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The 'Big State' versus the 'Big Society' in twentieth-century Britain

Pat Thane

Recent political discourse, in particular references to the 'Big Society', has drawn attention, including that of historians, to the role of voluntary action in British society over the past century or so. 'Big Society' rhetoric, insofar as it is clear about anything, seems to suggest that the growth of a substantial welfare state apparatus over the past century, especially since 1945, and driven by the Labour party, has squeezed out once-vibrant voluntary action, which therefore needs to be revived.

The historian's natural response is to ask whether this is so. Recent government statistics suggest that it is not. In 2001 the Labour government set up an annual Citizenship Survey run by the Home Office to measure levels of volunteering and other forms of community involvement, because Labour was also keen to promote voluntary action, or the 'Third Sector' as it chose to call it.¹ The Survey reported in 2010 that 40 per cent of adults in England had volunteered through a formal organisation at least once in the previous twelve months; and 25 per cent volunteered at least once a month. Fifty-four per cent had volunteered informally at least once in the previous twelve months, including helping neighbours, friends, relatives; 29 per cent did so at least once a month.² The proportions had been quite stable over the ten years of successive surveys. We have no way of comparing this with longer-run trends because comparable statistics do not exist for earlier periods, but the figures do not suggest a weak sector in recent decline. Unfortunately we will not be able to know the impact of current policies on the sector because the survey was discontinued by the Coalition government in 2010, apparently for reasons of cost.

What can we find out about the longer-run story? Historians of social welfare over several decades, the present author included, have paid less attention to the vitality of the voluntary sector than to the growth of state welfare.³ This is explicable

because the growth of state welfare was a major feature of twentieth-century British history that needed to be explored, though there have been some excellent studies examining the role of the voluntary sector and its relationship with the welfare state.⁴ Furthermore, the voluntary sector is not easy to research. Change over time is hard to measure in a diverse sector in which much activity is local and/or ephemeral and poorly recorded. There are few comprehensive long-run statistics or tools allowing the measurement of funds, or number of organisations or supporters.⁵ Many organisations do not have accessible records, often owing to the lack of resources to facilitate their archiving.

One measure of the size of the sector is the number of charities registered with the Charity Commission. This has risen from 56,000 in 1950 to 180,000 in 2010.⁶ But not all large NGOs or all small voluntary organisations are registered, and not everything registered (for example many public schools) would be recognised as a charity in the traditional sense. But, again, inadequate though the statistics are, they suggest that the sector is not declining or noticeably weak.

Reconstructing the history of voluntary organisations is complicated by the fact that the sector is so diverse that it is difficult to define, or even name. It encompasses a sprawling set of activities and organisational forms, from large, highly professionalised international aid agencies, such as OXFAM or Save the Children, to very local, wholly voluntary, sometimes faith-based, sometimes secular, groups devoted to helping asylum seekers, stopping road-building, especially recently trying to stop closure of a library or a day-centre for dementia sufferers, or promoting sport, amateur theatre or other forms of leisure and cultural activity. There is a danger of defining the sector so widely that it loses all coherence, appearing (as it has been described) as 'a loose and baggy monster', but it is important to be aware of its extent and diversity.⁷

In the course of the twentieth century, many organisations which were originally wholly or mainly voluntary in staffing and sources of funding have become increasingly professionalised. In addition to voluntary funding they have come progressively to receive more government and/or EU funding, so much so that the term 'voluntary sector' is no longer always appropriate. These are perhaps now better described as non-governmental organisations, a term no longer reserved for the overseas aid sector.⁸ As already suggested, New Labour labelled it the 'Third Sector', that is, not the state or the market sector, but this appears to have been deleted from the political language since the 2010 general election.⁹

Despite the difficulties, there has been a growth of recent work on the history of the sector. Professor Matthew Hilton and his colleagues at Birmingham University have received funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Leverhulme Trust to study NGOs since 1945, locating their records and assessing their work and significance.¹⁰ This has led to the publication of two important collections of essays, the second, *The Ages of Voluntarism*, covering the whole of the past century, and to an equally useful guide to the sector since 1945.¹¹

Valuably too, the Voluntary Action History Society was founded in 1991 to facilitate historical work on the sector. In recent years it has successfully encouraged a number of younger researchers entering the field. It recently celebrated its twentieth anniversary by publishing a collection of essays on the roots of voluntary action.¹²

Latterly, a collection was published to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of William Beveridge's less well-remembered report, *Voluntary Action*, which appeared in 1948.¹³ Beveridge, widely regarded as the godfather of the post-war British 'welfare state', was committed to a continued important role for voluntary action in what he refused to call a 'welfare state', preferring the term 'social service state', to denote an ethos of mutual collective commitment which he aspired to foster rather than a culture of dependency.¹⁴

While all of this work is very positive about the continued importance of voluntary action in British society over the past century, some political scientists and historians argue, to the contrary, that its significance has declined. Among political scientists, Robert Putnam in the United States put this case in *Bowling Alone*, although his empirical evidence was not very convincing.¹⁵ Among historians, Frank Prochaska, who has written important work on voluntary action in Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,¹⁶ has argued that it has declined since 1945, along with Christianity, but he does not support this convincingly and recent work, such as that by the Birmingham project, strongly suggests otherwise. Not only has voluntary action remained strong, as already suggested, but the contribution of Christian and other faith groups to it has continued powerfully, as Eliza Filby has demonstrated concerning Christianity.¹⁷

So what can we say about the relationship between the state and voluntary action over the past century? This chapter will focus on social welfare because that is where the debate is most active and where the relationship between the two sectors is probably closest, but it is important to be aware of the wider range of voluntary activities in Britain, briefly outlined above. Particular examples will be used of provision for the very young, under fives, and for older people, to illustrate the broader story in this sprawling sector. Overall, the relationship between the state and voluntary action is best described as complementary, marked by co-operation rather than competition, though the co-operation is not always without its tensions.¹⁸ What has developed over time is what some social scientists call a 'mixed economy of welfare', combining voluntary and state action, in shifting forms and with shifting boundaries.

To return to the days before the welfare state, nineteenth-century Britain was a society in which more people than ever before had money and time to give to others, and in which there was also a heightened awareness of both social and economic inequalities and the possible political dangers of neglecting to address them. As a consequence, there was a marked expansion of philanthropic giving and voluntary action. Of course, neither voluntary action nor donations were new in the

nineteenth century. They had a very long history in Britain.¹⁹ But the nineteenth century witnessed the expansion of knowledge about and understanding of social problems. The state, wherever possible, delegated social action to the voluntary sector. Then, as it felt the need to take certain measures further, for example to expand opportunities for education, it began by subsidising voluntary action, starting with schools and initially supporting mainly Christian institutions. When this proved inadequate to provide sufficient education for all children, from 1870 it moved towards establishing wholly publicly provided schools, funded through local rates, though without abandoning subsidies to the voluntary sector.²⁰

This set a pattern which has continued to the present: of the voluntary sector first identifying a social problem which needs a solution – in this case providing education for working-class children. They then created a solution by setting up voluntary schools. These provided a model which the state later followed. The state acted in this case because there was no way that the voluntary sector could provide for the full extent of the national need for education. Only the state had the resources to do this. Very often voluntary organisations saw, and still see, an important part of their role, not as substituting for the state, but as identifying problems, devising forms of provision to deal with them, then pressing the state to follow and expand upon their example, to deal with the problems they have identified. Voluntary organisations were well aware of the limitations of their own resources to resolve major social issues.

For example, George Behlmer has described how the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) was established in the 1880s to campaign against and seek services for the neglected but substantial problem of the physical and sexual abuse of children.²¹ With voluntary funds, they appointed their own officials to investigate cases, rescue children and ensure that they were looked after in voluntary homes, but they were well aware that they could not solve such a massive problem through voluntary effort alone. A key part of their role was to press government for legislation to punish perpetrators of cruelty and abuse. This led to the first legislation against child abuse, introduced from 1889. The NSPCC then campaigned for the comprehensive state-supported care for abused children that it knew was beyond its capacity. This led to the Children Act of 1908, which established committees in each local authority in England and Wales with a duty to identify, support and care for abused children. These committees included representatives of voluntary organisations. NSPCC inspectors helped administer the Act, because they had experience in the field, and children rescued from abusive homes were still often placed in voluntary institutions. It was one of many fields of co-operative, complementary action between the state and the voluntary sector in the years before 1914, in which the state built on the experience of the voluntary sector in extending its own welfare responsibilities.²²

Also concerning the care of children, voluntary organisations, mostly led by women, such as the large, mainly working-class Women's Co-operative Guild, campaigned from the end of the nineteenth century for measures to reduce the high

levels of infant and maternal mortality. They created voluntary child and maternal health clinics to advise and assist mothers on health and child care, sometimes providing free or subsidised food and milk, while demanding that the state adopt this model nationally, initially getting support and funding from some local authorities.²³ The campaigns continued through the First World War, fuelled by the need to replace those lost in battle, of which the women took full propaganda advantage. The government responded by funding public and voluntary clinics and child-care classes for mothers during the war. After the war, the 1918 Maternity and Child Welfare Act introduced subsidies for local authorities establishing welfare centres, health visitors, food for expectant and nursing mothers and children under five, crèches and day nurseries. From 1919 there were subsidies to voluntary agencies providing similar services.²⁴

The early years of the twentieth century, before 1914, saw a notable growth of important new initiatives in state welfare. Like the examples given above, almost all had their origins in the voluntary sector and incorporated voluntary organisations in their administration. One of the first acts of the Liberal government established in 1906 was, on the initiative of a Labour MP, to allow local authorities to provide free school meals for needy children on a model already developed by voluntary organisations in a number of towns and cities.²⁵ The first old age pensions were introduced in 1908, following campaigning by extra-parliamentary groups since the 1870s. The local administration of the pensions was placed in the hands of local pensions committees consisting of volunteers, often members of friendly societies who were experienced in administering sickness benefits to older members, and others such as clergymen who were familiar with local problems.²⁶ Similarly, when National Health Insurance and Unemployment Insurance were first introduced in 1911, their administration was placed in the hands of the voluntary organisations who already provided benefits of this kind for working people, the friendly societies and trade unions.²⁷

The motives of the Liberal governments which introduced these innovations for involving the voluntary sector were partly that it was cheaper to delegate administration to existing, experienced institutions, rather than setting up costly new government bureaucracies. In the cases of pensions and health and unemployment insurance, it also helped to buy off the doubts of some friendly societies and trade unions about the state moving into these fields in which they had long been active. But the friendly societies and trade unions had never been wholly opposed to state action in these areas. They were opposed to the state taking over work that they felt that they were already performing competently. This included the provision of sickness benefits and other forms of support for their members, who were mainly better-paid, regularly employed male workers. They favoured and were prepared to collaborate with the state in order to help those (above all women and lower-paid men) who could not afford to join such self-help organisations because they were too poor or had no regular income from which to make contributions.²⁸

These organisations saw state and voluntary action as complementary and so did the Liberal government. It did not envisage the state wholly taking on a welfare role and pushing out the voluntary sector, which it was keen to promote, but believed that the two should work together and that the state should encourage those with time and income to spare to support voluntary action. This was the environment in which Beveridge developed his enduring ideas, beginning in the voluntary sector as a resident at Toynbee Hall, the Settlement House in the East End of London, at the beginning of the century, subsequently advising Winston Churchill on the introduction of labour exchanges in 1909 and unemployment insurance in 1911.²⁹

Between the wars, both state welfare expenditure and the voluntary sector expanded, with the state increasingly subsidising voluntary action.³⁰ An example was the Labour-controlled London County Council (LCC) from 1934, when it first came under Labour party control under the leadership of Herbert Morrison. Morrison encouraged the collaboration with the voluntary sector, particularly in the public provision of education and children's services. This could be, and still is, a mixed blessing for the sector, since subsidies rarely come without strings and collaboration could and can impose constraints, but it led to a distinct improvement in health, welfare and educational services for children in London, often on models first proposed by the voluntary sector.

The National Council of Social Services was established in 1919 to continue and extend the considerable wartime co-operation between voluntary and state agencies and to co-ordinate the work of voluntary bodies. One of its stated aims was 'to co-operate with government departments and local authorities making use of voluntary effort', and it did exactly this, indeed still does as the National Council for Voluntary Organisations.³¹ It acted as a channel through which state funding was dispersed to voluntary organisations, produced research and policy documents, and held conferences to increase knowledge and awareness of social problems and possible solutions. The voluntary sector continued through the inter-war years in its role of identifying neglected social issues, proposing solutions, giving help where it could and campaigning for state legislation and action. For example, the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child was established in 1918 to help a particularly excluded sector of the population. In the next few years it gave voluntary help to enable the mothers and children to stay together, to find homes and work, and also persuaded parliament to improve the rights of these mothers and children, including rights to increased support from the father.³²

The voluntary sector expanded and was notably active between the wars, successfully influencing the policies and actions of central and local government, which were also expanding their welfare activities, despite the problems of the Depression.³³ As suggested above, William Beveridge was keen, during the Second World War, to promote what he called a 'social service state' in which voluntary and public sectors worked together. This was a theme of his famous report published in 1942, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, a document highly influential in

the formation of the post-war welfare system.³⁴ However, when Labour came into power in 1945, it rejected more of Beveridge's proposals than is normally recognised. The Labour government was divided and equivocal about voluntary action. There were those such as Prime Minister Clement Attlee, who had spent time at Toynbee Hall and became its president while in Downing Street, who believed that voluntary action had an important and continuing role in society. Then there were others, more obviously of working-class origins, who identified the voluntary sector with patronising, demeaning charity and wanted it banished from Labour's New Jerusalem.³⁵ They believed that the state could and should provide for all welfare needs funded by redistributive taxation. Voluntary organisations themselves felt uncertain of their role in the new 'welfare state', or whether indeed they still had a role. Donations flagged as donors shared this uncertainty and taxes also remained high.³⁶

Nonetheless, voluntary organisations gradually found a role for themselves and Labour continued to co-operate with them, not least because the post-war welfare state was far from comprehensive.³⁷ Labour continued to work closely with the National Council of Social Services.³⁸ Labour knew that it could not do everything immediately in the economic situation it inherited following the severe Depression of the inter-war years and a costly war, and it prioritised re-building the economy and creating and maintaining full employment over welfare. The party leaders believed, as Labour had since its foundation, that the best means to improve the welfare of the mass of the population was to provide full employment and good wages. Welfare was an essential complement to full employment for those unable to work.³⁹ What Labour established after the war was important and innovative but it was full of gaps, and social deprivation remained extensive, though on a much lesser scale than before the war.

Local authorities were enabled from 1946 to delegate provision to voluntary organisations. They were empowered to subsidise certain services such as residential care and other community services for older and disabled people (for instance, 'meals on wheels', widely provided by the Women's Royal Voluntary Service (WRVS)). Voluntary organisations, in co-operation with local authorities, continued to play an important role in the care of neglected and abused children. For young children, living unproblematically with their families, British governments have never been willing to make adequate peacetime provision for day-care. Only in the two world wars, when mothers were needed in the workforce, was the value of public day-care recognised. That too was left to the private and voluntary sectors, formal and informal, wherever possible, apart from provision for children with exceptional needs. At other times, family care, especially by grandparents, has always been an important substitute for public day-care in Britain. There are no known long-run statistics of such informal family care, though there is much anecdotal evidence of its continuing importance. In the recent past, according to a survey in 2011, one in three working mothers relied on grandparents for child care,

one in four of all working families.⁴⁰ Informal voluntary action of this kind has continued to be of crucial importance in British society. Retired people came to play a vital role also in more formal voluntary action, as the number of older people in Britain grew over the later twentieth century. About 30 per cent of people over sixty volunteer regularly according to a WRVS survey, making a major contribution to the continuing vibrancy of the sector.⁴¹

Following the Second World War, new voluntary organisations quickly emerged in response to perceived gaps in the welfare state. The National Corporation for the Care of Old People was founded in 1947 (with support from the voluntary Nuffield Foundation) to campaign against the inadequacy of social services for older people living at home and to provide services where possible. It still survives as the Centre for Policy on Ageing.⁴²

In 1946, the Association of Parents of Backward Children (renamed National Society for Mentally Handicapped Children in 1955, then MENCAP in 1969, which it remains) was formed by parents concerned about the lack of support they received for caring for their disabled children. In the same year, the National Association for Mental Health (later MIND) was formed. Both were responses to the very poor state of provision for the mentally disabled and mentally ill. They occupied half of all National Health Service beds at the foundation of the NHS in 1948, but received far less care and attention than the physically ill. In 1953 the Spastics Society (now SCOPE) was founded to support the still neglected group of sufferers from cerebral palsy. Citizens' Advice Bureaux (now Citizens' Advice), established just before the war and invaluable throughout the war in helping victims of bombing and other wartime casualties find assistance, found a new post-war role guiding claimants through the complexities of the new welfare services and providing legal advice.⁴³

Through the 1950s some older organisations faded away. The National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child (NCUMC), which had also faltered immediately after the war, wondering whether it still had a role, recognised that although provision for unmarried mothers and their children had improved somewhat since the end of the conflict with the establishment of the National Assistance Board in 1948, those who lacked family support were still seriously marginalised. The NCUMC attracted funding again, including a substantial annual subvention from the Ministry of Health (begun initially during the war when the National Council played an indispensable role in supporting pregnant, unmarried service-women and war workers⁴⁴) and resumed both its provision of support services and campaigning for more state action to assist the mothers and children and to eliminate the stigma they endured.⁴⁵

Major changes affected much of British society, including the voluntary sector, in the 1960s and early 1970s. From the mid-1960s, when large-scale poverty was 'rediscovered' following the much publicised research of Peter Townsend and Brian Abel-Smith at the LSE,⁴⁶ a new type of professionalised, media-aware

campaigning voluntary organisation emerged, often more inclusive of the groups they sought to help than their predecessors, working *with* them, not just *for* them, and with snappier, media-friendly titles.⁴⁷ They included the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), which was founded in 1965 in direct response to Abel-Smith and Townsend's 'discovery' of the extent of poverty among children, especially those in large families. It campaigned for improved state benefits for children. Another was Shelter, founded 1966, in response to the discovery of the prevalence of homelessness in the welfare state. These organisations were the products, variously, 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, largely 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 society and mass media less deferential to government authority than before. Older organisations gradually followed the new model, symbolised by name changes for most of them. Thus, among many others at this time, the Old People's Welfare Committee (founded in 1940 following wartime revelations of poverty among older people) became Age Concern.⁴⁸

These and others were campaigning and lobbying groups, sometimes also providing services and raising voluntary funds, often with support from central and local government and, increasingly, from the European Union, after Britain's entry to what was then the European Community in 1973. They employed increasing numbers of paid professional staff in addition to, or instead of, volunteers. One reason for this was that the large numbers of middle-class married women who had been the backbone of the voluntary sector through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were no longer available in such numbers after the war. Previously they had been excluded from paid work by social convention and voluntary work had provided a socially acceptable outlet for their skills and their desire for roles outside the home. After the war many of them could and did work for pay, including in the state and voluntary social services.⁴⁹

Alongside these professionalised NGOs, another kind of association developed, especially in the late 1960s and 1970s, consciously less bureaucratised and professional, often less concerned to lobby and work with government, even rather oppositional towards it, more public, street-wise and inclusive. These included the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) founded in 1969 and the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) founded in 1970. Both were linked with wider, international, gay, feminist, anti-racist and anti-war movements. They campaigned for greater equality in general but also on specific social issues. For example, the WLM brought both domestic violence and rape into mainstream public discourse for the first time and introduced new voluntary services for the victims: refuges for victims of domestic violence and rape crisis centres. They urged government to take over these innovative and valuable services on a national basis. Some local authorities did make such provision or subsidise voluntary institutions. Neither rape nor

domestic violence were new, but neither had they previously been openly and persistently discussed in public. The WLM brought them permanently to public notice and they have not since gone away, though nor, unfortunately, have the offences which continue at high levels. WLM campaigns did result in the first legislation against domestic violence in 1976 and growing public funding for refuges and rape crisis centres.

The role of voluntary action became, if anything, more important with the erosion of state welfare from the 1980s. When the Thatcher governments of 1979–90 tried actively to shift many public services on to voluntary organisations they met some resistance from the voluntary sector, which was acutely conscious of its limited capacity. The voluntary sector could not substitute adequately for the state in dealing with large-scale national problems. The Labour governments of 1997 to 2010 did much to revive state welfare whilst, as suggested above, they also encouraged and subsidised what they named the 'Third Sector' which, as we have seen, continued to flourish.⁵⁰ With the election of the Conservative-led Coalition government in 2010 there has been a return – much more rapid than under Thatcher – of pressure on the voluntary and private sectors to take over services from the state, which again faces realistic reluctance from many voluntary bodies (though enthusiasm from the profit-making private sector).

It is clear that, over the past century, the 'Big State' has not squeezed out the 'Big Society'. Rather, voluntary action has played a central, though constantly shifting, role in British society over the past hundred years and more.

Notes

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