

# **NGOs in Britain Project: Final Report**

*Matthew Hilton*

The key finding of the project is that, as stated in the opening words of *The Politics of Expertise*, ‘Politics was privatised in twentieth-century Britain’. By this we mean that during an era of rapid technological development and expanding horizons, emancipated citizens found new ways to maintain their engagement with the issues of the day. By supporting a range of political actors beyond the traditional arena of parties and parliament, they constructed their own personal manifestos of complaints, causes and commitments. Most significantly, they joined, supported and participated in a variety of groups which would increasingly come to be called NGOs.

At the end of the 1960s, the women’s liberation movement declared, ‘the personal is political’. The lived realities of everyday existence were to become the platforms of concerted feminist action. In this project we found that the phrase ought to be inverted. The political became personal. Through a range of new institutional structures, citizens remained engaged and interested in ways that allowed them to opt in and opt out of a tremendous range of political concerns. Their allegiances shifted, their forms of participation were profoundly altered, and their loyalties could no longer be assumed to be so stable, but their collective actions nevertheless continued to expand notions of just what constituted ‘politics’.

This is not how commentators usually describe the state of contemporary democracy, civic participation and political engagement. Drawing on declining levels of voter turnout, falling membership of established institutions such as the trade unions and the Women’s Institute, and collapsing rates of church attendance, academics, politicians, moralists and cultural critics have bemoaned our supposed lack of interest in the world, our political apathy and our unwillingness to join in various forms of associational life. This is our tendency, as one American political scientist famously put it, to ‘bowl alone’. We now supposedly prefer the solitary pursuits of television and consumerism over volunteering for good causes.

This is not the finding of this project. There are neither doom-laden epithets for the demise of democracy, nor starry-eyed prophecies for its imminent rejuvenation. Instead, while politics has indeed been privatised, this process took place amidst an incredible vibrancy in institutional life. Whether we refer to those intermediaries between the social and the political as civil society, the voluntary sector, charities, the third sector, the Big Society or NGOs, it soon becomes obvious that there has been a transformation in political engagement over the course of the last century. This has brought renewal to political participation, while also playing out in ways that are just as problematic as democracy has always been.

Some basic statistics on the scale of these sectors in the early twenty-first century bear this out. In 2008, the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) calculated there to be 171,000 voluntary organisations in the UK. These organisations drew on a combined income of £35.5 billion, held assets worth £75.5 billion, and were able to maintain a paid workforce of 668,000, with a volunteer army twice that size. If the widest definitions of the sector are employed, such that all forms of associational life are included, the NCVO estimated there to be approximately 900,000 organisations all over Britain, ranging from the tiny, local and informal to the huge, global and highly organised NGO leaders. Moreover, it has been estimated that 29 per cent of UK citizens formally volunteer every month, rising to 44 per

cent annually. Every year, 38 per cent of the population contacts an elected representative or government official, attends a public meeting or rally, takes part in a demonstration, or signs a petition. They turn out in huge numbers for NGO-organised events: 250,000 in Edinburgh in 2005 in support of Make Poverty History; 400,000 in 2002 backing the Countryside Alliance in its defence of fox hunting; and anywhere between one and two million in 2003 to oppose the impending war in Iraq.

As we hypothesised in our original proposal, NGOs have played a vital role in modern Britain. They have transformed the nature of social and political interaction and they have done so according to changing needs, values and interests of citizens such that it is has always proved impossible to shape civil society and the voluntary sector according to the priorities of governments.

To explain why millions of citizens have made individual decisions to support these organisations goes some way to outlining the transformation of politics in contemporary Britain. Long-term social trends are crucial here: the transition to mass society; the gradual expansion of the state; the emergence of an educated and increasingly affluent citizenry; and the lessons commerce provided to new actors seeking to influence politics. Most crucially, an ethos of professionalism and technocratic planning drove the expansion of modern institutions, creating new elites of experts who positioned themselves as best placed to understand the complexities of modern life and government.

For increasingly educated citizens, the mass political party had its limits in dealing with these concerns. The degrees of specialised knowledge that were needed to address the issues of modern liberal market democracies – for instance, the reform of social welfare, the regulation of the economy, the interpretation of human rights, the solutions to environmental degradation and climate change, the models to encourage global social justice, and the tools needed to understand the causes of poverty – required new cadres of technical experts and professional advocates. These were provided by the universities, the civil service and the established professions, yet the public also sought its own expert representatives that could address the types of issues concerning increasingly affluent citizens, motivated more by values than immediate material needs. Beginning in the interwar period, then, but expanding significantly from the 1940s, professionally-minded experts established new independent voluntary organisations, charities, and what would increasingly be termed NGOs to tackle the issues at the frontier of social and political reform.

The relationships these organisations came to have with their members and supporters have been very different from the types of activists and volunteers associated with the trade union movement or Victorian philanthropic bodies. For this reason, analysts of the voluntary sector, of social capital, of democratic culture and of political engagement have ignored, dismissed or marginalised those citizens whose politics have been privatised – especially when, superficially, participation often amounts to little more than a direct debit instruction. Yet the sheer scale of the NGO sector, and the massive number of supporters it boasts, demands our attention. We must be wary of letting judgements race ahead of analysis. Before we can begin to make negative or positive judgments on the state of contemporary democracy, we have first to understand the full range of political interventions undertaken by citizens. Over the last century, politics has become personalised and privatised in the sense that our allegiances are formulated individually in the private realm, rather than in the public arena of associational meetings, votes and motions. There have been good reasons for the privatisation

of politics, and we need to better understand this major social change, before we rush to condemn or condone.

More specifically, the research concluded that:

- **Civil society** is not in decline in Britain. While membership of trade unions, political parties, churches and traditional women's groups has fallen, membership of new social movements, NGOs and pressure groups have flourished.
- The nature of **democratic participation** has changed. While citizens are less likely to vote at the ballot box, they are more likely to lend their support to causes supported by donations and direct debit.
- In contrast to theorists of **social capital**, this ought not to be interpreted as a decline in democracy. Rather, there are rational reasons for supporting organisations that require little active involvement beyond financial support.
- **Social and political trust** is not a consequence of citizen participation. Rather, it is the cause. In an increasingly complex world, the public has opted to support increasingly professional and expert-driven civic groups through arms-length, 'cheque-book' activism. This has been a calculated decision to trust certain types of organisation to act on its behalf when dealing with other experts.
- The expansion of the **welfare state** has not weakened civic participation. In many instances the state has promoted and strengthened the voluntary sector, the welfare state has acted as a spur to further voluntary initiatives and, rather than being in competition, the state and the voluntary sector have complemented one another.
- Such findings seriously call into question the key assumptions of the 'Big Society' as propounded by the Coalition government since May 2010.

Lest it be thought that the project came to celebrate the role of NGOs it also concluded with some strong qualifications about what they have achieved. Much of these issues are concerned with the relationship between NGOs and the more mainstream politics associated with the established parties. Certainly, there has been much crossover, and many of the more progressive groups have indeed revitalised leftist politics, just as other organisations have provided a space for mobilisation at the Conservative Party fringe. But at the same time the class-based political system has not solely adapted to NGOs and the two have worked in very different ways. Here the 1970s might well prove to be the crucial turning point. It has been suggested that until that decade, 'a vertical, hierarchical vision of politics prevailed'. Since then, 'the authority of the political parties' has diminished. Our work explores how NGOs have filled this political gap. As lobbyists they have obtained particular successes. But there is an absence of an identifiable process that guarantees NGO success time and time again.

In a sense, NGOs fail to join the dots of political intervention. Pragmatism rather than ideology can gain adherents from across the political spectrum, but it can also lead to timidity. In pursuing a pragmatic politics that enables experts to have a seat at the technocratic table, more radical political solutions have been generally eschewed, though in the longer term it is perhaps more radical solutions that are required. For instance,

Greenpeace has often worried that the real answer to environmental problems require modes of living that run counter to the dominant economic and social system. Any gains sought on a pragmatic basis must inevitably involve compromises, but ones which can only delay, rather than remove, what NGOs see as an impending crisis.

Similarly, the effectiveness of NGOs can be challenged through their relationship with their supporters. It comes down to a question of trust. The nature of the trust placed in non-state actors might be real, but it remains problematic. The basis of the trust placed in an organisation might be one founded on ignorance as to what it is that the organisation actually does. In this sense, the relationship of trust can actually serve to limit the modus operandi and ultimately the effectiveness of these new political organisations.

Finally, the pool of NGO supporters has not been limitless. The number of participants has reached a ceiling in the same way that it did for political parties and traditional voluntary organisations. Indeed, it is likely that those lower socio-economic groups that were least likely to participate in political elections in the 1950s are the very same that are least likely to join NGOs today. Furthermore, the idealised supporter of the NGO looks something like Ernest Gellner's 'modular man': that is, someone who is active in civil society while also experiencing individualisation and atomisation. For Gellner, the price of modularity is the alienation and isolation that comes from having 'each activity unsustained by the other', in a manner that mirrors the political problems of a non-ideological approach. Yet, what is also apparent is that such modularity remains out of reach for lower social classes. Class remains relevant to people's identities, especially those whose limited educations and incomes make them less likely to join and support NGOs and to trust professionals as well as politicians. Accordingly, political solutions offered by NGOs might ultimately be unsatisfactory for both its participants and for those who feel excluded. If one prediction might be offered, then it is that politics will become – whether through NGOs or through the ballot box, but more likely through both – determined by those who can, rather than those who cannot, be googled.

What has been witnessed over the last seven to eight decades ought to provide little sustenance for either the optimistic or the pessimistic commentator of 'the state we're in'. NGOs are neither the saviours nor the symptoms of any perceived decline in political life. They have grown because they have responded to a changing political landscape and the public as a whole, knowing the limits of its own participation and the nature of the solutions sought, has recognised the need for their existence. NGOs have proved so pervasive because they have been able to participate in expert knowledge systems from which its supporters, as a public, have felt excluded and disillusioned. In this sense, 'the man in the grey suit' has not been the intermediary between the social and the political in the past half century. Instead, it has been 'the man in the white suit' – that is, the technocrat, the scientist, the engineer, the academic, the professional: in short, the expert – that has reformulated politics for a more complex era.

If greater trust is now placed in NGOs and charities rather than in political parties it is precisely because the professional experts associated with NGOs have a better feel for the game of politics in the modern technocratic state. As *The Politics of Expertise* argues, what is clear is that politics has changed and that it has done so largely because of the tremendous energy unleashed over the last seventy to eighty years by what can no longer accurately be labelled voluntary organisations. The public, by lending its seemingly passive support to NGOs through financial contributions, has appeared to have become less politically engaged. Yet members of this public have also personalised and privatised politics and acknowledged

too that their everyday concerns are better articulated by those with the resources to understand them comprehensively. This is neither de-politicisation or re-politicisation. It is, instead, the transformation of politics and the reorientation of state-society relations in an era of technocratic expertise.