

The Fabric of Welfare: Voluntary Organisations, Government and Welfare in New Zealand, 1840–2005. By Margaret Tennant. Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 2007. 274pp. NZ price: \$49.99. ISBN 978-1-877242-37-3.

AUSTRALASIAN WELFARE HISTORIES written prior to the 1990s tended to follow a similar trajectory. They began with a (slightly disapproving) discussion of the origins of colonial charity, but moved quickly to evidence of its failures cast as an essential pre-requisite to the early experiments with statutory benefits from which the colonies derived their reputation as social laboratories for the Western world. In the wake of cutbacks to the welfare state in the latter years of the twentieth century, such triumphalist narratives fell into decline, creating a space for attention to turn again to what by then was called the voluntary sector. But these new histories of voluntary activity often shared a tendency to triumphalism, making claims for independence and local innovation that were difficult to sustain.

As the New Zealand participant in the prestigious Johns Hopkins comparative research project on the non-profit sector, Margaret Tennant is well positioned to avoid both of these pitfalls. Rejecting the binary oppositions that construct much of the discourse within the welfare field, she argues for a mutual dependence between the government and the voluntary sector. While the balance has always been in a state of change, the old notion of a moving frontier, she argues, is inadequate. Rather, she suggests that the relationship between the two sectors should be understood as a fabric which is constantly being woven and rewoven. As some threads break new ones are introduced. Boundaries are blurred and old certainties are challenged but the integrity of the whole is never at risk.

A history encompassing 165 years is a bold undertaking, but Tennant argues that a broad sweep is necessary in order to avoid the 'short-term understandings and unwarranted assumptions of novelty' that mark much presentist thinking about welfare. This is no story of steady improvement, but rather a series of cycles in which claims are stated and restated and old myths are cast aside. New Zealand's voluntary sector, Tennant suggests, has demonstrated a capacity to innovate, but has never been able to command the means to allow it to function independently of state assistance. The relationship which developed between the two sectors was primarily complementary. Voluntary agencies courting state assistance moulded their services to meet the state's needs, consenting to the resulting limitations on their autonomy. From time to time new organizations arose to challenge this cosy arrangement, but the paucity of local philanthropy meant that over time the attraction of state funding outweighed the appeal of independence.

Tennant structures her analysis around four chronological divisions. The first covers the nineteenth century, where a population keen to be free of the impost of the English Poor Laws, but not prepared to completely abandon its implied right to relief, attempted to construct a voluntary welfare system on the British model, but never had the resources to do so. The introduction of Charitable Aid Boards from 1885 marked the formal introduction of the state into direct relief, but its contributions had underwritten the voluntary organizations almost from their inception.

The expansion of the welfare state in the early years of the twentieth century enhanced rather than destroyed voluntary efforts, creating new opportunities for organizations, increasingly formed on a national basis, to mark out new areas in which they could provide services that would justify state support. Even at its most expansionist the state continued to rely on voluntary agencies, whether it was to administer foster care programs or develop specialist services for the elderly. The voluntary sector was also an important provider of the paid social care work that preceded the development of professional social work in New Zealand.

This cosy arrangement continued during the post-war boom when the welfare state was at its height. The discourse here was one of partnership, with the government

underwriting established organizations to deliver services it valued, while voluntary organizations looked to government to extend its subsidies to cover the new services they had pioneered. However, by the 1970s, both Maori and feminist groups were challenging this arrangement, destabilizing a status quo they saw as culturally insensitive and paternalist. Clients, too, adopted a language derived from allied liberation movements to claim a right to speak on their own behalf rather than simply accept the services offered to them. However, organizations that had their origins in such challenges soon lost their radical edge, in the face of the reality that government assistance was the path to long-term viability.

By the end of the twentieth century the welfare state was in decline, but this provided no greater autonomy for the voluntary sector. Business relationships replaced partnerships and voluntary agencies were forced to compete with each other to attract government contracts. In the process the successful organizations had to take on the language of the market, blurring divisions not only between government and non-government sectors, but also between non-profit organizations and business. Such a balancing act demanded higher levels of professionalization, not only in staffing but also in relation to fund-raising, although even the most successful campaigns aim to raise less than 10% of the annual budget of their organizations.

Much of this chronology is constant across the Western world, but Tennant grounds her story quite firmly in New Zealand. Central to this distinctiveness is the presence of Maori, who certainly engage in action on their own behalf, but through structures that do not sit easily within Western notions of a voluntary sector, for participation is an obligation and it is the group rather than the 'others' who are the focus of help. The tensions experienced by Maori in trying to share in the government largesse without abandoning their cultural principles are traced throughout the book, culminating in the final section which discusses how previously Pakeha voluntary organizations have to come to terms with the new status accorded to Maori clients and staff following the revival of the Treaty of Waitangi. The distinctive religious composition of the New Zealand population is also recognized, although the greater dependence on the state ensures that what Americans would call 'faith-based charities' never achieved the prominence that they have in other jurisdictions.

Tennant's account seeks always to achieve balance between the top-down approach of the state and the intensely local roots from which much voluntary activity grows. Case studies of organizations and individuals feature throughout the text, with special attention paid to the foundation stories which imbue so many voluntary agencies with their sense of history and meaning. Other case studies provide an insight into the changing nature of fund-raising; from floral fetes, through queen competitions to state lotteries, telethons and red-nose days. Most importantly Tennant consistently reminds her readers that this is a small society. When representatives of the voluntary sector approach government for money, it is not an encounter between strangers. Indeed, all too often, it is wives approaching husbands, or neighbours talking to neighbours. Parliamentarians and senior bureaucrats are commonly active in voluntary organizations in addition to their role in government, and senior public servants often turn to colleagues in the voluntary sector to test new services that they hope to see incorporated into policy.

These complex interrelationships, Tennant suggests, are deserving of further research, but by tracing here the complex warp and weft that make up the fabric of welfare in New Zealand, she has established an extraordinarily sound base from which such research can proceed. I look forward to reading the work of the next generation of scholars to take up the challenge that Tennant has laid down.

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