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

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

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 examine 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 political 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.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

We use the term 'third sector' or refer to 'the sector' as a convenient shorthand. However, as we will seek to demonstrate in this paper, policy language and terminology varies between actors, and contestation over this usage is an important feature of the policy process. The election campaign afforded an opportunity for the political profile of the third sector 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 the pre-election era? These are the questions that we set out to explore in this research project.

The consequence of the relative uncertainty of the election outcome for the third sector was significant. Campaigning and influence could no longer be directed primarily at one, or even 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 do 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; there was always the possibility that they might win after all! At the same time, however, 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. For this reason 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. 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 their stall for future roles and relationships.

In addition to our documentary analysis of the election, key stakeholder interviews covered three main areas:

- the methods and techniques used by third sector organisations to campaign on a day-to-day basis;
- third sector organisations' (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. The full report is therefore split into three parts:

- The build-up to the general election, 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, 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 (6 May).
- The post-election period, 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.

Background

In 2010 the third sector's profile's was markedly more established than in previous elections, but the election 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.

During the 2005–10 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 the chief executives of particularly large service-providing charities, and claiming to speak for 'third sector leaders'; large grant-making bodies; a few large service-providers/charities 'fronted by charismatic leaderships' (2009: 74); and the Charities Aid Foundation. 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.

Pre election

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 being the largest).

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.

Purdah

Following Gordon Brown's announcement on 6 April that the general election would be held a month later on 6 May, the machinery of government immediately went into purdah, transforming the relationship between civil service, political parties and the sector.

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 candidate.¹ NCVO and NAVCA also published on-line campaign guides to support their members. These kinds of resources had been much less accessible to the sector in previous elections. However, a media source commented that it was likely that the guidance had an inhibiting effect on dialogue. Another civil servant 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. 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.

Campaigning strategies

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.

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. These were:

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

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.

Election strategy-building often began with a consultation process involving organisations' members to identify and narrow 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.

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 public agenda (a different priority from making it into party manifestos). An effective strategy in employing this kind of technique was to target party leaders and wait for critical mass to filter down. To some extent, the character of organisations was critical in how campaigning worked best.

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

consequently published these in the months preceding the election period, leaving some time to ensure that they received maximum publicity.

Often infrastructure organisations' best chance of influencing the agenda was to offer a perspective on stories featured during the campaign. 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, and several organisations published reactions and summaries on their websites, examining their relevance to the sector, which were sometimes picked up in the press.

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. 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.

Building relations

There was a need to develop relationships and understanding in advance of the election. 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.

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. 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. 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. 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.

The manifesto method

In 2010, much more so than in previous elections, the third sector was an issue that was up for discussion and which had multiple policy implications. TSOs' manifestos (alternatively titled, 'living

documents', 'a statement of intent', 'election pledges', and even – informally – 'a non-manifesto') were often the product of months of consultation with their 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.

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 to influence party policy and the political manifestos. The style of TSOs' manifestos was diverse and reflected differing perspectives regarding the length and specificity of policy detail considered to be the 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. A few organisations, mindful of the different audiences their manifestos might achieve, produced them in multiple formats.

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. 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.

The party manifestos

The first manifesto to be published, on 12 April, was the Labour Party's *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 its Big Society theme and launched at Battersea Power Station by a 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 14 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’.

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 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. 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’, but of the three manifestos studied the Labour Party’s integration of the third sector into its manifesto was the most thoroughgoing.

The Conservative manifesto appeared to involve some marked similarities on these issues, but framed them rather differently, significantly 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’. The sector was framed in terms of a vehicle for individual responsibility and change. The Conservatives’ 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. Instead of ‘third sector’, 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 a focal ‘Change Society’ 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.

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 defined the government’s relationship to the sector in terms of fairness and the provision of appropriate support. 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 third sector then, enjoyed an unprecedented presence in the political parties' manifestos in 2010. Notably, 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. This unusually high degree of consensus on the importance of the third sector placed it in a somewhat delicate position, since total accord risked its concerns simply not being debated and publicised. 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.

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. 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.

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 parties' 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 significant, positive impact on that organisation's morale and could go a long way towards assuaging other disappointments.

In terms of the third sector, the agenda during the election period included 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. The broader themes which came together to tell the story of the 2010 general election were the (rise and fall of the) Big Society, managing the deficit, constitutional matters, a reorientation of the agenda and stylistic issues. The media played an important role in how these were presented in terms of the political mainstream.

Community agenda

One substantive surprise addition to the 2010 electoral debate was the rise of the community agenda and the Citizens UK 'fourth debate' just days before the election, which had a late influence on the flavour of discussion. This was unexpected in that despite 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)² 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 4 May assembly, when an estimated 2,500 were in attendance.

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 of 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.

Post election

As the results of the 2010 election unfolded, of particular note to the third sector was the loss of the former Minister for the Third Sector (Angela Smith)'s seat amid redrawn boundaries and the extended period during which it was unclear whether the OTS would survive. Indeed, it took from the 11 May start of the Coalition Government until 18 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 Conservative manifesto.

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.

Concluding remarks

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 the government and the 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 from the post-election and mid-deficit reduction planning that 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 is now in the somewhat unprecedented position of having had a good campaign but, being apprehensive about what happens next, remains unclear on which parts of the sector will enjoy greater favour under the coalition government. The adaptability of the sector's campaigning techniques and skills in forging working alliances is likely to be called upon now more than ever as this new and potentially leaner political territory is negotiated.

End notes

¹ In response to a request from *Third Sector Online*, the Commission reported that it had received 18 complaints about charities over the period from 6 April to 5 May regarding political independence, leading to its opening cases on 16 of these (Plummer, 2010).

² 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).

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About the Centre

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

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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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