

Genetic Engineering of the Volunteer Movement*

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This is a rant. I say this not by way of apology, but rather by way of a caution. If you're not in the mood for a rant, don't read this. I write it for two reasons. First, I am passionate about these issues and feel the need to send my concerns "out there." Second, I want to stimulate some dialogue about these issues. Debate and disagreement are equally welcomed.

An Historical Perspective

For centuries volunteerism in Canada and the United States has evolved in a natural manner, shifting and changing shape in response to other shifts in culture, society, and notions of social responsibility.

In the United States, volunteerism has a history directly traceable to the first European settlers who, seeking refuge from religious persecution, established a new society founded on individualism, and individual action. Over time, volunteerism has become deeply entrenched in the American way of life. The general pattern seems to be, if something is wrong, Americans set about to fix it. Full stop.

In Canada, volunteerism is also deeply embedded in our way of life. I suspect that, in our country, volunteerism is more the product of vast spaces, a harsh climate, and the need for early settlers to help one another to survive. The inclination to help one another continued to thrive in small, relatively isolated rural communities well into the twentieth century, and remains alive and well to this day.

In both countries, volunteerism and the volunteer movement have changed significantly over time, evolving naturally in response to changes in our larger societies. From the relatively unorganized individual-based charity of the 1800s, volunteerism mutated as government agencies and nonprofit organizations began to deliver services to "the needy" in the early and mid decades of the 1900s. Informal volunteering has continued to thrive in both of our countries (people are still marvelously willing to help one another), but formal volunteering through organizations—has flourished as the number and variety of nonprofit organizations has increased dramatically.

We don't think about it much, but the nature of volunteering has been shifting. At one point it was almost exclusively unorganized. People were just helping their neighbours and family members as needed. What "charity" happened was individually based. This is the classic "lady bountiful" typology in which individuals—women mostly—administered unto the sick and the orphaned. As the sense of social responsibility grew, and as governments began to take on the provision of more and more services to those "less fortunate," citizens also began to organize more formal efforts to reach out to persons in need. Many of our organizations today had their beginnings in such grassroots

organizing by citizen volunteers who saw a need, rallied support and, over time, built organizations to respond.

Then the nonprofit sector discovered professionalism. Health and social service professions sprouted and multiplied, and a sense that only formally trained "professionals" could deliver effective services tended to drive volunteers into back rooms and onto sidelines. Paid, academically-trained staff, working in those very organizations that volunteers created, came to dominate service delivery efforts while volunteers were typically confined to support functions. The philosophy of "volunteers will supplement but never supplant the work of paid staff" took firm hold in the new profession to spring up in the 1970s: volunteer management.

From the perspective of how services are organized, both countries have seen a steady decline in government-based programs since the heyday of public services in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A growing distaste for the warehouse nature of institutional care combined with worsening economic conditions have pushed more and more services out of the realm of state sponsorship and into the community where they have been taken up by a continuously growing nonprofit sector. Not only can nonprofits typically deliver more sensitive, responsive, and humane care in their communities, but their smaller and more efficient administration makes them a cost-effective alternative to government-run programs.

We all understand that nonprofits also enhance their services and keep costs down through the involvement of volunteers. And while we don't really like to talk about it too much, we know that nonprofit organizations are becoming increasingly reliant on volunteers for front line service delivery. As budgets are slashed, staff numbers diminish, and administrators desperately seek cheaper ways of meeting rising demands, an army of volunteers has been recruited into the human service delivery system. In contrast to the "supplement but never supplant" mantra of 25 years ago, volunteers are now at the very heart of the real work in our sector. Ask any collection of managers of volunteers what would happen if volunteers withdrew their labour for a month and the resounding response would be: "Our agency would cease to function" and "Our clients would simply not receive service."

During the recent SARS outbreak in Toronto, hospitals went into lockdown as a strategy to contain the spread of the disease. All volunteers were suspended from duty. It only took a few days for the staff to realize just how important volunteers were to daily functioning, and administrators and managers of volunteer services were pressured to bring volunteers back as soon as possible. Some hospitals even looked to volunteers to help with SARS screening protocols, placing them on the most frontal edge of the front lines during the crisis.

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From Evolution to Engineering

So, volunteerism and the work of volunteers have grown and diminished, changing in shape in Canada and the United States over the last two to three hundred years, naturally evolving in response to structural, political, economic, and social changes in our larger societies. Volunteers and the volunteer movement have been what we needed them to be, and their evolution has been relatively unplanned, and unmanaged. I liken this to the Darwinian notion of evolution, whereby

species mutate and evolve, survive and become extinct, not according to some grand scheme, but in response to shifts in external conditions that, by happenstance, make certain mutations more "fit" than others. The process is one of natural selection rather than good management.

But things are changing. Over the last decade or so in the United States, and more recently in Canada, volunteerism has been "noticed" in a more formal sense. Instead of quietly evolving in a natural manner, volunteerism as a movement has been "taken in hand."

For example, the Points of Light Foundation in the United States is literally attempting to recreate voluntary participation. Its mission "to engage more people more effectively in volunteer community service to help solve serious social problems" steers volunteers towards laudable efforts in areas such as homelessness, violence, poverty, personal abuse, substance addiction, and health. Nothing wrong with that. But it is still steering.

Vast federal resources over the last decade or so have been channelled through the Foundation and its public parent, the Corporation for National and Community Service, to mobilize volunteers in a specific direction (most recently, towards homeland security and disaster planning). Encompassing the volunteer centre movement, the Foundation has been marshalling volunteerism towards government-defined ends. More recent expansions in a wide range of national community service programs have directed large numbers of citizens into community work. While not formally called "volunteering" by its proponents, the lines frequently blur between what some call "community service" and volunteering, and many have argued that, from a practical perspective, the distinction is inconsequential. It's all necessary and valuable. And certainly it is.

To be clear, it is not my intent to be critical of either the Points of Light Foundation or other US government efforts to mobilize community involvement. I am observing only. And what is happening to our south is of great interest because what happens to volunteering and volunteer management in the United States typically migrates north into Canada seven to ten years later.

In Canada we have only in the last two years seen any discernable political consciousness about volunteering as a social phenomenon. Unlike the United States which has deliberately promoted and supported volunteering through every Presidential Administration since Kennedy to the present (from creating the Peace Corps and VISTA through governors' offices, mayors' offices on volunteerism; protective legislation; etc.), volunteerism has operated in a virtual public policy void in Canada. But that is changing.

As a result of extraordinarily effective advocacy during the International Year of Volunteers, politicians and bureaucrats have begun to realize that volunteering exists. It is now drawing some attention. Funding for research is beginning to flow. Resources are beginning—really for the first time in this country—to be available for volunteerism per se.

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The Critical Question

The question that arises for me as I observe the shifts in volunteerism over the last century, compared to shifts in volunteerism taking place right now is this: *to whose ends?*

Unlike the pre-1990s volunteerism which naturally evolved in response to changes in community, society, and human need, volunteerism is now being managed by political forces. Not all of it, of course, but large chunks of it to be sure. And what has our experience been when volunteerism is seized and turned to political ends? Well, here are a few examples:

- The criminal justice system grabbed onto community service a decade and a half ago and defined it as a cheap alternative to jail time. So we now say to convicted offenders: Jail or community service - which punishment would you prefer?
- In the social service system here in Canada we have created workfare programs (often called welfare reform in the United States). We say to persons on extremely limited public funding: Would you like to volunteer and retain your benefits, or would you like to see your benefits cut or curtailed altogether? This is a voluntary program you understand? You can choose which option you would like.
- And in the education system in Canada, we have just begun to formally integrate community service (often called volunteering) into school programs. In Ontario, for example, which is the province where I live, the provincial government just three years ago decided that high school students must do 40 hours of community service—typically called volunteering—as a condition of high school graduation. No community service, no certificate. This program, ostensibly, has been designed to encourage civic responsibility, promote community values, and provide expanded opportunities for learning. So, in 40 hours, students will be screened, oriented, trained, and placed... and receive meaningful learning from whatever hours of service might be left for them to give after the upfront administrative functions have been satisfied.
- And they are to be placed in meaningful positions. The organizations that receive the service of these tens of thousands of students flooding into the sector must do all of the record keeping for the schools to ensure that the hours have been worked, and find meaningful positions that can be done by these young people in the remaining few hours available to them.

As the end of school year approaches, the headline in my local newspaper recently read: "Students warned to volunteer or miss graduation." Remind me, this is the program that was developed in the hope of creating life-long volunteers, right?

If I sound a little skeptical about government attention to volunteering, it is because the track record hasn't been stellar to date. Programs are developed by politicians and bureaucrats without consultation with managers of volunteers who are, we must surely admit by now, the only group of people in our society who truly know anything important about how to mobilize and coordinate the efforts of volunteers. Some bright spark in some government office decides that 40 hours is the right number. Where did that come from? Jail or volunteer? Mmmm, let me think. I wonder what does that do to the public image of volunteering?

Here we are, struggling to promote volunteering with too few resources. Politicians and other funders cut budgets year after year. They push agencies into ever-greater reliance on volunteers. They don't consider volunteer program infrastructure costs as eligible funding items (go figure that!), and they promote community service through their own initiatives by making it mandatory on penalty of jail, being cut off of welfare, or failure to graduate.

As the volunteer movement is steered to meet political ends, who's in charge? Who's making the decisions? What do those people know about volunteering and volunteer management? Are there any representatives from "our side" at the table?

It's a bit like genetic engineering, don't you think? Some scientist locked away in a lab somewhere is messing about with genetic material, creating new species from existing ones, all with the promise of the "greater good." Do you really believe it won't get out of hand?

With regard to volunteering, the question for me at the end of this rather long rant is this: Volunteering to whose ends... and will it still be volunteering when the genes are