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Book Review by Greg Procknow

High Ideals and Noble Intentions: Voluntary Sector-Government Relations in Canada. By Peter R. Elson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. 224 pp. ISBN 9781442610989

High Ideals and Noble Intentions is a unique phrase borrowed from a speech made to the International Association for Volunteer Effort by Jean Chrétien in 1998 that Peter Elson uses as his book's title. Like the title, this is a unique and refreshing book that serves as a wake-up call for those busily engrossed within the voluntary sector, including volunteers, board members, and funders et cetera. At its core, Elson's work presents in multitudinous detail the government's historically feeble attempts at procuring a stable and lasting relationship with the voluntary sector.

High Ideals and Noble Intentions relies on scholars and researchers who have on prior occasion explored voluntary sector/government relations; however, Elson goes beyond this and uses persuasive evidence to depict the maladjusted marriage of the voluntary sector and the Canadian government. Relying heavily on statistical portrayals provided in reports consolidated by the National Council for Voluntary Organizations dating back to 1980, Elson uses a wealth of primary sources (e.g. House of Commons debates) to complement his narrative enquiry.

Elson argues that the historical record documenting the relationship between Canada's federal government and its voluntary organizations shows the weakness of this relationship, which is only rarely mutually productive and supportive. He advocates the idea that a strong government partner is necessary for a flourishing voluntary sector, but when the government lacks the will to establish a relationship with the sector, then the latter needs to "independently invest in establishing itself as an inclusive and significant sectoral representative" (p. 158). Given this argument, the author's avowed intention is for his book to contribute to the understanding and practice of voluntary sector/government relations in Canada. Further, he argues that when a more sustainable and productive policy relationship between the two is fostered, it will prove beneficial to all Canadians. To this end, the book poses two broad questions: what accounts for the relationship that exists today between the government and the voluntary sector? And what has been the impact of key historical developments on voluntary sector/government relations today?

High Ideals and Noble Intentions addresses three issues (noted as critical junctures) at the cynosure of voluntary sector and governmental affairs: policy and advocacy, federal funding, and the federal regulatory regime. The three critical junctures explored are: (1) the 1930 amendment to the Income War Tax Act (chapter three), because both the regulatory and statutory contrivances implemented in it paved the requisite

groundwork for their reinforcement and consolidation in 1967 when the CRA developed a centralized effort to register and regulate charities; (2) regulatory changes made in between 1987 and 2003 to permissible political activity, as mandated by the release of Information Circular 87-1 (chapter four) in conjunction with Information Circular 78-3 and Political Activities CPS-022, which collectively amount to a momentous institutional shift in admissible political actions within the current legislative framework; and (3) the alteration from citizen-based project funding to service-based contract funding between 1994 and 1996 as provided through Paul Martin's Program Review, which has precipitated long-lasting impacts on the government/voluntary sector funding relationship.

Elson's work engages with an important epoch in Canadian history by unveiling the hidden idiosyncrasies of adverse governmental policies mandated for voluntary sector organizations, and proffers a compendious historical account of how the voluntary sector has been shaped in the 20th century.

The book, perhaps the most comprehensive work to date in terms of mapping Canada's rich history of the third sector, is unswervingly focused in detailing antiquated English legislature and its reciprocal influence on both the Canadian voluntary sector and the Canadian Federal government. Although the book provides manifold recondite descriptions of tax incentives and deductions, Elson does offer a concise history lesson throughout with accomplished ease. Elson's punctilious approach in both research and writing does justice to his seven recommendations (he notes them as being *Seven Principles of Engagement*), which are propounded below:

1. *Affiliate and organize*: Build a formal representation structure that will augment rather than depreciate the power of any one nonprofit organization.
2. *Build an agenda*: Anticipate, communicate and maintain a vision of an improved future, one that considers the entire voluntary sector and its relationship with the community.
3. *Communicate*: Ask for what you need: It is better to ask for too much as opposed to asking for too little.
4. *Engage your community*: By accessing both sectoral social and economic capital.
5. *Form an identity*: Know who you are by crafting an intrinsic profile of your organization.
6. *Invest in research*: Without requisite investments in research, key financial, societal, and policy issues are often ignored and misconstrued.
7. *Strive for social justice*: Create policy and legislative legacies that serve the best interests of both citizens and the voluntary sector.

The book does, however, have some shortcomings. For example, Elson openly acknowledges excluding mutual aid associations as well as quasi-governmental organizations such as colleges, universities, and hospitals. Moreover, Elson's analysis is often one-sided, relying heavily on addressing the relationship between the federal government and the voluntary sector as influenced by the government, i.e. governmental policies burdening or unburdening the voluntary sector. By so doing, Elson has underappreciated the manifold influences of the varied nonprofit groups that positively shape government operations and requisite services provided to Canadians. Further, Elson does not address questions such as: does, or has, the voluntary sector influenced policies that impact how federal governments govern themselves? Or, do government agencies depend on voluntary sector support and how would it affect federal government operations if nonprofit sector funds and support were withdrawn?

Elson's book is a strong and necessary contribution to the field, even though one feels at times as if he is weighing the reader down with his convoluted chronicles of government intransigence throughout the 20th century. I wonder, throughout Elson's work, if he maintains jaundiced opinions towards the Canadian government, or is just simply critical of the government's hampering of support to the voluntary sector. Although the author does a grand job of defining the three critical junctures in the relationship between the voluntary sector and the federal government as mediated by the government, I would have liked to see three more critical junctures as influenced by the voluntary sector that have inaugurated change in this relationship. Despite these shortcomings, *High Ideals and Noble Intentions* is recommended reading for third sector researchers, policymakers, voluntary sector advocates, and students across varied disciplines linked with health, social justice, economics, and governmental studies.

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