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From the Third Sector to the Big Society: Consensus or Contention in the 2010 UK General Election?

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Abstract

The 2010 election marked a turning-point in British politics, with a new Coalition government replacing the Labour administration which had been in power for thirteen years. This resulted in an apparent change in policy on the third sector, from a period of ‘hyperactive mainstreaming’ in which significant support was provided for the sector to the ‘Big Society’ agenda under which voluntary and community action are promoted as an alternative to state intervention. This article explores this transition through analysis of the presentation of third sector politics in the election campaign and the subsequent development of these under the new government.

Key Words

Third Sector, Big Society, Policy, Election

The Policy Legacy: Constituting the Third Sector

The idea that the state can and should shape the policy environment for the third sector in the UK has a long history, but the framing and emphasis of this idea has evolved dramatically as the capabilities of the State, and the priorities of society have changed. Harris (2010) provides a recent review of this history tracing change back to the early nineteenth century and more extensive analysis is provided by the contributors to a recent collection on the different ‘ages of voluntarism’ (Hilton and McKay, 2011). In her 1999 analysis Lewis sought to distinguish between shifts in the terms of engagement within policy over the last century or so, from a separate or supplementary role of service provision in the early twentieth century to one of complementary or, more recently, partnership (Lewis, 2005) relations. This theme of shifting relations was taken up Kendall (2009) who identified three phases of post war policy change – from incremental ‘charity-centric’ institution building up to the mid 1970s, through wider ‘voluntary sector’ oriented consolidation up to 1997, to ‘hyperactive mainstreaming’ under new Labour.

The second of these phases was foreshadowed by the recommendations of the Wolfenden Committee (1978) and has been described by Giddens and Leat (1997) as leading to the creation, in discourse, of the ‘voluntary sector’ in the UK. The third phase was also informed by recommendations for change, this time from the Deakin Commission (1996); but it was the Labour government and their commitment to a much enhanced role for the sector and much greater public support to underpin this that transformed the policy environment into one of hyperactive mainstreaming. The Labour governments of the early twenty-first century were operating in a unique set of circumstances for the development of third sector policy, within which the terrains of policy and practice became ‘decontested’ and the ‘third sector’ itself was constituted as the third plank of social and economic development, alongside the state and the market (see Alcock and Kendall, 2011).

Labour’s support for the sector reached a symbolic high point with the establishment in 2006 of the Office of the Third Sector (OTS) as a dedicated source of policy and practice, located

in the Cabinet Office and operating across government. The OTS was led by a senior figure recruited from the third sector (Campbell Robb, formerly policy lead at the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, NCVO), it developed strategic partnerships with all the major sector umbrella bodies, and it provided a range of programmes of horizontal support for sector agencies worth hundreds of millions of pounds. What is more, this hyperactive policy environment was largely welcomed by the third sector itself, which in effect was moulded into a ‘strategic unity’ to engage with government and take advantage of the widespread support on offer (Alcock, 2010a).

This strategic unity itself reached a high point late in the 2000s as the financial recession of 2008-09 began to restructure political and economic development. There were naturally concerns that the recession would impact deleteriously on the sector, perhaps leading to loss of funding from both private and public sources, and to greater demands on some organisations working closely with victims of economic change. In response to this the sector agencies came together to convene a series of ‘recession summits’ with successive Ministers for the Third Sector, to demand a policy response – and this is just what happened in the construction by the Cabinet Office of a Third Sector Action Plan to provide £42 million additional support for the sector.

The recession summits saw the sector at their most strategic and unified, and the policy makers at their most supportive; and, as we shall see, these may have marked a high water point in the policy environment for the third sector. Even at that point, however, unity though decontested was not universal, and policy engagement was not necessarily seen as consistent or benign by all commentators. Two factors bear critical understanding here.

First it is important to remember that since 2000 third sector policy in the UK has been devolved to the separate administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The OTS and the form taken by the hyperactive policy environment associated with it are therefore manifestations of the English situation. There are now separate offices and distinct policy regimes in all four countries, although in practice there has been a similar engagement in all in closer partnership with the third sector and greater support for this (see Alcock, 2012). There is not the scope to explore the details of the impact of devolution here, however, and discussion and analysis here focuses specifically on England therefore.

Second it must not be forgotten that behind the strategic unity of the sector is a diverse and sometimes conflicting collection of organisations and interests. There were voices within the sector who unconditionally embraced the new mainstreaming with government, in particular over an enhanced role in the delivery of public services; and who sought to speak for the sector on these issues. For instance, the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO) and their Chief Executive, Sir Stephen Bubb (ACEVO, 2004); and the head of the NCVO, Sir Stuart Etherington, who in a speech in 2002 commented, *“This is an exciting and challenging time for people working in the voluntary sector. Over the past five years we have seen a growing understanding of, and emphasis on, working with the voluntary sector across government. Partnership working has become the norm...”* (Etherington, 2002).

However, others have been less effusive, more cautious, or even hostile. For instance, contributors to publications by the Baring Foundation have expressed concerns that the independence of the sector could be threatened by too close an engagement with government (Smerdon 2006 and 2009), while the National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA) has

sought to portray the recent direction of policy travel as subverting the true spirit of voluntary action (NCIA, 2011).

Anxious voices from the world of practice have resonated with commentaries from think tanks and academia here. Paxton, Pearce, Unwin and Molyneux (2005) explored the co-existence of different ways of representing the relationship between the state and the sector more analytically. They contrasted the depiction of the sector as an ally in driving the outsourcing of public services with the notion of the sector as an arena for fostering 'civic infrastructure', in which a premium was placed on building social capital and trust. And, as they pointed out, these different agendas were both fragile and in tension. Neither policy nor practice engagement were necessarily consistent therefore.

In a more critical analysis of the policy environment under Labour for the delivery of public services, Carmel and Harlock (2008) argued that the closer engagement with the sector may not be so benign. As they explained increased involvement with government, in particular under contracts for the delivery of public services, was driven by the demands of New Public Management performance measurement. This was in practice imposing significant burdens on third sector organisations and was driving their activity towards government determined outputs and monitoring. This was because government needed to control those agencies delivering public services and in effect therefore was 'instituting' the third sector as a governable terrain in order to achieve this.

The extent to which striking a balance between prized third sector autonomy on the one hand and legitimate control to ensure public accountability on the other was indeed a demanding and complex issue becomes clear if we consider comparative analysis of the range of alternative approaches to governing third sector-state relations revealed in recent international research in Europe (Kendall, 2009).

In the Netherlands and Sweden for example, with traditionally much higher levels of activity in this sphere than the UK on several important measures, we witness respectively no, and rather modest, levels of organisation at national government level, even though these countries have relatively centralised policy systems by European standards. Here policy makers have tended not to perceive a need for extensive national policy action, let alone hyperactivity. Instead relations have tended to function essentially through the interactions of sub-national public authorities with the third sector actors with whom they happen to share a policy focus, rather than being joined up from above (Brandesen and van der Donk, 2009; Olsson et al, 2009).

In France, by contrast, volunteering is modest compared to the countries mentioned above, and employment and private giving are relatively lower compared to the UK, and yet there has been perhaps the most anxiety over the issue of state control. In this case, enthusiasts for *l'économie sociale* and *la vie associative* have long sought policy recognition and encouragement from the State by seeking to establish and elaborate a complex architecture of specialist third sector policy institutions relating to European, national, regional and local tiers of Government with the aim of cultivating a more healthy third sector policy environment. However, these efforts seem to have failed to achieve a momentum comparable to the British case, with shifts in governments and failures of implementation in recent years appearing to have undermined policy gains made in the previous decade (Fraisie, 2009).

Hyperactive Mainstreaming: Consensus or Co-operation?

The policy legacy of the New Labour era in England, captured in the notion of hyperactive mainstreaming, was then one in which government - to an exceptional extent, by European standards - sought systematically to raise the profile of policy engagement with the third sector. This was to because government had enhanced expectations of the third sector within the mixed economy that it was promoting more generally – initially championed as the pursuit of a ‘third way’ for policy planning (Blair, 1998; Giddens, 1998). Third sector organisations were now expected by government to play an expanded role in delivering public services, promoting civic engagement and supporting community action. Government also recognised that in order to promote and support the sector in this, active policy change and direct financial investment would be needed – not all third sector organisations would be able to embrace these new challenges alone. From these new government commitments flowed a range of institutional changes including the signing of the Compact and the creation of the OTS, and the development of horizontal programmes of support, such as Futurebuilders and Change-Up (see Alcock, 2011).

There was hyperactivity on the policy front, but this also required mainstreaming of third sector relationships. Government policies needed to engage with a sector that was ready and willing to take up the opportunities which the re-mixing of the economy of public services was providing and was prepared to engage with government in securing optimum planning and delivery of these. For this the third sector needed to be created in order to provide, in Carmel and Harlock’s (2008) terms, a governable terrain for public service reforms. More simply perhaps the Compact required signatories from government and from the sector, and for this, representatives of a unified entity were needed to enter mainstream relations.

The success of the Labour era was to constitute the third sector in this way and to engineer a consensus on the expanded role of the sector and its institutional engagement with government. The appearance was created of a *consensus* on the values of hyperactive mainstreaming, outlined by government in the joint Treasury and Cabinet Office paper on the ‘future role of the third sector’ (HM Treasury and Cabinet Office, 2007), and taken up by sector agencies in their participation as OTS Strategic Partners. And, as we suggested above, this consensus seemed to reach its high point in the 2008/09 Recession Summits, where a unified sector appealed to government for strategic investment, and was rewarded with almost immediate action.

However, our acknowledgement of the existence of varied perspectives on this process, and the foregoing discussion of the difficulty of striking a balance between autonomy and control already suggest caution in accepting the creation of consensus as an adequate account of the issues at stake. To portray the changed relations between government and the sector simply as one of a growing consensus is to ignore, or at least gloss over, the contradictions in policy and practice we mentioned earlier. These ambiguities were threefold.

First there were contradictions within government policy towards the sector. However, co-ordinated government policy planning may be, especially from the perspective of central departments like the Cabinet Office, in practice different departments have always been prone to follow the particular priorities and preferences of their own policy fields – not without justification are government departments often referred to as policy ‘silos’. But even

beyond departmental distinctiveness, there were in practice different policy agendas driving relations with the third sector.

The increasing expectation that third sector organisations would expand their role in delivering public services under contract from government commissioners in central and local government was a key feature of policy planning, as exemplified in the Treasury cross-cutting review (HM Treasury, 2002) and as welcomed by sector representatives such as ACEVO (2004). However, government also wanted third sector organisations to play a major role in civic renewal by (re)engaging citizens and communities in local action, with the aim of expanding social capital and improving democratic participation (Home Office, 2003). Though both may be attractive to government, and to sector organisations, these were rather different policy goals and could also lead to different forms of engagement and support with different types of third sector organisation. Government was also committed to providing support for capacity building to help equip organisations to take on these new roles, and yet they required different kinds of capacity building with different organisations, with the result that inevitably only some could in practice benefit (Wells et al, 2010).

There was more, for government also wanted to support independent charities through long overdue reform of the legislation on charitable objectives in the Charities Act of 2006 (Cabinet Office, 2002), and to encourage a more entrepreneurial approach to the use of commercial activity to expand the scope of the sector through social enterprise (DTI, 2002). There was also support, both in principle and through funding, for the role of sector organisations as advisers and advocates to citizens challenging government agencies, and as political activists and campaigners against government policies. All these were understandable, and indeed laudable, elements within government policy for the sector; but it is far from clear that they were all compatible with a single point of consensual engagement.

Second contradictory tensions also existed within the third sector itself. Conceptual debate about the existence and distinctiveness of a third sector has engaged scholars for some time, and across international boundaries (see Evers and Laville, 2004). There is the problem of sectoral distinctiveness, the overlap with both public and commercial activity, and the (increasing) phenomenon of ‘hybridity’ (Billis, 2010). There is also the problem of sector diversity, with organisational forms ranging from the local playgroup to the major international charity. In practice organisational identity may be more closely aligned to other similar missions and enterprises, rather than any overall sectoral form; so that in practice the sector is really more of an aggregation of subsectors.

This aggregation was described by Alcock (2010a) as a ‘strategic unity’, within which different subsectors come together because they hope to benefit from a co-ordinated engagement with each other and (more pertinently perhaps) with government. However, such strategic engagement is co-operative rather than consensual, for as much remains to fragment organisations as to unite them. Also this unity may be the particular produce of the policy regime developed in England under New Labour (Alcock and Kendall, 2011) – a co-operation bounded by time and geography, a dimension to which we shall return shortly.

Third, and perhaps most important, there were contradictory ideological frameworks underlying the surface consensus in third sector policy. Both policy developments and practice re-alignments under New Labour were underpinned by an unfolding threefold ideological differentiation, explored in more detail in Kendall (2010), between:

- A *consumerist* orientation, embracing quasi-market solutions, and linked the New Labour drive to improve public services for more demanding consumers by introducing choice amongst a mixed economy of providers.
- A *civil renewal* stance, with a premium on hierarchical order – in effect a *civil order* approach towards supporting citizenship through third sector action with targets for participation and government support.
- A *democratic life revival* tendency, most closely connected with support for more fluid and open policy interactions based on community development and community empowerment (Knight, 1993; Community Organising Foundation, 2007), where agendas for action were constructed more ‘bottom-up’ and could challenge local and central government or campaign for policy change.

Without a consistent over-arching ideological framework, there could be no consensus within the New Labour policy engagement with the third sector. These different ideological frameworks produced different discourses of policy engagement, taken up in various policy papers on service delivery (HM Treasury, 2002), social enterprise (DTI, 2002), civic engagement (2003) and never satisfactorily resolved, even in the final joint Treasury and Cabinet Office publication on the future of the sector (HM Treasury and Cabinet Office, 2007).

There was no policy consensus, but there *was* policy co-ordination, in particular once the OTS undertook strategic responsibility for developing and implementing third sector policy across government and for engaging with third sector agencies. Policy makers expected much of the sector to support service reform and community engagement, and were prepared to back this up with unprecedented levels of public investment. For instance, the OTS created a programme of strategic partnership with leading sector agencies, which encouraged these to co-operate to engage with government and respond to the invitations from policy makers.

Whatever the ideological fault lines, the extent of this strategic accommodation should not be under-estimated. By the end of the 2000s there was more that united the third sector than divided it, and it was bound more closely to government. As a result the sector had a higher profile in political and policy discourse than it had had for a century. However, in 2010 there was a general election. That could lead to significant change in third sector politics.

The 2010 General Election: Contest or Consensus?

All elections provide an opportunity for political and policy change, of course; but the 2010 election offered potentially significant challenges to the policy regime established under Labour, because for the first time for at least two decades this election promised to be a very open one. In its third term of office and presiding over a major economic crisis, the Labour government had been experiencing a significant decline in its support in public opinion polls; and the projection was that they would be unlikely to secure a fourth term in office. However, support for the Conservatives as the main opposition party was far from clear cut, with the polls suggesting that they too may be unable to win an outright majority. The Liberal Democrats had secured increasing numbers of MPs in recent elections and looked as though they might benefit from any voter disenchantment with both Labour and the Conservatives, which, as events revealed, became more important during the campaign itself. The 2010

election looked like it could lead to a change of government therefore; but it was not clear what form that change would take – and, of course, that is just what happened with no party achieving an overall majority on May 10th.

The consequence of this relative uncertainty for the third sector was significant. Campaigning and influence could no longer be directed primarily at one, or two, parties. What is more the close links that had been developed with the Labour government of collaboration and partnership, could be under threat from opposition parties who did not share the commitment to engagement with and support for the sector in the same style, or on the same terms. Third sector campaigners did not want to sever their links with Labour of course – perhaps they might win out after all! But at the same time it was important that they took every opportunity to influence the other parties too. Equally, the sector had to pay close attention to what the opposition parties were saying about their plans for the sector, in particular to see to what extent these might involve significant departures from current practice.

Questions over the future politics and policies for the third sector were therefore potentially more open in the 2010 election than they had been for many years. These were the focus of the research which underpins this article. It was based on a wide range of documentary material produced during the election, including key speeches, manifestos (from political parties and third sector organisations), media coverage and ‘edebates’ in the social media; and in addition detailed qualitative interviews with leading figures in third sector policy and practice.

Despite the potential for political conflict, however, the ‘good news’ conclusion of the research was that in practice there was considerable consistence within the discourses about the role of the third sector across the political spectrum during the election campaign, suggesting perhaps that even beyond Labour government mainstreaming there was a consensus over the role of the sector. However, this consensus was to some extent tacit, rather than overt, as third sector politics, perhaps inevitably, did not enjoy a very high profile within broader electoral politics. It also was also frequently based on broad principles rather than detailed policy pledges or agreements, which might in practice mask some more significant practical differences across the sector and between the political parties, which could become more contested when political commitments were eventually translated into policy programmes.

One reason for the apparent consensus was the long lead-in to the 2010 election, which meant that much ground could be prepared before overt political contestation really began. Although the election itself was not formally announced until April, it was known that an election must take place some time in the first half of 2010, and so many third sector actors has already begun to prepare the ground for lobbying politicians of all parties and to develop a narrative about the positive role that the sector could play.

The common strategy was for third sector organisations to plan and actively campaign in the year running up to the election. For example, one of our sector respondents had begun consultation on their election strategy in September 2009, which included focusing on candidates in key marginal seats and campaign meetings at the three major party political conferences. Across the six months’ preceding the election, key players in the third sector organised a number of summits, conferences and meetings, in which to build capacity and ensure that their policy aspirations fed into the political parties’ planning processes. These included breakfast seminars, parliamentary receptions, and, notably, the summits organised

by the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO) with the three main parties – which, at the parties’ own preference, were markedly different in format (the Conservative summit was the largest).

The production of manifestos was also a major electoral strategy for sector organisations. This was not a new phenomenon of the 2010 election; but in a potentially contested arena these could have a more important role in setting out the case for organisations and the sector more generally and seeking to influence the manifesto promises of the parties themselves. The publication of most sector manifestos preceded the formal election period, with a flurry of activity in the February to April period, which *Third Sector Online* described as “*manifesto mad*,” “*in vogue*” and “*a key weapon in the run-up to election day*” (Donovan, 2010). Often manifestos were developed in communication with political parties to ensure that priorities were reflected or at least considered in the latter’s manifestos. For example, one umbrella agency felt that it had been particularly successful in getting its key manifesto requests reflected in political parties’ manifestos as a result of investing considerable effort in targeting the authors of the Labour, Conservative and Liberal-Democrat manifestos at an early stage, and well in advance of publishing its own manifesto: “*it felt appropriate*” they said, “*to go directly to the people that were given the task of writing the manifestos and developing the party visions*”. Other third sector organisations were less successful, with some manifestos dismissed a little more than ‘shopping lists’ and one government representative commenting that, “*countless [different] manifestos from the sector tend to have little effect*”.

The manifestos of the three main political parties were published close together within a week of the general election formally being called in April 2010, although obviously they too had been the product of a longer period of consultation and development. For Labour, understandably perhaps, promises tended to focus on ‘more of the same’ with few major specific commitments, but increased emphasis for example on greater community ownership and community involvement. The Conservatives had prefigured many of their plans for the third sector in their *Green Paper* published in 2008 (Conservative Party, 2008), which had talked about an enhanced role for voluntary action to tackle the country’s problems; and they followed this with a paper early in 2010 entitled *Building a Big Society*, which introduced what was to become a major feature of later political and policy rhetoric. The Conservative manifesto, as their earlier *Green Paper*, included interesting references to changing terminology on the sector, eschewing ‘Labour’s’ concept of the third sector and referred instead to civil society and the voluntary and community sector. They also outlined a number of new policy initiatives, such as a National Citizen Service for 16 year olds and a Big Society Day. By contrast the Liberal Democrat manifesto was relatively muted in its discussion of third sector policy, with few direct references or policy commitments, beyond a proposed reform to ‘simplify’ Gift Aid.

Although there were some differences in detail in the party manifestos, therefore, and terminological contestation, overall the manifestos revealed that two of the major parties at least appeared to share much common ground about the importance of the third sector and the need for a proactive engagement with government. All supported the Compact as a formal means of governance for relations, all saw a continuing and indeed enhanced role for third sector organisations in delivering public services, all supported the growth of social enterprise (and social enterprises), and all emphasised the importance of the sector in community engagement. What is more all acknowledged, at least implicitly, the model of a

three sector approach to social and economic planning and the need for government to engage strategically with the third sector.

This surface consensus was something of a challenge for sector campaigners, however. Whilst it was valuable to have achieved such consistent general recognition, the widespread agreement on vague, ‘motherhood and apple pie’ support risked third sector which were more specific and demanding not being widely debated or publicised. This also probably contributed to the relatively low profile of third sector politics and its scant coverage in media reporting on the election. Although there was a lot about the election and the manifestos in the ‘trade press’ (notably *Third Sector Magazine*), there was little in the mainstream press; and one press source commented that, “...*there wasn’t a lot between them... a lot of the policies had been well known before the election.... [and much] was all warm words and pretty much the same agenda*”.

Similar concerns were expressed by some of the sector commentators, who felt that this made it more difficult for them to raise the profile of their campaigning, with one of our respondents commenting that, “*They all had the same pious intentions, but in nearly all cases unbacked by any specific proposals... [so that we] had to seize on the third sector implications of things which did feature*”. This revealed a more significant contradiction within the surface consensus on the third sector in the election campaign. If there was not much contention in what the parties were saying about the sector, what did that mean about what they were *not* saying?

The problem of ‘strategic silences’ in the 2010 election campaign was a more general one than just over third sector policy. Many commentators at the time criticised the parties, and particularly their leaders, for not spelling out in any detail how their economic policy planning would respond to the need for significant cuts in public expenditure. All parties agreed that future cuts would be needed to address future public sector borrowing commitments, and although there was debate and disagreement about the scale and speed of these, there was little of no discussion of how they would be implemented or how the consequences of this would be managed (see Smith, 2010, and Kavanagh and Cowley, 2011).

There was something of a ‘phoney war’ in election debate about future public sector spending, therefore. And much the same could also be said of third sector policy, albeit on a smaller scale. All parties wanted to increase third sector involvement in public service delivery – but how was this to be achieved? All wanted to increase social investment in the sector - but where would the resources for this come from, and how would they be managed? All wanted to increase volunteering and charitable giving – but how could the (relatively stable) trends in this be reversed? All wanted the sector to support citizen and community engagement – but how could government hope to lead this through top-down intervention and diktat?

In this context the consensus over third sector policy which emerged before and during the 2010 general election was only therefore a qualified consensus over rather vague and general aspirations; and it remained unclear how difficult trade-offs between concrete policy priorities would be made, or how these would be implemented and evaluated. So whilst it looked as though era of partnership and mainstreaming might continue in principle whoever won the election, in practice how this was interpreted and implemented could lead to significant practical disjuncture with the regime of hyperactive mainstreaming – particularly if, as of course happened, Labour did not win.

The Big Society: Continuity or Divergence?

The vagueness and ambiguity to which we have referred already made it difficult to predict how concrete policy choices would be made. The creation of a Coalition administration in May 2010 further exaggerated this problem. How would the balance be struck between the under-specified manifesto packages? And how would coalition politics lead to clear policy planning? What is more, despite Cameron's obvious support for the 'Big Society' concept, first trailed in his Hugo Young speech in 2009 (Cameron, 2009), the concept had not worked well in the election campaign and had been somewhat downplayed in the latter weeks (Helm, 2010). However, the new government moved quickly to re-assert its commitment to this 'new direction' for policy reform with the publication on 18 May of an agreed position paper on *Building the Big Society* (Cabinet Office, 2010), accompanied by a press conference at Downing Street with the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, where Cameron talked about "putting the Big Society at the heart of public sector reform". Following this Nat Wei, who had been instrumental in policy development, was appointed to the House of Lords to act as an (unpaid) advisor to the government on implementing the Big Society.

The Big Society thus rapidly became a central feature of government policy development, or at least its policy rhetoric. But what did it mean? Cameron made further key speeches on it in Liverpool in July 2010 and Milton Keynes in April 2011. He talked about it as his 'great passion' and argued that its aim was to engineer a significant shift in relations between citizens and the state, in which *top-down* government control and support would be replaced by *bottom-up* citizen initiatives and community action. And much has already been written about this new concept, by journalists and bloggers, as well as academic analysts. Norman's (2010) book on the topic provided an extended account of modern Conservative thinking on it, Smith (2010) considered its salience to the government's political ideology, and Alcock (2010b) and Taylor (2011) reviewed its early impact on third sector policy. Nat Wei also made speeches on the subject in the House or Lords and around the country – although his role as advisor did not survive, as he resigned in May 2011 citing pressure on his time from this unpaid commitment.

In part the Big Society is about political positioning, as Smith (2010) argues, and at this level its impact may be largely rhetorical. The new government has wanted to differentiate themselves from New Labour. At the most basic level, 'Big Society' is construed as the antonym of 'Big Government'. The previous administration have accordingly been categorised as supporters of a '*big state*, government knows best' approach to policy development, which crowds out citizen and community innovation and responsibility. However, they also want to distance themselves from the pro-market neo-liberalism which was seen by many to be the underlying cause of the financially driven recession. The Big Society, therefore, is not-the-state and not-the-market; and in this residual sense it is similar to New Labour's 'Third Way' concept, although, unlike this, it includes a more hostile conception of the role of government in general.

However, knowing what the Big Society is not does not necessarily help us to understand what it is – and like the Third Way, it does seem to be under defined in terms of policy priorities, apart from its principled hostility to the state. This vagueness has attracted some critics, because of the uncertainty it perpetuates about the future direction of government policy (Barnard, 2010). Although, as others have pointed out, the anti-state bias may help in

distracting those affected from blaming the new Government for the public sector austerity following the extensive spending cuts announced in the 2010 Autumn Spending Review (Coote, 2010). It is convenient, these critics point out, that under the Big Society more will be expected of citizens and less of the state, just at the time as state responsibilities are being dramatically scaled back for economic policy reasons.

Cameron has often said that the Big Society is not just a cover for public austerity, however, and that he would be promoting it even if there were no financial imperative to reduce public expenditure. We have no counterfactual against which to test this claim, but the logic of the Conservative position is certainly to cut public spending regardless of whether or not financial circumstances directly dictate this course of action. Indeed, to some extent the Big Society picks up on traditional Conservative antipathy to public welfare, which is one of the key features which distinguish them from social democrats. However, we know that the extent of follow-through on ideological instincts is in practice an empirical question: one only has to recall the unwillingness to dismantle the NHS and rein in social security spending revealed under the brazenly New Right administrations of 1980s to know that we cannot read off policy implementation from ideological predispositions. Perceptions of administrative feasibility and electoral calculations assure us of that. In this respect, as at the end of the day in all other policy fields, the real proof of the extent and content of the Big Society pudding will be in the eating of it (or not!). Until the policy programmes that will turn political rhetoric into practical reality begin to be implemented, we will not really know whether the 2010 election did really lead to a sea change in policy away from the hyperactive mainstreaming of the Labour era.

However, there has already been significant development of policy programmes flowing from the Big Society agenda. Much of this is the responsibility of the *Office for Civil Society* (OCS) in the Cabinet Office. This is the replacement for Labour's OTS, but in practice it has largely been a continuation of the office under another name. This is not to claim that the process has been marked purely by 'more of the same' of course. The name change is significant, because, as signalled in their 2008 Green Paper, the Conservatives have rejected the term 'third sector' and begun to refer to the sector as civil society, or as voluntary and community organisations and social enterprises (see Alcock, 2010b). The OCS has also had its budget drastically reduced by around 60 per cent, and much of the horizontal support for the sector which had been provided under Labour has already been dropped. It is no longer a distinct specialist office, and it faces pressure on resources, with a National Audit Office (NAO) report on the Compact suggesting that more direction was needed from OCS on this (NAO, 2012).

But the Compact has been maintained, albeit in much simplified form, and other policy programmes for the third sector have been developed since 2010 within OCS. These include the creation of the National Citizens Service for 16 year olds (piloted in summer 2011 and to be expanded in summer 2010), the commitment to train up to 5000 new Community Organisers, and the establishment of Big Society Capital (a dedicated investment bank for the sector). There is also the localism agenda being pursued through the Department for Communities and Local Government, which includes giving local communities a 'right to challenge' local authorities to put local services out to tender; and the establishment of 'vanguard' communities in Eden Valley (Cumbria), Windsor and Maidenhead, Sutton and Liverpool (though Liverpool later withdrew) where new initiatives for locally provided community services were trialled. And there are the reforms to public service structure and

commissioning, outlined in a White Paper published in July 2011, and intended to ensure greater third sector involvement in the delivery of public services (HM Government, 2011).

To the critics who have alleged that the Big Society is little more than political rhetoric, these policy programmes provide a significant challenge. They are also a clear recognition of the continuing commitment of the government to engage with the third sector and utilise policy levers to involve the sector in social and economic change. And it is here that a potential contradiction in the new government's policies, and politics, is revealed. In order to move the Big Society commitments from principled commitments to practical actions, the government has continued to need strategic engagement with the third sector, and in practice it wants to use this to secure very similar objectives to those of its New Labour nemesis.

Increases in volunteering and giving, increased involvement in public service delivery, moves towards more 'intelligent' and outcome-focused commissioning, support for mutualisation and social enterprise (especially for those in public agencies wishing to 'spin out' these from the public to the third sector), support for community organisations to engage citizens and promote civic renewal, and new models of investment for third sector organisational development – these were all key elements of Labour's third sector policy development. Even the much trumpeted, Big Society Capital, as a new source of sustainable funding for the sector outside of direct public support, is the same model that Labour was seeking to develop utilising the resources locked in dormant bank accounts and employing new 'softer' terms for loan finance for social enterprise.

When the policy programmes of the new government are examined in more detail, therefore, they often do not seem to signal a significant departure from the aims and activities of New Labour. At one level, this could be seen as a reassuring message for third sector beneficiaries, and a confirmation of the analysis of the election discourses, which revealed apparent political consensus on third sector importance and policy engagement. The message there, we saw, was to a significant degree one of continuity and not divergences.

However, we would suggest that this common ground should be understood as essentially a 'surface consensus' rather than underlying agreement on the direction of policy travel. This is because the differentiated ideological frameworks identified above remain in place. Ideologies do not simply determine policy, but they do shape its underlying discourses. And what we are likely to witness is that the inherited contradictions between these ideological frameworks will continue to underlie the new government's policy programmes – but will be *remixed and reprioritised* to align with the new anti-State meta narrative.

Most obviously, the public service reforms are set to remain embedded within a consumerist model of commissioning and competition, but with the limits of this model dramatically pushed back, so that only the judiciary and security services are seen as off limits. The role of the state will be curtailed to make room for market based commissioning, in which the third sector will be expected to compete more openly with commercial providers, as was revealed in the passage of a Private Members Bill to promote commissioning of social enterprises, which secured government support only at the price of dropping any preferential treatment for third sector providers (Teasdale et al, 2012).

At the same time, support for community action and community organising continues to be tied to expectations from government about citizen support for social cohesion; and this remains in tension with the rather different model of independent and campaigning

organisations that in practice often challenge government, whilst expecting support and engagement with them. There are some indications that the coalition Government is much less comfortable with adversarial advocacy than its predecessor, although it should also be recognised that consumerist and civil order models with less emphasis on campaign-led social change were already dominant under the previous administration.

As we argued above, these different ideological frameworks underpin different discourses on third sector engagement, and lead to different forms of policy intervention. What this also means, of course, is that the apparently new policy programmes, although distinctive in some ways, are likely to encounter similar practical challenges in their engagement with the third sector.

Conclusion: Re-mixing the inherited ideological balance

That policy development and implementation is underpinned by conflicting ideological frameworks, and therefore seeks simultaneously to pursue different and contradictory policy goals is hardly new or surprising. Nor is it novel to discover that policy engagement with the third sector will encounter diversity, organisational weakness, resistance to interference and regulation, and political challenge. These tensions were already present throughout the New Labour regime of hyperactive mainstreaming, although they were downplayed in the strategic engagement with the sector, as both parties sought to capitalise through co-operation on apparently shared agendas. However this strategic unity was always a fragile and fractured one; and, under the new government, it is coming under additional strain due to the default hostility towards the state which animates its public policy agenda in general, which is set to unsettle and remix the ideological mix inherited from New Labour.

During a contested general election campaign strategic unity within the sector was maintained to some extent in a direct attempt to continue to appeal to, and to shore up, a political consensus on the role of the sector. Our evidence suggests that this was a successful strategy, although in large part perhaps because it was not in the circumstances a controversial one. Support for the sector and commitment to engagement with government was shared by the major political parties – at least at the level of political principle and broad policy objective.

Following the election, however, the discourse has begun to change with the new Coalition government's Big Society policy agenda, especially as this has sought to distance the new government from Labour's programmes and to develop a rhetorical appeal to a restructuring of relations between government and citizens, with a more open hostility to state intervention and public provision. This has also been accentuated to some extent by the rebranding of the third sector as civil society, the withdrawal of much of the horizontal support for organisations and sector agencies developed under Labour, and the extensive cuts in public expenditure, which have begun to impact indirectly on public support for the sector at local level too.

In practice though, the policy programmes flowing from the Big Society agenda have displayed considerable similarity to both the broad expectations of the sector and forms of regulation and support needed to underpin this developed by New Labour. And, as a result, they have, continued to display the contradictions inherent within earlier policy engagement, providing contradictory messages to what has always been a diverse sector.

The first conclusion from our analysis therefore, is that, despite the fears (or hopes) of many in the third sector, the general election of 2010 did not provide a clear step change in third sector policy in England. And, for the first two years at least, the new government's Big Society agenda has involved significant continuities with the agenda inherited from the previous administration.

However, it is still relatively early days in life of the new government. Looking to the future, we witness an over-riding commitment to implementing the most extensive reductions in public spending for over half a century – pushing expected UK social policy spending below that planned in the US (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011) - and this in the context of principled hostility towards a role for the state in the direct provision of public services. This agenda is set to lead to significant re-mixing of the inherited ideological legacy. What is more, as we suggested earlier, the strategic unity of the third sector has been a fragile one, constructed in large part out of the desirability to present a united front to a supportive government – in particular in the expectation that this support would be translated into financial backing. Where this is no longer forthcoming, or at least much reduced, then the contradictory agendas of policy development and the diverse and contested nature of sector practice may in the future lead to greater fragmentation within the sector and a more conflictual political engagement with government, as the gradual removal of support for the strategic partners, the major English infrastructure bodies, has already begun to reveal.

We also conclude therefore, that in time the hyperactive mainstreaming of the New Labour era may be come to be seen as another passing phase in the development of third sector and state relations – not because a general election led to political change; but because the ensuing policy continuity could no longer survive in the face of continuing ideological fragmentation, intense external economic pressure, and internal contradiction and contestation.

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