

Coming of Age — The Dating Game*

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I am not one of those who believes that the voluntary sector is a residual category—what is left over when you take away the state and the market. I prefer to believe, instead, that the voluntary sector reflects humanity's will and capacity to co-operate, to undertake joint activity for the public good, without either the motivation of private profit or the coercive power of the state—in short, our unique human capacity for compassion and our equally unique human capacity to imagine and to create something better. If Bosnia and Rwanda express one aspect of our nature—and one doesn't have to look that far afield for other examples (as Mt. Cashel, aboriginal reservations, and François Lépine attest) — so, too, do Virginie Larivière, who at 13 years old collected 1.5 million signatures to urge the government to limit TV violence in Canada; Thérèse Thibodeau who campaigned successfully for fairer tax treatment for recipients of child support payments; and Craig Kielburger, who practically single-handedly has put the issue of child labour on the national agenda. All have proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that humanity's nobler instincts are alive and well, that individuals can make a difference, and that, when people work together, remarkable things can be accomplished.

All around us we see needs which are not being met by either the market or the state. The utility and importance of voluntary work can no longer be taken for granted. All of our institutions are under scrutiny. The not-for-profit sector, long exempt, is receiving its share. Until a few years ago, who would have thought that our institutional equivalents of Mother Teresa would be the objects of public disaffection: the Canadian Armed Forces, the Red Cross, or the Better Business Bureau of Greater Toronto?

A time of fundamental change may be defined as a time when not merely the old answers but even the old questions no longer suffice. Our old mental maps of the world are unhelpful. We can no longer tell when we are taking forceful action to make history, or merely panicky measures to catch up with it. As the

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Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset wrote: “We don’t understand what is happening to us, and *that* is what is happening to us!”

Put differently, in the words of Vaclav Havel, first president of the Czech Republic, “It seems that something is on the way out and something else is painfully being born...we are in a phase when one age is succeeding another, when everything is possible”.

In developing a new mental map we do know, by and large, where we want to go. The “good society” is one which offers opportunity to everyone, especially to the young; it provides a reasonable level of wellbeing for all its members, especially the disadvantaged (in a social context of family, friends and community); and it guarantees adequate order and stability to permit personal security, liberty and democratic participation in the affairs of the community.

Where the road is no longer clear is how we get from where we are to that destination. Not that we lack for people offering directions. We just don’t know which directions to trust—those repeated most patiently (the conventional wisdom); or those shouted most loudly and insistently (the ideologically loaded). What a struggle to make sense of so much information, so much of it contradictory! Actually, although we call this the Information Age, we should more accurately refer to it as the Era of Data. We are awash in facts (maybe “facts” since we hardly ever know whether they are true or not), but are we any more knowledgeable? Even when we think we know more, I have a sense that we are none the wiser. In fact the flood of data is largely useless without a conceptual framework to help us make sense of it, and—here’s the rub!—it is precisely our old frameworks which are being dismantled.

Thus confusion operates at every level: do we say yes or no to oat bran, or beta carotene, or more recently, mayonnaise; to whether the middle class is shrinking or male sperm counts in the industrialized world are going up or down? On all sides we are buffeted by changing and contradictory “facts”, analysis and, most perplexing, policy recommendations stemming from them. Sometimes it seems there is nothing we can know any longer, sometimes merely that what we *do* know is wrong.

In “fact” (if I may use the word) we do know quite a few things that could be the basis for sensible public policies:

- we know, for example, that prosperity (plus reasonable distribution) results in healthier communities and a stronger social fabric;
- we know that this in turn produces greater support for children and youth, which in turn leads to better long-term outcomes in health, learning, coping skills, etc.;

- we know, especially, that all of these are interlinked—both to each other and through time, so that changes today produce benefits, or conversely, entail costs tomorrow.

The problem is, we don't know very much about how to create prosperity, despite at least 30 years' effort. And, although we say we "know" these things, many people are not convinced— indeed many people are promoting policies which go directly against them: against any wealth redistribution, against measures to strengthen families and communities, against early investments which obviate the need for costly later remediation.

Symptoms of our confusion: our actions contradict what we say we believe. We say, for example, that work is essential to each individual's sense of worth and identity, yet our public policies do *not* aim to guarantee every person an opportunity to be fully productive. We say that a stable family and cohesive community structures are essential for people's sense of security, yet society makes few concessions to the needs of parents and, for the first time ever, parenting is not our generation's most elemental biological obligation to the future but merely a personal "lifestyle" choice! The ultimate paradox: anxiety about the future is making us increasingly conservative, yet the future itself demands radical change!

In such a situation, is it any wonder that concepts appear, are suddenly on everyone's lips, and then, just as quickly, disappear like soap bubbles in the sunlight? "Civil society", "social capital", "CED"—move over Sual Alinsky, Paolo Friere *et al.*, make room for John McKnight, Robert Putnam and Francis Fukuyama.

Before we can embark on an exploration of the voluntary sector's relationships with government, the private sector and the public, we will do well to reflect for a moment on where we have been. Twenty-five or 30 years ago, the voluntary sector entered into an agreement with government: you give us money, we will deliver your services. And so, for over a quarter century, the so-called independent sector (to use the U.S. term) has been shaped by (and even defined itself in opposition to) "government". Not for nothing did it call itself "nongovernment"—that was the essential, albeit negative, defining characteristic. It would hardly have been accurate to use the term "independent" sector, and even "voluntary" was more wishful thinking than descriptive.

Now that era has ended, and lo and behold the commercial for-profit model is supplanting government as the touchstone of our identity. The close working relationship between voluntary organizations and government appeared to meet the objectives of both sides: more money for voluntary agency programs,

enabling us to expand our activities and to benefit more people, in exchange for relatively low-cost delivery of programs that government did not feel able or willing to implement itself. A win-win situation? Or a Faustian pact by which government co-opted independent citizen initiatives and harnessed the vitality of their organizations to promote its own policies and deliver its services? Or, most likely, some mixture of both?

Well, before we get carried away by our enthusiasm for the rosy promises being made by jumping into bed with the for-profit world, we should ask ourselves what we learned while bedded down with government. Let me suggest some possible lessons we may want to bear in mind, and I am confident that each of you could add others to the list:

- It has *not* been, in Pierre Trudeau's colourful phrase, like sleeping with an elephant, where a twitch is felt immediately and provokes a quick reaction. When voluntary organizations lie with government, change takes place at the speed grass grows—slowly but inexorably agencies are made over to fit the government mold. Programs must be universally accessible, not tailored to specific clienteles, because that is government's mandate; procedures and timetables must conform to government priorities and deadlines because those are government's constraints, and so on.
- Language itself becomes a smokescreen instead of a tool of communication; the same terms are used by both parties but they mean different things, e.g., "*community development*", "*participatory*", to say nothing of U.S. President George Bush's use of the term "*empowerment*" etc.
- Blended agendas, so-called partnerships, actually mean that the most powerful partner prevails; the most perverse example of this is that in contribution agreements—the independent agent loses control over its own resources, it becomes accountable to government even for its own funds!
- Government cannot think laterally, nor can it think long-term: yesterday's cast iron commitment is today's regretful excuse, and a "full and comprehensive process of consultation" too often refers to the panicky phone call around 72 hours before the expiry of the fiscal year.

I could go on. My point is *not* to claim that all collaboration between government and the voluntary sector has been destructive, or that many organizations did not enter into such relationships with their eyes wide open after having made a careful calculation of their own interests and possible trade-offs. Simply, we should take stock of what happened over this 25-year period and of where we have ended up. Paradoxically, after the quarter century of win-win we now find ourselves in a situation where the government may in the

future be competing directly with the not-for-profit sector (raising funds for its own programs from corporations and the public, leveraging *its* resources with private support which might otherwise be directed to voluntary activities); where government after years of collaboration has in some respects turned on its erstwhile partner, attacking voluntary organizations for being “unrepresentative” (hence not entitled to be advocates for themselves or others), of merely serving “special interests”, of being—unkindest and most ironic cut of all—*not sufficiently autonomous*, and therefore of needing to be weaned off their malign dependence on what former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher liked to call the “Nanny State”, like a bunch of teenage dropouts or the infamous welfare moms!

What might our experience teach us? Certainly not, I repeat, that voluntary organizations should not work with government, or now with the private sector—but rather that such co-operation in practice is always based on self interest. Each side wants the other to behave in a way that advances its own mission, its own specific objectives in co-operating, and *its own values*. Business and government rarely delude themselves when they are diverted or thwarted in pursuit of their objectives. Can we say as much for the voluntary sector? Don’t capitulate and replace your standards either by bureaucratic ones or by exclusive reference to the bottom line. Don’t confuse the values and interests of individuals within organizations with those of the organization they represent (we have all lived to regret agreements established with accommodating and sympathetic individuals who shared our own understanding and perspectives closely but who could never prevail against systemic interests which were necessarily different, and sometimes opposed to their own).

Now—like a lover spurned by a former suitor turned suddenly stingy and vindictive—we question our own ability to attract support. Will anyone love us for who we really are? It’s bad enough we’ve been jilted, but government now says we were always spendthrift and clingy! A crisis of self-esteem, what could be more contemporary? Well, if you have no sense of your own self-worth it is awfully easy to go from one abusive relationship into another, to turn desperately and without examining your own needs and motives to the alternative—in this case, the debonair and beguiling private sector.

A healthy relationship should recognize and celebrate the difference among government, private enterprise, and charities, not try to muddy them and treat the strengths and weaknesses of each as interchangeable. Government is fueled by power, which allows it to set policy; the private sector is driven by profit, with a consequent focus on productivity; and the voluntary sector is motivated by principle and relies on people.

It is precisely because the nature of each differs that fruitful collaboration is possible and desirable, when the knowledge and strengths of each are used co-operatively, not trying to get one to pretend it is the other. Civic activist Jane Jacobs warned years ago of what she called the “monstrous hybrid” spawned by confusion between the moral bases of traders (business) and guardians (public servants), but it applies equally when the voluntary sector enters the picture.

Our infatuation with private sector models, and we are not alone in this, is taking two forms. On the one hand, we are trying to pretend that we really *are* the private sector, opening for-profit subsidiaries, or running our organizations as if we were businesses. On the other hand, we are looking to the private sector to replace the funds we formerly received from government sources. But a note of reality here: as the Centre for Philanthropy has pointed out, it is a fallacy to think that Canada’s corporate and private donations can substitute for government. Overall every 10 per cent cut in government funding would have to be met by a 60 per cent increase in individual or 500 per cent increase in corporate donations. Sorry, but it’s not going to happen.

As for the for-profit subsidiaries and non-related businesses, permit me a note of scepticism. Perhaps they will be successful, but the notion that the not-for-profit sector is going to be more successful than the enterprise sector at entrepreneurship seems to me a little fanciful. And, in any case, commercial firms are not going to brook direct competition from bodies which they view as having an unfair advantage derived from their charitable status.

So, for the short term at least, we can expect to have less money. Is this a tragedy? It necessarily will force voluntary organizations to be creative and to realize their other, non-financial, assets. Volunteers will replace paid staff for some functions (thereby forcing many to undo one of the consequences of the “Faustian pact” with government, when the greater short-term payoff came from accessing the bureaucrats, not deepening ties to the community). Persistent social problems may have to be addressed by strategies for systemic change, not just expansion of services or enlarging agency mandates. Our institutional interests may conflict with those of the communities we see ourselves as serving.

I am not so naive as to think we are going to overcome funding anxiety (and if that happened what would a foundation do?) but our preoccupation with our own funding needs leads us to overlook the range of assets each sector has to offer the others and thereby predisposes us to another unbalanced and unhealthy relationship. We *need* to co-operate with business and government. We *need* to work with business because of its ability to innovate, its sensitivity to change, its willingness to take risks where justified by the rewards, and its

efficiency. Collaborating with government can provide access to the public policy process and, at least historically, gave many of us greater credibility in the eyes of the public.

And why do you suppose government or the private sector might wish to work with us? Our resources, not to be underestimated, include goodwill/public credibility, a cadre of dedicated people, long experience dealing with critical social and economic issues, flexibility in dealing with the specific needs of specific groups—often the most disadvantaged among the citizenry. When social commentators write or talk about the voluntary sector, they tend not to emphasize its ability to deliver services cheaply. People like business author Professor Peter Drucker talk of “creating citizenship” Putnam speaks of the need to strengthen the social fabric, of the positive impact vertical networks and habits of trust have on community cohesion and economic prosperity. Rifkin speaks of the third sector as the “most socially responsible...it is the caring realm that ministers to the needs and aspirations of millions of individuals who, for one reason or another, have been left out, excluded from consideration, or not been adequately taken care of by either the commercial or public spheres”. In short, we have a great deal to offer each other: we could each usefully keep a hand in the other’s pocket!

Thinking only in terms of money obscures the very real exchange of resources and experience which would help both parties. Government after all wasn’t just offering us money; it was seeking access to our constituencies and effective service delivery. Most of all, it wanted what is our greatest strength—the vision and vitality of people who believe they can make a difference to society! For that ultimately is what we are all about, and if we sell ourselves short, that is what we will lose. If we compromise what is most fundamental about ourselves in order to attract money, we’ll end up not just without money but without the ability to attract the individuals and energy which make change happen. And that will be a loss not just to ourselves but to the country.

What would a healthy set of relationships look like? First, as I have said, there would be a mature understanding by all three parties of their respective strengths and characteristics. The voluntary sector would see that the corporate world is not monolithic, that some businesses and some executives are more interested in strengthening communities and augmenting public goods than others, that emulating efficiency and risk taking doesn’t mean abandoning accountability and responsibility. Businesses would see why it is in their wider interest to encourage and reward voluntary activity by their own employees, why communities are not helped when corporate foundations pretend to be building community when in reality they are serving a purely

self-promotional objective whilst draining support away from authentically voluntary bodies.

A healthy relationship with government would recognize that even though the ardour has cooled, we can still share the kitchen and bathroom, if not the bed. Government needs to welcome citizen engagement despite the occasional inconvenience it causes, to create a level playing field and to provide incentives through tax inducements and a modernization of charities law. It needs to control its own addiction to gambling and other short-term revenue fixes which not only mop up discretionary spending but add to the social wreckage left on the voluntary sector's doorstep.

Ultimately, a healthy relationship requires a new spirit of self examination and a willingness to take on new roles in the sector itself. We may not need therapy, but we do need more than a facelift and a manicure! Now that agencies are not obsessing about their individual relationships with government they can devote some effort to ensuring their collective capacity to formulate positions and advocate policies for the public good. The Voluntary Sector Roundtable represents such an effort. Less money must lead us toward effective co-operation and sharing of tasks within the sector, not cutthroat competition for a shrinking pie. Agencies can shift some attention from the eternal struggle to raise external funds to pay for the services they provide clients, to the challenge of mobilizing and empowering citizens to act on their own behalf. The philanthropic impulse in the population at large needs to be carefully nurtured, and institutions such as community foundations created or strengthened to give it an outlet.

Self-knowledge, the self-confidence not to sell ourselves short, understanding our own value base, these are what free us to enter collaborative arrangements on a win-win basis. In the final analysis, what will count is not what we say but what we do. Canadians are fed up with politicians who preach austerity but defend taxpayer-subsidized clothing allowances and golf club fees; with the exponents of family values who nevertheless argue that companies have no responsibility to accommodate working parents; with CEOs who are rewarded with million-dollar bonuses while decimating their workforces. The voluntary sector will fare no differently if it abandons its principles; if it puts organizational self-interest ahead of mission; if it jettisons justice in the pursuit of growth; integrity for the sake of popularity; participation for efficiency.

At the beginning of these comments I quoted Vaclav Havel's comment that we live at a time when everything is possible. I want to return to that. We inevitably feel a sense of loss when established relationships and ways of doing things are being thrown overboard. But it is time to get over that. There is a new sense of urgency to address pressing economic and social problems,

using all the resources at our disposal. Enlightened people in the private sector understand now that the health of business is tied directly to the health of communities; the federal government appears ready to enact some welcome measures to encourage donating to charities; not-for-profits are beginning to restructure, re-focus, and reorient themselves to new ways of thinking and doing. Traditional notions of granting and charity are being supplanted by concepts of community investment and bottom-up processes of change.

Never have there been such great opportunities for creative collaboration and synergy. And, of course, never has there been a greater need for us to stand up, to proclaim who we are, and to build the effective partnerships which allow us to tackle problems grown too complex and intractable for any one sector to address alone.

In the turmoil and uncertainty of these times, people more than anything else, need to feel part of a wider community, they need to feel valued as individuals with their own talents and contributions to make—not just throwaway workers or gullible consumers, they need to feel empowered to shape their own futures. Voluntary organizations, private in form, public in function, have a greater role than ever. We are all Virginie Larivières, Thérèse Thibodeaus, Craig Kielburgers. In our more modest way we, too, express their passion to improve the world and their conviction that the future belongs, not to those who get, but to those who give.