

Recent developments in volunteering and citizenship

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Policy makers have recently sought to use volunteering as a vehicle to develop citizenship, and to offer elements of citizenship as a reward to develop volunteering. Policy proposals have focused on developing citizenship among young people and regard the emergence of volunteering as a form of currency, able to secure access to social goods and to repay social ills. This paper suggests four key changes that underlie this shift, including an increased role for the state and moves towards coercive forms of incentivisation.

Introduction

Two distinct but overlapping sets of proposals have turned up the heat on debates about volunteering and offer new takes on traditional approaches to engaging individuals in community benefit activity.

Using volunteering to nurture a new generation of young citizens

The first set of proposals concerns recent debates about national 'citizenship' or 'service' programmes for young people. Similar schemes have been mooted before, and since the 'Young Volunteer Force Foundation' proposals of the 1960s, youth volunteering has never been far from the agenda.

Developments have moved quickly. In April 2009, Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced £140 million to fund an expectation that all young people will have contributed at least 50 hours of service to their community by the age of 19. The Conservative Party has been refining 'National Citizen Service', a six-week structured programme to be undertaken by school leavers, with pilots taking place in South London to test the model. The Liberal Democrats promise a national 'Youth Volunteer Force' (Liberal Democrats, 2009). Others (eg Crabtree, 2009) have gone a step further, advocating a mandatory 'national community service' for all school leavers.

Youth citizenship programmes have also been launched in the third sector. Government-funded 'v' has launched a structured 44-week full-time volunteering programme called 'v Talent Year', while the Private Equity Foundation is funding a London pilot of the US uniformed service programme City Year.

These programmes draw on a range of traditions – concepts of 'service' to the community, National Service, notions of citizenship and social cohesion. Others stress crime reduction and 'good citizenship', but concepts such as active citizenship, community service and volunteering are used interchangeably.

Key words volunteering • citizenship • service • policy making

Volunteering as currency – earning and payback

The second type of proposal to have enjoyed recent growth seeks to link volunteering with citizenship in a different way.

The concept of using service to the community to pay back a debt to society has been around for some time, most notably through 'community service' penalties imposed by the justice system.

A new development has been local and national government combining this 'pay-back' concept with 'volunteering'. In some proposals, this is similar in purpose to judicial community service; designed to ensure that the participant repays a social ill, but diverging from this model in being voluntary. Transport for London has launched an 'Earn Your Travel Back' programme for young people whose travelcard has been confiscated because of antisocial behaviour – an option to 'earn back' the card by volunteering for a minimum number of hours. This is not mandatory community service as imposed by a court; young people choose whether to volunteer in order to earn back the card.

Other related developments involve using volunteering to 'earn' a social good, rather than repay a social ill, and apply more formal conceptions of citizenship. The 2009 Borders, Immigration and Citizenship Act creates an option for those living in the UK and seeking British citizenship to fast-track their application by volunteering. Foreign nationals living in the UK who volunteer, according to procedures yet to be decided, will receive British citizenship two years earlier than those who do not participate in the scheme.

In a similar development, Manchester City Council recently announced that those volunteering to make neighbourhoods a 'good place to live, work and play' will be fast-tracked for a home by being moved up a band in the council housing waiting list.

Making sense of the proposals

Four key trends appear to underpin these shifts in the ways in which volunteering and community benefit activity are viewed and the purposes for which they can be used:

Rolling forward the state – an increase in state activism

Whether through Callaghan's 'Good Neighbour' scheme or John Major's 'Make a Difference' initiative, government has long taken an interest in directly encouraging community activity. Recent signs suggest that this desire to intervene has increased, with the major parties favouring more direct involvement in shaping community benefit activity. Boundaries between civil society and government are being stretched as politicians have sought to more tightly prescribe outcomes, and even to determine the day-to-day content; for example, the National Citizen Service proposal includes a suggested timetable. In immigration policy, the Home Office is moving beyond its traditional domain of administering the immigration process, instead creating a framework that will shape the lives of recent immigrants for years after their move to the UK.

This trend can be traced back to two main factors. One significant factor is the global downturn, which has led to a substantial expansion in the state's role. As Will Hutton (2008) commented 'John Maynard Keynes is back'. In the US and across Europe, governments have taken steps to nationalise banks and develop works projects to create jobs. Accepted notions of where the dividing line should sit between the public sector and other sectors have been revised and new spheres of action carved out for governments around the world.

Economic conditions provide a new context for the well-stated personal commitments to youth volunteering of the Prime Minister and Conservative Leader. For Brown, this was manifested in the establishment of the Russell Commission and its implementation body 'v'. Cameron has also been active, launching the Young Adult Trust, which ran pilot schemes exploring new ways of engaging young people, and publishing *Inspiring Britain's teenagers* (Conservative Party, 2008) outlining his plans for a new National Citizen Service. This personal commitment has created interest not only in the schemes' outcomes, but in determining the delivery mechanisms and programme structure used to achieve them.

Using community benefit activity to develop citizenship

The growth of state activism is closely linked to ambitions to develop citizenship and civic values. Concern that problems in the financial sector were partially indicative of a deeper ethical deficit in society has led to questions being asked about how successfully young citizens are being developed.

Recent policies seem concerned primarily with citizenship in the identity sense – of building common bonds, shared values and fostering identification with communities and the UK through shared experiences. The government's plan to tackle the recession, *Building Britain's future* (HM Government, 2009), expounds this, claiming that tackling the recession is about building 'shared values' in the financial sector and among recent immigrants.

Brown's announcement that all young people will be expected to undertake 50 hours of volunteering is part of a conviction that 'with our younger generations more involved in their communities, I believe that we will build a stronger, more united nation' (Cabinet Office, 2009), while Cameron intends the National Citizen Service to 'develop shared citizenship and bring the next generation together' (Conservative Party, 2008: 1).

Other proposals place a greater emphasis on developing shared 'good citizenship' and nurturing prosocial behaviour in young people. This approach is taken by the Liberal Democrats' (2009) pledge to 'Pilot ... a Youth Volunteer Force in areas with crime problems and large numbers of disaffected young people' where one of the intended outcomes will be to 'nurture respect for their elders among young people' (Liberal Democrats, 2009: 5).

It is interesting that volunteering is seen as a key vehicle for the development of these common bonds and positive that the potential for the achievement of substantive outcomes through volunteering is recognised. Nevertheless, there is a need for greater

clarity about what is meant by the development of citizenship and civic values, and how this differs from existing activity.

Moves towards more coerced activity

The third trend affecting both sets of proposals has not previously been a significant feature of government action outside of welfare-to-work programmes. This is the shift towards linking participation in a community benefit activity with some form of coercion.

It is important to be clear about what 'coercion' means in this context. The use of incentives is not new – National Trust volunteers contributing more than 50 hours have long been rewarded with free entry to the charity's properties, while more recently Orange RockCorps has offered gig tickets to young people who volunteer. While controversial to some, such incentives are generally seen as harmless sweeteners designed to help increase participation rates.

Distinct from a sweetener is a significant incentive or disincentive, which makes it difficult for an individual to turn down one of the options. Both have the consequence of constraining the ability to make a free choice. Where this is the case, it may well be fair to label the effect of an incentive or disincentive 'coercive.'

The Earn Your Travel Back programme is a good example. Given the need for a travelcard in allowing free travel to school, and the alternative of purchasing an expensive replacement card, it would seem very difficult to 'choose' not to take up the volunteering offer.

The 2007 Borders Act appears coercive in its offer. Given the presence of such a significant positive incentive, bringing with it benefits including the ability to avoid paying international fees for dependants at university, it is again hard to imagine those faced with this decision feeling as though they could make a free choice.

The work of government will always involve coercion to maintain order or achieve social ends. However, attempts to link coercion with volunteering have the potential to change the relationship between government and civil society, as well as public perceptions of civil society itself.

A growth in interest in structured youth programmes

Although not referenced explicitly, it is clear from proposals from the major political parties and recent third sector schemes that the implementation of citizenship programmes is increasingly associated with highly structured participant experiences.

One of the drivers of the youth citizenship programmes being advocated is a belief in the value of experiences defined by a clear 'structure'. It is this view that structure is key to successful development that has led to notions of National Service being invoked and used as inspiration for potential programmes.

The Russell Commission (Russell, 2005) has stressed the need to create a broad 'menu of opportunities' for young people, and research has demonstrated the importance of flexibility to volunteers (Gaskin, 1998). The drive towards youth-led activity and programmes where volunteers determine the content of their activity

seems to have given way to a new mantra of universalism, inflexibility, structure and a guarantee of shared experience.

The growing UK interest in the US service programmes such as AmeriCorps, and the funding of a CityYear pilot, demonstrates this growth of interest in more formally structured schemes that offer shared experiences; with the uniforms, badges and other elements evocative of National Service.

Conclusion

Over the last two years, volunteering has increasingly been linked to citizenship, both through renewed interest in developing youth citizenship and in using elements of legal and social citizenship as incentives to encourage participation. Both strands have in common a shift towards more structured programmes, a more interventionist role for the state and the use of volunteering as a vehicle to promote positive citizenship behaviours.

In a piecemeal way, local and national policy has developed so that service to a community is a currency, exchangeable for access to social goods such as UK citizenship and council housing; and redeemable against social ills such as antisocial behaviour. This raises two issues. First, it should be acknowledged that the coercive nature of these exchanges means that such activities may not be considered to be voluntary. Second, third sector organisations may need to instigate a wider, more strategic debate about whether policy makers are right to use community benefit activity in this way. Where such activity can be traded for social goods and where it is state led, this creates a risk of a negative impact on public perceptions of volunteering and other community participation, and it further blurs the boundary between state and civil society.

More broadly, lessons need to be learned more effectively from experiences abroad. US service schemes often seem to capture the political imagination in the UK, but there has been little robust discussion of these programmes in the UK. European experience, such as Dutch 'Civic Internships' or the social strand of German National Service could more substantively inform these debates.

Finally, there is a need for clarity on the key terms being discussed in order to allow a clearer debate. Casual and interchangeable use of the terms 'civic service', 'community service', 'citizen service' and 'volunteering' masks the distinctions between voluntary and coercive programmes and risks further confusing potential participants.

That the potential for volunteering and community activity to develop citizenship is being more fully realised is testament to the value it delivers. What impact that recognition has on the perceptions and nature of voluntariness, and the wider role of government, remains to be established.

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