

The Big Society

The Big Society, introduced following the establishment of the coalition government in May 2010, is a set of reforms and social policy upheaval ostensibly designed to combat Britain's supposed economic crisis. This has led to cuts in the public sector, leading to potentially 500,000 people out of work and untold consequences for service users. Proponents of the Big Society project cite its commitment to the rejuvenation of community autonomy, with such schemes as the 'Right to Buy'.

At RAPAR, we see the Big Society as a banner to cover up an unprecedented dismantling of the public sector; an ideological attack from a Conservative-led government that is both unconstructive in tackling economic downturn, and destructive to those who benefit from public funding and services. It threatens all facets of society, leading to mass unemployment, depleted public services and the segregation of those communities that are most affected.

These cuts are dreaded almost universally amongst service users, with good reason. The asylum seekers and people of destitution that RAPAR works with first hand will be hit terribly by the onslaught. The immigration question in Britain today cannot be seen as an isolated policy subject; the dangers ahead for those seeking asylum must be seen in the context of the Big Society project, and recognized in the burgeoning solidarity between all those hostile to it.

Work must be done to combat the negative stereotyping of immigrants and refugees, who have historically been used as scapegoats for national traumas, and are now being subtly pushed into public consciousness (viz. Cameron 'multiculturalism has failed' etc.) as an explanation for a crisis actually instigated by global banking and finance factors. Further, the dangers that public service cuts pose to people of destitution should be seen in the same context as the dangers that the cuts pose to all society.

From September this year, ministers from the Con-Dem government seek to cut back on public funding of English tuition for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Under the proposed rules, the state will limit free places to people on job seeker's allowance or employment support allowance (i.e. those who are actively seeking work). For those who claim on other benefits, such as housing, income support, or tax credits, free places will no longer be available. As a qualified EFL teacher myself, I am aware of the prices some centres charge for language courses. The opportunity to learn English from professionals will simply no longer be possible for a huge number of people who vitally need it. As the Shadow Secretary of State for Business, John Denham, has pointed out, these new restrictions will undo previous good work that concentrated funding for ESOL on areas most in need of language training.

In February, David Cameron made a heavily loaded speech on the supposed 'failure' of state multiculturalism, and has called for a 'muscular liberalism' when dealing with some migrant communities. Such an approach would include 'making sure that immigrants speak the language of their new home, and ensuring people are educated in the elements of a common culture and curriculum'. It is a strange paradox that the Prime Minister can set out such a programme while simultaneously cutting public funding to the thing most essential for successful integration: language.

The tacit scapegoating of minority communities for social problems has allowed the far right stereotype of the dangerous and undeserving immigrant to infiltrate mainstream debate. Multiculturalism is an attainable state; it exists in many parts of Britain already. It is a state that thrives in atmospheres of shared experiences, empathy and understanding. A cut in essential ESOL training for those most at risk of persecution in the workplace is destined to exacerbate feelings of 2nd class citizenship and segregation. Simply put, how can a migrant, without sufficient language training, progress in an English speaking society?

In November last year, the government proposed a £350 million cut to legal aid services. Within this, all immigration cases will be excluded from legal aid. Although asylum and detention cases maintain their aid (a last bastion of decency, it seems), aid will be withdrawn where and whenever there are appeals against decisions to take away continued welfare support for asylum seekers. Indeed, such is the negation of responsibility to migrants coming to this country that legal help will no longer even extend to asylum support cases where claimants are without accommodation. We therefore face the very real possibility that in the near future there will be legal cases proceeding where the defendant a) speaks no English, b) has no legal representation, c) is homeless. Needless to say, under these conditions the 'defendant' will not be able to do a great deal of defending.

Further to the cuts in legal aid, refugee services have seen public funding reduced drastically. The Refugee Council is to have its government funding cut by almost 62%, with cuts to frontline services beginning almost immediately. This will include the wraparound initial accommodation facility seeing a 50% reduction in funding to just £726,000, and the Council's one stop service cut by 62% to £2 million. Lastly, the Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES) is to be disbanded completely, meaning that for the first time in memory, there will be no government statutory funding to support refugees' integration in the UK.

Can we surmise, then, that central to Cameron's vision of 'muscular liberalism' in Britain is the destruction of truly essential services to migrants and asylum seekers? The restructuring of ESOL and legal aid funding to migrants and destitute people will have untold repercussions for the hope of multiculturalism in Britain. It is crucial to remember that all people who are affected by Big Society austerity are connected and share a common goal, a common experience, and the fundamental desire to have their voices heard. Migrant communities are a vital component of the overall opposition to the Big Society project, and represent one of the main voices amongst the many who see the destructive policies of the Con-Dem government for what they are, and seek to resist these policies.