

# The Voluntary Sector in British Society

*On 20 March 2009, the British Academy held a workshop to consider continuity and change in the socio-political roles of voluntarism and voluntary associations in British society. The convenor of the event, Professor Pat Thane FBA, charts the history of the voluntary sector from Victorian times to the present day.*

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**I**N THIS workshop, academics interested in the history and the present of voluntary action were brought together with practitioners in the sector, for a day of sustained, stimulating discussion. Despite public assertions that voluntary action is in decline, along with community cohesion in an increasingly individualistic, greed-driven age, the evidence from past and present is strongly to the contrary.

Change over time is hard to measure in such a diverse sector, in which much activity is local and/or ephemeral and poorly recorded. We do not have good long-run statistics or tools of measurement. It is so diverse that it is difficult to define, or even name. Forms of activity that once were wholly or mainly voluntary in staffing and sources of funding have, especially since the 1960s and 1970s, become increasingly professionalised, and are increasingly recipients of government and/or EU funding in addition to voluntary and other funding sources. These are perhaps more appropriately described as Non-Governmental Organisations, a term no longer reserved for the overseas aid sector. A

new term has recently entered the discourse, apparently propelled by New Labour: 'Third Sector', a sector of activity belonging neither to government nor the market.

There is indeed a danger, as was pointed out in the discussion, of defining the sector so widely that it loses all coherence. But the reality is that it encompasses a sprawling, diverse set of activities. A number of speakers sought to sub-divide these for analytical purposes, for example distinguishing between different forms of activity – such as that directed towards the arts and leisure, or to welfare and community needs. These are not mutually exclusive categories, but such divisions have the advantage of familiarity to those operating in these and other sub-fields.

## The Past

If it is hard to measure change over time with any precision, phases of historical change were identified by speakers and contributors. To summarise these very broadly: voluntary action, often though not always directed towards the needs of the poor, can be found throughout British history, often closely

associated with religious institutions. Certain voluntary institutions, in particular the magistracy and local government, have long been part of the state apparatus.

Voluntary action in the welfare field grew fastest as the economy expanded, especially with industrial growth in the 19th century. Largely it was genuinely voluntary in personnel and sources of funding, and independent of government – though not entirely so even then, and less so as the sphere of government action expanded. Even from the 1830s, voluntary, mainly faith-based institutions providing schooling for the working classes were funded, and increasingly regulated, by a state which was increasingly concerned about the literacy and discipline of the population and which eventually took control of most educational institutions. Education provided a model for future developments in state welfare: activities pioneered by the voluntary sector were adopted by the state.

As the sphere of state welfare grew through the first half of the 20th century, the state

and voluntary organisations worked increasingly closely together. The state was slower to be involved in sport and the arts, which came mainly in the second half of the century. Pioneering state welfare measures, such as old age pensions (introduced in 1908), national health and unemployment insurance (introduced 1911) were in fact administered by voluntary organisations, mainly Friendly Societies and trade unions. This was partly because it was cheaper for the state to build on their experience in these fields and on pre-existing administrative structures than to create a new bureaucracy, but also the Liberal government of the early 20th century believed that voluntary action was essential to a good society and should not be supplanted by the state. In their view the role of the state was to supplement the limited resources of the voluntary sector and make the services pioneered by volunteers more widely available.

The post-1945 Labour government greatly expanded the welfare role of the state. It also, in 1946, founded the Arts Council, funded by the state to develop the arts and increase public access to previously largely elite forms of culture. An increasingly active state caused uncertainty for established voluntary organisations, who wondered whether they still had a role. Certainly, within the labour movement there was a strong, and understandable, strain of hostility to what was seen as 'charity', which many working people had experienced as demeaning. But there were other influential ideas at the time. William Beveridge (Figure 1), whose 1942 report *Social Insurance and Allied Services* influenced many post-war welfare developments, did not believe that the state should displace voluntary action; indeed he wrote a book of that name in 1948, stressing its continuing importance. He wanted the state to provide for the basic needs of everyone. Beyond that basic level, they should provide for themselves or be supported by voluntary action. For this reason, he always disliked the term 'welfare state', which he believed implied dependency on the state, and referred instead to the 'welfare society' and the 'social service state' which, he thought, implied the duty for people to help themselves and others and to support the state.

The very formation of the post-war 'Welfare State' stimulated some new voluntary activities on behalf of groups whom it was feared would be marginalised by the new institutions. For example, the National Corporation for the Care of Old People (now the Centre for Policy on Ageing) was formed in 1947 to protect the interests of older people; and the organisation that is now MENCAP was founded in 1946 to ensure that children who were then described as 'backward' should be adequately cared for in the new educational and health systems. Through the 1950s, it became increasingly clear that the gaps in the welfare state were considerable. Established voluntary organisations recovered and reconfigured their activities, and new ones were formed to campaign for improvements.

From the mid 1960s, when large-scale poverty was 'rediscovered' through the research of Peter Townsend and Brian Abel-Smith at the London School of Economics, there emerged a new type of professionalised, media-aware campaigning organisations, often more inclusive of the groups they sought to help than their predecessors, and with snappier titles. They included the Child Poverty Action Group (founded 1965) and Shelter (founded 1966). They were products of the new awareness of continuing poverty in an increasingly prosperous society; of the return of a Labour government in 1964 and

hopes that it would continue expansion of the welfare state, on hold since its defeat in 1951; of growing numbers of trained social scientists graduating from universities keen to change the world; and of a less deferential society and mass media. Older organisations gradually followed the new model, symbolised by name changes for most of them – for example, the Old People's Welfare Committee (founded 1940) became Age Concern.

The international economic crisis of the mid 1970s led to attempts to cut back state welfare, and to encourage and subsidise voluntary organisations to replace it. This was especially so in the 1980s and continued through the 1990s, through the change of government in 1997. One outcome was the emergence of a new type of voluntary organisation, formed to challenge what had once been voluntary organisations which were now seen as arms of the state – for example, the emergence of associations of tenants of housing associations which, from the 1980s, took control of what had once been council housing but was shifted into the 'third' sector. A growing danger for the voluntary sector through the past century, of which it has been well aware, was that close association with the state and dependence on state funding would restrict its independence, since state funding is rarely unconditional.

## The Present

The sector now consists of a wide range of activities that, despite frequent pronouncements of its demise, is large, active and continually renewing itself.

A UK Home Office survey in 2003 found that 39 per cent of adults in England and Wales had 'formally' volunteered within the previous twelve months, i.e. had participated in some organised voluntary activity. Many others are known to volunteer 'informally' – e.g. helping out neighbours with difficulties – but they are difficult to quantify. Whether this is a higher or lower proportion of the population than in previous decades is, again, unknown for certain, because of a lack of comparable statistics, but voluntary action is clearly still very strong in early 21st-century Britain. This brief survey of the history of voluntary action has discussed the

Figure 1. Lord (William) Beveridge, Fellow of the British Academy. Photo: Ramsay & Muspratt.



organisations, but not the volunteers. They too have changed. Until the 1950s, the backbone of volunteering was middle and upper class women, who were mostly excluded from paid employment. As employment opportunities opened up for them, they were replaced with paid professionals and younger people. More recently a major resource has been the growing army of fit, active and experienced retired people. For example, Voluntary Service Overseas was set up in 1976 to find opportunities for young people to volunteer in poor communities abroad after leaving school or university. Their clients have changed. In 2008, 28 per cent of VSO volunteers were aged 50 or above, compared with 3 per cent twenty years before. 'Retired' people are working in poor countries as nurses, doctors, teachers, improving water supplies, giving training in how to start businesses, with skills and experience to offer that 18–21 year olds do not have. About 27 per cent of people over 60 are active in formal

voluntary organisations in the UK. The shape of the population changes but does not diminish the commitment to voluntary action.

Society cannot be wholly 'broken' if organisations continually emerge, as they do, to try to remedy its 'broken', dysfunctional features. There *are* selfish, individualist strands in modern society, and they too create voluntary organisations to promote their sectional interests, protecting their own back yards. Voluntary action is not always altruistic. It expresses many aspects of society, including Britain's increased multiculturalism. Immigrant groups have always created voluntary organisations to protect their members and meet their needs, as Jewish migrants to Britain did in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Anyone who doubts the continuing importance of voluntary action should try to imagine British society without it. It is unimaginable, so central to life at all levels

are the diverse organisations in question. If they disappeared, the government might be glad to be rid of many critics, but they would miss many others. Government has become as dependent on non-governmental organisations that carry out essential tasks in the welfare and cultural spheres as some of them, such as housing associations, are on the government. Voluntary action enters almost every area of human activity. This British Academy workshop perhaps helped us better to understand its roles in British society.

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The workshop was organised jointly with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary History, University of Birmingham, through its 'NGOs in Britain 1945–1997' project.

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## Civil Society – after a decade under New Labour, and in the age of Obama

**On 24 February 2009, the British Academy hosted an event in association with ARVAC (the Association for Research in the Voluntary and Community Sector) which compared the state of civil society in Britain and in the United States.**

In his talk 'Civil Society in the age of Obama', Jon Van Til (Professor of Urban Studies at Rutgers University) examined the choices that face President Obama's administration in the area of civil society – 'that vast but amorphous set of individual and group actions that lie outside the formal boundaries of government, business, and family/kin'. He argued that three embodiments of Barack Obama – orator, pragmatist and organiser – frame the policy choices of his new administration, which may find itself forcefully driven by a global transformation in civil society that Obama himself has done much to engender.

In 'A decade of Civil Society under New Labour', Colin Rochester (Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the

Centre for the Study of Voluntary and Community Activity, Roehampton University) provided an overview of the experience of the UK's voluntary and community sector since 1997. He critically examined New Labour's policy of engagement with the sector, and discussed the impact of its actions on voluntary sector organisations.

The texts of the two presentations may be found on the ARVAC website ([www.arvac.org.uk/docs/LECTURES2009.pdf](http://www.arvac.org.uk/docs/LECTURES2009.pdf))

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Summing up as Chairman at the end, Professor Nicholas Deakin spoke optimistically about the resilience of the voluntary and community sector in Britain. 'We don't get lectured by business so much – particularly in present circumstances – on adopting their models. We are much more likely now to be telling them about *our* models, and I think that is a thoroughly healthy development.'