

The Big Society—Beyond Trivia and PR

Critics of the Big Society point to the following anecdote to show that this grand communitarian concept is either trivial or a public relations stunt. A road sign, erected by the government, was repeatedly stolen by pranksters. The mayor asked the members of the community to make donations to buy a new sign. Many did, and the money was used to erect a sign that was much better anchored and hence less likely to be stolen.

Critics, who see in this incident evidence that volunteerism does not amount to much, disregard that volunteers can and do make major contributions to major societal missions. Thus in the United States, over 70% of firefighters are volunteers, and many small communities rely on volunteer first aid squads to handle medical emergencies. On the international front, organizations like Doctors without Borders allow medical professionals to provide aid to underserved parts of the world, and Habitat for Humanity relies on volunteers to build homes for needy families. And the amount of donations made by volunteers is far from trivial. For instance, voluntary donations by Americans to the victims of the earthquake in Haiti amounted to more than \$1.3 billion, which compares quite favorably to the amount given by China, namely \$15.5 million.

Moreover, one should not take lightly the benefits to the volunteers and donors, above and beyond the benefits to those to whom they reach out. When 400,000 citizens in Seattle, Washington learned to do CPR (nearly one in two), they befriended other volunteers. Such programs are one of the reasons Seattle is one of the friendliest, most communitarian places in the U.S. And social scientists found that when citizens participate in discharging a mission, their expectations are adjusted to the economic and political constraints all such projects face. Thus, they are much less likely to hold that if the government merely put its mind to a given mission, say, cutting fraud and abuse, it would be accomplished in a jiffy. They learn from first-hand experience that progress involves much more effort than it first seems and appreciate much more what is gained. In short, they become better—more reasonable and satisfied—citizens.

Even if one views all volunteerism as Lite Communitarianism, a key component of the Big Society program draws on a societal design that can do heavy lifting; namely, turning over important segments of government work to independent trusts of practitioners, say, health care professionals or educators. For example, the Big Society program calls for setting up “co-ops” of physicians and other health care professionals that will be granted a fixed budget to provide services for a given population in a given area, but with the freedom to allocate these resources in ways they deem will best serve (within broad but enforced national guidelines—for instance, they cannot use these funds to increase their fees beyond some agreed-upon limits). This approach is not driven by volunteerism but is financed by the state, indeed by taxpayer funds. And it involves professionals carrying out their work, not some after-hours mission. The decisions they are making as a group are part of their workday, although these are made much easier than they used to be when the same professionals were all part of the NHS, because now they can proceed with much less red tape and much less need to deal with various layers of government. The same holds for trusts of educators who run schools more or less the way charter schools are run in the United States.

Finally, savings to the public budget come in one obvious and one not-so-obvious way. Obvious savings are generated by the fact that the trusts are granted a fixed amount of money to work with, and they realize that if they need to increase expenditures on some items, it is up to them to find cuts elsewhere. The door is closed to what used to be done in the old days: seek to compel the government to cough up more funds. Less well known is the observation that various local groups are willing to accept some limited cuts in their budgets in return for the much greater autonomy they

are granted under the Big Society in the ways they employ these funds.

The Big Society is no panacea or cure-all. However, it can serve to build up the third leg of a good society, the communities, and draw less on the other two: the government and the market.

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