

# A new vision and voice

by Colin Rochester

The voluntary sector needs to re-imagine itself for the 21st century. Rather than being an arm of government the voluntary sector should see itself pathfinding new solutions for society

The proliferation of food banks is eloquent testimony to the continuing ability of voluntary action to respond rapidly and flexibly to the immediate needs of those whom the state welfare system has failed. Historically, however, voluntary organisations have done far more than simply provide first aid. They have highlighted deficiencies in state provision; put pressure on politicians to improve welfare provision; and challenged the view that the poor are undeserving.

But the sector's response to the Coalition's attack on the victims of poverty has been muted. Its leaders have made little contribution to documenting the consequences of government actions and exposing the culture of blame that underpins them. This vital role has been played instead by the bishops of the Church of England and the leader of Britain's Roman Catholics. This silence has been attributed to the growing dependence on statutory funding that makes organisations reluctant to criticise their paymasters. But the roots of their inertia are deeper and more complex than resource dependency.

Many voluntary organisations were disarmed and co-opted by the New Labour administrations. They were encouraged to see themselves as partners of a government which shared the aspirations of its new friends. And, given Labour had adopted ambitious targets for reducing child poverty, this offered a major opportunity for voluntary organisations to pursue their aims. The consequences of this partnership, however, were grave. Freedom to criticise was undermined and the sector was influenced by the neo-liberalism that underpinned Labour's policies.

The erosion of this sector as an independent force was the product of three overlapping trends: growing dependence on the

state; the adoption of market values; and loss of faith in its own organisational forms. Rather than devising their own ways of meeting social need voluntary organisations increasingly saw their role as helping to implement government policies.

In order to fit themselves for the role of service providers, voluntary organisations have adopted the culture and methods of business and the values of the market. They have developed strategies to increase their "market share" by maximising their appeal to the "customers" that commission their services at the expense of the beneficiaries of their activities. And they have looked to business for their organisational model – a top-down centralised bureaucracy with authority located in the hands of a Napoleonic chief executive. The result was an efficient machine for delivering the services required by commission-

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ers but one that was ill-fitted for expressing the needs of the people it served and for campaigning for policies that would meet them. Small wonder then that many were reluctant to defend their constituencies against welfare "reforms" and lacked the means of doing so.

Does this mean voluntary action has lost the will and the ability to offer an alternative to the toxic culture that blames the victims of poverty and to argue for policies that will address inequalities of wealth and power? The picture is not totally gloomy. A number of organisations have resisted the pressures to abandon their values, their distinctive practices and their inde-

pendence. Many more will be facing life or death decisions about their future as they discover only a minority will access the gold at the end of commissioner's rainbow. Those who have not completed the transformation into non-profit businesses may still be able to return to their roots. In the process they will need to focus again on what they are for rather than how they do things. And they will be joined by increasing numbers of new initiatives as voluntary action renews itself.

Given that the "leaders" of the voluntary sector have been enthusiastic champions of the Faustian pact with government we are not likely to see change of this kind happening from the top down. Instead we need to build from the bottom up. Is it too much to expect that a handful of committed individuals could identify the organisations in their locality that have a mission to relieve poverty and challenge them to contribute to a local alliance that expresses their opposition to the current attack on the poor. Emerging networks of this kind could make a claim on the resources of agencies such as settlements and councils of voluntary service to support their work. And they could develop a profile and presence in the local media and political arena.

But, while voluntary action begins at local level, it should not end there. We have access to social media that offer a low cost means of sharing information and developing solidarity between local activists. In the longer run, this kind of networking activity has the potential to develop a new focus – and a voice – for those who believe voluntary organisations need to make themselves heard in the fight against poverty and the battle for social justice. ●  
Colin Rochester is author of *Rediscovering Voluntary Action: The Beat of a Different Drum*