A Proposal based on the revitalisation of Civil Society
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Understanding the terminology...

Society is not an easy concept to pin down. The Oxford dictionary describes it as "an aggregate (something formed from a mass of loosely connected fragments) of people living together in more or less orderly communities." Twenty-four years ago Margaret Thatcher declared that “there is no such thing as society; there are only individual men and women, and there are families.”

Civil society, the Initiative identified in 2008, is a much broader concept. It describes the quality of human relationships implied by covenant (moral obligations that go further than legal contracts); it is where people have to accept responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Most day-to-day activity is about getting on with our neighbours and creating a quality of life that depends on our access to people we trust, like and admire. It is a spontaneous reaction by people simply doing what they think is right, and has very little to do with simply following formal laws. Civil society feels comfortable but when taxes replace generosity, and social workers replace caring neighbours, something precious within the organic nature of society withers, and life becomes colourless.

Civil society, however, has become a greatly weakened concept, and because education has now become micromanaged by the state so as to essentially fit “with a new economic imperative of supply-side investment for national prosperity” the revitalisation of education has to proceed in sequence with the recovery of civil society.

Big Society, said David Cameron in May 2011 as he re-launched for the fourth time to a nation uncertain as to what this meant, and sceptical of politicians’ interest in ‘doing something on the cheap’, “...is not some fluffy add–on to the more gritty and important subjects....you learn (in Big Society) about responsibility, and how to live [when] in harmony with others.”

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1 Now, as more families fall apart and there is less reciprocity in social life, some are reporting on what they perceive as an emerging community–wide affliction growing out of the individuals’ Social Attachment Disorders, whereby adults who, as children, lacked sufficient opportunity to develop their empathetic skills, find themselves unable to make meaningful relationships with others so that the glue which should hold society together just isn’t there.
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In the drawing together of three strands of Coalition policy – Big Society, Regionalism and local financial responsibility, and Education – lies the most promising route to the creation of a responsible, thoughtful and enterprising nation.

Such a melding of currently disconnected policies demands a better appreciation of the dynamics of human learning, of the motivators of behaviour, and the dynamics of interdependent communities. Transformed into joined-up policies, this would release the personal creativity of millions of people to create and support a functional democracy able to make informed judgements over complex issues, and then stick by the outcomes.

The Proposal. While this needs to happen fast across the whole country, it won’t happen at all unless government and the private sector take the lead in offering to go into partnership with some ten geographically and socially coherent communities (of between 20 and 50,000 people) able and willing to test how, by using all their resources – homes, communities, schools and voluntary associations they can transform the way they bring up their children, and in so doing transform their own lives. A full transformation (reversing the current “upside down and inside out” model) would take at least ten years, but such recognisable progress could be made within three years that the first part of a national ‘roll-out’ could start much earlier. The key to its ultimate success would be the recognition that it is the community which has to be unit of change, not the individual school.....and it is within such communities that civil society will best operate.

The Background. The concept of Big Society, when tainted with a political imperative to cut expenditure, is not immediately attractive to a people who, for twenty or more years, have been encouraged to value competition over collaboration. Yet, as the philosopher John Macmurray states: “Since individualism misrepresents our nature, it follows that communal life is the normal state for human beings. But human life is not organic; a shared existence is a matter of intention, not of fact. Community has to be created and sustained by conscious purpose, and the more successfully this is done the more we fulfil our personal nature”. This is what this Proposal on civil society has to achieve.
It will not be easy because a society that prides itself on scientific objectivity needs to be reminded both of Darwin’s statement in 1859 that “It is not the strongest of the species that survives, or the most intelligent; it is the one most adaptable to change”, and Einstein’s observation that “You will never solve a problem by using the same thinking that created the problem in the first place.” Neither individuals, nation states, nor economic systems exist in a vacuum. We change as we relate to others and what goes on around us, so that in 2007 evolutionary psychologists could summarise this as: Selfishness beats altruism within groups; but altruistic groups beat selfish groups every time. People who pull together pull through, whilst those who cannot cooperate simply disintegrate.

The structures of government within which we have to work, change over time. They often accumulate new powers quicker than they dispose of irrelevant functions. Over recent decades, central government has assumed more of the responsibilities which earlier had been undertaken by local government or simply left to the judgement of individuals. This has now reached the point where individuals often see absolutely no connection to what they’re paying for in national taxation, and the provision of local services. Consequently the concept of citizenship seems pretty vague to most people. As members of the EU the English have signed up to the concept of Subsidiarity – ‘it is wrong for a superior body to hold to itself the right of making decisions which an inferior is well qualified to do for itself’ – yet micromanagement by central government continues to downgrade local powers of decision–making and saps the energy that should fuel civil society.

The ability to know how to learn has never been more important than now when today’s skills can all too easily be in the display case of tomorrow’s museums. “In times of change learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped for a world that no longer exists”. By failing to appreciate children’s innate desire to find things out for themselves, so as to be in charge of their futures, modern society has come to place an excessive dependence to do formally what by its very nature needs to involve a mixture of the theoretical with the applied. “Learning is not something that requires time–out from productive activity,” stated a most successful study of businesses twenty years ago, “learning is at the very heart of productive activity.” Social groups provide the opportunities and resources for their members to learn because successful learning has to be both social and active. Schools, however good they may be, are only part of what matters in education; the home and community are the other partners.

Reductionism – the limitations of conventional thinking. Earlier advances in the physical sciences were much facilitated by the breaking down of problems into its constituent parts, and solving each part of the problem in isolation. It has slowly come to be recognised, however, that in complex systems this simply does not work for change in one part of the system.
automatically changes the dynamics in all the other parts. Just as schools, faced by the complexity of knowledge, divide the curriculum into separate disciplines so government, faced with the complexity of a modern state, allocates various responsibilities to specific specialist departments. With all the difficulties this creates for inter-departmental collaboration the one department that emerges as having the most authority, and sets the tone for other departments, is the Treasury “for he who pays the piper calls the tune.” Because Big Society, and even more Civil Society, has to transcend all departments it has no ministerial champion, whereas Education – too narrowly defined as being about schools – is so large and influential that it is all too easy for its ministers to equate schooling and learning as synonymous, and so the rest of the Cabinet fall into the dangerous trap of seeing it as a standalone activity, which it most certainly is not.

Perhaps it is only the Prime Minister who, overseeing the whole of national life, can understand what Vaclav Havel, former President of the Czech Republic, meant when he observed “Education is the ability to perceive the hidden connections between phenomena.” Without clearly appreciated connections radical ideas can far too easily fall through the gaps of conventional management.

**The emerging political problem is the management of enhanced expectations.** Throughout the 20th century England achieved ever higher standards of living by creating complex economies in which most people required very specific skills which often detached them from seeing the overall significance of their work. Frederic Winslow Taylor (Scientific Management of Work) argued that, by tightly defining what is involved in every stage of a specific task, it was possible to greatly increase productivity, but, by removing what had earlier been the satisfaction of a job well done, replaced this with cash incentives, and the inducement of longer holidays in which to get away from the ‘boredom of it all’. Subsequently, manufacturers in order to bolster the economy, introduce both the concept of planned obsolescence, and increased sales by encouraging changing fashion.

**England is now in a double bind;** as standards of living rise around the world so the cost of materials and imported goods increase, so forcing people to work harder to earn enough to pay for what earlier has been more easily acquired. Improved medical care, which of itself is costly, is so extending life expectancy that it is putting impossible pressure on pensions, and the expectation of increasing numbers of people for a work-free Third Age.

It seems that the concerns of many in the 1940s that the introduction of the welfare state would gradually weaken the individual’s drive to look after its own future, are starting to come true, and that the State as currently constituted will simply not be able to cope.
The implications of being overschooled but undereducated. At its roots this is due to the over-emphasis on aligning education with the economic investment for national prosperity resulting in whole generations of young people believing that education is primarily about getting the qualifications that will get them good jobs. In today's culture that assumes that the taxes people pay on their enhanced incomes will pay other people to solve the problems that, in their busy lives, they have actually created by themselves no longer contributing to those reserves of good will essential to sustain civil society. Put simply, if relatives and friends don’t play their part in supporting the sick and the infirm, the cost to the tax payer will be prohibitive (and beyond the magic of any party political dogma to solve). Here is the rub: unless young people grow up in communities where it is obvious that nothing comes without a cost, they will eventually wreck society by being totally unwilling to accept the personal implications of their essentially selfish actions.

Steps towards a solution. So persistent have been the siren calls of Parliamentarians over many years for young people to concentrate on those skills that will enable them to excel in whatever market place they find themselves, that several generations have lost that sense of collaborative endeavour which has to underpin strong communities. There is a fundamental contradiction in the Coalition’s wish to build communities that hold together because they live and work together, and an education policy predicated on the individual’s right to put their child in the car or on the bus to send him or her to a school far away from the community in which, in earlier primary years, the child had started to learn to become a participative member.

By removing the last vestiges of local, democratic planning for the well-being of all children within a community, Coalition policies play to the fact that it is far easier to build a strong school if it is only accountable to itself, and no-one – other than the amoral operation of the free market – has any responsibility.