

NCVO Campaigning Conference keynote speech

Rob Wilson, 10 September 2018

Thank you chair. It's great to be back at NCVO, I think it was one of the first places I came to speak as a Minister and I always valued the advice and information I received from those within the organisation. From the sagely Sir Stuart Etherington right through to his very talented team. For most of my time you also had as your chairman Sir Martyn Lewis, a very persuasive and constructive chairman, and of course you were fortunate to get Peter Kellner to follow him. It's nice to see so many familiar faces in the room still committing themselves to the fantastic work that charities and social enterprises undertake.

Obviously I saw this great work both in my former constituency and from the vantage point of Whitehall over a lengthy period. It made a very big impression on me. So I decided, post politics, I would devote some of my time trying to practice what I preached to you. So I have been waiting for the right opportunity – which I am delighted to tell you about briefly today. I am delighted to tell you that I am now properly one of you – I am back in the sector as a volunteer. The brilliant wheelchair sports charity WheelPower approached me in its search for a new Chairman of Trustees.

WheelPower is the national charity for wheelchair sport, providing opportunities for disabled people to play sport at all levels and lead healthy and active lives. My love of sport and my continued desire to make a difference burn as strongly as ever, so I'm very grateful to WheelPower, with all its association with the ParaOlympics, Stoke Mandeville and Sir Ludwig Guttman, for putting its trust in me to guide its future.

1. I am also involved with a great team of people, who wish to take a different approach to banking. We are working to set up the Community Support Bank, which will combine banking with social purpose. 50 per cent of the bank's profits will go to charity and it will work at grass roots level with a strategic charity partner to ensure delivery of the money direct to those charities that need it to undertake their fantastic work. If we are successful in gaining a banking license, we hope we can make a significant contribution to social and business change in this country.

2. I know you are here to focus on campaigning, but it would be wise not to treat it in isolation – because campaigning for your core mission, should always be woven into the fabric of every charity and to everything you do. Everyone in every charity should begin from a desire and understanding to deliver its mission. Therefore every time the organisation stands on a platform, uses social media, prints a brochure, it is an opportunity to campaign for your cause. Amid the everyday noise, this can often be lost.

There has been a lot of noise, mainly from the larger charities, about the Government not wanting charities to campaign. For me, nothing could be further from the truth. I was always slightly disappointed that, with the money spent, quality of the campaigns and public goodwill available, how many of the campaigns didn't quite succeed.

That being said, many highly targeted campaigns do succeed, particularly in the health area. So clearly the charity sector is doing much that is right. I would recommend looking in detail at those campaigns, detailing why they succeeded and sharing the best practice. Where good campaigning is concerned understanding and sharing best practice is essential.

From the Government's perspective, it dislikes confrontation so it is rarely a good idea. It brings defensiveness, particularly from civil servants, who did not want their Minister criticised or viewed negatively. It colours their advice and specifically their willingness to put critics in front of that Minister. A number of the overseas aid charities were, it could be argued, highly confrontational at times – we can argue whether it was justified or not at a later date. The result was a worsening of relations with Government and backbench MPs.

3. The campaigns that cause this to happen are generally those that venture onto contested political ground - where charities' campaigns are seen as aligning with one side or the other. Of course we all know about the rules on Party political campaigning and there is no doubt the vast majority of charities are very careful not to stray over the line. It is sometimes very hard for charities not to stray into grey areas to represent their beneficiaries.

My advice to those charities that wish to venture into direct public criticism of Government is GO AHEAD – but take some sensible precautions and be aware there is risk and the fire back at you can be damaging. I would advise you to take these sensible precautions:

Have a strong evidence base – make sure you have a credible case underpinning your campaign for your beneficiaries, heavily based on research that is honest and credible. It is make harder as a Minister to argue against the facts.

At the start, try not to be negative about Government. Make sure you hold constructive discussions with MPs, civil servants and if possible Ministers. AND don't start swinging punches before you've given a few warning jabs. Government hates surprises.

When you make your criticism public, reach for language that is as measured and temperate. I know there is often a tension here between creating media headlines and publicity for your campaign and things exploding into a row.

Never ever give even the appearance of political partisanship in your campaigning. It's totally unnecessary and won't help your charity in the short or long term with Government

4. Take advice from people who have been through these events before and seek out opinion formers and independent third parties, who may be able to influence on your behalf.

Think carefully about the state of the Government. For eg you might think high profile public criticism will win the day when a Government is weak. But have you thought that a weak Government might wish to avoid rows and do deals behind the scenes. Once things are public, positions quickly solidify.

Most of all please think and rethink before you act.

If you do these things, a well deployed campaign will be influential

By and large the Government values and understands how hard you work for your organisations. It knows you desperately want to succeed for your beneficiaries. No-one in Government will criticise the desire and effort that goes into what you do. But you must understand that Governments are elected by the country and have policies and a manifesto to implement. The fact that a charity may not like those policies is not a good reason for a campaign. Yet telling the Government about unintended consequences of policy is highly desirable and valuable. It certainly was to me as a Minister.

One final more general point I would make. It is a long time since civil society has had the confidence and the voice to properly and powerfully articulate itself as having, at least in part, the answer to many of society's most pressing problems. The last big ideas around UK civil society arose back in 2009 with notions of the Big Society foregrounding anything from social enterprise, to public service mutuals, new community rights and an enhanced role for charities.

5. But since then and since being superseded by the austerity agenda, the third sector has become more distant from people's political and social concerns. The austerity agenda has often been seen as an existential threat to the sector rather than a powerful opportunity to move the terms of debate onto your ground. It hasn't helped that big charity part of the sector has faced some difficult scandals, from fundraising to overseas aid. I accept this has made a clear voice much harder to hear.

This marginalisation of civil society has largely left non-profits and social businesses more out than in the current political and social conversation. It can sometimes appear that the third sector has little to offer to left-behind Brexit voting Britain or indeed to the aspiring but asset poor Remain voting young. **Nothing of course could be further from the truth** – I retain the belief that charities must provide the vital contribution to changing our society.

So even with the pressures on the state and the continuing programme of deficit reduction, it is wrong to suggest that civil society has little to offer British Society except slight amelioration at the margins of public policy. Politics, even with the launch of the Government's new civil society strategy, largely carries on as if there is no third sector strategic response to the problems of the day.

On the right, much of the debate about reforming capitalism and making it work for everyone, has resulted in the state stepping in and ensuring fair treatment and higher 'living wages.' There has been insufficient debate about changing the structural institutions of modern capitalism like the firm or the corporation, and where such debate occurs, it is usually uninspiring.

6. On the left, there seems little place for civil society, and for them recovering the role of the state, ending austerity and refinancing public welfare are the 3-legged stool on which a Corbyn Labour Party wishes to sit.

So we have the right returning to a highly interventionist managed markets approach and the left to big state solutions. This suggests (and I know there are good reasons) to a campaigning failure at a strategic level of the non-profit sector to step into the funding gap

opened by state withdrawal and provide the innovation and the transformational services at scale the country needs. It's now not just the Government that doesn't listen to the sector, it's the opposition as well.

This cannot be right. The third sector is full of vibrant and entrepreneurial ideas that can offer an at-scale solution to many of the most pressing public policy issues of the day. The challenge for the sector is that it is often fragmented, ideas are often boiled down to lowest denominator or the degree of virtue signalling. The sector rarely speaks with a single consistent voice and therefore isn't able to capture the national mood.

The solution is to spend time thinking together about what it is that will reinvigorate thought leadership in the sector; to take a fresh look at the problems that confront the UK, especially post-Brexit, and to ask what civil society needs to do to be equal to the huge challenges it needs to confront.

7. It means finding fresh voices, learning from other countries, think tanks or other sectors to challenge the groupthink solutions. Drill down to the coalface and find the evidence based solutions that almost certainly work and drive them to scale.

I know the sector understands many of these issues, but it is equally fair to be concerned that despite that recognition, the sector appears to be largely seeking a return to a grant funded and state supported role. One often finds in current strategic work in the sector the claim that civil society must be free from the state and be demonstrably autonomous, yet at the same time it argues the cut-backs in state support are threatening the existence of the third sector and public funding must be restored.

I know this is perhaps an overly simplistic analysis but it is the best I can do in 15/20 minutes. I hope I have given you food for thought and of course I am happy to take questions. Thank you and I continue to wish you well, (I should now say 'us well'), in our endeavours to help people who need our support.