

# Big Society or Big Chaos?

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**Few things are more troubling and disruptive than the break-up of a relationship. Even where the relationships are deeply flawed or under severe stress, the ending can be traumatic.**

The idea of the Big Society promises a host of beautiful new relationships with people who are or should be close to us. But few of us really know what these relationships will be like; and many are worried that the ones we already have will be broken.

No wonder many are deeply suspicious of David Cameron's vision of Big Society and Eric Pickles' constant refrain of localism. Even those besotted with the idea are struggling to articulate what it will mean in everyday life.

Those who have established relationships with government are likely to be most shocked by the new state of affairs. Some voluntary and community organisations have spent weeks analysing the new policy landscape and making representations to their regional government offices, only to find those offices summarily abolished. Others thought they had understandings with local councils. From Croydon to Kirklees, they have suffered rude awakenings as grants have been axed and contracts ignored.

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What the new world will look like at local level is almost impossible to say.

The government says there is no blueprint. But the carrot of autonomy comes at a cost as resources are withdrawn from the very activities ministers say they want to thrive.

So what is on offer? At best, it's a world where a thousand flowers bloom – where those who want to improve their communities just get on and do it without bureaucratic hoops and hurdles. At worst, a thousand flowers will wither through the chaotic and uninformed removal of the support they depend on.

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So we need to be clear about the circumstances we face. At a national level, even a cut in government spending of one third leaves us richer than most of the planet in public services and in support for voluntary organisations. There is no reason why we should not afford the essentials. We need to keep that perspective – and have an open debate about what is essential and what isn't. At local level, councils and funding bodies need to engage in a respectful dialogue rather than walking away from relationships that are easy to dump.

We need clarity too about what can be achieved. Localism – the principle that decisions should be taken as close as possible to the people they affect – is a worthwhile objective. Decentralisation of power and functions is necessary to get us there. A Big Society, or, as many would prefer to describe it, a good society, is a laudable aim and we should resist the temptation to be cynical.

The Big Society already exists in myriad examples of social action.



Let's support it and tell the stories of its achievements. But it is at risk of fragmentation and centralisation if government does not become more adept in undertaking its mission of culture change. If David Cameron wants to jump-start the Big Society wagon, Eric Pickles and George Osborne had better stop removing the wheels.

Longer term, we need to find ways to build and support what we value away from the vagaries and infidelities of government policy. The mutual and voluntary ideals of a Big Society offer a chance to create independent, cooperative structures that are resilient and sustainable. But we shouldn't underestimate the scale of the task ■