

The voluntary sector and New Labour: how civil is the partnership?

The criminal justice voluntary sector is being given the opportunity to run more services, yet **Clive Martin** describes reasons for concern.

In early November 2006, at HMP Wormwood Scrubs, the Home Secretary addressed an invited audience that included prisoners and key figures from the voluntary and community sector. The speech took place just prior to the screening of the highly critical BBC Panorama programme that described the way in which some offenders were being managed in hostel accommodation by the Probation Service. It was therefore not surprising that the speech emphasised the need to 'modernise' the Probation Service, albeit on an evidence base that many questioned.

However, the speech accurately reflected what now appears to be a fairly standardised government formula to improve (or modernise) public services. This works as follows – firstly, senior politicians contribute to a public debate, often initiated by the tabloid press, in a way that seeks to undermine confidence in public service delivery, e.g. 'not fit for purpose'. This is accompanied by an emphasis on an urgent need to modernise and get 'fit for purpose'! The public, whose consciousness about the issue has been deliberately raised, are offered the remedies that will cure us of the ills that have been laid bare. It is not always clear who are best served by this formula, but it is nonetheless well established.

The essential ingredients for the proposed remedy are also now fairly standard – namely a purchaser/provider split, a mixed-provider base to include private, public and voluntary sector agencies, and the introduction of a series of competitions as a means of deciding who is best placed to deliver whatever might need fixing. As with many proposed cures, they might or might not work – their effectiveness often depending on the doctor's correct diagnosis in the first place. Occasionally, cures are rejected by both practitioners and recipients alike because the so-called side effects have the potential to complicate, rather than resolve, the original problem – small concerns in the face of such an urgent problem!

So, after ten years of New Labour, was the Home Secretary saying anything new about the role of the voluntary sector in proposing these remedies at Wormwood Scrubs? On the one hand he clearly wasn't. The voluntary sector, not government, were the first to seek solutions to the problems that people faced when things went wrong and we have been doing this for centuries. This is now an ambition shared by successive governments, and

thus the obvious need for collaboration between the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and the government.

It could be argued that all that the Home Secretary and New Labour were doing was providing the sector with more opportunities to do what we are good at in the face of need. This could be interpreted as a worthy model of a benign, civil and modern partnership with one partner facilitating the process by which the other can achieve their goals. Is this the relationship that is summed up in a 'Compact' of mutual respect for difference while exploiting individual and complementary roles for the greater good?

But, as sometimes happens, a careless word can lead to misunderstanding and suspicion in even the best of relationships. In this particular instance the Home Secretary, intentionally or not, seemed to also link the role of the voluntary sector to one that would not only foster innovative practice but would help to bring down costs and to carry out mundane tasks that the state no longer wished to bother itself with. Is this really such a mutually beneficial relationship?

How do you judge the quality of a relationship? What is the evidence-base by which we could judge the social and economic value of the relationship between the government and the sector? This is where the picture gets more complicated – partly because at first glance it looks like the sector has little to complain about.

Firstly, there is evidence of the unparalleled growth of the voluntary sector that has been clearly generated by New Labour's belief and investment in the sector. Nationally, the number of VCS organisations continues to rise with an average increase of around 8,000 new charities registering each month. Income is up – charities with an income of over £1 million have doubled in the last decade. Income to the sector went up by £1 billion in the financial year 2003-04 alone.

Secondly, the aspirations of the 'Compact' that were published in the early years of New Labour have been extended and strengthened – albeit from a weak base. There is a process by which breeches of the Compact can be remedied and there is an Office for the Third Sector led by an able Junior Minister. The action plan that includes a programme of training for commissioners should reassure the sector that government has our best interests at heart.

Thirdly, the long-held complaint by the sector about not being 'at the table' has largely dissipated. Most government departments have voluntary sector 'Champions' along with published strategies about how they will engage with the sector. ACEVO, the Voluntary Sector Chief Executives Network, has hosted summits with the Prime Minister and there have been receptions at No. 10, No. 11 and almost all the other important venues in London SW1.

Fourthly, other financial issues of fundamental concern for the sector – full cost-recovery and three-year contracts – are at least widely acknowledged as important if not fully implemented.

Lastly, there has been significant movement in personnel and there are both politicians and senior civil servants, either in government or working closely with it, who have had long and successful careers in the voluntary sector and therefore understand it very well.

In the micro-arena that concentrates on work with offenders, policy and practice have moved on as well. The Prison Service has a stated policy that should ensure a voluntary sector co-ordinator in every prison, and they have a national post holder responsible for co-ordinating this work. The Probation Service has set itself a target that could result in more voluntary sector organisations delivering services to offenders in the community. Both services have had problems in the implementation of these policies, but at least they do exist today and they were not there ten years ago.

So what could there possibly be to complain about? Well, perhaps this is where the Home Secretary offered us a helpful clue and put his finger on a very basic but significant issue that won't go away – namely, that the voluntary sector is being pushed into becoming the cheap and equally mundane alternative to statutory provision. This has never been the sector's mission and we are right to be suspicious.

But is there any good reason for the sector's suspicion, especially for the offender-related VCS?

The first good reason to be suspicious is that our mission for social inclusion is being systematically undermined by the government's insistence on talking up crime and demonising people at risk.

There has been a consistent message from the voluntary sector and other stakeholders that the way the government is choosing to go about things is not an effective means of dealing with many offenders, especially those drawn into the criminal justice system because of the lack of resources elsewhere. The centuries of VCS experience of working with people in trouble with the law, and our role in public education, have at best been ignored, and at worst, treated with contempt.

Secondly, very basic VCS concerns have not been addressed. There has been no consistent

investment in those crucially important sub-sectors that could make a substantial difference to the promotion of safe and inclusive communities. The black and minority ethnic sector that works specifically with offenders is shockingly underfunded with a recent grant of £250,000 representing almost all of the investment over the past five years. Is this because the work is not valued? Is it because the black and minority ethnic sector has little chance of playing a big role in the commissioning environment and is therefore of little relevance? The VCS that works with offenders' families is in a similar situation. It receives little investment despite the role that it plays in reducing inter-generational offending and supporting the parents and siblings of offenders – who are frequently also the innocent victims of crime.

So, while government ministers have been prepared to listen to views about different models of service delivery and the ways in which they might be commissioned, there has been no serious engagement with the sector about how to address the rise in the prison population and the criminalisation of so many people. Effective VCS initiatives that protect the public and work positively with offenders, such as 'Circles of Support and Accountability' and 'Smart Justice', barely get an audience, let alone funding.

As far as the VCS is concerned, it looks as if the government trusts the tabloid solutions to crime more than the world-class experiences and skills of the sector. This has left the sector feeling short-changed, and distrustful about the nature of the partnership with New Labour.

But this is not all that has disengaged the sector. We are being drawn into a battle that is not of our making. The sector's dynamic creativity has always ensured that we will make the most of opportunities when they are presented to us. We are not slow to take on new roles and relationships when they are presented. However, the government and Probation Service (and previously the Prison Service) have been at loggerheads for many years. They urgently need to sort out their differences so that the public can be served by a decent criminal justice system. The voluntary sector might well be part of the solution but we should not be part of the war. It is not our battle, nor do we have the remit or resources to fight it. We need to stay focused on the best interests of our service users and not get distracted by this statutory civil war.

So what are the possibilities for the future if the VCS are to believe that New Labour is a worthy partner? How is this for starters?

1. The VCS needs evidence that our mission, as well as our ability to deliver services, is respected, taken seriously, and will be acted upon.

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community policing (Barry Loveday) can their record on balance be extolled.

Ultimately, it is on punishment rather than crime that Labour has at best failed to consolidate and, at worst, actively undermined their own best policies and practice. Prisons have just about coped with the remorseless increase in numbers, but at the expense of programmes that cry out for better resourcing (John Podmore). Women offenders have been under-protected and over-controlled under Labour, their numbers in custody at an all-time peak (Loraine Gelsthorpe). Most of all, youth justice has been prevented from building on the promise of the new Youth Justice Board and the youth offending teams by tough sentencing overwhelming the welfare principle (Rob Allen). Even so humane and vigorous a reforming Head of the Board as Professor Rod Morgan could do little to sustain progress in the teeth of the fastest growing and highest youth custody rates in western Europe. It would be a bitter capstone to New Labour's ten year watch over criminal justice if, following his resignation, his successor was to represent penal populism rather than informed and civilised policy and practice. ■

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advisers were convinced would work for them also. In policy terms Blair, Mandelson, Gould and the rest saw how Clinton had sought to recapture the so-called 'middle ground' and to jettison various 'liberal' hostages to fortune (Downes and Morgan, 1997) and applied the lessons in the creation of 'New Labour'. Early on after his appointment as Shadow Home Secretary, Blair visited Washington DC to talk to Democratic Party advisers. Within three days of his return he first aired his famous mantra, "tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime". Now matter how hard he later tried, Michael Howard was never able to 'out-tough' his opponent. British penal

those individuals judged, through their choices, to lack self-control, rather than to those who exploit such vulnerabilities. That this stance can be associated with a party of the 'Left', or even 'Centre' of politics, demonstrates how much things have changed since 1997. ■

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politics has been locked in this punitive embrace ever since. ■

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2. It is imperative that the VCS is understood and supported as being the means by which services are transformed, and not as the repository of already-failing and discredited solutions.
3. The VCS has a fundamental role to play in promoting diversity and social inclusion and this needs investment – especially by those who are most affected by crime, for example BME communities and families.
4. Community education and public awareness about the reality of offending, social exclusion, and positive community solutions to crime remain at the heart of VCS activity - and should be supported by government actions and funding.
5. It needs to be understood that the role of the government is not to instruct the VCS or local communities about what to do, but to trust and facilitate the process by which local solutions can resolve the most pressing community problems. ■

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