

Citizenship and the Voluntary Sector

With the support of the Simons Foundation, SFU students were invited by the Institute for the Humanities to submit written proposals that focused on issues related to citizenship. **Amanda Cawston**, a Philosophy and Humanities major at SFU, presented the following paper on November 9, 2006, at SFU Harbour Centre. For the Simons Student Citizenship Program. The Institute for the Humanities, Simon Fraser University, October 2006.

In 2000, 6.5 million people volunteered their time to a voluntary sector organization and the sector employed a further 1.3 million people.

—*Canada Voluntary Sector* (2002)

As the above statistic indicates, volunteerism in Canada is a significant force. Recognized as “one of three pillars that constitute Canadian society, together with public and private sectors” (Canada, *An Accord*, 2001, p. 3), the voluntary sector provides a less formal, though more personal means for participation in society. The fundamentally community-driven nature of the voluntary sector, in combination with the distinctly social nature of its motivation, creates an invaluable and distinctive perspective on issues of social justice. Given this unique access to community-based issues of social justice and its supportive role as one of the three main pillars of society, a strong voluntary sector seems vital for a progressive society.

The voluntary sector also holds significant potential for experiencing an active conception of citizenship. Not only a means for “giving back” to one’s community, volunteerism provides the opportunity to actively participate in the betterment of society. Individuals are able to directly contribute to the projects that reflect their values and actively demonstrate their membership in a community.

In this article, I explore several problematic elements of the relationships between the voluntary sector and the remaining two pillars,

the public and private sectors. The first concerns the role of the voluntary sector within a capitalist framework, focusing on the current economic pressures faced by the voluntary sector in Canada. The voluntary sector in Canada has faced significant challenges in recent years, including government funding cuts and declining public interest in volunteerism. In response, the voluntary sector has become an industry of its own, emulating capitalist market driven strategies to attract donor dollars and volunteer resources. Ethics consultants debate the benefits of increased corporate sponsorship while companies begin to capitalize on the economic benefits of corporate social responsibility and employee volunteer programs. Volunteering is increasingly viewed and promoted as a resume building and networking tool. In this context, how has volunteerism’s potential as an expression of citizenship been affected? The first section of this article examines the potential for citizenship within this new voluntary environment.

The second aspect concerns the relationship between the voluntary sector and government. By controlling access to funding and creating operating regulations, the Canadian government is a significant factor in the activities of the voluntary sector. I examine how several government policies, including the *Accord Between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary Sector* (signed in December, 2001) developed through the Voluntary Sector Initiative, and the *Income*

Tax Act affect volunteerism's potential for expressing citizenship. I also examine voluntary sector responses to these policies and their relationship to citizenship potential within the sector.

Through its community-based relationship with the public, the voluntary sector has enormous potential for the development and nurturing of active citizenship. This article offers a preliminary examination of two structural factors that may be limiting the citizenship potential of volunteer organizations, an examination that may foster new ways to think about active volunteerism and its role in society.

ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Although it is not the aim of this article to define the concept of citizenship, a brief discussion of the notion of active citizenship is required to emphasize its relationship with volunteerism. While the concept of citizenship is highly elusive and dynamic idea, most common understandings of the term include some form of participation as a necessary condition. This participation may take the form of voting in an election, membership in a political party or advocacy group, or volunteering. Regardless of the form of this participation, this active component of citizenship is more than the simple exercise of a voice. Active citizenship is the active modification of society. Active citizenship is not a replacement for rights based conceptions such as Marshall's (1950) legal, civic, and social rights hierarchy, but rather, a complementary component. Active citizenship is also a concept closely linked to the aims of social justice. As Wilfred Carr (1991) observes in his essay "Education for Citizenship":

Our present understanding of citizenship is thus the result of past struggles and organised protests (such as those of the Chartists and the Suffragettes) on behalf of social groups who were denied a full degree of legal, social and political equality. In this sense, citizenship is the

dynamic historical process of social transformation through which the demand for great social justice and a more egalitarian social order has been gradually promoted and realised. (p. 376)

The discussion of active citizenship has particular relevance in the modern context given the decreasing interest in traditional political participation. Historically appropriate avenues for affecting social change, such as joining a political party, are seen as minimally effective. Gidengil, Blais, and Nadeau's (2004), statistical investigation into the concept of citizenship, *Citizens*, clearly echoes this sentiment:

The 2000 Canadian Election Study asked Canadians which was the more effective way of working for change: joining a political party or joining an interest group. The answer was joining an interest group by a margin of three to one (61 percent versus 20 percent). (p. 131)

The social justice focus and active nature of the voluntary sector offers an alternate avenue for experiencing active citizenship. Closely situated within communities, the voluntary sector arguably offers a more direct experience of change in action as well as providing a greater sense of ownership. In the face of increasing voter apathy, the voluntary sector has enormous potential for becoming a vehicle for active citizenship.

THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR AND THE MARKET ECONOMY

To examine the relationship between the voluntary and private sectors, one first needs to realize the economic significance of the voluntary sector. Far from the everyday conception of small, grass-roots organizations supported mainly by a handful of senior citizens, the modern voluntary sector is an industry of its own. The voluntary sector is:

A vital pillar of Canadian society, the voluntary sector is a major social and economic force in this country – for example, consider that

the sector [1] employs approximately 1 million people [2] is supported by 6.5 million volunteers [3] includes 180,000 incorporated organizations [4] has annual revenues of \$90 billion and assets of \$109 billion. (Voluntary Sector Initiative, 2003, p. 4)

Despite its size and historical significance, the voluntary sector is experiencing tough times. Though the need for social services has increased, previously stable government funding has been reduced or eliminated. Charities are now forced to compete with each other for scarce government grants and donor dollars. Organizations that neglect to devote resources to marketing and branding efforts will simply not be able to compete. Predictably, an entire industry has sprung up around the voluntary sector offering marketing assistance, grant proposal writing specialists, strategic planning consultants, and technology support.

Not only are charities forced to compete for funds, they are also in competition for volunteers. According to the National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP), “[j]ust over 6.5 million volunteered in 2000, compared to nearly 7.5 million people in 1997” (McClintock, p. 7). To attract additional volunteers, charities are espousing the work experience and networking value of volunteering. Also, expensive volunteer recognition and incentive programs provide costly, but material means for charities to thank their volunteers. The combination of these trends serves to significantly undermine the citizenship potential of volunteerism. While admirable work is still being accomplished, volunteers are viewed as consumers rather than partners. The charity must try to balance its particular social aims against the need to provide a rewarding experience for the consumer-volunteer. Again, failure to provide this experience results in a loss of volunteers, which subsequently reduces the ability of the charity to achieve its goals.

One relatively new and popular volunteer recruitment approach is the encouragement

of “employer-supported volunteerism” (ESV). Described as a win-win situation for both the voluntary and private sectors, ESV is fast becoming a major component of volunteerism. From 1997 to 2000, “the number of employed volunteers who reported receiving approval from their employer to modify their work hours in order to accommodate their volunteer involvement rose from 22 per cent to 27 per cent” (Graff, 2004, p. 11). There are many ways employers can participate in supporting their employees’ volunteerism. For example, an employer may allow for a more flexible scheduling procedure to make it easier for employees to find time to volunteer. Alternatively, an employer may allow an employee to utilize company space and materials for volunteer work. The central requirement is that “employees perform work in the community with some form of support and/or encouragement from their employer to do so” (Graff, 2004, p. 7). Specific returns for the company include “enhanced reputation, increased consumer loyalty, and greater attractiveness to prospective employees” (p. 17). While volunteering, employees learn communication and teamwork skills and benefit from improved moral and productivity.

Despite the “win-win” appearance of this partnership, the potential for experiencing active citizenship is seriously limited. Charitable organizations most closely associated with current social justice issues may be extremely controversial or “fringe” organizations. It seems unlikely that an employer, aiming to improve a company’s reputation, would support potentially controversial charities. Therefore, an increase in employer-supported volunteerism could lead to a decrease in support for controversial social justice organizations. Unwilling to gamble its reputation on a hot-button issue, employers will prefer the stable, status-quo charities that admittedly do important work, but are not actively aiming to achieve social change.

**VOLUNTARY SECTOR AND
GOVERNMENT**

Any analysis of the citizenship potential of volunteerism must consider the relationship between the voluntary sector and government. Government funding decisions and regulatory controls play a substantial role in the day-to-day operations of Canadian charities. In this section, I will examine several governmental policies and programs that directly affect the voluntary sector's citizenship potential. Specifically, I explore the constraints on "political action" as stipulated in the *Income Tax Act* and the promising developments, though ultimate failure, of the Volunteer Sector Initiative, a government-voluntary sector cooperative program. While these issues are not new in the voluntary sector, they have previously been examined in terms of how governmental control serves to limit the potential achievement of the voluntary sector in terms of its goals. This article examines these same issues within the wider context of citizenship, and how regulatory control limits the development of volunteerism as a form of active citizenship.

Before exploring the regulatory details of the government-voluntary sector relationship, it is important to recognize the unique and significant positions held by each party. By actively supporting the goals of the voluntary sector, a government is able to provide the public with an alternate vehicle for experiencing citizenship as well as a more responsive and dynamic means of delivering social services. Particularly in a country as large and diverse as Canada, grass-root level organizations are simply better able to promptly respond to the needs of a community than a bureaucratically laden system of government institutions and programs. Though there is no doubt of the need for regulatory systems to ensure the voluntary sector operates with respect to inclusivity and equality, it must also be recognized that the potential exists for government regulatory control to impede the full influence of charitable work. It is from this

position that the relationship between government and the voluntary sector should be evaluated.

As mentioned above, the voluntary sector also occupies a unique position with respect to its potential for developing citizenship. By providing a means by which the public can directly support and participate in the social issues that it values, the voluntary sector is ideally situated to allow the public to direct the course of society. Participating in a charitable cause allows one to observe the effects on a more personal and encourages a feeling of ownership and accomplishment. Additionally, through its more direct relationship with the community, the voluntary sector is better able to identify social problems as well as workable solutions. The practical knowledge and commitment developed from years of hands-on helping simply cannot exist in even the most altruistic governmental committee. This wealth of knowledge and commitment represents the untapped resource. It is from here that the citizenship potential of volunteerism could be unlocked. By allowing the experience and dedication of the voluntary sector to significantly influence social policy, the public could more actively advance the aims of social justice.

Unfortunately, the existing relationship between the voluntary sector and the Canadian government falls short of this ideal. There is a sense of conflict and an atmosphere of mistrust surrounding current relations. Government funding for social programs has steadily declined, increasing the pressure on charities to provide a growing array of services. Government regulations promoted as necessary for protecting the public from fraudulent organizations seem designed to impede rather than facilitate charity operations. Complicated and ambiguous rules exist for registering a charity, issuing tax receipts, and distribution of funds.

Announced in June 2000, the Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI) offered hope for the improvement of government and voluntary sector relations. As a five-year project, the VSI

was created to foster communication, with the aim of defining the roles of government and the voluntary sector, their common goals, their resources for cooperation. Over the course of the initiative, a diverse group of governmental and voluntary sector representatives formed joint tables and working groups to examine a variety of relevant issues. These groups investigated areas such as advocacy, volunteer recruitment, funding issues, and regulatory concerns. Surveys were conducted, reports and educational materials were produced, and volunteer networks were constructed. Of foundational interest is a particular document entitled *An Accord Between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary Sector* (Canada, 2001, *The Accord*). Published in 2001 as a part of the VSI, this Accord represents the combined efforts of the voluntary sector and government to envision an ideal relationship, recognizing that the unique talents of each sector can be combined to work towards a common goal.

The ideals articulated in the VSI's *Accord* are refreshingly supportive and insightful. As a document of guiding principles and standards, *The Accord* offers a genuine opportunity for improving relations. Of particular interest is *The Accord's* direct recognition of the civic importance of volunteerism and its potential as an expression of citizenship. *The Accord* recognizes that “[t]he rich network of organizations, called the voluntary sector, helps make Canada the humane, caring and prosperous nation it is and is one of the strengths for which Canada is known around the world” (Canada, *An Accord*, 2001, p. 3). The focus on citizenship and social justice concerns is evident in *The Accord's* stated foundational values: democracy, active citizenship, equality, diversity, inclusion, and social justice. This shared *Accord* explicitly defines active citizenship as “welcoming the active involvement or engagement of individuals and communities in shaping society whether through political or voluntary activity or both” (Canada, *An Accord*, 2001, p. 7). The value of social justice is defined as “ensuring the full participation in the social,

economic and political life of communities” (p. 7). With these encouraging definitions existing as part of the central document outlining the ideal relationship between the voluntary sector and government, the possibility of effective and meaningful cooperation between the two sectors seems within reach.

The Accord also recognizes the strengths of each sector and the benefits of combining forces in these areas rather than ignoring or impeding them. The recognition of volunteerism's potential for guiding social change can be seen in the following passage:

*Voluntary sector organizations bring their knowledge, expertise and compassion in working with communities and individuals to public policy debates and identify priorities to governments. By encouraging people to participate and work together for common causes, the sector strengthens citizen engagement, gives voice to the voiceless, allows for multiple perspectives to be heard on a variety of issues, and provides opportunities for people to practice the skills of democratic life. (Canada, *An Accord*, 2001, p. 2)*

While the principles and goals of the VSI as articulated in *The Accord* are clearly groundbreaking and admirable, an investigation of the practical relationship between government and the voluntary sector reveals significant barriers in unlocking the citizenship potential of volunteerism.

Many of these practical issues have previously been raised by the Advocacy Working Group and the Voluntary Sector Forum components of the VSI. Of particular interest to both these groups, as well as the purpose of this article, are the seemingly contradictory positions held by government on the value of voluntary sector input on social policy. By examining the restrictions on “political activities” outlined in the *Income Tax Act*, the promising language of partnership offered in *The Accord* appears hollow.

The specific advocacy issues related to the restrictions of the *Income Tax Act* are compre-

hensively examined in Betsy A. Harvie's (2002) report *Regulation of Advocacy in the Voluntary Sector: Current Challenges and some Responses*. This report, sponsored by the VSI, illustrates how the existing regulations both suppress the ability of charities to affect social policy and reflect an attitude of control rather than genuine cooperation. Harvie's report includes significant discussion of the requirement, under the *Income Tax Act*, that a charity "devote no more than 10% of the charity's resources in non-partisan political 'activities'" (Canada Revenue Agency, 2006). Included in the definition of "political activities" are the acts of "persuading the public to adopt a particular view on a broad social question; and attempting to bring about or oppose changes in the law or government policy" (Canada Revenue Agency, 2006). Any charity that fails to abide by this "10 percent rule" risks losing its registered charity status. Being registered with the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) as a charity allows an organization to issue tax receipts to its donors who are then able to deduct these charitable donation amounts from their income tax. As Harvie (2002) mentions in her report, the ability to issue tax receipts is a significant factor in an organization's ability to attract donors, and having one's charitable status revoked is a significant setback for a charity (p. 18). The potential loss of one's charitable status is frequently not worth the risk for many charities, and they decide to avoid any actions that could be construed as political advocacy. The tax status of the voluntary sector is also a significant economic concern for government. To illustrate, "[i]n 2001, federal tax revenue from individuals and corporations was reduced by about \$1.5 billion as a result of contributions to these charities" (VSI, *Strengthening Canada's Charitable Sector*, 2003, p. 10).

To illustrate the implications of the "10 percent rule," the Voluntary Sector Forum offered the following example in an open letter criticizing the lack of regulatory progress:

Healthy Retirement can undertake research and conclude that crossing at crosswalks is four times as dangerous as crossing at traffic lights. However, the charity cannot move to the next logical step and take the position that marked crosswalks should be banned and hire communications specialists to initiate a campaign as this would cross into political activity. It is not rational or reasonable to ask charities to stop their well-researched line of reasoning at arbitrary points along the way to satisfy the mistaken idea that to actively work for policy change needs to be restricted. (Voluntary Sector Forum, 2003)

Harvie describes this environment as one that has "produced an "advocacy chill" where groups are fearful of the consequences of engaging in impermissible activities and frequently do much less advocacy than they might wish" (Harvie, 2002, p. 5). Not only does this environment result in the inability of a charity to achieve its goals, it utterly truncates the voluntary sector's potential for enabling active citizenship. By blocking the ability for charities to initiate public calls for action, government limits the avenues available for input on social policy. While the language of *The Accord* suggests an open appreciation of the voluntary sector's unique experience and knowledge of social issues, the restrictive limits on public "political activity" as specified in the *Income Tax Act* suggests a less appreciative attitude may be the reality. Further, rather than increasing civic engagement, this restriction on political activity reinforces the public perception that the political system is stagnant and incapable of effecting significant social change.

In addition to the lack of progress in regulatory reform that could realize the cooperative aims outlined in *The Accord*, recent government funding cuts to specific volunteerism programs further undermine the relationship. On September 25, 2006, the Government of Canada announced the cancellation of the Canadian Volunteerism Initiative (CVI).

Developed in 2002, the CVI was “designed to encourage Canadians to volunteer and to help more organizations involve volunteers” (CVI, 2002). While the VSI was intended to be a five year project, the CVI was promoted as “the first ongoing program to be implemented under the broader Voluntary Sector Initiative” (VSI, 2006). Operated through Volunteer Canada and Imagine Canada, the CVI provided resources and support for volunteer centres and research programs.

Offering little in explanation, the Honourable John Baird of the current Conservative government announced that a total of \$1 billion could be cut from the budget having “uncovered numerous examples of waste and duplication” (CBC News, 2006). Included in this \$1 billion was approximately \$10 million in funding for the CVI. Labelled as a “non-core program” the current government’s attitude towards the voluntary sector is clear. Rather than attempting to build on the relationship gains made over the course of the VSI, the current government has successfully shocked and alienated the voluntary sector. On the popular charity resource website “Charity Village,” a recent article on the cuts quoted the president of Volunteer Canada, Marlene Deboisbriand: “We found out about the cuts like everyone else, with the press release. There was no consultation, no advance notice, no transition planning,” (Levy-Ajzenkopf October 2, 2006).

In light of these recent events, the future of volunteerism as an avenue for active citizenship faces significant challenges. While the principles forged through the VSI and highlighted in *The Accord* articulated the significant potential of volunteerism as a citizenship tool, distinct barriers remain. The current climate surrounding governmental and voluntary sector relations is far from encouraging and collaborative, and specific regulatory restrictions remain unchanged. A more appreciative and respectful attitude combined with constructive regulatory debate is required to realize the citizenship potential of volunteerism.

CONCLUSION

This article presented an introductory examination of two structural factors that may be limiting the citizenship potential of volunteer organizations

- 1) the increasingly market-driven environment influencing the priorities of charities combined with the increasing participation of the private sector through employer-supported volunteerism; and
- 2) the attitudes and regulatory frameworks mediating the relationship between the voluntary sector and government.

Despite these obstacles, volunteerism continues to be an attractive avenue for experiencing active citizenship.

While by no means an exhaustive inquiry, this article has identified several critical areas of interest on the issue of volunteerism and its relationship to active citizenship.

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