Changing lives, changing society

Hinton Lecture 2006
Ed Miliband MP

Introduction

Can I start by saying what a privilege it is to be invited to deliver this lecture.

I did not know Nicholas Hinton but I have been humbled to read about and learn about his life. His achievements were great---his leadership of NCVO, Save The Children and his establishing of the International Crisis Group----but what has struck me most is his deep commitment to tackling injustice.

As he wrote in an article in 1993, the objective of a charity was “to make sure those with more powers—the donors, governments and local authorities…understand and put into practice the lessons learnt.”

In other words, tackling structural injustice was a key part of what the charitable sector must do. As he apparently often said “To change things in Britain you should think radical thoughts and wear a dark suit.”

In one respect at least, I hope you will tonight conclude I have followed his example.

I want to talk tonight about some of my reflections on the job I have been doing as Minister for the Third Sector, and on how I think the state and the sector need to work together in the years ahead.

I want to start off though by saying what has made the job such an inspiring and rewarding experience for me.

As some of you may know, I grew up in quite a political family. The thing I learnt as I was growing up was that one’s duty was not just to be angry about injustice but to try and do something about it. My dad was a writer and academic and in a different way he did something about it— he wrote, he spoke and he taught.
And one of the things I so admire about the sector is that that is what you do every day: you see injustice and do something about it.

And that unites for me the whole sweep of the third sector. From social enterprise, to small community groups, large voluntary sector organisations, indeed in every part of the sector, across the country, in different ways, you are seeking to change people’s lives.

And this is still for me best encapsulated by Beveridge’s description of the sector as demonstrating “the driving power of social conscience”.

Drive—a can-do attitude.
Power—the ability to change things.
Social conscience--- a sense of responsibility for society as a whole.

I also believe that the third sector is very much in the mainstream of the values of the country today. And that’s not because you’ve changed but because the values of the country have changed.

Because, for example, contrary to some of the stereotypes of young people, this generation is one that supported one of the largest third sector movements, Make Poverty history.

The world has changed since the 1980s then and that is because you have helped to change it: in the case of debt and development, raising the profile of the whole issue not just through NGOs but the churches, community groups and the other networks of civil society.

This speaks to a wider sense that many people may want to make a good living but they also want to leave the world a better place than they found it.

So I am inspired to work with you because I think you help make the world and our country a more just place.

And I want to talk about what government can do with you to help you make a change in society.

Some people may tell you that the best thing government can do to make that happen is to get out of the way.

The more that government plays a role in our society, they will tell you, the less the third sector can do what it does best.

They propose what foreign policy experts would call an ‘isolationism’ model.

I disagree with that and tonight I want to tell you why.

The mission statement of the Office of the Third Sector is ‘to enable people to change society’.
That’s because I think government and third sector can be partners in helping to change society: what you might call an ‘engagement’ model. My argument tonight about the engagement model is this:

First the attributes of the third sector—what it’s good at—are different from those of government and I want to explain how I see them.

Secondly, when you look at what has happened in the last ten years, I think we have demonstrated together how we can change society for the better— together.

But thirdly, I think government needs to be far better at engaging if we are to tackle the big social challenges of the next decade. And I want to explain how.

**Role of the sector**

Let me start with the third sector and explain why I believe it can make a contribution to the just society in ways the state cannot.

The sector does an enormous range of things in our society: building civic society, campaigning, delivering services and many others. But I want to pick out three attributes because they attempt to capture what I have learnt about the essence of your contribution.

First, your ability to engage and empower and reach out. This is reflected in the millions of organisations across this country that form the lifeblood of civil society. Tonight I see from the list of organisations represented here many groups that do this.

And your ability to build networks is also reflected in the reach of the services you provide. This is partly because you are not the state and people, particularly in most excluded groups, will be wary of the state.

But there is something more. What strikes me about many third sector organisations is your ethos particularly as regards the people you help. There is an ethic of equality and respect about it.

I am very influenced in this by a remarkable book written by Richard Sennett a couple of years ago, *Respect: The Formation of Character In A World of Inequality*.

Sennett is a supporter of the welfare state but he perceives that in practice its flaw has not been the conventional notion of encouraging dependency: we are all dependent on each other and that is no bad thing.

In fact, he argues its problem is that at times it has failed to provide respect for the person often called ‘the client’ which has tended to undermine the effectiveness of provision.
As he explains “It seemed to the welfare state founders that to provide for those in need required an institution to define what its clients need…The homeless teenager was not treated as possessing a certain expertise about homelessness.”

This rather academic description came home to me most when I met someone who had been helped by a drugs project called Multiple Choice in Leeds. He told me:

“Before Multiple Choice everyone else had told me they would solve my problem. They were the first to convince me I had the resources to solve my problem.”

And in a way I think this is what Sennett’s notion of respect is about. The state needs to learn from that, both in the way it involves the third sector in the delivery of public services, but also the way it delivers services itself. It is about understanding that people come to public services with an expertise and need to be involved in the process.

The second characteristic that I think is so important and so apparent across the sector is your ability to innovate and think about social problems anew.

In so much of the third sector, I see an extraordinary capacity to see old social problems and find new solutions.

From the education of autistic pupils to new methods in the delivery of community transport, the third sector has blazed a trail in a way the state often finds difficult.

Large organisations, whether they are state, private or dare I suggest, sometimes even third sector, can find it more difficult to be nimble, to work across boundaries.

Sometimes this is because of their smaller scale and greater agility, sometimes it can be about a culture of creativity.

The third characteristic I want to mention is the capacity to be a voice for the voiceless.

Social and political change does not happen simply because politicians want it to happen.

It happens because citizens struggle for change and it is your independence, your demands that make the change happen.

So these are three ways, among others, in which I think the sector demonstrates attributes which the state generally finds it far harder to do: engagement with users, their innovation and their ability to provide voice.

What about the state? There are things that the sector can do that the state cannot. I’ll be honest with you: I think there are things that the state can do that the sector can’t.
First, provide universality and equity in public services. In general, whatever the levels of innovation provided by the sector, it takes government to guarantee public services are available to all who need them.

Of course, this is because funding from general taxation is unique to government. But the partnership model suggests we should neither underestimate the importance of this, nor allow government to abdicate its responsibility for it.

The interesting thing about the history of a number of different services in this country, as I will explain, is that they were pioneered by the sector and then funded universally by the state.

Of course, the most famous examples are education, health and social security before the 1945 welfare state settlement. This is an example where the social progress that was made would not have been possible without the voluntary sector.

You pioneered new services, the campaign for them to be funded universally became overwhelming and then political change at the ballot box made it happen.

This takes me to the second attribute of the state: accountability. The fact that politicians nationally and locally are elected is basic but incredibly important.

The sector too provides accountability, speaking up, as I have said for the voiceless, but for it to work it must be matched by the political accountability that comes from local or central government. The third sector brings vibrancy and diversity; the state’s role must be to try and ensure all voices are equally represented. And ultimately it must do so because it is accountable.

In describing these different characteristics or attributes of state and sector, I hope I have given an indication of how they can complement each other. Each does things that the other finds difficult.

But I now want to move on to look at what has happened in the last decade to try and illustrate how we have ---together---been able to change society for the better and how it would not have been possible with a state that stood to one side or a sector that didn’t engage and innovate.

Since 1997

Let me take examples from three areas: from campaigning, service provision, and the building of strong communities---the areas I also want to talk about when I look at the future.

The last ten years have seen countless successful examples of third sector campaigns: Breakthrough’s breast cancer awareness, ASH’s campaign on smoking in public places, Scope’s campaign for disabled people, Stonewall’s campaign on civil partnerships, the campaigns by the environmental and development NGOs and many others.
It is a different world even from the 1990s, when Nicholas Hinton was writing an angry piece in response to a government-commissioned report which suggested charities should be made to separate their campaigning and other arms. As he wrote, “artificial division into service-providing and campaigning organisations would suck the life out of one of the most vibrant sectors of our civil society”.

In all these cases of successful campaigning, it was third sector organisations that mobilised people, organised the demonstrations. From the churches to the smallest community groups to the largest NGOs, people were mobilised.

Government cannot campaign against itself, and political change happens because of pressure and struggle. Change would not have occurred in any of these areas without the third sector.

These campaigns led to policy change in part because they were in tune with the values of the government. Of course, not every demand has been met, but significant progress has been made and it could not have happened without partnership. Isolationism on either side would not have delivered.

For service delivery, take childcare. In childcare, it was the third sector that identified the new need twenty or thirty years ago and started providing childcare in small settings as women went out to work in increasing numbers.

The sector continued to provide that care but also recognised that voluntary activity would not meet the extent of the needs, so it campaigned for universal childcare.

And recently local authorities have been given a new duty in the Childcare Act to secure sufficient childcare to meet local needs. This means that they will work with Third Sector providers and others. Unlike in the case of the Beveridge settlement, the Act assumes that the state sector is a provider of last resort.

Does anyone doubt the improvement that has happened and does anyone really think it would have been better if government had simply stood aside?

My third example is about how the state and the sector that can help build stronger communities.

I represent a constituency---Doncaster North---which used to be built around mining. Today the mines and the institutions surrounding it have almost all gone and that poses not just huge economic challenges but social challenges as well.

And part of the problem is that many of the institutions that built community have gone—because they were associated with the pits. Not just the mines, but the miners’ welfare, the sports club and all the other institutions around the mine.
So if you said to me now, what has been the most successful institution at building community, I would say Sure Start. Because Sure Start provides sites at which people can come together.

Some of them are run by the third sector---NCH---but as important, these public spaces provide places for all kinds of social interaction. They are used mostly by the smallest community organisations.

These organisations would have been worse off from a model which says the state should stand aside.

**The Decade Ahead**

So I think the engagement model has built social progress in the last ten years.

It recognises the different attributes of the state and the sector, and how they complement each other.

And it shows how these different attributes can drive social and political change.

Let me turn now to the third part of my remarks: what this means for the decade ahead.

At present we are engaged in a Third Sector review as part of the government’s Comprehensive Spending Review of all government spending.

Now I’ve been talking about the engagement model, but government has not been a good enough partner.

But I think government could be a much better partner.

So I want this review to address the urgent issues you care about. I have learnt, above all, we need the state to be better partner.

We need to make the good principles of the Compact a reality. We want stable funding from every level of government.

We want three-year funding to be the norm not the exception for local government, as the recent Local Government White paper set out, and for central government as I hope the Comprehensive Spending review will make clear.

We want full cost recovery to be far more widely implemented and that will be a focus of the Spending Review.

We need to streamline accountability procedures so that you do not face unreasonable burdens
And we want commissioners to understand how to contract with the third sector - which will also be a focus of the Action Plan for Third Sector Public Service Delivery at the time of the Pre-Budget Report.

At root, we are aiming at a cultural shift across all levels of government.

But I want our aims for the Third Sector Review to go beyond this.

Ten years ago the Deakin review looked across the board at the sector and what needed to be delivered and we have seen many of its recommendations implemented: a new more generous Gift Aid tax regime, worth hundreds of millions of pounds, new investment in volunteering, the FutureBuilders programme to support investment in public services, the new Office of the Third Sector, and finally, the Charities Act, which we will be celebrating tonight.

Most of the Deakin agenda is in place. We have reached a time to reflect not just on the urgent changes for now, but the vision for the next ten years.

So in three key areas, I want to suggest how the model of engagement between state and sector can be strengthened in the years ahead; how the different strengths of the state and the third sector can better enable people to change society. And I want to say something about how state and sector need to change as a result.

First, campaigning and voice. As we recognise the pioneering and culture-changing role you play, I, as a progressive politician, want the sector’s voice to be heard more loudly over the coming years.

Generally, it will make life more uncomfortable for politicians—but that is no bad thing.

What does this mean for the state? We must make government more open – more accessible to the currently disempowered.

We can never represent every voiceless group in the way that the multiplicity of third sector organisations can, but we can create new platforms and new opportunities to influence decision-making.

This has started in the Local Government white paper with the proposal that a 250 person petition can demand transparent scrutiny of a public service or a particular decision.

And it needs to go on, bringing the voices of users to the centre of where policy is constructed.

I have been very impressed by the Changemakers Young Advocates programme which brings young people into government agencies to help formulate policy not after the event but at its inception. We should try the same ideas out in new areas, including, for example, in issues around the welfare state.
So campaigning and voice are central to progressive change in the next decade. What does this mean for the third sector?

If I may say so, I think the central insight I have seen is that you have enormous power when you work together.

Strong campaigning must, I believe, be built on a recognition of the power you have when working collectively. This is true internationally, nationally and locally.

Internationally, Make Poverty History showed the impact that the NGOs working on debt issues could have by coming together.

And I happen to disagree with Iain Duncan Smith, who is reported by *The Times* as saying of Make Poverty History: “if everybody comes together for one movement you get only one concept prevailing and it locks out alternative thinking”.

Actually, I think that is how political change happens: from a unified voice.

Nationally, on child poverty, both government and third sector need to do more to raise the profile and change minds.

I have called for the charities involving young people to do the same: to demand together that issues of voice, youth services, and portrayal in the media are addressed.

And locally, too, third sector organisations could often have more influence by exercising a collective voice. Third sector organisations complain about their inability to have an effect. I understand the frustrations you face and I hope the steps we have taken in the Local Government White Paper will help, but you also need to think about how to strengthen your voice.

Second, public services.

The central insight for the next phase of public service reform is that the success of public services—whether it is health, education, youth services or many others—will depend on the involvement of the user. And the involvement of users depends on an ethos of respect and equality.

So success in preventative health needs to be built on respect for the needs of users, and on their involvement.

Success in education requires respect for the parent and child, and their involvement.

Success in youth services will only come if young people are involved in defining the service themselves.
So what does this mean for the state? That we need to be more plural and to learn the lessons from the third sector in the way the public sector delivers its services.

Many examples of public services delivered in the public sector do show the user engagement that is often seen as a characteristic of the third sector such as the personal advisor service in jobcentres or the 150,000 teaching assistants. There are public servants, working in the public sector, who display precisely the characteristics I described as being of the “third sector”. But it is not the case in enough services.

Through greater third sector delivery and reforming the way the state delivers itself, we need a state which meets the tests of respect and engagement.

What does it mean for third sector organisations? A greater role in delivery and teaching the public sector for those who want to. But some organisations in the sector will not want to play a role in service delivery. That’s fine. Others will want to play a role in helping re-design services but not deliver them. That’s fine also. Others will want to provide an accountability mechanism for services. Fine too.

Public services is one part of what you do, it is not the whole of what you do.

For those that do deliver services, it is important this doesn’t become simply a battle for territory with the state or private sector and focuses on the quality of the service. And the third sector needs to do better, working with government, at showing through evidence its impact and difference in the quality of service.

And it is important to retain independence. As Nicholas Hinton wrote: “artificial division into service-providing and campaigning organisations would suck the life out of one of the most vibrant sectors of our civil society”.

The third challenge is to build communities.

With your ability to reach out and engage you provide support and networks for people who often find themselves isolated and alone. In a world where people are more mobile and traditional institutions have broken down, this is more important than ever.

What is the challenge for the state? It is to create the spaces in which community can be built.

Public services need to be spaces for community-building – as sure start is, as youth services are –so we also need to think about the role of schools, health centres and other public services.

Community assets are also spaces for community-building. The challenge is for the state to be more open to asset ownership by the third sector. The Development Trust Association has shown the impact that holding an asset could have on the life and sense of ownership
by the community. Not only can they give people a financial stake in the community but also a social stake.

That is why we are looking at how we can promote asset ownership by community organisations, and why we will shortly be announcing funding to help those local authorities that want to transfer assets to third sector organisations. The challenge for the sector is to ensure there is the capacity and professional skill in place to make proper use of any assets that are transferred.

There comes a challenge for the third sector in this area, I think, which is to be realistic about whether a model is sustainable, and the skills are in place.

Let me finally just talk about volunteering in this context. In Britain today, around 20 million people volunteer regularly, an extraordinary testimony to the compassion and care of our nation.

Volunteering helps those in need, it enriches the volunteer but it also builds community. I think of my own area where the divisions between young and old are more apparent as other sites of community have declined. Or some of the other challenges of social cohesion our country faces.

Prejudice and suspicion are often the product of ignorance. I think in the years ahead, volunteering has an enormous role to play in bringing people in our society together.

**Conclusion**

Let me end where I started – with the inspiration of the sector.

In the history of our country you have brought about extraordinary changes for the better.

You have nursed the ill, you have embraced the neglected, you have empowered the dispossessed.

You have campaigned for changes in law and society and resources to tackle structural injustice.

And these things are important. But there is something above all these things that you do: you change attitudes. You change ethos. You change minds.

And the reason I am saying that is more important that anything else is because it is through this that political and social change happens.

If you think about the people who are taught about the problems of developing countries, then join Make Poverty history and then campaign for change. Their minds were changed by that journey.
Or If you think about the people who we hope will stand up for problems of child poverty here at home, get involved themselves and make change happen. Their minds change.

People realise a prejudice is wrong, change their minds and then change other people’s minds – and that is when politics and society shift.

You might call it social responsibility. And social responsibility therefore is the foundation of both voluntary action and a modern welfare state – not, as some would suggest, voluntary action versus a modern welfare state.

So my message tonight is this: progressive change can’t happen without you. But I also don’t think it can happen without an engaged government, working as a good partner at all levels.

It's a privilege to work with you.

Let's keep working in the years to come to change minds, change lives and change society

Thank you.