



Gareth Potts, British Government Policy Advisor

Interview with The Civic Caucus

8301 Creekside Circle #920, Bloomington, MN 55437

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Notes of the Discussion

Present : Verne Johnson (chair), Dwight Johnson, Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz (vice-chair), Tim McDonald

Summary of discussion - Gareth Potts is a policy advisor in the Office for Civil Society (OCS) - a unit within the UK central government department known as the Cabinet Office. He visited Minnesota and other places in the United States this summer to learn about maintaining and improving public services in times of fiscal constraint. In a meeting with the Civic Caucus he outlined several redesign efforts underway in the United Kingdom under the title of the Big Society, including:

- (1) encouraging public initiatives for more volunteerism, more charitable contributions, and more citizen involvement in public life,
- (2) empowering and funding community groups to prevent significant loss of identity when a valued local institution closes or moves,
- (3) empowering parents to set up new schools outside traditional school management,
- (4) empowering government employees to form new enterprises to deliver the same services under new arms-length relationships with their former employers,
- (5) giving private organizations financial rewards if they succeed in producing better outcomes from delivering services.

His comments were made in an entirely personal capacity and do not necessarily represent those of the UK Government .

A. Introduction of speaker - With prior experience in think tanks and academia, Potts worked for a time in the U.K. government's Strategy Unit. Now as a policy advisor in the Cabinet-level Office for Civil Society (OCS), his primary concerns are in the areas of volunteerism and philanthropy.

Potts is in the United States for the summer working on a project funded by a German Marshall Fund grant. He will be visiting Minneapolis, Detroit, Washington DC, and Baltimore.

As his project's title, *Alternatives to closure: US lessons for keeping valued community assets open*, would suggest, Potts is looking to the United States for ideas about how to keep important valued community assets-such as community centers, libraries and parks-open at a time when public spending cuts are threatening to close these assets. In particular, he is interested in novel mechanisms for funding, such as "crowd funding" and special tax measures, as well as creative ideas for bringing in volunteers to help with marketing, fund-raising and physical upkeep of assets.

While in the United States he will be meeting with key figures in community or civic groups, politicians, government officials, businesses, faith leaders, journalists, academics as well as the citizens that use the assets in question. Potts is happy to be contacted around this work: garethpotts1@gmail.com.

B. Discussion - Ted Kolderie introduced Potts, and described his experience on a similar project also funded by the German Marshall Fund as the Thatcher-inspired redesign of government was emerging.

"All European social welfare states were wrestling at that time with how to maintain service levels," Kolderie said, a similar situation as now. Individuals and groups in the private sector and in government began developing alternatives to public services, just as Potts describes the efforts of the Cameron government today.

THE PROBLEM: The British government is reducing spending.

Britain has gone through a substantial, multi-year downsizing of their public budget under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government. Many areas that have traditionally been publicly funded are now being cut drastically.

THE GOAL: Find alternative ways to provide needed services.

The UK Government is seeking alternative ways to fund community assets such as parks and libraries.

THE STRATEGY: Engage the public with the 'Big Society' initiative.

Overview of Big Society

Potts described how he views the concept of the **Big Society**, and how it compares to the idea of civil society. Big Society may be conceptualized as the antithesis to Big Government, i.e., the central government. One could think of it in terms of the central government as a subsidiary of Big Society.

It is purely a concept, Potts emphasized: There is no Big Society Program *per se*, or a Big Society Policy. It is rather a way of thinking about the working relationship between the public and its government. This is also very much a part of the Conservatives' wider ideological stance, not just a response to the need to reduce public spending.

There are three central pillars of the Big Society idea:

1. Promoting social action
2. Empowering communities
3. Opening up public services

Promoting social action - The initiative encourages people to give time volunteering, make charitable gifts, and to generally get involved in civic life. The Office for Civil Society office runs several programs that seek to encourage social action. The **National Citizen Service** offers a mix of outdoor challenge and projects for young leaders. OCS is also supporting a **community organizers** program - a term made more popular by the election of former community organizer, Barack Obama, as US President. Such organizers are skilled at fund-raising, can galvanize people on issues, and know how to encourage people to get out from behind the TV and get involved in local politics.

Other programs being supported include a **social action fund** and an **innovation in giving fund**. In both cases the aim is to support initiatives with the potential to be scaled up nationally. As the name suggests the latter fund is very much focused on technology-based solutions such as websites and apps for smart-phones.

Business is also expected to do its bit. So, for example, OCS encouraged the creation of a program where business would offer personnel and needed skills on a *pro bono* basis.

Empowering communities - The government is focusing on changing the powers available to community groups, including new rights for communities. One example is the new **Community Right to Bid** whereby, if a property comes up for sale that a community group has concluded is something they value - a pub, a shop - there can be a six month stay on the sale to see if the community can come up with the money. This is an anti-market position, Potts acknowledged, but is targeted primarily at rural communities that feel a significant loss of identity when an important institution closes or moves.

There is also money being made available. Most notable is **Big Society Capital** - around 600 million pounds - coming from dormant accounts, matched to an extent by banks. The organization makes loans to financial intermediaries to then lend to social enterprises.

Removal of bureaucracy is also a key aim. Another initiative led by a member of the House of Lords, **Unshackling Good Neighbours**, involves removing red tape that can impinge upon the workings of civil society organizations-for example, excessive form-filling. The Department of Communities and Local Government has also created a website called **Barrier Busting** where, if citizens identify rules that they find are stifling initiative, they can email such rules to the website and the government will look at putting their staff to work on reassessing them.

Opening up public services: The government is also focused on opening up public services. This means a range of things - most radically around getting new providers into the delivery of public services. One example is the new "free school" category of public school. There have been so-called academies since the 1990's that have more self-direction, inspired by chartering in Minnesota and elsewhere in the United States. Interested parents can set up **Free Schools**, with the school funding still coming down from central government.

There are new rights defined, such as the **Right to Provide** where government officials can look to spin out of government and form new social enterprises to deliver the same services under an arms-length relationship to their former employers. And there is the **Right to Challenge** where existing or aspiring social enterprises can ask to handle delivery of existing public services, with the idea being that these might offer a better service than the existing governmental providers.

There is also interest in new ways of paying for public services - most notably around **Social Impact Bonds**. When an organization succeeds at dealing with re-offenders, for example, and saves the state money, such an organization can be compensated out of anticipated savings. The government issues bonds to the private sector, thus shifting the risk to the private sector.

In the spirit of opening government, England will move in late 2012 to a process of **elected police commissioners**. There is also a lot of work being done by the Cabinet Office on **transparency** around publicly-held data, to include everything from civil servant pay to crime statistics.

Criticism of the Big Society initiatives

When the term Big Society came to be used, there was criticism that it was vague. Potts contends, however, that the concept is an intelligible one and that the general public does, in fact, 'get it'. Another complaint was some of the groups being asked to take on responsibility for previously government controlled activities were seeing their funds cut. Potts noted that there was some truth in this, but that the counter arguments held (1) that the cuts were needed, (2) that some money had been made available to help groups make the transition to cuts in other parts of their revenue and (3) that this is part of a broader Conservative Party interest in empowering citizens, business and community groups over and above Government.