

CRC Briefing: The New Government, the Cuts and the Churches

Introduction

This briefing paper seeks to set out some of the implications of the policies of the coalition government, the difficult economic climate and the challenges and opportunities this brings for churches.

Localism

The government has a strong focus on the very local. This has been translated into policies about local schools being independent from Local Authorities (Academies and “free schools”); doctors in consortiums having budgets for treatment for patients, and the end of Primary Care Trusts (PCTs); the “Big Society” being exemplified by a “save our pub” campaign.

It has also meant the lessening of regional government, and the abolition of Regional Development Agencies, Government Offices and local Leaders Boards in regions.

This brings opportunities for churches, who remain at the heart of local communities, and who exemplify how volunteers and charitable organisations can contribute to civil society.

However as churches we must be concerned for the poorest and most vulnerable, and there are risks that they will be left behind in the focus on the can-do society. For example, it is sometimes the case that those in deprived areas or remote rural areas have little choice over their GP practice. In some communities the quality of health care at GP practices is not good, and whereas in middle-class communities articulate people will be able to change practice (and drive further, for example,) or make waves if they are unsatisfied, this is less likely in very poor communities or rural communities where people may not have access to another practice or may feel they have little power and making a fuss is not worth it. Their care, if totally devolved to GP practices, maybe less good than other communities. Also, the preventive health strategies funded by PCTs may be less likely to be funded by local GP consortiums. Generally, poorer people are less healthy, and this was evidenced by the recent Marmot report to government.

Similarly with schools, if those with capacity, ideas and professional skills set up their own schools, this may leave behind those in poorer communities with failing schools, whom the LEA are increasingly unable to support due to the decreasing number of schools they manage and their corresponding drop in resources.

One of the CRC Board has called what is happening fragmentation; and when localism becomes local communities fending for themselves, there will be those left behind. When there is the capacity to see a bigger picture; when there is a wider strategy, those in danger of being forgotten and excluded can be included. Without a vision the people perish.

Churches, although very local, also have the benefit of connexions to a diocese, a district, a province, a Synod; and a national church – for Methodists this is “the Connexion”. Through the CRC we can share what is happening in Wakefield and Withernsea, Northallerton and Normanby, Hull and Huddersfield; and a wider view allows for a more strategic vision. Churches also are part of worldwide churches, which is why we have an international view as well.

This is why the church at local, diocese/district/synod level, and national level, is uniquely placed to have views which are relevant and deserve to be listened to – we have something important to say. And saying it together has more effect than separate areas and localities saying things.

The government are encouraging the formation of Local Enterprise Partnerships at city region level (Leeds, Sheffield, Humber) and sub-regional level (York and North Yorkshire). These will be a partnership of local authorities and business; but the churches’ voice and that of other voluntary sector partners must not be excluded because we have important experience and grassroots knowledge to share. Further, a lot of what we do contributes to economic development particularly in deprived communities where we help people to access jobs, give people self-confidence and leadership skills through volunteering in our projects, and deliver services like furniture recycling and childcare.

Government is also going to encourage more elected mayors for the 12 biggest cities who are at the centre of city regions, such as Sheffield and Leeds. However, the experience of Doncaster shows that unaccountable leaders with no deep mandate can be loose cannons who are a threat to the wellbeing of communities and stability of local governance. A vital role for churches may be as independent voices of the community who can hold them to account.

The Big Society

David Cameron’s passion for this is linked to Nat Wei, now Lord Wei, the Government’s advisor on the Big Society. He is a Christian who was a member of Teach First’s founding staff team. (Teach First was founded in 2002 by Brett Wigdortz to recruit exceptional graduates into challenging schools.) He was also a founder of Future Leaders, an accelerated development programme for potential head teachers of inner city schools. His hero is Lord Shaftesbury, he says.

There is a great deal of Christian influence in the government and the idea of philanthropy is deeply embedded. This means that the place of churches, their resources, volunteers, and presence in local communities will be totally in tune with the kind of voluntary activity the government wishes to encourage as part of our contribution to the Big Society. However, it remains to be seen whether in the current climate there will be any resources to support that work.

One of the things David Cameron has said he wants to encourage as part of the Big Society is Community Organising. Community Organising, the movement in the States founded by Saul Alinsky in Chicago, is about organising the poor for social action, and it has a good deal of Christian involvement. Barack Obama was a Community Organiser in Chicago. In the UK, churches and faith groups are at the core of many Community Organising groups like London Citizens. All the leaders of the political parties spoke at a large London Citizens event just before the election, and all promised to work with them on their campaigns, such as the Living Wage campaign. It was held on a Sunday, and there was a large and visible Christian church presence.

In our region, Impact in Sheffield did excellent campaigning work as a Community Organising movement until their demise a few years ago, and in Bradford, Church Action on Poverty have been running a Community Organising movement called Changemakers. There is currently interest and action in the churches in Community Organising in Leeds and Hull.

Again it remains to be seen whether there are any resources to encourage more Community Organising. Impact in Sheffield was forced to close due to lack of funding. Clearly, though, churches will continue to be involved in what is a powerful movement. And David Cameron has announced his intention to train a “new generation of community organisers”. This must be something churches will be part of – indeed they already are.

The Cuts

We are moving into an unprecedented era of huge cuts. The government have said they will protect frontline services; but this, frankly, is just not possible when the level of cuts are considered. Local Authorities for example are going to have to make crucial decisions about staff cuts and service cuts; we will see libraries closed, care homes shut, elderly care services cut back, respite care for young people with disabilities withdrawn. The Yorkshire Post (24th July 2010) reports that the cuts of 25% for Local Authorities will mean that 150,000 jobs will go in the region over the next four years as hundreds of millions of pounds is slashed from budgets. North Yorkshire County Council has told the YP that £100 million will be cut over the next four years and there will be compulsory redundancies. Barnsley will make cuts of £40 million and there will be “substantial” redundancies. But the Local Authority is the largest employer in Barnsley.

The further government department cuts to be announced in October in the Comprehensive Spending Review will mean cuts in services. Already, free swimming for children and pensioners, promoting healthy exercise, has gone. Affordable housing projects will now not go ahead, at a time when the number of people on social housing waiting list is at an all time high of 4.5 million (see the CRC briefing paper, the Housing Crisis). The Building Schools for the Future programme has been scrapped.

The Emergency Budget in June brought in higher VAT and changes to benefits; this will hit the poorest and most vulnerable the hardest.

At a time of increasing need, those who often give care like voluntary organisations will be closing down due to the drying up of funding sources. I have spoken to several local organisations providing services such as job seeker advice, debt advice and housing help whose funding ends in March 2011, with no sign of any future funding. This will also affect the many faith-based or church projects who are part of the wider voluntary sector and deliver services through contracts with bodies like Local Education Authorities and Local Authorities or receive government funding through the various targeted funds of the last government such as Capacity Builders or Future Builders which are almost certain to end in March 2011. These cuts, which are sometimes being applied mid-contract, will affect most large church projects who employ staff.

However, it will still be the churches who will act as backstop for those who fall through the net. We are not always so reliant on funding since we have a bank of volunteers and church staff. Churches can do some things without any extra resources, of course, as resources can come from within a church community. I have no doubt, for example, that those who provide food parcels will be inundated with requests, and homeless hostels will be overwhelmed this winter, as the churches will still be there even if other sources of help have gone. Recently someone who gives financial and debt advice told me that she has an entirely new kind of client – middle class couples, who have lost their jobs and now face losing their home. This is going to be an increasing story, especially in Yorkshire and Humber where so many jobs are either public sector jobs or reliant on the public sector. Any upturn in the economy is unlikely to provide the increase in private sector jobs here needed to match the loss of public sector jobs which will happen over the next two years. It will mean thousands of jobs in Local Authorities will go and places like Barnsley, Grimsby and Cleethorpes, Mexborough and Hull will be hardest hit.

The increase in unemployment expected in Yorkshire and Humber will also mean that they may be an increasing number of volunteers who would want to be involved with church projects helping the most needy. Churches should take advantage of training in the voluntary sector, and from Christian organisation Livability, on the management of volunteers to make the most of this opportunity, and ensure good practice in training and deployment.

As Christians we have a duty to care for the most vulnerable, and to champion our work in churches to build a better society – a Big Society, if we are happy to use government terminology. But we are not an alternative to properly funded welfare services, nor a plug for gaps in service provision. Nor are we an agency of government – we have our own distinct aims, objectives and values and projects for which we might seek funding, but we cannot be funding-led, rather than value-led.

The CRC will endeavour to seek to influence those in the region with power to make decisions and to keep reminding those people of the danger of the most vulnerable being left behind and excluded.

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