

From Modernisation to Big Society: Continuity and Change in Social Work in the United Kingdom

De la modernización a la Gran Sociedad: continuidades y cambios en el Trabajo Social en el Reino Unido

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Abstract

In this paper, I will explore developments in social work in the United Kingdom since the formation of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in May 2010. I will argue that the period since then has been characterised by elements both of continuity and change: continuity in that the neoliberal assumptions which underpinned New Labour's approach to social work continue to inform the approach of the Coalition; change, in that there is evidence of a more vigorous anti-statist rhetoric, reflected both in a critique of "bureaucracy" and also in the promotion of the Big Society as an all-embracing ideological framework. Against those who see the Big Society project as providing an opportunity for the emergence of a more progressive social work, I will argue that its primary rationale is to shift responsibility from the welfare state onto individuals and communities. The final part of the paper will explore some of the implications of the Big Society approach for social work and social care, through consideration of the policies of personalisation, localism and "open public services".

Keywords: neoliberalism, modernisation, Big Society, responsibility, austerity

Summary: Introduction. 1. Modernising Social Services: Social Work under New Labour 1997-2010. 2. The Big Society. 3. From Broken Society to Big Society. 4. Social Work in the Big Society. 5. Conclusion. 6. References.

Resumen¹

En el desarrollo del Trabajo Social en el Reino Unido, Harris y White identifican características comunes del neoliberalismo en el mismo bajo los gobiernos conservadores y laboristas (el nuevo laborismo), como son: la subcontratación de los servicios del sector público a las organizaciones privadas y voluntarias, la aplicación de valores y prioridades del sector privado a las organizaciones del sector público, sobre todo las tres «es»: economía, eficiencia y eficacia (Audit Commission, 1983) y el énfasis en la función clave de la gestión como una disciplina inequívoca para mejorar el rendimiento y la eficiencia (Harris y White, 2009, pp. 5-6).

Sin embargo, junto a estos rasgos comunes existen algunos aspectos específicos en la etapa del nuevo laborismo, que incluyen: un énfasis en la medición del rendimiento profesional y de los servicios, tales como objetivos e indicadores de rendimiento, con la nueva creación de organismos de control e inspección encargados de velar por que se cumplan estos objetivos; una mayor incorporación del uso de tecnologías de la información y la comunicación (TICs) y, supuestamente, un «enfoque no ideológico del bienestar» que se asienta en la noción de la práctica basada en la evidencia (Webb, 2006). Este énfasis en la gestión del rendimiento implica el protagonismo del elemento clave del proyecto del Nuevo Laborismo que ha sido la «modernización de los servicios sociales» y la opinión de que no se puede confiar sólo en los trabajadores sociales para ofertar servicios de calidad.

El alcance que estas medidas ha tenido en la mejora de la calidad del Trabajo Social en el Reino Unido es una cuestión todavía por determinar. En relación con la gestión del rendimiento, por ejemplo, ahora hay una cantidad considerable de investigaciones empíricas y de informes oficiales que sugieren que el acento que se puso en la última década en los objetivos establecidos e impuestos desde arriba y con un seguimiento estructurado a través de un estricto régimen de regulación e inspección, a menudo ha dado lugar a una práctica profesional mecanicista y defensiva. Según un reciente informe encargado por el gobierno, titulado *Revisión de la protección de la infancia en Inglaterra*, el establecimiento de la gestión del rendimiento ha tenido profundas implicaciones en la ética de la práctica profesional. En palabras de Munro, poner excesivo énfasis en la preparación de las personas para realizar inspecciones y para alcanzar objetivos e indicadores de resultados ha llevado a una situación en la que el sistema ha focalizado la preocupación de las personas en «hacer las cosas bien» en lugar de en «hacer lo correcto» (Munro, 2010, p. 14).

¹ Los artículos que figuran en lengua original contarán con resúmenes más amplios en español.

Otro elemento clave del Nuevo Laborismo sobre la modernización de Trabajo Social está basado en involucrar cada vez más a los profesionales para que incorporen de manera ineludible las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación (TICs). De este modo en el sistema de protección de la infancia, los trabajadores sociales deben dedicar entre un 60 y un 80 por ciento de su tiempo de trabajo a la introducción de datos en los sistemas de información, lo que no parece que sea la mejor forma de utilizar el tiempo de un profesional y, desde luego, está muy lejos de poder recurrir a los aspectos relacionales que constituyen la esencia de la actuación del Trabajo Social, que ha sido lo que prioritariamente, ha atraído a muchos trabajadores sociales a la profesión (White, Wastell, Broadhurst y Hall, 2010).

Por todo ello, ha habido un considerable descontento en la profesión sobre la forma en que el Nuevo Laborismo introdujo en su agenda la modernización del Trabajo Social, que ha sido vivida como un debilitamiento, tanto de los valores fundamentales de la profesión como de los aspectos terapéuticos y humanísticos, del Trabajo Social y que la ha reducido a una profesión puramente técnica «sin valores». Además, los trabajadores sociales fueron excluidos de gran parte de las iniciativas del Nuevo Laborismo para combatir la pobreza, tales como: el programa *Sure Start* para los niños y las familias y las diversas iniciativas del New Deal (Jordan y Jordan, 2001).

En este contexto el actual partido conservador, con Cameron como primer ministro, ha insistido, en que la existencia en el Reino Unido de un egoísmo creciente, el individualismo y el aumento de los niveles de desigualdad no se deben —apunta— a las políticas neoliberales aplicadas por los gobiernos conservadores y por el Nuevo Laborismo en los últimos treinta años, sino a la existencia de un «Gran Estado», sobre todo entre 1997 y 2010. En el nuevo laborismo: «se da una preocupante paradoja y es que con el crecimiento reciente del Estado con su efecto en la responsabilidad personal y social, ha promovido en lugar de solidaridad social, egoísmo e individualismo» (Cameron, 2009).

Frente al «Gran Estado», al *Big State*, Cameron ha contrapuesto la idea de la «Gran Sociedad», la *Big Society*, cuyo objetivo es «quitarle el poder a los políticos y dárselo a la gente». En esta perspectiva se alinean algunos destacados académicos de Trabajo Social que normalmente no simpatizan con las políticas conservadoras, en particular, Bill Jordan (Jordan, 2011). En un artículo reciente, Jordan ha interpretado la idea de Gran Sociedad sobre todo como una respuesta al enfoque gestor que el Nuevo Laborismo había atribuido al Trabajo Social y considera que ofrece a la profesión una oportunidad para volver a conectar con la perspectiva moral (en lugar de la tecnocrática).

Aunque la crítica a la filosofía tecnocrática del Nuevo Laborismo es un elemento del discurso de la Gran Sociedad, sin embargo es un error, verlo como el principal elemento. Lo que le preocupa más bien a Cameron son aquellos que se encuentran en el extremo opuesto de la sociedad que, ya sea por la edad, discapacidad o desempleo, dependen en mayor o menor grado del Estado de bienestar. En ese sentido, la Gran Sociedad es una continuación de su tesis precedente, y la respuesta a ella, a que Gran Bretaña es una «sociedad rota» (*Broken Society*), rota no por las políticas monetaristas de la década de 1980 de los gobiernos conservadores que cerraron grandes sectores de la industria, destruyendo comunidades de clase obrera y dejando a millones de personas sin empleo y sin esperanza (Davies, 1998), sino por la irresponsabilidad de los pobres y su incapacidad para romper con la dependencia del bienestar.

La idea de la «Gran Sociedad» es un importante programa de cambio estructural que apunta a revertir el Estado de bienestar de la posguerra. La idea clave es relevar al Estado de la responsabilidad de satisfacer las necesidades y gestionar los riesgos que los individuos no pueden hacer frente por sí solos.

¿Cuáles son, entonces, las implicaciones de la perspectiva de la Gran Sociedad para el Trabajo Social en el Reino Unido? Se consideran sucintamente tres elementos: personalización, empoderamiento de las comunidades y fomento de la acción social y apertura de los servicios públicos (HM, Government, 2010). El primer aspecto se refiere a la política de proporcionar a las personas una suma de dinero (conocido como un pago directo o presupuestario individual o personal) para que puedan comprar su propia atención en el mercado. Una segunda línea del proyecto «Gran Sociedad» consiste en otorgar a los consejos locales y a los barrios más poder para tomar decisiones, pero en el marco de la austeridad y recortes económicos actuales muchas organizaciones de beneficencia y de voluntariado locales, vistos por el Gobierno como la columna vertebral del proyecto de Gran Sociedad, dependen en gran medida de la financiación de las autoridades locales, que han sido las principales víctimas de estos recortes. El tercer aspecto se centra en abrir todos los servicios públicos (con excepción del sistema judicial y los servicios de seguridad) a la competencia de «cualquier otro proveedor calificado». La externalización de servicios, en pocas palabras, se convertirá en la posición a seguir por defecto. Desde finales de 1980, las políticas de los gobiernos, tanto conservadores como del nuevo laborismo, se han basado en la creencia de que la competencia es la mejor garantía de la calidad de los servicios públicos. Sin embargo, en este ámbito ocurre lo mismo que en el de la aplicación de la gestión del rendimiento, que se mencionó anteriormente: hay poca evidencia de que la «cultura del contrato» que se ha desarrollado haya producido como resultado una mejora de la calidad de la atención. Por el contrario, sobre todo en el Tercer Sector, con frecuencia ha conducido a una «carretera a la baja» entre las organizaciones que compiten para ganar contratos (Cunningham y James, 2007).

Si se tiene en cuenta el contexto de austeridad prolongada, además del aumento de la privatización de los servicios de asistencia social, es difícil sentirse optimistas ante el futuro del Trabajo Social en el Reino Unido. Sin embargo, se vislumbra un rayo de esperanza con el desarrollo, en los últimos años, de la creciente oposición a la agenda neoliberal, dentro del Trabajo Social, entre los profesionales, estudiantes, académicos y usuarios de los servicios, que se refleja tanto en un renovado interés por la tradición del Trabajo Social radical, como por el surgimiento de organizaciones, como la Red de Trabajo de Acción Social, la *Social Work Action Network*. Estos desarrollos son aún frágiles, pero la historia del Trabajo Social sugiere que, cuando los trabajadores sociales son capaces de conectarse con movimientos sociales más amplios, no sólo están en mejores condiciones para defender los servicios en los que sus clientes confían, sino también, su práctica se enriquece y transforma con este contacto. Cada vez son mayores las luchas en toda Euro-

pa contra las medidas de austeridad que socavarán aún más la calidad de vida de las personas más pobres y vulnerables de la sociedad e indican que no faltarán oportunidades para que se lleve a cabo este tipo de conexiones.

Palabras clave: neoliberalismo, modernización, Gran Sociedad, responsabilidad pública, austeridad

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Sumario: Introducción. 1. Modernización de los Servicios Sociales: Trabajo Social bajo el Nuevo Laborismo 1997-2010. 2. La «Gran Sociedad». 3. De la «Sociedad Rota» a la «Gran Sociedad». 4. Trabajo Social en la «Gran Sociedad». 5. Conclusión. 6. Referencias bibliográficas.

Introduction

More than three years have now passed since the collapse of the US investment bank Lehman Brothers in September 2008 turned what until then had seemed to many observers to be a financial crisis mainly confined to the US housing market into what is now by common consent the deepest crisis of global capitalism since the 1920s (Callinicos, 2010). Three observations can be made about developments since 2008. Firstly, initial expectations that the crisis would be short-lived and that the world economy would soon return to 'business as usual' have proved to be wildly over-optimistic. In a discussion of the factors contributing to this lack of recovery, Callinicos suggests that:

[T]he reality is that the world economy is still deeply constrained by the effects simultaneously of the crisis and of the measures taken to prevent it becoming worse. The financial bubble that precipitated the crisis was driven by massive borrowing by states, banks and individual households. All are now trying to borrow less and save more. Since higher saving reduces effective demand for goods and services, the economic consequences are negative (Callinicos, 2011, p. 5).

The second notable feature of the situation since 2008 is that the uniform response of national governments in the West, encouraged by major global financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank, can be summed up in one word: austerity. In Britain, for example, within a few months of coming to office in May

2010 the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government implemented cuts of £81 billion, £18 billion of which came directly from welfare, far exceeding the cuts to public services imposed by the Thatcher governments of the 1980s (Brewer and Browne, 2010). The result is that in Britain as in Greece, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, and elsewhere, it is ordinary citizens – and often the most vulnerable of them – who are being forced to pay for the crisis through the kind of cuts in services and wholesale privatisation of public utilities previously associated with the Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed by the International Monetary Fund during the 1990s on countries in the Global South (Stiglitz, 2002).

The argument has not gone solely in one direction, however, for the third feature of the crisis is the resistance to which these austerity measures have given rise. Both Greece and Spain, for example, have witnessed youth protest on a scale not seen since the 1970s, with Greece also experiencing an unprecedented series of general strikes. The effects of the crisis (including rising prices and unemployment) were also a contributory factor to the 'North African Spring' of 2011, while in Britain an explosion of student protest at the end of 2010 against increases in student fees and cuts to student benefits was followed by a half-million strong trade union demonstration in early 2011 followed by significant strike action against government attacks on workers' pensions in June of that year (Callinicos and Jones, 2011).

These three developments provide the context for a discussion of the personal social

services in Britain following the election of the Coalition government in May 2010. A central argument of the paper will be that the period since then has been marked by both continuity and change: continuity in that, despite the crisis of global capitalism, the neoliberal assumptions that underpinned social work under previous New Labour governments continue to inform the approach of the Coalition; change, in that the promotion of neoliberalism now takes place within a new ideological framework – the Big Society.

I will begin by locating social work in the UK in its recent policy context, the ‘modernisation’ of social work under the New Labour governments of 1997 to 2010 (Harris and White, 2009). Here as elsewhere in the paper, the main focus of the paper will be on adult social care, in part because social work in the UK is now too fragmented to address all areas of practice but also because this is where some of the most significant policy developments have taken place. The next part of the paper will critically examine the Big Society, the Coalition’s governing idea, and will seek to identify its underpinning rationale. Some social work commentators not normally sympathetic to Conservative policies have suggested that the project has the potential to allow social work to re-connect with some elements from its more progressive past. In the final part of the paper, I shall challenge that suggestion through a consideration of three key strands of the Big Society project: personalisation, localism and ‘open services’.

One caveat is necessary. I have referred above to ‘social work in the UK’. Since 1999, responsibility for certain areas of government in the UK including education, health, social work and social care has been devolved to local Parliaments (or Assemblies) in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In some cases, this has led to significant policy divergence. In Scotland, for example, while operating within a broadly neo-liberal economic framework, the governing party (the Scottish National Party) has sometimes pursued a more social democratic, less market-driven approach than the other main parties, including the Labour Party. Similarly, the main policy framework for the development of social work (Scottish Executive, 2006) is different from the English

framework. While it would be wrong to overstate the extent of this divergence and while there remain similarities in social work policy and practice throughout the UK, in some cases the differences are important and, where relevant, will be mentioned in the paper (other than developments in Wales and Northern Ireland, of which I am not sufficiently well-informed).

1. Modernising Social Services: Social Work under New Labour 1997-2010

The creation of a ‘social work business’ (Harris, 2003) in British social work, in the sense of the application of market disciplines to social welfare, did not begin with the New Labour governments of 1997-2010. It began some years earlier with the creation by their Conservative predecessors of a market (or ‘quasi-market’) in social care based on a split between local authorities, re-cast as ‘purchasers’ of services, and a provider or ‘independent’ sector, made up of voluntary and private organisations. Nevertheless, despite New Labour’s initial ‘Third Way’ rhetoric, it quickly became clear that its leadership shared many of the same neo-liberal assumptions as their predecessors, above all in their commitment to bringing the British economy (and the British workforce) into line with the requirements of a globalised economy (Callinicos, 2001).

Harris and White identify common features of neo-liberalism in social work under Conservative and New Labour governments as the contracting out (or ‘out-sourcing’) of services from the public sector to private and voluntary organisations; applying private sector values and priorities to public sector organisations, above all the ‘3 e’s’ of economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Audit Commission, 1983); and an emphasis on the key role of management as a distinct discipline in improving performance and efficiency (Harris and White, 2009, pp. 5-6).

Alongside these common features, however, were some distinctly New Labour twists. These included an emphasis on performance measures, such as targets and performance indicators, with newly-created regulation and inspection bodies responsible for ensuring that these targets were met;

greater reliance of the use of information and communication technology (ICT); and a supposedly 'non-ideological' approach to welfare, based on the notion of evidence-based practice (Webb, 2006). Implicit within the emphasis on performance management, the central element of New Labour's project of 'modernising social services', was the view that social workers could not be trusted to deliver quality services.

The extent to which these measures have actually improved the quality of social work in the UK is open to question. In relation to performance management, for example, there is now a considerable body of research evidence and official reports which suggests that the emphasis over the past decade on centrally-defined targets, imposed from above and policed through a strict regime of regulation and inspection, has often given rise to mechanistic and defensive practice. According to a recent government-commissioned Review of Child Protection in England:

A dominant theme in the criticisms of current practice is the skew in priorities that has developed between the demands of the management and inspection processes and professionals' ability to exercise their professional judgement and act in the best interests of the child. This has led to an over-standardised system that cannot respond adequately to the varied range of children's needs (Munro, 2010, p. 5)

Similar views were expressed by experienced workers in Scotland interviewed by the author in 2009. One commented:

We live in a performance framework where outcomes have to be seen to be measured. I think we all know that outcomes are really very, very difficult to measure but nevertheless they are measured, a lot of them are measured in such meaningless ways (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009, p. 69).

For practitioners, the implications of performance management for ethical practice have been profound. In Munro's useful phrase, an over-arching emphasis on preparing for inspections and on meeting targets and performance indicators has led to a situation where the system has become preoccupied by individuals 'doing things right' rather than 'doing the right thing' (Munro, 2010, p. 14).

Another key element of New Labour's modernisation of social work involved increasing reliance on information and communication technology (ICT). While 'Old Labour' approaches to service delivery were portrayed (or caricatured) as being bureaucratic, hierarchical, centralised and inefficient, by contrast services based around ICT were seen as being more accessible to clients (or customers), offered greater opportunities for standardisation and, not least, 'modern' in their use of state of the art technologies. As Coleman has argued, however, in a study of the use of social work call (or contact) centres in one area of England, it is misleading to portray the use of ICT as simply the extension of a neutral technology in the interest of greater customer access. Rather:

The use of ICT as an aspect of managerialism is not 'neutral'; it is a reflection of the economic trends, cultural influences and power relations in which it exists (Harlow, 2003, p17). Its adoption occurred in a context in which managerialism had already fundamentally changed the way in which the public sector was organised and managed, through the introduction of private sector management practices (Coleman, 2009, p. 33).

These technologies are also not neutral in a second sense. A study of one computerised assessment framework, the Children's Assessment Framework (CAF), in children and families teams in England following the death of a child at the hands of her carers found the structure of the CAF disrupted what the researchers described as 'the temporal and narrative display of information' (White, Hall and Peckover, 2009). There were no opportunities for the writer to provide a chronological perspective on the case or their involvement, nor to tell a story or characterize the child or parent.

Another finding by White and her colleagues –and one which provoked a good deal of media coverage– was that one commonly-used type of software, the Integrated Children's System, required workers to spend between 60 and 80 per cent of an average day inputting data into their computers, hardly the best use of the time of a professional worker and far removed from

the kind of relationship-based work which attracted many workers to the profession in the first place (White, Wastell, Broadhurst, and Hall, 2010).

Tapping into widespread dissatisfaction with New Labour's 'top-down' management approach and the sense of powerlessness experienced by front-line professionals was an important element in the Conservative Party's 2010 election strategy, above all as expressed in the idea of the Big Society, and it to a consideration of that idea and its implications for social work and social care that we shall now turn.

2. The Big Society

For rather obvious reasons, the election of a Conservative Government has not always been welcomed by the social work community in the UK. In the past, not only has it often presaged an attack on the living standards of some of the poorest sections of the community, most obviously under the governments of Margaret Thatcher after 1979, but in addition Conservative governments have traditionally been less than sympathetic to social work as a profession, often seeing social workers as overly ideological (in the sense of 'political correctness') and too sympathetic to 'less deserving' groups within the community, such as lone parents, asylum seekers and young offenders.

For several reasons, however, the response of at least some parts of the profession to the outcome of the 2010 General Election has been more ambivalent. Firstly, as no party succeeded in gaining an overall majority, the Conservatives now govern as part of a Coalition with the Liberal Democrats, many of whose supporters are people who would see themselves as being politically to the Left of New Labour (and many of whom, not surprisingly, were therefore dismayed when their Party leadership chose to govern jointly with the Conservatives). The involvement of the Liberal-Democrats as a junior partner in government is seen by some as a restraining influence on the right-wing of the Conservative Party. Secondly, as I have argued above, there was considerable unhappiness within the profession about the way in which New Labour's modernisation agenda was seen as undermining both the value base and the

therapeutic/humanistic face of social work, reducing it to a technical, 'value-free' occupation. In addition, social workers were largely excluded from New Labour's initiatives to address poverty, such as the Sure Start programme for children and families and the various New Deal initiatives (Jordan and Jordan, 2001). Thirdly, and most importantly, the Conservative Party under David Cameron sought to present itself to the electorate as a very different beast from the party led by Margaret Thatcher (dubbed 'the nasty party' by one of its leading spokespersons). Unusually for Conservative Party leaders, for example, Cameron was vocal in deploring materialism and the decline in community, emphasising instead the need to prioritise national happiness and well-being (Cameron, cited in Jordan, 2007, p. viii). Many of these themes came together in the idea of the Big Society.

The idea was first presented by Cameron in a public lecture in 2009 and developed in a series of speeches over the next year, where he described it as 'his great passion' (Cameron, 2009). While criticised both then and now by media commentators and others (including members of his own Party) for being vague and nebulous, in fact at its heart there is a clear theme, involving a critique of 'the Big State' and its alleged role in undermining personal responsibility. In his 2009 lecture, having paid the necessary homage to the post-war welfare state, Cameron continued:

But as the state continued to expand, it took away from people more and more things that they should and could be doing for themselves, their families and their neighbours. Human kindness, generosity and imagination are steadily being squeezed out by the work of the state. The result is that today, the character of our society - and indeed the character of some people themselves, as actors in society - is changing. There is less expectation to take responsibility, to work, to stand by the mother of your child, to achieve, to engage with your local community, to keep your neighbourhood clean, to respect other people and their property, to use your own discretion and judgement. Why? Because today the state is ever-present: either doing it for you, or telling you how to do it, or making sure you're doing it their way (Cameron, 2009).

With what might be seen as breath-taking audacity, Cameron also sought to place the blame for increased selfishness, individualism and increased levels of inequality not on the neoliberal policies pursued by both Conservative and New Labour governments over the previous thirty years, but rather on the 'Big State', especially under the 1997-2010 New Labour governments:

There is a worrying paradox that because of its effect on personal and social responsibility, the recent growth of the state has promoted not social solidarity, but selfishness and individualism (Cameron, 2009).

To this Big State, Cameron counterposed the idea of the Big Society, whose goal was to 'take power away from politicians and give it to the people:

It is about liberation – the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman in the street (Cameron, 2009).

Since first mooted by Cameron, there have been three broad responses to the Big Society idea: firstly, widespread scepticism, a suspicion that the idea is little more than warm words which lack any real substance; secondly, a view that the Big Society is no more than a cover for cuts (Toynbee, 2010; Holman, 2011); thirdly, a more sympathetic response which sees Cameron's idea as an attempt to address genuine issues of community breakdown, low levels of happiness and well-being in British society. Interestingly, amongst those who have been prepared to engage with the idea in this third way are some leading social work academics who are not normally sympathetic to Conservative policies, notably Bill Jordan (Jordan, 2011). In a recent paper, Jordan has interpreted the Big Society idea as being above all a response to New Labour's managerial approach to social work and one which provides the profession with an opportunity to re-connect with a moral (as opposed to a technocratic) agenda. The rationale for the Big Society, he suggests, is two-fold:

On the one hand, it offers to deliver citizens from the technocratic formalism of the new

public services, with their obsessions about rules, systems and checklists; it invites participation, enthusiasm and commitment. On the other, it promises to restore to professionals the power to exercise judgement, critique and expertise – to take back decision-making from the government, managers and inspectors (Jordan, 2011, p. 3).

More fundamentally, he suggests, the Big Society poses the question of what social services are really about. New Labour reduced everything to a network of incentives and contracts which sought to steer people's behaviour, without engaging them morally. By contrast, he suggests: "The Big Society is an attempt to reinstate moral (in place of contractual) regulation, in at least part of this field" (Jordan, 2011, p. 4).

3. From Broken Society to Big Society

Is Jordan correct then to portray the Big Society in this positive light? Does it, as some other radical commentators have also suggested, offer an opportunity for social work to reconnect with its core values (Beresford, 2010)? Widespread dissatisfaction with a technocratic approach to welfare is undoubtedly one element of Cameron's critique and one reason, for example, why the Coalition Government has been prepared to continue the process of social work reform initiated by the previous New Labour government. To date, changes initiated by the Social Work Reform Board have included the establishment of a new College of Social Work, intended to represent the profession as a whole; the introduction of a probationary period for social workers; and new professional standards for workers and employers (Social Work Reform Board, 2011). (These reforms apply only in England and Wales).

That the Coalition Government should have found it possible to support this reform process, however, is perhaps not so surprising. A critique which locates the problems of contemporary social work not, as critical commentators have argued, in the market-driven agenda of the past two decades but rather in 'bureaucracy' and red tape is one which sits easily with the anti-statist rhetoric of the Big Society (DE, 2011). Also less than

surprising is the fact that the Coalition's main proposal for the reduction of such bureaucracy and red tape is the creation of Social Work Practices, operating outside local authority structures:

Social Work Practices (SWP) are one example of running mainstream social care functions differently. They are professional partnerships of social workers, voluntary sector organisations and private sector organisations independent of the council that operate as social enterprises (DH, 2010, p. 36)

While some social work organisations have welcomed SWPs as a means of reducing bureaucracy and empowering front-line workers, others have argued that not only do they 'tilt the balance of social work' in the direction of the private sector (Garrett, 2009) but arguably they will actually replicate much of the bureaucracy of local authority social work (Cardy, 2010, p. 439).

While the critique of New Labour's technocratic ethos is one element of the Big Society discourse, however, it is wrong to see it as the main element. Rather, as the quote from his 2009 lecture shows, Cameron's primary concern is with the relationship between individuals and the State and above all, with the alleged role of that State in creating dependency and undermining responsibility. His is, however, a rather selective view of dependency and responsibility. He makes no reference, for example, to those highly-paid bankers whose reckless and irresponsible behaviour contributed to the creation of a global economic crisis in 2008, resulting in their having to be bailed out by that same 'Big State' (Mason, 2009). Rather, Cameron's concern is with those at opposite end of society who, whether through age, disability or unemployment, rely to a greater or lesser degree on the welfare state. In that sense, the Big Society is a continuation of, and response to, his earlier thesis that Britain is a 'Broken Society', broken not by the monetarist policies of 1980s Conservative Governments which closed whole swathes of industry, destroying working-class communities and leaving millions unemployed and without hope (Davies, 1998) but rather by the fecklessness

of the poor and their inability to break out of dependence on welfare. Writing in the Daily Mail in December 2008, for example, he argued:

How can Gordon Brown [the then British Prime Minister] argue that people who talk about a broken society are wrong? These children suffered at the very sharpest end of our broken society but all over the country are other young victims too. Children whose toys are dad's discarded drink bottles; whose role models are criminals, liars and layabouts; whose innocence is lost before their first milk tooth. What chance for these children? Raised without manners, morals or a decent education. They're caught up in the same destructive chain as their parents. It's a chain that links unemployment, family breakdown, debt, drugs and crime (Cameron, 2008).

It is a familiar right-wing diatribe, reminiscent of much underclass theory of the 1980s, and one which conveniently blames the poor for their poverty. As we have argued previously, it is also wrong in all of its key assertions (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2009). In terms of the present discussion, however, far from the Big Society idea representing a break with, or rejection of, this worldview, it is more accurately seen as a development of it, as an attempt to weaken and undermine the popular expectation that citizens can look to the welfare state for support when they are sick, unemployed or elderly and instead to shift responsibility from state to individual. As Coote has rightly argued:

Beneath its seductive language about giving more power to citizens, the 'Big Society' is a major programme of structural change that aims to overturn the post-war welfare state. The key idea is to divest the state of responsibility for meeting needs and managing risks that individuals cannot cope with alone. Functions that have been funded through taxes and carried out by publicly owned bodies for more than sixty years are to be transferred to 'civil society' and exercised through self-help, mutual aid, charity, philanthropy, local enterprise and big business (Coote, 2011, p. 82).

4. Social Work in the Big Society

What then are the implications of the Big Society approach for social work in the UK?

Here three key elements of that approach will be briefly considered: personalisation; empowering communities and encouraging social action; and opening up public services (HM Government, 2010).

4.1. Personalisation: empowering service users or transferring risk?

Personalisation (or Self Directed Support, as it is known in Scotland) refers to the policy of providing individuals with a sum of money (known as a direct payment or individual/personal budget) to allow them to purchase their own care on the market. While it is an approach initially pioneered by disability activists in the Independent Living Movement in the 1980s and 1990s as a means of escaping paternalist services (Campbell and Oliver, 1996; Slorach, 2011), the fact that it is also compatible with a neoliberal consumerism which constructs service users as rational customers has made it popular with both Conservative and New Labour governments since the mid-1990s (Ferguson, 2007). In an example of the policy continuity noted earlier in this paper, personalisation is now promoted by the Coalition as a key element of the Big Society agenda, since it involves shifting responsibility from the State to the individual service user (DH, 2010).

Personalisation has been promoted both north and south of the border as offering a new philosophy for social work. The reality, however, is proving to be rather different. A study conducted by researchers at the University of Strathclyde, for example, found that a major concern of the social care workers whom they interviewed related to the context of austerity in which personalisation is being implemented and the suspicion that the progressive rhetoric of choice and control associated with the policy is being used as a cover for cuts (Cunningham and Nickson, 2011). That concern also appeared to underlie a steep fall in support for personalisation in a survey of social workers conducted by *Community Care* magazine in 2011. Thus, while those questioned were supportive of the goals of personalisation, only 41 per cent of respondents believed that personal budgets would benefit users in the medium to long-term (down from 66 per cent in 2009).

4.2. Empowering Communities?

A second strand of the Big Society project involves 'giving local councils and neighbourhoods more power to take decisions and shape their area'. On the one hand, there involves the apparent re-discovery of community development, reflected, for example, in the proposal to employ five thousand community organisers in England (Cameron, 2010). This emphasis on community has been welcomed by some commentators who have seen it as providing social workers with an opportunity to move away from the narrow, individualised care management approaches which have dominated British social work for the past two decades and to re-connect with a community social work approach which has all but disappeared from contemporary education and practice (Beresford, 2010). While in principle opportunities to re-connect with more collective approaches should be welcomed, here too, as with personalisation, it is impossible to ignore the context of austerity in which such initiatives are being promoted. Many charities and voluntary organisations (including youth services), seen by the Government as the backbone of the Big Society project, depend heavily on local authority funding and have been among the main victims of these cuts (Kane and Allen, 2011). Given that weakening of community capacity, it is difficult to see how community development in this context can take anything but the most highly conservative form, aimed at getting the poorest communities to pull themselves up by their own boot-straps.

The second aspect of this emphasis on community involves the promotion of 'localism', with a new Bill proposing to give councils powers to buy-out local facilities, such as swimming pools and libraries, faced with closure as a result of cuts to local authority spending. While the notion of 'community control' of facilities may seem attractive in the abstract, once again the reality is likely to be very different. Firstly, there is the issue of funding; a proposed Big Society Bank, based on funds taken from unused bank accounts, will be unable to provide more than a fraction of the costs required to run these facilities; secondly, the proposal that local

volunteers should replace skilled and qualified staff will be hampered not only by these volunteers lack of skills but also by their lack of time, given that British workers already work amongst the longest hours in the European Community (Eurofund, 2009).

4.3. Opening up public services

The Localism agenda is one element of wider public sector reform, with a Coalition White Paper entitled *Open Public Services* (dubbed the 'Big Society' bill) published for consultation in July 2011 and likely to form the basis of legislation in 2012 (HM Government, 2011). Its over-arching aim is to open up *all* public services (other than the court system and the security services) to competition from 'any qualified provider'; out-sourcing of services, in other words, will become the default position.

The belief that competition is the best guarantor of high-quality public services has underpinned the policies of both Conservative and New Labour governments since the late 1980s. However, as with the performance management regime discussed above, there is little evidence that the 'contract culture' which has developed as a result has led to an improved quality of care. On the contrary, particularly within the Third Sector, it has frequently led to a 'race to the bottom' with organisations vying to win contracts (Cunningham and James, 2007). As one experienced worker from a mental health voluntary organisation told us:

My experience has been that workers' conditions have gone down and down, the wages have gone down and down, the hours have gone up... There is something about being professional in an organisation but how on earth do you provide empowering practice if workers are totally disempowered? I don't think it's possible (Doreen, cited in Ferguson and Woodward, 2009, p. 93).

Nor is there evidence that the increased involvement of the private sector has led to improved quality of care. A Financial Times survey of care homes in 2011 found that one in seven privately-run care homes rated only «adequate» or «poor» in contrast to one in eleven among non-profit or local authority

homes (and given the small number of inspectors, these figures are likely to be a significant under-estimate) (cited in Toynbee, 2011). The dangers, moreover, of increased reliance on the private sector were vividly highlighted in 2011 when Southern Cross, with seven hundred and fifty seven homes and 31, 000 residents the biggest provider of residential care for older people in the UK, went into receivership following a financial crisis due to a combination of falling numbers, rising rents and poor financial management, causing intense anxiety amongst its residents and their families. As one of Britain's leading social policy commentators noted:

The «dead hand of the state» looks rather more welcoming than the grasping hand of private equity. Southern Cross has shown how, as with the banks, privatised services that are too essential to fail make profits while relying on the state to pick up the pieces if they run into trouble, without paying the taxpayer for that hidden insurance (Toynbee, 2011).

5. Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that social work under the Conservative/Liberal Coalition government has been characterised by both continuity and change. Arguably, to date the elements of continuity have been more apparent than the elements of change. Thus, most of the policies discussed above - the promotion of a market within social care, the rolling-out of personalisation, the creation of social work practices, as well as an acceptance of the need for severe cuts in public spending – were also key elements of New Labour's programme while in government. Even the Big Society, David Cameron's big idea, can claim antecedents in the practice of the previous government (Seymour, 2010, p. 74). . Given the depth of the on-going financial crisis discussed in the first part of this paper, however, it is quite possible that Britain, like other European countries, could yet experience a second round of austerity measures which will transform the welfare state, including social work and social care, in ways that are currently unimaginable. Were that to happen, the riots in British cities in the summer of 2011 give some indication of what the reaction might be from those who feel they have been

abandoned and left without hope. Given that context of prolonged austerity, coupled with the increased, privatisation of social care services, it is difficult to feel optimistic about the future of social work in the UK. One ray of hope, however, has been the development in recent years of growing opposition amongst practitioners, students, academics and service users to the neoliberal agenda within social work, reflected both in a renewed interest in the radical social work tradition and also in the emergence of organisations such as the Social Work Action Network. These are still fragile developments. However, the history of social

work suggests that where social workers are able to connect with wider social movements (including the trade union movement), then not only are they better placed to defend the services on which their clients rely but that social work practice is also enriched and transformed through that contact. The growing struggles across Europe against austerity measures which will further undermine the living standards of the poorest and most vulnerable people in society suggest that there will be no shortage of opportunities for such connections to be made.

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