

## State-voluntary relations in contemporary welfare systems: New politics or voluntary action as usual?

COULE, Tracey <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2594-6527>> and BENNETT, Ellen <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3271-8757>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/17893/>

---

This document is the author deposited version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

### Published version

COULE, Tracey and BENNETT, Ellen (2017). State-voluntary relations in contemporary welfare systems: New politics or voluntary action as usual? *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*.

---

### Repository use policy

Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in SHURA to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain.

STATE-VOLUNTARY RELATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY WELFARE SYSTEMS:  
NEW POLITICS OR VOLUNTARY ACTION AS USUAL?

Tracey M. Coule\*  
Sheffield Business School  
Sheffield Hallam University  
City Campus  
Howard Street  
S1 1WB

E: [t.m.coule@shu.ac.uk](mailto:t.m.coule@shu.ac.uk)  
T: +44 (0)114 225 5909

Ellen Bennett  
Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research  
Sheffield Hallam University  
City Campus  
Howard Street  
S1 1WB

E: [ellen.bennett@shu.ac.uk](mailto:ellen.bennett@shu.ac.uk)  
T: +44 (0)114 225 6643

\* Corresponding author

**Authors' Note:** We would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for insightful and challenging suggestions on earlier drafts of the manuscript. Particular thanks must also go to the Guest Editors for this special issue of NVSQ, Professors Steve Rathgeb Smith and Kirsten Gronbjerg, who provided detailed, instructive guidance at each stage of the review process.

**Key words:** discursive institutionalism; state-voluntary relations; voluntary action; Deakin Commission; Wolfenden Committee; welfare systems

**Abstract:** In this paper, we analyze two landmark reviews of British voluntary action to cast a critical gaze on the recurrent claim that voluntarism is facing a new era of ever more turbulent welfare systems and dramatic changes in state-voluntary relations. Rather than representing a new era, we find the current climate may be more accurately considered a collage of past relations. By this we mean a composition of reality that assembles different aspects of past realities to create a seemingly new era. This suggests that conventional discursive institutional accounts of policy change, which downplay the interrelated dynamics of stability and change, are inadequate for explaining the evolution of state-voluntary relations specifically and policy reform more broadly. Debates about public policy and the role to be played by voluntary action among scholarly and practitioner communities would be better served by greater understanding of the historical experience which has formed today's institutions.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Following the global financial crisis and election outcomes in Western Democracies that represent a shift to the political right, there has been much scholarly attention to associated implications for public policy and the future of welfare states. This includes shifts from a universal model where services are a social right to a 'self-service' model that places increasing responsibility on citizens in many advanced democracies (Eriksson, 2012; Kuisma, 2013). The UK, the setting for our analysis, has experienced an intensified neoliberal regime, austerity measures through cuts in public funding, withdrawal of the state, market reorganization of public services and a welfare discourse that renews behavioral explanations (i.e. lack of personal and social responsibility) for social problems (Alcock & Kendall, 2011; Grimshaw & Rubery, 2012).

Despite its significant history, it is thus often claimed that voluntary action faces an increasingly turbulent and dynamically changing climate that holds the potential for dramatic changes in relations between the state, voluntarism and citizens - a 'new era'. This issue is not just a UK one. State-voluntary relations within the context of changing socio-political dynamics is occupying scholarly attention internationally, aptly reflected in the theme for the 2013 ARNOVA Annual Conference: Recession, Renewal, Revolution? Nonprofit and Voluntary Action in an Age of Turbulence and the call for papers for this special issue of NVSQ. Such claims about current dynamics are all too often made without sufficient recourse to the past as a reference point. In this paper, we counter this tendency through a discursive analysis of two historical landmark reviews of British voluntary action, which simultaneously look back at its history and towards its future, to cast a critical gaze on the question: just how 'new' is this purported contemporary welfare climate and its associated institutional arrangements?

This question offers a platform for considering what we might learn about state-voluntary relations in the contemporary era from relations of the past. It can tell us how institutional arrangements and the role of voluntarism have evolved and the extent to which the current climate may be a case of history repeating itself. It is also an important question in a global socio-political climate where major reviews of particular policy domains (and associated funding regimes and delivery infrastructure) will likely become commonplace in response to fiscal constraints and/or particular ‘administrative doctrines’ (Hood & Jackson, 1991) involving deep-rooted ideologies about the role of the state vis-à-vis other actors (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2012).

Given our analytical material, readers may expect a historical institutionalist explanation to the question we pose. We reject this approach on the grounds that if indeed we are facing increasingly turbulent times with unprecedented changes to institutional relations, historical institutionalism’s emphasis on continuities leaves us ill prepared to examine these turbulent times (Schmidt, 2011). Rather, we have favoured an interpretive approach that we believe is more suited to helping explain the dynamics of change and continuity through taking ideas and discourse seriously – discursive institutionalism (DI). DI concerns itself not just with the substantive content (the “what”) of ideas, but “how” discourse represents or embodies ideas and the institutional context within which this occurs (Schmidt, 2011). It is with these dynamics in mind that we undertake a rare data driven analysis of two of the most noteworthy reviews of British voluntary action – the 1978 Wolfenden Committee report and the 1996 Deakin Commission report – in order to address the question at hand.

Our paper provides two interrelated insights. First, that independent reviews aimed towards policy reform paradoxically involve discourses of stability and change. This suggests that traditional DI accounts, which treat stability and change as analytically distinct and downplay

their interrelated dynamics, are inadequate for explaining both policy reform and the evolution of state-voluntary relations. Second, that rather than representing an entirely new era, the current turbulent and dynamically changing climate may be better considered a collage of past voluntary-state relations or, in other words, an assemblage of different aspects of past realities to create a seemingly new era. One of the major implications of our analysis is that scholars, policy-makers and practitioners may benefit from looking to the past for insights as to how voluntarism has continually adapted to and shaped institutional relations to inform the current enterprise.

## **2. STATE-VOLUNTARY RELATIONS IN THE UK WELFARE SYSTEM**

An historical understanding of the socio-political context of state-voluntary relations in the welfare system is crucial to any consideration of the contemporary era and its implications for voluntary action. For reasons of brevity, we limit ourselves to the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

Voluntary action played the major role in social welfare for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Victorian Britain's government was characterised by a small central bureaucracy that minimized its activities to providing a framework for society largely to run itself (Harris, 1990); social action and welfare provision was locally organized and not the stuff of 'high politics' (Lewis, 1996, p.258). Under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, state provision was a deterrent system; a last resort for those unlikely to achieve societal participation through the labor market. The relief of poverty was largely addressed by what Beveridge (1948) later referred to as the top down (philanthropic) impulse of voluntary action through charitable trusts on the one hand and the bottom-up (mutual aid) impulse through friendly societies on the other. The emergence of youth culture in urban areas due to the migration of young men from home-based, small-scale cottage industries to large urban areas during the Industrial Revolution for example was responded to by the efforts of local philanthropists.

In the latter half of the 1800s, organisations whose sole aim was to address the spiritual, emotional and physical needs of young men were founded, including Christian organizations the YMCA and Boy's Brigade. Similar movements targeting female youth followed. Yet, it was not until widespread moral panic in the press about teenage delinquency in the late 1950s that the British government sought a national response to the needs of young people through local government agencies, finally making youth work a statutory responsibility in 2001. The latter half of the Century also witnessed the first attempts to co-ordinate voluntarism through development of the precursors to what we now refer to as 'infrastructure' or intermediary bodies, the first of which was the Charities Organisation Society (COS) founded in 1869.

While conventional approaches to the history of voluntary action emphasise its efforts toward relief of poverty, it is equally important to note the role of voluntary action in tackling the underlying causes of inequality and disadvantage through campaigning (Rochester, 2014). In the 19th Century such activities led to the 1833 abolition of slavery; the 1832 Reform Act; and the mobilization of the Chartists - a working class national movement that provided the template for the long campaign for universal suffrage and other causes such as 'temperance, cooperatives, local betterment programmes, or educational, land or property reform' (Tilly, 2005 p.48). The 19<sup>th</sup> Century then was generally characterised by consensus that those involved in state and voluntary action should cooperate, but that this should occur within separate spheres (Webb & Webb, 1912).

The early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century witnessed important developments in the state's responsibilities for welfare services. The liberal welfare reforms of the 1906-11 Lloyd George administration not only involved state intervention in what was previously the territory of voluntarism, they had a major impact on the ways in which voluntary action was

organized (Penn, 2011). In particular, Penn argues, the reforms created an imperative for voluntary organisations both to acquire a national presence to influence new governmental actors on the welfare stage and follow the state in adopting a ‘business’ model of organisation.

The first Fabian Society pamphlets advocating canons of social justice and the progressive improvement of society coincided with the liberal reforms of the early 1900s. The Fabians lobbied for the introduction of a minimum wage in 1906 and the creation of a universal health care system in 1911. Alongside the liberal reforms, they represent an important antecedent of the modern welfare state in Britain. This more pervasive state involvement in welfare also coincided with shifts in the electorate. Until 1918 the right to vote had been restricted to men who met particular property qualifications (the ownership of property of a certain value and later the rent of propertied land). In 1918, the consequences of World War I resulted in government expanding the right to vote to all men over 21 and women over 30 with property qualifications and in 1928 all women over 21 won the right to vote, resulting in universal suffrage.

Another significant impetus to voluntary action in Britain at this time was provided by the First World War and its profound effects upon state-voluntary relations (Grant, 2011; 2014). In particular Grant shows how voluntarism contributed to wartime social stability, creating an integrating mechanism between social classes by helping stimulate changes in the relationship between top-down philanthropy and bottom-up mutual aid whilst also pointing to elements of modern voluntarism. Here, he traces the professionalization of voluntary action, noting the turn from ‘amateur’ to professional, paid social workers; the invention and expansion of modern fundraising methods; the emergence of state attempts to better co-



ordinate voluntarism and, relatedly, the development of institutions that not only existed to co-ordinate and further the interests of voluntary action but promote mutually supportive links between statutory and voluntary 'sectors'. These included the War Office's appointment of a Director General of Voluntary Organizations (DGVO) in 1915 and establishment of a Council of Social Service in 1919, which superseded the COS and later became the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO). These new bodies embraced what was termed the 'new philanthropy' (Macadam, 1934), emphasizing much closer state-voluntary co-operation rather than the idea of 'separate spheres' promoted by the COS. Voluntary action was now positioned as a source of influence on and supplementation of welfare, with the major role and overall responsibility for social welfare moving to the state (Lewis, 1996; Rochester, 2014).

The Second World War simulated further entrenchment of state welfare responsibility and provision. The Beveridge report of 1942, which came in the midst of war and was highly popular with the public, constructed the blueprint for the post-war reforms known as the Welfare State, including social security based on a compulsory system of national insurance and creation of the National Health Service. The 1942 report was, however, the first in a trilogy, with the subsequent reports of 1944 and 1948 receiving much less public and scholarly attention. These later reports were significant in that Beveridge advanced the basis of a 'welfare society', not a 'welfare state'. Social advance, he argued, depended on everyone, with civil society and business playing their part. That the Labour government elected in 1945 implemented much of his 1942 proposals through state apparatus was at odds with Beveridge's intentions; his 1948 report was critical of the 'damage' the welfare state

was inflicting to what people did for themselves through voluntary action. The welfare system, in his view, should be owned by the people, not the state.

Around the same time other influential writers also argued for the progressive potential of voluntary action within welfare systems, placing altruism as an attempt to fulfil a moral void; solidarity and mutual aid as counterbalances to industrialism and individualism (Titmuss, 1964); and voluntarism as a flexible, ad hoc, tailor-made relief system to remedy the rigid application of Poor Laws (Marshall, 1949). The tenets of this stream of thought continues in more recent scholarship on the social basis and role of community care (Bulmer, 1987); voluntarism's fulfilment of welfare shortfalls, mobilization of resistance to regressive central government policies and space for greater self-determination (Wolch, 1990) and; co-production of public services as a means to overcome provider-centric models of welfare (Bovaird, 2007).

The creation of the welfare state did not lead to the marginalization of voluntary action, as is often depicted; expansion of the welfare state did not weaken civic participation and the survival and further growth of voluntarism post-welfare state suggests the two are not in direct competition (Hilton et al., 2013; Rochester, 2014). Indeed, there has been noteworthy challenge to familiar narratives arguing, in various ways, that voluntary action has been in decline since the perceived Victorian 'golden age' of philanthropy (Crowson et al., 2009; Hilton & McKay 2011). Nevertheless, changes in social attitude in the 1970s, when people increasingly became unwilling to pay towards the welfare of others, provided impetus for the 1979 Conservative government to undertake large-scale reforms, developing an 'enterprise culture' involving tax cuts, privatisation of government services, deregulation, and public spending cuts.

The introduction of New Public Management (NPM) in the late 1980s resulted in a system of public services organized on market principles, emphasising competition, consumer choice and efficiency (Coule & Patmore, 2013) and a clear division between service purchasing and provision through development of a "contract culture" (Milbourne & Cushman, 2013). This led to the erosion of the principles behind the welfare state and voluntary organizations were now promoted as an alternative to state provision (Kendall & Knapp 1996). While New Labour (1997-2010) and the Third Way retained much of this orthodoxy, there was a change in policy discourse with the emergence of the term 'third sector' to incorporate all non-profit organizations of all shapes and sizes, a large rise in the profile of the sector and an upward shift in the scope and scale of voluntary action (Alcock, 2011). This was accompanied by structural changes from within the Labour Government to support state-sector partnerships as a key feature of institutional arrangements under New Labour, and subsequently under the Big Society policy of the 2010 Liberal-Conservative Coalition, albeit in a remodelled form (Coule & Bennett, 2016).

### **3. METHODS**

In keeping with our DI analytical lens we are not interested, as rational and historical institutionalists have been, in whether the independent reviews were taken-up by the incoming political party, whether they resulted in transformation from one cohesive set of ideas to another, whether the timing of the reviews turned out to be a critical juncture for transformation or whether the public came to accept the ideas advanced by the reviews. Rather, we examine the focal reviews of voluntary action in respect of a) the substantive content of ideas surrounding state-voluntary relations b) how discourse represents or

embodies these ideas and c) the narrated characteristics of the institutional context within which the reviews occurred. In other words, the “what” and “how” of the texts.

#### Data sources

We take as our analytical material the two landmark independent reviews of voluntary action in Britain: the Wolfenden Committee report (1978) and the Deakin Commission report (1996). The justification for this is threefold and based on criteria relating to temporality, significance and relevancy. First, from a temporal standpoint, both reviews occurred after the institution of the modern welfare state, following Beveridge (1942), the institutional relations within which are the focus of our empirical attention. Second, the reviews are of major significance insofar as they are recognised and utilised as key touchstones for practitioner and academic communities alike (G & Leat, 1996; Lewis, 1996). Finally, in respect of relevancy both reviews were, above all, concerned with the future of voluntary action, set in the context of its past, and examined changes in the nature of state-voluntary relations while also addressing issues such as charity law, the relationship between voluntary organizations and the market and the role of intermediary organizations such as the NCVO. In this sense, they provide particularly appropriate material to pursue our research question. Whilst our analytical material was produced a mere 18 years apart, its scope extended to a 50 year timespan on the role and function of voluntary action. Moreover, we situate our analysis in the context of voluntary-state relations within the British welfare system more broadly through the extant voluntary action history scholarship foreshadowed in section 2.

The Wolfenden Committee reported on ‘The Future of Voluntary *Organisations*’ in 1978 – the year prior to the shift from the Labour administration of 1974-1979 to the Conservative administration of 1979-1997. The committee included academics from a variety of

disciplines and was Chaired by Lord Wolfenden. The publication advanced the idea of a voluntary “sector” for the first time. Arguably, encapsulating the diversity of voluntary action into a single label made it more straightforward for the sector to become an object of state policy (6 & Leat, 1997); a governable terrain encouraged into particular modes of being in the world (Mooney Nickel & Eikenberry, 2015). The second independent review of this domain ‘Meeting the Challenge of Change: Voluntary Action into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’, was undertaken by the Deakin Commission and reported in 1996 – a year ahead of the general election which saw the dawn of the New Labour administration, 1997-2010. The review essentially considered the Conservative administrative era from 1979 (i.e., post Wolfenden Report) and once again comprised academics as well as nonprofit practitioners. Whilst the review has been criticised as self-referential, self-serving and backward looking (6 & Leat, 1996) there has equally been praise for the extent to which it tackles head-on the wider context of the changing nature of state-voluntary relations (Lewis, 1996). In total, our analytical material comprised approximately 430 pages of text.

Neither the Wolfenden Committee nor Deakin Commission had any direct connection with government and claimed full independence. They were nevertheless initiated and serviced by NCVO, an organization that we have shown has a long history of supporting close ties between state and voluntary action since its emergence in 1919. Moreover, NCVO sought to reinforce its ‘voluntary sector leader’ role by setting up initiatives in response to the recommendations of the reviews. Following concerns regarding effectiveness in the 1978 Wolfenden report, for example, NCVO set up a working group chaired by management ‘guru’ Charles Handy in 1981 on improving effectiveness, leading to the establishment of a Management Development Unit and promotion of business management practices by NCVO. Similarly, in 1997 NCVO championed the proposal for a Compact Working Group following

Deakin's recommendation for such in 1996 and New Labour's subsequent call for a Compact in 1997. Against this backdrop, claims to independence are not straightforward.

#### Data analysis

We undertook an in-depth comparative analysis of the texts. We started by producing a narrative account of the substantive content of the documents by looking for commentary on the past role of voluntary action vis-à-vis other actors and organizations in the welfare domain and the envisioned future role. We then applied our question: *just how 'new' is the contemporary climate for welfare provision and its associated institutional arrangements?*

For this purpose we noted the major ideas surrounding state-voluntary relations, their institutional context and their evolution over time (the "what"), in addition to the ways such ideas were represented in discourse (the "how"). We went to the documents to search for specific ideas regarding the characteristics of non-profits, the relationship between the state and voluntary action, what is considered appropriate now and in the future and how this connects with or departs from relations of the past. We also identified the specific rhetorical strategies through which these ideas were constructed and represented. The production of free-flowing, theorizing narratives about evolving ideas of state-voluntary relations, rhetorical strategies and their links to each other and to the question at hand facilitated our sense-making. We continued reading widely in parallel to pursuing theoretical insights, sensitizing our developing ideas with existing scholarship. Through several iterations between data, our theorizing narratives and extant theory, we generated two core rhetorical strategies that illustrate how the texts orient towards existing ideas within the welfare system. The first, which we term constituting a discourse of stability, is about how the texts construct a sense of coherence with existing understandings of welfare systems generally, and state-

voluntary relations specifically. The second, constituting a discourse of change, is achieved through constructing dissonance with current ideas and existing arrangements for the purpose of challenge (see Figure 1 for our data structure).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

#### **4. FINDINGS**

In order to be meaningful, texts need to locate themselves within existing meaning systems and this is often achieved through developing linkages to institutionalized ideas and practices (Phillips et al., 2004; Maguire & Hardy, 2009). This signals the text producer's orientation to particular social groups, entities or issues – in our case, voluntary action and its past and future role in society vis-à-vis state and private entities. In advancing a vision for the future of voluntary action we find, somewhat paradoxically, that review documents simultaneously constitute a discourse of stability (where ideas cohere or are in unity with dominant, historically embedded ideas and arrangements) and change (i.e., non-coherence or discord with current ideas and arrangements).

##### **Advocating Historical Arrangements: A Discourse of Stability**

Despite their purpose being to advance a future “roadmap” for voluntary action, simultaneously looking back at its historical and forward to its contemporary role in society, the two reviews constitute a discourse of stability by a) displaying congruence with normative, culturally embedded ideas to create common ground b) providing comparisons to the past, emphasizing similarities.

Both documents construct congruence with normative, culturally embedded ideas to create common ground through reinforcing the identity and cultural features of voluntary organizations through reference to their ‘diverse’, ‘pioneering’, ‘participatory and

democratic', 'flexible and demand led' and 'innovative' nature (Wolfenden Committee 1978, p.15; 20; 26; 28; 29; Deakin Commission 1996, p.1; 7; 15). In doing so, they position voluntary action as the 'backbone of civil society' and 'the essential precondition for the health of democracy' (Deakin Commission 1996, p.15). As we have shown, such ideas emerged in the writings on the progressive potential of voluntary action in the 1940s (Beveridge, 1948; Marshall, 1949; Titmuss, 1964).

Both texts also provide comparisons to the past, emphasizing similarities. This is accomplished in three ways. The first involves emphasizing the enduring nature of voluntarism and continuity with the past. The Wolfenden Committee emphasise that, 'In the development of social provision over the last two hundred years the pace was first set by the voluntary sector, and then by the state' (p.20). Similarly, the Deakin Commission notes its concern with 'one of the oldest and most basic forms of human activity: the voluntary coming together of individuals to engage in mutual undertakings for their common good', emphasizing that such activities 'predate the appearance of the state, in any form that would be recognisable to a modern observer' and are equally 'wholly distinct from market exchanges, in not being embarked upon for financial profit' (p.15). Both texts thus nod to the Victorian 'golden age' of philanthropy and mutual aid where voluntary action played the major role in social welfare provision and reform.

The second way in which the texts provide comparisons to the past that emphasize similarities, is via the text producers looking outside the sector to underline the general acceptance of the sector and the state-voluntary partnership over time under the auspices of pluralism. The Wolfenden Committee, for example, refers to several Ministerial speeches as 'evidence of a general desire for partnership with the voluntary sector' (p.73). Specifically,



on page 61 they note that ‘Two recent Prime Ministers, Mr Heath [Conservative party] in 1971 and Mr Harold Wilson [Labour party] in 1975, have stressed... the importance they attach to the encouragement of the voluntary sector. The general attitude of government towards voluntary organisations was also set out in... June 1975 by Lord Harris [Conservative party]’. The review goes on to highlight passages from a pro-sector speech in the House of Commons by Labour backbencher Bruce Douglas in 1975, culminating in the conclusion that ‘the pluralist philosophy is generally accepted by both major political parties’ (p.62).

The Deakin Commission nods to the ‘pluralism that is characteristic of a healthy civil society’ (p.22) and suggests that ‘It is not an accident that the term “partnership” is so frequently used to describe what is undertaken through the different forms of voluntary action... When the state advances, the voluntary sector adjusts its role accordingly. When the state retreats... voluntary organisations adapt their mission, taking a more prominent role in what has come to be called “the mixed economy of welfare”’ (p.15). Indeed, state involvement in what was traditionally the territory of voluntarism emerged as far back as the liberal reforms of 1906-14; the notion of close state-voluntary co-operation or ‘partnership’ can be traced to the ‘new philanthropy’ (Macadam, 1934) championed by, what is now known as, NCVO and; the transient nature of what can be considered “the proper proportions of the mixture (between statutory and voluntary)” mooted by the Deakin Commission was aptly acknowledged by Marshall in 1949 (p25).

Finally, we observe the text producers underscoring continuity with the past to justify a new role by positioning past and envisaged roles as complementary. This is exemplified in the excerpt below from the Wolfenden report (p.47):

‘There is also wide-spread recognition that pioneering continues to be a valuable role of the voluntary sector... Most existing voluntary organisations began their lives as the pioneers of some service or other, and have subsequently become the providers of that service in a more routine way. It is an interesting question how far voluntary organisations continue to act in a pioneering role once their opening phase is over... the established organisation... is not usually the one that makes the great leap forward. Particularly if exclusively identified with one particular need or type of service it runs the risk of resting on its laurels.’

Note how the excerpt begins by appealing to the normative ‘pioneering’ role-identity of voluntary action, which it then places at risk unless the sector plays the envisaged role of developing services to then be taken over by statutory provision. This is reiterated on the subsequent page, where the text producers take the opportunity to again ‘emphasise the role of voluntary organisations as a source of new initiatives’ (p.48).

The Deakin Commission takes the opposite stance insofar as it warns of the dangers of believing the ‘future of the sector lies in embracing the sector’s new status as an increasingly significant provider of welfare services’ and ‘becoming incorporated into official decision taking to the point of becoming what have been described as “GONGOs” (government owned NGOs)’ (p.120). In order to play ‘their proper role in a democratic society’, the document posits that voluntary organizations should ‘provide information, stimulate debate and provoke dissent, whether or not these activities are welcome to those in power. This applies just as much to voluntary organisations which are actively collaborating with government, and which are receiving government funds, as to others whose relationship is more distant’ (p.49). Nevertheless, the discursive tactic remains the same – positioning past roles and envisaged

roles (service delivery and advocacy) as complementary: ‘Voluntary bodies, even when they have become “partners” must be free to act as advocates, providing a “voice for the voiceless” and campaigning on issues of public concern’ (p.120). By connecting the two, this discursive tactic begins to move towards a discourse of change, to which we now turn.

### **Dissonance with Existing Arrangements: A Discourse of Change**

In advancing a future roadmap for voluntary action both reviews build a sense of incoherence with existing ideas and institutional arrangements and constitute a discourse of change. They do so through a) construction of discord with the means by which the end goal (welfare provision) is pursued b) comparison to the past, emphasizing differences.

We identify two ways in which the text producers construct discord with the means by which welfare provision is pursued. First, they provide ethical evaluations that cast current approaches as “inadequate”. The Wolfenden Committee, for example, positions itself as:

start[ing] from the premise that there are many areas of recognized social need where current levels of provision are inadequate... We believe that each of the systems we have identified [the informal system; the commercial system; the statutory system; the voluntary system] might be made more effective, even within the limits of existing resources... We are concerned also with how that provision is made [and] sympathise with the criticism that the existing pattern is not as responsive as it should be to the interests of the individual citizen. And we believe that if the pluralist framework is to survive there is a need for a shift of power from the centre (pp.21-22).

Here, the text directly asserts that the current approach is inadequate and points to inefficiency, ineffectiveness, unresponsiveness and over centralised ‘monolithic’ state

structures (p.15). The year before the Conservative party lost the election to New Labour in 1997, the Deakin Commission critiques the now well established contract culture of the Tory era as ‘controversial in a number of important respects’ such as an ‘overdependence on local authority funding’, the potential conflict between ‘value for money’ and ‘quality of service to users’, ‘lack of freedom to innovate’, difficulties in ‘sustaining sufficient core funding’, ‘excessive bureaucracy in monitoring of implementation’ and ‘possible restrictions on advocacy and campaigning’ (p.53). Whilst the report ‘recognise[s] and accepts the principle that public money should be used for the public good’ it suggests ‘that the concept of “value for money” has been too narrowly defined... What is cheapest may not necessarily deliver the most public benefit... In the longer term, the public good may also be served by providing grant aid to bodies that do not themselves deliver marketable services... This [provision of information, lobbying or provoking public debate] is, after all, the essence of local democracy’ (p.55). The Commission’s drive for state support for, not just relief of need through service provision but, voluntary action’s role in tackling the underlying causes of disadvantage through campaigning appeals to late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> Century voluntarism where it was a major influence for reform.

Second, and relatedly, the text producers identify their approach as diametrically opposed to the previous era. The Wolfenden Committee does so by stating its ‘hope’ that the ‘trend towards larger-scale operations in the statutory sector is one which... will in the future be weakened, if not reversed’ (p.183). They mark their departure from ‘the past’ where ‘there has been a tendency to think and act as though the answer to social problems is for the state to assume direct responsibility and provide resources for the extension and intensification of statutory services’ by outlining ‘an urgent need to look afresh at the whole present pattern of social and environmental services and their organisation’ (p.74). They posit that what is

needed is not a simple ‘redistribution of activities between the statutory and the voluntary sectors’ but ‘the development of a new long-term strategy, by a new examination of the potential contributions of the statutory, voluntary and informal sectors, and their interrelationship’ (p.74). The preference for a small, central state is reminiscent of Victorian Britain and concerns for efficiency and effectiveness were the basis for the emergence of state attempts to better coordinate voluntary action, and the development of institutions such as NCVO and DGVO as a means to do so, as far back as the First World War. In the last quarter of the twentieth century Britain– in common with many liberal welfare regimes like the US, New Zealand and Australia – did indeed see a rolling back of the state under the Conservative government and the promotion of self-interest, self-reliance and individual opportunity at the expense of community and the promotion of public services.

Similarly, the Deakin Commission identifies its approach as diametrically opposed to the previous era through its narration of the ‘radical changes in the structure, practices and values of central government’ during the Thatcher and Major administrations of the 1980s and 1990s. In particular they focus on the way in which government departments ‘tended to regard voluntary organisations as, generally, desirable virtually by definition’ during the 1970s, followed by a change in attitude during the 1980s under the influence of the Financial Management Initiative and NPM, which increasingly focussed attention on results and responsibilities for securing value for money (p.45). The report positions ‘politicians of all parties’ as ‘particularly prone’ to see voluntary action as ‘simply instrumental to the present purposes of government’ (p.119) and argue that ‘to give real meaning to the term “partnership” central government must recognise the legitimacy of the voluntary sector’s diverse roles and its own responsibility to promote a healthy sector as a major element in the

democratic process' not least through the development of a concordat between the state and the sector (pp.3-4) and partnership founded upon 'negotiation between equals' (p.14).

It is noteworthy that, under New Labour, there was an almost instant shift to the rhetoric of partnership between the state and the voluntary sector and the hyperactive mainstreaming of horizontal support for the sector (Alcock & Kendall, 2011), including development of the Compact - a concordat on state-voluntary relations - in 1998. Contrary to the Deakin Commission's intentions, critical voices in both academic and practitioner circles argue that the Compact further compounded voluntarism as a subservient instrument of the state.

In building a sense of incoherence with existing ideas and institutional arrangements and constituting a discourse of change, the reviews also provide comparison to the past, emphasizing differences. The texts do this in three ways. First, current constraints are emphasized. From the outset, the Wolfenden Committee positions itself as 'conditioned by the circumstances which at this moment surround us, economic stringencies, continuing inflation, national uncertainties about the future' (p.13) and periodically returns to note 'times of economic restraint' (p.71) and 'the present economic crisis' (p.153) culminating in the suggestion that this implies a greater need for voluntary activities as 'improvement will be more dependent on voluntary effort or on the strengthening of informal caring arrangements' (p.181).

Similarly, the Deakin Commission discusses the constraints presented by 'the withdrawal of the state from many of its service delivery functions; pressure on the public funding of welfare; the search for means of sustaining 'civil society'; the need to have an alternative voice to articulate independent or minority cases' (p.2). They note that 'in these debates, the possibility is often raised of the voluntary sector taking a larger share in addressing all these

issues' but – in a departure from the tone of the 1978 review – question whether this presents a risk of the sector 'compromising its own identity and values' (p. 2).

Second, the case for change is linked to wider societal change and therefore need. In this regard, the Wolfenden report outlines the 'profound changes in the provision of social services' over the last 200 years due to 'not simply the development of an industrial society with the wealth, technology and organisational skills on which sophisticated and comprehensive statutory services could be constructed, but also major changes in social ideology and structure' (pp.15-16). In doing so, it naturalizes changes in 'trends in the scope and functions of the four main sectors providing social... care' over time and 'their relative roles in the future' (p.181).

Correspondingly, the Deakin Commission notes that voluntarism 'has always been linked to other forms of activity that take place in civil society... This means that when the tides of change sweep through society as a whole, the contours of voluntary action also shift' (p.15). The Commission thus defines its purpose as 'identifying ways in which voluntary action in all its variety can be helped to flow into channels that will best contribute to our collective well being', but 'without restricting independence or distorting values' (p.16).

Third, both reports reposition the role and contribution of voluntary organizations through location to referent groups. By way of example, the Wolfenden Committee excludes local authorities for their purposes but suggests 'there is a sense in which they, particularly local councils, can be regarded as closely akin to it [the voluntary sector]' (p.85). Equally, they argue that 'at many points on the margins the dividing line between the four systems is blurred', that 'some voluntary organisations [are] not obviously very different from statutory agencies' (p.32) and 'an organisation may also cross the boundary between the voluntary and

commercial sectors' (p.33). In the excerpt below, we see how the review shifts the role of the voluntary sector from a primary welfare actor to something that is subservient to the statutory system with a role limited to service delivery:

Although the voluntary system, as we have shown, was once the chief form of collective action outside the Poor Law, it can now best be seen in terms of the ways in which it complements, supplements, extends and influences the informal and statutory systems...

In relation to the statutory system it would seem that the voluntary system may have three kinds of contribution to make. First it may be able to extend the scope of existing provision. Second, it may be able to improve the standards of service provision. Finally, it may be able to offer services where little or nothing is available through the state (p.26).

The resulting bifurcation of the "sector" into a 'first force' of institutionalized service providers and a 'third force' of non-institutionalized advocacy groups (Knight, 1993) shares some parallels with the rather disconnected pre-World War I relationship between top-down (philanthropic) and bottom up (mutual aid) impulses of voluntary action. This plays out eighteen years later in the Deakin Commission's concern for the primacy given to service delivery at the expense of campaigning.

Nevertheless, the Deakin Commission also situates voluntarism's effectiveness against 'relationships developed over time with the other main forces in society' (p.1), stating that 'to survive and flourish, it must sustain working relationships with: Government [as funder and regulator]; the corporate sector [as a source of support and something the sector has sometimes sought to emulate]; trusts and foundations [as principal independent source of



funding]; users of services [as stakeholders]; the general public [as supporters and donors]' (p.2). Yet, at the same time the Commission stresses that 'there is something distinctive' at the core of voluntary action 'which is of vital importance for the future of our society', namely 'the contribution that is being made to the well-being of this society which takes place outside the confines of the state and the market' (p.16). In this respect, they reinforce their intention of outlining an approach that 'aims to ensure that change in the sector's role does not only respect but reinforces the distinctive values and characteristics of the sector itself' (p.121). We see then, that the report uses the same discursive tactic as the Wolfenden Committee, by repositioning the role and contribution of voluntary organizations through location to referent groups, but to a different end. Where the 1978 report used referent groups to collapse the distinction between voluntary organizations and those in other sectors, the Deakin Commission brought their distinctiveness to the fore.

## **5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This study aimed to cast a critical gaze on the extent to which the contemporary era of welfare and its associated institutional arrangements can be considered 'new'; it holds implications for theory, policy and practice concerned with state-voluntary relations in welfare systems. First, our findings present a significant challenge to current DI scholarship where theorisation of policy stability and change has evolved along distinct analytical tracks (see Stasson et al., 2010; Fairbrass, 2011; Brown et al., 2012 on change; and Hope & Raudla, 2012 for a rare account of policy stability). Our analysis shows that independent reviews aimed towards policy reform within welfare systems consist of overarching discourses of stability and change. Perhaps more paradoxically, the discourse of change itself may well represent a departure from recent institutional arrangements but when contextualized against an extended timeframe shows coherence with dominant ideas of bygone eras. The Deakin

Commission, for example, largely rejected the framework of relations set by Wolfenden and the subsequent Tory administration. Yet, its drive for state support for voluntarism's role in tackling the underlying causes of disadvantage through campaigning, not just relief of need through service provision, appeals to the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> Century where voluntarism was a major force for reform. In other words, the simultaneous discourses of stability and change developed in significant reviews of public policy domains produce layered or sedimented realities - a collage of past relations or assemblage of different aspects of past realities to create a seemingly new era. It is thus crucial that scholars interested in policy change take both 'time' and the interrelated dynamics of stability and change seriously; accounts that downplay such matters are inadequate for explaining the evolution of state-voluntary relations and policy reform more broadly.

Second, and relatedly, our findings provide some basis for optimism among practitioners regarding the future of voluntary action. Building on Hilton & McKay (2011) and Hilton et al. (2013), our analysis challenges linear narratives of decline and increasing turbulence. It would seem that there is a need to turn away from linear narratives of state advance and ever increasingly turbulent welfare systems and to reinstate the 'moving frontier' (Finlayson, 1994) of state-voluntary action as an on-going and fundamental element of social struggle and reform. Considered from today's vantage point, Beveridge's definition of voluntary action in the 1940s as 'everything that citizens do outside their duties to the State, to improve the conditions of life for themselves and their fellows' (Oppenheimer & Deakin, 2011) could convincingly be taken to explain David Cameron's Big Society rhetoric. The attitude towards people as the arbiters of their own hardships who would have to suffer the consequences, so deeply ingrained until the depression of the 1930s and which Beveridge (1942) tried to turn on its head, bears similarities to today's welfare discourse that seeks to renew behavioral

explanations for social problems (Alcock & Kendall, 2011; Grimshaw & Rubery, 2012). Equally, the issues vexing the Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector in recent years, including instrumental relations through markets; co-optation of leading intermediary bodies and voluntary service providers as instrument of a shrunken state and; restrictions on campaigning (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017), troubled the Deakin Commission almost 20 years previous and can be traced back further to Wolfenden in 1978 and the ideology and practices of the subsequent Conservative administration.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that voluntarism is not facing turbulent times, that the intensity and dynamics of such turbulence are or have been constant over time, or that the current welfare climate provides a generative impetus for voluntary action. Indeed, the particularities and impacts of current welfare retrenchment, increasing welfare conditionality, crushing funding cuts to nonprofit welfare providers and regulations that impede campaigning are well documented (see above paragraph), lead to a constrained civic space and create resource and policy questions that are different to previous eras. Nevertheless, what our analysis does point to is both continuities and constant renewal and adaptation in voluntary action's relationship with the state and its place within welfare systems. Discourses of state-voluntary relations illustrate that the people involved in voluntarism, in all its diversity and throughout its long history, have witnessed profound changes in the social, political and economic climate and institutional arrangements of their time. Welfare systems represent terrain that is constantly evolving; some features of that terrain may well be new ones but the symbiotic relationship between state and voluntary action within it is an old one. Our argument, then, is that apparently straightforward claims that the current era is more turbulent or fraught than previous eras are specious.

The lesson for policy makers is clear: governments have not been able to shape or control voluntarism according to short-term priorities; voluntary action has reconfigured itself to work both in and against the state through a mixture of incorporation and challenge. It will likely endure and change in nature, scale and scope, just as it has done for hundreds of years. Debates about social and public policy and the role to be played by voluntarism would be better served by an informed understanding of the historical experience which has formed today's institutions and relationships in order to learn lessons from the past. Overall, our study points to the serious limitations of a-historical accounts of and responses to current policy approaches. Taking the history of voluntary action and its associated institutional context seriously would safeguard today's scholars, policy-makers and practitioners from the 'temporal parochialism that assumes that the only time is now' (David Cannadine, inaugural lecture, Making History Now).

## REFERENCES

- 6, P. & Leat, D. (1997). Inventing the British voluntary sector by committee: From Wolfenden to Deakin, *Non-Profit Studies*, 1(2), 33-47.
- Alcock, P. (2011). Voluntary Action, New Labour and the 'Third Sector'. In M. Hilton & J. McKay. (Eds.), *The Ages of Voluntarism: How we got to the Big Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Alcock, P. & Kendall, J. (2011). Constituting the third sector: processes of decontestation and Contention Under the UK Labour governments in England. *Voluntas*, 22, 450-469.
- Beveridge, W.H.B. (1942). *Social Insurance and Allied Services*. Report by Sir William Beveridge. London, H.M. Stationery Office.
- Beveridge, W.H.B. (1944). *Full Employment in a Free Society*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Beveridge, W.H.B. (1948). *Voluntary Action: A Report on Methods of Social Advance*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Bovaird, T. (2007). Beyond Engagement and Participation: User and Community Coproduction of Public Services, *Public Administration Review*, 67,5, 846-860.
- Brown, A.D., Ainsworth, S., & Grant, D. (2012). The rhetoric of institutional change. *Organization Studies*, 33, 297-321.
- Bulmer, M. (1987). *The Social Basis of Community Care*. Allen & Unwin: London.
- Coule, T.M., & Bennett, E. (2016). Rhetoric, organizational category dynamics and institutional change: A study of the UK welfare state. *Public Administration*, doi:10.1111/padm.12274.
- Coule, T., & Patmore, B. (2013). Institutional logics, institutional work, and public service innovation in non-profit organizations. *Public Administration*, 91(4), 980-997.

- Crowson, N., Hilton, M. & McKay, J. (2009). *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-State Actors in Society and Politics since 1945*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Deakin Commission. (1996). *Meeting the challenge of change: Voluntary action into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Report of the Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector in England. London: NCVO.
- Eriksson, K. (2012). Self-service society: Participative politics and new forms of governance. *Public Administration*, 90(3), 685-698.
- Fairbrass, J. (2011). Exploring corporate social responsibility policy in the European Union: A discursive institutionalist analysis. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 49(5), 949-970.
- Finlayson, G. (1994). *Citizen, State and Social Welfare in Britain 1830-1990*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Grant, P. (2011). Voluntarism and the Impact of the First World War. In M. Hilton & J. McKay (Eds.), *The Ages of Voluntarism: How we got to the Big Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Grant, P. (2014). *Philanthropy and Voluntary Action in the First World War: Mobilizing Charity*. New York: Routledge.
- Grimshaw, D., & Rubery, J. (2012). The end of the UK's liberal collectivist social model? The implications of the Coalition Government's policy during the austerity crisis. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 36(1), 105–26.
- Harris, J. (1990). Society and the state in twentieth century Britain. In F. M. L. Thompson (Ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950, Vol.3*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, U.K.
- Hilton, M. & McKay, J. (2011). The Ages of Voluntarism: An Introduction. In M. Hilton & J. McKay (Eds.), *The Ages of Voluntarism: How we got to the Big Society*. Oxford: Oxford

- University Press.
- Hilton, M., McKay, J., Crowson, N. & Mouhot, J-F. (2013). *The Politics of Expertise: How NGOs Shaped Modern Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hood, C., & Jackson, M.W. (1991). *Administrative Argument (Vol.5)*. Aldershot: Dartmouth
- Hope, M. & Raudla, R. (2012). Discursive Institutionalism and policy stasis in simple and compound polities: The cases of Estonian fiscal policy and United States climate change policy. *Policy Studies*, 33(5), 399-418.
- Kendall, J. & Knapp, M. (1996). *The voluntary sector in the UK*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Knight, B. (1993). *Voluntary Action: The Centris Report*. Newcastle: Centris.
- Kuisma, M. (2013). Understanding welfare crises: The role of ideas. *Public Administration*, 91(4), 797-805.
- Lewis, J. (1996). The boundary between voluntary and statutory social service in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *The Historical Journal*, 39(1), 155-177
- Macadam, E. (1934). *The New Philanthropy. A Study of the Relations between the Statutory and Voluntary Social Services*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Maguire, S., & Hardy, C. (2009). Discourse and deinstitutionalization: The decline of DDT. *Academy of Management Journal* 52: 148-178.
- Marshall, T.H. (1949). Voluntary Action. *The Political Quarterly*, 20(1). 25-36.
- Milbourne, L., & Cushman, M. (2013). From the third sector to the big society: How changing UK Government policies have eroded third sector trust. *Voluntas*, 24(2), 485-508.
- Mooney Nickel, P., & Eikenberry, A. (2016). Knowing and governing: The mapping of the nonprofit and voluntary sector as statecraft. *Voluntas*, 27, 392-408.

- Oppenheimer, M. & Deakin, N. (2011). Introduction. In M. Oppenheimer & N. Deakin (Eds.), *Beveridge and voluntary action in Britain and the wider British world*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector (2012). *Protecting Independence: The Voluntary Sector in 2012*. London: The Baring Foundation.
- Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector (2013). *Independence Under Threat: The Voluntary Sector in 2013*. London: The Baring Foundation.
- Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector (2014). *Independence Undervalued: The Voluntary Sector in 2014*. London: The Baring Foundation.
- Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector (2015). *An Independent Mission: The Voluntary Sector in 2015*. London: The Baring Foundation.
- Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector (2017). *An Independent Mission: The Voluntary Sector in 2015*. London: The Baring Foundation.
- Penn, A. (2011). A social historical approach to understanding organisational issues in voluntary action. In C. Rochester, G. Gosling, A. Penn and M. Zimmeck (Eds.), *Understanding the Roots of Voluntary Action*, Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press.
- Phillips, N., Lawrence, T.B., & Hardy, C. (2004). Discourse and institutions. *Academy of Management Review*, 29, 635-652.
- Rochester, C. (2014). *Revisiting the Roots of Voluntary Action*. A paper presented to a Voluntary Action History Society Seminar held on 13<sup>th</sup> January 2014 at the Institute for Historical Research, London.
- Schmidt, V.A. (2011). Speaking of change: Why discourse is key to the dynamics of policy transformation. *Critical Policy Studies*, 5(2), 106-126.



- Stasson, K.R., Gisalson, M., & Leroy, P. (2010). Impact of environmental discourses on public health policy arrangements: A comparative study in the UK and Flanders (Belgium). *Public Health*, 124, 581-592.
- Tilly, C. (2005). *Social Movements, 1768-2004*, Boulder CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Titmuss, R. (1964). The Limits of the Welfare State. *New Left Review*, 27, 28-37.
- Webb, S. & Webb, B. (1912). *The Prevention of Destitution*, Webb & Webb, London.
- Wolch, J. (1990) *The Shadow State: Government and Voluntary Sector in Transition*. New York: Foundation Center.
- Wolfenden Committee. (1978). *The Future of Voluntary Organisations: Report of the Wolfenden committee*, London: Croom Helm.

**Biographical note:**

**Tracey M. Coule** is Reader in Nonprofit Governance and Organization at Sheffield Business School and academic lead for the pan-university Centre for Voluntary Sector Research. Her research focuses on organizing and managing work in nonprofit organizations and its linkages to wider societal arrangements, supplemented by a strong interest in research philosophy and methodology.

**Ellen Bennett** is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University. Her research explores the role of nonprofit organizations in the delivery of public services, and the relationships between nonprofit and state sectors, with a particular focus on discursive methodologies.

# Figures

Figure 1: Data Structure

