

**Decoding Third Sector Electoral Politics:  
The shaping of the agenda and getting heard in the 2010 general election**

**Jane Parry, Jeremy Kendall & Pete Alcock**

Contact: Jane Parry, Third Sector Research Centre, University of Southampton  
[J.Parry@soton.ac.uk](mailto:J.Parry@soton.ac.uk)

**Introduction**

If the third sector has typically enjoyed a low, uncontroversial public profile on the UK's political agenda, then a general election is a time of potential deviation. It can provide an opportunity for the sector to see its interests represented in public debate and to engage with parties from across the political spectrum, seeking to establish productive future relationships. However, the sector is not a single entity, indeed as this paper explores, the language of 'third sector' is contested. The term is used here, together with the shorthand 'the sector', for consistency to describe the diversity of voluntary and community organisations and social enterprises that fall outside of the realms of either State or private sector: a heterogeneity captured in Kendall and Knapp's conception of a 'loose and baggy monster' (1996).

During the New Labour governments of 1997-2010 the relationship between third sector and Government was formalised (Lewis, 2005) through the Compact, first published in 1998 (Home Office, 1998), and complemented by an underlying framework of financial and institutional support. The Compact represented a fundamental shift in the state/sector relationships, "*a new approach to partnership ... based on shared values and mutual respect*" (Zimmeck et al., 2012). This culminated in the establishment of the Office of the Third Sector (OTS) in 2006, which merged existing sectoral representation and placed it centre-stage within the Cabinet Office. Coupled with the recruitment of key third sector strategic partners, and the appointment of sector 'champions' across government, third sector policy enjoyed a unprecedented degree of political leverage during this period. Alcock and Kendall (2011) have described this as the political 'constitution' of the third sector, and while some have argued that the process rendered it a 'governable terrain' (Carmel & Harlock, 2008), it was underpinned by a narrative which posited the sector as a coherent entity. There were clearly mutual benefits to this partnership approach, reflected in Alcock's description of the sector working in 'strategic unity' to engage with government (2010a).

However, as Harris (2010) uncovers, the relationship between sector and government has fluctuated with political and ideological priorities, a dynamic explored by Wolch and conceptualised in terms of a 'shadow state' (1990). Historically the Conservative Party has embraced the sector's potential to assume a greater role in public welfare provision, and in the context of a general election couched in a growing awareness of the recession's lasting impact, it was unsurprising that this tendency would be resurrected within a deficit-reduction strategy. In this paper we argue that the discourse used by different parties to frame the sector, offers fundamental insight into shifting political third sector priorities.

For the first time in two decades the 2010 election promised an open competition, in the context of deepening recession and a loss of public trust in politicians following the expenses scandal (Kavanagh & Cowley, 2011). In its third term and presiding over a major economic crisis, the Labour government had been experiencing a significant decline in its support; opinion polls projected they were unlikely to secure a fourth term in office. However, the polls also suggested that the Conservatives would be unable to win an outright majority. The Liberal Democrats had secured increasing numbers of MPs in recent by-elections and appeared likely to benefit from voter disenchantment with both Labour and the Conservatives. The 2010 election therefore offered a potential change of government, the form of which was unclear. In the event, none of the political parties achieved a sufficient majority to form a government alone, leading to that relatively rare phenomenon in British political history, a Coalition Government – between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties.

Consequently, despite the sector's strong position by 2010, electoral uncertainty gave it an insecure future. The artificiality of electoral relationships involved third sector organisations (TSOs) courting a range of political agendas and negotiating different kinds of electoral language. Organisations that wanted to get their interests heard and represented needed to develop relationships with and lobby political parties on a broad basis, a careful balancing act if lasting working relationships were to be fostered and third sector organisations were not seen as intrinsically tied to one party's agenda. Necessarily this required a unique style of cautious campaigning and anticipatory self-censorship, in that it was expedient not to declare political alliances in uncertain circumstances.

It was also an election whose timing had been forecast by pundits, and for which there was a long lead-in and opportunity for lobbying political parties to secure a place on the agenda. A complicating factor was that once the election had been called, the sector anticipated that *purdah* would provide a barrier to engagement with policy makers, so early strategizing was an essential component of their political work. All stakeholders knew that spending cuts were imminent, likely to hit the third as well as public sector, and that consequently good relationships with the parties were essential to organisational survival. A key test of the strength of sector-party relationships was the profile of third sector interests in party manifestos and election campaigning.

This paper evaluates the success of the sector's campaigning methods in the 2010 general election, measured in the above terms once the election was declared. This mapping is complicated by the three main political parties using very different language to talk about the sector. These distinctions reflect ideological differences in how the sector's role was seen. It is argued that it is essential to unpick these differences – what they are and what they mean – to understand how an apparently high degree of electoral consensus on the sector masked very different attitudes to its future functions.

Below, we discuss the contested terminology and underpinning ideological frameworks around the third sector. We then describe the research project which looked at third sector electoral politics. This is followed by an overview of the sector's campaigning methods around the 2010 election, and an assessment of their relative success, measured in terms of inclusion in party manifestos, asking how much a consensus politics was established on the sector, looking at how the election agenda unfolded, and considering press coverage and less visible outcomes. The paper then shifts its focus to examine the rebranding of the sector, which has become increasingly evident with the establishment of a Coalition government, before presenting some conclusions.

### **Political terminology and ideology around the sector.**

A key issue for the research has been the disputed terminology of 'third sector'. Alcock and Kendall (2011) described this as 'chronically contested', a result of different agendas and different contexts. Some have regarded it as tied to the political legacy of New Labour's modernisation period (termed 'hyperactive mainstreaming' by Kendall (2009)), and thus having political meaning and being inseparable from Blair's 'third way' discourse (itself rooted in Giddens's social theory (1998)). Indeed Blair was using the term 'third sector' in speeches from at least 1999. However, academically the term predates the rise of New Labour; the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR) was established in 1992. A primary concern of the ISTR has been to implement a globally understood taxonomic concept of the sector, an aim supported by the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector (JHCNPS) project to develop 'operational definition' on the sector (Salamon and Anheier, 1992), although the latter has arguably (Wagner, 2012) introduced greater ambiguity over the longer term. More recently Taylor has reflected that the term third sector is 'semantically American' (Taylor, 2010: 5), with a complex universal resonance.

In the UK 'third sector' has become a politically-loaded term and, as Evers and Laville (2004) argue, the discourses surrounding the third sector are the product of dominant policy regimes or government. Correspondingly, Kendall (2010b) identified three distinctive ideological positions on the third sector: consumerist, civic renewal and democratic life revival, which he suggested were adopted by political parties with differing emphases to inform distinctive policy climates and development. Certainly since the 2007 Third Sector Review, it became clear that a Brownite premiership would afford a central and valued role to the third sector.

By 2008, the Conservative Party also made the point that sector would be key in their subsequent electoral policy, with the publication of their Green Paper on voluntary action. This was underlined by a Big Society paper published shortly before the election (Conservative Party 2010b). Some reflection of the significance of sectoral terminology is the haste with which, following the general election and the subsequent formation of a Coalition government, the Office of the Third Sector was rebranded the Office for Civil Society (at presumably some cost during a time of austerity).

In conducting the research then, it has been necessary to unpick the language used by different parts of the sector, the three main political parties, the media, and in public discourse. Partly a reflection of the sector's enormous diversity and diffuseness, this discourse has included: 'charities and charitable sector', 'voluntary sector', 'voluntary and community sector', 'non-government/non-statutory organisations', 'non-profit organisations', 'social enterprise', 'social economy', 'civil society' - terms with rather different emphases and meanings.

### **The general election research**

To look at these issues, research was conducted over a six-month period before, during and shortly after the 2010 general election, combining documentary analysis of policy papers and the manifestos produced by both TSOs and political parties, analysis of media coverage of third sector issues, and 15 qualitative interviews with key policy actors (Parry et al., 2010). The latter included umbrella and infrastructure organisations, a large charity, specialist media commentator, community-focused organisations, and civil servants/political figures. These simultaneous mixed-methods techniques enabled us to capture the dynamism of the unfolding electoral campaign and the third sector's role in that.

Most research informants were selected at the outset of the project, but some were recruited later in the election campaign on the basis of their emerging influence. Key stakeholder interviews covered three main areas: the methods and techniques used by TSOs to campaign on a day-to-day basis; TSOs' planning process leading up to and beyond the general election, and changes in campaigning techniques; and reactions to new political alignments. These interviews took place between April and July 2010, picking up on different temporal reference points. Recap interviews were held with some earlier respondents to re-engage with their expectations in relation to the Coalition government's agenda. Face-to-face and telephone semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were imported into QSR NVivo 8 for coding and analysis, along with fieldwork notes. Anonymised material presented in italics in this paper represents direct quotations from these transcripts.

### **Pre-election campaigning methods**

Third sector campaigning took place over three phases characterised by quite different activities. These were: the build-up to the general election, a period which commenced with the sector's planning process up to a year beforehand and culminated in the frenetic activity of the early months of 2010; election season, the period from when the election was called, political campaigning began and purdah was declared, until election day; and the post-election period, which opened up a new set of political alignments, and with them opportunities for third sector campaigning. It is the first of these, the organised lobbying activity, that is most significant for this paper; see Parry et al. (2005) for an analysis of the longer timeline of sector campaigning.

In the context of a prolonged build-up to the 2010 general election, stakeholders were careful to ensure their perspectives were publicised and understood in the hope of having these reflected in the electoral agenda. In 2010, much more than in previous elections, the third sector was an issue up for discussion, with multiple policy implications. Policy actors interviewed were extremely keyed up to the opportunities of the 2010 election, which provided an important reference point in their strategic planning. Consequently, within the third sector, election campaigning was effectively taking place well in advance of the general election, and fairly intensively over the preceding six months. However, reflecting the sector's diversity, distinctions emerged in terms of TSOs' campaigning portfolios, which ranged from an extended timeline of political campaigning; campaigning focused on the official election period, to opportunistic campaigning, and even anti-electoral campaigning.

For the TSOs who organised their campaigning over a more extended period, a common strategy was to campaign in the year running up to the election, and to redouble their efforts thereafter when it was regarded as critical to engage with a new government. They aimed to get organisational interests represented in party manifestos, and thus campaigning concerns were targeted, succinct and achievable.

*if you are a, kind of, lobbying charity and you're trying to get stuff in manifestos, you've got to be doing that, like, a year ago, you had to be starting that ages ago and doing the manifesto right at the eve of the election is too late.*  
(infrastructure organisation)

TSOs' most explicitly campaign-focused strategy was the publication of manifestos in the months preceding the general election, thus ensuring they received maximum publicity. Sometimes with a charter or pledge attached for MPs to sign up to, this approach had advantages in terms of staking out organisations' ground and providing clarity on desired action from political parties.

In 2010, a major difference in election planning that differentiated TSOs' work from their more routine campaigning was that the uncertain electoral outcome necessitated their conscious engagement with a range of political parties. For many organisations, these kinds of relationships had not existed with opposition parties prior to this election. Consequently there was a need to start building dialogue and understanding some time in advance:

*for the last decade, with limited resources, the best way for us to influence government policy on behalf of our members, has been very much to focus on the ruling party and the executive. And there's not been much, you know, realistically, not been much point engaging with the others.* (infrastructure organisation)

This involved developing quotable relationships with third sector spokespeople in the three main parties, as well as identifying key policy makers and ideologues. Specifically, there was a need to create effective channels for feeding information about third sector manifesto

requests into the political parties' planning processes, so that these could be reflected in the writing of party manifestos.

The extent to which different methods of engagement were drawn upon was related to TSOs' roles and intended closeness to government. For example, some organisations saw themselves working in partnership with government on particular issues: *'a few organisations have an awful lot of influence in terms of being able to walk in and out of government departments'*, (infrastructure organisation). Others regarded themselves as catalysts and prioritised maintaining a critical distance from political representatives: *'we are the people who say the things that other people don't say'* (community organisation). Most of the TSOs we spoke to operated somewhere between these two positions. Realistically, good quality personal contacts between CEOs, civil servants and public officials were often the most effective method for the sector to influence policy. However, the ad hoc nature of this kind of interaction made it difficult to identify or factor into organisational planning.

In the six months' preceding the election, key players in the third sector organised a number of summits, conferences and meetings, to build capacity and ensure that their policy aspirations fed into the political parties' planning processes. These included breakfast seminars, parliamentary receptions, and, notably, ACEVO's summits with the three main parties – which, at the parties' own preference, were markedly different in format.

The February-April period was characterised by a flurry of activity from the sector publishing their manifestos in advance of the election. *Third Sector Online* described this phenomenon as *"manifesto mad," "in vogue"* and *"a key weapon in the run-up to election day"* (Donovan, 2010). Manifestos were often the product of months' of consultation with memberships, as well as in communication with political parties. From the interviews it was clear that this planning and interaction stage started back in late 2009. Indeed, the impact of sector manifestos was arguably at its most powerful prior to publication and this was when the most critical consultation was going on with the next generation of policy makers. By the time they were released into the public sphere it was too late influence party policy and political manifestos: *"the big ideas have been fed in before then"* (political representative), and their publication dates were often quite artificial. By the time of the election campaign the third sector's manifestos stood as position papers rather than catalysts for discussion.

Following Gordon Brown's announcement of the general election, government machinery went into purdah, transforming the relationship between civil service, political parties and the sector. Guidance issued by the Parliament and Constitution Centre (Gay and White, 2010) to MPs explained the restrictions on civil servants' activities, including deferred announcements on policy and a lack of involvement in any campaigns which may be deemed party political. In the research, stakeholders strongly emerged as sensitive not to engage in activities that might be construed as overstepping political boundaries, possibly more so than in previous elections because of its unpredictable outcome.

### **The political parties' manifestos**

The three main parties' manifestos contained significant detail on the third sector in 2010, although this was framed very differently. Consequently these manifestos represent important historical resources marking this linguistic distinction and are ideologically telling. Interviewees often commented on the meaningfulness of these differences, and they were clearly important to political parties, yet this was not a debate which was being publically-pursued. Kendall (2009) has discussed the contested terrain of definitions and typologies for the sector, with a range of 'collective nouns' being favoured at different times and in different contexts. There has been no one universally-agreed definition for the sector, which has instead been informed by policy actors and political players with differential power positioning.

There was understandably greater pragmatism about their public use of terminologies among third sector informants than political actors. However, in analysing the parties' manifestos and considering how they framed the sector, there is an issue about the intended readership of these documents. Perhaps reflecting the electorate's distance from some of this terminology, manifestos tended not to talk about 'the sector' in its various formulations or to deal with relevant issues in a neat documentary section. But there was significant divergence in how the parties presented sectoral issues in their manifestos, and their decision not to engage in a debate on sector definition is revealing in terms of these issues' presentational difficulties. By contrast, the policy actors interviewed summarised the sectoral issues of the 2010 general election much more coherently and succinctly than the party manifestos.

The Labour manifesto, *A future fair for all*, focused on rebuilding the economy, whilst reforming and protecting public services, 'strengthening society' and 'renewing politics'. The third sector's role was conceptualised in terms of greater involvement in the provision of public services, and crucially the manifesto valued the sector's independence and campaigning role. Key discourse were 'fair', 'active reforming government', 'level playing field' and 'strengthening'. Its approach to the sector was one of consolidation and was the most integrated of the three parties, which is perhaps unsurprising given that its author, Ed Miliband, was a former Minister for the Third Sector. It related third sector issues to most aspects of policy in its chapters on living standards, education, crime and immigration, families and older people, communities, and global future. Its greatest concentration on sectoral issues was in its *Communities and Creative Britain* chapter. Reflecting the then government's policy of using 'third sector' to promote inclusivity, it was the only party manifesto to employ that terminology, although more broadly it used a mixed discourse, talking about 'third sector organisations', 'voluntary sector organisations', 'social enterprise', 'civil life and pride', 'voluntary and community sector', and 'civil society'. Notably, no use was made of the term 'charity/charitable sector'.

The Conservative Party's manifesto, *Invitation to join the government of Britain* (2010a), was characterised by language of a 'new kind of government', 'Big Society', 'civic society' and 'responsibility', and while there were marked similarities with the Labour manifesto on third

sector policy, *Invitation* was framed in a language of change. It was dominated by the Conservative's Big Society agenda, on which they had consulted with key TSOs, empowering individuals to change local communities. Their *Change Society* chapter concentrated on sectoral issues, which were relayed in a distinctive language. No reference was made to the third sector, but instead to 'voluntary sector providers', 'Big Society' (repeatedly contrasted to 'broken society' and 'big government'), 'civil society', 'civic society', 'civic responsibility', 'voluntary (and community) sector', and 'community organisers/ sector/participation'. Outside of this focal chapter there were few references to sectoral issues, an approach which may be telling in light of the Party's later presentational issues relating the Big Society concept to the electorate. Crucially, the manifesto also sketched out plans to eliminate the budget deficit over the course of a single parliament.

The Liberal-Democrat manifesto, more literally titled *The Liberal Democrat manifesto 2010* (2010), was distinctive in making most sparse mention of third sector issues, whichever terminology was employed to locate them, aside from a proposed reform to simplify Gift Aid. What coverage it provided was contained within its *your job, your family, and your community* chapters (no capitalisation), and discussed in terms of 'voluntary providers', 'voluntary sector' and 'social enterprise'. Notably, the manifesto made no reference to the terms 'third sector', 'civil/civic sector' or 'community sector'. More broadly, it drew upon discourse such as 'hope', 'credibility' and 'fairness' to set out its polity priorities.

Clearly it is problematic to draw direct correlations between third sector campaigning and policy representation in party manifestos. However, a particularly successful umbrella agency, in terms of getting its key requests reflected in political parties' manifestos, had invested considerable early effort targeting the authors of the Labour, Conservative and Liberal-Democrat manifestos, prioritising this over higher-level work with Ministers:

*it felt appropriate to, you know, go directly to the people that were given the task of writing the manifestos and developing the party visions.*

Two interviewees representing infrastructure organisations noted the effectiveness of the social enterprise movement in taking its message to political parties and appropriating language, "*borrowing from the private sector*", and making a significant investment in "*lobbying and communications*." The social enterprise movement subsequently found its interests well represented in party manifestos and taken up in politicians' language.

### **A consensus politics?**

On the basis of their manifesto formalisations all parties shared a positive interpretation of the sector's role in society, which they were keen to develop: a broad-brush consensus. Even the visible differences on the finer detail on third sector policy were described by one infrastructure organisation as '*different versions of the same thing*'. However, this unusually high degree of agreement on the third sector's importance placed in it in a delicate position. While it was valuable to have achieved recognition (for the Conservatives verging on



centrepiece placement) in the manifestos, total accord risked its concerns simply not being debated and publicised. At the same time, sectoral issues were low on the public radar, a fact reflected in their scant coverage in the mainstream press, and it was unrealistic to expect dramatic shifts in public attitudes to the sector over a single election campaign.

*it wasn't a matter of great discussion and great controversy, but there was a sense in which, you know, it didn't need to be. It is high on the parties' agendas and, you know, there was no argument about that.* (specialist media commentator)

However, as we have previously argued, this was at best a surface consensus (Alcock et al., 2012), and differentiated ideological frameworks remained in place underpinning policy discourse. Most fundamentally, these ideologies informed parties' commitments to the sector, positions connected to how they viewed its fundamental purpose. A political representative described a key difference between the Conservative and Labour Parties: the Conservatives wanted to make greater *use* of the sector, but at the expense of the more supported and partnership-orientated basis of the Labour Party. She summarised this distinction in terms of '*partnership and not replacement*'. Such differences in emphasis, far from embodying a consensus politics, potentially translate into huge differences in approach to and relationships with the sector, the effects of which are only now playing out. The linguistic differences uncovered by a more detailed reading of the parties' manifestos provide further corroboration of such distinctions, revealing significant political nuances in the meaning and value attached to the sector.

### **The 2010 campaign**

The 2010 general election campaign took place on multiple stages, with the televised leadership debates and Internet coverage providing new and significantly expanded media outputs. As with all electoral campaigns, it was only partly in politicians' power to map out its agenda. Although the party manifestos represented a line in the sand, their relative lack of controversy in 2010 meant that it was left to the press and third sector to draw out points of political distinction, which inevitably focused on differences of style and personality. The political science literature suggests that a degree of rationality in this as a political strategy. Bartels (2012) analysed OECD countries' election results during recession, and argued that at such times the electorate was less concerned with ideology and made pragmatic decisions about parties' economic management potential. That the electorate were confused about policy differences between the parties (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2011) suggests that politicians were relatively successful in this risk-averse strategy, but campaigns were subsequently criticised for their lack of clear direction.

There was perceived to be a uniqueness about the election, whose anticipated open-endedness, combined with the looming spectre of the need to address the deficit, stifled radical debate and made it difficult to analyse third sector issues in isolation from their broader political context. Additionally, the degree of party consensus on the third sector effectively ensured that it was not debated, and that sectoral issues which made it onto the

agenda only picked up on differing emphases. One interviewee suggested that clarity and debate on issues actually dissipated during election time, overtaken by an electoral narrative relatively unrelated to the interests at stake:

*I think now we're in the stage of election, it's hard to get a reality grip, so it feels like there's a bit of a fog and there's lots of rhetoric and interest in wanting to agree, but it feels quite phoney in a way, just the expedient of elections, kind of, crowds out everything else. (infrastructure agency)*

In an important sense party manifestos reflected the third sector's success in getting their interests onto the agenda. Consequently there was little expectation or accompanying campaigning at this point for sectoral interests to achieve a broader spotlight. Besides, having won political approval it was not in the sector's interests to jeopardise their position by inviting potential controversy. The general election campaign as played out in the media and public consciousness did not, by and large, touch explicitly on the sector's role, although it was often implicitly at the heart of parties' agendas. Peripheral discussion on third sector issues such as volunteering and Gift Aid were not the stories that captured the election's mainstream narrative.

One notable exception to this third sector policy silence, and one put in an explicitly populist language, was the Conservative's Big Society policy agenda (Blond, 2010), which stood as the centrepiece to its manifesto and kick-started its election campaign. Ostensibly about citizen engagement and localised service provision, Tam has argued (2012) the Big Society was in fact the frontend of a 'small state agenda' and shrinking of public services: policy with explicitly Thatcherite roots. During the campaign, however, it fell out of favour, and following anonymous Conservative activists' complaints about their difficulties explaining the Big Society to the electorate, Cameron stepped back from using the platform of the leadership debates to raise the policy's profile and enhance clarity. During the final half of the campaign there was barely a mention of this fundamental aspect of their manifesto.

Several interviewees welcomed a debate about the Big Society, anticipating that it would trigger deeper discussions about the sector's future role. Realistically, as one infrastructure organisation put it, a prevalent feeling in the sector was that "*that's the next debate to be had*", on the basis that the necessity of addressing the deficit meant that whoever formed the next government would need to reassess the role of the State. The same interviewee suggested Labour would be likely to frame this in terms of '*co-production*'.

The knowledge that the election winners would be charged with difficult spending decisions tempered the development of financial commitments and coloured every debate. It also opened up new possibilities for the sector in terms of public sector reform, an area high on the Conservative's agenda. However, while the economy and possibility of a double-dip recession were of central concern, all parties avoided getting into detailed and potentially electorally unpopular discussions about proposed deficit management - decisions which the

Institute of Fiscal Studies (2010) stressed were inevitable for whoever formed the next government. Consequently, the third sector's potential role in public sector reform was only discussed in the vaguest of senses. One infrastructure organisation reflected that this approach was inevitable during an election:

*I think it's good that that's on the agenda, because at least whoever wins the election, there will be some reflection on what that might mean and I think it's opened up the debate about the different roles the sector might play in a reshaped state.*

These debates have an ongoing narrative, and whether they are played out during election time is broadly irrelevant, particularly in the case of the deficit debate which was unavoidable over the longer-term. As is typical for elections, following the initial structuring influence of the party manifestos, the campaign took on its own momentum. A political representative commented:

*I think it's rather a shame that so much else got squashed during that time, it was an unusual election campaign to be a candidate on. On the doorstep, one of the big issues were the leaders' debates. And the economy. And I think, alongside that, lots of other issues got pushed to one side.*

The televised leadership debates, a new element in British electoral politics (Pattie and Johnston, 2011), provided a weekly focus for the contest. However, third sector content was more or less absent from these, and Cameron had already stopped name-checking the Big Society by the first debate on home affairs, where it most naturally might have sat.

A substantive surprise addition to the 2010 electoral debate was the community agenda and the Citizens UK 'fourth debate', which had a late influence on discussion. This was unexpected in that nationally Citizens UK were not regarded as part of the mainstream third sector, and indeed were stylistically quite unusual (not least in their strategy to campaign during the election period). Influenced by the methods of the Chicagoan political activist Saul Alinsky (Horwitt, 1992) they sought to express the collective agenda of locally-rooted groups such as churches, mosques and trade unions. Their work has been especially focused on building community power and training organisations to become politically confident. Their success in doing so is reflected in their ability to regularly sustain the critical mass of events like the 4<sup>th</sup> May assembly, when an estimated 2,500 were in attendance.

A number of factors came together during the last week of the campaign to focus interest on the Citizens UK event. Staged just days before polling day, it was covered by a number of key media commentators. The Citizens UK debate was interesting in that it appears to have at least partly driven the community organising agenda onto the mainstream. Community engagement represented a dimension of sectoral debate which had been little anticipated and whose complexity makes it difficult to push forward within a traditional policy framework. In the short-term at least, it was a highly successful campaigning strategy.

## **Press coverage**

At election time, third sector press coverage was far from assured, and only the most ‘eye-catching’ campaigns had a chance of achieving national recognition. In a point reiterated by several interviewees, under normal circumstances one or occasionally two broadsheet newspapers could be relied upon to provide some sectoral analysis, but during elections these expectations were suspended as papers became ‘reactive’, chased the most topical stories, and third sector issues were ‘squeezed out’:

*I mean obviously ones are more sympathetic, like The Guardian and The Times and so on. The Guardian in particular, obviously, are much more sympathetic and much more likely to go into the detail. But clearly all media, whether it be third sector or national, will tend to focus on what's news, what's unusual, what's controversial, so that's always a natural bias really. (infrastructure organisation)*

Where third sector issues got picked up, they tended to involve specific and containable policy platforms, such as Gift Aid or the Lottery, and there was a reportage gap in terms of more complex issues. Consequently, a whole range of policy matters never made the agenda.

Another infrastructure organisation complained that when the media sought out commentary from the sector it consulted the most high-profile umbrella agencies, which reproduced a particular viewpoint. A media commentator also noted that particular third sector organisations developed a reputation for being more or less ‘outspoken’ or ‘guarded’, and this affected the way that some journalists worked.

As noted earlier, elections provide somewhat artificial political discussions, in part because of the expectation that debates have neatly containable narratives and conclusions. During the 2010 general election, politicians’ concern was to be seen as listening to all interests, while simultaneously the leadership debates pitched parties against one another and made consensus (“I agree with Nick”) a matter of incredulity. Indeed the cult of personality engendered in the leadership debates dominated media coverage post-broadcast. Election time presents a theatre of relationships that bears little relation to their typical style.

## **Rebranding the sector:**

A key distinction between political parties was in terms of the questions raised by the Conservatives in their 2008 Green Paper about the concept of the third sector and their proposal to retitle the government office the Office for Civil Society (Conservative Party, 2008). This politically charged intention was actioned just a week after the Coalition Government took office. Reaction to the conscious change in terminology amongst interviewees was mixed, albeit generally cautious:

*There's a whole different lexicon compared to the last government that everybody's*

*learning so it's still in that, kind of, getting to grips with what's happening to it I suppose.* (support organisation)

The point was made several times that Nick Hurd, the new Minister for the sector, had been building up to a rebrand while in opposition and had repeatedly made the point that 'third sector' implied a prioritising that reflected badly on the sector. Hurd was quoted as saying that the term 'third sector' had been banned across the Coalition government because "*the boss really doesn't like it*" (Mason, 2010). One positive effect of the rebrand was felt to be that sectoral issues could become more accessible:

*you talk to a normal person in the street and they go "What? What's third sector?" I mean, people know what charities are, they know what, you know, a community group is.* (support organisation)

This interviewee countered, however, that 'civil society' provided no greater transparency than 'third sector', a reading which suggests an ideological motive behind the terminological change. Indeed, as Alcock pointed out, the debate does not compare like with like, since 'civil society' is a theoretical concept, "*focusing on how we conceive of relations rather than how we classify organisations*" (Alcock, 2010b: 388), while 'third sector' has provided a unifying framework – "a strategic unity" – for a diverse body of organisations and interests, around which policy has been mobilised (Alcock, 2010a). More unequivocally, "*civil society is not just a synonym for third sector*" (Alcock 2010b: 386). Similarly, Wagner (2012) warns against using the terms 'third sector' and 'civil society' interchangeably, representing distinctive, albeit potentially enhancing, paradigms. The support organisation above described a disconnect between the language of the policy world and their customers, a viewpoint interesting in the light of the term 'policy wonk' creeping into mainstream discourse in 2010 to disparage politicians' distance from the electorate.

While some interviewees dismissed the Coalition Government's rebranding mission, regarding it as "*a bit of a joke*", "*tiresome*" and "*superficial*", others were more hostile and took it as evidence of a shift in the state-sector relationship's balance of power:

*I think it's entirely inappropriate and disrespectful. I don't see the private sector having a makeover or, you know, the State being called something other than the State, so why should our sector be renamed by somebody else? I think that's a classic, kind of, imposition of hegemony really.* (infrastructure organisation)

For this organisation, the term 'third sector' was an unsatisfactory one within which to locate themselves, and there was a similar sense of malcontent with the term amongst several of those interviewed, at the same time as they pragmatically accepted its heuristic value. Perhaps one of the most frustrating aspects for the sector of its naming and renaming was that these political decisions were removed from it, and TSOs never had an opportunity to engage in discussions. Who was included and prioritised in the definition of the sector was also

unsettling – community groups were more easily encompassed in a discourse of ‘civil society’ than were infrastructure organisations. However, even when terminology was apparently uncontested, it was employed variably. For example, a civil servant commented that those on different sides of the political spectrum applied the name ‘social enterprise’ to very divergent kinds of organisations.

### **Conclusions:**

Having achieved mainstream credibility over the past ten years, the third sector approached the 2010 general election as an opportunity to raise its profile and push forward its agenda, a balancing act in the context of the election’s uncertain outcome. It achieved these aims in a cooperative style, enjoying productive relationships with political parties, and enacting long-term campaigning strategies to ensure that its interests were well understood and represented. An apparently broad political consensus on the sector gave it confidence in assuming this role, validated by the publication of the parties’ manifestos and their recognition of the sector.

The general election/purdah period was a more complicated and unpredictable campaigning time, when the sector tended to concentrate upon a consolidation and commentary role. Although third sector interests were fundamental to the main political parties’ policy programmes, these debates did not translate well into an electoral narrative for the media or general public. TSOs developed a range of soft and more measurable indicators during this period to evaluate their campaigning. These included achieving coverage in the trade and mainstream press, gaining named support for specific pledges, building good working relationships with key political figures, and getting their points represented in party manifestos. Informants frequently made the point that the sector had enjoyed a good *early* campaign; that is, that third sector organisations’ pre-election campaigning had been consolidated, entering the electoral period with their interests well-represented and understood, but that it was not realistic for this profile to be maintained during the unusual circumstances of election time. Indeed there was a relative lack of concrete debate during the election and third sector issues mostly remained a subtext. The 2010 general election was not won or lost on the third sector, and although the sector enjoyed a defining election, issues like the economy and personality dominated the agenda and public interest.

However, 2010 being a ‘landmark election’ (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2011), whose conclusion was uniquely open and which saw a post-war low in Labour and Conservative voting (Fisher and Wlezien, 2011), prompted some uncharacteristic political manoeuvring among both parties and stakeholders to hedge this uncertainty, and saw the third sector engage with the election as a political player. The third sector sought to maximise political capital by maintaining the ‘strategic unity’ which had served them so well under a Labour administration, and political parties exhibited a ‘surface consensus’ on third sector issues which concealed ideological differences potentially more controversial with an unpredictable electorate. In this sense, strategic unity was now being deployed as an electoral strategy by the sector to shore up political consensus. It seems unlikely that we will ever see party-sector interests so neatly aligned again, it being a temporary and mutually beneficial phenomenon

associated with very specific circumstances. The real issue on which the election would be decided – the deficit – was an unspoken narrative; consensus politics was the necessary compromise to fudge the issue. Possibly in more prosperous economic times a more opaque discussion would have emerged about third sector issues.

If a general election can be considered to have sectoral winners and losers, then social enterprise, the community sector, and organisations allied or influential to the new Coalition government, such as the Big Society Network and the think tank ResPublica, emerged in a positive light. By contrast, early policy developments made infrastructure organisations nervous about their future, and spending cuts looked set to hit larger, more contract dependant organisations hardest.

One of the key features of the 2010 election was the difference discourses deployed by the political parties around sectoral issues, the Labour Party's 'third sector' contrasting with the Conservative's 'civil society' and the Liberal Democrat's 'voluntary sector'. This reflected different priorities and interpretations of the sector's role, and a challenge for both sector and commentators has been to decode this language to navigate an uncertain future. In order to understand the story of third sector electoral politics in 2010, it is insufficient to examine the policies and relationships between political parties and sector; the politically-loaded discourse that has coloured virtually every aspect of these interactions must also be scrutinised. The third sector is now in the unprecedented position of having had a good campaign, but having to renegotiate a new set of alignments under a Coalition government. Their adaptability and skills in forging working alliances to build a new kind of engagement will be called upon now more than ever as they traverse this new and potentially leaner political territory.

Post-election and mid-deficit reduction, the sector clearly has a functional role in the Coalition government's programme. Despite an apparent desire to consult on working with the sector (OCS, 2011), early analysis of the state/sector relationship under the Coalition government has counselled for caution in the context of economic retrenchment and a different set of attitudes about third sector functions (Macmillan, 2011). So far these have signalled greater emphasis upon 'entrepreneurialism' and a shift away from partnership working, couched in the Coalition's localist agenda and spearheaded by its Big Society rhetoric. The broad political consensus that emerged in the party manifestos regarding the sector has been rather differently operationalised since the general election, with the Conservative Party's third sector policy's distinctive ideological roots becoming increasingly evident.

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