Review article:
Independence at risk: the state, the market and the voluntary youth sector

Colin Rochester
Rediscovering Voluntary Action: The Beat of a Different Drum
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Abstract

In reviewing Colin Rochester's book, this article builds on a brief discussion of the voluntary youth sector in a previous Youth and Policy article, 'Youth work in a changing policy landscape: the view from England' (Davies, 2013: 13-14). In uncompromising terms 'Rediscovering Voluntary Action' sets out the wider ideological and political contexts in which the voluntary sector (of which, it is assumed, the voluntary youth sector is part) is now operating, and the serious threat it is now facing to its independence and its potentially innovative, critical and democratic role within civil society. The risks here arise partly from the sector's increasing incorporation into government policy agendas and partly from its involvement in 'partnerships' with private sector businesses, some of whose ethical practices have been shown to be questionable at best. The article concludes by considering where resistance to these developments is being attempted and how effective this is.

The emergence of voluntary youth work

The origins of what today we understand as 'youth work' lie in the 'youth leadership' which, in the later decades of the nineteenth century, philanthropic volunteers provided through the scout and guide troops, brigades and girls' and boys' clubs they formed across the country. These were created for those who fell into the newly discovered category of 'adolescents' many of whom, it was being realised at the time, were neither at school nor at work – part of, with the schools, what Frank Musgrove many years ago called in a phrase with still too many contemporary resonances 'a gigantic street-clearing device' (Musgrove, 1966:30). What emerged were most of the voluntary youth organisations, local, regional and national, which – though their titles have changed over the decades – are still with us.

The establishment of a Service of Youth in 1939 and the somewhat strengthened legislative basis this was given by the 1944 Education Act brought the first significant challenges to what had for decades been seen, not least by the organisations themselves, as their all but exclusive mandate to deliver and organise youth work. By the later 1950s, however, their credibility amongst ministers and civil servants was declining, particularly for providing for what was by then being seen as a more liberated and affluent teenage generation. This in part prompted the Ministry of Education in 1958 to appoint a committee 'to review the contribution of the Youth Service' (Smith, 1997:31).

The resultant Albemarle Report (Ministry of Education, 1960) stopped well short of open public disavowal of the main national voluntary youth organisations. Indeed, in giving strong support to local voluntary sector 'partnerships' with the statutory sector, it sought to provide them with a mechanism for retaining leverage on both policy and practice. However, with Albemarle making an uncompromising case for the local state's role in providing youth work directly, the power relations within these partnerships often meant they were more rhetorical flourish than operational reality. With this as its starting point – and in sharp contrast to the kid-glove treatment of, for example, businesses and banks – from the 1980s onwards the neo-liberal era progressively brought increased state influence on the voluntary youth sector, leading in due course to its widespread incorporation into state policies and priorities.

Reconceptualising voluntary action …

Though Rochester's book gives little specific attention to the youth work segments of the voluntary sector, it provides the vital overall context for understanding this, its more recent development, and its current political strains and dilemmas. He draws both on his extensive voluntary sector practice and management experience and his record as an academic. The resultant book, though providing ample evidence of the latter – it is supported by references running to 13 pages – sets out its arguments and analysis clearly and logically and in accessible language. It is also a valuable reference text – for example on issues like the history of voluntary action and the impact of bureaucracy and managerialism on voluntary organisations.

Hopefully however youth workers, youth work managers and youth policy-makers will engage fully with its overall analysis and in particular the policy as well as practice implications for them of its reconceptualisation of 'voluntary' as in 'the voluntary sector', 'voluntary organisations' and 'volunteer'. In doing this, Rochester for example challenges what he sees as a dominant 'philanthropic paradigm' whose goals are assumed to be mainly instrumental and 'welfarist'. To rebalance these definitions, he highlights the expressive aims of conviviality, sociability and 'serious leisure'. These, he points out, have underpinned much of the self-help and mutuality of, for example, friendly societies and working men's clubs – and also, it can be surely argued, are central to the best youth work.

Volunteering – and the case of youth work

Rochester is at pains, too, to challenge currently dominant conceptions of volunteering. For example, he describes the 'default setting' of 'the volunteering industry' which has emerged in the past three-to-four decades, as rooted in

> *… the unspoken assumption that volunteering is essentially about unpaid work undertaken for the benefit of people less fortunate than oneself and which involves carrying out pre-determined tasks for a formal bureaucratic organisation which employs staff to manage its volunteer labour* (p.66).

Here, too, he points out, no account is taken of other kinds of motivation – particularly, again, expressive ones, some of which may be substantially driven by self-interest – or of the organisational contexts which embrace and indeed encourage what he calls 'unmanaged' forms of volunteering.

Though this may just be the reaction of a youth work obsessive, at this point Rochester's analysis struck me as perhaps overlooking or at least under-playing some special features of volunteering within the youth work field. For one thing, even after the 1960s post-Albemarle professionalisation of youth work, volunteers – many operating well outside voluntary sector bureaucracies and so, in Rochester's sense, largely 'unmanaged' – continued (and indeed continue) to provide most of its labour force. Given this reality, it is perhaps not surprising that the general public and the media still often fail to differentiate between them and those who see themselves as professional. Indeed, as a reaction to the push to professionalisation, many, often assertively, continued to lay claim to their identity as 'youth workers' so that as late as December 2013 Tony Ransley – a self-styled 'mere voluntary youth worker' – was responding to a news report on the slow take-up of membership of the Institute for Youth Work with barely concealed anger:

> *Take the way those young people and workers in the voluntary sector are treated, you know, The Explorer Scouts, The Guides, The Church Youth Clubs etc.*
>
> *Despite providing the lion's share of the effective youth work in the country, they are shunned by the professionals, excluded from resources and dumped in something called the third sector* (McCardle, 2013).

Though largely below the radar, such views and the material realities from which they stem have gone on having substantially greater influence on youth work and its face-to-face practice than on most other forms of professionalised work-with-people. Shaping how youth work (often unquestioningly) is seen by policy-makers and politicians, they have most recently provided national and local politicians with spurious justifications for decimating Youth Services on the grounds that volunteers are available to fill all the resultant gaps – in sufficient numbers and with

the time and skills required. The continuing (and overwhelming) numerical superiority of its volunteer workforce has also left youth work itself with some tough unresolved dilemmas – over for example whether and how to establish a 'licence to practice' which does not ignore and thereby devalue those who still do most of the face-to-face work; and how to define membership of an Institute which, with 'youth work' in its title, seeks to attract both professionals and volunteers.

A second youth work divergence from Rochester's account of the recent history of volunteering would seem to lie in the attempts he describes to tame the attitudes and behaviour of the unmanaged volunteer. He dates these efforts from the work of the 1969 Aves Committee and its report The Voluntary Worker in the Social Services. Produced at a time when concerns were emerging about the limits of the welfare state's resources, the report initiated a long-term strategy for recruiting 'the volunteer worker' as additional, albeit unpaid, labour into welfare, health and education services.

In this, however, the Youth Service may have pre-empted Aves. In 1961 a Ministry of Education-appointed working party chaired by the Director of Education for Cumberland, Gordon Bessey, was given the brief to:

> *… consider, in the light of the needs of the youth service, the nature of training which should be available to part-time youth leaders and assistants, both paid and voluntary (Ministry of Education*, 1962: Para 1).

The move was prompted mainly by Albemarle's concern that the 4,600 part-time workers employed by local education authorities should have 'professional experience of working with adolescents and professional understanding of their needs' (Ministry of Education, 1962: Para 287). Nonetheless, the Bessey report assumed throughout that it was addressing the voluntary youth organisations as well as local authority Youth Services and that its recommendations would be taken up by them and the volunteers they recruited.

Indeed one of its key proposals was that a 'common element' training should be developed for all part-time youth workers, to be 'provided locally by the local education authority and the voluntary bodies jointly, through one training agency' (Ministry of Education, 1962: Para 31). This recommendation was underpinned by appendices setting out a detailed and highly prescriptive curriculum for this training. Though widely implemented in the later 1960s and into 1970s, by 1975 all but eight of the 74 joint training agencies identified ten years earlier had disappeared (Davies, 1999: 189). The limited longer-term impact of these early attempts at 'managing' the Youth Service's volunteer workforce is perhaps most vividly illustrated thirty years later by Tony Ransley's recalcitrant commentary on the professional world, quoted above.

To the heart of the matter: the voluntary sector, the state – and now the market

Rediscovering Voluntary Action's analysis and critique of how volunteering and voluntary organisations have been reconceptualised in recent years are much-needed and indeed long overdue. However, at its heart the book has an analysis of even greater significance to the youth policy field: how this reconceptualisation has been used by the state to change, often fundamentally, its relationship with previously independent voluntary bodies; how this in turn has opened up these bodies to damaging intrusions by the for-profit business sector; and how in the process voluntary organisations are being used as Trojan horses for the privatisation of public services. Tracing these developments back at least to the 1980s, Rochester shows how they gained major new and carefully engineered traction first under New Labour and then the Coalition. Indeed, one of the book's basic premises is that the very notion of a 'voluntary sector' was invented by governments as one way of drawing its component organisations into state structures. As a result, their purposes and managerial processes have increasingly been shaped, first, for meeting state expectations and then, through procurement and commissioning, for delivering its requirements.

For understanding this journey, two chapters particularly merit careful scrutiny and a critical search for relevance by youth policy-makers and practitioners. One, 'A Perilous Partnership? Voluntary Action and the State', makes a well evidenced case, placed firmly in its longer historical context, that

> *… the degree of influence – both direct and indirect – exercised by government over the work and conduct of voluntary agencies has become a major threat to their independence of thought and action during the past 20 years or so* (p.69).

Rochester, correctly, adds caveats to this broad generalisation – such as that, though many voluntary organisations may still be 'subject to onerous forms of regulation' such as police checks on volunteers and health and safety requirements, fewer than a quarter of them get funding from central or local government.

Nonetheless, sometimes embedded in words which could be passed over too easily, this chapter has crucial messages for the youth work/youth policy fields. For example the threat, Rochester makes clear, is not just to the work of the voluntary agencies. It is also to their *conduct* – revealed both in the bureaucratic and managerialist ways in which increasingly they now do business internally and in how they are developing their external 'political' relations. No less a threat, it should be noted, now exists not just to their independence of action, but also to their independence of *thought* – to the point, it often seems, where many are apparently no longer noticing that they have given up the role even of 'critical friend' to government and have become just another compliant arm of its delivery.

The second chapter deserving careful attention from the youth policy field also has a challenging question in its title: 'Selling out? Voluntary Action and the Market'. Rochester's core message on this is that:

> *… in ways that were unthinkable 30 years ago and unusual ten years after that, the leaders and managers of voluntary organisations refer to them as 'businesses' and have developed 'business plans' which are based on securing greater 'market share' as they successfully pursue 'customers'… (They) have become increasingly difficult to distinguish from the commercial enterprises whose forms and practices they have adopted* (p.85).

As well as exploring a range of other organisational models which voluntary organisations could adopt, the analysis here too is located in a longer historical perspective and in particular in the rise of neo-liberal economics and the politics which have driven these to the centre of social policy-making. The chapter for example traces how, especially under New Labour and then the Coalition, an ideology intrinsically hostile to a state role in public services provision has led increasingly either to this being privatised or to a resort to forms of 'public sector reform' aimed at 'turning it into as close a facsimile of the private sector as possible' (p.90). For voluntary organisations, these developments have resulted in 'a significant recasting of their relationships with the state' (pp.92-93) and how they organise themselves, including the widespread adoption of internal managerialist structures and procedures. This has also brought a consequential shift either from using volunteers to employing paid specialist staff, and/or to formalising volunteers' roles.

Underpinned by this analysis, Rochester highlights how so many voluntary organisations have compromised the values and purposes which first inspired them and to which they claim still to be committed. In the process many of the most distinctive features of their role historically have been marginalised if not eliminated – such as developing services on the basis of what intended beneficiaries want and need; campaigning on their behalf; and speaking truth to the powerful. It is thus hardly surprising that a later chapter of the book is again framed by a question: 'What is Voluntary Action For?'

And the voluntary youth sector?

In laying out his arguments and evidence, Rochester gives very little attention to the voluntary youth sector. This may be because it doesn't provide core welfare state services – health, education, housing, penal. It may also be because, given the limited amount of profit to be squeezed out of its main users, it is much less 'privatisable' – unless that is, the growing impact on the wider sector of the big national 'voluntary' corporates is taken into account (see later).

When looked at in its own right, there is some evidence that parts of the sector have made piecemeal

efforts to resist the kind of 'mission drift' Rochester highlights. In 2009, for example, what was at the time Clubs for Young People – formerly the very 'traditional' National Association of Boys' Clubs and since fashionably renamed 'Ambition' – sought to defend the open access club work to which it was committed against New Labour shifts to targeted work. It talked for example of the government having 'still some way to go before the value of clubs is fully understood' and about public sector commissioners being 'too narrowly focused on some specific "problem" groups such as … NEETs' (Clubs for Young People, 2009:8-9).

Girlguiding, too – another long established voluntary youth organisations often somewhat unfairly stuck with the 'traditional' label – has also adopted some broader critical stances. It has for example encouraged its members to petition against the *Sun*'s page 3 topless women and to support a 'Better Sex Education' campaign, while its 2013 survey of members' attitudes included focuses on equality for girls and the challenges they face from 'everyday sexism, online abuse (and) appearance pressures' (Girlguiding, 2013). What was formerly the YWCA – now the Young Women's Trust – is also now giving priority to publishing and campaigning on young women's issues. (See for example Young Women's Trust, 2013).

Most notable in this context, however – though perhaps least surprising given its history – has been the Woodcraft Folk and the highly public positions it has taken up in recent years. In November 2010 for example it announced that it would 'enthusiastically support action taken by young people to protest against government cuts to education. This includes walkouts and non-violent direct action' (IDYW, 2010). A year later it was strongly urging its members to support a trade union day of action – for example, by avoiding doing anything to 'undermine legal and legitimate industrial action by crossing any picket line' (IDYW, 2011). It has also sought to launch campaigns in support of asylum-seekers and refugees and against the UK Border Agency's restrictive visa policies (Woodcraft Folk, 2013).

With the Woodcraft Folk as an exception, even these organisations, however, have rarely gone beyond expressing 'reservations' and 'concerns' to conducting overtly oppositional campaigns against government policies even when – such as the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance – they have had seriously damaging consequences for young people. As striking, voluntary youth organisations have been no better than others in the voluntary sector in confronting – even often it seemed noticing – the free-market ideologies driving these policies and the destruction of welfare state services, including local authority Youth Services, which is resulting. If anything, stances against the prevailing policy pressures and their underlying rationale have become even rarer since the Coalition government came to power as the push to promote the voluntary sector as a substitute for state provision has become more relentless and strategic and as organisations have allowed themselves to become increasingly entangled with private sector 'partners' as well as the state.

The National Council for Voluntary Youth Services offers one example of how this can play out in a particular organisation – in this case one which exists to represent 'a diverse and growing network of over 290 national organisations and regional and local networks that work with and for young people'. As co-ordinator of the Catalyst consortium, in 2011-13 NCVYS received over £1.28M of government money to, amongst other things, 'establish a social finance retailer that can pilot and then promote a youth sector specific social investment approach based on evidence of impact' (NCVYS, 2012). By this time, too, NCVYS was explaining its broader purposes as including 'strengthen(ing) the youth sector market (and) equip(ping) the sector to work in partnership with Government' (NCVYS, 2013).

It is hard to conceive of allocations of funding of this size coming without some strings attached – hidden if not overt. How can they not close down space to act, as NCVYS claims to do, as 'the independent voice of the voluntary youth sector'? How in particular can this be avoided when the money is given by a key government department (in this case Michael Gove's Department for Education) to the organisation as its 'strategic partner for young people'? And how can the organisation avoid such pressures at a time when that same government is labelling voluntary organisations which are calling for increased public spending 'fake charities' (Barings Foundation, 2013: 9)? Nor perhaps can it be seen as entirely co-incidental that in this same period NCVYS seemed to lose sight of its commitment to work not just with but for young people by, immediately, after the 2011 summer riots, launching its divisive 'Not in my name' campaign. This not only publicly distanced the organisation from any young person who had taken part in the riots but it did so long before it could have had any evidence on who had actually been involved or why, and in so doing it was at least encouraging if not acting itself on stereotypes of 'youth' against which it might have been expected to campaign.

As well as, through Catalyst, being involved with the Young Foundation and Social Enterprise UK – organisations which largely take as given the Coalition's market-oriented values – in 2012 NCVYS went into partnership with Respublica, a think tank whose founder and director, Philip Blond, has been described as 'a driving force behind David Cameron's 'Big Society' agenda' (Hennessy, 2010). NCVYS – without any prior explicit critique – thereby openly connected itself to endorsements of a 'post-liberal vision', 'a vibrant democracy and market economy' and 'a future (in which) the benefits of capital, trade and entrepreneurship are open to all'.

Confirming some of Rochester's other arguments, voluntary youth organisations are also becoming increasingly tied into relationships with major (indeed global) for-profit corporations, often, it would seem, without any prior check on what ethical risk this might involve both for their reputation and for what they actually do. Take UK Youth's Money Skills programme for example. Designed to help 'NEET' young people manage their money – presumably in whatever meagre amounts the state or employers choose to put their way – this continues to be sponsored by Barclays notwithstanding its recent alleged involvement in exchange rate rigging and insurance policies

mis-selling. For delivering the National Citizen Service in six regions across England, UK Youth, alongside the National Youth Agency and two other voluntary youth organisations, VInspired and Catch 22, is now also partnered by Serco, a corporation whose global interests include the arms trade. In relatively mild terms, Rochester describes Serco as having a 'controversial history of providing services to the criminal justice system, where its management of detention centres and other facilities has been criticised' (see also Corporate Watch, 2012). More recent additions to this record of ethically questionable practice include charging the government for tagging offenders who were in prison or even dead, and of covering up failures to meet targets for out-of-hours GP services it was running.

One other development discussed by Rochester is now also showing up within the voluntary youth sector: a 'predatory' intrusion into local areas by large national voluntary organisations operating on unashamedly competitive business principles. For youth work as informal education, these developments can often carry the extra threat of being taken over by agencies coming out of a child welfare or criminal justice tradition. One documented example of what can happen here – supporting more anecdotal evidence from elsewhere – is Barnardo's successful bid for a contract in Newcastle against a consortium of long-established local youth projects. Finding itself working in areas where it had no previous track record, its subsequent offer to some members of the consortium to work with it as sub-contractors resulted in competition and deep division where previously there had been significant levels of trust and co-operation (Bell, 2012).

So what's to be done?

Rochester seeks to tackle this ultimately testing question in a chapter entitled 'Dissenting voices'. Although sub-titled 'The Case of the National Coalition for Independent Action' (NCIA), this starts by looking at the work of the Barings Foundation over a number of years and most recently at its 'Independence Panel' (pp.190-93). Though the Panel's second 'annual assessment' was more forthright than its first in expressing its concerns about and for the sector (Barings, 2013), Rochester's conclusion remains valid: that its vision for addressing the threats is 'couched in the most general terms' with most of its prescriptions for action failing to face individual voluntary organisations and their governing bodies with their responsibility for safeguarding their independence.

Another blunter way of putting this perhaps is that, reflecting the composition of much of the Panel, those prescriptions remain safely within conventional 'establishment' parameters. The report for example stops well short of reminding readers of how strongly current policies are being driven by a broader set of neo-liberal economic and political values and aims which, by their very nature, are bound to put voluntary sector independence at risk. Though the report regrets that 'many organisations working with disadvantaged groups are experiencing a dramatic rise in

demand as income plummets', it nonetheless just takes it as a given, without critical examination, that 'the voluntary sector cannot be immune' from cuts. Despite accumulating evidence on how the state's Compact partnership with 'civil society organisations' is being ignored (including by the Coalition itself), the report also continues to place considerable faith in this and its capacity to act as a protection for those organisations' independence (Barings, 2013:7,10).

Rochester devotes most of the space in this chapter, however, to NCIA – not surprisingly perhaps given that he is (as am I) one of its directors (in effect trustees). He provides a valuable summary, not available elsewhere, of its history, its critique of the present situation and the voluntary sector's responses to it, its achievements – not least how it has 'helped to change the terms of the debate' (p.200) – and its limitations. What emerges from this account is both the exceptional nature of NCIA's role – and the weakness that in the end this represents as an indicator of how hard it has found it to win, not just interest an even generalised support, but active allies in a field whose very *raison d'être* is rapidly being eroded.

So where does this leave the possibilities for resistance to the present drift of policy and action within the voluntary youth work sector? Individuals from the sector have engaged with NCIA, though largely – as is the case of most others involved with it – as individuals but not on behalf of their organisations. NCIA has also highlighted the experience of some voluntary youth groups and projects such as those in Newcastle quoted earlier (see also NCIA, 2011). And it has worked in a strong mutually supportive relationship with the In Defence of Youth Work campaign (IDYW). However, with those working in the voluntary youth sector having only exceptionally seen NCIA as a home for addressing their discontents, its impact on them has probably been less than on those in the voluntary sector overall.

For its part, IDYW has highlighted relevant voluntary sector responses to youth work's predicament – sometimes supportively (for example for some of the positions taken up by the Woodcraft Folk), sometimes very critically as in the case of NCVYS's reaction to the 2011 riots. Given however that IDYW's core concern is what is happening to youth work in whatever organisational setting, the overall principled shifts in voluntary organisations' philosophy and ways of operating have not been central its work or critiques.

This must leave on the table Rochester's hard-headed if not very encouraging conclusion to his discussion of NCIA:

> *The muted response to its campaign may suggest that its analysis is flawed or, perhaps more probably, that its intervention came too late and that the damage to the independence of action enjoyed by voluntary organisations had already gone too far to be reversed* (p.201).

Youth work practitioner, youth work manager, youth policy-maker, politician – is anyone out there

on the front line listening; aware; concerned? As Rochester makes very clear, time is running out.

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