

Cameron's "Big Society:" Thatcherism's new guise

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British Prime Minister David Cameron's "Big Society" programme offers an ideological justification for the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition's efforts to impose between £85 billion and £100 billion in cuts over the next four years.

His speech in Liverpool was a restatement of Thatcherite market fundamentalism, dedicated to the destruction of welfare provisions on which millions rely and the wholesale privatization of the public sector.

Back in 1987, Margaret Thatcher famously declared, "I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it... They're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first."

Cameron is Thatcher's heir, but he cannot display similar candour or malice, given the bitter experience of millions of people with the results of Thatcher's slash-and-burn strategy. Instead, he cynically portrays cuts as opening "opportunities" for charities and local communities and privatization as a means of facilitating "greater local democracy."

The paucity of the actual programme Cameron announced was in inverse proportion to the scale of the rhetoric employed. Describing the "Big Society" as a "huge cultural change," and employing words such as "freedom" and "empowerment," he offered up four "vanguard" schemes—in Liverpool; Eden Valley, Cumbria; Windsor and Maidenhead; and the London Borough of Sutton. These involve such initiatives as reopening a closed local pub and a volunteer programme in local museums, involving unemployed

youth.

These and other projects are supposed to be funded by using the unclaimed monies in inactive bank accounts, which Cameron said would provide hundreds of millions of pounds, but which the *Financial Times* estimated would bring in just £60 million. Others have pointed out that funding the "Big Society Bank" in this way could be illegal.

Far more important than the modest proposals themselves is the painful message for which they were merely a sweetener.

What is planned is not merely a return to the 1980s. The Tories have in mind austerity measures that dwarf anything that was undertaken by Thatcher. Cameron's speech was a diatribe against government provision of services and welfare, which was blamed for Britain having the "biggest budget deficit in the G20."

From now on, the government would not "pour money down the throat of wasteful, top-down government schemes," which Cameron claimed had turned public sector workers into "disillusioned, weary puppets" and capable individuals into "passive recipients of state help." The government would instead "foster and support a new culture of voluntarism, philanthropy, social action." It would "get rid of the centralized bureaucracy that wastes money," and instead "open up public services to new providers like charities, social enterprises and private companies." All of this would "create communities with oomph."

The inclusion of charities is a transparent fraud. Charities rely for a third of their funds on the government, and this will inevitably be subject to cuts. The main recipient of government largesse—taken from the taxes of working people—will be private companies and "social enterprises" (which are only thinly disguised corporate entities). Those made to pay will be

the millions who rely on basic social services for both their livelihoods and essential amenities.

Behind the token projects Cameron announced, the government's cuts agenda will drive unemployment to between three and four million, destroy state education through the introduction of academies and privately run "free schools," and slash spending everywhere, including the National Health Service (NHS).

The objective of voluntary work is to force down wages, a central component of a vast privatization campaign. Last week, the *Guardian* reported that under the guise of an efficiency drive, ostensibly aimed at boosting productivity in the health service and elsewhere, billions of pounds are being made available for private companies.

"Outsourcing firms are preparing for a bonanza of local authority contracts to provide everything from binmen to back office bureaucrats and have reported a doubling in the number of deals on offer this year," the newspaper reported. "Private health companies are also expected to earn billions of pounds from the planned overhaul of the NHS in which GPs would take over responsibility for spending £70 billion."

The Liberal Democrats fully support the initiative. At a joint meeting with voluntary and charitable institutions in Downing Street, party leader and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg declared that building the "Big Society" required "radical change" and "bringing down vested interests."

"Vested interests" has become the standard euphemism employed in ruling circles for workers in the public sector.

That Britain has the biggest budget deficit in the G20 is because close to £1 trillion has already been handed over to the country's banks, alongside fiscal stimulus packages that almost wholly benefited the major financial institutions and corporations.

Citing the "sovereign debt crisis" resulting from this plunder of the social assets built up by millions of working people, the government now declares that more sacrifice is necessary to avoid default and a run on the pound. It does not mention that these further sacrifices will be used to prop up the very same bailed-out institutions whose speculative practices precipitated the economic crisis.

The "Big Society" is a recipe for social disaster, the responsibility for which rests squarely with the Labour

Party and the trade unions. As with every announcement of cuts by the government since it came to office, Cameron's "Big Society" speech evoked only mealy-mouthed platitudes from Britain's trade union leaders.

As for Labour's official response, Shadow Cabinet Office Minister Tessa Jowell tried to claim ownership of the Tories' initiatives—calling Cameron's speech a "brassnecked rebranding of programmes already put in place by a Labour government."

The front-runner in Labour's ongoing leadership contest, David Miliband, has been at pains to stress that criticisms of Cameron's proposals should be focused on how these plans will be implemented, rather than their substance and intent. He clearly calculates that these measures are very popular with big business, as well as providing a potential bonanza for many Labour hangers-on who are involved in contracting companies and the social enterprises.

Relying on the trade unions to paralyse and head off opposition in the working class, the bourgeoisie is using the crisis of its system order to carry out a massive programme of social de-engineering. Their aim is to obliterate the welfare state mechanisms set up in the immediate aftermath of World War Two and carry through an historically unprecedented redistribution of wealth from working people to the super-rich.

That is why Cameron's language, with its emphasis on charity, philanthropy and altruism, reeks of the Victorian era. This is the only point of reference from which the impact of these measures can properly be judged.



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