

Big Society Speech

Monday 19 July 2010

Transcript of a speech by the Prime Minister on the Big Society, 19 July 2010.

Read the transcript:

It's great to be here in Liverpool.

I've been in Downing Street for a couple of months now and it seems to me that the business of government falls into two categories.

There are the things you do because it's your duty.

Sometimes unpopular – but you do them because it is in the national interest.

And yes, cutting the deficit falls into that camp.

But there are the things you do because it's your passion.

The things that fire you up in the morning, that drive you, that you truly believe will make a real difference to the country you love.

And my great passion is building the Big Society.

Anyone who's had even a passing interest in what I've been saying for years will know that.

It's an idea I spoke about when I ran for the leadership of the Conservative party, when I was elected, throughout all the years in opposition, during the election campaign and when I stood on the steps of Downing Street.

So I can't tell you how excited I am that, after all that talking, we're now finally doing.

And today, I want to take this opportunity to explain some of the real, practical steps that we are taking to help make the Big Society a reality.

The Big Society

But before I get into the details, let me briefly explain what the Big Society is and why it is such a powerful idea.

You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment. You can call it freedom. You can call it responsibility. I call it the Big Society.

The Big Society is about a huge culture change...

...where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace...

...don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face ...

...but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities.

It's about people setting up great new schools. Businesses helping people getting trained for work. Charities working to rehabilitate offenders.

It's about liberation –the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street.

And this is such a powerful idea for blindingly obvious reasons.

For years, there was the basic assumption at the heart of government that the way to improve things in society was to micromanage from the centre, from Westminster.

But this just doesn't work.

We've got the biggest budget deficit in the G20.

And over the past decade, many of our most pressing social problems got worse, not better.

It's time for something different, something bold – something that doesn't just pour money down the throat of wasteful, top-down government schemes.

The Big Society is that something different and bold.

It's about saying if we want real change for the long-term, we need people to come together and work together – because we're all in this together.

Making it happen

The question is: how can we build it?

Of course, there is no one lever we can pull to create the Big Society in our country.

And we shouldn't be naïve enough to think that if the government rolls back and does less, then miraculously society will spring up and do more.

The truth is that we need a government that actually helps to build up the Big Society.

This means a whole new approach to government and governing.

For a long time the way government has worked – top-down, top-heavy, controlling – has frequently had the effect of sapping responsibility, local innovation and civic action.

It has turned many motivated public sector workers into disillusioned, weary puppets of government targets.

It has turned able, capable individuals into passive recipients of state help with little hope for a better future.

It has turned lively communities into dull, soulless clones of one another.

So we need to turn government completely on its head.

The rule of this government should be this:

If it unleashes community engagement – we should do it.

If it crushes it – we shouldn't.

And these are the three big strands of the Big Society agenda.

First, social action.

The success of the Big Society will depend on the daily decisions of millions of people – on them giving their time, effort, even money, to causes around them.

So government cannot remain neutral on that – it must foster and support a new culture of voluntarism, philanthropy, social action.

Second, public service reform.

We've got to get rid of the centralised bureaucracy that wastes money and undermines morale.

And in its place we've got give professionals much more freedom, and open up public services to new providers like charities, social enterprises and private companies so we get more innovation, diversity and responsiveness to public need.

And third, community empowerment.

We need to create communities with oomph – neighbourhoods who are in charge of their own destiny, who feel if they club together and get involved they can shape the world around them.

Methods

If these are the three strands of the Big Society agenda, there are also three techniques we must use to galvanise them.

First, decentralisation.

We must push power away from central government to local government – and we shouldn't stop there.

We should drive it down even further...

...to what Phil Redmond has called the 'nano' level...

...to communities, to neighbourhoods and individuals.

Second, transparency.

It goes without saying, if we want people to play a bigger part in our society, we need to give them the information.

So, for example, by releasing the data about precisely when and where crimes have taken place on the streets...

...we can give people the power not just to hold the police to account...

...but to go even further, and take action themselves – for instance, starting a new neighbourhood watch scheme, youth club or an after-school club if they realise that's when most of the trouble begins.

Third, providing finance.

We believe in paying public service providers by results.

It encourages value for money and innovation at the same time.

But the potential problem is that you can lock smaller organisations out, because they don't have access to start-up capital.

So government has a crucial role to play in bridging the gap – and indeed, more widely, in connecting private capital to investment in social projects.

We have already said we will create a Big Society Bank to help finance social enterprises, charities and voluntary groups through intermediaries.

And I can announce today that it will be established using every penny of dormant bank and building society account money allocated to England.

These unclaimed assets, alongside the private sector investment that we will leverage, will mean that the Big Society Bank will – over time – make available hundreds of millions of pounds of new finance to some of our most dynamic social organisations.

Vanguard Communities

But today, I want to focus on the first of these techniques – the decentralisation.

When I go up and down the country and speak to council leaders, social entrepreneurs and local activists it's clear to me that there is a real hunger out there to do more – to take on more responsibility and have more control.

So I ask them: 'what powers do you want? What more do you want to be able to do?'

It's by asking those questions that you arrive at so many of this coalition's most transformative ideas.

New powers for local communities to take over the running of parks, libraries and post offices.

More powers to plan the look, size, shape and feel of housing developments.

Powers to generate their own energy and have beat meetings to hold police to account.

These ideas signal the most radical shift in power from central government to neighbourhoods.

And we're here today because we're announcing something really exciting.

Not long ago, four parts of our country – Eden Valley in Cumbria, Windsor and Maidenhead, Sutton and here in Liverpool – came to us and said: 'we want more power and control. You've spoken about it long enough. Now give it to us'.

So that's what we're going to do.

These four vanguard communities will be the great training grounds of this change...

...the first territory on which real and ultra local power is a reality – and the Big Society is built.

They are all from very different places.

Rural, suburban, urban.

They're led by different sorts of people.

Local MPs, councillors, big local leaders outside of politics like Phil Redmond.

And they've got different ideas.

From devolving budgets to street-level, to developing local transport services, taking over local assets such as a pub, piloting open-source planning, delivering broadband to local communities, generating their own energy...

...and here, in Liverpool, building a volunteer program so they can keep local museums open for longer.

But they've all got one thing in common: a firm commitment from this Government to help them realise their dreams.

To help them, we will make available officials from the Department of Communities and Local Government.

If there's a problem or obstacle or bureaucratic log-jam, they will be there, on hand, to help break them down and get things moving.

And we'll also work with communities to help identify and fund a community organiser for each area.

These will be trained people who know how to stimulate and organise local support for – and involvement in – community action.

As these four areas move ahead with their plans, yes, there will be problems – financial problems, legal problems, bureaucratic problems.

Yes, there will be objections – local objections, objections from vested interests.

But you know what?

We're happy about that.

This process is all about learning.

It's about pushing power down and seeing what happens.

It's about unearthing the problems as they come up on the ground and seeing how we can get round them.

It's about holding our hands up saying we haven't got all the answers – let's work them out, together.

It's building on what we did in opposition – where we tested local policies such as paying the public to recycle and spending transparency in Windsor and Maidenhead.

And if this approach isn't like what you've heard from government before – that's because it's not.

This is not an initiative. We have not hired a Czar. These are not 'pilots' that will be 'rolled out'.

This is a big advance for people power.

The people power I have spoken about for years.

The liberal society that Nick Clegg spoke about on Friday.

And the big change this coalition government wants to bring.

Call to arms

For years, government has been about putting up barriers to local action, loading on the bureaucracy, piling on the forms, making life so much harder for people who want to make a difference.

Today, government is saying to the people of Eden Valley, to the people of Windsor and Maidenhead, to the people of Sutton, to the people of Liverpool:

What is it that we're doing that's stopping you from doing what you want to do?

How can we stop stopping you?

And how do we stop stopping others?

But this is just the beginning.

This does not start and end with these four areas.

I want other forward-thinking, entrepreneurial, community-minded people and neighbourhoods in our country to come forward and ask for the same freedoms, the same support too.

If you've got an idea to make life better, if you want to improve your local area, don't just think about it – tell us what you want to do and we will try and give you the tools to make this happen.

I passionately believe we have begun here will spread right across our country – covering it in innovation, local inspiration and civic action.

Conclusion

It's my hope – and my mission – that when people look back at this five, ten year-period from 2010, they'll say:

'In Britain they didn't just pay down the deficit, they didn't just balance the books, they didn't just get the economy moving again, they did something really exciting in their society.'

Whether it is in building affordable housing, tackling youth unemployment, inviting charities to deliver public services...

...the people in Britain worked out the answer to the big social problems.

A big part of that answer is the Big Society.

I think we are on to a really big idea, a really exciting future for our country and today, I hope, is one more, big step towards that.