An American Tale- Organising to Participate:
Trans-Atlantic Contributions to the "Big Society" Concept

ABSTRACT

This paper draws upon fieldwork in Brazil and the USA, which formed part of a 2011 Travel Fellowship through the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust. The author, Rob Gregory is Service Manager for Corporate Strategy, Communities and Partnerships at Great Yarmouth Borough Council and references examples from his own practice in community development to contextualise his findings in a British setting. In this paper the author suggests that structures of participation in local democratic processes and the mobilisation of communities as envisioned through Prime Minister, David Cameron's "Big Society" agenda need to be considered in relation to a closer interplay between the state and civil society in Britain. This agenda needs to push for an institutionalisation of participatory processes of the state and the authentic empowerment of local communities to genuinely influence change. He considers the impact of Participatory Budgeting in Brazil and Community Organising in the USA, both of which have been cited by the British government as tools to galvanise the Big Society in Britain.

INTRODUCTION

Leaving Britain the day after the first local council elections since the coalition government took power in 2010 provided a pertinent reminder to the purpose of my trip. Low voter turnout across the Great Yarmouth constituency averaging less than 40%[1], echoing a national trend acted as a poignant reminder that Britain is suffering a democratic deficit[2]. Authors such as Norris have suggested that the phenomenon of a democratic deficit 'arises from some combination of growing public expectations, negative views, and/or failing government performance' (2011:5). The 2001 turn-out to the UK General Election represented 59.4% of the adult population, the lowest on record (www.electoralcommission.org.uk, 2001).

Conservative Leader, David Cameron first mentioned the concept of Big Society some two years prior to his election as Prime Minister. Whilst not explicitly referencing low voter turn-out at elections, the 2010 Conservative Manifesto pledge drew largely on the notion of bigger society and smaller state; the idea that communities should have more control over the things affecting them, not being hampered by bureaucracy and being able to hold those in power to account. This presented a renewed vision of local democracy, a philosophy difficult to contest[3]. The challenge in maintaining this pledge however, following the formation of a minority coalition government during the tail end of a recession immediately fuelled scepticism and doubt. The reduction in the role of the state was translated as funding cuts to the public and voluntary sectors and emphasising the role of communities in providing services was seen as a suggestion that volunteers provide public services for free. Whilst David Cameron has persevered with the Big Society concept, the agenda has been devoid of any major policy directives. In spite of numerous re-launches many are still raising questions as to "What is the Big Society?" There have, however, been a number of initiatives proposed by both the new office of Civil Society, the recently created Big Society Network and others to help galvanise the concept. Unfortunately some of these have not been fully connected or delivered with the community empowerment approach that the concept intended. As I embarked on my fieldwork, I left behind a frustrated neighbourhood manager and community development worker exasperated by the implementation of one of these initiatives in one of my borough's large post-second world war council estates. A new "community empowerment" programme had been parachuted in from London, which disregarded

years of dedicated community work in that area and the committed work of residents, voluntary groups and other community stakeholders in building a neighbourhood management board over the previous year. The board was becoming an effective model of neighbourhood co-ordination, service accountability and the nurturing of wider community involvement.

Whilst frustration with centrally conceptualised community development programmes is not particular to the new administration, (under the previous Labour government a similar disconnect between Whitehall and local issues was constantly at the fore), it does appear that the philosophy of the Big Society is not yet being fully realised through Whitehall interfaces with local councils and indeed local communities, presenting both confusion and uncertainty at a local level.

This paper will explore two such Big Society initiatives in more detail, namely participatory budgeting and community organising. The former may be seen as the responsibility of local government and the latter the role for civil society[4]. Both are drawn from established models in the Americas and both may be seen as mutually reinforcing. A strong civil society is a sign of a healthy democracy and state actors themselves can be a transformative force that helps promote the growth of associations within communities and consequently civil society (Abers, 1998:512).

My fieldwork consisted of two months spent in Brazil and the USA from May to July 2011 and involved interviews, observations, on-line engagement and the collection of case studies and other data. The examples I provide are non-exhaustive and do not attempt to provide a comprehensive critique of either initiative, but rather a contextual summary, exploring the underlying principles of each to posit alongside the experience of current community development practice and local government in Britain.

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING: STATE STRUCTURES OF PARTICIPATION
Participatory Budgeting (PB) emerged in Britain in the early 2000s. Inspired by the Brazilian model which was created in Porto Alegre in 1989, it has since rapidly emerged in communities across South America and indeed world-wide. 'Participatory budgeting directly involves local people in making decisions on the spending priorities for a defined public budget' (SQW, CEA and Geoff Fordham Associates, 2011:5). The Labour government officially launched a number of PB Pilots as part of its policy directive supporting the Strong and Prosperous Communities White Paper in 2006. Communities Secretary Hazel Blears made a very clear commitment to the opening up of public sector budgets to wider community and public engagement. She stated 'My overriding belief is that people are capable of making quite complex difficult decisions, setting priorities, doing trade-offs if they are given the opportunity to do it' (Wintour, 2007). Indeed, had the Labour party remained in power legislation would have been passed to ensure all local authorities embedded some form of PB by 2012[5]. Early advocates of the potential for PB in the UK context, Church Action on Poverty, who later formed the Participatory Budgeting Unit were commissioned to develop learning around PB and share good practice nationally. Since 2007 a number of local authorities have trialled and piloted PB, often using external funds earmarked for young people, community safety and environmental projects, facilitating direct public involvement, usually through public voting. My own local authority, Great Yarmouth Borough Council embedded PB approaches into its pilot neighbourhood management programme in 2007 and then established a number of PB schemes in 2009 and 2010 utilising external monies and simultaneously levering-in partner resources. Given the borough's function as a district authority in a two-tier county arrangement this was paramount to ensure maximum influence on key budgets such as community safety and environmental services. The Great Yarmouth

pilots echoed learning identified nationally -they provided tangibility in terms of communities seeing immediately the efforts of their participation and transparency, where decision-making is made in the open, in a very participative way (SQW, Cambridge Economic Associates, Geoff Fordham Associates, 2011). What seemed to make the Great Yarmouth pilots successful was that they were part of a wider approach to locality working evolving over a number of years, which saw greater emphasis on community involvement in place-shaping and decision-making and fostered a great amount of community and council dialogue and deliberation (Great Yarmouth Borough Council 2010:19). The building of relationships and on-going dialogue and discussion appeared fundamental to this learning.

Interestingly, in 2010 PB was further acknowledged by the incoming government's policy agenda. The newly established Big Society Network and the existing quango National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts launched "Your Local Budget" in November 2010 to further test the boundaries of PB, particularly in a new financial climate when external monies would be reduced and PB processes would depend on challenging the allocation of mainstream budgets. Great Yarmouth joined the associated learning network, looking particularly at budgets challenges as a second tier authority and the ways in which the councils embeds participatory structures into its daily practices. Whilst there was limited learning from the network, it did provide an opportunity to make sense of PB in the UK in the current climate. For some authorities PB was floundering, for others it was an opportunity to involve local people in more difficult decisions around the future of public services. In order to interrogate more fully whether such state-instituted structures of participation might contribute to the vision of a big society, however, it is pertinent to look at its origins, success and limitations in Brazil.

The Emergence of Participatory Politics in Brazil
Porto Alegre in the southern Brazilian state of Rio Grande du Sol was the first city to establish the Orcamento Participativo (Participatory Budget) in 1989. This represented a transition to democratic rule in Brazil as it emerged from an autocratic military regime 'accompanied by the development of new political values and strategies that fostered institutional renewal at the municipal level' (Wampler and Avritzer, 2004:291). Authors Wampler and Avritzer suggest that such strategies were formed as part of a progression of movements since the 1970s to deepen and extend democracy for the majority of Brazilians who were excluded from civic life. They suggest that during the final phases of the military regime in the 1980s, citizens and voluntary associations worked together to create new political practices (2004:292). These practices started to build a groundswell of support for political revival and to overcome a political system hampered by corruption and clientelism, as an exchange of favours.

The newly elected Partidos dos Trabalhadores (Workers Party) that had originated through the radical action of the labour movements of the 1970s had a strong desire to mobilise the working class masses and had an early vision of full participation (Abers, 1996:42). Souza suggests that mass participation of the working classes was vital for the Workers Party 'participation means empowering the poor to become aware of inequalities and injustices and to reform the political and social systems through collective action' (2001:174). The election of the Workers Party in Porto Alegre provided a fertile political environment in which to develop new forms of participatory democracy as the city already had a significant history of grass roots organising (Abers, 1996:50) and therefore high levels of existing community activity. The concept of public deliberation over resource allocation was difficult for the major opposition party to contest, and actually provided a space for their wider participation

in the process without any significant challenge or contestation (Schneider and Goldfrank, 2002:14).

Porto Alegre's City Hall pledged to devolve part of its municipal budget for public deliberation and established an annual budget cycle and an elaborate structure of participation (Abers, 1996:49). This included both thematic and neighbourhood assemblies, which oversaw the election of delegates to represent areas in the annual budget setting process. Embedded in this structure was a system of voting to enable full participation in decision-making. Early attempts to facilitate this were not often done in a systematic way and there were a number of bureaucratic challenges (Abers, 1996:42). Participation figures in the early years were relatively low, however significant effort was put into mobilising people. Local government even hired community organisers to encourage citizens to participate (Souza, 2001:169) and invested heavily in skills and capacity building for local communities (Abers, 1996:44). This was combined with a methodology of weighting in terms of community need. In 1994 46% of the population of Porto Alegre knew about PB (Souza, 2001:170) and by 2000, 20,000 people were involved in the annual budget cycle (Baiocchi, 2003:57). Porto Alegre became the birthplace of a new movement of participatory politics with other Workers Party administrations in Brazil following suit in Belo Horizonte, Recife and Sao Paulo. Today PB is practiced globally inspired by the Porto Alegre experience.

Participatory Budgeting as a Process
It seemed pertinent that Porto Alegre should become the starting point for my fellowship. Welcomed by an International Relations Team who were also receiving guests from South Korea at the time of my visit, I received a well-versed presentation on the participatory budget and its process. City Hall have well established, heavily publicised and resourced 'elaborate structures' for participatory budgeting (Abers, 1996:49), which was notable in publicity and marketing materials, back office support and the facilitation of the process. Whilst City Hall were unable to provide an exact figure on the cost attached to PB they suggested that facilitating the process included around fifty dedicated staff and an annual facilitation budget of around R$ 300,000 - approximately £111,000. I attended the Education themed assembly one evening. A sea of administrative staff from City Hall were registering attendees, cross-referencing their details against central registers and delegate lists. Each attendee was given a voting slip, with four choices of expenditure clearly identified. Upon arriving in the grand auditorium I was immediately overwhelmed by the number of people in attendance. At least five hundred delegates were present, varying in age, ethnicity and class. The energy in the room was striking. During the proceedings delegates continued to arrive, groups talked and representations were made. Particularly striking was an impassioned speech made on behalf of the deaf community who criticised City Hall for their exclusion from the PB process as sign language was no longer being provided in meetings. The meeting proceeded with feedback on progress or indeed lack of progress being offered by the Director of Education and votes being cast by delegates on priorities for the education budget over the following 12 months. The obvious value of such processes to local communities was immediately apparent.

Whilst the formal presentations and responses from the panel were underway, the most striking observation was the discussion and deliberation amongst the audience. I observed a similar process in Sao Paulo where I attended the meeting of the Economic Council, which, albeit a smaller more deliberative forum was equally a hotbed of debate and contestation. The challenges from the floor and whispering and collective recollection of past events played out over the course of the meeting, capturing something more than purely a budget setting exercise.

Baiocchi captured the social dimension of the PB process in his fieldwork over eighteen months in two poor neighbourhoods in Porto Alegre where he suggested that PB assemblies were more often sites for open-ended civic discussions rather than political processes (2003:53). He explains that the language used by participants in the neighbourhood assemblies was neither about politics nor social movements but rather about issues of citizenship and community well-being (2003:62). The essence of participation for many of those involved in the PB process therefore, appeared to be the motivation for addressing issues of common good, where the very real examples that were being grappled with; such as the delay in instituting a family support programme in Sao Paulo and the need for crèche provision in the island communities of Porto Alegre had a direct personal impact on individuals as well as local communities as a whole. A similar discussion with a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in Porto Alegre suggested that dealing with such, basic and fundamental needs for communities ensured that participation was high. There seemed a low expectation that the state would automatically address such issues. There was a sense that if you did not participate you and your community would miss out.

Skills and Capacity to Participate
But it appeared that some communities did miss out. Too often the poorest and those most marginalised in society did not participate in these decision-making processes. The necessary commitments of time and the skills sets needed to participate, meant there was a significant under-representation from people living in poorer communities. In Recife where the adage 'you are never more than 1km from a slum' resonates, such communities were so compounded with issues of children as young as five dealing crack cocaine and inextricable rates of violence that PB has had a more limited impact on people's lives. There was a suggestion by a NGO in Recife that one community had never received resources through the PB process, partly because the community struggled to mobilise due to its preoccupation with significant gang violence and drug use, but also because City Hall deemed the investment needed to address such issues as being too high. Resources were directed to communities where the money available could have the biggest impact. Similarly, in his comparative study of two neighbourhoods in Porto Alegre, Baiocchi found that the poorer neighbourhood had the lowest existing levels of civic engagement. He suggests that both education and economic resources are strong predictors of civic engagement (2003:55).

Civil society organisations play an undeniable role in the participatory budgeting process in Brazil. Many see their role as capacity building and increasing civic and political literacy to encourage widespread participation in such processes. A neighbourhood-based NGO in Porto Alegre facilitated community workshops to involve residents in writing a book to evaluate the initial impact of PB in the city. Their use of workshops and informal learning techniques were about capacity building to build stronger community leaders to participate in the PB process. One interviewee suggested that there is a risk that participants could easily be manipulated by political interests, she described Brazilian political culture as an "exchange of favours" in spite of attempts to eradicate the corruption of the past. The manipulation of communities to block vote, or for community leaders to build political alliances was evidently common. Another NGO that emerged out of the Catholic Church in Recife, Etapas, runs a youth programme "a Juventude e Ação Política" aimed at increasing political awareness and civic literacy for 15-30 year olds. In their view this helps to build consciousness amongst younger generations and provides them with the skill-sets to participate in such processes. Such approaches by NGOs are evidently influenced by the spirit of Brazilian Theorist Paulo Freire, who himself worked as a community

educator in Recife in the 50s and 60s and asserts that vital to social change is the critical awareness and participation of the "subjects of the transformation" (Freire, 1996:108). Even those NGOs I met working in arenas not directly affiliated to the PB such as Projeto Pescar in Sao Paulo built into their vocational training programmes for marginalised young people a significant element of citizenship training into their schemes, which similarly helps to build civic literacy amongst young people and communities. This community capacity appears vital if participatory structures are to be utilised to strengthen democratic engagement.

Scope and Limitations
Whilst the civil society sector in Brazil attempts to maximize involvement in processes such as PB, they are also fiercely critical of some of its components. In places where PB is well established like Porto Alegre, a beneficiary organisation I spoke to is still awaiting the funds for a training project voted for during the 2004 budget-setting processes. City Hall also explained that one of the biggest struggles with delivering outcomes as a result of PB was often over-committing a budget and there then not being enough money to deliver the schemes selected. Infrastructure projects were also seen as notably difficult to deliver in twelve months and some whom I spoke to suggested that the focus on community-based funding did not give enough consideration to large infrastructure projects. These frustrations were evident in Sao Paulo as people were challenging the delay by City Hall in building 66km of new traffic lanes in the City. There was also the problem that issues were not actively addressed through the PB process. During my time in Porto Alegre, long-time advocate for the PB process, NGO Cidade was significantly reducing its involvement in the process. It felt the land regularisation policies being implemented by City Hall in anticipation of the 2014 World Cup, which lead to the relocation of slum dwellers were being imposed by City Hall without the opportunity for participation or debate. Such issues lay outside of the PB process. One might suggest that in City Hall deciding on the parameters of the PB process, it immediately excludes certain functions from debate and deliberation and therefore genuine involvement in the most pertinent issues for communities.

Critics have suggested that PB in Brazil can mask the true issues of inequality and injustice. They are state imposed structures of participation and therefore have limiting parameters of community control. An NGO I spoke to in Recife suggested that PB can pitch communities against one another, making them fight for scarce resources rather than spending time influencing issues of strategy and policy. The philosophy of PB is however, difficult to contest. It is undeniable that challenges still exist in Brazilian political culture, and that PB has part changed this. Authors and those I spoke to generally agree that PB has supported a more progressive form of democracy in a country that had experienced a politically unstable past, fraught with corruption and clientelism (Gueyre, 2005). Embedding PB as both a political and legal process has helped to institutionalise participation in Brazilian political life to ensure that it becomes expected and anticipated by its citizens. Indeed "post authoritarian Brazil has been described as democracy with citizenship" (Bethel, 2000 (cited in Baiocchi, 2003:55)) Speaking to long-time political theorist Dr Rebecca Abers at the University of Brasilia she suggested that certainly in Porto Alegre, community leaders know that the backroom negotiations of the past are no longer the way to get things done, mobilising others to attend those negotiations is far more effective.

Ideological Commitment to Participation
It is therefore notable that PB was 'created in a context [in Brazil] which differs significantly from Western Europe' (Sintomer, Herzberg, Rocke, 2008:2), Whilst the emergence of PB across Europe has been seen as a greater drive for state

transparency (Sintomer, Herzberg, Rocke, 2008:10), the role of participatory politics in Brazil serves a political purpose. For the Workers Party the PB process has helped to mobilise the poor and create forums for the engagement of opposition parties but in doing so it conversely does very little to challenge political power bases. Authors Schneider and Goldranfk suggest that by creating an arena for participation for major opposition parties PB has been successful in weakening opposition bases of power (2002:14).

The plight of NGO Cidade, which is now focusing its efforts on the 2014 World Cup redevelopment programme through the mobilisation of World Cup Popular Committees demonstrates the frustration of civil society with the inability to challenge some of the political processes which impact on the more fundamental arenas of peoples lives, such as poverty and housing. Whilst the PB process often provides one opportunity for participation it is often part of a wider process of community involvement in the addressing of issues.

The longevity of participatory budgeting in Brazil entering its third decade however, represents something of an ingrained political consciousness around participatory politics. At a time when PB might be considered to have lost its initial energy there are still examples of new and emerging PB processes. This was evident during my time in the Amazonas. The local newspaper reported the recent passing of legislation by the state assembly to instigate PB as part of the annual budget cycle across the vast Amazonian state (Souza, 2011). PB has become a trademark of the Workers Party. Similarly, new processes were emerging in Brasilia at the time of my visit where the Workers Party had taken control of City Hall the previous year.

Adopting a form of PB alone, however, is not sufficient in embedding a culture of participatory politics; rather there is the need for genuine political commitment. Wampler and Avritzer suggested that PB has not been so successful in Recife as it has had limited embrace both structurally and politically (2004:304). This was exemplified by a NGO in Recife who suggested that a previous successful participatory process called 'City Hall in the Neighbourhood' involving public hearings by the Mayor was dissolved by the subsequent Mayor in favour of a weak PB process, which has never become enshrined in law in Recife, although the Workers Party is currently in its third administration. Similarly, part of the frustrations I witnessed with the delay in building three new hospitals as agreed by the previous year's PB process in Sao Paulo was because the Mayor had used his power to veto the decision and allow only two to be built.

Participatory politics is an ingrained part of Brazilian political culture often institutionalised in city and state law, but it also becomes a vehicle to respond in a direct way to community needs - needs that are often unmet by the state and therefore a vehicle in which communities engage with local government to ensure their voices are heard.

COMMUNITY ORGANISING: CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISING FOR CHANGE
In 2010, the Leader of the Conservative Party, David Cameron pledged that if his party were elected, they would train a neighbourhood army of 5,000 community organisers, whom he suggested would 'identify local community leaders, bring communities together, help people start their own neighbourhood groups, and give communities the help they need to take control and tackle their problems'.[6]

The concept of organising drew significantly from the US model, heavily influenced by Saul Alinksy, seen as the founder of the modern community organising movement, after having worked in the Chicago Industrial slums in the 50s organising

communities into action to address issues of social justice and challenge local government. The success of the 2008 Obama political organising campaign still resonated strongly as did the knowledge that the president himself had started his working career in Chicago as an organiser with impoverished black communities in the 80s. Cameron suggested that the nation needed grassroots mobilisers to galvanise communities into action and grow the Big Society. A relative silence followed and very little in the way of policy, until the Office for Civil Society named a national provider to recruit and train 5,000 organizers. One of the ten first phase areas would be Norfolk, the county home to Great Yarmouth. Given the government's intention to primarily focus on the poorest neighbourhoods, and the borough's level of deprivation, Great Yarmouth would inevitably feel the impact of the programme[7]. Having worked at the council since 2006 and previously working as a community development worker for a local NGO I was intrigued as to how the organising model might fit with our own community development journey. The careful building of community relations through our neighbourhood management approach had taken years and the council was starting to rethink its design of services and interface with communities in a more collaborative and co-productive way. The growth and sustainability of the civil society in Great Yarmouth was something the council had significantly invested in. Whilst challenges in terms of community empowerment remained, progress had been made.

In spite of significant cuts the council had agreed to maintain resources for core community development, provided independently by civil society organisations across the borough. This had provided ongoing support to communities who wanted to better improve their neighbourhoods. The community development approach was focused on supporting communities to build community capacity and social capital to address needs. The organising model being proposed by the government appeared to aspire to similar outcomes and I was keen to learn more. There was a real risk of existing development workers and newly recruited organisers being deployed in the same neighbourhood with different approaches and agendas with communities caught in the crossfire.

The Rise of Community Organising in the United States
Community organising has a particular connotation in the history of the United States. It emerged as form of community work most notably in the 1960s and 70s when social unrest associated with civil rights movements, student revolts, women's liberation, the Vietnam war and slum clearance programmes in inner city areas captured the feelings and frustrations of many poor and working class Americans (Braeger and Specht, 1969:5). Thousands of neighbourhood and block groups emerged across the nation fighting for the social justice in response to the rapid changes taking place, this resulted in a 'groundswell movement of citizens calling for the return of political and economic power to a local level' (Fischer, 1994:138).

Fisher has documented the history of organising in the United States and suggests that the Alinsky model of organising was popular at this time as it rejected more radical methodologies deployed by the civil rights movements of the time (1994:145). Instead, in Alinsky's model, the focus of organising was about harnessing 'power' and bringing communities together through their lack of power using 'a combination of shared values and mutual self-interest' (Miller, 2009:12). The identified role of a community organiser was therefore identified to 'assist people to build a powerful voice through which they can effectively speak on their deepest concerns' (Miller, 2009:1). Community organising has grown and evolved as a concept over the decades to respond to new and emerging agendas. In the US today there exists thousands of community organisations and organisers continuing to champion the Alinsky approach.

My particular geographic focus on the San Francisco Bay area was fuelled by its rich social and political history. The Black Panther civil rights movement which swept the nation in the late 60s emerged from Oakland and by the 1970s gay rights movements in San Francisco had resulted not only in the mobilisation of gay communities, but also black and latino communities to elect the nation's first openly gay politician Supervisor Harvey Milk in 1978 (Shilts, 1982). Today San Francisco's Civil Society boasts a rich tapestry of community organisations and not for profit groups championing a range of issues of social justice. Many of which adopt a recognised model of community organising to champion these.

A Methodology to Build Power

One such organisation I spent time with was the San Francisco Organizing Project (SFOP), part of the faith-based People In Communities Organizing (PICO) network. The focus of the organisation is congregational organising, working with established faith-based organisations across the Bay Area. According to the group, the strength of this model as opposed to neighbourhood-based organising, is the sustainable way in which community ties already exist within a faith community, which provides a more stable and coherent platform to champion particular community issues. I accompanied the SFOP on a budget rally to the State Capitol in Sacramento. Faith-based Community Leaders who had been supported by their respective Community Organisers across the state of California were planning to rally to challenge budget measures being passed through the state, which they felt adversely affected the poor. Grappling with the $26 billion deficit, successive cuts were taking their toll on the poorest in the community. PICO stated that 4,000 children had lost health coverage as a consequence [8]. The bus ride to Sacramento provided both an opportunity to meet with community leaders across faith groupings, many of whom were highly skilled and educated middle class advocates. Alinsky has suggested that key to successful organising is the mobilisation of the middle classes, whose allegiance he deemed as essential for increasing the support for a campaign (1972:184). He went onto suggest that organisers must 'excite their imagination with tactics that can introduce drama and adventure' (1972:195). Upon arrival at the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament the thousand strong congregation recited their tactics to ensure maximum effect – the role of faith leaders was seen as paramount, as was the exploitation of the media to support wider interest. The inextricable link between faith and politics cannot be undermined in the US. The collective recital of hymns and calls of faith acted both as a unifying and motivating force as the congregation marched towards the State Capitol chanting "We have the power" in the blistering June heat. The day included both rallying speeches, public requests to key senators and private meetings with legislative directors. The tactics were carefully rehearsed and recited in order to get an outcome, very much supported and prompted by the organisers present.

During my time in San Fancisco I met with Abi a local Communtiy Organiser. Describing her role as an "agitator", her primary focus is to support groups to gain "power". The focus of her work is entirely on people issues that are identified by communities themselves and further validated by research involving wider community engagement work. Her approach taps into the "anger" of local communities and turns it into a positive force, highlighting issues varying from housing and workplace issues to those surrounding health and environment. Her approach is methodological, following a clear brief, working with a local organising committee based within a faith institution and supporting those community leaders to develop their skills and capacity to champion issues and effect change for their wider congregations. "Training" will often form part of these meetings where Abi will run workshop style sessions with the committee on particular skills sets such as

negotiating, or handling the media. Abi will often delegate tasks across the committee to ensure collective ownership of the actions and will often prompt discussion and debate around more contentious issues or encourage leaders to think more deeply about the causes of inequality.

During my meeting with stalwart San Francisco organiser Mike Miller, he referenced his own experience of challenging racism within a community by channelling issues of discontent within the largely white working class community on what he saw as the real power holders namely the City Hall and large private companies. Mike Miller also outlined that the focus of his work had been about building democratic organisations that will make a contribution to social, economic and environmental justice. This type of organising was also echoed by an organisation I met on the East Coast of the United States, Make the Road New York, who structured their organising not so much around communities of faith like SFOP but more around communities of interest and circumstance. Whilst there was a greater degree of community capacity building in terms of frequency of committee meetings and the less pronounced role of an organiser at meetings, Make the Road had a similar notion of what community organising and the role of a community organiser was as opposed to what it was not.

The Independence to Challenge
A distinction is quite clear in civil society in the US between not-for-profit service providers and community organisations. Mike Miller suggests that there is a different ethos for organisations funded by the state as opposed to those funded by their members (2009:59). Make the Road New York combine income from a number of private foundations, membership dues and government contracts to support their work, which is both about service delivery and community organising. Service delivery is often a good hook and engagement tool to get people involved. Equally the San Francisco Organising Project relies on a number of faith based sponsors and private institutions but also offers congregations the opportunity to buy 25 per cent of an organiser's time. In Mike Miller's recollection of block committees and neighbourhood based organising in San Francisco's Mission district in the 60s he referenced individual residents and associations paying membership dues to fund organising. In the groups I visited membership dues do not appear to fund community organising 100 per cent and a mixed economy approach to fundraising appears more evident. There is also a question of the independence of organisations that also deliver services on behalf of the state. The Housing Rights Committee of San Francisco faced a similar dilemma, providing housing advice and counselling through city departmental contracts, but also advocacy and organising work independently funded, which often puts them in direct opposition to departments within City Hall. Brian Cheu the Director of Community Development at San Francisco City Hall stated his view that City Hall should not fund community organising which would then question its authenticity as an independent voice for communities. The interplay between civil society and the state in the San Francisco context is an interesting one. Significant funding goes into the not for profit sector supporting community outreach and engagement. City Hall itself provides leadership training for community representatives and runs its own citizen hearings along with a range of informal and formal engagement programmes, led often by elected and/or appointed members. Brian suggested the work of his team focused on community development, which he felt focused more on collaborative efforts with local communities. He felt organising focused more upon issues and campaigns. Whilst he questioned the validity of some organisations seeking to represent wider communities whom he felt needed to be challenged in terms of their representation, he identified a clear role for organising, and cited previous positive encounters with the San Francisco Organising Project whom he felt were able to succinctly champion particular community causes in a constructive manner.

The Authentic Voice of the Community
The strength of the community organising model in the US appears to be its ability to effectively galvanise communities to challenge issues of social injustice. Tommi Avicolli-Mecca works for the Housing Rights Committee of San Francisco as a lead counsellor, but also part time as a grass roots organiser. He is also a freelance journalist for the Bay Guardian. Tommi has been involved in various "actions" over the past four decades, particularly in relation to housing in his own neighbourhood.

The historic Castro district of San Francisco developed in the 60s as a safe haven neighbourhood for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) communities. LGBT teenagers and young people across the US have often followed a pilgrimage to the Castro district seeking acceptance and sanctuary. The consequence of the dot com boom in Silicon Valley means San Francisco's real estate has rocketed since the 90s. Rental values have increased significantly creating a growing youth homelessness problem, which locals in the Castro felt was largely being ignored. Tommi and others helped to organise a range of community meetings to galvanise support to put pressure on City Hall to address the problem. Their strategy included lobbying local City Supervisors to sponsor a Public Hearing, which gave them the ability to bring their issues into the public arena. Overwhelmingly over one hundred people turned out providing personal accounts and testaments. Raising this issue with such support turned it into an issue which could no longer be ignored. The tactics of the Castro group also involved direct demonstrations outside the homes of Real Estate Speculators who they felt were profiteering from a legal loophole called "flipping" enabling rental homes to be broken up to sell off at significant return. This sparked significant media attention. Similarly at the neighbourhood level Tommi and his colleagues attempted to galvanise greater community support, which was a challenge given that the newer residents in the neighbourhood did not feel particularly compassionate to the plight of young LGBT homeless people. The group of volunteers who secured free use of shower facilities at a local High School Gym and food provision at a Church faced fierce opposition from some residents who worried such provision would lower the value of their properties. Through reassurance and perseverance the temporary shelter was established and serviced by local volunteers. The amalgamation of these efforts finally succeeded years later in City Hall agreeing to fund the provision of a dedicated LGBT Shelter, which would be run on behalf of City Hall by a local Church and not for profit organization. Tommi was waiting anxiously for the opening of the shelter at the time that we met.

Tommi's example provides a further illustration of community organising as a challenging force, built on a sense of anger and frustration with both the state and the market. Community organising effectively mobilised people into action deploying a range of strategies to attain a solution. These tactics were about exerting pressure on elected representatives, direct action, and neighbourhood capacity building. They were based on a self-identified cause, and driven by community members themselves. Whilst the development of the initial community shower and food bank project was a by-product of this process, it was a means to an end rather than an end in itself. The community actually felt that a permanent state-funded provision should be provided. There was not a long-term plan for those residents to continue delivering that service. For many involved in such actions, organising is a short-term tool for getting things done (Kahn, 1982:7). Indeed one of the criticisms of the community organising model is its failure to build long-term neighbourhood institutions.

Brill analysed the failure of a black community organisation in the late 60s undertaking a fourteen month housing rent strike and suggests that whilst the movement failed to capture both hearts and minds and was riddled with distrust between community leaders it also lacked the necessary restraint and foresight to build permanent poor people's organisations (1972:179). In spite of winning a number of concessions over its lifetime Mike Miller similarly maps the demise of the Mission Coalition Organsiation in the 70s. This is not say, however, that all organisations are short-lived, SFOP's umbrella organisation PICO has been in existence since 1972 and continues to champion a number of campaigns at a national level.

Navigating Political Structures to Instigate Change
Community Organising serves a particular purpose in the consciousness of the United States. It emerged at a particular historical conjecture and for activists such as Mike Miller it filled a notable void in the US, which in countries like Britain was filled by a strong Trade Union movement. Organising has evolved over time to maintain currency and for political scientists like Fisher the building of community partnerships with local economic and political powers has become a more dominant form of organising as it has adapted to a more neo-conservative political economy in the United States (1994:179). Indeed organising is a recognised concept in both the human and social sciences. Whilst in San Francisco I noticed billboards advertising Masters in Organising for educational professionals. I also interviewed a member of the Obama for America political organisation, which will utilise a range of recognised community organising tools to prompt communities into action for the 2012 presidential elections. The mobilisation of masses of people also has the ability to change the social landscape of the United States quite considerably. In San Francisco many organisers I spoke to used the term "Take it to the Ballot", which is a powerful tool dependent on obtaining a number of signatures to spark a referendum on a particular issue. This ranges from seeking legislation to protect low income renters in the city to more fundamental human rights around a high-profile campaign to ban infant circumcision in the city. The ability to bring about significant legislative change through grassroots action is undeniably a rallying force. It also carries particular strength in invoking the attention and the involvement of politicians.

For authors such as Mike Miller, whilst mobilising is often short-term and single-cause, organising has the ability to create collective ownership and shared action on a variety of issues over a sustained period of time (2009:36). It is important to recognise the relevance of community organising in the wider context of political and social life in the United States. In a nation-state that encourages individual rather than collective solutions organising seeks to address a void of collective consciousness and social action to address inequality (Kahn, 1982:11). A smaller welfare state in the United States also represents a starker and more apparent contrast between those with and those without. For some authors this highlights the fact that 'in the US today power is concentrated in the hands of a smaller number of well-organised individuals and corporations' (Kahn, 1982:3) and therefore reinforces the 'simple yet compelling principle that only organising builds power' (Brill, 1972:180).

WHAT FOR BRITAIN?
Henman suggested that the idea that PB alone had led to change in Porto Alegre is a 'fetishization' (2005:20). I would suggest that neither imported versions of Participatory Budgeting nor Community Organising alone will build the Big Society in Britain. It would be extremely naïve to assume their replication will be the panacea to building a strong civil society whilst increasing the transparency of the state to revitalise local grassroots democracy. Both concepts emerged at a particular

conjecture in South and North American political history. The ideological relationship with the Workers Party in Brazil and the association of civil rights and social unrest in the USA cannot be disentangled from the development of these movements. Equally it is of utmost importance to recognise significant work undertaken in Britain to date through organisations such as Church Action on Poverty on Participatory Budgeting and Citizens UK on Community Organising, which posits both of these concepts in a British context.

There are however, key principles from both models which provide relevance to current debates in Britain. Perhaps the most striking observation about both of these processes in their native settings is their recognition and longevity in democratic life in Brazil and the USA. I would suggest this is because they can have tangible and immediate impact on people's lives and because they can navigate effectively to the sources of resource and power. State structures of participation in Brazil are recognised, institutionalised and promoted. When participatory budgeting is successful, it appears not to be a light-touch approach but rather a political commitment, well resourced and further enshrined in law. It forms part of a wider commitment to participatory politics that has become ingrained in the consciousness of individual citizens. Similarly, in the US community organising is an effective tool because it can influence those in power i.e. there is an effective navigation of the political system. It is also uniquely bottom-up and draws very much on the articulation of needs from those it is intended to benefit. It is not artificially created. It is also important to recognise the effectiveness of such models in settings where there is a failure of the state to provide for those most disadvantaged. Whilst this does not deny that such issues exist for the most disadvantaged in Britain, there is perhaps already a greater interplay between the state and civil society in responding to such issues. The large-scale mobilisation of communities as a result of such processes may be more about addressing basic and fundamental needs as opposed to an appetite to engage in local democratic processes. For the benefits of both concepts to be realised in Britain we need to ensure they enable communities to effectively navigate political and state systems to effect change.

A Study of PB in England was published by the Department of Communities and Local Government in September 2011, assessing the impact of programmes to date[9]. The key finidngs suggested that PB 'was most effective when used in conjunction with other PB processes' (2011:5). Whether PB prospers in Britain I would argue will depend upon genuine commitment from all tiers of government and its wholesale application. It will also have to navigate the complexity of NHS, Policing and centralised "big spend" budgets to really ensure local people can influence the provision of services which genuinely impact on their lives. The indicated commitment to Community Budgeting provides some hope for this, but mediocre attempts by public agencies will have little notable impact on the lives of the majority of the population. Specific consideration will need to be given to the necessity to resource capacity building for communities furthest away from current civic engagement processes to ensure greater equity in participation.

The success of the community organisers programme will similarly depend upon the impact it has and the longer-term outcomes it generates and its ability to engage those less likely to participate. A state-sponsored programme to deliver a purist community organising programme is likely to be fraught with tensions, particularly as resources for long-term community work are reduced in areas where an organiser is likely to be parachuted in. Caught in the crossfire is likely to be the very community leaders and activists the Big Society is thought to depend on. Similarly there appears to be a number of contradictory messages around the government's intended relationship between the state and civil society. Community Organising is being

regarded as the plight of civil society in securing power from the state. Whilst direct community action such as demonstrations, pickets and strikes are effective tools for community organising, the model is limited in terms of collaboration to deliver more effective services that respond to the needs of those most disadvantaged. There is also a risk that a central government imposed programme of organising might lose any sense of accountability locally, fail to represent the genuine voice of the community and fail to build constructive relationships between communities and their respective village, town, city and county halls. The Porto Alegre experience of 'state-fostered civic organising' (Abers 1998:511) as part of the PB process provides an alternative by demonstrating a clear role for local government in creating 'enabling environments' which helps us to rethink the potential relationship between the state and civil society (Abers 1998:514). This will go some way to help realise the British government's aspiration for models of co-production[10] between the state and local communities.

At the time of writing Great Yarmouth Borough Council is evolving its structures of participation in light of the Localism Act. Engrained in this is a political and organisational commitment to participation. This will need to manifest itself in the day to day business of the council, from planning and budget setting, to service re-design, to new methods of delivery. At the same time the council is working with two local civil society organisations that have been awarded funds through the Big Lottery to deliver the vision of the Community Organiser's programme using an established community development approach, building on what is already there. The challenge for communities and the interfaces of government in Great Yarmouth will be evolving relationships between the state and civil society that are mature, meaningful and equal, as we ultimately attempt to build a Big Society supported by a progressive and responsive nation-state.

NOTES

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[1] 2010 Council Election Results based on an average of % polls across electoral wards. Nelson Ward, Great Yarmouth had the lowest voter turn-out, % poll 2011 = 26.2%. See http://www.great-yarmouth.gov.uk/council-democracy/elections-news-information/elections-results.htm for more information.

[2] For more on the concept of a Democratic Deficit see Norris, P,. 2011, *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

[3] The Conservative Manifesto 2010, available at www.conservatives.com

[4] By "Civil Society" I refer to all non-governmental organisations, voluntary and community groups, charities and social enterprises as recognised by the Office for Civil Society, part of the Cabinet Office.

[5] Formed part of the Draft National Strategy on Participatory Budgeting. Published by the Department of Communities and Local Government in April 2009.

[6] Community Organisers were included as part of the 2010 Conservative Manifesto, linked to the concept of the Big Society. For information on the current programme see the Cabinet Office web-site www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk

[7] See www.imd.communities.gov.uk for 2010 data sets relating to deprivation in England. Great Yarmouth contains 3 Lower Layer Super Output Areas which fall within the 1% most deprived nationally and a further 10 Lower Layer Super Output Areas which fall within the 10% most deprived bottom 10% nationally.

[8] Part of the pre-rally powerpoint presentation provided by PICO in Sacramento on 14th June 2011.

[9] Communities in the Driving Seat: A Study of Participatory Budgeting in England was published during the drafting of this paper in September 2011. A full copy with findings is

available for download in the publications sections of the Department of Communities and Local Government web-site www.communities.gov.uk.

[10] 'Co-production is a new vision for public services which offers a better way to respond to the challenges we face - based on recognising the resources that citizens already have, and delivering services *with* rather than *for* service users, their families and their neighbours. Early evidence suggests that this is an effective way to deliver better outcomes, often for less money'. Lifted from NESTA's web-site http://www.nesta.org.uk/areas_of_work/public_services_lab/coproduction [Accessed 5 November 2011].

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