Matthew Hilton on Non-Governmental Organisations

Matthew talks about his research into NGOs

Duration: 5:00 mins

My name is Matthew Hilton I'm Professor of Social History and I've been at the University of Birmingham for about thirteen years. My research at the moment is on the history of Non-Governmental Organisations in Britain since about the end of the Second World War. By known Non-Governmetnal Organisations or NGOs, what I mean are those charities, voluntary sector groups,civil society associations, such as Oxfam, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, Amnesty... and what I'm trying to do by looking at these organisations is understand the size and scale of this sector and understand the role they've played in politics and society, and understand the impact that these organisations have had.

Now it's important that we do this I think for two main reasons - to respond to two particular debates. One of these is about the so-called 'decline' of the political in Britain. It's said that voters no longer like to turn out at elections, that we've become more apathetic, that we're no longer engaged in politics that we used to - that we're less interested. What our research on the history of NGOs does is demonstrate that this is simply not the case. It may well be true that we no longer turn out at elections in the same numbers that we used to do, but what we do instead is join an increasing number of organisations, such as environmental groups, such as women's organisations, civil rights and human rights groups and we do this because we think these better reflect our views and allow us to engage politically in different ways. Politics is changing in that the arenas in which it takes place are also changing. And the second debate that we're responding to is that - a similar one in which it's claimed that there's been a decline in our rates of volunteering. We simply don't 'join in' in the ways we used to do so. Again we find that this is not the case.

Now it may well be true that organisations such as the women's institutes, the mother's unions no longer have as big a membership as they did in their apparent heyday in the 1950s. But instead we're joining different groups and we're doing so in different ways. We don't attend weekly meetings, but we do sign cheques or make direct debit payments to a whole range of organisations in order to express our political beliefs and values. Now this is a different type of membership but it shouldn't readily be dismissed, and what we need to do is understand the change in nature of membership and participation. And so the principle things that we've been looking at to explain the change in nature of politics are firstly the rising rates of education, the rising levels of affluence, which mean we no longer join organisations to defend our material interests - and that is we no longer join the trade union for instance, to ensure we have a decent wage, but we join other types of organisation, environmental groups, human rights organisations and so on, because they reflect our post-material values - that is, these organisations reflect our interest in issues that aren't materially related to our basic needs. And another crucial reason why politics has changed is that we live in a more complex world. It is simply too difficult for the individual to understand all of the science behind, say, the politics of climate change. We cannot participate in politics in quite the same way as we used to when the issues are so difficult. So what we do instead is we give our money to organisations such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, knowing that these organisations have experts that can bring expertise to expertise - they are better placed to engage as political actors on our behalf. So that means that when we just engage in forms of cheque book politics, when we don't attend weekly meetings, we're actually making a rational decision to engage in politics in different ways.

All of this means that the key ways to understanding NGOs and the history of NGOs is that they constantly adapt to the society and the political situation in which they find themselves in, And it's this dynamism, this constant evolution, this constant change, which is at the heart of the vitality of the sector. And its also at the heart of the sector's independence. NGOs, charities, voluntary sector organisations, civil society groups cannot be controlled no matter how often politicians, whether from the previous Labour government or the current Conservative and Liberal coalition would like to think they can control non-governmental organisations.

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