

Why society thrives when charities thrive

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The turbulence of the past decade, with its divisive politics and unprecedented global challenges, has threatened and undermined the place of the voluntary sector in our society. Charities have too often become the collateral damage of culture wars, with too many politicians and public figures setting themselves against us and a perceived 'woke agenda'.

Describing the charity sector as 'woke' is self-defeating – if being alive to some of the most pressing injustices of the day is woke, then of course we are 'woke'. This is what we are here for: in an increasingly secular society, the voluntary sector has stepped into the role that the church used to play, providing the moral compass which guides the Good Society – a society which is more compassionate and inclusive. What that society looks like is for all of us to help shape: charities can be the vehicles to bring together government, business, and communities to promote that change.

It is an essential role at a time when politicians on the far left and far right are pursuing increasingly radical populist policies that, at best, marginalise certain communities or, at worst, treat them as scapegoats. Such tactics can only lead to a more individualist, less compassionate society, where those with the loudest voices or the deepest pockets rise to the top, and where the moral assumption that we care for those most in need is forgotten.

This year marks 200 years of the RSPCA, which was founded by a group of 'revolutionaries', including anti-slavery campaigner William Wilberforce and Irish MP Richard Martin, who were determined to change the world for animals. In those two centuries, we have changed attitudes, behaviours, and more than 400 laws; we, along with the animal welfare sector that grew up around us, have changed the way we all think, feel and act towards animals.

This is the story of charity: a small group of people coming together with a shared ambition to address injustice or improve society in some way. We see the benefit of these collective endeavours in our society. Look at the immense efforts of mental health charities such as Mind, who have changed the conversation around this vital issue, putting mental health on the agenda when for too long it was invisible. And look at dementia – the critical work of dementia charities such as the Alzheimer's Society to raise the profile of this often misunderstood and ignored condition led David Cameron to adopt it as a key mission during his term in office. When we are at our best, and when we are given a seat at the table, the voluntary sector can be drivers for real and lasting societal change.

Sometimes what we do isn't popular. We can often be ahead of sections of public opinion or work on issues that are the political dividing lines of their day. This is a fundamental part of our collective story. When charities are at their best, they are leaning into their purpose and advocating for their cause. Take the RNLI, who have seen a significant rise in support on the back of their steadfast commitment to continue to save the lives of migrants making the treacherous journey to the UK in small boats. They have refused to be rocked by allegations of playing politics or 'wokery', but have stuck to their clear, 200-year-old purpose – saving lives at sea – because it is the right thing to do. Freedom from Torture's hugely successful #StopTheFlights campaign frustrated the Government's plans, persuading airlines to pull out of flights to Rwanda. While the Government set itself up in opposition to these charities, its Rwanda Plan continues to be mired in controversy, dividing public opinion and Westminster. Imagine how different, how much more nuanced and compassionate, the response to this complex problem could be if charities were not the opposition, but a trusted partner.

We are part of the solution and we know the solutions we need aren't going to be easy. The challenges ahead are intersectional and complex. They increasingly cross national borders in a globalised and interconnected world, requiring a co-ordinated global response. So, it is not possible to tackle a single cause or impact in isolation. Climate change, for example, means changing industry, our food system, inequality, health, and even animal welfare. Homelessness is not just a housing issue, it spans poverty, mental health, physical health, inequalities, and animal welfare, when people face a stark choice of finding somewhere to live or losing a much-loved pet. Our collective knowledge across these diverse yet interconnected issues is our strength, but if we are to be part of transformational and lasting change, we need to have proper collaboration with each other and with government.

Of course, charities must be accountable and rightly deserve scrutiny. We often hold a powerful place in people's lives, through delivering our services, or through our supporters, volunteers, and partnerships, and we don't always get it right. We have been rightly criticised for failings in the sector, such as the statutory inquiries into safeguarding at Oxfam and Save the Children, or the spotlight on fundraising tactics in the wake of the tragic death of poppy seller Olive Cooke. We trail behind the public and private sectors when it comes to equity, diversity, and inclusion. We lag when it comes to climate commitments too – research from the Charity Finance Group in 2021 revealed 80% of charities had not yet committed to net zero.

We cannot command support, from government or the public, simply by virtue of being charities and having good intentions. Nor can we expect to be bailed out by government if we fail. We must prioritise good governance and continue to innovate, embracing new operating models and new ways of working, and we must represent the communities we serve.

Notwithstanding these challenges, charities offer another key benefit to society: trust. Despite the difficulties facing the sector in recent years, trust in charities is growing, steadily but consistently. The Government's own figures place trust in charities above public sector institutions, like the police and social care, above the media, and above MPs and politicians, whose own trust ratings continue to slide. At a time when we are witnessing the outcry from the Post Office scandal and the Covid Inquiry is reliving some of the most challenging chapters of our recent history, charities are broadly recognised as a source of good in this country. Government ignoring how powerful that is in this age of distrust is perilous in the face of the huge and pressing challenges ahead.

It is imperative that charities hold their nerve and be clear and confident about what they stand for. That does not mean staying inside a narrow lane in what has lately been a hostile political environment, afraid of speaking out on issues that cut across society. The RSPCA is clear about what we stand for: animal welfare. But we know that the biggest threats to animal welfare are inextricably linked to our own futures and that of the planet. Climate change, the unsustainable growth in intensive farming, loss of habitat, absolutely cannot be solved by talking about animal welfare in isolation. We must be part of a bigger conversation.

Charities are often there when no one else is – delivering on unmet or poorly-met need, picking up the pieces when the state's safety net doesn't stretch far enough. But we are much more than that. We are society's moral compass. We can change attitudes, behaviours, even laws. We make sure that those most in need are not left behind. Charities strengthen our democratic ecosystem and when charities thrive then society thrives. The goal of any charity is to make itself redundant. We have a critical role to play in creating the Good Society, a society which cares for all its members and takes on the moral responsibility to support our most vulnerable people, animals, and the planet.

Often, the will is there - Governments want effective responses to social challenges, businesses want to be a force for good in society, communities want solutions to the challenges affecting their most vulnerable members. But it is not enough for charities to trail behind picking up the pieces or filling in the gaps. Charities have the power to change policies, practices and lives, but we need to be part of the solution from the start. We need a strong relationship with Government, one of mutual respect, trust and collaboration, open to tackling the biggest problems together. Any future government would be much stronger for it.

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