

# Charities, campaigns and progressive change

## Speech at *Britain's Most Admired Charities Awards*

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### Opening

I want to congratulate the magazine not just for tonight's awards ceremony but the job it does. It is professional, thorough, a good read and provides all you need to know about what is going on in the sector.

I also want to congratulate all tonight's nominees and all the charities in the audience tonight for what they do. In the months since I became the minister for the third sector at the cabinet office, it is meeting you that has made the job worthwhile.

The reason is this: you see injustice and unfairness and social problems and find ways of tackling them. And you do so in a million different ways.

### The Argument

In the pre-Budget report next week, we will be publishing the interim report of the third sector review, which will be completed next year.

It will talk about the urgent issues you face in terms of stability of funding, the implementation of the Compact, the quality of commissioning.

But it is also tasked with thinking ahead to the next ten years and how the relationship between the state and sector will evolve.

Last week I gave a speech to NCVO in memory of Nicholas Hinton. There I sought to look broadly at the relationship between state and sector in the years ahead and I argued that we need to understand the different

characteristics of the third sector and the state if we are going to get this relationship right.

I said that I thought the third sector can do things the state cannot and vice versa. I argued that the best way to build a fairer and more equal society is to view the relationship between state and sector as a model of engagement, not isolationism.

Engagement does not mean we will always agree; far from it. But what it does mean is that those who say the state should simply stand aside from the sector or vice versa fail to understand that many of the advances that have been made in our society over decades have been because of each playing their appropriate role.

Tonight I want to apply the idea of engagement to the question and issue of the sector's role in voice and campaigning.

My argument is that as we look ahead to the next decade, I hope you will play more of a role in voice and campaigning because we are more likely to end up with a more progressive society as a result.

To explain this case I want to make five points:

First, political change happens not simply because governments will it but because citizens demand it, often against government. That is why your campaigning role should be important to progressive politicians.

Secondly, the demands of citizens today make your role in voice and campaigning more important.

Thirdly, there is no contradiction between the core business of charities and their campaigning, as some have suggested; in fact, voice and campaigning is part of your core business.

Fourthly, government doesn't create your campaigning and voice but it can help it or hinder it; I want to help it.

Fifth, I want to talk about the challenges this analysis poses to the sector.

### **The Importance of Voice and Campaigning**

For me, when I talk about voice and campaigning I am not just talking about the large campaigns.

It covers everything from the large umbrella campaigns to the smallest community group.

It can be for the purposes of changing the policies of national governments and international institutions or influencing the local parish council.

It can be about campaigning from the outside or the voice from the inside.

And it can be nothing to do with the policies of national government but can be about changing practice in the private sector or the attitudes of the population at large.

My first point is to explain why it matters to me.

Because it drives progressive political change. Progressive change needs political will on the part of government but it also needs popular will.

And it is often the campaigns of third sector organisations that put issues on the agenda, mobilise popular opinion, push the government to go further, change attitudes to make change possible.

The debt relief at Gleneagles wouldn't have happened in the way it did without Make Poverty history.

Civil partnerships and the reduction in the age of consent wouldn't have happened in the way it did without Stonewall.

The smoking ban wouldn't have happened in the way it did without the campaign by ASH.

The Disability Discrimination Act wouldn't have happened in the way it did without the work of MENCAP.

We could go on – I suspect every organisation in this room is in some way part of a movement that has changed society for the better.

These campaigns led to policy change in part because they were in tune with the values of the government. Of course, not every demand has been met, but significant progress has been made and it could not have happened without partnership. An isolationist model on either side would not have delivered.

Of course, there are other campaigns against government. They too have an effect on popular will and government itself.

It's not comfortable for government to have the third sector ranged against it, but that is part of what democracy is about.

Some people might say – although it applies to the 1970s more than today – that this is a recipe for what they called "interest group overload". In other words, government faces such a range of demands it can't possibly cope with all of them or all the voices there are.

But I disagree with that. I think campaigning by the third sector is an essential part of a democracy which is accountable and vibrant.

Accountable, because your voice and campaigning acts as check on the power of governments.

And vibrant, because it ensures that the voices of the people who are often the excluded, the dispossessed and the vulnerable is heard.

Of course, we also need elected governments, accountable at the ballot box, to make final decisions but we also need citizens to make their voice heard.

Second, I want to argue that the context in the years ahead will make your voice and campaigning role both increasingly necessary and increasingly possible.

In the last twenty years, I think we have seen a big decline of deference--- people no longer accept what 'they are given' in their politics, their public services or the private sector.

In addition, people care and identify around a whole range of issues, which are not necessarily narrowly economic.

But this voice needs articulation not just by individuals struggling on their own, although this can have an impact. But as part of a wider community of purpose.

The danger is that deference doesn't give way to scepticism which can be constructive but cynicism which sees people detach from the political process.

Third sector organisations can channel this scepticism into communities making a difference themselves in a whole range of ways. And they can also turn into a coherent voice and campaign which changes things for the better.

You might expect me to say that political parties have a role in this too and I will. I think political parties at local level increasingly need to act like community organisations taking on issues.

But while they may work with third sector organisations, it does not take away the need for them to play their role.

As well as being increasingly necessary, technology and the internet also transforms the opportunity to campaign.

I am not an internet nerd. But it links people together in a way that no other medium can.

I gather there is a story about a 16-year old called Laurie Pycroft, who founded "Pro-Test" to support medical research on animals, and a month later had arranged a demonstration with 700 people, and, by showing that an active constituency for animal research existed, had changed way the subject was debated in Britain.

One of the largest pressure groups in America, [moveon.org](http://moveon.org), was begun as a campaign against the impeachment of President Clinton and has now become a multi-purpose mobilisation organisation.

The internet doesn't just provide new tools to link people up; it also provides a new means of getting your message out.

Thirdly, I want to argue there is no contradiction between your voice and campaigning role and your work as charities.

As people in this room will know better than me, the history of charity's role in campaigning has been controversial. In particular, part of the late 1980s and 1990s were spent in arguments about the political activities of some charities, with the government and the Charity Commission both putting pressure on charities' about their campaigning role.

The government even published a document which suggested that organisations should separate their campaigning and charitable roles.

Today, I want to suggest that while the law is right that charities cannot have political objects, it is right that both Government and Commission have changed their attitude towards campaigning in support of the ends of a charity.

Indeed, I would argue that campaigning and voice are utterly consistent with the other functions and role played by charities, in providing services and building civil society.

Not only are the two roles consistent, but many people who work in the third sector tell me that they see it as a duty to campaign. If you are involved in a particular issue, if the people you work with are telling you, "look, there's this important issue that is not being addressed", then part of your job, you tell me, is to address it directly, but part of it is to campaign to change the structural situation – and how could that not be a legitimate part of charity?

Because of the people you work with, you have a capacity to understand the issues they face and therefore play a unique role in drawing attention to them, in campaigning for their concerns to be addressed.

This can be about arguing for the big changes in government policy I talked about earlier.

But it can also be about changing perceptions in society where you know the people you work with face bigotry and prejudice.

Here in the audience I know there are many examples where you have changed minds.

For example, the work of the Terrence Higgins Trust in changing people's minds about attitudes towards AIDS victims.

Or the work of the Stroke Association, who I saw at an awards ceremony earlier this year receiving recognition for its work in educating people to understand the symptoms of strokes and treat them as a medical emergency and ensure quick treatment.

And you campaign on these issues in a way which is characteristic of your approach.

You see people as actors, agents, with autonomy and dignity, not as passive, victims.

### **Role of government**

So I have explained why I think your voice and campaigning is so important, why it is consistent with charitable aims not in contradiction with them and why the current context expands its potential.

This takes me to my fourth point about the role of government and the law. We do not create your campaigns. Indeed your campaigns are often against us.

And yet I want to suggest that, whatever the specific views of government ministers about your specific campaigns, in the sweep of history, it is massively in the interests of progressive politicians to champion your campaigning role.

Not by picking causes but by supporting your right and ability to campaign and opening up government to your voice.

Let me say something about campaigning and voice.

On campaigning, we need to create a culture in politics and government which is conducive to campaigning. That is what I have been attempting to do since I became a minister. Politicians, whether they are local or national, should understand and celebrate and respect your right to campaign – and understand that it is no contradiction that you are helping deliver services with a local authority, and you are also campaigning against that local authority.

But exhortation by me is clearly not enough. That is why in 1998 the Compact explicitly supported the sector's right to campaign and comment on government policy.

It is also why the 2002 Strategy Unit Report, Private Action, Public Benefit recommended that the Charity Commission guidelines should be revised so the tone was less cautionary.

Since then CC9, the Charity Commission guidance on this, has been rewritten.

However, too many charities are still uncertain.

That is why I am pleased that the Commission is in discussions with the Sheila McKechnie foundation about issuing further question and answer guidance to help trustees.

I am conscious that even beyond this, many local charities in particular, feel that it is very hard to criticise a local authority, because of a fear that their funding may suffer. I have discussed this with John Stoker, the Commissioner for the Compact, I know he is interested in this area, and I hope this issue will be an early focus for his work.

Government must also play its part in helping you build your infrastructure. And again, we should see support for campaigning and voice as much part of your infrastructure as IT, personnel, finance or fundraising.

And that is why Capacity builders and I have agreed that campaigning should have a higher profile role in its work going forward.

So we need to celebrate your campaigning role and support your capacity to carry it out.

But we also need to understand some of the sources of campaigning – which can be because people's voices were not heard in the original instance when policy was being made.

So we must also create new opportunities for your voices to be heard.

That doesn't mean agreeing with every campaign, but creating new platforms and new opportunities to influence decision-making.

This is partly about a big mind-set change in government. It is about citizens and their representatives shaping policy in its formulation stage not after the initial decisions have been made.

That is why in the Office of the Third Sector, we are investing over £11 million per year in "strategic partners", giving long term, unrestricted grants to 36 organisations with a track record in influencing policy and debate on the third sector.

The recent Local Government White Paper creates a new duty on local government to ensure the participation of local citizens. The third sector will have a greater voice in Local Strategic Partnerships, the forum for joining up policy in local authorities.

And citizens will be able, with a 250-person petition, to demand transparent scrutiny of a public service or a particular decision

Now we must look at making similar changes in other services and at other levels of government.

I have also talked before about the Young Advocates programme of Changemakers which brings the voice of young people into policy-making at an early stage. We should do the same in other areas.

The opportunity for voice does not remove the need to campaign but it does ensure that some issues can be addressed before a campaign becomes necessary.

This takes me then to my fifth point:

I want to suggest two challenges which it seems to me face the sector in this area.

First, to work together.

Government cannot and should not expect the third sector to speak with one voice. The formation of challenge inevitably involves disagreement.

But what has struck me in this area is that the collective power of the sector is enormous – and is sometimes underused.

Indeed the power of working together, and of making common cause with others, is a central insight of the third sector.

We have seen its success in countless areas, and I believe it could have even greater power. I have suggested on other occasions that charities involving young people could produce a unified, simple message that would be almost impossible to refute: a joint demand that issues of voice, youth services, and portrayal in the media are addressed.

And secondly to be uncompromising in your commitment to campaigning and not be persuaded out of it.

As some third sector organisations play a greater role in public service delivery, it seems to me that the best guarantee of public confidence of your independence will be the commitment to being an uncompromising voice.

## **Conclusion**

Let me end by talking about how the prospects for justice and fairness in society will be shaped by the decisions you make on your voice and campaigning role.

Earlier this month, when I attended the launch of the Sheila McKechnie Awards for campaigning, I met a woman called Jackie Schneider.

Jackie Schneider is a parent and teacher in Merton, South London, and she decided her children's school meals were not good enough. So she started a petition, and collected 3,000 signatures. She asked fellow parents who else

wanted to be involved, and was contacted by 150 parents who wanted to be active members.

She said: "I never realised I could make change happen - and it has made me braver about challenging other things."

So Jackie is now taking on a new campaign, to improve the way schools interact with children who have lost parents or loved ones.

This story illustrates to me:

The way campaigning can change the individual

The individual can mobilise a movement

And the movement can change policy.

It is the best argument against the futility of politics.

So my message to you tonight is that:

The course of history can change even when the odds seem overwhelming.

I know you will continue to have the courage to campaign and speak out.

I want government to celebrate, support and uphold your right to do so

And I look forward to our country becoming a more just and fairer place as a result in the years to come.