Governing Advocacy and Dissent in the Partnership State: Canadian Stories

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Introduction

As in many other countries, the Canadian government and the governments of some of its provinces have moved towards defining and formalizing their relations with non-profit, voluntary and community-based associations within civil society. The discourse surrounding these developments typically include statements that explicitly approve of the contribution of the third sector to democracy, applaud its advocacy function, and acknowledge the legitimacy of its role in organising dissent. Despite this rhetoric, however, advocacy and dissent are hardly the primary roles envisioned by governments when they promote and support “partnerships” with the third sector. Moreover, there are a variety of ways in which states “govern” these sorts of activities in the context of these new partnerships.

This paper is particularly concerned with the relation between policies of participation and partnership on the one hand, and social citizenship agency on the other. Following T.H. Marshall, social citizenship rights are traditionally understood as derivative from civil and political rights. The right to basic individual freedoms of speech, thought, religion, association and property, as well as rights to the exercise of political power through the vote or through direct participation in political institutions, created the conditions for citizens to join forces in organized associations and to effectively claim and enact social rights. In other words, the right of citizens to freely organize within civil society and on that basis, participate in politics, culminated in the construction of welfare states. We will argue in this paper that this dynamic continues to shape citizenship regimes, but that the obverse is now true as well: welfare states influence the way in which civil and political rights are defended or claimed by citizens. In the context of third way social citizenship regimes¹, we are asking about the impact of policies favouring participation and partnership on social citizenship agency, that is, on the character and efficacy of citizens’ advocacy and dissent in the arena of social politics. In short, do these policies tend to open up or close down citizen influence on the orientation of social decisions taken in the political realm?

In the first section of the paper, I discuss participation and partnership as a particular form of governance associated with what I am calling third way citizenship regimes. In the second section, I present a framework for understanding the dynamics of social politics. I will be focussing on agents and the “composing of constituencies” (Hobson and Lindholm, 1997), the mobilization of power resources, political opportunities and institutionalized power relations. In the third section of the paper, I introduce the state – civil society relation in different Canadian jurisdictions, as well as the political institutions and culture that prevail, before taking up case studies of three sites within Canada in the following sections: the federal level, the province of Ontario, and the province of Quebec. These two provinces have been chosen, not because they are the largest and most central, but because they tend to represent two extremes within the diverse Canadian experience. Ontario has a long history of primarily conservative, managerial

¹ We define a “third way” social citizenship regime as characterized by strong roles for the state, the market and the third sector, with an emphasis on inter-sectoral partnerships, citizen participation, and responsibilities associated with rights.
government, which was, however, represented by an exceptionally neo-liberal leadership throughout the late 1990’s (pro-market, anti-state and pro-individual responsibility). It is not alone in this orientation. Alberta and more recently, British Columbia, are led by governments of a similar persuasion. At the other end of the spectrum - but still “liberal” – lies Quebec with its Catholic heritage, nationalist state, social democratic aspirations, and sensitivity to the continental tradition of subsidiarity.¹ Quebec is not the only province, however, to place high value on social citizenship. Saskatchewan, for example, provided the model for Canada’s health insurance system, Medicare; it was the birthplace of Canada’s social democratic party (NDP) and has often elected NDP governments at the provincial level, as has Manitoba. Finally, the federal level represents an entirely different dynamic because of the specific nature of national voluntary organizations in Canada.

The premise of this paper is that the effective and creative development of social citizenship depends both on policies of participation and partnership, and on organized citizens. One without the other is rarely sufficient to mount and maintain a lively voice for advocacy and dissent in the society. On the basis of these the case studies, a number of theoretical questions will be addressed in the conclusion. For example,

- what are the conditions that either strengthen or weaken the ability of the third sector to continue and even reinforce its role in advocacy and dissent, despite its typically ambivalent entanglement in “partnership” with the government?
- It is clear that advocacy is rarely abandoned, but the way it is practiced may change under certain conditions. What is the significance of such new practices for the efficacy of advocacy and dissent?
- To what extent is the different treatment of third sector advocacy by government determined by institutional or political orientations?
- What does this tell us about possible effects of different strategies for maintaining and developing the advocacy role of the third sector?
- Is there a future for third sector advocacy and dissent in the context of partnership? Or will this role come to be restricted to less legitimate protest and social movements?

Participation as Governance in the Partnership State

Participation and partnership are mainstays of third way citizenship regimes. These regimes resist policies that are designed strictly to limit or control the capacity of the state in favour of the market. First, they taut “social investment” where state spending is favoured if it can be shown to promise significant social (and economic) returns in the future. Job-training, early childhood education and poverty reduction are typical priorities (Saint-Denis, 2000). Second, they aim to balance citizenship rights with responsibilities, or to replace passive with active programs. Beneficiaries of social assistance or unemployment insurance are expected to participate, for example, in job search, placement or training programs (Walters, 1997). Third, third way policies tend to be as concerned with improving social capital as they are in improving human capital. Thus, citizen engagement and associational life are promoted as values in and of themselves. Finally, third way regimes claim to promote flexibility and sensitivity to citizens’ needs through decentralization and the formation of local partnerships with community-based groups, close to the intended beneficiaries of policies. In the social realm, the non-profit sector or “social economy” is generally encouraged over private market enterprises. These four characteristics of a third way citizenship regime are combined, awkwardly and in variable measures, with the neo-liberal economic strategies of

¹ Subsidiarity refers to the principle of always enabling the most local level possible to address the welfare needs of citizens, be this the family, the community, or the region, with the central state becoming involved only in those areas or tasks where local or voluntary action would be inefficient, such as regulation and financing
marketization and privatization. Today, not only proponents of progressive governance, but also, proponents of neo-liberalism are likely to advocate third way strategies of partnership and participation.  

This paper is particularly concerned with the relation between policies of participation and partnership on the one hand, and social citizenship agency on the other. Following T.H. Marshall (1969), social citizenship rights are traditionally understood as derivative from civil and political rights. The right to basic individual freedoms of speech, thought, religion, association and property, as well as rights to the exercise of political power through the vote or through direct participation in political institutions, created the conditions for citizens to join forces and to effectively claim and enact social rights. In other words, the right of citizens to freely organize within civil society and on that basis, participate in politics, culminated in the construction of welfare states. We will argue in this paper that this dynamic continues to shape welfare regimes, but that the obverse is now true as well: welfare states influence the way in which civil and political rights are enacted by citizens. In the context of Third way welfare regimes, we are asking about the impact of policies favouring participation and partnership on social citizenship agency, that is, on the character and efficacy of citizens’ agency in the arena of social politics. In short, do these policies tend to open up or close down citizen influence on social decisions taken in the political realm?  

The meanings and issues of participation and partnership reflect this very question. Participation, in its most generic sense, means to take part in or share in a process. Thus, participative democracy means that citizens directly represent themselves in the political process, rather than delegating others to act in their name or on their behalf. But in social politics, participation is typically a contradictory relationship. It can be based on two different types of initiatives. The first emanates from a position of power, such as the government, and takes the form of the call to participate and the structuring of specific opportunities and institutions for participation. The second emerges in the quest for power by citizens, in advocacy and dissent. Often passing for a single strategy, participation always represents a relation between a strategy of incorporation on the one hand, and one of contention on the other - though both may or may not be simultaneously or symmetrically involved. Moreover, incorporation can be resisted, and confrontation can be stonewalled.  

As for partnership, it is best understood in the context of social politics as a more or less formal relation of asymmetrical cooperation. If participation is political, partnership is rather (inter)organisational or institutional. Like participation, it can either lead to the acquiescence of the weaker partner, or to the recognition of the formally equal status and rights of partners. I would argue that incorporation and acquiescence are the outcome of participation and partnership, in the absence of a sufficiently autonomous and capably organized civil society. The thrust of the argument is that that citizenship agency in social politics depends on the autonomy and capacity of non-market civil society. Third way policies of participation and partnership interact with and impact on civil society autonomy and capacity in ways that are shaped not only by these policies, but also by the patterns of self-organization of civil society in formal and informal associations, movements, coalitions, networks and so on.

2 Since the preparation of this draft, the governments in the three Canadian case study jurisdictions are closer to neo-liberal than third way thinking. At the federal level, a minority Conservative government was elected in 2006, and all indications are towards moving as fast as possible on an ideological neo-liberal agenda, as opposed to third way pragmatism. In Ontario, although a harshly pro-market, anti-social government was replaced in 2003, the new Liberal government has shown few signs of significant change. Finally, Quebec has also had a right-leaning government since 2003, though it has not been able to make much headway in implementing its bold plans for “re-engineering the state”, so far. In all three cases, policies of participation have been abandoned by the current governments, while partnerships are simply taken for granted. Our statement that neo-liberals also support governance through participation and partnership is premised on the discourse of trans-national agents actively promoting the adoption of neo-liberal policies (i.e. marketization and privatization) (e.g. Aycrigg, 1998; Gramberger, 2001). The Canadian experience forces us to question the reality accompanying that discourse. But that discussion lies beyond the boundaries of this paper.
Social politics

The concept of social politics is part of the legacy of TH Marshall’s treatment of citizenship. Building on his ideas, political sociologists such as Esping-Andersen and Walter Korpi developed theories of the emergence of the welfare state, focusing on the organization of new class coalitions (Esping-Andersen and Korpi, 1998; Esping-Andersen, 1990). According to this approach, allied and organized interests in civil society have been able to mobilize sufficient power resources within the democratic political system to eventually gain control of governments, and shift policy to the left. The idea of cross-class coalitions has since evolved to include consideration of the agency of new social movements, based more on identity than on class, such as the women’s movement and, in the US, the civil rights movement (Kriesi, 2001; Mannow, 2001; Quadagno, ).

This important strain of welfare state theory is closely associated with the neo-institutionalist approach, which explains the structure and operation of different welfare regimes by looking mainly at their institutional design (for example, their constitutions and established programs), the interests at play within the political system, and the relative political power of different parties representing different ideas. It has thus become increasingly focused on what goes on within the political sphere, with little attention to public sphere, or civil society. More recently, some authors have refreshed the neo-institutionalist perspective to include the power of ideas - mobilized outside the political system, in civil society – to influence the political sphere (Fischer, 2003). Still, the focus tends to be more on new actors and ideas than on social agency per se, that is, on the mobilization of power resources, whether they be directed to resistance or to claims-making.

If we turn to the literature on civil society, a different picture emerges. This literature is diverse. At least three strains can be identified. The first is normative and even ideological; it identifies civil society as the locus of democratic renewal. It is a perspective that emerged in the context of the political transition of post-communist states and Latin American dictatorships, where civil societies had previously been extinguished, and has been supported by authors such as Cohen and Arato (1992) and Keene (1998). The focus in this case is precisely on the agency of civil society, that is, on its potential for innovative social and political action outside of, but in engagement with the state. Social citizenship agency is taken to be an expression of – indeed equivalent to – an active, participative form of democracy that needs to be encouraged locally, nationally and globally. This idealistic vision has been characterized by Hann (2004) as the “church of civil society”.

This strain of the literature partially converges with a second, which focuses on governance. Some of this literature, too, has taken a highly normative position, in which governance is identified with a specific, neo-liberal model of “good governance” touted by most notably by the World Bank (Stoker, 1998; Jessop, 1999). This perspective looks at participation and partnership between government and civil society groups as tools for improved governance: not only can they potentially operate as efficiency-building strategies, but also, as democracy-building strategies. But it can also be analytical and critical. It tends to be at least as concerned with the contradictions that these strategies generate as it is with their possibilities. While new forms of governance are ostensibly more open to input from civil society and

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3 Power resources refer to those advantages that a group may control, and that contribute to its ability to prevail in political contests (for example, legitimacy, information, expertise, networks, or rights, such as the vote).

4 By claims-making, we refer to discursive or direct action in the public sphere, calling for new rights, for the expansion of, or better access to existing rights, or for alternative ways of framing the question of social rights.
more prone to delegate responsibilities to civil society groups, this is often at the cost of the groups’ autonomy. For example, calls for tender from government agencies will define the services that they require from a voluntary organisation, and impose upward accountability. A useful concept emerging from this literature is that of “Collaborative conflict” (Evers, 1993), which describes the contradictory agency of those civil society groups that engage with government in various ways (service provision, consultation, etc.) while continuing to claim their autonomy in the realm of ideas and interests, and to challenge the very government that (increasingly) pays their way. This double strategy has been dubbed “parallel agency” by Lustiger-Thaler and Shragge (1993). In our view, this perspective needs to be augmented by a more dynamic analysis of the emergence, processes and consequences of contradictory collaboration.

Finally, a third strain of the literature on civil society is inspired by social movement theory. This vast and diverse field, which is concerned with the study of contentious collective action within civil society, has been admirably reviewed by others (Benford and Snow, 2000). What is most relevant for the argument that we will develop is the extent to which social movement theory can inspire our thinking about the emergence, processes and consequences of “participation” and state-civil society “partnership”. Three concepts are particularly useful: collective identity-formation, resource mobilisation, and political opportunity. We are particularly interested in collective identity-formation, or the self-organizing processes by which collective actors are constituted. Following Hobson and Lindholm (1997), we conceptualise this process as one of “composing constituencies”, which they define as “both the process of creating shared meanings and consciousness among diverse individuals within a social category… and the framing of grievances and goals of a social movement” (478). Constituencies represent a more or less coherent position in discursive arenas in both the public and political spheres. Their existence is a condition of the effective mobilisation of power resources to push forward an agenda or idea in the political arena. The effectiveness of a collective actor’s resources mobilization will also depend on its strategic use of political opportunities, which relate to the degree of openness of a political system to penetration by external pressures and ideas. These opportunities may be structural (for example, inherent in the constitution or in institutionalized channels of communication) or circumstantial (for example, a weak government, an ally in the public service, an impending election…).

It would be a mistake to equate civil society – even organized civil society - with social movements. Indeed, the so-called “third sector” (including community, voluntary and non-profit organizations) that, in the name of participation and partnership, has recently been drawn into relations of consultation and contracting with governments, is quite distinct from a social movement in at least two important ways. First, while social movements organize themselves as vast, loose networks of people and associations, held together by commitment to a shared identity and contentious discourse, the third sector is rather a “loose and baggy monster”, composed of individual organizations that may or may not interact with each other, and no subjective collective identity. However, Third Way governments’ efforts to interact with “third sectors” as a whole, have a “naming” effect. They not only encourage the emergence of self-identification as a “sector”, but may even stimulate self-organization within the sector. Second, in contrast to a social movement, the third sector’s engagement with the state may be wholly collaborative, and without any of the contention that defines a social movement. Yet as Evers (1993:9) has argued, this sector is "not only shaped by public policies but also [is] a proactive factor influencing public discourse and social realities". It is not possible to conclude from the historical record that the third sector has little or no autonomous capacity or will to influence welfare state developments, for in many cases, effective claims for more and better state intervention in the social realm came from actors in the voluntary sector, dealing with unmet social needs on the front line. Historically, the so-called third sector (religious or secular) was in forefront of welfare regime development and actively engaged in social politics.

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5 For example, in Canada, groups that that seek to gain the status of a charitable organisation or to contract with the federal government, are severely restricted with respect to their permissible involvement in advocacy.
If we are interested in characterizing how people and organizations in civil society impinge on political power in the social realm, then we need to know how both the state and civil society are organized independently of each other. Then, we need to know how their interdependency is constructed. The concept of hegemony may be useful here, if used loosely, in a heuristic fashion. Hegemony refers to the way in which dominant classes operate with the consent of the subordinate classes, who come to share their ways of seeing, thinking and acting. Outside of a strictly class analysis, we can understand state – civil society relations in terms of the degree of consent, or uncritical collaboration that characterizes the relation, or the extent to which this relation can rather be characterized as contentious, confrontational or even conflictual.

The hypothesis put forward here, then, is that the extent of consent building for state-supported social policy orientations in a given society will depend on its social politics, that is, on the autonomy and capacity of social citizenship agency in the social arena, in relation to the state, and on the opportunities and constraints that the state presents. By autonomy, we mean the extent to which collective identities are developed and transformed into “constituencies” within civil society, representing coherent, self-constructed positions regarding social citizenship. By capacity, we mean the way in which civil society is organized: in broad, loose subjectively-constituted networks as with social movements, in discreet organizations as with the third sector, or otherwise. Both variables will impact on its ability to effectively mobilize power resources. But they will do so within a given state structure and political culture.

States, Civil Societies and Political Cultures in Canada

Under Canadian federalism, constitutional competence lies with the provincial governments in all those areas where third sectors tend to be most involved - health, education, welfare and culture. This does not mean that the federal government does not legislate and otherwise intervene in these areas. Not only does it incorporate family benefits into the tax system, and administer the Canada Pension and Employment Insurance, but it has piloted several national policies such as Medicare and contributes financially to their implementation in each of the provinces. Due to this division of responsibilities, virtually all third sector organizations involved in service provision relate to the provincial governments, not the federal government, and it is at provincial level that “partnership” becomes a contested issue. At the national level, Canada’s style of “executive federalism” means that social politics are dominated by relations and interactions between first ministers, departmental ministers, and deputy ministers of the federal and provincial governments. Social politics takes on a very different tenor as “participation”, not partnership - that is, access to the state outside of elections - becomes the principal issue for civil society actors in relation to the federal government.

Throughout Canada as elsewhere, the third sector has been increasingly integrated into new social policies, particularly in the areas of childcare, homecare for the elderly and employability development (Banting, 2000). The voluntary sector, as it is typically represented in English Canada, is best recognized for its advocacy and charity work, and, at the local level, for its coordination and provision of welfare and community services, through contracts with municipal or provincial governments. The province of Québec provides an exception to this essentially social representation of the sector. There, the concept of a “voluntary sector” is alien and considered “outdated”. Instead, the third sector is represented, in both popular and government discourse, as a social movement consisting in autonomous community action (Secrétariat, 2001). How can this striking difference be explained?
The explanation for the dominance of different third sector models in different parts of the country must start with a “two-nation” representation of Canada. Canada consists of two official language communities and founding cultures, French in Québec and English in most of the rest of the country. There are also two distinct institutional histories (Lachapelle et al, 1993; White, 1996). The divide between English and French Canada constitutes the principal cultural, political and institutional fault line in the country, even more central than class in the country’s institutional history (Jenson, 1989). This divide is due first, to language (in the 2001 census, 81% of the Québec population claimed French as its mother tongue compared to only 4.2% in the rest of Canada) and second, to the cultural and institutional legacy of the Catholic Church in Québec. In contrast, English Canada’s roots are diversely Protestant. The result is that what is known in Québec as the “community sector” has developed in a wholly different context than that of the English Canadian “voluntary sector”, both nationally and in each of the other provinces.

Competitive nation-building between the Canadian federal government and the Québec provincial government during the years of intensive welfare state growth in the 1960’s established and reinforced these different state-civil society relations (Jenson, 1989; Banting, 1995). Thus, in the 1960’s the federal government introduced a series of pan-Canadian social rights, such as pensions, unemployment insurance, family allowances and health insurance, representing a considerable federal contribution to what were constitutionally (but until then, seldom assumed) provincial responsibilities. Simultaneously, Québec was developing its own parallel policies in competition with the federal government, and not without contention between them. The “Quiet Revolution” refers to the decade (1960’s) during which Québec underwent an almost blindingly rapid transformation from a traditional, Catholic, conservative and inward-looking province into a modern, secular society with strong nationalist and social democratic aspirations. In recent times, Québec has led the other provinces in a push towards a more decentralised federalism, in terms of both social policy decisions and fiscal balance.

The dominant representation of the third sector in English Canada - the “voluntary sector” - largely reflects the liberal, Anglo-Saxon world view in which the sector is seated. Similarities to the British voluntary sector are limited, however. Inspired largely by the North American social gospel movement of the 19th century, the third sector in English Canada has always been as much involved in advocacy, citizen mobilisation and welfare service development, as in charity and health and welfare service delivery. Early voluntary organisations were characterized by their middle and upper class leadership, often based in professional social work, their links to the Protestant churches and their reliance on philanthropy. Some of these characteristics continue to dominate the sector, particularly at the federal level. Because of the welfare responsibilities that accrue to provincial, and, in some provinces, municipal governments, these levels are the most important arenas for voluntary and community organizations oriented to developing and providing services.

In most provinces, municipalities and voluntary associations retained a primary role in the traditional Canadian welfare state, much as they had in previous decades. As an example, Ontario established a pattern of governance in 1967 that reproduced pre-welfare state institutional relations. This was a dual system, with the province taking on responsibility for providing programs for the disabled or otherwise "unemployable" population, just as it had under Ontario Public Charities Act of 1874, but leaving municipalities responsible to deal with other risks, such as sickness, separation or divorce, and long-term unemployment (Graham and Phillips, 1998). Eligibility for provincial assistance was determined by at least 15 different categorical entitlements, and municipalities dealt with at least another five. Programs

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6 The aboriginal peoples, who constitute 3.4% of the population, constitute the “first nations” of Canada and have active and engaged “third sectors”, that reflect their own culture. But these will not be a focus in this chapter.
and benefits differed from one municipality to another. The market and the voluntary sector remained the principal developers and providers of services, though from the 1960’s, usually funded by the municipal or provincial government as opposed to philanthropy (Irving, 1987; Sabatini, 1996).

Indeed, at the municipal level, the development and coordination of public welfare services generally remained in the hands of the local Social Planning Council. These voluntary associations, many of which dated back to pre-depression years, were originally both advocacy and service organizations that had taken on the responsibility for promoting the social well-being and social development of their communities. In the Ontario welfare state developing during the 1960’s, their role increasingly became one of local coordination. For this, they remained heavily financed by their municipalities, with which they typically enjoyed a stable relation based on trust and collaboration, clearly constituting a case of “third party government” (Salamon, 1995). So, despite the rapid multiplication of federal social policies and a notable rise in welfare spending at all levels during the 1960’s and 1970’s, most provincial governments - although responsible for developing and implementing these welfare programs - did not really fashion themselves as welfare states.

The exception was Quebec. Québec’s civil society up to the 1960’s was dominated by an extraordinarily traditional and conservative Catholic Church. The Church was a highly structured, unified, and centralized bureaucratic force, which had established a system of pillars in which it maintained full responsibility for the development of French-language schools, hospitals, and social welfare organisations, as well as charity, leisure and cultural associations at the parish level. The Church also established a Catholic union movement and a Catholic cooperative movement, with a view to ensuring a place for Catholic moral values in the rising liberal economy. With the collaboration of a rural-conservative provincial government, this pillar system was maintained up to the 1960’s: the government looked after administrative and infrastructure affairs, the industrial economy was left to the “English”, and the Church remained in charge of everything and everyone else.

This traditional order in Quebec was overturned seemingly overnight with the election of a modernizing government in 1960, inaugurating what is known as the Quiet Revolution. That year is marked as the jumping-off point for a fifteen-year marathon of escalating social rights, as well expanding the government bureaucracy and the public sector. First and foremost, the educational system was taken over from the Church, extended throughout the province, restructured and modernized. Then, all church-owned (and, in the case of minority groups, community-owned) establishments in the health and social service spheres were integrated into a new public network, revamped, expanded, and consolidated under direct government authority and coordination. When the Canadian federal government adopted the Canada Pension Plan in 1961, with the agreement of the other provinces, Québec balked and instituted its own pension plan instead; it simultaneously established the Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec, a para-public fund manager, to channel those pension funds into indigenous industrial investment. Energy companies were nationalized to better serve industry, and an array of para-public financial and investment institutions were created to support the growth of indigenous capital. Although lacking the constitutional levers to be able to initiate an independent economic policy, the new Québec government was clearly oriented towards modernizing and growing the province’s indigenous industrial and financial economies.7

The roots of Québec’s third sector are both older - and newer - than those of English Canada. They are older because they still bear the legacy of the Catholic Church, whose grip on French-Canadian society was dominant from the time of the British takeover of the colony in 1760, right up to the Quiet Revolution of the 1960's. It is newer because of its reincarnation at the time of the Quiet Revolution, in

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7 The motivation for this orientation towards the development of a modern, indigenous economy was the documented, economic subordination of French Canadians within the Canadian economy.
the entirely new guise of the community movement. At that time, traditional parish associations were displaced by new, radical grassroots organizations. Groups focusing on childcare for working mothers. Influenced by Alinksky-style community action, popular in the U.S. during the 1960's (Alinksky, 1969; Lamoureux et al, 1989) they engaged the government through direct action, mobilizing communities to take their futures in hand and to demand expanded social and economic rights. However, equally influenced by the French autogestion movement of the same period, they were also highly suspicious of the new, self-aggrandizing Québec state, and demanded local, citizen control over new public services and programs.

Direct engagement between the state and the third sector is thus a long tradition in Québec. Indeed, it can be argued that community action represented the grassroots face of an otherwise elitist Quiet Revolution. Civil society supported the social democratic approach of the government up to a point, but advocated for the subsidiary principal: local, community-based organization were better placed than the state itself to plan and produce local services, if not to regulate and finance them. Up to a point, the government allowed itself to reflect community-based values. For example, it established a vast network of public, community-level health and social service organisations (CLSC’s) throughout the province that, much like parish organizations, were financed and coordinated from the centre. Preaching participation, it was prepared to allow community action groups to initiate the development of these centres in each community, so that they might reflect local needs and colour. But once accredited, the government took them over and eventually, limited their diversity and radical community health orientation. The story of the CLSCs is a story of government incorporation — indeed, appropriation — of community initiatives, and it has marked the culture of Quebec’s third sector ever since.

The emerging Ontario welfare state, in contrast, was built in large part on trusted relationships between local municipalities and certain voluntary social service agencies, funded by stable, un-audited operating grants. In 1982, as recessions hit the economy, the provincial government was beginning to invest more and more in social services offered by voluntary and community organizations. It created the Trillium Foundation, an arm’s length agency of the government, through which provincial funding was funnelled to the community sector. This foundation financed ars and culture as well as welfare services, but not “political activities” or advocacy. By the 1990's, the stability and predictability of these traditional relationships had ended (Scott, 2003). Government grants were increasingly replaced by limited government “contributions” to organizations for specified “projects”, or by public tendering for service contracts, both of which were subject to strict accountability with respect to the terms of the contribution agreement or contract. Public contracts would pay only for specific services required and stipulated by the government, and these increasingly clashed with the culture and principles of many of the voluntary organizations that were used to operating far more autonomously (Richmond and Shields, n.d.).

Quebec was taking a somewhat different route in the 1990’s. As in Ontario, community groups were being increasingly drawn into closer and closer partnership with the provincial state for the development and delivery of various services. However, with some exceptions, core grants remained the principal form of government financing. Still, in this context, the terms of engagement became increasingly tense as many groups felt their autonomy to be threatened. The greater the interest of the state in partnering with them, the greater their interest in improved the self-organisation of their movement, in order to defend its autonomy, integrity and interests. Since 1995, a provincial Secretariat for Autonomous Community Action liaises with the representative organizations of community groups, and new social policies, such as universal childcare introduced in 2000, favour the sector. In 2001, after negotiations that severely strained the internal politics of the sector / movement, the government adopted an official policy of recognition and support for community action. These developments have tended to divide the community movement, and to seduce more and more groups into profitable, collaborative relationships.
In contrast, English Canadian provincial governments have not developed the same institutional capacity to coordinate regional and local partnerships, and to effectively mobilize a wide variety of social resources from the centre. The situation is similar at the federal level, where it is seriously aggravated by the geographical, cultural and institutional fragmentation of the country. Horizontal coordination amongst voluntary organisations across the country is embryonic. A Voluntary Sector Roundtable, established by a dozen national groups in 1995, did not represent organizations in different provinces, nor local community-based and service delivery groups. This Roundtable, in close collaboration with the federal government, was responsible for the negotiation of an official Accord between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary and Community Sector, signed in 2001. Institutional supports at the provincial level are even less developed, with only a few of the provinces having developed “copy-cat” Accords. Otherwise, relations between provincial governments and their third sectors are normally situated within specific service sector contexts. Traditionally, many provinces left considerable autonomy to local, voluntary Social Planning Councils. But increasingly, their relations with voluntary organizations have shifted to competitive bidding for government service contracts (following the federal government’s lead), and tend to be confined to specific program or policy domains.

As contemporary third sector theory would predict (Salamon et al, 2000), the Québec-English Canada comparison suggests that greater state capacity and greater civil society capacity go hand-in-hand. Both English Canadian and Québécois third sectors are now more entangled with government than they ever have been - but in different contexts. Not only are the political cultures and institutions different, but also, the manner in which these civil societies have organized themselves is also different. How has this either strengthened or weakened their ability to engage the state on the terrain of social politics? What has been the impact on advocacy and dissent?

At the federal level: From collaboration to consent

Unlike European welfare states, Canada’s was not born of the organization of class interests into parties with significant influence or power over the policy-making process. Yet working class misery had been a highly visible, divisive factor during the depression, and throughout the depression years, social unrest became increasingly organized. It was controlled principally through policing and deportation; nearly 30,000 immigrant “agitators” were sent back to their countries of origin. Eventually, the government was forced to legislate unemployment relief and to initiate public discourse around more systematic social interventions. But the depression and war years had highlighted significant ethnic, national and gender inequalities. Ethnic diversity of the country increased rapidly post-war years, while the effort to make room for returning soldiers by expelling women from the post-war labour force led to intense debate about the place of married women in the workforce, and fuelling a rebirth of the women’s movement. Moreover, new modernizing, nationalist voices in Quebec were rising against the “ethnic class” structure of Canada and setting in motion the social and political movements that would lead to the Quiet Revolution, and eventually, the sovereignty movement. These challenges to social cohesion were an important contributing factor to the re-structuring of state-civil society relations in conjunction with the building of Canada’s welfare regime.

Canada’s emerging welfare regime was clearly a liberal one, promoting the market while protecting its individual victims, as well as certain groups, such as single mothers, who could not legitimately be expected to work. But beginning in 1960’s, particularly in relation to the French Canadian or Quebec situation, the federal government recognized the need to do something about social cohesion. Its response took the form of instituting official bilingualism and a policy of multiculturalism. Thus, the idea was Canada was constituted not only of individuals but of collectivities was acknowledged. Intermediary organizations gained legitimacy insofar as they provided a voice for “second class” citizens. Women’s groups, social justice groups, poverty associations, aboriginal groups, official language minorities and
ethno-cultural community groups became eligible to receive federal financing, and in many cases, arms length advisory committees were created within government to work with related groups and help further their social integration from within government (Jensen and Phillips, 1996; Jensen, 1997). This policy contributed significantly to the development of the Canadian tradition of advocacy and representation, centred in Ottawa, with relatively open access to specific federal government agencies.

However, this also meant that these voluntary organizations became increasingly dependent on federal financing. The government provided significant core funding to a large number of organizations, with few strings attached, encouraging them to carry out their missions of advocacy and representation as a means of supporting citizen engagement and ensuring a voice for marginalized Canadians. Particular ministries, such as Health and Welfare or Immigration and Manpower (later to become Health Canada, Heritage Canada, and Human Resources Development Canada), which ran well-financed programs designed for particular social groups, nurtured relations with “their” voluntary organizations. Thus, vertically-organized silos emerged, joining government and civil society agents operating on the same social terrain – though not without contention. In contrast, there was relatively little interaction amongst voluntary groups concerned with different issues and having different respondents in government. Occasional, ad hoc coalitions might form around a given issue, such as Free Trade in the 1980’s and child poverty in the 1990’s, but these did not cross silo boundaries, and the voluntary sector as such had no identity or common voice until the mid-1990’s (Laforest, 2005).

The 1980’s was a decade of recessions, dominated by Conservative leadership, rising social problems and cuts at the margins of federal contributions to social programs. Advocacy flourished in the accommodating context that existed at the federal level of government, despite diminishing funds (Phillips, 1991). However, by the early 1990’s, ideological critics began to argue that groups such as the National Action Committee on the Status of Women represented “special interests”, as opposed to the public interest, and had no business receiving significant core funding in a time of rising deficits and public debt (Pal, 1993). Moreover, the auditor general began to complain that little was known about the use to which such public funds were put, or the results they obtained. Dramatic scandals involving large, respected voluntary organizations such as the Red Cross (a tainted blood scandal) and religious residential schools (maltreatment of aboriginal children) did nothing to help the threatened reputation of voluntary organizations in general. Business leaders and their think tanks, mounting strong, well-financed lobbies against government spending on social policy and government intervention in general, also campaigned against the voluntary sector. In the name of defending traditional “charity”, they, too, charged it with defending “special interests” at the expense of the public purse (Fraser Institute, 2001). They questioned the tax breaks allowed to designated charities, arguing that these constituted an unfair advantage for the voluntary sector when they competed with the private sector for government contracts. According to Pross (2003: 66):

The most strident critic was John Bryden, Liberal MP for Hamilton Wentworth who conducted a vigorous campaign against government funding for special interest groups. In March 1994, he introduced in the House a private member’s bill which sought to secure disclosure of income received by senior officials of charities and non-profit organisations. Later the same year, he published a report which claimed to bring to light “an almost complete lack of government oversight – and the likelihood of widespread abuse – within Canada’s $100-billion not-for-profit industry”.

In 1995, the federal government (now led by the Liberals) announced significant changes to the funding regime for voluntary organisations (Phillips, 2001). A few select organizations would continue to receive core funding, but most would be moved to a system of “contributions”, or partial funding for specific projects, presuming their ability to procure alternative sources of money. Still others would see their public funding cut. Some organizations disappeared, others drastically reduced their operations and
restructured their financing in order to survive. This “cold climate” for voluntary organizations had several significant consequences for social politics. One was that it put a damper on advocacy. The Charity Act under which many of them operated officially permitted only 10% of their activities to take the form of advocacy, and self-censure now kicked in, as groups feared reprisals from ministries thinking they ought not to “bite the hand that feeds” (Pross, 2003). But a second consequence of this “cold climate” was the defensive self-organization of voluntary organisations at the federal level, and the emergence of a collective identity.

In 1995, the leaders of twelve leading voluntary organisations and umbrella associations joined forces to develop a strategy to defend themselves against the negative image of them projected by the government and powerful ideological foes within civil society, and to share their funding woes. They included an eclectic variety of actors that had never before seen themselves as operating in the same “sector”: from sports, arts and recreation to social justice and environmental associations, along with philanthropic foundations, international NGOs and huge health charities. Their stated objective was to enhance the relationship between “the charitable sector” and the federal government, and to encourage a supportive legislative and regulatory framework for organizations in the community. But there was a certain tension amongst these leaders; some saw advocacy and funding as the principal issues, while others insisted on the importance of paying attention to the issues that concerned government, if relations were to be improved. Thus, in 1997, this Voluntary Sector Roundtable set up a Panel on Accountability and Governance, under the prestigious chairmanship of a former social democratic (NDP) party leader. Broad consultations contributing to the development of its report helped to crystallize the sector’s identity, as well as to mobilize government, it seemed.

By 1997, having eliminated the deficit on the backs of citizens (e.g. significant cuts to unemployment insurance, narrow targeting of other benefits) and the provinces (a drastic, unilateral reduction in contributions to education, health and social programs), the Liberal Prime Minister had a big budgetary surplus under his belt. He now claimed to have been seduced by third way thinking. “Enhancing the capacity of the voluntary sector is a key objective of this government”, he said in his 1997 re-election campaign manifesto (Red Book, 1997). He also announced that the development of a government - third sector partnership, similar to the one signed in England in 1998, would be one of his priorities. He thus anticipated the call from the Voluntary Sector Roundtable for just such a compact, in the report of its Panel on Accountability and Governance, published in 1999. The government’s response to the report was to hastily set up a series “joint tables” to initiate discussions with the sector over a certain number of issues of common interest. These included regulation, capacity building, public awareness and the development of a government – voluntary sector Accord, but not funding or advocacy. Then, in 2000, it announced its Voluntary Sector Initiative, with a budget of $95 million dollars over five years.

This sudden flurry of government interest and activity took the Voluntary Sector Roundtable somewhat by surprise. First, it took the initiative out of the sector’s hands. This was not necessarily the next step that it would have chosen on its own (Laforest, 2005). Second, it exacerbated internal tensions, since the primary concerns of certain members were pointedly absent from the government-imposed agenda. Third, the elite composition of the Roundtable was not well positioned to represent the sector “from sea to sea”, and especially, not the huge population of service organizations operating at the provincial and municipal levels. None the less, it decided it could not possibly ignore this opportunity to change its rapport with the federal government. With little time to organize, it slightly broadened its membership from within its close network, and transformed itself into the Voluntary Sector Steering Committee, with a view to presenting itself as a strong, autonomous constituency in its participation with government representatives at the joint tables.

In the mean time, the government’s public pronouncements of partnership with the third sector raised the antennae of many national and local organizations. For them, the Voluntary Sector Roundtable and
Steering Committee appeared as a self-nominated star chamber, working with government behind closed doors and oblivious to the everyday trials of organizations on the ground. Thus, these identity-building and constituency-building activities by a few actors at the federal level did not enjoy a high level of legitimacy throughout the Canadian third sector. In fact, they were observed with significant scepticism. The leaders were not unaware of their weak credibility, but were drawn inexorably into the government-led maelstrom. Even within their limited ranks, certain members had exceptional access to the inner circles of government, while others felt marginalized (Laforest, 2005). For example, the president of the Health Charities Coalition of Canada, including the Canadian Cancer Society, Mental Health Association, Heart and Stroke Foundation and Diabetes Foundation, amongst others, had extraordinary power resources, as did the director of United Way, the major grant-making organization for the third sector. As Laforest (2005) points outs, they had a “profound steering effect” on the orientation of the Steering Committee, favouring insider strategies. Some new members sitting at the joint tables felt that they had less understanding and influence than the directors of large voluntary organizations not even represented in the Steering Committee. The self-organized network of voluntary organizations at this level, then, consisted in a tiny network of corporate / voluntary sector directors.

At the same time as this activity around the third sector was underway, Canada was witnessing the emergence of new governmental institutions for policy development. As a direct result of draconian cuts to the civil service, the government had found itself bereft of policy expertise. With a view to surplus spending, a cross-departmental Policy Research Initiative (PRI) had been set up by the Prime Minister’s Office, in order to encourage research that might lead to new policies ideas. The voluntary sector was consulted in this effort from the start. Increasingly, it became evident that policy expertise was a “product” that voluntary organisations could “sell” to government, under the new, “project contribution” funding regime. Advocacy strategies began to shift from traditional interest representation through the media and direct lobbying, towards the production of research on social problems and expert policy analysis. Moreover, the Voluntary Sector Steering Committee found, in its participation in the joint tables, that its own understanding of issues related to government – third sector relations far outstripped the weak knowledge-base of their government interlocutors. Advocating on behalf of the sector became a new preoccupation at the federal level, as the nature of advocacy itself adapted to new government opportunities.

In December 2001, an Accord was finally signed between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary and Community Sector (a “re-naming” strategy intending to make the agreement appear more inclusive of the sector as a whole). In a context where polls showing that an overwhelming prevalence of the idea that “government doesn’t care much what ordinary people think” (Nevitte, 2000), voluntary action was held as proof that citizens had the means to influence the state of affairs. Thus, a “shared value” announced in the Accord is that of active citizenship, or “active involvement or engagement of individuals and communities in shaping society, whether through political or voluntary activity or both”. In the letter of transmittal of the Accord, the process of consultation leading up to the signing was defending by pointing out that “special efforts” were made “to reach rural Canadians and visible minorities, Provincial and territorial officials and representatives from Aboriginal groups. The private sector [and] labour unions... were consulted”. Overall, the Accord was not as firm in its intent to announce an important new vision and era of government-third sector relations, as the British Compact had been. Phillips (2002) called it a case of “incomplete policy transfer”, insofar as the conditions were hardly ripe for the Canadian Accord to take a significant step in the redesign of Canada’s citizenship regime. Laforest (2005) attributes its weakness to the politics of its development. While terribly vague in its own right, the Accord led to the development of Codes of Good Practice that were meant to be more concrete. These, however, merely provided bland advice to groups who, for the most part, would rather have seen a more autonomous, more relevant, and more militant leadership to defend their interests and those of their constituents.
In the context of the Voluntary Sector Initiative, then, government – third sector relations were reduced to a single path: rather than opening doors to participation, it closed them. Groups that approached government agencies (with whom they may have had close relations in the past) to discuss any issue that was remotely connected to the agenda of the joint tables, were told that these matters were within the mandate of the Voluntary Sector Initiative and could not be addressed outside of that forum. The Initiative became the only game in town, excluding those who were not directly involved in it and providing an excuse for government departments and agencies to disengage.

In terms of public image, however, the sector appeared to be increasingly drawn into participation in policy development as, for example, in the case of the government’s first significant foray into social policy in ten years: the National Children’s Agenda. First announced in 1997, this terrain of social politics generated tremendous interest on the part of the new Voluntary Sector Roundtable, who saw it as a testing ground that could prove the value of third sector participation in policy development (Laforest, 2005). Touted as a coup by the voluntary sector leadership, the National Children’s Agenda actually took the wind out of the sails of contentious anti-poverty groups who had been advocating for this agenda since 1990, in a coalition called Campaign 2000.\(^8\) But this coalition was marginalized in the policy process when, in 1996, a new, broader and more inclusive coalition emerged, integrating professional associations of social workers and public health workers whose credibility and capacity to dialogue with government was high. It was this collaborative coalition that was invited to participate in the policy community that developed around the Children’s Agenda (McKeen, 2001). For the first time in years, access to government was significantly improved and the potential contribution of voluntary organizations to policy development was recognized. But like the Voluntary Sector Roundtable, this shift was described by some as another elite accommodation: leaders of some national organizations gained access; groups on the front line of child poverty continued to submit to funding cuts and service contracts that undermined their autonomy (Laforest, 2005). Ultimately, militant women’s’ groups and anti-poverty organisations that had originally demanded a children’s agenda, were sidelined and their concerns took second place to concerns more amendable to the government’s thinking at the time: interventions for children “at risk” (living in poverty) and the need to encourage parents’ labour market participation (McKeen, 2001; Dobrowolsky and Jenson, 2004).

In short, the process of identity-formation in Canadian civil society, at least amongst those groups active at the federal level, was an elite affair. The constituency that it composed - and that was publicly identified as the government’s “partner” - was dominated by middle class professional and upper class corporate world views. The vertical fragmentation of civil society in terms of class representation, size, capacity and mission, and its horizontal fragmentation across provinces and municipalities, perhaps precluded the possibility of a more inclusive, bottom-up process. But any effort in this direction was clearly obstructed the strong, unexpected and rushed initiatives taken by government, just as the sector itself was recognizing its shared vulnerabilities and dilemmas. The result was an inability to create any significant degree of collective autonomy. Those with the greatest capacity to engage in dialogue at the upper echelons of the federal government, were most successful in being heard and even in influencing policy. Yet individual groups and coalitions continued their advocacy and dissent in the temporarily improved climate of the Voluntary Sector Initiative. Anti-poverty groups, for example, remained vigilant, monitored and publicizing the government’s progress, or lack of it, in diminishing poverty through the Children’s Agenda. Yes their voices and others like their’s are seldom heard in the media, compared to 15 or 20 years earlier.

\(^8\) In 1989, the House of Commons had unanimously pledged to end child poverty by the year 2000. Since then, a coalition of well-established civil society organisations working in the area of social justice – including one that was a member of the Voluntary Sector Roundtable and Steering Committee – had formed under the name of Campaign 2000, and had been relentlessly lobbying to convince the government to adopt a Federal action plan that would transform that pledge into a reality.
The federal government’s Voluntary Sector Initiative drew to a close in 2002. The feeling within the voluntary was that the Accord and the entire Voluntary Sector Initiative had not helped to improve the conditions under which the sector operated. There was an internal reorganization of sector leadership, that also left most organizations unsatisfied. By 2006 a new Conservative government was in place, and federal government doors were slammed on the voluntary sector.

At the provincial level: Ontario, from collaboration to coercion

Groups who want to lobby for policy change in Canada generally focus their energy on the federal government, even though the bulk of social programs are designed and implemented at the provincial level. This is because, until the 1990’s, opportunities for accessing federal government agencies abounded, while paths for accessing provincial governments were considerably less obvious. Most service groups operate at the municipal or community scale. Advocacy, though often an integral part of their activities – particularly defending the rights of vulnerable groups – was the primary mission of only a minority of community organizations. The majority were primarily involved in providing services to these social groups, under contract with the city or province.

In Ontario, the 1960’s and 70’s were the halcyon days of stable, collaborative relations between municipalities and the local, volunteer Social Planning Councils, who coordinated social services, funded principally through public foundations such as the United Way. By the 1980’s, these days were rapidly waning. The cause was somewhat paradoxical. Due to economic recessions, there was an exceptional expansion of services and organizations, an increasing reliance on public funding, a tremendous growth in their budgets, and a rising preoccupation with efficiency and accountability in public administration, that ultimately brought the traditional roles and structure of these organizations into question. In 1995-96, in the city of Ottawa – the same territory and period in which national voluntary organizations were founding the Voluntary Sector Roundtable – the local Social Planning Council lost its funding from both the province of Ontario and the Ottawa region. Its budget fell from $1 million to $450,661 in one year (Moscovitch, 2003). This is a stark illustration of gulf between the elite, Ottawa-based Voluntary Sector Roundtable plugged into the federal government, and local, community-based service groups operating in the same city.

Aside from introducing project funding, contracting and tendering during the 1980’s, the Ontario government also drastically reduced its overall contribution to the voluntary sector as its own social service transfers from the federal level were cut. This left little for maintaining the administrative core of these organizations, and hundreds folded. For those that survived, service contracts provided no support for their traditional advocacy and capacity-building activities which they either had to abandon or accomplish by taking on more volunteers, a strategy which was itself over-burdening. Together with competition from private market enterprises (both small and large), the reduced budgets and threat of extinction pressured them to cut corners (including staff) and to adopt complementary financing strategies, such as user fees or commercial activities. Not only Ontario, but Alberta as well, under Conservative leadership, took a stance towards the voluntary sector with little pretence of respecting autonomy or promising symmetry. As in Ontario and, indeed, most provinces, competitive tendering was required for most government services, and charitable agencies now competed with the for-profit sector and with other agencies for contracts containing “stringent conditions” of accountability, as well for “public legitimacy” (Hossli, 2000). These policies amounted to a significant transformation of the operating environment of the voluntary sectors in much of Canada (Leduc Browne, 1996; Hall and Reed, 1998; Reed and Howe, 1999; Dart and Zimmerman, 2000; Hossli, 2001; Meinhard and Foster, 2002; Brown and Troutt, 2003).
At the same time, citizens’ needs were growing. Although many municipalities tried to come to the rescue of organizations so that their work at the local level might continue, the causalities were still very high. Thus, throughout the 1990’s, provincial governments such as Ontario’s came to depend more and more on voluntary and community organizations to keep up with growing demands from social groups hardest hits by federal budget cuts, repeated recessions, and their own downgrading of provincial social programs. In face of this reliance on the voluntary sector, in 1995, a new Conservative Ontario government unilaterally set up an advisory board on the voluntary sector, with a view to learning how the sector’s contribution in the social sphere might be strengthened. Initial themes put forward by government for study by the advisory board included (a) developing cohesion amongst groups, (b) developing an information strategy and (c) defining a framework for accountability. On this basis, the Coalition of Ontario Voluntary Organizations (COVO) eventually emerged and was funded by the government’s Trillium Foundation. While COVO has become a strong voice advocating for the interests of the sector, it none the less retains the objectives that had been devised by the original advisory committee nominated by the government. These include, for example, “to develop and communicate accountability processes that are meaningful and realistic within the operating environment of the sector” (COVO, 2000, italics added by the author). There was little pretence to autonomous self-organization with the objective of influencing or changing the sector’s operating environment.

Reforms in the realm of social assistance illustrate the situation. If these reforms came relatively late to Ontario, it was not for lack of trying: the government changed hands amongst three different parties during the 1990’s and early 2000’s, swinging from the traditional Conservatives to the Liberals, to the social democratic NDP, and eventually back to the Conservatives again under an ideologically neo-liberal leadership determined to unleash a “common sense revolution”. Each party in power had tabled a welfare reform. Only the last one, “Ontario Works”, was ever implemented. Ontario Works represented the introduction of what the Conservative leader, Harris, called “‘workfare’ or ‘education-fare’ or ‘get-off-your-duff-and-do-something-fare’” (July 30, 2003, interview with the Frontier Centre of Public Policy). The program called for able-bodied people receiving assistance to either participate in one of a number of employability enhancement measures made available to them, or to contribute 17 hours a week to work in a community organization, on pain of seeing their benefit cut.

Ontario Works thus enlisted community groups in a policy they abhorred. It had been foisted upon them without consultation and placed an unwanted burden on organizations whose passive acceptance of the responsibility had simply been assumed by government. Many of these groups were fiercely opposed to “workfare” both in principal and on the basis of their assessment of the efficiency of the Ontario Works programs in particular. But their initial resistance to taking on workfare “volunteers” was also due to pragmatic concerns about the ignorance of the sector that the so-called partnership implied:

The voluntary sector is ill-equipped to accommodate hundreds of thousands of "involuntary volunteers." Genuine volunteer work requires an administrative infrastructure. Volunteers have to be recruited and trained, their work assigned, coordinated and monitored. The voluntary sector, under-resourced at the best of times, has suffered tremendous funding reductions from every level of government and simply does not have the capacity to absorb thousands of new "volunteers." To date, the government has been silent on the issue of how people will be protected if they are injured or become ill on a workfare placement. Voluntary sector agencies may face tremendous civil liability costs for such injuries.

The community groups expressed their massive opposition to Ontario Works in a web-site entitled “Welfare Watch”, which become a successful rallying point. But with few exceptions, community groups in Ontario, as elsewhere, quietly participated in these sorts of programs. They did so because the
programs constituted the principal source of funding to help people on assistance maintain or improve their benefits, at a time when 20% of welfare recipients were being cut from the assistance rolls. They also became an important source of resources – both human and financial – for the community groups themselves, which otherwise, were seeing their funding reduced and were typically starved for financial and other types of support. In this manner, dependent participation in government policies ultimately came to characterize the “operating environment” in Ontario.

Yet as in the federal case, it cannot be assumed that this formal leadership of the sector truly represented the diversity of forms of civil society organization in Ontario, particularly as concerns advocacy and dissent. The unexpected win of the Conservative government in 1995 in fact unleashed massive protests, in which grassroots community organizations, as representatives of the potential victims of conservative policy, originally took the lead. As a result of budget cuts, these groups were in a state of disarray. According to one report (Camfield, 2000) the first protests were called by “a hastily organized group” with support from the Toronto Labour Council. Others protests followed, equally spontaneous and with minimal resources for mobilization. Finally, the Ontario Federation of Labour took on the organization of a series of 12 Days of Action, along with an association of community groups called the Ontario Coalition for Social Justice. Each massive demonstration shut down a different city for a day, one after the other, sometimes mobilizing as many as 200,000 people in a single Day of Action. On top of this, the provincial government was hit with some of the biggest strikes in Ontario’s history, involving mainly public sector workers such as teachers, supported by parents and students. Throughout it all, however, the government stonewalled. After a 5-week strike by provincial employees, 10,000 provincial public servants were laid off. The Ontario Federation of Labour withdrew its support of the Days of Action and though several more were held, they began to lose steam.

Clearly, the instrumentalization of civil society groups by the Ontario government did not squeeze out autonomous advocacy and dissent. Rather, what eventually dampened contentious social politics was the total lack of opportunity to engage the state on issues of concern to activists. The government provided no legitimate voice or access to these groups. Moreover, with the downloading of clients and programs from the federal, to the provincial, to the municipal level, crushing budget cuts, and the near-demise of Social Planning Councils, the capacity of community groups to organize was seriously undermined. Groups that formerly collaborated within local territories, now found themselves competing against each other in bidding contests for government contracts, in order to survive. Finally, in this overwhelming context, spontaneous collective action could not be transformed into a sustainable social movement. An alliance with the labour movement, though eminently useful, was dependent on union interests, and their limits. On all these points, the Quebec case presents an interesting contrast.

Quebec: from contentious politics to contradictory collaboration

At the time of Quebec’s Quiet Revolution, in the 1960’s, traditional parish associations were giving way to radical citizens' committees, and the dominant Church hierarchy was losing its grip on the population. Citizens’ committees emerged in deteriorating, urban working class neighbourhoods and rural areas facing rapid modernization and threats to independent forms of production. They would consist of 20 or 30 local people receiving guidance and training from "radical" professionals, disaffected with the traditional, moral role assigned to social work by the Church-run bureaucracies. They would sometimes be financed through charitable organizations or donations, or federal local initiative grants when these became available in the early 1970s. In some cases, as many as 300 citizens would participate in the activities organized by these committees around such issues as housing, green spaces, health, tenants' rights or urban renewal. Some would offer direct services to the community, such as legal aid, protection, food co-ops , clinics and child care. The committees' objectives went beyond local organizing, however,
to include advocacy and the lobbying of public authorities for such collective services as parks and recreation facilities for youths, or more and better schools. Different citizens' committees might group together to reinforce the authority of their demands. This sort of networking, then, was evident in the very origins of Quebec’s community movement, spurred by leftist ideological commitment. It was of a wholly different character than the collaborative relations organized by professionalized Social Planning Councils in other provinces.

While the citizens' committees presented themselves as radical alternatives to traditional social services, they interested some members of the reforming elite who were involved in elaborating health and social service policy for the new modernizing government in Quebec City. A major health and social service reform, developed between 1966 and 1971, eventually introduced a specific response to local community action: the CLSC (local community service centre). The CLSCs were to be an original type of public establishment: small, non-bureaucratic and geared to respond to locally expressed needs. They were to focus on community development and prevention rather than traditional casework and medical services, and they were to encourage accessibility and citizen participation. Not only were citizens originally awarded a majority of seats on the management committees of the earliest CLSCs, but the establishment of the first CLSCs was delegated to existing or new coalitions of citizens' committees, working with a professional community organizer appointed by the state. Eventually, well over 200 CLSCs were established by the government in communities across the province, creating an integrated, comprehensive network of local establishments that no other provincial government would have contemplated (White, 1999).

The real power of the citizens in the CLSCs was to prove illusory, however. The CLSC staff consisted principally of professional social workers, nurses and community organizations. The director was appointed by the Ministry of Health and Social Services. Citizen members of the boards quickly found themselves in a contentious, but dependent position in relation to the idealist ambitions of the health and social service professionals that staffed the organizations. The turbulent first five years of CLSC development thus pitted citizens against professionals, and radical young professionals against administrators and the state, resulting in the unofficial banishment of community organization as a primary CLSC activity, and a turn towards less radical, though nonetheless innovative forms of socio-health service delivery. Most citizens eventually withdrew from the boards of CLSCs, and the few who remained or those elected in their place continued in a subordinate role to staff, and particularly, to the Ministry’s view of what the CLSC should be. The implications of collaboration with government were finally confirmed by the Ministry of Social Affairs:

I don't think you are expecting excuses from me for the government's control over CLSCs. This control is the normal and inseparable counterpart of our responsibilities, which are challenged much less frequently ... the State defines the goals of a programme like the CLSCs and provides the means for carrying them out. The responsibility delegated by the State concerns the way these means are used to achieve the goals ... participation must be seen in this context. Let there be no confusion: participation does not mean that the State abdicates its role; it merely shares it ... the proportions in which it is shared can of course be challenged, but not the basic idea. (quoted in Lesemann, 1994: 260).

By the 1980’s, the limitations of the state's "integrationist" strategy of the Quiet Revolution had become apparent. Despite its long, militant and highly politicised history, public incorporation and the recessions of the 1980's were taking their toll on the adversarial energy of the community movement. Furthermore, the year 1981 had seen a massive mobilization of civil society over the first of two unsuccessful referenda on Quebec independence, under the leadership of the PQ. This had rallied all nationalists and particularly
the left, including intellectuals, artists, unions and the community movement, in a way that had never before been observed in Canada. Weary of the political factionalism that occupied the movement during the 1970’s, exhausted from the disappointing referendum effort, and faced with both soaring unemployment and government cutbacks in health and social services, activists turned their attention towards responding directly to communities’ urgent and intensifying needs. Thus, the socio-economic climate of the 1980’s depoliticized community action in Quebec, but it also stimulated the development of a new generation of community groups, self-help groups and non-profit organisations which mushroomed in communities across the province to deal with old, new and returning social problems, such as violence against women, poverty, homelessness and hunger. In this sense, the growth of the community sector in Quebec paralleled that in other provinces, such as Ontario, at the same time.

But in Quebec, there was a centre-left party in power now. One of the PQ’s responses to recession was, as elsewhere, deep budget cuts in the health and social service sector. Many of the regional boards of the highly decentralized Ministry of Health and Social Services reacted by nurturing the new generation of community groups, in order to maintain and improve services in their regions. Although they often found creative ways to finance these organizations, the funds were rarely recurrent, and the groups led a precarious existence, many of them disappearing and reappearing with the vicissitudes of available finding from various sources. Still, just as municipalities were desperately trying to support community groups in Ontario, allies in certain regional health and social service boards were a significant factor encouraging the development of community groups in Quebec. The difference came when the Quebec provincial government once again sought to generalize a grassroots model that appeared constructive. First in the area of community mental health services, and then, in others such as youth, the government required its Regional Councils to organize tri-partite service planning committees, involving solid representation from community action groups. These groups were not only to participate in the regional planning process, but also to participate in the implementation of the regional plans, with provincial government funding. These tripartite committees elevated the community groups visibility and legitimacy, at the same time as it drew them into deeper partnership relations with the state.

Community activists had already developed a mistrust and defensive attitude towards the state on the basis of the CLSC experience. The representatives of these groups were often hostile to the public “establishment” because of the perceived threat of integration or instrumentalization. Yet not to be involved in regional planning and service delivery was deemed to be a worse alternative. Collaboration with Regional Boards and other government bodies was thus undertaken with a healthy dose of suspicion. It led community groups within particular sectors, and eventually, groups working in different sectors within the same region, to band together in sectoral or regional roundtables. Several factors account for the early emergence of strategic networking in Quebec when in Ontario, it didn’t seem possible. First, there was a history of horizontal, grassroots networking in Quebec, different from the sort of top-down coordination and resource development that had been the hallmark of Social Planning in English Canadian municipalities. It helped that this history of grassroots networking was associated with a set of progressive shared values and meanings, to which many groups in the 1980’s still claimed an allegiance, and which contributed to the development of a common discourse and identity. Indeed, this identity, solidarity, and shared vision - reinforced by interaction in dense networks - constituted community groups more as a social movement than a “third sector”. But a second condition essential to this development lay in the opportunities provided by the Quebec state.

The result of this and a multitude of similar experiences in Quebec has been the emergence of a state-community relation in which contention and cooperation coexist as two sides of an ongoing relation. Social groups both confront the state, opposing its controlling, technocratic inclinations, and yet agree to participate in debates and negotiations about the ways and means, as well as the ends of social policy and development. Throughout the 1990’s, this model of engagement was reinforced. Community groups were increasingly involved in local planning and service delivery, but at the same time, they were
increasingly organizing themselves, within and across sectors, and at local, regional and provincial levels. Their objectives were to share, define and build their independent, alternative expertise, and to formulate collective positions in their transactions with regional and provincial authorities. Although service contracts became the norm in some sectors, such as home care, competitive bidding for government contracts was never instituted. Instead, groups organized themselves in such a way that they would distribute amongst themselves the various mandates for which there was available funding. The sector was not without ideological cleavages, leading to different self-identities, and either more or less contentious or collaborative relations with government agencies. However, those well-organized associations of community groups that considered themselves to constitute a social movement, became the dominant voice of the community sector and provided the appearance of a cohesive identity. Of approximately 5000 groups financed by the provincial government today, 4000 identify themselves with this movement.

The reciprocal relation and the tension between the state and the community sector shifted gears again in 1995. It began with a show of the community movement’s mobilization capacity. A massive coalition of community groups, women's groups, poverty groups and students’ associations descended on the National Assembly in Québec City for a long-planned “March for Bread and Roses”, demanding, amongst other things, an anti-poverty policy. As a result, the community sector was offered a place alongside the government, business and union sectors at a provincial socio-economic “summit” held in 1996. There, the provincial prime minister gained the consensus he sought on a zero-deficit policy, but the community contingent was also able to pressure the state, business and union sectors to agree to contribute to an Anti-poverty Fund, to be invested in job creation programmes for the poor. The Fund and the summit in general proved to be the impetus for the promotion of Québec's social economy.

Finally, in order to better support its policy of partnership with the community sector, the government announced in 1995 the creation of a Secretariat for Community Action. Its official mandate included facilitating community groups' access to government resources; advising the government on how best to support community action; and fostering a better understanding of the sector. It also administers the Fund for Autonomous Community Action through which it provides direct support to organizations. Another mandate of the Secretariat for Community Action was to develop a provincial policy regarding relations between the government and the sector. In response to this initiative, the multitude of sectoral and regional associations of community groups stepped up their own organization. This process was not without internal tensions. Some groups and associations believed it essential that they organize to participate actively in the development of the government policy, to ensure that it respected their self-definition and their autonomy and favoured their development. Dissidents believed that the government had no place having a policy about autonomous civil society groups and were against doing anything that would lend legitimacy to such a presumption.

Ultimately, the community movement created an advisory committee to the Secretariat, with a restricted mandate from its member organizations to represent the movement as a whole only in so far as this policy was concerned. It collaborated with the Secretariat on the development of the Policy for the Recognition and Support of Community Action, which officially institutionalized its advisory status. Still, unlike the Ontario advisory committee, it is not a creature of government but rather, self-initiated and self-organized, and its members are not appointed but are delegated by the associations of autonomous community action groups. The ideological influence of the community movement on this policy is evident, at least on the discursive level. For example, the very name of the Secretariat was changed, at the insistence of the advisory committee, to the Secretariat for Autonomous Community Action (though the recognition and support of not-so-autonomous community action is within its
9 The official government policy, adopted in 2001, gives full rein to the movement to define itself in its own terms, and indeed reproduces its self-definition as the official one. Yet the gap between discourse and practice is as wide here as in any other domain. The existence of this policy has not had a significant impact on government – civil society relations, which have been developing along the same lines for at least two decades: some respect for core mission funding through grants, but increasingly prevalent funding through service contracts. Still, competitive bidding has never been instituted. And most social policies, including child care, mental health, and anti-poverty measures, explicitly favour community groups over the market.

In short, Civil society in Quebec has tended to self-organize in the style of social movements. This form of organization has served to build power resources within civil society, including expertise; the circulation of information; legitimacy; mobilizing capacity beyond its own fluid borders, in allied social movements; development of a “political wing” in the second (and third) level associations; and last but not least, identifiable respondents and spokespeople. This solidarity hides important differences and tensions, but these are characteristic of any social movement. It none the less remains significantly different - more autonomous and with greater capacity to act - than civil societies that are less internally collaborative.

But can this dense and relatively powerful self-organization maintain a state of contention within the field of social politics, particularly in the context of a government policy to “recognize and support” community action? Consent to partnership seems to be slowly and surreptitiously creeping into the field of community action, as this policy designed to protect autonomous community action, increasingly promotes contracting and shrewdly undercuts the movement’s self-identity.10 But as in our other sites, and throughout Quebec’s history, contention pokes out in another direction. The Liberal party currently in power in Quebec has been unable to implement the “re-engineering” of the state that he had promised, in face not only of popular resistance, but also resistance within his own party. Still, the birth of new right-wing party and the current combination of a Conservative federal government and Liberal provincial government, has come to reveal a general if subtle alteration in Quebec’s political culture, a few notches towards the right. In the face of these changes, Quebec’s community movement is showing clear signs of re-politicization. For example, it has participated with other social movements in the inauguration of a new political party, the Parti Québec Solidaire (PQS), to re-establish a political voice on the left.

Conclusion

This paper began with a series of questions about the practice of advocacy and dissent in the partnership state. To conclude, we will briefly consider each of these questions in light of what we have learned from the three Canadian case studies presented here. First, it is clear that there has been a movement in Canada away from open access of voluntary and community organizations to government, and towards narrow,
service contracting relations. Participation has actually diminished, while so-called partnerships, in the contracts, have everywhere become dominant. The shift however is considerably slower and less complete in Quebec, where core mission funding is still available to a majority of organizations. What are the conditions that affect the capacity of the third sector to continue its role in advocacy and dissent, despite its entanglement in “partnership” with the government? The answer appears to be threefold: power resources, dense networking, and a distinct identity that frames and legitimates claims. If one is missing, participation is more likely to end in consent than to make room for contention.

Clearly, to participate as a “partner” of the state, as opposed to its instrument, the third sector must control some power resources of its own: alternative sources of funding, unique expertise, constitutional rights, symbolic or social capital, to name a few possibilities. In Ontario, it appeared that under the Conservative government of 1995-2002, the sector had been virtually stripped of these resources. As a consequence, it was not able to defend itself against egregious expectations in exchange for funds. In comparison, at the level of the federal government, these resources remained intact in many of the large voluntary organizations, including alternative sources of funding, a fair degree of legitimacy, and especially social capital. Social capital and expertise in particular, served to reinstate relatively egalitarian relations with the state, once participation was on the agenda. Yet the federal situation differs from that in Quebec in a significant ways: first, if the federal government controlled the agenda in Ottawa, in Quebec, the community groups were able to mobilize to take control as often as the government did so. Second, the national organizations of the Voluntary Sector Roundtable did not have an identity distinct from that of state actors, as Quebec’s community organisations do. Reason for contention, beyond the corporate interests of the sector itself, did not exist in Ottawa. Once the state opened the doors to partnership, relations with the sector leadership became virtually consensual and dissenters were marginalized. In contrast, in Quebec, a shared way of seeing, thinking and acting developed within the third sector since the 1960’s. It is clearly different than that proposed by the state, regardless of the party in power. Socialization into these values through dense networking, over generations of community organizations, allowed for the formation a positive identity, and a legitimate basis for contention.

Regardless of the different conditions that prevailed, and whether advocacy was considered legitimate or not, it was never muzzled; it always squeezed out through some venue other than partnership. Spontaneously organized demonstrations in Ontario could not endure, however, because of lack of resources. In Quebec, socialization into partnership may be occurring in the context of the policy to recognize and support community action, but the debate between neo-liberal and progressive ideologies is manifesting itself, not through participation in government sponsored venues, but rather, in the press and other public media. If groups themselves do not practice double strategies of contention and consent, as in Ontario and Quebec, then we see that different groups within the third sector will. This is illustrated in the federal situation by the continuing vigilance of more militant anti-poverty groups vis-a-vis the government’s Children’s Agenda, for example. Only a totalitarian government can wipe out the public sphere in which associations form and express themselves. Still, some third sectors practice consent and others are coerced into it. Social movements – defined by their solidarity, broad networks and contentious politics – do not always, or even often, coincide with third sectors.

Why are some government more open to tolerating and even encouraging advocacy than others? Almost all governments today claim to hold citizen engagement and participation in high esteem. But the Canadian federal and the Ontario governments seem to tolerate it somewhat less than the Quebec government. The reason is both political and institutional. The traditionally left-of-centre PQ institutionalized what it has called the Quebec Model of development: a consensual, neo corporatist model of informally-structured social partners, in which regional planning and program implementation are carried out through sets of intermediary structures, and in which both the state and community action groups are represented amongst the stakeholders. It is a partisan model; one of the first moves of the Liberal government elected in 2003, for example, was to dismantle these regional intermediary structures.
and replace them with local political structures, dominated by mayors. The community movement thus plays a role in the broad political strategy of the PQ. It has also been used as a lever to budge unions and business in the context of consensus-building exercises, and as an ally in the promotion of sovereignty. The PQ has incorporated the relatively powerful community movement into its political strategy, and is therefore shocked and insulted when the movement publicly criticizes it. The Liberal party, on the other hand, has no such political investment. Like the pragmatic government at the federal level, it can open or close the door to participation, according to its perception of what is to be gained or lost at a particular moment or in a particular context. We saw, for example, that if the voluntary sector is talking accountability and capacity building, government is interested; if it is talking advocacy and funding, it is less so. The hostility to social movements in general is also ideological on the part of Ontario’s conservative government. In the “common sense revolution”, government funded community groups are government’s creatures, or they are abandoned.

Given these parameters - internal cohesion, and political and institutional support - is there a future for third sector advocacy and dissent in the context of the partnership state? The Quebec case suggests that perhaps not. Despite a high degree of internal cohesion, political and institutional support may be succeeding in taming Quebec’s community movement, and socializing it into a consenting partner. What makes this possible is, in part, that the movement’s cohesion is principally discursive. The institutionalization of the partnership relation is rewarding once-marginal practices, such as service contracting; nurturing marginal and new interests; and dividing the movement along its own, internal fault lines. It may be that community groups will undergo a second incorporation into the state, more subtle than the first one in the 1970’s, when the CLSCs were installed as public surrogates for citizens’ committees. But that experience showed that civil society activism crept back in another guise and another venue, supported by distinct values, networking and other power resources. We might hypothesize that, where the third sector has built up significant social capital, as is the case in Quebec, then it will survive periods of depoliticization and, with reinvestment, return in a new cycle of contention as it has in the past.

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