

Charity, Voluntarism and Philanthropy – New and Redefined Keywords for the Age of Austerity – March 2016

Background and Current Context

In January 2016, a group of thinkers, community activists, current and former charity workers and volunteers came together under the auspices of the Raymond Williams Foundation to attempt to re-define some contemporary Keywords and to create a ‘thought piece’ or essay based on our discussion; *this was* intended to stimulate and also challenge current debates about **charity**, **philanthropy** and **voluntarism**. A fruitful and intense debate, ranging over a whole weekend, *reflecting* much pre-reading, showed that the three words needed to be considered together, though some attempt here is made to uncouple the words, in their historical and contemporary application.

Raymond Williams examines Charity as a keyword in Keywords (1976) but does not himself tackle Philanthropy and Voluntarism. He defines the need for Keywords, his seminal work on language, as being about a problem of vocabulary, with language, *‘like any other social production ... [as] the arena of all sorts of shifts and interests and relations of dominance’* (Williams, 1976/2015, p.15). Words can become philosophically charged and a ‘scraping off’ or cleansing process, through the patina of old meanings and the accretion of more recently acquired meanings, is required to reach the kernel of words and facilitate their reclaiming. The application of keywords is all-important – meanings are contested, both historically and in a contemporary context. For this reason, Williams investigated language and its application and we were moved to use the same approach.

We take as our starting point the Marxist description of ideology as ‘a false understanding of social reality’ (the current Oxford dictionary definition of ideology is uncritical, defining it as a ‘system of ideas and ideals, especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy’). We believe that it is important to attempt to re-examine language as part of a process of consciousness-raising about the structural realities which surround us and impinge on civil society. Therefore, the primary consideration at the root of our concern to understand these words is a desire to consider their usage – politically and socially - in a period when poverty in the United Kingdom has reached new heights. Poverty has become a loaded word ideologically, in the Austerity world of the UK, arguably demonising the poor. In the 2015 election campaign it was used only once by the then-Labour leader Ed Miliband and only in the context of benefits by David Cameron, whose rhetoric presupposes a moral failure in those who find themselves living in poverty and economic inequality. Yet it is a major scourge of our times and the renewed emphasis on charity, philanthropy and voluntarism, and the retreat from state provision, is profoundly political in the context of real and widespread poverty and growing inequity.

Recent Statistics from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Annual Report, MPSE 2015, November 2015) show that the proportion of people who lived in households with an income below the Minimum Income Standard (MIS) increased by nearly a third between 2008/09 and 2012/13. More recently, families have seen the greatest increase in poverty, with at least 8.1 million parents and children now living on an income below what is needed to cover a minimum household budget, up by more than a third from 5.9 million in 2008/09.

Far from the media image of benefits claimants ‘dragging us all down’, the JRF research (November 2015) shows that work does not generally allow people to reach the MIS if they are on the minimum wage, even with in-work benefits such as tax credits. In 2015, many families fell about 15 per cent short of what they need. Many people find themselves in precarious work, without the safety net of contracts, decent terms and conditions of work, and at the whim of both private and public sector employers use people on a freelance or ‘agency’ basis. Those seeking benefits often find themselves sanctioned and without access to any income for periods of time, sometimes for perceived infringements – failing to make a benefit review, for instance - or fall into poverty when benefits cheques do not materialise on time.

Many people currently using food banks fall into these categories and there is a proliferation of foodbanks across the UK. The Trussell Trust – the biggest charitable foodbank provider – maintains a network of 400 foodbanks, offering a minimum of three days’ emergency food and support to people experiencing crisis in the UK. In 2014/15, the Trust gave 1,084,604 three day emergency food supplies to people in crisis. They cite a figure of thirteen million people living below the poverty line in the UK, with individuals going hungry every day for a range of reasons, from benefit delays to receiving an unexpected bill on a low income. As things stand, this contemporary snapshot is unlikely to change significantly in the current political climate, where inequality is deepening.

Civil Society

Our three Keywords all sit beneath the banner of ‘Civil Society’ and it is a phrase much-used to describe voluntary action and the networks and spaces we inhabit and within which we meet outside the state and the marketplace. Michael Edwards, writer and activist and a leading writer on the subject, defines this in 3 ways, in his 2014 book, ‘Civil Society’:

1/ Civil society as **associational life** – This is the space of voluntary association and includes community organisations, sports clubs, NGOs, charities, faith groups, mutual aid and informal networks, and unions. According to Paul Bunyan and John Diamond, this form of civil society includes: *‘Individual acts of kindness, generosity and charitable giving; The work of volunteers in charities up and down the country, for example the numerous food banks set up by local groups in recent years as a response to austerity and food poverty’* (Bunyan and Diamond, 2014, New Statesman, 2-8 May, p.8).

2/ Civil society as **the good society** – Here, civil society is understood as the good society, *‘which encompasses the realm of ideas and competing narratives about the nature of a good society and how it might be achieved’* (Bunyan and Diamond, as above). In this space issues connected with poverty and inequality sit at the heart of debate about what a good society might look like and civil society organisations make a contribution to, and inform the debate, in a number of ways. These organisations include bodies such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation .

3/ Civil society as **the public sphere** – This concept of civil society takes us into the realm of politics. It is the space in which important questions are asked about the nature of social and political change and the ways in which civil society organisations can develop the power and legitimacy to engage in

the public sphere. Whilst current political rhetoric implies that this kind of change is largely consensus-based, marked by increased co-operation and collaboration between the market, the state and civil society, recent experience within the charitable sector shows a very different situation. As Bunyan and Diamond comment:

...."partnership" under New Labour and the "big society" under the Conservative-led coalition both envisaged an ever greater role for civil society and implied a shift in power away from the market and state towards civil society. In reality, the opposite has largely been the case, as neoliberal hegemony, actively promulgated through what one author has referred to as the state-market nexus, has remained firmly entrenched. Through the employment of "managerial technologies" and private sector practices, such as contracting and commissioning, the practices of civil society and third-sector organisations have been significantly impacted upon, involving, among other things, a shift towards service delivery at the expense of other forms of engagement such as advocacy and campaigning' (as above, p. 9,10).

This was a key feature of our discussion, the extent to which charities, and the voluntary sector in general, have taken on the characteristics of business and the state, effectively becoming part of the system rather than sitting in an alternative space from which they can critique and comment - the space of the Lifeworld, as described by the German social theorist and sociologist, Jürgen Habermas. To Habermas, the Lifeworld is 'the informal and unmarketised domains of social life' (Finlayson, 2005, p.51), by which he refers to the Lifeworld as an essential space for social and cultural integration, grounded in communication as its fundamental medium. It represents family, kinship and household, voluntary and community organisations, the political life outside organised parties, the reproduction of culture and tradition, and aspects of the mass media. It is a space for people's everyday encounters, where shared culture and discourse provide a bulwark against destructive dissent and social disintegration but allow for action, critical reflection and even disagreement. It is continually evolving and shifting and refreshing itself, like language, and we cannot place ourselves outside it or remain indifferent to it, as we stand within it as 'communicative actors'.

The voices of dissent are out there, trying to reclaim a charity/voluntary sector which could sit in the space just described but their struggle is perhaps best shown through the example of the National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA), who have recently become an on-line presence only, after 10 years of active campaigning. One of the key strands of their work has been to offer a critique of the increasing 'professionalization' of the work charities do. The fact that many charities have taken on the characteristics of the statutory sector means they no longer offer an alternative ethos - self-determining; client-led - to the establishment of services. In 2012, the NCIA carried out an inquiry into local activism across the UK. This culminated in a Final report published in March 2013 entitled Here We Stand: Inquiry Into Local Activism and Dissent. This approach is central to the philosophy of NCIA. As Bunyan and Diamonds express it, their approach must be seen '*in contradistinction to consensus-based notions of social change ... as being vital to a vibrant and healthy democracy*' – this is illustrated in the following quote from the report: "*Activism without the capacity for dissent will not have sufficient force. Without this capacity, the democratic role of voluntary action (or civil society) is fundamentally undermined. This is already the case for many voluntary and community services co-opted by funding regimes and marketisation. The role of the dissenting activist, of whatever form or style, has now become critical for our collective health and well-being*" (as above, p.11).

This Paper

We take as our starting point historical understandings of charity, philanthropy, voluntarism and aim to bring them into the present day. Our intention is to make clear the current realities of ‘civil society’ and to interpret and critique contemporary heuristics about these words. We need a means of moving beyond a shallow, depoliticised understanding of such important concepts in order that we can create a conceptual framework for better action, contest what is promoted ideologically as ‘common sense’, move away from unthinking jargon and re-order language and meanings in the context of our social reality.

- Altruism

In terms of our process, we began our discussion by critiquing the concept of **altruism**, which we considered initially as a fourth keyword. What we concluded is that altruism is a deeply complex word, denoting, at its best, disinterested and selfless concern for the well-being and welfare of others, and conceived as the opposite of selfishness. It is a traditional virtue in many cultures and a core aspect of various religious traditions and secular worldviews, though the concept of ‘others’ toward whom concern should be directed can vary among cultures and religions.

Altruism tends to be understood as an individual act, outside the context of social relationships, as the performance of an action which is at a cost to the individual – in terms of time, resources, sharing of skills. What we considered was that much debate exists as to whether ‘true’ altruism is possible in human psychology. The theory of psychological egoism suggests that no act of sharing, helping or sacrificing can be described as truly altruistic, as the actor may receive an intrinsic reward in the form of personal gratification. The validity of this argument depends on whether intrinsic rewards qualify as ‘benefits’. The actor also may not be expecting a reward. Barbara Oakley takes this a step further in her article for *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, Concepts and implications of altruism bias and pathological altruism. She argues that *‘altruism and empathy themselves can inadvertently bias our efforts to create truly cooperative modern, complex societies’* and that *‘pathologies of altruism and of empathic caring should receive concentrated research focus’* (PNAS, p.2), rather than altruism being reified as a sacred concept. She asks a very pertinent question, which came out of our own conversations - namely, *‘is it possible that some social advocacy and social justice efforts result in the same types of pernicious effects on a societal scale so that efforts to build cooperation instead inhibit it? We often do not know, because well-meaning advocates have made raising those questions a taboo’* (ibid, p.7). We concluded that Altruism should be an underpinning concept throughout our discussions but that we should be wary of it as a heuristic device.

We recognised that, given contemporary society’s ideological, social and cultural engineering towards individualism, there are dangers in applying altruism uncritically, as a ‘good thing’, at a societal level. As Oakley expresses this dilemma, *‘good government is a foundation of large-scale societies; government programs are designed to minimize a variety of social problems. Although virtually every program has its critics, well-designed programs can be effective in bettering people’s lives with few negative trade-offs. From a scientifically-based perspective, however, some programs*

are deeply problematic, often as a result of superficial notions on the part of program designers or implementers about what is genuinely beneficial for others, coupled with a lack of accountability for ensuing programmatic failures' (as above, p.3).

This leads us into our thoughts on charity, which Williams considered as a keyword.

Charity - History

The Oxford Dictionary (Oxford University Press) currently defines charity as:

1/The voluntary giving of help, typically in the form of money, to those in need; 2/An organization set up to provide help and raise money for those in need; and 3/Kindness and tolerance in judging others.

Delving further back, the word "*charity*" entered the English language through the Old French word "*charité*", which was derived from the Latin "*caritas*" meaning preciousness, dearness, high price, and implying Christian love of humankind or **unconditional love of others**. At this stage, according to Raymond Williams, it was connected with the bible and the *sense of 'benevolence to neighbours, and specifically gifts to the needy'* (Williams, 1976, p.21); thus, with Christian love.

In medieval Europe during the 12th and 13th centuries, Latin Christendom underwent a charitable revolution, which resulted in rich patrons founding leprosaria and hospitals for the sick and poor. New religious orders emerged with the primary mission of engaging in intensive charitable work. Some argue that this movement was spurred by economic and material forces, as well as a burgeoning urban culture. Other scholars argue that developments in spirituality and devotional culture were central. For still other scholars, medieval charity was primarily a way to elevate one's social status and affirm existing hierarchies of power (cf. Trustee board membership of charities today).

Going back as far as the late medieval and Tudor era, the **English Poor Laws** were a system of poor relief which existed in England and Wales which developed out of the laws of that period and were codified in 1587–98. The Poor Law system was in existence until the emergence of the modern welfare state after the Second World War, though some elements of Poor Law principles persist.

The English Poor Law can be traced back as far as 1536, (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_Poor_Laws_-_cite_note-4) when legislation was passed to deal with the impotent poor, although there was much earlier Tudor legislation dealing with the problems caused by vagrants and beggars. The two statutes of the Poor Law in England and Wales encompass the Old Poor Law, passed during the reign of Elizabeth I, and the New Poor Law, passed in 1834, which significantly modified the existing system of poor relief.

The sense of charity as an institution was established by the 17th century. 'Charity begins at home' was already a popular saying at this point. The notion of 'taking charity' – and the fear of wounded self-respect and damaged dignity it implies – also starts to appear around this time. Williams describes this as relating to '*the interaction of charity and of class feelings, on both sides of the act*' (ibid, p.21).

19th Century Charity and the New Poor Law

The Poor Law system was changed by the later statute from one which was administered haphazardly at a local parish level to a highly centralised system which encouraged the large-scale development of workhouses by Poor Law Unions. The 1832 Royal Commission into the Operation of the Poor Laws was set up following the Swing Riots in the 1830s, which saw an uprising against hunger and oppression, in which rural workers demanded higher wages and an end to the new machines which destroyed their winter employment. They reinforced their demands with rick-burning and the destruction of the threshing machines. Whilst the rural workers were savagely suppressed, it became clear that the social and financial gulf between rural labourers and farmers was widening.

The 1832 report concluded that the existing Poor Laws undermined the prosperity of the country by interfering with the natural laws of supply and demand, that the existing means of poor relief allowed employers to force down wages, and, that poverty itself was inevitable. The Act in 1834, despite being labelled an "amendment act", completely overhauled the existing system and established a Poor Law Commission to oversee the national operation of the system. This included the coming together of small parishes into Poor Law Unions and the building of workhouses in each union area for the giving of poor relief. Although the aim of the legislation was to reduce costs to rate payers and cut demands for poor relief by making the Poor Law a deterrent, one area not reformed was the method of financing of the Poor Law system which continued to be paid for by levying a "poor rate" on the property owning middle classes.

Despite the aspirations of the reformers, the New Poor Law was unable to make the Workhouse as bad as life outside for many people, despite the poor diet offered and familial segregation, in a period of turbulent and violent social change

The **Charity Organisation Societies** were founded in England in 1869. In the early 1870s a handful of local societies were formed with the intention of restricting the distribution of outdoor relief to the elderly, ill or 'non-able bodied' and to force them to accept the workhouse test. They were mainly concerned with the distinction between the **deserving poor and undeserving poor**, believing that giving out charity without investigating the problems behind poverty created a class of citizens that would always be dependent on alms giving. Instead of offering direct relief, the societies aimed to **address the cycle of poverty**. Neighbourhood charity visitors taught the values of hard work and thrift to individuals and families. The COS set up centralized records and administrative services and emphasized objective investigations and professional training. Such charities used 'scientific philanthropy' to help poor, distressed or deviant persons. Such 'scientific principles' aimed to '*root out scroungers and target relief where it was most needed*' (Rees, R., 2001, p.6).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charity_Organization_Society_-_cite_note-12

In Britain, the COS was led by Helen Bosanquet and Octavia Hill and was founded in London in 1869. It similarly supported the concept of self-help and limited government intervention to deal with the effects of poverty. Hill and her colleagues firmly believed in supporting the individual within the home – much of Hill's work focused on establishing family home visiting schemes and inculcating a **self-sufficiency, responsibility and self-help** approach to tackling poverty and poor health.

The COS claimed that private charity would be superior to public welfare because it improved the moral character of the recipients. However, records show that only a minority of its relief recipients managed to become self-reliant, despite the fact that COS granted relief only to recipients it deemed “worthy” and improvable. Furthermore, journals kept by the COS case workers and visitors indicate that they were not on friendly terms with the relief recipients but **described them in disparaging terms and interacted with them in an intrusive and presumptuous way**. In fact, the COS was bitterly resented by the poor for its harshness, and its acronym was re-framed by critics as “Cringe or Starve”.

Beatrice and Sidney Webb

In the 19th century Beatrice and Sidney Webb argued that civil society and charity should not substitute for the state, but be additional to it. As Barry Knight explains in the *New Statesman* (as above), they differentiated between the ‘parallel bars’ and ‘extension ladder’ models of voluntary action:

‘The parallel bars model involves state action and voluntary action working side by side to reduce poverty. This was the prevalent model during the first decade of the 20th century when there was a great awakening about the importance of social conditions. The extension-ladder model distinguishes different roles for the state and for voluntary action. Under this, the role of the state is to secure a national minimum of civilised life open to all alike, of both sexes and all classes – by which was meant “sufficient nourishment and training when young, a living wage when able-bodied, treatment when sick, and modest but secure livelihood when disabled or aged”’ (New Statesman, 2014, p.4).

Interestingly, in true Victorian style, Beatrice Webb did not believe in the capacity of those receiving support through the ‘extension ladder’ approach to organise for themselves. She dismissed ideas of workers co-operatives - where the people who did the work and benefited from it had some control over how it was organised – as unsuccessful. Her own niece, Kitty Muggeridge, puts it this way:

‘... although it was Beatrice herself who put the 20th-century zeitgeist into its most concrete form, in the Welfare State, something in her remained sturdily Victorian to the very end. “What has to be aimed at is not this or that improvement in material circumstances or physical comfort but an improvement in personal character,” she wrote. She believed that citizens who were given benefits by the community ought to make an effort to improve themselves, or at least submit themselves to those who would improve them’ (Muggeridge, and Adams, 1967, p.177).

Self-Improvement or Missionary Zeal?

Critics of charitable giving contend that simply transferring gifts or money to disadvantaged people has negative long-term effects and promotes dependency and a lack of drive towards self-improvement. Beatrice Webb – and the activists within the COS movement – implied this, though from different starting points.

Oscar Wilde, in his *The Soul of Man*, takes charity apart from yet another angle, calling it “a ridiculously inadequate mode of partial restitution...usually accompanied by some impertinent attempt on the part of the sentimentalist to tyrannise over [the poors'] private lives”, as well as a

remedy that prolongs the "disease" of poverty, rather than curing it. This, in effect, captures the 'missionary flavour' of many of the middle and upper class interventions in the lives of the poor and destitute. The use of the word restitution here is important, in its sense of the restoration of something lost or stolen from its proper owner or recompense for injury or loss.

In his 1845 treatise on the condition of the working class in England, Friedrich Engels takes this further, unpicking the concept of charity – not as restitution or even sentimentality - but as a salve to the conscience and a way of tidying away social problems so that they do not trouble those who are better off. He points out that charitable giving, whether by governments or individuals, is often seen by the givers as a means to conceal suffering that is unpleasant to see. Engels quotes from a letter to the editor of an English newspaper who complains that:

'streets are haunted by swarms of beggars, who try to awaken the pity of the passers-by in a most shameless and annoying manner, by exposing their tattered clothing, sickly aspect, and disgusting wounds and deformities. I should think that when one not only pays the poor-rate, but also contributes largely to the charitable institutions, one had done enough to earn a right to be spared such disagreeable and impertinent molestations'.

The English bourgeoisie, Engels concludes,

'is charitable out of self-interest; it gives nothing outright, but regards its gifts as a business matter, makes a bargain with the poor, saying: "If I spend this much upon benevolent institutions, I thereby purchase the right not to be troubled any further, and you are bound thereby to stay in your dusky holes and not to irritate my tender nerves by exposing your misery. You shall despair as before, but you shall despair unseen, this I require, this I purchase with my subscription of twenty pounds for the infirmary!" It is infamous, this charity of a Christian bourgeois!'

Perhaps more kindly, Julia Stapleton talks about the role of idealism in motivating middle class engagement with the poor, many of whom had a genuine desire to improve the lot of the most vulnerable in society, albeit on their own terms – and, arguably, this extended beyond relief of poverty and more towards the concept of philanthropy as the promotion of welfare and spiritual and material well-being in others.

'Idealism provided a powerful philosophical foundation for the spirit of altruism, self-sacrifice and obligation which seized the governing and intellectual classes in the last quarter of the 19th century' and that the State's purpose 'was not to enhance national power or cultural identity but to ensure the spiritual and material well-being of its citizens' (Stapleton, 2005, p. 155).

Philanthropy

Philanthropy is defined, without any ideological caveat, in the Oxford Dictionary as 'the desire to promote the welfare of others, expressed especially by the generous donation of money to good causes'.

It could be argued that aspects of **philanthropy** relate closely to the idealist mind-set cited above of 'enhancing the spiritual and material well-being of its citizens', and instances of philanthropy

commonly overlap with instances of charity, though not all charity is philanthropy, or vice versa. Philanthropy, for instance, can represent patronage for a cause or an institution, such as Stephen Fry's role as patron and ambassador of the mental health charity, Mind. It can also relate, however, to displays of wealth ostensibly for public benefit, such as the erection of grand public buildings – hospitals, schools, parks, libraries. The net result can be an enhanced social standing for the philanthropist. Acting as a philanthropist allows for a 'cherry-picking' process whereby the wealthy patron chooses what issues/activities or personal hobby horses to support and, thus, where their money will be deployed. One concern connected with it is that the more intractable, less publicly 'attractive' social and economic issues - such as homelessness, drug and alcohol dependency, prostitution, domestic violence and so on - are less likely to attract support from a wealthy patron - unless, like Fry, they have been personally affected. As indicated above, the relationship of philanthropy with 'good causes' and 'generous' action itself is questionable, in terms of who defines the nature of a good cause, how this value-based decision is reached and who actually benefits.

A difference commonly cited between philanthropy and charity is that charity relieves the pains of social problems, whereas philanthropy attempts to solve those problems at their root causes, which is reminiscent of the COS model of creating self-sufficiency or more contemporary concepts of providing skills development or **capacity building**. This is debatable. Philanthropy has the implicit inference of giving unto people, or patronage (in all its connotations), rather than people doing it for themselves.

However, in contemporary society, at its best, philanthropic giving is efficiently marketed, closely targeted to specific groups to ensure optimum delivery and impact and could be argued to be less wasteful than some elements of the charity sector – a criticism levelled at those charitable bodies who display a lack of coherent objectives, whose work overlaps with other providers and who could be described as financially wasteful. There is no doubt that many charitable bodies or organisations have existed for years, are focused on generating income to maintain established infrastructure, staffing and buildings, and may no longer be 'fit for purpose'. I will return to this point later.

'Charity is a cold grey loveless thing' - Rights not charity: the Evolution of the Welfare State

The decline of both charity and philanthropy at the beginning of the twentieth century ties in closely with people's fight for direct democracy and equality and the enfranchisement of a wider proportion of the working population. This period saw the Poor Law system falling into decline. This was due to factors such as the introduction of Liberal welfare reforms and the availability of other sources of assistance from friendly societies and trade unions. Many of these reforms emanated from the collective action and workers' co-operation of the kind which made Beatrice Webb anxious. It created increasing duties on the state to protect its citizens and marked a move away from the whims of philanthropy and charity – favourite causes, missionary zeal, targeted interventions by the wealthy – towards an establishment of rights and taxation. Clement Attlee stated that '*Charity is a cold grey loveless thing. If a rich man wants to help the poor, he should pay his taxes gladly, not dole out money at whim*' (Attlee, 1920, p.75).

William Beveridge's report in 1942 was the foundation of the post-war Labour government's welfare state. That being:

*"a concept of government in which **the state plays a key role in the protection and promotion of the economic and social well-being of its citizens** [my emphasis]. It is based on the principles of equality of opportunity, equitable distribution of wealth, and public responsibility for those unable to avail themselves of the minimal provisions for a good life. The general term may cover a variety of forms of economic and social organization."*

Whilst this represents the mid-20th century view of policy, we remain a country today with a system of representative democracy and we are entitled to vote for our elected representatives according to their policy platforms. At least in theory, we can vote them out, we can lobby them, we can argue with them. The state is the means by which we organise ourselves democratically and in relation to the sensible distribution of wealth and wellbeing. The state, according to Beveridge, places upon us the responsibility to participate, to work and to care for others but, if we are incapacitated, it will care for and maintain us.

As early as 1931, R.H. Tawney, an outstanding social educator and President of the Workers Educational Association (WEA) from 1928-44, insisted that education and social organisation must go hand in hand with political equality to achieve the true democratisation of society. He supported some of the thinking which helped create the Welfare State and spans its evolution, the shift from 19th century moral philosophy and Christian, or missionary rhetoric, arguing, instead, for equality through the delimiting and control of economic and social power:

'Democracy is unstable as a political system as long as it remains a political system and nothing more, instead of being, as it should be, not only a form of government but a type of society, and a manner of life which is in harmony with that type. To make it a type of society requires an advance along two lines. It involves, in the first place, the resolute elimination of all forms of special privilege which favour some groups and depress others, whether their source be differences of environment, of education, or of pecuniary income. It involves, in the second place, the conversion of economic power, now often an irresponsible tyrant, into a servant of society, working within clearly defined limits and accountable for its actions to a public authority' (Tawney, 1931, p.30)

As the historian JFC Harrison expressed it, philanthropy and politics are intimately connected.

*'A Laissez faire economy is also cruel and unjust. Supply and demand, as the regulating principle of wages, is clearly inequitable, for the competition between capital and labour is always weighted against labour' (Harrison, 1961, p. 98) and 'schemes for profit sharing and the like are impossible under laissez faire and in any case are too late and do not go to the root of the matter. **Like private philanthropy it is utterly inadequate to deal with the pressing problems of our society**' [my emphasis] (Harrison, ibid, p.99).*

As we come into the present period in the early 21st century, the rise of the market again decouples philanthropy and politics.

The Rise of the Market

The Welfare State arguably permitted the decline of charity and philanthropy for a time. Barry Knight, in the *New Statesman*, suggests that voluntary action, as a whole, was less prominent until the 1960s when some of the sheen of the early years of the Welfare State – and particularly its pacifying influence on collective action and the fight for societal change – had started to wear off.

The voluntary sector emerged from this period in a different form.

'Then came the 1960s, which saw a rebirth of new and radical organisations based on the freedom of the age in which the cracks in the welfare state had become all too evident and citizens were no longer willing to be cast in passive roles. Principles of association and participation were much to the fore here. Gradually, the voluntary sector rebuilt its influence' (New Statesman, as above, p.4).

The voluntary sector became a space for innovation, contest and radical action, a space where the state and the voluntary sector were understood to have different but complementary goals and where the state provided money for voluntary organisations to work in self-determined areas, as long as they did not take on work properly undertaken by the state. This led to a flourishing of voluntary action: conservation and preservation bodies; organisations associated with disability activism and organisations dealing with homelessness, substance misuse and poverty, amongst others. It also led to a flowering of voluntary action – that is, of people volunteering their time, expertise and energy on a free and unpaid basis to support causes and issues important to them.

As Knight goes on to say: *'This all changed in the 1980s. In 1986, the Home Office wrote to the NCVO [National Coalition for Voluntary Organisations] to say that government would only fund voluntary bodies that met government objectives'* (New Statesman, as above, p.4).

Thus began the neo-liberal love affair with state-controlled charitable and voluntary activity and the new dawn of philanthropy, from its post-Victorian era slumber.

The current Conservative Government's emphasis seems to be on a return to concepts of **charity, volunteering, personal enterprise/ self-reliance and philanthropy**, moving away from an organised voluntary sector or collective activism. Ed Miliband, as leader of the opposition in 2010, described the Big Society (more on this later) as heralding *'a return to Victorian philanthropy, with little role for the state....This is essentially a 19th-century or US-style view of our welfare state – which is to cut back the welfare state and somehow civic society will thrive,'* (Radio 4, World at One, July 2010). The Conservative ideology represents a considerable paradigm shift for swathes of the voluntary sector and civil society who have tried to stay true to their more recent campaigning and self-initiating roots and has left them fundamentally cash-starved.

'What is clear is that the voluntary sector, a pivot of the Big Society, is experiencing huge difficulties in meeting the challenge, because voluntarism rarely functions in isolation from the state.....It is pious optimism to suggest that private philanthropy will suddenly appear in the same proportion, or in the same places, as the disappearing public purse' (Hopkin, 2011, <http://www.socialsciencespace.com/2011/02/the-big-society-or-back-to-little-societies/>).

Penny Lancaster argues that the critical role of charity and voluntarism as a broker of innovation in addition to the state is being compromised in contemporary society and the hard-won victories of the twentieth century are being lost or placed under severe strain:

'For generations voluntary organisations have provided services for individuals, families and communities. Before the establishment of the welfare state, these may have been the only social and welfare services available. The post war settlement saw the creation of a wide variety of rights and entitlements alongside the extended provision of free health, education, legal aid, income support and social welfare protections. The bulk of welfare services were provided directly by state agencies, decreasing the importance of provision by voluntary services. Many voluntary agencies re-positioned themselves as places from which to stretch the frontiers of state provision through innovation, and to provide informed policy and political critique of the shortcomings of that provision' (Lancaster, 2016, p.1).

Linsey McGoey, in a recent article entitled in Truthout, The Limits of Trickle-Down Philanthropy, suggests that views such as those expressed by Atlee – in which charity was understood as cold comfort without economic equality and which had become *'commonplace by the mid-twentieth century'* - are almost lost in contemporary society. She comments, *'what's surprising is how neglected they are today'*. She cites the rise of 'philanthrocapitalism' and a return to an uncritical adoption of charity as the main reasons for this change:

'Charitable giving is seen as sacrosanct, even while the failures of private charity to make dents in growing economic inequality or to curb escalating poverty ...grow more obvious. Any force in society that's seen as inviolable or irreproachable is worrying, whether it's unaccountable big government or unaccountable big philanthropy.'

She argues that 'philanthrocapitalism' is nothing new, harking back to 17th and 18th century thinkers such as Adam Smith, for whom it is incontestable that *'private enterprise can yield public benefits'*. She states that *'Philanthrocapitalists have been trying to "save the world" for over 300 years. What's new today is that we accept on faith that their trickle-down philanthropic efforts represent an improvement over the past'* and that *'the media and public are largely accepting the bullish triumphalism of the new breed of philanthrocapitalists who suggest, wrongly, that their effort to marry private interest with social welfare is somehow unprecedented'*.

This marriage of economics, philanthropy and business, whilst nothing new, takes us to heart of the issues the voluntary sector faces at the moment. Effectively, McGoey's critique of philanthropy suggests that the big philanthropists, people like Bill Gates and Bill Clinton, are now making the choice about the allocation of resources, leading to an almost unimpeachable power and authority in the hands of a tiny super-rich minority, and leading to an increasing disempowerment of the state. Whilst this may be an acceptable price to pay for the benefit of vast philanthropic donations, McGoey argues that such private donors are not filling the void fostered by receding states.

We have seen that it is arguable, at best, that poverty and social injustice can be answered through private interest and philanthropy. We have seen that, if the services of the private sector and the voluntary sector are represented as *essentially* preferable to state provision, there is a danger that the voluntary sector becomes a provider of what were formerly state provided services and that expectations of the services it can actually provide are unreasonably high. We have also seen that, then, its independence and ability to ask difficult questions and to campaign on unpopular and deeply intractable social issues is chronically compromised. Whilst the public sector has been subject to active scrutiny of its services and stringent accountability measures, if the voluntary sector is expected to engage in service delivery to support the policies underpinning current government

thinking (such as Big Society, Giving etc.), one has to ask where the lines of accountability now fall and who will take the blame if such a massive shift in service delivery does not work.

Voluntarism

This brings us to our last Keyword and perhaps the area that excited most debate at our Keywords weekend – **voluntarism**. Firstly, some definitions are in order. The Oxford Dictionary describes voluntarism in contemporary society as 1/ the principle of relying on voluntary action (used especially with reference to the involvement of voluntary organizations in social welfare); 2/ It gives its historical definition as the principle that churches or schools should be independent of the state and supported by voluntary contributions (especially in the 19th century) and 3/its philosophy as the doctrine that the will is a fundamental or dominant factor in the individual or the universe.

Much of our discussion centred on concerns about the essentially slippery nature of defining **voluntarism**. Some members of our group were using the term volunteerism and were linking it with volunteering in the sense of giving of time, energy and skills freely, often out of an impulse to be 'other-regarding'. This would include acts of human compassion, such as being neighbourly, or engaging in volunteering for causes or concerns close to our hearts - essentially because we want to. We acknowledged deep concerns that volunteers are increasingly being used to displace the role of professionals. This ties in with the Big Society ideology, defined in July 2010 by David Cameron as fostering a culture of philanthropy and voluntarism, and placing emphasis on a greater sphere (or burden) of activity being undertaken by the voluntary sector, wider civil society and unpaid volunteers. An example might include local people running libraries which will otherwise be closed down, displacing trained librarians with volunteers but this is only one example in a wider cultural expectation that a whole range of provisions will become voluntary.

Cameron said at the time:

'Our public service programme will enable social enterprises, charities and voluntary groups to play a leading role in delivering public services and tackling deep-rooted social problems'.

The then Communities Minister, Eric Pickles perhaps showed the true colours of the Big Society programme as a means of saving money: *'Even at a time when money is tight, it is still possible to find different ways of delivering. It is unashamedly about getting more for less.'* (Radio 4, World at One, July 2010). This applies, of course, across many areas of the public sector – the mantra is cut expenditure, achieve more with fewer resources and defer to market disciplines.

One issue which genuinely concerned the group was that of accountability. The Government made great play of offering themselves up to increased scrutiny and accountability through right to know and right to data schemes as part of the Big Society programme, ostensibly creating increased 'transparency'. However, this rhetoric sits oddly within the Localism agenda, where power is decentralised to the lowest possible level, and in the Giving paper, which argues for a huge reduction in public funding and the creation of a more diverse (and less secure) funding model. Add to this that any scheme or service run by volunteers and removed from the professional sphere no longer has the same capacity to be called to account if things go wrong or to prove that their service is working or meeting people's needs if it is called into question.

We also debated the rise of therapeutocracy and the tyranny of professionalisation in some quarters. In the therapeutocratic world view the state knows what is best for us; the justifications and uses of state power therefore increasingly become therapeutic—in the sense of being about the treatment or melioration of pathologies (thus individualised) and the assurance of citizens' sense of 'well-being' (usually ill-defined). In this way, the state has a greatly reduced role in offering the protection of rights and liberties or the provision of support for conventional moral constraints and democratic conceptions of citizenship. By the second decade of the twenty first century, we have gone so far down this line that the therapeutic state is well-enough established that opposition to the welfare state does not necessarily translate into a rejection of therapeutic efforts to reform the very definition of welfare itself. Problems we experience are not created by structural or social issues but are rendered individual and psychological.

The concept of volunteering as a replacement for professional work, the rise of the individual and not the collective, the reduced role of the state in social and economic support structures, insecurity of funding for the voluntary sector and increased emphasis on private philanthropy or 'giving' has led to confusion and uncertainty about voluntarism and what it actually constitutes. There is also an additional insecurity in the increased use of unpaid volunteers in that they can walk away without any come back, leaving the services they provide even more vulnerable. Zygmunt Bauman in his 2000 work, *Liquid Modernity*, selects five of the basic concepts which have served to make sense of shared human life - emancipation, individuality, time/space, work and community – all tied in with volunteering - and shows how they have essentially become fluid and contested areas without the structural certainties of the past, complicating and confusing our own immediate settings of life-politics and human community. As a group we felt strongly this loss (or obscuring) of the Lifeworld, its displacement by the system, and our disappearing sense of civil society as a space for mutual support and collective action.

Penny Lancaster describes voluntarism – and by extension, the voluntary sector thus, referring back to Habermas' definition of the Lifeworld:

'Voluntary action occupies a space within civil society that is distinct from both the state and the market - a space in which citizens come together freely to exercise self-determining collective action. Such formal and informal associations are an expression of citizen action, usually driven by compassion, conviviality and fun, mutual interests and generally, a determination to make the world a better place. Voluntary groups do not have to exist. Their activities are not required by law, nor is there a statutory duty to keep them going if they fail. This is the core of voluntary action: to exist and act by choice. Voluntary groups that provide services to individuals and communities are part of this wider world of voluntary action' (Lancaster, 2016, p.1).

Key to her commentary is that civil society and voluntarism are neither the state nor the market. Activities associated with civil society are not mandatory or statutory – their central feature is that of being predicated on choice.

Some facts and figures which we shared, and which evidence the shifting sands of voluntarism and reflect Lancaster's comments, include that:

- Far from being strengthened in the first 5 years of the Big Society, the voluntary sector has faced £3.3bn of cuts in public funding up to 2016.
- Competition – the opening up public services to- charities, social enterprises, private companies and employee-owned cooperatives allows bodies to compete to offer people services. Quality can be variable.
- The private sector appears to have been the main beneficiary of the opening up of public services. ‘Spin outs,’ the splitting off of public functions or services to other delivery organisations, are already having an impact in the NHS and the number of Academies and free schools is increasing. Volunteering is central to this change, with a rise in volunteer management roles in jobs formerly held by professionals.
- Voluntary organisations working with disadvantaged groups in deprived areas are more likely to depend on statutory funding but local authorities with the highest levels of deprivation in England suffered the deepest cuts in spending in 2011-2012 (The Big Society Audit, 2012 – Civil Exchange).
- By the time of Whose Society? The Final Big Society Audit in 2015, (January 2015, Civil Exchange) the UK ranked 28th out of 34 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries on income inequality - and there is also a huge and growing gap in wealth. At the same time, the very poorest in society have borne a disproportionate share of benefit and tax cuts and cuts in public services.

At the heart of Penny Lancaster’s definition are some of the key points which arose in our group discussions:

- Volunteers give their time, effort, resources and energy freely, in order to provide emotional support, personal skills or to engage in an interest.
- Volunteering adds value and community cohesion - problem sharing, action learning - and acts as a contribution to pride of place and community spirit
- True voluntarism represents choice: As Donald Story expresses it, *‘Volunteer endeavours do not spring spontaneously from the human capabilities for giving; they grow out of choices, or, rather, free choices. That freedom is the definitive feature of volunteer activity is recognized by many writers and practitioners in the field’* (Story, 1992, p.14).
- Voluntarism is not about rampant or narcissistic individualism– at its best it springs, arguably, from a sense of shared community or associationism, shared interests, even ‘conviviality and fun’ and to define it as an individualist act is ideological. It is not state-controlled and it should be a space of freedom.
- Volunteering is not about propping up services in charities, responding to the increasing demand for service reductions in statutory services
- When volunteering becomes mandatory – such as when students are required to show additional volunteering activity alongside their academic work as part of a CV-enhancing activity, or is required of those out of work or not in training, such as the National Citizens Service, or as a means of saving public services at community level e.g. libraries - it ceases to be true voluntarism, based on higher instincts to help others, or ‘other-regarding behaviour’. It is no longer *‘the giving of oneself to others to their end’* (Story, 1992, p. 15).

- As public sector jobs are cut back, the loss of paid work and its 'replacement' by the work of volunteers threatens the essence of voluntarism. Volunteers are then placed in positions of considerable responsibility, including management, often with poor quality training, a lack of development and support and the attendant risks of litigation.

Our overall view – at the end of our Keywords process - was that the last capitalist crisis we have faced in the UK (and globally) has given the current UK government an opportunity to try to re-order society, to create a culture of 'divide and rule' in which community, associationism and voluntarism are suspect unless they go hand in hand with government thinking, and we now live in a culture in which individualism prevails. Their ideological onslaught and the Austerity agenda builds on the earlier efforts of Margaret Thatcher to undermine the very concept of 'society' and also New Labour's Third Way, which began the process of redefining the role of the voluntary sector. The capitalist model promotes a return to mercantilism, big business and fictional finance. New policies – such as Giving and the Localism Bill, along with Big Society rhetoric, create an unnecessary complexity where even to act as a volunteer can create internal dissonance, and the wellspring of care and concern for others – charity (as the unconditional love of others), compassion, other-regardness - becomes distorted. Do we allow a return to patronage and philanthropy, accepting crumbs from a ruling elite, with a shrunken state, diminished rights and conditions, mandatory volunteering and growing inequality or do we, as the NCIA has for over 10 years, ask questions, reclaim language and promote socially-responsible debate? It seems to us that we have an urgent, and collective, duty to reclaim voluntary action, be clear about the essential role of the state – its duties and responsibilities – and return charity and philanthropy to their rightful place on the extension ladder before it is too late.

I return to Penny Lancaster's excellent paper to finish this document, written as the swansong of the NCIA. She defines four key principles as the starting point for all voluntary action and for democracy:

- *'a belief in public services run by publicly accountable institutions;*
- *that public services be run for people and collective benefit and not for individual profit or according to market ideologies;*
- *that our democratic health depends on safeguarding and nourishing a space for citizens to act separately from the state and the market, in particular in the interests of care, justice and equality amongst people and for the planet;*
- *that within this space, voluntary services are to add to, complement, challenge and test out new ways to meet need: not to take the place of public services'* (Lancaster, 2016, p.7).

Sharon Clancy - on behalf of the RWF Keywords group February 2016

References

Aldridge, H., Barry Born, T., Hughes, A., MacInnes, T., Tinson, C., Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Monitoring poverty and Social exclusion 2015 www.jrf.org.uk/mpse-2015

Attlee, C. R. (1920) The Social Worker, London, G. Bell and Sons.

Bauman, Z, (2000) Liquid Modernity, Polity Press, Cambridge

Bunyan and Diamond, 2014, The Role of Civil Society - Creating positive change, *New Statesman*, 2-8 May

Edwards, M. (2014) Civil Society, Polity Press, Cambridge

Finlayson, J.G. (2005) Habermas: A Very Short Introduction. New York: Oxford University Press.

Harrison, J.F.C. (1961) Learning and Living 1790–1960: A Study in the History of the English Adult Education Movement. London: Routledge.

Hopkin, D. (2011), The Big Society – or back to little societies? Social Science Space, published February 9, 2011 , <http://www.socialsciencespace.com/2011/02/the-big-society-or-back-to-little-societies/>, accessed 16/2/16

McGoey, L., The Limits of Trickle-Down Philanthropy - Sunday, 10 January 2016, *Truthout Interview with Linsey McGoey*, author of *No Such Thing as a Free Gift: The Gates Foundation and the Price of Philanthropy*, <http://www.truth-out.org/progressivepicks/item/34344-the-limits-of-trickle-down-philanthropy>

Muggeridge, K. and Adams, R. (1967), Beatrice Webb: A life, 1858-1943, London: Secker and Warburg

Lancaster, P. Thinking out loud - The Job of Voluntary Services - What voluntary services should do, not do and might do – <http://independentaction.net/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2015/12/The-job-of-voluntary-services-final.pdf>, accessed 16/2/16

Oakley, B., Oakley, *PNAS*, Concepts and implications of altruism bias and pathological altruism ,June 18, 2013, vol. 110, suppl. 2 www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1302547110

Rees, Rosemary (2001), Poverty and Public Health 1815-1949, London: Heinemann

Scott, M. and Waterhouse, P. (2013) Here We Stand Inquiry into Local Activism & Dissent; Final Report <http://www.ioe.mmu.ac.uk/caec/docs/NCIA%20Here%20We%20Stand.pdf>, NCIA with Manchester Metropolitan University and Community Audit and Evaluation Centre

Stapleton, J. (2005) Citizenship versus Patriotism in Twentieth Century England, *The Historical Journal* 03/2005; 48(1)

Story, D. (1992) Volunteerism: The "Self-Regarding" and "Other-Regarding" Aspects of the Human Spirit –Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, March 1992, vol. 21, no. 13-18

Tawney, R.H (1931) Equality, Allen and Unwin, London

Williams, R. (1976:2015), Keywords, Oxford University Press: Oxford (for his delineation of Charity, pp. 20 – 22)