

RSA

21st century enlightenment

The Big Society: Challenges and opportunities for membership organisations

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

As the comprehensive spending review has underlined, we face a gap. It is the gap between the kind of future to which we as a society aspire and the one we seem likely to create relying on current patterns of thought and behaviour. Labour talked about behaviour change. David Cameron talks about a Big Society but the point is the same; citizens themselves need to change if society is to flourish in new and challenging circumstances.

I believe membership organisations can play a very important role in bridging that gap and I want to explain why. But that potential often goes unfulfilled and many organisations seem ambivalent about member engagement. We need to understand and act on the variables which determine whether membership strengthens society. The reward will not only be more powerful organisations but the possibility of spreading a new ethic of participation across society.

Membership and the social aspiration gap

In my first RSA annual lecture, back in 2007, I suggested that what I called the social aspiration gap had three dimensions. We need citizens in aggregate to be more engaged, more resourceful and more pro-social. By engaged I mean not only more likely to participate but also to appreciate the kinds of choices we need to make at all levels of decision making if we are to make wise policy for the long term. By more resourceful I mean citizens who are better able individually and collectively to meet their own needs without relying on the state or on unsustainable forms of economic growth and who have the creativity, entrepreneurialism and confidence that citizens will need to succeed in a global knowledge economy. And by pro-social I mean we need people who understand that society can only flourish if enough of us are willing in one way or another to make a contribution to the common good – whether in our neighbourhoods or as citizens of the world.

How might membership organisations help close the social aspiration gap? Let's start with engagement. The very fact that someone has joined a third sector organisation means they care about some aspect of society and are willing do something about caring. Whether it is the RSA, the Conservative Party or Amnesty International joining up is a form of engagement. Members receive newsletters and are encouraged to attend events or join in on-line debates to deepen their knowledge.

But while nearly all membership will involve some commitment and learning, a third dimension require a generalised distinction between different types of organisation. Although other organisations may offer lots of ways for members or supporters to interact with each other and with head office, it is in rights based membership organisations – like the RSA or

the National Trust - that proper democratic engagement can take place. This is why these organisations can claim in to be, in Alexis de Tocqueville's phrase, 'schools of democracy'. When as a student at Southampton University in the early eighties I canvassed the halls of residence to get support for a motion condemning the policies of Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin it may have been an act of political futility but it taught me organisational skills that I later used to get elected as a County Councillor.

Turning to the second dimension of the social aspiration gap and the need to foster citizen resourcefulness, membership organisations can again play a powerful role. From the work of Robert Putnam and subsequent research on social capital and social networks we know that people's connections powerfully affect everything from life style to well-being and employability. In relation to economic resilience, weak bonds – between acquaintances rather than intimates – are particularly useful. By offering many opportunities – both face to face and on line - for the development of weak bonds with like minded people, membership organisations enhance people's social capital.

Finally, in relation to pro-sociality, third sector membership organisations are by their very nature concerned with social benefit. But also, by bringing people together with a shared mission and commitment, membership creates the right context for collaboration and altruism. The bonds of membership engender habits of reciprocity and a sense of trust that can radiate into wider society. Jeanette Winterson once wrote that the city we inhabit, inhabits us. The organisations we inhabit, inhabit us, we carry the habits and values we develop into the rest of our lives.

Paul Twivy, Chief Executive of the Big Society Network has said that one of its founding principles is that society is enhanced by associational life. This is, of course, an idea which can be traced back not only to Burke's idea of the little platoons but also to liberal pluralist and civic republican traditions in political philosophy. Associational life is what exists in the squeezed space between state and market. Membership, whether formal or informal, can be defined as a sustained form of association. Membership of third sector organisations can be the backbone of the Big Society.

Membership in decline?

This is the sunny side of the street, but what of the shadows? If membership, and particularly rights based membership, is such a good thing why do we see the following broad trends:

The long term decline (although it may have bottomed out) of many forms of rights based membership, particularly in working class communities; friendly societies, trade unions, political parties. The rise of credit unions is the exception to the rule.

A general drift in governance form in membership organisations towards more business like models in which the power and decision making is concentrated in the hands of professional staff and Boards of Trustees.

New third sector organisations tend to be established on the basis of a business like model of governance. Although there are exceptions, like London Citizens, there doesn't seem to be a lot of enthusiasm for setting up new rights based membership organisations. The greatest dynamism and innovation in the third sector seems to be among social enterprises and single issue campaigns not long established membership organisations.

These are, of course, generalisations. As the NCVO/RSA project on membership organisations found, it is difficult to draw hard and fast conclusions when combining quantitative measures –such as membership numbers – with qualitative ones – such as the style of governance and leadership. The sheer size of the National Trust – which has 6% (and rising) of the country's population – can drown out other smaller shifts in numbers.

But, overall, my sense is that we have seen in the UK a shift broadly similar to that described by Harvard based political scientist, Theda Skocpol in her essay 'Advocates without members – the recent transformation of American civic life'. Professor Skocpol bemoans the shift towards more centralised, professional advocacy organisations and away from broad based participative organisations. She writes:

'In huge membership federations, local chapters were widespread, full of leaders and members seeking to recruit others. Hundreds of thousands of local and supralocal leaders had to be elected and appointed every year. Privileged men and women who climbed ladders of vast membership organisations had to interact in the process with citizens of humble or middling means and prospects. Classic membership federations built two-way bridges between classes and places and between local and translocal affairs. Now, in a civic America dominated by centralised, staff-driven advocacy organisations, the bridges are eroding.'

While only some of this may apply to the UK (where membership organisations have not tended to be so socially mixed) we do know that recent decades have seen the emergence of an ever steeper social class gradient for civic participation. Putting these trends together in an analysis of social capital in Britain Paola Grenier and Karen Wright conclude:

'There are two fundamental factors which undermine the effectiveness of modern civic participation to generate trust across society. The first is the increasing concentration of participation – largely in the A, B, and C1 social classes. The second is the commodification of membership and volunteering, making it increasingly about private benefit, hollowing out its social meaning, and weakening its relationship with social capital.'

We can explore the reasons for these trends from two perspectives; contextual factors and internal dynamics. The NCVO/RSA study identified many of the changes in wider society which might be implicated in a decline in the culture of democratic participation in civil society. These include pressures on time, the rise in individualistic and consumerist values, new opportunities for leisure and self-development, easier access to information; all of which reduce the attraction, or increase the opportunity costs, of participative engagement.

But for the rest of this speech I want to focus on the internal dynamics. Why is participation experienced as problematic by both organisational leaders and members and what can be done to foster successful and deep forms of participation which can be an exemplar for wider society? This may make for a drier subject matter than speculating about social trends but I take comfort from the fact that in a recent seminar of forty or so third sector managers, held as part of the NCVO project, the overwhelming majority chose as the subject they most wanted to discuss the question; how can organisations address the trend towards a commodified model of membership?

A starting point is to recognise that the reality of membership often belies the idea that it can enhance social capacity. Membership can, for example, mean people talking primarily to people who share their views; a way not of engaging with the wider world but of reinforcing assumptions and caricaturing opponents. Worryingly this is a tendency which appears to be reinforced by social media. When I was in Government I often observed a disconnection between the pragmatic position some groups adopted in Whitehall negotiations and the more strident and oppositionalist tone of their advertising and communication with their members.

The culture of membership can be inward looking. An analysis of on-line content around the recent election for Labour leader found more discussion of the history of New Labour than the challenge posed by David Cameron, of the union Unite than the Liberal Democrats and of the length of Andy Burnham's eyelashes than climate change (and yes that final one is true).

Being a member can sometimes be an alternative to taking action. In an NCVO focus group a recently-joined member of a charity said: 'I joined so that I had done my bit – it meant I didn't have to keep worrying about the issue'. We may blame the professionals in charge but most members seem happy with a transactional relationship.

The politics and bureaucracy of membership can sap energy that might otherwise be directed at achieving social change. Too often the different perspectives and motivations of organisational leaders and lay activists can create a gulf across which people feel they can only be heard by shouting.

Given the distance between the potential and the reality of membership, the question we need to explore is this: What are the variables that determine whether memberships are a powerful force for good, a wasted resource or, at worst, a barrier to effectiveness?

Making membership work

First, mission: Third sector organisations, including those that are membership based were created to meet a social need. But as the world changes so do social needs and the ways in which we might meet those needs. We need continually and self critically to examine whether in the light of changing circumstances our organisational form, practices and policies are the very best way for us to fulfil our mission.

On the one hand, this is about being relentlessly outward looking, spotting and interpreting changes in society and technology that may change the definition and delivery of an organisation's mission. On the other hand, it is about the shifting balance of the inherent organisational dilemmas facing third sector organisations; between advocacy and service provision, between meeting needs and preventing problems, between a tight focus and a broad appeal.

One example of a long term shift in orientation – and one which often caused considerable conflict during transition – has been the move among organisations representing disadvantaged groups such as people with disabilities or older people from an approach which emphasised pity and charity to one which focuses on rights and empowerment.

If the leaders of third sector organisations want to encourage their members to adopt new ways of thinking and working then they need to take the lead providing strategic clarity and encouraging debate and scrutiny. Most importantly, organisational leaders, whether executives or Trustee Boards, should open up these discussions to the membership so members feel they are the agents of change not merely observers or victims. This can be difficult. It can involve recognising past mistakes, challenging long established practices and cherished traditions. While paid employees see being held to account for their effectiveness as part of their job, it can be much more difficult for people who have given their time and effort voluntarily to accept that they may need to redirect their efforts.

It is all too easy for head office to see the need for change, decide to act on it and only then share the exciting news with activists and members. Unsurprisingly, this can lead those lay activists to suspect that change is driven not by the best interests of the organisation but by the desire of those at the top to take control or prove they are worth their generous salaries. And, yes, here I do speak from experience.

If an organisation is clear about its mission, how it has to adapt to change and engage its members in moulding its response, the longer-term challenge is **alignment**. How can every activity in the organisation support the pursuit of the mission? It is here, it seems to me, that professional and Trustees need to be more imaginative and creative about the role that members can play.

Even if members are genuinely valued, and sometimes they are not, they will be seen variously as cheerleaders, as low-level volunteers, as customers and invariably as sources of funding. What these roles tend to have in common is that they support the delivery of a given plan of action. What is harder, but potentially much more rewarding, is to adopt an organisational form which allow members through their preferences and actions to be the co-producers of the strategy. Instead of seeing members as a conduit for the central plan, this model seeks to provide a platform on which members can develop their own interpretation of the organisation's mission and how concretely to pursue it.

When I arrived at the RSA four years ago the organisation was perfectly sound and many people based in this building were doing good – albeit quite low profile – work. The Society had a good recruitment strategy which had seen Fellowship grow strongly over several years. Fellows were valued for their annual donation. There was a little bit of funding and other support for the activities of our hard working lay regional committees. There was a fair degree of autonomy but not a great deal of alignment

Over these four years the executive and Trustees, engaging at many levels with the Fellows, have developed a clearer more focussed mission, centring on understanding and enhancing human capability. But, if the Society nationally is advocating a more ambitious model of citizenship – people who are engaged, resourceful and altruistic – then surely we should be supporting our Fellows to exemplify this ideal in their own activities?

This is why the last four years have also seen a major expansion in our investment in our Fellows with a focus on supporting social interventions in line with our charitable aims. The Fellows in Chelmsford who developed a major project to renew their town centre. The group of Fellows who meet here every Friday morning to oversee a joint research project they are undertaking on social enterprise. The Fellows on our Tipton Academy governing body. The Saturday Arts Academy being hosted by Fellows in Tennessee (yes, Tennessee) because schools have stopped funding arts education. Or RSA Scotland which has used an anonymous donation to set up a social enterprise venture fund which has supported Fellows initiatives including a community garden and a new form of citizen engagement. Indeed, so successful was the Scottish venture fund that we have copied it nationally.

Our vision is not only that the RSA Fellowship is a powerful force for good in the world but that over time we can see the various activities of the RSA – our lectures and events, our research and advocacy and the activities of our Fellows being part a of seamless social movement to enhance human capability.

This is a challenging goal. It is hard enough, for example, to ask a researcher to develop and manage their own project including raising funds and influencing policy makers without then asking them to engage 27,000 Fellows and then decide which of the array of opinions they receive they should act on. In seeking to engage a membership which has in the past been largely passive there is a danger that we create expectations which we are unable to fulfil. So we are feeling our way, developing new norms, processes and skills.

But whatever the setbacks and barriers RSA staff and Trustees are determined that an ambitious model of Fellowship stands as a symbol of the Society's ideal of fuller citizenship. Taking an idea from Ghandi, shouldn't all membership organisations have this ambition; that their relationship with their members and the activities of those members exemplify the change they are about in the world?

Finally, there is the **democratic challenge** in making the most of membership. Not only is this tough but it can be difficult to talk about honestly. Winston Churchill famously described "democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried". Even if we are committed to membership participation in its many forms this shouldn't blind us to the difficulties of such a commitment.

In 1968 the Journal 'Science' published what has proven to be a very influential article. Written by the ecologist Garret Hardin it was entitled "The Tragedy of the Commons". Using the metaphor of cattle grazing on common land, Hardin sought to explore the problem that individual people pursuing their own best interests might behave in a way which destroyed a shared resource on which they and everyone else in their community relied. In my experiences there are two tragedies - or to be less emotive let us call them perils - of voluntary membership organisations.

The first we might call the peril of the rotten apple. It is that in self organising groups of volunteers, destructive behavior tends to be better at driving out constructive behavior than vice versa. In the modern world, creative, generous, talented people have many calls on their time, many ways they can make a contribution. If they are confronted in a group by someone who finds it hard to collaborate, to listen or to adapt and who as a consequence acts as a block to the group working effectively then these talented people will simply walk away and find a more productive use for their time. In contrast, the person who is acting as a block may take a very long time to see that their behavior is damaging. More likely they will blame a lack

of success on everyone else, or they will end up creating a closed clique of people who share their particular view of the world. The potential for constructive action has been lost in the blink of an eye, but it can take a huge amount of time and effort to overcome a force of negativity.

The second might be called the peril of governance. This revolves around two ideas of volunteer activism. One idea starts from wanting to make an impact on the world and only engaging in governance debates in as much as is necessary to facilitate that impact. The other idea starts from governance for governance's sake, a focus on process with the question of making a difference in the world in the background at best.

I don't want here to draw a false dichotomy. There are active members who love being part of delivering the organisation's mission, there are those who enjoy the procedures of governance, those who enjoy both and people whose activism takes different forms at different times. The peril is that among those who are active it is the ones who focus on governance who tend to have much more voice and impact on the organisation as a whole than those who put their energies into being part of fulfilling the organisation's mission.

In making these two points I am neither arguing against membership engagement nor putting the blame for problems on certain kinds of members. Indeed, I have a confession to make: I have contributed to the perils I describe. In the early eighties as a left wing activist in the Labour Party I would go to meeting after meeting denouncing the leadership for their revisionism. In vain would older, wiser members suggest to my comrades and me that perhaps we should spend less time attacking each other and more time trying to communicate with the public. I also recall serving as a member of a school governing body. While not holding back in meetings from loudly holding the head teacher to account, I rarely bothered to visit the school let alone explore how I might offer concrete support to staff or pupils. My criticisms would have been more constructive and credible if I had shown at least some inclination to enjoy the school's successes.

The task is not to try to distinguish good members from bad but to develop ways of working which, on the one hand, foster peer to peer collaboration rather than hierarchically framed conflict and, on the other hand, attach voice and status to achieving social impact as well as holding an official position. To develop and maintain a culture in which active members feel respected and engaged but also committed to be partners in the delivery of the organisation's mission is not easy. Those of us with this ambition need to be honest about the challenges and learn from our mistakes and successes.

Conclusion

It is surely significant that over the last thirty years there has been so much investment and progress in forms of individual member engagement – what is often called customer relations management – but in most organisations comparatively little progress in new forms of collective participation, even with all the potential now offered by social media.

Today's busy, sophisticated, post-deferential citizens will get involved if they are offered an experience which is enjoyable, which offers self development or which makes a real impact, and preferably a bit of all three. The activist part of too many membership organisations still suffer from the same hierarchical, bureaucratic, process dominated ways of working they inherited from an earlier very different era. We wouldn't dream of using the same written communications we sent out forty years ago, but how much have our committee meetings changed? Perhaps that's why all the survey evidence on civic activism says that it continues to be overwhelmingly dependent on the same 1% of the population

Our country needs to change. Despite the breath of fresh air provided by a new Government, the public's attitude to politics is disengaged and distrustful. Although there are many amazing people struggling against the odds, in too many areas people lack the confidence or the tools to tackle social problems themselves. Despite the aspirations of our Prime Minister and the needs of our society, levels of volunteering have not risen in recent years.

I believe that the sustained forms of associational life which we call membership, and particularly membership which carries it with its rights and responsibilities, can play a vital role in building a bigger society and in fostering a more engaged, resourceful and generous model of citizenship. But for this potential to be fulfilled means asking hard questions about the mission, the alignment and the democratic culture of membership organisations. Can we develop new and better ways of engaging members as true partners? Recently here at the RSA we have got some of the answers wrong. I will know it is time for me to move on if we stop asking the question.