

The Governance foundation



Evidence, Ideology and the Big Society

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July 2010

No one should argue with Phil Redmond's desire to 'unleash the energy in our communities' and David Cameron's passion for 'getting our communities going'. Is it possible that the ideas of Saul Alinsky, a radical community organiser who was branded as a dangerous communist in the USA in the 1960s, have become a core feature of Conservative thinking? It would appear that the redistribution of power from Whitehall to communities, neighbourhoods and individuals should be celebrated by everyone, if it comes off.

Cameron is right to suggest that this would be a huge culture change, and he warns that there will be vested interests who oppose it and others who say that it will not be possible. The Labour Party has already argued that this is no more than a cover for cuts in local services but communities around the country are being invited to submit proposals: 'Tell us what you want to do and we will give you the tools to make it happen'. Four very different parts of the country have been identified as 'vanguard communities', including Redmond's home city of Liverpool. Although Cameron concedes that he does not have all the answers, he says that we can all learn from their experience over the next year.

Perhaps we should be asking if there is any evidence we can learn from before we start. It is one thing to have passion for empowerment, quite another to have some knowledge about what will work and what will not, based on evidence of past experience.

The main idea behind the 'Big Society' proposals of the Coalition is that real change is driven by local people working together in their communities. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) are leading this radical shift of power from Westminster to local people. People will take control over the big decisions that affect them, power will be devolved to neighbourhoods, citizen participation will increase and communities will take over ownership of local assets.

Many sceptical media commentators intuitively feel that communities have no great desire to take over the running of local public services. However, there is very little evidence at a local level that is used to support the proposals from DCLG or substantiate the views of their critics. Some information does exist but, since it does not support the dominant government narrative, it is likely to be ignored.

In order to understand the link between evidence and policy making, we must first accept that what passes for social and economic knowledge is deeply affected by ideology and interests. In socio-economic policy-making, what is treated as information is often no more than opinion reinforced by contagion. When the ideas of political actors are united by a common ideology, they are reinforced without recourse to the empirical evidence that would throw the fundamental assumptions of the dominant discourse into question. This was as true of the last Labour Government as it is of the Coalition. Even 'informed opinion' is selected and quoted to reinforce the assumptions of the discourse, and a compliant media narrative also helps to ensure that this occurs.

The most obvious example of this triumph of opinion over evidence can be found in the realm of social policy. There are a number of factors that come between the generation of

knowledge and the implementation of policy. In the search for knowledge, powerful actors, groups, bureaucracies and other institutions are able to shape the questions that are asked, ensuring that they are consistent with their world-views and interests. In the social construction of knowledge, evidence is then selected by bureaucrats and policy-makers to ensure consistency with institutional cultures and the perspectives of their political masters. Information is filtered through a prism of culture, interests and power and, in this process, radical ideas are marginalised, neutralised, diluted or co-opted in a distorted form. Powerful groups and institutions have the capacity to take up critical progressive concepts and redefine them for their own use.

The effects of this include the changing meaning and ownership of certain concepts which began their intellectual lives as progressive ideas but which are co-opted and redefined to become no more than buzzwords. Concepts are captured, diluted and distorted to obscure the core policies and structures that are at the heart of the generation of inequality, powerlessness, poverty and deprivation. In this process, opinion that is profoundly influenced by the interests of elites and is reinforced by contagion squeezes out information that is inconvenient.

Many of the concepts that underpin the idea of the Big Society have positive and progressive connotations. Empowering communities, training independent community organisers and promoting social enterprises, charities and voluntary groups all have their roots in a critique of neo-liberal economics. However, when progressive ideas and concepts are taken up by organisations whose neo-liberal core philosophy is not questioned, the progressive concepts become buzzwords that are interpreted and applied by elites and powerful institutions, including the media, in support of this neo-liberal agenda. Concepts come to mean what the powerful want them to mean, inconvenient information is ignored and underlying ideological assumptions go unquestioned.

All political parties are committed to the empowerment of people through increasing the influence they have over the delivery of services to their neighbourhoods. Traditionally, this was a Liberal Party philosophy that was taken up by the Liberal Democrats in their push to take over cities and districts across the country. From the late 1990s, it became part of New Labour's communitarian commitment in areas such as those covered by Partnership Working, Neighbourhood Management Initiatives and the New Deal for the Communities programme. More recently, it has become a central feature of the Conservative idea of the Big Society and it includes a commitment to creating 5,000 community organisers to help establish and run neighbourhood groups that will come together to take over local amenities and address local issues such as education, planning and security.

This idea of empowerment had its first practical expression in the Community Development Programmes (CDPs) of the 1960s. The theory behind the CDPs was that the poor were personally responsible for their situation and it was they who had to change: the circumstances of those in need were thought to be due to personality characteristics such as laziness or an inability to defer gratification. Based on a distortion of Oscar Lewis's 'Culture of Poverty' theory, the CDPs originally emphasised individual

and family failings as the reasons for people's poverty. Influenced by the ideas of Alinsky, however, those who became involved in community development quickly realised that the vast majority of the people they were supposed to be 'treating' were ordinary working-class families who were trying to do their best in difficult circumstances. The main issue was not the pathology of individuals or communities, but the material environment in which they lived their lives.

Community development workers came to recognise that the major changes that were required were not in the psychology and behaviour of the poor but in the structural features of society and the economy: it became clear that what was needed was a more equal distribution of wealth, along with national policies for investment and improvement in the quality of public sector housing, education and other services. When CDP workers argued that there was no pathology and that the problems were structural rather than personal, the Programmes were quickly closed down.

Today, people are much more accepting of the idea that poverty is the result of structural injustices or plain bad luck, but one quarter of the population still think that people are poor or deprived because of laziness and a lack of willpower. This finds expression in the Conservative Party view that if these people would take more responsibility for themselves, they could improve their health, education, skill levels, incomes, life chances and their neighbourhoods. Government intervention is seen as interference that discourages personal responsibility.

For those who prefer a structural explanation for poverty, the main challenges are to increase income-earning opportunities and deliver the improved services that would enhance people's quality of life. Rather than 'blaming the victim', the fundamental question is about how to improve government performance so that it can make a difference.

In both these perspectives, individual responsibility and government intervention have a role to play, but the difference between them is more than a question of emphasis. Those promoting the structural argument have sought to involve local people in decision-making bodies and those supporting the responsibility argument have developed a position that says that services should be controlled by the users of those services so that their innovative ideas will re-energise both the communities and the services.

As suggested above, a fundamental question that a number of commentators have identified concerns the extent to which people want to be involved in the delivery of the services that affect their daily lives. Ipsos MORI surveys show that almost half of people in Britain would like to be 'very involved' or 'fairly involved' in decision-making in their local area. This has been interpreted by the Coalition as indicating a very large pool of potential volunteers who could help to deliver local services. However, when asked in more detail about their intentions, only 5% wanted *active* involvement and 4% said they were already involved. Almost half just want more information and one quarter want to be consulted more.

Ipsos MORI interpret the fact that 5% want more active involvement to mean that there are 1.5 million people across the country who could be drawn into service delivery; and the Coalition assumes that this most of this could be done on a voluntary basis. At a time when public sector budgets are being cut, these people are seen as a large untapped resource that could be actively involved in local issues on a little- or no-cost basis. Research at a neighbourhood level paints a very different picture. Ipsos MORI's own data suggests that in a survey of one London Borough, where 26% said they wanted to get involved in community action, only 2% actually got involved.

In research carried out by the Governance Foundation in other parts of the country, when people were asked *how* they would like to become involved, only a very small percentage made a firm choice from the various practical options that were presented to them. In Sunderland, when residents of social housing areas were asked if they thought they had sufficient influence over the running and management of housing services in their area, only 17% said no. When asked if they would like to have a bigger say in how neighbourhood services were managed, only 7% said they would. When this small group were then asked how they would personally be prepared to get involved, the most popular alternative was to go on a walkabout with officers to point out their concerns. Five per cent of the population wanted to be *consulted* in this way. The least popular activity was to become a member of the managing Board for their housing, with only 5 out of 1200 respondents choosing this option.

This raises important questions about the representative nature of the people who would be potentially running our neighbourhoods, as well as our schools, medical centres and hospitals. Who are this self-selecting minority? Within a large popular mixed-tenure area in Birmingham, covering six neighbourhoods, the neighbourhood where the residents were *least* likely to want to have a bigger say in how local services were run was a poor area that was dominated by young single people living in council flats. The neighbourhood where residents were *most* likely to want to influence what was happening locally was the second wealthiest. It had the second highest level of owner-occupation, the second highest level of occupational pensioners, living in mainly detached or semi-detached housing. In this part of the city, middle-class older people were most likely to become involved, thereby putting themselves in a position to obtain further benefits for their already relatively wealthy neighbourhood. In these circumstances, empowerment would not necessarily benefit those in most need.

In both these cases, the individuals who wanted to participate most were economically active men of prime working age, who also indicated that they could not participate because they were working, supporting their families. When Ipsos MORI asked people who said they felt they didn't have enough influence and would like to be involved in decision making what prevented them from getting involved in the decision-making process, 40% said they didn't have enough time. The question of time for these residents is unlikely to be resolved by any policies to increase participation. Breadwinners, both male and female, who are interested in participating by whatever means, are always going to be less able to do so because of their personal and family circumstances.

It has also been recognised for a long time that residents are more likely to participate in local community activities when things are going wrong. As any community development worker will tell us, it is when things are bad that people are most motivated to get involved. When service delivery is failing, some residents will begin to fight for what they see as their rights and what they have paid their taxes for.

For the most part, their priority is the efficient and effective delivery of local services. There is no evidence to suggest that they are interested in taking over the delivery of the services as unpaid amateurs. They may want more information and they want to be consulted about their needs, but they expect professionally trained people to satisfy these needs. Well-meaning amateurs taking over the delivery of services is for the most part a recipe for service decline, even when the amateurs are national or international non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The involvement of NGOs is a central plank of the Coalition strategy. In the West Midlands, there are said to be over 20,000 NGOs contributing a wide variety of service activities and claiming to represent a variety of community interests. Not all of these can represent local community interests, so how are organisations to be selected for participation? People involved in community-based organisations are always quick to point out that the Voluntary Sector does not represent their community interests, but NGOs are just as quick to speak about the people they 'represent'. In a recent television interview, for example, a person from Age UK referred to 'the people we represent' three times, meaning the elderly. NGOs, of course, do not represent anyone. They may be helping people, providing a voice for some of them, doing good work and collaborating with health and social services, but they do not *represent* the sections of the population they serve. Nevertheless, they are lining up to participate in the delivery of services for which we are paying taxes in this era of austerity, preparing to replace the public sector professionals who have been trained to provide them.

Smaller participating organisations will of course be encouraged by the public sector to organise into umbrella organisations, which will then be selected by those with the power to do so as the representatives of 'communities' of interest. On the ground in neighbourhoods across the country, individuals will continue to emerge to represent different localities on a variety of forums, much as they do at present. Often referred to as 'the usual suspects' by sceptical public sector officers, these people are usually able but unelected individuals who can articulate the concerns of the residents of a locality. In the absence of large numbers of people wanting to become active, they are often underappreciated by officialdom and viewed with hostility by other members of their communities. The more active they become and the longer they commit themselves to help, the more likely they are to be seen as agents of authority, sometimes even spies of 'the Council'. Lacking local legitimacy, they can often get ground down by unpaid over-work, or they leave the neighbourhood.

The evidence also shows that when people are consulted they are more likely to be happy with outcomes, but 'empowered' individuals who give their time to committees and boards are less likely to feel empowered. While 60% of people think that they *can*

influence decisions affecting their local area, 60% of those involved in decision-making bodies report that they *cannot* influence decisions. The experience of participation makes active citizens much more likely to say that they cannot influence decisions and, for these individuals, empowerment is a disempowering experience.

What do people and communities aspire to? They want the very things that the Coalition will cut: better schools, housing and transport, more attractive homes and neighbourhoods, more effective policing, continuous improvement in health care, and the efficient delivery of other services. When things go wrong, they want to be consulted and listened to. Some will choose to become more active in their communities and there is every reason to encourage this. But do they want to run our police, schools and health service?

The evidence suggests that 13% would like to have more say in what the police do and in the services they provide, but there is no evidence that this means more than consultation. The majority would like more information but are happy to let the police get on with their jobs. With respect to education, only 5% of adults in England think that parents are the most appropriate people to run state-funded schools, compared to 32% who think that parents should NOT run state schools. The better educated are more likely to think parents should NOT run schools, but we can be sure that it will be a better-educated middle-class minority who will become involved in this way.

The new language of empowerment and participation is unlikely to have a serious impact on the problems of poverty and inequality. Contrary evidence will be ignored and NGOs and academics who are active as producers of local knowledge are likely to find that the practical application of their knowledge remains under the control of the state. Neo-conservative think tanks will enhance this control by reinforcing dominant opinion and rearticulating neo-classical theory. The new language of 'the empowering state' and its allies will divert attention from the real causes of poverty.

Against a tide of ideology posing as knowledge, progressive concepts whose meaning has been appropriated by elite groups and institutions need to be reclaimed and re-linked to other concepts such as redistribution, equality and social justice. Saul Alinsky's purpose was: 'to realize the democratic dream of equality, justice, peace, cooperation, equal and full opportunities for education, full and useful employment, health, and the creation of those circumstances in which men have the chance to live by the values that give meaning to life'.

The intellectual challenges for the left are to deconstruct the new knowledge industry, expose the interests and agendas behind it, question the assumptions, world-views and myths that have no basis in empirical reality, and lay bare the contradictions of dominant thinking. This, of course, is an ideological statement and there is no guarantee that anyone with power will listen.