In this lecture I use the phrase “bigging up society” to refer to the process of policy-based evidence formation, rather than evidence-based policy formation, which characterises debate in this field. The focus is on what we can say about the capacities of third sector organisations, and about the distribution of voluntary resources, with an emphasis on the short-lived “Big Society” programme of the coalition government led by David Cameron. This was underpinned by a selective interpretation of the evidence base on voluntarism and a degree of exaggeration of its benefits. Furthermore, while the government was certainly - rhetorically at least - in favour of voluntary action, in practice supportive government initiatives were heavily constrained by austerity and recession; the ability of voluntary organisations to establish a leading role in public service delivery was limited by market-led reforms; and the voluntary sector itself came under sustained political criticism from politicians and the media. There are lessons here of wider relevance for governments wishing to support voluntary action.