

THE SOCIETY AND THE CHANGING FACE OF WELFARE

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF HELPING CHILDREN

A journey of generosity and giving through the generations

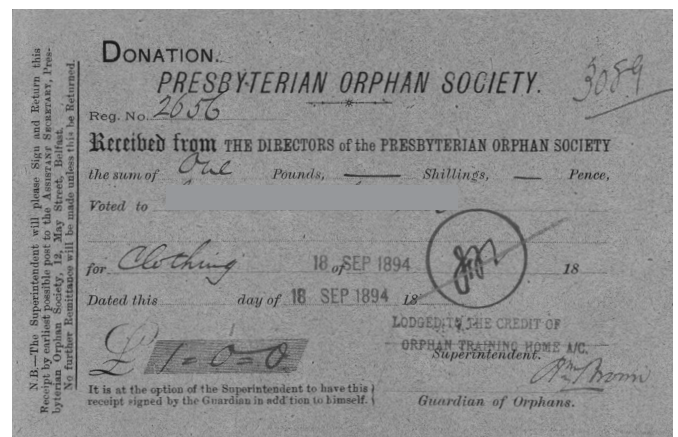


The Society has always argued that social involvement is rooted in the character of God and it is possible to identify with reasonable ease those in need whom we can help. Whilst social involvement might be advanced as a biblical injunction, interpretation of what should constitute social action by the Presbyterian Church has varied over the last two centuries. Thinking has changed, not only in response to the growth and development of the Presbyterian Church, but also in relation to external factors, not least the development of government policy and increase in the functions of the state. How then has the Society worked out its role in practice over this period in relation to both church and the state?

Social Policy 1900 – 1945

In nineteenth-century Ireland social care provision by the state was piecemeal and chiefly concerned with applying English legislation to Ireland, the financing of welfare, and the degree to which social care legislation could be used for 'social control'. Indeed the main burden of welfare services was still carried on by voluntary effort. In the first half of the nineteenth century the Kirk Session was involved in the social care of Presbyterians. The widows, orphans, aged and infirm, were all assisted. The Society was founded in 1866 at a time of great philanthropic activity by various church agencies, and whilst the motivations behind this charitable endeavour were no doubt mixed, there is little doubting the genuine desire to care for those in need.

At the start of the twentieth century concern about social issues motivated the Westminster Parliament to establish two Royal Commissions on the Poor Laws between 1900 and 1910. Various acts were generated by the impetus created by these Commissions and these were to be the foundation of governing legislation until 1945. Whilst the Presbyterian Church produced enlightened and concerned reports on social issues to the General Assembly in the first half of the twentieth century, these usually went no further and had little influence on government policy. In addition the Society's work was relatively unaffected by government provision.



Grant donation slip.

Change since 1945

Since 1945 there have been seismic shifts in social policy. The socialism of the period 1945-51 with its emphasis on security for all in terms of a National Health Service and benefits system was succeeded by a social democratic approach of labour governments of the 1960s and 1970s. Bevan caught the optimism and egalitarianism of the late 1940's well when he talked of an equality which values children and their potential. He stated "It is commonly said that we are all born unequal, but surely that is the wrong way of expressing it. True we are born of parents who occupy different positions in society; and therefore children start their lives with varying advantages. But that is a difference of social situation and not intrinsic in the children. It would be more correct to say that we are born with different potential aptitudes, than that we are born unequal." This rhetoric seems not far removed from the sentiments of the Society's founders and supporters, though they might not have articulated it in this way.

End of Consensus

From 1945 to 1979 there had been a welfare consensus in Britain. This was an acceptance of an idea of social equality and welfare with a strong regulated economy ensuring redistribution of wealth and the alleviation of want and hardship. This consensus was to be shattered by the New Right ideology which imbued the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) and John Major (1990-1997). The New Right developed a significant critique of the Welfare State and the strategies emerging from this critique included proposals for significant reductions in the level of state welfare activity, often suggesting the maintenance of a safety net only for those 'genuinely' unable to provide for themselves, together with the expansion of provision by the private and voluntary sectors. The New Right influence over social policy arguably reached its peak during the third term of the Thatcher government where major reforms took place in various social policy areas. It could be argued that the 'New Labour' governments of 1997 and 2001 continued to accept the strengths of New Right arguments in a number of areas, although such ideas were incorporated within the philosophy of the 'third way' which emphasised mutual responsibilities of the state and citizenry in meeting social and economic need. The Conservative-Liberal coalition government only marginally curtailed Conservative passion for welfare reform though the subsequent Conservative outright victory meant such reforming zeal gained greater impetus with benefit curtailment prioritised and ongoing. In the midst of a debatable retreat from welfare the Society's role is arguably more important in 2016 than it has been for some time.

The Society – Longevity, Biblical Focus and Relevance

In this necessarily brief sketch of the nexus of social policy changes over this extensive period and the Society's work what observations can we make? Perhaps one of the most obvious yet remarkable observations concerns the continued existence of the Society despite the massive sea change in social policy and provision over a 150 year period. Whilst many forces have been at work in the survival of the Society from an era of early industrialisation to that of the internet, it could be argued that it is clear that a biblical focus on need, which is timeless, has imbued the Society with longevity.

It might also be argued that a clear focus on children and their families, at once biblical, necessary and always relevant has helped sustain the Society. Whilst the Society may have mutated within its area of work, it has not evolved into an organisation which is different in client base or organisational structure from that of its original founders' vision. This clarity and unswerving focus have allowed the Society to navigate its path throughout a period of burgeoning state apparatus and an increasing complexity in the interplay of voluntary sector and state. In some ways the denominational nature has also been a major strength ensuring no dilution of focus and maintaining a suitable degree of independence from the state. Whilst little has been said about the differences in the two 'Irish' jurisdictions since partition it could be argued that both jurisdictions were to varying degrees imbued with the ethos of changes in the UK and both UK and Ireland have been influenced progressively either positively or negatively in latter years by the European and American policy debates.

Perhaps one final point should be made about grant giving by the Society. The giving of grants has had a different meaning at different times over the last 150 years. In a period when the welfare net was not provided by the state the grant was crucial for many as a buffer between these individuals and destitution. The welfare state relegated the grant to a supplementary role which since 1980 has arguably now become a more complimentary one. However, what has been constant has been its power as a symbol of the Christian care of the church, both biblical in emphasis and meaningful in the way it is delivered. Perhaps therein lies part of the reason that the Society continues to function as effectively within church and state in the twenty-first century as it did in the nineteenth century. The usefulness of the amount given in grant may have varied over time but the relevance of the grant as symbol has remained unchanged. It is a tool of pastoral ministry but, more than this, it is the outworking of a biblical understanding of Christian compassion and the demonstration of Christian love.