

Address by Margaret Harris to the Meeting on ‘Faith and Policy: Where Next for Religion in the Public Sphere?’ on 1 July 2010

Social Enterprise, the Voluntary Sector and Mainstreaming Faith

Some of you may remember the light bulb jokes that went the rounds some years ago. My favourite was ‘How many Californians does it take to change a light bulb?’ The answer of course was ‘Any number is cool but the light bulb really has to WANT to change’.

I was reminded of this old joke when I was thinking around this subject of ‘mainstreaming faith’ into the public sphere. It seems to me that the key question here is ‘Does faith actually WANT to be mainstreamed?’ Or are faith organisations just allowing themselves to be incorporated incrementally into the mainstream of public policy and policy implementation without having made any conscious decision that this is what they want to do or that this is what they ought to do? Have they considered the implications of ‘going mainstream’? Are they fully aware of the extent of the public policy expectations on them? And – most important - have they considered whether they can meet those expectations and still remain true to their own faith-based goals?

It is of course true that some policy makers are truly motivated by an interest in what people of faith and faith based organisations - as such - can bring to the solution of public and social problems. George W. Bush and Gordon Brown are but two examples of politicians who, in their different ways, were convinced that Christian ways of doing things and Christian values have a lot to offer to the resolution of social problems. Most recently, Lord Wei, the new government’s adviser on implementing the ‘big society’ has proclaimed how important his Christian faith is to him and how much he admires former President Bush’s approach to fighting poverty through ‘partnership’ between religious nonprofits and government agencies(1).

But I would like to suggest that this kind of genuine respect for ‘faith’ amongst policy makers is relatively rare. Even where it does genuinely exist, it is often founded on very limited knowledge about the range of beliefs and practices encompassed by religion-based groups in this country. Much of it takes concepts from Christianity and assumes that they are applicable to other religions as well. Indeed, the very concept of ‘faith’ – the generic term used by policy makers - is essentially a Christian one and is not appropriately applied to all other religions.

My own and others’ research suggests that, for the most part, policy makers’ interest in ‘faith’ is less about respect for religious practice *per se*, and much more about the fact that ‘faith groups’ are seen as having enormous potential to contribute to the resolution of intractable social and political problems; it is a form of instrumentalism in fact. The issues which it is hoped faith groups can tackle is impressively wide. They include everything from the fights against terrorism, crime, civil unrest, and child poverty; through the provision of mainstream welfare services including care of the elderly, emergency financial assistance, schools, and subsidised housing; and on to the development of community cohesion and active citizenship. In all these areas policy makers are hopeful that faith groups can offer contributions of money, volunteer time and models of problem solving and service provision.

I would suggest that – in effect - people of faith, and faith organisations, are mostly seen in policy terms as part of the broader voluntary sector (or ‘third sector’ in old money or ‘civil society’ sector in new money). Whatever the label applied to it, this broad and heterogeneous sector of non-governmental, non-profit-seeking organisations – encompassing social enterprises and big charities through to small community associations and self-help groups - is yet again being wheeled out by politicians as the key means by which the problems of so-called ‘Broken Britain’ can be resolved. Indeed, we are already seeing a new bandwagon rolling in which consultants are offering to help voluntary organisations measure their ‘impact’ – all the better to prove to governmental organisations their fitness to be players in the Big Society game. If they can demonstrate

their ‘impact’, they might be rewarded with governmental funding which will enable them to ‘scale up’ their good works.

Some key figures in voluntary sector infrastructure organisations and in the big bureaucratised voluntary agencies like the RNIB or NSPCC seem to be keen to take on any or every public service that may be up for grabs. I wonder, though, whether anybody has asked the ‘little platoons’, small and medium-sized civil society organisations – including the faith based ones - if they actually WANT to scale up, professionalise, and become instruments for the delivery of the latest governmental policy agenda.

We know from research into those voluntary organisations which have been involved in governmental commissioning of public services in recent years, that close involvement in implementation of governmental policies can come at a high price - in volunteer demoralisation, external regulation, goal deflection, and organisational independence.

From my own research I would say that some faith organisations are indeed pleased to be serving the needs of their local communities through the voluntary provision of services which they themselves have initiated, or through the provision of local services funded by regional or local government grants. Others find themselves suddenly in a new league of activity in which volunteers and projects have to be tightly managed to ensure that they comply with the external regulations and accountability requirements which (quite rightly) accompany the receipt of any governmental funding. Initial religiously-inspired goals to alleviate suffering, welcome the stranger, heal wounds and ‘share God’s love’ can be overwhelmed by governmentally-driven agendas to provide services on a wide scale and to externally-determined professional standards of excellence.

For example, small groups bringing together people from a local mosque and a local church for gentle social activities over shared food, can find their enthusiasm for bridge-building killed off by demands that they provide clear evidence measures of how they have successfully built inter-faith understanding. Members of inner city churches offering their premises for use by members of other faith can suddenly find themselves

battling with draconian health and safety regulations. Church members who set up a small project to provide day care for children or older people in a spirit of expressing their faith in a practical way, can be incredulous when they realise that in effect they have become a part of the local authority's portfolio of social services provision.

Two recent well-publicised cases tell us some more about how engagement in the public policy agenda and in the provision of public services can impact on faith groups. The Catholic Church in this country found itself engaged in a bitter internal battle when changes in the law obliged all voluntary sector adoption agencies, including Catholic ones, to provide adoption services for same sex couples – a principle which was seen as being contrary to *Catholic* principles by dominant sections of the church. In the education field, a recent decision of the Supreme Court has obliged Jewish schools in this country to abandon their own religious-based definitions of who is a Jew and therefore eligible for entry to a Jewish school, and to adopt instead a definition based on secular ideas of what is evidence of 'faith', namely attendance at services for worship.

In citing these examples, I am not wishing to debate the rights or wrongs of the regulations or legal principles involved. I want merely to make the point that there is often a price to be paid by faith groups – as all other types of voluntary sector groups – when they are drawn more closely into the public policy implementation agenda. Faith groups – again like other kinds of voluntary organisations - are driven by their own goals and visions. Public policy is - necessarily - often driven by very different goals and visions. Who is the winner when these goals clash?

So faith groups need to reflect consciously before they rush headlong into becoming instruments of public policy implementation. They need to ask themselves whether they really WANT to change and move into the mainstream of public policy.

(1) R. Ramesh 'Mister Big' SocietyGuardian 23 June 2010 p.5

Margaret Harris