

Catholic church: Big Society is failing



The Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, criticised the Prime Minister's flagship policy as lacking "teeth". The archbishop has been one of the most prominent supporters of the Big Society, but he told *The Sunday Telegraph* that he feared communities hit by the economic downturn would suffer if they did not get support.

The head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales said Catholics were afraid the Coalition was "washing its hands" of its responsibilities to communities and expecting volunteers to fill the gap.

"It is all very well to deliver speeches about the need for greater voluntary activity, but there needs to be some practical solutions," he said.

"At the moment the Big Society is lacking a cutting edge. It has no teeth."

Archbishop Nichols said Mr Cameron's project was at a critical stage, and predicted that the next few months could determine its success in alleviating the potentially damaging effects of government spending cuts.

He has previously spoken enthusiastically of the potential for the Big Society to transform society, with its emphasis on "localism" – handing greater responsibility to communities to govern themselves. Among new powers planned in the Localism Bill introduced last December, communities are to be given influence over council tax increases and the option of taking over state-run services.

However, the archbishop warned: "Devolving greater power to local authorities should not be used as a cloak for masking central cuts.

"It is not sufficient for the Government, in its localism programme, simply to step back from social need and say this is a local issue." His comments are likely to be seized on by Labour as evidence of growing concern over the impact the Government's spending cuts will have on communities.

Leading charity figures, including Sir Stephen Bubb, the head of the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations, have suggested that the scale of cuts could undermine the vision of the Big

Society.

"We're now at a very critical point, with the philosophy of the Big Society getting clearer, but on the other hand the effects of the cuts are becoming real and there's real pressure about what will happen on the ground," said Archbishop Nichols.

"As we said in our discussion document, a government cannot simply cut expenditure, wash its hands of expenditure and expect that the slack will be taken up by greater voluntary activity."

The discussion document was published at a meeting held by the Catholic Church to discuss the Big Society and attended by politicians, including Baroness Warsi, the co-chairman of the Tory party.

Concerns were raised by Fr James Hanvey, one of the archbishop's advisers, that the Government was pushing through policies similar to those of the Thatcher and Major governments, which were seen by some to be divisive.

"The political question that hangs over the Big Society is its provenance," said Fr Hanvey. "Has the Conservative part of the Coalition simply seized the economic crisis as an opportunity to push through the unfinished neoliberal agenda of the last Conservative administration? We should not forget the enormous social division that was entailed in this. It signalled the end of a humanist and humane consensus in British society."

Archbishop Nichols said there was a worrying tendency for the poorer sections of society to be worst affected by cuts and accused the banks of failing to contribute their share to helping the victims of the economic crisis.

"The poorest are taking the biggest hit while at the same time you see huge bank bonuses and profits and this is not right," he said.

Francis Maude, minister for the Cabinet Office, said: "We are absolutely up front about the need for cuts. We cannot go on with debts costing £120 million in daily interest alone. However, as we change the business of government we are changing it to support a bigger, stronger society."

Jonathan Wynne-Jones - The Telegraph