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## **Editorial: Redrawing the boundaries of the third sector and civil society in troubled times**

**John Fenwick and Jane Gibbon**

In practical terms the boundaries of the public and private sectors are blurred, and in political terms they remain contentious. Since the New Right in the United Kingdom advanced the cause of wholesale privatisation from the late 1970s onward, and other countries went as far or further in ‘rolling back the state’, there has been little agreement internationally about the proper scope of public sector provision. Much has been written on this topic, but in this themed issue of *Public Money and Management* the focus is upon the distinctive role of the third sector: the sector which is not ‘private’ nor ‘public’ but which encompasses a range of voluntary, community, co-operative, neighbourhood and social modes of organisation. Perhaps it seemed to some that such a third sector might take the ideological heat out of public vs private debates which have not always been constructive. Furthermore, for New Labour up to 2010, and for the Conservative-led coalition government of the UK up to 2015, an emphasis upon the third sector seemed an excellent way of reducing direct public expenditure: and all the better if this emphasis could be clothed in the garb of empowerment, citizen governance and localism. Yet the role and boundaries of the third sector have proven to be problematic. This themed issue – comprising developed versions of papers first presented to panels we convened at the *Policy and Politics* conference in Bristol in 2015 - examines some of the salient issues. Amongst successes there remain conflicts, there are unresolved matters of control and accountability, and there is the ever-present question of funding. These matters have hardly been clarified since the General Election of 2015.

The two short ‘debate’ pieces set the scene. Duncan McTavish addresses the theme of this issue directly, examining the changed role of the state during the past century and proposing a resolution in favour of greater community control and its positive spinoff for outcomes relating to health and wellbeing. Toby Lowe considers the shift from performance management to performance governance and introduces a key factor – complexity – which is taken up by other contributors too. This is the complexity of systems, of provision and of outcomes and is a crucial factor in seeking to understand the place occupied by the third sector.

The two New Development articles look more closely at the specifics of implementation in two societies. Rob Manwaring examines the relationship between state and civil society in Australia, identifying five models of how this relationship might develop in practice including the adaptation of the UK ‘Big Society’ approach to Australian circumstance. We

take up the theme of the Big Society in the UK directly, examining its shaky practical and philosophical bases, and we argue that the relationship between public, private and third sectors is to be understood as a function of complexity. Such complexity is now a permanent feature of cross-sectoral debate and practical intervention, about which the superficial notion of a Big Society has little to tell us.

The five full articles examine contrasting aspects of the boundary between third sector and civil society in some detail. Kathryn Addicott's article looks at the experience of women senior managers with specific emphasis upon Wales, exploring ways in which entrepreneurship and social enterprise may flourish in today's challenging environment. It is particularly interesting to note her conclusion that entrepreneurship itself may be gendered in its meaning and its application. Civic entrepreneurship is also taken up by Lorraine Johnston and John Blenkinsopp in their detailed study of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) where, drawing from research in the North of England, they draw conclusions about the role of LEPs in the context of an increased role for civil society in policy-making. The wide-ranging discussion from Jan Myers offers a glimpse of just what complexity looks like in practice: the indistinct boundary between public and private; the role of mutual and co-operative organisations; and specific applications in health and social care, all viewed through the lens of austerity.

Martin Field and Antonia Layard shift the focus toward housing provision, with particular attention to neighbourhood planning and community housing development, an aspect of the 'localism' favoured by current and previous governments in the UK. Again, the question arises of what this all means in practice: and, again, it is found to be unclear and uncertain. Finally, Nina Boeger seeks to assess the impact of legal duties on public authorities, enacted in the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, to take into account the social, economic and environmental impact of awarding public service contracts, and the opportunities this may or may not offer for the third sector.

What would we see as the contribution of these articles to the further work of both scholarly researchers and practitioners?

First, the **wide scope and diversity** of what are normally termed third-sector organisations remains striking, including neighbourhood, community, voluntary and local forms of citizen organisation; larger-scale trusts and co-operative bodies; mutuals; charities; and organisations motivated by philanthropy or, in contrast, aspects of a social economy yielding forms of social entrepreneurship (Lohmann 2007). The third sector, in short, is not a discrete area of study or practice at all, it is a range of organisations with blurred boundaries, defined by its

differences to both the private and public sectors. Within this lie some important but unanswered questions, including the question of how the third sector organisation is led and managed (Fenwick and Gibbon 2016).

Secondly, there are numerous **positive examples of practice**, many of which are alluded to within the articles of this themed issue. In the context of what Jan Myers refers to as ‘variegated’ provision there remains scope for innovation based firmly within the values championed by third-sector providers. Overall, political rhetoric – for instance, reference to a Big Society – has added little to what third sector organisations were already skilled at doing.

Thirdly, the **political future** for support of the third sector is at present very unclear, at least in the UK. With a Conservative administration preoccupied with exit from the European Union, and a Labour opposition obsessed with internal organisation, there is unlikely to be any explicit or high-profile championing of the third-sector despite the formal links of Labour to the Co-operative Party and the opportunity this potentially provides for growth of the not-for-profit sector.

Finally, the articles in this issue reinforce the **complexity** of inter-sectoral relationships in the field of public service. Such complexity is likely to be a long-term feature of public provision. Academic researchers have not yet developed adequate theoretical tools for understanding the complexity that practitioners grapple with and it is hoped that the articles in this issue may support this task.

## References

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