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Transformational moments?

Introduction

This book argues that the 2010s witnessed the most significant renegotiation of social welfare provision in England since the consolidation of the welfare state in the 1940s. William Beveridge asserted in his landmark 1942 report *Social Insurance and Allied Services* that ‘a revolutionary moment in the world’s history is a time for revolutions’ (Beveridge, 1942: 6). This book considers these two decades, the 2010s and the 1940s, as two *transformational moments* in which the boundaries between voluntary action, the state, family and the market were rethought.

Although the 1940s saw the restructuring of welfare provision, which resulted in the post-war state assuming primary responsibility for the delivery of social welfare services, this did not rule out a continued role for voluntary-provided social services and the involvement of volunteers. In the late 1940s, when the so-called ‘moving frontier’ between state and voluntary welfare provision shifted, a period of intense debate about the nature of voluntary social service and its future direction in England ensued. It is now widely accepted that the war years and Labour government (1945–51) laid down

the principal institutions of what has been called the ‘classic welfare state’ (Digby, 1989). Yet how far the 1940s debate on voluntary action influenced the design of social welfare policy, and how far it signalled an important period of adjustment and renewal for voluntarism has never been fully investigated.

The same concept of a ‘revolutionary moment’ or turning point was used to describe the context in which welfare services were reshaped in England in the 2010s under the Coalition and subsequent Conservative governments (Brindle et al, 2014; Lawton et al, 2014; Welby, 2018). From 2010, the Coalition government embarked on a ‘restructuring of Beveridgean proportions’ (Taylor-Gooby, 2012: 62). The 2010s were shaped by a politics of austerity that sought to restrict welfare benefits and strengthen sanctions in the social security system, far-reaching changes that some consider amounted to the dismantling of the welfare state – as part of a ‘dismembering’ of the state itself (El-Gingihy, 2016; Toynbee and Walker, 2017; Alston, 2019). Such developments had profound implications for individual citizens, as well as consequences for voluntary action. However, during the 2010s the debate about the relative roles of the state, voluntary action and other actors in welfare provision was muted in comparison to the 1940s. Until the COVID-19 emergency began in 2020, just as we were writing this book, there was scant attempt to reach a consensus in terms of who should be responsible for providing social welfare services in the 21st century and what levels of need they should be meeting.

The 1940s and 2010s were also transformational decades for the voluntary movement in England. The social upheaval caused by the Second World War (1939–45) led to greater public awareness of need, accelerated trends towards cooperation between voluntary organisations, and strengthened partnerships between the voluntary movement and statutory sector. Driven in part by a desire to present a more united voice to government, the 1940s saw the emergence of new

umbrella bodies working in specific areas of welfare, particularly older people's services, children's services and the youth sector (Figure 1.1). In contrast, the 2010s were marked by the contraction, closure and merger of several long-standing voluntary sector infrastructure bodies, alongside a growing concern to strengthen voluntary sector leadership, governance and regulation. Changing funding regimes, including a shift away from state support for infrastructure agencies that had marked the New Labour years (1997–2010), contributed to competition and fragmentation within the voluntary sector, affecting its collective voice (Macmillan, 2013; 2016).

This book contends that there is value in considering these two transformational moments together. Exploring how different narratives for the role and contribution of voluntary action in welfare provision were articulated and contested in both periods enables these narratives to be seen as discursive interventions, seeking to shape moving frontiers between the state, voluntary action, commercial providers and others. Alongside contributing to knowledge about the present and the past, this analysis can provide valuable insights into potential welfare futures, even more important in the light of COVID-19. We build on scholarship that 'highlights the dangers of ahistorical social policy analysis' and argues for the need to understand current shifts within the wider historical context (Lambie-Mumford, 2019: 9; see also Means and Smith, 1998). The book is unique in giving equal weight to both historical and contemporary evidence, placing both within the same conceptual framework.

This introductory chapter briefly introduces the scope of the research underpinning this book and offers definitions of key terms, before presenting a short review of relevant literature on the moving frontier and the mixed economy of welfare. The final two parts of the chapter provide an overview of key social policy developments during each transformational moment, set within their wider social, political and economic contexts.

Scope and definitions

This book suggests that revisiting debates about the role, position and contribution of voluntary action to social welfare is timely. Examining both the 1940s and 2010s, the book analyses narratives emanating from the voluntary movement (through archival records from voluntary organisations), the general public (collected by social research organisation Mass Observation (MO)) and the state (through parliamentary debates, speeches and policy papers). It examines four areas of voluntary action: children's services, youth, older people's services, and the voluntary movement or sector as a whole. In focusing on voluntary organisations which seek to represent these areas, the purpose is not to provide organisational histories, but to see them as windows into the debates that were taking place within these different welfare fields. The book draws on an interdisciplinary research project in which we have worked collaboratively with partners ([Chapter Two](#)). The focus on the 1940s and the 2010s is not to suggest that events in these decades emerge from nowhere, completely breaking from the past; rather that they represent two key moments in the development of the welfare state, and voluntary action, positioned within longer trajectories of change.

Defining voluntary action is complex, and never more so than in a period of increasingly blurred boundaries between public, private and voluntary sectors. Like other scholars we use the term 'voluntary action' as a catch-all to encompass the work of voluntary organisations, volunteers and activists ([Davis Smith, 2019: 3](#)). The book adopts the term 'voluntary movement' to refer to the collective work of voluntary organisations in the 1940s, following the widely accepted practice of the time, and because it would be anachronistic to apply today's preferred phrase 'voluntary sector'. Other terms which crop up in our source material include 'third sector', now seen as inextricably linked to the New Labour years, and 'civil society', which came to be the preferred term of

the Coalition and Conservative governments of the 2010s. In both time periods, however, the public was probably more familiar with the concept of ‘charity’, and this terminology is reflected in the questions asked of respondents by MO in both decades.

This study does not seek to examine in detail the whole field of social welfare. Education and healthcare, for example, fall largely outside its remit. It focuses instead on three fields of welfare – children, young people, older people – where previously unrecognised or hidden need was being revealed for the first time during the mid-twentieth century, and where need continued to exist in the 2010s. These three fields were included in the list that [Beveridge \(1948: 226\)](#) considered to be ‘needs that remain in a social service state’, where responsibility was likely to be shared by the state and voluntary organisations.

Equally this study does not seek to cover the whole of the UK: its focus is predominantly on developments in England. As [John Stewart \(2019: 26\)](#) notes, it is important to recognise that the UK has never been a ‘unitary state’ and that Scotland, Wales and, from the 1920s, Northern Ireland retained some degree of ‘welfare autonomy’. In the 1940s, the key institutions of the welfare state, including the NHS, were created by separate pieces of legislation for the different nations. Since 1999, policy relating to the voluntary and community sector has been a non-reserved area across the nations that form the UK jurisdiction. While England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland share some of the same drivers underpinning volunteering and voluntary sector policy, the rhetoric surrounding their deployment has become distinct ([Alcock, 2012](#)). The Big Society discourse, for example, was not adopted in Scotland. These changes are complex and bound up with the wider geographies of devolution ([Woolvin and Hardill, 2013](#)).

In the inter-war period, the emergent voluntary movement had a UK-wide focus, although steered by the National Council

of Social Service (NCSS), a supposedly national movement, it had a distinctively English flavour. The Depression and Second World War were important periods for the development of devolved infrastructure bodies. In 1934 the South Wales and Monmouthshire Council of Social Services was formed to support Welsh communities struggling with the impact of unemployment. It became known as the Wales Council for Voluntary Action in 1980. The Northern Ireland Council for Social Services (now the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action) was founded in 1938, while an independent Scottish Council of Social Service (now the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations) was formed in 1942, with financial backing from the NCSS, after an initial delay caused by the war (Davis Smith, 2019: 89). Nonetheless, concepts of ‘British’ or ‘national’ identity were then, and continue to be, deployed uncritically in much writing on voluntary action, as we touch upon in [Chapter Three](#).

Frontier and borderland: researching the mixed economy of welfare

Adopting the language of ‘frontier’ and ‘borderland’ to conceptualise the moving boundary between voluntary action and state welfare provision has a long history (Llewellyn Smith, 1937; Bourdillon, 1945; Beveridge, 1949). The term moving frontier appears to have first been used by Anne Bourdillon (1945: 2) in her introduction to a volume produced for the Nuffield Social Reconstruction Survey, but has widely been attributed to a 1949 House of Lords speech by Beveridge. Similarly, the argument that the role played by voluntary organisations, commercial providers, the family and other actors in social provision in the UK amounts to a ‘mixed economy’ of welfare is now widely accepted. This is sometimes known as ‘welfare pluralism’ (Hadley and Hatch, 1981; Johnson, 1987). Early to mid-20th-century commentators on welfare were acutely aware of this mixed provision, and keen to understand the role that voluntary social service played and

would play in any future ‘social service state’ – Beveridge’s preferred term for what we generally now call the welfare state (Harris, 1997: 452) – as well as to map out the boundaries of statutory–voluntary partnership. Elizabeth Macadam (1934) famously identified a close partnership between private philanthropy and state action, which she called the ‘new philanthropy’. A decade later, GDH Cole wrote a ‘retrospect’ of voluntary social service in which he considered it a ‘great mistake’ to suggest that as state action expanded, the scope of voluntary social service would necessarily contract; rather the boundaries would continue to be remade (Cole, 1945: 29). A similar theme of transition and evolution marked Beveridge’s so-called ‘third report’ *Voluntary Action* (Beveridge, 1948) as well as the writings of the leading post-war scholar of social policy Richard Titmuss (Titmuss, 1958; Stewart, 2019).

In the era of the classic welfare state, however, which lasted from the 1940s until the mid-1970s, there was a tendency for scholars to overemphasise the role of the state and to view the history of voluntary action simply as a stage in the development of the welfare state (Thane, 1982; Stewart, 2019). In his survey of the history of voluntary action in England, for example, David Owen conceptualised the post-war voluntary movement as ‘junior partners in the welfare firm’ (Owen, 1965: x). Others recognised the role of voluntary organisations in pioneering welfare services and activities which were then taken over by local government, but without fully acknowledging the continued place of volunteers and voluntary organisations in delivering, managing and modifying such services after 1945 (Fraser, 2003; Thane, 1982; Lowe, 2005). Helping to shape this narrative, the 1978 Wolfenden Committee on The Future of Voluntary Organisations judged the voluntary sector ‘to have been marking time’ in the immediate post-war years (Wolfenden, 1978: 20). Frank Prochaska (2006: 93) depicted a voluntary movement in ‘disarray’ in the 1940s, reeling from ‘blow’ after ‘blow’ of state welfare expansion. In contrast, Rodney Lowe (2005) described an ‘uneasy consensus’ in

the post-war welfare state in which the practical benefits of continued voluntary involvement in welfare provision were reluctantly accepted in three main areas: unpaid volunteers within statutory services, self-help groups (particularly for children and older people), and, most contentiously, charities that continued to provide social services such as children's homes, domiciliary care for older people or work with 'problem families'. Debates over the place of voluntary social services did not go away, however. A series of inquiries in the 1950s and 1960s considered the place of voluntary organisations or volunteers in state welfare services, including Younghusband which reported in 1959, Seebohm in 1968 and Aves in 1969. There were also some attempts to investigate the public's views on this topic (Morris, 1969). Written in the Thatcher era, Maria Brenton's examination of the historical development of the 'voluntary sector in British social services' was produced in the context of an upsurge of interest in the potential of non-governmental alternatives to the delivery of social services (Brenton, 1985).

Geoffrey Finlayson revisited the concept of the moving frontier in the 1990s and the term subsequently became widely used in academic discussions about social welfare in the UK, and in other national contexts (Finlayson, 1990; 1994; and see, for instance, Powell, 2019). Martin Gorsky (2014) proposed that since the 1990s a substantial rethinking of British welfare history has occurred, in which scholars have sought to 'emancipate the subject area' from an earlier teleological approach and to offer a range of revisionist takes on social policy. Finlayson (1990), Jose Harris (1990), Bernard Harris (2004; 2010), Jane Lewis (1995; 1996; 1999a) and others began to argue that far from it being a story of linear development, there had always existed a 'mixed economy' of welfare in which the state, the voluntary movement, the family and the market had played different roles at different points in time. Voluntary associations were integral to the 19th-century conceptualisation of the state, when they were

'buffer institutions' between the citizen and the state (Thane, 1990: 1–2). Nick Deakin and Justin Davis Smith (2011) suggested that the history of voluntary action has been shaped by those, on both left and right, anxious to sustain the 'myth' of the Labour Party's hostility to voluntary action. The history of voluntary action is now a flourishing field of inquiry, with much new work rejecting declinist narratives (as epitomised by Prochaska, 2006), and arguing for recognition of the continued vitality and adaptability of voluntary action after 1945 (Hilton and McKay, 2011). Nonetheless, few scholars have revisited the role of voluntary action in the design of social welfare policy in the 1940s or investigated the nature and extent of the debate on voluntary action in this period (though see Means and Smith, 1998; Grier, 2001; Hayashi, 2013).

Welfare and social policy reform in the 1930s and 1940s

The Second World War and its aftermath were to have major implications for the future of statutory, commercial and voluntary welfare provision. However, we must recognise how far the social policy changes that emerged at this time built on earlier reforms. Legislation introduced by the Liberal government of 1906–11 had powered a 'parallel expansion of statutory and private welfare' in the inter-war years, most clearly seen in insurance and health care markets, which offered purchasers a wide range of choice from proprietary and mutual providers (May and Brunson, 1999: 277). By 1939, 42 per cent of the population was covered by the state national insurance scheme, but as dental, hospital and optical care was excluded, the majority of this group were also purchasing additional private insurance. During the 1930s Depression, the unemployment insurance system and other statutory welfare services expanded to deal with the crisis, but were subject to considerable limitations (Harris, 1995). Successive Conservative-dominated national governments (at first led by Ramsay MacDonald and, after 1935, by Stanley Baldwin) relied

on a deepening partnership with the voluntary movement. For example, the government channelled significant sums to the 'Depressed areas' through the NCSS for a range of occupational and recreational schemes for unemployed men and women (Brasnett, 1969; Harris, 1995; Davis Smith, 2019). While these initiatives 'made an important contribution to social and cultural lives' of the unemployed, they did little to 'relieve the underlying problem of mass unemployment' (Harris, 2004: 211). This perceived over-reliance on the voluntary social service movement in place of government action to create jobs was criticised by many on the left (Wilkinson, 1939; see also Finlayson, 1990).

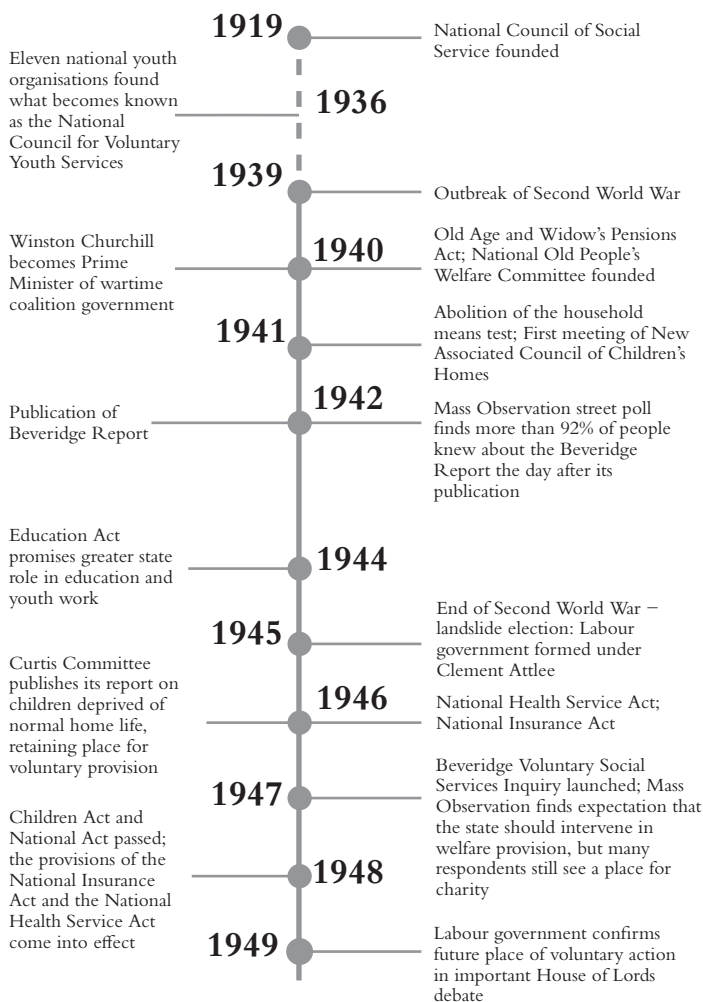
The social upheaval of war, particularly the experiences of large-scale evacuation from major cities, revealed serious shortcomings in existing welfare services and stimulated demand for wholesale welfare reform. The war led to the recognition that people could end up in poverty through no fault of their own, accelerating a move away from traditional, piecemeal welfare provision (Harris, 2004). Media coverage about the inadequacies of existing services together with heightened public interest in social issues meant pressure for reform began to build across several policy areas (Holman, 1996; Thane, 2018). In his contribution to the official history of the war, Titmuss (1950: 506) argued that, by 1945, government had come to accept responsibility for the health and well-being of the entire population.

While the 1940s are well understood as transformational for welfare services in England, they are not always recognised as a key decade in laying the coordinated groundwork for the formation of what would later be called the 'voluntary sector'. The NCSS embodied the idea of partnership and coordination between the state and the voluntary movement, and within different traditions across voluntary action (Davis Smith, 2019). In 1938, after the Munich crisis accelerated preparations for war across government and civil society alike, the NCSS took the initiative in setting up a 'Standing Committee of Voluntary

Organisations in Time of War', which included a hundred of the principal national voluntary organisations. This committee began making plans for how the voluntary movement 'could be of service to the nation', which it was ready to implement on the outbreak of war. From 1938, the NCSS was also conducting pilots of Citizens' Advice Bureaux to offer advice and support to people during wartime. By the end of the first month of the war, 381 bureaux had opened; financial aid from government came in 1940 (Brasnett, 1969: 101). Similarly, the creation of the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) in 1938, to mobilise women volunteers to help with evacuation and the impacts of likely air raids, is an example of growing partnership between voluntary and statutory services. WVS was a hybrid organisation, receiving government funding to cover core running costs and mobilising up to a million volunteers by the middle of the war (Hinton, 2002).

In May 1940 Neville Chamberlain's government fell and was replaced by a cross-party coalition under Winston Churchill; as the leader of the opposition, Clement Attlee was brought into the Cabinet. The new government placed renewed emphasis on post-war planning and reconstruction, which was part of boosting civilian morale at a pivotal moment in the war (Bew, 2016; McKinstry, 2019). Subsequent wartime social policy accelerated wider welfare reform (Figure 1.1). The Old Age and Widow's Pensions Act, introduced in summer 1940, prompted what the *Times* called a 'remarkable discovery of secret need' among older people (Titmuss, 1950: 516). New supplementary pensions for old people and widows would be administered by the Assistance Board, thereby removing the stigma of the hated Poor Law. The change resulted in hundreds of thousands of older people coming forward to claim the new benefit, revealing previously unrecognised levels of poverty and poor housing conditions (Rowntree, 1941; Harris, 2004). Here, too, was a new opportunity for voluntary action and for voluntary–statutory partnership (Means and Smith, 1998). Organisations and individuals concerned about the problems

Figure 1.1: Timeline showing key dates from the 1940s



faced by older people during wartime came together as a committee of the NCSS, chaired by Eleanor Rathbone MP, to form what became known as the National Old People's Welfare Committee (NOPWC). The abolition of the household means

test in 1941 for individuals receiving help from the Assistance Board was another important step away from a local system of poor relief towards a 'national system for the relief of poverty' (Harris, 2004: 285).

The war focused new-found public attention on children and young people. Child care professionals seized the unique opportunities presented by evacuation and wartime disruption to study children in a variety of settings (Grier, 2001: 236). Serious shortcomings in children's services were thus revealed, particularly in residential care for children who were 'deprived of a normal home life'. One of the most ardent campaigners on this topic was Lady Allen, widow of a Labour peer, whose forceful letter to the *Times* in July 1944 called for government investigation of the 'repressive conditions that are generations out of date' in voluntary and local authority children's homes, and prompted a public outcry (Allen, 1944). The high-profile case of 12-year-old Dennis O'Neill, who was killed by his foster father in January 1945, further added to the growing public outcry. A public inquiry into the care of looked-after children was chaired by Myra Curtis and reported in 1946. This work impacted on that of another umbrella voluntary group created in wartime, the Associated Council of Children's Homes (ACCH), which first met in November 1941 when four of the largest charities then providing residential care for children in the UK came together: Dr Barnardo's Homes, the Catholic Child Welfare Council, the Church of England Waifs and Strays Society (afterwards the Church of England's Children's Society) and the National Children's Home and Orphanage (later known as Action for Children). These four organisations were responsible for over 33,000 children and argued that, hitherto, legislation affecting children had been passed without any consultation with them.

Increased attention was also focused on young people as the war sparked regular moral panics about wayward youth. There was growing recognition that the social and physical needs of young people, the vast majority of whom left school at 14,

had been neglected. The Board of Education's assumption of a 'direct responsibility' for 14 to 20-year-olds through the 1939 creation of the Youth Service therefore presented both a challenge and an opportunity to the voluntary organisations, which at that point were delivering most leisure and training services for young people. Other significant reforms included the Coalition government's Education Act 1944, which introduced free secondary education for all, extended local authorities' role in leisure-time provision and was designed in due course to raise the school leaving age to 16. The Standing Conference of National Voluntary Youth Services, which had originally been formed in 1936 by 11 national voluntary youth organisations in association with the NCSS, including the National Association of Boys' Clubs (NABC) and the National Association of Girls' Clubs (NAGC), helped its member organisations to navigate this changing landscape and to uphold the idea of statutory–voluntary partnership (Green, 1986).

In June 1941, Beveridge was appointed to lead a government inquiry into social insurance and turned what was expected to be a low-key, technical exercise into an investigation resulting in a blue-print for the post-war welfare state (Harris, 1997; Lowe, 2005; Timmins, 2017). When it was published in December 1942, people queued in the winter cold to get hold of the Beveridge Report, which eventually sold over 600,000 copies. Published just after the important military victory at El Alamein, the report signalled 'a new phase of optimistic restructuring of social policy' (Alcock, 1999: 204). Beveridge identified five giant evils – squalor, want, ignorance, idleness and disease – which he argued had to be slain on the road to reconstruction. His plan proposed a free-at-the-point-of-entry national health service, comprehensive social insurance through the state, and non-means-tested family allowances, and was predicated on full employment. Beveridge's own caution about the 'revolutionary' changes he proposed is significant for understandings of the mixed economy of welfare. He noted that his plans were to be a 'natural development from the

past. It is a British revolution' and relied on maintaining the pre-war system of contributory insurance with payments from employers and the state (Beveridge, 1942: 31). The reception of the Beveridge Report has often been cited as evidence of wartime consensus, although this is not necessarily how it was seen at the time (Harris, 2004). The report won Labour backing but left the Conservatives deeply divided, prompting a split within the wartime coalition over the issue of implementation (McKinstry, 2019). It did, however, receive widespread support among the public. Despite Conservative resistance, in April 1943 Churchill was persuaded to establish another committee to investigate the practicalities of implementing Beveridge's recommendations (Harris, 2004).

The May 1945 general election was framed around post-war reconstruction but was bitterly fought, with 'little sign' of consensus between major parties (Thane, 2018: 187). It was Labour's ambitious programme of social and economic reconstruction, including a promise to implement much of the Beveridge plan, which helped secure its first landslide majority (Thane, 2018). Alongside the nationalisation of key industries and utilities, Attlee's new government introduced a swathe of reforms which set up the key institutions of the welfare state. In England and Wales, important legislation included the National Insurance Act 1946, the National Health Act 1946, the Children Act 1948, the National Assistance Act 1948 and the Town and Country Planning Act 1949. One key departure from the Beveridge plan involved ending the role, held since 1911, of voluntary organisations and commercial companies as 'approved providers' of national insurance, thus sounding the 'death knell for mutual aid friendly societies', as Beveridge lamented (Lewis, 1999b: 261). However, predictions that the Labour victory would see the demise of either commercial or voluntary welfare service provision were not to materialise. Sustained lobbying by powerful interests ensured commercial provision was built into the welfare state: fee-paying education survived, private medical practice continued, the

private business status of dentists, pharmacists and opticians remained, and while the life insurance industry faced greater regulation, it too was allowed to continue (May and Brunsdon, 1999). The ability, indeed the right, to purchase education, healthcare, housing or pensions ‘has never been seriously questioned’ in England (Stewart, 2019). Similarly, the Labour government sought to retain a role for voluntary organisations and volunteers in welfare provision, both in principle and on practical grounds.

Voluntary action was considered important by many within the labour movement for promoting active citizenship and as training for democracy. Attlee’s own roots were in the university settlement movement and others in the Cabinet had sympathy for voluntarism (Grier, 2001; Deakin and Davis Smith, 2011; Bew, 2016). Moreover, the economic situation limited what the government could achieve, leading to ongoing reliance on voluntary organisations for welfare delivery. Such provisions were built into the new legislation. The National Assistance Act 1948, for example, which finally abolished the Poor Law, gave new powers to voluntary organisations to deliver services (Chapter Six). The achievement of the post-war Labour administration in establishing the enduring institutions of the British welfare state, notably the much-loved NHS, and in extending the social ‘safety net’, should be seen in the context of both austerity and the mixed economy. Public spending on welfare grew, but growth was at a rate which ‘both contemporaneously and retrospectively has been exaggerated’ (Tomlinson, 1995: 212). Moreover, the extent to which the post-war welfare mix retained an important place for voluntary action, and commercially provided welfare, has also been under-appreciated.

Turning points and transformational moments, 1951–2010

Before jumping to our next transformational moment, it is important to consider the intervening period, if only briefly.

The decision to compare the 1940s and the 2010s builds on a growing literature which draws parallels between these two periods. Some of this scholarship was driven by a desire to mark the 75th anniversary of the publication of the Beveridge Report and to reflect on the giant evils as manifest today (Brindle et al, 2014; Armstrong, 2017). However, social policy analysts have also repeatedly made the case that the 2010s were marked by welfare reforms the scale of which had not been seen since the 1940s (Taylor-Gooby, 2012; Beatty and Fothergill, 2013; Lambie-Mumford, 2019). None of this is to deny the significance of other transformational periods for the mixed economy of welfare, which are very briefly reviewed here (see also Lindsey and Mohan, 2018). As scholars including Anne Digby (1989) and Robin Means and Randall Smith (1998) point out, discussion about the changing welfare mix has been bedevilled by a tendency by some on the left to imagine a ‘golden age’ of the classic welfare state and by some on the right to deride and reject the achievements of this era.

Within these decades, the 1960s have been identified as significant for the voluntary movement with a ‘rediscovery of poverty’ prompting the formation of a new wave of charities, including Child Poverty Action Group and Shelter. The 1970s were also important. The social democratic welfare state lasted from the 1940s until the mid to late 1970s, when the 1973 oil crisis, economic stagnation and subsequent growing unemployment led to the break-up of the post-war welfare consensus. In 1976 Labour abandoned its commitment to full employment. Thane (2018: 322) suggests that the welfare state reached its ‘zenith’ in the late 1970s, in terms of both expenditure and range of state services.

The election of Margaret Thatcher’s government in 1979 led to a decisive shift towards a neoliberal approach to welfare and ‘low-tax market-centred presumptions’ which have broadly framed policy making ever since (Taylor-Gooby et al, 2017). The welfare state was envisaged less as a solution to poverty

and more as part of the problem. A pressing concern for the Thatcher and Major governments was the question of welfare dependency, in which recipients of welfare were held to be morally and socially ‘diminished’ by receiving support, and proposed solutions were to limit and reduce welfare spending (Drakeford, 2007: 65). Cuts and restructuring of contributory benefits had the effect of increasing the use of means-tested benefits in a period of rising unemployment, so overall the cost of social security continued to grow through the 1980s and 1990s (Alcock, 1999). Reforms to social security introduced by Norman Fowler, while billed as ‘the most substantial’ since the Beveridge Report, in fact turned out to be less significant (Alcock, 1999: 212). There were also minor reforms to eligibility for the state pension coupled with strong support for the expansion of private pensions. In the context of an ageing population, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw an extensive debate about the ‘future affordability of the welfare state’ in which older people were viewed as a potential ‘burden’ (Means and Smith, 1998: 323).

Far-reaching changes were being made in other areas too. The late 1980s saw the transfer of public utilities to private ownership, reversing the nationalisation of the Attlee years, attempting to create a market for energy and water supply, while quasi-markets were developed in education, social work and healthcare (Le Grand and Bartlett, 1993; Drakeford, 2007). Reforms sought to bring in a wider range of providers. The most significant legislation of the time was the NHS and Community Care Act 1990. This enabled NHS and local authority social service departments to develop local provision for health and social care by contracting with a range of organisations to deliver these services. The Act ‘transformed social service departments from the direct providers of services to care managers: they were to identify the needs of individuals and open tenders, for which the private and voluntary sectors should compete’ (Jones and Lowe, 2002: 195). It thus marked

a ‘major shift’ in the relations between the voluntary sector and the state, as well as signalling a change in the way public funding was channelled to voluntary organisations in a move away from grant funding to contracts (Alcock and Scott, 2007: 89). One key effect of the Act was the marketisation of older people’s residential care, and an increase in local authority and state spending in this area (Glennester, 2007).

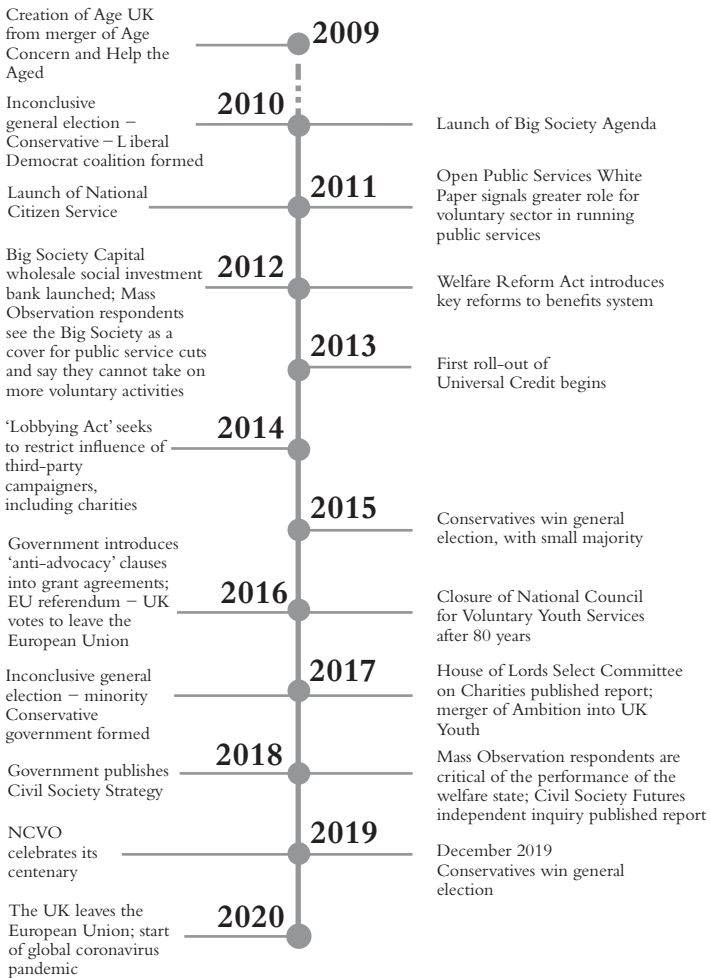
In terms of welfare reform the New Labour era was marked more by continuity with the previous Conservative administration’s rule than change. Successive Labour governments after 1997 did not reverse public service markets, and in some cases developed them. The continued expansion of occupational welfare (including pensions, healthcare, maternity pay, counselling) and commercial welfare (including life insurance, private healthcare) was encouraged (Alcock, 1999; Brunson and May, 2019). Between the late 1990s and the 2000s, Labour succeeded in establishing a ‘policy consensus on the expanded role of the third sector in public service delivery’ (Lindsey and Mohan, 2018: 30). New Labour’s 13 years in office were marked by prominent support for an expanded ‘third sector’, including not only voluntary and community organisations, but also more commercially oriented forms of social enterprise, cooperatives, and mutual organisations (Alcock, 2011). The policy framework was encapsulated by a ‘Compact’ between government and the sector, introduced in 1998, and underpinned by increased investment in the sector, particularly for ‘capacity building’ (Macmillan, 2013). The New Labour period saw a rise in the profile of voluntary action ‘to rival, if not outstrip, that at any point in the previous century’ according to Alcock (2011: 158), and what Kendall (2009: 67) identified as ‘unprecedented, deliberate and sustained *horizontal* policy hyperactivity’ associated with the third sector’s ‘mainstreaming’. In terms of a transitional moment for the mixed economy, however, the New Labour era is not as significant as that which followed.

The 2010s, social welfare and voluntary action

The 2010s decade was bookended by an inconclusive general election in May 2010, which resulted in the formation of the first coalition government at Westminster since the Second World War led by David Cameron and Nick Clegg, and the election of an 80-seat Conservative majority government under Boris Johnson in December 2019. In 2010, Liberal Democrats joined the dominant Conservative Party in a coalition that was to be shaped by the politics of austerity. This had its origins in the fallout from the global financial crisis of 2007–8, which was rapidly reframed from a financial crisis to a ‘fiscal crisis of the welfare state’, leading to cuts in public spending unprecedented since 1945 (Gough, 2011: 50). As Hugh Bochel and Martin Powell (2016) note, the three main parties were not that far apart at the time of the 2010 election, with policies that aimed at cutting the deficit and greater use of the market within the NHS and social care, albeit proposing different speeds and different balances of tax increases. In office, the dominant theme of the Coalition’s social policy was a reduction in public expenditure (Bochel and Powell, 2016). However, cuts were not spread evenly across policy areas, with spending on pensions and healthcare prioritised over that on children and families, housing and local government (Bochel and Powell, 2016). There was also significant regional variation (Kitson et al, 2011). Overall, there was a shift away from a focus on structural causes of poverty, with emphasis instead placed on notions of individual responsibility, tied up with ‘a resurgence of discourses around deservingness’ (Lambie-Mumford, 2019: 9; see Chapter Four). Coalition social policy intensified a New Labour focus on ‘making work pay’ by reducing benefits and increasing conditionality (Bochel and Powell, 2016). The Welfare Reform Act 2012 introduced Universal Credit, restricted Housing Benefit and strengthened sanctions in the social security system (Figure 1.2). For example, between 2009 and 2014 there was a threefold increase in the use of benefit

TRANSFORMATIONAL MOMENTS?

Figure 1.2: Timeline showing key dates from the 2010s



denial as a penalty for failing to follow stringent rules (Oakley, 2014, cited in [Taylor-Gooby et al, 2017](#)). At first, such moves appeared to be in tune with a hardening of public opinion on matters such as benefit sanctions, although more controversial policies such as the so-called ‘bedroom tax’ or outsourced fitness-to-work tests were less well received ([Defty, 2016](#)).

The Coalition proposed far-reaching, fundamental restructuring of the welfare state, including ‘the substitution of private for-profit and not-for-profit agencies for state services’ in social housing, social welfare, health, education and other public services ([Taylor-Gooby, 2012](#)). The influential 2011 Open Public Services White Paper saw the state itself as a problem, marked by a supposedly outdated approach to delivering public services. Instead, it was suggested, opportunities should be opened for a wider range of organisations to provide innovative solutions to welfare needs. The NHS, for example, was opened to for-profit and not-for-profit providers through the ‘Any Qualified Provider’ scheme following the Health and Social Care Act 2012 ([Bochel and Powell, 2016](#)).

David Cameron came into government promoting the idea of the ‘Big Society’, and, unusually for a serving prime minister, his first speech considered voluntary action. Set alongside the ‘open public services’ agenda, there was the potential to significantly increase the role of voluntary action in social welfare. However, the new government also made significant cuts to the voluntary sector, particularly to voluntary sector infrastructure bodies. Commissioners of public services were asked to consider social benefit and well-being alongside cost, but there is little evidence of significant expansion of welfare provision by the voluntary sector during the Coalition period ([Bochel and Powell, 2016](#)). The Big Society remained a problematic concept, difficult to sell to a wider public, and began to fade from view after a couple of years. There was also interest in new ways of giving money and time, from the Innovation Fund to the National Citizen Service ([Lindsey and](#)

Mohan, 2018). Voluntary organisations that spoke out about the negative effects of austerity were interpreted by government as too political, with concerns about this seemingly reinforced by the passing of the 2014 ‘Lobbying Act’ (Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014) and a growing critique of governance and leadership in the voluntary sector (see [Chapter Three](#)).

The election of a majority Conservative government under Cameron in May 2015 seemingly marked a vindication of the politics of austerity. The new government promised changes to the scale and scope of the state and introduced further cuts, again aimed largely at local government and working-age people, unequally distributed across England and Wales ([Beatty and Fothergill, 2016](#); [Taylor-Gooby et al, 2017](#)). While this period saw significant social policy change, particularly in the field of disability benefits, the topic of welfare reform faded from media headlines as the Brexit crisis unfolded from 2016 to 2019. This contributed to an apparent vacuum in domestic policy and decision making, as evidenced in the repeated delays to pursuing meaningful and much-needed reform of social care. The second half of the 2010s were marked by growing political polarisation on issues of welfare; as the Labour Party, for example, took a turn to the left after 2015 under its new leader Jeremy Corbyn. By the end of the decade, the UK appeared to many commentators never to have been more divided ([Armstrong, 2017: 170](#)). [Taylor-Gooby et al \(2017: 49\)](#) argue that the UK’s decision to leave the European Union after the 2016 referendum, in which a majority of 52 per cent voted to leave, was shaped in part by a ‘popular welfare chauvinism and a mistrust of the political establishment’. Cameron was replaced as prime minister by Theresa May in summer 2016, but the challenge of the Brexit negotiations left little space for social policy reform, particularly after the loss of the government’s working majority following the snap election in May 2017.

The impact of the cuts to public services and reforms to benefits under both Coalition and subsequent Conservative

governments had significant implications for voluntary organisations. Austerity increased the demand for the services of many voluntary organisations at the same time as reducing their resources, undermining any wider ambitions to increase their role and contribution. One very visible aspect of the voluntary sector's response has been in the expansion of food banks. Starting in 2010 the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network grew rapidly to 1,235 distribution sites by 2019, alongside an estimated 842 independent food banks (Loosptre et al, 2019). Lambie-Mumford (2019: 9) argues that the growth of food charity is the 'embodiment' of the longer trajectory of social policy change since 2010. Indeed, the concept of 'Food Bank Britain' made its way into popular culture as a proxy for the impacts of austerity on individuals (see Chapter Four).

As the impact of austerity on the poorest unfolded, some voices within the voluntary sector began to argue for a reform of social welfare. Such criticism was unsurprisingly not welcomed by government, and concerns were voiced that voluntary organisations were being silenced through measures like the aforementioned 'Lobbying Act' (2014) and the 2016 introduction of 'anti-advocacy' clauses into contract and grant agreements (Chapter Three). The picture was not helped by a series of 'charity scandals' relating to fundraising and safeguarding which made media headlines in the second half of the decade. The 2010s were also marked by a greater blurring of sector boundaries that has more resonance with the pre-1939 welfare mix than the period of the 'classic welfare state' (see Chapter Five). By the end of the 2010s, the newly favoured term 'civil society' was held to include many different actors from voluntary organisations through to mission-driven businesses. Returning to the idea of a moving frontier, Davis Smith (2019) identifies a new stage of 'this shifting frontier' which occurred around the time of the formation of the Coalition government in 2010. The 'decoupling' (Macmillan, 2013) of the voluntary sector and the state, pursued by both Coalition and Conservative governments, has ironically

occurred during a period in which the voluntary sector is urged to take on a greater role in the delivery of welfare services.

About this book

This book highlights the relevance of history to contemporary policy discussions, and we hope it will contribute to scholarly debates across history and the social sciences, as well as having implications for policy making and practitioner audiences. The book was completed during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, during which time the UK government adopted a range of economic welfare support measures unprecedented in peacetime, while at the same time the voluntary and community sector was mobilised to meet new need across the four home nations (Macmillan, 2020). Commentators repeatedly drew parallels with the 1940s. The discussion throughout this book speaks directly to further restructuring and rethinking of the welfare mix, with implications for voluntary action.

The chapters in this book build upon one another, becoming more specific, detailed and analytical as it moves towards its conclusion. While each can be read alone, there is added value in reading them together and in order. **Chapter Two** discusses the theoretical framework that underpins this study and outlines its methodological approach. In **Chapter Three**, we present two high-level, overarching narratives, evident in both time periods, about the role, position and contribution of voluntary action. Subsequent chapters examine in greater detail the basic premises upon which these narratives are built. **Chapter Four** examines how different narratives about the role of voluntary action are made in relation to different understandings of the type of welfare needs that should be met, how these should be met, and the broader context in which they are embedded. **Chapter Five** returns to the idea that voluntary action is always positioned in relation to others, particularly the state, but also commercial and other providers of welfare, and explores the evolution of relationships within

this mixed economy. [Chapter Six](#) examines in more detail the ways in which narratives are strategically deployed during periods of unsettlement to make and shape *room* in social welfare by focusing on one specific example, or what we call an *emblematic moment*, for each time period. We conclude in [Chapter Seven](#) by revisiting the notion of the moving frontier, calling for a more nuanced understanding which recognises the complex and contested nature of the fluid and permeable boundaries between voluntary action, the state and others. The debate about voluntary action's place within the 21st-century welfare mix is ongoing, and we aim to both highlight the urgency of that debate while also providing unique insight to help inform it.