Introduction

Planning in England is subject to periodic upheavals. Perhaps there never was a period of stable planning regulation – but what seems undeniable is that planning reform is now with us on a near permanent basis, as incoming political administrations seek to modernise, reform or ‘deregulate’ planning. Partly this seems to be an underlying feature of our neoliberal times, as governments engage in fast policy fixes and selective policy transfer, grounded in discourses of planning ‘big government’ and unwieldy regulation for preventing previous ‘prescriptions’ of neoliberal medicine from achieving their desired effect (Peck, 2010; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2013). More specifically, neoliberal discourse seems to require a demonisation of planners and planning as a bureaucratic, anti-enterprise form of social engineering that is forever ‘locking up jobs in filing cabinets’. The UK’s recent Plan for Growth provides a fine example of this.

One of the most significant burdens highlighted consistently during the Growth Review has been the UK’s overly slow and bureaucratic planning system. Since January 2005, an estimated 3,250 pages of national planning guidance for England has been issued at considerable cost to the public sector.

The costs for business are also significant, both in time and money. On average it takes more than twice as long, 95 days, to go through the procedures to build a warehouse in the UK as the USA. Recent research by
Reading University suggests that the costs to the economy associated with delays in processing applications may be up to £3 billion a year.

(H.M. Treasury and BIS, 2011: 21, para. 1.25 and 1.26)

In this context regular reforms are no surprise. Equally unsurprising is that the failure of each attempt to reform planning is never linked to the contradictions and inconsistencies of these reforms, but instead it is blamed on the planners. The professional bodies of planning have too often proven inept or quiescent in the face of attacks and calls for reform. A more compliant scapegoat for neoliberal ideologues and scaremongers could scarcely be imagined, so naturally like all bullies they keep coming back.

In this chapter we want to argue that the upheavals in planning have taken on new dimensions as the underlying neoliberalisation of planning has manifested itself in a range of strategies that seek to defer, displace and transfer political questions and issues. This provides a more subtle, less confrontational style of bringing about planning reform, where the very public emphasis on consultation helps deflect concern away from how the possibilities for fundamental disagreement are being narrowed. We might usefully think of these as post-political strategies for presenting neoliberal policies as successful and merely needing tinkering, no matter what the evidence might be to the contrary. As the introductory chapter makes clear, the nomenclature and strands of post-foundational thinking are complex. The term 'post-politics' tends to be used as shorthand for a general analytical framework that encompasses a range of mechanisms, tools or strategies through which the political is displaced or foreclosed by politics. Between them Rancière (1999) and Žižek (1999) point to a number of forms of political displacement or how politics abolishes the political (Marchart, 2007: 160–161). Anarchopolitics is a politics of nostalgia built around the internalisation of a set of values framed by a common self-identity. Panopolitics concerns radical democratic politics where disagreement and dissent are tolerated within the rule of law. Metapolitics is ‘beyond’ or ‘before’ politics and concerns how politics does not and cannot reflect social reality that can only be uncovered through science. Difference and antagonism are merely a ‘side show’ or delusion. Ultrapolitics involves the dominance of the political as difference and antagonism over politics where the political adversary is to be destroyed. Utopolitics is Žižek’s description of right-wing, populist politics or fascist regimes (Sharpe and Boucher, 2010) where politics becomes about ‘them and us’ demonising a group within society. Finally, post-politics seeks to displace politics through the projection of a world without conflict where a consensus order is already established or where it can be established through the deployment of various strategies of politics such as deliberative democracy.

One upshot of these different strategies of political displacement is a contingent form of depoliticisation or displacement: the strategies enacted in a particular time and place will vary. We might add that those strategies employed with regards to planning will also be contingent and determined by the conditions and circumstances of this particular form of state intervention in land and property markets.

These diverse figures of displacement all lead with regularity to the same result. They all seek to put the play of the political difference to a halt, thereby either reducing the political to politics or hypostatising politics into the political.

(2007: 161)

We use the term ‘post-political’ throughout this chapter in its broader analytical sense to include the range of strategies of political displacement and depoliticisation within a particular time, place and sector. As we have argued elsewhere (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010, 2012), we can see evidence of post-political strategies in many of the recent reforms in English planning, not least as it has been co-opted into an approach that no longer mediates between alternative and sometimes competing views but instead presents growth and development as unproblematic. Allied to this we have seen a blurring of institutional responsibilities, accountability and legitimacy, where planings commitment to a more participative, communicative approach has been used to obscure precisely political moments of disensus. This post-political planning presents political issues as technical or the remit of professional and experts and through the deployment of techniques and nomenclature that provide positive though limited opportunities for stakeholder or public input and engagement (Swyngedouw 2007, 2009). In this chapter we set out to explore recent planning reforms under the Localism and Big Society banner through the lens of post-political analysis.

The Localism Act of 2011 and other changes, such as the publication of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (DCLG, 2012), herald a departure and new era for planning in England. The intellectual lineage of the current approach to planning can be traced back to a paper produced by the Conservative Party before the 2010 election, Open Source Planning (Conservative Party, 2010a). This contained a wide-ranging critique of the planning system that had evolved under Labour, particularly in the period since 2004. The general thrust was that the centralised, ‘top-down’ approach to planning underpinned by regional housing targets had not delivered and local communities felt alienated. In its place Open Source Planning proposed a decentralised approach:

if we enable communities to find their own ways of overcoming the tensions between development and conservation, local people can become proponents rather than opponents of appropriate economic growth.

(Conservative Party, 2010a: 1)

Proposals in Open Source Planning which later came to dominate planning reforms of the Coalition government included:

- allowing neighbourhood groups to come together to specify what kind of development they want to see in their area;
- providing financial incentives to communities to persuade them to accept more development;
abolishing the regional tier of planning and substantially slimming down national, prescriptive planning guidance;

- introducing a duty to cooperate to provide for coordination across local authority areas; and

- introducing a national presumption in favour of sustainable development.

Such principles echoed those in the Conservative Party manifesto and were given some coherence and context by the notion of the Big Society. According to the party’s manifesto, ‘the change we offer is from big government to Big Society’ (Conservative Party, 2010b: viii), a distinctive shift from one of former Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s most famous provocations, namely that ‘There is no such thing as society’. Following three successive election defeats the Conservatives were keen to present a new, caring image and distance themselves from the ‘Nasty Party’ image of the 1980s. At the time the ‘Big Society’ agenda was seen as an attempt to portray the party as more caring and socially aware. If so, this strategy was only partly successful. The result of the May 2010 election was that no party had an overall majority leading to the creation, unusual in Westminster government, of a coalition. Despite the need to accommodate the Liberal-Democrat party’s policy agenda, the Coalition Agreement (H.M. Government, 2010) explicitly endorsed Open Source Planning and the Big Society concept.

The Big Society agenda for planning seeks to appeal to a wide and potentially incompatible range of interests, embracing both pro-growth and anti-development factions. The Coalition approach involves turning this definitional fuzziness from a vice to a virtue, arguing that their agenda seeks to avoid prescriptive and clarity in order to move from a ‘one size fits all’ system and encourage diversity and experimentation. Requests for greater clarity about the nature of the Big Society are usually met with the response that to do so would limit the notion, or as one respondent to a House of Commons Committee inquiry into the subject put it:

Please, please, please do not publish a definition of Big Society. Part of the cultural change we face is to shift local authorities and associated and interwoven organisations (much of them third sector) away from a top down driven rule-based operation to a locally driven decision-based culture.

(Leach, 2011: 4)

The idea that defining the concept will inevitably limit it echoes the strange world of quantum mechanics where the act of observing something affects the observed reality. The government may genuinely wish to avoid limiting the potential of the Big Society though we would also add that defining and clarifying the concept would involve undermining the consensus around widely agreed but nebulous notions. This circular argument – that the Big Society is too nebulous to be of practical use whilst defining it would undermine the diversity it seeks – is both a neat trick and a point of departure for post-political forms of planning.

New Labour’s approach to planning was similarly founded upon all-encompassing, feel good, fuzzy notions that were of little practical use to planners and communities ‘on the ground’ – what did ‘sustainable development’ or ‘spatial planning’ mean for a specific proposal or place? (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012). ‘Specificity’ was provided through overwhelming volumes of technically driven national policy and guidance. This enabled Labour to answer the question ‘what is sustainable development?’ by pointing to various evaluations and technocratic procedures, largely interpreted and undertaken by the growing cadre of consuls serving the government. New Labour’s Third-Way post-politics centred on the application of increasingly specialist managerial techniques and accredited new systems of audits and indicators, routinised, normalised and mobilised through partnerships and legitimatized through endless rounds of consultation with ‘stakeholders’ and ‘the public’.

As with Third Way notions such as spatial planning, sustainable growth and urban renaissance, there was initially widespread support for the Big Society planning agenda. However, as New Labour discovered, it is easy for a wide range of disparate interests to sign up to nebulous concepts in the hope and expectation that it would help them forward their own policy agendas, albeit each understanding it to mean something different (Allmendinger, 2011).

Cracks are already beginning to appear in the Big Society approach to planning and disenchantment is creeping in as the implications become clearer. According to The Sunday Times, the Shires have been ‘in revolt’ over the draft NPPF (Sunday Times, 7 August 2011; Daily Telegraph, 7 August 2011). In the face of a strong media backlash and effective campaigning by a coalition of nature groups, the draft NPPF was radically overhauled. Contradictions continue to pervade the new planning framework, not least in that the widely trumpeted simplification of planning rules heralded by the NPPF (DCLG, 2012) has been accompanied by a requirement that local plans be issued with a certificate of conformity to ensure consistency with national planning policy. Similarly, localities have been informed that the default position on development proposals is ‘yes’ (DCLG, 2011: part 19). This becomes particularly relevant in that if a planning authority fails to produce an up-to-date local plan, then developers will be allowed to make applications that will only be judged against national advice rather than local plans. In such ways national policy prescription has been refamed and made more draconian rather than abolished. Put simply, less is more when it comes to the Coalition government’s approach to central prescription.

Further criticism verging upon open revolt emerged in late summer 2012 as the government introduced yet another round of planning reform aimed at helping stimulate economic growth. After a series of ministerial and prime ministerial public statements rehashing the fact that the Coalition blamed lack of growth on planning rather than lack of funding and confidence by private investors, the government’s return to a prescriptive centralism became clear in the reforms proposed in the Growth and Infrastructure Bill (second reading) put before Parliament (House of Commons Library, 2012). This provided for the government
to take over planning decision-making through the national Planning Inspectorate, where it deemed local planning authorities to be making slow or poor-quality decisions, with little recognition that cuts to local authority staffing might be forcing councils to either accept a backlog in dealing with applications or having to usher them through without adequate scrutiny. There are already signs of disquiet and policy rethink emerging around the Big Society planning agenda then, with even the Secretary of State Eric Pickles driven to joke about how liberalism had become ‘muscular localism’ in the wake of his new proposals to strengthen central direction (Wintour, 2012).

Yet, despite growing reaction against planning’s ‘new era’ there remains a consensus that the Big Society and Liberalism are ‘good’:

Of course, I agree that localism is a fine thing. Nothing I have seen from the Town and Country Planning Association, the Royal Town Planning Institute or any other planning body has said anything different.

(Shapley, 2011: 36)

And herein lies the uniqueness and paradox of the Big Society approach to planning. The government’s agenda is simultaneously centralising and decentralising, limiting debate and discussion on political power in the process. A fragmentation of planning away from a centrally directed ‘one size fits all’ system allows a multitude of approaches – as long as they all comply with the centralising, neoliberal dictat that there is a presumption in favour of (sustainable) development. This ‘divide and rule’ tactic maintains the illusion of local choice and discretion whilst imposing conformity: a neighbourhood can determine where development will go, not whether there should be development.

It is clear that the Big Society is a distinct regime of post-political planning to the erstwhile, Third Way approach. Both Third Way planning and the Big Society are essentially facilitative of neoliberal growth strategies (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2011, 2012) and as such they represent part of the continual evolution and experimentation of neoliberalism (Peck, 2010). What distinguishes the Big Society from the Third Way approach of post-political planning is a shift in emphasis and mechanisms of achieving growth. This shift, even though it echoes some of the key elements of the ‘rolled back’ neoliberalism of the 1980s, is part of the natural evolution of and experimentation in post-political planning. However, the conditions under which such regimes shift can tell us about the operation of post-political planning and the inclination of planning into neoliberalism and post-politics. This evolution and shift in post-political strategies constitutes one focus of this chapter.

The second focus of the chapter concerns the underlying nature of the Big Society planning regime. As with the Third Way approach there is a strategic selectivity in policy and legislation that provides a clear, underlying direction and guide to planning. Part of the emerging dissatisfaction with the Big Society regime concerns the way in which such selectivity has not been successfully masked and

the clear, neoliberal growth agenda is ‘showing through’. Post-politics concerns a balance between masking intentions yet being concrete and clear enough to direct policy and change. If the balance is lost then corrective strategies need to be employed. Yet change in planning through policy, legislation and other means is necessary and exposes the strategies and tactics of a particular post-political regime.

Finally, what is also clear from the above discussion is that post-polities as a strategy of planning is not ‘agent-less’: post-politics requires agents to ‘make sense’ of competing and vague notions in the light of local circumstances. Planners were co-opted into post-political planning under New Labour and given new, influential roles as the ‘hub’ in a partnership-led, neoliberal growths strategy (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012). Under the Big Society such a role differs in some respects though planners are still required to be part of the balance between facilitation and action. The third focus of this chapter is therefore upon the role of the planner in post-political planning and how planners, as key actors with significant professional discretion, are charged with managing and reconciling different kinds of crises within neoliberalism.

Essentially we address three questions: what is it that characterises Big Society post-politics, how does it differ from Third Way post-politics and why did a change come about? The rest of the chapter reflects these questions. In the next section we provide a brief overview of post-politics, neoliberalism and governmentality as a context for the three main sections that follow. In the following section we try to address the first question above by establishing some characteristics of the Big Society before moving on to analyse how the changes to planning fit into different conceptions of the Big Society. We then move on to provide a comparison between Third Way and Big Society post-political regimes. Finally, we provide some conclusions and suggest some future research questions and topics around post-political planning.

Post-politics, neoliberalism and governmentality in English planning

Post-politics – in the broad sense – provides an increasingly popular and relevant framework for helping understand the changing nature of planning, providing useful insights into the implications of movements such as ‘spatial planning’ with its emphasis upon consensus, partnership and ‘conflict-free growth’. Such movements reflect the shift away from more adversarial forms of politics as part of what has been termed the post-political condition (Swyngedouw, 2007, 2009). The breakdown of old style, class-based politics and the loss of faith in socialist alternatives to capitalism since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 is associated in some influential accounts with the ‘death’ of the political as a place of conflicts, power and antagonism (Mouffe, 2005; Žižek, 2000). In its place we have the rise of various forms of post-political planning, most notably for our purposes those based around the management of growth through consensus-based mechanisms (Oosterlynk and Swyngedouw, 2010). In planning the pursuit of consensus has
involved deployment of universal themes that seem to command agreement by appealing to progressive though non-specific discourses such as ‘sustainable development’ or ‘urban renaissance’, each of them in Swyngedouw’s (2007) terms fuzzy ‘feel-good’ concepts or empty signifiers that disarm effective opposition by their ability to seem uncontroversial and commonsensical.

There are clear though, as yet, largely unexplored connections between planning as a form of post-politics and the neoliberalisation of planning. We have discussed elsewhere how English planning has increasingly become a form of neoliberal spatial governance (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2013) highlighting a range of manifestations including a symbiotic relationship between, on the one hand, the continual re-regulation of planning’s scales, processes and objectives in the search for a more perfect ‘market state’ (Harvey, 2006) and, on the other hand, the need to transplant and translate such processes into concrete places and situations (Castree, 2008). The upshot is variability and a variety of neoliberalisms that are highly dependent upon actors such as planners to ‘make sense’ of such nostrums interpreting, resisting, facilitating and overcoming the contradictions and tensions within the dynamic tenets of neoliberalism (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2013).

One element of change that exemplifies the neoliberalisation and post-politicisation of planning ‘on the ground’ is the growing incidence of soft spaces of planning and governance (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010; Haughton et al., 2010). Such soft spaces provide alternatives to statutory or hard spaces providing ephemeral, creative and experimental arenas for planning outside and alongside the more formal, territorial spaces. The growth of soft spaces within the UK and elsewhere can be understood in part at least, as part of a wider set of experiments in neoliberal regulatory restructuring that produces geoinstitutional complexity and variegation, which at system level serves to achieve resilience and continued hegemony (Peck, 2010; Brenner et al., 2010). Planning is an essential component in this process and soft spaces are a function of the endless and experimental search for geoinstitutional variation (Haughton et al., 2013).

A related dimension to our understanding of planning as neoliberal spatial governance concerns the processes by which the decisions and behaviours of institutions are achieved. Foucauldian governmentality helps focus analytical attention on the mechanisms through which neoliberalism guides and shapes the conduct of organisations and individuals, such as planners, and the selectivities involved in how they create or draw on a range of formal and informal techniques of government (Lemke, 2007). Informal mechanisms include elements of self-government, rewarding preferred behaviours and outcomes and normalising and routinising what is acceptable. Local partnerships are ‘empowered’ to promote local development, so long as they agree to do the bidding of their central government funders and to be judged by agreed output measures. The widespread use of performance targets and funding streams to encourage certain approaches and institutional forms, such as partnerships under New Labour, shaped the options open to actors, possible solutions and approaches. Some options are in effect favoured and others either proscribed or simply assumed as ‘impossible’ under the conditions of consent-building, where ‘radical’ alternatives to the mainstream become marginalised and rhetorically presented as the terrain of untrustworthy radicals and impractical dreamers whose opinions can and indeed must be listened to, but never considered seriously as policy options.

However, such self-government under the neoliberalisation of planning goes much further than this. There is an important dimension, amounting to doctrine, policy orthodoxy or paradigm, that provides the context for decision makers to interpret their role and that of planning. This on-going process of neoliberalisation has involved significant change for planning and planners, in terms of the scales, processes, relationships, outputs, culture and roles. Planning has moved from being a regulatory function and provider of key forms of collective infrastructure to a role of enabling, facilitating, coordinating and partnering others, providing the spatial dimension to the state’s territorial development ambitions and across a range of different scales.

The notion and manifestations of the Big Society agenda for planning can usefully be explored using this theoretical framework, but as we turn to next, the Big Society approach raises some particular planning related issues within neoliberal governance, governmentality and the post-political framework.

Mapping the Big Society

The Big Society is the dominant policy theme, if not nascent ideology, that contextualises and gives direction to decision-making within the current Coalition government (Izzard and Srere, 2012). Its chameleon nature provides policy makers and those charged with interpretation and implementation with a broad palette from which to ‘make sense’ of situations and options. In planning, as in other areas of public policy, such choice is sometimes not easy given the scope and contradictions of possible strands of Big Society thinking; the retention of the national Infrastructure Planning Commission to deal with major developments (albeit folded into the Planning Inspectorate), initially introduced under Labour, for example, sits, at best, uneasily with the notion of handing power back to communities. Similarly, the rhetoric of neighbourhood planning is difficult to reconcile with the presumption in favour of sustainable development (DCLG, 2011) (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2011).

Yet it is clear that the Big Society agenda is not as random or incoherent as it may superficially appear – rather it systematically favours certain interests over others. The various component themes of the Big Society are not equal or static. Given its ambiguous nature there is a need to map and explore the notion of the Big Society to, first, establish the scope of discretion within planning and, second, to enable a comparison and assessment with actual emerging changes in planning and thereby establish what could be termed actually existing Big Society planning. Comparing the scope of the Big Society with actual changes will help better understand what choices are being made and the underlying reality behind a new post-political regime for English planning. In this section we map the different
interpretations before moving on to comparing these against actual change in the next section. In order to achieve step one above and provide greater clarity to the notion of the Big Society as a driver of change to planning we propose six interpretations or narratives from existing literature and research. These views are not meant to be mutually exclusive nor are they intended to be exhaustive, nor least given the evolutionary momentum and potential multiple trajectories of notions of the Big Society.

Political repositioning: (i) as a reaction against New Labour’s Third Way and (ii) as a rebranding of the Conservative Party away from its sometime ‘Nasty Party’ image

One widely held interpretation is that the Big Society represents an attempt to distinguish the Conservatives from New Labour. Such distinctions are not easily achieved in an era of small differences between the major parties and where partisan politics are ‘a thing of the past’ (Mouffe, 2005: 1). Indeed, some of ideas of the Big Society were prefigured in Labour’s 2008 White Paper, *Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power*, notably the themes of empowering communities, redistributing power and promoting a culture of volunteering. However, there were two points of departure for the Conservatives. First, the Big Society narrative pointed to the mismatch between significantly increased public spending in areas such as health and education under Labour and a claimed lack of proportionate improvements in performance, highlighting that there was not a simple relationship between resources and better public services. Second, this lack of a linear relationship between resources and improved public services was due to Labour’s belief in a centralised state. In other words, whilst the ends of achieving improvements in public services were common between the main parties, the means differed. The Big Society was a bottom-up alternative to New Labour’s top-down government, an alternative to centralism.

The second element of political repositioning was that the new leadership of the Conservative Party wanted to create a perception that they had moved away from the ‘Nasty Party’ image of the party’s past, a phrase used by senior party figures in 2002 in advocating the need for the Conservative Party to broaden its electoral appeal. In effect, the Big Society became a re-branding strategy, akin to the Blairite creation of ‘New Labour’, one that was intended to create a perception of moving on from previous ideological baggage of listening to the rich and powerful and not to ordinary people.

Moral not market regulation

Some advocates for the Big Society focus upon the need to pull back from the increasing ‘marketisation’ of society and social relations and, instead, reintroduce more organic, moral and trust based forms of regulation that place less emphasis upon measurement and valuation of society through economic means. This approach contrasts social and economic interactions based upon ‘contractual regulation’ (e.g. codes, rules, policy statements, etc.) with ‘cultural or moral regulation’ that rely upon interpersonal communication. Moral regulation is instead envisaged as encouraging the emergence of locally agreed and specific standards of behaviour and accountability without state involvement. According to the moral regulationists, there has been a damaging expansion of markets and market-oriented reasoning into spheres of life traditionally governed by non-market norms. Such an expansion ultimately undermines social relations, alienates communities, involves the expansion of state activities, attempts to inappropriately measure and control social relations in momentary or market based ways and ‘crowds out’ natural and spontaneous forms of regulation. In addition, performance targets can lead to perverse behaviours aimed at meeting narrowly defined criteria whilst losing sight of wider societal goals, not least where the so-called ‘law of unintended consequences’ comes into play. In terms of the practical approach, moral regulationists point to a loose collection of ideas based around devolution of power, strengthening of moral regulation through cutting back on targets and good practice guidance, improvement of political engagement and charitable endeavour.

**Big Society, Small State**

One widespread if rather cynical understanding argues that Big Society rhetoric is being strategically deployed to provide an electorally acceptable yet intellectually based justification for reducing the size of the state. The Big Society, Small State understanding builds upon two complementary arguments. One interpretation of the need for a Big Society and Small State is premised on the long-held Conservative position that growth in the government sector ‘crowds out’ private sector growth. This position has been used by some to rationalise public sector spending cuts post-2008. The other take on the Big Society, Small State is that of a mismatch between traditional ‘command and control’ forms of the state and what David Cameron has termed the ‘post-bureaucratic age’; government is too big, too centralised and too stupid for the needs of society in the twenty-first century. This represents a longer-term trend away from comprehensive welfare provision towards what Evans (2009) terms the post-welfare, contracting state. For some this argument provides a convenient justification for the traditional Conservative concerns of reducing or privatising the public sector (UNISON, 2011).

**Latest incarnation of pro-growth neoliberal governance**

The ‘rolled out’, Third Way model of neoliberalism gave rise to the credit crunch, financial crisis and recession from 2008. As this time the nationalisation of banks threatened the project of neoliberalism according to some (Smith, 2008) leading some to even wonder if this presaged the ‘end of capitalism’ (Alvater, 2009). In retrospect the recession amounted to a crisis in rather than of capitalism and the
search was on for new forms of neoliberalism (Gamble, 2008). The notion of the 
Big Society can be interpreted as in part at least a response to the crisis, a re-legit-
imisation tactic for the Establishment, having not been part of the Conserva-
tive's policy agenda previously. According to Peck (2010) neoliberalism seeks opportu-
nities and takes advantages of situations to evolve, often experimentally, into new 
forms that seek, in the phrase of Harvey (2006), to create a ‘market state’. The 
Big Society is the latest incarnation of neoliberal governance carefully loading 
the origins of the financial crisis onto the expansion of the state under Labour, whilst 
promoting the idea that state growth had undermined ‘self-reliance’. Rather than 
greater state controls over financial services, the Big Society blames the state for 
the ill of society and promotes a solution around a more minimal state through 
a radical decentralisation of power allowing the community and not-for-profit 
bodies to challenge and then take on public services. According to Kiby (2010: 
486), ‘the Big Society is largely about ordinary citizens doing their bit to keep the 
free market going’ in an era of austerity.

The Big Society as decentralisation

There is some confusion between the Big Society and the notion of localism with 
the two often used synonymously. In evidence to the Communities and Local 
Government Committee on Localism, the former Minister for Decentralisation, 
Greg Clark, stated that:

> I see localism as the echo, if you like, to try to do everything at the most 
local level. I see decentralisation as the way you do that. If you start from a 
relatively centralised system, you decentralise to achieve that. [...] If you do 
that seriously and comprehensively then I think you move from a position of 
a very centralised state to something we have called the big society.

(House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, 
2011: 12–13)

In this view the Big Society is predicated upon and preceded by decentralisation 
of state functions and amounts to an attempt to establish a more direct form of 
democracy, to give individuals and local communities greater decision-making 
power in order to bridge the gap between people and the politicians that work on 
their behalf (Parvin, 2009: 351). If the Big Society is a Conservative notion then 
Localism is the Liberal–Democrat contribution. In order to fuse the two, David 
Cameron has emphasised the liberal tradition with Conservatism, identifying a 
‘strong liberal, civic tradition within Conservative thinking, stretching back from 
Edmund Burke to Michael Oakeshott, that celebrates the small and local over the 
big and central’ (quoted in Lee, 2011: 11). To the extent that large multinational 
corporations remain intact, this 'decentralisation' tactic for government acts as an 
effective tactic of 'divide and rule' allowing the powerful to remain powerful while 
leaving an eviscerated, vestigial state as a legitimating device.

Electoral advantage – the Big Society as zeitgeist

The growing disenchantment with Westminster politics following the MP 
excesses scandal combined with an increasingly active and informed electorate, a 
fragmentation of class-aligned politics and the impacts of a globalising economy 
upon the significance and role of the nation state all point to an electoral oppor-
tunity to provide a popular alternative. The Big Society is an attempt to appeal 
to an increasingly well-educated and consumer-oriented citizenship who have 
become increasingly used to autonomy and control over their private lives in an 
era when 'top-down', state-led initiatives are resurrected. Such an attitude is 
matched by the increasing complexity of decision-making in a globalising world and 
the neoliberal promulgation of 'state-failure' and market-led alternatives for a slimmer-
down public sector.

The Big Society is a label that provides an umbrella for a series of populist 
measures and legitimating discourses, such as 'empowerment' and 'community'. It 
legitimates a post-welfarist politics that posits the poor and others on the 
margin of society as responsible for their own position and the pursuit of wealth 
as a natural unmitigated good. More than this, a punitive roll-back of welfare for 
the poor, is justified by stigmatising certain groups of the most vulnerable as not 
being 'responsible', helping to deflect attention away from the rich and powerful. 
The Big Society constructs an electoral message that we are all in this together, 
even as it serves to emphasise that the state’s primary role is to promote wealth 
creation and economic growth. In this new framing, the Big Society can take on 
growing responsibility for a whole range of issues that the state is too incompetent 
to undertake, which is then elided with the message that the state needs to ensure 
it does not undermine growth by 'over-regulating the rich and by diverting its 
scarce resources to helping the least well-off.'

The six interpretations of the notion of the Big Society are not exclusive and 
there is some overlap between them. Four 'clusters' of understanding stand out. 
The first is around electoral advantage and the need for distinctiveness, particu-
larly from Labour's approach. The second 'cluster' concerns the nature of the state 
and the need to reduce its size and decentralise its functions. Third, there is 
growth imperative and the reorientation of regulations and the state to facilitate 
economic development. Finally, there is the moral regulation argument.

A Big Society planning: rhetoric and reality

Clearly there are wide variations in the interpretations of the Big Society concept 
and this fuzziness has been echoed in the proposals for and changes to planning. 
Whilst there has been a widespread welcoming of prospects for 'radical decen-
tralisation' (e.g. Rydin, 2011) there has also been uncertainty and suspicion about 
what the changes mean and add up to as a whole (e.g. Hambleton, 2011; Shepley, 
2011) whilst others have bemoaned the missed opportunity to make other, more 
effective measures that would deliver greater decentralisation (e.g. Bristow, 2011).
In Table 2.1 we set out an analysis of the changes to planning against the four clusters of Big Society interpretations. The approach locates initiatives in relation to which 'theme' of the Big Society agenda they belong and whether they reinforce or undermine that theme.

One characteristic of the new, 'Big Society' planning system is that there is a clear economic focus to many of the changes. Another is the internal contradictions that are built-in, not least the desire to allow greater local discretion in plan-making alongside punitive measures to ensure that any local authority stepping out of line with the broad sweep of national policy is quickly brought back into line.

Whilst the government continuously asserts that it does not know how the new system will evolve, and that it is open to local actors imposing their own direction on where to take their planning policies, there appear to be seven overriding changes that give the government of initiatives a more concrete direction and form, namely:

- the shorter, simplified NPPF provided as a replacement for more detailed national planning policy guidance;
- the introduction of a presumption in favour of sustainable development;
- certificates of conformity to NPPF required for local plans;
- the intention to align developers to make applications solely against NPPF criteria, where an up-to-date local plan is not in place;
- the threat to bring in the Planning Inspectorate to take over the applications process for authorities deemed to be slow or making poor quality decisions;
- the abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies; and
- the retention of the Infrastructure Planning Commission, albeit taken back into government.

There are many other changes but some of these at present appear to be either minor (e.g., changes to the Use Classes Order, removing maximum non-residential parking standards), largely rhetorical (e.g., local plan inspectors report no longer binding, duty to cooperate between authorities) or driven by the seven significant changes (e.g., neighbourhood planning). Neighbourhood planning may well come to be a common feature of planning in England, though within a presumption in favour of sustainable development, the need to conform to local plans that, in turn, need to conform to national policy and planning need, limit any impact and discretion and undermine what many communities believe to be a decentralisation of planning. These seven overriding initiatives also undermine other Big Society planning changes, particularly decentralisation and localism.

Another Big Society planning agenda is firmly grounded in a reworked sub-national framework for economic development and governance, where the regional approach is disband and a new sub-regional systems of private sector-led Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) established, albeit without a clear mandate or much in the way of resourcing. Considerable attention is paid to planning in
the 2011 Plan for Growth (H.M. Treasury and BIS, 2011), mainly an exhorting critique of previous modes of planning as a burden and impediment to growth. Planning is both a supply side constraint upon growth and needs to be deregulated, simplified and incentivised (viz. new generation Enterprise Zones, the New Homes Bonus, and the presumption in favour of sustainable development) while at the same time a necessary tool in the Coalition’s growth agenda (viz. Local Economic Partnerships, Community Infrastructure Levy). Nevertheless, an overall characterisation of Big Society planning at this stage of its evolution would be that it is deregulatory, favours local devolution and is anti-‘big government’.

Post-political planning strategies

The second question we wish to address concerns the differences between Third Way and Big Society post-political strategies for planning. Superficially Big Society planning echoes the post-political nature of Third Way approach under New Labour. The very terminology of planning under New Labour came to reflect something of the post-political desire to create seemingly common-sense, non-challengeable phrases with which to justify and take forward the growth-led agenda in which alternatives become invisible. Fuzzy and malleable, it was hard to publicly argue, initially at least, against terms such as ‘spatial planning’, ‘urban renaissance’, ‘sustainable development’ and ‘smart growth’, widely used post-political terminologies minted, adopted and deployed in ways that helped legitimate the strategic ambitions both of planners and the government (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010, 2012; Allmendinger, 2011). These phrases all performed powerful invisible political work, effective in part as their antonyms (e.g. unspatial planning, urban decline, unsustainable development etc.) are so inherently undesirable as to seem preposterous as policy goals, helping render opposition to them seem equally preposterous.

There are differences as well as similarities between New Labour and the Coalition agendas, differences that help us better understand the evolving nature of post-political debate in the UK and, in particular, in what circumstances there is a rupture and change of direction. It is helpful to analyse these differences as strategies of variously deferring, displacing and transferring the political moment (Table 2.2). By deferring the political we refer to strategies of deferral of conflict to some future point in time. By displacing we are concerned with shifting the political to other arenas and groups such as planners. By transferring the political we mean the ways in which conflict is taken away from the immediate community and representative processes into new, fuzzy communities of interest and democratic processes that may not align or map onto experiences of change ‘on the ground’.

Analysis of Table 2.2 highlights that both Third Way and Big Society planning strategies are post-political though with subde and significant differences. Under New Labour the political was deferred through appealing to open-ended processes of multi-scalar and sectoral coordination and integration. Regeneration and spatial planning were on-going processes where the political was always somewhat off in the future. Conflict was minimised through requiring strategies to be achieved through multi-sectoral working and partnerships, working on an assumption (false as it turned out) that this would lead to long-term buy-in to the strategies by all those involved. The recession of 2007–time of writing quickly revealed the fragility of many of these strategies, as those that had signed up to particular strategies and agreements in times of growth quickly sought to renegotiate their positions in times of austerity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2.2 Third Way and Big Society post-political planning strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deferring the political</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Multi-sectoral and spatial coordination blurring</td>
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<tr>
<td>responsibilities and locus of accountability and</td>
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<tr>
<td>legitimacy. Planning as a fleet of foot process,</td>
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<tr>
<td>difficult to tie down - no concrete forum for the</td>
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<tr>
<td>political. Third Way</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partnership-led consensus through consultation and ‘front</td>
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<tr>
<td>loading’ involvement blurring issues of growth</td>
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<tr>
<td>management. Heavily stage-managed consultations, often</td>
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<tr>
<td>involving specialist consultants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encouraging ‘local solutions’ to planning ‘problems’ through</td>
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<tr>
<td>definition of ‘problem’ is determined centrally around</td>
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<tr>
<td>neighbourhood growth. Those neighbourhoods and</td>
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<tr>
<td>communities that are active and likely to resist growth</td>
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<tr>
<td>engage in neighbourhood planning, sometimes unaware that</td>
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<tr>
<td>important political issues are not considered ‘legitimate’</td>
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<tr>
<td>subjects for their work.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Displacing the political</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Technical, bureaucratic processes and procedures led by</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘expert’ and accountable to stakeholders as much as</td>
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<tr>
<td>political representatives. Objective and ‘scientific’</td>
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<tr>
<td>identification and management of planning ‘problems’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Growing use of financial incentives — commodification of</td>
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<tr>
<td>political and appeal to individual and community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-interest.</td>
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<tr>
<td>New formulations of communities and neighbourhoods that are</td>
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<td>left to be self-selecting.</td>
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<td>Abandonment of universal coverage, for instance by</td>
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<tr>
<td>neighbourhood plans, and acceptance of ‘white space’ on the</td>
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<tr>
<td>policy map.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Transferring the political</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic processes around ‘consensus’ and</td>
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<tr>
<td>partnership. ‘Experts’ and illusion of objectivity of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quantitative-based processes and techniques in being</td>
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<tr>
<td>objective. New systems of monitoring, audit and use of</td>
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<tr>
<td>indicators introduced to drive forward policy</td>
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<tr>
<td>implementation in pursuit of measurable, tangible outcomes.</td>
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</table>
Deferring the political is achieved in the Big Society approach by encouraging communities and neighbourhoods to become the planning unit and take responsibility for resolving planning issues locally. Critical here is that neighbourhood planning is not intended to achieve universal coverage, only those communities that decide it is in their interests are expected to opt in. As such this is a self-selective process, where those communities motivated by particular political issues are the ones that will be more likely to take responsibility for planning. That this responsibility is only partial and subject to heavily prescribed, centrally imposed restrictions may not be fully appreciated at first. For the Coalition government, deferral involves creating a series of new policy vehicles empowered to act but with little public finance to help facilitate them. Once the strategies are created, the tensions will arise as raised expectations are likely to be met by central government with the response that ‘it’s your strategy, you’re responsible, you have little or no money’.

**Displacing** the political includes the downplaying of New Labour’s technical and expert-led processes and, instead, relying more on self-interest as the rationale of communities. This comes under the greater influence of financial incentives (e.g. New Homes Bonus, Community Infrastructure Levy and the proposal that profits from renewable energy developments should be shared with communities). The role of planners has changed under this post-political machinery, with this though does not necessarily mean that there is a loss of influence. Third-Way post-politics was prescriptive in its development and deployment of techniques and methods for displaced political issues drawing heavily upon, for example, strategic environmental assessment, sustainability appraisals, retail impact assessments and design and access statements. Although these could be undertaken in-house by planning authorities, in many cases they were outsourced to consultancies, with legitimacy out-sourced to the process, as consultancy reports were presented for public consumption as expert scientific input and therefore technically and politically neutral. That both consultants and techniques were carefully chosen and that draft reports critically scrutinised should go without saying, so the ‘neutral’ itself is one that is carefully constructed. Each technique introduced new ways for addressing tensions and conflicts between economic growth and other social and environmental objectives, presenting these as reconcilable tensions with possible ‘win-win-win’ solutions rather than old-style political trade-offs. The new techniques became integral to the planning system, in the process creating a form of self-policing governmentalities for local partnerships that required them to buy into the strategies and their results. Big Society post-political planning is far less prescriptive and more ambiguous in the ways in which politics is displaced, preferring ‘appropriate techniques’ that allow a community to decide what is appropriate.

Finally, the **transfer** of responsibility of the political under Big Society Planning is shifted from representative, consensus-based democratic processes allied to participative forms of democracy, in favour of direct, locally determined approaches. The need for a successful referendum to approve a Neighbourhood Plan places responsibility for planning issues firmly within a community.

These three post-political strategies translate into a range of characteristics for planning (Table 2.3).
Table 2.3 provides a selection of characteristics to highlight the evolving nature of post-political planning and the different strategies that can be and are being employed to deliver growth agendas. A number of broad points can be identified. First, there is a very different role for planners under the two strategies. The role of the planner under Spatial Planning was as a consensus builder, underpinned by collaborative theories of planning and delivered through partnership-led, technically sanctioned, evidence-based policies and processes. On the other hand, the Big Society approach provides a broad direction allowing individuals, such as planners, to ‘make sense’ of situations within local contexts. It is only at concrete points of action and decision-making that the contradictions within the Big Society manifest and need reconciliation: reconciling national and local priorities and interests, for example. The advice from the Planning Inspectorate to its inspectors on the consultation draft NPPF is illustrative of this. The advice stresses that the NPPF is a consultation draft yet it sets out the ‘tone of the government’s overall stance’ (Planning Inspectorate, 2011: para i(1)) and gives a clear indication of the Government’s ‘direction of travel’ in planning policy (Planning Inspectorate, 2011: para 3).

This points to the emerging importance of ‘soft’ guidance as part of the current planning reforms, where emergent policy directions are signalled through ministerial speeches and media interviews, as much if not more than actual ‘hard’ policy initiatives. The NPPF reduced over 1,000 pages of detailed national planning policy guidance to 50, simplifying the system whilst increasing scope for both discretion and ambiguity. This is presented rhetorically as a mechanism that empowers local actors, yet it also creates an obscure policy space within which different interpretations of the Big Society can be projected: the NPPF is both a product of and a process through which post-political planning operates.

Second, the role of the national level is significantly different under the two regimes, rhetorically at least. Rather; New Labour talked loudly of the need for devolution and local empowerment, it remained at heart deeply distrustful of local government and preferred to experiment in devolving powers to alternative local and regional governance mechanisms. For New Labour the advantage of these governance bodies was that they allowed money to be channelled conditionally, and the also required local government participation alongside private sector and civil society actors, producing forms of mutually-reinforcing lock-in around strategies to help draw down central government money and powers, and by default a process of lock-out for radical dissenting voices that might disrupt consensus. By contrast, the Coalition government confidently proclaims that it is happy to see alternative strategies emerge within an area, and for strategies to be widely differing in style and content, so long as they do not conflict with the new minimalist national planning guidance. But very quickly fault lines have emerged in this storyline of political indifference to local difference, as guidance wording has been tightened up with each iteration of draft policy and legislation to ensure some level of conformity by local actors to the guidance of national government and the wider local area plans agreed by local government.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have begun to analyse evolutionary trajectories of post-political planning, in which the post-political condition is seen to be less part of a coherent and relatively stable fix that supports the neoliberal growth project, but is instead, like neoliberalization, something best regarded as a mutable process that involves various responses and outcomes. Part of this, we have argued, involves constraints and discontinuities in how the political moment is variously deferred, displaced and transferred. The political though always surfaces and new ways of dealing with consent and dissent tend to emerge in consequence.

In exploring this we have focused on the evolution of planning from New Labour’s Third Way approach, to the Coalition government’s Localism agenda. The political appeal of the Localism agenda in planning was undoubtedly strong to many, playing as it did to critiques of New Labour as centralising, controlling, illiberal and distrustful of local people. This was a caricature that New Labour found not only unflattering, but hard to refute. Somehow a powerful disconnect had emerged between New Labour’s carefully manicured self-image and its much parodied public image as a party of control freaks. Localism was one of the battlegrounds on which the 2010 election was fought, ending up with a decisive victory for the Coalition’s Localism agenda, which very much played through into its current planning reforms.

To understand why this should be we need to appreciate how the very fuzziness of the word ‘localism’ and all the baggage that surrounds it renders it a quintessentially post-political term. Localism is a feel good term that is hard to argue against and therefore becomes difficult to refute policies that are said to be founded upon it, rendering opposition difficult to mobilise. In the words of British comedian David Mitchell,

To politicians, ‘local’ is a powerful buzzword: local people, local services, local post offices, locally sourced product – these are all phrases with positive connotations. ‘How can there be anything sinister in having more local things?’ we think. The seductive rhetorical appeal of the Big Society is based on this – it disguises dereliction of duty as devolution of power.

(David Mitchell, The Observer, 14 August 2011)

Perhaps the public cynicism that was bred in the later years of New Labour influenced reactions to the localism agenda. For its honeymoon period was relatively short. It is hard to see then that the Coalition government, for all its talk of addressing democratic deficits that it inherited, as challenging the post-political malaise. Rather it is remaking it in its own image and in pursuit of its own favoured strategies.

The consequences of over two decades of post-politics in UK planning have been dramatic, as properly political moments of disagreement have been variously displaced, deferred or transferred, rendering protest increasingly pointless within
the system itself. Dissent remains an enduring characteristic of planning, but increasingly it manifests itself outside the formal and informal processes of the statutory system, evident in judicial reviews in particular. Belatedly spotting the genie was out of the lamp, Prime Minister David Cameron in November 2012 announced to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) that the growth of appeal through judicial review needed to be reviewed and curbed, failing to recognise that use of judicial review in planning was often a last ditch, expensive response from those who felt the planning system no longer listened to them. As media commentator and chairman of the National Trust Simon Jenkins (2012) observed of these proposals:

Even where decisions are sound, most of the trouble comes not from officious individuals, but from due process under law. It is ministers who are responsible for that process. Cameron’s revised planning regime is loaded against local decision in favour of ‘national policy’. That will not speed decision but the opposite. Stripping out local consent is an invitation to local people to litigate.

The post-political approach in planning has generated a widespread feeling of disenfranchisement, as the powerful are seen to have had the system stacked in their interests. In an era of challenges to technocratic authority, litigiousness and media-tisation of both major and sometimes trivial disputes, it is not possible to stop eruptions of dissent within planning, which tend to burst out in often piecemeal and contradictory fashion. The emerging approach to these outbursts of protest has been to carefully contain and manage them, requiring local planning authorities to make decisions faster whilst also requiring them to consult more widely with affected stakeholders and communities. Post-politics both feeds off and is a product of the growing disputatiousness around planning issues – it is in other words both symptom and cause. The post-political malaise of planning feeds off a wider societal discontent with politicians even as politicians and the media call for a more ‘grown up’ politics. In such ways is disensus simultaneously trivialised and put at arm’s length, characterised as a problem of planning rather than a problem of the political.

Any planning system that defines its subjects is a ‘police order’ in Rancière’s terms of a partition of the sensible: giving a definite voice and place to people. Planning cannot be anything else than a police order since its very essence lies in giving a place to people and activities, through zoning, allocation of development rights and allocating voice to different subjects, not least through public participation and stakeholder engagement. From the perspective of politics proper, it makes sense to allow a certain openness and flexibility as to who participates and in what capacity in planning-related discussions. Theoretically, this leaves open the opportunity for the politicisation of community. However the circumscripted possibilities offered by the ‘return to the community’ under the Localism agenda has instead signalled a return to prescriptive centralism, so that paradoxically the

Big Society pre-emptively evacuates the possibility of the politicisation of local communities around planning issues. Opening up the black box of post-politics and distinguishing different forms of displacement helps to identify the divisions from which the political may re-emerge. The contradictions inherent within the Big Society agenda between ‘centralism’ and localism contain the seeds of the possibility, if not the inevitability, of a re-emergence of the political.

Note

1. Ironically, each new round of experimentation is typically promoted as part of a need to simplify ‘overly complex’ earlier institutional forms.

References


House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee (2011) *Location*, London: H.MSO.


