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We, the taxpayers, need you! [1]

Written by **Anton Howes** [2] | Tuesday 30 November 2010

Last year I said [3] that the principal thing to look forward to from an incoming Conservative government would be its focus on transparency, releasing vast tranches of raw information for Cameron's envisaged "army of armchair auditors" to sift through and interpret. The benefits of releasing raw data would be to increase accountability, reduce government waste and facilitate choice in public services. I argued that the data has to be as raw as possible, without a self-serving government presenting the data as it sees best and potentially skewing it to its own ends. Fortunately, the coalition government chose to keep this vital aspect of Conservative policy.

However, some fans don't quite seem to get it. Mark Easton of the BBC, whilst appreciative of the transparency, seems to lament [4] the recent overload of information, seeing no corresponding increase in accountability. He criticises the fact that the data raises more questions than it answers, broadly along the lines of "This looks odd, but is this money well spent?" To me, those are exactly the right questions to be asking. What else is accountability but asking awkward questions, receiving inadequate answers, and then campaigning for change?

Easton is correct that accountability has not yet appeared, but he is being impatient. He questions the very ability of "armchair auditors" to sift through the data, expressing his own difficulties in doing so. But he's taking Cameron's phrase too literally. If there is any manifestation of the "Big Society", it is the ability of individuals to organise themselves. The "armchair auditors" could be any organisation outside of government, put together to collate the data and make it useful, then allowing us, or perhaps an entirely separate organisation to ask all those awkward questions and drive government expenditure down by questioning every penny spent.

Perhaps it's a role for an organisation like the Taxpayers' Alliance, or perhaps it's a space to be filled by an entirely new "army". In any case the government, by releasing data, has given us the weapons to trim the state. It's up to us to organise ourselves, provide that accountability and do the trimming.

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