Published on *Adam Smith Institute* (http://www.adamsmith.org)

The big society [1]

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The Conservatives? new ?big idea?, the unifying concept that underlies and connects the policies contained in their manifesto, has turned out to be something of a damp squib. For all of the talk of a ?Big Society?, where every man, woman and child is part of some semi-state voluntary body, in reality it expects too much from people without any incentive for them to take part.

Some of the thinking behind the ?Big Society? idea is actually sound: different parts of the country have different needs in terms of state services, and allowing them to organize themselves will promote increased competition between areas. The problem with the current ?postcode lottery? is not simply that some areas are have better public services than others, it?s that worse areas have no incentive to improve themselves except in exceptional circumstances. As Hayek argued in *The Constitution of Liberty*, decentralizing the execution of state services promotes experimentation between areas and increases the likelihood for good practices to emerge.

The problem with the Conservatives? plan is this: by thinking about society and the market as different things, they are disregarding the immense contributions to society that people make with their jobs. This makes the Conservatives think that they can get something for nothing by getting people to carry out volunteer work in state co-operatives out of a guilty feeling that they contribute nothing to society in their jobs.

The ?Big Society? banks on people not recognising the social value of their jobs and feeling morally impelled to volunteer through state-sponsored activities. The Conservatives need to recognise that the free market rewards contributions to society far more than the state, and the only people who will take part in their state co-operatives are busybodies who want to control others.

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