

**Voluntary action in the British World:
Some observations on the last twenty years**

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This paper touches on a couple of aspects of voluntary action, both from an historical and contemporary perspective. I want to examine, albeit very briefly, the three countries that are covered by the label 'British world' - Australia, New Zealand and Canada - in the new book, *Beveridge and Voluntary Action in Britain and the wider British World*, edited by Nicholas Deakin and myself, and their experiences with 'voluntary action', since 1991.¹ One of the key points is the effect of the Global Financial Crisis [GFC] on the relationship between governments and voluntary sector. I think its fair to say that the GFC and the ensuing recession and large government funding cuts from 2009-11 has been much more pronounced in the UK, than certainly in Australia and to a lesser extent Canada and New Zealand.²

It has been argued that the effect of the GFC on the voluntary and philanthropic sector, especially in terms of a reduction in funding sources and a contraction of established relationships, was replicated in many countries such as the UK, the USA, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and elsewhere.³ However in comparison

¹ Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2011.

² See, for example, the response by the Charity Commission in its recent Newsletter, Winter 2011/11 - http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/Library/about_us/ccnews33.pdf. Accessed 26 March 2011.

³ For Canada, see http://www.imaginecanada.ca/files/www/en/publicaffairs/2011_prebudget_submission_08172010.pdf; for New Zealand, [http://giving.org.nz/files/Impact%20Survey%20Feb%202023%2009%202_2 .pdf](http://giving.org.nz/files/Impact%20Survey%20Feb%202023%2009%202_2.pdf). Accessed 24 March 2011.

with what is happening, and has happened in the UK and some parts of Europe, Australia and New Zealand largely escaped the effects of the GFC, and in terms of volunteering and philanthropic giving, the affects have been minimal.⁴ That is not to say that in Australia, at least, the charitable sector has experienced an increased demand for its services across the board, and certainly the spate of domestic and international natural disasters in the first months of 2011 has put an enormous strain on organisations such as the Australian Red Cross and World Vision.⁵ I believe there are other factors at work in the Australian context that I will detail later in the paper.

There is little doubt, as we argue in our new book, that since 1991 the 'promotion of voluntary action has become a very popular concept ... and voluntary organisations are now significant players in public policy, across the political spectrum and in many different countries'.⁶ That is partly why the publication of our book that looks back at the period that provided the backdrop for Beveridge and his voluntary action report, is so relevant for today's political and policy contexts.

It is also important to remind ourselves of what Beveridge saw as 'voluntary action'.⁷ In his 3rd De Carle Lecture delivered at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand, in April 1948, Beveridge stated that it was 'everything that citizens do outside their duties to the State, to improve the conditions of life

⁴ Quarterly data published in December 2010 by the Office for the Community and Voluntary Sector, New Zealand stated that both giving and volunteering remained stable.

<http://www.philanthropy.org.nz/sites/all/files/How%20NZers%20Give-%20June%20Quarter%202010.pdf>. Accessed 26 March 2011.

⁵ Michelle Griffin, 'Charities stretched to manage programs', *SMH*, 15 March 2011.

⁶ Melanie Oppenheimer and Nicholas Deakin, 'Beveridge and Voluntary Action', in Oppenheimer and Deakin, *Beveridge and Voluntary Action in Britain and the wider British World*, p. 1.

⁷ Once described in an Australian review as 'a tireless burrower into Britain's social habits' correcting 'any illusion that a beneficent State can be the sole fount of human happiness'. See T.S. Monks, *Book of the Week*, 'The State and Voluntary Action', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 November 1948, p. 8.

for themselves and their fellows'.⁸ He then went on to distinguish between the two main frameworks – the two pillars of voluntary action – philanthropy and mutual aid.

The last 20 years has witnessed a profound shift especially at the political and policy level in this regard, and we are still assessing the consequences and impact of these changes, particularly at a social and national level. I believe its also fair to say that governments turned to voluntary action in its broadest terms as a way to alleviate the ills and dilemmas of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, unfortunately not always with the best results. For example, Cameron's 'Big Society' initiative – appears to the outsider at least to be a 'grab bag' of ideas selected at random for maximum effect – an idea to be hitched to the voluntary action 'superhighway'.

In Australia, the term 'voluntary action' has become a widely used phrase in the climate change debate. The Federal government in its ill-fated Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme or CPRS from 2009 talked about 'voluntary action' being taken into account when setting future scheme caps. It specifically talked about 'household voluntary action' that is Australian households being able to achieve CPRS caps and therefore reducing emissions. 'Everyone must do their bit to meet the national emissions reduction targets', the website of the Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency, yet to be updated, still declares.⁹

This is an interesting shift in the use of the term in Australia. In this context the term 'voluntary action' is being employed by the State to enforce a policy 'for the public good' when Beveridge clearly meant voluntary action was 'separate from'

⁸ Mitchell Library, Sydney, Beveridge Papers, M2618, box 429, typescript of third De Carle Lecture, 'Voluntary action for social advance', April 1948, pp. 3-4.

⁹ <http://www.climatechange.gov.au/en/government/initiatives/cprs/cprs-progress/voluntary-action.aspx>. Accessed 24 March 2011. This legislation has yet to pass parliament. A CPRS, to be implemented in 2011, was twice rejected in the Federal parliament in 2009. The then PM, Kevin Rudd, then deferred the scheme in April 2010. Australia now has a Multi-Party Climate Change Committee to oversee climate change policy and most recently the Labor government announced a carbon tax would be introduced.

the State, and concerned an individual's response to his/her own personal situation and then them wanting them to be proactive and to do something about it – for example the mutual aid component through friendly societies; trade unions; co-operatives; building societies - whatever. With the second component – philanthropy - an individual becoming inspired by a social consciousness to do 'good' for others – and in doing so make a better society.

This confusion is symptomatic of much of the debate that has occurred in Australia in the recent past. In my view, there continues to be very little real understanding, from both an historical and contemporary perspective, of the development of voluntary action and voluntary association and especially of the *value of independence*, a point made strongly in the British report from the Baring Foundation published in 2009.¹⁰ In Australia there has been a blurring of the boundaries, especially at a policy level, between the state and voluntary sector – a distinction of and separation from that Beveridge was very keen to make. But over the last 60 years, in countries such as Australia, the confluence between the two is quite marked. The rhetoric of 'partnership' between government and voluntary sector, with the increasing development of a 'quasi public' persona, intimately linked with and reliant on government funding leaves us with unresolved contradictions of the role of state, markets and the voluntary sector in Australia today.

When looking at Australia, New Zealand and Canada in the period from 1991, it is interesting also to note that an organisation such as the Voluntary Action History Society does not exist in these countries. Indeed a senior historian colleague of mine noted the book launch flyer on my door of my office and commented in a very surprised tone of the existence of such a society! In Australia and New Zealand, there is a loose network of academics, mainly

¹⁰ Matthew Smerdon (ed.), *The First Principle of Voluntary Action: essays on the independence of the voluntary sector from government in Canada, England, Germany, Northern Ireland, Scotland, United States of America and Wales*, STVS-Independence, Working Paper No 3, The Baring Foundation, March 2009. <http://www.baringfoundation.org.uk/FirstPrincipleofVA.pdf> Accessed on 24 March 2011.

historians, but also social policy and social work scholars, who have been meeting since 2005 at Australasian Welfare History conferences, with the fourth such meeting scheduled for New Zealand in November 2011.¹¹ The main protagonists here, historians such as Shurlee Swain, Ann O'Brien and myself, and Margaret Tennant and Bronwyn Dally in New Zealand were, I think, propelled to action after attending the first VAHS conference, '400 Years of Charity' held at University of Liverpool in September 2001. I am not aware of similar societies or groupings in Canada although there is a significant body of literature on the topic of social welfare history, especially from the early 1980s onwards, but the focus, once again is not often on aspects of voluntary action history.¹²

Despite this lack of organisation and formal association, at an academic level at least, all three countries, but Australia and Canada in particular, see themselves as nations with a tradition of voluntary action and volunteering, based on similar traditions here in Britain. I guess it's obvious that as British settler societies, voluntary action was part and parcel of the cultural, social and political baggage brought by British immigrants, along with other British customs and traditions such as language, systems of government, sport, food etc. These themes are discussed in our Beveridge book in the relevant chapters on each country written by Paul Smyth for Australia, Margaret Tennant for New Zealand and Peter Elson for Canada. In Canada for example, it's argued that the volunteer spirit is deeply rooted and a 'traditional Canadian value' and that 'Canadians have a long association with voluntary action with volunteering mobilising 'enormous energy for the common good' over a long period of time.¹³

¹¹ 1st Australasian Social Welfare History Workshop, Melbourne, 2005 with some articles published in *History Australia*, volume 2, no. 3, 2005; 2nd Australasian Social Welfare History Workshop, Wellington, 22-23 November 2007 with an issue of *Australian Historical Studies*, volume 39, issue 2, June 2008 devoted to papers; 3rd held at UNSW on 18-19th February 2010.

¹² John Graham 'History of Canadian Social Welfare, in *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, <http://www.oxfordbibliographiesonline.com>. Accessed 17 March 2011.

¹³ See, for example, Janet Lautenschlager, *Volunteering. A Traditional Canadian Value*, Voluntary Action Program, Department of Canadian Heritage, Ottawa, 1992, p. 1.

In the Australian context I have argued that we are, too, a 'nation of volunteers'.¹⁴ Particularly with the devastating Queensland floods and cyclones in January/February this year, and the flooding which extended to much of eastern Australia over the summer, the volunteer response, especially the thousands who turned up in gumboots with brooms and shovels in gloved hands, in Brisbane in January to assist with the clean up, was truly amazing and was noted by the media and politicians. The Brisbane response was largely brought together through a Facebook campaign, which would be a fascinating research topic to explore – and is a wonderful example of the influence of new social media networks on volunteering today. However, there is a note of caution here with a recent submission by Volunteering Queensland to the Queensland Flood Commission of Inquiry assessing that a large proportion of these people, when asked if they wanted to continue volunteering, responded in the negative.¹⁵

The counterpoint to this is that although advocates of volunteering and voluntary action in Australia have long recognised our 'rich history of volunteering which has contributed significantly to the quality of our lives and to the foundations of a democratic, caring and vibrant society', the 'true value of volunteering' continues to be overlooked'.¹⁶ Like here in the UK, in 1991, when the VAHS was established because voluntary action history was being ignored, interest in aspects of the history of voluntary action in Australia has provoked little interest from historians generally, even though this notion of Australia as a 'nation of volunteers' resonates emotionally, culturally and politically in the recent past, and continues in the present.

When we look at how each nation, that is Canada, New Zealand and Australia, has responded to voluntary action [using Beveridge's original understanding] in the past twenty years there are some striking similarities and differences. Peter

¹⁴ See Melanie Oppenheimer, *Volunteering. Why we can't survive without it*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2008, p. 5.

¹⁵ See 'Queensland Volunteers – Not Long Term', 5 May 2011. <http://www.probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2011/05/queensland-volunteers-not-long-term>. Accessed 12 May 2011.

¹⁶ Joy Noble and Fiona Johnston quoted in Oppenheimer, *Volunteering*, p. 5.

Elson, who wrote the Canadian chapter for the Beveridge book, is currently one of the most prolific researchers in the field of Canadian nonprofit or voluntary action history especially in the period from 1990s to today. His new study, *High Ideals and Noble Intentions: Voluntary Sector-Government Relations in Canada*, was recently published.¹⁷ Elson argues that the period 1994 to 2008 was a critical one for the voluntary sector in Canada when prominent discussions surrounding issues such as government/voluntary sector relations, policy, funding, advocacy, and definitions of what charity meant at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century were held.¹⁸

Elson suggests that relations between governments and the voluntary sector are not good led by budget cuts and perceptions of isolation and marginalisation. This is despite initiatives by the sector around ten years ago, forming the Voluntary Sector Roundtable, the completion of the Broadbent Report (1999) that detailed self-regulation and better governance processes; the creation, in 2000, of the Canadian Voluntary Sector Initiative [VSI], by the Canadian Federal government including an Accord between government and the voluntary sector; and the development of codes of practice and advocacy.¹⁹ But as Elson explains, 'there was no movement by the government on two areas which were of utmost concern to the voluntary sector, the definition of charity and funding practices'.²⁰

The major problem, Elson argues, was that there was no continuity between the early negotiations and policy developments within government departments. So within a short space of time political interest in the Accord disappeared and after five years and a change of government in 2006 to a minority Conservative government, the result has been cuts to funding in all areas including policy and research and a corresponding lack of interest in the voluntary sector overall.²¹

¹⁷ University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2011.

¹⁸ Peter R. Elson, 'London Calling: A Comparison of Critical Junctures in Voluntary Sector/Government Relations in Canada and the UK', paper given to the 2008 ARNOVA Conference, 20-22 November 2009, Philadelphia, PA

¹⁹ As part of IYV in 2001, it included a C\$95 million, five-year series of committees, accords, regulations, and a series of seven Joint Tables.

²⁰ Elson, 'London Calling', p. 11.

²¹ Elson, 'London Calling', p. 18.

All in all the story is quite depressing and not the response one might have thought of ten years ago in the heady days of IYV in 2001.

As far as the New Zealand experience goes, like Canada, the last twenty years has been a very challenging period for the voluntary sector. Margaret Tennant, New Zealand's foremost historian of voluntary action and social welfare, one of our contributors to the Beveridge book, and author of the highly acclaimed *The Fabric of Welfare: Voluntary Organisations, Government and Welfare in New Zealand, 1840-2005*, argues that, as elsewhere in the western world, the relationship between the voluntary sector and the state is complex, and that during the past decades, the relationship in New Zealand has been re-evaluated and contested.²² Tennant paints a picture of a battered voluntary sector battling the storms of neo-liberalism, competitive tendering, contracting out, pressure to professionalise, and re-branding that has led parts of the sector to look more like publicly listed for-profit companies on the stock exchange.²³

From a country that, like Australia, exalted its role as the 'social laboratory of the world' at the beginning of the twentieth century, a society of 'workers' one hundred years later has all but totally vanished and indeed reversed these ideals. Tennant argues that voluntary endeavour evolved slowly in colonial New Zealand largely due to the small population and an 'individualistic ethos', and it was not until after the 1880s when voluntary and benevolent organisations were formed in reaction to economic failures and increased urbanisation.²⁴ This development was influenced, too no doubt, by the increase in voluntary action in Britain itself with the nineteenth century seen by Justin Davis Smith and others as the 'golden age of the voluntary association'.²⁵

²² Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 2007.

²³ *The Fabric of Welfare*, p. 213.

²⁴ *The Fabric of Welfare*, p. 216.

²⁵ Justin Davis Smith, 'The voluntary tradition. Philanthropy and self-help in Britain, 1500-1945', in Justin Davis Smith, Colin Rochester and Rodney Hedley (eds), *An Introduction to the Voluntary Sector*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995, p. 14.

Like New Zealand, Australia's early charitable sector looked to the state for financial support from the earliest days although unlike its cousin across the Tasman, the establishment of the penal colony of New South Wales by the British government was always going to influence its development especially in terms of voluntary action and relationship with governments. Like Canada and New Zealand, the last twenty years have seen significant changes as Paul Smyth outlined in his chapter in the Beveridge book. But although Smyth argued that the voluntary sector was always merely a subsidiary largely dependent on government funding, I think this emphasis, once again, places the role of voluntary action on the back burner. This has been a common feature of Australian voluntary action historiography and something that Davis Smith suggested within the British literature as well when he stated that 'the voluntary sector has been ill served by historians' rather viewing it as merely a 'prelude to the development of the welfare state'.²⁶

Over the past 10 years, there is little doubt that, largely through the influences of the Australasian Welfare History Workshops, Australian historiography in this field has shifted with research focussing less on the role of the state, and more on the voluntary sector and its important role in the 'mixed economy of welfare' 'supplementing, complementing and sometimes challenging the state'.²⁷ A rise or perhaps a re-awakening of explorations of religion and religious organisations and its role in welfare history more generally has also been a feature in the Australian historiography. In the most recent workshop, for example, held in February 2010, over half the papers dealt with some aspect of religion, especially focusing on indigenous and child welfare.

There is also significant change underway at a government and policy level in Australia. Following the Blair government's direction in this field, the Labor government, elected in 2007, led first by Kevin Rudd and now Julia Gillard, are propelling a series of significant changes under the guise of 'partnership' with

²⁶ Davis Smith, 'The Voluntary Tradition', p. 19.

²⁷ Margaret Tennant and Shurlee Swain, 'Editorial', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 39, issue 2, June 2008, p. 147.

the sector, including a compact, a national volunteering strategy, and a new national regulator for the not-for-profit sector.²⁸ Rudd appointed a Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion and the Voluntary Sector, Senator Ursula Stephens – the first such position at a federal level - but unfortunately this was not continued under Gillard. And New South Wales' new coalition government, elected on 30 March, does not have a Minister for Volunteering at all! Some of this recent change has been led by a Productivity Commission's report on the Not-For-Profit Sector that was published in January 2010.²⁹ All of this is set against the backdrop of at least 15 years of sporadic reviews and inquiries into the sector and its relationship with governments that have resulted in only limited policy development or reform especially at a federal level.

Developing and implementing a reform agenda in Australia has been excruciatingly slow and fragmented.³⁰ At the same time, the conversion of the sector into a quasi-market driven model, driven by contracts, competition and choice and controlled almost exclusively by governments through funding arrangements, has continued unabated. Unlike New Zealand that enacted a Charities Commission in 2005, and Canada with its Charities Directorate and *NotforProfit Corporations Act 2009*, Australia has been very slow to focus on reform in this area. Few politicians of any political persuasion really seem to understand the sector and its relationship with government, and we rarely have champions in cabinet or in positions of influence. With a minority government that relies on three independents in the House of Representatives and with the Greens to hold the balance of power in the Senate from July this year, combined with intense debates on climate change, the National Broadband Network etc,

²⁸ See Consultation Paper, January 2011, Attorney-General's Department, Commonwealth of Australia, <http://www.ag.gov.au/cca>. Accessed 20 March 2011.

²⁹ Productivity Commission Research Report, Contribution of the Not-for-Profit Sector, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, January 2010.

³⁰ The landscape is littered with reports and inquiries starting with the 1995 review of *Charitable Organisations in Australia* by the Industry Commission. More recently, we have had the 2001 *Inquiry into the Definition of Charities and Related Organisations* and the 2008 Senate Economics Committee Inquiry into *Disclosure Regimes for Charities and NFP Organisations*.

today in 2011, even with IVY+10, the focus on voluntary action in the Australian context and real reform, seem as remote as ever. This gloomy outlook may change with the recently announced Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission [ACNC] to begin on 1 July 2012.³¹

Conclusion

So where to from here? These dialogues, symposia, and connections that we've managed to create from the 2008 60th anniversary of the publication of Beveridge's *Voluntary Action* have prompted me to consider the possibility of suggesting a large transnational study of the impact of voluntary action across time and place including Great Britain, Australia, USA, Canada and New Zealand. It could be based on a Leverhulme International project [or an Australian Research Grant DORA] that begins with World War I and focuses on pre-war, wartime and post-war experiences of voluntary action from say the high point of voluntarism, 1880s through to the 21st century. Using a transnational framework, we could explore a range of themes including historical origins, continuity and change, 'the moving frontier' thesis, Beveridge's voluntary action, changing relationships with government over time and place, the role of individuals, philanthropic giving etc. With the centenary of WWI only a few years away that global event could provide the transnational study with a focus, 'a hook' as they say in the publishing world.

Through such a transnational project, we could revisit some of the issues that Beveridge, that enigmatic 'burrower into Britain's social habits', sought to address in his 3rd report; issues that were outlined in Part IV of the conclusions and recommendations:- that the key to the future of voluntary action included adequate financing and an overhaul of financial structures of voluntary sector; the 'wise use of willing volunteers'; the essential support of the state neither

³¹ See 'Reform at Last: Budget establishes One-Stop NFP Regulator', 11 May 2011. <http://www.probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2011/05/reform-last-budget-establishes-one-stop-nfp-regulator>. Accessed 12 May 2011.

smothering nor disdainful; and the rethinking of exactly how social services are constructed and delivered.³²

³² These points were brought up in a book review, John S. Morgan, 'Reflections on the Third Beveridge Report', *The Social Service Review*, vol. XXIII, 1949, pp. 176-183.