Transformational Moments in Social Welfare

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Introduction

Across both decades, our study identified a range of roles for voluntary action that fit with five hypothetical roles for the non-profit (voluntary) sector internationally identified by Salamon et al (2000): service; innovation; advocacy; expressive and leadership development; community building and democratic society. In the sources for our research, voluntary action was, for example, described variously as: a provider (and funder) of a diverse range of welfare services; a source of experience, expertise and innovation in welfare provision; fulfilling important campaigning, lobbying and advocacy roles; enabling and supporting groups and individuals to express their views and concerns and have a say in decisions affecting them; and as a form of active citizenship, social action and contributor to civil renewal and community cohesion.

Across these many different roles and contributions, we identified two overarching narratives. The first positions voluntary action at the heart of democratic society: it is a fundamental part of who we are as a nation, regardless of whether this is articulated as England, Britain or the UK. The second
Image 3.1: Covers of Age UK’s election manifestos from the 2010s

Source: Reproduced courtesy of Age UK.
positions voluntary organisations as key actors in the provision of welfare: it is part of what we do to meet a diverse range of needs within society. As we detail later, these two broad narratives can be found in both time periods and across all sets of actors. They act as narratives highlighting voluntary action’s importance as an essential component of society.

This apparent consensus and continuity, however, masks considerable difference. While there was agreement that voluntary action is both a manifestation of, and an essential contributor to, democratic society, there were significant differences in emphases between and within time periods. There was a broad consensus regarding the role and contribution of voluntary organisations in the provision of welfare services. But a desire, among some, to preserve the position of voluntary organisations as service providers in the 1940s in light of an expanding state was replaced in the 2010s by a concern about the retraction of the state creating an enhanced role for voluntary organisations in service provision.

This chapter discusses these points of consensus and divergence on these two overarching narratives regarding the role and contribution of voluntary action, drawing directly on evidence from across the study. We conclude with the suggestion that claims about the fundamental roles of voluntary action assume greater significance at moments when those very roles are felt to be under threat.

It is part of who we are: voluntary action, democracy and society

A broad consensus

There is a broad consensus that voluntary action is a fundamental part of who we are as a democratic society; an idea that cuts across both time periods and holds true between different sets of actors. It is noteworthy that while the focus of this study has been on England, the claims here often refer to a broader notion of imagined Britishness. Voluntary action is conceived as a fundamental element of the British way of
life, in all its growing and shifting diversity. Voluntary action is both a manifestation of, and an essential contributor to, democracy and/or a ‘good’ or ‘strong’ society; it is conceived of as a fundamental right but also a responsibility.

Such narratives were found in state sources across both time periods. In 1947, for example, Attlee spoke of a British ‘tradition of voluntary effort’ which went beyond class. In the House of Lords debate on Voluntary Action for Social Progress in 1949, voluntary action was described as ‘the very lifeblood of democracy’. Volunteers were heralded as fundamental to healthy, democratic society, and voluntary organisations as ‘schools in the practice of democracy’, or as important ‘debating ground[s]’.

Similar sentiments were repeated by state actors in the 2010s. In a House of Lords debate in 2010, for example, the role of voluntary organisations was argued to be ‘absolutely crucial’ in the creation of resilient communities. A 2017 House of Lords report on charities noted that ‘Charities are the eyes, ears and conscience of society … their work touches almost every facet of British civic life’. Consensus across the political spectrum on this broad point was suggested by the civil society strategies published by both main political parties in the late 2010s. The ministerial foreword to the (Conservative) government’s 2018 Civil Society Strategy, for example, praised the voluntary ‘organisations, large and small, which hold our society together’, while the opening paragraph of Labour’s strategy stated: ‘Civil Society is part of the fabric of our nation. It includes community groups, voluntary organisations, faith groups, campaigns, social movements, social enterprise and social action. Without a thriving civil society, democracy can’t work’.

Similarly, in the 1940s voluntary organisations were keen to promote their work as essential for democratic society, particularly when writing in the context of total war against dictatorships. The annual reports of the NCSS, for example, frequently suggested that the voluntary social services were...
‘a manifestation of democracy in action’.\textsuperscript{8} They argued that the work of individual voluntary organisations, and voluntary action more broadly, would continue after the war because they were essential for life in a free democracy. Meanwhile, the NCVYS’s forerunner argued that ‘The aim of Education in the schools is good citizenship; the aim of Education in the Voluntary Organisations is that and more; it is the living of the Good Life’.\textsuperscript{9}

Similar concepts were echoed by voluntary organisations in the 2010s. This was seen most notably through references to the role of voluntary organisations in campaigning and advocacy work, as well as their contributions to the creation of a strong, or ‘good’, society. Voluntary action was depicted as ‘essential to a healthy democracy’\textsuperscript{10} and important for ensuring a ‘wider range of voices are heard’ in public debate.\textsuperscript{11} In 2017, for example, the NCVO argued that ‘Charities’ role in providing a voice and informing public debate, either by raising awareness or by influencing change, is valued by the British people and makes our democracy one of the strongest in the world’.\textsuperscript{12}

Meanwhile, MO writers discussed the concept of voluntary action and charity as a ‘civic responsibility’. The great floods of March 1947 were, for example, used by many as an example of a ‘public duty’ to help. Although there were few working class writers responding to this directive, one writer from working class origins wrote a polemic on charitable giving, arguing that working class people were more generous and more empathic in their giving to those in need: ‘It is very true that the poor help the poor’,\textsuperscript{13} reflective of the notion that giving was part of who we are. In the 2010s, writers talked of an ‘instinct’ to help those in need. Accounts of voluntarism, written in April 2012, demonstrated a wealth of voluntary action, showing volunteering to be part of a civic core in England (Lindsey and Mohan, 2018). Many of those responding to the April 2018 directive saw charity as ‘vital’, with some also conceptualising it as being part of a British national identity: ‘I think charity in the UK has always been one of our strengths as a country’.\textsuperscript{14}
Challenge versus consensus: differences between groups of actors

There is broad agreement then, across different sets of actors and time periods, that voluntary action is fundamental to British democracy and society: it is part of who we are. This is a normative discourse: this is what a ‘good’ or ‘strong’ society and a ‘healthy’ democracy looks like. Not everyone, however, agreed: Walter Hannington, founder member of the Communist Party of Great Britain and National Organiser of the National Unemployed Workers’ Movement, for example, dismissed the NCSS conceptualisation of a spirit of voluntary service as essential to the good life as having little meaning beyond a ‘Mayfair drawing room’ (Hannington, 1937: 201).

Further, while there was agreement on the overarching narrative, there were important differences in emphases within it between the sets of actors.

Voluntary sector actors, for example, tended to focus on voluntary action being part of democratic process, to which they contributed directly through their policy influence, campaigning, and advocacy activities, and indirectly by acting as conduits for the engagement of their members and beneficiaries. Some voluntary organisations argued that it was a ‘unique’ role of charities to help amplify the voices of their beneficiaries within decision-making processes. Even within the voluntary sector, however, there were variations, reflecting the different roles and positions of different organisations. Narratives relating to the role and contribution of voluntary organisations to democratic processes appeared more central to those organisations which worked directly with service users, than for bodies whose role was mainly to support other organisations.

Within state narratives, the overarching message was similar, but there was less sense of challenge. The role of voluntary organisations in enabling members of the public – particularly more marginalised individuals and communities – to engage in democratic processes was recognised. There was less
recognition, however, of voluntary action’s direct role in democratic processes through its campaigning, advocacy and policy functions. Indeed, these roles have at times been directly criticised by some state actors (as discussed later). Overall, state narratives have tended to focus more on voluntary action, particularly in the form of volunteering, as being part of a British way of life, part of a free and strong, or ‘Big’, society, rather than emphasising its democratic function within society. It has been more about consensus and harmony than challenge. Voluntary action, state narratives have tended to suggest, is altruistic, brings people together, creates bonds, and builds relationships, trust, reciprocity and therefore social capital: it ‘symbolises a strong society, it also reinforces a strong society’. Conservative MP Jacob Rees Mogg (controversially) suggested, in a radio broadcast about the rising use of foodbanks, ‘to have charitable support given by people voluntarily to support their fellow citizens, I think is rather uplifting and shows what a good, compassionate country we are’ (cited in a Guardian Online article by Walker and Butler, 2017). During a House of Lords debate in 2010, a Conservative peer, Lord Taylor, argued:

Charities and other voluntary and community organisations also play a role in creating bonds and driving social capital among volunteers within the organisations. It is common to hear people talk of charity work strengthening their sense of purpose and well-being, and giving them opportunities for building friendships. The freedom for any of us to set up such organisations – to take action on what we believe is important – should be seen and cherished as a fundamental right.

While voluntary action was framed here as a ‘fundamental right’ (a point also argued by voluntary organisations), there was also emphasis within state narratives on voluntary action as a ‘responsibility’. These discussions echo wider debates on citizenship, which have, arguably, seen a shift from an emphasis
in the 1940s on rights to basic welfare and full participation in society, to a more conditional understanding of citizenship in the 2010s, which emphasises that rights come with responsibilities and benefits with behavioural conditionalities (see Marshall, 1950; Dwyer, 2000; 2004). While rights were emphasised in terms of freedoms to establish and take part in voluntary organisation, responsibilities tended to be emphasised in terms of individuals taking part in voluntary action to address needs.

Among the public, voluntary action as part of democratic society was less central to the ways in which MO writers talked about the role and contribution of voluntary action in welfare, with views varying considerably with class and political orientation. Writers tended to focus more on voluntary action being part of a national instinct, as an expression of concern, care, compassion, love, duty and personal responsibility. And for some this was problematic as it was considered to be paternalistic. For others, voluntary action was expressed as a class-based responsibility to the less fortunate (see Chapter Four). The contributions of voluntary action to a specifically democratic society were given less emphasis. That said, as we shall go on to discuss in the next section, in the 2010s there was greater recognition among the public of the role of voluntary action in holding government to account.

Undermined but needed more than ever: changes over time

While there was a suggestion across both the 1940s and 2010s that strong representation within democratic society was an issue for voluntary organisations at points in time during which (new) needs were being identified or amplified, there were also important differences in emphasis between the two time periods.

In the 1940s concerns were expressed that the expansion of the welfare state might erode the role and position of voluntary action within society; that the place of voluntary action as an
important part of the British way of life would be undermined as the state took on increasing responsibility for meeting needs. As Fred Messer, MP and Chair of the NOPWC, argued at the organisation’s 1947 conference:

In all voluntary work there was a stream of good will which had no other object than to serve the people. There was a desire to make what contribution could be made by the individual to the welfare of others. If we dammed that stream of goodwill we should destroy one of the finest characteristics of this people.\(^{19}\)

Messer continued, however, that this ‘must not be misunderstood as a belief that poverty should continue just for the sake of relieving it’.\(^{20}\) This statement hints at tensions between a recognition of the importance of voluntary action as part of a way of life and a suggestion that voluntary action is only warranted as long as needs persist. This tension is apparent in the narratives of different actors, but particularly among those on the left of the political spectrum.

Among voluntary organisations there was a recognition in the 1940s of the importance of joining forces – working together – to represent the views and interests of those whom they supported within the development of welfare policy. The Standing Committee of Voluntary Organisations in Time of War, for example, emphasised the need for greater cooperation to become part of the ‘permanent fabric of the voluntary movement’.\(^{21}\) Indeed, the NCSS argued that it had a ‘special responsibility for promoting partnership between State and voluntary effort’.\(^{22}\) In general, the tone was supportive and collaborative, with working together extending not just across different organisations within the voluntary movement, but to government too.

The 2010s were marked by a more combative tone, with greater emphasis placed on the role of voluntary action in holding government to account and challenging its decision
There was much discussion of the role of voluntary action in ‘representing’, ‘defending’, ‘challenging’, ‘fighting’, ‘battling’ and ‘tackling’; sentiments that were far less evident in the 1940s. This shift resulted in part from heightened concerns in the 2010s about the effects of austerity, the erosion of welfare rights, and the state’s abdication of its responsibility for meeting needs (see Chapters Four and Five). In this context, the role of the voluntary sector in challenging the state, upholding people’s rights, being the voice for those who are marginalised, and resisting any transfer of responsibilities was amplified.

A narrative emerged within MO writing of charities as the ‘people’s voice’, in highlighting unmet social need in the context of austerity, and ‘challenging government’ decisions and ‘failures’ (see Chapters Four and Five). Voluntary organisations, some suggested, were well positioned for this role, due to their embeddedness within local communities which, ensured they understood the issues: ‘Charities are near enough the “people’s voice”. Because they work in the community they are best placed to access the unheard and unseen and to promote their voice to government.’23 Indeed, one writer suggested it was ‘their duty to lobby government, to tell them what’s working and what needs to be in place’.24 Such sentiments were far less evident in the 1940s writing.

The underlying suggestion was that the state was failing to meet welfare needs, and voluntary action had a role to play in holding government to account, challenging decisions, and acting as a voice for those in need, and (for some) stepping in to fill the gaps left by a withdrawing state (see Chapter Five). Such sentiments were also clearly presented within voluntary sector narratives. There was, however, a concern among MO writers about the ability of charities to perform this role if they were over-reliant on government funding – whether they could properly challenge and hold government to account, and whether they should or should not be filling these gaps in provision. The public were not alone in raising questions.
In 2012 and 2014 the right-wing think tank the Institute of Economic Affairs published two reports (Snowdon, 2012; 2014) which decried the use of public funds by charities to lobby and campaign for government action. With references to public choice theory, it was suggested that government was paying ‘sock puppet’ charities effectively to lobby for more government, at taxpayers’ expense. These reports were cited favourably by ministers on several occasions, and the suggestion that charities should not stray into the realm of politics was reflected in Conservative policy and rhetoric. In January 2014 the ‘Lobbying Act’ contained measures designed to restrict the possibility that third-party campaigners, including charities, could have undue influence on the outcome of elections. Meanwhile, backbench Conservative MPs became increasingly vocal in their criticisms of charity campaigning. In June 2014, for example, Conservative backbench MP Conor Burns reported Oxfam to the Charity Commission for what he described as its ‘overtly political’ tweet about the ‘perfect storm’ of austerity and food poverty. Then, in September 2014, the Minister for Civil Society, Brooks Newmark, was reported to have said: ‘The important thing charities should be doing is sticking to their knitting and doing the best they can to promote their agenda, which should be about helping others’. In February 2016 government announced the introduction of anti-advocacy (‘gagging’) clauses into grant agreements, which restricted the use of public funds for campaigning. Matt Hancock, as Minister for the Cabinet Office, said in Parliament that ‘we are committed to ensuring that taxpayers’ money is used for the good causes for which it is intended and not wasted on Government lobbying Government’. 

The Lobbying Act, anti-advocacy clauses and associated fears of losing funding should they speak out were met with widespread concern by many within the voluntary sector, which interpreted these changes as overt ‘threats’ to the role of voluntary action as a fundamental part of democratic society.
Such threats were then compounded by wider developments. During the 2010s austerity was viewed as having significantly affected the resources available to voluntary organisations – some organisations closed (the NCVYS being a case in point), others had less unrestricted income available to draw upon for roles beyond those which they were contracted to deliver – thus reducing their capacity to participate. At the same time, spaces for engagement in deliberative forums with government and local councils – such as national-level Strategic Partners Programmes and Local Strategic Partnerships – were closed. There were, voluntary actors argued, fewer opportunities to engage in policy making and broader democratic processes.

Many within the voluntary sector became convinced that successive governments in the 2010s had undermined voluntary action’s role in the democratic process – a role defined by the NCVO as giving ‘a voice for their beneficiaries and their cause, as key contributors to the public policy discourse’. At a time when bold claims were being made about the value of the fundamental role for voluntary action, this very role was seen as being threatened. Voluntary organisations suggested that both ‘the ability and willingness of the voluntary sector to speak out’ had been affected, and that this ‘could have a knock-on restrictive impact for individuals’ ability to engage politically’. This was not something, however, that the sector took lightly. As the NCVYS, for example, argued, ‘campaigning is embedded in the history of voluntary organisations in the UK, we have no intention of being silenced’.

In summary, while our sources show that voluntary action has been perceived as a fundamental part of who we are over both time periods, this changed during the 2010s and some elements of it appeared to be under threat. Further, this ‘threat’ to the role of voluntary action in democratic society was explicitly linked to organisations’ roles in the delivery of welfare services. We turn now to consider this second overarching narrative: voluntary action is part of what we do to meet needs.
It is part of what we do: voluntary action, service delivery and meeting need

This second narrative encompasses the delivery of welfare services but also extends to how society meets a wider set of needs related to spending leisure time meaningfully, engaging in opportunities for learning and development, providing mechanisms to bring people together, and giving outlets to people’s desire to help others. A virtuous circle is suggested by these narratives, with voluntary action being part of who we are, and part of what we do as an active expression and embodiment of this, for example charity is perceived as ‘an outlet for human kindness’. Through expressions of voluntary action, skills and confidence can be developed and communities and society are strengthened, reinforcing voluntary action as part of who we are. The government’s 2018 Loneliness Strategy, for example, argued that the voluntary sector can ‘create strong, integrated communities and challenge obstacles that isolate people or groups. In its delivery of services and projects, it can equip people and communities with the knowledge and skills to recognise loneliness and tackle it’.

In the 1940s there were many references to the voluntary movement being of ‘service to the nation’, specifically in meeting the unexpected and evolving needs of wartime but also in the reconstruction after the war. Across specific fields – including children’s home providers, youth services and older people’s welfare – voluntary organisations made repeated assertions about their invaluable contributions to service provision. In part, this reflected widespread concerns that their role might be eroded as state provision increased. More generally, there was recognition that even with a newly expanded role, the state alone could not meet all need – that there would still be a place for voluntary action (and indeed private, individual action). Such sentiments were reflected in the narratives of all sets of actors. There was an emphasis on voluntary organisations as ‘supplementing’ the greater
state provision, with voluntary action praised, particularly by political leaders, for ‘humanising’ services in contrast to supposedly ‘impersonal’ statutory provision. Voluntary action was talked about in terms of innovating and pioneering – finding new ways to meet needs which might later be ‘absorbed by statutory bodies [while] voluntary services explore in other directions’.35 While the state was constrained, it was suggested, by ‘what public opinion will allow’ or not being ‘prepared to make the mistakes which are inevitable in pioneering work’, voluntary action was ‘unhampered by these considerations’ and so could ‘concern itself with any kind of social problem and, upheld by convictions which may be still strange to the mass of citizens, can absorb the shock of setbacks and disappointments’.36

Turning to the 2010s, a dominant narrative – among all sets of actors – was of an expanded role for voluntary organisations in delivering public services. At the start of the decade, the Coalition government was developing the idea of ‘open public services’,37 within which voluntary organisations would play an important part, alongside private sector organisations and individuals and families. A joint letter from the Minister for the Cabinet Office and the Minister for Civil Society in 2010, for example, signalled a desire for an expanded role for voluntary action within a new ‘Big Society’ by calling for ‘voluntary, community and social enterprise sector organisations [to] have a much greater role in running public services’.38 There was a continued emphasis, among all sets of actors, on the role and contribution of voluntary action in innovation and finding new ways to deliver services, including through providing more personalised or ‘relational’ (Cottam, 2011) approaches to welfare.

**Recognising the limits of voluntary action: concerns about form, quality and quantity**

While the role of voluntary action in meeting need was recognised within this overarching narrative, our sources also
expressed limits as to what voluntary action could, or should, do. We observed this across both time periods and among all actors, but with noteworthy differences in emphasis.

During the 1940s, concerns were raised about both the capacity and the quality of voluntary services: about voluntary action’s ability to meet the growing level of need, equitably, and to do so to a high standard. The reliance on unpaid volunteers was an important feature of these debates. For example, suggesting that many volunteers lacked the knowledge required to deliver welfare services effectively, one MO writer argued that ‘social services such as these are more of a menace than a service’. At the same time, however, there was also growing concern about the ‘growth of the salariat’ in voluntary social services. Evidence submitted to Beveridge’s Voluntary Social Service Inquiry also pointed to concerns about money being wasted by the NCSS and other organisations, and descriptions of the voluntary movement as a ‘chaotic field’.

The question of capacity was, it was widely agreed, best met through an expanded role of the state. This is in line with the broader theoretical argument that government provision of welfare services is an institutional response to different kinds of voluntary failure (Salamon, 1987 – see Chapter Five). The issues of quality and efficiency were to be addressed, in part at least, through professionalisation, training and a new inspection regime.

Perhaps more fundamentally, however, there was a deeper concern in the 1940s about the very notion of ‘charity’. This was expressed most clearly by members of the public. Even among those who were supportive of the role of voluntary action in general, there was a suggestion that charity was all too often paternalistic, ‘cold’ and unreliable, and should no longer be necessary: ‘The accepted meaning of Charity, something given grudgingly by someone in a good position to an unfortunate. This word charity stinks in my nostrils.’ Indeed, MO titled its bulletin summarising the research ‘As Cold as Charity’ (see Image 2.1). The following passage
from one MO writer captured well the tensions within many narratives at the time: ‘It is difficult here to separate what one feels about charity from what one thinks. I have a soft spot for “charity” emotionally, but I think it should not be needed & that the better developed society becomes the less need there will be for charity.’

During the 2010s, concerns about both the capacity and quality of voluntary action resurfaced. As one MO writer argued, ‘it is haphazard and should not be relied upon as a total solution to anything’. During the second half of the decade, questions were increasingly posed about the quality of leadership and governance within the voluntary sector: there was a suggestion of a ‘leadership deficit’.

Following the collapse of Kids Company in 2016, for example, the government was quick to defend its own role in funding the organisation over many years, expressing disappointment that the charity had failed to become sustainable (BBC News, 2015). At the time, Kids Company’s problems were framed in terms of leadership and governance failures, a position reinforced in reports by the Public Accounts Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. The latter concluded that ‘the board failed to protect the interests of the charity and its beneficiaries, despite its statutory responsibility to do so’. A subsequent court ruling has since exonerated the board of trustees from these allegations of mismanagement (Butler, 2021). Similarly, in 2016 the House of Lords select committee inquiry into charities brought concerns about governance to the fore, concluding that there was a need to ‘strengthen’ leadership and governance as well as to increase regulation of the voluntary sector. While such disquiet was mostly seen in state narratives, similar concerns for ‘inconvenient truths’ within the voluntary sector, including a ‘leadership deficit’, were at times echoed.

However, the 2010s also saw another, more fundamental, concern raised which questioned not only the ability of voluntary action to provide welfare services, but the
appropriateness of it doing so. A dominant message from government (embodied in legislation such as the 2011 Localism Act) was that centralised, top-down approaches to delivering public services were broken and outdated and that the state should enable communities and individuals to meet their own needs while encouraging voluntary action to play a greater role in providing welfare services (see Hadley and Hatch, 1981 for similar discussions in the 1980s). However, many voluntary sector actors and the general public questioned whether charities should be filling the gap in provision left by a retreating state. These were not practical worries about the limits of voluntary action in terms of quantity or quality, but ideological concerns about social welfare and the appropriate role for voluntary action in welfare provision. Rather than ‘supplementing’ statutory services, voluntary action was described as ‘replacing’ them, or often as ‘filling gaps’ as the state was cut back through welfare reforms and austerity-driven cuts to services, and for many this was problematic (see Chapter Five for a fuller discussion).

In search of distinctiveness: growing contestation

Relatedly, alongside questions about the limitations of voluntary action, across both time periods we also saw concern about its distinctive contribution, particularly in the delivery of welfare services. It is in the 2010s, however, that these discussions appear to have become more active and contested.

During the 1940s, there was a search for distinctiveness evident in the narratives of all sets of actors. This was generally positively framed: while the state’s role was to ensure uniformity and equity in welfare provision, voluntary action had a clear complementary role to play in humanising services, mobilising volunteers and engendering a sense of ownership within statutory services, innovating to develop new ways of meeting need that could then be taken up by the state, and filling gaps
in areas of need that were either too great for the state to cover alone or which were felt to lie outside its remit. As one MO writer noted, voluntary action ‘lavish[ed] tremendous care (and even extravagant care) on the individual where care does not properly fit into the State plan’. 51

During the 2010s, we noticed a heightened concern to recognise the distinctive contribution of voluntary action to service delivery, but with important differences between our sets of actors. Within state narratives two potentially conflicting positions are evident. On the one hand, there was discussion of voluntary action’s distinctiveness in terms of its innovative capacity and potential ‘closeness to service users’. 52 On the other hand, government talked of being ‘sector neutral’, particularly in debates on the ‘open public services’ agenda, which suggests a lack of distinctiveness: ‘We do not have an ideological presumption that only one sector should run services: high quality services can be provided by the public sector, the voluntary and community sector, or the private sector’. 53

To a limited extent, MO writers in the 2010s echoed the ideas that were so prevalent in the 1940s about the distinctiveness of voluntary action in terms of its ability to innovate. This was set alongside an enduring recognition of the ability of voluntary action to meet ‘niche need’, of the more personalised approach of voluntary organisations, and of their ability to work with people beyond the reach of the state. As one writer argued, ‘Charities are so relevant in our country because they provide the emotional support the welfare state cannot presently give’. 54 An overarching anxiety, however, among these writers was that distinctions became blurred when voluntary organisations offered services that were provided by the state and that this might lead to growing inequalities in access. As one noted, ‘I think that the situation is very confusing and difficult for everyone when there is a variety of organisations giving different services. It causes disparity in the support people get’. 55
Some writers believed that charities should not be providing services that they saw as the responsibility of the state, often expressed along the lines of ‘Charities should be in addition to not in place of public services’. Others, however, adopted a more nuanced position, suggesting that the state and voluntary organisations should work together to deliver welfare services, but with each fulfilling different roles. As one writer put it, ‘[charities] can add value to government-led services by providing specialist input and additional facilities, often using well-motivated and trained volunteers’.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is in the voluntary sector narratives that we saw the strongest arguments in favour of distinctiveness. These concentrated along several lines, including the unique ability of voluntary organisations to reach marginalised individuals who otherwise would not access services; to intervene early and prevent the escalation of needs; to provide local, trusted, specialist (as opposed to universal), flexible and innovative services; and to provide better-quality and more personalised services by drawing on their expertise, insights and service user involvement. The desire across the voluntary sector to recognise distinctiveness coincides with the concerns of the general public that voluntary organisations were to be used to fill gaps left by a retreating state: that is as a replacement for the state, rather than as a distinct contributor alongside it. In 2010, for example, Children England argued that ‘Too often our work is seen solely as an extension of the hand of the state rather than an upward expression of the needs of local communities’. The dominant narrative across voluntary organisations posited that voluntary action provided a different approach and offered different solutions to the state and other providers (for example family, market – see Chapter Five). Voluntary action was not simply about topping up the state, but doing something distinct from the state. Some voluntary sector actors argued that there should be a shift in emphasis from the role of voluntary action in delivering services to its role in transforming them.
Summary

Across the many different roles and contributions that voluntary action can assume within social welfare, this chapter has identified two overarching narratives. The first positions voluntary action at the heart of British democracy and society: it is a fundamental part of who we are as a nation. The second positions voluntary organisations, and volunteers, as key actors in the provision of welfare services: it is part of what we do to meet needs within society. Within different strategic action fields (see Chapter Two), the strategic purpose of these narratives can be highlighted: they seek to talk up the role of voluntary action as a core element, or even pillar, of society. In both cases the importance of voluntary action is proclaimed, as essential and distinctive. Through this, the room for voluntary action in society, overall, is celebrated, but also promoted in specific fields of social welfare. ‘Talking up’ becomes a key discursive intervention in struggles around the moving frontier (see Chapter Six).

The apparent consensus and continuity, however, masks considerable difference. While there was agreement among all sets of actors, for example, that voluntary action is both a manifestation of, and an essential contributor to, British democratic society, there are significant differences in emphases between and within time periods. Voluntary sector narratives tended to emphasise the campaigning and advocacy roles of voluntary organisations in holding governments to account and creating a more democratic society, while state narratives tended to focus on the more consensual, ‘helping’ role of volunteers and voluntary organisations in building a ‘bigger’ or better society. Within this broad consensus, the desire to preserve the position of voluntary organisations as service providers, observed in sources from the 1940s – even against a backdrop of an expanding state – was replaced in the 2010s by suspicions about an expanded role for voluntary action in the context of a retracting state. Claims about the fundamental
role of voluntary action in society appeared to assume enhanced significance at moments in time when those very roles were under threat. In the 1940s, the primary threat was to the voluntary movement’s service delivery role; in the 2010s the threat was to the voluntary sector’s involvement in democratic processes – to its campaigning, advocacy and policy roles. This came when arguably the scale of welfare reform and rising levels of need in the 2010s suggested the sector’s campaigning role was needed more than ever (see Eikenberry, 2009 for a related discussion).

Across both time periods there was a suggestion that voluntary organisations have a distinct ability to reach the most marginalised, to advocate on behalf of those most in need, to innovate and to provide a more humanised approach. For some, this was a reason to promote voluntary organisations, for others it was not. Underpinning these differences are important questions of how voluntary action is understood – what is being imagined when different actors talk of voluntary action, charity and voluntary organisations – ideas about the distinctiveness of voluntary action, and whom/what it is being compared to and distinguished from. More deeply, they reflect different ideological positions about the nature of need, as we go on to discuss in Chapter Four, and who should be responsible for meeting it (see Chapter Five). Through these discussions, the narratives themselves can be seen as part of an active struggle to ‘make room’ for voluntary action (and/or individual voluntary organisations) within contested fields of welfare provision (see Chapter Six).