

A Historical Guide to NGOs in Britain: Charities, Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector since 1945

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Books on the history of the evolution of the welfare state in Britain are numerous. Examples over the past 40 years include Derek Fraser's *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*, Pat Thane's *The Foundation of the Welfare State* and Bernard Harris's *Origins of the British Welfare State: Social Welfare in England and Wales 1800-1945*.⁽¹⁾ There are, however, far fewer on the history of the voluntary sector. Whilst there have been some excellent publications on aspects of this topic, a recent example being Katharine Bradley's *Poverty, Philanthropy and the State: Charities and the Working Classes in London, 1918-79*, there has been no survey of the overall development of the sector since Davis Smith, Rochester and Hedley's *An Introduction to the Voluntary Sector*, since when much has changed.⁽²⁾ The present volume therefore comes at an opportune time to examine the impact of New Labour and the early stages of the present coalition and fills an important gap in the literature of charity and voluntary action.

However, *A Historical Guide to NGOs in Britain* is *not*, and does attempt to be, a narrative or interpretive history of the sector over the past 60 years, but a reference and data book with some linking passages that provide coherence. It generally avoids debating the reasons for change or passing judgements on them, for example the increasing dependence of many voluntary bodies on state funding. These topics and the authors'

interpretations of the data are to be published in a companion volume, *The Politics of Expertise*, in the near future. It might be suggested that this is a little like publishing the appendices to a book before the book itself and it certainly leads to questions being raised in the current volume that rather 'hang in the air'.

So the current book is one of factual information and it stands or falls by the comprehensiveness, or at least representativeness, of that information. The volume is organised into logical sections starting with the ever-vexed question of definitions. This chapter will be a godsend for students looking for a concise, straightforward explanation of all those overlapping and confusing terms such as charity, voluntary sector, third sector and NGO (the preferred 'catch-all' term the authors adopt). The scale and growth of the sector is then briefly covered, with some very helpful tables on selected membership figures. This chapter also reviews the position of the sector within British civil society; a topic which is picked up again in the final chapter on international comparisons which, again well supported by relevant data, looks at the vital contribution of voluntarism to social capital with telling extracts from the World Values Surveys.

Chapter three profiles the major NGO sectors (health; social welfare; international; environment; political 'think tanks'; human rights; gender and sexuality; race and ethnicity), in each case covering key facts in their development and growth. It is slightly disappointing not to see recreation and leisure, in which two million people a week volunteer and six million a year take part competitively, included, but this is symptomatic of a more general failing in the sector as a whole, which seems to regard sport as separate.

By far the largest section of the book is chapter four which provides 'pen portraits' of 63 of the leading NGOs in Britain today. Most of these are the 'obvious suspects' though there is, perhaps, a slight bias in favour of campaigning organisations and against umbrella bodies. There are some omissions: no Scouts or Guides, Masons or Oddfellows (all four in the top twelve membership organisations in the UK with a total of a million-and-a-half members), no Citizen's Advice, no royal charities such as The Prince's Trust, and no Help for Heroes (the subject of a recent phenomenal rise in interest), for example. However, given that the authors' intention is to 'represent the diversity of the sector' and 'illustrate the range of activities and modes of operation that NGOs are engaged in' (p. 79) this is a perfectly reasonable selection. It will certainly be one that is utilised many times by those needing a quick, simple overview of a wide range of significant UK voluntary bodies.

Chapter five is something of an oddity. The book spends 16 pages profiling 13 'key players' in the British voluntary sector of the past 60 years from William Beveridge and Fenner Brockway to Ann Pettifor and Peter Tatchell. There is no explanation either as to why these particular 13 were chosen or what this section is meant to add to the overall survey. Obviously some of the choices are arguable –how influential on the sector has Mary Whitehouse been? But more pertinent perhaps is whether this, very brief, section is needed at all.

A problem that this section shares with the previous one is that it is very London-centric. Whilst the book is clearly aimed at providing a survey of *national* organisations, to do so to the total exclusion of organisations and individuals who have worked and campaigned in Wales, Scotland and (perhaps especially) Northern Ireland, is to miss a very significant aspect of the recent history of British voluntary action.

Chapter six on membership and volunteering is far more focussed and relevant, with more helpful tables, but chapter seven which covers income streams and giving is more problematic. The key change, the increasing dependence of the voluntary sector on government funding, is well covered and the main pros and cons highlighted. Also given adequate comment are the changes and demographic trends in individual charitable giving. However, two lesser though extremely influential sources of income are not discussed at all. The first is income from trusts and foundations, the second is the National Lottery which is only mentioned in a table derived from the UK Civil Society Almanac. Though together these sources account for only approximately ten per cent of all income to the sector it can certainly be argued that they are significantly more influential than this modest contribution might indicate. The Lottery has, for example, had a very significant impact in areas such as amateur arts and community sport and has also been a significant influence behind the drive towards greater accountability and measurement of outcomes and performance. There might also have been

mention here of new models of finance such as social bonds and ‘payment by results’, though they are admittedly embryonic and potentially ephemeral. Perhaps the problem here is that the book is ‘data driven’; it looks at the big trends as revealed by statistical information and then provides a commentary. This works extremely well in discussing, for example, volunteering trends or government funding but doesn’t so easily pick up *emerging* issues; though it may be argued that the book is correctly focussed on what *has* happened in the sector rather than on where it *might* be going in the future.

The following chapter is a wide-ranging discussion of the impact of NGOs, notably on public and governmental opinion in the UK. The concept of public ‘trust’ in charities is examined, which again has important linkages to the impact of voluntary organisations on social capital. Perhaps in the discussion on trusted ‘brands’ it would also have been helpful to mention the surveys that assess trust across all brands, comparing trust in charities with those of commercial favourites such as Amazon or the John Lewis Partnership. The section concludes with some very brief campaign case studies including that to stop sporting contacts with South Africa, the only look-in sport gets. I feel it would have been beneficial to have expanded on this very important element of the sector’s influence on society and politics to the exclusion of the personalities section.

Personalities do become significant in the chapter on governance and professionalism and there is some, though perhaps not enough, discussion of the extent to which a charismatic leader is essential to the success of a cause or the expansion of an organisation from a ‘bright idea’ to a national institution. Administrative structures and the progress of legislation are outlined though professionalization of fundraising and fundraising techniques is only briefly touched on.

A Historical Guide to NGOs in Britain is at its best in its wider, more general sections providing a new and vital source of data and an overview that situates the development of British civil society within a wider political and international context. Whilst it has its weaknesses in the selection of organisations and personalities, its failings are few, and only significant in its England-centric bias and its omissions from its income section. It is probable that as time goes on the book, perhaps especially its portraits of individual organisations, will become increasingly valuable to students of the history and development of the UK voluntary sector.

Overall a work of this kind can only be of benefit in a political climate that seems to become ever more remote from considerations of historical perspective and from drawing conclusions based on them. Even those within the voluntary sector are often remarkably ignorant both about the key facts regarding the development of the sector and even, on occasion, the history of their own organisations. Politicians of both major parties, whilst fond of quoting history to underpin their policies, often forget inconvenient facts (such as Tory opposition to environmental charities or Labour opposing the introduction of the National Lottery) or even fabricate them (for example the Prime Minister’s recent speech on commemorating the First World War which inflated the losses on the first day of the Battle of the Somme by a factor of ten). *A Historical Guide to NGOs* should help them, their advisors, the sector and its students to ensure that such errors are less likely, or at least that they are better informed.

Notes

1. Derek Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*, (London, 1973); Pat Thane, *The Foundation of the Welfare State*, (London, 1982); Bernard Harris, *Origins of the British Welfare State: Social Welfare in England and Wales 1800–1945*, (London, 2004). [Back to \(1\)](#)
 2. Katharine Bradley, *Poverty, Philanthropy and the State: Charities and the Working Classes in London, 1918–79* (Manchester, 2009); Davis Smith, Rochester and Hedley, *An Introduction to the Voluntary Sector*, ed. Justin Davis Smith, Colin Rochester and Rodney Hedley (London, 1995). [Back to \(2\)](#)
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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/59464>