

Third Sector Research Centre
Research Report (44)

**Opportunity and influence: the third sector and the
2010 general election**

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Contents

Section 1: The political context to the 2010 general election	3
Context.....	3
Methods	4
Structure of the report.....	6
Section 2: Build-up to the general election	6
The policy actors.....	6
The sector's long-term campaigning work.....	7
Political parties' activities	9
Purdah	10
Section 3: The third sector's position	12
Extended timeline of campaigning.....	13
General election-focused campaigning	13
Opportunistic campaigning	15
Anti-electoral campaigning	15
Working with political parties	16
Section 4: Setting out the agenda	18
Third sector manifestos	18
Political parties' manifestos	20
Overall emphasis of the party manifestos.....	21
Sectoral definitions.....	21
Detail of third-sector coverage	22
Consensus and difference	25
Press coverage	26
Third sector responses to party manifestos.....	27
Section 5: Mapping the general election campaign	28
The political mainstreaming of the sector	29
The Big Society.....	31
Managing the deficit.....	34
Constitutional issues.....	34
Re-orientation of the agenda	35
Contest's style.....	36
The role of the media	37
Section 6: New political realities	38
The sector's response to the Coalition government	41
The rebranding of the sector.....	42
Post-election campaigning.....	44
Expected policy change	46
Section 7: Conclusions	48
Endnotes	50
References	51
Appendix: Glossary of acronyms	54

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Abstract

This paper explores how the different voices and interests of the third sector, political parties and media have shaped and reflected the policy agenda over the course of the 2010 general election campaign and into the early post-election period. Using research methods which combined documentary analysis with qualitative interviews with key policy actors in the third sector, we examined the relative success of different campaigning methods in an election that was unique both in its uncertain electoral outcome and in terms of the relative consensus that political parties expressed at the outset towards the third sector. A range of third sector and political manifestos are considered highlighting the ideological significance of the language employed, and assessing the impact of one against the other. Attention is drawn to the raised profile achieved by the third sector early in the election campaign and reflected in its coverage in the three main parties' manifestos. This was followed by a relative lack of substantive sectoral discussion during the unusual period of the election and purdah, when the sector concentrated upon a consolidation and commentary role. The Conservative's Big Society agenda lost momentum during the election, and the Citizens UK 'fourth debate' prompted an unexpected late surge of media interest in the sector. The new political realities of the post-election period have seen refocus on policy development and rebranding, return to third sector campaigning, and realignment in sectoral-state relations in the context of a (revived) Big Society politics.

Keywords

Third sector, general election, manifestos, campaigning, Coalition Government, Big Society, purdah, media, consensus, ideology, rebranding.

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Section 1: The political context to the 2010 general election

Context

The history of organisations between market and state in the UK has a long and distinguished pedigree. Most commentators and historians have agreed that the role of this 'third sector' in the social and economic life of the country has been an essential one, widely recognised by politicians and policy makers. We use the term 'third sector' or refer to 'the sector' as a convenient short hand. However, as we will seek to demonstrate as the paper proceeds, policy language and terminology varies between actors, and contestation over this usage is an important feature of the policy process. We might hope and expect therefore that third sector policy and practice would be a feature of political debate in any election in the country. However, there can be little doubt that third sector politics and policy have enjoyed a particular prominence over the last decade or so, with the Labour governments of 1997 to 2010 introducing greater public support for the sector and raising the profile of political engagement with government, as we have discussed in earlier Working Papers and publications (see Alcock, 2010a; Alcock and Kendall, 2010; Kendall, 2009). This higher profile has also been welcomed by the sector who had shared the Labour government's commitment to collective and collaborative links between a unified third sector and the state, referred to in another earlier paper as a 'strategic unity' (Alcock, 2010b).

By the time of the 2010 general election, therefore, the politics of the third sector could be said to be experiencing a higher profile than at any time since the early part of the previous century. The election campaign itself thus afforded an opportunity for this political profile to be put to the test. Would politicians maintain, and even extend, the profile of the sector in their manifestos and campaigning? Would sector-based agencies be able to use the public forums of campaigning to promote their role and secure the support of the future government to a continued high profile for their work? Would the media and the election commentators see the third sector as a critical election issue? And finally, would the eventual election of the new government lead to any immediate response to the politics and campaigning of pre-election era? These are the questions that we set out to explore in this research project.

However, the 2010 general election was an important opportunity for the influence of the sector to be tested for another reason. For the first time for at least two decades this election promised to be a very open one. In its third term of office and presiding over a major economic crisis, the Labour government has been experiencing a significant decline in its support in public opinion polls; and the projection was that they would be unlikely to secure a fourth term in office. However, support for the Conservatives as the main opposition party was far from clear cut, with the polls suggesting that they too may be unable to win an outright majority. The Liberal Democrats had secured increasing numbers of MPs in recent elections and looked as though they may benefit from any voter disenchantment with both Labour and the Conservatives, which, as we discuss below, became more important during the campaign itself. The 2010 election looked like it could lead to a change of

government therefore; but it was not clear what form that change would take – and, of course, that is just what happened with no party achieving an overall majority on May 10th.

The consequence of this relative uncertainty for the third sector was significant. Campaigning and influence could no longer be directed primarily at one, or two, parties. What is more the close links that had been developed with the Labour government over the recent years of collaboration and partnership, may be under threat from opposition parties who did not share this commitment to engagement with and support for the sector. Third sector campaigners did not want to sever their links with Labour of course – perhaps they might win out after all! But at the same time it was important that they took every opportunity to influence the other parties too. Equally, the sector had to pay close attention to what the opposition parties were saying about their plans for the sector, in particular to see to what extent these might involve significant departures from current practice.

Questions over the future politics and policies for the third sector were therefore potentially more open in the 2010 election than they had been for many years; and it is for this reason that the questions explored in this research will be of interest to policy makers and practitioners across government and the sector. As we explain below, the ‘good news’ for the sector in this was that in practice all the major political parties did share a positive interpretation of its role in society, and indeed seemed keen to see this growing further in the future – despite political differences, there was consensus on broad support for the third sector. And, as we explain, third sector agencies were keen to use their influence to build on this consensus, and many took the opportunity of the election to set out the stall for their future role and relationships.

However, within the apparent consensus there were also differences – not the least because competing political parties needed to have something different to offer to quizzical voters. Most obvious here were the questions which the Conservatives had raised in their 2008 ‘Green Paper’ about the concept of the third sector itself and their proposal to retitle the government office the Office for Civil Society (Conservative Party, 2008). And as we shall see some of these differences were opened up during the campaign in their ‘Big Society’ proposals, and have since become key elements of the changing politics of the sector introduced under the new Coalition government.

The 2010 general election led to the election of a new government for the UK, and much of the political discourse which we analyse in this paper extended across the UK during the election period. However, development and delivery of third sector policy has been devolved to the separate administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland since 2000. Separate government offices and departments have been established in these devolved administrations and many of the third sector agencies have separate organisational bases within these other countries (Alcock, 2010c). In practice therefore the focus of this research was on the political debate and campaign practices within England; and it remains to be seen to what extent the devolution of policy will lead to a different politics for the sector in the other three UK nations.

Methods

We set about addressing the research questions outlined above using a mixed methodological strategy. First, we conducted documentary analysis, collecting together various electoral materials and media commentary covering the 2010 general election period. This included:

- party leaders' speeches from party conferences and at policy launch events;
- proceedings from sector summits and conferences in the run-up to the election;
- policy documents;
- manifestos produced by third sector organisations and umbrella agencies;
- detailed policy manifestos published by the Conservative, Labour and Liberal-Democrat parties;
- comparative Ministerial interviews conducted by TSOs and umbrella agencies;
- press coverage of issues pertaining to the third sector in the specialist and mainstream media;
- blogosphere material from leading third sector representatives and commentators;
- influential documentation produced in the post-election period, such as the Coalition Agreement and *Building the Big Society* document.

The second strand of the research involved qualitative interviews conducted with key players in the third sector, political representatives, civil servants and media commentators. This has involved 15 interviews with 13 organisations and representatives, which included umbrella and support or "infrastructure" agencies, a large charity, a specialist media commentator, more community-focused organisations, and civil servants. One more organisation provided an email response to our questions. Most research informants were selected at the outset of the project, but some were recruited later in the election campaign on the basis of their emerging influence and relevance to the electoral agenda. Using tailored semi-structured topic guide schedules, the interviews covered three main areas:

- the methods and techniques used by third sector organisations to campaign on a day-to-day basis;
- TSOs' planning process leading up to and beyond the general election, and how their campaigning changed (or did not) in relation to how the election unfolded; and
- reactions to new political alignments and anticipated changes in styles of working.

These interviews took place between April and July 2010, and consequently picked up on different temporal reference points. Recap interviews were held with some earlier respondents to re-engage with their expectations in relation to the Coalition Government's agenda. All interviewees were provided with assurances of anonymity in the way their voices were presented¹. Otherwise, where organisations or individuals are named in the report this is in relation to material and views already in the public arena and not to points made in the interviews. Purdah imposed some restrictions on when and/or whether interviewees felt able to participate in the research. Face-to-face and telephone interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were imported into QSR NVivo 8 for coding and analysis, along with fieldwork notes. Material presented in italics in this report represents direct quotations from these transcripts.

Structure of the report

The project then, and the stories it uncovered, can be regarded in terms of a timeline which was characterised by distinctive activities and voices. These are reflected in the organisation of this report:

- The build-up to the general election (sections 2 and 3), a period which commenced with the sector's planning process up to a year beforehand, and which became characterised by the frenetic activity of the early months of 2010.
- Election season (sections 4 and 5), the period from when the election was called, political campaigning began, and relationships between the sector and political parties were transformed by *purdah*, until election day (6th May).
- The post-election period (section 6), which began with a period of uncertainty and opened up a new set of political alignments, and with them a new set of opportunities for third sector campaigning.

The conclusion (section 7) reflects on the winners and losers in terms of setting the agenda for the 2010 general election, and how this is best measured.

Section 2: Build-up to the general election

As we discussed above, in 2010 the third sector's profile's was markedly more established than in previous elections, and yet the election itself was the subject of intense speculation, and its outcome less certain than any election in over two decades. This made political positioning more difficult than in earlier elections and required the third sector to direct its attention to all three major parties in a quite unique way. In order to secure their place on the agenda, both politicians and third sector organisations commenced campaigning well in advance of the official confirmation of the election, somewhat blurring the boundaries between election and standard parliamentary activity. Once the election had been called, however, the imposition of *purdah* provided a formal barrier to engagement with policy makers, as we discuss below. This section considers how key players in both the third sector and the three main political parties approached the 2010 general election as a chance to deploy the third sector's raised profile to pursue their interests.

The policy actors we spoke to were extremely keyed up to the opportunities of the 2010 election, and it was an important reference point in third sector organisations and umbrella agencies strategic planning. Consequently, election campaigning was effectively taking place for at least a year in advance of the general election within the third sector, and fairly intensively over the preceding six months' (see section 3 for more detail on this process).

The policy actors

Inevitably, as the fortunes of the third sector have risen certain policy actors have come to dominate the agenda and to hold particular influence with government. In part, this is an issue of the effectiveness of their campaigning methods, but other factors like Ministers' pet interests, organisations' abilities to grab headlines, and personal relationships between chief executives and government officials have also played a role. These key players are partly reflected in the OTS/OCS's

strategic partners, of whom there were 42² at the time of the election, although in reality some of these hold greater influence than others.

During the 2005-2010 parliament of the Labour government, a handful of policy actors rose to take centre stage in influencing the national third sector agenda. Reviewing this landscape, among those Kendall (2009) identified as prominent were: NCVO and NAVCA, variously referred to as 'generalist umbrella bodies', cross cutting/horizontal voice agencies or 'infrastructure' agencies; ACEVO, a key 'policy insider' representing particularly large service providing charities' chief executives, and claiming to speak for 'third sector leaders'; together with large grant-making bodies; a few large service providers/charities 'fronted by charismatic leaderships (2009: 74); and the Charities Aid Foundation. Kendall noted that this field was ever-changing, with power dynamics shifting with the agenda, and organisations with different foci and style coming into favour. A civil servant we interviewed talked about a '*complex tapestry out there of all sorts of organisations,*' including relatively new policy actors such as New Philanthropy Capital and Social Investment Business, which did not fit into the more traditional roles of the '*niche market players.*' Indeed, this interviewee felt that the creation of the OTS in 2006 (as a unit within the Cabinet Office) had brought more social enterprise players into the field of the third sector. From within the sector, an 'infrastructure' body interviewee recognised the new organisational fluidity and degree of contention too by recognising the relevance of additional actors. He acknowledged the extent to which they were supplementing or challenging traditional relationships and linkages:

So you do get... I mean, I think they fall into three categories, if you like. There are networks which are basically... They're not government fronts but they are very closely allied to a particular public policy position that suits the government, and that would be Big Society Network, New Schools Network, etc. Then you've got London Citizens, which I think is completely independent and ... would I suspect want to disassociate themselves from any government agenda... it is actually about I think quite left of centre policies, so it does have an ideological overtone. And then you look at others like the [National] Coalition [for Independent Action], and that's just opposition. I think the [first two categories], whether they're promoting policies associated with the government or not, are engaged in a way, and I think London UK Citizens became very prominent during the election. (infrastructure organisation)

We will have more to say about these players below. For now, we simply note that these dynamics will evolve as the controversial ramifications of the Big Society agenda of the Coalition government feed through the system. For example, the newly-formed Big Society Network has already enjoyed a raised profile, and the increased emphasis upon 'community organising' is visibly making more room for the expression of both consensual and conflictual agendas from within the sector.

The sector's long-term campaigning work

While they were not mutually exclusive, for the most part TSOs' routine techniques for making themselves heard by government (see Kendall, 2003) differed somewhat from the more explicit election campaigning work we encountered in this study. Reflecting the diversity of the types of organisations in the sector, routine campaigning included:

- lobbying MPs, civil servants and Ministers (writing, emailing, talking, phoning);
- holding meetings (formal and informal), seminars and conferences;
- organising and taking part in taskforces, commissions or working groups;
- conducting and disseminating research on sectoral issues;
- writing press releases and taking part in media interviews.

The extent to which these methods of engagement were drawn upon was very much related to organisations' roles and intended closeness to government. For example, some organisations saw themselves working in partnership with government on particular issues: 'a few organisations have an awful lot of influence in terms of being able to walk in and out of government departments' (infrastructure organisation). Others regarded themselves as a catalyst and prioritised maintaining a critical distance from political representatives: 'we are the people who say the things that other people don't say' (community organisation). In reality, most of the TSOs we spoke to operated somewhere between these two positions, engaging with government on a regular basis but also having to negotiate conflicting interests in order not to damage ongoing policy work. Notably, campaigning methods were employed flexibly in order to maximise their impact:

if we're not getting much joy with government, either at civil servant or ministerial level, then we'll obviously go into, kind of, campaign or media mode. (umbrella agency)

Time and again, interviewees commented on the significance of developing good quality relationships with civil servants and other public officials in order to maintain the channels of dialogue. Often chief executives and directors conducted a lot of the less formal but effective interactions with government, and the ad-hoc nature of these made them difficult to identify or factor into planning. One interviewee commented that what organisations were trying to foster was the impression, if not the reality, of friendliness. Notably, over the longer-term, campaigning had pragmatically focused on the (then) ruling Labour government, with relationships developed with the other main parties being a more recent part of organisations' portfolios (see section 3).

One of the challenges for the sector has been responding to the different working styles and priorities of the various Ministers who have held the post since the Office of the Third Sector was set up in the Cabinet Office in May 2006 (Ed Miliband, Phil Hope, Kevin Brennan and Angela Smith). A point commonly made was that while the turnover of Ministers had the advantage of seeing a promoted Minister taking forward the sector's interests in other parts of government, it also took about six months to bring a new Minister up to speed with TSOs' agendas, time this could represent a duplication of effort. Partly because of this tenure issue, several interviewees emphasised the importance of maintaining good relationships with key civil servants, although their influence was less immediate than Ministers'. Obviously, Ministers will have different preferred styles of working, and it was in TSOs' interests to identify these as quickly as possible in order to be successful. For example, a politician we interviewed felt that being approached directly by TSOs was most effective in getting messages to government, enabling a dialogue to be established - talking through potential pitfalls and developing a good understanding of each other's positions. This interviewee noted her long-standing

third sector background, which informed her understanding of sector-political relations and which she asserted involved non-bureaucratic communication techniques.

Organisations were able to draw some lessons on the kind of campaigning that had proved most effective for them. A key point made repeatedly was about diplomacy - the need to understand the competing pressures on Ministers and civil servants, and where appropriate to present oneself effectively as a *'can-do'*, *'solution-focused'* organisation, whose efforts were likely to simplify existing problems. By contrast, organisations felt that they were likely to damage their case by allowing an image of themselves to develop of appearing *'whingeing'*, *'vociferous'* and *'demanding'*. One civil servant made the point that, *'there's a difference between getting the ear of a Minister and getting the ear of government, and actually having any impact on the way they think about things,'* and explained that the more *'brash'*, *'slick'* or visible organisations may actually have less of a lasting impact than those who took a more measured and respectful approach. Achieving this balance was undoubtedly a skilled political act, *'if you can get an organisation that's good at that, married with someone who has all the kind of ability to knock down doors and everything else, then you've got a pretty powerful combination.'*

One infrastructure organisation spoke of the effectiveness of using case studies and other evidence to illustrate and make memorable their campaigns. Another noted that, occasionally, *'doing the unexpected'* could be a refreshing change for government, and provided an approach that was more likely to incite media interest. Targeted campaigning on a single issue was also identified as a technique likely to set organisations apart in a field where Ministers were juggling competing demands.

In the six months' preceding the May election, key players in the third sector organised a number of summits, conferences and meetings, in which to build capacity and ensure that their policy aspirations fed into the political parties' planning processes. These included breakfast seminars, parliamentary receptions, and, notably, ACEVO's summits with the three main parties – which, at the parties' own preference, were markedly different in format (the Conservative summit was the largest).

Political parties' activities

The Labour, Conservative and Liberal-Democrat party conferences in late February and early March 2010 provided an opportunity for agenda-setting and gauging public response, ahead of the general election and the publication of policy detail in the parties' manifestos. However, the party leaders' speeches made little reference to the sector and were poorly covered on television broadcasts, although somewhat more so in the mainstream press.

Party conferences also provided an opportunity for the sector to oil the wheels of communication between themselves and the political parties, publicise the content of their manifestos, and stage their own fringe events. Back in September 2009, *Third Sector Online* reported that the sector was regarding the 2010 party conferences more than ever as a critical opportunity for lobbying, and one in which they would be pursuing more targeted personal meetings with Ministers and their Shadows (Wiggins, 2009) in order to ensure that their manifesto requests were understood and appreciated.

Alistair Darling's third Budget as Chancellor of the Exchequer, delivered on 24th March, provided the unofficial trigger for the 2010 general election. Received in the mainstream press relatively positively in the context of a testing economic climate, *charitytimes* also reported a 'cautiously positive' response from leading third sector organisations (Holt, 2010a) and *Third Sector Online* regarded the outcome from the sector as 'mixed' (Ricketts, 2010). The Budget contained an extension of charities' tax relief and movement towards an investment wholesale bank, but no policy progress on Gift Aid or substantial donor legislation. More generally, however, since the Labour government's relationship with the sector was established and set out in the Compact, and their priorities ongoing, they arguably had less need to make a discussion point of them. They also lacked the campaigning funds of the Conservatives.

As might be expected from the leading opposition party, the Conservatives focused more heavily on releasing policy papers setting out their position on the third sector in the run-up to the general election. Of particular note in the Conservative's portfolio was the Big Society launch at the end of March, followed by the setting up of its Big Society Network, an organisation with a crucial role in subsequent policy development. Led by Nat Wei and Paul Twivy, the Network has provided ongoing development and an online narrative for the Big Society, and has been inviting community groups to contribute to its website (thus far to limited success). One infrastructure organisation described it in terms of:

a very strong, kind of, marketing media savvy approach, so a lot of people there from that kind of creative industry, marketing kind of, very clever PR stuff.

David Cameron's speech at the Centre for Social Justice on 27th April was significant in his pursuit of the Big Society agenda, which he described in terms of a more involved, concerned community ("a progressive conservative approach") as the solution to what he termed "the broken society".

Purdah

Following Gordon Brown's announcement on 6th April that the general election would be held a month later on 6th May, the machinery of government immediately went into purdah, transforming the relationship between civil service, political parties and the sector. Guidance issued by the Parliament and Constitution Centre (Gay and White, 2010) to MPs explained the restrictions on civil servants' activities during this pre-election period, including deferred announcements on policy and a lack of involvement in any campaigns which may be deemed party political. Cabinet Office guidance (2010a) provided greater detail on these requirements. OCS described the practical impacts on their activities thus:

so we were not updating our website, for example. So it was a very clear way that we talked to our partners and colleagues around the sector, we were not making any announcements or anything that could be confused with electioneering or, et cetera. So again, we weren't having a series of visits, we weren't talking at conferences, we weren't going out on visits, we weren't going to see partners who were delivering programmes with us.

Government activities were monitored by the Propriety and Ethics team during the election period. Several interviewees commented that purdah had a heightened impact on campaigning in 2010

compared to previous elections, since the former's outcome was less predictable and all players were sensitive to accusations of overstepping political boundaries.

In order to promote clarity, in January 2010 the Charity Commission published renewed guidance on campaigning and political activity by charities to supplement its existing, more detailed guidance (Charity Commission, 2010; 2008). This emphasised the legitimacy of campaigning which furthered organisations' charitable purposes, but precluded campaigning in the interests of a particular party or candidate³. NCVO and NAVCA also published on-line campaign guides to support their members. These kinds of resources were much less accessible to the sector in previous elections. While most third sector organisations took this advice on board in their election planning, we also uncovered evidence that the guidance was being interpreted more cautiously by some third sector organisations. Their concerns about misjudging the balancing act had the effect of limiting the type of campaigning that would have been regarded as entirely appropriate. For example, the former Minister for the Third Sector reflected on a surprisingly low level of constituency contact during the election when she would have been open to discussions (this issue is explored further in section 3), and a media source commented that the guidance likely had an inhibiting effect on dialogue. Another civil servant commented: *'I thought we would see more high profile activity actually,'* and felt that the sector had concentrated on *'behind the scenes'* as opposed to *'headline grabbing'* campaigning, and acknowledged that *'it is quite difficult for charities to make headlines and not be accused by one side or the other of having strayed into party political territory.'* These kinds of absences are impossible to quantify, but open up an area of potential missed opportunity in terms of agenda-shaping.

[an infrastructure organisation] are very conservative about this in a way, they regarded themselves as being covered by purdah, which bewildered me really because, you know, they get money from government sure, but they're not part of the civil service. They're not even a, sort of, arm's length organisation, you know, kind of, or a quango but they chose to behave like one. So when we asked them about things during the campaign, they were very, very measured and guarded and reluctant to say anything very much.
(specialist media source)

A second explanation for more cautious campaigning during the election is that some third sector groups, assessing the likelihood of a change in government and reflecting on the Conservatives' lesser sympathy towards third sector campaigning, were engaging in anticipatory self-censorship in order to protect their longer-term interests should a change in power materialise.

Other interviewees felt that purdah had negatively affected their campaigning work well in advance of the election having been announced.

Infrastructure organisation: Particularly this year, purdah's been a major problem in terms of trying to maintain a relationship with government, which it probably hasn't been in the past, I mean, it's been an issue, yeah -

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Infrastructure organisation: Well I think it's simply that officials, the senior civil service, is wanting not to create problems for itself if there's a change of government, simple as that. I think, you know, the party elections when I've been working in the sector, a change of government has been, not impossible but very, very remote and very unlikely, so I think

it's simply that the senior civil service is trying to make sure that if a new government comes in, they can get on with business without any kind of taint of senior civil service or bits of the civil service have been, kind of, seen to be promoting the old government's policy.

Consequently, even within the relatively rigid parameters of purdah, it was clear that the inevitability of the impending general election coloured the nature of government-sectoral relations and had the effect of dampening down debate and even normal government activity, for the period immediately preceding election time and not covered by purdah.

Section 3: The third sector's position

Given the high degree of speculation regarding the timing and significance of the 2010 general election, we were interested in unpicking how the sector was preparing, and the degree to which the election marked a turning point in organisations' normal campaigning work - with stylistic and practical consequences.

While election periods have tended to be regarded as the height of political activity, the knowledge of impending purdah led to the sector thinking about and planning its campaigning work more carefully than usual. The character of its campaigning during this period consequently needed to take into account the virtual shutdown of sectoral relations with government officials, at the same time as it raised opportunities for focusing on MPs' and prospective MPs' constituency campaigning. Simultaneously, the election period represented a period when the media were looking for public interest stories, and well-orchestrated public relations campaigns could capitalise on flexibility in the agenda.

Reflecting the sector's diversity, there was no one trend in the way that organisations and agencies approached the general election, rather a number of significant patterns or strategies. The extent to which organisations relied upon qualitatively different campaigning techniques depended to a large extent on their expectations of the opportunities offered by the election – whether they regarded it as a chance to raise their profile or felt that it was the right time to enlist specific policy support from the political parties. Pragmatically, smaller organisations had fewer resources to devote to election planning and made strategic decisions about how best to deploy their efforts. In our interviews with key players from the third sector, four distinctions emerged in terms of their various campaigning portfolios, which were distinguished by time:

- an extended timeline of political campaigning;
- campaigning focused on the official election period;
- opportunistic campaigning; and
- anti-electoral campaigning.

While these were not, in the most part, mutually exclusive approaches, there is value in examining how they worked to different organisations' advantage at different points in time. This section also looks how these campaigning strategies were combined with organisations working with a broader range of political parties in the build-up to election time.

Extended timeline of campaigning

In effect, an extended campaigning timeline tended to be the norm for the third sector organisations involved in this study, but there was a great deal of variety in how this was implemented and the degree of conscious campaign planning that had taken place. An extended timeline of election planning involved building bridges with multiple political parties, starting campaigning activities well in advance of the general election, in addition to focusing on post-election policy formation and planning how organisations might best assume a position of influence in this scenario. The most common strategy adopted by TSOs was to plan and actively campaign in the year running up to the election period, and to redouble their efforts in the post-election period when it was regarded as critical to engage with a new/re-mandated government. Their tried-and-tested arsenal of campaigning tools were utilised in this process, but with a somewhat adapted focus in light of general election circumstances. The aim was to get organisations' interests represented in the party manifestos, so it was not a priority to be campaigning during the narrow boundaries of the election period and their expectations for media coverage around this time were low.

if you are a, kind of, lobbying charity and you're trying to get stuff in manifestos, you've got to be doing that, like, a year ago, you had to be starting that ages ago and doing the manifesto right at the eve of the election is too late, it's sort of the previous party conferences. (infrastructure organisation)

Election strategy-building often began with a consultation process involving organisations' members to identify and narrow down campaigning priorities. Since at election time the priority was to achieve representation in party manifestos, campaigning concerns needed to be highly targeted, succinct and achievable.

For example, an issue-based charity we spoke to had consulted on and developed their election strategy back in September 2009. They had agreed to make constituency visits the centrepiece of their campaigning activities, focusing on key marginal seats where they worked with candidates to ensure that they had a good understanding of existing projects and to achieve support for their work. These visits took place from January until purdah was called in early April, whereupon the charity switched campaigning methods to focusing upon getting candidates to sign up to their pledge (when the informant was interviewed halfway through the campaign, they had achieved 400 signatures). They had also taken their campaign out to the three party conferences, and while they had not produced a manifesto, they published a report to accompany the pledge which was launched at a policy conference in March. The publication of the political parties' manifestos in April indicated that the charity had achieved the desired support for their pledge, and they intended to consolidate the success of their campaign after the election by holding a reception at Westminster, in between new MPs being sworn in and the Emergency Budget.

General election-focused campaigning

Some organisations placed greater focus than others on the anticipated media scrutiny of the election to ensure that their policy priorities made it onto the agenda (notably this was a rather different priority from making it into party manifestos). This might be the pinnacle, or but one aspect of their electoral campaign. The kinds of activities that TSOs turned to for their electoral campaign focus included

getting MPs signed up to a charter or pledge, which provided a fairly measurable indication of political support. An effective strategy in employing this kind of technique was to target party leaders and then wait for critical mass to filter down.

To some extent, the character of organisations was critical in how campaigning worked best. For example, in the run-up to the announcement of the election, the charity discussed above had focused on organising local visits with parliamentary candidates to its (potentially very photographic) projects, which had obvious PR benefits for both parties. As soon as the election was called, they capitalised on this political engagement and potential goodwill by switching focus to getting candidates to sign up to their pledge.

The publication of a manifesto was the most explicitly campaign-focused strategy, which is examined in more detail in section 4. The production of an election manifesto has become fairly standard practice in the sector, and represents the more formalised and measurable end of organisations' campaigning. While the production of a manifesto is not in itself a new campaigning technique for the sector, the knowledge of the impending election in spring 2010 meant that organisations were able to coordinate the publication of their manifestos to enhance their impact. The majority of TSOs and umbrella agencies published these in the months preceding the election period, leaving some time to ensure that they received maximum publicity. One, more adaptable, approach to producing a manifesto was provided by an infrastructure organisation which regarded its document as 'living' and changeable to reflect the agenda, something which on-line publication made possible:

what we'll be doing is just reviewing the progress and I guess our policy will move. We might well refine our policy as events unfold.

The approach of having a charter or pledge for MPs to sign up to, combined with the release of a manifesto, during the official campaigning period had advantages in terms of staking out organisations' ground and providing clarity on the desired action from political parties. However, one politician reflected that a national campaigning focus incurred a loss of contact at the local level: *'it doesn't really create any meaningful dialogue or relationship,'* and concentrating on her constituency role during the campaign, she bemoaned the lack of contact with local charities which might otherwise have raised her awareness of specific issues.

Making their voices newsworthy at a national level presented a challenge for third sector organisations, which often lacked media leverage. Often infrastructure organisations' best chance of influencing the agenda was to offer a perspective on stories featured during the campaign, such as the Big Society: *'so trying to, sort of, tease things out of, that was one of the things the third sector had to do'* (media source). Making themselves available for comment on politicians' statements and topical issues was another tactic. By contrast, issue-based charities tended to focus more on local press which, covering the work of campaigning MPs in their constituencies, was particularly open to service-orientated stories demonstrating the sector's work.

Responding to the publication of the political parties' manifestos provided another opportunity to contribute to the agenda as it was being formed (see section 4), and several organisations published reactions and summaries on their websites, which were sometimes picked up in the press.

Opportunistic campaigning

For some third sector organisations the agenda swung unexpectedly towards their interests during the political campaign, giving them the opportunity to maximise this exposure for the issues on which they were already campaigning. For example, the Citizens UK rally during the final week of the election campaign, at which the attendance of the three main party leaders was secured to respond to the alliance's manifesto requests, proved a media triumph capitalising on the synergy of the leadership debates and passing into popular mythology as the 'fourth debate' (see section 5).

The sector's campaigning during the election then, like their routine campaigning work, was multi-pronged. There was a fair amount of scope during the campaign to build on public relations, reiterating the sense among potential ruling parties that TSOs were attractive partners with whom productive working relationships could be built:

it's probably just the realisation of if we're going to get anywhere, it's a matter of saying the same things consistently, you know, respectfully but powerfully, not being afraid to talk about issues around power and inequality. And kind of challenging it really, yeah. (infrastructure organisation)

This more flag-waving approach to campaigning could be particularly effective in terms of achieving longer-term policy success.

I mean, our policy is, you know, our strategy, I guess has kind of been we do have plans but it's, kind of, been adaptive and responsive and, you know, taking advantage of opportunities as they arise and trying to make them where we can, but I don't think we'll be really changing how we do things. (infrastructure organisation)

Anti-electoral campaigning

Not all organisations working in the third sector were engaged in election campaigning. One community-orientated organisation we spoke to actively rejected the idea that they needed to engage with political representatives around the general election in order to have an influence on the broader policy process. This organisation regarded its role and aims in the sector somewhat differently, described the election period as 'business as usual,' and saw no point in engaging in the election since 'whoever you go for, the government gets in.' They took a critical stance to formal political structures and refused to engage with political parties prior to the election, and indeed felt that it was the least helpful and most artificial time to be doing this:

because politicians will say whatever they think you want to hear ... the only thing they want is to get elected, not to have a proper conversation ... there's precious little difference in the positions between the three major parties and, consequently, you know, as far as our stance on the election was concerned that there would be pre-election, election and now a new government, and now it's back to business as usual, you know, they will all be pursuing the same policies.

This viewpoint was driven by the organisation's syndicalist perspective on the appropriateness of demonstrably autonomous community mobilisation, and indeed its establishment had been motivated by a concern about the state's growing involvement in the voluntary sector. Their fundamentally different take on how policy and politics operated meant that it was wholly appropriate for the organisation to engage in a different set of tactics to inform political actors, in which the election itself was irrelevant:

we're not a lobby group, we're not interested in influencing government - what we're interested in is mobilising voluntary sector interests to resist, where appropriate, this increase in co-option and this increasing orthodox stifling, stifling orthodoxy about the way in which you need to operate in order to go about your business.

It is, in itself, interesting that this oppositional stance was relatively uncommon in national-level organisations in a sector defined by its diversity and where statutory dependence provides organisational vulnerability during times of cutbacks. Notably this organisation was in its pioneering early years and operated on a small budget, and its stance sometimes provoked antagonism from parts of the sector embedded in more traditional lobbying styles. However, it took pride in raising the uncomfortable truths that membership-based or state-dependant organisations were more constrained from exploring, and consequently pursued agenda-shaping from a different angle.

Working with political parties

One of the major differences in election planning in 2010 that differentiated TSOs' work from their more routine campaigning was that the uncertain electoral outcome indicated by the opinion polls necessitated their conscious engagement with a range of political parties. For many organisations, prior to this election, these kinds of relationships had not existed with opposition parties, whose interest in the sector arguably developed much later. Consequently there was a need to start building dialogue and understanding some time in advance:

for the last decade, with limited resources, the best way for us to influence government policy on behalf of our members, has been very much to focus on the ruling party and the executive. And there's not been much, you know, realistically, not been much point engaging with the others. So part of what we've been doing over the past two years is just, is very consciously building relationships with, particularly the Tories and that's, you know, that really is partly just about building the personal relationships. (infrastructure organisation)

This involved developing quotable relationships (for the purposes of website materials) with third sector spokespeople in the three main parties, as well as identifying key policy makers and ideologues. As part of their pre-election work, a number of third sector organisations published on-line interviews with political representatives, drawing attention to nuances of policy difference for their members. These included: Directory of Social Change, who posed specific questions on irrecoverable VAT, Payroll Giving, Gift Aid and the Compact; KnowHowNonProfit, whose podcast focused on funding issues; and NAVCA who probed the parties on their support for the sector. A political representative interviewed felt there was a greater use of hustings meetings made by the sector and the OTS than elsewhere in government, an approach which raised issues at an early stage in the campaign and demonstrated a particular style of electoral relationships.

The Conservatives, in particular, were keen to involve the sector in discussions concerning the development of their Big Society concept, and a number of organisations felt that individually Nick Hurd (the Shadow Minister for the third sector at the time) had been proactive in engaging with the sector over a number of months, an approach likely to enhance future working relationships. At the same time as organisations were striving to build these relationships with political parties, they needed to counterbalance their efforts against the demands of impending purdah and would not wish to be seen as endorsing specific policies. They were also conscious of their members' concern about charities' working with the Conservative Party, traditionally not regarded as a natural alliance. A

number of interviewees emphasised the importance of becoming self-consciously flexible yet independent on this, and engaging with cross-party policy development if they were to protect TSOs' interests beyond the election:

So in some senses, the trick is not to be inflexible and kneejerk, you know, but to have an open mind and think what genuinely is going to move things forward, because it may not be, I don't think it is a right/left polarity. (infrastructure agency)

Another infrastructure organisation explained the efforts they went to to be even-handed in this process:

We ensure that, obviously, that we play a, with a very broad bat and we cannot allow ourselves to be identified with a political cause, so we always ensure that if one party seems to be more supportive then we work on the others even harder, to ensure that it always appears that we're a completely politically neutral organisation, but willing to work with anybody to achieve our social and environmental aspirations.

And a large charity consciously changed the character of its campaigning work during the election period, being acutely aware of its political capital and the potential for its projects to be used in a way that endangered its organisational integrity:

But making sure that we're not at the whim of any candidate or party, that's why we've shut down over this campaign period, because ... we want new services and we could be pulled in any which direction and be used for political purposes very, very strongly.

However, not all TSOs were so concerned to evade political controversy; indeed doing so could occasionally, if not riskily, attract welcome attention to one's cause.

Specifically, there was a need to create effective channels for feeding information about third sector manifesto requests into the political parties' planning processes, so that these could be reflected in the writing of party manifestos. A politician interviewed described the existence of a sentiment that contact between the Conservatives and the sector was more formalised and productive at this point in the electoral cycle, but felt that this failed to take into account the then Labour government's established channels of communication and different writing styles of the parties of government and opposition:

we were feeding in information all the time from meetings we were having on a regular basis [...] so it was pretty much less formal, but it was that, sort of, constant dialogue on the manifesto.

Another interviewee pointed out that, regardless of the specifics of electoral outcome, this election was likely to see a higher than average turnover of MPs⁴, and so a critical part of the organisation's work was to engage with this new intake at a local level in the hope that they could be recruited as future advocates for third sector issues.

Two interviewees (representing infrastructure organisations) noted that the social enterprise movement seemed to have become particularly effective at taking its message to the political parties and appropriating language accordingly; for example '*borrowing from the private sector.*' In part, it was felt that this reflected a significant investment in '*lobbying and communications.*' The SE movement had subsequently found its interests well represented in the party manifestos and taken up in the language of politicians from all parties (see section 4).

Section 4: Setting out the agenda

In the context of this prolonged build-up to the 2010 general election, key stakeholders were careful to ensure that their perspective was understood and received maximum publicity in the hope that the electoral agenda would reflect these positions. In 2010, much more than in previous elections, the third sector was an issue that was up for discussion and which had multiple policy implications. This section looks at a selection of manifestos published by third sector and umbrella organisations in the run-up to the general election, and relates these to the third sector coverage contained within the three main political parties' manifestos.

Third sector manifestos

The February-April period was characterised by a flurry of activity from the sector publishing their manifestos in advance of the May general election. *Third Sector Online* described this phenomenon as “*manifesto mad*,” “*in vogue*” and “*a key weapon in the run-up to election day*” (Donovan, 2010a). Often manifestos (alternatively titled, ‘*living documents*’, ‘*a statement of intent*’, ‘*election pledges*’, and even – informally - ‘*a non-manifesto*’) were the product of months’ of consultation with organisations’ memberships, usually in addition to being developed in communication with political parties to ensure that priorities were reflected or at least considered in the latter’s manifestos. For example, one umbrella agency which had been particularly successful in getting its key manifesto requests reflected in political parties’ manifestos had invested considerable effort in targeting the authors of the Labour, Conservative and Liberal-Democrat manifestos at an early stage, even more so than it worked with Ministers, and well in advance of publishing its own manifesto:

it felt appropriate to, you know, go directly to the people that were given the task of writing the manifestos and developing the party visions.

From the interviews it was clear that this planning and interaction stage started back in late 2009, and that neither sector nor party manifestos were produced in isolation from each other. Indeed, the impact of sector manifestos was arguably at its most powerful *prior* to publication and this was when the most critical consultation was going on. By the time they had been released into the public sphere it was essentially too late influence party policy and the political manifestos: ‘*the big ideas have been fed in before then*’ (political representative), and their publication dates were often quite artificial. By the time of the election campaign the third sector’s manifestos stood as position papers rather than catalysts for discussion, and are a resource which has made this election particularly documentable.

We looked at 13 manifestos (including one joint production) published by various umbrella agencies and larger third sector organisations/charities during the four month period leading up to and during the general election campaign (see below). The style of these manifestos was diverse and reflected differing perspectives regarding the length and specificity of policy detail considered most effective in acquiring political uptake. They ranged from fairly extensive ‘*shopping lists*’ of requests, to tightly-focused, more achievable demands, designed to be read and easily digested by busy MPs. Indeed, one civil servant admitted to finding the proliferation of manifestos at this time somewhat counter-productive:

If the whole sector signs up to one manifesto with a set of clear and feasible demands, then it might have an impact. Until then, countless manifestos from the sector tend to have little impact.

A few organisations, mindful of the different audiences their manifestos might achieve, produced them in multiple formats. Some were also linked to pledges which they sought to get MPs to sign. It was clear from the interviews that the development and timed publication of third sector manifestos within the electoral cycle also reflected a range of different organisational priorities and planning processes.

Organisation	Title	Date	Key Demands
SEC	No More Business as Usual – A Social Enterprise Manifesto	February 2010	Calls for 3-fold increase in SEs' contribution to the economy by 2020, supported by 6-point policy framework.
Action for ME	2010 Election Manifesto for ME	February 2010	6-point policy framework to equalise resources for ME sufferers & carers.
Age UK	Our Power is our Number	February 2010	Issues 6 challenges to politicians: respect; support for independence; enough money; feeling well; taking part locally; thinking global.
NAVCA	Strong, Independent Roots	February 2010	5 policy pledges from government intended to strengthen local voluntary action.
CPRE	Vote for the Countryside in 2010	February 2010	Calls for modernisation of planning, protection of human habitat, and action on litter and fly-tipping.
Institute of Fundraising	Untitled	February 2010	4 –point ask on fundraising.
NCVO	The Good Society	February 2010	Combination of thematic priorities and specific proposals (Robin Hood tax, banking transaction tax to support public services, annual leave for volunteering).
MNDA	The case for a national strategy for MND	March 2010	Calls for national strategy to improve holistic care of people with MND.
New Philanthropy Capital	Manifesto for Social Impact	March 2010	6 point call to improve social impact, via measures geared towards supporting charities' & philanthropists' effectiveness.
SEC/ACEVO/Community Alliance	The Time is Now	March 2010	4-point call for investment to support healthy civil society.
Community Sector Coalition	Unleashing the Potential	April 2010	Call for a bottom-up approach to support grass-roots organisations.
Directory of Social Change	Election pledges	April 2010	5 low-cost, high-impact political commitments.
Citizens UK	General Election Manifesto	May event	6 point call of specific pledges from 3 main party leaders.

Several interviewees noted the importance of recognising the economic climate in developing their manifestos, and explained that they had consequently produced documents which made realistic, solution-orientated recommendations to government, as opposed to the more specific interest-based demands they might otherwise have favoured. They felt that the former were more likely to get incorporated into party manifestos and lead to ongoing processes of dialogue; one large charity commented on the importance of not simply asking for investment, but for '*smarter investment*.'

Generally third sector organisations were happy to see their manifestos picked up in the specialist press, such as *Third Sector Online*, *Civil Society* and *charitytimes*, since this was where they were likely to receive the most in-depth and accurate consideration, and a common strategy was to target their press releases in this direction. Very occasionally, third sector manifestos were also able to reach a national audience:

Our manifesto was excellent, it was reported in, you know, some of the broad sheets, it was referenced directly by Patrick Butler at The Guardian, it was, got excellent feedback from the membership, which is really important. And I think it was probably, I would say this wouldn't I, but I think it was the most successful manifesto from the third sector that was launched. (infrastructure organisation)

However, this was unusual and perhaps reflected the topicality of this organisation's remit, combined with its carefully-orchestrated media campaign. It was not just the style and content of organisations' manifestos that contributed to their impact, but also their timing and manner of publication. While some organisations simply made their manifestos available on their websites, others put a great deal of work into press releasing, publicising, and providing briefings for politicians. For example, the launch of NAVCA's manifesto was singled out for praise as being particularly effective:

they launched it at the House of Commons beforehand, and then they sent it to all candidates [...] I thought it was good. And it wasn't threatening. (political representative)

As Donovan (2010) has observed, one of the major purposes of the third sector's manifestos in 2010 has been in getting its messages out to the people who will influence policy in the next Parliament, be they new MPs, or those working in think tanks, as political researchers or civil servants. Consequently, dissemination strategies will play a critical role in manifestos' overall success, albeit one that is more difficult to assess.

Political parties' manifestos

By contrast, the three main political parties published their detailed policy manifestos within a short period of one another, in the clearly-defined boundaries of election time: within a week of the general election having been called. This created a climate of intense press analysis and comparison of the party manifestos at the start of the election campaign.

The first to be published, on 12th April, was the Labour Party's manifesto, *A future fair for all*, which was launched in the West Midlands (Labour Party, 2010). Largely written by Ed Miliband, its front cover depicted a 50s/Maoist design of a family looking towards the sunset, which drew some predictable press criticism. Distinctive discourse contained within the document included 'fair', 'active reforming government', 'level playing field' and 'strengthening'.

A day later the Conservative Party published its *Invitation to join the government of Britain*, playing heavily upon the Big Society theme and launched at Battersea Power Station by team of helpers wearing pale blue T-shirts emblazoned with the slogan 'we are here to help' (Conservative Party, 2010a). Authored by Oliver Letwin and heavily influenced by Steve Hilton, Cameron's Head of Strategy, its format was unusually that of a plain blue hardback book, whose formality contrasted with its internal format which included use of multiple posters, photographs and case studies, and which was organised in a non-traditional chapter format. Its layout made it appear the most substantial (that is, lengthy) of the manifestos, and it was characterised by language such as, 'new kind of government', 'Big Society', 'civic society' and 'responsibility'.

Finally, on the 14th April, the Liberal Democrats published their straightforwardly-titled *Liberal Democrat Manifesto 2010* (Liberal Democrat Party, 2010). Written by Danny Alexander, its lack of design was likely intended to serve a political point, and it also opted not to divide chapters in traditional numerical terms, but gave them titles such as 'your job' and 'your community' (non-capitalised), and made heavy use of photographs. It drew upon discourse such as 'hope', 'credibility' and 'fairness'.

Overall emphasis of the party manifestos

The Labour manifesto focused on rebuilding the economy, aiming to cut the structural deficit by two-thirds over the course of the next Parliament, in doing so reforming and protecting public services, 'strengthening society' and 'renewing politics'. There was very much a role for the third sector in this, in terms having a greater involvement in the provision of public services, including the taking over of 'failing' schools, hospitals and police forces. Crucially it included recognition of the sector's valued independence and emphasised the importance of maintaining its campaigning role. Angela Smith, the incumbent third sector Minister defined the government-sector relationship in terms of '*partnership*'.

The Conservative manifesto appeared to involve some marked similarities on these issues, but framed them rather differently, and crucially did so in a language of change. It talked about 'changing Britain' and empowering individuals to change local communities, notably through its 'Big Society' concept which was counterpoised to a demonised 'big state'. It pledged to call an Emergency Budget soon after taking power, and sketched out plans to eliminate the budget deficit over the course of a single Parliament. It sought to simplify the running of TSOs, and to focus on "outcomes, not the micromanagement of the process". Nick Hurd, the then Shadow Minister framed the sector in terms of a vehicle for individual responsibility and change.

The Liberal-Democrats, perhaps surprisingly, placed less emphasis on the sector in their manifesto than the other two parties, and more on broader societal 'fairness' and 'openness'. They concentrated on plans for reforming tax, schools systems, the economy and the political system. Like the Conservatives, their manifesto promised an Emergency Budget by June, with public sector cuts to kick in by 2011-12. Their Shadow Minister, Jenny Willott defined the government's relationship to the sector in terms of fairness and ensuring the provision of appropriate support.

Sectoral definitions

While in 2010 the three main parties' manifestos contained significant detail on the third sector (see below), it was notable that they framed the sector very differently. For all the talk about consensus on

third sector policy detail, their fundamental linguistic divergence is ideologically telling. Interviewees often commented on the meaningfulness of these differences (particularly in relation to the rebranding of the sector, see section 6), and they were clearly important to political parties, yet this was not a debate which they were publically pursuing. Kendall (2009) has discussed in some detail the contested terrain of definitions and typologies for the sector, with a range of 'collective nouns' being favoured at different times and in different contexts. These have included: 'charities and charitable sector', 'civil society', 'social economy', 'social enterprise', 'voluntary sector', and, from 2006 until the 2010 general election, 'third sector'. At any one time there has been no one universally-agreed definition for the sector, which has instead been informed by a range of policy actors and political players with differential power positioning.

Amongst the third sector representatives we interviewed, there was understandably more pragmatism in their public use of terminologies than among political actors. However, in analysing the parties' manifestos and considering how they framed the sector, there is an issue about the intended readership of these documents. Perhaps reflecting the electorate's distance from some of this terminology, manifestos tended not to talk about 'the sector' in its various formulations, nor to deal with relevant issues in one neat documentary section. Nevertheless, there was significant divergence in how the parties presented sectoral issues in their manifestos (see below), and their rejection of what might appear a more logical concentration of information on the sector is revealing in terms of these issues' presentational difficulties. By contrast, the policy actors we interviewed summarised the sectoral issues of the 2010 general election much more coherently and succinctly than the party manifestos, although these covered the same ground.

Detail of third-sector coverage

The Labour and Conservative manifestos contained significant detail on third sector policy; the Liberal-Democrat's less so.

The Labour Party manifesto arguably displayed the most integrated approach to the sector, in that third sector issues were related to most aspects of policy and were hence discussed throughout the document (that is, in the chapters on living standards, education, crime and immigration, families and older people, communities, and global future). The greatest concentration on sector issues was contained within the 'Communities and Creative Britain' chapter. Reflecting the then government's policy of using the term 'third sector' to promote inclusivity, that discourse was employed exclusively in the Labour manifesto, although more broadly the manifesto employed a fairly mixed discourse, talking about 'third sector organisations', 'voluntary sector organisations', 'social enterprise', 'civil life and pride', 'voluntary and community sector', and 'civil society'. Notably, no use was made of the term 'charity/charitable sector'.

Labour Party sectoral policy included:

- more local support for the Compact, and constituting the Commission for the Compact on a fully statutory basis;
- proposed National Youth Community Service to oversee young people contributing 50 hours' work in their local communities by the age of 19;

- more public involvement in how Lottery money is spent, and the Olympic diversion money to be returned to Culture, Heritage and Sport;
- communities to be supported in taking over local buildings and land;
- establish a fund for community ownership of pubs and social clubs;
- support of community involvement in renewable energy services;
- promote participatory budgeting and Community Land Trusts for the local purchasing of amenities and assets;
- an investigation into how philanthropic support can be better incentivised;
- the launch of Social Impact Bonds and generation of community-based social enterprise ‘hubs’;
- the Co-operative Party, Business Link, enterprise education and Regional Development Agencies to provide support to the growth of Community Interest Companies and third sector mutuals;
- £75m invested in a Social Investment Bank;
- banking reform, including Better Banking Campaign and the Post Office to become the People’s Bank;
- greater emphasis on personalised, preventative public services and a level playing field to ensure that all sectors can compete for public sector contracts.

The former Minister for the sector felt that the Labour Party’s manifesto had failed in the sense that, *‘we didn’t really spell out how our policies affecting the sector went across government,’* and that this should have been made more explicit. This was partly an issue about attempting to deal with the sector in one department, when it was becoming increasingly apparent that it was a cross-cutting concern: *‘the clarity of how deep our thinking and approach to the third sector went across government wasn’t as clear as it could have been.’* Perhaps the most surprising aspect of this criticism is that the manifesto was largely written by another former Minister for the sector, although of the three manifestos studied the Labour Party’s integration of the third sector into its manifesto was the most thorough-going. Our interviewee also felt, with the benefit of hindsight, that the Labour Party’s manifesto would have benefited from having focused greater attention on its future plans for working with the third sector.

The Conservative Party’s 2008 *Green Paper* (Conservative Party, 2008) provided an early indication of the third sector thinking that was to feature in their 2010 election manifesto, and they also published a Big Society paper just before the election was announced (Conservative Party 2010b). Their election manifesto’s coverage of third sector issues was unsurprisingly dominated by their heavily-trailed Big Society agenda, on which they had consulted with a number of key third sector organisations. Their ‘Change Society’ chapter (the second substantive section of the manifesto) concentrated their position on sector issues, which was relayed in a distinctive language which made no reference to the third sector. Instead they used a discourse of ‘voluntary sector providers’, ‘Big Society’ (repeatedly used in contrast to ‘broken society’ and ‘big government’), ‘civil society’, ‘civic society’, ‘civic responsibility’, ‘voluntary (and community) sector’, and ‘community organisers/sector/

participation'. There were few references to sectoral issues outside of this focal chapter, and this approach may be telling in light of the later presentational issues the Party experienced relating the Big Society concept to the electorate. As if to underline the point that the Conservative Party were eschewing the language of the third sector, in Hurd's open letter to the sector coinciding with the launch of the manifesto, he pointedly chose to preface his comments with reference to 'the voluntary sector'⁵.

Specifically, the Conservative manifesto's policy in this sphere included:

- establishment of a National Citizen Service organising voluntary placements for 16 year olds within their communities;
- ensuring that all Lottery money goes into the sector, with sports, heritage and the arts receiving a 20% allocation;
- the formalisation of a 'right to bid' to run all community services;
- parents and charities to be empowered to set up new academy schools and to purchase local assets;
- an investment in training for independent community organisers;
- a Sustainable Communities Act to improve information and control over government spending in an area;
- encourage philanthropic giving and local voluntary activity;
- establishment of a Big Society Bank providing finance to local groups, charities, social enterprise and non-government bodies;
- an annual Big Society Day;
- a commitment to work with local authorities to deliver public services via the third sector;
- greater fairness in grant allocation to improve the stability of third sector organisations;
- a welfare to (sustainable) work programme using the private and third sectors on a payment-by-results basis;
- a review of the criminal records and vetting systems;
- petitions with over 100,000 signatures to automatically become eligible for formal parliamentary debate;
- the civil service to be transformed into the 'civic service' via appraisal recognition of social action.

The Liberal-Democrat manifesto was distinctive in making most sparse mention of third sector issues of the three main parties' manifestos, whichever terminology was employed to locate them. What coverage it provided was contained within its jobs, family and community chapters, and discussed in terms of 'voluntary providers', 'voluntary sector' and 'social enterprise'. Notably, the manifesto made no reference to the terms 'third sector', 'civil/civic sector' or 'community sector'.

The Liberal-Democrat manifesto included the following proposals for the sector:

- moving to a gross profits tax system of the National Lottery;

- encouragement of community-owned renewable energy schemes;
- a Sustainable Communities Act Amendment Bill, giving communities the right to propose local actions which improve sustainability;
- easy-giving bank accounts to facilitate charitable-giving alongside current account activity;
- reform of Gift Aid to a single rate of 23%;
- a portable CRB checking system;
- public service reform to enhance third sector organisations' role in service delivery;
- legislative change supporting mutuals, social enterprises and co-operatives;
- protection of free speech and the right to protest (reform of the Public Order Act).

Consensus and difference

Aside from this detail on third sector policy – described by one infrastructure organisation as '*different versions of the same thing*' - there was a substantial degree of unsaid broader endorsement of the third sector and recognition of its role as part of the mainstream. For example, in 2010 all three parties made routine and positive references to social enterprise, not only in relation to third sector policy but in multiple contexts, a stark contrast to 2005 when it was mentioned in just one party's manifesto.

The unusually high degree of consensus on the importance of the third sector placed in it in a somewhat delicate position. On the one hand, while it was valuable to have achieved recognition (in the case of the Conservatives, verging on centrepiece placement) in the manifestos, total accord risked its concerns simply not being debated and publicised. At the same time, sectoral issues were relatively low on the public radar, a fact reflected in their scant coverage in the mainstream press, and consequently it was somewhat unrealistic to expect to see dramatic shifts in public attitudes to the sector over the relatively brief course of an election campaign.

And so it wasn't a matter of great discussion and great controversy, but there was a sense in which, you know, it didn't need to be. It is high on the parties' agendas and, you know, there was no argument about that. (specialist media commentator)

This interviewee also made the point that the consensual yet vague nature of the parties' take on the third sector put the impetus back on the sector to make the story their own:

They [the political parties] all had the same pious intentions, but in nearly all cases unbacked by any specific proposals. And so I think that the sector had to fall back on trying to seize on the third sector implications of things which did feature in the campaign. The best example which, I suppose, was the Conservative's Big Society idea which was, in itself, quite vague but has a lot of potential implications for the voluntary sector. And so trying to, sort of, tease things out of that was one of the things the third sector had to do.

Thus, whatever the restrictions of the electoral campaign, this was a period when the third sector could not afford to lower its profile. Consequently, some of the key differences which the sector was able to identify between the parties over the course of the election included:

- a Conservative emphasis on localism, manifested in the Big Society, versus a Labour protection of a government-third sector partnership - described by a community organisation as a standoff between ‘*non-hierarchical working*’ and a ‘*command and control*’ approach;
- labour’s commitment to the role of third sector organisations in campaigning, compared to a Conservative preference for the sector to concentrate on service delivery and individual advocacy;
- the Liberal-Democrat proposal to reform Gift Aid;
- suspicions regarding political parties’ divergent ideological commitments to the sector, connected to how they viewed its fundamental purpose.

Of these, the latter point is the most telling. A political representative described a difference in emphasis and ideology between the Conservative and Labour Parties (the Liberal-Democrats did not feature in this analysis): that the Conservatives wanted to make greater *use* of the sector, but at the expense of the more supported and partnership-orientated basis of the Labour Party. She summarised the key difference as ‘*partnership and not replacement.*’ Such differences in emphasis potentially translate into a huge difference in approach to and relationship with the sector, and did little to address the common perception that the Conservatives regarded the sector as a way of getting public services ‘*on the cheap*’ (infrastructure organisation). The linguistic differences uncovered by a more detailed reading of the parties’ manifestos provide further corroboration of such distinctions, revealing significant political nuances in the meaning and value attached to the sector.

Press coverage

In the absence of major third sector stories over the course of the election, a press source commented to us that one of their main projects was providing a commentary and analysis on the differences between the parties’ manifesto positions.

there wasn’t actually a lot between them, and so there was a sense in which our coverage became quite samey in a way, a lot of the policies had been well known before the election campaign. And there was a little bit of excitement when the Lib Dem’s manifesto actually had a couple of specific proposals for the third sector, namely reforming Gift Aid on a particular pattern as having a single rate for Gift Aid, Gift Aid at 23% and also saying that they would introduce a Bill to reform and standardise the whole business of co-operatives and mutual. And so they produced the only two specific proposals and yet they were always the third party, whose proposals were never going to be acted upon in a sense. And the other two parties was all warm words and pretty much the same agenda.

The press tended to present summary positions on the manifestos, and few engaged in the next level of analysis; consequently debate on the manifestos remained rather superficial. One infrastructure organisation commented that this was one context in which the media actively sought the opinion of the third sector – in providing an authoritative commentary on the party manifestos, although of course this was with the caveat that they provided a headline-grabbing opinion:

I think they’re always looking for the sector to be, you know, critical. I don’t think it’s really that much different in terms of what they’re looking for - they’re looking for us to be challenging and they’re not interested in us saying, “Oh that’s a wonderful manifesto.”

You know, they're looking for the negatives, they're looking for the news. And that is obviously what they do at all times, but I think that's accentuated during general election periods because they're trying to look for a difference between all the political parties.

From the third sector's point of view, this setting up of an opposition between political parties' and the sector's interests was not the most helpful approach, and they had to proceed with caution in working with the press at this time.

Third sector responses to party manifestos

The party manifestos were important to third sector organisations not only in order to gauge their post-election positioning, but also in terms of providing a concrete measurement of how successful their pre-election campaigning had been. While manifestos did not represent a policy commitment but a direction of thinking, their content and the way in which it was presented offered a useful indication of how effectively TSOs had been able to make the case for their interests. The reproduction of a single policy idea, in a format that had been developed in conjunction with a third sector organisation and demonstrated a productive listening relationship, had a significantly positive impact on that organisation's morale and could go a long way to assuaging other disappointments.

A fairly common activity performed by infrastructure organisations during the election period, and one on which they were able to demonstrate their even-handedness amid *purdah*, was to provide a coordinated summary and response to the party manifestos' coverage of third sector issues. Perhaps as a consequence of this kind of summary information being so readily available, few of our interviewees had devoted much time to studying the parties' manifestos although several already had a reasonable idea of what they would contain from pre-existing relationships with political parties. NCVO, the Institute of Fundraising, ACEVO, NAVCA, SEC, the Institute of Fundraising, CSC and DSC all provided their members with synthetic analyses of the manifestos at this time. There were no big surprises in the sector's response to the manifestos, but there is value in having a documentation of these positions.

NCVO made the point that all three manifestos offered broadly similar policies and endorsed their recognition of the sector, with the proviso of the need for greater policy detail. They expressed concern that the Labour Party manifesto had indicated Lottery money being diverted from the third sector, and contrasted this with the Conservative position which had shelved earlier plans to divert these funds. They welcomed civil society being placed at the centre of the Conservative manifesto, but were more disappointed at the lack of a coherent vision for the sector in the Liberal-Democrat manifesto, despite some otherwise valuable policy commitments (removing restrictions on protesting and the proposed easy-giving accounts).

SEC felt that Labour's manifesto provided good coverage of all their requests, but they would have liked to have seen a greater commitment to data collection on social enterprises. They were also broadly supportive of the huge distance the Conservative Party had travelled in their attitude towards social enterprise, but felt that their manifesto could have seen more inclusion of SEs in employment and environmental sustainability. They were enthusiastic about the Liberal-Democrat manifesto's commitment to a Mutuels, Cooperatives and Social Enterprises Bill, but found it lacking on commitment to SEs in schools.

The Institute of Fundraising expressed disappointment at all three manifestos, on the basis that they provided little detail on charitable giving and little serious recognition of the third sector's work. They welcomed the Liberal-Democrat's proposed easy-giving bank accounts but were frustrated by their Gift Aid proposals, which they felt could have a potentially negative effect on the sector if replacing higher-rate relief.

DSC commented that the parties' third sector policies as presented in the manifestos remained vague and broadly similar, being limited to minor differences such as the Conservatives on Lottery funding. Although they saw the Big Society as offering a potentially radical vision for the sector, this was tempered with scepticism that it was a tactic for delivering cheaper services. ACEVO noted that a thriving third sector was central to the Big Society concept, and responded positively to the Conservative manifesto's thinking on the sector's role in public service reform.

NAVCA remained unconvinced by the Liberal-Democrat commitment to supporting grants to the sector. CSC was perhaps the most vocal in its overall disappointment at the manifestos, questioning their commitment to policy-building, as evidenced in their lack of long-term funding and radically-devolved power: *'a pick and mix approach to third sector policy.'* They commented that the parties' manifestos provided no formal recognition of the community sector (a point perhaps surprising in light of what happened next) and were lacking in practical commitments. CSC also suspected that funding for third sector infrastructure would be cut by all parties in the future.

This kind of analysis, however, only went so far, possibly influenced by purdah and the need to be even-handed, and one infrastructure organisation commented:

there's not been enough unpicking of all three parties' policies and what they really mean for us, as a sector, and for the communities we seek to represent.

However, if this was not done immediately after the election when the information was readily available, it is difficult to see when it might otherwise productively have occurred. As might be expected, the feedback from our interviews often presented a less diplomatic sectoral response to the manifestos than their formalised published versions. One infrastructure organisation felt that the Big Society concept had been fundamentally watered-down for publication, that sectoral issues more generally were presented as *'a minor strand of all manifesto policy,'* evident only in their *'stunning lack,'* and that this absence was symptomatic of *'the kind of hollowed out political debate that we have more generally.'*

Section 5: Mapping the general election campaign

The 2010 general election campaign took place on multiple stages, with the televised leadership debates and Internet coverage providing new and significantly expanded media outputs. As with all electoral campaigns, it was only partly in politicians' power to map out the agenda and shifting foci of debate or interest.

The publication of the three main political parties' manifestos represented a line in the sand regarding their intended agenda. However, these proved particularly uncontroversial and predictable

in 2010, and it was left to the media and sector to draw out points of distinction between the parties, which inevitably focused heavily on differences of style and personality.

Well, I think there's precious little debate about it but, in a sense, that didn't matter because there was political consensus that this was an important subject. (media commentator)

There was perceived to be a uniqueness about the election, whose anticipated open-endedness, combined with the looming spectre of the need to address the deficit, stifled radical debate and made it difficult to analyse third sector issues in isolation from the broader political context. Additionally, the degree of consensus characterising the parties' positions on the third sector effectively ensured that the issue was not up for debate, and that the sectoral issues that made it onto the agenda picked up on differing emphasis and language.

One interviewee suggested that clarity and debate on issues actually dissipated during election time, overtaken by an electoral narrative that was relatively unrelated to the interests at stake:

I think now⁶ we're in the stage of election, it's hard to get a reality grip, so it feels like there's a bit of a fog and there's lots of rhetoric and interest in wanting to agree, but it feels quite phoney in a way, just the expedient of elections, kind of, crowds out everything else. (infrastructure agency)

This informant felt that the artificiality of election time made it difficult to analyse interactions and make sense of their longer-term impact.

I think it's more excruciating during the election period, by which I mean the worry is that it's, there's a bottleneck and there's a lot of pressure to please, you know, to say certain things. So I think it's maybe harder to have real, relaxed, genuine exploratory conversations. So I think there's a, kind of, certain wariness of we've been here before, and the gap between rhetoric and reality.

As discussed in sections 3 and 4, in an important sense the party manifestos represented the success or otherwise of the third sector to get their interests onto the agenda. Consequently there was little expectation or accompanying campaigning at this point to ensure that sectoral interests achieved a broader spotlight. The general election campaign as it was played out in the media and public consciousness did not, by and large, touch explicitly on the role of the sector, although as we have already seen it was often implicitly at the heart of parties' agendas. There was peripheral discussion of volunteering, Gift Aid, and some kind of Social Investment Bank, but these were not the issues that captured the election's mainstream narrative. Below, we look at themes which came together to tell the story of the 2010 general election: the Big Society, managing the deficit, constitutional matters, how the agenda got reoriented and the contest's style, in addition to considering the role of the media in constructing this narrative. But before examining the general election agenda as it touched upon the third sector, we reflect on the context of the sea change in receptiveness towards the sector that had laid the ground for the debates that took place during the 2010 election.

The political mainstreaming of the sector

By 2010, as in no previous general election, the third sector was in the position of being assumed to have earned its right to automatic consideration in the political parties' agendas, as evidenced in their

manifesto coverage of sectoral issues. The Labour Party had arrived at this position some time earlier than the other two political parties (see Kendall (2009) on 'hyperactive mainstreaming') as part of its Third Way modernisation programme. One infrastructure organisation interviewed identified 2006 and the announcement that community empowerment was the main duty of local authorities as a 'pivotal moment' in this process. Certainly since the Third Sector Review in 2007 under Ed Miliband, it became clear that a Brownite premiership would afford a central and valued role to the third sector. By 2008, the Conservative Party had made the point that sector was to be key in their thinking at the next general election, with the publication of their Green Paper on voluntary action. A civil servant we interviewed described the political parties' approach to the third sector by 2010 as *'totally embedded now. Whereas previously it was a bit of an add-on.'*

Third sector organisations clearly felt that they had played an important role in increasing the sector's political profile. An infrastructure organisation explained, *'it's the noise that organisations like ours have made over the past few years,'* but also acknowledged that the sheer size and volume of work performed by the sector had had an incremental effect in building its momentum. A support organisation felt that the success of the sector was a two-way political process, with the Labour government's investment in infrastructure organisations in turn strengthening the sector and enabling it to become more effective at speaking with a single voice in the political sphere. A second perspective on the sector's standing at the 2010 general election was that political changes in attitude towards the sector were sometimes more pragmatic, in that politicians saw it as playing a key role in their strategies for addressing the public deficit and social problems; what one community organisation described as *'a means to an end instrumentalism.'*

To some extent, these two perceptions reflected a key political schism in how the sector was viewed. As seen in the previous section, the apparently broad consensus on the importance of the sector masked key differences in how its role was viewed, with the Labour Party regarding it in terms of partnership, campaigning, service delivery and policy influence, compared to a Conservative emphasis on localism, social action and smaller government. One infrastructure organisation pointed out that much as the Conservatives saw genuine prospects for the sector in their agenda, they would not be sentimental about it: *'it's not necessarily interested in propping up juggernauts in the sector, particularly at times of austerity.'* A former government official explained that the sector was *'part and parcel of what we want to do'*, while a current civil servant further explained this sometimes subtle but crucial difference:

I think the Conservative and Lib Dem ethos is not about we need to support the sector because it's a good thing [...] but actually we need to do this because it will deliver a better society.

The Labour Party too were at times charged with cynicism in their valuing of the sector. For example, one infrastructure organisation commented that the way in which the Compact had played out in recent months provided evidence of a less than wholehearted support, *'there's a kind of kneejerk response of just chucking in the third sector to a lot of policy announcements and strategy. It's kind of become part of the landscape.'*

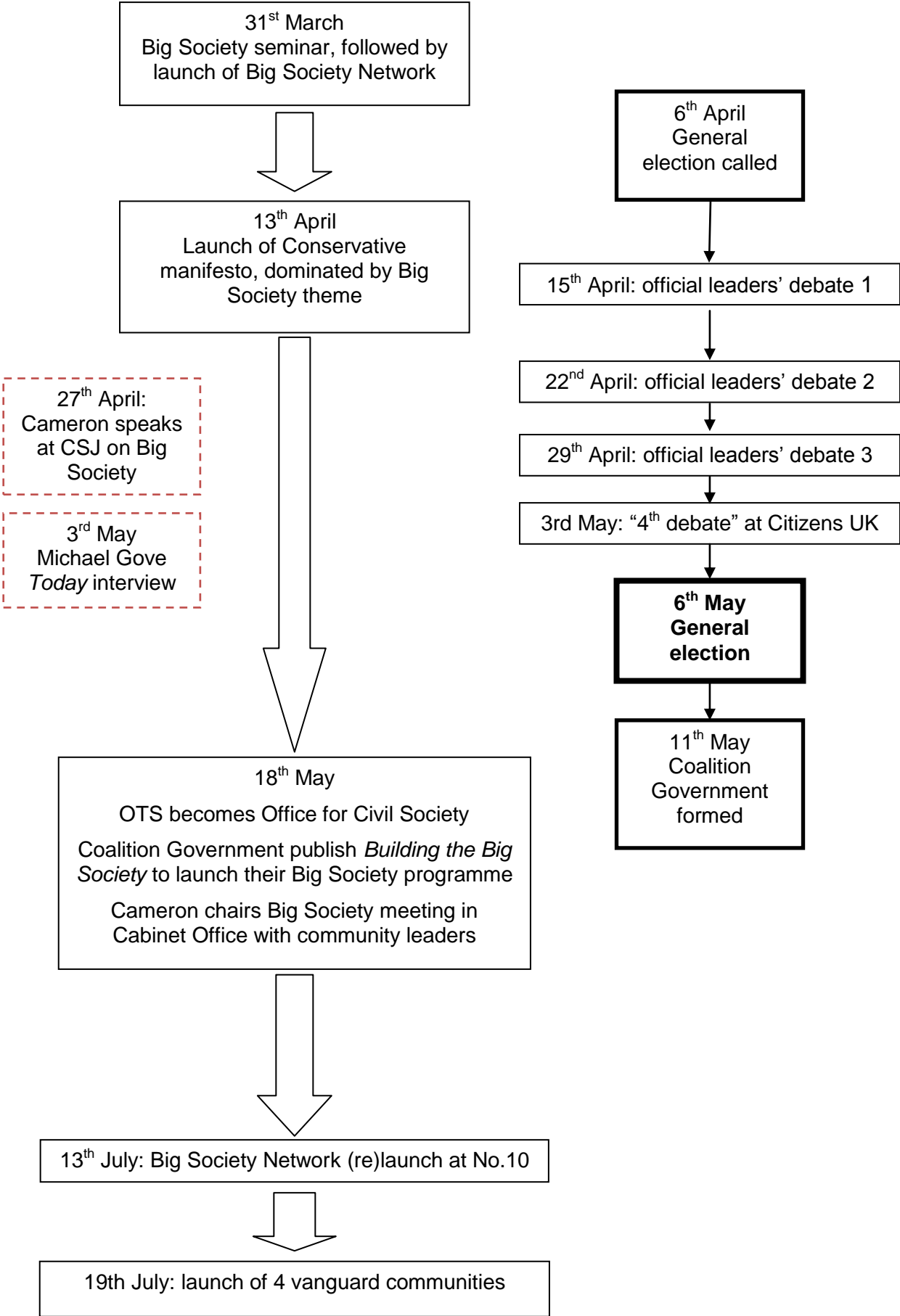
The mainstreaming of the sector then was not regarded as a taken-for-granted or permanent position by third sector organisations, even during the relatively advantageous position of the 2010 general election. An infrastructure organisation that had been very much in favour during the election and admitted to having considerable traction in the post-election climate, noted that the lagging of public awareness of the sector behind political support produced a vulnerability that spending cuts directed that way would go little contested should it fall out of favour.

The Big Society

The most obvious difference between the political parties' position on the sector, and one which was put in a populist language designed to be picked up by the media, was the Conservative's 'Big Society' which stood as the centrepiece to its manifesto and effectively kick-started its election campaign. However, following anonymous Conservative activists' complaints about their difficulties explaining the Big Society to the electorate, Cameron stepped back from using the opportunity of the leadership debates' platform to raise the policy's profile and enhance clarity. During the final half of the campaign there was barely a mention of this fundamental aspect of their manifesto. A media commentator we spoke to reflected that, outside of the specialist press, the Big Society concept was mainly picked up on by *The Guardian*, and otherwise just in terms of its electoral unpopularity rather than providing any kind of analysis. Figure 1 (below) illustrates the trajectory of the Big Society programme against the events of the general election; critically after about the first week of the election campaign there was little mainstream discussion of the policy, which dropped from the agenda until the formation of the Coalition government.

A notable feature of our research interviews was their almost universal confirmation to a language that the Big Society had been abandoned by the Conservatives mid-campaign because it '*didn't play well on the doorstep.*' This phrasing was also replicated in the media (Jenkins, 2010) and it had evidently become a popular wisdom or shorthand for an accepted phenomenon, worthy of future interrogation.

Figure 1: Chronology of the Big Society agenda's development across the 2010 general election timeframe



A number of interviewees tied this ‘hot potato moment’ to the Michael Gove Radio Four Today interview on 3rd May, although arguably this represented a last-minute return to a policy quietly discarded earlier in the campaign.

I can remember hearing Michael Gove, I think it was, on Radio 4 being questioned about Big Society, it just was appalling, he was not coherent, he was not clear, he completely fuffed it ... given the audience - not necessarily the size of the audience, but the influence that that audience has - [to] go on at the prime slot and completely cock up their central campaign for the election was crazy. And they found it very difficult to communicate what their ideology was around Big Society and they didn't do it very well. (infrastructure agency)

One infrastructure organisation described how, when Conservative contacts had approached them to discuss how the Big Society wasn't working in constituencies as ‘a campaign device,’ they had suggested that the party was failing to give it a strong narrative hook and needed to illustrate it with tales of ‘inspiring people.’ A more common line among interviewees was:

I think that the Conservative leadership got the message quite early on in the campaign that the Big Society theme was one to, not to push forward too much, you know, I think they must have had feedback that it wasn't really playing very well, you know, at meetings and on the doorsteps and so on. (media commentator)

The Big Society, being a point of obvious linguistic distinction between the parties, attracted a fair degree of media coverage particularly in the earlier part of the campaign. However, several of our interviewees described it as superficial under any greater scrutiny, and the lack of analysis and explanation devoted to its practical implications (particularly, and perhaps most surprisingly, by Cameron) is likely to have played a part in its rapid fall from the agenda.

Several interviewees welcomed the onset of a debate about the Big Society, hoping that it might prompt deeper discussions about the third sector's future role. Realistically, as one infrastructure organisation put it, a prevalent feeling in the sector was that ‘that's the next debate to be had’, on the basis that the necessity of addressing the deficit meant that whoever formed the next government would need to reassess the role of the State. The same interviewee suggested Labour would be likely to frame this in terms of ‘co-production.’

A number of third sector organisations we spoke to had been consulted by the Conservatives in their development of the Big Society, and were happy to provide their expertise on what the sector could offer – while noting that this advice was distinct from a wholesale endorsement of the policy, and warning of the danger of community groups becoming used as ‘a political football.’ One of the community organising groups interviewed, which post-election the Conservatives were engaged in discussions with about how to train their “neighbourhood army” of community organisers, demonstrated a shrewd awareness of how they could make shared agendas work for them:

So they don't particularly mind where these seeds are sown, which is fine for us because we do and we know the cities we'd like to go to where we already have a presence and people would welcome us and where there is a little bit of money being raised, because to do this you've got to raise money, not from the government either. So, in this instance, the Big Society would help pay for the training of the volunteer community leaders, but

not for the core organising that goes on and we still have to raise the money for that. While that suits our needs, it suits them because they would be training.

Managing the deficit

The knowledge that whoever won the election would be charged with making difficult spending decisions tempered the development of potentially unviable financial commitments over the election period. Simultaneously, this opened up new possibilities for the sector in terms of public sector reform, an area which for some time had been high on the Conservative's agenda, as it had been for ACEVO. However, while the economy and possibility of a double-dip recession was an issue of central concern, all parties avoided getting into detailed and potentially electorally unpopular discussions about how they planned to manage the deficit - decisions which the Institute of Fiscal Studies (2010) stressed were inevitable for whoever formed the next government. Consequently, the third sector's potential role in public sector reform was only discussed in the vaguest of senses. One infrastructure organisation was pragmatic that this approach was inevitable during an election, and remained optimistic that the debate would open up in the post-election period:

I think it's good that that's on the agenda, because at least whoever wins the election, there will be some reflection on what that might mean and I think it's opened up the debate about the different roles the sector might play in a reshaped state.

The issue here is that these debates have an ongoing narrative, and whether they are played out during election time or not is more broadly irrelevant, particularly in the case of the deficit debate which is unavoidable over the longer-term.

In a secondary sense, the knowledge of the deficit coloured every debate:

it was a weird election because even from the broader, kind of, politics, it's almost like everyone was afraid to propose anything big because of there being no money, you know. And politicians were no different, you know, it was almost like their tendency to, kind of, promise the earth was reined in because they're almost viewed as irresponsible if they're making, you know, commitments that just weren't going to happen because of the budget crisis. And I think that was reflected a bit in the charity campaigning as well. (support organisation)

Constitutional issues

Before the general election had even been called, polls were already suggesting that a hung parliament was a likely outcome. Since this had last occurred in Britain in 1974 and was an unknown phenomenon to much of its population, significant media attention was devoted during the 2010 campaign to exploring the nuances of the UK's electoral system and its alternatives, the consequences of a hung parliament, and the likely intentions of the Liberal-Democrats in such a scenario. A common line taken in the media at this time was that the public would not accept a (Labour) party into government that came third in terms of the percentage of overall votes but maintained a majority of seats, an outcome that the polls suggested was likely for much of the campaign. This of course may have been a tactical argument designed to dilute the Labour vote rather than a genuine constitutional concern.

One consequence of the pronounced focus on constitutional issues in the 2010 general election, foregrounded in the knowledge of an uncertain election result, was a likely dilution of political debate amongst parties whose leeway for risk-taking was of an unknown quantity. It is likely that this hindered the possibility of more fundamental questions about the sector's future from being addressed.

Re-orientation of the agenda

The movement of the agenda away from issues which interviewees felt were important matters for debate, often towards more superficial issues, led to a rising sense of dissatisfaction with the campaign which, after the initial structuring influence of the party manifestos, soon took on a momentum of its own. A political representative commented:

I think it's rather a shame that so much else got squashed during that time, it was an unusual election campaign to be a candidate on. On the doorstep, one of the big issues were the leaders' debates. And the economy. And I think, alongside that, lots of other issues got pushed to one side.

The leadership debates, whereby David Cameron, Gordon Brown and Nick Clegg took part in themed live studio debates over the course of three weeks, provided a new feature of electoral campaigning in the UK and one more comparable to US presidential elections. They were preceded in late March, by an 'Ask the Chancellors' debate. They arguably focused attention and broader debate more on the party leaders than may have occurred otherwise, provided the impetus for 'Cleggmania', and became the focus of sustained polling activity analysing which leader was considered to have won each debate. For a couple of weeks in the middle of the campaign, and following reportedly rocketing personal ratings, Nick Clegg sat in the media spotlight, being variously compared to Churchill, Obama and even Jesus (Lever, 2010). There obviously remains significant post-election analysis to be done here, since the leadership debate polls put Clegg's popularity at a level that was not replicated in general election voting.

Interviewees were generally dismissive of the leadership debates, regarding them primarily as a distraction from the kind of detailed policy discussion likely to cover third sectoral issues, and concentrating on soundbite politics, the '*lowest common denominator*' (infrastructure organisation), and controversy - all aspects which contrasted with the campaigning strategies adopted by the sector. One infrastructure organisation described the artificial arena of the leadership debates in terms of an often unhelpful distraction:

it's very much angled towards putting the politicians on the spot, really, you know, it's all geared for TV and, you know, it's a very simple, kind of, bludgeoning agenda, really. You know, it's basically putting somebody's arm behind their back and saying, "You do agree with us, don't you?" in front of lots of people. So you know, I think that does kind of capture the headlines.

Another infrastructure organisation felt that this recourse to personality politics was unhelpful in the sense of dumbing down the important issues and '*can create problems in terms of trying to intervene in the debate.*' Others felt the leadership debates were of negligible significance to the sector's campaign, since they weren't creating stories that were likely to be competing with each other for

space, but that they may in fact have prompted a mild political interest amongst people who otherwise would not have engaged in the election. In terms of third sector content, this was more or less absent from the leadership debates, and Cameron had already stopped name-checking the Big Society by the first one on home affairs, where it might naturally have sat.

One substantive surprise addition to the 2010 electoral debate was the rise of the community agenda and the Citizens UK ‘fourth debate’, which had a late influence on the flavour of discussion. This was unexpected in that although painstakingly building up relationships in, and links with, a range of communities over twenty years, nationally Citizens UK were not regarded as part of the mainstream third sector (and nor would they define themselves in these terms), and indeed were stylistically quite unusual. Influenced by the methods of the Chicagoan political activist Saul Alinsky (Horwitt, 1992)⁷ they have sought to express the collective agenda of locally rooted groups such as churches, mosques and trade unions. Their work has been especially focused on building community power and training organisations to become politically confident. Their success in doing so is reflected in their ability to regularly sustain the critical mass of events like the 4th May assembly, when an estimated 2,500 were in attendance.

A number of factors came together during the last week of the campaign to focus interest on the Citizens UK event. Staged just days before polling day, it was covered by a number of key media commentators – including Allegra Stratton of *The Guardian* and Paul Mason of *Newsnight*. The Citizens UK debate was interesting in that, if the initial post-election period is more broadly indicative, it appears to have at least partly driven the community organising agenda onto the mainstream. Community engagement represented a dimension of sectoral debate which had been little anticipated and whose complexity makes it difficult to push forward within a traditional policy framework. The Citizens UK assembly captured the media’s attention in that it involved a late impressive performance from Gordon Brown (Stratton, 2010), who by this point had been more or less written off as unable to compete in a highly-stylised field, and perhaps then appealed to a sense of compelling narrative twist or the underdog triumphing. Coming directly after the exaggeratedly formal leadership debates, it also provided the appearance of being less stage-managed and more emotionally-driven, an aspect likely to appeal to the media seeking a dramatic conclusion to the general election.

Contest’s style

Considering the dominance of personality in the campaign, it was perhaps surprising how marginal a role David Cameron, the eventual prime minister of the Coalition, played in proceedings. Style predominated in the leadership debates, which were analysed in terms of features like suits and leaders’ ability to parrot back questioners’ names:

You know, I just thought [sighs], is this what we’ve come to. This is like it’s becoming X Factor, this is not about voting for a coherent set of policies, and even the messages that they were sending out didn’t seem to resonate with the audiences. It was all about style, and how they looked, and how they sounded, and how they, you know, responded.
(infrastructure organisation)

As noted at the beginning of this section, election time provides political discussions that are somewhat artificial and distinctive from those at other times, in part because it is expected that

debates will have a neatly containable narrative and conclusion. During the general election, politicians' concern to be seen as listening to all interests, combined with *purdah*, likely stifled debates with the sector, while simultaneously the leadership debates exaggeratedly pitched parties against one another and made consensus ("I agree with Nick") a matter of incredulity. So, effectively, election time presents a theatre of relationships that has little to do with their more typical style.

The Conservative Party entered the election period with a substantially greater campaigning fund than either the Labour or Liberal-Democrat Parties, which informed the style of campaign it was able to run. The Conservatives relied much more heavily on high-profile campaign posters, while unofficial Internet campaigns sought to readdress the balance by providing doctored parodied versions of Conservative campaign posters⁸, which supporters could easily link to their Facebook profiles and Twitter feeds. From the Conservative point of view, one of the problems with this apparent discrepancy was that it was difficult to authoritatively make the case for financial austerity at the same time as running a flashy campaign.

The role of the media

As one infrastructure organisation claimed, during election time the sector concentrated their efforts on engaging with local press, both because that was where campaigning candidates were based but also because by this point only the most '*eye-catching*' of campaigns had a chance of achieving national recognition. In a point reiterated by several interviewees, under normal circumstances one or occasionally two broadsheet newspapers could be relied upon to provide some sectoral analysis, but during election time these expectations had to be suspended as papers became increasingly '*reactive*,' chased the most topical stories, and third sector issues were '*squeezed out*':

I mean obviously ones are more sympathetic, like The Guardian and The Times and so on. The Guardian in particular, obviously, are much more sympathetic and much more likely to go into the detail. But clearly all media, whether it be third sector or national, will tend to focus on what's news, what's unusual, what's controversial, so that's always a natural bias really. (infrastructure organisation)

The same interviewee commented that in order to take existing success further, achieving coverage in newspapers like *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun* was necessary. These were not known for their third sector coverage or analytical capacity but were nevertheless agenda-setting and represented a missing piece in any genuine media strategy. Where the organisation in question recognised that they had a rather complex policy message for this media format, they were developing a tactic of telling stories which vividly illustrated their work.

Another infrastructure organisation complained that when the media sought out commentary from the sector it tended to be the most high-profile umbrella agencies they went to – notably NCVO and ACEVO – which was '*lazy journalism*' and reproduced a particular viewpoint. *The Guardian's Society* section came in for approval for its balanced approach from several quarters, for example, in organising roundtable sessions with a range of third sector representatives. A media commentator also noted that particular third sector organisations had developed a reputation for being more or less '*outspoken*' or '*guarded*' when the press came to them for a quote, and this naturally affected the way that some journalists worked and their future communication strategies.

Another issue was that where third sector issues got picked up, they tended to be those looking at a very specific and containable policy platform, such as Gift Aid or the Lottery, and there was a reportage gap in terms of more complex issues, such as collective action, which meant that a whole raft of policy matters simply never made the agenda. Given that collective action is fundamental to the Big Society concept, this would at least partly explain the reluctance of a large portion of the media to engage with the policy during the campaign. One infrastructure organisation described media commentary as *'inherently simplistic'* and complained that,

We've got a very, sort of, warped bubble of media anyway, which is obviously what drives a lot of the election messaging.

The same interviewee explained the (comparatively huge) media impact of the Citizens UK rally, which was fundamentally concerned with community action, in terms of its complying with some of the golden rules for press interest during election time. That is, it focused on personalities, whom it put 'on the spot,' concentrating on sound bites attained in a limited timeframe. Stylistically, Citizens UK had executed a very different kind of event to those more typically associated with the sector, offering its agenda a hot democratic resonance which had obvious press appeal and allowing it to transcend the perceived difficulties of presenting a complex subject matter.

More peripheral third sector interest stories during the election included analysis on the intake of new MPs from voluntary sector backgrounds (Donovan, 2010b) and Gordon Brown's revelation during a GMTV interview that if he lost the election he would likely seek work within the sector.

It was generally agreed that *The Guardian* had provided a reasonable commentary on the Big Society, as had Radio Four, and there was also some trade press interest in how well the sector was complying with political campaigning restrictions (see section 2). But these were media sources whose audiences were already engaged with third sector issues, and not ones introducing them during the election period as a policy concern. As one media commentator complained, to some extent the specialist press had to work to create their own stories (as opposed to providing a simple commentary) because during this election time *'there was not a lot of high profile stuff happening there.'*

Section 6: New political realities

In a marked difference from recent general elections, on 7th May the country woke up not to news of how its government was to be formed but to political uncertainty and intrigue which lasted into the next week. The result of the 2010 general election was (as predicted by the exit polls) a hung parliament, giving the Conservatives 306 seats, Labour 258, Liberal-Democrats 57 and other parties 28 (the election in one seat was postponed). This presented a rather different and more disappointing scenario for the Liberal-Democrats than had been anticipated during the campaign, but simultaneously left them kingmakers as they entered into negotiations with both the Conservative and Labour Parties. Cross-country trends varied significantly and dramatically (Baston, 2010), suggesting that local factors had an unusually strong influence on voting, perhaps in reaction to the media's exaggerated focus on

national personalities. *The Guardian* described it as an election in which 'exceptions ruled' (Glover, 2010), citing conflicting swings to Labour and the Conservatives in Scotland and England respectively, the election of the country's first Green MP in Brighton, and huge turnout variation across the country.

NAVCA used this quiet time, when no one party was able to command a majority, to make the point that strong political leadership was needed to ensure the protection of local voluntary action. *Third Sector Online* spoke to key third sector spokespeople to get a feel for the prevailing mood, and found it mixed, with DSC concerned that a lack of leadership would lead to gridlock and delays in funding agreements, and ACEVO commenting on the challenge of lobbying in the context of a hung parliament (Jump, 2010). ACEVO also provided on-line post-election briefing at this time, analysing the election, and outlining likely outcomes and their implications for its members. On the content of the electoral agenda more generally, ACEVO reflected optimistically that, "the election has marked a real renaissance for our sector."⁹ NCVO were concerned to hold back on voicing an opinion on how the sector stood until the political situation had been clarified. Meanwhile, the Conservative and Liberal-Democrat spokespersons, Nick Hurd and Jenny Willott emphasised the opportunities for successful cross-party working on third sector policy, for example, in simplifying Gift Aid and reforming public sector delivery (Wiggins, 2010b).

By 11th May, it became clear that an operational Lib-Lab coalition would be vulnerable on a numerical basis, and Gordon Brown resigned as prime minister, rapidly followed by David Cameron forming a Coalition Con-Lib government with Nick Clegg as his deputy. The Coalition Agreement set out policy detail on: deficit reduction, spending review, tax measures, banking reform, immigration, political reform, pensions and welfare, education, relations with the EU, civil liberties and the environment. The joint public face of the Coalition was immediately reiterated the following day as Cameron and Clegg held their first press conference in the Downing Street gardens. The following day purdah was lifted, and NCVO immediately called for a third sector summit to be held with Government to discuss the implications of their new policy programme (Plummer and Wiggins, 2010).

The period of uncertainty before the new government was formed marked a break in the overall tone of the campaign, in that it was the one time when Conservative MPs broke rank in a Cameron backlash. It is common knowledge that the Cameron leadership masks an ideological split within his party which he had thus far been able to pragmatically manage for electoral gain, but his inability to achieve an outright win under the most promising electoral conditions for the Conservatives in years led several from his party to openly criticise his campaign. At least one senior MP expressed discontent at having been asked to sell the Big Society message at a time when it was still too "woolly" to engage voters, and there appears to have been a lack of research on how the policy was likely to play with the electorate (Helm, 2010).

Of particular note to the third sector was the loss of the former Minister for the Third Sector's (Angela Smith) seat amid redrawn boundaries, but also the extended period during which it was unclear whether the OTS would survive. Indeed, it took from the 11th May start of the Coalition Government until 18th May and the very end of the Cabinet appointments for the newly rebranded Office for Civil Society to be announced, housed in the Cabinet Office under Francis Maude, and with Nick Hurd (formerly the Shadow) as Minister for Civil Society. Nick Hurd's new role was downgraded

to the level of Parliamentary Secretary, compared to his predecessor who had been a Minister of State, although it is not yet clear if this reflects a deprioritisation of the department or the move is part of broader government rationalisations. The process was undoubtedly unsettling for the sector and was somewhat counterintuitive following the priority given to the sector in the manifesto, as explained by one infrastructure organisation:

I found that all very strange. I mean, I don't know, I'd love to know the reasoning and the, sort of, what happened behind the scenes because, you know, you wonder whether, could they not decide who it should be, did he not actually want it, was it because it's actually, sort of, as big as they say it is, you know, there was this feeling that is the Big Society stuff just rhetoric or do they actually mean it? And will they, kind of, stick with it based on the, kind of, election result and the fact that, you know, even a lot of Conservatives aren't, apparently haven't been blown away by the whole thing?

The stated preliminary priorities of the Office for Civil Society were to facilitate the process of running charitable organisations, to improve the sector's resourcing to strengthen its independence, and to assist sectoral-state working relationships. At this time, Francis Maude and Nick Hurd sent an open letter to the sector reaffirming these priorities, that they intended to pursue within the context of the Big Society agenda, and acknowledging the fiscal pressures which would challenge this task. A civil servant commented that the subtext of the letter was:

we need this thing now because we need to find ways of changing social make up and because this sector has this interesting and political place in the relationship between citizens and the State.

Almost immediately, David Cameron chaired a Big Society meeting in the Cabinet Office, re-launching the programme with a selected group of community leaders that sparked much discussion about how pre-existing TSOs and umbrella agencies would fare under Big Society politics. Several interviewees felt that the invitation list provided a thinly-veiled message regarding the (low) value it placed on infrastructure organisations, combined with a signal that the government was serious about engaging with grass-roots organisations. On 18th May the Coalition government published its *Building the Big Society* document, outlining their position (Cabinet Office, 2010b).

One third sector support organisation commented with surprise at the Conservative Party's persistence in pursuing the Big Society agenda, and made sense of it thus:

they really ramped it up and they're sticking with it as a, kind of, central theme, rather than - they could have, kind of, baulked at the unpopularity, or baulked in the face of the cynicism about it. But it's almost like they haven't had any choice so they're stuck with it.

However, its endurance is perhaps less surprising in terms of the Big Society representing one of the few policy areas on which Conservative-Liberal consensus was unproblematic. Indeed the Big Society has otherwise been described as '*traditional liberal localism*' and '*an ideological basis for a new liberal conservatism*' (Jenkins, 2010).

On 20th May, the Coalition Government published their five-year programme for government¹⁰, using the tagline 'Freedom, Fairness, Responsibility' - discourse borrowed from both Coalition parties' manifestos, and overlapping with Labour's. This document focused less on the Big Society and more

on a range of cross-cutting and disparate third sector issues, including those giving individuals and communities greater rights to intervene in local affairs.

The sector's response to the Coalition government

In this section, we reflect on the new set of political alignments and their implications for the sector in terms of: key policy actors' responses to the Coalition government; the rebranding of the sector; how the new arrangements are beginning to impact on post-election campaigning; and early reactions from the sector on how they now expect to see government policy on the third sector change.

Amid knowledge of the spending cuts likely to impact on the sector, NAVCA, talking on Directory of Social Change's website, emphasised the importance of the sector *remaining "principled and consistent"* in its dealings with government, and of not being afraid to challenge them when necessary in the months ahead. Pragmatically, they also spoke about the need to *"pick our fights"* and to act as *"respectful partners"* working with the public sector in order to best represent members' interests. They acknowledged the *"uncertainty"* facing the sector, and speculated that there would be more impetus to *"collaborate"* and *"compromise"* in facing the future's challenges, but that the Big Society would also provide *"opportunity"*. Around the same time, DSC published an online guide to the likely debates for the sector over the next few months, which included the intricacies of the impending spending cuts, payment by results, a Big Society Bank, changes to the Lottery, and local government reform. And NCVO, now out of purdah, published its post-election briefing paper, outlining key issues similar to those identified by DSC: the Big Society, funding, local government and public services. Meanwhile, Social Enterprise journal summarised the verdicts of key third sector leaders on the new government as *'an opportunity with an air of caution'* (Hampson, 2010). And Civil Society reported on sector leaders' expressed willingness to work with Cameron in order to make the Big Society a success.¹¹

By 24th May the Treasury had announced £6.2b of cuts, immediately followed by the Queen's Speech on 25th outlining the Coalition government's programme. Some of the likely impact of the Coalition's spending cuts was clarified in Osborne's first (Emergency) Budget on 22nd June, but the sector is awaiting further detail to come in October's Comprehensive Spending Review. The June Budget confirmed a rise in VAT to 20%, a 25% cut to departmental spending (excluding Health and Aid), an increase in the income tax threshold, levy on the banks, multiple changes to benefit eligibility, and a freeze on Child Benefit (HM Treasury 2010). The Department for Communities and Local Government faces one of the largest of these spending cuts - £780m in 2010-11 – which poses a number of questions about how the Big Society will be funded. One interviewee commented that thus far, the Coalition government's third sector policy platform has been influenced largely by Conservative thinking, with a nod to the Liberal-Democrats regarding tax on Lottery sales.

charitytimes reported a sense of unease amongst the sector at the Emergency Budget (Holt, 2010b), predicted to hit vulnerable groups the hardest, and by increasing the VAT burden on charities seriously raising the financial pressure they faced. There were concerns that the VAT rise would hit smaller charities disproportionately, which attracted criticism from the Institute of Fundraising and Charities Aid Foundation. This response was in contrast to the more guardedly supportive response that the Labour government's March Budget had received (Holt, 2010a). In July the NCVO's Charity

Forecast Survey reported that voluntary sector organisations' confidence was at an all-time low regarding their financial prospects, and their chief executive voiced concern on their website about the *"tidal wave of cuts about to hit the sector."*

The NCVO's Research Department described the Emergency Budget as *'the single biggest retrenchment in fiscal policy in most people's living memory'* (Wilding, 2010), making projected cuts to the sector of £3.2 billion a year spread over 40,000 organisations. Larger TSOs were predicted at being at greatest risk, as were employment and training organisations – which drew an average 70% of their funding from statutory sources. NCVO have since launched a 'crowdsourcing the cuts' project to monitor this process¹². New Philanthropy Capital added that charities doing preventative work would be more vulnerable than those working on a crisis basis, as were those that worked on soft skills (such as confidence-building) rather than more measurable outcomes (Yeowart, 2010). In response to the growing sense of unease in the sector, ACEVO launched its Cuts Watch website¹³ in late June, *"to provide guidance and support to third sector organisations through public spending cuts."* In early July, NAVCA's chief executive took the opportunity of addressing the East Midlands Funding Advice Conference to talk about the challenges for the sector of responding to the spending cuts, and in early August NAVCA developed pages on their website devoted to helping members *"navigate the cuts landscape."*

The rebranding of the sector

Part of the new politics has been a very conscious change in terminology across government, which has set up a new set of challenges for the sector's campaigning. The almost immediate rebranding of the department from the Office of the Third Sector to the Office for Civil Society is one example of this, and signals a shift in emphasis in the government's priorities. Reaction among our interviewees was mixed, albeit generally cautious:

there's a whole different lexicon compared to the last government that everybody's learning so it's still in that, kind of, getting to grips with what's happening to it I suppose.
(support organisation)

The point was made several times that Nick Hurd had been building up to a rebrand while in opposition, which made the process inevitable, and that he had repeatedly made the point that 'third sector' implied a prioritising that reflected badly on the sector. Nick Hurd was quickly quoted as saying that the term 'third sector' had been banned across the Coalition government because *'the boss really doesn't like it'* (Mason, 2010a)¹⁴. It is unclear how tongue-in-cheek this comment was intended to be, but it has already been much reproduced, and a crib-sheet apparently issued to civil servants on the language of the Lib-Con government has been reproduced on-line¹⁵. One positive effect of the rebrand was felt to be that it could make sectoral issues more accessible to the public:

you talk to a normal person in the street and they go "What? What's third sector?" I mean, people know what charities are, they know what, you know, a community group is.
(support organisation)

This interviewee countered that if it was accessibility at stake in the rebrand, then ‘civil society’ was not any more transparent a term. The support organisation described the disconnection between the language of the policy world and their customers, a viewpoint which bears some attention since the 2010 election saw the entry into mainstream discourse of the term “policy wonk” to disparage politicians. Relatedly, DSC recently published a position piece on their website¹⁶, in which they made the case for charities to ‘*speak clearly, not in code*’, or risk becoming unaccountable to the often vulnerable groups with which they work, and that charities’ closeness to government risked blurring this priority.

Aware of the importance of discourse, NAVCA has recently been working on changing the language it routinely uses¹⁷, in favour of formats that more accurately describe what they are conveying. For example, they have made a decision to disregard the term ‘infrastructure organisation’ and replace it with ‘local support and development organisations’, and to stop using ‘third sector’ and ‘third sector organisations’ and instead talk about ‘voluntary and community action’ and ‘voluntary organisations and community groups’. The hope is that this will improve understanding of the work they do, which they see as being crucial as they work to counter public spending cuts. It is likely too that the movement reflects recognition of the falling out of favour of the language of infrastructure in the new political landscape.

Several interviewees dismissed the rebranding of the Department by the Coalition government as a peripheral issue:

I think most people think it's all a bit of a joke to be honest, and no one's really that bothered what the name is (infrastructure organisation).

Comments were made by another two infrastructure organisations that the process was ‘*tiresome*’ or ‘*superficial*.’ Two organisations were somewhat concerned about the sector’s apparent willingness to be defined by the government of the day, and one spoke extensively about the impracticality of a single terminology being able to cover the diversity of the sector.

I think it's entirely inappropriate and disrespectful. I don't see the private sector having a makeover or, you know, the State being called something other than the State, so why should our sector be renamed by somebody else? I think that's a classic, kind of, imposition of hegemony really. But it's what you come to expect and I think, obviously, every Minister, every government wants to see its particular badging and branding there. (infrastructure organisation)

For this organisation, it was clear that the term ‘third sector’ had been an unsatisfactory one within which to locate themselves, and there was a similar sense of malcontent with the term amongst several of those we interviewed, at the same time as they more pragmatically accepted its value as a heuristic device. Perhaps one of the most frustrating aspects of the naming and renaming of the sector was that these political decisions were removed from the sector, which never got the opportunity to engage in its meaningfulness. There was undoubtedly also a sense in which the political movement on who was included and prioritised in the definition of the sector was unsettling. However, even when terminology was apparently uncontested, it was clear that it was being employed

variably. For example, a civil servant commented that those on different sides of the political spectrum applied the name 'social enterprise' to very divergent kinds of organisations.

There was also concern about who language excludes, and at the point of writing it was not clear exactly what this might imply, although community groups appeared to be more easily encompassed in 'civil society' than infrastructure organisations. On another level, 'civil society' was felt to encompass a broader range of institutions, including trade unions and universities, whose characteristics were very diverse. It was noted that particular organisations had been more attuned to the importance of linguistics in the run-up to the election – such as NCVO, which had already had the 'civil society' debate – and that this might position them more favourably in the new political climate than those who clung rigidly to the terminology of 'third sector'. But a more general point was that language was imperfect and the naming of the sector was a debate that could run indefinitely. As Alcock points out, the debate is not comparing like with like, since 'civil society' is a theoretical concept '*focusing on how we conceive of relations rather than how we classify organisations*' (Alcock, 2010d, p.388); and the third sector has provided a unifying framework – 'a strategic unity' – for a diverse body of organisations and interests, around which policy has been mobilised (Alcock, 2010b).

Post-election campaigning

Given the relatively high degree of political consensus on the sector, as documented in the parties' manifestos, combined with the often meticulously-planned electoral campaigning of leading TSOs and umbrella agencies, it seems reasonable to assume that the sector has had a good campaign and it made large inroads into the electoral agenda in comparison to previous elections. One media commentator described it as, '*as good as could be expected, I think there are no great surprises or anything,*' and this was a fairly widespread perception amongst those we interviewed. The 2010 general election was clearly not won or lost on the third sector, and issues like the economy and personality dominated the agenda and public interest; but in many senses it has been a watershed election for the sector.

A number of the organisations we spoke to had explicit plans in motion for the post-election period, when they hoped to translate the working relationships developed during the campaign into political capital – for example, organising briefings for new MPs and Ministers. At least two organisations were concerned that in the light of the Coalition, they needed to develop better links with Liberal-Democrat representatives, and it was only just beginning to emerge who key contacts would be on third sector issues. It was also felt to be important to engage with organisations and individuals likely to hold influence under the Coalition government, such as the Big Society Network, and with a new set of think-tanks and Special Advisors.

The post-electoral period will be crucial in determining whether electoral impacts can be translated into policy outcomes, and as yet there is little certainty about the campaigning methods and organisational styles that will prove most productive in forging lasting working relationships with the Coalition government. Traditionally, the Conservatives have been less comfortable with the campaigning style of the third sector, and it is unclear whether this attitude will or has changed. Faced with these new political realities, interviewees variously described their organisations as '*incredibly*

nervous, *'apprehensive'*, *'very unsettled'* and *'suspicious'* - in particular, of the Conservatives' motives in implementing their Big Society policy platform, and how infrastructure organisations' roles might be supplanted by the Big Society Network and would need to find ways of reinventing themselves. However, not everyone felt pessimistic in this new context; at least one infrastructure organisation felt the community agenda offered them new possibilities to influence policy:

we feel that the agenda's moving our way and it just gives me encouragement to say what we've been saying consistently a lot louder.

Another suggested that launching a new policy programme such as the Big Society would necessitate the government being open to new ways of listening, which the sector could plug into. Organisations already used to working together are likely to share their knowledge of successful lobbying at industry summits, meetings and conferences. One infrastructure organisation stressed that co-operative working with other TSOs was also essential in terms of creating a credible opposition, should this become necessary:

if we come out rather than being picked off one by one, we need to come out cohesively as a wider third sector, kind of, summit of leaders, coming out and saying we collectively believe that this government is getting it wrong.

Indeed, it was reported that NAVCA and NCVO, amongst others, have already discussed the possibility of merging should it become necessary to survive funding cuts (Mason, 2010b).

More broadly, even the more hesitant or apparently disenfranchised organisations were keen to engage with the new government as early as possible to ensure that their interests were heard and that they maintained a policy influence. As seen above, sector leaders were careful to emphasise this willingness in the media in the immediate aftermath of the election result, positioning themselves sympathetically to the new government. ACEVO's chief executive's Big Society speech on 27th May¹⁸ provided an early example of the sector attempting to kick-start this process of re-engagement and demonstrate their willingness to respond to new challenges. And previous to this, ACEVO had written to the Prime Minister extending their 'Big Offer' to work as government partners in reforming public services.

A lot of this post-election re-engagement work will involve building new relationships between organisations' chief executives and Nick Hurd to strengthen the OCS-sector link, and several interviewees reported that informal contacts were already under development. One infrastructure organisation commented that with the change of government there had also been a change in governing style and that Cameron's concentration of power was more comparable to Blair's, based around an inner-circle – not all of whom were elected representatives - which posed new challenges for the sector, *'because they're completely hidden and they're completely inaccessible.'*

At the same time, the context of spending cuts meant that the relationship between the sector and government was likely to be a rather different one in this Parliament, and campaigning techniques would need to adapt to this reality:

what we may be dealing with fairly soon is a Coalition that's much more limited in its power by Parliament and its own back benches, that has no money and that might find that its lack of money starts to conflict with some of the rhetorics, say around Big Society. And that, for both of those reasons could be quite unpopular. Erm, and I think that will require us to speak in a different way to government and, and to, you know, when we're addressing ourselves to them, [to] be careful about the degree to which we embrace what they're saying. (infrastructure organisation)

Consequently this organisation saw its future role shaping up less in terms of the supportive partner it had been in previous years, and more as a 'critical friend'.

Expected policy change

A major perception was that the Coalition government would invoke deeper and more rapid spending cuts than would have been pursued by a Labour government. As one infrastructure organisation put it, '*clearly, a lot of people in the sector are concerned about the impact on their beneficiaries, but also on their own funding.*' And until the Comprehensive Spending Review in the autumn, speculation on the detail of these cuts is likely to provoke further sectoral discomfort. NCVO have already predicted that cuts will disproportionately affect larger TSOs (Wilding, 2010), and the early weeks of the Coalition government have sparked conjecture that the infrastructure organisations will be less in favour and 'starved of funds' in a Big Society environment. As one infrastructure organisation pointed out, this would be a fairly easy cut for the government to make since third sector umbrella agencies have a low public profile:

I think they can potentially hack us, take a knife to us. And it's not going to bring people out in the streets in the same way that, you know, the closure of a school or hospital would.

While its broader policy agenda remains unclear, the Big Society looks set to feature as the centrepiece of the Coalition government's programme, and in Liverpool on 19th July Cameron launched one of a series of four¹⁹ "vanguard communities", amid considerably more press interest than the idea attracted during the election campaign²⁰. In his speech, Cameron provided further detail on his policy platform, explaining that there were three strands to the Big Society agenda: social action, public service reform and community empowerment; and that three main techniques would be employed to "galvanise" the process: decentralisation, transparency and financial provision (via the Big Society Bank). He defended this vision against accusations that the Big Society was a cover for saving public sector spending, amid the context of his Communities Secretary Eric Pickles stating that the government was "*unashamed about getting more for less*" and Ed Miliband comparing the Big Society to Victorian philanthropy (Watt, 2010).

The Guardian raised concerns that when they spoke to local partners in Cameron's chosen "vanguard communities" that they had a limited understanding of how the process would work and welcomed further clarity (Williams and Syal, 2010). The elaboration of the Big Society plans also drew criticism from Unite on financial grounds, describing it as *an 'intellectually flawed pipe dream'* (Holt, 2010c), and the Internet is currently awash with articles and blogs deconstructing the concept. Yet despite this scepticism and its relative failure during the campaign the Big Society apparently remains the fundamental strata of government policy, leading more than one commentator to infer that it has

become a convenient vehicle within which to couch intended spending cuts, offering the carrot of community empowerment. At least one infrastructure organisation interviewed expressed concern that the sector was being *'played: we're expected to create a Big Society but without the resources to do so.'* Partly this was an issue of the Big Society concept having been *'born before the recession'* (infrastructure organisation), and was *'an enormous, ambitious programme'* (civil servant interviewee). Several interviewees explained that they felt the government was seriously underestimating the costs that would be necessary to ensure the success of its centrepiece policy, and that it would probably take up to a year for this reality became apparent. But as a programme in its own right, the Big Society looks set to have multiple implications. A public official commented, *'it changes absolutely every area of social policy.'*

One infrastructure organisation, otherwise engaged in a productive dialogue with the Conservatives on Big Society policy, explained their concern (during the election campaign) at how it might be implemented:

But my frustration ... is that they fail to locate community groups and collective community action within their civil society, Big Society agenda, so they go for inspirational individuals, community entrepreneurs or activists, but they don't appreciate that, kind of, ecosystem. Well Nick Hurd has mentioned it, but it's just not, it just feels like a, kind of, placatory holding position and my full expectation is that whatever party is in power [will] not only have to make massive cuts, but will effectively - the status quo position will be to let local authorities have a fairly strong role and not intervene in any meaningful way with third sector ...it's not a Big Society position.

Perhaps the greatest fear from the sector regarding the Big Society, underlined by their exclusion from early policy meetings, was that it overlooked the importance of pre-existing intermediaries and long-standing and trusted relationships:

you do actually need a framework to achieve some of these ambitions, you can't just throw money into communities and expect them to just do it and learn as they go. The risks there are, very significant, so the chain of good practice, the legal advice, you know, the knowledge, the support that Big Society needs is there but they seem to be, kind of, navigating around the current infrastructure. And one of the things that I've heard is that because many of the organisations were too closely associated with the last government - well, surprise, surprise, you know! (infrastructure organisation)

Several infrastructure organisations were concerned that the Big Society Network would seek to reproduce and replicate their role, even while they stood as the Office for Civil Society's strategic partners. However, this would be a complex and long-term process, and if the government pushed ahead with it, they were underestimating the value of their pre-existing resources within the sector:

Actually they need, kind of, funnels and, you know, we're not umbrellas, in effect we're funnels. We funnel the anger, the frustrations, the ideas, the challenges of the movement and coherently present them to government in a tidy and calm way. And actually if they think they can do without us, then I think they'll soon live to regret that because they will have angry and frustrated and all sorts of people, and they will simply not be able to, you know, separate the wheat from the chaff and they'll be completely overwhelmed. (infrastructure organisation)

Another interviewee, representing a support organisation, described there as being *'this weird kind of mismatch'* with regard to the Big Society between the community organisations who saw themselves as having something to gain from potential outsourcing, and the general public who were *'pretty cynical about it just being about a bunch of mumbo jumbo that's going to attempt to mask the funding cuts.'* Winners in this new policy field were felt to be smaller, community-based organisations that fitted in with what the Big Society Network were looking to promote, social enterprises, and think tanks like Phillip Blond's ResPublica.

Alongside the Big Society, most commentators are expecting to see fairly fundamental public sector reform over the next few years, with a significant role for the third sector. Two interviewees felt that this would involve a greater emphasis on payment-by-results in service delivery.

Clearly, while the new Government continues to unveil and develop its approach to third sector policy, the now opposing Labour Party is undergoing its own realignments. Immediately after the new government was formed Brown resigned from Downing Street, to be replaced as Labour leader after an internal election by the former Minister for the Third Sector, Ed Miliband. And he later appointed Roberta Blackman-Woods as shadow minister. How third sector policy develops under the new leader will clearly be a subject of renewed interest for both the sector and its commentators.

Section 7: Conclusions

Having realised mainstream credibility over the past ten years, the third sector approached the 2010 general election as an opportunity to raise its profile and potential and to push forward its agenda. This it achieved in a cooperative style, enjoying productive relationships with the political parties, and enacting long-term campaigning strategies to ensure that its interests were well understood and represented. The broad political consensus regarding the sector gave it confidence to assume this role, which was validated by the publication of the parties' manifestos and their recognition of the sector. The general election/purdah period was a more complicated and unpredictable time to campaign, when the sector tended to concentrate upon a consolidation and commentary role. Although third sector interests were fundamental to the main political parties' policy programmes, these debates did not translate well into an electoral narrative for the media or general public, and even the central plank of the Conservative's campaign - the Big Society - disappeared from the agenda during the campaign. The sector reserved their campaigning efforts for the post-election period which, seeing a new set of political alignments, has proved a particularly crucial component in this general election.

Third sector organisations developed a range of soft and more measurable indicators during the 2010 election campaign to assess how well their campaigning was going. These included achieving coverage in the trade and mainstream press, gaining named support for specific pledges, and getting their points represented in the party manifestos. The point was made frequently in our research that the sector had enjoyed a good early campaign; that is, that third sector organisations' pre-election campaigning had been consolidated into entering the electoral period with their interests well-represented and understood, but that it was not realistic to expect to maintain this profile during the unusual circumstances and political behaviour of election time. Indeed there was a relative lack of

concrete debate over the course of the election, and third sector issues remained a subtext to much of the discussion.

Although the post-election period is likely to involve significant settling-in for both government and sector, there is already much that can be construed about the success of the sector's campaigning, and organisations have experienced mixed fortunes in terms of making it into parties' manifestos, attracting media coverage, and establishing working relationships with the Coalition government. If a general election can be considered to have winners and losers among the sector, then social enterprise, the community sector, and organisations allied or influential to the new Coalition government, such as the Big Society Network and the think tank ResPublica, have emerged in a positive light. By contrast, early policy developments have made the infrastructure organisations particularly nervous about their future, and spending cuts look set to hit larger, more contract-dependant organisations the hardest.

The broad political consensus regarding the sector that emerged in the party manifestos has been rather differently operationalised in the short period since the general election, with the Conservative Party's third sector policy's distinctive ideological roots becoming increasingly evident. It is clear that post-election and mid-deficit reduction planning, the sector will have an important functional role in the new government's programme, and that long-term policy planning and a maintained emphasis on post-election manoeuvring will inform realignments of the sector. The sector are now in the somewhat unprecedented position of having had a good campaign but, being apprehensive about what happens next, remain unclear on which parts of the sector will enjoy greater favour under the Coalition government. The adaptability of their campaigning techniques and skills in forging working alliances are likely to be called upon now more than ever as they negotiate this new and potentially leaner political territory.

Endnotes

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- ¹ The former Minister for the Third Sector (Angela Smith) was happy to go on the record in order to give space to her unique perspective, and the material from her interview has been presented in this way where relevant, but otherwise it has also been anonymised.
- ² Set to be reduced to 15 by March 2011 (Wiggins, 2010a).
- ³ In response to a request from *Third Sector Online*, the Commission reported that it had received 18 complaints about charities over the period 6th April – 5th May regarding political independence, leading to its opening cases on 16 of these (Plummer, 2010).
- ⁴ Taking into account MPs stepping down, the redrawing of electoral boundaries, and anticipated electoral turnover, the 2010 general election was estimated as producing the largest change in intake since World War II, Prince (2010).
- ⁵ <http://www.acevo.org.uk/Document.Doc?id=575>
- ⁶ The interview took place in mid April.
- ⁷ Saul Alinsky's work has more famously been a leading influence on democratic politicians in the US, most prominently in recent years upon Barack Obama in his formative years; see Slevin (2007).
- ⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/gallery/2010/mar/30/general-election-2010-labour>
- ⁹ <http://bloggerbubb.blogspot.com/2010/05/um.html>
- ¹⁰ http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/409088/pfg_coalition.pdf
- ¹¹ http://www.civilsociety.co.uk/home/election/content/6603/sector_leaders_vow_to_help_cameron_create_his_big_society
- ¹² <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/cuts>
- ¹³ <http://www.cutswatch.org.uk/main/index.php>
- ¹⁴ Interestingly then, Michael Gove used the term 'third sector' in his Radio 4 interview on the Big Society just days before the election.
- ¹⁵ <http://www.i-volunteer.org.uk/newshound/is-civil-society-dead-already/>
In this, the language of 'third sector' was to be replaced by 'voluntary, community groups and social enterprises and the voluntary sector' ; notably not 'civil society'.
- ¹⁶ http://www.dsc.org.uk/NewsandInformation/News/Doyouspeakcharity?dm_i=6S7,3B18,OO3MM,AAZG,1
- ¹⁷ <http://www.navca.org.uk/news/language.htm>
- ¹⁸ <http://www.acevo.org.uk/Document.Doc?id=682>
- ¹⁹ The others are in Sutton, Windsor and Maidenhead, and Eden Valley in Cumbria.
- ²⁰ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/blog/2010/jul/19/politics-live-blog-monday>

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Appendix: Glossary of acronyms

ACEVO	Association of Chief Executives for Voluntary Organisations
CSC	Community Sector Coalition
CSJ	Centre for Social Justice
CPRE	Campaign to Protect Rural England
CRB	Criminal Records Bureau
DSC	Directory of Social Change
ME	Myalgic Encephalomyelitis
MNDA	Motor Neurone Disease Association
MP	Member of Parliament
NAVCA	National Association for Voluntary and Community Activity
NCVO	National Council for Voluntary Organisations
OCS	Office for Civil Society
OTS	Office of the Third Sector
PR	Public Relations
SE	Social Enterprise
SEC	Social Enterprise Coalition
TSO	Third sector organisation
VAT	Value Added Tax

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.

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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'.

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