



VOLUNTARY ACTION HISTORY SEMINARS

VAHS seminar series at the Institute of Historical Research

SEMINAR ABSTRACT

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Volunteering and Democracy in Britain Since the 1790s

After briefly defining both terms in the equation, the paper will outline the several dimensions of their affinity in the U.K. from the 1790s to the present: making new recruits for public life, injecting new ideas and information into government through or in spite of the two-party system, closely monitoring government's pretensions, fostering the participatory ideal, and channelling discontent into parliamentary rather than violent courses. Yet for several reasons the affinity between voluntarism and democracy was always somewhat precarious in these years, given the activist temperament, the social obstacles to full democratic participation, the campaigners' deliberate or accidental misrepresentation of opinion to the politicians, and the potentially or actually undemocratic structural factors within the organizations involved. The paper will conclude by asking how far recent social and political change enhances or reduces these threats to the affinity – changes such as secularization, the collapse of empire, the decline of socialism/corporatism, the 'breakup' of the U.K., shifts in the role and structure of the family, the diminished faith in the two-party system, the increasing disillusion with British political institutions, the growth in the mass media, and the advance of recreational affluence. The aim of the talk is to evoke or provoke the considerable expertise and experience of the seminar's members, as evidenced by the very varied papers it has heard in recent years, into discussing important shared and ongoing problems.