

*Good Neighbours: associational philanthropy and civic  
apprenticeship in 19th Century England*

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The relationship between the British government and the British people changed so dramatically in the twentieth century that we may see the Victorian age as an *ancien régime*.<sup>i</sup> While central government was little noticed in the late nineteenth century, the tendrils of the state were everywhere to be seen by the 1960s, from the local surgery to the unemployment office on the High Street. Translated into quantitative terms, government spent about 5 per cent of gross national product in the 1890s and over 50 per cent in 1960.<sup>ii</sup>

Victorians held government in esteem, but they expected little from it on social issues. In a decidedly Christian culture, they commonly believed that poverty was ineradicable, yet they sought its amelioration through voluntary service. A century later, most Britons believed poverty could be abolished, but that responsibility for health, education and welfare resided in the political process. An opinion poll in 1948 found that over 90 per cent of people no longer thought there was a role for charity in Britain.<sup>iii</sup> To the collectivist mind, a proper social democracy would, to use the Labour leader Barbara Castle's words, show 'a toughness about the battle for equality rather than do-goodery'.<sup>iv</sup> The use of do-gooder as a term of abuse encapsulated the transformation of values.

With the rise of collectivism, the payment of taxes had become the primary civic duty. Individuals could take satisfaction from paying their taxes, but they were in many ways more impotent in an age of universal suffrage and parliamentary democracy than their disenfranchised ancestors had been under an oligarchic system.<sup>v</sup> Paradoxically, there was more social connectedness in the age of Queen Victoria, with all its class distinctions and fear of representative democracy, than in post-war Britain, with its New Jerusalem egalitarianism. Those very distinctions and fears made social contact within and between classes essential. Self-governing institutions, from lowly mothers' meetings to the mighty voluntary hospitals had connected citizens to their communities and gave them a measure of direct control over their own affairs. In an era of religious commitment, limited government and strong local allegiances, social responsibility was not simply a corollary of privilege but a corollary of citizenship.

Britain is a nation of joiners, and we should not underestimate the degree of unpublicized charity even in the heyday of the welfare state. The Nathan Committee, which investigated charitable practices in the 1950s, concluded that charity and unpublicized neighbourliness made 'satisfactory social relationships possible'.<sup>vi</sup> Still, as good neighbours and charitable campaigners we are far less impressive than the Victorians. If the twentieth century may be described as the age of collectivism, the nineteenth century was, as one eminent Victorian called it, 'the age of societies': 'For the cure of every sorrow there are patrons, vice-presidents, and secretaries. For the diffusion of every blessing there is a committee'.<sup>vii</sup> As the historian G. M. Trevelyan observed, Victorian Britain was so overrun with philanthropy that 'not even the dumb animals were left unorganized'.<sup>viii</sup>

Reading ourselves into history, it is questionable whether we can fully understand the motives of charitable campaigners in the past, even when we admire their energy and accomplishments. In an increasingly mobile and materialist world, in which culture has grown more national, indeed global, our intellects find it difficult to relate to the lost world of parish life, in which millions of local associations provided essential services and a moral training for the citizenry. To many people in Britain today, the very idea of Victorian philanthropy has an air of quaintness about it. But as we reject the piety and social hierarchy of our forebears, we tend to forget that benevolence and neighbourliness, self-help and helping others, were among the most urgent of Victorian values. We also tend to forget that much of Britain's idealism and democratic culture grew out of these values.

Yet there are signs that things are beginning to change; Victorian values seem less quaint than they did in the 1960s. The strategic planning in welfare provision that characterized the post-war decades ended in doubts, reassessment, and recrimination. After the oil crisis in the mid 1970s, the spending limits of state social services propelled a revival of interest in charitable traditions and local solutions. Diversity, innovation and cost effectiveness were thought to be among the principal virtues of charity, and these became increasingly apparent against the background of government economies and the spiralling costs and bureaucratic inefficiencies of the welfare state.

By the time Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979, social engineering was out of fashion. Under her leadership, central government became a reluctant patron of the welfare state, and the political rhetoric in the health and social services shifted to the pursuit of efficiency, private-sector expansion and pluralism. The New Right, with its reversion to the language of the

minimal state and the need for voluntary endeavour, echoed sentiments that had been little commended since the heyday of Victorian liberalism.<sup>ix</sup> But such sentiments were being voiced in a world that had lost its Victorian underpinnings. In the end, Mrs. Thatcher was another example of the tendency of post-war Prime Ministers to show little regard for charitable independence. In mass democracies, politicians and bureaucrats wish to regulate and co-opt rival centres of authority, a process that has occurred under both Labour and Conservative governments. Under the guise of Victorian liberalism, Mrs. Thatcher carried forward the very collectivist agenda that she disavowed.

The collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1989 had more positive repercussions for voluntary institutions than Mrs. Thatcher and the New Right. The decline of world socialism led to a swing in the pendulum of social perceptions, perhaps as great as at the end of the nineteenth century when views about the causes of poverty began to move in a direction unfavourable to voluntary service. With socialism in ideological retreat around the globe, those values and freedoms offered by voluntary agencies had more to recommend them. After 1989, and the apparent triumph of the market, fewer people looked to the government for the cure of all social ills or saw state planning as the road to freedom. Instead, there was a new emphasis on entrepreneurial philanthropy and the virtue of civic engagement, in which politicians increasingly stressed the duties of citizenship.

In promoting the virtues of democratic pluralism, 1989 effectively changed the language of politics, reshaping the context in which charity was understood. In the last two decades charity has come to be elided with notions of civil society or community service, which has made it more palatable to erstwhile critics. Take Gordon Brown. In an article in *The Times* in 1988, he decried charity as 'a sad and seedy competition for public pity'.<sup>x</sup> A few years later, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, he launched a campaign to reinvigorate charitable service and civic spirit.

David Cameron's 'Big Society' may be seen as continuing this trend. It is fair to say that people are bemused, and not a few alienated, by the idea of the big society, which is understandable given the vagaries and complexities of British welfare provision. We have reached a curious stage in the evolution of social policy where the state wants the voluntary bodies to do more, while the leaders of the voluntary sector want the state to do more. As a point of departure, it is worth noting that in the 1980s about 10 per cent of overall charitable revenues came from government sources. The figure is now approaching 50 per cent and rising. Of the 160,000 or so societies registered with the Charity Commissioners, about 35,000 receive

state funding. These tend to be the larger, more prominent institutions, which are currently clamouring for more government money. For all the talk about the 'citizenship of contribution', we may be reaching a tipping point, when individuals will assume that charities are essentially government agencies paid for by taxation and consequently no longer feel the need to contribute as individuals.

On the face of it, the Big Society described by David Cameron has much to recommend it. In so far as it enlivens local communities and reduces the burdensome regulations on charities it will be of social benefit. Charitable partnerships with local authorities have advantages in educating government about the pressing issues that matter to people on the periphery. But we should not assume that partnerships would reduce the role of government or encourage volunteering or voluntary donations. What we may be undergoing is a further stage in the perfection of the state monolith under the guise of partnership, a process that one charitable director calls 'a cultural takeover by stealth'. Paradoxically, the big society's promotion of the contract culture may result in more government rather than less. It is worth noting that the first thing the government did when introducing the Big Society was to expand the Ministry for Civil Society, which is responsible for doling out contracts and further regulating charities. To the Victorians, a minister for voluntary institutions would seem a contradiction in terms.

There has always been a tendency to see philanthropy in class terms, in which our society is divided into the wealthy who give and poor who receive. While there is a good deal to be said for this assumption, it needs considerable qualification. Just as we are inclined to think of philanthropy today as the preserve of the rich, there is a tendency to think of Victorian philanthropy likewise. This is something of a misunderstanding, which is a reflection of today's fascination with wealth and millionaire donors. Much, if not most philanthropy, whether past or present, operates within classes rather than between them. For their part, the middle classes are never more active than when looking after their own interests, not least in higher education and the arts.

Think of those nineteenth-century philanthropists who gave to Oxford and Cambridge colleges, to museums and to the arts. Who benefited? When the Victorian manufacturer Samuel Morley contributed to higher education he said that he wished to provide for the sons of the middle class. The patent medicine king Thomas Holloway saw middle-class women as the principal beneficiaries of his college in Egham. The John Rylands Library in Manchester, the

Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool and the Tate Gallery in London were founded as great civic institutions open to all, but who were their principal users? Such benefactions do not fit easily into the conventional model of charity as the rich helping the poor.

Individuals from the wealthier classes often found themselves dependent on charity. Indeed, charity within the privileged classes represented one of the fastest growing forms of philanthropy in the nineteenth century. Charity and self-help were essential to the maintenance of the professions. Artists, actors, musicians, playwrights, governesses, lawyers, dentists, pharmacists, clergymen, naval and army officers, all had institutions for their support and the support of their families in times of need. By the end of the nineteenth century, the charitable yearbooks listed hundreds of societies in Britain that catered to genteel applicants, from decayed merchants to old Etonians.

To counter the conventional class model of charity, in which the rich give hand outs to the poor, it is suggestive to think of the history of philanthropy broadly as the history of neighbourliness. Neighbourliness conveys the importance of philanthropy at all social levels and reveals its implications for individuals and communities across the class spectrum. The standard definition of philanthropy is love of one's fellow man, an inclination or action that promotes the well being of others. It encompasses a neighbourly visit or a widow's mite as well as the momentous decisions of great charities or the donations of great benefactors. Cast widely to include informal expresses of kindness, the philanthropic net catches virtually everyone at one time or another. Often the recipients themselves turn charitable in better days, for one of the striking things about kindness is its contagiousness. Many a Victorian workingman, having had the hat passed round for his own emergency, gave generously to others in their time of trouble. It was customary.

The springs of philanthropic action are deeply rooted in such customs, often little more than impulses, and in the needs and aspirations of people who respond to their difficulties and opportunities in a particular way, whether it is at home, in the pub or in some wider social setting. For all the talk about millionaire philanthropy, more often than not philanthropic action was, and remains, a grassroots activity, in which neighbours address local issues creatively. As Julia Rowntree puts it in her book on the arts and civic engagement: 'neighbourliness is based on an exchange of skills, expertise and resources in the acknowledgement of a common curiosity or need and in a spirit of reciprocity.'<sup>xi</sup> As the Victorians recognized, the most fruitful forms of cooperation are to be found face to face . And as often as not, it implied a moral relationship.

Neighbourliness, charity or kindness, call it what you will, not only made life in Victorian England more bearable and human, but propelled those traditions of free association that are thought to be essential to the creation of a vibrant democracy. Voluntary bodies gave a voice to those who were excluded, or felt excluded, from the political nation: minorities, dissenters, women and the working classes. Through associational culture, the most obscure sects could prosper in their own enclave of belief. Whatever the cause, self-governing institutions could achieve their *ad hoc* purposes without being stifled by ritualized conventions or enmeshed and consequently immobilized by politics. The fluid, instrumental traditions of voluntary association made a rigid, monopolistic political system less likely to develop in Britain. The very density of free associations, catering to all manner of maladies and aspirations, thwarted those who anticipated the collapse of the social order.<sup>xii</sup>

Class solidarity, ethnic survival and denominational renewal are critical to understanding the vitality and expansion of Victorian philanthropy. Charities proliferated in a liberal society splintered by religious, class and local allegiances. Sectarian rivalries inspired much Victorian philanthropy, and every denomination had charitable emphases. Quakers and Unitarians favoured educational causes, for example. The associational ideal was particularly suited to missionary purposes in an urban and industrial age, for it offered ordinary men and women the genuine possibility of both self-improvement and civic advancement. As one Victorian campaigner put it, people live in a dreamland of their own, but if they dared to engage with this poor disordered world it would 'work out in them a better goodness than their own'.<sup>xiii</sup>

Victorian philanthropy gave voice to minority and majority opinion alike. By encouraging participation, charities and other forms of voluntary association acted as schools of citizenship for those both inside and outside the political nation. In a culture that was profoundly voluntary, free associations became an essential sphere of local democracy and civic pride. Among its virtues, associational culture offered a pragmatic training ground in citizenship and politics, what may be described as a civic apprenticeship. Church and chapel societies prepared many a Liberal and Labour leader for secular office. For their part, friendly societies, which had strong links with Nonconformity, were 'highly principled, democratic organisms whose members were required to be active and conscientious practitioners of civic virtue and public spirit'.<sup>xiv</sup> Of course, many voluntary bodies were not inspired by a faith in democracy; and some of them, run by autocrats, had little enthusiasm for the participation of the membership.<sup>xv</sup> Yet self-governing

institutions, which embodied what has been called 'subscriber' democracy, supplied the growing points of personal and social initiative.

This was of particular importance to women, who had far fewer opportunities for self-expression than men in the nineteenth century. They naturally turned to charity as an outlet for their industry and talents. A look at subscription lists in charitable reports provides compelling proof of the advance of female philanthropy in the nineteenth century. Over the years, I have studied thousands of subscription lists and the pattern is clear. In a typical charity in the 1790s only about 5 per cent of subscribers were female. By 1830, the figure had risen to about 30 percent; by the 1870s it had risen to about 60 percent. Over the same decades women formed a large number of societies of their own, often dealing with issues relating to women and children.

The charitable work of women was a lever which they used to open the doors closed to them in other spheres, for in its variety it was experience applicable to just about every profession in England. Through their extensive contact with charitable organization, women increased their interest in government, administration and the law. Through contact with charity schools they increased their interest in education. Through the system of district visiting they increased their interest in the problems of poverty and the social services. Through their work as hospital, workhouse and prison visitors they increased their interest in, among other things, medicine and diet. As a religion of action, philanthropy slowly challenged the complacency of women, gave them practical experience and responsibility and perhaps most importantly, it heightened their self-confidence. It was no accident that women trained in charitable societies were prominent in the female suffrage movement. Philanthropy was the taproot of female emancipation.

The historian Arthur Schlesinger's belief in the central importance of voluntary associations to American democracy could be applied to Britain. (Much of America's charitable culture had its origins in Britain.) Voluntary societies, he argued, provided the people with their greatest school of self-government. 'Rubbing minds as well as elbows, they have been trained from youth to take common counsel, choose leaders, harmonize differences, and obey the expressed will of the majority. In mastering the associative way they have mastered the democratic way.'<sup>xvi</sup> In centralized welfare states, it is easy to forget that a nation's political condition depends to a large extent on the creative chaos of its associational life, on the myriad actions, typically unexceptional and little known, undertaken in local communities by self-

governing churches, charities, mutual aid societies, clubs, and other institutions that operate outside the state.

The scope for democratic participation is proportional to a nation's associational life. Take the practice, once common among British charities, of electing beneficiaries by the vote of subscribers. Such institutions, called voting charities, sharpened the significance of participation and had the merit of making personal bonds between the giver and the receiver of assistance. Like other associational forms, they brought neighbours together while reducing the chasm between the social classes. Typically, a committee drew up a list of candidates eligible for relief, and all the subscribers then voted, each casting his or her vote proportional to the amount of his or her subscription. The practice was prone to abuse, but it embodied a democratic process, however corrupted by electioneering, in which negotiation and compromise were essential.<sup>xvii</sup> For many citizens, particularly women, they were the only elections in which a vote could be cast.

Democracy comes in different forms--the Victorians thought it inherent in institutions. Most charities, whether they had votes to distribute or not, encouraged the habits of association and may be seen as an expression of democracy in the sphere of social and moral reform. To the liberal mind, the diffusion of power was a guarantor of freedom. Institutional self-government, it was argued, provided a check on the mechanisms of the central state--and the tyranny of the majority. It also acted as a check on the vicissitudes of the market, for it encouraged peaceful competition and solidarity based on shared interests. Philanthropy was a form of enlightened self-interest. John Stuart Mill elaborated its political significance in the *Principles of Political Economy* (1848): 'The only security against political slavery, is the check maintained over governors, by the diffusion of intelligence, activity, and public spirit among the governed'. Without the habit of spontaneous voluntary action, he added, citizens 'have their faculties only half developed.'<sup>xviii</sup>

It was a Victorian commonplace that society was most likely to flourish through local self-government and individual effort. National progress, it was argued, was the result of individual energy, not the institutions of government. 'The highest patriotism and philanthropy', wrote Samuel Smiles in *Self Help* (1859), 'consists not so much in altering laws and modifying institutions, as in helping and stimulating men to elevate and improve themselves by their own free and independent individual action. . . . No laws, however stringent, can make the idle industrious, the thriftless provident, or the drunken sober. Such reforms can only be effected by means of individual actions, economy, and self-denial, by better habits, rather than by greater

rights'.<sup>xix</sup> Such views, widely circulated in the popular press, permeated social and political life in Victorian Britain.<sup>xx</sup>

Such views also cut across the denominations, which in the nineteenth century were arguably more important in the development of a social consensus than political affiliations. Clearly, they fuelled the idealism of charitable campaigners, whose dislike of government interference and rule from London had deep roots in Victorian culture. Under Christian influence, charity bridged the divide between individualism, so marked a feature of the nineteenth-century temper, and the collective needs of the community. The Reverend Archer Gurney, an English Chaplain in Paris, put the religious cum political case for charity in 1872: 'We are no friends to benevolent despotisms in this land of ours. We like, in most ways and as far as may be, to administer ourselves. So private charity is with us an all-important agency.'<sup>xxi</sup> It was widely assumed that in serving good causes voluntary associations served the wider cause of civil liberty.

The British have always been most interested in what happens around their homes and streets, despite the sporadic outpouring of public sympathy for national causes or foreigners in distress. And they did not have to read Samuel Smiles to know that propping up the family and the parish with good works and a little self-help was often the only way of preventing the deterioration of those vital social institutions.

Much Victorian charity was informal, centred on families and neighbourhoods, but most communities would have boasted visiting societies, missionary associations, working parties, mothers' meetings, and temperance societies, which met in homes, churches and chapels, or rooms rented for the occasion. Soup kitchens, dispensaries, cottage hospitals, maternity charities, crèches, blanket clubs, coal clubs, clothing clubs, boot clubs, medical clubs, lending libraries, and holiday funds expanded the expression of voluntary service. Such associations are particularly revealing of the grass roots and take us deeper into the ideal of the good neighbour. Meanwhile, innumerable penny banks, savings banks, provident clubs, goose clubs, slate clubs, and pension societies, often attached to city missions, mothers' meetings and other charities, reflected the Victorian obsession with thrift and mutual aid. They were part of the makeshift economy in poor neighbourhoods, where strategies for survival were all too often touched by desperation.

As these local institutions suggest, we should not assume that associational philanthropy was a form of philanthropy that excluded most of the population. Given the level of immediate need, charity was a necessity in poor neighbourhoods and took various forms, from providing shoes and Sunday dinners to deprived children to setting up a temperance society or a

missionary association. As Mrs. Pember Reeves noted in her classic study of Kennington before the First World War, the 'respectable poor live over a morass of such intolerable poverty that they unite instinctively to save those known to them from falling into it.'<sup>xxii</sup> The charity of the poor to the poor was, according to various observers, startling in its extent.<sup>xxiii</sup> Friedrich Engels, invariably hostile to middle-class philanthropy, remarked that 'although the workers cannot really afford to give charity on the same scale as the middle class, they are nevertheless more charitable in every way'.<sup>xxiv</sup> He did not consider that this expression of working-class solidarity might work to prevent a revolution.

Historians often take the view that the charity is a form of social control, which confirms the power of the rich and keeps the poor in their place. I take a different view, which takes into account the charity of the working classes, which is a subject that has eluded most historians. Perhaps unconsciously, historians who see philanthropy in conventional class terms have tended to perpetuate the view that working men possessed little feeling or humanity, when in fact egalitarian beneficence came naturally to the poor and was essential to their domestic economy. As a cleric in South London remarked in 1908: 'the poor breathe an atmosphere of charity. They cannot understand life without it. And it is largely this kindness of the poor to the poor which stands between our present civilization and revolution.'<sup>xxv</sup>

Few charitable campaigns went without working-class support. The financial impact of working-class contributions should not be exaggerated, for weekly wages prohibited subscriptions of any size.<sup>xxvi</sup> But the statistical information for working-class charity, while fragmentary and patchy, is suggestive. A survey of rather more prosperous working-class families in the 1890s showed that half of them contributed funds to charity each week and about a quarter of them made donations to church or chapel.<sup>xxvii</sup> The hospitals were among the charities favoured by working men and women. Well over half the income of several hospitals in the North of England came from 'workmen'.<sup>xxviii</sup> Miners paid for others in South Wales.<sup>xxix</sup> The League of Mercy, founded in 1899, raised £600,000 from artisans, tradesmen and humble subscribers for the voluntary hospitals of London before they were nationalized in 1948.<sup>xxx</sup>

The availability of records of wealthy, middle-class institutions has distorted our understanding of charitable experience. In any study of organized charity, the contribution of the working classes is likely to be underplayed, for so much of it was informal and unrecorded, unostentatious and uncelebrated, often merging with mutual aid. But the relative dearth of evidence for organized working-class benevolence should not lead us to underestimate its extent.

Just as the middle classes founded institutions that catered to their especial needs, working men and women did so too. The records show that they established their own Sunday schools, charity schools, soup kitchens, washhouses, temperance societies, Salvation Army shelters, boot and clothing clubs, servants' institutions, Navy missions, sick clubs, mothers' meetings and visiting societies.<sup>xxxii</sup> When they cooperated with their wealthier neighbours, as in hospital provision, education, or the arts, their philanthropy acted as a springboard into the existing social system.

Participation in charitable causes was a passport to social status and social integration, but it was also a part of the pattern of education and leisure. To many, it was as important as the training picked up in schools or mechanics' institutes. In encouraging skills and a wider social outlook, it was not unlike the education on offer in mutual aid societies, trade unions or benefit clubs, which, it should be said, often had a charitable dimension. Whether in their own charities or joining middle-class institutions, humble men and women honed a basic education and often developed skills in book-keeping, secretarial work, fund-raising and general administration. In voluntary societies, unlike the wider world over which they had little control, campaigners could make decisions that had meaning for their own lives and those around them. In the context of the political transformation taking place in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the view that charitable work represents a 'nursery school of democracy' is especially apt.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Associational philanthropy saturated people's lives in the past, both givers and receivers, to an extent that is nowadays unimaginable. A glimpse of the Rothschild Buildings in the East End of London in the late nineteenth century is a case in point. Apart from the extensive network of casual benevolence performed daily by the residents, organized societies luxuriated, a tribute to the congruence of Judeo-Christian traditions. Run mostly by women, with the assistance of the poor of the tenements, they included: Sick Room Helps Society, Jews' lying-in Charity, Israelite Widows Society, Whitechapel Children's Care Committee, Soup Kitchen, Boot Club, Clothing Club, Children's Penny Dinner Society, Ragged Schools' Union, Bare Foot Mission, Children's Country Holiday Fund, and a Savings Bank. This concentration of 'charity, thrift, and paternalistic interference in the lives of the respectable working class', remarks the historian of the buildings, 'was to steal its way into every pore' of the residents.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Take another example of charitable enterprise, this time in South London. In 1887, Octavia Hill, a founder of the National Trust and a leading charitable campaigner, acquired a plot of land for a garden and playground in the heart of Southwark, close to large Peabody Dwellings. The following year a hall, called Red Cross Hall, was added, along with six cottages that

overlooked the garden. The trustees appointed a small managing committee, which included a number of working men elected by the local working-men's club.

The project may be seen as an example of a community arts centre, which was dependent on local supporters and volunteers. It was an institution entirely consistent with the motto I see inscribed in the lower hall of the BAC: 'not for me, not for you, but for us'. Here is Octavia Hill's description of the facilities in 1888: 'We have had magic lanterns, concerts, lectures, and plays provided for us by various kind friends. . . . By the great kindness of friends we have been able to provide really beautiful music, Sunday after Sunday. They have also brought microscopes, shells, water-colour sketches, photographs, books and vases. . . . Tea, coffee, warm drinks, cakes and oranges are sold, and the Hall becomes a bright winter drawing-room for the neighbourhood, and pleasant little groups of friends congregate at various tables in the Hall, looking at the illustrated books. We have a splendid contribution of books for our library and have secured a certain number of movable gymnastic apparatus, and a sergeant capable of seeing to the learners. We have let our small committee room to a teetotal lodge, and they and the men's club have given entertainments in the Hall from time to time. There was a soiree for 200 persons on New Year's Eve, in the Hall, organized by the working men's club.'<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The Red Cross Hall and Garden remains open to the public today. In its heyday, it was a local monument to civic pride and collaborative effort. It was but one of a score or so of such schemes established in the poorer neighbourhoods of London by Hill and her associates, many of them connected to the Kyrle Society, a charity established in 1876 to provide art, books and open spaces to local residents.

Raising funds for such projects was a Victorian obsession. Competition for resources was so great that charity organizers missed few opportunities to extract money from the public, from humble subscribers to the charitable 'ten thousand'. Given their attitudes, taking money from the state left most nineteenth-century campaigners feeling decidedly unwell. One authority likened it to the feelings of the curly haired boy in *Nicholas Nickleby*, as his mouth opened before Mrs Squeers's brimstone and treacle spoon. The Victorian reluctance to look to the government for support, combined with the government's reluctance to offer it, threw philanthropists back on their own resources and ingenuity.

Most Victorian charities did not have a fairy plutocrat to provide the wherewithal for their operations. As local institutions they depended largely on local sources of funding. Innovation, audacity and personal flair were hallmarks of their charitable money making. Traditional

sources of funds, including church collections, dinners, balls and concerts carried on as in the past with few changes. But new events were added, such as fetes and cruises, flag days and charity shops. Perhaps the most effective fund-raising invention in the nineteenth century was the charity bazaar, a decidedly female institution, which raised vast sums of money for institutions of all descriptions. In their peculiar mix of commerce and amusement, bazaars made the act of charity seemed natural and diverting, a part of day-to-day life.

Unlike raising money from a single donor or a government grant, annual bazaars, concerts, outings and dinners linked people to their communities. Connecting people through projects and events, through arts and crafts, through celebration and festivity, have always been crucial to the survival and adaptation of associational charity. For most charities, waiting for a wealthy benefactor to turn up is an unlikely recipe for success. Institutions that ignore their users and neighbours in favour of concentrating on major donors or government grants often lose their vitality. Is it because people no longer have the inspiration and leisure to contribute that today's charities look to millionaires and to government? Clearly, we have we lost the religious moorings that propelled so much Victorian philanthropy. Moreover, women, traditionally the backbone of civic activity, have greater opportunities and commitments and thus less time to give to their neighbours. The issue before us today is how to recreate a sense of civic engagement against such a background.

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A few general remarks in conclusion. The generation that grew up in the heyday of the welfare state remains fearful of relying too much on voluntary provision and continues to look to government for essential services. I suspect there are many in the audience tonight who feel strongly about this and believe the arts are an invaluable social good that should be supported by government. But the drift of opinion away from state provision has gained momentum in recent years, which is having an effect on voluntary societies whether they like it or not. The big society is an attempt to address these issues; but, as I suggested earlier, the 'contract culture', in which charities do the government's bidding, may simply lead to a devolved form of collectivism, which undermines the independence of charities and their traditional role as alternatives to government provision and critics of government policy. As one charitable official said to me years ago, 'no one is rude to his rich uncle'.

Still, as a consequence of the cross-party embrace of charity, the public is becoming increasingly aware of the range and depth of voluntary activity. Voluntary campaigners cannot

be dismissed as they often were in the post-war years as middle-class do-gooders providing frills. The problems that afflict British society are now seen less in ideological terms than in the past, and they are thought to have solutions that require a greater degree of charitable contribution. For all its inventive intervention, the state is widely seen as too blunt and impersonal an instrument to provide opportunities and security without reinforcements from volunteers. This is true across the spectrum of social provision, from homelessness to the arts.

As the interest in charity and civic duty has mounted in recent years, much of the former tension between right and left over social policy has been defused. Yet a degree of tension between the state and voluntary action is inevitable. The essence of charity, like the essence of voluntarism generally, is its independence and autonomy—it is the antithesis of collective or statutory authority. Government provision depends on compulsory taxation. It is largely about furthering equality. Charitable provision, on the other hand, cannot be extorted by force; its proponents have usually been driven by individualist motives, though they may also be egalitarian. Historically, the work of charity has been an expression of a liberal polity, not a collectivist one. Distinctions between government action and voluntary action are thus deeply rooted, not least in thinking about their respective roles and boundaries.

A greater degree of partnership between the state and charities now seems likely. But partnership should not mean amalgamation. Achieving an equilibrium agreeable to all parties is a chimera. Tension between the two sectors, with their different agendas and contrasting democratic forms, is both desirable and invigorating. The expression of civic virtue, after all, requires more than sitting back, paying one's taxes, and leaving the resolution of social problems to officialdom. A decline in voluntary activity is a measure of decay in a liberal society. In the end, the political maturity of a country is not measured by the size of its government. To the Victorian mind, it was measured by a polity that provided the conditions of liberty conducive to civic life and by what citizens willingly did for themselves and for one another.

To break down the tidy-minded half-truths about philanthropy, it is sensible to see it in its variety and contradictions, as an expression of a pluralistic society. As suggested, benevolence has as much to do with temperament as class; and the poor themselves have made a significant contribution to charitable traditions through their own efforts. In a society of growing diversity, voluntary groups that provide a distinctive voice to minorities will become an increasingly prominent outlet for the expression of idealism and community spirit. When seen as an expression of civic engagement and associational citizenship, charitable work raises fundamental

issues about the relationship of the individual to the wider society. In participating in voluntary activity, citizens produce as well as consume government.

A persuasive case can be made out for a balance between diverse voluntary initiatives and uniform state assistance in a democratic society. But finding an effective balance in the provision of services is likely to be as elusive in the future as it has been in the past. In the search for it, we must not lose sight of philanthropy's other meanings, which are so much a part of its distinctive contribution to national well-being. The charitable have always been most effective where they have blended into their surroundings, where their labours are personal, natural and unexceptional, in actions that prevent catastrophe or help people through it, that avert everyday disappointment, or which offer people the possibility of getting outside themselves into wider opportunities. In their diversity and principled rivalry, their love of the ad hoc remedy and their seemingly inefficient muddle, today's good neighbours, like their Victorian forerunners, bequeath immeasurable moral and civic benefits.

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<sup>i</sup> G. M. Young, *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age* (Oxford, 1936), p. vi.

<sup>ii</sup> Jose Harris, 'Society and the state in twentieth-century Britain', *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950*, ed. F.M. L. Thompson, 3 vols., (Cambridge, 1990), vol. 3, p. 64.

<sup>iii</sup> Beth Breeze, 'The Return of Philanthropy', *Prospect* (January, 2005), p. 53.

<sup>iv</sup> Castle, B., *The Castle Diaries 1974-76* (London, 1980), p. 144.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>vi</sup> Parliamentary Papers, Cmd. 8710 (1952), par. 53.

<sup>vii</sup> Sir J. Stephen, *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, 2 vols. (London, 1849), vol. 1, p. 382.

<sup>viii</sup> G. M. Trevelyan, *History of England* (New York and London, 1929), p. 617.

<sup>ix</sup> Geoffrey Finlayson, *Citizen, State, and Social Welfare in Britain 1830-1990* (Oxford, 1994), p. 366.

<sup>x</sup> *The Times*, 3 May 1988.

<sup>xi</sup> Julia Rowntree, *Changing the Performance: A Companion Guide to Arts, Business and Civic Engagement* (London and New York, 2006), p. 241.

<sup>xii</sup> R. J. Morris, 'Clubs, societies and associations', *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950*, 3 vols., ed. F. M. L. Thompson (Cambridge, 1990), vol. 3, p. 443.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ellice Hopkins, *The Power of Womanhood* (London, 1899), p. 9.

<sup>xiv</sup> Jose Harris, 'Victorian Values and the Founders of the Welfare State', *Victorian Values*, ed. T. C. Smout (Oxford, 1992), pp. 174-5.

<sup>xv</sup> Brian Harrison, 'Civil Society by Accident? Paradoxes of Voluntarism and Pluralism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', *Civil Society in British History*, ed. Harris, pp. 91-3.

<sup>xvi</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., 'Biography of a Nation of Joiners', *American Historical Review*, vol. 50, 1944, p. 24.

<sup>xvii</sup> David Owen *English Philanthropy, 1660-1960*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), pp. 481-82.

<sup>xviii</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy* (Penguin edition, 1970), pp. 312-13.

<sup>xix</sup> Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help with Illustrations of Conduct & Perseverance* (London, 1958), p. 36.

<sup>xx</sup> Joanna Innes, 'Central Government "Interference": Changing Conceptions, Practices and Concerns, c. 1700-1850', *Civil Society in British History*, ed. Harris, p. 39.

<sup>xxi</sup> Rev. Archer Gurney, *Loyalty and Church and State: A Sermon Preached . . . on the occasion of the National Thanksgiving for the Recovery of H.R.H. the Prince of Wales* (1872), p. 6.

<sup>xxii</sup> Mrs. Pember Reeves, *Round About a Pound a Week* (London, 1914), pp. 39-40.

<sup>xxiii</sup> See, for example, William Conybeare, *Charity of the Poor to the Poor* (London, 1908).

<sup>xxiv</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, eds. W. O. Henderson and W. H. Chaloner (Stanford, 1958), pp. 102, 140.

<sup>xxv</sup> William Conybeare, *Charity of the Poor to the Poor* (London, 1908), p. 6.

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- <sup>xxvi</sup> See Martin Gorsky, *Patterns of Philanthropy: Charity and Society in Nineteenth-Century Bristol* (The Royal Historical Society, 1999), pp. 184-5.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> *Family Budgets: Being the Income and Expenses of Twenty-Eight British Households, 1891-1894* (1896), p. 75.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> B. Abel-Smith, *The Hospitals, 1800-1948* (London, 1964), pp. 250-51.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Richard M. Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy* (London, 1976), p. 67.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Frank Prochaska, *Royal Bounty: The Making of a Welfare Monarchy* (New Haven and London, 1995), p. 159.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> See Frank Prochaska, *The Voluntary Impulse* (London, 1988), pp. 27-31, *passim*.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> The phrase comes from Parliamentary Papers, *Committee on Charitable Trusts*, Cmd. 8710, (1952), par. 53.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Jerry White, *Rothschild Buildings: Life in an East End Tenement Block 1887-1920* (London, 1980), p. 148, *passim*.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Octavia Hill's Letters to Fellow-Workers 1872-1911. ed. Robert Whelan (London, 2005), pp. 204, 244-5.