

Saved by the Tories?

Colin Rochester, a member of the Coalition Planning Group, has checked out what the Tories have in store for voluntary action. Looks like we've found some interesting allies in our quest for an independent sector – or have we.....?

The Shadow Minister for Charities, Social Enterprise and Volunteering, Greg Clark, has described an important new book on “helping deprived communities to help themselves” published by the School for Social Entrepreneurs[1] as “a polite, but unmistakable, eviction notice to the established order”. He might equally well have applied this description to his party’s Policy Green Paper on *Voluntary Action in the 21st Century*[2]. This is a remarkably well written and readable polemic whose critique of government policy towards the voluntary and community sector will make very uncomfortable reading for ministers, civil servants and the small coterie of national voluntary agencies who have associated themselves with the government’s agenda since 1997.

The tone is set in David Cameron’s foreword:

... our aim is not to change the voluntary sector, which is more than capable of changing itself as it sees fit. Rather, our aim is to change government: from being an object that gets in the way of civil society to being a force that gets behind civil society, open to and supportive of, the energy and initiative of a free and civilised nation.

A Stronger Society is rather more convincing as an attack on the current position and recent experience than as a set of proposals for the future and its analysis of what has gone wrong hits a series of nails firmly on the head. It begins by suggesting that the current government’s interest and investment in the voluntary sector – including the creation of an Office of the Third Sector with its own minister and the expenditure of millions of pounds of public money on new initiatives – “has not been an unalloyed boon”. There are real anxieties about the “Government’s determination to apply bureaucratic-age practices to a sector which embodies vibrancy and diversity. It has too often regarded charities and voluntary groups as bodies that are to be instructed, rather than trusted.” This approach, which the Green Paper describes as treating sector organisations as “not partners but servants”, is particularly wrong-headed when it comes to the delivery of public services where the government uses “targets, directives, legislation, inspection regimes and conditional funding to force people ... to operate in the approved way”. In the process it has lost sight of “Beveridge’s key insight that people and organisations are more ... ‘vigorous and abundant’ ... when given the freedom to act on their own initiatives than when ordered from above”. And it has led to the wholesale replacement of financial support through grants with contracts and a draconian commissioning regime.

The authors also argue that the Government’s approach to promoting volunteering has brought little return for the amount of time and money invested in it. This is because it is fundamentally flawed: instead of “directing support to grassroots volunteering organisations” Ministers have preferred to use a top-down approach and “lavish public funds on their own quangos, complete with the usual paraphernalia of such enterprises: designer logos, flashy websites, regional offices, PR consultants and expensive advertising campaigns”.

A third charge is that the Government has wasted a great deal of taxpayers' money on the ChangeUp programme and other attempts to build the sector's capacity. The Conservatives describe the implementation of these schemes as a "fiasco" which could have been avoided had it been shaped by the views of the sector rather than the preferences of Ministers. "We will have to wait for the NAO report to find out how many millions have been wasted as a result of these debacles, but our understanding is that this tale of woe is far from over."

And, finally, the establishment of the Office of the Third Sector has achieved little: "with very little clout with those departments and agencies which really matter to the voluntary sector, its real function is as a distributor of funding and as a setter-up of quangos – all founded on the presumption that a small group of Whitehall bureaucrats is best placed to shape the future development of Britain's charities and social enterprises".

This is a picture which may be highly coloured but is recognisable to many of us and it provides a stunning indictment of the way in which the relationship between Government and the sector has developed since 1997. But what would the Conservatives do to rectify the situation? Part of their answer is simply to "do no harm: we will value and protect the voluntary sector we've already got – one that sets its own priorities, raises its own resources and works for social change beyond the limits of the state". Similarly, their approach to promoting volunteering not only includes the need to encourage and invest but also "where necessary, simply get out of the way".

More specifically, the Green Paper envisages a return to grant-based funding for many kinds of activity with contracts reserved for areas where they are essential: "it should be possible for government bodies and local authorities, who are familiar with the work of charities and voluntary bodies over a period of time to trust them to make good use of public funds". The National Lottery would be reformed to ensure that funds were directed exclusively to the voluntary sector and not siphoned off for public policy purposes. Support for volunteering would be directed to grassroots volunteering organisations and the administration of funds for capacity building would be simplified by eliminating unnecessary layers of bureaucracy. Finally, the OTS would be replaced by a beefed-up Office for Civil Society "at the heart of government".

Overall *A Stronger Society* represents a radical rethink of the relationship between the voluntary sector and the state which goes beyond party-political point-scoring. After all, the key features of the current policy mix – emphasis on the delivery of public services; contracts; and major centralised initiatives in volunteering – are not inventions of the Labour administrations in power since 1997 but have their origins in the earlier governments led by Margaret Thatcher and John Major. It is therefore a significant document and it is to be hoped that voluntary sector organisations will be able to shake off the "consultation fatigue" that affects us all and respond to the invitation to comment on the proposals.

Responses should be sent to: James O'Shaughnessy, Conservative Campaign Headquarters, 30 Millbank, London SW1P 4DP 020 7222 9000