1
The ages of voluntarism

An introduction

MATTHEW HILTON AND JAMES MCKAY

The vitality of voluntarism has long been a cause of concern. Indeed, it is difficult to recall a period when such anxiety was not prevalent. In 1948, after he had helped establish the welfare state, William Beveridge worried about the potential dangers of an all-powerful Leviathan. *Voluntary Action: A Report on the Methods of Social Advance* was the follow up and final part of the trilogy begun with *Social Insurance and Allied Services* (1942) and *Full Employment in a Free Society* (1944). This classic liberal text was written in the shadow of a modern state that Beveridge feared would trample the ‘vigour and abundance’ of voluntary action; that is, those forms of civic engagement that he held to be ‘the distinguishing marks of a free society’ and one of ‘the outstanding features of British life’.1 He sought out ways to encourage the continued vitality of voluntary action, it being so central to ‘new ways of social advance’. Yet his faith was tinged with pessimism. Not only did ‘the coming of the social service state’ threaten the traditional role played by many voluntary organisations but social changes had adversely affected the sector too. The redistribution of income since the First World War, the greater enjoyment of leisure by more people (but in smaller parcels for those who had previously enjoyed much more), and the declining influence of the churches all threatened to reduce the impulse and the ability to volunteer.

Beveridge’s concerns are common to so many declinist narratives found across the political spectrum and which continue to inform debates about the voluntary sector. The corollary of such a narrative is that some ‘golden

age’ must have existed in the past. For Beveridge, that past was the era of Victorian philanthropy, ‘a time of private enterprise not only in pursuit of gain, but also in social reform’, and to which British citizens were indebted. Furthermore, this debt was owed above all to ‘the few’, the figures like Shaftesbury, Elizabeth Fry, William Booth and Octavia Hill who, for Beveridge, dominated the scene: ‘There is always need for the few – dynamic individuals wholly possessed by this spirit. They call it forth in others; they create the institutions and societies through which it acts; they lead by their example. Voluntary Action depends on its pioneers.’

It is a heavily romanticised view, just as much as the views and assumptions of many a political scientist imbued with a Tocquevillian respect for the classic institutions of civil society and democracy, or of social historians keen to mark the Victorian era as the heyday of philanthropy and volunteering.

In contrast, it is the contention of this volume that any such identification of a so-called ‘golden age’ is neither helpful nor appropriate. Our starting point is that we reject the notion of a voluntarist Garden of Eden from which we have long since been expelled. Instead, the contributions to this collection show how voluntary action has constantly reinvented and redefined itself in response to social and political change. So the fixing of a point when the voluntary sector was somehow ‘ideal’ is enormously unhelpful; its normativity obscures far more than it reveals, trapping us in an inappropriate declinism that obliterates the sophisticated adaptability of a sector that persists in being marked by diversity and vitality.

In any case, if pressed, most authors will soon move beyond such simplistic interpretations and will point instead to the ongoing work of voluntary organisations amidst a constantly evolving political and social context. Beveridge himself recognised that:

In face of these changes philanthropy has shown its strength of being able perpetually to take new forms. The Charity Organisation Society has passed over to Family Welfare. Within this century entirely new organisations have arisen, such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, Women’s Institutes, the Workers’ Educational Association, the National Council of Social Service, Training Colleges for the Disabled, Women’s Voluntary Services, and Citizens’ Advice Bureaux. The capacity of Voluntary Action inspired by philanthropy to do new things is beyond question.

---

2 Ibid., p. 13.
3 Ibid., p. 152.
4 Ibid., p. 301.
For the Wolfenden Committee on Voluntary Organisations, reporting thirty years later, change was once again a central theme, driven above all by the developing socio-political environment:

In summarising the principal developments in social provisions over the last two-hundred years it is possible to identify four main phases. The first, which we will call ‘the last phase of paternalism’, lasted until 1834. The second, which we will call ‘the era of state deterrence and voluntary expansion’, covered the years 1834–1905. The third, marked by the emergence of statutory social services, occupied the next forty years. The final phase, which runs from 1945 to the present day, we describe as ‘the consolidation of the welfare state’.⁵

The report particularly drew attention to changes in the voluntary sector during the post-war decades. Perceiving a relative lull in the immediate post-war years, it argued that the pace of change then picked up again in the late 1950s, including a reorientation of the sector, to differentiate itself from, and move beyond the limitations of, the welfare state, a ‘flowering of mutual-help groups’, ‘the growth of coordinating bodies at local and national level’, the encouragement (particularly through grant support) of the sector by local and national government, and a rise in pressure-group activity.⁶

Eighteen years later, the anticipation of change was an important element of the Deakin report, Meeting the Challenge of Change (1996).⁷ The adaptive imperative placed upon the voluntary sector came from: changing economic and technological circumstances (particularly globalisation, flexible labour markets, and the knowledge economy); the impact of demographic change and its broader social repercussions; ‘political, structural and institutional changes’, particularly the future role of the state, and developments in public opinion and, of obvious significance for voluntarism, in the nature of participation.⁸

Simplistic and unhelpful notions of decline, then, should be replaced with an understanding of (even an appreciation for) the role of change. To

---

⁶ Ibid., p. 20.
⁸ Ibid., pp. 39–43.
borrow Beveridge’s phrase, it is voluntarism’s ‘capacity . . . to do new things’ that frames the chapters in this volume. Our collective starting point is that the voluntary sector has continued to thrive, to adapt, to respond to challenges thrown its way, to retreat in certain areas and to grow in others. Our role as historians is to understand the nature of this adaptation, to set out a chronology of evolution, and to point to the most important social, political and economic themes that can explain such change.

The chapters in this collection have therefore been selected because the case studies they examine are emblematic of either the most significant periods in the history of voluntary action since the nineteenth century or the most significant issues that have impacted on the sector. The chapters explore the experience of war, the role of women in public life, the participation of middle- and working-class volunteers, and the rise of new forms of activism, engagement and participation. They show how the voluntary sector has responded to the changes in party politics, during periods of both rising and declining mass membership, and to the institutions of central and local government which have established diverse forms of interaction with the voluntary sector (from direct funding, to partnership and collaboration, and even to hostility and competition). Various chapters examine the role of the voluntary sector within and beyond the welfare state in the 1940s and 1950s, the rise of organisations that more comfortably identify themselves as ‘non-governmental’ (i.e. NGOs) than as voluntary bodies, and the changing relationship with the state at key moments (for example, during the Attlee governments of 1945–1951, the Thatcher governments of the 1980s, and the engagement with the ‘third sector’ sought by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown’s administrations after 1997).

What emerges is that the concerns that so vexed Beveridge at the end of the Second World War are concerns that still continue to offer challenges and opportunities to the voluntary sector today. The role of the state, rising living standards and changing leisure patterns, social mobility and trust in institutions are subjects as relevant now as they were for Beveridge in 1948, especially as the Conservative-Liberal coalition government embarks upon its ‘Big Society’ agenda. What is clear, though, is that the strength of the voluntary sector lies in its ability to respond to such challenges, then as now. The stresses these challenges create are ultimately creative as much as they are destructive. The historical explorations of the voluntary sector collected here should warn commentators today that there is much to concern those who work and lead the sector. But, we should not forget,
there is also much to be optimistic about in the contribution made by voluntary organisations to democratic life in its broadest sense.

I

The narrative of a voluntary sector in terminal decline can easily be supported by many broader themes of modern British history. If it is assumed that the high-Victorian period represented a golden age of philanthropy then it is easy to suggest that there has been a gradual erosion of its role subsequently. Campaigns on behalf of women and children and for better public health and improved social reform were superseded to an extent by the early welfare reforms of the Edwardian years. The classic public sphere was ‘structurally transformed’ such that the space for voluntary associations was eclipsed by the tremendous growth of the public and the private, commercial sectors. If female charity workers had constituted their own feminine public sphere, then they too were squeezed by the same processes. By the time of the First World War, the mass mobilisation of the state seemingly brought to an end this apparent heyday of voluntary activity.

Attendant on these changes were not only the social factors listed by Beveridge but also political ones due to the extension of the franchise. The rise of the mass political party politicised public life to an extent that voluntary organisations were seen to be aligned with one of the main political parties. The interwar period saw the emergence of new types of voluntary activity such as the Women’s Institutes, the British Legion, Rotary, and the League of Nations Union. These have often been interpreted not so much as independent manifestations of associational life but as extensions of, and supporters of, one of the main political parties.


11 Nancy Fraser, Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory (Cambridge, 1989).

mass mobilisation of the Second World War, on the home as well as the military front, further brought the state into areas previously occupied by the voluntary sector. The subsequent establishment of the welfare state served to hammer another nail into the coffin of voluntary social services.\textsuperscript{13}

The new social movements associated with the 1960s did offer a revival of the voluntary sector’s fortunes, though in a rather different form from that of its nineteenth-century predecessors. But the more spectacular moments of activism associated with the peace movement, feminism and environmentalism masked a more persistent decline in the fortunes of the voluntary sector. This is the thesis as put forward by Robert Putnam. In \textit{Bowling Alone} (2000), he provided compelling evidence for the growing unwillingness of ordinary Americans to participate in all forms of associational life, from social movement groups to parent-teacher associations and even leisure and cultural bodies as in the eponymous bowling league.\textsuperscript{14} Putnam’s emphasis upon decline over time is at its most explicit with his focus on generational change, as the so-called Greatest Generation, which endured the Depression and fought the Second World War, was succeeded in turn by the Baby Boomers and then Generation X, whose own civic-mindedness was a pale shadow of their grandparents’.\textsuperscript{15}

Such critiques have been transposed to the British context, with another dimension being added as even those voluntary groups that have enjoyed increasing memberships (such as the environmental movement) have been dismissed as vital components of ‘social capital’. Instead, it is claimed, these social movements have developed into highly professionalised NGOs and lobby groups that ask no more of their members than the renewal of direct debit arrangements. Such voluntarism, it is claimed, owes little to healthy social and political engagement and far more to the culture of consumerism: politics becomes a matter of single-issue preference with none of the barriers to exit associated with participation in a traditional voluntary organisation.\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, the floodgates of affluence and consumption are rarely kept in check in the debates about voluntary action. Once opened,

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 275.
\textsuperscript{16} See, for example, G. Jordan and W. Maloney, \textit{The Protest Business: Mobilizing Campaign Groups} (Manchester, 1997), pp. 17–25.
\end{flushleft}
consumerism sweeps away all other social structures leaving atomised individuals with no option but to shop.

Of course, this narrative is something of an oversimplification. But it does still persist in various forms. One of the most recent revivers of the narrative of decline is Frank Prochaska. In his *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain* (2000), Prochaska details with loving care the historical scale of Christian-inspired social service in fields such as education and nursing, only to lament the eclipse of this effort in the twentieth century. The villain here, though, is the Leviathan, rather than Putnam’s generational and social change: ‘It was not a coincidence that the expansion of government and the contraction of religion happened over the same period, for the modern British state was constructed against religious interests and customs of associational citizenship.’

We remain sceptical of such accounts because of the evidence from today which points to the continued thriving nature of voluntary life. There are around 160,000 charities registered with the Charity Commission of England and Wales. In their 2002 study of *Democracy Under Blair* (2002), David Beetham, Iain Byrne, Pauline Ngan and Stuart Weir found that 156 of the 200 largest charities relied on over 2 million volunteers. A National Survey of Volunteering survey conducted in 1997 found that 22 million people had engaged in some form of voluntary activity (averaging four hours weekly) in the previous year. In 2003, the UK Home Office citizenship survey suggested that more than 20 million people ‘were engaged in active community participation’, with the trend being one of expansion, rather than decline. Findings for formal volunteering saw a similar upward trend, making a contribution equivalent to around a million full-time workers. These levels of active citizenship were found to have been maintained in a subsequent official study in 2005. Indeed, some scholars have

---

20 Ibid., p. 211.
taken such evidence to argue that this is all part of a wider trend of democratic renewal. The forms of participation that many new types of voluntary organisation encourage—demonstrations, signing petitions, consumer boycotts—are noted to be on the rise, suggesting that while political engagement, as measured by voter turnout, is certainly on the decline, civic activism, as directed by the voluntary sector, is not.\(^{23}\)

We do not wish to go so far as to counter a narrative of decline with one of advance. However, if we pursue a line of constant renewal and adaptation it becomes obvious that many of the specific instances cited as examples of decline can be directly countered. First, it is not so apparent that an expanding state has necessarily encroached upon a terrain formerly held by the voluntary sector. Indeed, as in Jose Harris’s analysis of civil society, it is perhaps better not to see the state and the voluntary sector as entirely distinct entities, but as mutually co-constitutive.\(^{24}\) Often, the state and the voluntary sector have worked hand in hand, giving rise to new opportunities and possibilities, by no means all of which might be identified as co-option. The rediscovery of poverty during the 1960s can be used here as an illustrative example. Triggered above all by social policy experts in the London School of Economics (who themselves were closely allied to the Labour Party), publications such as ‘The Meaning of Poverty’ (1962) and The Poor and the Poorest (1965) used the state’s own statistical evidence to highlight the shortcomings of welfare provision, giving rise to pressure groups such as Shelter and the Child Poverty Action Group. These both forced forward statutory welfare provision and were led by individuals whose careers moved between the voluntary and political/statutory spheres. Cases such as these allow one to break down the supposedly clear division between state and society. They also reassert the ongoing agency of actors other than the state, an agency implicitly denied by declinist laments. Constitutive of, and complementary to, the rediscovery of poverty were a flock of voluntary associations—from the Claimants Union and the Disablement Income Group, to Release and the Brook Advisory clinics—which pioneered innovative and much-needed new services. They knew that the man in Whitehall did not necessarily know best, and set about teaching him a thing or two.

\(^{23}\) Pippa Norris, Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism (Cambridge, 2002).

\(^{24}\) Jose Harris, ‘Introduction; Civil Society in British History: Paradigm or Peculiarity?’, in Jose Harris (ed.), Civil Society in British History: Ideas, Identities, Institutions (Oxford, 2003), pp. 1–12.
Secondly, the changing nature of participation in voluntary societies must not be too readily assumed to be in a decline that leads from the philanthropic high-mindedness of the Victorians, to the jam-makng social life of the Women’s Institute and on to the direct-debit political shopping associated with many NGOs. Indeed, the reporters of Democracy Under Blair even go so far as to suggest that while ‘cheque book participation’ might appear to reduce social capital, it does not necessarily constitute a disengagement with politics and thus ‘volunteering’ in this guise remains as important as ever to democracy. As they put it themselves:

for reasons of time, much contemporary politics takes place by proxy, but we should not therefore underestimate the role of attentive and critical ‘audience’, whereby an organisation’s members may cheer on its actions from the armchair, or, alternatively, exercise the option of ‘exit’ if it seems ineffective or in breach of the purpose for which they joined. As long as organisations depend on membership subscriptions for their survival, they cannot afford to get far out of touch with the expectations of their members. And most can rely on being able to mobilise a wider penumbra of potential activists from their armchairs in support of a major issue or event, even if the numbers do not seem large in relation to the total population.\textsuperscript{25}

Thirdly, whilst we should not overlook the significance of proxy participation, we should also not neglect the fact that voluntarism continues to provide varied and extensive opportunities for direct activity. The environmental movement has been a key target for those scathing of ‘couch-participation’, yet here one sees an enormous range of opportunities for involvement, from the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers’ support for more than 2,000 local groups, facilitating the work of more than 100,000 people, to the more politically-oriented lobbying and campaign work undertaken by organisations such as the Campaign to Protect Rural England and Friends of the Earth, with their impressive voluntary local infrastructures.\textsuperscript{26} Thinking more broadly, one only has to summon to mind the charity shops that inhabit every British high street to see that the concept of proxy participation is only appropriate if carefully, and narrowly, applied.

Fourthly, the link with living standards can be contested as there is no proven link between voluntary giving and the fluctuating fortunes of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Beetham et al., Democracy Under Blair, p. 216.
\item Jordan and Maloney, Protest Business, p. 170; http://www2.btcv.org.uk/display/facts_and_figures (accessed 5 January 2010).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
the economy. Obviously, recessions can have an impact on the voluntary sector, but what analyses there have been of the impact of economic downturns on the sector suggest that this impact will be as diverse as the sector itself. Moreover, measured over the long term, the proportion of income given to charity remains relatively stable, and voluntary organisations continue to be formed during recessions as much as they are through booms.  

Fifthly, one should be wary of the implicit (and often explicit) political agenda in much of the declinist analysis. Much of this comes from the New Right, seeking to establish Victorian philanthropy as a period of grace, in order to demonstrate the essential sinfulness of statutory welfare provision. As the director of the Institute of Economic Affairs Health and Welfare Unit argued, ‘The story of the voluntary sector in the twentieth century is one of politicisation.’ Ceasing to be ‘bulwarks of liberty and focal points for collective effort’, voluntary organisations had now either been yoked to the state, or ‘had come to see their role as pathfinders whose task was to provide a social need in order to legitimise demands for universal provision through the political process’. Hence, Margaret Thatcher’s conviction that ‘the statutory services can only play their part successfully if we don’t expect them to do for us things that we could be doing for ourselves’. The notion that voluntarism and charity ought to be more involved in the provision of social services, amidst the retreat of state provision, is complementary to the argument that the voluntary sector ought not to be engaged politically. Contemporary criticisms of the supposed influence of NGOs in promoting ‘burdensome’ regulation and constraint upon industry have roots in the 1970s concern that Britain and other industrialised nations had become ungovernable, partly through the political system being clogged up with the demands of pressure groups. This in turn manifested

itself in the Thatcher governments’ distaste for ‘lobbies’, and motivated attacks from the right on international aid and development charities during the 1980s. Of course, the New Right is not alone in bringing ideology to the debate – neo-Tocquevillian social scientists champion a vision of liberal civic life with no less commitment.

Finally, there is a much broader numbers game that has been played over the voluntary sector over the past half-century that makes it inconclusive as to whether there has been a decline even on the most basic measures. Each time evidence is presented of decline, new data emerge that immediately contradict it. Beveridge’s worries in 1948, then, soon proved to be ill-founded. In their seminal 1963 work, *The Civic Culture*, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba found that membership rates of voluntary organisations were much higher in the United States and the United Kingdom than elsewhere in Europe. While Almond and Verba were keen to point to the qualitative differences in the various forms of participation, their overall conclusions, in terms of the social capital debate, suggest there need be little cause for concern: even relatively passive forms of membership that required little action on the part of supporters improved citizens’ feelings of political competence and, thus, helped sustain British democratic life.\(^{31}\)

In a sense, *The Civic Culture* pointed to a new ‘golden age’ of participation and voluntary action, one which Robert Putnam has subsequently bemoaned the loss of in US society. Yet, when attempts have been made to apply the findings to Britain, such calls for pessimism seem less certain. Peter Hall, reviewing a number of studies into voluntarism in Britain in 1999, found that while many traditional voluntary groups had indeed seen a decline in membership, others had actually increased their membership, and new groups continued to be founded all the time. A study of over 1,000 organisations conducted in 1992, for instance, found that while one-quarter of them had been founded before 1944, roughly the same amount had been founded in each of the decades of the 1970s and 1980s.\(^{32}\) Using such raw data alone suggests the narrative is as much open to optimism as it is to pessimism.


Yet, such squabbling over numbers does not add much to our understanding of the voluntary sector. It is time to move the debate forward. The analysis must shift from the quantitative to the qualitative dimensions. We ought to seek to understand the various relationships individual citizens have had with the different types of voluntary action. Certainly, it will be the case that some forms of participation add more to civic life than others. But, in the first instance, we should not rush to judgement. We should try to understand the different types of engagement on their own terms; to understand the rational decisions taken to engage with voluntary organisations in certain ways. To do so is to understand the context of voluntarism in any one year, decade or period. And to know this context is to know the history of voluntarism.

II

Together, then, what the chapters in this volume do is point to certain themes that are central to the history of voluntary action over the last century. And the history of these themes goes some way to providing a chronological framework for understanding *The Ages of Voluntarism*, a chronology marked by persistent continuities as well as change. If we accept that the voluntary sector cannot be understood as an entity in its own right, then the two broad thematic areas that require further exploration are its relationship with what exists above – the state – and what exists below – society. The history of voluntarism is one of its changing relationships with these two entities. It does not so much occupy a space between the two, but is part of a complex set of relationships and interactions such that its history is inseparable from both.

To engage with this history, it is necessary to reflect upon the definition of voluntary action. For Beveridge, the term encompassed the entirety of ‘private action, that is to say action not under the direction of any authority wielding the power of the State’, notwithstanding the fact that his report was ‘confined to Voluntary Action for a public purpose – for social advance’.33 Others offer more prescriptive definitions, encompassing, for example, operational and financial independence, the distribution of surpluses in a not-for-profit manner, and the use of volunteers.34 As we have noted


12
elsewhere, terminology and definitions tend to carry with them analytical assumptions that do not translate easily across academic disciplines.\textsuperscript{35} Indeed, the extensive definitional possibilities on offer explain the popularity of Kendall and Knapp’s characterisation of the sector as ‘a loose and baggy monster’.\textsuperscript{36} Theoretically, we tend towards Beveridge’s expansiveness, that voluntary action embraces all associational life, from Sunday football leagues to political party membership and international lobbying organisations. Yet, there are two practical reasons for the more targeted approach taken in this volume. First, the organisational history of many of the more prominent forms of association – political parties and trade unions being cases in point – continues to be well covered by commentators.\textsuperscript{37} Second, and perhaps more pertinently, for the purpose of the chapters collected here, is that this volume is not conceptualised as a comprehensive overview of voluntarism. Rather it seeks to tackle specifically the decline narratives outlined above, to champion interpretations of continuity and change, and to highlight specific areas where these have been unduly neglected.

What we are referring to, then, is indeed a ‘loose and baggy monster’. In order to uncover the diversity and vitality of the voluntary sector, the chapters in this collection do not adopt a definition that restricts it to, say, philanthropy, legally-constituted charities, or specific types of non-professional activity. To do so would be to establish norms from which any changes must be regarded as abnormal derivations: from such a point, inappropriate narratives of decline soon set in. Yet, the chapters in this collection do not seek to include literally all forms of associational life. Although the voluntary sector seemingly overlaps with, and certainly campaigns on similar issues to, political parties and trade unions, it does not do so with the intention of ultimately obtaining general political power (no matter how minority-based such a political party might be), nor does it, at its core, serve an instrumentalist function for its members (which is the proper role of a trade union).


\textsuperscript{37} For recent contributions see: Andrew Thorpe, Parties at War: Political Organization in Second World War Britain (Oxford, 2009); J. Lawrence, Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair (Oxford, 2009).
In definitional terms, the voluntary sector has blurred edges, but it warrants separate study because of its particular role in relationship to society and the state. The changing dynamics of this role are uncovered in the chapters that follow. And the first proposition that must be asserted is that the history of voluntary action is inseparable from the history of the state. Beveridge’s concerns that the state might crowd out the voluntary sector as it expands its own social services have proved unfounded. Indeed, as the state has expanded, it has sought new relationships with the voluntary sector, particularly as a form of service provision that either complements the role of the state, or else performs the government’s duties to its citizens. This has led to an ongoing debate about the independence of the sector, its co-option through funding and its manipulation into areas that serve the interests of the sitting administration, rather than those of the voluntary organisation itself or the constituency which it seeks to represent. Yet, once viewed over the long term, we should take care not to exaggerate these potential difficulties. Justin Davis Smith has remarked that, by the interwar period, there was already a great deal of ‘interdependence’ between the state and the voluntary sector.38

In part, this was because the developing state continued to rely upon the voluntary sector. Early welfare reforms took account of the role of volunteering and made provisions for the funding of organisations in selected areas. In times of war, such collaboration continued and was extended rather than being pushed to one side. As Peter Grant’s chapter demonstrates, an increasingly interventionist state in time of war did not preclude the continued development of a thriving voluntary sector; indeed, it encouraged it, contrary to assumptions in the existing literature. While the scale of volunteering to fight in the First World War has long been appreciated, it is little understood that this was supported by a comparable voluntary effort on the home front, which became more coordinated and regulated (but most certainly not displaced) by the state as the war progressed. Grant outlines three stages in this. First came the establishment of the National Relief Fund (NRF) in 1914, which relied upon the existing voluntary infrastructure to channel support and relief, and operated in the mould of middle-class paternalism. Inconsistencies and delays in the NRF system led to the appointment by the War Office of a Director General of Voluntary Organisations in 1915, charged with ensuring the eradication

38 Justin Davis Smith, ‘The Voluntary Tradition: Philanthropy and Self-Help in Britain, 1500–1945’, in Davis Smith et al., Introduction to the Voluntary Sector, p. 25.
of waste and the maximisation of support for troops. Finally came legislation, in the form of the 1916 War Charities Act, which sought to tackle the small amount of fraudulent activity taking place. Internally, the war encouraged professionalisation and innovation within the charity sector, seeing the development of flag days, direct mail and subscription lists. Externally, it embedded a notion of ‘charity working hand-in-hand with state welfare’, which would be prominently explored in the 1930s by Elizabeth Macadam’s *The New Philanthropy*.

The next stage in the development of the state and the voluntary sector came with Beveridge’s own reforms of the 1940s. The establishment of the National Health Service, the welfare state and the era of mass education provided new opportunities for the voluntary sector. Despite widespread predictions of its displacement following the Attlee reforms, Nicholas Deakin has warned elsewhere against seeing the state/voluntarism relationship in the crude terms of a zero-sum game, of growth in one sector necessarily leading to shrinkage in another. Instead, he draws attention to the changes this new situation brought about within the sector: ‘new attitudes were developing as new skills were acquired and new tasks addressed, some of them directly generated by the expansion of state functions’.

In his chapter with Justin Davis Smith for this volume, Deakin further elaborates on this theme, arguing against the simplistic and misleading characterisation of the Labour Party in the twentieth century as antagonistic to voluntarism. Speaking in the 1970s, Richard Crossman encapsulated Labour’s supposed hostility, arguing that ‘We all disliked the do-good volunteer . . . . We despised Boy Scouts and Girl Guides.’ This disdain for what was perceived as patronising, middle-class meddling has coalesced with broader developments and attitudes to embed the notion of antagonism. The scientific-rationalist goals of Fabian socialism led away from the vibrant patchwork of grassroots social action, while, with the establishment and development of the welfare state, the mid-twentieth century saw collectivism shouldering many burdens that had hitherto been carried by the sector. Ideologically, it has also suited both New Labour and the New Right to exaggerate the attitude of ‘Old Labour’, in order to provide

---


a rhetorical counter-point for their own political ends. Nevertheless, while opposition to voluntarism has indeed been a theme throughout Labour history, particularly on Labour’s hard left, the notion of a broad and consistent antagonism is largely a myth, one based upon a confusion of charity and philanthropy with other forms of cooperation, mutual aid and active citizenship. This latter theme, which Attlee called ‘the associative instinct’, has been an overlooked, but nevertheless important, constant in Labour’s social thought, from Attlee’s experiences as a young man at Toynbee Hall, through the promotion of active and local democracy in the 1940s and the revisionist turn away from macro-economics and towards quality of life issues in the 1950s and 1960s, to the ‘rainbow coalition’ partnerships between local Labour administrations and voluntary groups in the 1980s. In locating coherence amongst different political actors and periods, Deakin and Davis Smith therefore complement the work of Ewen Green on Conservative ideology, where assessments of the coping capacity of civil society, in different areas and at different times, conditioned attitudes towards the appropriate role of the state.41

Several commentators have already pointed out that the subsequent history of the post-war state saw the further encouragement of the voluntary sector. The rediscovery of poverty in the 1960s led to greater collaboration with the voluntary sector and this growing sense of copartner was formalised through a series of measures in the 1970s. At the civic and regional level, local authorities were permitted to increase their formal funding of voluntary organisations, and at the national level, the Voluntary Services Unit was established in the Home Office. For a variety of ideological and practical reasons the Thatcher governments of the 1980s expanded the number of funding arrangements with the voluntary sector. The centrepiece here was the Community Programme of David Young’s Manpower Services Commission, with both financial and moral imperatives overcoming suspicions from the sector (later seemingly confirmed) that the programme was principally designed to massage down politically-difficult unemployment figures.42 The shock when this funding stream came to an end in the late 1980s marked the culmination of a decades-long crisis the sector had faced over the availability of resources; other challenges centred around new approaches to management within

the public sector, tensions surrounding internal governance, and those centring on policy priorities.43

It is within the context of this latter issue, and the oppositional role of the sector in a period of hardship and social unrest, that Eliza Filby explores the impact of Thatcherism, particularly in regard to the Anglican Church. Filby begins by recounting the adaptation of the Church to the expansion of the state in the twentieth century. Two developments – the expansion of state welfare and declining church attendance – have led to a narrative of the displacement of Christian action. In fact, the Church continued to play a leading national and local role, as evidenced by the ongoing relevance of the local parish to fund-raising efforts, the role of Christians in charity work, and of national Christian organisations like Dr Barnardo’s and the Children’s Society. This is not to say there was no change – as Filby notes, Christian organisations adopted the style and methods of secular voluntarism, and declining denominational identity gave way to rising ecumenical initiative – but overall ‘the story is one of reformulation rather than retreat’.44 The Church was, therefore, a central player in the 1980s when, for ideological as much as practical reasons, the Thatcher governments championed the role of the voluntary sector in retraining and work schemes, in an era of mass unemployment. Church initiative here was led by Church Action with the Unemployed (CAWTU), and framed in a ‘non-political’, paternalistic way (albeit not always working out that way on the ground). This failure to critique the underlying causes of poverty ran counter to a contemporaneous feeling that ‘the task of the Church had changed, its purpose was “not so much to take over the Samaritan role from statutory agents, as to question a system which puts so many people into the ditch”’.45 The 1985 Faith in the City report was key in the articulation of this stance, although the roots of opposition to reactionary social thought can be traced back to nineteenth-century Christian socialism. Again, though, the experience of Church social action in the 1980s defies simple stereotype. Faith in the City’s establishment of the Church Urban Fund led to disquiet amongst the Church’s middle-class membership, and demonstrated that progressive social thought was not universally shared in the Anglican community.

44 See Filby, Chapter 7, this volume, p. 137.
45 See Filby, Chapter 7, this volume, p. 146.
Finally, the Labour governments of 1997 to 2010 brought about further developments in the relationships between the state and the voluntary sector. Increased regulation, competition, corporate backing and the ‘contract culture’ have led many to worry that the voluntary sector will – or has – become too closely connected to the state. The concern is that such a blurring of boundaries will result in a decline of trust in voluntary bodies, precisely what has helped sustain their popularity with the public.\(^{46}\)

However, in his overview of some of the main changes affecting the sector under New Labour, Pete Alcock demonstrates once again the significance of adaptation and renewal, rather than decline or co-option. The most striking development for the sector during New Labour’s period of office was the 2006 creation of the Office of the Third Sector (OTS), ‘which brought together policy co-ordination for the voluntary and community sector with previously separate support for social enterprise and co-operatives and mutuals, and was part of a deliberate attempt by government to expand the reach of policy intervention into areas not traditionally associated with voluntary action in the country’.\(^{47}\)

Historically, it inau-gurated a new stage in the social welfare role of voluntary action, which has developed since the nineteenth century from leading provision, through complementarity and supplementarity with regard to state welfare programmes in the twentieth century, and into the partnership seen at the start of the twenty-first century. These developments took place within a ‘shared discourse’ supportive to state-voluntary sector partnership, supported and encouraged through mid-1990s contributions from Nicholas Deakin (from the voluntary sector) and Alun Michael (from the Labour Party), and alongside the complementary notion of the third way, which played such a part in the wider New Labour project.\(^{48}\) The result was ‘a “strategic unity” amongst all the key agents and agencies, who had a collective interest in maintaining and developing the third sector as a space for policy intervention and forward planning’.\(^{49}\)


\(^{47}\) See Alcock, Chapter 8, this volume, p. 159.


\(^{49}\) See Alcock, Chapter 8, this volume, p. 165.
The OTS, therefore, needs to be recognised as a development that both rationalised and built upon the institutional, legal and financial changes of the New Labour years: the establishment of the Active Community Unit, the Civil Renewal Unit, and the Social Enterprise Unit; the development of the national and local Compact agreements, with their institutional complements, the Commission for the Compact, and Compact Voice; legal changes such as the 2006 Charities Act, which reformed the definition of permissible charitable activity, and the establishment of Community Interest Companies; and, perhaps most importantly, significant financial support, through the so-called ‘builders programmes’, which sought to develop the organisational capacity within the voluntary sector for its new role of partnership. The New Labour years were not a clean break with the past – the principle of partnership came with a long heritage in both theory and practice – but the degree of interest in and support for the sector in the 1997–2010 period marks these years out as a distinct new era of appreciation and engagement.

It is not entirely accurate, therefore, to see the state acting upon the voluntary sector. Rather, their complex interconnections mean they have to be viewed in tandem. Likewise, there exists no straightforward relationship between voluntary action and the wider public. The public supports voluntary bodies for a variety of reasons, matching the variety of organisations found within the sector itself. Therefore, any overview of the history of volunteering and membership of associations must take into account the esteem in which the voluntary sector is held by the public, and the purposes for which it believes the voluntary sector exists.

Much of the relationship between the public and the voluntary sector has been viewed in terms of trust. It is often commented that while trust in politicians has declined over the last few decades, trust in the voluntary sector has remained high. The charitable sector as a whole continues to obtain much support. A survey published by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) in 1998 found that 91 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement, ‘I respect what charities are trying to do’.50 Yet the nature of trust needs to be unpacked. Onora O’Neill has commented that, while we might state that we do not trust journalists, we do trust them to provide, say, accurate football results.51 Similarly, our high levels of trust in charities might be dependent upon a restricted definition of what

---

charities do. It is interesting to note that in the same survey conducted by the NCVO 89 per cent of respondents agreed that ‘charities are about raising money to help the needy’. This is a far more restricted role in comparison to what charities actually do. It is a problem common to the international aid and development sector. Bodies such as Oxfam and Christian Aid enjoy high levels of public trust, but this trust is based on their role in disaster relief. If the public was made fully aware of the tremendous range of activities such voluntary organisations engage in to promote long-term development (including lobbying of domestic and international governments), then the levels of expressed trust would certainly be somewhat lower.52

Nevertheless, and notwithstanding these problems of measuring trust, it is quite clear that the wider public looks to the voluntary sector for specific things. These change over time as well as being incredibly varied at any one moment. Indeed, the voluntary sector has adapted over the course of the twentieth century in response to these changing demands of the public, together with the expectations and confidences the public places in it. In an age of mass political parties, therefore, the public has sought in the voluntary sector, alternative, non-sectarian means of addressing social, economic and political issues. The rise of single-issue politics is often associated with the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, when the decline in mass party politics set in, but it becomes apparent that the voluntary sector has always been an outlet for political expression beyond the formal party system. Too readily has it been assumed that voluntary organisations that have expressed political opinions have somehow been connected to the wings of the Conservatives, Liberals or Labour. Instead, the voluntary sector has been the means through which society can express other motivations and desires.

In this volume, for instance, Helen McCarthy’s examination of the interwar voluntary sector demonstrates that associational life did not come to be dominated by the ideological logic of class-based mass party politics and that it continued to develop an independent voice, oriented towards support for liberal democracy more generally. Her point of departure is A.J.P. Taylor’s ‘army of busybodies’ which, despite historiographical assumptions to the contrary, continued to thrive in the interwar period –

not only in terms of political party membership and organised religion, but also through organisations such as the League of Nations Union, the National Council of Women, the Club and Institute Union, and the British Legion. For McCarthy, the ‘ideological work’ performed by voluntary associations came in two parts. First, it educated and socialised the new mass electorate into the workings of the liberal democratic system, thereby acting as a ‘bulwark of democratic values’, and contributing to the relative failure of organised communism and fascism to take hold of British society during the period. Second, they assisted in the democratisation of social relations. While class, gender and religious stratification continued to exist, McCarthy argues that it is erroneous to assume, as some commentators have done, that associational life entrenched privilege and anti-progressive values. Instead, limited, but nevertheless significant, ecumenism and gender- and class-mixing meant there was ‘a democratising logic at work in the associational cultures of interwar Britain’.

The public supported certain voluntary organisations because they trusted them to better represent their own – or others’ – interests. This means that we must move away, yet again, from any idealised imagining of the social structure of the voluntary sector. The emphasis within the new social movement literature on the agency of ‘middle-class radicals’ with their abstract agendas – in itself a clearly significant development – risks the assumption of the relative insignificance of locality and ongoing working-class action in the post-war decades. On the contrary, working-class groups have consistently sought in voluntary action mechanisms for promoting their concerns. The charge against the welfare state is that it has made its dependants particularly passive recipients of the state’s beneficence. But as Peter Shapely’s chapter on tenants’ associations demonstrates, the voluntary sector was also shaped by a working-class culture, even at the height of the welfare state, with the provision of services generating engagement rather than apathy: ‘The relationship between the citizen and the state carried greater promises and raised hopes. When these hopes were not fully realised, tenants reacted in frustration.’ Tenants’ associations provided a vehicle for the assertion of working-class interests in the face of an often unresponsive bureaucracy; in doing so they ‘helped to create a new decision-making arena, making a contribution to expanded

53 See McCarthy, Chapter 3, this volume, p. 56.
54 See McCarthy, Chapter 3, this volume, p. 67.
55 See Shapely, Chapter 5, this volume, p. 100.
notions of democracy’. That they managed to do so while engaging tenants from across the political spectrum demonstrates ‘the essential flexibility and robustness of the voluntary organisation as a form which continued to provide an effective platform for the development of civil society’.

Finally, society continues to place trust in the voluntary sector because it can be seen to deliver. The increasingly complex nature of modern life means that technocratic solutions to problems have been sought over party-political ones. Moreover, as successive governments in the post-Second World War period have ‘depoliticised’ issues by siphoning them off to expert committees and bureaucratic bodies, the need for expert bodies that can engage in technical disputes over specific subjects has grown. There is thus a certain logic in the rise of the passive direct debit contributor to the modern ‘voluntary’ organisation. As issues about the environment, public health, international development, and so on, demand expert solutions that go far beyond the competence of ordinary citizens, then so too do these citizens support those organisations they believe they can trust to put the expert case forward.

Undoubtedly, the much commented upon professionalisation of the voluntary sector since the 1940s has had its own internal dynamic. The sheer increase in size and scale of voluntary bodies means that many if not most have had to become far more professional as organisations which seemingly takes them far away from their formerly actively participating members. But the huge increases in membership of new organisations and the funds collected through individual donations show too that professionalism is something the public is willing to support.

This suggests a much more general rise of the modern voluntary agency, one which cannot be solely located in the cultural revolution of the 1960s and the attendant emergence of the ‘middle-class radical’ attached to post-material ‘expressive’ politics. In this volume, Virginia Berridge and Alex Mold further explore the heightened professionalism of the voluntary sector as it adapted to the emergence of a new form of activist. But they do so by demonstrating that the 1970s were just as interesting a decade as the 1960s. Different schools of thought have imposed different models

56 See Shapely, Chapter 5, this volume, p. 111.
57 See Shapely, Chapter 5, this volume, p. 95.
58 F. Parkin, Middle Class Radicalism: The Social Bases of the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (Manchester, 1968).
for understanding voluntary activity during this period. Sociologists like Touraine, Melucci and Habermas have promoted new social movements and the new politics, an extra-parliamentary lifestyle activism, which broke with class-based elitism. Political scientists, on the other hand, have often focused on pressure groups, and, in particular, the differentiation between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ groups, a classification that relates to both organisational approach and integration in the policy-making process. In their chapter, Berridge and Mold use the case study of voluntary action around smoking and illegal drugs to demonstrate that the distinctions between old and new politics, between insider and outsider groups, simply ‘melt away’ when closely examined. Instead, they focus attention on the ‘in between spaces’ of the oppositional models, where organisations merged counter-cultural presentation and thought with more traditional pressure-group and service-provision activity, and combined policy challenge with partnership-working, a balancing act enabled by a surprisingly permissive statutory funding regime.\(^{59}\) Sophisticated use of the media and of scientific research was relatively novel, and points to the increasing importance of professionalisation and expertise, whereas the importance of sympathy and collaboration amongst policy and political elites has a long heritage. Appealing for subtlety over simplicity, Berridge and Mold conclude that the activity of voluntary groups such as ASH (Action on Smoking and Health) and the Standing Conference on Drug Abuse ‘might escape easy categorisation, but it should not escape our attention’.\(^{60}\)

### III

Such developments, as outlined by Berridge and Mold, are clearly ongoing. They give space for an optimistic reading of the state of the voluntary sector today. For all that greater state attention to the voluntary sector has seemingly threatened its independence through the contract culture, it is likely that the public will continue to support and place trust in those voluntary organisations that are better placed to mediate the expectations of the public and the regulations of the state. This may well result in the decline of yet another generation of voluntary agency, just as we have seen

---

\(^{59}\) See Berridge and Mold, Chapter 6, this volume, p. 115.

\(^{60}\) See Berridge and Mold, Chapter 6, this volume, p. 134.
the declining fortunes of philanthropic bodies and mass-member social organisations in earlier decades. Others will be able to adapt and renew themselves according to the changes taking place in state and society. But one thing must remain certain if the history of voluntary action teaches any lessons. If the current plethora of voluntary bodies cannot adapt, new ones will emerge – in different form and with different agendas – to take their place.

This is an important lesson that history brings to policy makers who seek to make the voluntary sector serve agendas other than those it sets itself. At the time of writing, the new Conservative-Liberal coalition government of May 2010 launches upon a ‘Big Society’ programme that seeks to revitalise the voluntary sector and unleash its potent energy. While much of the detail remains vague, the novelty of these proposals is not so obvious. Indeed, the banning of the use of the term ‘the third sector’ within Whitehall shortly after May 2010 is an indicator that this is but the latest in a long line of ‘new’ attempts to forge a relationship between the state and the voluntary sector that did not start with Beveridge, or end with Blair and Brown.

There is the danger that the Big Society proposals are based upon mistaken beliefs about the relationship the voluntary sector has with both state and society. One of the key themes in Prime Minister David Cameron’s rhetoric is the problems induced by an over-interfering state. As he put it in July 2010, ‘top-down, top-heavy, controlling’ government ‘has turned able, capable individuals into passive recipients of state help with little hope for a better future. It has turned lively communities into dull, soulless clones of one another.’ This has been mixed with a critique of New Labour’s approach to the voluntary sector that claims government has had a similar dispiriting and de-incentivising effect. While the former accusation is a common trope of Conservative thought, the latter perhaps holds more empirical validity. As the chapters in this volume attest, the voluntary sector cannot so easily be controlled by external forces: new

---


forms of voluntarism emerge, especially if other types, whether through contracting, partnerships or compacts, are seen to be too closely tied to the state’s goals. Yet Cameron’s proposals represent another form of control, especially since, at base, the Big Society is to be expected to step in where Big Government retreats amidst a drive to reduce public spending. But the state and the voluntary sector are not alternatives. Indeed, they thrive in their relationship to one another. It might be possible, in certain areas of the social services for example, that the voluntary sector can take over from the state, but in other areas, it is just as likely that a revitalised voluntarism will acknowledge its own limits and make claims upon the state for further intervention, increased spending and, in effect, an expansion of Big Government.

Likewise, the chapters in this volume demonstrate the diverse relationships voluntary sector organisations have with the society around them. The sector cannot be reduced to a specific role, or imagined as one particular type of volunteering. However, many of the backers and promoters of the Big Society proposals do just that. In particular, there is a strong strain of socially conservative Anglicanism within those who have become Cameron’s advisors. They perceive an opportunity for a Church, supposedly marginalised over the last decade or so during a ‘politically correct’ programme of support for minority faiths, to re-engage with social issues, its congregations and offshoot associations providing the core of the community initiatives envisaged in the Big Society proposals.\footnote{Francis Davis, Elizabeth Paulhus and Andrew Bradstock, Moral, But No Compass: Government, Church and the Future of Welfare (Chelmsford, 2008); Francis Davis and Brian Strevens, The Big Society: A View from the South (Southampton, 2010); Iain Duncan Smith, Breakthrough Britain: End the Costs of Social Breakdown: Overview (London, 2007).} Yet this is only one type of voluntary activity, one perhaps suited to the heyday of Anglican worship and membership of the Mothers’ Union. Other forms of voluntary organisation, as typified in the case studies presented here, will continue to find alternative forms of expression and alternative solutions that will destabilise any imagined cosy relationship between a retreating state and an amenable voluntary sector.

This lack of control might be the principal lesson for policy makers arising from this volume, but for historians vibrancy, dynamism and diversity must also be noted. Throughout the last century, we have persistently and continuously worried about voluntarism’s health and future. Largely this is because we treat the voluntary sector as a prism through
which we attempt to observe other phenomena: democracy, civil society, political engagement, and even individual and collective morality. For all that we define and identify the existence of an independent voluntary sector, it is never analysed – and perhaps never should be – as distinct from the society from which it emerges or from the state apparatus within which it is inevitably bound up. It is not something distinct from the world around it. And to understand this context is to see how it has continued to evolve, adapt and transform itself. The voluntary sector has not declined and, as such, its supposed revival is unlikely to prove the panacea that many have perennially hoped it might become. Understanding its changing patterns is key. It is hoped that the chapters in this volume provide a basis for better appreciating the continuities and changes in the voluntary sector.