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The Ben Pimlott Memorial Lecture 2011 The 'Big Society' and the 'Big State': Creative Tension or Crowding Out?

Recent political discourse about the 'Big Society'¹ has stimulated thinking among historians and others about the relationship between state and societal action concerning social welfare and other important areas of daily life, past and present.

Implicit, sometimes explicit, in the Big Society rhetoric is the assumption that voluntary/philanthropic/community/non-governmental/third sector (the terminology is itself as diverse as this large terrain²) action to promote social improvement has declined from some past golden age, normally located in the nineteenth century. That the growth of the 'Big Welfare State' has been a major agent of that decline, and the 'Big State' and the 'Big Society' are and always have been at odds, as state welfare grew through the twentieth century, 'crowding out' non-governmental action. This declinist discourse itself has a history that has persistently been invoked by critics of the welfare state.³ It has been reinforced by academic writing. In the USA and Britain, Robert Putnam made a big impact with *Bowling Alone*,⁴ describing the apparent decline in social bonds in US communities in recent times, though his more recent work calls this interpretation in

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¹ See e.g. <www.communities.gov.uk/communities/big society> accessed 20 February 2012.

² N. Crowson et al., eds, *NGOs in Contemporary Britain. Non-State Actors in Society and Politics since 1945* (London, 2009), 3.

³ E.g. R. Harris and A. Seldon, *Welfare without the State: A Quarter Century of Suppressed Public Choice* (London, 1987); F. Mount, *Clubbing Together: The Revival of the Voluntary Principle* (London, n.d.), 5–6; R. Whelan, ed., *Involuntary Action* (London, 1999), 14.

⁴ R. D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (New York, 2000).

question.⁵ For Britain, Frank Prochaska has argued that voluntary action has declined since the Second World War in association with the decline in Christian observance,⁶ but, again, the evidence suggests otherwise.⁷

Rather, a growing body of recent work complements older studies to show that, throughout the history of the British welfare state, institutions of civil society worked closely with the state, that they reinforced and complemented each other, if sometimes in tension and with continually shifting boundaries. This work suggests that non-governmental social action has not been declining in the long or the shorter run. Britain has long had, not a monolithic welfare state, but a 'mixed economy of welfare' involving public and private action.⁸

How much Voluntary Action?

Change over time is hard to measure in a diverse sector in which much activity was and is local and/or ephemeral and poorly recorded. There are no comprehensive long-run statistics or tools of measurement of funds, number of organizations, or supporters.⁹ It is so diverse that it is difficult to define, or even name, as we have seen. It encompasses a sprawling set of activities and organizational forms, from large, highly professionalized 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, trying to stop closure of a library or a day-centre for dementia sufferers (especially recently), promoting sport, amateur theatre, or other forms of leisure and cultural activity, and many other things. There is a danger of defining the sector so widely that it loses all

⁵ R. D. Putnam and L. M. Feldstein, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York, 2003); R. D. Putnam and D. E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York, 2010).

⁶ F. Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain: The Disinherited Spirit* (Oxford, 2006).

⁷ E. Filby, 'Faith, Charity and Citizenship: Christianity, Voluntarism and the State in the 1980s', in M. Hilton and J. McKay, eds, *The Ages of Voluntarism. How We Got to the BIG SOCIETY* (Oxford, 2011), 135–57.

⁸ G. Finlayson, *Citizen, State and Social Welfare in Britain, 1830–1990* (Oxford, 1994); G. Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England, 1870–1908* (Stanford, 1982); J. Harris, ed., *Civil Society in British History. Ideas, Identities, Institutions* (Oxford, 2003); R. Lowe, 'Welfare's Moving Frontier', *Twentieth Century British History*, 6 (1995), 367–76; Crowson et al., NGOs; C. Rochester et al., eds, *Understanding the Roots of Voluntary Action. Historical Perspectives on Current Social Policy* (Sussex, 2011); M. Oppenheimer and N. Deakin, eds, *Beveridge and Voluntary Action in Britain and the Wider British World* (Manchester, 2011); Hilton and McKay, *Ages*.

⁹ M. Hilton, 'Politics is Ordinary: Non-Governmental Organizations and Political Participation in Contemporary Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 22 (2011); Crowson et al., NGOs, 2:230–268.

coherence, 'a loose and baggy monster' as it has been described,¹⁰ but it is important to be aware of its extent and diversity.

Many organizations, which were originally wholly or mainly voluntary in staffing and sources of funding, have become over time increasingly salaried and increasingly recipients of government and/or European Union (EU) funding in addition to voluntary funds and voluntary action, so the term 'voluntary sector' is no longer always appropriate. These are perhaps now more appropriately described as Non-Governmental Organizations, a term no longer reserved for the overseas aid sector.¹¹ A new term was invented by New Labour, 'Third Sector', i.e. not the state or the market sector, but it appears to have been deleted from political language since the election of 2010.¹²

We do have numbers of people volunteering with formal institutions since 2001, when the Labour government set up a biannual Citizenship Survey to measure this and other forms of community involvement. The Survey reported in 2010 that 40 per cent of adults in England had volunteered through a formal organization at least once in the previous 12 months; 25 per cent volunteered at least once a month. Fifty-four per cent volunteered informally at least once in the previous 12 months, e.g. helping neighbours, friends, relatives; 29 per cent at least once a month.¹³ The proportions were quite stable over the successive surveys. They do not suggest a sector in recent decline.

The 2010 Survey also revealed high levels of community cohesion: in 2009–10, 85 per cent of the sample thought their community 'cohesive', a place where people of different backgrounds got on well together, an increase from 80 per cent in 2003. This suggests that many people do not believe their communities are 'broken'. We may not discover whether levels of volunteering and feelings of community cohesion rise or fall in the coming years because the termination of the Citizenship Survey has been announced, as part of the public spending cuts.¹⁴

Another measure is the number of charities registered with the Charity Commission. This has risen from 56,000 in 1950 to 180,000 in 2010.¹⁵ But not all large NGOs or all small voluntary organizations are registered and not everything registered would quite be recognized as a charity, e.g. many public schools. Yet,

¹⁰ J. Kendall and M. Knapp, 'A Loose and Baggy Monster: Boundaries, Definitions and Typologies', in J. D. Smith et al., eds, *An Introduction to the Voluntary Sector* (London, 1995).

¹¹ Hilton, 'Politics'; Crowson et al., *NGOs*.

¹² P. Alcock, 'Voluntary Action, New Labour and the "Third Sector"', in Hilton and McKay, *Ages*, 158–79.

¹³ <www.communities.gov.uk/publications/Citizenship_Survey:2009-10> accessed 17 February 2012.

¹⁴ <www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/research/citizenshipsurvey> accessed 20 February 2012.

¹⁵ Hilton, 'Politics', 238; Hilton and McKay, 'An Introduction', in *Ages*, 5–6.

inadequate though the statistics are, they suggest that the sector is not declining or noticeably weak.

State and Society since the Nineteenth Century

That is the present situation. What about the longer history of voluntary action and its relationship with the welfare state as it grew, then faltered, through the twentieth century into the twenty-first? The nineteenth century has been regarded as the golden age of philanthropy, with good reason. Of course charity was centuries old even then,¹⁶ though there were new manifestations. Voluntary action of various kinds flourished particularly from the eighteenth century, in a society in which more people were prosperous than ever before but there was continuing poverty and inequality and concerns about the possible political repercussions. Religious belief encouraged philanthropy, as it long had. Also voluntary associations assisted social and political networking and the formation and perpetuation of local and national elites. Middle- and upper-class women provided a reservoir of voluntary workers, since they were effectively socially prohibited from paid work and many able, energetic women wanted to make a contribution outside the home. Too often stereotyped as condescending 'Ladies Bountiful', very many of them were highly committed to what they regarded as serious work, despite the lack of payment, and increasingly they were trained.¹⁷ Many working-class women joined them when they could. Then as now, voluntary action had a significant place in the national culture.¹⁸

Mutual Aid

From at least the later eighteenth century, voluntary associations were not formed or supported only by the elite. The political right in Britain and, more recently parts of the centre-left, look back nostalgically at another supposedly 'golden' feature of nineteenth-century culture: mutual organizations, formed and managed by and for working people; Friendly Societies providing support in sickness, unemployment, and old age, as did Trade Unions, another kind of mutual; building societies; and various kinds of co-operatives. It is argued that we never needed a

¹⁶ D. Owen, *Philanthropy in England, 1660–1900* (Cambridge MA, 1965).

¹⁷ T. Deane, 'Late Nineteenth-Century Philanthropy: The Case of Louisa Twining', in A. Digby and J. Stewart, eds, *Gender, Health and Welfare* (London, 1996), 122–42; T. Deane, 'The Professionalization of Philanthropy: The Case of Louisa Twining, 1820–1912', DPhil thesis, Sussex University, 2005; E. Colpus 'Landscapes of Welfare: Concepts and Cultures of British Women's Philanthropy, 1918–1939', DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 2011.

¹⁸ R. J. Morris, 'Clubs, Societies and Associations', in F. M. L. Thompson, ed., *Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1950–1850*, Vol 3, (Cambridge, 1990), 395–444.

welfare state because mutuals, along with voluntary hospitals and other non-state institutions were providing adequately for need, and could and should have been allowed to continue and grow.¹⁹

These were important institutions that grew substantially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because the state did not provide good health care, pensions, unemployment relief, or housing except in the demeaning form of the Poor Law. The philanthropic sector did what it could in the face of need too extensive for it to cope with, but working people sometimes found it condescending and preferred to be independent when possible. Mutuals emerged to fill the gaps for some.²⁰ More working people could afford to contribute to an insurance fund or towards buying a house than ever before and those who could did their best to help themselves and their families.

But not everyone could do so. It is estimated that by 1910, Friendly Societies plus Trade Unions had a total membership in Britain of between 6.3 and 9.5 million.²¹ Again, precise numbers are hard to find because many societies were small and poorly recorded and membership especially of smaller societies was unstable. More people took out life insurance—primarily to pay for a decent burial—than more costly sickness insurance. Whatever the precise figure, members of mutuals were a minority of the British population of c. 40 m people aged 16–65 years in England, Wales, and Scotland in 1911, most of whom were working class. Only a minority of workers were covered by mutuals. Most conspicuously omitted were women, the majority of the population and in greater danger of poverty than most men, since their longer life expectancy combined with their lesser opportunities to earn and to save brought greater likelihood of impoverished single parenthood and old age.²² Few women could afford to contribute to mutual benefit schemes and Friendly Societies and Trade Unions rarely provided benefits for family members of male contributors because few could afford the additional premiums. Women were also excluded by the homosocial conviviality that was an important feature of many mutual societies, which often met in pubs.²³ Many societies, especially

¹⁹ D. Green, *Reinventing Civil Society* (London, 1993); J. Bartholomew, *The Welfare State We're In* (London 2004); R. Davis, *Tangled Up in Blue. Blue Labour and the Struggle for Labour's Soul* (London, 2011).

²⁰ P. Johnson, *Saving and Spending. The Working Class Economy in Britain, 1870–1939* (Oxford, 1985); P. H. J. H. Gosden, *The Friendly Societies in England, 1815–1975* (Manchester, 1961); Finlayson, *Citizen*.

²¹ D. Weinbren, '“Organizations for Brotherly Aid in Misfortune”: Beveridge and the Friendly Societies', in Oppenheimer and Deakin, *Beveridge and Voluntary Action*, 51; Johnson, *Saving*, 15–25; E. P. Hennock, *The Origin of the Welfare State in England and Germany, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 2007), 177–81.

²² P. Thane, 'Women and the Poor Law in Victorian and Edwardian England', *History Workshop Journal*, 6 (1978), 7–28.

²³ Johnson, *Saving*, 63–7.

the larger ones providing the most comprehensive benefits, prudently had a minimum income limit for membership as well as obligatory medical examinations, which excluded 'bad risks'. Women in work rarely earned enough to contribute to a mutual, nor did large numbers of lower paid, often irregularly employed men.

Mutuals were the preserve mainly of regularly employed, better paid men: 'Friendly Society membership was the badge of the skilled worker.'²⁴ Or, as a fellow of the Institute of Actuaries put it in 1893, Friendly Societies provided sick pay (and generally, in effect old age pensions) to:

Not more than one third or one fourth of the workers; they certainly do not include that large mass of pure labour for whom it is most desirable that these schemes should be propounded: they do not take in the dockers and... they take in only a very limited proportion of the agricultural labourers, therefore nothing... that the friendly societies could do, even if their finances permitted it, would touch the mass of the population of this country.²⁵

Mutuals were especially concentrated in regions where there was most well-paid, skilled work, mainly Lancashire and Yorkshire. Yet, Rowntree found that just 14.4 per cent of the population of York belonged to Friendly Societies in 1900. Booth found that only 5.6 per cent of London labourers did so in the 1890s.²⁶ Mutuals did not generally aim to exclude deprived people—who were often their wives, sisters, neighbours—and they supported state action to assist the many who, despite their best efforts, could not help themselves.²⁷

Mutuals were not wholly independent of the state by the late nineteenth century. In what has been described as a system of 'state sponsored individualism',²⁸ their financial affairs were increasingly regulated by the state, to safeguard members against poor or occasionally dishonest administration by inexperienced, unpaid officials, especially in terms of adjusting contributions to match risk to ensure solvency. Statutes in 1793, 1819, 1929, 1846, 1850, 1855, 1875, and 1896 gradually increased safeguarding regulation, supervised by an official Registrar of Friendly Societies from 1846, though still at the end

²⁴ B. B. Gilbert, *Evolution of National Insurance* (London, 1966), 167.

²⁵ Royal Commission on the Aged Poor, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1895, vol. xvi, Aberdare Commission, Evidence, q.11,792, quoted Johnson, *Saving*, 57–8.

²⁶ B. S. Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life*, (London, 1901), 357; C. Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, Vol. 1 (London, 1891), 106–10.

²⁷ P. Thane, 'The Working Class and State "Welfare" in Britain, 1880–1914', *Historical Journal*, 27 (1884), 877–900.

²⁸ B. Supple, 'Legislation and Virtue: An Essay on Working Class Self-Help and the State in the Early Nineteenth Century', in N. McKendrick, ed., *Historical Perspectives. Studies in English Thought and Society in Honour of JH Plumb* (London, 1974), 214.

of the century some smaller societies failed and members lost their accumulated contributions. A problem, especially for small societies, was ensuring a steady flow of young, healthy entrants to balance the costs of providing sickness and, effectively, old age benefits to older members, especially as the numbers of older members grew later in the century. Increasingly, smaller societies were replaced by large, national, sometimes international, 'affiliated orders' as they were known—such as the Manchester Unity of Oddfellows and the Ancient Order of Foresters, institutions big enough to absorb multiple risks.²⁹

Mutuals of all kinds were the creation of working people to meet their own needs and they determinedly kept maximum control of them. As Supple puts it, 'thrift was an intrinsic part of working class history . . . not merely a habit thrust on them by other social groups'.³⁰ Savings funds were also established by employers and landowners for working people. They tended to be less appealing, though for many they were the only safe option available.³¹ Successful forms of voluntary action have been initiated from the bottom-up as well as from the top-down.

Mutuals were wary of state control, hence the slow, cautious growth of state regulation.³² When new demands for welfare action by the state emerged in the later nineteenth century, Friendly Societies and Trade Unions were hostile to proposals for Britain to follow the innovative provision of social insurance in Germany in the 1880s, delivering sickness, disability, and old age benefits. This was not surprising. Bismarck had explicitly sought to undermine the growing socialist movement, as well as to encourage economic growth, with measures designed to gain the support of skilled workers for the liberal state.³³ The first German social insurance schemes also largely left out women and lower-paid men, such as agricultural workers, for the same reasons as they were excluded from British Friendly Societies: they could not afford the regular contributions. Mutuals thought state measures of this kind unnecessary and undesirable in Britain, a step towards the state becoming too powerful, seeking to control and 'enslave' the working class.³⁴

But they did not wholly oppose state welfare. They believed that the state should support the many hard-working people who could not help themselves, whilst leaving the mutuals to help those who could. They supported the campaign at the turn of the century for tax-funded, redistributive, non-contributory old age pensions for those who could

²⁹ Gosden, *Friendly Societies*; Supple 'Legislation', 215–38; Johnson, *Saving*, 52–5; Gilbert, *Evolution*.

³⁰ Supple, 'Legislation', 215.

³¹ Johnson, *Saving*, 54.

³² Supple, 'Legislation', 215.

³³ Hennock, *Origin*, 182–4.

³⁴ Thane, 'The Working Class and State "Welfare"'.

not afford to save for old age and had no alternative to stigmatizing poor relief when they were too weak to support themselves, after lifetimes of hard, low-paid work.³⁵ They saw state and voluntary action as potentially complementary and mutually supportive, while resisting and seeking to contain the danger of an over-mighty state, striving for a supportive and democratic not a controlling 'servile' state, as Hilaire Belloc described it.³⁶

The Voluntary Sector and the Origins of the Welfare State

This is part of a wider story of voluntary organizations in the nineteenth century and long after, lobbying for more state action not less, though not unconditionally. An important part of the story of the development of state welfare since the early nineteenth century is that of voluntary organizations identifying and seeking to resolve urgent social problems, doing their best to help by creating new forms of provision, recognizing their own limitations, then demanding state action on the grounds that the state alone had the capacity and the resources to tackle big problems comprehensively. They were generally willing to cooperate in the state action that resulted.³⁷

This process can be seen in all spheres of social welfare. As the British state moved cautiously into new areas of social action in the nineteenth century, it first subsidized the existing work of voluntary organizations. From the 1830s, voluntary, mainly faith-based, institutions providing schooling for the working classes were funded, and increasingly regulated, by a state that was concerned to promote the literacy and discipline of the population. From 1870, locally elected Boards of Education were established to expand the system, funded by local rates, paving the way for compulsory education in 1880, though voluntary and private education continued.³⁸

Much needed improved working-class housing was pioneered by philanthropists, including the 'Five per Cent philanthropists', investors in new working-class housing, who were 'philanthropic' because they took a lower return, at 5 per cent, than they could gain from the stock market.³⁹ Before the First World War a few local authorities, above all the London County Council, also began to meet the massive, but massively expensive, need for housing people who could not afford a

³⁵ P. Thane, *Old Age in English History. Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford, 2000), 194–215.

³⁶ H. Belloc, *The Servile State* (London, 1912).

³⁷ Finlayson, *Citizen*, 107–200.

³⁸ G. Sutherland, 'Education', in Thompson, *Cambridge Social History*, Vol. 3, 119–70.

³⁹ J. N. Tarn, *Five Percent Philanthropy: An Account of Housing in Urban Areas Between 1840 and 1914* (Cambridge, 1973).

market rent for a decent home, but only after the war did the state subsidize council housing.⁴⁰

In a different area of acute need, violence against children was not new in the later nineteenth century. As George Behlmer has described, it took the voluntary National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC, founded in 1884) to bring it to public notice, seeking ways to rescue and protect children, then pressing government to punish perpetrators, as it did with legislation from 1889.⁴¹ It then campaigned for the comprehensive, state-supported care for abused children, which was beyond its powers. This led to the Children Act, 1908, which established local authority committees to seek out, support, and care for abused children, on which voluntary organizations were represented. NSPCC inspectors helped administer the Act, particularly investigating suspected cases of cruelty, because of their experience in the field, and children rescued from abusive homes were 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. As the economist, B. Kirkman Gray, put it in 1908, a 'co-partnership' had been established in the English home between parents and the state. 'This is a result', he added, 'which is calculated to give satisfaction to the socialist, but it was also brought about by philanthropic individualists'.⁴²

Voluntary institutions, mostly led by women, such as the large, mainly working-class Women's Co-operative Guild, itself a product of nineteenth-century mutualism, campaigned from the end of the century 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 subsidized food and milk, while demanding that the state adopt this model nationally, gaining support and funding from some local authorities.⁴³ As we will see, the campaigns continued through the First World War, fuelled by the need to replace the generation dying on the battlefields.

The story of the development of state welfare at the beginning of the twentieth century is that, far from the state seeking to crowd out voluntary action, it was often persuaded into action by voluntary organizations, who then worked closely with it in implementing new forms of action and on whose work the state depended. This close relationship is clear in the foundational measures of the modern welfare state: old age pensions (introduced in 1908), and National Health and

⁴⁰ M. Daunt, 'Housing', in Thompson, *Cambridge Social History*, Vol. 2, 195–250.

⁴¹ G. Behlmer, *Child Abuse*.

⁴² Quoted, Behlmer, *Child Abuse*, 216.

⁴³ D. Dwork, *War is Good for Babies and Other Young Children. A History of the Infant and Child Welfare Movement in England, 1898–1918*, (London, 1987).

Unemployment Insurance (introduced 1911). Pensions were the subject of campaigns by individuals and voluntary organizations, including Friendly Societies and Trade Unions, from the 1870s.⁴⁴ The inadequate, tax-funded, strictly means-tested pension introduced in 1908, targeting the very poor and mainly women, who made up three-quarters of the first pensioners, complemented rather than competed with the work of the mutuals by providing for those who could not afford to save for their own old age.⁴⁵ Pensions were administered locally by committees made up of members of Friendly Societies and Trade Unions and other volunteers, such as clergymen, but were funded and regulated by the state.

National Insurance was supported more reluctantly by the mutuals, since it appeared to compete with their work. They were won round partly when the Labour Party, reluctantly, agreed to support the 1911 Act because it provided benefits for lower-paid workers, subsidized by employers and taxpayers, guaranteed contributors access to a general practitioner and provided such new benefits as a maternity allowance, payable on the birth of a child, designed to enable working-class mothers to afford expert care in childbirth in an effort to reduce infant and maternal mortality. Following a campaign by women, particularly by members of the Women's Co-operative Guild, the allowance was paid directly to the mothers, not, as initially proposed, to the fathers. National Insurance appeared to be popular with many working-class voters and by opposing it Labour would have risked losing their support to the Liberals.

The mutuals were also won over by gaining a major role in the administration of National Insurance. Those mutuals, and also some profit-making insurance companies, which registered as 'approved societies' under the 1911 Act were responsible for assessing claims and allocating and administering benefits. This arrangement was introduced partly because it was cheaper and easier for the state to build on the experience of the voluntary sector and on existing administrative structures than to create a new bureaucracy. It was also designed to counter the antagonism of the mutuals to National Insurance. Equally important, prominent Liberals believed that voluntary action—people choosing to give their time and money to help others—was an essential component of a good society, and should be encouraged and supplemented, not supplanted, by the state. Giving a prominent role to voluntary action mollified opposition from those Liberals who remained opposed to the state taking over a substantial welfare role.

⁴⁴ K. Fukasawa, 'Voluntary Provision for Old Age by Trade Unions in Britain Before the Coming of the Welfare State', PhD thesis, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 1996.

⁴⁵ Thane, *Old Age*, 216–35.

The alternative was for the state to complement the limited resources of the voluntary sector and make the services pioneered by volunteers more widely available, whilst integrating them into the new procedures. This view was evidently shared by many voluntary organizations, who knew their own limitations. Working with the state did not mean that they stopped pressing for more state action or abandoned their commitment to voluntary effort.

The First World War

This close relationship between the state and non-state sectors continued and expanded through the First World War. At the beginning of the war, pensions and other allowances for servicemen and their dependents were provided by voluntary organizations, such as the Soldiers and Sailors Families Association, the Soldiers and Sailors Help Society, and the Royal Hospital, Chelsea as they had long been. Their funds, activities, and volunteers expanded rapidly, assisted by royal appeals.⁴⁶ It soon became clear that the scale of war mobilization was beyond their capacity to cope and the state quickly took over, for the first time providing allowances and pensions for the families of servicemen.⁴⁷

In other respects, charitable effort expanded massively in response to the war. About 11,000 new charities were established, more than doubling recorded pre-war charitable income to £100–150 m per year. Charities, large and small, responded to new problems like helping families of servicemen whose allowances were slow to arrive and those affected by the unemployment caused by economic dislocation in the first year of war; and to older ones like infant mortality and national ill-health, rendered more urgent by the loss of fit young men at the front. Much of the growth was haphazard and uncoordinated, causing the War Office in 1915 to establish a Director-General of Voluntary Organizations who managed efficiently the mass of organizations offering 'comforts', such as hand-knitted socks to the troops.⁴⁸ But the expansion also aroused fears of incompetent or fraudulent fund-raising and existing charities lobbied government for more regulation. The Charity Commission (est. 1853) was responsible only for charities with long-term endowments, as most wartime charities were not. In 1916, the War Charities Act placed registration and regulation of charities in the hands of local authorities, with variable results, but it appears to have

⁴⁶ P. Grant, 'Voluntarism and the Impact of the First World War', Hilton and McKay, *Ages*, 31–2.

⁴⁷ S. Pedersen, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State. Britain and France, 1914–1945* (Cambridge, 1993), 108–11.

⁴⁸ Grant, 'Voluntarism', 30–5.

prevented significant fraud and reassured the public that their donations were safe.⁴⁹

Women who before the war had campaigned for improved infant and maternal health care and welfare took advantage of wartime concern about wartime deaths to campaign still more vigorously. The government responded by funding public and voluntary clinics, child-care classes for mothers and milk supplies. The number of health visitors (another voluntary initiative gradually taken up by local authorities) doubled; more health centres were established. 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. Between the wars, women campaigned for local authorities to take advantage of the legislation, leading to real improvements by the onset of the next war.⁵⁰

Between the Wars

Through the 1920s and 1930s, despite economic depression and unemployment, state social provision and expenditure grew in the areas of housing, health, education, and much else, much of it channelled through local government and often by means of funding voluntary action, as in the provision of some maternal and child health clinics. Voluntary associations of various kinds were an influential presence in British political culture in the 1920s and 1930s, as Britain came to terms with the great extension of the franchise in 1918, when all men got the vote at the age of 21 years, and most women at 30, tripling the size of the electorate overnight.

Voluntary associations played an important role in drawing new voters into the political system and maintaining political and social stability at a time of economic depression and international crisis as well as transformation of British politics.⁵¹ They included voluntary social welfare institutions of an older type and many new ones. New associations also emerged in response to urgent contemporary

⁴⁹ Grant, 'Voluntarism', 38–9.

⁵⁰ P. Thane, 'Visions of Gender in the Making of the British Welfare State: Women in the British Labour Party and Social Policy, 1906–45', in G. Bock and P. Thane, eds, *Maternity and Gender Policies. Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States, 1880s–1950s* (London, 1991), 104–7.

⁵¹ K. Middlemas, *Politics in Industrial Society. The Experience of the British System since 1911* (London, 1979); H. McCarthy and P. Thane, 'The Politics of Association in Industrial Society', *Twentieth Century British History*, 22 (2011), 217–29.

issues of another kind, such as the League of Nations Union,⁵² and the many organizations designed to encourage newly enfranchised women to use their voting power, which achieved significant improvements in family law and welfare provision at central and local government level despite the small numbers of women in parliament.⁵³ The period also saw the growth of myriad organizations devoted to encouraging sport, health, fitness.⁵⁴

The National Council of Social Service (now the National Council of Voluntary Organizations and still important) was set up in 1919 to continue and extend the wartime cooperation between voluntary and statutory bodies and coordinate the work of voluntary agencies. One of its stated aims was 'to co-operate with Government Departments and Local Authorities making use of voluntary effort', as it did. It acted as a channel through which statutory funding was dispersed to voluntary bodies, produced policy documents to inform social legislation and held regular conferences on a broad range of subjects, from the uses of leisure to welfare for the unemployed.⁵⁵

Alongside established groups, a variety of new, single-issue voluntary organizations emerged to draw attention to gaps in social welfare provision, many of them set up by newly enfranchised women who were well aware of the need of politicians to respond to a newly democratic electorate now that most (after 1928 all) adult women and all adult men, including the poorest, were enfranchised. Among many other new organizations, the mixed-sex National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child (NCUMC, founded 1918) provided services and financial support, and campaigned tirelessly for state action to help these most marginalized and stigmatized people. They were supported by bishops and prominent politicians, including Neville Chamberlain (its Vice-President for several years) and by feminists and suffragists, among others. The NCUMC succeeded in its first 10 years in persuading parliament to increase both the financial obligations of absent fathers and the legal rights of mothers and children, whilst giving them what direct financial and personal

⁵² H. McCarthy, 'Parties, Voluntary Societies and Democratic Politics in Interwar Britain', *Historical Journal*, 50, 2007, 891–912. H. McCarthy 'Associational Voluntarism in Interwar Britain', in Hilton and McKay, *Ages*, 47–68.

⁵³ P. Thane, 'What Difference did the Vote Make?', in A. Vickery, ed., *Women, Privilege and Power. British Politics, 1750 to the Present* (Stanford, 2001), 253–88.

⁵⁴ I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the Body. Beauty, Health and Fitness in Britain, 1880–1939* (Oxford, 2010).

⁵⁵ K. Bradley, *Poverty, Philanthropy and the State: Charities and the Working Classes in London, 1918–79* (Manchester, 2009); M. Brasnett, *Voluntary Social Action: A History of the National Council of Social Service, 1919–1969* (London, 1969).

support it could. It remains, in 2011, unflaggingly active, now called Gingerbread.⁵⁶

Another voluntary organization that is still active and indispensable, Citizens' Advice (as it is now known, originally Citizens' Advice Bureaux, CAB), was established in 1939 to help people access state benefits and other forms of social support, as they became increasingly extensive and complex, and to negotiate the expensive and often inaccessible legal system, as they continue to do.⁵⁷ As the sphere of state action grew, the voluntary sector found another role: helping people to negotiate their way through new state structures and access the increasing, and increasingly complex, range of benefits and services.

Meanwhile, older voluntary institutions continued, adapted to changing circumstances and collaborated with central and local government while campaigning for more state action. As Kate Bradley has shown, East London settlements, mostly established before the First World War, between the wars moved into new areas of voluntary service, including women's health care, legal advice, and services for young people.⁵⁸ State and non-state sectors worked together and many individual workers found no apparent discomfort in moving between them, the complementarity of the sectors was widely taken for granted.⁵⁹

The Second World War

During the Second World War some voluntary organizations faltered as volunteers became involved in war work and donations dwindled. But, as in the previous war, voluntary effort proved so vital to the war effort that new ones formed and others expanded and were increasingly subsidized by the state which found them indispensable. The Women's (later Royal) Voluntary Services (WVS) was founded and funded by the government in 1938 to use the energy and expertise of women (mainly but not entirely middle-class in practice) to help victims of the severe bombing that was expected at the outbreak of war, with evacuation and then with keeping services running amid the disruption of war, as James Hinton has described.⁶⁰ Among many examples of the essential work of established organizations, without the NCUMC and some

⁵⁶ P. Thane and T. Evans, *Simmers? Scroungers? Saints? Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth Century England* (Oxford, 2012).

⁵⁷ I am grateful to Oliver Blaiklock's PhD research for this information.

⁵⁸ Bradley, *Poverty*.

⁵⁹ Colpus, 'Landscapes of Welfare'.

⁶⁰ J. Hinton, *Women, Social Leadership and the Second World War. Continuities of Class* (Oxford, 2002).

Christian welfare organizations, the Ministry of Health could not have coped with the numbers of unmarried pregnant servicewomen and war workers, and it increasingly subsidized their work.⁶¹ The reliance of the state on the voluntary sector to maintain social conditions and popular morale during the war exposed the inadequacies of many central and local government services and the need for radical reform after the war.⁶²

In 1942, William Beveridge's influential government report, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, generally credited as the foundation document of the post-war welfare state, recommended extended state welfare. But it is often forgotten that Beveridge also explicitly valued and sought to preserve what he regarded as the complementary and socially indispensable work of the voluntary sector in what he refused to call a 'welfare state'. He preferred the term 'social service state', with its implication that, in a good society, all members of the population had an obligation to support and serve others rather than to encourage dependence on the state.⁶³ He recommended in his report that the state should implement a comprehensive system, a universal 'safety net', of social insurance and services, 'from the cradle to the grave'. These would be adequate to protect the whole population from the 'five giants on the road of reconstruction... Want... Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness'.⁶⁴ But, above that level of basic protection, Beveridge believed that people should be encouraged and expected to help themselves, ideally by saving through non-profit mutual organizations such as Friendly Societies, which he much admired and which he recommended should be regulated and, if necessary, assisted financially by the state.⁶⁵

In 1948, Beveridge published another report, *Voluntary Action*, promoting his notion of the essential role of voluntary action in the modern 'social service state'.⁶⁶ He had first become involved with social issues as a volunteer resident at the pioneering East London settlement, Toynbee Hall, at the beginning of the twentieth century. He later advised Winston Churchill on the establishment of Unemployment Insurance and strongly supported the incorporation of mutual associations in its administration. As Jose Harris has described, Beveridge, like many of his contemporaries, saw no contradiction in

⁶¹ Thane and Evans, *Sinners?*

⁶² S. Ferguson and H. Fitzgerald, *History of the Second World War. Studies in the Social Services* (London 1954).

⁶³ J. Harris, *William Beveridge. A Biography* (Oxford, 1997).

⁶⁴ *Social Insurance and Allied Services*. Report by Sir William Beveridge, Cmd. 6404, London 1942, 6.

⁶⁵ *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, 143.

⁶⁶ Oppenheimer and Deakin, *Beveridge and Voluntary Action*.

promoting the expansion of state welfare and cooperation of state and voluntary welfare institutions, working together to promote good citizenship in a free society. This was his vision of the post-war future.⁶⁷ As he put it:

The independence of Voluntary Action does not mean lack of co-operation between it and public action. Co-operation between public and voluntary agencies...is one of the special features of British public life. But the term Voluntary Action does imply that the agency undertaking it has a will and a life of its own.⁶⁸

He saw voluntary action as capable of checking the potential of the state to become too powerful.

Another influential figure in post-war Britain, Michael Young, had similar views and enthusiastically supported those of Beveridge. He too had lived at Toynbee Hall, between 1933 and 1935. In 1945, he headed the Labour Party Research Department and was largely responsible for writing the party's election manifesto, *Let Us Face the Future*. The term 'welfare state' is absent from this document, though it did promise social and economic improvement for the 'millions of working and middle class people [who] went through the horrors of unemployment and insecurity' before the war. Indeed, over the next 6 years Young became witheringly hostile to the term and the concept of the 'welfare state', identifying it with impersonal centralization lacking space for participation by users. He argued that state services should work in partnership with other public and private institutions, provided that they were all publicly accountable, and that an important role, especially for non-profit institutions, was to assist people to understand and to express their needs and genuinely to participate in decision-making that affected their lives. For the rest of Young's life he encouraged and founded voluntary, participatory organizations designed to empower the individual against large public and private corporations and to improve their effectiveness, including the Advisory Centre for Education, the Consumers Association, housing associations, and, less successfully, co-operatives.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ J. Harris, 'Voluntarism, the State and Public-Private Partnerships in Beveridge's Social Thought', in Oppenheimer and Deakin, *Beveridge and Voluntary Action*, 9–20.

⁶⁸ Lord Beveridge, *Voluntary Action. A Report on Methods of Social Advance* (London, 1948), 8.

⁶⁹ M. Young, 'Small Man, Big World: A Discussion of Socialist Democracy', in *Towards Tomorrow*, No. 4 (London, 1948). M. Young and M. Rigge, *Mutual Aid in a Selfish Society: A Plea for Strengthening the Co-Operative Movement* (London, 1979); A. Briggs, *Michael Young. Social Entrepreneur* (London, 2001); P. Thane, 'Michael Young and Welfare', *Contemporary British History*, 19 (2005), 293–9.

Voluntary Action in the Welfare State

The welfare policies of the post-1945 Labour government were less comprehensively influenced by Beveridge than is often thought, concerning voluntary action and much else. Young's ideas similarly made limited impact. Within the labour movement there was a strong and understandable strain of hostility to what was seen as 'charity', which many working people had experienced as demeaning and reinforcing class differences. There was a widespread feeling that voluntary action belonged to the past and was not part of the new, post-war world order of state-led planning. Voluntary organizations themselves went through a period of uncertainty about their future, unclear whether they still had a role as state welfare expanded. Donations became scarce, partly due to high taxes, though potential donors also perhaps believed that the state had taken over responsibility for eliminating need and voluntary action was no longer needed.⁷⁰ Friendly Societies and Trade Unions lost their role in administering social insurance. They had been increasingly criticized for their uneven performance between the wars.⁷¹ The Friendly Societies, went into decline, and were not accorded the supplementary role to state welfare that Beveridge recommended.⁷²

Yet Labour was not entirely hostile to voluntary action.⁷³ While he was Prime Minister, Clement Attlee became President of Toynbee Hall, where he also had been resident as a young man. The government continued to support and fund voluntary organizations which provided services the state could not yet adequately take on, such as the NCUMC whose annual subsidy from the Ministry of Health grew during the war and increased further for many years after. Unmarried mothers and their children were better supported than before in the post-war welfare state, but many gaps and difficulties remained, such as provision of child care.⁷⁴ The WVS, set up to meet war needs, carried on until the present providing on a voluntary basis community services such as 'meals-on-wheels' for housebound disabled and older people, supplementing local authority services. The National Assistance Act, 1948, enabled and encouraged local authorities to work with and subsidize voluntary organizations to provide care, particularly for older and disabled people. The government aimed to improve services in these

⁷⁰ P. Thane, 'Voluntary Action in Britain since Beveridge', in Oppenheimer and Deakin, *Beveridge and Voluntary Action*, 121–34.

⁷¹ N. Whiteside, 'Private Provision and Public Welfare: Health Insurance Between the Wars', in D. Gladstone, ed., *Before Beveridge: Welfare before the Welfare State* (London, 1999), 26–42.

⁷² Weinbren, 'Organizations'.

⁷³ N. Deakin and J. D. Smith, 'Labour, Charity and Voluntary Action: The Myth of Hostility', in Hilton and McKay *Ages*, 69–93.

⁷⁴ Thane and Evans, *Sinners?*

areas but did not have the resources to do so in the difficult post-war economic situation, the more so since it prioritized reconstruction of the economy and full employment over welfare, following its long-held belief that the most effective form of 'welfare' for most people was regular work and decent pay. The 'Welfare State' was an essential complement to full employment for those unable to work.⁷⁵

Hence, after the war, welfare services were much improved but many gaps remained. The very formation of the 'welfare state' stimulated new voluntary activities supporting those falling into the gaps, particularly older, disabled, and mentally ill people. The National Corporation for the Care of Old People (now the Centre for Policy on Ageing) was formed in 1947 to protect the interests of older people. The organization that is now MENCAP was founded in 1946 (as the Association of Parents of Backward Children) to ensure that children with learning difficulties, who were then generally described as 'backward', were adequately cared for in the new education and health systems. In the same year, the National Association for Mental Health (now MIND) was formed to fight for mental health services which were severely marginalized in the newly announced National Health Service, despite the fact that mentally ill people occupied 50 per cent of NHS beds.

It was widely believed throughout the 1950s that the welfare state had eliminated poverty, except perhaps among some older people, but the considerable gaps in provision became increasingly obvious. When the Conservatives came into government in 1951 they had mixed feelings about state welfare, but they did not abandon it though they were disposed to encourage voluntary action.

Established voluntary organizations gradually recovered and reconfigured their activities to fill the gaps the welfare state, while pressing the state to act to fill those gaps. New organizations continually formed to campaign on newly identified issues. As decolonization progressed, overseas aid organizations, such as OXFAM, grew, often with religious roots, sometimes inheritors of missionary activities.⁷⁶ The voluntary sector was reinvigorated in its role of innovation and pressing for and working with state action. There were parallel developments in voluntary action, taking diverse forms, in the arts, sports, and other areas. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), the Homosexual Law Reform Association, and the anti-racist Institute of Race Relations were all founded in 1958.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ P. Thane, 'Labour and Welfare', in D. Tanner et al., eds., *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge, 2000), 80–118.

⁷⁶ C. Saunders, 'International Aid and Development. British Humanitarian Aid and Development NGOs, 1949–Present', in Crowson et al., *NGOs*, 38–58.

⁷⁷ J. Burkett, 'Peace. Direct Action and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, 1958–1962', in Crowson et al., *NGOs*, 21–37. M. Waites, 'LGB Equality. Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual NGOs in Britain: Past, Present and Future', *ibid.* 95–112.

In the 1960s, large-scale poverty, especially among children and large families, was 'rediscovered' by researchers at the London School of Economics (LSE).⁷⁸ This was not the absolute destitution of the earlier part of the century, but the researchers revealed significant inequality and relative deprivation and there was increased awareness of problems such as homelessness.⁷⁹ These discoveries helped to give birth to a new breed of, media-aware, campaigning organizations, often more inclusive of the groups they sought to help than their predecessors—less top-down—and with snappier, media-friendly, titles, focused mainly on pressing for more effective state action. These included the Child Poverty Action Group, founded in 1965; Shelter, founded 1966; the Disablement Income Group (DIG), founded 1965 by Megan du Boisson, who was suffering from the early stages of multiple sclerosis when she discovered that there were no state disability benefits available to married women such as herself who were not in paid employment and so outside the National Insurance system. DIG was founded on a voluntary basis but, like other groups, grew rapidly and attracted paid, trained workers as well as volunteers, who might well also be trained. It played an important part in persuading the Labour government to introduce the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act, 1970, which introduced a wider range of cash benefits for disabled people and their carers and required local authorities to register disabled people and to publicize services for them. DIG was effective very quickly and pioneered campaigning by disabled people for disabled people. These organizations played an important advocacy role with and on behalf of disadvantaged groups, though some also provided services, as Shelter provided homes for homeless people.⁸⁰

Organizations such as this were products of a new awareness of continuing disadvantage in an increasingly prosperous society, and of gaps in the welfare state, but also of a number of other changes: the hopes aroused by the return of a Labour government in 1964, that it would continue the post-war expansion of the welfare state; the growing numbers of social scientists and other experts graduating from universities, keen to use their knowledge and training to change the world; a society less deferential to authority, such as that of the medical profession, and more willing to be critical of state services; a mass media also less deferential, more openly critical of government and

⁷⁸ B. Abel-Smith and P. Townsend, *The Poor and the Poorest* (London, 1964).

⁷⁹ J. Greve, *London's Homeless* (London, 1966).

⁸⁰ T. Evans, 'Poverty. Stopping the Poor Getting Poorer. The Establishment and Professionalization of Poverty NGOs, 1945-95', in Crowson et al., *NGOs*, 147-63. V. Berridge and A. Mold, 'Professionalisation, New Social Movements and Voluntary Action in the 1960s and 1970s', in Hilton and McKay, *Ages*, 114-34.

eager to promote new campaigns; also the dwindling of the traditional reservoir of voluntary labour, middle-class married women, who after the war were more likely to enter the paid workforce, often working for the new and expanded public and non-governmental services. Older organizations gradually followed the new model, taking on more professional staff, becoming more inclusive of the people they spoke for and more publicity conscious. The change was symbolized by name changes for many of them e.g. the Old People's Welfare Committee (founded 1940) became Age Concern.⁸¹

The voluntary sector also embodied the changing contours of Britain's cultural diversity, as it long has. Immigrant groups have long created voluntary organizations to protect their members and meet their needs. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the voluntary Jewish Board of Guardians, funded by wealthy British Jews, assisted poor Jews fleeing from persecution in Eastern Europe and protected them from accusations of scrounging off British taxpayers by claiming poor relief.⁸² The Indian Workers' Association was founded in 1938 to support Indians in Britain, including assisting them to claim welfare, such as unemployment benefits, to which they had a right as British subjects born within the Empire.⁸³ Like many other organizations founded since the 1940s, it still assists new migrants to settle, providing free welfare and legal advice, whilst fighting racism. Minority ethnic and faith groups of all persuasions have continued to create voluntary organizations.

From the later 1960s other new types of voluntary movement sought to redress diverse inequalities, such as the Women's Liberation (WLM) and Gay Liberation movements and campaigns against race discrimination. These were consciously less organized and professionalized than other associations, more inclusive, preferring public demonstrations to behind the scenes lobbying, often openly critical of conventional parliamentary politics. Yet they campaigned, with some success, for state action against the inequalities suffered by gay people, women, and ethnic minorities, and pioneered action to help these and other. The WLM brought domestic violence and rape firmly and permanently out of the shadows in which they had long been hidden and onto the public agenda, voluntarily establishing refuges for victims, many of which later gained public funding from local authorities, then achieved belated legislation against domestic violence in 1976, though, sadly, not

⁸¹ Thane, 'Voluntary Action', in Oppenheimer and Deakin, *Beveridge and Voluntary Action*, 125–6.

⁸² D. Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews. Social Relations and Political Culture, 1840–1914*. (New Haven and London, 1994).

⁸³ <www.dango.bham.ac.uk> accessed 25 April 2012.

its eradication.⁸⁴ For all their unconventionality, they had much in common with more conventional voluntary organizations in identifying social problems, proposing and implementing solutions, and campaigning for state action.

Retrenchment

The international economic crisis of the mid-1970s led in the 1980s to attempts internationally to cut back state welfare. Under the Conservative governments of the 1980s there were serious attempts to replace it by encouraging voluntary action. These continued through the 1990s, through the change of government in 1997, though the Labour governments also improved state welfare in important ways, reinstating many of the losses of the preceding 18 years.⁸⁵ Many voluntary organizations greeted these successive changes without enthusiasm, since they well knew that many serious social problems required resources and a national reach which they lacked—the reason why so many of them campaigned for state action in the first place. They did not believe that they should, or could, replace the state, but had a separate, complementary role. Also, a danger for the voluntary sector through the twentieth century, of which it was well aware, was that too close association with the state and too much dependence on state funding could, and in some cases did, restrict their independence, their capacity to innovate and criticize the state, since state funding is rarely unconditional and governments tend not to favour their critics. New tensions emerged between state and non-governmental institutions out of the very attempts by government to boost—but also control—the non-governmental sector.⁸⁶

Conclusion

Non-governmental organizations of all kinds have been important components of British society and politics and of everyday life for the past 150 years and more, though their roles have shifted and changed. Far from being crowded out by a growing state, or existing in opposition to it, non-state organizations have had a complementary and indispensable, though not always harmonious, relationship with the British state. This article focuses—all too briefly in the time and space

⁸⁴ H. McCarthy, 'Gender Equality', in P. Thane, ed., *Unequal Britain. Equalities in Britain since 1945* (London, 2010), 111–4.

⁸⁵ P. Toynbee and D. Walker, *The Verdict. Did Labour Change Britain?* (London, 2010); Alcock 'Voluntary Action, New Labour and the "third sector"', 158–79.

⁸⁶ Hilton and McKay, 'Introduction', in *Ages*, 1–26.

available—on welfare institutions, though the scope of voluntary action has always been much wider. There is no sign that voluntary action, in its many forms, has declined as the ‘welfare state’ has grown. Rather it has adapted to fill the many gaps in state provision. Anyone who doubts the continuing importance of the voluntary sector should try to imagine British society without it. It is unimaginable, so central to life at all levels are the diverse organizations in question. Government has become as dependent on non-governmental organizations that carry out essential tasks in the welfare, social, and cultural spheres as some of them are on the government.⁸⁷ Far from the ‘Big State’ growing at the expense of a vibrant ‘Big Society’, they have worked and changed together, often in creative tension, constructing and sustaining the ‘mixed economy of welfare’ which has more accurately characterized the British welfare regime through the past century.

⁸⁷ P. Shapely, ‘Civil Society, Class and Locality: Tenant Groups in Post-War Britain’, in Hilton and McKay, *Ages*, 94–113.