

The great non-discussion of voluntary action's future: a review of four reports in 2015

Introduction

A chilly Bodmin Moor provided the ideal stimulus to review four reports recent reports, all four discussing the challenges facing local voluntary action, its contemporary context and probable future. "Ideal stimulus" because local voluntary action is all about "place", and during the winter, Cornish villages burst out with the life muted by each summer's tourist deluge. The potential to be real suddenly seems again a possibility, and actual people share their worlds in ordinary conversations, a living escape from the reductionism of statistics, policies, theories and political crises profiled in such reports.

Probably, neither the reader, certainly not the writer, are academic philosophers. However, the constructionist approach adopted is associated with a wish to raise awareness about the theoretical influences upon chosen ways of "framing" issues. The major influences on the writer are summarised briefly in the next paragraph.

Perspective, said Kant, is all. So how we read the landscape, or interpret our conversations with strangers, can tell us a lot about reading social science reports, not least, to look for ourselves in our interpretations, and to hear the silence, the unspoken voices beneath the figures, policies and organisational cultures. This brief paper argues that a "non-discussion" emerges within a culture where what counts as "knowledge" is simply, as Nietzsche suggested, that which the strongest impose upon everyone else. Thomas Kuhn more recently proposed that "paradigms" (a paradigm being a particular theory which is always taken for granted as the correct way in which to examine the world) only change when they accumulate unsolved puzzles which bring the paradigm into crisis – such change often being sudden and revolutionary, rather than methodical or evolutionary. Feyerabend (Feyerabend, P. *Against Method*, 1975) extended this to include the impact of a plurality of competing theories, genuine progress stemming from the efforts of mavericks acting against entrenched methods. Derrida's strategy of "deconstruction" probes internal contradictions to remind us that current meanings are merely those which are stabilized by dominant cultural and political ideologies. Hence, the "language of reason" can become totalitarian, by suppressing and excluding all which is different or does not fit.

These thinkers influence how this short paper attempts a deconstruction of the four reports, by exploring the process of social construction of the issue of "a future for voluntary action" in terms of its linguistic and political manipulation. This manipulation is not perceived as necessarily intentional, but stems at least from an absence of awareness of alternative paradigms, and a failure to attend to data which does not happily "scan" with the framework in use. The purpose of deconstruction is to challenge the view that only one "objective" perspective exists, and to show how scenarios are socially constructed in ways that often reflect self-interest, power relationships, ideologies or absence of complete or accurate information. This process of social construction can include the theoretical underpinning and methodology of academic and research analyses, as well as political policy making and "independent" reviews of the state of voluntary action. The current review adopts a "constructionist" approach described by Silverman as "informed by a refusal to accept taken-for-granted versions of how the world is put together" (Silverman, D. *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, Sage, 2011, p x1v). Hence, what is not said, questions which are not asked, and taken-for-granted backdrops, are of the essence.

We approach the deconstruction by asking two basic questions of each report:

- Which issues are defined as "key" in each report?

- Which alternative paradigms do the reports reflect, with what results?

The four reports

The first report is *Change for good: report of the independent commission on the future of local infrastructure* (NAVCA, January 2015). Commissioned by NAVCA and claiming to be independent, the focus was on the future of local support and development activities, provided by councils for voluntary service, rural community councils and a range of other bodies. The report was prepared by an expert panel who received and commissioned evidence. “Infrastructure” was defined in a specific way, as a range of support services provided to the wider voluntary sector to help it “develop”. The possibility of “support and development” being a part of a process of mutual aid and co-operation, and hence not clearly distinguishable from “service delivery” or “campaigning” was not explored. The ethos was that that local voluntary action requires support and development if it is to meet the increased demands being placed upon it by social change and state policy. The question about whether it wants to meet these demands, or how it might wish to structure its support, is not asked. We term this **the NAVCA report**.

The second report, *Whose society? The final big society audit* (Civil Exchange, January 2015) seeks to address whether the government initiative formerly known as the “Big Society” has achieved any of its objectives. This report draws largely upon written evidence, which is well summarised. The report is inevitably drawn into discussing the relevance of the Big Society ideology for local voluntary action, and an attempt is made to draw up a “balance sheet”. The overall conclusion is that the Big Society failed to deliver of its promises, but that this was largely because it was not effectively and democratically implemented, rather than because of any philosophic, political or sociological failings. We term this the **Civil Exchange report**.

The third report is *Fight or fright: voluntary services in 2015. NCIA enquiry into the future of voluntary services: summary and discussion of enquiry findings* (National Coalition for Independent Action, January 2015). This report summarises a wide-ranging piece of work carried out by NCIA and available in seventeen separate reports prepared by academics, practitioners, activists and campaigners. The focus is on structural and cultural factors actively promoted by state agencies and from within the voluntary sector, which are undermining the concept of independent (especially local) voluntary action. This is the most explicitly critical report, taking the line that state policies and private sector activities are rapidly destroying both voluntary action, public service and the welfare state. We term this the **NCIA report**.

The fourth report is *An independent mission: the voluntary sector in 2015: final annual statement of the Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector* (Baring Foundation, Civil Exchange and DHA, February 2015). The report offers the judgement that the independence of the voluntary sector, especially smaller organisations, is rapidly evaporating in the face of unsupportive state policies, reducing public expenditure, attacks on campaigning, and the failures of the Public Services (Social Value) Act and the Compact. The report argues that the potential and willingness are there within the voluntary sector to help deliver an “enabling state”, but these need to be properly “unlocked”. A further Commission is proposed to investigate this, part-funded by £100,000 from NCVO. We term this **the Baring report** (Baring Foundation being the major sponsor).

Which issues and values are defined as “key” in each report?

Independence

It is interesting that the theme of “independence” stands out in all these reports, because ten years ago and before the beginning of the work of NCIA, this issue was never addressed by enquiries or reports, and rarely discussed. So how do the reports see “independence”?

The NAVCA report brands its panel as “independent” (of NAVCA), but its analysis says nothing about issues concerning independence of voluntary action. Hence a model of voluntary action is assumed which casts voluntary organisations in the role of delivering state services under contract, and requiring advice and support to achieve this effectively. Typically, this advice and support comes from NAVCA members such as CVSs, but another recent source has been the artificial market created by the Big Lottery, termed Big Assist, where members of the scheme buy and sell vouchers from Lottery-approved suppliers.

The Civil Exchange report, addressing some aspect of the Big Society policy, addresses independence as a valued attribute of voluntary action, but fails to grasp the nettle of state incorporation. Like the NAVCA report, the argument is that state policies have not been implemented effectively enough, but surely more effective implementation would have led to deeper incorporation, and hence even further reductions in independence?

The Barings report paints a picture of steadily reducing independence for voluntary action, especially amongst smaller groups, arguing for a further Commission to discuss this (something that NCVO literally bought into at the report’s launch even).

The NCIA report deals with sustained work, much of it grass roots, over the last decade. What does stand out is that when NCIA was formed in 2006, “independence” was not on the agenda of government, local authorities, Baring Foundation, NCVO, ACEVO or NAVCA. Lip service was routinely paid in official reports, but independence was not perceived as seriously threatened. The work of NCIA (supported by the Tudor Trust) flagged up the issue politically, culminating in the 2015 report. However, NCIA’s work is in a structured way ignored by the other three reports, and has also been regularly rubbished over a period of years by national bodies like NCVO, ACEVO, NAVCA, and ignored by the Baring report. The NCIA report addresses structural and policy issues which have been undermining independence, and their consequences. The solutions identified demand a change of political heart and a challenge to what the NCIA report described as “neo-liberal ideology”. A deconstruction of what is taking place here would address the issue of why particularly the Baring report adopted the NCIA identification of key problems, whilst de-politicising the conclusions and directing energies into a further Commission. The sub-text of this is that it was done without even naming NCIA, a stratagem worthy of Le Carre. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that voluntary action “independence” is viewed, by those who wield national power, as a useful marketing strategy to influence government resource allocation, primarily in favour of large national voluntary sector bodies. It should be noted that this stratagem has not been discussed with the huge number of local voluntary organisations most at threat, and there is no reason to believe in any “trickle down” effect from putative increased government support for national bodies.

Partnership

The key value of partnership appears in three of the reports, under various guises. However it effectively serves an ideological function because it is presented as unambiguously valuable, an unquestioned backdrop for all policy: effectively, a value with which no-one would dare disagree. The issue here is that no value exists outside of its context or interpretation, and “partnership” only has contextual meaning. In the Barings report, government stands accused of failing to engage the voluntary sector in a partnership to deliver the Big Society: indeed, alternative structures were deliberately created, such as the Big Society Network, whose alleged “independence of state funding” when launched has turned out to be very far indeed from the truth.

Three of the reports, apart from that from NCIA, peg their hopes on voluntary action establishing productive partnerships of various kinds with the state and private sector. One would have thought that an interest in independence would lead to a belief in self-reliance and mutual aid, but no, these terms feature no-where. The political sub-text of these three reports is to influence allocation of

resources into voluntary action, particularly to infrastructure bodies and national “leadership” bodies. Hence, the idea of “infrastructure” is never unpacked by NAVCA to consider alternative mutual aid models, so the analysis is confined to promotion of the interests of those bodies cast in the established mode. The recommendation that they must adapt and change, effectively to government policies, wishes and ideology leaves the reader wondering about the meaning of the report’s title, “Change for Good”. Key questions such as “whose good?” are unexplored, particularly in the context of power relationships, and the challenges to campaigning emerging in government policies.

The stark conclusion to talk about partnership is that the term should no longer be used without full consideration of other associated values including power relationships, autonomy, organisational culture and values, self-reliance, control and ownership. It is worse than a meaningless word, for it is used ideologically to justify policies which might not appear so attractive. This is examined further under “the enabling state”.

Voluntary action is a good thing

Here perhaps, is a key value, the same meaning of which is shared by all four reports? If we interrogate each report under this value, what is the result? Interestingly, voluntary action and volunteering are perceived as absolutely unambiguously good things by all reports. However, there are important nuances that in practice undermine an apparent consensus.

The NCIA report attaches more importance to the “space occupied” within civil society by voluntary action than how this space is filled. “Voluntary groups” it records “do not have to exist”. NCIA focuses its support on such voluntary action when it “is intended to advance social justice, equality, liberty, conviviality, freedom from want, enfranchisement and environmental sustainability”. This report is also explicit about the political nature of voluntary action. Voluntary action, under this perspective, exists to “complement, not substitute for, public services and entitlements”. Some responsibilities need to remain with the state, because voluntary services, like private businesses, are neither universal nor democratically accountable”. Hence, in the NCIA view, the goodness of voluntary action is contingent upon the context, what it is seeking to achieve, how and why. The inference is that some voluntary action would fail this test.

The Baring report locates the value of voluntary action in its “distinctive contribution” but the meaning of this is taken-for-granted as stemming from its capacity to think, speak and act independently. The report refers to threats to its campaigning activities, giving several recent examples, and gently criticises the competitive model underpinning public service “reform”. The underlying message is that if state policy stemmed from decent liberal values and voluntary action was allowed to campaign without restriction, and offered grant aid rather than forced to compete for its funding, then all would be well.

The NAVCA report is of course focussed upon “infrastructure” or “support and development”, so the value of voluntary action is a second-order concept: infrastructure supports voluntary action because its job is to do so. The precise ways in which the supported voluntary action can claim to be “a good thing” are left to the organisation in question. Hence “infrastructure will be needed in some form as long as people come together to form voluntary organisations and community groups”. The NAVCA report takes the positive value of voluntary action entirely for-granted, suggesting merely that it needs to be “both proactive and reactive” and that infrastructure “needs to change”. Given the primary governmental audience, this must mean to change in ways which appeal to government, by becoming a “leaner enabler”, yet more “collaborative”, “strategic” as well as more strongly rooted locally. It is hard to think of any buzz-word that is missed. We explore later the implications of how “infrastructure” is defined in this report.

The Civil Exchange report concentrates on the Big Society ideology and its practical impact. The focus in the Big Society ideology is entirely instrumental, saying nothing about whether voluntary action is a “good thing” in itself, but linking it to disinvestment by the state in public services that have formed part of the post-war welfare state settlement. Following this, the Civil Exchange report concentrates its energies upon a perceived failure to engage the world of voluntary action in the Big Society ideology, and a failure by the state to deliver on policies which were required for the Big Society to succeed. Hence, the verdict is that “the results so far are largely negative”. Whilst the “potential to unlock the power within society has been demonstrated, it remains to be realised on a significant scale”. Hence, whilst the Civil Exchange report is quite critical of a failure to implement government policy, it takes for-granted the latent potential within communities to deliver what was expected by the Big Society ideology. The report points to evidence of widespread geographical variations in capacity to deliver on this, but never takes the step of suggesting that the development by the state of social policy over the last two hundred years was in response to an absence of such capacity. An unanswered question is left hanging: in relative terms, are communities and families any more capable of meeting shared needs through voluntary action now than they were in 1815? The form may be different, but the content, less so, as evidence of gross inequality akin to the Victorian era builds up.

Voluntary action should be supported by individuals, the state, and the private sector

This key value is a corollary of the previous one, but usefully treated separately. The value is that *everyone* should support voluntary action. Again, this value is found to be a key moral imperative in three of the reports, whilst the NCIA report contents itself with recording that “voluntary groups do not have to exist”. The Civil Exchange report might have questioned assumptions within the Big Society ideology about the capacity or wishes of local communities to deliver. But instead, it focuses resolutely on a need for less marketisation, more devolution, better targeting, a more collaborative ethos and increased engagement by private businesses. This not uncommon recourse of aiming at the ball, not the target, serves the purpose of avoiding a direct clash with party political policies, be they government or opposition. The Civil Exchange message is that the objective is valid, but the means were inadequate. Hence implicitly, the “Big Society” could flourish and deliver all that was expected of it, if only it had been implemented thoroughly. If one supports voluntary action sufficiently, it can achieve anything.

The NAVCA report, as it did with the previous “key” issue, skates around the problem by talking about the “convening power of infrastructure”, and arguing for the need to finance its key role if everyone is to be persuaded to support voluntary action. Hence self-interest is transparent. The Baring report discusses “unsupportive statutory funding arrangements” and argues for another new Compact, but has little to say about any significant sources of private sector support that are as yet untapped. If anything, it sees much of the voluntary action world as being disadvantaged in the competitive funding stakes, as growing numbers of contracts are thrown open to the “independent” sector (by which is meant voluntary and private).

Hence there is a mixed and confusing picture about how and why voluntary action should be supported, and virtually no attention to the contribution of the millions of individuals who in aggregate offer most.

The concept of the enabling state

The “enabling state” is a relative neologism that has found its way into all four reports. By and large, it means that public expenditure should be directed towards enabling communities or the private sector to deliver services, or help themselves. Hence it embodies an ideology of reducing public expenditure, and the scale of direct public sector provision. There are too many issues to explore here, but key ones are whether the results of such a policy will be efficient and cost effective; and

whether it will, in fact, deliver comparable services. There has not been much evidence of government interest in funding serious evaluation to shed light on these questions, and hence the Civil Exchange report into the “Big Society” is of particular interest.

Once again, the interpretations are different. The Civil Exchange report on the “Big Society” ideology takes for granted a shrinking public sector, and bases its argument around the need to invest more effectively in civil society to fill a gap which, they acknowledge, is yawning. However, whilst the report contains a full, if tempered, dissection of the failures of the Big Society, there is no questioning of the concept of the “enabling state”, which is accepted as a sensible policy. The Baring report takes a similar line, in suggesting that the independence of voluntary action is a prerequisite for it to be able to deliver on the “enabling state” ideology. Again, the means are felt to be inadequate, but the goal remains unchallenged.

It is only the NCIA report which probes more deeply into the implications of the “enabling state”, and rather than focussing on the Big Society failure, it questions the realism of this whole policy, arguing that voluntary action should be supportive of, additional to, fundamental state-provided services. Under this scenario, the world of voluntary action is left to pursue its own agendas, and if these coincide with those of the state or private sector, then mutually beneficial arrangements might result. If not, the NCIA report implies, then not. The freedom for voluntary action is more important than an expectation that it should deliver public services, and its freedom to campaign is crucial (a point also asserted in the Baring report). The NCIA report points out that many public, welfare state and health services began as voluntary initiatives or campaigns, and suggests that it was often for good reasons that state services replaced these.

The NAVCA report takes the “enabling state” entirely for granted and beyond challenge. Hence, it asserts that the world of voluntary action infrastructure should rapidly adapt itself to this scenario if it wishes to remain in any kind of state funding relationship. Hence, a funding relationship with the state is perceived as absolutely crucial, effectively at any cost.

The right to represent and speak for voluntary action

None of the reports gives any attention to the legitimacy of their case, their right to speak out, and who they represent. Indeed, it is tacitly assumed by each report that their conclusions represent a considered presentation of one or other constituency of interest from the voluntary action world.

The Baring report’s claim to legitimacy stems from its procedures for gathering evidence, listening to the views of leadership bodies, and from the experience of its expert panel. The Civil Exchange report is essentially an analysis of research (in so far as the Big Society was ever researched) evidence, statistical trends, and policy studies. Its credibility stems from the credibility of the organisation itself and its associates, their capacity to undertake a balanced and comprehensive (one might say, “objective”) piece of work.

The NCIA report is drawn from evidence gathered by seventeen more detailed reports, prepared by academics and practitioners. The report’s focus is problem-oriented, addressing perceived threats stemming from the growing loss of independence of voluntary action, together with the marketization of state policy and withdrawal of government from key areas of activity. Its claim to legitimacy stems from the quality of its analyses, as well as the experience and commitment of the report’s authors. This report claims to speak for no-one, certainly not the wider voluntary sector, and hence assumes more of a campaigning role, by contrast for example with the Civil Exchange report’s claim to a form of neutral objectivity. The one report describes the world, the other aims to change it.

This can hardly be said of the NAVCA report, although it describes how the views of the organisation’s membership were sought in meetings, conversations and regional seminars. As

NAVCA consulted their membership widely, their report (described as an “independent panel”) has a legitimacy, but this only serves to highlight the inability of this membership to address the deeper issues probed in all of the other reports. In this sense, the NAVCA report is the most challenging, because in honestly reflecting the views of its membership, it casts the future for voluntary action in the same mould.

Ideal types for the future of voluntary action

These are presented as “ideal type” dichotomies. Hence, the process of personal choice between perspectives hangs upon informed judgement, rather than any pseudo-scientific procedure of reaching a fully rational selection. There is emphatically no “tool kit” or aspiration to create one. In any case, empirical evidence is frequently accorded less attention than political expediency or ideology, in all of the reports. The invitation to readers is to consider the implications of each position within whatever context relates to their interests and concerns, and to reach a personal or organisational judgement which they find satisfactory.

Position one:

The world of voluntary action should regularly assert the virtue of its independence from the state and private sector, whilst in reality working to become an integral part of both. The concept of independence fills the need for a key selling point despite its vacuity.

Position two:

The world of voluntary action should assert its independence of the state and private sector, but it must market itself to these in ways designed to attract support. This means that it must continually adapt the language it uses, and its priorities, to government and private sector thinking. Fundamental challenges to policies of elected governments are to be avoided.

Position three:

The world of voluntary action should assert its independence, and work with the state or private sector only when their policies, values and activities accord with its own. However it may continue to try to influence the world outside itself.

Position four:

The world of voluntary action should act independently, and build a future which maximises the potential to achieve this. This probably means receiving little state or private sector support, down-sizing hugely, and operating from public fund raising and volunteer workforces.

Conclusion: An independent Mission, or Mission Impossible?

What are the implications of these paradigms? Because they are ideal types, they can easily be accused of over-simplification, an imposition of false dichotomies. But their deeper purpose is not to offer immediate answers, but to highlight underlying processes in which we might be playing unwitting parts. They force upon us several urgent questions:

- Why do all four national reports have so little to say about real voluntary action as activists observe it every day? Why is structural analysis so divorced from real people? Need it be?
- Three of the reports focus on organisational politics and seeking to directly influence government policy. Two might be described as “analytic”, one is directly self-interested, and one speaks “from the heart”. What are the authentic human voices behind each report, and for whom do they really speak? Who is not speaking at all?
- Which underlying structures of power, self-interest, control and funding underlie these reports? Which unwritten alliances?
- Why do most of these reports view certain crucial aspects of life as “off bounds”, in particular, any robust critique of neo-liberalism?

- Why are certain ideologies so influential, such as “voluntarism”, “partnership”, “the enabling state” and now, “independence”? Which interests are these ideologies serving?
- Why is so much evidence-based critical literature ignored by most of the reports? Why do three of the reports ignore the fourth, despite the pioneering early work of NCIA having been well promoted?
- Why are some values, such as “organisational self-reliance” or “mutual aid” systematically ignored, in favour of appeals for “partnership”, “scale economy” or “not re-inventing the wheel”? Surely the point of “independent” voluntary action is to encourage free thinking and creativity?

This review shows how there are fundamental choices afoot, particularly in the world of local voluntary action. Let it be clear that this world, in 2015, owes these four reports and their writers deep gratitude, not for the answers they offer, but for the processes they reveal. In considering these questions, and the four “positions” generated by this brief review of the reports, we can begin to deconstruct not only the reports, but their influence on the activities of voluntary action organisations, and individual activist volunteers, all over the country. In deconstructing action, and challenging the constructions pressed upon us, we both educate ourselves and change the future.

The writer hopes that this review is a helpful support to the growing number of voluntary action groups who are embarking on that road.

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