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Voluntary action – renaissance or decline?

Both articles were first published in *New Start* magazine on 14 July, 2006

Frank Prochaska

Is British charity in decline? Various indicators suggest that a revival is taking place. The number of registered charities has increased by 70% since 1991, while charitable income has risen to over £20 billion. Moreover, paid employees in the sector now represent about 2% of the workforce. Given such figures it is hard to argue that charity is in retreat.

But this rosy picture needs serious qualifications. Few modern charities have been able to maintain the level of face-to-face interaction they could in the past, when women's associations were more prominent. The decline of personal service, closely associated with parochial charities, coincides with the decline of Christianity since the Second World War. Given the importance of religion as a motive for charity in the past, it is worth asking whether a revival of charity can be sustained without a revival of religion?

In the British voluntary sector there has been a shift of mass participation from *member* to *client*, with a loss of participatory citizenship. The growth of government bureaucracy has encouraged greater professionalism and scale in those charities forming partnerships with the state, but the cost is the depersonalisation of charity as it comes under greater ministerial control.

The state's ascendancy in welfare has encouraged the secularisation of religious charities, making it difficult to navigate the hazards of partnerships with government without jettisoning principles. Some, like the Shaftesbury Society and Barnardo's, have sacrificed their evangelical principles and now accept huge sums from government sources.

The growth of partnerships between voluntary bodies and government, which began in earnest after the First World War, is in marked contrast with the 19th century, when relatively few institutions accepted government funding. Today's 'contract culture' calls into question the very independence of charitable societies.

As charities are brought into the orbit of government they effectively become agencies of the state. In the mid-1980s, about 10% of charitable revenue came from government sources. The figure stood at 45% by the late 1990s.

The government's recognition and promotion of volunteering has much to recommend it, but there is a cost to autonomy, personal ministrations and civic democracy when charities become enmeshed in government regulation and 'service delivery'. Who is the volunteer working for in this compact?

Those charities that work closely with local or central government will shape their priorities to suit available grants and often forfeit their role as critics of government policy. The growth of partnerships has dulled their candour and undermined traditions of radical advocacy. As one hospital volunteer put it: 'no one is rude to his rich uncle'.

The recent statistics showing more money now comes to the charitable sector from government sources than individual contributions should sound an alarm. If contributors believe charities are essentially state funded they will be less likely to make donations.

It could be argued that voluntarists are simply showing resilience and adaptability, moving with the times. Clearly, Victorian traditions of philanthropy, built on religious foundations, the voluntary labour of women, and a lack of government interest in social issues, are a thing of the past.

In my evidence to the Deakin Commission on the Voluntary Sector in the mid 1990s, I observed that charities were swimming into the mouth of Leviathan. Can those charities being digested in its stomach any longer be called independent or voluntary? And if not, what does this mean for our associational and civic democracy?

Frank Prochaska teaches history at Yale University and recently published *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain: The Disinherited Spirit* (Oxford, 2006). This article is based on a paper delivered at the Centre for Contemporary British History annual conference on 28 June and was first published in *New Start* magazine on 14 July 2006.

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It is extremely difficult to assess whether or not the complex, ever-changing world of the British voluntary sector has 'declined' over the past 100, 50 or even 10 years. Much voluntary action, whether the myriad informal services performed among friends, families and neighbours - still commonplace, whatever the pessimists may say - or in formal institutions, goes unrecorded. The Home Office Citizenship survey, 2003, reported that more than 23 million people in England and Wales contributed 19 billion hours of voluntary work, equivalent to the work of 1 million full-time workers. No one can tell whether this is more or less than in the past - comparable figures do not exist - but, by any standards, it is a lot.

Frank Prochaska adopts a narrow definition of charity as 'face- to-face interaction...closely associated with parochial charities', performed by women. There is less need than in the 19th century, or even the 1930s, for untrained female volunteers to perform roles now carried out by trained, publicly-funded social workers. Social workers make mistakes, but so did charitable visitors in the past. Was it really better for society to support its most vulnerable people through untrained women whose unpaid work was not valued by society, than to train and pay professionals?

Voluntary agencies also employ professionals to work with clients, though many also use volunteers. Volunteers are vital to the work both of large, long-established institutions, such as Citizens Advice Bureaux, and innumerable smaller community groups. There are fewer middle-aged women than in the past with time for voluntary work, but many fit, energetic retired people are filling their places.

Christian observance has fallen over the last century. It is much less certain that the spirit of care for others that previously fuelled Christian charity is less evident now in the activities of other faith groups and of non-believers. Christian organisations continue to make major contributions, not least in the sector of voluntary action which has grown fastest over the past 50 years - overseas aid.

As the role of the state has grown, the voluntary sector has not disappeared, but has found new roles to complement or to plug the gaps and failings in state provision. Some voluntary agencies - mainly larger ones - receive substantial state funding; most receive none or very little. Even larger organizations- such as Age Concern or the Child Poverty Action Group- are well aware of the

dangers of control through state subsidy and retain their independence by raising funds from voluntary donations and other activities.

Frank Prochaska is unduly pessimistic about a vibrant voluntary sector.

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