

# The left and voluntary action in England: Debates in the 1940s and 2010s

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# Debating 'charity'

- A 'hard and unlovely thing': *'The evil of charity is that it tends to make the charitable think that he has done his duty by giving away some trifling sum, his conscience is put to sleep, and he takes no trouble to consider the social problem any further'* (Attlee, 'The Social Worker', 1920)
- Welfare state teleology: the post-war eclipse of charity
- The 'myth of hostility' (Deakin and Davis Smith, 2011)
- Mixed economies and the 'moving frontier' (Finlayson, 1990, 1994)
- Changing nature of 'partnership' over time (Lewis, 1999; Harris, 2010)
- 'Junior partners' (Owen, 1964); 'marking time' (Wolfenden, 1978)
- Into the 1980s-90s: welfare pluralism, associative democracy and social capital
- Towards a 'third way' politics – a new 'partnership' with the third sector

# 'Discourses of Voluntary Action' (ESRC, 2017-2019)

Examining debates on the **role, position and contribution of voluntary action** in the provision of welfare in the 1940s and 2010s – two 'transformational moments'

1940s		2010s	
<b>'State narratives'</b> (government documents; parliamentary debates)	<b>'Voluntary narratives'</b> (voluntary organisation archives)	<b>'Public narratives'</b> (mass observation – archives and new directive)	
<b>Voluntary action</b> <i>NCSS (1919)</i> <i>(NCVO)</i>	<b>Children</b> <i>NCACH (1941)</i> <i>(Children England)</i>	<b>Young people</b> <i>NCVYS (1936)</i> <i>(UK Youth)</i>	<b>Older people</b> <i>NOPWC (1940)</i> <i>(Age UK)</i>

For more information see: <https://discoursesofvoluntaryaction.wordpress.com>

# 'State narratives'

## Voluntary services...

*'...which humanise our national life and bring it down from the general to the particular' (Attlee, Toynbee Hall, 1947)*

*'The State has now taken over many things which these voluntary agencies did in the past, but...however much the State has done or may yet continue to do, Philanthropy will still be needed...That means merely that there is **a perpetually moving frontier for philanthropic action**'*  
(Beveridge, HL, 22-6-49)

## A new co-operation...

*'As the scope and opportunities of the statutory services expand it becomes increasingly important to consider how they fit in with the existing pattern of voluntary effort' (Morrison, LCSS, 1948)*

## The very stuff of life...

*'We are convinced that voluntary associations have rendered, are rendering, and must be encouraged to continue to render, great and indispensable service to the community. I hope that that deliberate expression of our basic Governmental attitude will carry far and wide... **the statutory and voluntary social services are not contradictory but complementary**, and that neither will be able to fulfil its highest purpose except in partnership with the other' (Pakenham, HL, 22-6-49)*

# 'Public narratives'

**1947**

*'I should deeply resent being dependent on charity myself, and imagine other people like me. Consequently, I am all for people's **needs being furnished as a right and not by charity**'*

(PN 47 3.0163, male, 60, unemployed)

**2018**

*'I am **firmly in favour of the welfare state**...I believe that such a huge majority of the UK population have known nothing else that they do not realise how fortunate we are to have it'*

(PN18 4.0052, female, 64,  
Retired Civil Servant)

**2018**

*'How long is it since food banks became a 'normal' part of our lives: walking past them on the street, adding groceries to their collection boxes in the supermarket, having to use them? Five years? Not as long as ten surely? Something has gone very wrong if significant numbers of the population cannot afford to feed themselves without relying on such outlets...In my opinion then, **the relevance of charity in Britain today is that it is compensating for the Government's negligence in looking after its citizens properly**'*

(B3327, male, 51, administrator)

# ‘Voluntary narratives’

## 1940s: acceptance and anxiety, expertise and influence

- war had *‘increased awareness on the part of official bodies of the cardinal importance of the work of voluntary organisations’* (NCSS, 1945)
- *‘the day of voluntary organisations was not over’* (NCSS, 1946)
- voluntary organisations’ work of *‘first importance’* to government (NCSS, 1947)

## 2010s: unsettled relationships

- tensions over delivery, voice, transformation
- insiders (NCVO) and outsiders (NCIA)
- pushing back: a ‘Declaration of Interdependence’ and campaigning against children’s social work reform (Children England)

## Declaration of interdependence in children’s services

“ We share the vision and commitment to create a society where all children and young people are valued, protected and listened to, their rights are realised and their families are supported.

We believe that the reliance on price-driven competition in children’s service commissioning is eroding, rather than building, our collective capacity and sense of common cause in achieving this vision.

We declare our mutual respect for the importance of public service, charitable mission, professionalism and voluntary action in a more creative and collaborative future for children’s services.”

# Overarching themes

- Context matters
- Complex, multiple and fluid 'moving frontiers'
- Abstract concepts and everyday realities
- Voluntary sector 'failure' (Salamon, 1987):
  - 'insufficiency'
  - 'particularism'
  - 'paternalism'
  - 'amateurism'

1940s	2010s
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• shift to the left</li><li>• social democratic, state expanding, welfare project</li><li>• collectivist spirit of reconstruction</li><li>• austerity...</li><li>• role of the media</li><li>• trust in charities</li><li>• a <b>pragmatic partnership</b> between the state and voluntary action</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• ongoing rightward shift</li><li>• neo-liberal, state retrenching, welfare project</li><li>• individualist/populist spirit</li><li>• austerity...</li><li>• role of the media</li><li>• trust in charities</li><li>• an increasingly <b>antagonistic environment</b> for voluntary action</li></ul>

# Implications for contemporary debates

The left in different shades – red, purple and blue

## **A socialist approach to charity** (in the meantime):

*‘we understand the need for charity in the here and now...but its existence is a failing of our current social order’*

(Owen Jones, Hinton lecture, Nov '18)

## **Bigger than the Big Society:**

*‘part of the fabric of our nation...civil society is made up of thousands of human-scale institutions that people trust and feel ownership over and allows them to assert power collectively...without a thriving civil society, democracy can't work’*

(Labour Party, ‘From Paternalism to Participation’, Jun '19)

An unresolved **question about the state** –

what we think ‘it’ is, how we regard what it does and how it does it, and what we imagine its possibilities might be...

