Whither the Welfare State?
Losing Citizenship Rights and Entitlements to Welfare in an Age of Austerity[1]

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Introduction

The welfare state has been entrenching through huge public expenditure cuts, particularly in Western Europe. However, this current round of slashing public expenditures is different from that of the 1980s, because now a confident market assaults the state as the protector of human and citizenship rights under the guise of the need to transfer taxes away from meeting welfare needs to supporting the demands of capital accumulation to provide economic growth. This objective is being reached through the generation of a fiscal crisis that lacks an economic base predicated on the production of goods and services, focusing instead, on speculation on future price rises in commodities that may not have yet been produced. In this article, I focus on the disappearance of the political state as a defender of personal rights and freedoms to its emergence as the protector of vested economic interests that may not even reside in a particular political or nation-state. I term this the corporate protector state. This trend exposes capital as borderless while the labour-force is not. Labour is controlled through immigration policies that recreate the national citizen-foreigner divide. Moreover, as corporate protector, the sovereign status and capacity of the nation-state to curtail the activities of capital is being challenged by multinational corporations that cross borders without hindrance. I explore the implications of this for ordinary citizens who are asked to furnish their own welfare provisions that reinforces a subsequent shift of caring onto women within the family, but with fewer resources at their disposal than previously and thereby intensifying the caring burdens that they are expected to fulfill. I also suggest that paid employment will become the privilege of the few, and unpaid voluntary work the substitute for lack of waged employment for too many ordinary residents, especially young people.

The state as defender of citizens' rights: A brief moment in history

Class struggle, liberation movements by women, black activists and disabled people have demanded services that enabled them to survive difficult times. These activists promoted the idea that these provisions were citizenship-based entitlements that treated people as equals and with dignity and respect. Moreover, these represented displays of social solidarity, paid for by pooling risks and were encapsulated within the welfare state. Their successes were captured in legislation that endorsed the notion of entitlement or rights to services, especially in the welfare domain, and contrasted sharply to philanthropic or charitable-giving or means-tested benefits that stigmatised and belittled recipients in previous eras. I argue below that the belief in citizenship-based rights is being replaced by reliance on charitable good-will and limited means-tested, targeted provisions funded by the public sector.

The post-war welfare state was based on a covenant between the individual citizen and the state, which as guarantor of people's rights ensured that an individual in need received the services required. In Britain, it was the outcome of World War II, when soldiers returned home to war-ravaged countries and the population was stirred to support the pooling of risks to give better lives to all. Universalism, social justice and the collective pooling of risks underpinned the notion of the welfare state and it formed a covenant between the individual and the state. Taxes and contributions to social insurance were collected from those in waged work to ensure that people received services free at the point of need, especially in health and education. Under these conditions, the welfare state became an expression of solidarity. Although housing and social services were initially included in these, their exclusion by a Treasury that refused to fund these two sectors on the grounds of lack of financial

[1] Cette communication est issue du colloque "L'Etat social dans tous ses états".

resources began the process of unraveling people's dreams for an inclusive future that has continued to the present.

This foundation of the welfare state is being undermined today through public expenditure cuts that are inaugurating the age of austerity precipitated by the mortgage sub-prime rate crisis in the USA and the collapse of banks in several Western countries. In the UK, the Coalition government's commitment to the 'Big Society' and small state has intensified the unraveling of a rights-based entitlement to services. This stance advanced the neoliberal agenda that promoted the view that people should look after themselves and expect nothing from the state. Thatcher in the UK went so far as to claim that there was 'no society, only individuals' in clarifying her lack of sympathy for solidarity among people not known to them. As these neoliberal ideas gained ground, the state lost its status as defender of people's welfare rights and social policy became driven by the imperative of reducing public expenditures on universal welfare provisions available to all. Additionally, welfare was used pejoratively to denote individuals who were defined as incapable, lazy and disinterested in waged work, despite the absence of decent employment opportunities that would enable them to earn enough to pay their bills and support dependents at both ends of the age spectrum. Punitive policies threatened to withdraw benefits for those who refused low-paying jobs that would leave them worse off than if they had remained on benefits, in what has been termed 'the poverty trap'. In today's climate of austerity, discourses about entitlement to benefits are being corrupted through market-based purchases, calls for self-sufficiency and the replacement of publicly funded services by charitable-giving. Moreover, individuals are invited to exercise *choice* to oil the wheels of this neoliberal juggernaut that is commodifying services by turning them into market-based purchases available to those who can pay the price. Choice, however, can only be expressed by those who have money to become players in the market-place.

Welfare for the many or the few?

The age of austerity began in the deregulation of the commercial sphere alongside the regulation of the public sector during the Regeanite and Thatcherite years[2]. It destroyed the fundamental basis of the welfare state and gave the market priority in caring for people as well as in appropriating public assets and utilities through the sale of public goods and the privatization of nationally owned assets held by the state. It also changed the professional labour process by introducing the corporate management, 'new managerialism', bureaucratic forms of quality assurance, and performance management to reduce professional autonomy and undermined civic ethics and relationship building with those practitioners sought to serve[3].

The fiscal crisis of 2007-8 aggravated this situation and commenced the current restructuring of capitalist social relations which is rooted on the taxpayer subsidising bad decisions made by bankers. This has initiated a crisis of state sovereignty that exposes 'economics as ideology' as unaccountable financial elites determine what governments should and must do[4]. Their refusal to fund the debts that they incurred and then transferred to the state has led to major fiscal crises in countries like Ireland, Portugal, Greece, Spain and Italy. In some of these, e.g., Italy, it led to the imposition of an unelected troika in charge of government, thereby compounding a 'democratic deficit' that prevails in the West as the electorate rejects politicians and becomes further alienated from its rulers. Therefore, the deregulation of the private commercial sector culminated in the fiscal crisis of 2008 that undermined the notion of rights to benefits for all but rich people who could play the market. Bankers were the greatest beneficiaries of this turn in social policy, while ordinary people, especially those saving for

[2] Dominelli L., Hoogvelt A., 1996, 'Globalisation, Contract Government and the Talyorisation of Intellectual Labour' in *Studies in Political Economy*, 49, p. 71-100.
[3] Clarke J., Newman J., 1997, *The Managerialist State*, London, Sage ; Folgeraiter F., 2004, *Relational Social Work: Toward Network and Societal Practices*, London, Jessica Kingsley.
[4] Dominelli L., Hoogvelt A., 1996, *art. cit.*

their pensions were the biggest losers as lack of economic growth destroyed the market basis of the profits that were to have provided decent levels of pensions. That this has occurred at a time when the ageing population is growing indicates the impossibility of relying on the market to provide services and safeguard the future for the many.

Growing inequalities

Inequalities between and within countries are increasing. Ironically, the number of billionaires is increasing despite the fiscal crisis. The number of billionaires rose from 793 in 2005 to 1,210 by 2010[5]. Moreover, China, India and Russia are challenging American dominance of the rich list. Today's richest man is Mexican Carlos Slim Helu, while the American Bill Gates is the second richest. The richest woman is French and owns the l'Oréal empire. At the same time, three billion people live on less than $2 per day.

Income and wealth distribution have become increasingly polarized, with conditions deteriorating seriously during the past 30 years. The top 20 per cent of the world's population accumulated 86 per cent of the wealth while the lowest 20 per cent controlled only 1.3 per cent during this period. Growing inequalities led to a North-South differential that rose from 2 to 1 in the 18th century to 70 to 1 in 2002[6]. To put it more graphically, the richest 3 people in 2007 had more wealth between them than the total gross domestic product of the 48 poorest countries. An employee at the top of the corporate ladder in the West earns 200 to 300 times more than the average worker compared to 40 to 60 times more during the 1960s and 1970s[7].

Poverty in the UK

The UK, one of the richest countries in the world, like the USA, still has significant numbers of people living in poverty. Despite New Labour's commitment to eradicate child poverty originally by 2015, then extended to 2020, one in four children continue to live in a poor household. Also, obesity, malnutrition and poor health are linked to poverty. The introduction of user fees in health has meant that many people on low incomes are doing without needed medicines, health treatments or dental treatment. Tuition fees for university students will exclude many poor people for using this route as a way out of poverty. The rise in tuition fees to £9000 per year led to a 20 per cent drop in home applications for admission to UK universities in 2012. Social workers continue to deal largely with poor people – the figure of 80 per cent falling into this category was first highlighted in the Seebohm Report in 1968 and has been consistent for a very long time. The situation is even more dire on a global level. Global Issues suggests that 80 per cent of the world population is poor, and that children die from malnutrition, poor health and other social problems that could be avoided by a more equitable distribution of the earth's resources and care for their physical environment[8].

Poverty and homelessness go together

Poverty is also acquiring an international dimension. In 2008, 20 per cent of the homeless people on the streets of London were migrant workers from Eastern and Central Europe. They had lost their jobs, lacked money to return home and couldn't access state benefits (Homeless Link 2009: 5). Some people, e.g., those entering countries as asylum seekers become homeless for years because they are

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[5] Kroll L., Fass A., 2011, 'The World's Billionaires', *Forbes Magazine, Special Report*, 12 March.

[6] George S., 2003, 'Globalizing Rights ?' in Gibney M. J. (ed), *Globalizing Rights,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 18-19.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[8] Dominelli L., 2012, *Green Social Work,* Cambridge, Polity Press.

not entitled to benefits if their application is refused and they appeal (Lay, 2007). Additionally, some Western countries face a housing shortage as few new houses, especially those available for either purchase or rent to low income people, are being built, so the housing needs of settled residents are pitted against those of asylum seekers and (im)migrants.

'Don't raise taxes' mantra

The loss of universal, publicly funded services at the point of need was predicated on the idea that the state could not afford such luxuries. But this state of affairs was articulated by those politicians who were averse to imposing progressive taxes that would extract their fair share of taxation from the wealthiest people in society. Monied elites threatened to leave a nation-state that taxed them highly for low-tax regimes, and 'don't raise taxes' has become an enduring mantra that no politician dared to challenge. As capital can traverse borders with impunity in current national regimes, this threat is relatively easy to implement. At the same time as cutting benefits to the poor, the state was able to subsidize corporate welfare by reducing corporate taxes, providing grants, developing infrastructures including communication and transport networks to encourage those offering to employ people to stay. This transfer of public funds to the private sector symbolises the shift from individual to corporate welfare while the sell-off of the public sector affirms the state's role as a site for capital accumulation. In other words, the nation-state has shifted gears and become the corporate protector state.

Corporate welfare is hidden welfare

Corporate welfare is a hidden welfare state of subsidies and grants for business. However, its existence discounted or ignored, although the sums involved are significant[9]. Public discourses collude in its invisibility by placing a mantle on corporate welfare and focusing on 'welfare' when individual welfare is actually being referred to. Welfare paid to individual poor people is visible and a centre-piece of attack through economic and social policies. Welfare paid to individuals is seen as negative, making people dependent on a 'nanny' state and lazy. Avoiding this undesirable state of affairs turns welfare into a legitimate target for cuts. In neoliberal discourses, dependency is remedied through independence or self-sufficiency and is credited with distancing the state from the citizen.

Markets produce winners and losers

The market-place produces winners and losers. The losers are the majority of the world's people and the planet whose resources are pillaged for profit. In 2005, the winners were 946 individual billionaires who held $US 3.5 trillion and owned and controlled the world's largest corporations. They formed an unaccountable elite who:

- followed neoliberal ideologies in which the market was king (yes, it excludes women);
- shaped social policies within nation states;
- distorted development for profit (for themselves);
- assuaged their guilt through philanthropy when they 'retired' from the money-making business; and
- decided priorities for others through corporate philanthropy, e.g., Bill Gates focusing on fighting malaria in Africa but not creating jobs that would enable people to become self-sufficient.

[9] Barlett D. L., Steele J. D., 1998, 'Corporate Welfare: Special Report' in *Time*, 9 November.

Bishop and Green[10] termed the growth of corporate philanthropy, '*philanthro-capitalism*'. This trend is of concern and impacts badly on poor people because it increases the lack of accountability for decisions made about their lives and their priorities as become determined by people who neither live in the locality nor understand the traditions that mediate relationships and meaning in their lives.

Public expenditure cuts restructure social and work-place relations

The welfare state has become a source of capital accumulation for private entrepreneurs by releasing state assets that are sold cheaply and by providing opportunities for firms to buy public facilities that they can then use to sell services to consumers. This often takes the form of outsourcing whereby large multinational corporations acquire state assets, sack existing workers and (re)employ the same workers at lower wages and with fewer entitlements to holidays, sick leave and other benefits. These companies remain in place as long as profits can be made, and disappear quickly when these are not possible. For example, Southern Cross, a large multinational corporation closed 3000 residential homes in 2010 without thinking about the consequences for older people whose *homes* these were. Instead, these service users were metaphorically turfed out on the streets and/or sent to their families to care for them.

Privatisation of state facilities creates further inequalities as most service users cannot afford either the charges for provisions made available through the private sector or the user fees required for those in the public sector. Moreover, reduced wages for social workers and other care workers, employing people without unionisation, and asking people to apply for their old jobs back are part of the privatization package. Fragmented social services provisions follow in its wake as an outcome of privatisation. And, the burden of care shifts towards a reliance on informal caring which is based on women's unpaid labour as part of the withdrawal of the state from welfare provisions[11].

Commodified helping relations

Helping relations have been subjected to market discipline, particularly through the 'new managerialism' that has proletarianised professional work and commodified social work practice. A social worker in Dominelli[12] put it pithily when saying:

> 'I feel that managerialism and market forces within a mixed economy of welfare are destroying professional social work practice. Increasingly the organisation is driven towards creating an expensive callous bureaucracy which prides itself on delivering resource-led policies as prime measures of its effectiveness and efficiency… Social services departments are predominantly managed by white middle class men. This perpetuates the patriarchal, conservative nature of the organisation.'

Under the 'new managerialism' or 'public sector management', social work tasks have been altered, and relational social work which was traditionally the core of social work has been replaced with bureaucratic social work – form filling, being controlled by computer technology, and being productive and efficient in an unending tempo of keeping busy[13].

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[10] Bishop M., Green M., 2008, *Philantrocapitalism: How the Rich Can Save the World*, London, Bloomsbury Press.

[11] Hutton W., 1995, *The State We're In*, London, Jonathan Cape ; Plummer J., 2011, *Analysis: Sector Budgets Feel the Squeeze, Third Sector*, Available on http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/news/Article/1060843/Analysis-Sector-budgets-feel-squeeze/ accessed on 26 April.

[12] Dominelli L., 2004, *Social Work: Theory and Practice for a Changing Profession*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

[13] Folgeraiter F., 2004, *Relational Social Work: Toward Network and Societal Practices*, London, Jessica Kingsley ; Dominelli L., 2004, *op. cit.* ; Dominelli L., 2012, *Green Social Work*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Social workers also have to do more with less under conditions of austerity, as public support for the welfare state provisions has been eroded by government policies and the media that castigates poor people for failing to provide for themselves by seeking work and ensuring that even low-paid jobs are filled. Acting as gatekeepers of the state's scarce resources has intensified the oppressive control roles that social workers play, and explicitly places the longstanding care-control dilemma at the centre of contemporary practice. Having large numbers of people who are unemployed or without decent incomes carries the potential of creating additional social disorder and strife and increasing crime related to low incomes, particularly amongst those who lack the means to feed addictions, e.g., burglary. Moreover, poverty undermines health and well-being.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights' (UDHR's) promotes entitlements

Articles 22 to 27 of UDHR focus on economic, social and cultural rights including social security, an adequate standard of living, health, education, fair remuneration for work and maintaining a cultural life. Social workers can use these provisions to get resources for service users. Utilising this tool can be especially powerful in advocating for people's rights during the age of austerity. Additionally, the realization of human rights is increasingly being linked to the sustainability of the planet's environment – land, water, air quality[14]. Human rights underpin human well-being and entitlements to welfare provisions. Hence, it is important that social workers support their development.

Susan George argues that Article 23 of the UDHR is relevant to poverty eradication strategies because she asserts that:

> 'Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for… health and wellbeing… including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood[15].'

Social workers can utilize these provisions to advocate for resources to be placed in poor communities and insist that citizenship-based entitlements continue to provide the basis for receiving services.

The 'Big Society': Localism and citizen (Dis) Empowerment or the 'Fend for yourself' philosophy

The UK's Coalition government argues that citizen empowerment, devolved powers and community involvement can replace 'big government' that has stifled creativity in local communities. They have encapsulated this thought in the idea of the 'Big Society' and through policy and legislation such as that enshrined in the Localism Act. Eric Pickles, Minister for Communities and Local Government, claims that 'localism, localism and localism' are his three top priorities and central to the 'Big Society' that depicts a 'top-down' approach to empowerment. 'Big Society' discourses have become a rhetorical device for obfuscating real power relations, i.e., centralised control that features in Britain's governance structures. This obfuscation of reality is unacceptable because it denies citizens their agency and right to determine policies that endorse their demands for a better future that is guaranteed by their nation-state. It also sympbolises a marginalised island nation's rulers' dreams of greatness based on its realizing by squeezing ordinary citizens for the benefit of a multinational corporate elite. Grass-roots discourses see community as a local space for collective resistance; the government as a site for good governance and drawing on the language or rhetoric of empowerment to shift the focus away from government unto local governance structures. The 'Big Society' promotes residents' involvement as a way of regulating the political subjectivities of 'empowered' individuals and

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[14] Ungar M., 2002, 'A Deeper, More Social Ecological Social Work Practice', *Social Services Review*, 76, p. 480-497.

[15] George S., 2003, *art.cit.*

communities and confuses the cause of low economic growth with its cure - cuts and more cuts in publicly funded services. Yet, the writing on this strategy is clear. Austerity does not provide the basis for economic growth, as John Maynard Keynes noted drily during the recession of the 1930s.

The Big Society: Enacting the 'Fend for yourself' philosophy of care

The state's withdrawal as a provider of welfare worries those needing the services offered through a welfare state, especially as this creates a space filled by private corporations in an arena from which they had once been excluded. There are both opportunities and dangers in this development. In the UK, the new twist in the privatisation agenda is the 'Big Society'. The 'Big Society' was posited by David Cameron as Tory Leader during the 2010 General Election when he launched on 19 July. It became adopted as Coalition policy to encourage communities to become self-empowered and reduce their reliance on government intervention. People were encouraged to build on innovative initiatives based on charitable work and entrepreneurial endeavours in both public and social sectors; and respond to public need through grassroots initiatives[16]. The initiative began with four showcase local authorities – Liverpool, Eden in Cumbria, Sutton in Greater London, and Windsor and Maidenhead, both in Berkshire. However, Liverpool had second thoughts and withdrew from it in February 2011.

The 'Big Society' is a vague idea grounded in the ideologies of self-help and philanthropic giving familiar to Victorian Britons. As a formal policy, it was led by Nick Hurd, MP as Minister for Civil Society and Lord Wei as the Prime Minister's Advisor on the Big Society. However, the 'Big Society' combines savage public expenditure cuts with reduced publicly funded welfare services; pathologises people; blames them for their predicament; and emphasises their lack of skills, initiative and will-power in pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. It encourages community self-empowerment, local decision-making, reduced reliance on government intervention; builds and innovates through charitable work or entrepreneurial endeavours; and responds to public need through grassroots initiatives. The government created a 'Big Society Bank' fund of £200 million promised by the UK's four big banks.

Funding for the 'Big Society' Bank was also secured from dormant accounts in England. Many of these were held by poor people, especially pensioners who saved money for a 'rainy day' and do not spend them until such an event arises. To reclaim their money, they have to struggle through extensive and lengthy bureaucratic processes that sometimes prove beyond them (personal communication). Such practices highlight the state's arbitrary power to raid people's bank accounts without their knowledge or consent. While this act is legal, it constitutes legitimated unethical behaviour in a democratic society. And, it raises questions about the state's lack of accountability to individual citizens, especially those who are marginalised and disenfranchised. Yet, the state did not contemplate raiding the bank accounts of wealthy people to fund community initiatives by proposing a law that required that anyone earning over a sufficiently large six digit figure could contribute a certain percentage to 'good works'. Ordinary residents are aware of such discrepancies in the government's handling of different groups. Several young people commenting on their involvement in England's summer riots of 2011 expressed their contempt for society's hypocritical stance on appropriating property that belonged to others on BBC's *Newsnight Programme* by saying that what they did was no different from what politicians and bankers did when they helped themselves to taxpayers' money[17].

The 'Big Society' has an idealistic, nostalgic view of community and claiming to:

- Empower individuals and communities;
- Encourage social responsibility; and
- Create an enabling and accountable state.

[16] Cameron D., Clegg N., 2010, *Building the Big Society* available on http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/building-big-society accessed 26 April 2011.
[17] Dominelli L., 2012, *op. cit.*

These aims were to be achieved by:

- increasing localism and devolution;
- promoting volunteerism; and
- transferring powers to the local level[18].

'Big Society' initiatives do not challenge the existing allocation of power and resources because they channel people's energies within the existing system and attempt to level out inefficiencies and discourage communities from voicing critical political opinions, focusing instead on doing more with whatever is already available to them. Meanwhile, large banks are not held accountable for failing to lend to small businesses or pay their fair share of taxes. Their treatment assumes that communities are homogenous and allow the government to ignore the diversity of voices within them. The government's approach also promotes competition between community groups and civil society organisations in a context of scarce resources. And, it neglects the long and noble history of voluntary work which nonetheless failed to solve the magnitude of social problems that has confronted volunteers in the past. Nor are they likely to meet the substantial need that currently exists as the state increasingly withdraws from its provider role.

Some groups formed the 'Big Society' Network (http://thebigsociety.co.uk/what-is-big-society/) to bring together the 'silent' majority of taxpayers and exert more influence on government by:

- Empowering individuals and communities;
- Encouraging social responsibility; and
- Creating an enabling and accountable state.

These objectives were to be achieved through initiatives that increased localism and devolution; promoted volunteerism; transferred powers to local communities; encouraged the formation of co-operatives, charities and social enterprises; and supported open and transparent government by publishing data on government activities. These moves are laudable because they encourage 40 per cent of people who believe they can influence local decisions to do so. Currently, one million community groups and 238,000 social enterprises have attempted to engage local communities in reducing the British state's centralised power. However, as unemployment grows, there is little substance behind the government's claim to increase local employment except on the rhetorical level.

Despite the support the 'Big Society' carries within the Coalition Cabinet, the policy fails to touch the failures of large banks to lend to small businesses; be held accountable for their decisions; and contribute their fair share of taxes to the public purse. Its injunctions are crude, as David Cameron's concern of 'Ending the something for nothing culture' makes clear. Ordinary citizens have seldom had 'something for nothing'. They have contributed to society in many and diverse ways ranging from paid employment and paying taxes to unpaid caring in the home.

Additionally, the government ignores the voluntary sector's dependency on state funding and has not learnt from its history. The 'Big Society' replicates the deficiencies of Victorian philanthropy, particularly its capacity to blame poor individuals for their plight, despite evidence indicating that poverty has structural causes that must be addressed as well. Philanthropy's failure to meet widespread need led to the creation of the welfare state (Owen, 1982). Why should people believe that philanthropic approaches will succeed now when they failed before?

The modern day philanthropic credo is being expressed by philanthro-capitalists such as Bill Gates and Warren Buffet. Philanthropic giving amongst the super-rich has been promoted by these two individuals asking their friends to pledge to promote 'good works' by dedicating their wealth to that purpose[19]. Together, Gates and Buffett succeeded in getting 40 fellow billionaires to pledge $238

[18] *Ibid.*
[19] Bishop M., Green M., 2008, *op.cit.*

billion in charitable donations. Victorian philanthropists tended to act within their own communities. Today's billionaires operate in the Global South and turned giving into a contemporary version of noblesse oblige.

This strategy seems to be a continuation of a well-established Western tradition of turning individual philanthropy into corporate philanthropy that becomes subsidized through tax relief, or other public subsidies to private bodies. The Gates Foundation is currently spending $33.5 billion on HIV/AIDS and a sustainable green revolution in agriculture. In fulfilling its mission, these priorities could potentially yield substantial profits for this organisation. In 10 years, it is predicted that the Gates Foundation will have a GDP larger than 70 per cent of world's nations[20]. This concentration of wealth in the hands of a few unaccountable individuals seems unethical because super-rich people decide the priorities for other countries; they do not pay taxes proportionate to their wealth either in these places or in their own countries of origins; and their enterprises do not pay workers wages that allow for a substantial rise in their standard of living. These weaknesses in philanthropic giving led to the formation of a welfare state funded by the public as a whole and as a result, enabled workers to receive benefits as a right (Webb, 1909). This message is being undermined by the 'Big Society', the current public expenditure cuts and the loss of state funding for public goods. This situation will get worse as the age of austerity begins to spread into other groups.

The state's relationship with the individual citizen is no longer that of guarantor of welfare rights, but one of telling a person to 'fend for yourself'. The state activates self-action by becoming punitive, depriving people of welfare by:

- limiting their access to benefits, e.g., the disability allowance;
- reducing benefits, e.g., reducing the period of entitlement to benefits as of right and replacing these with means tested-benefits, e.g., unemployment insurance (job seekers allowance), pensions; and
- removing benefits from people, e.g., disability allowance.

Politicians have insisted that residents: 'Work your way out of poverty'. Yet, they have failed to ensure that there are sufficient well-paid decent jobs whereby this objective can be achieved. And, without adequate funding, it has become impossible for ordinary people to obtain their welfare rights in the market-place. And, this approach has affirmed privilege for the few and residual welfare for the many.

The unfunded and under-resourced grandiose ideas contained in the 'Big Society' depicts the abrogation of the state's responsibility for its poorest citizens and exacerbates poor people's plight by combining savage public expenditure cuts with reduced publicly funded welfare resources, pathologising people, blaming them for their predicament and emphasising their lack of skills, initiative and will-power in pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. Contextualised, holistically embedded, innovative strengths-based solutions will enable people to respond effectively and social workers can assist them in developing these. In these endeavours, clarifying the nation-state's role in defending the interests of rich elites is important.

Eric Pickles[21] as Communities Secretaries articulated the conservative nature of the 'Big Society' when speaking to local authorities in April 2011 and demanding that they:

- Avoided disproportionate cuts in funding;
- Provided three months notice if cutting funding or terminating it;

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[20] *Ibid.*

[21] Pickles E., 2011, *Action to Boost Support For Voluntary Sector and Cut Red Tape for Councils*, Available on http://www.communities.gov.uk/news/corporate/1885482 accessed on 26 April 2011.

- Worked with organisations to determine the shape of future services; and
- Engaged organisations in discussions to improve services and innovative.

Such injunctions become empty rhetoric in an age of austerity. But they shift the blame for Britain's economic woes away from central government or the City of London and onto local communities and local authorities.

Savage cuts in public expenditures can undermine the viability of 'Big Society' volunteers. Local authority budget cuts for 2011/12 will lead to reductions of 19 per cent in overall funds disbursed to voluntary agencies and hit the voluntary sector hard. Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield between them have cut monies to voluntary organizations by $43.9 million. Only a few councils like Newcastle City Council (NCC) are not cutting theirs. NCCC has added £3.5million to its voluntary sector budget to keep a workforce of 7,000 in business and generate £70million in revenues. But, NCC is making £45million in cuts elsewhere[22].

The Coalition government's refusal to empower collective action in communities through on-going and substantial injections of public funds turns the 'Big Society' into a highly conservative concept capable of reproducing existing resource inequalities and hindering improvements in the quality of life in poor communities. So, I define Cameron's 'Big Society' an idea that demands that people become self-sufficient in meeting their own needs, deliver their own services as publicly funded welfare resources are reduced, produce innovative responses to current and projected social problems while remaining within existing resource constraints and political parameters. Cameron's desire to devolve central power falters against the lack of resources and decision-making powers to tackle structural inequalities including his failure to hold accountable the financial sector and super-rich elites for their unwillingness to pay their share of taxes. Working for the whole of society rather than the privileged few including large shareholders in the financial sector and re-orientating the economic system to serve people not the financiers has to become embedded in society through transfers of power that produce transformative social change at local and/or global levels. The 'Big Society' also takes the physical environment for granted and this can only be shifted if local people prioritise care of the environment throughout their activities. Currently, the environment is treated as a commodity for capital to exploit and has led to a serious environmental crisis that is global in its reach.

The Big Society' policy has other critics. Labour leader Ed Miliband declared it 'a cloak for the small state'; Anna Coote of the New Economics Foundation thought it would produce a 'diminished society, not a bigger one' because it focused on 'privatising the welfare state on a massive scale'. Brendon Barber, a trade union leader thought that it stood for 'the sink or swim society', and that Cameron's 'ideal society was Somalia'. David Prentice of UNISON worried that volunteerism would become a 'cut-price alternative' to decent public services. Steve Bell in the *Guardian Weekly* identified the motto of the 'Big Society' as 'From each according to their vulnerability, to each according to their greed'.

In Dominelli[23], I critique the lack of resources associated with 'Big Society' ideas promoted in the UK by David Cameron and Nick Clegg, but highlight its potential to bring people together in self-help initiatives that might form energy sufficient communities. The skills of community-led mobilisation can be utilized to create more humane urban environments, and can be facilitated by social workers, especially if they engage local residents in demanding their rights and solve their problems in their own way. This means that people's skills and expertise must be valued and strengths-based approach used to replace both the deficit model of working with poor communities and that which requires that these groups eschew their own identities and adopt middle-class lifestyles as often occurs in mainstream social work (Callahan et al, 2000). Additionally, I argue that social services must become an inclusive, universal publicly funded service, not a residual and stigmatised one. High quality social

[22] Plummer J., 2011, *Analysis: Sector Budgets Feel the Squeeze, Third Sector*, Available on http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/news/Article/1060843/Analysis-Sector-budgets-feel-squeeze/ accessed on 26 April.
[23] Dominelli L., 2012, *op. cit.*

services for all, readily available and accessible at the point of need is a human right and integral to realising social justice claims to resources. This approach integrates theory and practice in thinking holistically about these issues and breaks new ground. This vision is absent from the 'Big Society'.

The Big Society idea has had some supporters. In the *Financial Times*, Ben Rogers declared that social ills could be solved if 'residents and citizens played their part'. Ben Brogan at the *Daily Telegraph* thought that this allowed 'society [to be] rebuilt from the ground up'. In the same paper, Ed West declared that the 'socialist ideology' of the British public would prevent the 'Big Society' from taking off. On the upside, the Big Society was expected to foster alliances between the working and middle-classes because the latter are more capable in mobilising themselves to defend their specific local interests than the former (Mott, 2004). Creating such alliances need to be handled with care because they can reinforce class inequalities and top-down power relations between these two communities (Rose, 2000). Avoiding the 'false equality trap' that accords middle-class people a superior status that enables them to speak to working-class communities from a position of knowing, arrogance or superiority, or all three, and belittle the contributions of local working-class residents whose ideas might differ from theirs is another danger for practitioners to avoid (Barker, 1986; Dominelli, 2006). Knowing a community and its resources (or lack thereof), developing relationships of trust and achieving early, if small successes, in meeting locally expressed goals, are important in developing local collective, community action.

Organising communities without government interference is a good idea. Social workers or community workers can develop alternative local institutions by engaging local residents. As practitioners, they can challenge pre-existing agendas that exploit people and the natural environment and ensure that meaningful alliances that do not divide community groups are developed[24]. Social workers would assess these conflicting realities for local people and help them juggle competing needs to develop transformative responses in the absence of publicly-funded facilities.

Conclusions

The state has remained within a neoliberal economic paradigm in which the interests of the few in making profits supersede the interests of the many. The state has gone to market. But more than that has happened in this restructuring of the state. The state has become part of the market, and its relationship with its citizens is one of last resort rather than the upholder of their human rights and their claims to social justice. It presents social workers with the challenge of affirming its values as defender of the welfare rights of the many, and challenging the nation-state's role as corporate protector at the expense of the majority of its citizens. Only then, can citizenship-based entitlement to services for the many be preserved.

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