

Not all birds of a feather

Claire Fox

In January, I spoke at a colloquium organised by PrimeTimers, a social enterprise which offers the third sector invaluable business expertise and mentoring.

This is an important service for the voluntary sector which, these days, has to work in a world that demands increasingly-professional standards, if it is to survive.

Having spent my first seven working years in the voluntary sector, I'm not one to romanticise its traditional amateurish – dare I say, ramshackle – reputation.

Poor organisation is no proof that an organisation is more authentic than its corporate or government peers. It seems a good thing that 'we are no longer the hippy sector,' to quote Stephen Bubb, ACEVO's chief executive.

However, the professionalisation of the sector should not be an excuse for its emasculation. I have started to worry about babies and bathwater. Is the voluntary sector being sucked dry of its unique ethos and independence? And are local authorities the vampires that are to blame?

The hallmark of the voluntary sector is that each organisation is kept alive by a passionate commitment to its particular way of doing thing. This diverse mishmash, which includes everything from super-size charities to local community groups, is dubbed a third sector precisely because it is different from the statutory and corporate sectors.

It's the diversity of the sector, and the strong individual missions of organisations – with all the daring, experimental, idiosyncratic, quirky and independent-minded cultures it creates – which makes it tick, and makes it such an invaluable asset in filling neglected areas of provision.

What jeopardises this very distinctiveness is the move away from arm's length state grants and the latest craze for councils directly commissioning services from voluntary organisations. The drop in grant funding of £1.5bn over recent years – may have been effectively replaced by contract funding, but that hasn't simply resulted in a like-for-like swap.

No doubt unintentionally, local authority interaction with charities today is eroding their autonomy. Funding in the form of commissioned contracts, which has risen more than 60% since 2001, means a substantial amount of the sector's total income is for work decided on by an outside agency.

And that means accepting someone else's agenda and changing working practices to prove to their paymasters they are fit for purpose.

So, the voluntary sector is being asked to conform to a myriad of council-imposed targets, leagues tables, inspectorates, rules and regulations. All these external and extraneous demands are designed to make it comply with a monolithic 'one-size-fits-all' version of best practice service delivery.

As more core responsibility for what was erstwhile statutory care work is

formally handed over, so public sector practices are set as the uniform standard that should be attained.

This approach is in danger of crushing the life out of one key distinctive component of the sector. One-fifth of organisations have experienced a decline in volunteer numbers.

NCVO research also reports it is harder to recruit trustees than five years ago. At least 90% of charities have one to five vacancies on their board. Mark Restall, at Volunteering England, explains this by noting: 'This professionalisation of free volunteering puts people off... red tape leaves the volunteer saying, "Hang on, I am not being paid for this, but I am being treated as a salaried professional.'"

This is counterproductive – for all parties. PM Gordon Brown commends the sector for its contribution to civil society, not least by harnessing the best public spiritedness of communities through volunteering.

But guess what? Forcing these spontaneous acts of voluntarism to ape professional employment practices undermines the voluntary aspect of civic mindedness.

We are assured the new love affair between the state and its voluntary sibling is far more than its lowest-price provision.

I might not approve of this opportunistic political hi-jacking of genuine grass-roots relationships, but it seems obvious that if the sector is better trusted than the state, ever-closer involvement with the state is likely to diminish that trust.

The final irony is that the Government itself has now recognised there may be a culture clash between its local authorities and voluntary organisations. Its barmy solution is to train up its own side 'in the proper and sensitive handling of the volunteering instinct'.

Thousands of state commissioners are to be 'educated' in the third sector's distinctive ethos, only to then stamp on it by only awarding tenders to those which conform to centrally-determined outcomes.

Give me a ramshackle bunch of hippies any day – at least they can think and act for themselves.

Claire Fox is the director of the Institute of Ideas