

# The Big Society – to be run by churches - is Mr Cameron's pipe dream

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First the Communities Minister and now the Prime Minister have declared Britain to be a "Christian nation".

In a [speech](#) to "faith leaders" gathered at Downing Street Mr Cameron said that his Government intended to see that religious groups play a much bigger role in influencing its policies.

But not only were there the usual platitudes about how marvellous church is for everybody, Mr Cameron actually started talking like a classic proselytiser of religion saying he wanted to imbue people with a "sense of evangelism".

In his speech he said: "People sometimes say, 'You talk about the big society, don't you realise this is what the church has been doing for decades ...Jesus invented the big society 2,000 years ago.' I just want to see more of it."

He told the gathered bishops, vicars and other pious persons of his churchgoing at St Mary Abbot's in Kensington where he "pops in" perhaps "every other week" for a spot of peace and quiet.

He mentioned his children. "I'm proud to be at a reception for Christians here in Downing Street and proud to be a Christian myself and proud to have my children at a church school."

He said that he sometimes set quizzes for his children over breakfast testing them on their knowledge of the gospels.

But Mr Cameron's personal religious inclinations are not what concern us. It's when he starts talking about involving the churches in policy-making and service provision that our hackles rise.

He said he wanted to make life easier for faith organisations that run services such as food banks. "I want to see the possibilities for that to expand." If they were "finding obstacles in their way", he urged faith leaders to think of him as a "giant dyno-rod in Whitehall. I want to make it easier to unblock the things you do."

Of course, we've heard all this before. At the same event in 2012 [he said](#):

The domestic challenge is, and you'd be surprised if I didn't bring it up, the issue of the Big Society. I think there is enormous potential in churches and faith-based organisations to tackle some of the deepest problems we have in our society, whether it is educational and under-attainment, whether it is homelessness, whether it is mental health. Just wandering around the room chatting to some of you, I was talking to a lady who runs very important residential clinics for young people who have been self-harming or indeed have eating disorders – a classic example of someone of faith who has a great belief in wanting to do good, in wanting to change the world and we should be encourage those faith-based organisations into the solving of social problems.

And last year he said:

"This government does care about faith. It does care about the institutions of faith, and it does want you to stand up and oppose aggressive secularisation."

The Big Society is a long time coming and the churches and mosques and temples would be well advised to be very wary of what is being asked of them. They may want desperately to provide services for the needy and hungry, which they complain the Government is not doing, but they are not equipped for the job as the state is.

I'm sure Mr Cameron would be very pleased to palm off the difficult and expensive elements of the state's welfare remit – such as taking care of the elderly and disabled, the disadvantaged and the unfortunate. Let the compassionate churches do it. They're very good at that sort of thing.

Yes, indeed, they are. They have plenty of experience; they used to run the workhouses, the asylums and the Magdalene laundries. They would love to be able to force people to pray and go to church in order to receive services that the state provides universally without question.

Unlikely? They're already doing it – ask the countless parents who are forced unwillingly into church in order to get their children into a taxpayer-funded state school. What will it be like when they have hospitals, old folks' homes and nurseries under their control?

But if the state cannot afford to run these services, then the church certainly can't.

If the churches collude with the Government in reducing and eliminating services that many depend on, then they will have a lot to answer for. And when they have them under their control and the money runs out and the services disappear altogether, who will be to blame?

We don't have to look far to see what welfare services are like when they are "faith-based". In Germany the Catholic Church runs many of the welfare services at the state's expense. They are discriminatory, authoritarian and intolerant. Read [this article](#) for an idea of what it is like when religion becomes a powerful arm of the state.

And churches should note: when they are an arm of the state, they become answerable to the state.

Mr Cameron and his friends who declare that Britain is a Christian nation obviously don't read the statistics. If they think it will bring them electoral advantage, they should think again.

I have a feeling that the Big Society is no nearer now than it has ever been. The country doesn't want it, and it is unlikely ever to have it on the scale that Mr Cameron envisages or the churches hope for.

## **Terry Sanderson**

Terry Sanderson was the former president of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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