Food banks should be shame of coalition, not proudest moment; Columnist.

Byline: Paul Benneworth

I HAVE been reeling since December when David Cameron described food banks as the epitome of the 'Big Society'.

He had been casting around for something to encapsulate his lacklustre flagship policy and food banks seemed to offer him this.

But food banks should be the shame of the coalition Government, not their proudest moment. Food banks give out emergency food parcels to families who cannot afford to feed themselves.

They are a sign of a society that has failed to provide its most vulnerable with life's essentials. Whilst it is wonderful that volunteers make up for that failure, a Government that cannot give citizens basic services is one that has lost any moral right to govern.

Forget the coalition's stupid rhetoric, we are not Greece and don't risk becoming Greece any time soon.

We have the world's sixth-biggest economy.

Voluntary work about us all personal When our banks failed, every man woman and child in the country gave PS3,000 to bail them out.

improving Austerity is a red herring. When our politicians want something, then we can afford it. So I can only conclude the coalition wants children to go hungry. I seethe when I see the coalition dragging volunteers' good name into shoring up their own grubby self-interested policies.

But what can we do? A good state provides essential services for its citizens, but the state should not provide everything. The state should ensure those things we need to live meaningful, dignified lives including a roof over us and enough to eat.

The last Government increasingly used the voluntary and charity sector to deliver public services, but again that misses their essential point.

Voluntary work and charity is about us all making a personal commitment to improving people's lives. We work alongside state services to make things nicer for people less fortunate than ourselves. I was lucky enough to experience the best side of this two years ago, when my son was born. He had severe jaundice and spent 10 days in hospital, including several days in Newcastle's Royal Victoria Infirmary's Special Care Baby Unit.

SCBU epitomises the very best of the NHS and I am fiercely proud of their sterling work saving the lives of prematurely born babies. They ensure that both parents and babies can deal with the shock of the arrival with as much dignity and normality as humanly possible.

But hospitals and the NHS cannot do everything, and SCBU have their own supporting charity, Tiny Lives.

As well as fund-raising to buy more equipment, Tiny Lives also fills in the things that make the experience nicer for parents and tiny babies but which a hospital cannot easily provide.
Tiny Lives provided us with a disposable camera. That might not and charity is making a to lives sound important, but it's the one thing you forget when you have a late night, blue-light ambulance transfer from the maternity unit to SCBU.

They also had a parents' room where we could get a few minutes' peace and, more importantly, see photos of babies like ours who had later thrived. That gave a really comforting sense that you were not alone in this frightening situation and made those first few days and weeks more tolerable.

Tiny Lives epitomise great charities doing superb work supporting a world-class hospital unit working for our most vulnerable. I have decided that 2013 should be the year I commit to helping their work making things better for society's weakest.

This year more than ever they need our support. For that reason, I run my first marathon in April for them to support them.

Find out more about Paul's marathon efforts at [www.justgiving.com/Paul-Benneworth](http://www.justgiving.com/Paul-Benneworth)

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