

IS 'BIG SOCIETY' STILL A THREAT TO AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICES?

26 Feb 2013: Following CPD's major report [Big Society and Australia](#) released in May 2012, [Whatever happened to the Big Society?](#) documents a string of failures and unintended consequences arising from the UK's Big Society experiment, and warns of alarming parallels in Australia.

Written by CPD researcher Cameron Elliot, the paper revisits the performance of Big Society policies in the UK, in the third year of David Cameron's UK government.

Tony Abbott referenced Big Society principles in a 'landmark' speech last year, saying that 'securing our future depends more on strong citizens than big government'. Many Australian's have felt the real effects on communities of cuts to government services by conservative state governments. The strong possibility that the next Australian federal government may adopt a similar agenda to Big Society makes it important to consider the outcomes of the UK policies.

Broken promises to 'Broken Britain'

- Volunteerism has decreased.
- Social investment and enterprise remain small with extremely slow growth
- Homelessness in England jumped by 14% in a year.
- Financial status has worsened for UK households while income inequality has grown.
- Mental health services were cut while Mental Health Act detentions rose - reaching the highest levels ever recorded.
- Examples of substandard service delivery by outsourced providers, notably large private companies such as Serco, G4S and A4e, continue to emerge.
- Nine in ten community sector and charity providers report they are more at risk under Big Society outsourcing regimes.

Counterproductive cut-backs

- The civil service has been reduced by more than 60,000 – a 12% reduction, in the absence of any kind of workforce planning for public services as a whole.
- Local authorities, particularly councils led by the Conservative Party, have turned to large-scale privatisation, purportedly to save council funds.
- Changes in the National Health Service have limited accountability, damaged continuity of care and lifted restrictions on user fees, yet *increased* bureaucracy and costs.

The originator of Big Society thinking, Phillip Blond visited Australia last year to advise senior Coalition figures. Blond, however, has since sought to distance himself from the policies resulting from his ideas. The International Monetary Fund recently admitted that austerity measures may themselves prolong recessions without producing the expected fiscal savings. The UK may face a 'triple-dip' recession.

This unpopular, failed strategy should serve as a warning to Australian governments, some of which appear to be receptive to a similar approach, as evidenced by large scale cutbacks in Queensland, Big-Society-style rhetoric from NSW, and Big-Society-style recommendations from the Victorian Audit Commission.

Whatever happened to the Big Society demonstrates that shrinking the public sector does not automatically strengthen either community or corporate sectors. The new CPD paper argues for a flexible approach, which recognises the respective capabilities of governments versus private agencies, and considers the complex question of how to provide essential services using more than the one dimension – it is not only size of government that matters, but rather its capacity to serve and empower its citizens.

Notes to Editors

- The Centre for Policy Development (CPD) is a public interest think tank dedicated to putting creative, viable ideas and innovative research at the heart of Australia's policy debates. CPD gives a diverse community of thinkers space to imagine solutions to Australia's most urgent challenges.
- 'Big Society' was originally championed in the UK by Phillip Blond, a theologian, lecturer, founder-director of the conservative think tank ResPublica and advisor to David Cameron before the 2010 election. Once elected, Prime Minister Cameron released his 'Big Society' manifesto, which promised to "redefine the role of the state as a provider of public services."
- Cameron Elliot is a researcher in CPD's Public Service Research program. He has held social research and policy analysis positions in the public and private sectors. In previous roles, Cameron was involved in the development of national health policy, the evaluation of health workforce innovation trials, and academic research in the areas of cognitive psychology and clinical neuropsychology.
- '**Big Society' and Australia** by Dr James Whelan analysed recent UK initiatives and the potential impacts if Australia were to follow suit. The report received extensive media coverage, and gave rise to lively debates on television, radio and on the conference podium: <http://cpd.org.au/category/all-articles/public-service/big-society/>
- **Whatever happened to the Big Society?** will be available for download from the CPD website from Tuesday 26 February: <http://tinyurl/ozbigsociety2>

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