Volunteers and Voluntary Organisations at the Neighbourhood Level: Challenges of Building Community in the 21st Century

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Thank you so much for inviting me to contribute to the St Wilfrid's Lecture series this year - for giving me the opportunity to visit this wonderful place and for the opportunity to reflect – from my own academic perspective - on your theme for this series: 'Who is my neighbour? Exploring 21st Century Community'

Introduction:

A long time ago in a country which was then far away, there lived a small-town inn keeper who had 5 sons and 2 daughters. One of the sons at the age of 22 decided to seek his fortune beyond his small town. He had heard about another country where there would be plenty of opportunities to earn a living and where poor young men were not conscripted to serve for long years in the ruler's army.

That young man was a Polish Jew called Israel Moses, my paternal grandfather. He arrived in England at the beginning of the 20th century with no money and no English language. But he did have training as a tailor and so he quickly found a job and a place to sleep in the sweatshops of London's East End. Within a few years he had a wife and four children – one of them my father. Although his wife, my grandmother, also worked the two of them never earned sufficient to house, feed and clothe their family. They survived all the same with the help of the hundreds of small charities and local mutual aid associations established to meet the material and spiritual needs of the new immigrants from Eastern Europe and keep them from being a drain on public funds.

Most of the voluntary organisations which enabled my father's family to survive were founded and run by Jews – started by local synagogues or more established British Jewish philanthropists. They set up housing trusts, soup kitchens, theatres, newspapers and they established clubs where the children of immigrants could study, play sports, enjoy outings to the sea, and learn to understand English culture. Those children, just one element in the huddled masses of the East End of London, also benefited from the vision of British philanthropists who simply wanted to raise the living conditions of impoverished slum dwellers and the aspirations of their children. My own father was educated at Raines Foundation School – a charity school established by an English churchman and philanthropist, Henry Raine, in the eighteenth century. Raines School managed to turn the children of impoverished immigrants who spoke no English into people of knowledge and sensitivity able to take their place in the white collar labour market of the 20th century and in the British Armed Forces of the Second World War.

I have begun with this very personal narrative not only because it seems to typify the nature of neighbourhood and community a mere one hundred years ago – mutual aid, charity and philanthropy - but also so that we have a bench-mark for our reflections this evening about the challenges of building neighbourhood and community in our own century.

I mention it also because the scenario I have shared is, I suspect, not that far removed from the mental image held by our politicians and policy makers when they urge us all to 'active citizenship', 'volunteering' and 'philanthropy' as the sensible way to deal with a broad swathe of contemporary social problems - ranging from the care of an ageing population through to the challenges of unemployment.

Somewhere behind the visionary-sounding policy concepts of 'community development' and 'neighbourhood regeneration' and, most recently, 'Big Society' (1) - are assumptions that the poor, if left to themselves, will voluntarily help one another and generate social solidarity without needing state-funded intervention – just as they apparently did at the end of the Victorian era when my grandparents were struggling to find their feet in a new land. Where friends and family in neighbourhoods cannot quite manage to keep lives on track, well, there will be corporate and individual philanthropists who will dip into their vast reserves of wealth out of a sense of 'social responsibility'; and may be also some small, carefully targeted, hand-outs from government special project funds or the National Lottery (2).   And of course, if all else fails, surely the churches, synagogues, temples and mosques will open their doors and coffers because is not helping the needy a fundamental obligation of all faith groups?

By the way, the social policies I am talking about tonight are not ones that arrived fully formed with our current Coalition Government or the economic recession. We can trace from at least the mid-1970s a growing consensus amongst policy makers that the Welfare State - established in the 1940s during a wave of post-War social consciousness and solidarity - needs to be 'rolled back' to provide more of a 'mix' of welfare provision from the public and voluntary sectors and even the business sector. This idea includes giving a freer rein to charities, philanthropists and citizens to do more to meet needs (Hogg and Baines, 2011).

Yet as the idea of 'rolling back the welfare state' gained traction in the 1980s and 1990s, the momentum which had led to the setting up of the Welfare State in the first place was somehow forgotten - the patchy provision of medical and social care according to geography and wealth; horrible housing conditions for many; the stigmatising of the poor; unemployed men fainting from hunger as they queued for hand-outs; and the generally poor state of health and low life expectancy of all but the richest sections of society. Incidentally, of the four children of Israel Moses born in the early years of the 20th century, only one lived into mature adulthood and even he, my father, lived only into his mid-60s. Damp and cramped living conditions, erratic access to decent food and medical treatment, and general social chaos at the local level took their toll on all four of them – despite the improving efforts of philanthropists.

So my arguments tonight are not directed specifically at our current Government or even particular previous Governments. The point is a much broader one; that building local community in the 21st century cannot be simply a matter of harking back to traditional ideas about social responsibility (1) or even to ones about the Welfare State of the 1940s and 1950s which nurtured my own generation to far better health and educational attainments than our parents' generation.

We need to take a realistic look at what is appropriate for this 21st century, given not only the evidence of history but also the evidence about the kind of society we now live in. Major changes in demographic characteristics, economic conditions and social expectations have occurred since my grandfather first stepped ashore here. And those changes make community building in the 21st century especially challenging.

Three Pillars of Public Policy on Community:

Let us take a look, then, at the ideas currently underpinning public policies for building community. There are three main intellectual pillars upholding the policies – assumptions about volunteering and voluntarism; assumptions about philanthropy and giving of money; and assumptions about the organisational capacity of the voluntary sector – charities, associations, community groups, advocacy groups and so on. I think each of the pillars, or sets of assumptions, are flawed, mostly because they do not sufficiently take into account the realities of 21st century living in the UK or the linkages between different facets of our hugely complex society.

Let us look first at assumptions about *volunteers and volunteering.* Policy makers persist in believing that there is an untapped reservoir of potential volunteers who can be called into the service of their local communities – as community workers, carers, advice-givers, youth workers, child-minders, good neighbours, bridge-builders and so on. The idea seems to be that if the state and local government move away from responding to need, ordinary people will somehow be empowered to fill the care and community-building vacuum - without any payment (Bartels et al, 2013); that ordinary people will find the will to look after themselves and each other; they will ensure, for example, that the hungry are fed, the homeless sheltered, the immigrants integrated into local communities, abused children protected, and sports clubs run for the young people enthused by the 2012 Olympics. But before we build national policies on this assumption, it might be wise to take into account some key research findings – some evidence about realities.

First, 'self-help' associations and 'mutual aid' are rarely able to provide solutions to major social problems. Local areas with those most in need of help are also often those with least resources of time and money to give to others (Williams, 2011). An early research piece about the pre-school

playgroups movement was appropriately entitled 'the deceit of self-help' because it identified the tendency of such local associations to increase the burdens on those who are already over-burdened and stressed (Finch, 1984).

Second, volunteer-run services at the local level can raise sensitive issues. A free advice service run by local volunteers, for example, will remain unused if local residents are fearful of gossip about their personal lives. Again, many people are happy to pop in on an informal basis to keep an eye on an isolated older neighbour but they quickly back off if there is an attempt by governmental agencies or charities to formalise, monitor or regulate what they are doing (Abrams, 1980). We should also bear in mind that the heavy female contribution of voluntary hours which was for long the mainstay of local charities and groups, can now be relied on less and less. More and more women are in employment and more and more women are single parents with little or no time to offer as volunteers beyond their family commitments.

So what about the 'young and early retired' people who appear on the face of it to be ideal new recruits to local volunteering – still relatively fit and with new found free time? Well nowadays they are often looking after grandchildren while parents work – a valuable type of volunteering from a social welfare perspective and it saves the public purse millions (Arber and Timonen, 2012). But the point is that such people are already doing their voluntary bit – even though it is largely hidden from the volunteering statistics. Younger retired people are also part of the fortunate and exceptional 'baby boomer' generation who often have sufficient money and good health to be able to pursue time-consuming hobbies, including travel, once they are no longer in employment. Not a good source of new volunteers there (Davis Smith and Gay, 2005).

Research tells us, too, that people are generally not keen to do on a voluntary basis work that was previously done by paid staff. This point applies particularly to services previously provided by trained professionals such as social work, counselling, running libraries or health care (Naylor et al, 2013). And it applies especially to those geographical areas which are most in need. Similarly, people in faith groups are generally not keen to be 'commissioned' to deliver public services. If you see your activities as a way of expressing God's love or your religious obligations, you do not necessarily want to be told by policy makers what services you should provide to whom, or to be subject to the strict regulations and monitoring procedures which now accompany publicly funded services (Cairns, et al, 2007).

Recent research also shows that volunteers are less and less willing to take on regular commitments or to volunteer for the same cause for a long stretch. The trend – which is not confined to the UK –

is towards what has been called 'episodic' volunteering in which people do one-off tasks on an occasional basis (Macduff, 2005). So where services need by their nature to be provided on a regular basis (for example, a weekly drop-in for homeless people or a day-centre for elders) continuity will be likely to require complicated rota systems – in other words 'management'. And volunteer management costs money.

This brings us to a key point. Volunteers are not a free good even though they themselves are not paid. They need to be supervised in their tasks and thanked. There are increasingly complex administrative tasks attached to recruiting and retaining volunteers; these may include arranging criminal record checks and carrying out monitoring required by funders. Many volunteers need training, sometimes quite sophisticated and expensive training. There is a growing trend for volunteers to expect something in return for their work; for student volunteers it may be a reference for their CV; for others it may be a formal qualification which might lead to paid work; and for yet others it may be gifts of the sort that were showered on the Olympic volunteers. The managers of the volunteers for the 2012 Olympics have certainly ratcheted up volunteers' expectations of thanks in kind. Material rewards included clothing, watches, metal pins, a souvenir baton, parties, and opportunities to apply for tickets for a variety of sporting and ceremonial events. How will we keep 'em happily volunteering down at the grassroots now that thousands of souvenir batons are on living room shelves and e-bay?

The Prime Minister has talked optimistically about his wish to "harness" (his word) the Olympics volunteering spirit and "ensure that what happened last summer is the beginning of a great volunteering legacy for our country" (3). But politicians may have misunderstood what kind of volunteering 'legacy' can be delivered from the 2012 Olympics. Yes, around 80,000 people were recruited as volunteers to do a range of tasks during the Games, from driving VIPs and directing tourists, through to performing in the various ceremonies and guiding athletes. And yes, far more people expressed interest than could actually be involved. But it is one thing to volunteer to participate in a prestigious and glamorous once in a lifetime event – even to take leave from your paid work to do so - and quite another to turn out on a regular basis, say on a cold, wet Monday evening in the English winter - to run a sports club, care for elderly neighbours or provide support to a refugee family (Harris, 2012a). Even those with spare time left after they have done their paid work or looked after their families, are well aware these days that they have choices about how to spend their leisure time. As one harassed chairwoman of a local voluntary association said to me when I was doing research on volunteer boards: 'I don't have to do this you know. I could be playing badminton.'

In short, assumptions that there is an untapped pool of people eager to volunteer to help their communities if they are just given a little encouragement from politicians and government projects – well they fly in the face of current research about volunteers and their motivations (Rochester et al, 2010).

If we need to be cautious about donations of volunteer time, what about the second pillar – assumptions about voluntary donations of money? Is there scope for increasing *financial support* for local community and neighbourhood activities?   Here too, research suggests caution.

Nobody can be unaware of the current Government's 'austerity' drive and the related major public spending cuts. And anybody involved with provision of health, education, housing, legal advice, criminal justice and social welfare will be well aware, too, of the way in which public services have been drastically reduced and will continue to be reduced even further in coming years. We hear in broad terms about the impoverishment of more and more families and the growing inequalities between rich and poor in this country. What is less often remarked upon is how the public sector spending cuts have knock-on impacts and are linked in numerous ways to other changes in society.

Cutting public services is not just about services and welfare benefits simply disappearing or being rationed to the point that they are unobtainable – drastic as that is for ordinary people at the local level. This is all happening at the same time as other phenomena, many of which are driven by similar pressures. It is happening, for example, at the same time as small local firms are struggling to remain in business and keep people in employment; they are not much in the mood for offering corporate philanthropy or employee volunteering to help replace the benefits and local services which have been cut. The large national and global corporations may in theory be in a position to help out but when times are tough they will be more inclined to put their philanthropy with well-known national causes (where there is pay-back for their brand) rather than with small, struggling local voluntary associations and charities (Harris, 2012b).

 If not businesses helping out with financial support at the local level, then what about local people; will *they* donate more to local services? Leaving aside people trying to live on increasingly inadequate state benefits, what about those in employment? Well, people who are unsure about how long they will remain in employment, or who are forced into part-time employment, are not much in the mood for increasing or even continuing voluntary donations to charities and other good causes. We also know that there is a trend for younger people (under 30s) to give less to charities than do older people (over 60s) (CAF, 2013) and that individual giving to charities seems to be declining (CAF, 2012). The total value of the largest donations to charities is also falling (Breeze,

2012).   A recent research report was pessimistic about the scope for increasing donations at the local level (Bashir et al, 2013). Where individuals do make donations, they are likely to do so in response to the large national welfare and medical charities which can afford to advertise and sponsor – not to local organisations.

As for the charitable trusts and foundations which owe their wealth to successful businesses of the past – the Rowntree and Baring Foundations and the more recently established family foundations such as The Tudor Trust and the Pears Foundation - well they too are struggling. In their case the struggle is with very low returns on their investments coupled with increasing requests for support from a larger and larger number of charities and voluntary associations left high and dry by public expenditure cutbacks (IVAR, 2012). Should charitable trusts replace public funding? And if so, what should they give up funding instead? Where can they be most effective and achieve most impact? Is it best to help small community organisations or should they opt for less risky support of established larger voluntary organisations which have efficient monitoring procedures and which promise economies of scale and big impact?

If we should be cautious about relying on volunteers and philanthropists to build community in the 21st century, what about the third pillar on which the politicians and policy makers seem to be pinning their hopes – *the formal and informal voluntary associations, charities and religious congregations which have traditionally provided services and monetary benefits*? Surely it is in harsh economic climates that they have historically shown their worth? As the welfare state retreats, can we not rely on our charities – first recognised in law in England in 1601 – to save us from the worst excesses of those other societies we hear of in which the poor die on the streets, abuse and neglect festers behind closed doors, and the stranger is shunned and exploited?

Here again, we need to be cautious about the apparently simple idea that charities and voluntary associations will come in to fill the vacuum left by the state's retreat. In the first place, in so far as charities and voluntary organisations need donations of time and money in order to survive at all, this life-blood – as I have tried to show – is not in plentiful supply and is certainly not increasing as need and demand increase. Indeed the combined impact of ideological emphasis on individual self-help and austerity cuts to public spending is likely to drain away even more of the voluntary lifeblood of charities, as potential donors of time and money struggle to maintain their own incomes and support family and friends because other kinds of support are dwindling. The voluntary sector press is currently recording the demise, and anticipated demise, of small and local charities on a weekly and accelerating basis – even as senior government ministers continue to laud the invaluable contribution to meeting local needs that is made by small independent voluntary organisations.

Again, charities and voluntary organisations, even the big household names like Barnardos and the NSPCC, are not equipped to meet social need on a large scale, even within a single local area. At best they can provide patchy geographical coverage and they cannot necessarily focus their coverage on areas where need is greatest. In fact research has shown a national mismatch between the supply of volunteers and local philanthropists on the one hand, and incidence of social need on the other hand. This is especially so at the community and neighbourhood level where charities and local associations have now become heavily dependent on grants and projects commissioned from external sources such as local authorities and local foundations.

Small and local voluntary associations are facing an additional challenge as public sector spending cuts bite; the withdrawal of funding from the infrastructure bodies of the voluntary sector – a point of which Ripon and Harrogate CVSs are only too well aware at present. Councils of voluntary service, volunteer recruitment projects and specialist supporters of black and ethnic minority groups have for many years been funded largely from governmental sources. As part of their drive to increase the capacity of voluntary organisations to deliver public services and develop local communities, successive central and local governments of the last thirty years have been providing funding which became crucial for the survival of smaller third sector organisations. The infrastructure bodies provided them, for example, with advice on personnel and human resources, recruitment of volunteers, networking and mutual learning, and back-office functions such as IT support and payroll services. Whereas the large national voluntary organisations may quite readily take such functions in-house, small voluntary organisations with just one or two paid staff or none at all, simply cannot. Without infrastructure support bodies they will collapse. To put it starkly, central government and local authorities are withdrawing support for the voluntary sector, just at the moment when the spending cuts of those same governmental authorities are causing a rapid rise in the demands on the voluntary sector to replace services and benefits once provided by public agencies.

To summarise my argument so far, then, I believe that the three key pillars on which current policy assumptions about 21st century community rest, are weak; they are heavy with assumptions that are not sustainable in the light of research evidence.

The changing policy environment:

The policies are also flawed in so far as they do not take into account the changing policy *environment* of the last hundred years. Three key elements in that changing policy environment are

of special note tonight when we are talking about our local communities and how we respond to their needs: changing expectations about quality of life; changing demographics; and globalisation.

Take quality of life expectations. When I was a toddler in the late 1940s, few people had electrically operated domestic appliances; rooms were bitterly cold all winter unless heated by polluting and inefficient coal or paraffin; bathrooms and indoor toilets were far from universal; and if you got bronchitis or an ear infection there were no antibiotics to help you heal and return rapidly to work or school – you stayed in bed, may be for weeks, until time healed you – or not . And now, just in my own lifetime, all these things are widely regarded as basic essentials, even fundamental rights, in a Western country – fridges, vacuum cleaners, TVs, washing machines, dry and vermin-free accommodation with heating in winter, individual bathrooms, and access to healthcare and life-saving drugs.

This rapid rise in expectations about quality of life in this country needs to be placed alongside the public policies aiming to roll back the frontiers of the state since much of what has been achieved since I was a toddler has been achieved because of governmental action funded by taxes. A free national health service and large scale social housing developments are the two most obvious examples. As the state increasingly retreats from taking responsibility for ensuring all citizens have access to what are now regarded as minimal standards, the pressure on the three pillars – volunteers, philanthropists and voluntary organisations – is increasing commensurately. At the local community level, clergy find themselves in the forefront of more and more requests for help to meet basic living standards, including food for families. Citizens Advice bureaux, if they can survive the local authority financial cuts at all, are faced with more and more manifestations of social deprivation from people who might previously have turned up at Benefit offices, local authority social work departments or hospital A and E departments - but who now have nowhere else to turn except to local voluntary organisations and charities.

The second change which has to be factored into discussions about community building in the 21st century is the shifting demographic profile of the country and how this plays out at the local level in demands for voluntary and community services. The country is ageing. A smaller proportion of young people have to support a greater proportion of older people – financially and socially. To some extent the impact of this has been mitigated by the arrival of younger immigrants and by the fact that many older people are sufficiently healthy and wealthy to be able to live independent lives. But many of the 'old old' are very frail; they need care beyond what can be given by family and friends. Other important changes, with major local implications, are being revealed by the results of the 2011 Census; for example, the number of people living in England and Wales but born outside

the UK has risen to 13% of the population (4) so many local communities will be needing appropriate support services to enable the British born children of new residents to reach their full potential. In some areas, local communities and voluntary associations are struggling to maintain social cohesion in the face of negative pressures to avoid contact with people of different faith, ethnicity or country of origin (Sennett, 2013). Community level associations and congregations often do a good job on 'bonding' together people with similar backgrounds but a cohesive 21st century society also needs projects which help people to 'bridge' across differences (Harris and Young, 2010).

The changing demographic profile of the country is linked to a third change in our public policy context - internationalisation and globalisation. What happens at the local level in this country is less and less within the control of local communities themselves or even of regional and national governments. The huge corporate businesses whose activities span the globe are often far more powerful now than national governments or even political and economic conglomerations like the EU (Vogel, 2006). There are severe limitations on our ability to control our physical and social environments and equally severe limitations on what a local community can do to respond to issues such as unemployment or ill health caused by pollutants.

A way of thinking about the future of our communities:

So if the current pillars of public policy about local communities are resting on flimsy foundations within a complex policy environment, do we have alternative ways of responding to the challenges of thinking about our local communities in the 21st century?

Given the awe-inspiring venue tonight and the proud history of this lecture series, I am tempted at this point to step out of my role as an academic social scientist committed to careful and dispassionate critical analysis of public policy, and have a go instead at some theologically-based reflections - because my personal view is that aspects of current UK public policy fly in the face of basic principles about social solidarity which are at the heart of the major religions. But tempted though I am to segue into a sermon at this point, I will restrain myself. Instead I want to draw to a conclusion with some ideas grounded in my home academic discipline.

If we now step back from the telescopic lens I have been training on our local communities in the early years of the 21st century and take a broader historical scan, what do we see? What has been happening over the last 100 years or so to our voluntary and community sector? A quick glance might suggest that the wheel is turning full circle - from a situation in which local communities were left to themselves to deal with need as best they could, as in my grandfather's day; through a short-lived period in which the state used our tax contributions to take on responsibility for ensuring minimum standards of education, housing, healthcare and income for all; with the community and voluntary sector supplementing the state's provision and pioneering new ideas and ways of meeting

need. And now, a quick glance might suggest, we are again being left more and more - to do what we can for ourselves and for each other in our local communities.

But we need not frame this as an inevitable turn of time's wheel. We need not be so passively accepting of what seems to be happening. We can in fact intervene and control our destinies, using information and knowledge as our tools.

Our world is a very different one from the pre-World War I era of my grandfather's day. We rightly have much higher expectations of what minimum standards should be; the age profile of the population is very different; and we live in a multi-faith, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society which was unimaginable in Victorian and Edwardian times. We also now know from the history of the last hundred years both the advantages and limitations of relying on governments to meet our individual and community needs. Equally, as I have tried to indicate tonight, we know the advantages and limitations of relying on volunteers, philanthropists and charitable voluntary organisations to meet needs. We now know that neither extreme is fit for the purpose of developing and maintaining community in 21st century Britain. We should act on this evidence.

What, then, is the way forward for building communities in the 21st century? I would like to suggest that the concept of 'civil society' offers a useful frame for thinking about what kind of future we want for our communities. By using the concept as an analytic tool, I think we can pull out some helpful guidelines for developing our communities in this new era – post-Victorian charity and philanthropy; post the cradle-to-grave Welfare State; and within a new kind of international and global context.

A sidebar here for those who are not too sure what I mean by 'civil society'. The *term* was used by the Ancient Greeks and Romans and was picked up again, although used in a different way, by 19th and 20th century European philosophers including Hegel, Marx, Gramsci and Habermas. More recently the *term* 'civil society' has been colonised by think-tanks wanting to spread ideas about capitalism and liberal democracy to the countries of the former Soviet Union bloc; it has been misused by academics as a synonym for 'volunteering' and 'voluntary associations'; and it has been hi-jacked by politicians wanting to tell us citizens what we ought to be doing to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps (5). In short 'civil society' has become a Humpty Dumpty term which means just what the speaker chooses it to mean.

This is a pity because the *concept,* as adopted and debated by European philosophers at least, was rich and useful. It was grounded in a concern to nurture democracy and prevent governments - and businesses too – from encroaching upon and directing citizens' personal, social, political and community lives. I think we should reclaim it as a way of thinking about building community in the 21st century.

The concept reminds us to make distinctions between the public space in which citizens do things, un-coerced, for one another, and two other spheres of life: government and business, or 'the state'

and 'the market'.   It reminds us of our right to think through independently what <u>we</u> want our local communities to be – how we assess local need, how we meet those needs, how we employ the resources of time, money and physical assets available to us within our communities, and how we identify where we need help from outside – from governments, business, and charitable foundations.   Most important perhaps, the concept reminds us that we need to be proactive. If <u>we</u> don't assert our right to independent thought and action about our own communities, then we cannot be surprised when governments and corporations impose <u>their</u> priorities on us; when they use their superior resources to "harness" (their term) the expertise of citizens (Ricketts, 2013); when they get charities to deal with the most intractable and stigmatising of social problems (Rees et al, 2013); when they pressurise small community organisations to provide public services under tightly defined and punitive contracts; and when they tell us in patronising terms how communities are being 'set free' to do more for themselves (1).

What should we do then? We need to inform ourselves about trends in social and public policy; to be 'policy literate'. We need to remember that it is governments which make policy and we are free, as inhabitants of a different public space, to criticise those policies, especially when they move too far into telling citizens and small communities what they should be doing. We can even criticise the ways in which policy makers frame the nature of social and public problems (Herman and Chomsky, 1994). We should also make our voices heard when we know from research and historical experience that key social policies are resting on faulty foundations.

Again, we need to nurture within our communities the 'social capital' which accumulates as we learn to be effective speakers in meetings, active participants in voluntary associations and enthusiastic networkers (Putnam, 2001). We need to attend those 'public square' meetings, participate in local chat lines, go on demonstrations against the closure of local public services, volunteer to do what we can for our neighbours, sign e-petitions, use social media to express concerns, join local associations which bring people together across divides, and generally make our individual and community voices heard (Aiken et al, 2011).

As local communities we have to have a vision of where we can feed in to a combined effort across all sectors to respond to social problems. But that does *not* mean doing everything that government throws at us or doing things in the ways prescribed by politicians and civil servants. Whatever we do as communities, we need to have our own vision about what we want; we need to form networks of local organisations to strengthen ourselves; we need to be brave in advocating the cause of our own communities; and we have to learn to say 'no' to being co-opted into delivering government policy objectives if they are not also <u>our</u> objectives.   In short, we must reclaim the civil society 'space' and use it actively and creatively (Baring Foundation, 2013).

 If we have a clear vision and determination we might even be able to turn to our own community advantage some recent public policy initiatives such as the freedom to acquire local community buildings; the localisation of some social benefits; the appointment of paid community organisers as part of the current government's 'Big Society' agenda; the establishment of Big Society Capital to

encourage 'social investment'; and the new policy of the Big Lottery Fund to involve communities in its strategic plans (6) (7).

Yet in exercising the power of civil society in our communities we need to be clear that there really are limits on what civil society on its own can do to build community - however enthusiastic the contributions of volunteers, philanthropists and voluntary organisations. Civil society must be distinct from government but that does not mean that it cannot also expect support and respect from government. If we are to achieve minimal living standards in a complex society we need a new vision of how the three spheres – government, business and civil society - can be both distinct and collaborative; how government can support the voluntary sector without insisting on disproportionate regulation, accountability and control.

If we get our act together at the local level we can demand from politicians and businessmen that they do not control us and impose upon us their agenda for our 'civil society'. Instead we must ask with clarity that they cooperate with us in a respectful manner - so that together we can achieve 'the good society'. Empowerment of communities is not about being 'set free' by governments.   It is about finding our own vision for our own communities.

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Endnotes

(1) See for example, Prime Minister David Cameron's speech on the Big Society on 14 February 2011 at http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-on-big-society/

(2) This month (April 2013) sees the launch of yet another gesture initiative - £36m over two years from the Cabinet Office for a Centre for Social Action "to support volunteering and social action". Within this mini project will be a mini-mini project that will "harness the capabilities, expertise and resourcefulness of citizens and civil society". (Rickets, 2013) Another initiative is due to start on 1 May – A 2 year project costing £9.5 million. Funding comes from the Department for Communities and Local Government and the programme will be run by Locality to help people in England create neighbourhood plans and shape development in their local areas.

(3) Quoted by Owen Gibson, The Guardian Sports Correspondent, 24 January 2013

(4) Reported for example by Jonathan Freedland in The Guardian, 12 December 2012, p1.

(5) In this country, we even have a governmental 'Office for Civil Society' which proclaims itself to have responsibility within the Cabinet Office for "charities, social enterprises and voluntary organisations".

(6) See http://www.civilsociety.co.uk/directory/company/2765/office_for_civil_society

(7) As reported by Peter Wanless in Third Sector, 27 November 2012 p10

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