

The Allure of the 'Big Society': Conveying Authority in An Era of Real and Manufactured Uncertainty¹

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Keith Jacobs, School of Social Sciences
University of Tasmania

Abstract

The inception and roll out of the UK government's Big Society agenda offers an opportunity to consider the changing modalities of contemporary political engagement. Much of the critical scholarship on the Big Society views it as a rationale to legitimise both a reconfiguration of the welfare state and austerity programme to reduce government debt; whilst these explanations are helpful they take us only some way towards understanding the appeal of these agendas for politicians and their political parties. The key question explored in this paper is why, despite the hostility and cynicism towards ideological projects such as Big Society, do politicians continue to identify and pursue them? It is argued that the Big Society agenda is only in part a rationale for austerity and welfare reform; it also provides a discursive setting for politicians to address societal anxieties by offering a navigable route for the future.

¹ This paper is a work in progress. Please let me know if you wish to quote from it.

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'Are we listening enough to the grassroots community, as a government and as a country? Of course we're not. But that is what lies at the heart of the Big Society vision. We accept that government has too much power and has got too arrogant in terms of its attitude to the grassroots. That is what we are trying to address through the localism and Big Society agenda. We are talking about massive, seismic cultural change here, it's not going to happen overnight' (Nick Hurd, Minister for Civil Society: 2011).

Introduction

The 'Big Society'² heralds a departure from post-war Conservative party policymaking that has usually displayed an antipathy towards explicit ideology³ and a preference for a more pragmatic *modus operandi* (see Bale 2012). So the Big Society agenda is, in this respect, a significant innovation for the party. The Prime Minister David Cameron following the urban riots that took place in August 2010 conveyed his ambition for the direction of a new social agenda.

'So is this government more about cuts? Yes. Is the Big Society some optional extra? No. It holds the key to transforming our economy, our society, our country's future and that's why I will keep on championing it and keep on building it, every day that I have the privilege to lead our country' (Cameron 2010).

² The Big Society as a broad policy agenda can be distinguished from localism - that specifies a legislative programme to encourage non-governmental actors to deliver welfare services.

³ Whilst writers such as Hall and Jacques (1983) have sought to portray Thatcherism as a purposeful political project; this was not quite accurate as Thatcher herself made no attempt to explicitly set out an ideological agenda although this did not deter her supporters from doing so. Recent studies such as Bale (2012) have sought to reappraise her period in office.

The aim in this paper is to explore the allure of reform agendas by asking why, in spite of the obvious risks, politicians remain wedded to a broad narrative frame such as the Big Society?⁴ It begins by noting the nascent aspects of contemporary politics; for example, a mediatised landscape and the discursive construction of a societal crisis. This is followed by a review of the literature and the fabrication of a psychosocial lens for understanding the Big Society. In the main part of the paper I offer some reflections on what the deployment of a Big Society reform agenda can tell us about the conduct of UK politics. The conclusion then discusses the Big Society in the wider context of neo-liberal ideology.

Apathy and the mediatisation of politics

A feature of the modern UK is the apathy and disinterest towards political parties especially amongst young voters. Stuart Hall has used the term ‘disaffected consent’ to describe the broad disengagement from party politics that has accompanied the rise of neo-liberalism from the mid 1970s. He argues that whilst ‘there is as yet no overwhelming majority appetite for the neo-liberal project. But as far as disenchantment of people from politics itself and the idea of collective resistance is concerned, a massive de-politicalisation has done its work’ (Hall 2011:723).

At a time when politicians are wrestling with the immediate challenges that flow from sovereign debt and the global financial crisis; the reporting and coverage of politics is undergoing a transformation. In a most thoughtful article, Paul Hoggett (2010) has argued that a salient feature of contemporary politics is the blurring of image and reality. The reporting of politics, he notes, has moved away from a focus on the delivery of welfare programmes to media strategies and campaigns.

The Big Society agenda is constituted and presented within this new media horizon (see Couldry 2012 for a discussion) and policies are now framed accordingly. Perhaps the most significant change is the attempt by politicians to engage their audiences in

⁴ Whilst I touch on the policy implications of the Big Society agenda, there is no explicit attempt to evaluate its implications for welfare services such as public housing or social care. For excellent and broad ranging discussions on these issues, see Civil Exchange (2012) and Corbett and Walker (2013).

language and imagery that appeals to individual and subjective narratives. The link between individual needs, aspirations and policy frameworks is evident in recent political campaigns. For example, politicians are expected to demonstrate affinities with the general public using social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. In the UK this can be seen most clearly in the ways that both former prime-minister Tony Blair and now David Cameron have sought to stage their public image to capitalise on being parents of young children (see Yates 2009 and 2010). We can also note the Prime Minister and Mayor of London Boris Johnson made full use of the media opportunities from the London Olympics. The new media technologies have opened up considerable opportunities for politicians to engage with the public.

A second feature of contemporary politics is the pervasive sense of disillusionment and cynicism that circulates in public discourse. Tony Judt's (2010:8-9) explanation, set out in his book 'Ill Fares the Land', is that 'we have entered an age of insecurity – economic insecurity, physical insecurity, political insecurity... Insecurity breeds fear. And fear – fear of change, fear of decline and fear of strangers and an unfamiliar world – is corroding the trust and interdependence on which civil societies rest'. Judt goes on to adduce a convincing argument that the generalised anxiety that circulates in today's media outlets and political discourse can be traced to the neo-liberal forms of governmental practice that have elevated individual responsibility and denigrated governmental forms of welfare provision.

It is this sense of despondency, that the very basis of civil society is under threat, which forms the backdrop of contemporary British politics. The Big Society can be understood as a response to this generalised anxiety about the future. As I shall argue, politicians feel compelled to address this broad sense of despondency and there is a societal expectation for them to do so. Cynicism and indifference are the most common public responses to the Big Society agenda. In a recent survey as few as 9% of the UK electorate believes that Big Society will deliver its objectives and as many as 39% take the view that the government should forget about the whole idea' (Hudson; 2011 cited by Elliot: 2013:2). Yet it is important not to fall into the mistake of assuming that these misgivings are testimony for the failure of the Big Society agenda.

For, in spite of the disillusionment that appears to have set in, politicians continue to roll out programmes of reform and deploy grandiose language to propagate their ideas. Politics is increasingly about an appeal to values through the establishment of new discursive ‘publics’; the issue of whether policies succeed or not is of less consequence. As I argue, what matters more is that there is a political constituency that abides by the normative assumptions that underpin the agenda. In other words, the popularity of the Big Society agenda matters less than the acquiescence to the narrative of a ‘Broken Britain’.

The work of John Clark (2012) is apposite here. In an article titled ‘Historical amnesia in politics and policy’ he argues that in contemporary politics ‘the past appears as the location of our troubles, mistakes and misfortunes. In contrast, the future holds out the promise of overcoming such conditions. The present tends to be less discussed – merely a staging point on the necessary, inevitable and desired trajectory towards the future’. (Clarke 2012:158). Clark’s depiction of contemporary politics forms a context for the arguments set out here. For if I understand Clarke correctly, he is responding to the recent tendency to depict the past as problematic, to disavow the present and to idealise the future. Indeed, much of the UK political discourse of the last 15 years⁵ conforms to this form of temporal ordering and the thinking behind Big Society is no exception.

Literature on the Big Society

The Big Society agenda has generated discussion across a variety of media platforms; and much of the commentary has been critical. As Macmillan (2011:3) observes, ‘responses have included a combination of doubt, confusion, occasional enthusiasm, but also widespread indifference amongst the general public’. The survival of the Big Society programme is puzzling given that it has generally been received along this negative spectrum.

There have been different interpretations of the origins of the Big Society policy agenda. As Macmillan (2013) points out, some commentators have sought to see it as a continuation of New

⁵ The social exclusion agenda articulated by Tony Blair relied on this mode of temporal framing (see Levitas 2012).

Labour policies on welfare (Hodkinson and Robbin 2013), Thatcherism (Cobbett and Walker 2012) or even further back to debates on voluntarism emanating in the 19th century (see Hilton and McKay 2011). The emphasis here is on locating and sustaining community acts rather than securing allegiance through practical deeds such as as service delivery or transfer payments. As Macmillan (2013: 5) argues: 'it is perhaps appropriate to view the Big Society not as a single concept or programme, but as a loose and encompassing alliance of ideas and signals with a range of purposes'.

One of the most common explanations of the political value of Big Society is that it provides a means to shift attention away from a discussion on spending programmes (see Lee 2011). Other scholars view it as part of a larger rebranding exercise to repackage the Conservative party and establish a connection with the electorate (Albrow 2012). The fact that the Conservatives were out of power for 13 years and were viewed in Teresa May's words as the 'Nasty Party' certainly acted as a spur to reposition the party along a more centrist path. The electoral success of Tony Blair was probably a factor and there is much in Cameron's style of politics that is derivative of the former Labour Leader.

We can however discern different views towards the significance of the Big Society. First, there are scholars who are willing to take at face value some of the claims being made by the coalition government; For example, Lowndes and Pratchett (2012) distinguish between short-term political expedience and long-term ideological objectives. They note: first; that any coherence in the agenda has been damaged by budgetary cuts and second; that its logic is derivative of the previous Labour government's administration - that is, performance driven and externally focused (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012:38). They point out that 'there are elements of one-nation Conservatism being articulated within the Cameron emphasis on social responsibility but the social equality implicit in this language is diminished by the over-riding emphasis on individualism that is emerging in many policies' (p.35). Whilst Lowndes and Pratchett are far from supportive of the Big Society; they do contend that there is something positive that can be extracted from it.

Foucauldian approaches

Some of the most insightful scholarship on the Big Society deploys a Foucauldian framework (Foucault 2002) that makes use of the writings of Rose (1999, 2007) and Rose and Miller (2010) and others. These scholars attest the appeal to individual responsibility is a key part of Big Society's seductive power. It asks us to take more responsibility for our lives and by foregrounding personal obligation it summons the powerful imaginary of a self-directed and individuated modern identity (Glynos 2011). A key tenet of Foucauldian informed analysis is the claim that that modern forms of government are constituted through projects, plans and practices; in short, that power is productive as well as restrictive. For example, Rose (2000 and 2007) observes how we have been side-tracked into thinking that governance is about making policies more efficient. Instead he claims it is more about making the process of government more marketable and palatable. Rose uses the term 'ethnopower' (Rose 2007) to denote this shift in the forms of governmental reflexivity. Rose's arguments have been put to good effect by Bulley and Sokhi-Bulley (2012). They write that 'under the vision of a Big Society we are not to be less governed, but more efficiently and effectively so, by governing our own conduct and that of those around us in our families, neighbourhoods and workplaces' Bulley and Sokhi-Bulley (2012:5).

These contributions are all relevant for they highlight how the Coalition government's Big Society agenda serves as a convenient device to mask unpalatable spending cuts of over 11 billion pounds from agencies providing welfare and local government services (HM Treasury 2012). Yet whilst this Foucauldian analysis takes us further, it overlooks the agency components of governmental practice. Stuart Hall makes the important point that the ideological component of the Big Society agenda masks an orchestrated attempt to restructure British society. Hall is explicit about the orchestration and intent of the Big Society agenda. He writes of the coalition policy as 'arguably the best prepared, the most wide ranging, radical and ambitious of the three regimes that, since the 1970s, have been maturing the neoliberal project'. For Hall (2011) what is taking place now, should be viewed as a component of the 'long march of the neoliberal revolution'. At the core of the Big Society agenda is an implicit demonization of the working class under the term Broken Society, the coalition are able

to portray the feckless and workshy as culpable for Britain's malaise (Hall 2011: 721).

Janet Newman (2011) makes some interesting observations on the modus operandi of contemporary policy making. She argues that the idea of pre-existing public is a fiction....the public only comes into being around specific issues where there is a clear common interest in responding to those issues'. Newman goes onto to claim that publics 'have to be convened: they are discursively summoned up, addressed, hailed as such' (p.316). For Newman, the Big Society platform can be viewed as a means to create such a public to lend legitimacy to new forms of neoliberal policy-making that draw attention to the 'unsustainability of state welfare and the dependency inducing components of the public sector' (p. 320). As she notes, the appeal of the Big Society narrative is that it establishes a new public that identifies with the premise that Britain is broken and something needs to be done.

In addition to the points made at least two other observations can be discerned from the literature. First, the Big Society narrative seeks to encourage the active engagement of civil institutions and actors in the conduct of what has largely been the preserve of local government for example volunteering. Second, implicit in the Big Society is a disavowal of representative forms of democracy such as local government. The reform agenda under the guise of the 2011 Localism Act provides opportunities for organised interest groups to strengthen their foothold. If we accept this basis premise that the Big Society is a strategic device to reconfigure welfare provision and legitimise austerity cuts then the question of how this strategy might be successful can be posed. Third, in terms of *ideology*, the Big Society agenda draws upon enduring themes that have become such a feature of British politics; namely a distrust of big government, bureaucracy and a valorisation of community and the local. The Big Society, as many commentators have pointed out, (see Kerr et al 2011) chimes with the neoliberal governmentality agenda that seeks to roll out functions of the welfare state to private sector competition. As Peck (2010) argues, neo-liberal ideology is not simply about a reduced State but also about reconfiguring the State itself in accordance to market values.

A psychosocial lens.

The literature on the Big Society has been far ranging and critical yet there remain a set of questions which have not been addressed. For example: is the role out of the Big Society emblematic of wider processes taking place? What is particular about the contemporary era that encourages politicians and parties to conceive and pursue programmes such as Big Society? What does the binary split implicit in the Big Society agenda (i.e. 'Broken Britain'/Big Society') tell us about the contemporary political culture? Is there a link between new media technologies and the public's response to recent 'ideas' driven agendas?

In considering the allure of explicit political agendas both for politicians and the general public and the other questions set out above, I was drawn to research that foregrounds 'subjectivity' as a component of politics; notably scholarship that has sought to 'redescribe' politics through what has been termed a 'psychosocial' framework (e.g. Rose, 1996; Clarke 1999, 2006; Frosh 2010; Glynos 2011; Rustin 2013). All of these writers are committed to exploring subjectivity as a field where the vicissitudes and turbulences of contemporary politics are played out. Rose (1996) for example, argues that our engagement with politics is, to some extent, informed by the societal fantasies and desires we hold in relation to politicians and government. One of the most enduring and powerful societal fantasies we cling to is that governmental leaders have the capability to meet our aspirations. For Rose (1996), the power-image of the State relies on this attribution and our expectation that governments will deliver on their promises is a manifestation of this socio-political fantasy. As Glynos 2011:70 writes fantasy denotes a framing device that the subject uses to 'protect themselves from the anxiety associated with the idea that there is no ultimate guarantee or law underlying and guiding our social existence'.

For both Rose and Glynos, the concept of fantasy⁶ provides a lens for understanding not only the expectations we invest in politicians but also the sense of disappointment that so often follows when reality returns. Zizek (2009) has also noted this sense of broken trust and dismay. He argues that the feelings of disillusionment can be traced to our initial fantasy that constitutes government as

⁶ See Jacobs (2013) for a discussion of fantasy in relation to population concerns in Australia.

a vehicle for positive social transformation. Disengagement is often inevitable because of the unrealistic aspect or these expectations and a sense of lack that can never be replete⁷. The core argument promulgated by Žižek and others is that any engagement with politics is always predicated on feelings; in particular desires and expectations. In political discourse, the narratives that appeal are those that offer some form of psychic comfort to ease anxiety. Yet, the appeal of the Big Society has been underexplored in contemporary scholarship.

In making this point, I am not suggesting that one can read subjectivity as an analogy for politics writ large. It is rather the vocabulary— and particularly the lexicon of psychosocial research—that offers the basis for a new inflection of the standard interpretation of the Big Society agenda and the statements made in its name by government ministers. The substantive claim I make in the remainder of this paper is that the notion of a Big Society rests on a fantasy about the problems and prescriptions for modern Britain. The construction of the problem of *Broken Britain* is framed in terms of austerity and a collapse in modern values, whilst the solution put forward is based on a claim that the state has accentuated this moral collapse through its meddling. Second, the political interventions such as the *Big Society* establish both a narrative and a connection with specific sections of the electorate. These narratives appeal because they offer assurance and, in some ways, fulfil societal desires that governments will always act in the interests of the citizenry. For politicians, Big Society provides opportunities to gain media coverage, to bed down a narrative vision and undergird the legitimacy of their rule. The issue as to whether or not Big Society delivers a programme of warranted welfare reform or leads to improved, possibly more local, service delivery is therefore of less importance than the audience-capturing potential of the ‘Britain is Broken’ message. The tacit acceptance that ‘Britain is Broken’ provides a mandate for politicians intent on restructuring the welfare state and imposing austerity cuts. As Hall (2011: 713) points out, ‘ideology works

⁷ There is an implicit split in the Big Society agenda. Drawing on a Kleinian conceptual vocabulary, Big Society constitutes the *good* object that we are drawn to, whilst Broken Britain is the *bad* object that we find ourselves captured by.

best by suturing together contradictory lines of argument and emotional investments—finding what Laclau called ‘systems of equivalence’ between them’. In the remainder of this paper, I draw upon the concepts from this strand of literature to interpret some of the statements made by politicians such as David Cameron in support of Big Society.

Attractions of the agenda

What are the attractions of the Big Society agenda? Given the hostility amongst critics and cynicism, it is worth asking why politicians are prepared to mount ideological campaigns in the knowledge that they will almost certainly run up against a groundswell of cynicism and indifference? The obvious answer is that the public demands these efforts and this persistence even though it responds with incredulity. The allure of the Big Society is its *offer* of a ‘new’ way of establishing government relevance and attention in a media environment that has run on ahead of traditional forms of politics (Coudry 2011). Big Society conveys an impression that something is being done to deal with the challenges the UK faces in remaining a significant global presence and in sustaining high living standards in the face of recession, mass immigration and other challenges. In this sense, ‘Big Society’ can be viewed as a synecdoche for wider developments that are being played out in other quarters of the political world.

As I stated at the start of this paper, much of the attraction of the Big Society platform is that that it serves as a response to the societal anxiety about contemporary Britain that is prevalent throughout the community. The notion of a ‘Broken Society’ is used as a framing device to construct and sustain the imperative and mandate for reform. Consider, for example, David Cameron’s speech following the urban riots in mid August 2011

So this must be a wake-up call for our country. Social problems that have been festering for decades have exploded in our face. Now, just as people last week wanted criminals robustly confronted on our street, so they want to see these social problems taken on and defeated. Our security fightback must be matched by a social fightback. We must fight back against the attitudes and assumptions

that have brought parts of our society to this shocking state. We know what's gone wrong: the question is, do we have the determination to put it right? Do we have the determination to confront the slow-motion moral collapse that has taken place in parts of our country these past few generations? Irresponsibility. Selfishness. Behaving as if your choices have no consequences. Children without fathers. Schools without discipline. Reward without effort. Crime without punishment. Rights without responsibilities. Communities without control. Some of the worst aspects of human nature tolerated, indulged - sometimes even incentivised - by a state and its agencies that in parts have become literally demoralised. So do we have the determination to confront all this and turn it around? I have the very strong sense that the responsible majority of people in this country not only have that determination; they are crying out for their government to act upon it. And I can assure you, I will not be found wanting. In my very first act as leader of this party I signalled my personal priority: to mend our broken society. That passion is stronger today than ever.

We can note a set of discursive strategies deployed by Cameron in this extract. First, the use of the word 'we' is a form of projective identification in which the traditional divide between politicians and the public is narrowed. We can also note the tendency to evoke a multiplication of negative oppositions—'Schools without discipline. Reward without effort. Crime without punishment. Rights without responsibilities'.

Here, a set of value judgements is presented as an unproblematic, objective and urgent truth — 'social problems that have been festering for decades have exploded in our face'. As Macmillan (2013: 5) comments, the construction of Big Society relies on the creation of a 'rhetorical other' that is Big Government and Broken Britain. Postulating Big Government as a problem allows the Coalition to parade Big Society as the concomitant solution:

'Because we believe that a strong society will solve our problems more effectively than big government has or ever

will, we want the state to act as an instrument for helping to create a strong society... Our alternative to big government is the Big Society' (Cameron 2009).

The appeal of narratives

From this psychosocial lens, the Big Society can be viewed as a narrative construction. And this is the third theme I discuss: the importance of foundational stories as a form of political communication. Big Society offers a storyline that is intended to appeal to the electorate. In simple terms, the claim being made here is that a lack of individual 'responsibility' has 'broken Britain'. Cameron argues that Government policy making has contributed to this by establishing 'a welfare system that has paid people who had no intention of getting a job to stay at home'. Reform of the public services is necessary to incentivise good behaviour and to support communities to act responsibly and 'do the right thing'.

What is significant about Cameron's remarks is his attempt to project the problems of government into the civil sphere. Consider the quote set out below:

'Whatever the arguments, we all belong to the same society, and we all have a stake in making it better. There is no 'them' and 'us' – there is us. We are all in this together, and we will mend our broken society – together' (Cameron 2011).

Cameron is suggesting that the state should be active in promoting this all-for-one and one-for-all social renewal:

We need a thoughtful re-imagination of the role, as well as the size, of the state ... this means a new role for the state: actively helping to create the big society; directly agitating for, catalysing and galvanising social renewal ... We want the state to act as an instrument for helping to create a strong society (Cameron: 2009).

Critics who view the Big Society agenda as fundamentally concerned with rolling back the British welfare state have taken insufficient heed of attempts made by its proponents to reconfigure both the state and the role of politics in the post-GFC

era. Drawing upon the work of Kerr et al. (2011), I want to suggest that in addition to its ideological appeal, Big Society provides a pathway or route to reconfigure the welfare state and establish new commercial spaces for private sector and corporate interests.

The pivot of a Broken Britain

One of the appeals of Big Society is that it reduces the risk of political failure and establishes a form of state control at an arm's length. Big Society is a means by which the welfare state can be opened up to non-state actors from the commercial sectors. Essential to this narrative is the claim that the welfare state has failed. The strategic device used is the imaginary of a Broken Britain which is constructed as 'the Other' (Lacan 1977; Žižek 1989 and 2009) to denote disorder and disfunctionality both within the State and civil society and of course to frame the long decline of British influence abroad.

The narrative of a Broken Britain therefore serves as the *pivot* by which the Big Society agenda can be presented to the electorate. Broken Britain serves a valuable framing purpose as it conveys an image of disorder that invites diagnosis and remedy. The appeal of Broken Britain rests on a depiction that is understandable for media circulation. As Slater (2012: 17) writes: 'the state is making a steady switch from a remedial to a *generative* force in respect of marginality, inequality and precarity'.

A broken state and a broken people is hardly the 'totalising' reality of the current era, but it still represents a theoretically possible 'Big Other' (Lacan 1977; Žižek 1989), a terminus waiting in imagined space and time that may or may not be avoidable if current trends continue. Broken Britain is something to fear and something to seek salvation from. In short, it offers symbolic assurance in the form of an ideal, mythologized past when individuals were more community-minded. It then uses this idealisation to plot a navigable route through the framing of modern Britain as a site of societal anxiety. In the extract below, we can note how Cameron seeks to portray the state as culpable for a breakdown in social solidarity. The failure of individualistic culture, he suggests, can actually be traced back to the 'social' practices of government.

Human kindness, generosity and imagination are steadily being squeezed out by the work of the state ... state control is a substitute for moral choice and personal responsibility, obligation and duty are in danger of becoming dead concepts instead of living value systems ... What is seen as an act of solidarity, has in practice led to the greatest atomisation of our society. (David Cameron, Hugo Young Lecture, 10 November 2009)

The term 'cognitive polyphasia' (Moscovici 2000; Jovchelovitch 2002) is helpful here to note how we often desire outcomes that appear contradictory. For example, we want politicians who are strong leaders but we also require them to be consultative and in touch. Big Society manages to straddle this divide. It offers up a form of intervention that appears to be anti-bureaucratic but actually holds out the promise of a political solution to address concerns about social fragmentation. The Government have been able to take advantage of our contradictory desires in pursuing reforms that have reduced the capability of welfare and local government to assist vulnerable households (Civil exchange 2012). Consider for example the assertion in a 2010 Government report that 'only when people and communities are given more power and take more responsibility can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all' (Cabinet Office 2010).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the attraction of the Big Society agenda in an era in which the reporting of politics by the media has undergone significant change. Whilst much of the literature on Big Society has generally viewed it as a pretext for both austerity cuts and welfare reform, I have argued that it also offers the rhetorical means by which politicians can convey authority in an era of real and manufactured uncertainty. Whilst Big Society has been roundly derided, its Manichean morality tale remains convincing even as some of the traditional forms of party politics are being reshaped by a combination of neo-liberal ideology, changing media practices and globalisation processes.

What are the key conclusions that can be drawn from this discussion? One of the appeals of the Big Society agenda is that it provides a rationality that has the guise of moderation and

common sense. Whilst its rhetoric appeals to longstanding frustration about the 'iron cage' of bureaucratic government and the insularity and remoteness of politicians, its implementation is likely, as commentators have made clear, to undermine representative forms of democracy and elevate commercial interests in areas such as local government service delivery and planning.

Second, a clear logic can be discerned in the deployment of the Big Society agenda: that is, a mythologization of the past, a depiction of the present as a 'broken society' and the charting of a course that will take Britain through to an Arcadian future. This logic conforms to a narrative that has broad appeal. A belief in Big Society requires a denial or a re-inscription of the past and the failures that have beset politicians. In an era of intense media scrutiny (Yates 2010) that has been termed the mediatisation of politics, politicians feel an obligation to appear in control, and to be busily pursuing a programme of recovery and renewal.

Third, Big Society agenda has been carefully packaged as being anti-political, and it capitalises on the long held distrust of government and construes the past in a way that invites nostalgia. As I have argued, the electorate is yearning for politicians to put to rights certain seismic societal concerns that are broadly regarded as major threats to the UK social compact. In a different context, Melanie Klein (1984) used the concept of *reparation* as way to convey how individuals seek means of fixing a damaged world indirectly, through emotional adjustments. Klein's concept of reparation—some way of making amends, fixing a damaged world—provides a way of understanding the allure of Big Society. The fantasy component of Big Society resonates with large sections of the British public because it gives life to a hope that can compensate for the sense of loss and disappointment that is a feature of 'Broken Britain'.

Fourth, it may turn out that Big Society will be cast aside once Cameron resigns as leader of his party. Yet the austerity programme and restructuring of the welfare state now being pursued will be hard to reverse. The Big Society agenda has created a vocabulary for the promulgation of a neo-liberal fantasy in which social equality is disregarded as a policy objective. It

offers an idealised view of the community that disregards power and conflict.

Finally, the programme of work provides us with a setting to observe the modern forms of governmentality and the ways in which present uncertainties are projected into a future that can contain and even transmute their negative charge. In this respect, an analysis of Big Society provides insights about the conduct of neo-liberal policy making and the efforts made both to install a sense of purpose and reassert the capacity of political leaders to effect widespread social change.

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