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Ottawa *Watch* 321: Diane Finley and the Big Society

By Lloyd Mackey

Diane Finley resigned from the House of Commons in May, 2021, shortly before the pandemic era election called by Justin Trudeau. She had offered to serve as interim Conservative leader after the defeat of the Stephen Harper government in 2015. Rona Ambrose won that role.

An October 28 headline in the *Globe and Mail* caught my eye. “Ottawa looks at rewriting rules on charitable giving,” it read.

The story, by *Globe* reporter Bill Curry, was one of several in which the newspaper was taking an “in-depth look at the evolution of philanthropy.”

Charitable giving is an intriguing topic for this journalist because so much of such philanthropy is faith-based, and is so recognized by Canada Revenue Agency.

Curry was exploring some recent public comments by Diane Finley, minister responsible for Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC).

He noted that Finley was looking for ways to help “businesses and citizens [to] shoulder more of the cost of giving” as part of government’s “ultimate goal [of a] shift in public expectations as to the role of government in assisting social causes.”

Then he cut to the chase. Finley’s plan, he suggested, in the fourth paragraph of his story, is “inspired by British Prime Minister David Cameron’s Big Society experiment, in which social responsibilities that traditionally fell to the state are put in the hands of the citizenry and private sector.”

It turns out that Finley recently travelled to London, in Curry’s words, “for a first-hand look at Big Society projects that aim to boost volunteerism and corporate support of social goals.”

The combined effect of the May 2 Canadian election and the British vote a year earlier likely helped Finley’s new focus.

Big Society – especially the British experiment in that direction – was recently examined by at least a couple of Canadian faith-linked or soft-conservative think tanks – Cardus and the Manning Centre, to be specific.

In Britain, the concept had its genesis a few years ago, when former Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith began many of the social issues enunciated by the political left with

solution-based thinking emanating from the right. His work was done through the Centre for Social Justice.

Duncan Smith talked about the concept in 2009, at an Ottawa conference put together by the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. Your humble scribe was there for his presentation and determined to keep an eye on the idea.

Let's fast forward to the May, 2010 British election, when the Conservatives won a minority. It formed the government through a five-year coalition agreement with the centrist Liberal Democrats.

From my particular perch, the coalition was greased, in effect, by the sense that the Lib-Dems could work with Tories who could see social issues being addressed through a "Big Society". That would be preferable, in centrist eyes, to control by Big State and/or Big Labour. Those two latter perspectives became the purview of the Labour Party after "third-wave" Tony Blair turned the prime ministerial reins over to the more doctrinaire leftist, Gordon Brown.

Around the time of that 2010 election, I came across many British Christian newspaper stories about centre-right efforts to involve religious leaders in the Big Society idea.

Curry summarizes the Canadian perspective as follows:

The concept of social investing, as it is called, has a growing number of advocates worldwide. But its implementation in the UK at a time of drastic cuts in government spending, is also the subject of considerable controversy and confusion.

At its core, Britain's Big Society asks local volunteers and the private sector to provide some of the services that government used to finance, in areas including schools, libraries and hospitals. [British Prime Minister] Cameron says it will empower communities, but critics call it a public-relations effort to put a positive spin on deep cuts.

Ms. Finley hopes to test some of those ideas in Canada very soon. "This is a high priority for me," she said. "The same old ways aren't going to fix the problems."

The possible changes in charitable giving rules, which represent only one aspect of the Big Society concept, will be explored by the House of Commons finance committee. Kitchener-Waterloo Conservative MP Peter Braid proposed the study, winning hesitant support from opposition parties. New Democrats, particularly, worry about charity rules changes reducing government revenues – and state control over programs.

For her part, Finley points to one faith-based social initiative, Habitat for Humanity as a "concrete example" of social investment partnership.

As Curry paraphrases her: “Habitat [and its volunteers], by working with private-sector companies like Home Depot, can achieve far more social good than they could otherwise.”

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In view of Canada’s recent involvements in Libya and Afghanistan, let’s not hesitate to remember, this Friday, those who lost life and limb in those conflicts. And let’s be prepared, as well, to keep looking for biblical and helpful ways to bring conflict to bay.

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