

## **A deeper relationship between charity, business and government can power better services, social progress, greater impact, and innovation**

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Anyone needing support, assistance, a shoulder to cry on, or a service is unlikely to distinguish between the sectors that we so artificially separate into. These separations are often designed to create division, turf protection, and organisational boundaries to make life easier for providers not the people.

Any idea that charities, government, and business can each forge their own path is misguided at best. These three domains of our society are often referred to as a 'three-legged stool' for good reason – if one is missing from the way we debate and organise ourselves as citizens, our society is off kilter, and we all suffer. The same applies if one or more is overly dominant.

The way that these three 'legs' work together ebbs and flows over time. Google 'charity business collaboration' and you will find dozens of articles about fundraising partnerships. These can be incredibly beneficial for both parties, but I would like to highlight collaboration around reform in pursuit of common purpose and shared values, which also exist across the charity, business, and political worlds.

I have seen it first-hand in my own career – from the building of homes for particular sections of the Black and Asian communities; to working with the NHS to catch early symptoms of cancer where language and culture present taboos and barriers; to networks like Better Way, which builds mutual understanding and encourages the cross-fertilisation of ideas across civil society, the public and private sectors.

Charities and business need humble, open, and competent government that recognises its role in orchestrating services, rather than direct delivery and control. We know things need to change and we cannot continue to regurgitate current ways and processes that continually exclude people and communities.

A firm and active commitment between charities, government, and business to collaborate can be generators of ideas and innovation.

Government and business need charities because they have grown out of a need identified by citizens and, thus, have deep insight into how that need could be addressed across complex systems. They are providers of some of the most critical services and support (from mental health, to food and fuel poverty, to arts and culture), and they have a reforming role in holding power to account, enforcing rights, and helping us press for a better future for all.

I know that people with the will to change things for the better exist across all three domains. Taking ideas that push us forwards, embedding change in our social fabric, and making them mainstream often requires civil society to make the case for change, business to show how it can work in the public as well as private sectors, and government to provide the moral, legal and/or policy framework to work within. This is where Government can play a crucial role as orchestrator and enabler.

For example, accessibility as the norm for new homes will stand or fall on a combination of public appetite, political will, new construction practices, imaginative design, well-conceived building standards, and developers showcasing what can be done. We are already seeing

campaigning architects leading by example on areas like sustainability and human-scale beauty. I have no doubt there are others out there with fire in their bellies about homes that work for any occupant. Ultimately, however, government policies followed by investment will need to ensure that enough homes are built to the appropriate standards so that desire to improve the quality of our homes can finally outweigh the desperate need for quantity.

We are a long way from that point, but it is campaigning charities and grassroots activists who are most likely to get us there.

I believe the true potential of collaboration between the private sector and charities is only just starting to be felt, as more businesses identify 'social good' as part of their missions. Like Ben and Jerry's, who put not just their money but their brand, their platforms, their political contacts, and dedicated staff time into supporting campaigners working to enforce and improve the rights and dignity of refugees in the UK.

Another example is the internationally recognised company Patagonia, which encourages us to repair our coats for lifetime wear rather than purchase a new one. They clearly demonstrate the balance between planet and profit for good.

The dynamic between charity, government, and business is not, nor should it be, a wholly cosy relationship. Charities have always been able to, and need to be supported to, talk honestly about some of the challenges we face. Whilst collaboration towards shared goals is desirable, there is also creativity and progress to be found in challenge and friction.

Many years of campaigning, by both grassroots activists and more traditional charities, led to the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act. Disability rights campaigners had to shout, and shout loudly, before a government finally introduced some of the key regulation and protections they needed. Proposals were resisted by businesses and senior government figures, who were ideologically opposed to greater regulation, feared increased costs, or felt it would reduce their choices. However, the subsequent changes in working practices, our built environment, and public attitudes generated new opportunities that pushed our society forwards. Workplaces and technology started to better meet the needs of all employees, we gained buildings that work better for everyone, public transport slowly became accessible to more of the public, and many more TV programmes are subtitled (a development that has been enthusiastically embraced by younger viewers<sup>1</sup>). It was a direction of travel that benefitted us all.

The Minister for Disabled People at the time was William Hague. In reflecting on how a Government apparently implacably opposed to legislation was turned around, he said, 'it wouldn't have happened without the campaigning'<sup>2</sup>.

Martin Lewis, now a household name has become synonymous with someone who can navigate complex consumer legislation, corporate priorities, and people's ability to navigate the current challenging environment. Charities have been doing this at ground level, affecting people's lives for decades. If this was actively encouraged by Government, we would see a role for citizens that would essentially recalibrate our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> *Young viewers prefer TV subtitles, research suggests*, BBC News, 15 November 2021:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-59259964>

<sup>2</sup> *The Reunion: disability campaigners*, BBC Radio 4, 10 April 2016:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/591HbNXpfSw1WFMkPN2fQcY/the-reunion-disability-campaigners-full-programme-transcript-10-april-2016>

A shift in a particular policy, or the introduction of a specific law, might be achieved through the efforts of a handful of focused organisations. But long-term change – change that ‘sticks’ – depends on ideas and attitudes being generated, embedded, and actively sought and accepted across all parts of society. Anyone pressing for society-wide change needs to forge partnerships across politics, academia, grassroots activism, trade unions, business, the arts and entertainment, the media and more. Charities have robust and productive relationships with all of these sectors.

I have challenges for all three ‘stool legs’.

Government – Do you recognise the potential going untapped when charities are reduced to simply deliverers of contracted services? Are you willing to widen your table and invite mature, even if sometimes challenging, debate for charities as well as business? Are you willing to radically reimagine the power balances and create a truly equal partnership?

Businesses – How deep is your intention to contribute to the environmental and social health of the nation? Are you thinking beyond fundraising partnerships and building more collaborative relationships with charities? Are you thinking about how to create the capacity within charities to do it rather than simply ‘extracting’ their knowledge and networks? And, are you critically examining your impact on people and planet, whilst pursuing profit?

Charities – Are you thinking beyond changing the law or government policy in pursuit of your mission? Should we not be seeking collaboration between ourselves as much as government and the private sector? Are there solutions that we can suggest and explore in partnership with businesses?

If we can build better mutual understanding across the three domains, and relationships that withstand challenge alongside collaboration, I believe we will unlock a richer and deeper well of ideas than we currently imagine.