.

1. PREVENTING A SMALLER SOCIETY

Major local charitable and civic organisations employing specialist staff are key to ensuring that the current period of change does not result in a smaller society, rather than the “Big Society” that the Government aspires to or the “Good Society” espoused by the Opposition in Parliament.

Crucially, if these ideals of “Big Society”/ “Good Society” - depending upon your viewpoint - are to have any meaning for daily life and the nature of society as we immediately experience it, then it will be vital for there to be a clear local picture of how such organisations are to expand and flourish, and how locally we are to facilitate that.

Inherent in ideas of a “Big Society”/ “Good Society” is a belief in locally responsive solutions. In this light it is pointless to seek an instruction from the centre as to how the concepts are to work locally, indeed it would be wholly contradictory to the aims of the ideas, but it is the duty of each local authority and community/ communities within it to establish how they are going to put in place the conditions within which the local charitable/ civic sector which employs staff is going to be able to thrive and expand.

The concept behind current political thought, certainly on behalf of the current Government, seems a clear and simple one, which may seem obvious but is, perhaps, all the more powerful for that. The argument would seem to be that since the War the debate has largely focussed on the relationship between the state and the individual and where the boundaries should lay between the two. No doubt this is an over simplification, but proponents of “Big Society” ideas at least suggest that this analysis of the way in which our common life can be divided is wrong, and that in between the state and the individual is society, made up of all the groups and organisations in which people freely come together at different levels and in different ways, and that the aim of policy should be to support that section between the state and the individual to expand and grow.

Clearly, people come together in a number of ways, all equally valuable. Sometimes people may be volunteering to help do the chores that enable a group running activities and events to thrive. Sometimes they might be fund-raising or helping with the local branch of a national charity or organisation. Both activities are clearly important, but it would seem obvious to me that if society (as defined by those who support the analysis given above) is to grow and is to become bigger as a result of this period of change, rather than perhaps somewhat introverted and inert, then it is the major local charitable organisations that employ staff which will be central to this process. Volunteering on the front line to help run activities and the like is of huge value, and very important, but on its own it will not provide the impetus for a high quality experience of life and change for the better or ensure the professional input which is often needed to ensure that vital work is properly done in all areas of life from Culture and Social Care to Health, Education and the Environment. Equally, national charities and bodies, though also carrying out vital work, will inevitably respond to a national picture, rather than the local circumstances which ideas of a “Big” or “Good” Society call upon us to respond to.

This having been said, however, the national context does create important conditions within which local solutions have to be formed. No town or borough is an island, though many eminent people in the field, such as Camila Batmanghelidjh of “Kids Company”, have expressed the view that there is a lack of clarity from government as to the frameworks within which and by which the sort of charitable organisation which I am referring to here should grow. More recently the Archbishop of Canterbury has excited much debate with a leading article in the “New Statesman” in which he commented; “I don’t think that the government’s commitment to localism and devolved power is simply a cynical walking-away from the problem. But I do think that there is confusion about the means that have to be willed in order to achieve the end.” (“New Statesman”, 13th June 2011, p.4) In a statement which would have benefited from greater scrutiny and greater debate over what he meant, he went on to say that; “The uncomfortable truth is that, while grass-roots initiatives and local mutualism are to be found flourishing in a great many places, they have been weakened by several decades of cultural fragmentation”. (“New Statesman”, 13th June 2011, p.5)

Equally, decisions by government seem to be shifting resources in favour of charitable, civic and voluntary sector organisations. In the same issue of the “New Statesman” in which the Archbishop made his comments, Iain Duncan-Smith said that his Department would be commissioning voluntary and community groups to deliver the Work Programme that it is launching, stating that almost 300 such groups “will be involved in delivery of the Work Programme, amounting to a substantial investment in the sector. This is what the ‘big society’ is all about: investing in voluntary organisations when they are the best at what they do”. (“New Statesman”. p.18) Three hundred organisations would work out at out just under one for every two Parliamentary constituencies, so clearly local knowledge about organisations being commissioned to undertake both this work and other pieces of work by the government would have a positive effect on local understanding of the resilience and character of civil society in each community.

At the same time, central government itself has published a new “Compact” between itself and the charitable organisations which it works with, which is endorsed by both the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister. Limited to the relationship of national

government to the charitable and third sector organisations which it works with, the document none-the-less makes plain some of the goals which the Government has, stating that its key aim is to achieve “a strong, diverse and independent civil society” (HM Government, Cabinet Office, “The Compact”, p.8). In his Introduction to the document, the Prime Minister writes; “getting citizens more engaged, involved and responsible for the communities around them will only be possible in partnership with the sector” [charitable and third sector - AC] (p. 3), while the Deputy Prime Minister writes; “A flourishing civil society is fundamental to achieving the Power Shift the Coalition Government is committed to, transferring power away from central government to local communities”. (p.3)

Though local government is not mentioned by either writer - unsurprising as the “Compact” they are introducing only relates to the relationship between national government and charities - this emphasis on local circumstances brings us back to our starting point and the need for local thought on how the sort of charitable organisations which we believe is central to society becoming larger rather than smaller are going to be able to expand rather than contract and, consequently, society will become bigger rather than smaller locally. I hope that my recommendations flow reasonably logically from the preceding paragraphs.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That Havering Council should carry out an audit of the existing framework within which the relationship between local government and the charitable/ third sector exists, highlighting any changes being introduced to it and their implications for local choices and local decision making with regard to the sustainability of major local charities.
2. That Havering Council establish a clear understanding of changing funding sources for the charitable and third sector, and of proposed changes, and uses this to inform its relationship with the local charitable/ third sector to be a “safe pair of hands” in ensuring that it has the resources to flourish and employ staff.
3. That Havering Council seek to establish a clear understanding of which third sector organisations central government is commissioning to work in communities in Havering, in order to inform its own judgement of the strength of the charitable sector in the borough.