

Civil Society Revisited: Possibilities for increasing community collaboration in a competitive world

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Refereed paper presented to the
Australasian Political Studies Association Conference

University of Adelaide

29 September - 1 October 2004

*'We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition:
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.'*

William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 1599.

Abstract

Civil society holds a special place in the heart of political science. This space between the 'harsh acquisitive world'¹ of business and the 'faceless bureaucracy' of the state has been much studied, with particular attention being paid to those community groups that have emerged to challenge or supplement government. Some theories have portrayed such groups as a necessary buffer between the state and the public, while pluralism has them competing for policy influence. More recently, the diverse proliferation of rising civil society action has been variously taken as evidence of post-industrialism, post-modernism, or reflexive modernisation. The rise of neo-liberal discourses in public policy has had a twofold effect. First, it has shifted some responsibilities from the state to non-government organisations. Second, it has paradoxically encouraged both new competition and new alliances between different parts of the community. So what really is, or could be, the role of community groups within civil society? This paper addresses this question by using the recent rise of collaborative initiatives around Australia as examples. It argues that many groups that have traditionally been on opposite sides of issues may now have an opportunity to construct a shared vision of what they want to achieve. In so doing they might actually increase their effectiveness in bringing their visions to fruition.

Introduction

While civil society is something that most people experience everyday, it is often treated as the poor cousin of the state and the market. Its contribution to society is largely excluded from key economic indicators such as GDP, and it is rarely given the kind of media prominence that is afforded to politics and high finance. This third sector, however, has always been a vital part of society and is growing in importance. This paper looks at the changing role of civil society with a particular focus on Australia. Part one sets the stage with a comparison of a cross-section of theoretical analyses. Part two tracks some of the changes that have occurred as a consequence of the recent implementation of neo-liberal policies. Finally, part three examines moves to establish a more coordinated approach amongst peak-body community organisations. Overall it is argued that any hope of significantly reforming society rests with the ability of civil society to organise, produce innovative ideas, and

¹ The phrase 'harsh acquisitive world' and the inspiration for the title of this paper are taken from Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited*.

influence the mainstream institutions of power. A more effective way to accomplish the just and sustainable outcomes that are sought may be through community collaboration rather than competition.

1) Rethinking civil society

For the purposes of this paper, civil society refers to the organised social space that is outside the state and does not have the pursuit of business as its prime purpose. It consists of various social movements (eg. the green movement), interest groups (eg. sporting associations), pressure groups (eg. the National Farmers Federation), non-government organisations (eg. the Australian Council of Churches), and not-for-profit bodies (eg. Oxfam). The groups may promote a particular sectoral interest (eg. unions and the rights of workers) or promote some ideal (eg. Amnesty International and human rights). Their primary goal may be to influence government policy (eg. Queensland Conservation Council) or they may be focussed on delivering social services (eg. the Red Cross). Obviously these categories are very porous and organisations may both deliver a service and lobby for policy changes (eg. the Australian Council of Social Services). Further, some groups do engage in commercial activity to raise funds (eg. Oxfam and The Wilderness Society both run retail shops), others may support candidates for political office (eg. the 'No Pokies' independent in the South Australian upper house), some may be representing a particular group of producers (eg. Agforce) or consumers (eg. the Australian Consumers Association), and others may be involved in activities of the state (eg. ACTU involvement in the Hawke government's Accords). The diversity of causes, number of organisations, and global reach of civil society has certainly expanded rapidly over the last few decades, although these kinds of institutions have existed for much longer.

After visiting the USA in 1831-32, Alexis de Tocqueville produced two volumes outlining his views on the new democracy that are still used by political scientists as a good example of 19th century liberalism. Being one of the first studies of an early modern democracy, that has strongly influenced the subsequent development of state institutions around the world, it provides a worthwhile point to start a paper on civil society. In the first volume, de Tocqueville [1835] suggested that political associations were a necessary link between the state and the public that helped democracy to function. He saw them as expressing three degrees of the right to freedom of association: to allow for the expression of a shared interest or view; to coordinate efforts to achieve some end; and, to produce representatives for people who shared these interests or views. A common aim, as he saw it, was to effect some change in the laws of the state. He suggested that these associations work best when they were tempered by a strong public spirit, patriotism, respect for the rule of law, and where differences of opinion were not too great. In his second volume, de Tocqueville [1840] argued that associations were a way of empowering individuals, reduced the risk of revolution, relied on a two-way interaction with a free press, and provided a practical education in organisational skills. Many of these features are still apparent in contemporary civil society according to textbook analyses of other liberal democratic states like Australia (eg. Jaensch 1997; Smith 1997; Hague, Harrop &

Breslin 1998). Detailed analyses of civil society over the last century vary, however, depending on the theoretical view that has been adopted.

Perhaps the closest contemporary view of civil society to De Tocqueville's emerged from the American school of pluralism in the 1950-60s. This analysis paid particular attention to pressure groups and their ability to influence policy decisions in contested issues. Dahl & Lindblom (1970), two of the founders of pluralism, suggested that pressure groups form a kind of 'polyarchy' where groups or coalitions of groups compete in putting pressure on government to decide in their favour. The politics of civil society is therefore like a contest with the government as a neutral arbiter - it cannot favour one group too much for fear that the other groups will campaign against it at the next election. In this model business is simply another pressure group that sometimes wins and sometimes loses. In academic circles this model has been considerably undermined by mounting evidence that the game is tilted to favour business in the long run (Crenson 1971). Lindblom (1977) was one of the founders of pluralism who later repudiated the theory. In his revised view, business is in a privileged position that is supported by an ability to keep issues off the agenda and a pro-business ideology amongst political leaders. Similar criticisms are raised by other theorists (Lukes 1974; Miliband 1970), yet this view of civil society persists in the popular media and the rhetoric of business and politics.

The Marxist view of civil society in liberal democracy is more complicated. On the one hand, clashes between unions and business are often taken as indicative of a more fundamental class struggle between the workers and the owners of capital. According to this view, until workers take control of the state and the means of production they will be limited to gaining only minor concessions (Marx 1977). On the other hand, civil action by other groups (such as the greens) is little more than part of the facade of liberal democratic politics. It is a kind of sideshow designed to distract the public from the fact that government policy is dominated by the needs of capital (Miliband 1970; Pepper 1993; Bell 1995). If this were the case, however, surely two centuries of civil society activism should have made apparent that campaigning is pointless. Yet how do we explain the significant changes to both the state and business that have been brought about by political associations such as unions, the women's movement, and environmentalists?

Dissatisfaction with traditional liberal, pluralist and Marxist explanations has encouraged more recent theorists to try to explain the complexity of current civil society as a combination of new social movements (ie. those not based on either the working or capital owning class) and old class politics (Offe 1985). Inglehart (1977), for example, argues that as a society becomes more prosperous a middle class emerges that has satisfied most of its material wants. Members of this class then turn their attention to other issues, such as the environment. Hence what are considered to be 'new social movements' are really just a manifestation of the middle class. The problem with this view is that many movements have emerged in poorer states from among the poorest citizens. The Chipko movement in India, for example, is a movement of poor rural women who have been willing to put their bodies on the line to prevent the clearing of their local forests (Shiva 1989). Further, Broad (1994)

points to many cases where the poor in developing states have actually been better custodians of the environment than the well off middle class in developed states.

Another problem with a class-based explanation is that in theory there should be little opportunity for cooperation between groups from different classes. Studies by Siegmann (1985) and Norton (2003) have suggested that many factors other than class influence the capacity for cooperation between the working class labour movement and the supposedly 'new middle class' environmental movement. These factors include the relative status of both as either 'insiders' or 'outsiders' in government decision-making, the degree of internal democracy, and the prevailing institutional ideology or discourse. This opens the door to an entirely new way of understanding civil society - one where the identification of issues, the formation of groups, and their tendency to compete or cooperate, is influenced by constructed views of the world. Through this door enters a number of post-structural, post-modern, strong and weak constructionist schools of thought. Dryzek (1997), for example, offers a concise survey of different kinds of groups within the environmental movement that can be differentiated according to their discourses, drawing on previous work by Foucault (1990) and Habermas (1987) (for a more detailed explanation see Howes 2001a). In this view, civil society is like a sea of different discourses that can clash and undermine each other, or can reinforce to build into waves of change. In later work Dryzek, et. al (2003) argue that movements are successful if they can link their cause to at least one of the constructed core imperatives of the state (eg. security, order, or prosperity), or have their goal added to those core imperatives. They attribute the spread of liberal democracy to the success of a new middle class movement in the 18th century, and the development of the welfare state to the 19th century rise of the labour movement. Their analysis also suggests that civil society does not go away if neglected by the state. On the contrary, it can be strengthened if the state is seen as failing to respond to community concerns.

The idea that civil society is something that responds to issues when the state is unwilling or unable is something that has been much explored by Beck (1992). In his view, the industrialised world has made the transition from one where the politics is largely driven by class, to one that is largely driven by risk. This 'risk society', as he calls it, engenders a politics where citizens are worried about problems (such as pollution, toxic waste, etc) that are generated by a modernisation process that has become reflexive. The fight over the distribution of such 'bads' has therefore usurped the class struggle over the distribution of traditional 'goods' like wealth as the basic political dynamic of society. The state is ill equipped to address these risks and so a new sub-politics of protest has emerged to tackle these issues. Our civil society has therefore become a struggle between risk winners and risk losers. The mass protests outside major world economic and political meetings, for example, includes people from both the working and middle classes, and brings together those citizens who feel threatened by economic globalisation. These include farmers, unionists, environmentalists, feminists, left wing radicals, right wing nationalists, anarchists, first and third world activists, and religious groups, among others (Howes 2001b).

This brief history of ideas offers some insight into how the understanding of civil society has developed. Associations do offer an important link between the state and society, but they have moved beyond simply trying to alter laws and now demand significant structural changes to the way society is organised. The political space left to this part of society is bounded by the priority given to the economic interests of business by government, but there are still considerable gains to be made from community action. While class may influence the formation of some movements, their behaviour is also affected by factors such as discourse, institutional structure, and relative political status. Finally, civil society is increasingly taking on the roles that the state is unable or unwilling to accept. This model offers us greater opportunity to identify the conditions for competition and cooperation between various community groups.

2) The impact of neo-liberalism

Of special relevance to the development of civil society in Australia over at least the last two decades has been the adoption of policies and programs that have been shaped by neo-liberal discourses (Pusey 1991). While NGOs have a long history within Australian politics, neo-liberalism has exacerbated the conditions that require action from civil society and created a context in shaping the nature of such movements. By encouraging a reduction in government spending and welfare support, neo-liberalism has created a sizeable hole that NGOs have had to fill in their attempts to ensure, amongst other things, social equity, justice and sustainable management of natural resources. This is evidence of the sub-politics of reflexive modernisation at work, where the basic political struggle is between winners and losers within a risk society.

Until the 1970s state intervention was supported by political discourses such as administrative rationalism and Keynesian economics that constructed the state as the solution to problems that arose from the excesses of the market. This was particularly evident in the manufacturing and agricultural sectors², where a range of state based interventions, including tariffs, subsidies, price supports and quotas, were enforced as a way of ensuring the economic viability of farm families and rural communities (Campbell and Lawrence 2003). During the 1980s, however, welfare and other broad-based social agendas were replaced by a narrow focus on the free market, and deference to market forces to meet social and environmental needs (Gray and Lawrence 2001). A key consequence was the privatisation of a range of community services, including health care, telecommunications, and job search and training services. It was assumed that market forces could drive these services to greater efficiency, improving their competitiveness within an increasingly global economy, and delivering a net social benefit to both clients and taxpayers. The reality of privatisation of essential social services and the increasing exposure of the Australian economy to the vagaries of the global market, however, has not always produced the results that neo-liberals predicted. The privatisation of the energy sector in South Australia, for example, led to higher electricity prices and a more unreliable peak-period supply. In Melbourne, the sale of the public transport system has resulted in

² Although both Australia and New Zealand were equally supportive of neo-liberal reform as a strategy to address the apparent crisis in agriculture (see Campbell and Lawrence, 2003).

higher fares, reduced services, and subsidies to firms that cost the taxpayer just as much as the original public system. Commonwealth subsidies designed to encourage people to take out private health insurance led to a dramatic rise in premiums and the cost of health care, not the predicted reduction, and would have been more effective if spent on the public hospital system.

Apart from the apparent lack of efficiency dividends in privatising such public goods, there has been an uneven and inequitable distribution of transition costs (Gray and Lawrence 2001; Campbell and Lawrence 2003). There was, for example, a downsizing of major industries such as manufacturing that had a particularly harsh impact on women and people from non-English speaking backgrounds, whose employment was highly concentrated in these sectors (Gray and Lawrence 2001). The high unemployment levels of the 1980s and 1990s created a flow-on of social problems, especially in rural Australia. Declining incomes in these regions in many instances resulted in the withdrawal of essential services, and threatened the viability of whole communities (Lawrence and Williams 1990). These impacts aggravated other problems, placing increasing financial pressures on families, and occurring alongside an increasing incidence of domestic violence and youth suicide, problems that became particularly acute in rural and indigenous communities (Lawrence 1996; Green 1996). The natural resource base also suffered. This was particularly evident in the agricultural sector, where worsening economic and social conditions forced farmers to adopt unsustainable farming methods in an attempt to remain viable within an increasingly competitive global economy. By 2000 rural environmental damage (such as soil erosion, degradation of water resources, and dry-land salinity) was estimated to cost in excess of \$2 billion annually, and could rise to over \$6 billion by 2020 (Madden, et al. 2000). The extent of salinity alone could increase from 2.5 million to 15.5 million hectares unless action is taken (Bouilly 2000). The size, impact and spread of such risks again support Beck's theory.

Civil society has responded to these stresses in various ways. Internationally, community action has been widely recognised as imperative for addressing such problems for several decades. The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, the World Commission on Environment and Development (1983-87), and subsequent Earth Summits (1992 and 2002) identified collective community action as essential prerequisites in the shift to socially and environmentally sustainable societies (Doyle and McEachern 2001). Calls for increased community engagement, for example, feature prominently in both *Agenda 21* and *Local Agenda 21*. The activities of NGOs are now a significant influence in defining problems, formulating responses, and implementing programs. At the same time, civil society has experienced a rapid and sustained growth in new social movements in recent history. The number of environmental NGOs, for example, has increased to over 13,000 in the developed world, with 2,230 operating in developing countries. Of these, thirty and sixty percent respectively formed during the 1990s (Doyle and McEachern 2001). The rise of neo-liberal policies – particularly with regards to trade and economic development – has become a central focus of civil society protests at major international economic and political forums from Seattle in 1999 to Cancun in 2003 (Howes 2001b). These protests indicate that civil society is

increasingly losing faith in the ability of the state and business to address major issues, and is demanding more substantial institutional change.

While the rise of neo-liberalism has catalysed increased community action, it has also been accompanied by a shift in governance by the state. More specifically, it has produced new strategies that are designed to influence civil society from 'a distance' (Rose 1993). Rather than relying on direct disciplinary tools such as surveillance, policing, or direct social control, these new technologies create citizens who regulate their own behaviour and action (Herbert-Cheshire 2003). To this end, government departments have deployed a range of support services ostensibly designed to assist in building local community capacity (Herbert-Cheshire 2003). At face value, these new services should empower the community and increase local autonomy but Murdoch and Abram (1998, 41) argue that it is really a form of 'action at a distance' where the state subtly defines the boundaries and characteristics of civil society. Through training programs, funding and community workshops, state agencies establish the boundaries for conceptualising social and environmental problems, thereby influencing the actions of civil society. This process can also marginalise alternative forms of action, particularly in rural Australia. The Landcare Program³, for example, and other similar community-based resource management groups have promoted a relatively narrow agenda, which has failed to challenge agricultural intensification, economic rationalism and increasing integration within the global economy (Lockie 1999). Allen (1993), Kloppenburg (1991) and others have argued that re-thinking the worldviews inherent in such programs will be an essential pre-requisite in moving towards social justice and environmental responsibility. It can be argued, therefore, that it may be important for community groups to take the initiative independently of formal state programs in order to allow for the development of more creative solutions. Findings from Murdoch and Abram (1998) and others (see also Whelan and Oliver 2004 and Lockie 1999) suggest that engagement in social change activities outside such official programs may ensure civil society movements are able to retain their goals and objectives. At the international level, for example, NGOs organised their own forums to discuss issues such as business liability and wealth redistribution that were omitted from the official 1992 Earth Summit. They also kept the debate on climate change going when it was forced off the formal Agenda at the second Earth Summit in 2002. At the national level, cooperation between the ACF and NFF put salinity on the political agenda with a cooperative report on the nature of the problem, when it had been neglected by formal government policy for decades.

This analysis highlights several important roles for civil society. The expansion of neo-liberalism has, at least in the short-run, exacerbated social and environmental problems that civil society has been left to address as the state withdraws. It has also drawn attention to the importance of NGOs in representing interests excluded from mainstream policy. At the same time, the neo-liberal agenda has shaped the nature and dynamics of some movements, particularly through the expansion of state-run

³ Australia's Landcare Program is the largest community self-help program directed at addressing environmental and social problems facing rural Australia. Since its inception in 1989, over 4200 community groups have established to address local resource use and degradation issues (Lockie, 1998). In 1996 Landcare became part of the broader Natural Heritage Trust program that extended the approach to programs such as Coastcare and Bushcare.

community self-help and capacity building programs. It is important to critically assess the impacts on civil society to ensure that innovative approaches continue to emerge. Of particular interest are attempts to increase collaboration between groups, independently of the state, that may offer a new and important model.

3) New moves for collaboration

The recent rise in neo-liberal public policy, combined with a proliferation of NGOs, has encouraged the state to further withdraw from direct service delivery and selectively delegate functions to civil society. This change has placed more pressure on the community sector (Green 2000) and NGOs are now striving to make better use of their scarce resources by collaborating on specific projects. The withdrawal of the state and increased community need (outlined in the previous section) has encouraged peak-body organisations to develop a common platform for innovative programs and stronger advocacy.

In 2000 David Yencken founded a permanent organisation, called the Australian Collaboration, to encourage cooperation between NGOs at the national level. The aim was to focus efforts on a common purpose - that of achieving a just and sustainable society. A deliberate decision was made to limit membership to a small number of peak-body organisations, each representing a large number of individual groups, that collectively stood for a broad spectrum of community interests (Yencken & Porter 2001). (The organisations involved were: the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF); the Australian Consumers Association (ACA); the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS); the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA); the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA); the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC); the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCAA) and its Social Justice Network.) The initial intention was to include only non-government organisations, but finding a non-government peak-body to represent indigenous groups proved problematic. Goldtooth (cited in Fleming and Hanks 2004) points out that there are many differences between the governance of many indigenous nations. As a result, an invitation was made to one government body (ATSIC) to represent the indigenous interests. This decision will now have to be revised with the recent Commonwealth announcement that ATSIC is to be disbanded.

In late 2001 the WA Conservation Foundation (WCF) created an equivalent State-based organisation modelled on the Australian Collaboration, spurred on by the announcement of the establishment of a *State Sustainability Strategy* policy development process. The WA Collaboration recognised an early and very public opportunity to influence policy by challenging, modifying and participating in the process of public consultation. It implemented a more extensive community engagement program to generate a broader public discussion of sustainable development. This, in turn, helped consolidate the new organisation and provided a highly visible, tangible project through which the NGOs could build their collaborative relationships.

Three key documents have been produced since the establishment of both these organisations. In 2001, the Australian Collaboration produced *A Just and Sustainable Australia* (Yencken & Porter 2001) and *Where are we going: Comprehensive social, cultural, environmental and economic reporting* (Yencken 2001). These documents formed the basis of the national focus of the Collaboration and provided a starting point for state-based initiatives. They helped the WA Collaboration shift its role from being an 'informant' in the *State Sustainability Strategy*, to becoming a creator of their own strategy that could be used to work with, or lobby against, the state. The community engagement process, involving a number of 'Sustainability Summits' around WA, produced the *Community Sustainability Agenda: Creating a Just and Sustainable Western Australia* (Duggie & Hodgson 2003). In addition, the WA Collaboration was successful in lobbying the State Government to improve its public engagement processes. This demonstrates the ability of independent civil society organisations to overcome the agenda-setting tendencies of state-run community programs and generate more innovative alternatives. By working together, the NGOs enhanced their ability to overcome the state's attempt of 'governing at a distance', had a greater influence on policy, and improved their chances of achieving their goals.

Early moves are now being made in Queensland, South Australia and Victoria to create their own Collaborations. Each face different challenges arising from varying State Government agendas and a diversity of issues. In Queensland, for example, both the Conservation Council and the Farmers Federation have expressed interest in the embryonic organisation, but have only just emerged from a long-term dispute over land clearing. These kinds of disagreements make it difficult to realise a collective purpose and common agenda. Although it could be argued that the increased demand on resources has contributed to difficulties in commitment to escalating collaborative efforts, the need to review and prioritise the way many NGO's are operating in today's environment cannot be ignored. Gaining the time and energy required to escalate collaborative efforts posits the need to review strategic prioritisations. However, this has proven challenging, in light of the complexity experienced in determining 'tangible' projects that can represent the multiple perspectives and agendas that are brought forward for consideration.

Although it is acknowledged there are several successful NGO's in Australia, many are facing considerable challenges to their future survival. The need for these organisations to reinvent themselves to ensure their continuance over the next five to ten years cannot be ignored. However, the energy required on revisiting the future purpose, strategic intent and the need to match these changes with organisational realignments cannot be underestimated. The member-driven strategies that currently keep these organisations 'doing' can be somewhat aligned with the need for a politician to make decisions that keep them in office, regardless of the long term consequences. Furthermore, a large proportion of these organisations within Australia receive a significant proportion of their funding from government, which does not accommodate the time and resources required for the development of these

organisations.⁴ With many of these challenges facing NGO's, the collaboration of multiple organisations is challenging.

However, Osbourne & Murray (2000) suggest that in such early stages, four key factors are important for determining success in developing a new collaboration. The first is to build on existing relationships whenever possible. Second is to build from limited collaborations, which involve limited challenges to organisational autonomy and shift this towards toward more significant (and risky) challenges over time. Third, is to be explicit about both the organisational and personal goals and to look for congruence, while not trying to force them to be the same. Finally, is an acceptance that competitive tensions will continue to be a legitimate part of collaborative ventures. All of these have been features of the early stages of the Queensland Collaboration.

Green (2000) proposes a number of obstacles that can challenge the successful creation of these types of collaborations within the non-profit sector. First, is the tendency of most organisations to resist giving up resources, credit, visibility or autonomy. While this is the case, the inability to focus at a strategic level and re-prioritise the focus, resources and time towards collaborative programs has been more of an issue in Queensland. Second, not everyone insists on being the coordinator, but nobody wishes to be coordinated. This was certainly the case in Queensland and it is exacerbated by the need for time, resources and energy. Third, there is a risk that so much effort will go into maintaining a coalition that little remains for actual programs. Fourth, getting the right people to attend the meetings and commit to future development has been difficult. As pointed out previously, consistency of attendance by senior stakeholders has been a key challenge and this relates back to the priority allotted to the initiative by NGOs and their representatives. Finally, Green (2000) suggests that those who are good at initiating coalitions and getting broad agreement on goals are not necessarily those best at implementing programs.

The success and direction of Collaborations within Australia is difficult to predict during these early stages, however, the ability to influence and inform the debate across civil society through collaborative NGO efforts does offer great potential. The WA experience demonstrates the importance of such collaborations in fostering innovative initiatives and empowering civil society. While there are many obstacles, the fact that such disparate groups from different classes are willing to at least consider closer ties in places like Queensland may be an indicator of both the impact of neo-liberal policies and the rise of a sub-politics generated by reflexive modernisation.

⁴ In 2004, Sharon Bryant conducted a search through a number of grant search engines and through contacting various levels of government in order to seek funding for community groups to carry out organisational development and innovation. Although there was small amount of funds available for technology, there were limited resources available to address the larger scale exercises that many government organisations implement to improve and redefine the relevance of their organisations within a changing environment.

Conclusions

Historically there have been many attempts to explain civil society, from de Tocqueville's observations, through the Pluralist versus Marxist debates, to post-modern theories. The size and function of this third sector of society has developed and changed over time to produce something that is more than just an attempt to change laws, nor is it simply window dressing for capitalism. It has moved beyond simple class politics and has become an expression of the diversity of discourses that have been woven into the fabric of society. As the state attempts to withdraw, and with faith in government and business declining, civil society is increasingly taking on the role of providing essential services and advocacy. It is likely to be this sector that will be the key to finding innovative responses to the social and environmental risks created by the process of reflexive modernisation. Indeed, historical evidence indicates the actions of civil society movements in Australia and elsewhere play a vital role in initiating such social and environmental change.

Over the last two decades the rise of a neo-liberal policy agenda has exacerbated the conditions that require civil society action. At the same time, state agencies have attempted to play an increasingly central role in mediating the activities and agendas of community groups, raising a number of concerns about their autonomy and effectiveness. A range of recent collaborations between major NGOs, however, has the potential to increase community empowerment. Whether this move succeeds or whether it will be neutralised by the new mechanisms of community governance deployed by the state remains to be seen. One thing that is borne out by recent developments is that reflexive modernisation appears to be alive and well and living in Australia.

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