

**Unions and the Big Society**

History & Policy lunch-time session at the Unions21 Conference 2011

Cllr Jim Moher

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A group of about twenty conference delegates discussed presentations on this theme by Gregor Gall, Professor of Industrial Relations at the University of Hertfordshire and Chris Weavers, Political Officer, NASUWT. The historical perspective was to have been given by Professor Alastair Reid of the ‘*History & Policy Forum’,* but he was unable to attend due to illness. However, as the session was chaired by Cllr Jim Moher (retired CWU national officer) of the same Forum, he was able to highlight some of the historical parallels.

Gregor based his remarks on the survey of union representatives (‘Unions in the Community – *a survey of union reps*’) which he had carried out for the TUC in 2008. This survey of a section of the 200,000 or so volunteers - ‘a tangible link between national unions and their membership of some 7 million members’ - remains especially relevant in this context. He reminded us that unions could trace their own version of the ‘Big Society’ to the earliest combinations of the 18th and 19th centuries, such asthe Scottish weaver cooperatives.

He found that these lay representatives were a key community as well as workplace and union resource, with their desire for social justice and agenda of fairness, tolerance and respect. Their social skills and experience were not just workplace assets (‘social capital’) but should be valued as an integral part of society.

The TUC recommendations urged unions to develop different approaches to ‘community unionism’ so as to assist their campaigning efforts with government, employers and other organisations generally eg., to strengthen union recognition legislation. Professor Gall reinforced that message.

Chris Weavers, from his own background in local government as well as in occupational (teacher) representation, took us deeper into what the rather vague ideas of Cameron’s ‘Big Society’, might mean. He found that the ‘Big Society Network’ claimed three principles:

* empowering individuals and communities;
* encouraging social responsibility;
* creating an enabling and accountable state

Few could argue with those principles. However, the complete lack of detail provided and the context in which it had been launched of unprecedented cuts in public services, understandably caused people to question its’ authors’ true intent. [The detail contained in the current Localism Bill, does little to allay those fears. JM]

Chris believed that a very different alternative narrative could be developed by trade unions based on those three principles. ‘Empowering individuals and communities’ has been what the trade union movement has always been about. The cooperatives, mutuals and friendly societies were also developed to empower individual working people. By ignoring this tradition, this government clearly mean to empower a different section of society.

Secondly, their theme of ‘encouraging social responsibility’, (the belief that organisations and individuals have an obligation to act to benefit society at large), does not seem to extend to corporate social responsibility. Here it is unions which have been at the forefront pushing for ethical investment (pension funds**);** healthier, safer and greener workplaces, and of course, decent pay, terms and condition**s**. Similarly, their campaigns on child poverty, climate change and civil liberties at home and internationally (he mentioned NASUWT’s efforts in Burma, Columbia and Zimbabwe), chime on the same theme.

The third Cameronian principle, ‘Creating an enabling and accountable state’ emerged as a description for a move away from public to private provision and an alternative to the welfare state, i.e. health, social care and education experiments. Chris saw this government’s philosophy on ‘accountability’ as to market forces rather than democratic accountability, citing their Academies and ‘Free Schools’ programme. His union were seeing how democratically elected and led local authorities are being increasingly removed from education provision by state funded financial inducements, in conjunction with ideologically-driven private and unaccountable Academy organisations.

The chair drew attention to Professor Alistair Reid’s ‘*New Statesman’* article on *‘Unions and the Big Society’* for their TUC Congress issue (13th September 2011). This argued that the omission of trade unionists from the Con-Lib coalition’s ‘people to be empowered’, highlighted both parties’ still deeply entrenched hostility towards the unions. Margaret Thatcher’s branding ofunions as ‘the enemy within’ for electoral advantage had not been abandoned by the current Cameron leadership. Yet his ‘Big Society’ concept is clearly a departure from her declaration that ‘there is no such thing as society, only individuals and families’. This significant admission had not been followed through, though a slightly less hostile attitude is being paraded in public for PR reasons.

The Liberal Party had once been union-friendly (they introduced the first legislation to protect union rights in the 1870s and in 1906), and always havesupported various forms of industrial partnership. Yet the Liberal Democrats today, despite their focus on ‘community politics’, still seem to see unions as part of the socialist obstacle.

Professor Reid has published extensively about the powerful craft union tradition in the late 19th and early 20th century, such as in the shipyards – his recent book is entitled, ‘*The Tide of Democracy’*  - ‘Shipyard Workers and Social Relations in Britain 1870-1950’. He recalled their radical involvement in wider social affairs and politics in the network of trade unions, friendly societies and co-operatives, supplemented by social services administered through democratically elected local bodies. He argues that this was at the core of ‘Original Labour’ that emerged in the 1870s and 1880s. This version of social and political progress, based on the emancipation of the people and the empowerment of voluntary associations only began to fade as the long, deep interwar depression undermined the finances of even the strongest of the craft unions and laid the basis for an increasing dependence on the central state to provide economic stability. The Labour Party’s role in national government during the Second World War, which was widely considered to require highly centralised solutions to domestic emergencies, marked it as a centralising force for the next half-century.

Accordingly, he sees a challenge here for unions: to rethink not just their history, but also their current role in society.

Discussion

Andy Ballard (CSP), felt that the Labour Opposition were ‘missing a trick’ in not exposing the true aims of the ‘Big Society’. He instanced how Health sector privatisation was proceeding in the South West, where many NHS services were at serious risk.

Martin Tiedemann (Co-op Party) – ‘the oldest and biggest Big Society’ - also felt that the trade unions were failing to combat the deeper ideology of this seductive concept (aiming at a smaller state to be replaced by cooperatives etc).

John Ferrett (Prospect), argued that society was not synonymous with the ‘Big Society’, which he saw as a ‘cuts message’. He felt that unions were good at talking but not listening.

Gary Kent (PROSPECT), as the national officer responsible for negotiating with Ministers carrying through the privatisation of air traffic control, he felt their approach was entirely ideological. However, they had to grapple with the change to the ownership structure and were considering the idea of having employee representatives on the Board. As had been pointed out by many of the speakers, much of the ‘Big Society’ concept derived from the trade union heritage. This posed the dilemma whether we should aim to smash or subvert the process?

A number of other contributions ensued. Responding, Professor Gall saw the forthcoming TUC march as an important staging post in the campaign to resist the government’s cuts programme. Public services may not always be as good as we want but we need a clearly defined alternative to the traditional nationalised model of State-run industries by mandarins. Chris Weavers saw the need to combat the anti-union ideology so prevalent.

Jim Moher thanked the speakers and all for attending and contributing to what had been a stimulating discussion in the time available. For more information about the History & Policy Trade Union Forum, see [www.historyandpolicy.org](http://www.historyandpolicy.org)