

# Fair's Fair

## Equality and Justice in the Big Society

# Runnymede: Intelligence for a Multi- ethnic Britain

Runnymede is the UK's leading independent thinktank on race equality and race relations. Through high-quality research and thought leadership, we:

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# Introduction

*Citizenship isn't a transaction – in which you put your taxes in and get your services out. It's a relationship – you're part of something bigger than you, and it matters what you think and feel and do.*

*David Cameron, Conservative conference, 6 October 2010*

The Big Society has become one of the most discussed topics in contemporary politics. Yet the terms and limits of the debate remain, even in July 2011, nebulous and ill-defined. One area which has not featured in the debate on the meaning of the Big Society is how to ensure that this agenda delivers equality and fairness for all. Few would argue against the principle of greater empowerment for communities, but there are real risks that increased localism simply means that local elites aggregate greater power to themselves and that already vulnerable groups are forgotten and thus further marginalised.

In order to address this, Runnymede decided to talk to community residents themselves about their hopes and concerns regarding the proposed changes. We found a range of responses from a wide variety of citizens. Over the course of the research, however, we did encounter considerable scepticism regarding the Big Society and the motivations behind it. Some people expressed the view that this was a mere fig leaf for swingeing cuts to public services. Others supported the Big Society proposal in principle, but were sceptical that the government would actually go ahead with handing genuine power to communities. Many expressed fear that they were simply not equipped with either the time or the expertise to take over greater responsibility if central and local government stepped back.

In the context of current economic hardship – predicted to deteriorate further in the short term – people will come to rely more and more on exactly the public services which are facing cuts. This is an issue of concern in itself, but there is a real risk that vulnerable people, who rely on these services already, will be unable to step in and provide them when the government does not. They may lack

time, social capital and the necessary skills to play this role. Ironically, it is exactly these factors that render them vulnerable in the first place.

Runnymede embarked on a series of conversations with residents of Blackburn, Croydon and Newcastle to explore ways to avoid this vicious circle. These conversations form the basis of this report, in which we outline the dangers and opportunities that people see in the Big Society. A 12-minute film, which shows people in these three locations discussing issues raised by the coalition government's localism agenda, including volunteering, free schools, and elected police commissioners, can be viewed at: [www.runnymedetrust.org/fairsfair](http://www.runnymedetrust.org/fairsfair).

There was a real sense that the Big Society project could end up simply serving those with the sharpest elbows and the loudest voices. In the words of a Newcastle participant, 'the biggest fear is that the Big Society will become the big divide'.

# Methodology

Fair's Fair was conceived as a way of examining the concerns that communities and citizens have about the Big Society. In order to examine this, we felt it was vital to engage directly with those communities themselves. The research for this project was conducted between December 2010 and March 2011. We conducted deliberative consultations with groups of between 16 and 25 residents of Croydon, Blackburn and Newcastle.

After conducting background research, we contacted councils in each of the areas to request them to invite members of their citizens' panels to participate. We felt that this would allow us access to sufficient numbers of residents in the limited time available. While not all councils were able to provide us with panel members for our project, all three were extremely engaged and went to great efforts to help facilitate our research, for which we are very grateful. Croydon Council in particular agreed to allow us access to their Citizens' Panel and successfully organized a deliberative consultation for us. They were extremely helpful in contacting the residents, providing a space for the consultation along with refreshments and small incentive payments for participants.

The three areas were selected on the basis of their particular demographic profile, both in terms of ethnic diversity and socio-economic makeup. We felt that talking to people in areas with different demographic composition would give us a diverse range of views in a variety of contexts. Croydon is a very mixed area, with a large part of the population being Black British and South Asian. Blackburn, like Croydon, has a minority ethnic population above the national average, but these are overwhelmingly Indian and Pakistani, with a large Muslim population. Newcastle, on the other hand, has a minority ethnic population lower than the national average. In Croydon we spoke to the Citizens' Panel, in Blackburn a large portion of the group came from Youth Action, a local youth group, and in Newcastle we spoke to a group of voluntary sector workers connected to long standing BME women's organization The Angelou Centre.

We conducted background desk research to identify which areas would be the most productive for our study, and then to provide a basic

economic, demographic and political context. In addition we looked for specific examples of the Big Society reforms in the region. From this we drew up a presentation on the Big Society which formed the structure for our consultations.

Given the novel nature of many of the reforms under discussion and the patchy awareness of the Big Society programme among participants and the nation in general, deliberative consultations were deemed to be the most appropriate methodological approach. A deliberative consultation differs from a focus group in that participants are not only asked for their views, but are also asked to consider relevant facts from different points of view and to think critically about various perspectives. Facilitators provide information to help inform the debate on a subject of which participants may not have sufficient prior knowledge. We opened our consultations with a general discussion of the Big Society and participants' awareness of it, and then we discussed two specific examples of policies which, according to the government, will follow the Big Society template: elected police commissioners and free schools. Finally, we discussed what was required for the Big Society to be a fair society.

# Blackburn, Newcastle, Croydon

## Blackburn

The population of Blackburn with Darwen is estimated at 20 per cent Asian or Asian British and 75 per cent White British; 20 per cent of the population is Muslim.<sup>1</sup> Blackburn has the lowest Gross Disposable Household Income (GDHI) of the North West region, the region with the lowest GDHI in the country. In 2007, Blackburn with Darwen had a GDHI of £10,880. Blackburn with Darwen is 27th most deprived of the 354 boroughs in the country.<sup>2</sup> Thirty seven per cent of Blackburn and Darwen residents are within the most deprived 10 per cent in the country. A fifth of the borough and a quarter of children live in households in receipt of benefits. It was a centre of far right activity in the 1970s when the first wave of Asian migrants arrived and again from 2000. Both the British National Party and England First have won seats on the local council in the past.

In 2010, Blackburn with Darwen Council announced that it was slashing its budget by a third and removing ring-fencing for programmes that benefit the disadvantaged.<sup>3</sup> Statistics like this have raised concerns among community leaders such as the Bishop of Blackburn, who told the Synod in November 2010 that that he 'remained to be convinced' that the Big Society was going to prove to be more than an excuse for abdicating responsibility on to the voluntary and private sector.<sup>4</sup>

## Newcastle

At 84 per cent, Newcastle's population is overwhelmingly White British, with Asian or British Asian residents making up 7 per cent and no other group above 3 per cent.<sup>5</sup> As of 31 March 2010, Newcastle Council employed 8,638 people, of whom 2.9 per cent were listed as BME and a further 2.52 per cent non-declared. Over a third (38 per cent) of BME council employees are part-time while just under a third (30 per cent) of white employees are part-time.<sup>6</sup> BME women in the city are less likely to be employed full time, and in particular Bangladeshi and Pakistani women are more likely to be employed in the hotel, retail and restaurant sectors.<sup>7</sup>

Like many towns in the North East and North West, Newcastle has suffered disproportionately

from the cuts to local government. In terms of spending power, the council has lost £98 per person compared with a national average of £49 per person. In January 2011, Newcastle council announced it was going to have to make up to 1000 redundancies over the course of the year.<sup>8</sup> The voluntary sector in Newcastle has been badly affected by these cuts. A survey by the NCVS found that 85 per cent of the sector relied on the local authority for at least some of their funding and only a third of those had sufficient funds to carry on their work for more than 12 months.<sup>9</sup>

## Croydon

Croydon is ethnically the most diverse area we visited. Only 60 per cent of Croydon's population is White British, followed by 14 per cent Black or Black British and 12 per cent Asian or Asian British.<sup>10</sup> In recent years Croydon Council has made significant gains in ensuring ethnic diversity in its work force. The proportion of BME employees in Croydon Council is roughly equal to the BME population of the borough as a whole. These figures represent a doubling of the council's BME workforce from 18 per cent in 2004 to 36 per cent. However it is notable that BME employees do not make up a large percentage of the upper echelons of the workforce: while 55 per cent of the top 5 per cent of earners are female, only 23 per cent are BME. This represents an improvement of 10 per cent since 2008, but dramatic cuts to council services threaten to erase the admirable gains made in the borough.<sup>11</sup>

Croydon is set to make the second largest cuts of any borough in London. In June 2011, Croydon Council ratified a £1.2 million cut in funding to the voluntary sector in the borough.<sup>12</sup>

# Cuts and Austerity

## 'How Can We Do More in This Economic Climate?'

In the past year, the media has frequently debated the idea that the Big Society is merely a fig leaf for drastic cuts to the public sector. Although the government has endeavoured to dismiss this interpretation, participants in all groups expressed this belief. In Blackburn, one participant, who was reasonably positive about the idea of the Big Society, recognized that the history of Thatcherite economics would dog the concept: 'The problem is, the time it's coming at, it's coming at a time where there's a lot of cut backs, so often it's perceived that the Tory way of running government is to cut spending'. In Croydon – a group that had a very mixed response to the Big Society – one participant stated at the beginning: 'There's always a bottom line somewhere. This is clearly connected to the cuts'. Meanwhile voluntary sector workers in Newcastle were unambiguously sceptical: 'I think for all of us, the concerns are very real: is this about getting volunteers to do what paid staff should be doing?'

On a related note, the next issue to be raised was that of where the money for these initiatives would come from given the financially straightened environment: '...so where's all this money going to come from for community engagement?' Participants were also quick to point out that while volunteers may be unpaid, that doesn't mean there are no costs involved. A sentiment voiced by a Newcastle resident was reiterated several times throughout all three discussion groups: 'I am very worried the voluntary sector is already overstretched and it seems like we are going to become even more so as we have to take on new services and use volunteers'. In Blackburn, where participants were often positive about the idea of greater community participation, several participants echoed the comments of one member who said:

*If the Big Society came with a whole chunk of money then the volunteers could run the library (for instance) with a budget like the local authority does. But essentially they're just volunteers, they'll do what they can but nothing more.*

In Croydon, one member questioned the ability of communities to step in and provide more resource intensive services. During a discussion of free schools he interjected: 'My concern is rather more practical; which box are you going to pull out from under the bed, marked "teachers" to staff these schools?'

## Cuts Hit the Poorest Hardest

Finally, many people were worried that the cuts would have an unequal impact on the poorest and most marginalized in society. This concern did not just include the fear that people would not be able to participate, but also that cuts to services by their very nature afflicted the most vulnerable as they were the most reliant. In Newcastle, one participant stated: '...they're busy at the minute cutting back everything. Even benefits for the lowest paid and the most vulnerable.... The most vulnerable in our society are being hit the hardest, and to me that is the worst discrimination of all'.

# Big Society versus Big Government

One theme that recurred through these discussions was the ideological division between a Big Society and a big government. This could take several forms. Many participants pointed out that the Big Society was a new name for something they had long been doing. Some people agreed that society should do more, and government less, but questioned whether the Big Society agenda would achieve this. Others were more concerned that some specific roles should be reserved for the government, not communities, the voluntary sector, or individuals.

## ‘We’ve Been Doing the Big Society for Years’

Participants in all three groups expressed the view that the Big Society had been happening in their communities, but it was particularly prominent in Blackburn and in Newcastle. At the start of the consultation, one Blackburn participant stated: ‘I think ... (the Big Society) happened a lot in ... immigrant communities because they have a strong family and community structure’. In Newcastle, one participant said: ‘We’ve actually been doing the Big Society for 34 years with the Tenants Federation’. A more pressing critique was that regardless of the rhetoric, Big Society proposals were being imposed from the top down without regard for the needs or wishes of the communities involved. A woman in Newcastle stated: ‘The problem is that there has been a top-down structure. So funding has always come from Government to large institutions, local authority bodies etcetera’. This was linked to a wider trend in government to centralize powers away from local authorities. Many of the Big Society reforms were therefore seen as being basically a method of further disempowering the council while devolving responsibility to a more local level. A Newcastle participant said that in the 1970s, ‘you could work with local councillors to get things done but councils really don’t have any power anymore’.

There were further fears that this would jeopardize accountability and transparency. One risk that members of all groups mentioned was the loss of accountability. On the subject of elected police commissioners, one Croydon participant’s primary concerns were:

*...what about corruption? Because they have a lot of problems in America with commissioners being corrupt. At least with the system we have now the police commissioners have got an oversight committee – the police complaints committee.*

In Newcastle, women expressed the fear that localism might weaken democracy because it gave power to privileged groups in the community. In regards to free schools, one said: ‘Religious conservatism would mean that women and girls would suffer and there wouldn’t be quality control, so level of treatment could become a serious problem’.

## Not Everyone Can/Should Take Part

The final concern was that all areas of civil society simply did not have the same capacity to step in and take on these roles. This would make participation and the benefits which may accrue from it deeply uneven, and possibly result in the people being given responsibilities for which they were ill-equipped. On the topic of elected commissioners, the Newcastle group worried that Roma groups do not vote because ‘Roma aren’t allowed to vote. The rules and regulations again ... this is where they put up barriers to society taking part. Why shouldn’t the Roma vote? Or BME community?’ It was felt that this left them excluded from protection from discrimination. Similarly, one participant argued that ‘people (who) are wanting to vote, it’s mainly middle class older people that vote so younger people won’t get their say...but it’s them who get arrested’.

In Croydon, one woman stated that even if she did get involved she was basically unequipped to do so: ‘Because [if] I think graffiti is a problem but I’ve voted for someone who said they were going to get rid of graffiti and, unbeknownst to me, that meant the budget for terrorism was cut, then I’ve made a terrible choice’.

# Community Cohesion

## Will Everyone Have Their Voices Heard?

If there was one overriding principle on which there was consensus amongst the participants of the discussion groups, it would be that everyone must have their voices heard in the Big Society. This would not happen automatically, but would need to be central to any strategy to devolve power to local communities. People's ability to participate, they argued, is unequally determined by differing capacity, access and time. There is therefore a real danger that people with the sharpest elbows and loudest voices – those in already privileged positions in society – will dominate the Big Society:

*In any large group there is always the vocal people that take over, to voice their opinions and have their say. Whereas the very people who can't express themselves, because they have language difficulty and things like that, always get left behind. With the community workers, at least they were trained, people who were able to guide people, to look at their views. Whereas if it's left to groups to run willy-nilly, how is it going to work? (Newcastle participant)*

Importantly, many participants pointed out that people's capacity to participate is to a large extent structured by 'race' and ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status. Groups who face discrimination and are already excluded from decision-making processes will be less likely to have their voices heard in the Big Society. Without proper safeguards, the Big Society may consequently be unrepresentative of the local communities it is meant to reflect. As one Croydon participant put it: 'It's going to be quite under-representative of people who don't have the time. It's great for ladies who lunch who have the time, but I would struggle'.

A number of participants argued that this could result in some groups actually being further marginalized and victimized in the Big Society:

*There are communities within communities, that are not part of the wider community ... You could be in an area with high levels of National Front and English Defence League, which is very localized. Who's going to ensure, in terms of the*

*Roma or BME communities, their participation? Some parts of Newcastle are really good, in terms of community activism. But there are other parts where some communities are totally excluded. (Newcastle participant)*

## The Big Society Can Fuel Segregation

Many participants reflected on how some elements of the Big Society can be detrimental to community cohesion. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this was most prominent in the discussion on free schools. Many participants were concerned that some groups would use the opportunity to set up exclusive schools designed to cater for particular demographic groups but exclude others. In many ways, this view indicates an awareness that Britain's education system already allows for a degree of self-segregation, and the examples given during the meetings reflected this understanding. Many participants argued that free schools would allow religious groups to further self-segregate from the rest of society. One Blackburn resident expressed a common sentiment when he said: 'Personally, I would be worried about segregation because parents would always want to send their children to schools within their religious community'.

Other participants, however, added a class dimension to this by suggesting that parents most likely to set up free schools would be middle class parents concerned with conserving their class privilege:

*The majority of parents and teachers are not interested in setting up a school. Some do, because they feel elitist and think their children are much better and want more for their own children. The easy way for them to deal with that is for them to pay for more private tuition for their children. I'm not very political, but it is another conservative myth that all these people want to set up schools. (Croydon participant)*

This was considered by many participants to be inherently unfair, particularly as free schools would be funded by taxpayers. A participant from Blackburn said: 'You want the best for your kids really. If you see somebody else's kids doing well with your money, you're going to be a bit cheesed off'.

# Equality

## Fairness or Equality?

Participants were asked to consider the place of 'fairness' in the Big Society agenda, and how the government uses this concept in its rhetoric. Most expressed scepticism about the usefulness of the concept in policy, and felt that 'fairness' was a hollow term. The coalition government document *Building the Big Society* asserts that 'only when people and communities are given more power and take more responsibility can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all'.<sup>13</sup> Participants in all three groups were asked about their reaction to this assertion, and a Croydon resident summed it up as follows:

*I think that's a load of rubbish actually, I really do. That statement basically says 'we've got no idea of how ordinary people live and work, no idea whatsoever. And we don't know what to do'.*

The Blackburn participants discussed the need to monitor and collect data on different groups in the Big Society. They argued that 'fairness' is ill suited for this, and a more easily measurable concept such as equality might be more appropriate.

On the topic of equality, a number of participants made the case that some elements of the Big Society can actually increase inequality, and pointed towards the tension between private and public benefit:

*From a parent's perspective, I can see a lot that's positive in free schools. They can be more specialist, more flexible. And they don't necessarily have to be religious. However, from a community perspective, does this develop or maintain a two-tier system? Mainstream education for most, and then an alternative system for the children whose parents have time and money to put into a free school. Education is a right for all people. Why not improve education for everyone, rather than having a two-tier system? (Blackburn participant)*

Many participants were sceptical about the current government's commitment to equality and doubted that they are well placed to deliver equal outcomes for all groups. One member of the Newcastle discussion said that her main concern is 'all of the gains of the last government in terms of equality getting unpicked'.

## The Big Losers in Austerity Are Those Least Able to Make their Voices Heard

Participants agreed that the voices of all groups need to be heard to ensure fairness in the Big Society. There was widespread concern, however, that the voices of the most vulnerable would continue to be ignored. Many participants made the connection between the Big Society and government cuts, and argued that those who lose out in austerity will be the same people who are least likely to make their voices heard. Participants seemed aware that government cuts disproportionately affect the most vulnerable people in society, who are not only having the services they rely on for survival cut, but due to welfare reform are also under immense pressure to prove their worth as 'deserving poor':

*People are being forced into low-paid jobs, people who are sick are being harassed to take work when it is going to make them more ill. Maybe if you go to better off areas, where people have retired early, they might be able to volunteer but then there's a thing about people only volunteering in their own locality. But the people I'm working with are so stressed at the moment. If your children are five, you're meant to get yourself a job. Well, who looks after the children? There's just so many contradictions. And then there are all those people with mental health problems that are so stressed at the moment. I feel really upset about the whole situation. (Newcastle participant)*

This paradox seems to lie at the heart of the Big Society agenda, and was considered by many participants to be the greatest danger of localism. That is to say, those who risk being further marginalized by government austerity will also find that the voluntary sector's capacity to step in is reduced due to that very same programme of government cuts.

# Race Equality and the Big Society

In the early days of the Big Society as a policy agenda, the new economics foundation made the point that the 'Big Society idea is strong on empowerment but weak on equality'.<sup>14</sup> A year on, this still holds true. The Big Society signals a departure from statutory mechanisms to ensure race equality, but has yet to offer any alternatives. The participants in Newcastle explicitly voiced the concern that the gains in the last decade in equality legislation are being unpicked. They have good reason to be anxious. The coalition government's lack of commitment to equality generally and race equality specifically was crystallized in the decision to substantially cut the funding to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and to ask on the Red Tape Challenge website whether the Equality Act should be scrapped in its entirety.<sup>15</sup> There are three major concerns in this area, which we feel the architects of the Big Society have yet to significantly engage with.

The first point is that the Big Society is hugely reliant on social capital to be effective. BME communities, in particular those who are newly arrived in the UK, are far less likely to have the sort of weak ties (such as informal conversations with the person delivering the post) that an RSA report identified as so crucial for securing this capital.<sup>16</sup> A 2010 report from the Third Sector Research Centre revealed that BME groups were more likely to become involved in social enterprises than their white counterparts but they were less likely to be aware of funding opportunities or have access to formal support structures.<sup>17</sup> Bidding for and signing contracts also requires a significant amount of legal knowledge. It is highly unlikely that small BME enterprises would have access to such expensive expertise.

Secondly, even if a BME community group successfully negotiates the various obstacles involved in bidding for a service, the loss of the council as a neutral arbiter could be potentially damaging for community relations. During our research in Blackburn, we asked the group how they felt the white community would react to an Asian elected police commissioner: '...if there was an Asian commissioner I think it would cause a bit of an uproar in the minority of the White British

population'. However, another participant went on to say: 'I think one of the issues is that the minority community would probably accept a White candidate without any problems but a candidate from the minority community would face lots of internal conflicts and divisions'. The concerns are that not only would members of the White majority react badly to a Muslim candidate, for instance, but might also spark tension and conflict between potentially divided BME communities themselves.

Finally, the Big Society contains no distinction between benevolent and malevolent communal action. It is taking place in a socio-economic environment of increased tension which has already led to outbreaks of violence and intimidation against communities in the UK, particularly Muslims.<sup>18</sup> Taking services out of the hands of bodies with a statutory commitment to equality and opening them up to groups of any ideology or belief has grave potential for social harm. As one Newcastle participant commented, 'the rise of the English Defence League, that's the Big Society in a perverted sort of way, isn't it?' Without some measure to determine which groups are appropriate to run vital services, it is possible that groups or individuals sympathetic to far right ideology move into key positions of influence.

# Summary

The Big Society has been feted as the most radical reform to public services and British life since the 1940s. Yet during the successive consultations the same impression came through. Even those who supported the ethos behind the Big Society – and few would argue against greater empowerment – felt, at best, deeply ambivalent about the specifics.

Our research indicates that on a local level, consent for this localist revolution has yet to be granted. The consultations covered a period of four months during which Big Society reforms were in almost constant public discussion. Yet a year on from its entry into mainstream political debate, the public as well as the voluntary sector and local councils still seem unsure of what is expected from them, and many of those tasked with the implementation of the Big Society have voiced serious concerns. This bewilderment and tumult was reflected in the discussions we had in Blackburn, Croydon and Newcastle. The more participants learned about the Big Society agenda, the less they voiced confidence that this central plank of coalition policy will deliver on its promises.

If the Big Society is to be enacted fairly, it must respond to the criticisms and concerns participants expressed.

Firstly, it must acknowledge and take account of the limits of communities' capacity to undertake this project. Especially in a time of significant economic hardship, which the government admits will only exacerbate in the short-term, people have real fears about their ability to take on more. Accepting that capacity is not evenly distributed, there needs to be some mechanism to mitigate the risks of increased segregation. In the wake of speeches condemning 'state-sponsored multiculturalism' and advocating a 'muscular liberalism', it is surprising to see proposals such as free schools which contain significant scope for religious division.

Secondly, the Big Society will fail if it becomes another top-down imposition from central government. There was a great deal of cynicism about the authenticity of the government's intentions: 'At the end of the day, they're up there, we're down here. They won't allow us to do

something that's different'. Even more damaging than cynicism that the coalition is earnest in handing back power, is the feeling that the whole project is being approached in an intrinsically disempowering manner. 'The problem is that there has been a top-down structure.' This can create resentment but even those who engage with goodwill may find themselves engaged in projects that are inappropriate, using methods that are ill-suited to their needs. The government must be prepared to move beyond restating their commitment again and again, and to devote efforts to engendering both capacity and will where these are lacking, before any more radical localist reform is put in place.

Thirdly, the participants identified a danger that the Big Society agenda could be used by already privileged groups to further entrench their social and economic advantages. For example, free schools could be used by middle class parents to ensconce their class privilege, and police commissioners could be elected on a promise to further victimize certain groups, such as Roma and traveller communities. It was also pointed out that volunteering in affluent areas is usually designed to benefit the immediate vicinity and will therefore do little to reduce segregation by wealth and ethnicity. A successful Big Society therefore needs safeguards to ensure that localism is inclusive and breaks down barriers between groups rather than reinforce them.

Finally, although the role of 'fairness' in the Big Society has not been articulated explicitly, the government's eagerness to be seen as 'fair' extends to localism. However, 'fairness' is a nebulous concept and impossible to measure. A Croydon resident raised the question: 'Fairness and opportunity for all? That covers a whole load of things. How do you define that? Does that mean that everyone gets equal opportunity when going for a job? There's no definition to it. There's no meaning'. For the success of the Big Society to be gauged, a more objective measure is needed. Participants suggested that equality would be better suited.

# A Way Forward?

So is there anything to be said for the government's localism agenda? Can principles of equality and fairness guide the development of the Big Society, or is it doomed to become the Big Divide? The participants of this project suggested that a successful Big Society agenda would need tangible and practical policies, and that these have been rather thin on the ground. Seeking to move away from a negative analysis of the Big Society – what it is not – Runnymede has advanced three shifts in focus that would allow race equality a central place in the Big Society.<sup>19</sup>

## From the Active to the Activist Citizen

When the 'active citizenship' initiative was introduced by then Home Secretary David Blunkett MP, the 'active citizen' was assigned an enhanced role for citizens and civil society organizations. It focused on encouraging participation in pre-existent modes of action: voting, paying taxes, volunteering, etc. The 'activist citizen' goes further by seeking to create new modes of action and to alter the status quo. It also dramatically broadens the scope for action, and redefines citizenship in terms of actions rather than status. Thus, previously excluded groups – such as irregular migrants, asylum seekers and refugees – can be incorporated. The Big Society potentially has space for this mode of citizenship, in particular in relation to anti-racism and equality. The questions that present themselves for the anti-racist activist citizen are therefore: How can we exploit the framework that the Big Society creates for active citizenship to deliver more equal outcomes for minority ethnic groups? Does the active citizen seek to close ethnic gaps in educational attainment by setting up a free school? Should s/he seek to address institutional racism in the criminal justice system by running for the office of police commissioner?

## Addressing the Accountability Gap

Government proposals have sought to swap accountability for data transparency. This is insufficient. Data provide only retrospective information on what has already occurred, but fail

to offer guidance to behaviour as public models of accountability do. Furthermore, data is static and requires interpretation before it can be a spur for action, providing no fixed routes for transferring information into improvement. If the government will not take responsibility for accountability and ensuring equality, how can we? Lessons could be learnt from a variety of extra-legal mechanisms. For example, the Fairtrade Mark, the Stonewall Workplace Equality Index, and University League Tables all move from simple monitoring to actively applying pressure on the respective institutions. Equally, 'Equality Scorecards' have the potential to provide activist citizens with both a measure and a benchmark against which elected officials can be held to account. They can use this to hold officials to account and to apply pressure when they feel they are failing in their duties to promote and preserve equality. Furthermore, new technologies allow for crowd-sourcing the experiences of millions of citizens who have been subjected to racial discrimination, allowing us to move beyond analysing existing datasets.

## Organizing the Organizers

The current financial climate has seen huge numbers of race equality organizations go under and many more face drastic cuts, particularly with the reduction of the Tackling Race Inequalities Fund. The race equality sector currently contains 11,000 organizations, which even at times of great austerity should remain a significant force for change. However, this will require serious thinking about value for money and establishing greater self-reliance of the type seen in other sectors such as gender equality, disability or poverty. It is crucial to find ways of supporting organizations to pull in the same direction, and focus on delivering change that people from minority ethnic communities recognize as valid in their lives and which seeks to improve our multi-ethnic society. This requires an emphasis on communication, creating space to learn from each other's practice, and a truly inclusive approach which enables coalition-building between and among our diverse communities. If the organizers are not organized, it is unlikely that we will be successful in building or supporting the kind of grass roots movement that can capitalize on the opportunities presented by activist citizenship.

# Notes

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# Selected Runnymede Publications

## **Diversity and Solidarity: Crisis, What Crisis?**

A Runnymede Perspective by James Gregory (2011)

## **New Directions, New Voices: Emerging Research on Race and Ethnicity**

A Runnymede Perspective edited by Claire Alexander and Malcolm James (2011)

## **Passing the Baton: Inter-generational Conceptions of Race and Racism in Birmingham**

A Runnymede Report by Kamaljeet Kam and Kjartan Sveinsson (2011)

## **Widening Participation and Race Equality**

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## **Achieving Race Equality in Scotland**

A Runnymede Platform by Sir Jamie McGrigor, Robert Brown, Humza Yousaf and Johann Lamont with responses from Professor Kay Hampton and Ephraim Borowski (2010)

## **Financial Inclusion amongst New Migrants in Northern Ireland**

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A Runnymede Financial Inclusion Report by Omar Khan (2010)

## **Preventing Racist Violence in Europe: Seminar Report and Compendium of Good Practice**

A Runnymede Roundtable Report by Kjartan Páll Sveinsson, Sarah Isal, Robin Oakley and Aine Woods (2010)

## **The Future of the Ethnic Minority Population of England and Wales**

A Runnymede/Centre for Policy on Ageing Report by Nat Lievesley (2010)

## **The Costs of 'Returning Home': Retirement Migration and Financial Inclusion**

A Runnymede Report by Omar Khan and Phil Mawhinney with research assistance from Camille Aznar (2010)

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## **Race Equality and the Liberal Democrats**

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## **Why Do Assets Matter? Assets, Equality, Ethnicity – Building Towards Financial Inclusion**

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## **(Re)thinking 'Gangs'**

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