

The Coalition, 2010-2015

Collected Posts

26th February 2010

Fairness: Equality's Poorer Cousin

There are rumours that the Prime Minister is going to announce the next general election on Saturday. It seems very unlikely but the rumours are flying.

Whenever it is announced and already, you will be hearing all the parties talking about "Fairness". Labour's campaigning slogan is "A Future Fair for All", the Liberal Democrats are also campaigning for a Fairer Britain. But what does it mean and when did we stop talking about Equality?

"Fair" is not "Equal". Fair is compromise, it's good enough, it's asking those at the bottom of the economic and opportunity heap to look around, see the gap between themselves and the highest earners widen ever more and conclude that the policies that seek to mitigate that gap are an acceptable compensation. Fair suggests that Equality has left Aspiration Towers, that it has become the impossible dream. Equality is socialism's lost endeavour, Fair is the Third Way.

A policy of aspiration towards Fairness is the final admission that capitalism cannot deliver the golden outcome for all, whether you believe in Trickle Down theory or the mixed economy.

5th April 2010

Tomorrow We Will Know Our Fate

Tomorrow it is expected that Gordon Brown will visit the Palace and ask the Queen to dissolve Parliament. It is also widely agreed that the date of the upcoming General Election will be the 6th of May 2010 - this is the date reserved for the local council elections and it would be foolhardy and unpopular to go to the expense of picking a second, separate date for the national ballot.

The machinery of election news gathering and broadcasting is already fully operational. The news cycle is filled with outlined positions, rebuttals, the uncovering of gaffs and inconsistencies of message and then the subsequent back-peddling. Since every party has a new message for each day leading up to the campaign, no issue is reviewed in any depth. I am still waiting to feel a sense of the Conservatives' ideological position and Labour, despite their recent resurgence still feel vulnerable and without a slate of core values to share with the electorate. This week I think it's harder to assume that a hung parliament is the likeliest outcome. Although it causes me to shudder deeply, I can see a small but workable Tory majority in the corner of my eye.

I think we can assume that the turnout will be low, that older voters will be the biggest influence in the largest number of constituencies and that the turnout of voters under thirty will be low. Only half of eighteen to twenty-four year olds are actually registered to vote and yet they are more likely to be experiencing unemployment, an inability to

assume a place on the housing ladder (as property ownership has become both an expectation and a necessity in an absence of adequate social housing) and considerable debt after completing their education. The over fifty-fives, recipients of free tertiary education and beneficiaries of the Thatcherite explosion in property ownership and house-price inflation, will command the attention of the parties over the next few weeks with their concerns about care in their old-age. Today Demos has suggested that sixteen year olds should have the vote. I fully support that, in the same way that I support far better civic and political education in schools and more broadly.

As a political geek I always get excited about elections but every single time I also get immensely depressed by the quality of the public debate as the future of the country is reduced to single phrases, not even whole soundbites, designed to chime with a disgruntled or anxious electorate. If I had a wish it would be that the political world could believe enough in the electorate to deliver its arguments in paragraphs.

8th April 2010

Casualties of the Wash-Up

Last night as Parliament sat, the Government hoped to force through its final pieces of legislation. In amongst all the horse-trading and confusion there were a few controversies, there are other places that are discussing in detail the ins and outs of the Digital Economy Bill so I won't get into it here. Instead I want to focus on the Schools Bill.

This Bill has been well prepared for, DCSF have been putting work into it for over two years and some of its flagship elements have been well-publicised and announced. Last night, at the behest of Michael Gove, a number of incredibly important elements of the bill were scrapped to ensure its passage.

If you want an idea of the damage that will be done to the prospects of young people in and out of schools in the event of a Tory win, look no further than to the actions of the Conservative Party last night. Michael Gove, the Shadow Schools Secretary, refused to support individual tuition for young people struggling with learning, the implementation of a new primary curriculum and most egregiously, the implementation of compulsory PSHE - including sex and relationships education - even with the right of parents to withdraw their children up to the age of fifteen.

When I wrote about the announcement on PSHE I was cross that parents were still being allowed to withdraw their offspring up to fifteen and that faith schools would still be free to teach PSHE within the "context of the values of their faith", whatever that means. It was clear that an accommodation had been reached with parents' and faith groups to ensure wider support for the measures. In a response to a hectoring tweet I sent the Secretary of State, he indicated as much to me - that more radical steps would be difficult to achieve.

Now even this hammered-out political compromise has been up-ended by the man who would like to be your next Education Secretary. Mark me, this is not a man who is interested in schools as part of Children's Services, despite the positive impact of the Children Act 2004. He is interested in Schooling: the filling of impressionable young minds with facts, the instilling of discipline with force if necessary and the exclusion of children with special educational needs and behavioural problems to the backwaters of separate

schooling and Pupil Referral Units. Don't believe me? Think he sounds reasonable when he talks about parent-founded schools? Then I direct you to his [speech last July at the RSA](#). I think you will find it informative.

No, last night Michael Gove flexed his political muscles well in advance of receiving a mandate and it was a disgraceful act, illustrating the shape of things to come if he does indeed find himself in the big chair at Sanctuary House. Young people - desperately in need of information, support and the opportunity to explore the personal and complex issues associated with the journey to adulthood - will be worse off if it comes to pass.

18th April 2010

Cameron Has Lost His Memory

Don't be sucked in. Cameron's talk of the Big Society sounds very nice, although many voters have told him that actually they're rather too busy with their work and families to spend time running the local school as well. His line, which he says Samantha came up with, "There is such a thing as Society, it's just not the same thing as the State", is very pithy too and I'm sure has a great deal of appeal for Tory modernisers. Today he added to his plethora of pith, "Life is We, not Me" and finally, for me, the straw met the camel and the camel was undone.

How dare he? How dare he imply that mutualism is a Tory invention, that our culture of self-interest, individualism and consumerism is not the direct consequence both of Thatcher's policies and her philosophy? She did say "There's no such thing as Society" and boy did she mean it and her party lapped it up. She meant it and she put it into practice with abandon, ripping the heart out of working Britain and its communities. She destroyed British manufacturing, deconstructed the unions, privatised social housing and deregulated finance. She was the architect of the "I'm alright Jack, stuff the rest of you" attitude that allowed finance to explode into the Eighties culture of flashy excess, while millions found themselves on the dole and without an affordable home.

In destroying the unions, she took away the local social and political structures that supported communities across the country and were the entry point for working people into Parliament as representatives of their communities (and now the Tories have the gall to equate Unite's involvement with the Labour Party to Lord Ashcroft's!). How we regret that now, as we complain about our political elite, those who walk straight from their Oxbridge and Russell Group universities into political roles and then seats with the major parties and whom the electorate regards as out of touch with their own day to day experiences. Why are we then surprised that the electorate lacks interest in the political process?

Thatcher's legacy of privatisation, deregulation and anti-communitarianism touches all aspects of our political and social environment. To hear another Tory leader telling us to buck up and be nice to each other for a change is a little bit rich.

Don't fall for it, the prospect of a new Tory government is terrifying. We can't allow it to happen.

7th May 2010

The Result?

I feel like I've gorged on the aftermath today.

I drove up to Rugby this morning, listening to the Today programme and then BBC Radio Five Live. After my meeting, I drove home to more of Five Live, mostly Peter Allen having fascinating and surreal conversations with pundits, politicians and passers by on College Green at Westminster - the best being his exchange with John Pienaar during which he complained that the Five Live political correspondent was gesticulating too aggressively with his ice lolly.

The exit polls, although dismissed at the outset last night, turned out to be completely accurate, predicting the Tory lead with no overall majority, the resilient second place for Labour and the deflated return on Cleggmania for the Liberal Democrats. It predicted what we've all imagined for the last few weeks: a Hung Parliament.

The outcome? Nick "I'm not the Kingmaker" Clegg has become the Kingmaker, announcing this morning that in his view it was Cameron, not the constitutionally enabled Prime Minister, who would get first dibs on forming a government. As soon as he said this Brown was effectively sidelined, left to play statesman Prime Minister, guiding the ship while the crew argued about the map.

Very soon after, the oily Cameron took to his podium to explain to Clegg, the Liberal Democrats, the Conservative Party and the country, why his party and the Liberal Democrats would make an awesome partnership of stable government "in the national interest".

So as I write they are meeting behind closed doors and I wonder whether they're hoping to agree some arrangement in time for the 10 o'clock news, thereby forcing the Prime Minister's resignation and a change of guard in time for the financial markets opening on Monday.

Am I right? I was right to predict that Clegg would have no problem forging a relationship with the Tories and that's why I, dear reader, voted Labour.

10th May 2010

Clegg Calls the Shots

Nick "I'm not the Kingmaker" Clegg has been making the most of his Kingmaker status today to get the result that he wants.

This morning's negotiation with the Tories went well by all accounts and both parties left to talk to their members of parliament. Problem was that the Lib Dem backbenchers wanted a little more reassurance about Cameron's advances, particularly on proportional representation and education.

Almost immediately, Clegg called Brown to let him know that, rather than seeing him on the quiet, he wanted to hang out and chat in public - with conditions. At five o'clock, Gordon Brown emerged from Number Ten to announce that he would be talking to Clegg about a possible coalition and to acknowledge that lots of people in the country see him as the obstacle to progress and, for that reason, he would be stepping down, triggering an immediate contest for the Labour leadership. While that was going on, Gordon

explained, he would lead talks to bring together and lead a coalition with the Liberal Democrats and other parties in advance of a new Labour leader taking his place in September.

Game, Set and nearly Match for Nick “I’m not the Kingmaker” Clegg. By suggesting to Brown that there was a chance of coalition, subject to his resignation, Clegg forced Cameron’s hand this evening to make him a better offer than this morning. And so it is, Cameron has called Clegg tonight to offer a referendum on PR.

Nick Clegg, evangeliser of open democracy, has used his power in a hung parliament to force his chosen outcome. I don’t think he has any intention of making an alliance with Labour. He is out for a Tory-Lib Dem arrangement and this is how he’s pushed it.

Nick Clegg, I judge you.

13th May 2010

Gove Installed as Secretary of State for Education

Alas, the worst has happened: Michael Gove is Secretary of State for Education.

I’ve written about my anxieties at this prospect before, I think they need revisiting but let’s just summarise what we’re up against:

Free schools created by parents, charities and other interested organisations - creating a market for the provision of schools in every area and based on a model in Sweden that hasn’t improved attainment, more academies out of local authority control, heads able to permanently exclude without right of appeal for children - leaving them to Pupil Referral Units, less inclusion in mainstream for disabled children and more segregation into special schools, discipline a higher priority than need, children sitting in rows, wearing ties, learning the kings and queens of England, removal of Children’s Plans for local authorities. No compulsory sex and relationships education in the PHSE curriculum for children and young people, no one-to-one tutoring for struggling learners. No promise to continue with the school leavers guarantee of a place in education, training or work on leaving school.

The focus of the Department will be “educational attainment”, as though children and young people exist in a bubble, apart from their families, peers and other influences and stresses. As though no other factors influence their readiness, their ability or their capacity to learn. As though one way of learning suits everyone, as though every child is in a family with two functioning parents. As though every child is free from disability or illness, as though there are no children and young people in need, who are vulnerable, who might struggle in school and need extra help, who might need a second chance.

I thought about trying to make an argument but do I need to say anything else?

23rd May 2010

Queen’s Speech and Cognitive Dissonance

So the Queen’s Speech has been leaked a little bit. Disgruntled Tory/Lib Dem backbenchers or peeved civil servants who don’t take kindly to their new masters?

Whichever, there are in fact no surprises. Alongside the abolition of the whole ID card project, schools will be the first recipient of the ConDem magic. Anyone working in Children and Young People's Directorates across England can look forward to trying to unpick the new legislation very soon, a hastily thrown together Department for Education Bill Team will already be working on it. It'll come quickly and it will hit hard. Schools and services will be restructured to accommodate it, if you imagine it won't cost money to implement it, you're wrong.

In other news, I still can't adjust to the Coalition. I know I'm not alone. I mean really, who didn't feel weird watching Clegg and Cameron sitting next to each other in Parliament this week? Perhaps, right now, they are clinging to each other for comfort as the fault lines begin to form throughout their parties.

13th June 2010

Getting To Know The Coalition

Now we are getting to know our new government and it is a peculiar beast. The Prime Minister seems terribly comfortable in his new role, as though his expectation of power has finally been met and he's had enough time in opposition to rehearse his style of leadership. Hence we get a handful of PM Cameron poses: tough 'war-time' leader delivering unpalatable medicine on cuts; patrician leader born to power and, finally, oikish football man of the people, raising the Cross of Saint George above Downing Street with a cry of "Come on, England".

The Deputy Prime Minister is wheeled out to speak about his hobby-horse policies, in particular proportional representation, although he is hazy on the details when it comes to a referendum. He is sent to Europe to act as the emollient to his Euro-sceptic coalition partners, speaking in Spanish, German and Dutch to impress the locals. At the same time, he and his colleagues are unusually quiet about some of their least favoured coalition policies such as the Conservative noise on increased tuition fees and degree courses being taught in local Further Education colleges to save on the costs of university living. Similarly, one only has to watch ministerial questions in the House of Commons to see Liberal Democrat ministers of state squirm next to their Tory colleagues as they defend policies they must instinctively know to be counter-intuitive to their own values.

This is in contrast to the new Conservative ministers who lean over the Despatch Box with an entitled air. Sarah Teather, at Education Questions recently, had to explain away changes to policies on Special Educational Needs which she must know will lead to more young people being filtered away from their local peers into specialist, separate provision - hardly a motif of the social justice to which her party claims to be committed. There is a lot of talk about where and when the fatal cracks in the coalition will appear but I think the Opposition should be wary of expecting implosion any time soon. It's in the interests of both governing parties to make this arrangement work but it is particularly critical to the Liberal Democrats who must show that coalitions can function in British politics if they are to make a strong argument for proportional representation.

18th July 2010

Changing Times, Big Questions

The Coalition has its feet under the table finally. Clearly there have been some rather serious teething problems but, whether thought through or not, they have some Big Ideas and they are determined to make their presence felt immediately with some Big Changes. Some of these changes are being paraded as unavoidable in the economic climate but most are clearly guided by a view that the state must be rolled back from the individual. The purpose of this new blog is to examine those changes, uncover the ideology within and attempt to propose some alternatives.

So there are three areas that I want to explore:

- The Big Society
- Localism
- The role of the private and voluntary sectors in the delivery of public service

These areas of policy are starting to be talked about already but, as the Government finds its feet, they are yet to be entirely clear on the detail. In that vacuum, the public sector unions, the voluntary and private sectors have been making noise and positioning themselves either for a fight or the spoils - it's hard to tell at the moment.

What is clear is that even before the Comprehensive Spending Review in October the plans are already afoot for radical change, not least in the shape of the Academies Bill - being rushed through the Commons this week - and last week's NHS White Paper which proposes a violent overhaul of commissioning structures that will cost £1.2bn alone.

These are dangerous times and those of us that find ourselves alarmed by these changes must give thought to our arguments and propose solid and equitable alternatives.

18th July 2010

The Big Society Emerges, Kinda

David Cameron took to the BBC Breakfast sofa yesterday morning to describe his vision for the Big Society. He is struggling to give it a clear shape but he implies that Big Society is an umbrella term for anything that involves citizens making some form of contribution to their community. This is certainly reflected in both Andrew Lansley and Michael Gove describing their respective health and education reforms as part of the Big Society. Cameron's problem is that he's described this variously as people 'being empowered to make a contribution' to their communities and 'having more control over their public services'. Which agenda is this serving? Perhaps it's both.

He needs to be even clearer. He talks vaguely about social enterprises, 'charities' and citizen groups running projects and services. Is he talking about the bigger national charities tendering to run local projects or small local charities working in their own communities? Surely if he wants localism then he's thinking of the latter? If that's the case, voluntary sector organisations big and small are warning that severe cuts to central government funding will seriously impede their ability to run any services at all. Cameron's response to this is to provide the Big Society Bank, a cash raid on dormant bank accounts that will reap over £100 million to be spent on new projects and services.

When Gordon Brown proposed this as a means of funding work with vulnerable young people, the Tories described it as a disgraceful act of theft.

This morning a number of Cameron's 'Vanguard Communities' - God forbid we should call them Pilots or Pathfinders - explained that they were still a bit fuzzy on the details of their new journey into citizen service delivery. So it's still not clear then?

NESTA and the New Economics Foundation have been working on a model of 'co-production' of public services which they have launched this morning. See the report below. This argues for an equal partnership between professionals and service-users to create and deliver the most effective and responsive services. I'm supportive of this approach, my life working with young people has been all about creating functional partnerships with them to improve their services.

My main concern with all of this is that yet again the public sector is being painted as the duffer in the piece, unable and unwilling to be flexible, innovative or creative but instead driven by managerialism and targets. Anyone who works in or with local authorities knows that this is not the case and that local government is full of driven and committed people who are transforming services, often in partnership with other organisations.

Equally, there is a willingness in this debate to ignore our existing democratic structures. Cameron's picture is one of local services, run by local people but where is the accountability, the continuity when people fall away and where is the assurance that services will be provided equitably across communities?

We need to revive our democratic structures and engage people with local democracy. Turn-out rates for local elections are tiny, elected members are overwhelmingly retired and have held their positions for way too many years. The local electorate is ignorant of the range and seriousness of the decision-making power that is held by their local councillors on their minute mandates. It is this that needs to change. This is where the local revolution in practice and thinking needs to happen.

We can't sideline our existing democratic process - we need to reform it.

6th August 2010

Our Evolving State

It's the summer holidays, Parliament is in recess but the Government's activity continues unabated. This week the Prime Minister has announced that there will be no return to recent levels of funding for the public sector, those days are over. Instead we are asked to send in our proud examples of "doing more for less". We are entering the realm of the cut-price, slimline state. So if we cannot expect our public services to be richly funded ever again, would someone like to clarify the narrative for me: are these cuts a one-off reaction to "the disaster of the deficit" or a longer term plan to make a permanent and irreversible change to the quality and character of the public sector?

George Osborne says that where there are reductions in public sector jobs and investment (and I think that's a polite way of describing it) the private sector will jump in, expanding to provide alternative employment. But at the same time, the service sector, our biggest and most productive in the economy, has seen growth grind to a halt. Car sales are dipping quickly in the absence of the previous government's scrappage scheme

and, one assumes, an unwillingness among the public to commit to large purchases when many are worrying about their jobs. There are voices worrying very publicly about the risk of a double-dip recession.

Where the private sector seems to be very active is in positioning itself in the market to deliver public services. Health and education are the new feeding grounds. Whatever the rhetoric about the Big Society, the defunding of small and large voluntary sector organisations will make it very hard for them to compete with the private sector to deliver services. Social enterprises might be in a slightly better position, being a favoured hobbyhorse of some in the Coalition.

Yet still there is alarmingly little in the way of direction for local authorities. We hear an endless amount about what the Government doesn't like, is scrapping, is abolishing and deconstructing and only vague plans to indicate where we're heading, except for the continuing rhetoric on the Big Society and Localism. These two headings seem to be catch-alls for an array of peculiar, small-fry, large-fry and contradictory ideas: run your own pub, run your own school, elect a mayor and a police commissioner but we don't like regional government, get an academy without consultation but with central governance and oversight, we don't like local authorities messing about with education but they can oversee GP commissioning of health services to preserve the democratic link.

Having made a commitment to analyse the evolving nature of the new state, I'm finding it hard to do. The pace of announcements and the contradictory policies are masking the connecting thread. Perhaps it will become clearer as we move towards the early autumn, parliament sitting and the inevitable drama of the party conferences?

8th August 2010

Milk of Human Kindness in the Big Society

Today's hoo-hah over the removal of state-funded milk for the under-fives in pre-schools and nurseries, a policy both headlined and withdrawn on the same day, is not simply an embarrassing U-turn for the Government.

It is an illustration of the much more worrying trend which I alluded to yesterday: policy making from the Prime Minister down to departments and ministers is being driven not by a coherent and strategic set of political positions but the demand from the Treasury that departments prioritise finding savings of 40% in their budgets. This has led to us being treated to a series of policy proposals amounting to ministers musing out loud about value for money and how their great ideas are part of the Big Society, localism or the end of the nanny state and the Prime Minister simply telling us that the small state is good for us and we'll just have to get used to it.

This is no way to progress. We're close to one hundred days into the new government but we still feel mired in limbo, waiting for the big strategic direction to be announced. Wasn't the point of the quick and full coalition arrangement to act in the national interest by avoiding any prolonged period of uncertainty? Well it strikes me that we are in a very prolonged period of uncertainty and there are huge and persistent questions about the

political direction of the country that will not be answered until the Comprehensive Spending Review in October.

Is this uncertainty a necessary product of having a coalition administration: are we lacking a clear direction because it hasn't been agreed yet?

Or are we to be subjected to a parliamentary term of policies created from an anti-state or easy-to-cut position in the absence of any other?

10th August 2010

Old-School Tory Myths in Use Today

So the Big Society is not for everyone. Benefits "cheats" will be on the receiving end of investigation by credit rating agencies acting as bounty hunters, paid for every cheat they uncover. The headline is that £5.5bn will be saved by doing this. The detail shows that actually only £1.1bn is lost to fraud, the majority is mismanaged through error. Remember that £16bn per year should be collected from high-rate taxpayers but is not recovered by the Treasury because those taxpayers have accountants that help them avoid their fiscal responsibilities. Apparently this is acceptable.

The atmosphere is getting increasingly Thatcherite in tone, scapegoats are being established: it started with bureaucrats and public sector staff, now it's "cheats". Are we really all in this together?

Where are the Lib Dems? I thought they were meant to be busy smoothing off the Tory hard edges?

15th August 2010

The Cuts Start to Sting as the Government Turns its Back

Today in the Observer and online at guardian.co.uk, the Diary of a Civil Servant series continues with a valuable insight into the Coalition's thinking: Laissez-faire is back and the civil service is struggling to adapt. I've written in previous posts that we have been lacking direction from the Government, well it seems that the Coalition likes it that way. Obviously more pointers will come from the Comprehensive Spending Review but, apart from the continuing abolition agenda (being delivered with a gleeful sneer by the corpulent Eric Pickles), perhaps this is what we're going to be left with - It really could be a single message of "Just get on with it".

When questions are raised about accountability for all our new, local, do it yourself public services, the response from the Coalition is that local authorities will have oversight and services will be accountable to "communities" and service users. Well that's interesting but it's not democratic. "Oversight" is vague and something that local authorities are not being allowed to have with schools. Neither is it accountability through a democratic process. If the extent of the local authorities power is "oversight" how do I, as voter in a local election, use my vote to influence my elected representatives to alter the quality or type of service being provided? It sounds to me that my local council elected member will

have very little influence over the service that is being delivered. So who will be influencing the type and quality of the service and how will that take place? Who will ensure that the process is equitable? Who will ensure that services exist to meet the needs of a varied community and that the diverse community is enabled to participate in services? Who will commission these services to ensure that needs are met? Will local authorities commission? Will that be how the democratic process is enacted? Have they honestly thought this through?

Okay so let's set aside these still unanswered questions and address the Coalition's argument that the voluntary sector is perfectly placed to deliver our new public services at better value for money. The Independent on Sunday has today published '100 Days, 100 Cuts', an instructive guide to services provided in part by the voluntary sector that have already been cut. It's useful to remind ourselves that voluntary sector organisations cost money to run and that they already deliver huge numbers of statutory and non-statutory services. Most are commissioned to do this by the local authority which has democratic accountability and, where they are statutory services, the legal responsibility for their effective delivery.

Some of the larger national charities receive up to 90% of their income from central and local government funding to deliver both statutory and non-statutory services to older people and children. Smaller local charities will be reliant on local government funding to deliver smaller, specialist services on their behalf, such as domestic violence shelters or rape crisis telephone lines. On top of that are national funding bodies, The Lottery, Children in Need, Sport Relief, Comic Relief and a number of other big funders who prop up all sizes of voluntary sector organisations with money that you have donated. Nothing is cheap and nothing is delivered entirely by volunteers in cardigans with time to spare.

So if you take Government out of the picture, will we have any services at all?

17th August 2010

What Fairness is...(again)

In the lead-up to the 2010 General Election, I wrote that Fairness was Equality's poorer cousin:

"'Fair' is not 'Equal'. Fair is compromise, it's good enough, it's asking those at the bottom of the economic and opportunity heap to look around, see the gap between themselves and the highest earners widen ever more and conclude that the policies that seek to mitigate that gap are an acceptable compensation. Fair suggests that Equality has left Aspiration Towers, that it has become the impossible dream. Equality is socialism's lost endeavour, Fair is the Third Way.

A policy of aspiration towards Fairness is the final admission that capitalism cannot deliver the golden outcome for all, whether you believe in Trickle Down theory or the mixed economy."

Listening to George Osborne today, it still feels just as relevant. The Coalition is trying to establish the narrative that the current cuts and what's to come in the Comprehensive Spending Review are part of a move to make Britain fairer. The Big Society will make Britain fairer too, apparently. My question is how, exactly?

We know that the cuts are hitting the poorest hardest, that poor women are hurt the most. We know that services delivered by local authorities and charities are disappearing or threatened, leaving the vulnerable more at risk. How is this fair? How is it fair that those on welfare are targeted for £1.1bn lost to fraud while the £70bn per year lost to tax evasion and avoidance is an acceptable consequence of economically active billionaires in the UK?

While we're talking billionaires, don't be fooled that having a few of them stump up half their earnings to charities of their choice is an act of fairness or a suitable alternative to appropriate taxation. It's not. Where's the equitable redistribution of wealth? The exact same principle applies to the Big Society. Public services exist to meet equitably the assessed needs of people in their communities, they shouldn't be established on the whims of individuals or small vocal groups.

Fairness has become a meaningless term, thrown out from the Coalition as a modesty veil for vulgar, destructive cuts and rolling back the state. We urgently need a real discussion addressing inequality of income and opportunity if we are to establish an equal society.

7th September 2010

Spending Review Around The Corner

It's been a long time since I last posted. I have tried not to write while in a state of fury, choosing instead to read around the Government's and other organisations' response to the Big Society. But now, as we're only a month away, it is the Comprehensive Spending Review that is exercising us all.

As Nick Robinson pointed out on the 10 O'Clock News last night, people are keen to support cuts as long as they are not directly affected by them. It's okay to cut someone else's housing benefit as long as my children's centre or maternity provision stays. The thing is that these cuts are so unprecedented, so determinedly ideological, that everyone will be affected. This is a rolling back of the state and it is not necessary.

The fact that every individual in this country could make a strong argument against the slashing of a service, provision or benefit that they use, or in favour of maintaining investment in the industry or business they're involved in, is the very proof of why the state is so important to our economy, our communities and our society.

Rolling back on this scale damages our productivity, risks a double-dip recession and throws millions of people on the scrap heap. There's no big society here, only every man for himself - the ghastly proof of Thatcher's legacy.

23rd September 2010

Relationships are at the Heart of Public Service

It's not the economy, stupid. It's the relationship.

Think of the public services that you use regularly. The school your kids go to? The health centre where you visit your GP? Maybe it's the specialist disability team or aged care support for your parents? At the point of entry and interaction with that service, it's the

relationship you develop with the staff that shapes your experience, your feeling of being looked after and your sense of whether the service is meeting your needs.

In my field we talk about the concept of Corporate Parenting, the idea that the local authority is both an organisational structure holding and administering a legal responsibility around a child or young person taken into care and their parent in the absence of care from their own family. This is a complex position, forcing an often unwieldy organisation into the role of carer and protector. It's a peculiar and oxymoronic expression and yet it encapsulates exactly the role a local authority must take when it makes the decision to protect a child.

The structures, services and bureaucracy, however complex, must exist to support the heart of a successful system: the relationship between the looked after child and their closest carer. It might be a foster carer, a social worker, or a care leaver's personal adviser. When young people who have left the care system talk about what made a positive difference to their experience, they don't say "Well the crucial factor was the management structure of the children in care team" or "The Corporate Parenting Strategy made me feel really cared for". No, young people will tell you it was the relationship with the trusted adult who believed in them, put an arm around them when they were fed up, celebrated their successes with them and helped them see a future more positive than their present.

It's the relationship that counts at the point of entry and the relationship that sustains the success of the service, whatever it is. But it only works if the organisation creates the structures that maintain the accountability while enabling the service to be delivered through that relationship.

Some councils are suggesting that they will outsource most of their services including some of their statutory functions such as children's social care. Will a culture of contract management be enough to maintain accountability, high quality services and the relationship as the beating heart of public service delivery?

7th October 2010

Cameron Says More About the Big Society, Reinvents Tories as Keepers of the Communitarian Flame

Yesterday's speech was a fascinating episode of re-writing history and I want to make a couple of comments about it. Firstly it's worth reflecting on an interesting narrative that has been emerging. Whenever Cameron talks about the Big Society, the media jumps up and down saying that no one understands it and the Tory masses don't like it. I think it's very clear that Cameron's Big Society is one of community action and a deeply local approach to providing on-the-doorstep do-it-yourself services. What's not to understand? I'm not surprised the Tory faithful are muted in their response since the historic view of the public sector in Conservative circles is that it's full of pinkos and, frankly, involves a life's work of getting one's hands unpleasantly dirty for not much money - who would want to do that?

Interestingly Lord Hutton has popped up with the first iteration of his report on public sector pensions to tell those people who commit themselves to working for the common

good for a living, should work for longer and receive lower pensions when they do finally retire. Lord Hutton probably imagines that the public sector is full of chief executives and managers getting paid more than the Prime Minister with gigantic pensions to look forward to. No, I'm afraid not. The vast majority do low-paid, difficult jobs for not much money. Jobs which many people would never, ever consider doing themselves but are happy to see other people rewarded poorly to do them in their place.

So we return to Mr Cameron's speech. The yogic contortion that the Prime Minister managed yesterday was to suggest that the principles of collaboration, shared responsibility, contribution and citizenship have somehow been Tory values all along. He opined that, borrowing from John F Kennedy, our society should be shaped not by what we consume but what we contribute.

I know it's old hat but really, how can he attempt this manoeuvre when his party still celebrates at conference each year the legacy of Thatcher? Thatcher who said "there's no such thing as society", Thatcher who did everything she could to dismantle working people's sense of community by taking apart the unions, Thatcher who sold off council housing with a message of self-interest being the route to success. Thatcher, whose entire philosophy was at odds with any notion of responsibility to anyone else.

It was an extraordinary backflip and it has gone completely unchallenged, just as the narrative of Labour's profligate spending being the cause of our deficit goes unchallenged every single day.

Whatever thoughts people have about how we should organise our public services, it really grates to hear the Conservative legacy rewritten and Cameron berating us for attitudes entirely formed by his predecessor's obsessions.

26th October 2010

The Fallout From the Spending Review & Cuts

I've been feeling a bit overwhelmed by the amount of information and commentary in the aftermath of the Comprehensive Spending Review. It will, of course, take months to unravel the details of the policy announcements and their impact but a few headlines seem to be causing the most concern. So here goes at a first pass.

With much of the focus on welfare cuts, housing benefit and the defence review, it is easy to ignore the announcement in the Spending Review that could potentially be most damaging. It is the cuts to the Area Based Grants for local authorities that will cause some of the most visible losses to communities. Regardless of the lifting of the ring-fence on many streams of funding from central government, local authorities are left with holes in their budgets so large it will be down to them to make the most difficult and unpopular cuts. This is where valued, local services and support will start to fall away and the vulnerable will be hit hard.

The announcements on Housing Benefit and welfare are gravely concerning, they will condemn the poor and those working on low-incomes to cycles of poverty that will require them to move from their homes and communities, especially in the South East. The problem of high private sector rents being paid through housing benefit by the government is rooted in the lack of affordable social housing stock, the need for social

housing far outweighs the availability of homes. Thatcher's policies created the environmental circumstances that led directly to that and to the subsequent overheating of the housing market. What was once considered a basic human right, shelter, became a market ripe for speculation. It was the housing bubble that was at the centre of the financial crash in 2008 and, after all that individual profit has been made, it is the low-paid and unemployed who will pay the price.

Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the man most keen on localism, has announced that plans to create a "super-council" from three Tory London boroughs are fine by him. As CS Bungo remarked on twitter this week, might we start calling them Regions? Oh, wait.

Meanwhile the Deputy Prime Minister's outing on Desert Island Discs on Sunday was a peculiar affair, he was evasive about serious policy concerns - particularly his own flip-flopping on tuition fees - mumbled far too much and then revealed his secret love of fags. In the Commons today he had to make clear that he was in no way defending smoking. His musings on being a "young father" watching his sons play on his iPad, revealed a very comfortable home life - one which many people in this country will find increasingly alien over the coming months.

And as for his pupil premium, 'funded from outside of DfE's budget', that seems to be unravelling too with many of his colleagues in government unclear about their position. How many more about-faces, Nick?

My last concern is where is the Labour Party? I thought that when the leadership election finally closed and the new leader stepped forward, we would see the party robustly tackling the performance of the Coalition and particularly challenging the tedious and persistent narrative of "unavoidable" cuts. I expected Ed Miliband out in front of this argument but find him absent. He wasn't strong enough to pick one of the two leading candidates for Shadow Chancellor - Balls or Cooper - and in failing to do so, he has stolen from the Opposition the opportunity to challenge the Coalition orthodoxy from an informed and confident position.

13th November 2010

Localism, the Big Society, the Cuts, the Future

Last week I attended *Cutting It: 'Big Society' and the New Austerity* at the RSA. You can listen to the event [here](#). The session was focused around the release of a report from the new economics foundation authored by Anna Coote, which critiques the Big Society in the context of the Coalition government's deficit reduction agenda and the resulting cuts. Coote describes the Big Society as structural reform, "...the social policy that makes the Comprehensive Spending Review possible". She argues that the government has to provide the Big Society narrative to illustrate that the "unavoidable" cuts, though unwelcome, will not create a destructive gap but instead unleash a liberating wave of social activism and entrepreneurship that will move into the place of the state. In doing so, the country will be freed from the unwelcome clutches of the overbearing and disempowering state and will remember how to do things for ourselves.

She goes on to argue that the cuts and the Big Society constitute the end of the post-war settlement, a shift of responsibility from the state, to which we all contribute for the

greater good, to the private and voluntary sphere, where accountability, equality of access and outcome all seem a little harder to guarantee.

On the other side of the fence, this week the Children's Minister Tim Loughton appeared to suggest that no one really knows what is meant by the Big Society. Certainly at the RSA event, after listening to Anna Coote's precise deconstruction, Jonty Olliff-Cooper, of the Big Society Network, suggested it meant feeling able to chastise the youth who listens to his music loudly on the bus, or to report graffiti to the council by sending a photo using your iPhone.

The Big Society is also apparently about localism, local decision-making and local accountability. The man at the head of this particular crusade is Eric Pickles and it is he who has argued so strongly against intervention from the centre while at the same time working behind the scenes to ensure that his preferred new Local Enterprise Partnerships (the replacement for the successful Regional Development Agencies) are formed and that local councils only collect refuse fortnightly.

And if the Big Society is about local accountability and decentralisation, why do we discover today that Michael Gove plans to provide school funding by formula from the centre, bypassing entirely our democratically elected local authorities?

In the complicated world of public sector commissioning, we have Lord Nat Wei and Ian Duncan Smith on record criticising the growth of larger voluntary sector organisations for becoming "arms of government", competing to deliver local services and too dependent on central and local government funding. At the same time, the government is encouraging local authorities to use the voluntary sector to deliver services while cutting local budgets. In fact the government's Localism Bill will require local authorities to outsource the majority of their services. What if a local authority, accountable to its electorate, chooses to provide its own services? Meanwhile the Cabinet Office has written to major voluntary sector organisations promising that the transition to the Big Society will be eased by other sources of funding and has also stated that small, local voluntary organisations will be protected by central government grants to help them survive.

So this is all feels a bit confusing. The government thinks the voluntary sector is critical to the Big Society but one arm of government really doesn't like the bigger charities who have already positioned themselves in this market, another arm offers bigger charities support through a difficult transition while at the same time cuts handed down to local authorities which risk smaller local voluntary organisations will be mitigated by central government funding. So is it localism or centralism? Local accountability or intervention from the centre according to its preferences?

Does the government itself actually know what it means by localism and the Big Society? Are we going to have localism in some areas of policy and not others?

We already have the structures for local accountability, democracy and participation. If we're going to survive the cuts and the government's confusion about its own agenda, we must act to revitalise and protect them.

12th December 2010

The Lib Dems are the Enablers of a Furious Assault on Young People

The Lib Dems proved themselves this week to be not the purveyors of a "new" honest politics but entirely corruptible given the sniff of power. Charles Kennedy and Ming Campbell, the two remaining statesmen in their ranks, cannot know where to look, such is the bile being directed at their party.

Sarah Teather, now a minister in Michael Gove's Department of Education, was once a new backbencher, excoriating the Labour Government over tuition fees in her maiden speech. How things change.

And Don Foster, my Member of Parliament. Don Foster whose election literature pleaded with me not to waste my vote on Labour but to support him to keep the Tories out. Don Foster who campaigned vigorously for Bath's enormous student support with a pledge to vote against rises in tuition fees and a policy in favour of their abolition. Don Foster who this week called himself a victim after a brick was thrown through his constituency office.

What disgraces they are. What flibbertigibbets.

And what damage, in their compliance with their Tory masters, they are doing to the life chances and the optimism of young people. Future Jobs Fund gone, EMA gone, tuition fees up, youth services destroyed by local cuts, Connexions gone, disadvantaged secondary students patronised with old money dressed up as a new pupil premium, while their schools are given permission to exclude them more easily and control them with physical force.

You think there was violence in Parliament Square this week? That was nothing. The violence being done by this Coalition to the futures of our young people will have repercussions down the generations.

22nd January 2011

Freedom of Information 2.0 is not the answer to reduced accountability caused by Localism

The Guardian reports that Gus O'Donnell, the head of the Civil Service, has asked a senior colleague to explore the impact on political accountability of the Coalition government's localism agenda.

The government is very much in love with its Localism and Big Society agenda, assuring us that the changes being implemented will lead to more responsive, accountable local services and away from the overbearing state - which apparently has been bothering us all rather a lot.

Accountable how, exactly? As education and health services become less directly accountable to local and central government and more public services are delivered through commissioning and contracts by the private and voluntary sector, we are forced into the role of 'customer'. We will become recipients of services whose only recourse when faced with a serious grievance, is to a complaints procedure.

Public services have increasingly been delivered to a 'Personalisation' agenda, creating the right service to meet the individual needs of the service user. It's a laudable ambition and there is no doubt that where services can operate in that way, the outcomes for individuals can be much improved.

But perhaps the personalisation agenda sits hand in hand with the ambition to carve up public services into a range of providers, justified by the need to meet an ever more complicated range of needs? If local authorities are not going to deliver public services but instead commission most of them, that is a very different relationship between elected members and officers and the services they provide for their local population. Instead of direct oversight and management, the assessment of quality, monitoring and evaluation will be carried out through contracting arrangements. This is not a satisfactory state of affairs, it reduces any meaningful sense of the local population influencing the quality of the services they receive through the ballot box.

Many of our public services are already partly delivered by third parties, more so in some local authorities than others. But these new changes will open and strengthen the free market across our services and this goes to the heart of the ideology driving the Coalition.

I've always believed two things very strongly: that as a country we should be committed to our mutual wellbeing and that the provision of education and health by the state on our behalf is entirely about enabling that in a democratic way and secondly, that these are services that should never be delivered for profit.

Now that the Coalition is in power (and enacting a series of ideologically motivated changes for which it had no mandate), the provision of education and health is to be handed to the private sector. The narrative is that new, innovative and successful organisations will arrive in the marketplace and revolutionise our outcomes, sending us soaring up the international league tables.

The truth is that private sector organisations will see an opportunity to make money. Companies you've never heard of will arrive, trumpeting their credentials as experts in teaching and learning or healthcare. But they're not experts, they are opportunists and they are certainly not committed to the education of your children or the solving of your heart condition. They are here because a market has opened up, they are here because they can make money. If they're not driven by that motivation, where have they been? Why have you not heard of them before, telling you how important your education and wellbeing is and what they're doing to make it better?

Surely the true route to local accountability is services delivered by your local authority and accountable to you, individually and collectively, through the ballot box?

The suggested cure coming from noises around O'Donnell's review, is an extension of the Freedom of Information Act as though being able to ask private or voluntary sector providers to account for themselves in lengthy paper exercises, is an alternative to credible, transparent democracy.

It's time for us to get a grip. These changes are an assault on our already ailing democracy. We need to revive the polity at a local level before all meaningful sense of public ownership and accountability collapses.

6th February 2011

The Education Bill is an attack on vulnerable children & young people

Last week it was NHS reform, this week the Education Bill comes before Parliament. Before the election I wrote about my fears of an Education Department run by Michael Gove. This is what I said:

“Mark me, this is not a man who is interested in schools as part of Children’s Services, despite the positive impact of the Children Act 2004. He is interested in Schooling: the filling of impressionable young minds with facts, the instilling of discipline with force if necessary and the exclusion of children with special educational needs and behavioural problems to the backwaters of separate schooling and Pupil Referral Units. Don’t believe me? Think he sounds reasonable when he talks about parent-founded schools? Then I direct you to his speech last July at the RSA. I think you will find it informative.”

I was scared then, I think I'm more scared now.

My job over the last few years has been focused on helping local authorities improve their services to children and young people in and leaving care. Part of that work has been about addressing the difficulties some young people face in school. Under the previous government we were heading in the right direction, creating more joint working and shared responsibility between schools and the rest of the local authority to support young people to stay in school and get the support they need.

This Education Bill has at its core some elements that will undo all that good, not just for young people in care but other groups of vulnerable young people too.

You will have heard about the English Baccalaureate; it's not just a limitation of subjects that will harm the chances of vulnerable young people:

- The requirement on schools to collaborate with the local authority to ensure the wellbeing of children and young people is removed.
- Schools will find it easier to exclude young people whose behaviour is challenging.
- The assumption that children and young people with Special Educational Needs will be educated in mainstream schools is removed.
- Pupil Referral Units will be expanded and inspected.

When these measures are taken alongside the expansion of Academies and Free Schools, the inevitable consequence will be increasing numbers of the most vulnerable

young people being excluded or channeled away from their schools and into special schools or pupil referral units.

We will be told that the move to different provision will be "in their best interests" or will "more appropriately meet their needs". This will be an argument familiar to those who have fought for their disabled child to be educated in mainstream school alongside their peers.

League tables and the notion of parental 'choice' are at the root of this. This new legislation is an inevitable extension of a policy that has moved us away from providing a good local school for every child and into a market of schools competing for students. In that competitive market, where schools must publicise their good results and show off their well behaved students in order to attract parents, vulnerable children create a problem.

Our comprehensive system is founded on the belief that all young people are entitled to a high quality education and that it is socially beneficial for young people to learn together, regardless of their background or circumstances. Huge strides have been made over the last decades, even against the background of league tables, to provide the support needed to vulnerable young people to enable them to stay in school with their peers. These measures will fracture that protection.

The Coalition will argue that the Pupil Premium is the remedy to ensure that schools will take on pupils from what they would call disadvantaged backgrounds - including children and young people from care. But increased competition with other schools will focus on reputation and regardless of whether a school has the money to support a young person, if they get a reputation for having the "difficult" kids they will worry that they are not attractive to the parents of high achieving students.

The government knows this too which is why these measures have been brought in. Strengthening provision in Pupil Referral Units (more money, Ofsted inspections and full-time teaching), illustrates very clearly that the Coalition aims to filter some young people out of mainstream education. Schools will be more easily able to exclude their students and the government will argue that the alternative provision of Pupil Referral Units will be an acceptable and well-funded alternative.

These measures are designed to clear our schools of vulnerable and challenging children and young people and educate them separately from their peers. This is absolutely not acceptable and is entirely at odds with the principles of our comprehensive system.

We must fight the Education Bill.

13th February 2011

Forget social mobility, this government's agenda is all about social exclusivity

The story in the Mail on Sunday about premium internships being auctioned off for thousands of pounds at Tory fundraisers should surprise no one.

The Conservative party is infused with privilege and money; these elements in tandem provide the golden ladder of opportunity straight to the penthouse suite of establishment Britain. Once there, a lifetime of continued privilege and wealth is all but guaranteed. It makes sense then, to ensure that privilege continues to be handed down to the next generation.

So finding itself in power once again, the party is busying itself with manoeuvres that will cement those privileges for its own while at the same time persuading a corner of the electorate that it is working entirely in their interests. Whether it's 'alarm clock Britain' or 'hard-working families', the government is keen to show the public that it is actually most concerned with their family's social mobility.

But explore the policies in more detail and they start to look a little more exclusive than inclusive, a little bit like social mobility for you but not for you.

It seems to me that the government thinks that 'disadvantage' means being poor and that poverty is simply the absence of money. That would explain Gove's obsession with the number of children on free school meals who get into Oxford each year. It's the spectre of the deserving poor again, those children that are grubby and living in penury but simply need the attention of the noble squire who takes an interest, recognises with delight the giant brain that lurks beneath the unkempt hair and coal-dusted face and immediately sends them up to Oxford to fulfil their promise.

Last week I wrote about the Education Bill and tried to show that a number of distinct measures in the legislation, when taken alongside the increase in Academy, Free and UTC schools, will result in thousands of children being excluded from the opportunity to learn with their peers. These children and young people will be those who have special educational needs, physical disabilities and mental health problems. They might be young people who are refugees or have English as a second language. They might live in the care of their local authority.

Excluding these young people from their peers is not a commitment to social mobility for the disadvantaged, it is an act of social exclusion that will have the exact opposite effect. In addition, these problems are not exclusively found alongside poverty and the government should consider a careful approach if it's to convince the parents and carers of disabled children that it has social mobility at heart while excluding their children from the local school.

There has been a lot of anxiety recently about attacks on disabled people by teenagers. How can we be surprised by this if we insist on learning and socialising separately from our disabled fellow citizens? It is social exclusion and it is deeply damaging.

Alongside education policy for the young, Disabled young people and adults are seeing their physical mobility and transport allowances cut back, with devastating consequences. What on earth are we to make of that? Social mobility good, actual mobility which contributes to social inclusion (including the opportunity to work) bad?

When we look at the aspects of policy that have improved people's life chances and enhanced their social mobility in recent years, they are all now being cut back. Higher

tuition fees are putting middle-income families off sending their children to university because they are fearful of such high levels of debt, despite the government's reassurances that repayment will come later. Education Maintenance Allowance kept young people in further and higher education who might not have attended otherwise. Sure Start centres provided essential nurture for children and parenting support for vulnerable families, giving them a head start. Aim Higher gave young people who had never considered higher education, the opportunity to explore it as a real option. I could go on.

Social mobility is meaningless without social inclusion. But I don't think the government wants to talk about that.

Post script: On Monday 14th February, the Prime Minister relaunched his Big Society initiative with a speech to social entrepreneurs and representatives of the voluntary sector. During questions, David Cameron talked about the National Citizen Service, his new scheme to provide six week community activity courses for sixteen year olds after their GCSEs. The big selling point, which he emphasised several times, was that the NCS would provide the opportunity for young people from different backgrounds to get to know and understand each other through their work together and that this was critical to the Big Society and social cohesion.

So why can't they get to know each other at school?

21st February 2011

Profiteers versus Little Platoons

Today the Prime Minister announced that public service delivery is open to absolutely anyone who would like to profit from it.

But hang on a minute! What about the little platoons of the Big Society who are set to deliver our public services as we all pull together to support ourselves? Surely if the platoons are busy delivering services, the potential markets for the private sector will be reduced? I can't imagine all those profit-making companies being pleased about that.

So on the one hand we are being exhorted to participate for the greater good but on the other, the road is being cleared for the private sector to get business from our misery and make a profit from our taxes.

Or is it that the volunteers will still be required, not for their philanthropic contribution but to assist an improvement in dividends for private sector shareholders?

Post Script: I've just received the localgov.co.uk bulletin, Mark Conrad's analysis is excellent. He includes the following quotation from the Prime Minister's Telegraph piece:

"I would argue that our plans to devolve power from Whitehall, and to modernise public services, are more significant aspects of our Big Society agenda than the work we're doing to boost social action."

13th March 2011

More on the DCLG review of local authority statutory duties

I've been chatting with Children's Minister Tim Loughton MP on twitter over the weekend.

I asked him about the Pickles review of all local authority statutory duties, including those affecting vulnerable children and families. Mr Loughton told me that as it was a review of all statutory duties, it was not significant that the Children Act provisions were included.

The thing is I think it's very significant because of the rhetoric coming from the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government himself. He is not averse to attacking local government as wasteful, pointless and teeming with jobsworth bureaucrats. He views our local democratic structures as a barrier to choice and individual responsibility rather than arbiters of equity.

His inclusion of duties affecting a wide range of vulnerable groups seems entirely in keeping with his ideology. I would be unsurprised if Mr Pickles announced that the implementation of care orders for vulnerable children should be carried out by the voluntary sector in the future. We heard last week, in the Special Educational Needs Green Paper, the suggestion that the voluntary sector should deliver statutory assessments for disabled children, currently a local authority task.

So if the Children Act and other local authority duties to vulnerable groups are not under threat from this review, why include them at all?

19th July 2011

Our Public Services, a Private Sector Profit (published in DeAlign)

The phone hacking palaver just keeps on giving and it has occupied the press and politicians for the last two weeks.

It's water torture for David Cameron and his government, the resignations and revelations burst like pin-sharp droplets into the press, preventing him from grabbing hold of the story - any story.

And so it was a week ago Monday when the Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt had to answer an urgent question on phone hacking in the House of Commons because the Prime Minister was at Canary Wharf, to launch his long-delayed and much-trumpeted white paper on public services.

David Cameron has had a lot to say on the role of the state since he came into office. The launch of the white paper, Open Public Services, was designed to be the final coming together of all the Prime Minister's big ideas: scaling back the size of the state, the little platoons of volunteers willing to run their own post offices, the localism agenda, parents running schools and the desire to end the "state monopoly" on public services.

It was meant to be the moment when we all listened to him and realised that he had been right all along and we simply did not understand his splendid joined up thinking. The crowning glory of all of this would be to announce the detail of his plans to open the delivery of public services to "any willing provider", basically an invitation to the private

sector to bid for public service contracts without hindrance and in direct competition with the state.

Unfortunately for Cameron, all his sound and fury was drowned out by the mêlée surrounding the phone hacking affair and his own grubby relationship to it. After giving his carefully crafted speech, the questions rained down but none sought to shed light on his big idea.

However, he did achieve some coverage, not least since on the morning of his announcement, the private sector elderly care provider Southern Cross announced its descent into administration. Quite a juxtaposition and one which the media put to good use.

Labour took a different angle, shrugging their shoulders and arguing that there was nothing new in the white paper and in fact, that it looked significantly watered down. The party let it be known that government had clearly been worried about being too radical, lest they found themselves with another NHS issue and a convoluted rearguard.

But in the midst of all the hoo-hah and however much the Opposition snipes about this being an emasculated set of proposals, one sticks out.

The government is absolutely committed to the private sector's entrance into all public service delivery. The big providers are already there, companies like Serco and G4S. They provide some of the basic services your council would normally run. In recent months they have been awarded enormous tax-payer funded contracts to deliver the new Work Programme. The Prime Minister wants you to believe that his plan is all about choice and competition which will drive up quality of service and put the "consumer" of public services in charge. He thinks he will create a variety of choice through a range of providers. But the list of prime contractors is always very small and the same names pop up again and again.

Meanwhile, small sub-contracted companies and voluntary organisations rely on the largesse of the prime contractors to support their direct delivery of our public services in a way that is sustainable.

Add to that the complications of private finance so perfectly illustrated by the awful mess Southern Cross found itself in and we have a very new, very radical change on our hands: our public services, paid for by us, delivered at a profit by the private sector but accountable to no one but the "customer".

Whatever your views on how we support ourselves as a society, this is a fundamental change to the fabric of our political and democratic structures. Perhaps last week we needed Cameron to be heard because surely, this must be opposed?

23rd August 2011

More Than Money (published in DeAlign)

The unemployment figures for the quarter to June made grim reading last week, 38,000 more people unemployed (21,000 of whom were women) and an unemployment rate amongst 16-24 year olds of 20.2%.

As the figures were released, markets were shuddering all over the world with anxieties over the eurozone and the USA's loss of its 'triple A' finance rating.

Towards the end of the week, the markets continued to look rocky and the UK reflected on the causes and ramifications of the recent riots. On Friday, the Prime Minister decided to spend the afternoon at the test match, arguing that he needed to take a break to avoid a 'fried brain'.

For the first time in decades, the state of our country and the world's finances seem to be having a direct and tangible impact, for most of us, on our daily lives. Since the Coalition came to power in May 2010, the focus of our politics and national debate has been the deficit, the cuts and the still-stumbling global economy. A fortnight ago, we added the riots to that agenda. Last week we added rising unemployment.

Usually in an economic downturn, a significant proportion of the population is insulated from any serious personal harm, they ride it out. This time though, only the very wealthy are immune, the rest of us are finding it hard.

The numbers many of us were once able to ignore - redundancies and job losses, rising VAT, commodities prices on the stock exchange, inflation and the projections for economic growth - we now know are critical to our own, very personal economic wellbeing.

And wellbeing is the critical issue here. It's no coincidence that we talk about economic 'depression' when growth stalls and the risk of a double-dip recession feels ever-present. Even at the height of early 1980s nuclear panic, I have never known our nation to be so gripped by anxiety and worry, so bleak in outlook.

It doesn't take long in any family or network of friends, to find someone who has lost their job in the last twelve months or even someone who is still unemployed after six. Early retirement, forced redundancies, companies going into administration, government funding cuts to public services and charities - all of these things have economic and emotional consequences for individuals and their families. Those consequences when multiplied are even more devastating.

When the cuts began and concerns grew that the economy would stall, many made predictions of riots, higher rates of crime and increased domestic violence as families came under economic pressure. Well we've had the riots and we've not seen the crime statistics but I can tell you that, driving through Dorset last week, I saw the following headline on a local paper: "Domestic Violence Shelters Overflowing".

We cannot avoid the emotional and social consequences of our economic torpor which raises an interesting question for David Cameron. Last year he announced his determination to address the quality of our national "wellbeing" as a measure of progress and success, in addition to the usual economic indicators. He argued that we were too focused on economic outputs, ignoring the value of more human states of being. Much of this was derided in the press as a "happiness" agenda but he had a serious and valid point. However, the Prime Minister and a large number of his policy advisors think that "happiness" and "wellbeing" are states of mind over which we have complete personal control, regardless of our economic circumstances. He concludes that with a bit of will-power, anyone can break free from the chains that shackle them and succeed. It's a classic neo-liberal, personal responsibility, "pull yourself up by your bootstraps"

argument.

The problem for Mr Cameron is that on current evidence, the very opposite is true.