

The Big Society or Civil Society? A new policy environment for the UK Third Sector

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The general election held on 6 May finally led to a new government for the UK. Eventually, because of course the election itself did not produce an outright winner and only when the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats were able to agree on the construction of a coalition could a new government be formed. The delays flowing from this have made it more difficult to predict at an early stage how the new government will act, in particular because third sector policy was not a high profile policy issue to be included in the initial coalition talks.

In contrast to this uncertainty, however, is the relatively high levels of consensus amongst all the major political parties on the role and importance of the third sector in twenty-first century society and the need for government to be proactive in supporting this. This predates the 2010 election and the campaigning around it. Indeed whilst in opposition in 2008 the Conservative Party had published a 'Green Paper' outlining their plans for the sector, which envisaged significant continuity with many of the central features of recent policy development, in particular a centre role for third sector organisations in both the delivery of public services and the promotion of community engagement.

It is also a Conservative responsible for third sector policy under the new government, with Nick Hurd, former Shadow Cabinet spokesperson, installed as Minister for Charities. We can expect to see moves towards political and ideological support for community action therefore. Whether this is backed-up with financial resources is less clear, although the Conservatives have talked about providing grants to recruit and train a new cadre of community activists and leaders – even modelling this (in principle at least) on the experiences of Barak Obama in Chicago. The Conservatives have also discussed other measures to promote voluntary and community action including a Big Society Day (a time for neighbourhood and community action), greater encouragement for employment-based volunteering, and a National Citizen's Service to get young people involved in their communities. And all of these have been included in commitments from the Cabinet Office to get the Big Society moving.

As with the previous government, however, the Conservatives want both to support community action and to encourage third sector organisations to become more involved in the delivery of public services on behalf of the state. They recognise some of the barriers to commissioning and delivery that third sector organisations experience here, and recognise the need to move towards a more stable funding environment, longer (three year minimum) grants and contracts, and a move towards market-based, rather than cost-based, funding. Hurd has said that, "We are committed to bringing a clear vision to the sector that will mean charities, social enterprises and voluntary organisations are easier to run and not overwhelmed by interference and bureaucracy". These could be major improvements for organisations involved in service delivery, although they are not a significant departure from previous government practice. And they will not address some of the problems experienced by the smaller and less experienced organisations currently effectively excluded from contract funding.

Most significant of all perhaps though, will be a symbolic move away from past discourses on the 'Third Sector' towards a discourse focused on 'Civil Society', including a change in the title of the Government Office charged with co-ordination and support for the sector – the Office of the Third Sector is now the Office for Civil Society. There may be many in both the voluntary sector and social enterprise worlds who will not mourn the passing of the third sector rhetoric – why only third? some cried! However it did have a unifying impact, and without this notion of a single sector, future policy and practice may become more fragmented. Also there is much debate (especially amongst academics) about what is meant by Civil Society, and in particular whether it is an entity (a set of organisations like the third sector) or a way of relating (all those actions and relations that we engage in outside the state and the market). Academics can debate this; but policy makers and practitioners may be more concerned with whether this potentially more amorphous concept does provide any unifying framework for political engagement – or rather leaves different subsectors and interest groups to fend for themselves. Only time will tell.

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