



The Not So Big Society

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Ted Baillieu and revolution aren't words that you normally see together, but that's how the report read:

'A secret audit commission report calls for a revolution in the way government services are delivered, with charities and private businesses taking responsibility from bureaucrats,' it claimed. 'The report to the Victorian government details budget savings of at least 2 1/2 times the size of the \$2.2 billion Ted Baillieu's Coalition has so far announced to stabilise the state's finances.'

The next part wasn't so surprising:



'The final recommendations of the Victorian review, delivered to the government in January, were so controversial that the Baillieu government has suppressed it and instead appointed another taskforce, including secretaries of the Premier's Department and Treasury to review its findings.'

But then there were these lines:

'The final report borrows from the "big society" plans of David Cameron's government in Britain, which has sought to get charities and volunteers to take over the delivery of government services.'

About a week before we'd heard something interesting from the federal coalition—that they planned a vast program of outsourcing to the states if they won the next election:

'Federal Coalition finance and deregulation spokesman Andrew Robb said the opposition was looking to use its planned handover of administration of environmental laws to the states as a model for other areas, both to reduce red tape and to cut thousands of federal public servants from the payroll. The federal government would not abandon its own policies under the plan... but states would act as agents for the commonwealth in administering federal policies.'

Earlier, Opposition Leader Tony Abbott had also begun to speak of his preference for 'empowered communities' rather than 'empowered government'.

These signals appear to point to a genuine desire to slowly and systematically reduce the size of government. Combined with a program like the one presented to Baillieu it could not only remake public services but also remake civil society. Or it could just offer a new means for social capital to be lost to the state, new packaging for the sad old trend of the past 70 years.

Much has been made of the recent visit to this country of Red Tory thinker Phillip Blond. Blond has been evangelising for David Cameron's so-called Big Society, a conservative communitarianism.

It would be better to look at the fate of the man who actually coined the Big Society phrase, Steve Hilton. A friend of Cameron's since they both worked for the Major government two decades ago, he left Number 10, packed his bags and went to join his wife in California back in March after less than two years in government.

Hilton had sold his idea badly. The concept of the Big Society, in which the state shrunk and private or voluntary groups grew to fill gaps looked like cover for cuts in a recession—or was painted that way. Worse, Hilton also came off second best from battles with the bureaucracy. Nothing really happened. For localism and devolution, the end of one-size fits all, must be at the heart of this communitarianism, and that is too much of a surrender for any bureaucrat to bear.

Without this, the mooted change in service delivery is just a tool for state capture of voluntary and



not for profit bodies. These organisations find themselves hemmed in by bureaucratic requirements that make them proxies for the state, not alternatives. True bureaucracy-busting would create a real revolution in government.