

Third Sector Research Centre

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**Who's speaking for whom? Exploring issues of
third sector leadership, leverage and legitimacy**

Heather Buckingham, Angela Ellis Paine, Pete Alcock,
Jeremy Kendall and Rob Macmillan

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Abstract

At a time of public spending cuts and rising demand for many third sector services, the sector's voice and its ability to influence policy are arguably increasingly significant. This paper draws on empirical research to explore the issues of legitimacy and leverage in relation to the national level leadership of the third sector. The findings suggest that opportunities for policy influence have contracted under the Coalition government, and in some cases the routes to influence had changed. The paper discusses the foundations upon which national sector leaders based their claims to legitimacy, including technical, political and values based legitimacy, as well as a growing reliance on 'resonance' within the sector and beyond. In closing the paper considers whether the context of austerity might provide an impetus for national leaders to identify shared values amidst the sector's diversity, in order to build a stronger united voice.

Keywords

Third sector, leadership, representation, legitimacy, influence

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Introduction

At a time of public spending cuts and rising demands for many third sector services, the sector's voice and ability to influence policy are arguably increasingly important. At the same time, the same cuts in funding, alongside developments such as the dismantling of the Office for Civil Society's strategic partners programme and more recently the introduction of the Lobbying Bill, have the potential to weaken or stifle those voices. This paper focuses on the organisations and individuals who can be considered to speak on behalf of the sector in its engagement with policy at national level and the practices by which they do so – on issues of leadership of and across the third sector in England.

There is a growing body of literature about organisational leadership, particularly the skills and abilities that make good organisational leaders (e.g. Grint, 2005; 2010), a small amount of which has focused specifically on leadership within third sector organisations (e.g. Paton and Brewster, 2008; Chambers and Edwards-Stuart, 2007; Cormack and Stanton, 2003). Most of the academic literature and indeed the policy and practice debate, however, has focused on leadership in the third sector – on the 'craft' of being a good leader within individual third sector organisations. There has been much less written about leadership of or across the sector more generally (Macmillan and McLaren, 2012). Yet, over the past couple of decades, it has become increasingly apparent that there are those who purport to provide leadership across the sector as a whole, or at least components of it, such as charities, or social enterprises. Indeed, there is an expectation upon certain individuals and organisations to do so, both by those within the sector or by those who interact with it, such as policy makers, politicians and the media.

Previous research by TSRC highlighted the centrality of certain organisations and individuals in mediating relationships between key policy makers and funders and the third sector at large (Taylor et al, 2012; Ellis Paine et al, 2012). It is this group of leaders, who appear to have a voice or influence in national level policy debates of generic interest across the third sector, rather than pertaining to specific fields such as health or employment, which are of central concern to this study.

Analysis of popular discourse within the sector can reveal the identities of a number of key actors seeking, or being looked upon, to shape knowledge and understanding of the sector within policy making processes. As not many within the sector have access to or influence over the important national policy debates and practice issues concerning 'the sector', in practice they constitute a small and selected group, and might be considered to be a third sector 'policy elite'.

This group is, however, a porous and contested one - not everyone will agree who is within its membership. The diversity of the sector and the ambiguous boundaries that have warranted its description as a 'loose and baggy monster' (Kendall and Knapp, 1995) increases the contestation and the complexity. Throughout the paper we refer to the 'third sector' or 'the sector', rather than referring to any of the other titles often used (rightly or wrongly) as synonyms (e.g. voluntary sector; voluntary and community sector; civil society) or constantly reiterating the complexity and contested nature of the term: we do so primarily to enhance the paper's accessibility. Our research respondents were far from agreed on a name for the sector, what was included within it, or whether they were representing all, some or none of it (see section 4.1). If the sector is difficult to define or to delineate, how do its leaders know who they are speaking for? Given its diversity, is it even possible to

identify collective interests to articulate? Not only is it unlikely that there will be agreement on who is providing leadership, not all who claim to provide leadership or who are assumed to be doing so will agree on what the core concerns and interests are. What is more, these boundaries and debates will change over time, as both the membership of the leadership group and the context within which they operate change. It is not always clear, therefore, who is speaking for whom, on what basis, or to what effect. Whilst this poses challenges for the study of leadership it also highlights the importance of a better understanding of who it is that speaks for the sector at national level, the bases of their legitimacy for doing so, and their ability to leverage influence within the policy making process.

This paper explores these themes using empirical data from an exploratory qualitative study. After providing a brief review of relevant policy and research documents, we outline our research questions and the methods we used to explore them. The study findings are divided into three themed sections, of leadership, leverage and legitimacy, before the paper finishes with a short conclusions section.

Background

There is little research on leadership *across* the third sector (Macmillan and McLaren 2012), yet it is neither a new phenomenon, nor a new problem (see for example: Lewis, 1995; Finlayson, 1994). It is arguably, however, an increasingly contentious issue. In this section we provide a brief history of the development of the leadership across the third sector, and particularly of the emergence of a third sector policy elite, before outlining our research questions.

The existence of key organisations and/or individuals providing leadership across voluntary organisations is not new. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the Charity Organisation Society (COS) sought to provide leadership for voluntary organisations - across the 'charitable sector' - both internally through shaping its activities and values and externally through seeking to promote and secure support for the sector. However, this was a highly contested terrain (Lewis, 1995). The COS did not speak for all charities and indeed was critical of some, and over time the COS abandoned its co-ordinating role to focus more directly on family welfare, later becoming the Family Welfare Association (Lewis 1995), and now Family Action. In 1919 a new co-ordinating agency was established in the National Council of Social Services. This proved more enduring - later becoming the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) which remains one of the key leadership organisations for the sector today.

Arguably, however, it was towards the end of the 1970s, with the emergence of the notion of a 'voluntary sector', and subsequently of the voluntary sector as a distinct policy field, that questions of representation and leadership rose in prominence. As 6 and Leat (1997:33) suggest, the 20 year period following the Wolfenden Committee, which reported in 1978 (Wolfenden Committee, 1978), was distinguished by 'the construction of a sub-elite, an interest, a lobby and a field of public policy'. The Wolfenden Committee has been credited with the creation of the notion of a 'voluntary sector' (6 and Leat, 1997) and indirectly therefore of an

'attention space'¹ for discourse about the state of the sector and its policy and practice needs. It also led to the growth of intermediary bodies (now more commonly known as infrastructure organisations), one of the four functions of which was seen to be representing the interests and views of the sector in policy making processes:

'The role of representation is essential in our view. As legislation becomes more difficult and complicated, so it becomes more necessary to have a body able to speak about it on behalf of the voluntary sector, though we realise that there will not normally be a common view on all major points' (Wolfenden, 1978: 140 – quoted in Rochester, 2013: 40)

Together, these developments can be seen to have set the stage for a small group of individuals and organisations to assert claims to and/or to be looked upon to provide leadership across the sector and particularly to act as representatives of the sector within policy debates. This group – the sub-elite in 6 and Leat's terms or the policy elite in ours – was made up of leaders of infrastructure organisations, key national charities, and a small number of academics/thinkers associated with the sector, who took on a representative role for the sector, engaging on behalf of the sector in policy making processes.

At the end of the 20 year period following the Wolfenden Committee, 6 and Leat (1997) suggest that the process of inventing the sector was completed through the report of the Deakin Commission in 1996. The Deakin Commission was established by the NCVO to review the relations between the sector and government, and argued for the need for more formalised channels to improve this, including a 'concordat' to manage relations. Its report was taken up by the incoming Labour government in 1997, which massively increased public support for the sector and established a range of new forums for engagement with it, including the Compact to implement Deakin's concordat proposal.

While the Deakin Commission represents the end of a period of construction of a voluntary sector as a distinct concept with an associated policy field and policy-elite, it also represents the start of a period of 'hyperactive mainstreaming' of the third sector within public policy under New Labour (Kendall, 2009). Key developments included the establishment of the Office of the Third Sector (OTS) in the Cabinet Office in central government, set up to facilitate a more co-ordinated approach towards the sector, alongside the development of a network of third sector 'strategic partners', funded by government in part at least to provide an representative/mediating role between government and the sector. During this time infrastructure bodies 'flourished', increasing in number, size and profile (Rochester, 2013), effectively increasing claims to leadership across the sector. Government support for the sector was influenced by the voices of those most active in these networks, seen for example when the economic recession of 2008 began and a series of 'recession summits' were convened through which sector leaders could lobby government ministers for public support (Taylor et al, 2012). Such events provided opportunities for the sector's policy elite to influence policy and to reinforce their position as mediators between government and third sector organisations.

¹ Here we borrow the concept of 'attention space' used by Randall Collins (1998) to describe the world of intellectual networks, and the space in which different intellectual traditions or philosophical positions define themselves in relation to rivals.

Under New Labour then an unprecedented level of vertical (within specific policy fields, such as employment, education or health) and horizontal (across sector) support was provided for the third sector. New spaces were opened up for the sector to influence public policy. Together these developments can be seen to have reinforced the position of the sector's policy elite as operating in a space between government and third sector organisations.

Since the Coalition government was formed in 2010, public funding for the sector has been reigned back, and the strategic partners programme and other forums for engagement scaled down or withdrawn. The OTS has become the Office for Civil Society (OCS), with a reduced set of programmes and a smaller budget. Hyperactive mainstreaming was replaced by the 'Big Society', within which Labour's corporatist partnership approach (Macmillan, 2013a) has been supplanted by an expectation that the role of government is only to provide advice and ideas.

Through a combination of its introduction of deficit reduction measures and a dismantling of the programme of support for third sector infrastructure, the Coalition government seems to be reversing the trend set by New Labour towards greater third sector support and involvement in policy making. The result has been 'unsettlement' (Macmillan et al, 2013) of the role of key third sector leaders in relationship with government, as well as about who is, or is not, given access to participate in policy debate, and about new priorities for the sector. At the same time, the authority of the sector's leaders and their legitimacy in speaking on behalf of the sector has been directly challenged from within (see for example Rochester, 2013). Some have been asking questions of the sector's leadership: who is providing leadership for the third sector, how it is changing, what are its bases for legitimacy, its ability to leverage power and influence within the policy making process.

Organisations and individuals who dominated third sector leadership positions under the previous Labour administration may have to learn new ways of working and a new set of 'rules of the game'; to renegotiate their positions; to review and re-assert their claims of legitimacy; to review who or what they are representing and the ways in which they do so; and to find new ways of leveraging power and influence and of exploiting any new opportunity for policy influence. Arguably, at the same time as some of the established leadership organisations have been faced by funding cuts or seen the spaces for engagement changing, other – new players – may emerge to fill new spaces that may have opened up within the leadership field.

The study

The research reported in this paper sought to explore further these issues of third sector leadership through addressing three key themes:

- Mapping leadership within the third sector- exploring who currently provides leadership within the third sector, how they built and maintain their positions, who they network with, and the styles in which they operate;
- Exploring the opportunities available for third sector leaders to engage with and exert influence on the policy process – identifying the main

spaces within which third sector leaders influence policy and the mechanisms by which they do so, and the ways in which these have changed over time;

- Exploring the ways in which third sector leaders relate with and gain legitimacy from those they seek to represent – identifying the claims to legitimacy made by third sector leaders and the main mechanisms through which it was achieved.

In order to explore these issues, this exploratory study involved three main elements:

1. A brief review of existing literature on third sector leadership and of sector press coverage of three policy issues – the Give it Back George Campaign (in 2012), the recession summits (of 2008 and 2009) and the gradual development and promotion of social investment – to identify individuals and organisations taking a leadership role. Leaders identified in multiple sources formed the basis for our interview sample (see below).
2. Interviews with key third sector leaders and other key third sector stakeholders, including government representatives and funders: 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key national third sector stakeholders, including leaders within infrastructure bodies, major charities, sector press, and government. The purposive sample was identified through supplementing the research team's existing knowledge with the literature/media review. The interviews explored leaders' individual biographies and leadership approaches, mechanisms employed to influence policy and successes and challenges in doing so, and sources of legitimacy when speaking into debates about the sector within the policy process. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and subject to thematic analysis.
3. Focus groups with third sector organisations and third sector infrastructure bodies: Five focus groups were conducted with representatives of TSOs and local infrastructure organisations in different parts of England. The focus groups explored the extent to which TSOs felt they were being effectively represented by sector leaders, and their perceptions of the influence these leaders had. The focus groups were digitally recorded, transcribed and subject to thematic analysis.

It should be noted that the fieldwork took place in autumn/winter 2012/13. This predates the engaged discussions in the sector and with government over the terms of the 'Lobbying' Bill, which became legislation as the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014 in January 2014. In addition, it is worth highlighting the exploratory nature of this study – it was not comprehensive in its coverage or engagement with sector leaders or indeed on the issues associated with leadership across the sector. We focused instead on hearing in detail from a selection of key national leaders and other stakeholders about their stories, experiences and perceptions of third sector leadership.

Whose voice? Identifying leadership across the third sector

Our respondents felt that leadership across the third sector is provided by a range of different organisations and individuals, operating at national and local level, drawn from inside and outside of the sector, and speaking on behalf of and seeking/claiming to represent all, some, or indeed none of its constituents. From within the sector, key actors can be categorised as falling into one of three leadership groups:

- *Full horizontal*: speaking/being seen to speak on behalf of the whole sector;
- *Partial horizontal*: speaking/being seen to speak on behalf of a proportion of the sector defined along horizontal lines, such as size or type of organisation;
- *Vertical*: speaking/being seen to speak on behalf of a proportion of the sector along vertical policy lines, such as education, criminal justice, and homelessness.

Amongst those respondents who were providing horizontal leadership, there was a lack of agreement as the definition of ‘the sector’ that they were providing leadership for or what was included within it. While some talked about providing leadership across the third sector, others talked about the voluntary sector, or the voluntary and community sector, others talked about the social sector or (more narrowly) about the social enterprise sector. Very rarely did they problematize these concepts or attempt to define what was contained within them. It is most likely that each referred to slightly different, but overlapping, fields of activity.

Leadership is provided by infrastructure organisations and by a few national front-line organisations. Being a leader in an influential third sector organisation does not automatically make someone a leader ‘of the sector’, but some organisational leaders were felt to operate on a level that results in their influence extending beyond their own organisation, into the wider vertical policy field that they operate in (e.g. health) or, for a small number, across the wider horizontal field of the third sector per se. A small number of individuals were identified as providing a leadership role within the third sector while being based outside of the sector, including individual government ministers and civil servants; funders; academics, commentators and consultants.

While there was a great deal of consistency in the small number of individuals and/or organisations identified within the fully horizontal category (e.g. NCVO, ACEVO, NAVCA, CAF), there was less agreement on the other categories. When asked who provided leadership across the third sector it was common for respondents to name individuals and/or organisations operating within specific vertical policy fields and/or local rather than national infrastructure organisations, although the focus of this study was primarily on national leadership. Who you identify as a ‘sector leader’ varies according to where you ‘sit’ within and around the sector (the policy field you occupy, the size and nature of your organisation etc.), and where you are based geographically.

A group in flux

The leadership network is changing. It was suggested that in recent years, while many of the traditional incumbents remain, some have been lost and some new players have entered the field. The demise of the OCS strategic partners programme in particular, and funding cuts more generally, has meant that *'the traditional third sector infrastructure has been shattered'* and this was felt to have altered the leadership map and changed the membership of the third sector policy-elite.

How leaders earned their positions and came to be recognised as such was the subject of debate. In general there was a sense that the 'new' third sector leaders were somewhat different to the 'old'. The third sector, it was suggested, had become a more attractive place to work, making leadership positions within the sector an *'aspirational career choice'*, stimulating an influx of high calibre leaders:

'so, lots and lots of very smart people are moving into the sector, and at an earlier age. It's not like when they're retiring and want to give something back, it's when they're at their very best, their most creative, their most risk-taking...'
(National stakeholder, 05)

Some, however, questioned the legitimacy of those who were new to the sector and who were seen to have attempted to move beyond being a leader within an individual voluntary organisation to being a leader of the sector. In particular, respondents questioned whether these new 'leaders' had enough experience of the sector or embodied its values fully enough to be able to genuinely represent it. Others suggested that in recent years leadership positions (or at least positions of influence) had been acquired purely by virtue of the connections people had to key government policy makers, rather than having been earned over time – people were seen to be parachuting in and upsetting the established order. We take the discussion of legitimacy further in section 6.

There was recognition of the value of leaders moving between different sectors – of 'boundary crossing' (see Lewis, 2012; Little and Rochester, 2003) - bringing the experience of working in the private and/or public sector to the third sector. At the same time, while some suggested that the third sector had got better at *'growing our own'* leaders, others felt that the sector was still not producing enough of its own leaders and that those moving in from the outside lacked *'grounding'* in the sector. The following quote illustrates some of this debate, albeit coming from a respondent who had crossed the boundary from the voluntary sector into the public sector:

'But one of the things that's come through very clearly is that there is a traditional voluntary sector leader at local level, and I'm going to over characterise this, so this is an exaggeration, but you get the classical voluntary sector, if I think back to the 90s, shuffling around a little bit, not particularly smart, saying, 'Well it's all well and good but we haven't got any money', and you've got the bright, buzzy, sharp-dressed social entrepreneur coming up, going, 'okay you haven't got any money that's fine, we can do it like this then, instead'. We need a way of the sector challenging its own leadership more, and actually it goes back to this whole thing about credibility of the legitimacy of who it is you're speaking on behalf of and who you're representing, and to be doing that in an open, dynamic, engaging way' (National stakeholder, 10)

Leadership styles

It was apparent that several different styles of third sector leadership exist, each of which was seen to have its own strengths and weaknesses:

- *Internal versus external*: one style of leadership saw emphasis placed on internal, organisational, relationships and influence, another saw emphasis placed on building external relationships and influence.
- *Ideas versus action*: while some leaders built their position through being seen to have strong, creative ideas; others built their position through delivering action.
- *DIY versus collective*: for some, leadership was a relatively individualist endeavour; for others it was achieved through bringing other people along with you.
- *Loud versus quiet*: while some leaders were reported as making their presence felt by 'shouting loudly', ensuring a media presence and being at all the right meetings and events, others were felt to be working quietly and persistently behind the scenes.

While certain leaders were identified as typifying the different styles, it was also recognised that often individual leaders would adapt their style according to the context in which they were operating – they may, for example, be 'loud' in one context to one audience, and 'quiet' in another. This was one example of the capabilities that leaders needed to operate effectively and to build and maintain their positions (see section 5).

In general, it was apparent that what counts as 'good leadership' across the sector is subjective: the ways in which it is assessed vary across audiences, time and context. 'Good' leadership cannot be captured within a definitive set of functions or skills that can easily be taught or learnt by aspiring leaders. Nevertheless, beyond individuals and cutting across the different styles of leadership, several characteristics emerged as being seen to represent 'good' leadership of the third sector:

- *Values*: Being clear what your values are, adhering to them, being passionate about them, being transparent about them, and having alignment between personal and organisational/sectoral values. Values based leadership, it was suggested, requires emotional investment. This was seen as particularly important for third sector leadership.
- *Independence*: Being able to speak out on important issues, including on unpopular causes or against dominant discourses, and not being unduly influenced by the agendas of others, particularly those who fund you.
- *Connections*: Good leadership requires connections – bringing people in, joining people up, maintaining and developing relationships, working collaboratively, and communicating well with a range of stakeholders.

- *Representation*: Being genuinely representative, through being able to ‘embody the spirit of what you’re representing’ and not just speaking on behalf of others, but also enabling them to speak for themselves and through being clear and precise about who you are speaking on behalf of, your legitimacy in doing so.
- *Accountability*: being open, honest, transparent and accountable.
- *Insight and experience*: having a good understanding of the internal and external environment, being able to ‘see the bigger picture’, including the needs of beneficiaries, generally built through ‘authentic experience at the sharp end’ combined with sharp analytical skills.
- *Balance*: between internal and external roles, but also between technical and political roles, providing support and voice.

There was a lack of agreement as to whether or not third sector leadership, and in particular the styles of leadership and what represents ‘good’ leadership in the third sector, was any different to leadership in other sectors. Those that argued that it was the same everywhere suggested that the skills required of leaders were the same whatever sector they were based in and that all leaders face the same issues. Others, however, suggested that third sector leadership was somehow different, and indeed better: that the diversity of the sector created unique challenges; that leadership of the third sector is more values based than elsewhere, requiring additional emotional investment; that stakeholder management is more diverse and more complex; and that it is more concerned with influencing public policy (see Kirchner, 2007, for a discussion of distinctiveness within third sector organisational leadership).

Leadership challenges

It was felt that third sector leadership was currently facing a number of challenges:

- *Lack of independence*: There was a concern that the third sector leaders were failing to speak up on issues of relevance to the sector and/or its beneficiaries due to a perceived risk of political alienation and/or retraction of funding. As one respondent said:

‘...I think there has been a failure of leadership for people to do what’s right and what’s brave and courageous, and stand up for our ultimate beneficiaries, because of fear of political alienation, the impact on physical resources’ (national stakeholder, 05);

- *Lack of effective voice*: There was a concern that the ‘sector lacks effective voice’, and particularly a voice that extends beyond individual vertical policy fields. In part this was felt to be due to perceived challenges associated with a lack of opportunities for the third sector to engage with the policy making process, and in part due to perceived challenges of uniting the sector.
- *Lack of change*: Some respondents felt that leadership within the sector had become stale. It had been dominated for too long by the same people, who

had the same ideas. There was some concern that this lack of turnover, combined with the recent reduction in resources meant that vested interests had developed and were resulting in some leaders putting their organisation's interests first, or even their own personal interests, rather than the interests of the sector as a whole or beneficiaries. What was needed, it was suggested, was new people, with a new vision for the contribution of the sector, or for a different kind of society and how the third sector contributes to that. This argument, however, is held in contrast with concerns noted earlier about 'new' people parachuting in to leadership positions.

- *Lack of resource*: A final key challenge identified as affecting leadership across the sector was a lack of capacity to undertake leadership activity, but also lack of investment in building leadership. As one respondent said:

'There'll be a lot less of it [leadership and representation of third sector to government at national level] and it'll be thinner probably because of the lack of cash going into it. It won't be as well researched. It won't be as well founded in that authentic local experience' (national stakeholder, 14)

Many of these challenges are picked up and expanded upon in the following sections as we explore in more detail the issues of leverage and legitimacy.

To what effect? Exploring issues of policy influence

Casey's (2004) work on third sector participation in the policy process suggests that there exists a 'gap' between the third sector, and the organisations that comprise it, and the opportunities afforded by the policy environment to influence policy making processes. Since TSOs and their beneficiaries are in many cases profoundly affected by policy changes, and able to provide 'front line' evidence regarding their impacts, there is a need for some form of mediation, representation or voice that enables the third sector to 'speak into' the structures in which representation and policy work take place. The demand for this form of leadership comes both from the sector itself, and from government agencies and the media, who rely on trusted intermediaries to manage their engagement with TSOs. Third sector leadership is not of course all about representation, or indeed policy influence. These are, however, important elements of it.

Political opportunity structures - the dimensions of the political landscape which provide the context within which third sector leaders operate when interacting with policy processes - however, vary over time with changing government priorities and socio-economic conditions. The characteristics of third sector organisations, and indeed the sector as a whole, also change over time, as does the network of actors involved in leadership roles.

By way of understanding this situation, and of exploring the opportunities currently available for third sector leaders to engage with and exert influence on the policy process we draw on Casey's (2004) framework for considering third sector participation in the policy process. This enables us to consider a range of both external (political and socioeconomic environment; the policy in question) and

internal (characteristics of TSOs; the network of actors) factors which operate together to affect the space for and effectiveness of third sector policy levers.

Political and socio-economic environment

There was a broad consensus that in contrast with a period at the start of the new millennium, in which the third sector had been brought into the policy making process and horizontal support structures had blossomed, political opportunity structures were now changing, reducing the space for third sector involvement in policy making. While the transition from New Labour to the Coalition was pinpointed by some as the turning point, others were keen to point out that any difference between the two was a matter of degree, that any change that was taking place had already begun in the final years of New Labour, or indeed that any apparent changes between the two administrations were relatively insignificant. As one respondent suggested:

'I mean, policy influence... I think successive governments have learnt the art of tent making as a means to manage the demand for policy influence, which isn't the same as policy influence. So I think that the policy influence of the third sector hasn't changed for 20 years and the greatest period of policy influence of the third sector is probably the 60s. I am sceptical... So this government has an Office of Civil Society, the last government had an Office of the Third Sector, both governments have ministers whose responsibility is to engage, but there's a sense in which it's seen as a means of managing rather than engaging and influence across government...' (national stakeholder, 12)

In general, however, the early years of the Coalition were characterised by an exceptional rate of change and turbulence, making it hard for sector leaders to do more than provide reactive responses. Since the Coalition assumed office there have been a few high profile policy 'wins' for the third sector. The *Give it Back George* campaign was, for example, frequently highlighted as a success story by our respondents. Beyond these specific examples, however, there was some pessimism about the sector's current ability to influence policy:

'I don't see that any of us have any influence on what happens with policy that's coming out from Central government, we don't have a voice. And even if we go out and shout our voice is not listened to.' (Focus group respondent)

Indeed, there was criticism of the policy making process as a whole, with a suggestion that current government policies lacked coherence or were made up *'on the hoof'* and that there was *'an isolationist feel'* to the development of policy, reducing any space for sector influence.

The retraction of the Office for Civil Society (OCS) strategic partners programme was seen to be having the dual impact of removing established mechanisms for engagement while also reducing resources within the sector to do policy work. The scaling down of OCS, and its perceived loss of power and capacity, was also seen to represent a closing down of opportunities to influence, as was the closing of quangos and a perceived weakening of power within local authorities which had previously provided a link between the sector and central government. While new structures, such as the OCS's small charities group and large charities group, had been put in place they were not on the same scale and, indeed, they had

the potential to unsettle the old order further by bringing in frontline organisations to engage directly with OCS rather than relying on infrastructure organisations/strategic partners to mediate the relationship.

The dismantling of horizontal structures had contributed to a change in tactics on behalf of some sector leaders, as they re-focused their efforts on building links with a range of individual government departments. While there was no suggestion that relationships had not been built with individual government departments under New Labour, there was a sense that these had become more important, while, for some, relationships with the Cabinet Office as a central point for the sector had become less significant, although still important.

In general, while a '*natural desire to engage*' the third sector was seen to characterise New Labour's period in office, the Coalition was felt to have less of a '*feel for the voluntary sector*', with few existing connections, a general sense of confusion as to what the sector was about, and a broader '*ideological chasm*' between the two.

The policy in question

Our study explored the processes through which third sector organisations sought to influence policy, and perceptions of the general effectiveness of these, rather than analysing specific policies in-depth. The phases of the policy cycle (if such a thing currently exists given comments above relating to the speed and somewhat unpredictable nature of policy making) and of the electoral cycle were, however, felt to be significant. While policy making processes may be relatively closed at present, there was hope that opportunities to influence would open up in the period before the next election². There was some suggestion that the current challenges being faced by the sector in seeking to engage with and influence policy making processes were as much if not more related to the stage within the electoral cycle - changes within one administration - than a more fundamental change in opportunities between administrations.

Beyond these two sets of external factors which were shaping the political opportunity structures for third sector leaders, Casey's (2004) model suggests their ability to influence policy also depends on a range of 'internal factors' such as the skills of individual leaders and the capacity of leadership organisations. This was very much reflected in our study. Indeed, some suggested that rather than the opportunities for influence having closed or shrunk, it was more that they had changed and leaders had to find new ways of working: the internal factors were just as, if not more significant than the external. As one respondent put it:

[the] route into influence is very different. You have to figure out a new way, and many of us don't know what that new way is' (National stakeholder, 11).

Characteristics of TSOs

Several aspects concerning the characteristics third sector leadership organisations and frontline organisations were highlighted as creating challenges for policy influence. Pressure on financial resources had reduced capacity to do policy work; to engage with policy makers, and to rigorously underpin claims of legitimacy (see

² As a reminder, the research was conducted in Autumn/Winter 2012/13 and responses may be different if leaders were interviewed more recently.

below), from both the perspective of leadership organisations having the resources to gather the views of their members or constituents in meaningful ways, and the resources of the frontline organisations to participate in such processes. This was particularly problematic within certain parts of the sector which were traditionally under-resourced, such as the BME sector.

Financial pressures had also heightened issues of independence, reinforcing questions of the ability and willingness of leaders to speak out on issues that were in opposition to dominant policy discourse if their organisation was in receipt of statutory funding. Anxieties over being '*frozen out*' and losing funding led to leaders, particularly at a local level, adopting a cautious approach. Indeed, one of the positives seen to have emerged from reduced statutory funding and horizontal support was that national leaders may now feel freer to overtly challenge government.

Capabilities of individual leaders

Capacity issues were not limited to time and money, neither were they just organisational and sector issues. The capabilities – skills, knowledge, confidence - of individual leaders – both current and future - leaders were arguably as important, if not more important than the characteristics of TSOs or indeed the sector more broadly. Alongside Casey's category of TSO characteristics, therefore, our study highlighted the significance of the capacities and capabilities of individual leaders in shaping the extent to which the third sector can influence policy. Fligstein's (2001) concept of 'social skill' – the ability to analyse, to motivate, and attain cooperation, to adapt and make best use of changing rules and resources - is useful here.

Some respondents questioned whether current third sector leaders had the 'social skill' required to engage effectively with the opportunities that do exist to influence policy; whether they were able to adapt and make the best use of all the policy levers currently available to them. A question was raised, for example, as to their ability to unite and gain support and cooperation different parts of the sector (not to mention the desirability of this). It was also suggested that some of the long-standing sector leaders had simply run out of ideas on which to take the sector forward, and in a time of constrained financial resources, (new) ideas were seen as increasingly important. Others suggested that today's leaders needed to become more skilled in the use of social media, alongside maintaining a strong presence within the traditional media.

Other personal resources of individual leaders were identified as affecting the success of attempts to influence. As introduced in the 'identifying leadership' section above, some respondents reported that a new set of third sector policy actors had gained access to the inner circles of government by means, not of their organisational credentials or their claims to legitimacy, but of their personal connections to government ministers and officials. These new actors had to some extent unsettled the existing leadership map.

The network of actors

The ability of leaders to use their 'social skill' in order unite the sector (or certain parts of it), to build coalitions and to rise above vested interests and create a common collective identity were identified as characteristics of good leadership, but also a challenge facing the sector. As Fligstein (2001) suggests, social skill matters less when there is little turbulence or external threat; at present it would seem it matters a great deal.

The diversity of the sector, and a '*lack of common identity*' was felt to produce challenges in terms of creating a 'strategic unity' (Alcock, 2010), '*articulating common goals*' and '*speaking with one voice*'. Although this is not a new problem, a period of apparent unity (*ibid*), or at least relative stability, during New Labour's time in office was now questioned, as external threats to funding and to independence, for example, contributed to an unsettlement which resulted in individual leaders being accused of safeguarding their own or their organisation's position, rather than considering the best interest of the sector as a whole, or its beneficiaries. Failing to speak with one voice was recognised as a barrier to policy influence, and the strength of the network of third sector policy actors, and of individual leaders' abilities to bring the network together and to motivate cooperation across the network, was seen to be important to the sector's ability to influence policy.

These different factors – external and internal – were operating together to affect the ability of third sector leaders to influence public policy. Most often they were currently seen to be combining in a way which meant that the third sector was less able to exert influence on policy making.

On what basis? Exploring issues of legitimacy

Not only was the ability of third sector leaders to influence policy challenged, so too was their legitimacy in attempting to do so. As we saw in the above sections, the legitimacy of certain organisations and/or individuals in their role as representatives of the third sector within policy processes was questioned; with some respondents suggesting that they did not feel well represented, that the current policy-elite did not have the legitimacy to speak on their behalf, for a number of reasons including a lack of experience and grounding for those new to the sector, or a lack of ability to move beyond the vested interests of the well-established in order to truly represent the sector as a whole. The ways in which leaders gain legitimacy as representatives of the third sector, particularly given the diversity of activities, forms and values embodied by organisations within it (Macmillan, 2013), is then a pressing question.

Chaskin (2003, p. 178) suggests that legitimacy refers to 'the extent to which an organization justly and properly speaks for and acts on behalf of its constituency'. Legitimacy is conferred on individuals or organisations by particular audiences according to their perceptions (Taylor and Warburton, 2003). It is constructed out of an interaction between the attributes, processes and strategies of a given organisation (or indeed individual) and a given audience (see Suchman, 1995). The ways in which legitimacy is assessed may vary depending on the audience (e.g. TSOs, policy makers, the public), nevertheless a number of key sources can be identified upon which claims to, and acceptance of, legitimacy are typically based.

To frame our discussion of the ways in which claims for legitimacy were made we make use of Brown's (n.d., cited in Taylor and Warburton, 2003) analysis of the role of third sector organisations in the policy process, which identified four bases of legitimacy: legal, moral, political and technical. Legal legitimacy refers to compliance with relevant legal requirements, whereas moral legitimacy relates to an organisation's values and how these are reflected in what they do and how they do it. Political legitimacy involves 'democratic representativeness, participation, transparency and accountability to constituencies for which third sector organisations

speak and act' (ibid. p. 65). Technical legitimacy meanwhile is based on claims to expertise, competence or knowledge in a given field.

Taylor and Warburton (2003) suggest that technical legitimacy was particularly important to the New Labour government, which emphasised quality of evidence, track record and ability to deliver when working with the third sector. Arguably part of the unsettlement of leadership across the sector has been a reconfiguration of the forms of legitimacy which those leaders claim and which are recognised as being important by a range of different stakeholders. Indeed, only three of the four aspects of Brown's framework - political; moral and technical legitimacy - featured in our respondents' discussions. As legal legitimacy was not discussed by our respondents (perhaps simply because it was taken for granted and we did not directly ask about it), we have left it out of the following analysis and instead we add a section on 'resonance'.

Political legitimacy

For some leaders in the study, representing a particular constituency was an important part of their remit and they felt this gave them a mandate to speak into policy debates. This was more likely to be the case in membership organisations and was achieved through mechanisms such as member surveys and other forms of consultation, including voting at AGMs. For example, the leader of one membership organisation stated:

'... continuous engagement is how I would describe it. So that means creating a culture, which doesn't always happen in infrastructure organisations, whereby members are at the heart of everything we do, and that is our number one values statement, that we are here for our members, and that's why we are here... And building that sense where they're not passive, but they are active in shaping, in deciding, in informing, in responding, in influencing, in all of those' (National stakeholder, 05)

For some such organisations being able to cite the number of members that they represented was important: size matters in legitimacy claims. This use of participatory structures, most often through membership bodies, and the sense of direct accountability to members that these engendered, appeared to correspond most closely to what is widely termed 'political legitimacy'. However, this participation rarely amounted to democratic representation. One reason suggested for this was that there was usually a balance to be struck between offering representation and providing leadership, the latter of which may not necessarily involve advancing the majority view of members.

The limited capacity and willingness of members – often frontline voluntary organisations - to respond to policy consultations also made it difficult for those soliciting their views to gain a representative picture. One leader whose organisation had sought policy input from their members reported that:

'many of the organisations that we were talking to ... were already overstretched and so you didn't get the response, you just got the echo of a silence.' (National stakeholder, 11)

This was confirmed by some of the local organisations who said that in the face of rising demand and reduced funding due to government cuts and policy changes,

responding to local needs had to take priority. For others though, policy engagement was prioritized because it was recognised as crucial. Local voluntary organisations acknowledged that they needed other (often membership or infrastructure) organisations to influence policy on their behalf, but concerns that they were not always well-represented by these organisations in some cases sat in tension with their limited capacity to contribute to such debates.

The limits to front-line organisations' participation were taken into account by leaders in different ways. For instance, one explained how, for issues expected to attract little interest from members, alternative mechanisms of developing legitimate policy input would be employed, such as research. In other cases, leadership organisations would engage small numbers of individuals or organisations more intensively, for instance through focus groups or one-to-one conversations. Representation was also influenced pragmatically by the need to engage with media debates in timescales that were not usually compatible with formal large scale consultation.

Some leadership organisations prided themselves on having participatory structures which enabled them to offer an authentically national policy voice across a geographically dispersed membership body. However, criticisms of the '*London-centric*' nature of national third sector leadership by local and regional front-line organisations suggest that they had not always been successful.

Importantly, not all third sector leaders sought to be representative, and not all had memberships or even obvious constituencies. Indeed, several interviewees explained that their organisation had actively resisted becoming a membership organisation. For instance, one said:

'if I was a membership organisation... there would be a degree of accountability which limited my flexibility and ability to deliver my mission. If you look at some of the criticisms of some membership bodies and some sectors, they've suffered because they've had to pursue a path which represented sometimes their most vocal members' short-term interests rather than the long-term; instead of what's right or what's competent.' (National stakeholder, 04)

One interviewee connected this issue with that of the sector's diversity, suggesting that claiming to represent such a wide range of organisations placed significant limitations on what leaders were able to say, therefore requiring a very cautious approach.

While political legitimacy was important for some, there were challenges in achieving it. For others it was not even an aspiration; they relied instead on other forms of legitimacy.

Technical legitimacy

Technical legitimacy has a number of components, including knowledge and experience. Many respondents referred to the importance of research and evidence as means of informing contributions to policy debates, maximizing the quality or robustness of what was said by leaders, and enabling them to challenge questionable claims with greater authority. This knowledge-based legitimacy was sometimes drawn on independently, and sometimes in conjunction with participatory mechanisms involving member organisations. However, it was perhaps most crucial for organisations who did not have a mandate based on membership. Track record was also important in terms of becoming a reliable and respected contributor to

policy debates. This included turning around requests for data or comment from the media and policy makers rapidly.

Experience – particularly of activity ‘*on the ground*’ – was deemed by some to be an important source of legitimacy. Sometimes this was at a personal level, where an individual leader had experience of working in front-line organisations in local communities. In other cases, on the ground experiences were conveyed to third sector leaders by means of the participatory mechanisms associated with political legitimacy described above:

‘We also had a hand-picked group of elder statesmen of the movement, it was 15 to 20 chief execs around the country who I knew had been there quite a long time and would bother to respond if they knew that they were shaping. So I’d be saying, you know, “Next week I’m going to meet [a government minister], we’re going to talk about [a draft bill]. How important is it to you [...]? Do you think that’s going to work in your area?” ’
(National stakeholder, 14).

In other cases national leaders could act as brokers or facilitators, creating opportunities for leaders of front line organisations to speak directly to policy makers or the media.

Conversely, concerns were raised about some leaders who had been granted positions of influence in key national organisations without having sufficient experience or understanding of the sector. Experience was seen both as an aspect of ‘good’ leadership and of technical legitimacy. A lack of experience, of technical legitimacy, was one of the key criticisms raised by some respondents to a number of individuals who they perceived to have ‘parachuted’ in to third sector leadership positions over recent years.

Moral legitimacy

Taylor and Warburton (2003, p. 324) suggest that the third sector is ‘*a sector where, for many organisations the primary accountability requirement is to values*’ (see also Kirchner, 2006). Few leaders spoke directly about values as a source of legitimacy. There were, however, some exceptions. One respondent stated that they were not seeking to be representative but had certain values that they stood for as an organisation, hence their legitimacy came from holding to these. Another leader expressed strong convictions about the importance of bringing grassroots level experience to bear on policy debates.

Some respondents pointed out that whilst frontline organisations want umbrella bodies to be responsive to their members, they also expect them to ‘take a lead’ on some issues. Arguably, this points towards a need for leadership based on values or principles. Indeed, values featured frequently when respondents spoke in general terms about what characterised good leadership in the third sector.

Resonance as an indicator of, or replacement for legitimacy?

Some leaders seemed to claim that their legitimacy was based on resonance. Rather than seeing resonance as part of an audience’s decision to acknowledge their legitimacy, they suggested that if what they said was deemed by others to be sensible or useful, this in itself made it legitimate. For example:

‘If we speak, you want people to say, “I get that. You know, that makes sense...”... in a sense the legitimacy comes from people’s acceptance of what we say” (National stakeholder, 09)

It was suggested that leaders who continually misrepresent the sector will eventually be removed and that a feedback mechanism operated, whereby counter-arguments in the media and social media would act as a ‘quality control’ on the ideas being articulated by sector leaders.

This raises the risk that the other bases of legitimacy may remain unexamined, allowing poorly-grounded arguments to gain purchase within policy debates and public opinion. With pressures on resources limiting capacity to engage in mechanisms that may underpin legitimacy, there is a danger that the only legitimacy some of member of the third sector policy elite may have when speaking on behalf of the sector is that which has been acquired through having been asked to speak and not yet been asked to stop.

Most of the national leaders involved in this study employed a combination of these different sources of legitimacy in their contributions to policy debates, and to some extent these different bases of legitimacy allowed for different kinds of leadership. For instance, organisations that were free from having to balance the interests of a large membership could voice ideas and views that these bodies could not, whilst the large membership organisations could offer an authoritative mandate which may have held greater sway on issues where representativeness was important.

Conclusions

At a time when the sector’s voice and ability to influence policy is of heightened importance, leadership of the third sector is facing a number of challenges. While there has been considerable stability in the small number of individuals and organisations who provide full horizontal leadership, beyond these few some of the traditional incumbents have been lost while other new players have entered the field. Organisations and individuals who dominated third sector leadership positions under the previous Labour administration have had to review and re-assert their claims of legitimacy and to find new ways of leveraging power and influence. Those new to the sector, or at least to leadership positions within it, have had to justify their positions and prove their worth.

Leaders in any policy environment have to be politically astute and ‘socially skilled’ in motivating others to cooperate (Fligstein, 2001). Their ability to provide leadership and to influence policy also depends also on the political context in which they are operating and the status they are afforded within this. Recent changes within both of these internal and external sets of factors have affected third sector leadership in a number of different ways.

Changes in political opportunity structures appear to have reduced the space available for third sector leaders to influence policy. An apparent move towards ‘*isolationist*’ and reactionary policy making in general, coupled with the dismantling of horizontal support for the third sector, have closed down some of the engagement structures previously available to third sector leaders.

Meanwhile, the sector’s ability to respond to the opportunities and challenges created by the current political context has also been challenged. While

organisational capacity for policy work has been squeezed, the individual network resources and 'social skill' of leaders may have assumed greater importance. Mechanisms of securing legitimacy through member participation, expertise and research, however, remain important in ensuring that perspectives given truly reflect the views and experiences of those which the leaders are perceived to represent. The resources to make these mechanisms work effectively are however also under pressure.

The scale and diversity of the sector creates a challenge for leaders looking to build political legitimacy in a democratic sense. These concerns, coupled with the mis-representation of 'resonance' as a source of legitimacy by some within the sector, suggests that there may be a need for all stakeholders to more closely examine the foundations upon which leaders' contributions to debates are based, and for greater clarity in terms of who is speaking for whom and on what basis.

Overall, the 'gap' between the third sector and policy opportunity structures is a contested zone, and the ability, and indeed the desirability, of third sector leaders to give voice to the interests of such a diverse sector are held in question. If third sector organisations are to influence the policies that shape the context in which they operate, there remains a clear need for leaders or representatives to act as mediators, giving voice to the sector's interests and views in the policy sphere.

However, leaders' ability to do this seems likely to depend on a range of internal and external factors, including the extent to which they are able to find and forge unity across the diversity that characterises the sector. This may, in turn, depend on the extent to which convincing narratives can be developed around priorities and core elements all organisations with the sector share (see also Macmillan and McLaren, 2012). There was a frequent call for new 'ideas' and/or a new narrative based on shared values – such as equality, solidarity and social justice, for example, or indeed shared challenges, not for the sector itself but for its beneficiaries. Perhaps the impact of austerity will serve to sharpen the sector's focus on finding common ground, bringing about a new strategic unity in response to difficult, rather than favourable times.

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About the Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The Third Sector Research Centre exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research.

Third Sector Research Centre, Park House, 40 Edgbaston Park Road,
University of Birmingham, Birmingham, B15 2RT

Tel: 0121 414 7073

Email: info@tsrc.ac.uk

www.tsrc.ac.uk

Theory and Policy

It is essential that the Centre's research is informed by a strong theoretical and conceptual analysis of the sector and the policy environment within which it is situated. Theoretical analysis of the sector is not well developed in the UK, in part because of the applied focus of much existing research. TSRC will contribute to ensuring that difficult theoretical issues are articulated and explored. Critical understanding of the policy environment is also essential, for it determines much of what happens within the sector. TSRC is co-funded by the Office for Civil Society which is responsible for developing and delivering policy in England. The Centre's research will help inform this policy development, but will also make that policy process itself the subject of critical review. We need to know 'what works', but we also need to understand who decides 'what matters'.

Contact the author

Angela Ellis Paine Tel: 0121-414-5461 Email: a.paine@bham.ac.uk



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