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RESPONSE

The public library in the UK's Big Society

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In his timely piece on the need to defend the public library service, Philip Pullman refers in passing to the Chicago School for a clue to the origins of the economic theories behind today's dominant market idolatry. Fifty years ago, from his Chicago University desk in the political wilderness, Milton Friedman (1962/2002, p.xiv) wrote:

> Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.

Friedman argued that the role of market ideologues like himself in the period of Keynesian dominance was to keep the ideas of market fundamentalism 'alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable'.

Well, we certainly have a crisis and Friedman's disciples in the Conservative-led Coalition seem determined not to let it go to waste. Neither of the coalition parties won the last election, but they did succeed in winning the post-election debate about the nature of the crisis. They redefined it from a financial crisis caused by the greed of an under-regulated banking sector to a crisis of public debt caused by an inefficient and bloated public sector. The victory of the new commonsense – a reworking of Margaret Thatcher's TINA mantra, 'There is no alternative' – owes much to the failure of Labour either to challenge this or to come up with an alternative narrative. And while it must be of great comfort for David Cameron, it cannot have come as a surprise, because much of the Coalition's policy towards the public sector (in terms of markets, competition and 'choice') is simply an extension and deepening of what took place under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

Politicians of almost every stripe – in the narrow political spectrum of modern Britain – agree with the leader of Oxford County Council that the cuts are 'inevitable'. On the rare occasions that politicians feel the need to respond to a challenge, it is almost always as in Oxford, with a shrug of the shoulders and a

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demand to know what should be cut instead of this or that service. Ben Franklin may have remarked that 'nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes', but many of the wealthiest 1% in Britain, such as Philip Green, would question this. To them, tax is optional, something for the little people. Nevertheless, Franklin's broader point remains valid: in the world of policy, nothing is inevitable, there are always choices. It is a political choice to sanction military action abroad, to retain a nuclear deterrent, to reduce taxes for the rich and to cut public services.

So, in one sense, the attack on the public library service is just one of many on a range of different public services we have long taken for granted. But as well as sharing some common features with public services in general, there are some distinctive features of the public library service to which Philip Pullman has drawn attention. The justification for the rundown of public libraries is not simply a part of the austerity programme. It is actually a cynical cocktail of generalised cuts, marketisation, fake 'localism' and the Big Society circus. If none of these appears convincing enough, ministers drag in the impact of technology, digitalisation of books and a carefully edited selection of statistics to show the long term decline in library use.

When discussing the government's enthusiasm for public sector cuts and its conviction that 'diversity of provision' (privatisation or abandoning the service to unpaid volunteers) will compensate, it is as well to remind ourselves of what the library service is, where it came from and why we have one. Britain's public library service has served as a 'street corner university' (Broady-Preston and Cox, 2000) and community centre for over 150 years. It made and makes an essential contribution to the social, educational, cultural and economic well-being of local communities throughout the country as it evolved from an *ad hoc* network of local initiatives into a nationwide municipally-provided service governed by Act of Parliament. Located in every part of the country, people in both town and country are able to access new worlds through their local library. This is now under threat on a scale never before seen. According to CILIP (the professional librarians' body), there are 600 libraries at risk of closure at the moment with the prospect of further cuts.

The evolution of the public library service shows how a real Big Society is an organic growth, blending movement from below with action from above. Self-help merged with agitation for legislative change and state intervention to create a service in response to both a need for literacy and a desire for knowledge. Moore (2004, p.28) notes that the first piece of legislation, the 1850 Public Libraries Act, 'was, in many ways, giving legitimacy to provision that had already been made'. Progress was slow and, in some places, non-existent. Where this was the case, local movements grew up – often led by trade unions – and set up their own institutions or lobbied for the creation of municipal ones. In the absence of public service provision by the state, many working class communities and organisations set up their own services. For example, as late as 1934 there were over 100 miners' libraries in the Welsh coalfields, many of which were part of larger institutes with a wide range of cultural opportunities on offer – from amateur radio to drama, from photography to opera, as well as political and trade union education:

> The miners' institutes of South Wales were one of the greatest networks of cultural institutions created by working people anywhere in the world. (Rose, 2010, p.237)

Contrast this with the Coalition's strategy of cutting an already existing public provision and presenting local communities with the Hobson's choice of no service

at all or finding volunteers to staff it. What next; close a hospital or ask for volunteers to run it? The movement in favour of public libraries, and community initiatives where none existed, was part of a great wave of democratic change. The Big Society is the opposite. The nineteenth century campaigns for public libraries were driven by people wanting more control over their own lives and the access to knowledge and information (as well as entertainment) that allowed this control. No wonder many of those in power took the opposite view. Arguing against the 1850 Public Libraries Act, one Conservative MP observed that:

> … people have too much knowledge already: it was much easier to manage them twenty years ago; the more education people get the more difficult they are to manage. (Quoted by Lord McIntosh in Lords debate, *Hansard*, 2004, col.319)

It is also no surprise that many of the leading lights behind the campaign for public libraries were on the left of the political spectrum. The parliamentary pressure for the Act came from the radical Liberal MPs, William Ewart and Joseph Brotherton. Who knows what they would have made of modern day Liberal Democrats busily closing libraries. The Manchester Free Library was the first public library to be set up under the provisions of the new legislation, and its first librarian was the Chartist Edward Edwards (who also worked on the legislative campaign).

While many industrialists could see the virtue of a literate and numerate workforce, if only to operate the machinery of mills and factories, and there were others who regarded public libraries as an extension of citizenship, there were some who drew the line at their taxes paying for reading for pleasure. The Tory MP Sir Frederick Banbury opposed the Bill:

> My experience is that public libraries are places where, if the weather is cold, people go in and sit down and get warm, while other people go in to read novels. I do not believe, speaking generally, that public libraries have done any good. On the contrary, they have done a great deal of harm, because the books read, as far as my information goes, are chiefly sensational novels, which do no good to anybody. (Kelly, 1977, p.216)

The idea of the rich funding the novel-reading of the poor so upset some local burghers that a number of libraries actually banned fiction for a while (Muddiman, 2000, p.18). A recent variant of this was expressed by the Adam Smith Institute (1986, p.32) in making the case for introducing library charges:

> … there seems no good reason why the state should be expected to provide leisure and entertainment facilities of one kind free of charge to the user when it does not do so for others such as films or football.

Such views are not the preserve of eccentric right-wing think tanks; in 2007, Yinnon Ezra, head of leisure services at Conservative-run Hampshire County Council, declared, ‘We have to ask whether fiction should remain in libraries when most people buy books’. The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (at the time responsible for ‘strategic leadership’ for libraries in England) refused to disassociate itself from this statement – perhaps not surprisingly as Ezra was one of its board members (Cooke, 2007).

The attacks on libraries may be particularly fierce now, but they are not new. As McMenemy (2007, p.273) points out, '… in the UK at least, the public library is a service that constantly has to defend its right to exist'. Conservatives and their Liberal Democrat accomplices (such as Mark Littlewood of the market cultist the Institute of Economic Affairs) today go even further and would like the state (always the 'bloated' state) to withdraw completely from the provision of a library service. Littlewood (2011) cannot decide whether withdrawal should be because libraries are irrelevant or simply too costly, but the neoliberals prefer to forget that the public library service is a municipal and national government response to market failure – the failure of the private and voluntary sectors to supply a much-needed resource on the scale and of the quality demanded.

The case against libraries is usually supported by a very selective use of statistics; for example, Littlewood (2011) cites a year-on-year decline in library visits of 3.4 million. It is rarely mentioned that there were 314.5 million visits to libraries in 2010–2011, 114.7 million visits to public library websites, over 300 million book issues, 24.5 million audio, visual and electronic issues, with just under 12 million 'active' borrowers (CIPFA, 2011). Many private sector services would like to be this 'irrelevant'.

It is also claimed that libraries are unnecessary because we have Wikipedia, eBay and Amazon, and anyway 'everyone buys books' these days. Not so; spending on books and the percentage of people buying books are actually declining (Booksellers' Association, 2012) and have been for the last few years. Some 8.2 million adults in the UK have *never* used the Internet (ONS, 2012) and there are 5.7 million households without any kind of Internet connection (ONS, 2011). Most public libraries provide free access, but even if every single person in the country had fast broadband and was IT-literate, libraries would still not be irrelevant. Libraries also offer Internet access to subscription-based journals, databases and other reference sources that would not be available to any but the most wealthy. It is certainly true that libraries have to change, and are changing, in response to social and technological change. If the publishers get their act together, ebook borrowing could be very popular.

In reality, Conservatives and Orange Book Liberal Democrats are happy to see the demise of the public library service for the same reason they oppose every other public service – they detest the ideas of pooling risk and collective provision. In the case of libraries, they also see a potential new market to be opened up, an opportunity to expand the extent of the private 'wealth-creating' sector and to advance the commodification of information and knowledge. The notion of information as a commodity is not new, but as Goulding (2001, p.2) points out, the process of commodification 'has been accelerated by recent technological innovations'.

Goulding (2001, p.1) refers to the National Consumer Council's characterisation of information as a 'right of citizenship', a social good that enhances social, political and cultural life. Usherwood *et al*. (2005, p.90) emphasise the role of libraries in securing this citizen's right to know, and cite the *New York Times* (1998): 'One test of a democracy is whether it grants equal access to the tools that make knowledge possible'. They note (2005, p.91):

> The need to ensure equity in the distribution of services is one of the factors that distinguish public sector organizations such as archives, library and museum services from those in the commercial world.

Hendry (2000, p.447) agrees, arguing that public librarians:

> … should be among the custodians and propagators not of information but of the gift of reason: a gift that can turn information into knowledge, and then to understanding, reason and tolerance, and perhaps even a wee bit of wisdom; then we might achieve a just society.

There has always been a tension within library service provision between the democratisation of knowledge and intellectual emancipation on the one hand, and the library as a form of social control and economic investment on the other. This remains, but at the heart of the public library service, and what makes it public, is its role in raising horizons, defending intellectual freedom, equality of opportunity and equality of access, and in facilitating active and informed citizenship in a democratic society. The Coalition and its followers in council chambers around the country claim that 'we're all in it together' in the battle to shrink the deficit, and that the public library service is just collateral damage in their stand for economic competence. But the attacks on the libraries reveal that all the talk of the Big Society is just cover for the real goal of a small state. The market fundamentalism they preach will create a poorer and meaner-spirited country. Free public libraries are symbols of a democratic society that values openness, equity, access and solidarity. The Coalition is hellbent on creating a society whose symbols will be the gated community, paywalls around information that was once publicly available, and social interaction mediated through the cash nexus. Unless we want to see that, we need to join Pullman and others; we must take a stand in defence of services like public libraries.

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