A cohort of twenty British national voluntary agencies serving handicapped people was studied in 1976 and again in 1989 after a decade of major shifts in public policy. Changes and continuities were identified in income, structure, governance, management, programme, inter-organisation relations and advocacy. A consistent pattern of growth, bureaucratisation and professionalisation was found, with relatively little change in the dominant mode of financing, statutory or philanthropic. A three-stage model is proposed to describe the development of British voluntary agencies since the 1970s, and some of the organisational implications of current policies for the 1990s are noted.

Introduction

As part of the reaction to the crisis of the welfare state, there has been a resurgence of interest in Britain and in most other European countries in the capacity of voluntary organisations serving as an alternative to government in the provision of public services. This represents a dramatic change from the 1970s when there was still concern in Britain about the survival, or at least the uncertain fate, of voluntary organisations in a welfare state 'whose ever widening scope of responsibility and power appears to overshadow and challenge the viability of the non-governmental sector' (Kramer, 1981, p.11).

This view and the era it evokes seem quite distant from the late 1980s when, as the Griffiths Report put it tersely, 'local authorities should be purchasers of care and not monolithic providers' (Griffiths, 1988, p.6). As a policy goal, it implies a reversal of the historical pattern whereby many services of voluntary organisations were eventually taken over and provided by government — a government that now seeks to divest
itself of this responsibility. It was not long ago that the major concern of the voluntary sector in Britain was about its declining role; now, in contrast, there is anxiety because it may face an expanding role in the 1990s due to major changes in the policy context and the emergence of a new, Conservative paradigm of the British welfare state.

Since 1979 the Thatcher Government has sought to limit state responsibility for the social services and to favour more use of non-governmental organisations in order to promote an ‘enterprise culture’ (Wolch, 1990). The primary strategies to reduce statutory ownership and provision have been de-governmentalisation (de-nationalisation and privatisation of former state-owned industries and public utilities), and requiring the contracting-out of many of the functions of local government. The Conservative ideology underlying these changes has stressed the values of the competitive market, individualism, voluntarism, ‘value for money’, as well as greater consumer choice and participation (Brenton, 1985; Johnson, 1986; NCVO, 1989). There has also been an extended, dramatic struggle for power between central and local government in which voluntary organisations are caught in the middle — with the larger national agencies seemingly beneficiaries — and local, community-based organisations as likely losers. Ten major initiatives affecting the social services have been undertaken in rapid succession since 1985, which are widely regarded as unprecedented in their speed and scope, and as the most significant changes in social policy since the end of World War II. Rooted in a revival of nineteenth-century liberalism, these trends represent a radical departure from the British tradition of social reform and incrementalism, reversing expenditure trends of over two decades (Glennerster, Power and Travers, 1989).

Despite Conservative rhetoric to the contrary, the political outcome, setting the stage for the next decade in the social services, is a greater concentration of power in central government which exercises more control over local government taxation, spending and operations as a result of 50 pieces of legislation restricting local government since 1979 (Pickvance, 1987). Local authority social services departments will be severely limited in their direct service functions, confined to an ‘enabling’ role in which they finance, arrange and coordinate, but not directly provide the personal social services; rather, they will be expected to contract out for community care and other statutory services.

Government has also tried to strengthen voluntarism by stimulating charitable giving by individuals and corporations through authorisation of payroll deductions, more liberal income tax deductions, and lifting the 34 year-old ban on advertising by charities on independent radio and television. These measures, as far as can be determined, have had little impact on increased philanthropic giving (Charities Aid Foundation,