

The Third Sector as deliverers of services – overhyped; an idea whose time is done

As seasoned travellers on the highways and byways of community sector life, all of us are used to exercising a healthy scepticism in relation to rhetoric, which can often sound great, and delivery, which disappears down the memory hole.

Anyone remember the 2001 Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plan words about the Local Strategic Partnerships being a partnership of equals? The New Deal for Communities being resident-led as opposed to a vehicle for stock transfer arrangements? Sure Start programmes chaired by local people rather than Children's Centres retreating into the Town Hall? Community Empowerment Networks shut down and local people with a taste for activism sign posted to ChangeUp 'training' programmes to build their capacity!

Over the past 20 years our sector has been feted by a range of partnerships. A backdrop to this has been a shift in attitudes to government in the west – that government should do less, steer not row. Also that citizens needed to do more and expect less from the state, the idea that welfare made people dependent also crossed over and morphed into a wider expectation that everyone needed to be more socially committed. The big ideas of neo liberalism combined with 1980s communitarianism and the Third Way has created a new world, which even if we're not familiar with the theory, we know the practice because we live it every day.

As governments ceded more power to the market something was needed to fill the gap – initially the private sector, via PFI deals (read any copy of Private Eye for practical details), then hybrid social entrepreneurs circa 1996 Charlie Leadbetter's thin air magicians, now more generally the third sector is thrown into the breach. All these bandwagons seek to bridge the gap between what the state used to do and the vacuum that has opened up. At different times the private sector, social enterprise and more generally the third sector is privileged with mythical status as the new active ingredient in sorting social problems.

If the analysis is broadly right, that state does less, others do more, where are we now as a consequence? Has recent policy done us any favours?

There are always opportunities for the more independent parts of the voluntary and community sector to decide its own destiny. No one is actually forced yet to deliver contracts, though the new work for your benefits DWP consultation comes pretty close to it. The reality is that the bulk of the sector votes with its feet and stays aloof from the social experiments done in its name. The positives are all about the sector's autonomy which remains intact last time I looked, though we've long since parted company with those sleepwalking into contracts, who forfeit the claim to be community led. What is worrying is as follows:

The growing inequalities in our sector which translates as a decline in small and medium sized charities relative to an expanding third sector, where a few voluntary in name only corporate predators Hoover up contracts. How many equalities groups, for example disabled groups struggling with changes in adult and social care, or Black and Ethnic groups faced with the after-effects of single group funding 'consultation' do you know that are awash with contracts? How many tenant and leaseholder or resident organisations are pioneering new forms of democratic engagement to meet the bold spirit of the Empowerment White Paper – aka communities in control? Well somebody out there must be getting all the money but it is a fact that by far the majority of groups are getting less.

Alongside the winner-takes-all inequality inscribed into the new third sector settlement goes a parallel agenda – that of capacity building the local state in its new role as uber community consultant. The Empowerment White Paper is pulled in two directions by seeking to devolve power to both the town hall and local people, echoing, if not saying, yesterday's catch phrase of double devolution. Given that power rarely flows downwards the outcome tends to be a 'new deal for local authorities' who, within upper and lower limits, need to raise their game in regard to a dangerously disenfranchised group of people – aka the public. The third sector's role is not so much advocacy and campaigning but as an economic means to an end – it's cheap, it's trusted (though less now than before) and it rarely organises itself to take a principled stand.

However over the summer a group of MPs poured scorn on the rhetoric of its own government – the Public Administration Select Committee report Public Services and the Third Sector: Rhetoric and Reality, June 2008, came out and said what we all know. In its summary it states:

'The central claim made by the Government, and by advocates of a greater role for the sector in service delivery, is that third sector organizations can deliver services in distinctive ways which will improve outcomes for service users. We were unable to corroborate that claim. Too much of the discussion is still hypothetical or anecdotal '

In other words we don't know what we don't know. However, what the bean counters and money men do know is that quote 'Despite the emphasis given in government publications to involving the third sector, only 2% of public service spending is on third sector delivery. The debate on the transformative capacity of the third sector is a rhetorical storm in a fiscal teacup.' Unquote.

A storm in a fiscal teacup – is that what we are now?

Or to really add salt to the wound, "If the sector is so good, why are they not winning now?" so says Will Werry of the Commissioning Joint Committee, in the same report.

To return to the start of my article – ‘third sector as delivers of services – overhyped an idea whose time is done’ – given the select committees words my skepticism with regard to third sector world domination is clearly in good company, even if it feels a bit odd to have the patrician elite of Westminster reflect it back to us, less shiny but with a healthier approximation to reality

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