“Will civil society organisations recognise the potential impacts of climate change?”
page 3

“There is nothing in the plans to ensure the inclusion of outsiders and marginal groups”
page 6

“Local environmental action shows that there is untapped power in communities to make radical changes”
page 8

“Popular mobilisation cannot come from politicians”
page 12

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION?
COMMENT

It's easy to parody the Big Society as harking back to a lost past of street parties and the Home Guard, but it resonates with many of us from the environmental community. We've learnt the hard way that it's not possible to crack climate change and environmental degradation without reinvigorating civic responsibility. So even where there are concerns, as some contributions in this Inside Track explore, it's an agenda worth engaging with.

Green Alliance welcomes the coalition government's commitment to strengthening the role of civil society and we think it could produce a flowering of local responses to environmental sustainability. But there are two icebergs ready to sink the government's vision. The first is money, or rather, the lack of it. Even the most entrepreneurial charities are dependent on some public funding and may struggle to keep staff and volunteers in the face of cuts. Environmental charities are particularly vulnerable as public budgets are squeezed, because the environment is not considered a frontline service, and even though green spending is already low it is easy to cut.

The second risk is short-termism. Humans are hard-wired to overvalue immediate gains or sacrifices and underestimate future benefits. It's why we are all born NIMBYs and why localism doesn't automatically protect our long-term interests. Such short-termism can be managed pragmatically through negotiation on funding and planning policy if central government recognises its continuing role in representing our long-term interests.

The spirit that has led communities and social entrepreneurs to better their surroundings exemplifies the Big Society. Our hope is that the groundbreaking work of environmental action groups can inform the emerging responses of the non-environmental charities to the Big Society, so that sustainability is embedded in the power shift from central to local.

The views of contributors are not necessarily those of Green Alliance.

THE QUARTERLY MAGAZINE OF GREEN ALLIANCE

2 COMMENT
3 MAKING THE CONNECTION
6 BIG SOCIETY OR SMALL CHANGE?
8 TRANSITION TIME
10 IS THE FUTURE LOCAL?
12 MORE MISSIONARIES PLEASE
15 HOME TRUTHS
16 A HEATED DEBATE
18 GETTING OUT OF THE RED AND INTO THE GREEN
19 GREEN ALLIANCE NEWS

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The key is to engage non-environmental voluntary organisations on the basis that climate change is going to affect what they're trying to do. I see that as the necessary step towards a much more articulate and powerful set of voices adding to the pressure on government to act.

Matthew Smerdon, The Baring Foundation

Making the connection

Faye Scott examines how Big Society thinking could, and should, lead to action on climate change

The government's Big Society vision has turned the spotlight on civil society, offering organisations and communities around the UK the chance to tackle the issues that matter to them on their own terms. It's an attractive vision and, among its many other expected benefits, has great potential to deliver environmental progress.

Many environmental initiatives already exemplify the Big Society in action. Communities have come together to develop renewable energy projects, grow local food and provide recycling and sustainable transport services. All of these have clear environmental benefits, but they also help to protect communities from energy price shocks, create jobs, share healthy living messages and build economic independence.

These are the kind of Big Society activities we hope to see more of, but they could still be classed as 'green' efforts. How can we ensure that the broad sweep of initiatives catalysed by the Big Society vision also delivers environmental progress? They too provide opportunities for embedding action on climate change across civil society, helping to build a bigger, better and more sustainable society.

This presents a different order challenge, because how far do diverse civil society groups recognise climate change as a relevant concern? How aware are they of the impacts that climate change will have on their core goals and the needs of their beneficiaries in years to come and the action they can take in response? Without this understanding, the chance for Big Society initiatives of all kinds to deliver progress on climate change may be missed. More fundamentally, organisations may find their long-held ambitions at risk.

Trust and influence

Green Alliance has been exploring the landscape of civil society action on climate change by looking at the activities of 22 diverse organisations through a comprehensive survey, workshops and in-depth interviews. Climate change will affect all of civil society. It has the potential to roll back progress on addressing poverty, exacerbate inequalities and challenge our ability to meet the needs of the vulnerable. Addressing it offers opportunities: to develop new green jobs and more sustainable public services and to build greener, healthier and more resilient communities.

Understanding the relevance of climate change is not always easy and many organisations continue to see it as an issue with no connection to their immediate concerns. But others are already recognising and responding to the impacts that climate change will have on their work. Their most important role is helping to demonstrate the value of action.

Civil society organisations are incredibly well placed to influence government and business, using their varied relationships with decision makers and key stakeholders to demand more ambitious progress on tackling climate change. With their trusted role in communities, they are also ideally placed to support behaviour change in ways that clearly link to the issues their stakeholders already care about. The degree to which organisations have taken on and are comfortable with these roles was a focus of our study.
What we found

There is an encouraging amount of activity underway, undertaken by a range of organisations that go well beyond the usual suspects. Responses to climate change range from simple environmental policies in offices to efforts to engage vulnerable people, artistic endeavours by young people, cartoon-based communications with health professionals and thorough efforts to embed action on climate change across an organisation’s work, as can be seen in the case studies on page 5.

Despite the impressive range of activity, it was striking how far efforts to tackle environmental problems and wider benefits in other areas.

Crucially, it raises questions about how far we can assume organisations will begin adding their voice to calls for action on climate change and seeking to influence decision-makers. Adding new and compelling voices to the debate in this way will deliver the greatest impact, yet many organisations expressed hesitancy about it.

The question of how best to support organisations in this area led us to identify the success factors in organisations understanding and responding to climate change. These are expressed in the diagram below, along with their outcomes.

**Success factors**

Among the success factors, umbrella leaders stood out as vital, as they are ideally placed to jump-start the process of organisations understanding the relevance of climate change to their work. They can engage their members in the context of issues they care about, in language that resonates and can help them get a number of the other success factors in place. Engaging their members proactively is essential, but many umbrella organisations remain hesitant about this. Climate change is a new issue for them as well, so building the capacity of umbrella bodies is critical. Given their potential to cascade engagement and awareness, they are important organisations on which to focus any such support. In the context of the Big Society, one final point stood out. It was clear that inevitable engagement with climate change across civil society cannot be assumed. It must be acknowledged that organisations will require effectively targeted support. Ensuring that we achieve a bigger and more sustainable society depends on organisations being equipped to respond in ways that build in sustainability. As with the Big Society programme in general, the vision is all and, desirable as it might be, it will not be realised unless the support that organisations need to play their part is recognised and addressed.

CASE STUDY 1

**Action on climate change**

**Carbon Addict**

The Carbon Addict is a humorous, cartoon-based website that cites the symptoms, behaviours, diagnosis and management of ‘carbon dependence syndrome’, the consequences and complications of living a high carbon lifestyle. The website (www.carbonaddict.org) is targeted at health care professionals and written in language familiar to them. It aims to get people thinking about the links between health and climate change and to signpost them to the evidence. More broadly, it aims to encourage health professionals to use their knowledge in clinical practice, dedicating more time to supporting patients in making lifestyle changes that benefit their health and the environment.

CASE STUDY 2

**Action on climate change**

**Arcola Theatre**

The Arcola Theatre aims to be the UK’s first carbon neutral theatre. They have examined every aspect of the theatre’s operation, from the impacts of lighting to the food in the café, and inspire staff and theatregoers with green living tips. They support fellow theatres in becoming more sustainable through events and tailored information on issues such as scenery salvage. And they maximise their outreach into the community, hosting Green Sundays that engage new audiences with environmental issues and making the link between them and arts. Their planned new premises will not only reflect all of these aspects, it will go further still by hosting the first centre for energy technology in the arts. This groundbreaking facility will be a dedicated workspace where engineers can develop initiatives that tackle climate change and bring together artistic, entrepreneurial and technological creativity.

For more information visit www.arcolatheatre.com

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Green Alliance’s report, New times: new connections will be published on 28 October, when it will be available to download at www.green-alliance.org.uk
Is the Big Society merely the state’s way of passing the social welfare buck to the people, or can it truly help us to find a route towards good lives for all, now and in the future, asks Anna Coote

The Big Society is more than a passing sound bite. It represents the end of the post-war welfare settlement and the beginning of a whole new way of organising how we live together and look after each other; especially as it goes hand in hand with spending cuts on an unprecedented scale. In a nutshell, it entails a much smaller state, much less public spending, much more voluntary and commercial activity and much more done locally by non-state organisations. It adds up to a massive shift in responsibility from the state to individuals, groups, volunteers and philanthropists.

The post-war welfare system has been built on the premise that the economy will continue to grow, yielding ever more taxes to pay for more and better public services. It has generated a culture of dependency, driven up expectations beyond the means of targets and regulations that stifle local creativity. Now, continuing economic growth is not only uncertain because of the nature of the global crisis, but also inconsistent with the government’s commitment to cut carbon emissions, as Tim Jackson, author and professor of sustainable crisis, but also inconsistent with the government’s commitment to cut carbon emissions, as Tim Jackson, author and professor of sustainable development in the Centre for Environmental Strategy at the University of Surrey, has pointed out. All in all, it is time to look for new ways of getting things done.

**How fair can a Big Society be?**

On the face of it, the Big Society favours more direct engagement and action by citizens and more local control. It appears to recognise and value the resources that people have in their everyday lives, so that those who need services are not just problems to be fixed, but active participants who have something of value to contribute. It offers to breathe new life into small local organisations.

But there are grave dangers too. Not everyone can participate on an equal footing. Our capacity depends on education and income, family circumstances and environment, knowledge, confidence, how we rate ourselves, how much time and energy we have, and whether we have access to the right people and places. All these factors are distributed unequally. Meanwhile, groups, networks and organisations have boundaries that are determined variously by blood ties, law, friendship, duty, obligation, tradition, geography, politics, wealth, status and class. There is nothing in the plans for a Big Society to ensure the inclusion of outsiders and marginal groups, to break down barriers created by wealth and privilege, to promote collaboration rather than competition between local organisations, or to prevent those that are already better off and better connected from gaining more than others.

**More local autonomy, or less?**

The doors are thrown wide open for big businesses to gobble up opportunities for taking over state functions. Will large corporations such as United Health, Serco, Capita, PW and Deloitte do to local services what the likes of Tesco have done to our high streets?

How far individuals and local groups can take on new responsibilities will depend partly on how much time they have at their disposal. Everyone has the same amount of time, of course, but some have much less control over how they use it, especially women in low-paid jobs with big family responsibilities. It is hard to see how hard-pressed lone parents, for example, will benefit from new demands to engage in local activities to fill the void left by a retreating state.

The Big Society assumes that poverty is a problem for poor communities, which must be made more resilient so that they are better able to cope, and that downsizing the state will help society to flourish. Both assumptions are false.

**What will happen if government decides to cut back even further on funds for essential services?**

Efforts to mend disadvantaged groups and neighbourhoods will fail if they do nothing to address the structural links between economy and society. Only a robust, democratically controlled state can ensure that resources are fairly distributed between citizens, and that fundamental rights are protected against powerful interests.

The Big Society is weak on equal opportunity and social justice. It looks especially insecure against the background of fiscal retrenchment and low growth. What will happen if government decides to cut back even further on funds for essential services? There will be no defence from a well-organised workforce or a shared framework of local and national government. With the Audit Commission out of the way, there will be no defence in regulation. What will happen if government decides to cut back even further on funds for essential services? There will be no defence from a well-organised workforce or a shared framework of local and national government. With the Audit Commission out of the way, there will be no defence in regulation.

**Translating vision into policy and practice**

But let’s not be gloomy. The Big Society is an unfinished story. Here are suggestions from nef for bringing it to a happier conclusion.

- Make social justice the main goal, so that this idea is not just big, but fair and sustainable.
- By social justice we mean the fair and equitable distribution of social, environmental and economic resources between people, places and generations.
- Build a broader economy, a stronger democracy and a strategic state, to underpin the Big Society and ensure it can achieve social justice.
- Make co-production the standard way of getting things done, with people who are currently described as providers and users working together in an equal and reciprocal partnership, pooling different kinds of knowledge and skill.
- By changing the way we think about and act upon needs and services, this approach promises more resources, better outcomes and a diminishing volume of need.
- Redistribute paid and unpaid time, by moving gradually towards a much shorter paid working week, to spread opportunities for paid employment as well as for caring and for local action.
- Make the Big Society sustainable, with all activities and transactions geared to protecting natural resources, safeguarding the interests of future generations, preventing harm and helping to shape an economic order that does not depend on infinite economic growth.
- Measure success by capturing the social and environmental, as well as the economic returns on investment.
- Finally, all this must be part of what nef calls a great transition, to a system where everyone is able to survive and thrive on equal terms, without over-stretching the earth’s resources. This means changing how we live and work, relate to each other, organise our economy and society, and safeguard our environment, in short, finding a route towards good lives for all, now and in the future.

Anna Coote is head of social policy at nef (new economics foundation). For more details see Ten big questions about the Big Society and ten ways to make the best of it at www.neweconomics.org
We spoke to Peter Lipman from the Transition Town movement about what the Big Society means for community action and the wariness that many feel about it.

The government is seeking the involvement of civil society to help shape a Big Society. How should we all respond?

There is a very active debate going on in civil society about the Big Society. Some people are saying it’s a fig leaf for cutbacks associated with a rolling back of the state, and under no circumstances should any elements of civil society do anything that could validate it. At the other end of the spectrum you’ve got elements of civil society, so that they become more diverse and inclusive as possible.

The government is seeking the involvement of civil society to help shape a Big Society. How should we all respond?

Does community action on the environment exemplify the Big Society in action?

If it means people getting up and doing it for themselves and not waiting to be spoon fed by a government, national or local, then absolutely. Will the Big Society be that? We are still waiting to see. But community action on the environment does show that there is enormous untapped power in communities to make radical changes, and good examples of this already exist.

It’s well known that where people take ownership for themselves they are far more likely to achieve their ambitions than if it’s imposed from above or handed on a plate. The immense power of community action can begin to change social norms, particularly with environmental issues, where people own a whole different set of behaviours for themselves because they see their peers doing it. I think this is enormously powerful and can only come from people doing things together.

What sort of opportunities and possibilities does it offer communities, in both practical and sociological terms?

It certainly looks as if the Big Society will enable communities to take more control over local assets and also how they use them. What I’d love to see happen is more, far more community run enterprises such as Stroud’s Foodco and Totnes’ Tresoc, and it does look as if there may be more opportunities for this sort of development. So, for example, if the new Big Society Bank provides significant support and funding for such community enterprises, then that would make a practical difference.

How will government prevent the cuts from completely undermining the Big Society?

I really don’t know the answer to this. The Big Society is aimed at people in more deprived areas and where the social fabric is weaker. But these are areas that usually need parenting programmes, crisis centres, projects that tackle crime, support groups, after school clubs etc the most. Following the spending review many of these projects are likely to struggle, and it’s not clear what will fill the gap beyond an expectation of communities doing these things for themselves with support from civil society organisations. It’s ironic that the cuts are being decided centrally. Following on from that, it would need a total scale of cuts being agreed centrally but with local people having more say in deciding how and where they should fall.

Do you think the government’s Big Society plans are going to have significant implications for communities?

There appears to be an interesting assumption at the heart of the Big Society that if you make powers available to people they will have the time and the capacity to use them. From what I’ve seen so far, the opportunities look exciting but the more immediate evidence we’re seeing is what the challenges will be. As a result, for many the negatives feel more real than the opportunities at the moment; the impact of cuts and the deregulation of the corporate sector are of more immediate worry than the positive vision of communities having more power. It will be very interesting to see where we are in six months’ time, when we’ve had the comprehensive spending review and the results of that are more apparent on the ground.

So, overall are you excited by Big Society, or more wary about how it could all pan out?

Overall I’m wary, while also acknowledging that it’s worthy of very careful consideration. On the one hand, the reforms to planning that enable people to shape their communities could be very positive, but if you devolve power it might be very negative. People might make choices that work for some issues but not for others. For example, people who currently live in a green belt area could act in favour of enormous development because there is high unemployment locally and it would offer jobs and better housing. Both valid concerns, but bang goes the green belt area. How are we going to mediate such tensions?

The fact that there is going to be a whole new generation of community organisers supporting the creation of neighbourhood groups could provide big opportunities. On the other hand, what actual financial support will there be for these programmes? Or are they all going to be programmes that are there to take advantage of only if you’ve got the time and resource to do so?

And when it comes to climate change, we now have a legally binding obligation to meet our climate targets. The planning system could be used to massively support that by, for example, stringently reducing the amount of car parking to be allowed in any new development on a national and regional basis, eliminating competition for parking allocations between neighbouring cities and towns. However we’re seeing many of the planning levers that would enable this being ripped up, with decisions left to the far more local level. In the face of a widespread inclination to short termism and in the face of other, more immediate concerns, that is deeply concerning because we desperately need substantial, urgent action on climate change. The same analysis applies to resource scarcity and security issues, which in my view are best tackled by an empowered, active community being strongly supported by national frameworks and infrastructures.

So overall we’re facing a double-edged prospect. Communities have always got on and found ways to meet their goals against the odds and the Big Society agenda could validate and celebrate those efforts and help to realise them on even more ambitious scales, as it seems to offer much of what active communities have been seeking for decades: greater control over the places they live and the range and design of the services on offer to them. But without funding, accountability or shape, it risks being an empty promise.

Peter Lipman is chair of Transition Network, the charity which supports the transition movement, plans to hold a strategy day with community organisers to look at the implications for communities where any elements of civil society do anything that could validate it. At the other end of the spectrum you’ve got elements of civil society, so that they become more diverse and inclusive as possible.

One of the key elements of community action is that we start looking at ourselves and then seek to come to consensus with others. I would very much hope that communities looking at environmental initiatives will by default assume that, if they’re serious about sustainability, then that has to include social justice and issues of equity. There are a wide range of reasons to be as diverse and inclusive as possible.
IS THE FUTURE LOCAL?

In launching the Big Society idea, the government has huge ambitions, but limited funding to see it through. Is this a vision doomed to failure? Not if communities take the initiative and government gives them the support they need, argues Will Day

While the objective of creating a strong, healthy and just society has been clearly expressed, it is not yet clear how the concept of the Big Society will enable communities to live within environmental limits, or help them to tackle the local environmental issues which contribute to ill health, inequality and disadvantage. Nor has it yet addressed the question of how communities can adapt to avoid the ill effects of climate change.

There is strong and widespread evidence to suggest that an area-based approach to these issues is what is needed. An approach which takes an integrated look at the sustainability of local physical infrastructure as a whole, the homes we live in; our transport options; our utilities and communications; the green space around us, will avoid the duplication of dealing with each problem in isolation, saving money and minimising disruption. Crucially, an integrated approach which puts communities at the centre of prioritising, planning and delivering solutions is also more likely to attract involvement, both on an individual level and in terms of attracting funding and expert support.

These were the findings of the Sustainable Development Commission’s recent report The Future is Local – empowering communities to improve their neighbourhoods, the culmination of a year-long project undertaken with the help of partners from government, local authorities, community and voluntary groups and academia as well as housing, infrastructure, business and finance professionals.

The high cost of low infrastructure

Our motivation for tackling the subject lay both in the urgent need to cut carbon emissions and in the stark facts of how local environmental issues affects the life and health of communities. Substandard housing costs the NHS £2.5 billion a year. Lack of access to good spaces and safe walking and cycling routes contribute to high levels of obesity and mental ill health, which combined currently cost the NHS £13 billion a year. Flood defences are likely to become an increasingly pressing issue. The floods of 2007 have already cost insurers over £3 billion. Traffic congestion in England, if left unchecked, is likely to cost £22 billion by 2025.

The scale of the work required to bring local infrastructure up to scratch to meet these challenges is clearly vast, and the public sector finance available to fund such programmes will be extremely limited for the foreseeable future. Our research found that a neighbourhood approach to upgrade works is likely to cut costs by taking advantage of economies of scale, in one case, by 20-30 per cent, but can also unlock new and innovative finance solutions. Community ownership of assets provides opportunities for residents to benefit from a ‘pay as you save’ approach, while creating the possibility of generating revenue to improve areas through provision of local cycleways, parks or flood defences, for example. A neighbourhood approach makes a more attractive proposition for private sector partnerships, with utility providers or other service providers, or for securing loans or grant funding. Devolving decision-making power to communities over the public finances available enables neighbourhoods to unite over the most pressing issues facing them.

Local initiatives can have global impact

Just as important as the financial benefits, we found that people were more likely to get involved in initiatives that promise to improve their neighbourhood as a whole, compared with those focusing on a single issue. While the uptake rates for home energy efficiency programmes have been underwhelming, our research shows that combining energy reduction with viable improvements to homes and the wider locality is more likely to attract participation. What begins with a project focused on crime reduction could lead on to creating allotments. The results are far reaching, with people reporting great satisfaction from getting to know their neighbours. It also acknowledges that the actions we take at a local level often have global impacts.

This isn’t a pie-in-the-sky vision. All over the UK, villages, towns and cities are already taking matters into their own hands and are reaping the benefits of tackling local economic, environmental and social issues in an integrated way. Our report cites 30 examples representing a wide range of approaches, from the South Wales home energy efficiency programme which is creating jobs and achieving massive savings from an integrated approach; to the community-owned wind turbine in Finty in Scotland, which is now providing additional income to pay for local home insulation.

There goes the neighbourhood

Of course, communities can face considerable challenges as they attempt to transform their neighbourhoods. Some of these challenges are around the experience and expertise available to them; others are financial or legal. So what needs to happen for a neighbourhood-based approach to become the rule rather than the exception?

Practical support to communities and local authorities provided at a national level and covering legal, financial and technical issues, would make it easier to achieve results. Clear policy support from the government will be essential to minimise development risk. Some legislation will be needed. Moves towards allowing communities to derive long-term benefits from low carbon energy infrastructure are a good start. Designing regulatory frameworks for infrastructure and utility providers that support an integrated approach making communities more sustainable would be a good next step. In other cases, assistance can be provided by improving the evidence base on crucial issues. Setting up the proposed Green Investment Bank to bring private sector support to projects at a local level, not just national infrastructure, would also make a big difference.

While the Big Society approach may contain answers to the problems of upgrading our community infrastructure for the 21st century, the government also needs to fulfill its part of the bargain by creating the conditions for it to flourish. There is no doubt that involving the whole community in securing a sustainable future will deliver the most effective, and the most cost-effective, results.

Community action Sustainable Blacon

The Cheshire community of Blacon has long experience of developing partnerships with a range of organisations to improve local quality of life, creating social enterprises and providing vocational training and incubator support for local business. When the community developed the ambition to become a model sustainable urban community and to reduce its carbon emissions by 20 per cent in three years, it set up Sustainable Blacon Ltd, a joint venture managed by local residents, representatives from local councils, the local District Housing Trust and expert advisers in energy, green spaces and urban design to enable the community to achieve its goal. Its ambitions are focused in four areas: energy, green space, transport and social enterprise, with the intention of bringing new life and investment to an area with significant deprivation.

Blacon’s organised approach, involving a focus on health as well as reducing energy use and installing renewable energy sources, has led to the community being selected for DECC’s Low Carbon Communities Challenge. It has also been recognised by British Gas as part of the company’s Community Energy Saving Programme.

Initiatives already underway in Blacon include demonstrations; providing information and practical advice to local residents and promoting low carbon living, and trialling Energy Management Systems in 150 homes representing a broad social spectrum.

Planned initiatives include:

- District heating and renewable power microgrid demonstration projects in a mixed use redevelopment area
- Trailling new smart meters
- Engaging the community in energy efficiency through a programme of thermal image surveying delivered by volunteers and a school
- Improving green spaces
- Improving cycling and walking infrastructure and providing cycle training and maintenance courses
- Establishing a furniture re-use project diverting reusable furniture from landfill

Will Day is chair of the Sustainable Development Commission

Source: SDC
Every year near the warm, sandy beaches of Rimini, a delightfully eccentric conference takes place. Here Christian and Catholic thinkers from across the world speak before crowds of thousands. These theologians and philosophers speak of many things, but two key doctrines, centuries old, have endured: that of subsidiarity, that power and authority should be vested at the lowest level possible; and that of civil society, the idea that service for others in common body is the essence of a good society and should be the ultimate object of our endeavours.

All of which is a nice, but no doubt slightly strange place to begin an article on the contemporary environmental agenda, or so you might think. Rimini remains relevant because if we are to look for the root of thought on the Big Society, that much-misunderstood narrative of the present coalition government, there is no better place to begin than here, where the seeds of destruction for environmental discourse as we know it were first sewn.

We are at a moment of great change, and environmentalists everywhere are slowly, too slowly, I think, getting the measure of it. Large scale campaigns or presences at the top tables of high profile summits to get action of some kind have for too long sapped the strength and occupied the attention of the ranks of the environmentally aware. The work of the super-lobby group has been nothing short of the work of the evangelist, preaching a message from on high. But this message has suffered from a relative paucity of what we might think of as missionaries: those who do not work on high, but who are driven by their mission into the heart of mistrust and hostility. The ideal missionary made her bed amidst those who did not believe and merely sought to improve their lives. No missionary worth her salt would have spent time preaching to the choir of the converted. Where are these environmental missionaries? What are they doing to improve lives? Tom Flood and his carbon army at BTCV may be an example. I saw Zac Goldsmith plant a tree once in London. Can we have more of that, please?

If everyone’s responsible, who’s in charge?

The era of what I refer to as peak government is nigh. Peak in the sense of battered resource, diminishing return on centralised solutions and damaged trust in the decisions made by those on high. The majority of the UK public is resistant to the transformational changes that a government would need to enact, were it to respond in the archetypal social democratic way to the challenges offered by climate change.

A recent opinion poll found that only 13 per cent of respondents thought that it was reasonable to expect people to ‘make significant and radical changes to their lifestyle in terms of the products they buy, how much they pay for things and how much they drive and fly’ (Public attitudes to climate change, 2008: concerned but still unconvinced, IPSOS-MORI). Where there is an appetite for change to a greener global society, this is usually limited to appetite for incremental changes that are unlikely to lead to fundamental transformations. The old nirvana of a sort of collective outrage at the damage humanity is visiting on the natural world or our fellow man, or public agitation for proportional governmental responses to these challenges, has been exposed as a vain dream.

The alternative is the great convergence. Community technologies, community media and a strengthened civil society have reshaped the nature of collective action. Empirical studies demonstrate that, across a very wide range of cultures, people’s values are organised in remarkably consistent and meaningful relationships, the mapping of which is reproducible across a wide range of different contexts.

Those values are embellished and created by the relationships we have and share. With its emphasis on civil liberties, civic service, localism and civil society, the coalition has embraced this relational agenda and called it the Big Society. An emphasis on social action and the grassroots has seen the development of a community organisers’ fund. An invigorated interest in light touch paternalism and social values in the form of behavioural economics and social psychology has elicited Number 10’s own ‘nudge unit.’
A shift from state action to social action

Mutual models of management and reciprocity to offer incentives and preserve community and individual rights has seen, to name one practical issue, that some of the things we do really are after the heart and soul of the nation. Economists are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul. It is a natural and necessary symbiosis: that nexus between the economic and the cultural, the environmental and the civil. Look to government no longer; look outward, look local, look to ourselves. Like the pious locals during that summer week in Rimini, we could be surprised at just how far these ideas might travel.

The Big Society approach resides in creating local, people-powered ideas that include a substantive vision of changing lives, but also to sustainable local economies: the Totnes chapter, for example, has its own currency. What might local, popular investment look like? Consider the idea of a Green Investment Bank. If this entity was to be based on the same model as the Big Society Bank, with government not investing directly in innovation, but wholesaling to organisations with interesting ideas, to bring community actors and projects into the sustainable space; to get blended private, philanthropic and cornerstone public funds into pioneering local approaches to sustainable living.

The venture society is deputy director at ResPublica. Environmentalists who think it should have still failed to understand the new channels of policy guru, put it, “Thatcher wanted to roll back the frontiers of society.” Or as Oliver Letwin, Cameron’s policy guru, put it, “Thatcher wanted to roll back the frontiers of the state. Brown wanted to roll forward the frontiers of social action to social action... the task of government is to roll forward the frontiers of society.”

The Big Society approach resides in creating local, people-powered ideas that include a substantive vision of changing lives, but also to sustainable local economies: the Totnes chapter, for example, has its own currency. What might local, popular investment look like? Consider the idea of a Green Investment Bank. If this entity was to be based on the same model as the Big Society Bank, with government not investing directly in innovation, but wholesaling to organisations with interesting ideas, to bring community actors and projects into the sustainable space; to get blended private, philanthropic and cornerstone public funds into pioneering local approaches to sustainable living.

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R
ght across the political and policy landscape, attention is focused on the outcomes of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR). Among the initiatives under threat following tough negotiations with the treasury is the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI), a long overdue policy to support renewable heat.

The RHI has been on the table for a number of years and the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) confirms that it will save carbon and generate renewable energy at a lower cost than the majority of other renewable technologies. Nevertheless, the policy has yet to be agreed by the government.

Is the coalition cooling off on renewable energy?
The case for renewable heat gained prominence when the findings of the Biomass Task Force were published in autumn 2005. Sir Ben Gill, who chaired the task force, concluded that lack of recognition of renewable heat in policy delivery could be attributed to “no targets, no concerted policy, no strategy.” However, in the five years that followed the Biomass Task Force, the previous government published 11 reports and consultations on renewable heat, all of which identified the potential for significant cost-effective renewable heat supply. Despite this the government failed to give renewable heat official support. As a result, in 2008, NERA Economic Consultancy (for BERR) in the Qualitative evaluation of financial instruments for renewable heat found that the sector currently supplies less than one per cent of UK heat.

A further scaling back of support for renewable heat technology will be a severe blow to progress towards our 2020 renewables target.

First, end-use efficiency needs to be increased across the domestic, commercial and industrial sectors. One way of doing this is to improve the fabric of buildings to make them more thermally efficient, more naturally ventilated but with less heat leakage.

Then we need to increase the use of more efficient generation technologies. For example, Combined Heat and Power (CHP) can provide low carbon heat, electricity and cooling. Replacing the millions of old fossil-fuelled boilers operating in UK homes and offices would achieve significant carbon savings, as would ensuring that all homes have modern heating controls.

Heat infrastructure needs to be developed, covering small local schemes to city-wide networks to enable heat from a range of sources to be efficiently distributed and shared.

Approving the RHI is just the first step
Even if the RHI is successful, 88 per cent of heat will still be provided by fossil fuels. If we are to effectively decarbonise heating and cooling, a wider policy framework will be needed. In particular, the government will need to focus on three main areas.

First, with heat accounting for 49 per cent of energy demand and 47 per cent of UK carbon emissions, renewable heat offers a cheap way of cutting carbon emissions and reducing our dependence on fossil fuels.

Cooling will also need to be addressed. Currently the RHI does not include cooling technologies, this could result in some renewable heat being wasted and systems being designed in a less than efficient way. It may be technically impossible or much more costly and difficult to factor in cooling at a later date once renewable heating systems have already been installed.

Renewable heat clearly needs immediate support from the government, and a wider policy framework to support it. Will the level of ambition for renewable heat survive the spending review? We hope so.

Rachel Cary is senior policy advisor rcary@green-alliance.org.uk

Can we really afford to let short-term budget cuts undermine long-term progress towards energy policy goals?

MORE RENEWABLE HEAT FOR YOUR MONEY

Green Alliance has recently published Cost effective renewables: the role of the Renewable Heat Incentive in decarbonising energy, which can be downloaded free at www.greenalliance.co.uk/climateandenergy

This paper looks at why the RHI is urgently needed and identifies six ways to make the policy even more cost effective:

1. Base support for renewable heat projects on low levels of expected heat consumption (deeming) to incentivise energy efficiency.
2. Reward industrial heat users who switch fuels used in existing boilers, from coal to biomass or fossil gas to biogas.
3. Include waste renewable heat: there is a large amount of heat wasted by biomass and biogas power generation.
4. Ensure returns are better for large schemes than for small schemes, since they offer economies of scale.
5. Actively discourage heat dumping: OFGEM could be given powers to disqualify applicants who are known to have dumped metered heat.
6. Cap support for the least cost-effective technologies, small biomass and solar thermal output.
Cast your mind back to 2007. Could you have imagined a Conservative-led coalition government putting a proposal for a state-backed bank at the heart of its policy programme to be the greenest government ever? Yet the extraordinary set of events from the credit crunch and the Copenhagen failure to the 2010 cliff-hanger election has led us to such a point.

Green Alliance is not interested in policy debate for its own sake; however, we are interested in environmental outcomes. We have been calling for the creation of a Green Investment Bank to play a central role in levering significant increases in private investment in low-carbon building stock.

It must be established as a permanent, independent financial institution, under an act of parliament, to maximise private investment into the infrastructure required to deliver the targets set out in the Climate Change Act.

It must be able to take real investment decisions into infrastructure provision, deployment of low-carbon technologies at scale and the improvement of the energy efficiency of our building stock.

It must have some initial capitalisation at a scale that will allow the GIB to grow and make a significant impact on private investment flows into those markets.

It must be able to issue debt and raise money from the capital and savings markets, as well as making its own equity investments.

It must have an ongoing role to advise policymakers on investment barriers to the low carbon transition.

To do this the government will need to commit some public money in the Spending Review from its capital budget to help set up the bank. We would expect that other long-term investors would be willing to put in equity to the bank, in particular sovereign wealth funds and institutional investors. (The previous government was going to allocate £1 billion from asset sales, matched by another £3 billion from private investors.) The government liability would then be limited to the initial stake, and any capital raised by the bank in the future would not count as public sector borrowing.

Some are beginning to fear that all the government will do is create a streamlined fund from the capital and savings markets, as well as making its own equity investments.

Bringing it home
November, date tbc
Launching Green Alliance’s latest study, which maps the extent of current climate change activity across UK civil society and analyses success factors and possibilities for further mobilisation.

Electricity market reform
November, date tbc
Presenting and debating our recent analysis of what it will take to decarbonise the electricity sector.

Big Society and the environment
Early December, date tbc
We are planning a high-profile one day conference on the Big Society and the environment. It will provide a timely opportunity for civil society groups to look at what the Big Society agenda means for their work, members and communities.

Contact Richard Booth for more details about these events at rbooth@green-alliance.org.uk, 020 7630 4520 or visit www.green-alliance.org.uk/events

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Tamsin Cooper became deputy director in September and will be working on organisational strategy and the overall management of Green Alliance’s themes. Tamsin has been working at the Institute for European Environmental Policy where, for the past five years, she has played an active and influential role in the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. She has a detailed knowledge of EU institutions, political processes and the EU budget and has worked previously at the Centre for Environmental Policy at Imperial College.

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Former deputy director Thomas Lingard has returned to Unilever as global external affairs director, following the end of his secondment at Green Alliance.

Edward Robinson joined in August in the new role of media and communications manager and is now our primary contact for press and media enquiries.

Edward has experience in public affairs, media relations and journalism, working previously for the agency Bell Pottinger.

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Our Green Living blog is migrating to a new home. Visit our blog for information on events, papers, policy proposals and ideas in the world of driving pro-environmental behaviour change. You can also share your opinions on how to drive a big, green society. Add your views to the debate at www.thegreenlivingblog.org.uk

Chris Hewett is a Green Alliance associate
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Green Alliance is an influential, independent organisation working to bring environmental priorities into the political mainstream. We work collaboratively with the three main parties, government, the third sector, business and others to ensure that political leaders deliver ambitious solutions to global environmental issues.

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