

Prêt-à-réviser

Part 1. Britain

■ Small Government Ideology and Practice Past and Present

To “roll back the frontiers of the State”: with this radical statement of intent, the British Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, advocated a “hands-off” policy for central government especially as far as the economy was concerned. Rightly or wrongly (1), “Thatcherite politics” came to be synonymous with a decline in society’s Welfare State provision and the rise of the individualistic market based economy (2).

As the recent film *The Iron Lady* clearly shows, back in Thatcher’s turbulent eighties, this concept of the greedy society was pilloried by the Opposition and the Trade Union movement who resented mass privatisation leading to the sacrifice of whole communities such as the coal miners (3) or the steel workers. Though hailed as a courageous, economic visionary by staunch Tory supporters, Thatcher bequeathed social division through her dogmatic public refusal to negotiate: “This lady’s not for turning,” she once remarked at a Conservative Party conference.

In the context of economic recession, others on the political right, espoused the guiding principle behind Thatcher’s economic policy, namely that the State can not afford to step in and foot the bill (4) for a failing industrial sector. With rapid globalisation, competitiveness for industry revolves around increased cost-effectiveness and cost-cutting and not repeated bailouts from central government. David Cameron and Mitt Romney back in 2012 lambasted left-wing opponents for profligate spending. Running at approximately 16 trillion dollars the state budget deficit in the US leaves the country teetering on the brink of a financial cliff.

The alternative to Obama’s stimulus plans was to eliminate “every non-essential expensive government programme” which was to include repealing the controversial healthcare reform dubbed “Obamacare”. Trump, the newly elected President in 2016, attempted and failed to do just this provoking the ire of even senior Republicans like Senator John McCain who travelled to Washington despite being gravely ill to vote down Trump’s anti Obamacare bill.

Similarly, David Cameron lamented a past of totally irresponsible financial management during Gordon Brown’s term of office. According to the Conservatives, Labour had squandered public money in futile government schemes helping to finance Big Government “quangos” or government think tanks (5). Far from improving the quality of citizens’ lives this centralised power back in Westminster and increased red tape (6).

The Small Government solution favours laissez-faire capitalism! the principles Milton Friedman laid out back in 1962. The world of business is a “dog eat dog” world and with “social Darwinism” society, too, has to adapt or perish. Even left-wing governments have toyed with small government policies. In search of excellence, Mr Blair introduced privately run “Trust hospitals” and extended the Thatcherite grant-maintained school system so circumventing Local Education Authority controls.

■ Big Government Ideology and Practice

When television viewers witnessed the gruesome spectacle of Hurricane Katrina back in 2005 the world realised there had been an appalling leadership breakdown as government failed to rescue those afflicted by this natural disaster. Corporate America was shocked and the first helpers on the scene were Hollywood actors. The inept administration of a lame duck President was eventually shamed into action but it was a case of too little too late.

This painful incident came to embody “Small Government” based on individualism and indifference, quite the opposite of the Obama dream. The health scandal in Flint, where tap water was poisoned by lead due to incompetence from the water board but also cost cutting measures brought in by the authorities showed how poor communities could be let down by the powers that be.

In 2016 British PM Theresa May recently recognised the limits of “laissez faire” government when she evoked the need for a “shared society”. This soundbite refers to the need for a government to step in to regulate rogue markets which are widening the gap between rich and poor. This regulation was to be achieved by price caps on utilities but was pooh poohed by some in industry who saw it as an unnecessary intrusion in business affairs.

When he came to power and from his re-election Obama reaffirmed his controversial belief in Big Government. Unlike Reagan, who claimed “government is not the solution to our problem government IS the problem”, Obama boldly took on Congress to push through (7) groundbreaking legislation such as on health. Though his Big Government bills were fought tooth and nail (8) by the Tea Party and the Republican right and despite personal attacks and racist slurs against his name, Obama’s stimulus plan for the American economy seemed to pay off for car manufacturers like Jeep that were saved from bankruptcy by state aid.

Similarly, Big Government ideology places social justice firmly on the agenda. Whereas in the past Americans (9) benefited from health insurance merely through their jobs, the Obamacare policy aims to provide comprehensive health care for all regardless of their employment status. Granted Obama’s check amounted to a trillion dollars and complicated the nation’s tricky financial situation further, still. It was long overdue as health inequality used to be rife (10) since only wealthier inhabitants could afford private health insurance offering better quality care.

The principle of Big Government is to foster social mobility through equal opportunities like Affirmative Action in order to make society more inclusive, to curb institutional racism. The basic tenet is that a healthier, more just and less cutthroat society will be more productive and competitive. In a nation in which the pursuit of individual happiness is inscribed in the Constitution, Big Government entails guaranteeing basic rights and opportunities. It transcends mere economic concerns.



Vocabulary

1. rightly or wrongly : *que cela plaise ou non* ; 2. Thatcher believed in market forces to create a vibrant economy and society. 3. as vividly shown in the film *Brassed off (Les Virtuoses)* ; 4. foot the bill : *payer les pots cassés* ; 5. think tanks : *groupes d'experts* ; 6. red tape : *paperasse* ; 7. to push through : *make become law* ; 8. tooth and nail : *bec et ongles* ; 9. except the poorest covered by Medicare/Medicaid ; 10. rife : *ici, répandu*.

Exercises



I. Right or Wrong. Justify with a brief quote.

1. Thatcher believed in free market economy and small Government.
2. Small Government entails bailing out struggling industry with public money.
3. Republicans believe in eliminating all non-essential spending.
4. Mr Obama's Big Government spending safeguarded jobs in industry.
5. Many people were shocked by the Bush administration's inaction after Hurricane Katrina.

II. Comprehension questions. Answer in a brief sentence.

1. What were the social consequences of Thatcher's laissez-faire capitalism in the eighties in GB?
2. Explain why Obamacare is a good example of Big Government in practice.
3. What obstacles does Barack Obama face when attempting to implement Big Government policies?
4. Give two examples from the text of a left-wing government espousing small Government policy.
5. What effect has heavy government spending had on the federal budget?

Back in 2006 picking up on the words of his illustrious predecessor as head of the Conservative Party, Mrs Thatcher, when she referred to “rolling back the frontier of the State”, David Cameron promised to “roll forward the frontiers of society”. Indeed, as head of a political family often branded the “nasty party” for its lack of social agenda ever since the Iron Lady reportedly claimed there was no such thing as society, Mr Cameron had to pull out all the stops (1) in order to rebrand the Tories as people friendly.

His plan was to continue the Thatcherite process of fostering people power through localism. This involves disbanding expensive Labour quangos and replacing large government bodies with smaller locally administered groups based as far as possible on volunteering. Reduced government involvement entails enhanced local democracy, whilst enabling the Prime Minister to implement much needed budget cuts. Criticised as a measure of expediency or populism pandering to the right wing voters increasingly tending to favour fringe parties like UKIP (2), Mr Cameron believed his plan would heal a nation broken by almost twenty years of labour mismanagement.

■ The Bad News

Subsequent events may well have both dispirited and encouraged the P.M. at the same time. In August 2011, Britain witnessed some of its worst riots for decades. Widespread vandalism and looting took place and the Metropolitan police was overwhelmed, there was a breakdown in basic law and order. The government even had the British army standing by bringing back memories of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Coming just one year after the election this was hardly the manifestation of Big Society Number Ten (3) had in mind. Whilst many of the rioters were hell bent on causing gratuitous trouble more worrying were the genuine grievances voiced about Cameron's social plan.

Indeed, the Big society plan favoured volunteering instead of direct government funding in order to provide certain vital public services. Local libraries for example were to be manned by non-paid staff which sometimes led to downsizing shorter opening hours or even complete closure of certain facilities. Funding to non-essential services like youth clubs was heavily cut leading to unemployment among youth workers and increased idleness among youth already prone to anti social behaviour.



Vocabulary

1. pull out all the stops : *faire tout son possible* ; 2. right-wing anti-Europe party.
3. Number Ten Downing Street : *résidence du premier ministre britannique*.

■ The Good News

Despite the tricky economic climate, the new Prime Minister Theresa May's current administration can still rely on an undercurrent of goodwill and humanity fostered by the Christian tradition of the nation but also by the relatively harmonious multicultural make up of British society. This cohesion became evident in the aftermath of the riots in 2011 during the Royal Wedding and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the Olympic Games.

In one scheme, for example, an entrepreneur originally from China, Natt Wei, launched a young enterprise scheme to motivate young people into getting involved in their local communities, a far cry from the binge-drinking lager louts we normally read about in the media. The "Riot Wombles" is an other heart-warming example of Big Society in action. Responding to a plea from a bereaved Muslim shopkeeper after the riots, Britons from all walks of life spontaneously turned up armed with brooms and rubbish bags in order to clean up, themselves, the mess left by the rioters in their towns.

Carefully orchestrated or "branded" events like the Jubilee celebrations or the Olympics have restored a national feel-good factor in Britain. Cameron's Big Society was much criticised as thinly veiled austerity but insisted about the inclusion of those who are different as shown by the very successful promotion of the Paralympics in London 2012 or Cameron's softening stance (1) towards gay marriage. Ex-drug addicts can prove excellent unpaid administrators of drug rehabilitation clinics.

If Mr Cameron hoped to inspire a beleaguered nation his unpopular austerity measures probably contributed to his downfall. Theresa May conscious of the need to mend fences with society introduced her own concept of the "shared society". In a complete departure from Thatcherite "laissez-faire" capitalism, she recognised government had to step in to regulate the imbalances of the market. The ever-widening gap between haves and have-nots undermined the good will in society. When even basic public services are slashed (2) by 60% in the name of austerity, hospitals and libraries close and roads are no longer repaired as in Northampton for example the whole concept of civilised society is called into question.

For Mr Cameron and Mrs May, the Big or Shared Society was supposed to herald a return to greatness for a Britain which has lost most of its former glory and clout (3) on the world stage especially in the almost farcical context of the Brexit negotiations. The British model is one of an inclusive, diverse and tolerant society but based on a firm foundation of a traditional shared identity. This is all well and good provided the "feel-good factor" persists. One threat resides in increasing nationalism, as Brits have increasingly to tighten their belts and hence they tend to look for scapegoats (4) amongst foreigners for their economic woes (5).



Vocabulary

1. stance : *opinion* ; 2. slashed : *severly reduced* 3. clout : *influence* ;
4. scapegoat : *bouc émissaire* ; 5. woes : *problèmes*.

Exercises



I. Right or Wrong? Justify in your own words.

1. The term Big society was invented by Mrs Thatcher.
2. The Conservative government believes more central government involvement is necessary.
3. Big society entails more participation from ordinary citizens.
4. Young people often suffer from a very negative image in the popular press.
5. Business has a role to play in improving British Society.
6. Cameron's policy of Big Society could be a smokescreen to implement budget cuts.

II. Identify the people described below.

1. The Prime Minister who introduced "Big Society"
2. They joined forces to clean up their local community after the London Riots.
3. The political party nicknamed the "nasty party"
4. British politician who questioned the importance of society and favoured the individual.

III. Answer in your own words 20 words each question.

1. Explain the importance of events such as the Paralympics.
2. Why did young British people riot in August 2011?
3. How would you define Britishness?
4. Give examples of actions local inhabitants have taken in the Big Society programme.
5. What showed Mr Cameron took the riots very seriously?
6. What reproaches do the press often make about young people in Britain?
7. How does Theresa May's concept of society differ from Thatcher's one?

The lessons of the 2011 Riots in Great Britain and their historical context

One year into his term of office (1), in August 2011, David Cameron, the freshly elected Prime Minister of the British coalition government, had to tackle a full-blown crisis in domestic affairs. With the police forces overstretched, the government was compelled to place the armed forces on stand by, lest law and order should break down utterly. One may well wonder whether this sudden, often violent demonstration of public discontent is a new phenomenon and whether it symbolises a seachange in the conventional British character known as stiff-upper-lip.

A brief glance at history will tell us that from time immemorial and as early as the Roman occupation different sectors of the British population have always resisted. Queen Boadicea and the Picts, William Wallace from Scotland or the first trade unionists, like the Tolpuddle martyrs, to name but a few, resented the imposition of often tyrannical power in the name of the Crown arbitrarily confiscating land or goods or denying basic rights and a decent standard of living to workers.

More recently Hyde Park witnessed riots in 1866 when, after a disappointing election result peaceful protestors were barred entry to a park reserved for the upper class. Brixton, a predominantly West Indian quarter of south London, witnessed clashes with the police back in 1981, leading to a government enquiry into the grievances of ethnic minorities in Britain. In the ensuing report, Lord Scarman, chairing the enquiry concluded that Britain was riddled (2) with institutional racism which inevitably led to racial tensions and riots. What has been a constant feature of British political life is the constant setting up of official enquiries to try to fathom (3) the causes of unrest.

■ The different causes of unrest

In a class-ridden society like Great Britain, enmity (4) between lower and upper classes has always fuelled tensions. For Mr Cameron, the perceived failure of multiculturalism by which different faith communities tend to bond together in distinct groups without linking with the majority culture needs to be addressed if Britain aspires to a truly harmonious melting pot. Often based on calls for more democracy and better respect of human or animal rights, demonstrations have, by and large, rarely led to significant bloodshed. British environmental anti nuclear or other protestors have tended to be of a peaceful ilk (5) preferring human chains, chanting and singing to outright destruction. At a recent gathering of dairy farmers for example demonstrators lamented the fact they remained “frightfully well-behaved”. Perhaps the Big Brother society, policed by