



BIG SOCIETY BATTLE HYMNS

Long before it became a buzz phrase for politicians, **Big Society** was being elaborated by Peter Latchford in his work with public servants – and he has lessons for all of us, says **Lord Mawson**

The modern world of politics, government and public service is made up of talkers and doers. Sadly, today, the theorists, policy wonks and strategists have hold of the wheel. But for how long?

This book celebrates the lives of practical, enterprising public officials who understand that modern public services are not principally about process or purpose but about people and relationships. It is full of real and inspiring stories that demonstrate how to get more out of less. We benefit from Peter Latchford's experience of many years as a public sector troubleshooter and also from the access he has had, over the last decade, to a wide range of excellent public sector leaders and their frontline staff.

This is a book for our time when public funds are now in short supply; it shows how to stop spraying money at problems and grip the practical details. Latchford offers encouragement to all those who work in the public sector and are fed up to the back teeth of inefficient, impersonal and rule-bound cultures. He shows us 'a good way to spend life' through a new and honourable vocation.

For Latchford, the public sector is often 'unnecessary, ineffective, or straightforwardly counter-productive'. It is too large, not enterprising enough and unresponsive to modern people. 'Enormous' is the word he uses, with 'around 40 per cent of the country's income now dependent upon government'. Approximately 20 per cent of people in work are employed in public services. For years we have swallowed a mass of red tape, paperwork and pen-pushing that doesn't work and it is choking us all.

Yet this book reminds us that there are good people in the public sector doing excellent work. But the systems that inhibit their work need overturning, bad eggs need removing and public servants must once again return to engaging with the citizen. As a social entrepreneur who has spent over 26 years working in some of our most deprived communities, I have witnessed 19 attempts to restructure the NHS. This book often rings familiar bells. Latchford describes a public sector that 'regularly goes through the paroxysms of restructuring every eight to ten years'. Here we go again!



LORD MAWSON
Crossbench peer and author of *The Social Entrepreneur*

AUTHOR: Peter Latchford
TITLE: African Igloos and Public Service Heroes
PUBLISHER: Wingfast Publishing
PAGES: 170

Latchford describes why such benefits are rarely achieved: 'So much effort is put into managing the structural change that little management time can be spared to ensure that services are properly tailored and responsive to individual clients.'

And I would add, woe betide the soft underbelly of the voluntary and social enterprise sectors – often the real long-term players in local communities – who get in the way *en route*. Latchford's amusing story about African igloos is one of many unintended consequences that this lack of leadership results in.

Whilst this is not a political book, Latchford reminds us that 'government has become far too seduced by intellectual argument, by policymaking in conference rooms... by well-meaning but soft-handed progressives whose soul lies in the office, not in the street'. Many of our politicians have become such people; they have lost their human connection to the emotions of the people they tell us they 'represent'.

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Alarm bells should be ringing around Westminster: this very practical book will be read by those more interested in people and relationships and getting things done, than policy. It holds some important clues as to what the Big Society might look like in reality. For this great concept, a bit like the Third Way (remember that?), will depend upon those who are better at handling a shovel than a pen.

This book is essential reading for Big Society enthusiasts, and for those rare politicians who are interested in what is actually going on in the bowels of the ship of state when, as a minister, they press the green button! 🗳️