

Panel Session: Making a difference? Reviewing government's involvement in volunteering

'Losing Soul': Should we be concerned about the independence of volunteering?'

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Introduction

This paper discusses the impact of the policies and practices of government on the essential character or 'soul' of volunteering. It begins by outlining the nature of government's interest in voluntary action and defining the key characteristics of the 'spirit' or ethos of volunteering. The main body of the paper then discusses four ways in which the actions of government may encroach on the autonomy of volunteering – the threat of compulsion; the growth of government volunteerism; the ways in which government may set the volunteering agenda; and its role in creating the environment in which voluntary action takes place. It then concludes by suggesting what government should - and should not – do.

In the UK successive governments have invested time and substantial sums of money in promoting and supporting volunteering. The details of these activities are covered in other contributions to this panel and I will therefore restrict my outline of this interest to two comments on what I take to be its key features. The first of these is that there is a gap between the rhetoric of government ministers which emphasises the intrinsic value of volunteering and the reality of their practice which tends to treat it as a means of achieving their policy objectives. The second point is that, on the whole, government policies have taken the form of short-term and high profile initiatives which are neither shaped by what we know about volunteering 'on the ground' nor informed by an understanding of the history of voluntary action

The paper will also attempt to summarise what we mean by the 'soul' of volunteering in a few sentences. This is made possible by the work of the late Jimmy Kearney whose analysis of the values which underpin volunteering (Kearney, 2001; 2007) ought to be required reading for all those involved in the field. One of the six principles developed by Kearney will serve to define the ethos of volunteering which is under threat from the actions of the state.

This is the belief that '*Volunteering is an act of free will or choice*: people volunteer 'in response to their own personal values and belief systems' (2007: p 6). The freedom to volunteer also involves the freedom *not* to get involved: 'just as a person may decide to volunteer he or she must also be able to refuse to do so' (*ibid*). It also follows that 'the volunteer has the right to choose

in what area he or she will participate and for what purpose' (*ibid*). Volunteers are 'not biddable'; have the right to be 'mavericks'; and, do not have to 'volunteer for good'. Kearney quotes with approval Sir Kenneth Stowe's (2001) view that volunteering 'is essentially self-starting, inner-directed, and often angry ... So it is or it can be untidy, uncoordinated, awkward and irresponsible, even to the point of unacceptable law-breaking. That is the nature of the beast.'

The threat of compulsion

The most immediate or direct challenge is the possibility of government making some forms of volunteering compulsory. What Kearney (2001; 2007) has called 'mandated volunteering' is not uncommon in the United States and Canada. The main focus is on the involvement of young people in 'community service' and the creation of a link between academic learning and the involvement of students in their local community in the form of service learning. While much service-learning is voluntary – one option among a number of possible courses of study – some US states and school districts and at least one Canadian province have made it compulsory in schools and colleges and, in some cases, have made it a condition of graduation.

'Voluntary or community youth service has not, of course, been mandated in the UK' and the government has put its emphasis on programmes like *Millennium Volunteers* which 'build on young people's interests and aspire to meet what they want out of volunteering' Kearney (2007; p 10). On the other hand, as Davis Smith has pointed out (2001; 2007 p 26), 'a present day school-based community service programme which requires students to volunteer as a core part of the curriculum' may involve a degree of coercion not much less than participation in the subbotnik – the compulsory day of 'volunteering' required by the early Soviet state.

Successive UK governments have, it is true, fended off recurrent proposals or demands for a national scheme of community service for young people as a replacement for compulsory military service which was phased out in 1960. The most recent expression of this view formed part of the evidence collected by the Neuberger Commission (Gaskin et al, 2008; p50). (Volunteering) 'should be compulsory for all 14 to 18 year olds before they do any other job and it should also be part of a university course'.

A more significant problem contained in the Welfare Reform Act has been widely criticised as introducing 'workfare' into the UK's benefits system (see, for example, Bunting, 2009). The new Act gives Job Centre staff enhanced powers to require claimants to undertake activities which are seen as paving the way back to employment and these include 'compulsory full-time community activities that will be exchanged for the pittance that is jobseekers' allowance' (Serwotka, 2009).

Government Volunteerism

The second issue of concern is the potential for government to harness volunteering to its own policy objectives. There is, of course, nothing new or unusual about volunteering in the public sector; lay magistrates, special constables and prison visitors are a long-standing feature of the criminal justice system and school governors claim to be the largest volunteer group in the UK (<http://www.nga.org.uk>). And it was the growing numbers of volunteers in the NHS and the social services departments of local authorities that led to the establishment of the Volunteer Centre UK (now Volunteering England) and the development of the new role of volunteer management.

Government volunteers have been identified as one of the future growth points for volunteering (Rehnberg, 2005). Again, the evidence comes from North America –although the trend may be more widespread; Rehnberg quotes from a roundtable discussion which was part of the preparation for the United Nations International Year of Volunteers and concluded, *inter alia*, that volunteering must ‘be recognised as a strategic resource which can be positively influenced by public policy’ (Capeling-Alakija and Pennekam, 2000 quoted in Rehnberg, 2005). It is doubtful, however, that many other countries which participated in the UN year matched the history and scale of engagement with volunteers demonstrated by the USA’s Federal Government.

What Rehnberg (p 94) calls ‘the ability of government to spur service initiatives’ was originally demonstrated by President Kennedy’s call for international service through participation in the Peace Corps which he established in 1961. Kennedy’s initiative in involving volunteers in implementing his foreign policy and international development strategy was matched on the internal policy front by his successor, Lyndon Johnson, with the establishment in 1964 of VISTA – Volunteers in Service to America – as part of his War on Poverty programme. More recently, the Clinton presidency consolidated a number of different sets of work, expertise and resources into the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Significant though these programmes are, they are dwarfed by the scope and complexity of the initiative launched by George W. Bush in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11th November 2001. The *USA Freedom Corps* is an umbrella programme which took in the earlier initiatives and added a range of new activities. According to the Department for Homeland Security this very ambitious programme is, ‘designed to “inspire and enable all Americans to find ways to serve their community, their country or the world”’ with a mission which ‘asks every American to donate 4,000 hours of service across his or her life span’ (Rehnberg (2005; p 102).

Setting the Volunteering Agenda

The investment of successive American presidents in government-led programmes of community service and the lack of any comparable activity in

the United Kingdom present something of a paradox. One would have expected programmes of this kind to find more fertile ground in Britain, where the state has a history of collaboration with and mutual respect for voluntary action, than in USA where any extension of the government role - especially at Federal level - tends to be met with suspicion. Rather than establishing programmes which involve volunteers in addressing public policy goals the British government has preferred to influence the volunteering agenda while remaining at arms length from its implementation.

The government's priorities for voluntary action have been expressed through a series of funding programmes which have targeted specific groups of potential volunteers (such as young people, older people and students in higher education) and, occasionally, certain kinds of volunteering (such as a brief but intense flirtation with mentoring in the early years of the 21st century). The majority of these funding opportunities have been directed to existing organisations although both the Experience Corps and v were new voluntary sector 'independent' bodies albeit with significant government investment.

There is a good deal of disquiet and criticism about these initiatives on the part of people who manage and staff both volunteering infrastructure bodies, especially local volunteer centres, and volunteer-involving organisations. These feelings were reflected in the evidence collected by the Neuberger Commission (Gaskin *et al*, 2008). Some of the criticisms have focused on the short-term nature of the funding for government initiatives and others have been prompted by what is seen as the duplication of effort created by the establishment of new mechanisms for delivering them. At the heart of the unease, however, is the feeling that priorities are being imposed on them by government bodies which are out of touch with what is happening and with what is needed at local level where most volunteering takes place. One informant told the Commission: 'government should stop inventing new volunteering schemes and support existing organisations and infrastructure. The sector already knows what it is doing and should be trusted to get on with it' (Gaskin *et al*, 2008; p 119).

Creating the Environment for Voluntary Action

Those giving evidence to the Commission were also concerned about the ways in which the activities of government could work against their expressed policy of support for volunteering by creating an unhelpful environment. There has been a long standing issue about the implementation of Benefits legislation with local officials advising claimants that volunteering might mean that they were unavailable for work and thus not entitled to benefits despite clear statements to the contrary at national level. More recently, the issue of criminal record checks has been a bone of contention.

The evidence suggest, however, that the - largely unintended - barriers in the way of people engaging in volunteering are more numerous and more widespread. One example was the impact on purely voluntary groups and especially those involved in sport and recreation of regulatory measures

which seemed disproportionate: 'how can a local group interested in sports facilities on an inner city estate be expected to provide accounts that would satisfy Ernst and Young?' (Gaskin *et al*, 2008; p 120).

More generally informants complained that: 'regulatory bodies seem incapable of taking volunteering into account and seem keen to pass yet more regulations which effectively stop or severely curtail established volunteer activities, even when such activities have not resulted in any significant problems in the past' (*ibid*). Similarly, associational activities have been affected by government policies which expect local authorities to charge market rents for the use of the meeting rooms that groups need and by the selling off or privatisation of school playing fields and other community facilities.

Respondents to the Commission on the Future of Volunteering's call for evidence identified two underlying explanations for these problems. In the first place, they suggested that government officials did not have an adequate 'understanding of volunteering and the settings in which it took place' and needed to 'increase their awareness of how volunteering is distinct from paid work, and how the contribution of volunteers actually works in practice' (*ibid*; p 115). Secondly they felt that government lacked a strategic approach to volunteering. One large volunteer-involving organisation wanted to see: 'a coherent overarching strategy relating to volunteering. We have seen initiatives that target specific groups, but these seemed to operate in isolation' while others suggested the need for 'greater coherence and consistency across government on volunteering issues' (*ibid*; p 114).

What government should – and should not – do

These four facets of government action can be seen as threats to the integrity of the volunteering experience as defined by Kearney and others. Volunteering cannot by definition be compulsory; there are grave concerns about whether it can be harnessed to the needs of the state without damaging the core idea that volunteers choose where and how to get involved; the priorities for voluntary action should be the result of a multitude of choices made by volunteers rather than decided by government; and, if government has a role, it is to create conditions under which all kinds of volunteering – and none – can flourish.

There are, however, two views about what all of this means for the role of government vis á vis volunteering. The first of these is based on the idea that the state is both benign and competent. This leads to calls for a 'healthy partnership between volunteering and the state' (Davis Smith, 2000) in which the government's role includes 'setting the strategic direction' for voluntary action (Commission on the Future of Volunteering, 2008). From this point of view, the shortcomings of government action are due to its failure to develop a coherent policy overview on volunteering.

The alternative response is based on two strongly held beliefs. The first of these is that the state is neither benign nor particularly effective. The second is that volunteering is – and should be – every bit as anarchic, ungovernable and untidy as Dahrendorff (2001), Kearney (2001, 2007) and others have suggested. In this view, if government has a role, it extends no further than ensuring that there are few, if any, obstacles to volunteering. Otherwise it needs simply to ‘get out of the way’.

If the second of these views can be seen as Utopian, the first may be characterised as naïve. Governments will continue to play a role in shaping the scope and nature of volunteering and the extent to which their actions are allowed to threaten its soul will be determined by the level of resistance – both passive and active – from those of us who believe it to be important.

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