

What is social justice? And what is the Big Society?

Edited notes of the presentation by John Vincent at Umbrella, Hatfield, 12 July 2011

What is social justice?

There is no agreed definition! Why?

It may be because social justice is seen as being about redistribution of wealth – and therefore ‘left-wing’:

“To pursue social justice is to believe that society can be reshaped – its major social and political institutions changed – so that each person gets a fair share of the benefits ... Neo-liberals reject this idea because they believe it is destructive of a free market economy”¹

We decided to use the excellent straightforward definition from the Welsh Assembly Government:

“Social Justice is about every one of us having the chances and opportunities to make the most of our lives and use our talents to the full.”²

Incidentally, social justice has been the preferred term for this area of work in Scotland since the start (rather than talking about ‘inclusion’, ‘exclusion’ or ‘cohesion’).

When we wrote our book³, John Pateman and I saw that terms such as ‘social exclusion’ were not likely to remain under a new Government, and so chose to use ‘social justice’ as we wanted to use a term that was not going to disappear immediately – the Coalition Government is still working very closely with the Centre for Social Justice⁴.

And what is the Big Society?

This too does not have an agreed definition, so I am therefore going to use the definitions I downloaded from the Cabinet Office website⁵ yesterday!

There are three elements to the Big Society:

- Community empowerment: “giving local councils and neighbourhoods more power to take decisions and shape their area”
- Opening up public services: “our public service reforms will enable charities, social enterprises, private companies and employee-owned co-operatives to compete to offer people high quality services”
- Social action: “encouraging and enabling people to play a more active part in society”.

Community empowerment, involving more and more people in their communities, and engaging people in, for example, the political process are all laudable aims. However, is this really going to work, or is the call to “open up” public services really just an invitation to the private sector?

There is a number of Big Society programmes which give more of an indication of how this all might develop. These are:

- The Big Society Bank – to be established from dormant bank accounts in order to fund social enterprises, charities and voluntary organisations. However, according to a speaker in the previous session⁶, this is going to take some seven years to set up!
- National Citizen Service Pilots – these aim to “bring 16 year olds from different backgrounds together over the summer to take part in residential and home-based activities such as outdoor challenges and local community projects.” However, questions are now being asked about the cost of the scheme
...⁷
- Community Organisers – at least 5000 Community Organisers are to be trained, yet there are doubts that the number of volunteers required can actually be found⁸

- Community First – “a new fund that will encourage social action through new and existing neighbourhood groups. The fund will empower people in areas with high levels of deprivation and enable them to take more responsibility for their communities.”

Yet there is also growing criticism of the Big Society, and the thinktank ippr has just published an article⁹, “The Big Con”, by Henry Tam (formerly Head of the Civil Renewal Unit, DCLG) which takes a critical look and also suggests a way of reframing the discussion in order to tackle disempowerment.

We are now going to look at what these two issues mean for libraries – particularly focusing on the idea of needs-based services.

¹ Miller, David, 'What is social justice?', in N. Pearce & W. Paxton (ed.) *Social justice: building a fairer Britain*. pp. 3-20. London: Politico's Publishing, 2005.

² See: <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/socialjustice/?lang=en>.

³ John Pateman and John Vincent, *Public libraries and social justice*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010.

⁴ See: <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/>.

⁵ See: www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/content/big-society-overview.

⁶ “Big Society, Big Opportunity: the response of government information professionals to the Coalition’s agenda for the public sector”, Government Information Group.

⁷ “National Citizen Service ‘too expensive’”, *The Guardian* 23 June 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/jun/23/national-citizen-service-too-expensive-mps>.

⁸ See, for example: Joe Saxton, “Who volunteers? Volunteering trends based on government data: 2001-2010 – a briefing from nfpSynergy”, 2011, http://www.seapn.org.uk/content_files/files/government_volunteering_trends_2001_2010.ppt.

⁹ Henry Tam, 'The Big Con: reframing the state/society debate', *Public Policy Research* **18** (1), March-May 2011, 30-40.