

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE STATE: THE ROLE OF CHARITIES IN CAMPAIGNING

Monday 5th to Tuesday 6th September 2016

A St George's House Consultation

St George's House, Windsor Castle

Short report

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Situation

Over the past six years, charities in the UK have experienced an increase in regulation, including new regulation of fundraising and stronger limits on lobbying; declining statutory funding; and critical scrutiny in the media amid uncertainties about the role charities should play in society and the character of the regulatory environment in which they operate. These have all in different ways constrained charities' ability to represent and assist the beneficiaries they stand for.

The voluntary sector is worried by a general change in atmosphere which seems to posit charities as an evil to be contained – rather than the vital body of a strong, independent, and diverse civil society, and the means by which many are helped and represented who cannot rely solely upon their immediate circle or the state.

As members of civil society, regulatory authorities and charity-representative bodies, we met at St George's House to discuss these issues under the rubric "The role of charities in campaigning". In summary, we feel strongly that there is an urgent need now to:

- indicate to the prime minister the many areas in which charities can and would continue to help state and government to **prioritise the needs of the 'just managing' and 'left behind'**
- arrange to **meet and converse regularly** with government representatives, ministers, and regulators in safe spaces towards greater mutual understanding
- seek statements of support from ministers, opinion-leaders and especially the Charity Commission about **charities' valuable ongoing role in civil society including policy-making**
- **importantly, refresh and re-sign the Compact** between state and voluntary sector

In more detail, we feel charities can, with help, improve the essential contribution they already make to the UK. Charities can take action on behalf of their identity as such; they can amplify their voices for more effective communication; and they can contribute to the cultivation of deeper and more understanding relationships with government, state, and regulatory entities:

1. Self-definition as a sector

- cultivate humility
- have, and act upon, clear priorities (it's about the beneficiaries)
- present a clear stance
- act early to set our own house in order when necessary, remaining constructively self-critical and retaining priorities
- be part of the solution and vision, not the problem; be ready to fill gaps left by the state or private enterprise
- be ready to push back confidently if charities' role is threatened (as in Anti-Advocacy)
- collaborate and mobilise; build movements

2. Voice

- meet the zeitgeist: tell a story
- push forwards the positive evidence about beneficiaries and volunteers, and connect their stories with the wider challenges
- bring in more various voices to represent charities
- amplify *local* voices in particular
- speak for voiceless organisations
- use existing communication channels and spaces better, and more
- move into new channels: use media, including traditional media

3. Relationship with government and regulator

- make a realistic offer to help government make sure that the needs of the struggling and left-behind will be met, with particular reference to the PM's statement of 13 July and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, to which the UK Government is a signatory and played a key role in the lead up to their adoption
- **refresh the Compact**; have both charities and government re-commit; (re)build a mutually informative and helpful relationship with government
- ask the Charity Commission for informal follow-up conversations about what charities can do to support the Commission moving forward
- ask the Charity Commission to demonstrate leadership to trustees regarding the value of charities' policy contributions
- communicate with the House of Lords Select Committee (with reference to Julia Unwin's review of the future of the sector)
- invite special advisers and parliamentarians to informal 'safe space' conversations to share perspectives
- work to have government 'pause the clause' (more bluntly, to get rid of one-size-fits-all anti-advocacy rules; charity, as care for others and on behalf of others, *is* advocacy)
- work with supportive MPs to pursue the above
- help provide continuing training in charity issues for MPs, and enhance civil-service training and courses

It is important to build on the conversation so far, to generate greater trust and the possibility of greater collaborative plans for a better society. We believe passionately in our causes and are keen to engage in order to further them.