

## **Charities Parliament.**

### **How Should Churches Respond to the 'Big Society'?**

Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2010.  
Oasis House, London.

The Director of Charities Parliament (Pete Brierley) opened the event noting recent media attention due to David Cameron's re-launch of the 'Big Society' concept earlier that week.

#### **Notes from Archbishop Rowan's Keynote address:**

++R spoke on the language of the Big Society, and said that this was to be a big discussion over the next couple of years. The society that God wants is one based on people having a sense of dependence on each other. If one part of society is poor (in whatever way) it is an issue for everyone. In a good society every voice, every gift is valued.

The Archbishop allowed himself 2½ cheers when regarding the language of 'Big Society'. Christian social awareness sits between two ideologies: One extreme sees a society where the Government is expected to solve its problems; the other suggests that there is no 'society' (only 'individuals') and the role of Government is to prevent conflict. 'Big Society' seems to take seriously the concept of a just and good society where all can give and receive. There are signs of mutual sympathy and empathy in the concept that defends society from the two "toxic distortions" noted above. It raises the question: How do we define Government? Government could be defined as that which sustains the vision that communities/countries belong to each other. [ref: John Neville Figgis]. The church has got to model practical, even argumentative community. The government is there to adjust, nourish and "fiddle" to make society work: "...to make some connections and make it work." One cheer.

But is the 'Big Society' to cover spending cuts? The question that gives cause for only half a cheer. The energy is coming from the government – ie. the thinking that government solves problems and knows best. It is not the prime supplier of Social Good. 'Big Society' will need investment to maintain its quality and quantity of activity.

Another area in all this is the need to nourish certain types of people. We need to recover the concept of 'Virtue' – the 'Human Quality' that brings out courage, moderation, intelligent planning and fairness. Any future vision must include a clear sense of who we want around. Will the vision nourish the right types of people? If our society allows people to be degraded and told they are useless, this is no good. The same applies if we just give things to people; they will become dependant. Can we grow people of Virtue?

If 'Big Society' is to work, education will be key. Lateral thinking is needed as well a simply 'knowledge'. Educating people financially regarding microcredit systems, credit unions etc will also be needed. Hope for Virtue is cause for a full cheer. Virtue is learnt in "grown-up, dependable, 'thick-textured' society" such as the Christian faith believes in; one which engages with environment, family etc. People need emotional stability to grow.

There does seem to be a willingness to engage with 'Big Society' but it needs heart and conviction for society/people to change. Society will change, not by individuals changing, but by their recognition that they are impoverished when their neighbour is impoverished. A key question is: What do we owe to one another simply because they are another person?

Interdependence is fundamental and good social institutions form around that: government centralisation is a problem.

Another key question: What do we reward in our society? If what we rewarded was Virtue, our building of society would look a lot different.

So;

1 cheer for engagement that brings forward sympathy and empathy etc.

1 cheer for move towards building a better textured society.

½ cheer for not being clear about how much is about Virtue and how much is simply cost cutting.

We stand at a watershed. Tribal paradigms are looking stale. There is a chance to shift assumptions. “If churches engage and push we could be in for an interesting couple of decades.”

### **Bob Reitemeier – Chief Exec of the Children’s Society.**

Notes from his address:

There are 3 possible outcomes for ‘Big Society’;

1 – It works – Socially responsibility and community action increases, leading to consequences intended by government. [Assumes that government desires stability]

2 – It works - Socially responsibility and community action increases, leading to consequences not intended by government – leading to social revolution.

3 – ‘Big Society’ fizzles out.

A Recent Ipsos-Mori Poll about ‘Big Society’ found that people were interested in:

1 – Concept of fairness in society – the place of vulnerable and disadvantaged in society.

2 – Consultation with the public has to be genuine.

The key words in all this are: Love, Justice, and Forgiveness. Justice is love in action. Forgiveness is casting away barriers to love. With this in mind, the Children’s Society is working on the ‘Good Childhood Conversations’ that can from the Good Childhood Report. Thirty such conversations have happened so far with various groups in society.

Behavioural change needs to happen; turning discussion into action. Those involved in the ‘conversations’ are saying that ‘Other people’s children matter’ – not just their own. Changes that will allow children to be listened to are important: Eg. a group of teenagers meeting on the street need to be listened to, rather than a ‘mosquito’ system being put in to deter them from being there. Reference was made to [redeemingourcommunities.org.uk](http://redeemingourcommunities.org.uk) .[Promoting partnerships between the Church, Police and local authorities, to address the causes of crime and bring hope to local communities. – quote from website]

The key issues we must deal with:

1 – Social responsibility and community action are labour intensive: They require ‘person power’.

2 – Must address the real needs of local community.

3 – People need to feel the benefit. We don't have a strong tradition to change for the common good, only for personal benefit. Showing that the common good can lead to personal gain may be a way forward. We Christians can see a love of others as a personal benefit.

The Christian input to 'Big Society' thinking is to show help and encourage society itself to help others by:

1. Being the mature/secure people that ++Rowan mentioned in his address.
2. Engaging with micro-financing.
3. Showing what love really is.

**The Q & A session was chaired by Steve Chalke.**

Fran Beckett (Former Chief Exec of the Church Urban Fund) joined the Archbishop and Mr Reitemeier on the panel.

**Q:** (from Trevor Burns: Radio 4) When money is being handed out, should there be a distinction between those motivated by faith and those motivated to promote their faith?

**++R:** Yes, There has been some bureaucratic confusion on this subject that needs to be sorted out.

**FB:** Faiths should not expect the Right to have funding to share their faith.

**Q:** How can local churches engage with changing the narrative of government debate?

**BR:** The real debate will be at the lower level. Identify those in greatest need and work with the definition of government.

**++R:** We need to measure how we are impacting on social culture. Much good work is long term and the current governmental obsession with 'box-ticking' is not helpful.

Three questions taken together:

**Q:** How can the church engage with the white working classes and how can they [those classes] engage.

**Q:** What are the practical steps we need to take?

**Q:** Why do we feel we need government permission to start with Social Responsibility?

**++R:** 'Doing things to' people has been part of church history, and not a good part. Positive elements cross generational divides, even if it seems 'chaotic'. We need to ask: What is really needed? What is of the deep problems? An example was given where everyone in a small congregation was active on councils and socially responsible committees in their village. The church doesn't need permission to act but should ask itself if this is a new opportunity or just what we should already be doing.

**BR:** We don't need permission to act; but we might say: "I'm glad you asked that. We have an answer."

**Q:** There is a fear that 'Big Society' thinking could lead to unfairness if stronger people take over and 'smaller' people get sidelined.

**++R:** The church should be aware of this. It is one of only a few independent agencies to broker issues and ask the question about 'everybody's issues' such that people are in less

competition with each other. Whilst the church can draw people together to talk it can fear to do so. We need to be bold and realise that people expect it of us: Speaking for the voiceless. Pastoral provision is not based on financial situation. A flourishing church can be big or small in size as 'flourishing' is about its ministry, not its numerical or financial standing.

**BR:** We have the role to promote equality. Activity is not good enough unless it works towards real ends.

**Q:** Will the Church set up a 'Big Society' Fund?

**++R:** It maybe a good idea but there is probably no appetite for it. We need to put our money where it is needed. Outrageous generosity can be achieved by small and big congregations through their lives – not just their money. Are funding models of the 1980's (ref. C.U.F.) right for now? The 'Faithful Cities' report put more emphasis on brokerage.

**Q:** Who should be held accountable for the 'Big Society', and how?

**++R:** Government needs to be held accountable. It should be an issue discussed at the next election even if they have thrown down a gauntlet for us.

**BR:** We are mixing up national debt with 'Big Society'. Will 'Big Society' fade with the debt, or will it continue after the debt is gone?

**Q:** Is 'Big Society' just about getting people to do more?

**SC:** Many Christians are knackered already. Are we heading for more breakdowns?

**BR:** Christians give, and continue to raise their giving, more than average people do. So is it about those who give to give more, or more about encouraging those who currently don't do anything?

**++R:** Need to re-educate society about volunteering.

**FB:** The tradition was that non-working females did a lot of volunteering. There is a need to look at why, not just how, young people get involved with volunteering. If it is just about volunteering to 'do what's needed' it will fail.

**Q:** If all this comes about: What will the church of the 'Big Society' [era] look like?

**BR:** Virtual. It will not be the building. You will find it where it is needed. It will be a diverse population, not enclosed in a Christian community.

**FB:** It would take different forms in different communities. It will be out there, listening, working with passion of vision for interdependence whether the congregation be 60 or 600 in number.

**++R:** It will be a church which tries to make sure its own people have capacity to be part of the community wherever it's moving. It needs to be patient in a 'quick-fix' society, for there are no quick-fixes. It needs to be serious about the worth and value of small things, and maturely trust the energy of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

The Director of Charities Parliament closed the meeting with a reminder of St. Paul's exhortation to be subject to one another.

**Notes by:** Revd Robert Hill, Social Responsibility Adviser. 26<sup>th</sup> July 2010.