Dear Reader

Ever wondered what the future might hold? It is a fickle endeavour at the best of times.

However, we seem to have entered a new phase where the skills of the legendary seer Teiresias rather than those of researchers would really come in handy. Take volunteering for example:

We learn excitedly that Julia Neuberger is appointed to become the new Prime Minister's volunteering champion.

We know that Julia Neuberger is the Chair of the Commission on the Future of Volunteering which "is an independent body established by the England Volunteering Development Council". We understand that the England Volunteering Development Council is "a high-level representative and advocacy mechanism for volunteering". Of course the "Volunteering Hub is the principle sponsor of the Commission on the Future of Volunteering".

The Volunteering Hub is "one of the national hubs of expertise described in the ChangeUp strategy" and ChangeUp is a ten year programme, sponsored by the Home Office.

The researchers and seers amongst us might conclude that the political importance of volunteering is clear, albeit we might raise an eyebrow at the term 'independent' describing the Commission on the Future of Volunteering.

Yet, then we find out that Capacitybuilders, which is charged with delivering ChangeUp want to drop the Volunteering Hub altogether.

Where then does this leave volunteering and the work so far undertaken by the Volunteering Hub?

What I read at the moment about the future of volunteering or the voluntary sector more generally is a picture of confusion, misunderstanding and frankly mayhem. It is, in my view hard to underestimate the effects such confusion may have especially on small voluntary organisations and their plans.

If researchers want to assist voluntary organisations in understanding this mayhem and if voluntary organisations are to assist politicians with some clarity about what this mayhem means to them we will need to speak out clearly and frankly.

Importantly, I feel, we will not need to speak with one voice and we certainly do not need somebody claiming that they speak for all of us. I want to encourage all of you to write for this bulletin highlighting the good and the bad with messages that even politicians may understand.

I should warn, though, of what happened to Teiresias when he spoke out. A very unhappy Hera blinded him. Yet in the end he was rewarded with the gift of prophecy and a very long life by Zeus.

Jurgen Grotz
(emergency editor)

What's in it, Teresias?

The Prime Minister's 10–year vision for how government can support a thriving third sector

http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/news/news_stories/070724_vision.asp

What do you see? Write for our next edition!

Reflections on the workforce development agenda for the voluntary and community sector: Lessons from near the frontline

John Diamond

The focus on the "professionalisation" of the sector has been a theme in a number of the contributions to this Bulletin over the past 3-4 years. The language and typologies often adopted imply a negative use of the term "professional". In part this stems from a tradition within the sector itself which is wary of social/welfare state agencies and their tendency to seek to exert control. It also reflects a significant shift over the past 10 years in which the Labour Government has both used and courted the sector in order to promote its policies and practice. A part of that broad social/political agenda has been the "professionalisation" of the sector. In this discussion paper I want to explore some of those developments as I have both observed them (in my work related role) and experienced them (as a trustee of organisations - including this one).

OBSERVATIONS AS AN OUTSIDER: LOOKING IN:

From the perspective of someone who engages with the sector on a commissioned or support role the changes and trends over the past 10 years appear to look like this:

- An increase in the sense of instability within the sector
- A growth in the contract culture and associated performance targets
- A marked shift towards the sector increasing its role as a substitute for the state sector
- A move towards the "professionalisation" of the sector as a necessary part of ensuring the continued role of the sector as a provider of commissioned services
- A marked decline in the relative autonomy of the sector

These trends and developments have (especially since 1997) been accompanied by a variety of policy papers and consultative documents. At the same time the Labour Government have created a number of organisational units or agencies to progress the trends outlined above. Indeed it can be argued that there is a Blair/Brown consensus on the place of the "Third Sector" in the delivery of Labour's social and welfare agenda.

But, as practitioners and users know, the cultural/political shifts highlighted above illustrate a number of basic but competing narratives about the sector. Whilst it is too short a space here to examine them in depth they can be reduced to the following: the Labour Project since 1997 has been about the incorporation of the sector into the institutions and frameworks of the state (at both a local and central level). Alternative perspectives (or narratives) which allow for expressed differences of interpretation or seek to pose a critical reflection on the nature of the relationships between the sector and the state are marginalised or excluded.

In a very important sense the trends over the past year represent a qualitative shift in the nature of the relationship between the sector and the state. The sense of instability within the sector is partly financial and partly organisational. The dependency culture on short term finances is not new. But the dependency on the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) has created a context within which financial planning/forecasting is more difficult and agencies find themselves increasingly having to meet the demands of commissioning bodies. The impact of the contract culture has a number of consequences: in particular is the shift in working practices/culture from a process driven approach to an outcome focussed one. Whilst, this might be overstating the case it does, seem to me, that this

tension neatly illustrates the shift which has taken place over 20-25 years but has become more marked since 1997.

Finally, the impact of these changes (and Labour's own needs) has resulted in the shift towards a more professional work force: an emphasis on management, human resources and recruitment, and contract specification. These changes will, over time, result in a new workforce increasingly less wedded to or aware of the more radical traditions of the sector.

LISTENING/EXPERIENCING FROM THE INSIDE:

All of the changes described above I have experienced as a trustee or as someone working with trustee boards/members. And whilst I am not arguing that trustees do not have responsibilities which they have to meet I do want to suggest that a consequence of the trends above will be to reduce the sector and marginalise those of us who "volunteer" to be a part of the sector.

I want to draw a parallel here between two separate (but I think related) developments. There does appear to be a parallel with the experiences of school governors. As the role and function of school governing bodies has changed and become more responsible for a range of matters so has the pressure to find school governors increased. Adding to the legal (and by implication professional) status of school governing bodies extends the assumptions and expectations of school governors. These changes may not be what individuals want or what local communities want either. There is a capacity issue and as the Government changes the professional context within which education for children takes place and alters the legal status of schools then this has consequences for governors and for their sense of being in-

cluded. The other policy/practice development involves the changed roles of Housing Associations -- as the Government has promoted the role of social landlords and changed the financial/funding context so the size of housing associations have grown. Associations have seen mergers and alliances as a way of coping within a difficult financial environment. I can see a similar trend within the sector.

As a trustee and someone who works with trustee boards my concern is not that the professionalisation of the sector is irrelevant but rather be clearer about whose needs are being met by such a process. The shift towards qualifications/accreditation may meet the needs of individuals and possibly the wider labour market but it may not be congruent with needs of local, neighbourhood based community centres or organisations. It seems to me that there is a need to ensure not just the broader political independence of the sector but also the wider cultural autonomy of a sector which is more sensitive to the needs of its members than welfare state agencies are to their users. Its about frames of reference and whose needs are given a priority. The risk for the sector, caught up in this workforce capacity debate, is that the conversation about what is really needed gets lost.

In another context we would be saying that missing the needs of users or misrepresenting them would be "unprofessional". Why do we tolerate it here?

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National Coalition for Independent Action

Celebrating voluntary & community action to change and challenge the world around us

Andy Benson

We face a crisis in the ability of voluntary and community action to challenge and change the world about us, and more broadly to act as part of the checks we need within our democracy. This threat to independent action will, unless challenged, undermine our civil society, our political health, and the capacity of communities to get what they need for themselves.

The Coalition is a new alliance of organisations and individuals who have come together out of frustration and anger to object to the state of the UK Voluntary and Community Sectors. We see the Government co-opting our inspiration and creativity, for State purposes. We observe supine and self-interested responses from bodies supposed to represent our interests. We watch the fear and uncertainty displayed by many grass-roots groups, faced by top-down instructions and private sector practices. Performance management, quality assurance, target-based contracting, procurement, commissioning, and regulation – these are doctrinal mechanisms for control, not improvement or engagement. And accompanied by a thinly disguised new phase of privatisation of public assets and services.

The Government talks about "community empowerment", "active citizenship", "partnerships" and "choice". In practice, local community groups are told to work according to Government targets, not local need, and to compete with each other for meagre resources. The pressure is towards smaller numbers of larger, corporate organisations who are able to carry out State bidding. Increasingly there is no room for difference, variety, or for dissenting voices. The role of voluntary action – to challenge the powerful without fear and to change the status quo – sits with a small number of brave, under-resourced and isolated people.

We aim to mobilize, support and work with those who share our concerns; to combine to expose and resist the current direction of travel; and to become actively involved in dissent where this is needed. We aim to build a strong enough voice to give confidence to those wanting to speak out and take action, and to create an alternative way of doing things. We will challenge and impede, as we can, the juggernaut that is rolling over us – hether it be driven by central government, local statutory bodies or conspiring voluntary organisations.

Our current programme of work includes:

- Building our website as a focus for information, support, debate and communication (go to www.independentaction.net)
- Working with people in local areas to assess the capacity of voluntary and community groups and organisations to assert their independence of thought and action
- Devising strategies to help the sector resist the damaging consequences of the introduction of procurement and commissioning
- Challenging the national, 'representational' agencies to stand up and be counted
- Planning a winter conference to launch the Coalition and raise its profile.

At present we are run entirely by volunteers and with no money. We hope this will change as the momentum of the initiative grows. For this we need widespread involvement and support. If you read this and agree with what we say, then

Please join us!

Please contact us at: indyaction@yahoo.co.uk

Volunteering to lead

Nick Ockenden

The Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) is undertaking a new piece of research that will explore issues of leadership within smaller groups that are led by volunteers. This project, which is being carried out on behalf of the Volunteering Hub, has two specific aims. The first is to identify the needs of volunteers as group leaders. This will include exploring the support that the groups and their volunteers want and need. It will also investigate the wider barriers and challenges facing volunteers as group leaders. The second aim is to explore the growth and development of the volunteer-led groups and the impacts of this growth. It seeks to identify the factors that can lead a group to grow and investigate the impact of these changes, particularly on the relationship between volunteers and any paid staff the group may take on. The research also seeks to develop an understanding of those groups that may not wish to grow in size, or those that may be time dependent and come to an end after their original goals have been fulfilled.

There is currently a limited amount of research that explores volunteering within volunteer-led groups. Most existing research concentrates on volunteering within volunteer-involving organisations, which can often be larger in size. These organisations and their volunteers can frequently be easier to reach for research purposes, perhaps being part of well-known national bodies or members of networks. Volunteer-led organisations, on the other hand, can often remain largely invisible to policy makers, researchers and other organisations. They may not be members of support networks and they may not be in touch with the local volunteering infrastructure.

This appears to the case with environmental organisations in particular. In her discussion of environmental volunteering in Scotland, Dalgleish (2006) describes the lack of a central, coordinated infrastructure for such groups. A further study within Scotland highlighted the isolation facing many groups as a result of the lack of support networks in their local area (VDS, 2006). Similarly, a recent study by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) stated that *"most community groups are not affiliated to any national, regional or local body"* (2006, p.15). Evidence seems to suggest, however, that volunteering in this area is prolific. Research undertaken by urban parks charity GreenSpace estimated there to be over 4,000 volunteer-led groups working with parks and green spaces throughout the UK, involving approximately 500,000 volunteers (Ockenden and Moore, 2003).

The research that exists indicates that many of the issues facing volunteers within volunteer-led groups are unique, being very different to those within larger, volunteer-involving organisations. Rochester's (1999) *'Juggling on a unicycle'* is one of few pieces of research to explore the challenges specific to smaller organisations. While he does not specifically address volunteer-led groups, he describes many difficulties that are characteristic of small size and are therefore likely to also affect groups entirely staffed only by volunteers. These include depending on the work and commitment of a comparatively small number of people, limited and precarious funding, and a limit to the amount of specialist expertise available within a very small staff team. He goes on to note how this can render them especially

vulnerable to external changes. Similarly, DCLG (2006) describe how the activities of community groups will often be dependent on the *"commitment and energy of a single person who energises and co-ordinates the inputs of other volunteers"* (p.14).

Volunteer-led groups may also be affected by life-cycles that do not have so much resonance with larger, more formalised groups. Research indicates that it is possible for groups to grow and develop as they secure more funding, with many being well-established. Of the 1,000 groups that informed the GreenSpace research, 21% were over thirteen years old, and 56% said that their membership levels were increasing (Ockenden and Moore, 2003). However, it is also possible for those groups that have been set-up for a predetermined end (such as a summer play scheme or to save an area of green space from development) to come to a natural end when this purpose has been achieved (DCLG, 2006).

To explore some of these issues, this research will work with six volunteer-led groups from Thurrock and Manchester as case studies. Building on some of the evidence of volunteering in environmental groups, two will be drawn from this sector. Two further groups will represent sports clubs, while the final two will be groups working with arts and heritage. The research will take place between now and March 2008.

The findings of this research will be disseminated as widely as possible throughout the volunteering infrastructure. In an attempt to reach as many volunteer-led groups as possible, this will include Volunteer Centres, volunteer development agencies, councils for voluntary services and local authorities. It is hoped that the practical recommendations within the final report

will contribute to a better understanding of the needs, challenges and desires of volunteers who give their time in small, volunteer-led groups. It is also hoped that it will help improve the ability of the volunteering infrastructure to provide quality, comprehensive and appropriate support to these groups. While this is a relatively small research project, it is hoped above all that it will raise awareness of a form of volunteering that can sometimes risk going unnoticed.

If you are interested in the research, or would like to take part as one of the case studies, please contact Nick Ockenden on 0207 5208 931 or nick.ockenden@volunteeringengland.org. Further information on IVR can be found at www.ivr.org.uk, where the final report will also be published.

References:

Dalgleish, J. (2006) **The opportunities for environmental volunteering to deliver Scottish Executive policies: a discussion paper** BTCV Scotland: Stirling

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Volunteer Development Scotland (2006) **Volunteering and the natural heritage – an audit and review of natural heritage volunteering in Scotland** Commissioned Report F05NC07 (unpublished) Volunteer Development Scotland: Stirling

Veronique Jochum, Belinda Pratten and Karl Wilding (2007) (eds.) *Faith and Voluntary Action: an overview of current evidence and debates.* NCVO: London.

Reviewed by: Fiona Poland

This challenging and well-researched report provides a framework for helping the voluntary sector to recognise the place of faith groups within it. It offers some key concepts for defining faith-based organisations and communities as and uses these to examine the scope of voluntary activity undertaken by such groups. It is underlined here that faiths can be seen to have strong links with specific components of voluntary action such as charitable giving and civic participation, but that there is less evidence that faith will be more strongly expressed in patterns of practice or civic participation than other personal characteristics. The editors argue therefore, that while faith groups can be seen to make substantial contributions to the sector, there is much to be gained by faith groups themselves and the wider community by taking a nuanced view of the diversity of practice and capacity within faith groups if they are to be enabled to access appropriate support and for their engagement with local voluntary and statutory sectors to be based on a robust understanding of what they do.

A nuanced examination of the evidence relating to the impact of faith groups' contribution to key aspects of voluntary action is provided in a sequence of chapters by different contributors. Howarth suggests that the convictions of faith groups can help stimulate resistance and dialogue as well as consensus within civil society. Much of the volunteering activity undertaken in faith communities was found by Locke to rest on everyday routine activities within rather than outside their own communities. Furbey highlights that faiths may be seen as 'both solution and problem' (p.34) in relation to social cohesion and that while they may contribute bonding, bridging and linking social capital, these may be limited by internal and external limiting factors. Finneron documents the organisation of faith groups' ar-

rangements for accountability , transparency and communication within faith groups can be highly variable. This together with the lesser likelihood of non-Christian groups having paid posts to enable their representatives to be involved in consultative forums, can limit their capacity to participate in local governance. Finally Rochester, Bissett and Singh acknowledge that services provided by faith groups can support people in ways which can complement state provision but also remind us of the tensions which may be experienced by such groups in doing so. They may experience limitations in their own internal resources and the values and practices of other groups or external bodies may sometimes conflict with their own core values and practices.

Overall, this report importantly stresses commonalities of association and interests for gaining resources, in capacity-building so as to make a strong case for the greater integration of faith groups within the voluntary sector. The evidence it provides suggests that government, local authorities and VCSs must appreciate the particular needs of faith groups at local and community level, rather than making assumptions of distinctiveness and commonality at a separate, sectoral level. However, perhaps the report could do more to recognise that faith groups do exercise claims to be distinctive in their beyond-cradle-to-grave views on and involvement in their members' lives; in their role in formally constituting key transitions in family and community transitions and in their claims to mediate extra-secular moral authority. Such claims may well particularise the bonding and bridging capital that they can provide. This suggests that more work is needed to engage specifically with their specific and related needs in these areas for the aims for the integrative aims of this report to be fully realised.

www.governancepages.org.uk
Kevin Nunan

The management committee of a local community organisation find themselves in a dilemma. They have been advised by their very well intentioned grants officer based in the local authority that they should have a job description for committee members (with a specific one for the chair and treasurer and secretary) and a code of conduct. The grants officer has also suggested that they do a skills audit of the committee. It all sounds quite reasonable and is scenario that is being repeated with voluntary organisations up and down the country.

They email national organisations, search the local CVS library and trawl the internet. But instead of drawing a blank as they feared, they unearth a treasure trove. The problem now is which or the many examples should they follow? Which is the gold in this pile? Take the code of conduct, for example. They have unearthed half a dozen ranging from one page in length to 54 pages, covering a range of conduct from turning up on time to the personal qualities they should possess. How does a committee chose? Should they stick with the 'big' labels regardless, or follow fashion and do what everyone else is doing, or perhaps chose the one that fits best – if they can agree just what is the best fit? Even if they make the right choice how do they convince their grants officer that the one page version is a better fit for them than the 54 page option?

This is where Governance Pages comes in. Governance Pages (www.governancepages.org.uk), is a new website being developed by Arvac that aims to present concise and accessible information on governance aimed at committee members of small voluntary organisations. Our challenge is to make appropriate resources and information available to those groups and organisations that need it, signposting to a range of suitable resources or developing appropriate ones where none exist. In plain English Governance Pages attempts to guide the reader through the options so that they can make an informed choice from the options available.

Governance Pages draws on a number of years of governance research and came out of the recommendations of the report 'A Lighter Touch', published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2004. The report identified a 'fuzzy frontier' between informal group activity and more structured voluntary organisations. This report recognized that there were ample resources aimed at trustees of larger and more formal organisations, but that there was a lack of appropriate material written from the perspective of trustees and management committee members of groups and small organisations in the 'fuzzy frontier'. The report recommended that we should

"accept that informal organisations cannot, indeed should not, change from being based on group processes into 'nascent bureaucracies' overnight". Resources were needed that recognised the less formal and more fluid nature of small groups, where there is often no clear cut distinction between roles, no dedicated resources to support the committee, and many different ways for the committee to accomplish its aims. In theses circumstances it is vital that choices are made that enable, not stifle. Governance should be facilitative rather than constraining.

Currently the website is divided into a database of questions arranged logically to cover common questions about govern-

ance; a support finder feature that quickly locates appropriate sources of support; and a dedicated search page allows you to search for resources and information from a range of hand picked sites greatly increasing the chances of finding what you are looking for.

Our final challenge is to make that community groups and small organisation (and their advisers) know about the site. So please take a look at Governance Pages (www.governancepages.org.uk) and pass it on to anyone you know who may find it useful. Governance Pages will continue to add features in response to demand, so do take a look and give us your feedback and ideas.

We want to hear from you:

Please send us:

- News items

- Details of new publications, resources or websites

- Information about research in progress

- Meetings or events you would like us to publicise

- Comments or opinion pieces you would like to share with other ARVAC members

by e-mail to
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