



URBAN POLLINATORS

LOOKING UP - APRIL 2011

COMMENT AND ANALYSIS FROM JULIAN DOBSON

THIS MONTH: A RESILIENT SOCIETY

THE BIG SOCIETY - IS IT ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS?

WHY THE STATE IS A PARTNER, NOT THE PROBLEM

WHY SCALE MATTERS

WELCOME

Urban Pollinators is a consultancy and practical think tank founded by Julian Dobson, commentator on regeneration, placemaking and community issues. This newsletter is part of a series of regular commentaries on topical subjects. We hope you find it useful and informative - please pass it on to anyone you think will be interested, and please let us have your views.

This month we reflect on a year of debate around the idea of a 'big society', and argue for a shift towards a vision of society that addresses the long-term challenges we all face.

FROM A BIG SOCIETY TO A RESILIENT SOCIETY

Over the last year we've been closely involved in the debates about the big society, the UK government's vision for communities. Depending on your viewpoint, the vision could be anything from old-fashioned privatisation of state services to a radical empowerment of the ordinary citizen.

The truth, as always, contains elements of both and of neither. What has become clear since David Cameron launched his vision on 31 March 2010 is that it has everything to do with the role and function of the state and a conviction, for ideological or practical reasons, that the state will need to become much smaller - yet also more responsive.

There has also been growing acceptance of the view that the future of citizen empowerment must be determined not by government or its advisers, but by the citizens themselves. That is the ethos of Our Society¹, a growing network of activists and observers who last month organised a 'big society reality check' that set out some key tests for the coming year².

Our Society is developing a role as an unofficial watchdog, scrutinising and debating the policies and programmes associated with the big society. But we need something more: a sense of direction about how society needs to develop, beyond the hurly-burly of political debate and scrambles for funding.

Shifting the focus: from big to resilient

The photo of David Cameron launching his big society policies has become a cliché. Behind him is that familiar poster proclaiming 'Big society, not big government'.

1 See <http://oursociety.org.uk/>

2 See <http://livingwithrats.blogspot.com/2011/04/five-tests-for-big-societys-second-year.html>

The crude message is that government is the problem and society is the solution. But as we'll see with the opening up of markets in public services (see our January newsletter³) there is no direct relationship between the size of the state and the self-reliance of society: indeed as sharp-elbowed contractors move into more public services, we are likely to find society as well as the state becoming less powerful.

But framing the debate around the size of the state, particularly in relation to the immediate financial dilemmas facing government, is to ask the wrong question. We risk ending up with a vision of society and government determined by present austerity rather than by our capacity to respond to future challenges.

At present most of the emotional and intellectual energy is being expended on the impact of spending cuts in central and local government, the health service and the welfare system. On both sides of the argument there appears to be a view that growth and economic recovery is a given, and that what matters is how the economy should be rebalanced between different sectors (public, private and voluntary) and geographies (high-growth cities and regions and the rest).

These assumptions are not unique to the UK debate. More widely, there appears to be an accepted wisdom that the financial crisis of 2007-2009 (or 2007 to 2011, more accurately) was merely a blip in an upwards trajectory of growth. Global urbanisation is seen as a cornucopia of opportunity by the likes of Edward Glaeser⁴ and the McKinsey Global Institute⁵.

Such views are popular with policymakers because they don't challenge the paradigm. This is a world where exponential growth means more for everybody, although we are confronted every day with evidence that there is not more for everybody.

There are other voices. Richard Florida, author of *The Rise of the Creative Class* and more recently of *The Great Reset*, has shifted his tone of late, arguing that we are experiencing a crisis in global economics that will take thirty years or more to resolve, and that we need to 'move from a creative class to a creative society where each human being is valued and rewarded'.⁶

More urgently, Lester Brown of the Earth Policy Institute in Washington has issued a wake-up call to the effects of environmental degradation and depletion, arguing that the world needs to be put on a 'war footing' to reduce carbon dependency and the effects of a global crisis arising from the loss of water, food and energy resources⁷. Tim Jackson, professor of sustainable development at Surrey University, argues that we need to be ready to wave goodbye to traditional economic growth altogether if we are to avoid environmental catastrophe⁸.

Does this all seem a far cry from the Cameron government's vision of a big society? Nothing could be more pertinent. The vision of society citizens and government develop over the next few years must be fit to address all our economic and environmental challenges.

3 This and other previous newsletters are available at http://urbanpollinators.co.uk/?page_id=92

4 Glaeser, E. (2011). *Triumph of the City*. London: Macmillan.

5 McKinsey Global Institute (2011). *Urban World: Mapping the Economic Power of Cities*. See <http://www.mckinsey.com/mgi/>

6 Speech at Cr8net conference, London, 24 March 2011

7 Brown, L. (2011) *World on the Edge*. London: Earthscan.

8 Jackson, T. (2009) *Prosperity Without Growth*. London: Earthscan.

The concept of resilience is central to such a vision. Resilience is frequently pigeonholed as a specialist interest within a particular field - mental health, emergency planning, or local economic development, for example. But it spans professional and sectoral interests and provides a lens through which we can assess policy across government and society.

Resilience is more than what's known as bouncebackability. It includes the ability to self-organise, to maintain balance, and to respond to change. The Resilience Alliance puts it thus: 'Ecosystem resilience is the capacity of an ecosystem to tolerate disturbance without collapsing into a qualitatively different state that is controlled by a different set of processes. A resilient ecosystem can withstand shocks and rebuild itself when necessary.'⁹

The purpose of a big, good, or better society isn't just to maintain an ideal balance between civil society and the state, between public spending and tax income, or between different providers of social and community services. In an increasingly uncertain world, it should be to fulfil the Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainability - to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Our resilient society - can we build it?

Discussions of 'big society' over the past year have tended to focus on organisational and technical issues: what is the role of social enterprise, how do we encourage more volunteering, how should we reform public procurement?

As spending cuts have taken effect, a more polarised debate has emerged about whether or not the big society is effectively the dismantling of the welfare state and the end of the post-Beveridge consensus. More fundamental questions are being raised about what we want government to do, and how much we trust government to do it.

Events like the last month's earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis in Japan show we need a different starting point. The question here is what kind of society do we need in order to survive, adapt and thrive? How do we ensure we all play whatever part we can, and how best can state and civil society work together to create the conditions for flourishing communities?

Such communities clearly need to be socially, economically and environmentally resilient – few would argue the contrary. Getting there has proved far more laborious than might be expected of an advanced civilisation, and such a journey appears well beyond the scope of the current government's ambition.

Social resilience: doing it ourselves

The idea of social resilience comes closest to the vision articulated by government ministers. Caricatured as getting volunteers to do the jobs we were once paid for, it really touches on deeper issues of neighbourliness and community, turning the typical reaction to a crisis or injustice of 'something must be done' to 'we must do something'. A socially resilient community doesn't pass the buck.

⁹ See <http://www.resalliance.org/index.php/resilience>

But in stripping away much of the support for voluntary activity currently funded by government, there is a high risk that instead of stepping into the breach, communities will find their efforts more fragmented and much less resourced. As has now been pointed out on numerous occasions,¹⁰ it makes no sense to try to build a big society by kicking away the props of the one we have.

That said, the vulnerability of current voluntary and community activity to rushed and ill-considered spending decisions illustrates the lack of resilience in the current system. Support structures that are at the mercy of political and economic fashion or foible are unlikely to be at their best in a crisis.

Just as we have a National Grid to collect and distribute electrical power, we need a kind of national grid of community infrastructure – a network of networks to share learning and support organisations or communities in crisis, which is resourced on a continuous basis. Instead of the pot-luck of lottery grants or short-term funding programmes, we need to bring together community organisers, development trusts, local charities, housing associations and more to learn from and support each other. The aim of such a grid should not be to distribute and monitor funding so much as to supply personal support, mentoring, know-how and technical expertise.

Such a national network should complement and support the local networks that are the backbone of a resilient society. Again, knowledge and exchange is vital at a local level – knowing who is good at what, where to find the advice you need. Time banks, for example, can build networks where people exchange skills and in the process build friendships and gain support – for example, Headway, a charity that supports people with brain injuries, runs a successful time bank in Hackney, east London.¹¹

Another aspect of social resilience should be asset ownership and management. The coalition government is taking some positive steps via the Localism Bill, but there is a naivety that needs to be challenged. Asset ownership can be a means of financial sustainability, but can also be a millstone around community organisations' necks. It is a long-term strategy and must be financed and supported in a way that minimises risk. Important lessons are emerging from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's work on community assets¹².

At the right scale and over enough time, asset ownership can reap social dividends. Walerton and Elgin Community Homes¹³ is one example of a community-owned housing association where residents control their rent levels, help determine repairs programmes, and have strong networks of friends, family and neighbours. As a result they tend to be happier and healthier than in comparable neighbourhoods¹⁴.

10 See, for example, David Robinson's open letter to David Cameron:
<http://www.community-links.org/linksuk/?p=2225>

11 See <http://www.headwayeastlondon.org/timebank/>

12 See <http://www.jrf.org.uk/events/community-assets-seminar-series>

13 See <http://www.wech.co.uk>

14 Satsangi, M. and Murray, S. *Community Empowerment: final report to Walerton and Elgin Community Homes*. Download from http://www.wech.co.uk/images/stories/pdf/Community_Empowerment_Report_by_Dr_Satsangi.pdf

Economic resilience: doing it for each other

Well connected communities can only do so much through voluntary effort or through engagement with public services. Most people have limited control over their economic context: the cost of essentials, the decisions of employers, the match of opportunities to their particular skills.

They could have more. Recent events have underlined our economic vulnerability to events outside our influence – the Icelandic volcanic ash cloud of April 2010, which cost European businesses a reported €2.5bn¹⁵, and the rise in the price of oil following recent disturbances in the Arab world.

Renewable energy is one way in which communities can boost their economic resilience, becoming less vulnerable to external shocks and creating opportunities for new industries. Güssing in Austria is an example of a town that has reinvented itself through renewable energy¹⁶.

The growing interest in local loyalty schemes for independent retailers and alternative currencies such as the Lewes Pound¹⁷, which aims to keep customers' money circulating within the local economy, also show how communities can begin to build economic resilience. Instead of seeing profits leak out of the locality, such schemes create local supply chains that recreate relationships between producers, retailers and consumers.

These schemes, though, are swimming against a tide of concentration of trade in the hands of a few giant corporations – four supermarket chains control nearly 80 percent of the UK grocery market, for example. The think tank Res Publica has recently called for local councils to be given powers to levy extra taxes on giant out-of-town stores in order to reduce business taxation for independent shops¹⁸.

There is growing interest from all parts of the political spectrum in a resurgence of cooperatives and mutually-owned businesses. While this has largely been discussed in the context of public services, the mutualisation of private firms could build stronger links of ownership and trade with local communities. Local and mutual ownership reduces the risk of hostile takeovers and the loss of connection and control that almost always follows.

Environmental resilience: doing it for us all

Social and economic resilience won't work without environmental resilience, though. Current obsessions with growth as an unquestionable economic goal and deficit reduction as the top political priority have left the UK lagging well behind other nations in greening the economy and reducing oil dependency. In this the coalition government has followed in the footsteps of its Labour predecessors, talking the talk of sustainability while taking decisions that fail to challenge unsustainable patterns of consumption.

There are initiatives that show how the ambitions of a greener economy, local ownership and community self-help can all come together and bring benefits to everyone. Inspiring projects such as Incredible Edible Todmor-

15 See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/apr/27/iceland-volcano-cost-business-europe>

16 See <http://livingwithrats.blogspot.com/2010/03/properties-of-land.html>

17 See <http://www.thelewespound.org/>

18 Res Publica (2011). *The Right to Retail*. Download via <http://www.respublica.org.uk/articles/right-retail>

den¹⁹, which has seen a Yorkshire town transformed into a hotbed of local growing, or the Energy4All network²⁰, demonstrate what can be done by determined people.

But there is a long way to go. Commercial buildings are designed with a lifespan of 30 or 40 years when they could last a century or more. Investment in electric cars has proceeded at a snail's pace. The UK's homes remain among the worst insulated in northern Europe. The cost of solar panels is still prohibitive to most people. Environmental protection is being cut back.

The state: a partner, not the problem

The issue with most of the examples cited here, compared with what needs to be done, is scale. Just as a series of projects nominated for big society awards do not add up to a big society, so a few examples of resilience do not add up to a resilient society. But they point to what could be achieved.

Margaret Mead famously observed: 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.' It has become a favourite quotation of politicians and thinkers, but it needs a caveat.

What will change the world, or even a modest handful of communities, is not just the small groups of committed citizens. What will bring about change is an attitude of partnership between government, citizens and business that sets aside facile arguments about how big the state should be and instead focuses on our common interest in building a society that can thrive in much more uncertain times than most of us anticipated a decade ago.²¹

A vision of a big society that sees the state as the problem may succeed only in reducing our ability to do the three things necessary to build resilience: supporting local self-help, localising the benefits of economic activity, and living within environmental limits. By refocusing the state, nationally and locally, to meet these imperatives, we can develop a vision of society worth shouting about.

IN OTHER NEWS...

For us as for many others, March saw the end of a major piece of work - the Regeneration Academy at Bradford Council, where we were leading on placemaking skills. Over the last 15 months we've worked with more than 180 local authority staff, helping them to understand the place they work in and how their jobs impact on it.

We're continuing our work with The Mersey Forest, building on our paper on a future for community forests, and with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on community assets. We've also been working on a pro bono basis

19 See <http://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk/>

20 See <http://www.energy4all.co.uk/>

21 The Centre for Local Economic Strategies' work on place resilience is helpful here: <http://www.cles.org.uk/research/resilience/>

with Incredible Edible Todmorden and the Our Society network (see above). You can find out more about these projects on [our website](#), or drop us an email.

To find out how we can help you with writing, research, events or training, email julian@urbanpollinators.co.uk or call us on 0114 229 5726.

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK

We'd like your feedback. Was this newsletter interesting or useful? Are there topics you'd like us to look at in the future?

If this is the first time you've received this newsletter, you might like to check out previous issues. Themes have included public service reform, the future of town centres and rethinking regeneration. You can download them from [our website](#).

Please send your comments to Julian Dobson - email julian@urbanpollinators.co.uk - or find us on Twitter at [@urbanpollinator](#).

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