

# The Big Society -

British Conservatism and its journey to modern, compassionate  
progressiveness?

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# Abstract

This thesis is investigating the British Conservative Party's focus on two concepts: the Big Society and the Broken Society. By using Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analytical approach in analysing the language used in political speeches, the values and ideas constituting the Big Society was found. The Big Society is explained as a radical, yet compassionate agenda based on a redistribution of power from government to citizens. In times of economic hardship, the Big Society is argued to be the recipe for building a better Britain. The Big Society is a welfare reform agenda that is suppose to solve the Broken Society. What needs to be fixed is the growing underclass: irresponsible families that live off welfare dependency and engages in a culture of poverty. The way poverty and inequality is discussed: as a symptom of cultural and behavioural problems – makes the compassionate agenda doubtful and raises the question whether it really means a better and bigger society for everyone. The results of the analysis shows that the Big Society – Broken Society narrative is nothing new and builds upon New Labour's rhetoric which implies the domination of a discourse – where material poverty and inequality is seen as not so problematic.

*Key words:* Big Society, welfare reform, underclass, critical discourse analysis, British politics

*Words:* 9725

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# 1 Introduction

In May 2010, the Conservative Party in Britain together with the Liberal Democrats joined for Government and the Big Society is the big idea that underpins the Coalition Governments' social policies. David Cameron, now Prime Minister, first used the term Big Society in 2009. The Conservative Party has since spoken of a revolution and a radical redistribution of power from the government to the citizens. The Government is talking about empowering communities, localism, and promotion of a philanthropic culture. Its focus is public reforms, social action and civic responsibility. The Big Society is claimed necessary in replacing *the big government* because:

the state has become too big for its boots. Together, we will dismantle the architecture of state interference...[...] pushing power out to families, communities and individuals. This new government will tear down the big, bossy, bureaucratic, unaccountable state and replace it with one that answers to you (Coalition 2010).

The Conservatives have long been referring to pockets of the British society as broken. Cameron argues for the need to talk “frankly” of how to “mend our broken society and how we repair those parts that are most badly fractured” (Cameron 2010a). The big society is seen as the solution -the way to fix this.

In an era of fiscal austerity the welfare state is being squeezed into a corner of savings, which in turn leads to a reconceptualization of the welfare state and its functions. The Big Society is suggested to be the Conservatives way of responding to the growing demands on the public sector. The Conservatives argue they are a new, modern, compassionate, and progressive Conservative Party, and the Big Society is their goal. But what does this concept really entail?

## 1.1 What is the Big Society?

### *Public Reform*

“[S]imply spending money” is not a solution. Instead, it is argued necessary to challenge the way in which government is currently managed (Coalition 2010). In one of his Big Society - speeches Cameron claims:

[T]he size, scope and role of government in Britain has reached a point where it is now inhibiting, not advancing the progressive aims of reducing poverty, fighting inequality, and increasing general well-being (Cameron 2009a).

## *Civil Society*

In hand with public reform and welfare change comes the focus on civil society. In the Conservative Manifesto it is pointed out that: “there is such a thing as society, it’s just not the same thing as the state”. The Big Society means a diversity of welfare services, where communities and societies are working together for progress. The “proud and long-standing charitable tradition” of Britain is used as a reminder of the big part the voluntary sector play, and is assumed to play (Conservatives 2010a:37-38).

## *Responsibility*

Cameron speaks frequently of responsibility and about doing the right thing: “[I]f it encourages responsibility we should do it; if it encourages irresponsibility, we shouldn’t.” (Coalition 2010). “Human kindness, generosity and imagination” is argued to have disappeared as a result of expanding state control. Instead of helping people, the welfare state has brought about a fragmentation of society, where the bonds of responsibility and duty between people are said to have been replaced by regulation and bureaucracy on the part of the state (Cameron 2009a).

## *Family*

Making Britain the most family-friendly country in Europe is one of the primary goals. The Conservatives are clear on the matter that they will recognise marriage and civil partnerships in the tax system. It will, they claim, send out signals that commitment is important (Conservatives 2010a:41). This along with a tougher family politics is said to be aimed at making families more responsible (Cameron 2011a).

## 1.2 Purpose and Problem

The Big Society is an agenda for welfare reform. It is also an example of political renewal. The Conservatives are arguing that their ambitions for welfare reform are radically new, however this quest for political renewal has been seen before: *New Labour* and their Third Way and in Sweden *De Nya Moderaterna* – the new worker’s party of our times. The Big Society agenda possesses influence on current politics, and is therefore of major relevance to study. Rhetoric is never *just* rhetoric. The argument is that the progressive depth of the Big Society is questionable and that the broken society perspective legitimises both welfare retrenchment and harsher welfare policies.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the rhetoric surrounding the Big Society and the broken society narrative. By using Norman Fairclough’s critical

discourse analytical methodology and theoretical framework the language used to legitimise the political direction on the basis of the Big Society vision will be discussed. And these following questions is this thesis starting point:

*What ideas and values constitute the Big Society concept and how does the Conservative Party try to legitimise their political agenda?*

*Do discursive practices cover and deepen unequal power relations in society, or do they challenge current social relations by representing “reality” in a new way?*

### 1.3 Delimitation

This thesis is based around the social policies of the Big Society agenda. I have chosen not to discuss the reforms as such and instead focus on the rhetoric used by the Conservative Cabinet Ministers<sup>1</sup> in legitimising and explaining the Big Society. The research was based on the four themes previously presented: *Public reform, civil society, family and responsibility*. In accordance to this framework the most important representations and arguments are presented.

### 1.4 Disposition

Previously the Big Society agenda was introduced as well as the purpose of this thesis. Norman Fairclough’s critical discourse analytical approach is discussed, as well as my practical methodological approach and the empirical and theoretical material used is discussed in next chapter, Chapter 2. In Chapter 3 follows the analysis of the language concerning the broken society – big society concept by using the methodological and theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2 and 3. Finally, in Chapter 4 the result of the analysis as well as my conclusions are presented and the questions introduced previously will be answered and discussed. In Chapter 5 the reference list is presented.

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<sup>1</sup> The Cabinet Office is the government.

## 2 Methodology and Theory

This chapter starts with a discussion on critical discourse analysis. Then Norman Fairclough's methodological and theoretical framework is presented and I discuss how I make use of it as an analytical tool. The second part of the chapter introduces the empirical and theoretical material.

### 2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

What is discourse? Discourse is explained as a system of statements and practices that dominate various institutions (Neumann 2003:17) but discourse is also how we speak about the world and how we interpret it (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002:6-7). Discourse analysis is based on a social constructivist approach in which theory and methodology is interlinked and rests on the idea of the world being socially constructed (ibid 2002:3-4). The ambition of critical discourse analysis (CDA) is not to be politically neutral or fully objective, but to uncover discourses and social practices and power relations that maintain them, hence the term *critical* discourse analysis (ibid 2002:64-67). Discourses are struggles between different knowledge claims, which represent different ways of interpreting the world. Our knowledge of the world is not of an objective truth, but rather seen as a result of socially constructed relations. The way we understand and interpret reality is both historically and culturally dependent (ibid 2002:2-6). All of us carry tinted glasses mirroring our reality, which leads to selective choices and preconceived ideas irrespective of how hard we try to stay objective (see Beckman 2005:21 and Hollis 1994:77,214). The critical discourse analytical approach provides us with tools to carry out a critical reading of political documents, without a strict objective approach. Still, it is very important to keep a self-critical approach when analysing the texts. The risk is that as a result of our common-sense understandings, we treat issues as taken for granted. Yet it is precisely the common-sense understandings we need to deconstruct and analyse. To keep a distance between oneself and the material one is investigating is therefore vital (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002:21-22). Social constructionists do not argue to carry the truth, but they discuss *a truth* (ibid 2002:211).

### 2.2 Power struggles

Fairclough sees language as a socially conditioned process. Linguistic phenomena

are social phenomena; what we speak about and how we speak about something is determined socially and will have social effects (2002:19). Fairclough views discourses as social practices that are both constitutive and constituted. Discourses both constructs reality and are being constructed by reality. The aim of studying discursive and social practices is to analyse *representations of reality, power relations and social relations* and how these practices further *strengthen interests of certain social groups* (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002:64-67). Discourse is an important form of social practice, that changes and reproduces knowledge, identities, social relations and power relations (ibid 2002:65).

In CDA, discursive practices are seen as contributing to the creation and reproduction of unequal power relations between social groups. In the discourse analytical field all exercise of power is seen as a way of projecting reality that is in accordance with actors' own interests and convictions. To be able to do so, they need to project reality as natural and normal by transferring their convictions to others. It is all about having the power to stabilise norms and to make others think a certain way (Neumann 2003:147-148). Political messages and ideas constantly reproduce the political reality (Beckman 2005:92). The use of language is consequently a way of exercising power. Exercise of power becomes manifest in the creation of identities, in the creation of "them and us". Languages carry certain symbols and signs, dividing them from us. Being capable of creating, and project "them and us" as reality speaks for a stabilisation of a discourse, in other words, it turns into a dominating discourse (Neumann 2003:83f).

### 2.2.1 Ideology and Class

Fairclough is highly influenced by Marxism and the idea of class relations and class struggle as fundamental influences on all aspects of society. Class struggle is seen as a necessary and inbuilt character of the social system where maximization of profits and power of one class depends upon the maximization of exploitation and domination of another. While social struggle may though be more or less intense and may appear in more or less obvious forms, all exercise of power take place under conditions of social struggle (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002:75-76, Fairclough 2001:28).

To Fairclough ideology is the primary means of gaining authority, with ideology being a type of a hegemonic discourse. Fairclough claims that practices and discourses upholding unequal power relations are ideological, based on the ideology of the dominating class that over time has become naturalized and thus seen as universal and normal. Ideological power means: "power to project one's practices as universal and 'common sense'" (Fairclough 2001:27). Fairclough claims that ideology disguises itself, pretending to be something it is not. He discusses naturalisation of discourse types: taken-for-granted assumptions that are not being questioned, and how discourse types can lose their ideological character in the process of naturalisation. The extent of naturalisation depends on the power of the social groups whose ideologies and discourse types are in question.

Common sense is a process of naturalization and a process of power, and the dominating group determines what is common sense. This is important to understand, according to Fairclough, in order to being able to understand the distinction between the “superficial common-sense *appearances* of discourse and its underlying *essence*”. It means that we should not take language practices at face value and be naïve in relation to explanations given (2001:76-77). Jørgensen & Phillips point out that the aim of discourse analysis is to conduct a critical project, to try to “destabilise prevailing systems of meaning” and uncover the common-sense understandings of our world (2002:176-178).

## 2.3 Fairclough’s Analytical Framework

What is important to point out is that I will use Fairclough’s framework extensively both methodologically and theoretically. Fairclough provides us with an analytical framework for how to analyse a *communicative event*. A communicative event is an example of language use, written or non-written, which is then analysed in three parts, or dimensions: As a *text*, as a *discursive practice* and as a *social practice* (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002:67-68).

Through analysing the linguistic features -the text - I intend to search for symbolic and important words that are used as representational foundations in the debate surrounding the Big Society agenda. In searching for frequent words like these, I intend to find a visible pattern of the rhetorical language, which I will then use to analyse the discursive practices.

Analysing the discursive practice should focus on the *intertextuality* of the texts - how the texts of authors’ (speech-makers, politicians, journalists...) draw on already existing discourses, such as welfare discourse versus neoliberal discourse (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002:68-69). There are different types of discursive practices. *Creative discursive* practices are when discourse types are combined in a new way, which is a sign of and driving force for socio-cultural change. In contrast, there are *conventional discursive* practices. These are indications of a dominant, hegemonic order still standing strong (ibid 2002:73). First I need to find the most important representations, the representations that appear to be more or less visible (Neumann 2003:33). Representations are what we acknowledge as real and for a discourse to dominate and to become stabilized these representations need to be constantly reproduced and reconstructed (ibid:157-158). According to Fairclough, representations in the welfare discourse of New Labour and the Third Way led to a construction of what reality did look like, what it could look like and what it should look like (Fairclough 2000:9). I will focus on the language and interpret and analyse what it is said and how it is said, and how the language is used as a tool in trying to achieve something.

Discourse analysis itself according to Fairclough is not sufficient enough to analyse the broader social practice. To be able to do so one needs to integrate

social and/or cultural theory (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002:69). Fairclough's framework is supposed to work as a guide for how to analyse and study both texts and actions. The three dimensions affirm the degree of interlinking between language, discursive and social practice. It shows how important it is to study texts as intertextual, as having links with other texts and being a part of a bigger context, as a way to understand the entire picture and underlying assumptions (ibid 2002:70). Seeing language as discourse and as a social practice, Fairclough suggests, is essential not only to analysing texts themselves, but analysing *the relationship between texts, processes and their social conditions* (2001:21). However, in the interest of time, I have decided to focus on the first two dimensions: text and discursive practice, and unfortunately must leave out an extensive analytical reading of the social practice dimension.

### 2.3.1 Practical Method

Essential for Fairclough is the analysis of text on a grammatical and linguistic level. Fairclough often counts words and expressions quantitatively. I have chosen not to use this strategy frequently but rather focusing on the expressions themselves. Focusing on some of his linguistic tools has helped me to read the material more systematically and being able to find the key words. The following four linguistic tools have been used:

*Collocations*: A sequence of words that co-occur often, or more often than usual, for example a word a verb is most frequently followed by. Fairclough uses the example *social exclusion*, is it more frequently followed by *prevent* or *reduce*?

*Modality*: The level of commitment or obligation a statement the writer or speaker expresses. Is the writer referring to what has been said or written as his/her own beliefs or as a general fact? Or how authoritative are the expressions? *Shouldn't*, *Mustn't*, *Should* or *Must*?

*Over-wording*: a frequent use of certain words or expressions.

*Presupposition*: the explicit and implicit meaning of texts – the presumptions made. (Fairclough 2000:161-163).

## 2.4 Empirical Material

The difficult part of discourse analysis is the issue of delimitation. However, there is a need to delimit the scope of the study. The empirical material stretches from 2008 to 2012. I chose the year 2008, because of the Conservative Party's

successes that year. They won, among others, the significant mayoral seat of London, in addition the economic recession led to dissatisfied voices against the Labour government. Most material is based around 2010 and 2011 because of the general election in 2010. However, links to the Big Society concept is traced back to 2008 in connection to the concept of the broken Society.

I have focused on finding material on the Conservative party's website, the Cabinet Ministers websites, the Cabinet Office's website and the Prime Ministers website Number 10. Newspaper articles and journal articles have been used when links to them have been on these three official websites, containing speeches or articles written by one of the Cabinet ministers. More extensive use of newspaper and journal material was impossible since I already had a substantial amount of text. However, the main ambition is to map what the prominent Conservative ministers are saying, and not what the political opposition or the public make of the Big Society. Thus, the focus remains on what the Government is expressing. Most of the empirical material is based on written political speeches and documents by Prime Minister David Cameron as well as Pension Secretary Ian Duncan Smith, in charge of welfare reforms, and the ministers of the cabinet, since they are the key people working for governmental welfare reform. I have focused on the Conservative Party since the Big Society is their idea and have therefore excluded the Liberal Democrats from the analysis.

The search words have been *big society* and *broken society*. All the texts used in the analysis have a link to one of these, or both expressions. The reading of one text has led me in the direction of another. And by searching with these search words on key ministers, speeches and articles have been found. Still, I have found two texts as the most important ones: *The Big Society* (Cameron 2009a) and *Our Programme for Government* (Coalition 2010) that are used more frequently than other texts. I recognise that this thesis can not tell the entire picture of the Big Society by using a limited number of texts, still I trust the material I have, show a rather comprehensive picture of the language applied in connection to the Big Society – broken society discourse. Many of the texts are identical and build upon each other. This made it easier to find the repetitive and recurrent representations and words.

## 2.5 Theoretical Material

The main theoretical material is based on the book *New Labour New Language?* by Norman Fairclough which focuses on a critical discourse analysis of the rebranding of Labour and their approach to the Third Way discourse. This is used as both a methodological and theoretical foundation.

Since the discussion concerning the broken society focuses on 'broken' parts of the society it was necessary to integrate theoretical material concerning poverty, inequality and the British legacy concerning these issues in being able to understand the concept of *brokenness*. The Broken Society idea is based largely

upon the idea of an underclass, or the rise of an underclass, as argued by the American political scientist Charles Murray in the late 1980's, and his work on the rise of the British underclass will be used (1990, 2001). An underclass discourse is also discussed by Ruth Levitas in *The inclusive Society, social exclusion and New Labour*. Levitas discusses discourses surrounding social inclusion and exclusion (Levitas 2005). Ruth Lister and Fran Bennett have discussed the Big Society language in *The new 'champion of progressive ideals'?*, which I will use as a reference when analysing Conservative rhetoric on inequality and poverty. Rosemary Crompton also discusses the role of family, but from a class perspective in the article *Class and Family* (2006). And in order to grasp the attitudinal perspective among the public in concern to the welfare system I have drawn on an interesting study by Peter Taylor –Gooby and Rose Martin: *Fairness, Equality and Legitimacy: A Qualitative Comparative Study of Germany and the UK* (2010).

In *The Conservatives under David Cameron – built to last?*(2009) edited by Simon Lee and Matt Beech, at Hull University, department of Politics, the Big Society concept is discussed as well as the political renewal of the Conservative Party. *The Welfare State Reader* (2006), edited by Christopher Pierson and Francis G Castles, will also be used as a reference when discussing the welfare state in Britain.

However, the theoretical material *should not* be seen as a theoretical foundation of this thesis, but instead as a complementary material providing the analysis with valuable perspectives in order to understand the discursive practices

## 3 The Big Society, The Broken Society – language analysed

In this chapter the key arguments expressed in relation to the Big Society and the broken society will be discussed and analysed. These are the recurrent representations and expressions I found that are part of the construction of the Big Society – broken society discourse.

### 3.1 Welfare Reform

The failure of the big state - big government - is a re-current issue. “For years, there was the basic assumption at the heart of government that the way to improve things in society was to micromanage from the centre, from Westminster.” Cameron said this in his speech on *Our Big Society Agenda* and added: “But this just doesn't work.” (Cameron 2010b). Problems are big, changes need to be big, and there is a need for big ideas. In the key text *Big Society* (Cameron 2009a) the word *big* is mentioned 30 times. This illustrates the frustration the Conservatives feel about the current way of state control and state interference. The Government is speaking about radically reforming government and the welfare system and argues it is the ‘biggest, most dramatic’ redistribution of power (Cameron 2011a). The big society agenda, envisioned in time of the declared need of austerity measures, has been accused of being a cover for cuts (BBC 2011). Cameron strongly rejects these accusations by stating that he has been going on about this idea years before the cuts (Cameron 2010b). But when explaining what this Government will be remembered by the Big Society:

In Britain they didn't just pay down the deficit, they didn't just balance the books, they didn't just get the economy moving again, they did something really exciting in their society (Cameron 2010c).

Tackling the debt is, in according to this quote, the priority - the society is a secondary policy area. This implies the overall priority of the political agenda and the Big Society can rightly be questioned as being a cover for public sector cuts.

The critique of Labour is made up of strong, demonstrative words in a number of texts. The Conservatives try hard in describing the wastefulness of a top-down centralised system, calling it old-fashioned and inefficient. The financial crisis and Labour's borrowing and carelessness are used to justify the cuts (Cameron 2011a). The legacy of the Labour Party is described as:

spinning, smearing, briefing, backbiting, half-truths and cover-ups, patronising, old-fashioned, top-down, wasteful, centralising, inefficient, ineffective, unaccountable politics (Cameron 2010a).

The limits of government are repeatedly pointed out, and in the aftermath of the financial crisis, the need for governmental reform was highlighted. In referring to the state as ‘big, bossy, bureaucratic’ and ‘too big for its boots’ (Coalition 2010) an image of an unaccountable and ineffective public sector becomes illustrated. A year in government, the carried out public reforms were presented as ‘cut’ ‘axed’ ‘smashed’ and ‘revealed’ (Cameron 2010d). The rhetorical use of rather harsh words is once again noticeable. Proving the need for radical, urgent reform is intensified by the frequent over-wording of the words: *need, change and radical*. Even though Cameron attacks the state and the big government, he is careful about attacking the state itself. It is claimed that the state should not be left without responsibility, since the idea of responsibility is the core of the Government’s policies. Cameron argues the state’s crucial role in ensuring fair funding, fair competition, and fair access regardless of wealth. However, the state’s responsibilities should never become an excuse for top-down run government and central control (Cameron 2011b). Still, the view of the state as strong and supportive, and the rejection of state retrenchment may be questioned. Cameron pointed out that as the “*state spends less and does less*” (my emphasis) some parts of society need to step up to the commitment of providing welfare services. Cameron argues this would be the case no matter which party was in government (Cameron 2011c). Public sector cuts is here justified by ensuring a shifting responsibility strategy and by referring to harsh austerity measures as inevitable.

### 3.1.1 Outsourcing of Public Services

This is a “*call to arms*” (my emphasis) argues Cameron when discussing communities responsibilities (Cameron 2010d). The Government recognises problem of unequal resources and therefore have introduced both National Citizen Service<sup>2</sup> and more importantly, Community Organisers – a “*neighbourhood army*” (my emphasis) of 5 000 professional community organisers who will boost the confidence in deprived communities so people can come together and tackle their problems (Cameron 2010e). Again, the language is based upon an idea of urgency to fight for change – words such as *army* and *call to arms* are describing the struggle people need to make together.

A recurrent theme in the discussion of welfare provision is the significance of faith-based organisations. Cameron pointed out the nearly 30 000

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<sup>2</sup> For further information, visit [www.nationalcitizenservice.direct.gov.uk](http://www.nationalcitizenservice.direct.gov.uk)

faith-based charities who “desperately want to do more - but too often find themselves excluded from mainstream funding” will gain more power (Cameron 2010e). Sayeeda Warsi, Minister without Portfolio<sup>3</sup>, suggests: “I believe that the principles of the Big Society mirror, in many ways, the values that make faith communities such vital assets to national life” (Warsi 2011). Warsi continues arguing that faith-based organisations welfare provision have showed themselves be more open and inclusive than other charity agencies, and in this way responds to the critique that faith-based charities would be selective in their assistance. Warsi ensures that no community or “corner of society” will be left behind. The Big Society should be viewed as a new beginning for relations between state, faith and society (Warsi 2010). If Warsi more broadly speaks of faith, Cameron does not shy away from talking about Christianity. He argues: “I think there is something of a Christian *fight-back* going on in Britain” (my emphasis). Cameron points out the values of the Bible as something that helps in creating strong societies and that faith-based organisations have an “enormous” potential in tackling the “deepest problems” in society:

I think that Christian teaching can help us to have the strong values that we need as a country and we should be celebrating that and shouting about that (Cameron 2012a).

Also here Cameron sticks to a language referring to a fight and a struggle: Christian *fight-back*. This also shows that the Big Society is very much based on Christian values such as family and philanthropy. However, notice: it is Cameron *himself* who *believes* there is a fight-back and that faith-based organisations have enormous potential. So, this is not based much on evidence, but instead based on values and morals the Conservative believe should be the foundation of society.

Warsi argued that the Government won’t leave anyone behind but the cuts have become an alarm clock for the voluntary sector; hit by cuts and loss of funding, but still expected to do more (BBC 2011). How will the charity sector be able to compete with private enterprises when cuts hit them? Cameron, however, argues that charities dependency on the state *needs to be altered by focusing more on giving and generosity*, and point out the necessity for outside funding (Cameron 2009). This shows that at the same time as the voluntary sector is encouraged, or practically forced, to rely on alternative funding to do more as a result of governmental spending cuts, they have less money to do it with.

## 3.2 Welfare dependency

The expression welfare dependency is used widely, never explicitly defined but simply assumed as common understandings in Conservative policy documents.

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<sup>3</sup> A minister not working in a specific ministry or without specific responsibilities.

Welfare dependency is described as a welfare culture, a culture of “something for nothing” (Cameron 2008a, Cameron2012b). Welfare is claimed to have ‘trapped’ millions in dependency:

Welfare began as a life-line. For too many it's become a way of life. Generation after generation in the cycle of dependency - and we are determined to break it. (Cameron 2011a).

In reforming the welfare system, Cameron argues that money should go to people who need it and that the welfare system should not be “subsidising the consequences of our broken society” (Cameron 2012b). The discussion on welfare dependency and welfare reform is thus concentrated around the welfare culture that we are told have emerged, the something – for - nothing culture where people can live off benefits with no incentive to work. Cameron argues that as the state has continued to expand, people have become less responsible. Responsibility is disappearing because the state does it for you (Cameron 2009a). Debt, massive welfare rolls are said to be a consequence of “one person, a collection of people, or even a whole culture, saying, ‘Let’s do what we want, instead of what is right’”(Coalition 2010). Welfare is hence seen as the root of most problems that has condemned the poorest sector of society to a life of welfare dependency. The broken society is argued to have done so much “damage to people’s lives – not to mention the costs that our deep social problems load on to the state.”(Cameron 2011d). The welfare system is never referred to as something good, or something actually doing good. Instead, repetitive words such as *dependency* and *culture of welfare* describe a dreary part of a society, where responsibility is missing as a result of an irresponsible welfare regime.

### 3.3 Broken Families

In a speech on the broken society in 2008, Cameron describes the brokenness of Britain as: family breakdown, welfare dependency, debt, drugs, poverty, poor policing, inadequate housing, and failing schools but the main cause of the brokenness that lingers is based on the lack of responsibility and common sense. Cameron argues that governmental policies are not always the cause of the broken society, and that the causes lie in the national culture. The state cannot do it all, Cameron claims, and that is why the institution of family matters so much. When families work, society will work (Cameron 2008a). The rates of divorce and single parenthood worry the Conservatives. Britain has the highest rates of teenage pregnancy, family breakdown and highest divorce rates in Europe (Cameron 2010d). Cameron argues that the focus on marriage is a clear example of the “aggressively” pro-responsibility agenda the Conservatives will pursue. It is seen as a way of building incentive for good behaviour (Cameron 2009a).

The rhetoric of the importance of families is nothing new in Britain. New Labour spoke about the value of the family and the need for “mutual respect” and “acceptable conduct: and that the breakdown of family is directly linked with the breakdown of law and order (Fairclough 2000:42-43). The connecting link between families and welfare dependency, according to Fairclough, is also discussed in the New Labour language, based upon the idea of responsibility (2000:71, 57-62). “The values of a decent society are in many ways the value of the family unit” Tony Blair proclaimed (ibid: 2000:43).

The language about the family is focused on presenting the bad family and the bad parents, as the root cause of many problems. The bad family is linked to the cycle of welfare dependency. When families are discussed, about the themes are the problems of benefit dependency and lack of work and responsibility. The rhetoric is based on constructing the family as a problem so big that it loads its problems onto the rest of society. In reading the texts collocations (Fairclough 2002: 161) of the word *family* have been identified. Most frequent is the word *broken*. Other collocations are: *breakdown, poverty, fail, strengthen, responsibility, stability, welfare, single parents* and *cultural change*. All these words describe a reality where the broken families are dependent on society and in need of fixing.

What is noticeable is the escalated ruthlessness in the rhetoric of the family and the broken society after the riots in the summer of 2011. The brokenness the Conservatives had been warning about now unfolded: an entire country, and an entire world, could witness it in the media. In the *Statement on Restoring Order to Cities* Cameron described it as: “criminality pure and simple and it has to be confronted and defeated.”(Cameron 2011e). In the speech after the riots Cameron condemned the actions and the rioters themselves: “Those thugs we saw last week do not represent us, nor do they represent our young people - and they will not drag us down.” Cameron argued:

These riots were not about government cuts: they were directed at high street stores, not Parliament. And these riots were not about poverty: that insults the millions of people who, whatever the hardship, would never dream of making others suffer like this. No, this was about behaviour... people showing indifference to right and wrong... people with a twisted moral code... people with a complete absence of self-restraint. (Cameron 2011b).

The lessons of the riots were, according to Cameron, the need to talk about behaviour. “Social problems that have been festering for decades have exploded in our face” (Cameron 2011b). Cameron came to argue strongly that families matter and he went on to draw the conclusions that many of the rioters possibly did not have a father at home and possibly came from bad neighbourhoods:

where it's normal for young men to grow up without a male role model, looking to the streets for their father figures, filled up with rage and anger. So if we want to have any hope of mending our broken society, family and parenting is where we've got to start. [...] [A]nd we've got to be less sensitive to the charge that this is about interfering or nannyng (Cameron 2011b).

The riots led to the Government being able to use them as rhetorical proof, or at

least interpret them as proof of what has gone wrong in the country, being able to pinpoint more specifically to the responsibility of families and parents. The problem of this discourse however, is that the causality links are weak. The lack of restrictions and irresponsibility and fatherlessness are considered to be the cause to criminality and bad behaviour, without any further explanations. The Conservatives are trying to blame the problem of family breakdown on the growing welfare state. Cameron argues that “[t]he warmth of a child’s parenting is as important to their life chances as the wealth of their upbringing” (Conservatives 2010:41). However, Cameron does remark on the problems attached to parenting when there is a lack of resources and argues: “it is easier to achieve good parenting when there is material prosperity” (Cameron 2010f). So, it is *easier* to be a good parent when one has resources, but the warmth of a child’s upbringing is still argued to be as important. This, although vaguely, recognises the need for resources but at the same time imply that it is seen as less important than stability and cultural upbringing.

### 3.4 Poverty and Inequality

In the National Equality Panel Report in 2010 it was stated that inequalities in earnings and incomes are high in Britain, compared to other industrialized countries, and since thirty years ago. The large growth in inequality between the late 1970s and early 1990s has not been reversed. The report argues that economic advantage and disadvantage becomes reinforced through the life cycle, and therefore, policy interventions need to counter this at each life cycle (2010:1). Lister and Bennett argue that poverty in modern times have been hard for the Conservative Party to discuss. But now they have accepted the idea of relative poverty (Lister & Bennett 2010:85-86). The need to increase equality of opportunity is in the focus of the Big Society agenda:

Of course in a free society, some people will be richer than others. Of course if we make opportunity more equal, some will do better than others. We all know, in our hearts, that as long as there is deep poverty living systematically side by side with great riches, we all remain the poorer for it. That doesn't mean we should be fixated only on a mechanistic objective like reducing the Gini co-efficient, the traditional financial measure of inequality or on closing the gap between the top and the bottom. [...]we should focus on closing the gap between the bottom and the middle, not because that is the easy thing to do, but because focusing on those who do not have the chance of a good life is the most important thing to do (Cameron 2009a).

Here Cameron explains equality of opportunity and justifies it as the cornerstone of political policies. However, by using the *of course* in the beginning of the first quote Cameron also clarifies that divisions and inequalities are not problematic in and of themselves. Divisions between poor and rich is argued to be known, *in our hearts*, to be bad for society, but by justifying other measurements than the Gini co-efficient Cameron clarify that material resources is not the main priority in the

fight for equality and poverty reduction. George Osborne, Chancellor of the Exchequer, says that it is important to not just focus on money, and instead focus on broader issues such as schools and parenting (Coalition 2010). Duncan Smith also argues that poverty and brokenness are not just symptoms of lack of resources (2011a). Duncan Smith discusses how the poor part of society has become “detached” (2010) from the rest and that “[de]structive and demoralising patterns of life tend to be passed from one generation to another” (ibid 2011b). This can be argued as acknowledging the importance of structures. But it is not poverty and inequality itself that is mentioned, instead the behaviour of the poor. Lister and Bennett argue that the Conservatives broken society narrative downplay the importance of social and economic structures by basing problems on bad families and a culture of welfare dependency (2010:90). It is then not an economic structure that is being recognised, instead a behavioural, cultural structure. The following quotes clarify the view on poverty and inequality as a behavioural issue:

We talk about people being at risk of poverty, or social exclusion: it’s as if these things – obesity, alcohol abuse, drug addiction – are purely external events like a plague or bad weather. [...]Of course, circumstances – where you are born, your neighbourhood, your school, and the choices your parents make - have a huge impact. But social problems are often the consequence of the choices that people make.(Cameron 2008b).

Cameron interprets the issue of poverty as a condition one is trapped in, instead of a process of social and economic inequalities. Poverty and inequality should not be viewed as a result of purely external events: it is also a choice. Social problems are thus put upon the individuals and their choices and responsibilities. In a comparison<sup>4</sup> with the UK and Germany, Taylor-Gooby and Martin found that the idea of personal responsibility is particularly strong in the UK. The authors found that in the UK people are expected to take more responsibility for their outcomes. Opportunities are seen as widely available and it is one’s responsibility to seize them. Inequalities of opportunity were seen as the outcome of individual choice, based on personal behaviour. This, Taylor- Gooby and Martin suggest, is linked to the belief that exists in the UK regarding the failure of low-income groups to seize opportunities, therefore making them undeserving of welfare support. Equality of opportunity predominated the discourse about fairness and social provision (2010:93-95). What Taylor-Gooby and Martin show is that in the UK, the issue of inequality is not so controversial.

The need to reduce, tackle and fight poverty (Cameron 2009a) are frequent collocations in connection with the word *poverty*. The focus on the *poorest people* is also numerous. The word *poorest* is used 11 times in the *Big Society* speech 2009 and the word *poverty* is mentioned 26 times. *Inequal(ity)* is mentioned 11 times compared to the word *equal(ity)* 18 times. *Opportunity* and *fair(ness)* are mentioned 7 times and the word *gap* 5 times. The use of the word *poverty* is

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<sup>4</sup> A comparison based on focus groups from both countries.

mostly based on a discussion about the failure of the previous Labour Government to deal with these issues. According to Fairclough *reduce rather than prevent* poverty clarifies that the concept of poverty implies a condition rather than a process, one cannot reduce people or circumstances (2000:54-55).

### 3.5 An Underclass Discourse

Crompton discusses the discourse of class reproduction and poverty as seen as largely a result of a lack of aspirations and ambitions, deriving from the absence of cultural capital where instead of striving for change people endorse the “culture of poverty”. This culture of poverty is much based around blaming the victim-rhetoric (2006:662). Murray describes the underclass as: “a subset of poor people who chronically live off mainstream society (directly through welfare or indirectly through crime) without participating in it.” (1990:5). In his study on the uprising of the British underclass Murray focuses on family and single parenthood. Murray argues that the central problem is that children in communities without fathers have no set of rules. The fewer fathers, the greater the tendency for the kids to “run wild” (ibid:12). Murray asks: “How contagious is this disease? Is it going to spread indefinitely, or will it be self-containing?”(ibid:20). Murray’s terminology is based on the idea of a class - not just poor people, but people living on the margins of society, who are “unsocialized” and “often violent” (2001:26). The main link between Murray and the rhetoric of the Conservatives is this focus on the family, the discussion of the breakdown of families and the link between this, crime and the importance of marriage (see Murray 2001:31-33). Lawrence M. Mead discusses, along with Murray, the new politics of the new poor- the underclass – in the USA. Mead argues that there have been changes in politics, when the poor behave badly bigger government becomes hard to defend because of the view of beneficiaries as undeserving. There is now a preoccupation with dependency and dysfunction issues, not opportunity issues (2006:107-109). Mead recognises this same trend in Britain, where the issue of behavioural outsiders is more controversial than economic matters. The focus is now a politics of *conduct rather than class*. This dependency politics is based on social issues more than economic ones (ibid:111-112).

The values underpinning the Big Society agenda is consistent with the ideal of a residual welfare state with high eligibility requirements (Titmuss 2006:45). The welfare system is not only a mechanism that intervenes and corrects, argues Esping –Andersen, it is also an active force of social stratification (2006:165). What is interesting is that anti-welfare narratives are highest in times of low public spending, the risks of welfare backlash does then not depend on spending but on the class character of the welfare system. In liberal, residual welfare states as Britain increasingly have turned into, depend on the weak social stratum as in contrast to social democratic welfare states where it depends on middle-class loyalties (ibid:173). The underclass discourse can be argued as

justifying a tougher welfare regime. Fairclough argued, in the analysis of New Labour, that the concept of an underclass had ceased being used (2000:52). But in the rhetoric of the Conservatives I found it a few times: Michael Gove, Minister of Education argues:

I recognise that using a word like underclass has potentially controversial connotations. It can seem to divide society into them and us. But I believe there's a merit in plain speaking' (Gove 2011).

Though Cameron himself rarely links his ideas to an underclass, his fellow minister Duncan Smith does refer to the underclass discourse rather frequently. Duncan Smith point to a “steady rise of an underclass”, a group characterized by ‘chaos and dysfunctionality’ and “governed by a *perverse* set of values” (my emphasis) (Duncan Smith 2011b) and a Britain “witnessing a growth in an underclass whose lifestyles affect everyone” (Duncan Smith 2008). Crompton discusses a cultural account of class reproduction, where material factors are disregarded and instead a culture of poor is seen as the root to inequalities and poverty. If class reproduction is seen as largely a result of a lack of aspirations and motivations, the blame - the - victim game risks going too far and fundamental links will be overlooked (2006:662). As Gove suggests, when discussing the underclass -poor people- as a homogenous group upheld by chaos and low values, it may lead to a divide in society between *us and them*. Gove here acknowledges how one is speaking about the underclass may lead to further divides but argues that the necessity for speaking *plainly* about these issues justifies and legitimises the need to use the term underclass. Hence, the need to separate groups of people is viewed essential in being able to pinpoint to the problems in society.

### 3.6 The Blame Game

Cameron argues that the widening gap is a result of globalisation and new technologies. People with skills and those who manage to capture opportunities will benefit, others face the risk of exclusion. The response, Cameron argues, has been a growing welfare sector redistributing money through benefits and taxes. Still, this has not tackled poverty and inequality. Cameron's solutions are to make “opportunity more equal” starting with educational reform, and to help create a more responsible society. What is interesting about this explanation is the lack of responsibility on the Conservative's part, Cameron states: “You [Labour] have failed and it falls to us, the modern Conservative Party to fight for the poorest who you have let down” (Cameron 2009b). Lister and Bennett points out how, in his *Big Society* - speech, Cameron traced the 20<sup>th</sup> century poverty trend up until the 1960s and then jumped to post- 1997, when Labour was in power again (2010:86). In *Labour's Two Nations*, a report by the Conservative Party, the failures of the Labour Party in addressing poverty and inequality are discussed (Conservatives 2010b:6). The National Inequality Panel reported it was to a great

extent during the Thatcher years that widening inequalities grew in Britain (2010:1). Lister and Bennett affirm it was the Conservatives that let inequality and poverty levels rise and who left a legacy of deprivation in the hands of Labour. The lack of assuming responsibility for this, Lister and Bennett argues, brings into question the Conservatives *real* commitment to poverty reduction and equality strategies today (2010:87).

### 3.7 New Rhetoric?

During the Thatcher years the social democratic welfare state was challenged. Individuals should not be dependent on collective state provision and freedom and choice were more important than equality and social justice. This led to an underfunding of welfare services which has become known as one of the key legacies of Conservative social policy in the 1980s and 1990s (Driver 2009:82-83). Thatcher very famously stated that “And you know, there’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, there are families.” Thatcher did though not challenge the idea of a society, but argued for the need for active citizens and strong families (Lee 2009:55-56). This has been the core idea in the Big Society discourse. Underpinning the Big Society is the desire to separate society from the state and extend the Thatcherite idea of individual entrepreneurship as the major driver of social change (Lee 2009:59). Cameron has tried hard to the Conservative Party as a party for everyone. It has been difficult owing to the Conservative legacy, but in focusing extensively on welfare issues Cameron managed to collect votes. Cameron has argued that they are “not the same old Conservative Party”. They have changed and have now become a party for the mainstream majority (Cameron 2010g):

If you care about poverty, if you care about inequality, if you care about the environment – forget about the Labour Party. It has forgotten about you. If you count yourself a progressive, a true progressive, only we can achieve real change (Cameron 2008c).

What is interesting is that the broken society thesis managed to enable the Conservative Party to address popular issues such as anti-social behaviour, immigration, drugs, and crime *without* using the language of former Conservatives (Lee 2009:50). Cameron claims that the big society vision is something new and radical. But links are found with the discourse of New Labour and Tony Blair’s Third Way: the focus on family, the strengthening of communities, equality of opportunity, responsibility and public service outsourcing (Fairclough 2000:38-42). Along with a new ‘partnership’ between government, business and voluntary sector (Fairclough 2000b:166). New Labour too, argued that poor parenting is the root to many problems and because of this, responsible parenting was top of their agenda (Levitas 2005:123). Continuities between the Labour and the Conservatives discourses today are striking when it

comes to social policies. Cameron's political direction will not lead to radical changes in British social policy argues Beech (2009:30) and Griffiths (2009:107-108). But most interesting is that New Labour argued that welfare reform was necessary because of an increasingly expensive and ineffective system that failed to reduce poverty and "tackling social exclusion" *but* encouraged welfare dependency. The New Labour discourse appropriated much of the Thatcherite language and mixed it with social democratic and communitarian discourses, and hence left the Conservatives searching for their own new approach (Fairclough 2000b:172-173). Next, a discussion on the Conservatives *real* commitment on progressiveness and compassion will take place.

## 4 A Dominating Discourse of Welfare Reform?

Previously the linguistic and discursive features of the Big Society – Broken Society concepts were analysed. This chapter will discuss the findings and answer the research questions presented in Chapter 1. These questions were: *What ideas and values constitute the Big Society concept and how does the Conservative Party try to legitimise their political agenda? And: Do discursive practices cover and deepen unequal power relations in society, or do they challenge current social relations by representing “reality” in a new way?*

It is important that the Big Society is not dismissed as insignificant rhetoric. Rhetoric is never just rhetoric. What we say and how we say something does have consequences (Fairclough 2002:19). The Big Society is referred to as a new radical idea. The need for this is based on the belief that government does not have all the answers, and control over public services should be close to the ones who use them – the people. This has led to the focus on alternative providers of welfare, where charities are expected to do more. Faith-based organisations are encouraged to take the initiative. The Big Society addresses important issues concerning redistribution of power and democracy, though it is questionable whether it is a new and radical idea: in addition the Christian values that permeate the vision of the Big Society raise questions about secularism and whether faith-based organisations really have the best cures for ‘tackling’ the ‘deepest problems’ in society.

In the analysis it was made clear that an aggressive, urgent language of welfare dependency, as well as the debt and broken families underpin many of the reasons cited in the calls for change changing in the welfare system. The focus on pointing out failures of the previous government as well as assertion to the public that the current government are *doing the right thing* act as legitimisation of the political direction taken. The welfare reform and its characteristics thus appear as inevitable.

The debt is claimed to be the primary priority at the same time as the Government argues that the Big Society agenda should not be understood as a cover-up for massive spending cuts. Still, in times of austerity, is it possible both to cut back the state and still encourage social action? I understand the cuts as possible because of the *shifting* of responsibility. The ‘transfer’ of power to individuals, communities, charities and social enterprise does seem co-dependent with austerity measures. In time of austerity it is just not reliable to argue that welfare reform and outsourcing of public service *not* is a cover for cuts. Not only is the financial crisis used to legitimise the Big Society. I argued that after the

riots (in summer of 2011) the rhetoric on brokenness escalated. It can be interpreted as a stroke of luck for the Government that the riots occurred, as they now had “proof” for the existence of a broken society and a rising underclass. The idea of an underclass characterises the idea of a broken society and has had major influence on social policies. The problem of inequality and poverty is presented as a cultural problem: based on individuals’ and especially families’ moral and behavioural shortcomings. The broken society thesis thus legitimises the Big Society. The interesting question then becomes this: how does the broken society thesis have such great influence and, more importantly, such a high grade of acceptance?

The Big Society vision is claimed to be a bottom-up approach but is it really so? I view it as the governmental policies working top-down in trying to activate citizens and force them to take more responsibility, instead of the other way round. The Government, it then can be argued, uses this rhetoric in order to sidestep its responsibilities and push them onto the third sector. What is the aim of this outsourcing, and when is the limit reached? Is it mainly about contracting out services for which the government is still responsible or will it go further than that? In relation to Cameron’s argument that charities should not be dependent on the state, it is clear that the aim is to ensure that alternative welfare providers will not be accountable to the state. It is consequently uncertain whether the voluntary sector will be able to compete with private enterprises and businesses - this needs to be discussed more widely by the Government.

Exercise of power was explained earlier as something made possible by the creation of *us and them* and domination of discourse (Neumann 2003:83f). The way the Conservatives speak about welfare dependency, broken families, big intrusive government and irresponsibility, without any further explanations or facts, implies that that the separation of an us and them is, or should be based on common understanding. Levitas points out that the evidence for a dependency culture is very questionable (2005:20).

The broken society narrative downplays the effects of structural and economic factors and blames faults on society and individuals (Lister & Bennett 2009:105). The poor and troubled: the broken families are seen as inflicting problems onto the state and society. The way problems are based on a cultural view of poverty overlooks fundamental structures of poverty and inequality processes. When structural issues are discussed it is based around the problems of the welfare system or external issues such as globalisation. But nowhere are the poor, the underclass, discussed as a symptom of a broken society – where inequalities are rampant as a result of structural social and economic issues, which in turn leads to not being able to seize opportunities or not having the necessary skills. Hence, the causal links are weak and do not tell the entire story. This, which I refer to as the “blame game” brings into question whether the purported compassion toward equality and poverty reduction is genuine, when the state’s responsibilities are being downplayed. The political rhetoric based on the broken society narrative projects the Conservative Party’s truths. It is all about having the power to stabilise norms and to make others agree and think the same way

(Neumann 2003:148). Poverty and the poor are based on a construction of two groups of people: the broken and the non-broken. The power dimension is made visible when language is used to draw boundaries between them. This plays a role in how we think about welfare, poverty and inequality and in this case, legitimates a tougher welfare regime. As explained earlier in the previous chapter, the view on inequality and poverty in Britain is based upon the idea of equality of opportunities, even so among the public (Taylor-Gooby & Martin 2010:93). Middle-class loyalty toward the welfare system is decreasing as a result of a greater residual system (Esping-Andersen 2006:163-167). This in turn could explain a greater acceptance among the public for a tougher welfare regime with more stringent eligibility requirements and conditionality attached to welfare provision. Fairclough argued that New Labour focused more on cultural poverty than material poverty (2000:53). This implies the domination of a particular poverty discourse that is so strong that it entrenches two different political ideologies. The discourse surrounding the underclass is then made up by a conventional discursive practice (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002:73). The view on inequality and poverty among the British, as Taylor-Gooby and Martin showed, strengthens the argument that the underclass discourse dominates the British welfare discourse, even among the public.

To conclude, the links between Thatcherite rhetoric, New Labour rhetoric and Cameron's conservative ideas imply a dominating and naturalised class discourse, where the idea of an underclass has become naturalised (Fairclough 2001:76-77) and unquestioned. According to Fairclough, language is a tool in this ideological class struggle and is hidden in various discourses (ibid:33, 75-77). Hence, the Big Society it is nothing new but purely a disguised mix of conservative, centre-right ideals. The modern compassionate and progressive Conservative Party tones down the traditional right-wing Conservatism in using the term Conservatism in a new way – focusing on compassion, progressiveness and modernity. Still, the underclass discourse contradicts the compassionate and progressiveness the Party now argues to adhere to. Jill Kirby, former director of the Centre for Policy Studies<sup>5</sup>, illustratively argued that the Broken Society thesis is “a peg for almost any social policy reform” (2009:246). It is therefore important to avoid seeing political rhetoric as pure rhetoric. In the end it has social consequences. It will be interesting to see how the Big Society agenda unfold. I see an interesting vision, based on many constructive ideas<sup>6</sup>. But, it is important to remember that politics is a constant struggle between social groups, arguing their truths and *the Big Society and the broken society is one of those convictions* the Conservative Party is trying to bring about as the truth.

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<sup>5</sup> An independent centre-right think tank, visit [www.http://www.cps.org.uk/](http://www.cps.org.uk/)

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