



Recovering civil society in Australia and in Australian aid

A paper presented to the CES Canberra Chapter
on 13 June 2007 by Paul O'Callaghan

It is an honour to be invited to speak to the Centre's Canberra Chapter. I wish to acknowledge the original owners of the land on which we now meet, the Ngunnawal people.

This Centre was created last year in the spirit of compassion, especially for the disadvantaged and marginalised. It takes as a basic proposition that we all have a collective responsibility to assist those most in need. The Centre's mission is especially important in a period where our public debate has often been skewed towards a narrowly individualistic conception. This has been exacerbated by the high profile achieved by those interpretations of Christianity which eschew the core teaching of 'Love thy neighbour'.

The Centre is one of a number of emerging civil society groups in Australia which has the intention and capacity to steadily improve the quality of our public debate and helps us, as a nation, re-define national purpose based on ethical standards.

It is the commitment to treat each member of the human family as having inherent worth and dignity that marks out these groups. Their approach presents a challenge to the highly individualistic and often economically focussed approach which has dominated much debate in this country over the last decade or more.

By calling on our leaders to act with responsibility for the whole human family, including future generations, this emerging civil society voice has the potential to re-focus community attention on the need for a collective approach and ethical standards. This applies both at home and in relation to the extreme poverty of our fellow human beings around the world.

I offer two simple propositions to you and hope to show why it is realistic to expect that, based on them, Australians can 'punch above our weight' in addressing global poverty in the next 20-30 years:

1. Regardless of their religious or cultural background, most Australians accept something like the view I have just mentioned. To the extent possible, they want Australia to help in shaping a better world for future generations.
2. Whether or not Australian society rises to the challenge of global engagement depends principally on the actions of civil society. If civil society groups become better collaborators and demonstrate their own leadership to our politicians, Australia will enter a phase of being a much more significant change agent for the good. (NB When I refer to civil society I include churches, non-profit agencies, foundations and other non-government agencies).

But first, a small story. I recently met with four Sydney high school students who had come to Canberra to persuade their government Member of Parliament to support a stronger Australian policy commitment to reduce global poverty. They were concerned that, despite Australia having outperformed all other OECD economies over the last decade, we remained in the bottom two-thirds of those countries in terms of official aid as a share of national income.

They were part of a group of nearly 200 high school and university students who had come together to express their view. None had ever had previous contact with their local members or State senator. All were a little nervous about the meetings they were about to have.

They were neither naïve, partisan nor ideological about this cause. While they identified themselves as Christians, they described their cause in terms of a broader, global ethic. In a quiet comment, the youngest of the group offered the insight that: “Where you are born in the world should not determine whether you survive childhood”.

Both the message and the confidence of these four young Australians about contributing to change were inspiring. They had already succeeded in getting 30-40 other students interested in the issue at their school and were now focused on getting their local parliamentarian interested.

That belief is central to solving problems in the community, the nation and internationally. It reminded me of the courage and persistence of Faith Brandler and three friends who decided in 1958 to change the Australian constitution to recognise Aboriginal people as citizens. Like most courageous people, that group also had a long journey ahead of them.

As in every generation, many young people are pre-occupied by their own immediate relationships, material concerns and aspirations. However, I have been struck over recent years by the growing commitment of many tens of thousands of young Australians to contribute to Australia’s Make Poverty History campaign. This is a global advocacy campaign to promote greater awareness of poverty and to encourage people to take action in their own ways.

This new phenomenon is building on fertile ground as Australia has one of the highest rates of volunteering in the world. Despite the image often conveyed in the media of our community, several million Australians either volunteer or contribute regularly to the Wesley Mission, St Vincent De Paul Society, Anglicare, Salvation Army, Uniting Care and other groups.

In their donations through non-profit aid agencies, Australians are the second most generous after Ireland among the 22 OECD countries for per capita private giving. Over one million Australians donate regularly for this purpose.

While we were all surprised at the scale of response by ordinary Australians to the Asian tsunami (\$350 million in just four weeks), it did reflect this deep well of compassion across our community. My earlier assertion about most Australians wanting their country’s help in shaping a better world is also based on some research findings:

- 88% of Australians believe not enough is being done to close the gap between the rich and the poor
- 4 out of 5 Australians believe that charities can make a long-term impact on the lives of poor people
- nearly 60% believe they can play a role in raising the living standards of the poor overseas.¹

Social justice - not charity

Before commenting about what I see as the potential for a better coordinated Australian civil society to galvanise a larger Australian role on global poverty, I wish to say that this cannot be achieved on the basis of charity. If we practice the precept held by the main faith traditions that we should *love our neighbour as we do ourselves*, then the basis of our interaction with the poor cannot be conceived as being one a one-way hand-out. It must be based on mutual respect and a recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of others.

¹ Roy Morgan survey of 60,000 people in 60 countries.

I believe that the very positive public response to Sir William Deane's repeated reminder to Australians to focus on our least advantaged citizens reflects a broad acceptance that this is still true for the Australian community today.

Former USA President Franklin Roosevelt made a similar point regarding the obligation of any civilised society to treat with dignity and respect its most marginalised and dis-empowered. In 1937 he said that "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have too much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little" (Second Inaugural Speech, January 1937).

A major reason that the Wesley Mission, St Vincent De Paul Society, Anglicare, Salvation Army, Uniting Care and others are held in such high esteem by the disadvantaged people whom they serve is that their practices reflect this respect for others. They provide leadership in showing that we can only have a good society if our most vulnerable and marginalised citizens are part of it with us.

Our leaders need to frame Australia's global anti-poverty effort along similar lines of partnership and social justice. If they do so, there is a better chance to build upon community support for such programs. It is unfortunate that in much official overseas aid, the notion of charity remains firmly embedded. Much aid is based on a framework of a powerful donor government offering benefits to a largely passive and grateful recipient government.

In my observation, a relationship conceived of as 'donor' and 'recipient' in which the civil society of the recipient country has virtually no voice is likely to achieve less than optimal results over time. Three additional reasons tend to exacerbate this problem in official aid programs:

- Blurring of policy objectives. Typically, governments have a unique mix of foreign, security and commercial objectives in mind as they shape their aid program.
- Primary reliance on contracting out the delivery of the aid program to for-profit contractors. Australia has had one of the highest levels of such private contracting companies among the 22 OECD countries over the last 20 years.
- The exclusive way in which the country-to-country aid programs are developed and designed without the participation of civil society in the so-called recipient countries. Australia, like other donors, continues this practice now. It is normally justified on the grounds of efficiency in planning. Regrettably, it means that the priorities which a recipient government conveys to Australia about use of aid funds may have little connection with views across civil society. This helps to explain why many official aid programs tend not to be sustainable over time.

It's up to civil society to achieve change

Australians have fought for social justice on a wide range of fronts over many decades going back to the earliest white settlement. In the field of disability, for example, the Benevolent Society began advocacy and support programs for blind citizens 170 years ago and we have evidence of a significant number of settlers wanting to ensure that aboriginal people were not mistreated.

On the more recent issue of global poverty, Australia has also had a voice in global debate and in seeking to assist the poor and disadvantaged. This has been both through the work of non-profit agencies and government programs. However, while private citizens have continued to expand their commitment through donations to non-profit agencies (11% growth per year excluding the tsunami response), neither side of Australian politics has shown leadership in terms of making an Australian contribution to global efforts. Neither side is anywhere near matching the 2005 commitment by European governments to reach a level of 0.5 per cent spending of National Income by 2010. This is despite the high level of private giving by Australians and the exceptional economic growth and budget surpluses achieved over the last decade.

The onus rests squarely with civil society groups in this country not only to actively promote a more ethical framework for public policy and integrity, but also to engage in the global poverty challenge. We are fortunate that, in addition to the many Australians who share such thinking, the Australian business community is becoming increasingly engaged outside its traditional areas of direct commercial interest.

One might ask why civil society has not been as effective in influencing public debate over the last decade. I believe that the following factors are relevant, though by no means an adequate explanation in themselves:

- The inability of a diverse array of civil society organisations to identify the need for a cohesive, collective voice on at least some issues. This has resulted in part from a growing fear among churches and other non-profit agencies that policy advocacy will lead them into conflict with governments. Thus, we have seen growing board-level concern among non-profits to avoid risk to their future government contracts.
- The example of one of Australia's largest, faith-based service provider choosing to become, in effect, a corporate-style sub-contractor of government social programs. Not surprisingly, this change was matched by a withdrawal from any public comment which could be seen as critical of government.
- The effectiveness of lobbying by some evangelical groups in arguing a radically individualistic concept of Christianity. This has appealed to an increasing number of non-evangelical politicians, perhaps because it bolsters an underlying prejudice that disadvantaged people really have only themselves to blame for not becoming successful.
- Survey responses by a wide range of non-profit peak bodies in 2006 have also shown a significant increase over the last decade in their perception that public criticism of the federal government would have adverse organisational consequences for them.
- Periodic campaigns by the Australian Tax Office since 2004 to remove charitable status from a variety of organisations has reinforced this fear.
- Such ethical issues as the treatment of bona fide refugees or adopting an Australian leadership position with respect to global poverty have further reinforced the perception among civil society groups of the difficulty in bringing about change. It has also enabled political leaders to play favourites among civil society groups, as in the case of the federal government's funding of a national non-profit group which has no authentic representation from civil society.

Neither of the major political parties feels sustained pressure to change their ethical or policy orientation from the leadership of civil society.

There are also trends in our political institutions and media ownership which have diminished the quality of debate in Australia's democracy. These have been highlighted by scholars including Professor Patrick Weller, Anne Tiernan, and John Uhr, as well as commentaries by Clerk of the Senate, Harry Evans, and many others. They show that the Executive wing of government has never had such a concentrated control over parliamentary process and over the broader political process. A feature of this change has been the lack of governance accountability over the 450 professional staff who now advise federal ministers. While ministers have argued that advisers can not be held accountable to external scrutiny, we have witnessed an increasing number of cases where ministers are not prepared to take responsibility for actions by advisers on their behalf.

A small but important facet of this trend has been the promotion by government of groups which are strongly opposed to any civil society voice being heard in the national political process. The federal government's funding and other support for the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) is a case in point. A goal of this Institute is to remove civil society voices from public debate on the grounds that only elected politicians have a legitimate role in shaping public policy. Nonetheless it sees an important role for the representatives of business to participate in lobbying.

Although the IPA's ideology is not shared by most Coalition politicians, its views appear frequently in the media and several federal ministers have used IPA arguments in recent years in an effort to undermine the legitimacy of mainstream, service-provider peak bodies which seek to present policy recommendations to government.

In addition, increasingly restrictive rulings by the Australian Tax Office since 2006 with respect to selected advocacy non-profit agencies appear to reflect a bolder government view of the role of charities. This is that they should not, in any way, be engaged in seeking to influence public policy. Until an October 2006 ruling, the ATO had accepted that advocacy was a legitimate aspect of the role of charities. However, if a case currently before the AAT leads to a judicial ruling in favour of the government position, Australian charities will be on notice to avoid involvement in public debate about policy matters. This would remove from policy development processes the very voices which often bring decades of expertise in particular areas, such as homelessness, mental health, disability etc.

The above-mentioned trends all point to the need for those who care about the marginalised and disadvantaged to find ways to cooperate. Without the emergence of a more coherent, collective voice on at least some key ethical issues, we are not likely to see more ethical leadership in Australia's public life in the next decade. Nevertheless, I am optimistic that much can be achieved because:

- Those of us in civil society groups are now able to readily draw on research, analysis and experience from our counterparts across the country and overseas.
- Some unexpected alliances and partnerships are emerging across international institutions, think tanks, charities and new philanthropic organizations.
- Some innovative new links are emerging with Australian and overseas business groups. I have found a growing number of entrepreneurs and professional people who want to bring their insights, skills and networks of influence into this area of concern. They also bring a genuinely global view.
- Australian tax law now allows wealthy individuals to set up trusts for social purposes in a way that was not possible until 2000. Over 500 of these have been created in the last four years, offering opportunities for new partnerships with the social sector.
- Non-profit organisations in Australia are taking on an ever larger share of service delivery.
- Our history of social justice works is also inspiring. Small groups of citizens have actually brought about major change, just like the Referendum on aboriginal Australians or the federal Disability Discrimination Act. (We can not forget that similar small bands of folk led the ultimately successful campaigns to end of slavery, for the right for women to vote, for the protection of consumers from dodgy consumer products, for sanctions against apartheid, for banning of landmines and for acceptance of responsibility to deal with climate change).

As I see it, these factors, combined with the pattern of innovation among many non-profit agencies and the evident passion of many young Australians about global poverty, all point in a direction which our political leaders will need to notice.

However, the political parties will only take notice if we can find enough common ground to articulate social justice ideas effectively. That means overcoming the understandable fear of getting out of favour. At the same time, it means avoiding the dangers of 'divide and conquer' politics and becoming partisan. These are all things which our civil society leaders are capable of doing.

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