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Positioning the service for the future

Thank you for inviting me here to celebrate your 70th birthday with you. I have long been impressed by the work that you do and the very tangible difference that C.A.B.s up and down the country make to people's lives.

Anniversaries are important – this year is also NCVO's 90th. They are a chance to reflect on the past and to renew our vision for the future. For NCVO, from its earliest days its work has been characterised by a concern for the quality of life of the whole community. As we look forward, we want to make sure that this continues to be a focus of our work and that of the sector that we represent.

As David has already outlined, we are facing difficult times, when many voluntary and community organisations are having to meet increasing needs with diminishing resources. Organisations such as yours provide essential support to individuals and communities. Looking to the future, I have no doubt that there will be an even greater need for your services. David has already talked about the impact of the recession, about public service contracts. I want to widen the discussion a little – talk about the role of civil society, and the part we can all play in creating the good society.

But let me start by explaining what I mean by civil society – it is a phrase which has not historically had a lot of resonance in this country, but which is being used more often. Civil society is the space between state, market and family life – the space where people come together to make a positive difference to their lives and the lives of others: to offer mutual support; to pursue shared interests; or to help those in need.

At the heart of civil society, indeed all forms of voluntary action, is a conviction that the world could or should be better than it is. And a commitment to act in ways that will close the gap between what is and what could be. To build the good society.

Until recently talk of the good society seemed rather old fashioned. Out of place in our more cynical age of celebrity and consumerism. But we have witnessed a change in recent months, in large part triggered by the banking crisis and the recession that followed. Although, I think there was a growing interest even before that in different ways of living our lives and running our world.

As we move forward from the recession, and with the prospect of an election which may well lead to a new government, we as individuals and our society are in an unusual place – we have an opportunity to rethink what our values and our priorities are. Realistically, the window of opportunity is probably small, but I

think it is important we take it. We are now presented with a choice: we can go back to how things were before – unsustainable growth, free markets driven by greed, increasing inequality and a failure to act on climate change. OR we can take a very different approach, an approach that is driven by the values and methods of our sector and which recognises the need for people to be part of something greater, to feel that what they do, matters. An approach that builds on the strength of people and communities – not on a divisive culture of obscene city bonuses and excessive consumerism.

But what is the change that we want to see? What should our new vision of social change and social progress be? It is easy to talk about the good society in abstract terms – but we need to be clear about what this means in very practical terms. This is unusual territory for NCVO – we have always focussed our work on improving the environment in which our members operate – voluntary and community organisations across the country – operate. But I think we are at a point where it is right that we ask these questions, indeed that NCVO leads a debate on this issue.

That is why in the coming weeks I am going to be asking my members to discuss what the good society means to them and their organisations; and what they need to close that gap between what is and what should be. I want to start that debate today by discussing with you, what it might mean: and sharing some of my thoughts on my vision of the good society.

My vision is founded on a strong belief in the value of voluntary action and the importance of an active and vibrant civil society, as both the means of achieving the good society and a good thing in its own right.

Which is why I believe that to face the challenges ahead, we need to look beyond the conventional solutions offered by the state and the market and realise the full potential of civil society.

Already we have seen signs of change – not just people's disgust with the high street banks and the cynical practices that created this financial crisis – but also interest and more faith in old forms of finance – the mutuals and co-ops that have fared much better than traditional banks. And an increasing view that altruism not self interest is what should motivate us.

So now is the time we should be investing in communities and in the civil society organisations that sustain them – to meet rising need, build community cohesion and lead us out of recession. The last decade has seen unprecedented levels of support for civil society organisations, working in partnership with government and, sometimes, with business. Civil society is already a big economic player – we employ 1.3m people and have an income of £116 billion. But the funding we have received has been largely for the delivery of government programmes and priorities, which are not directed by us, nor fully informed by our skills, knowledge and expertise. We could and should do more. The range of contributions that our sector can make has not been properly understood or valued - we remain very much the third sector. Greater emphasis - and priority – in public policy is still given to market solutions and to the role of government.

In my view, we need to rebalance these relationships in favour of civil society if we are to secure a better future for our communities: Society itself is strongest when all three spheres, state, market and civil society work together to make it so.

Yes, we need economic growth and prosperity, but this should not be the sole measure of public good. We need a society in which people come before profits and where the interests of society come before the interests of the market. We need strong democratic institutions to act in the public interest; to further the common good; to protect our rights and freedoms and create a sense of belonging in a fair and just society. But we also need a thriving civil society to realise those rights in practice and to act as a bulwark against the power of the state and the market.

Fairer

For me, the good society is based on the values of social justice, solidarity and humanity that have been the basis for voluntary action down the centuries. It is a society that values the collective needs and interests of society as a whole as well as the private interests of particular individuals or groups. A society that ensures that every person is able to fulfil his or her potential, whatever that might be. It is a fairer and more compassionate society.

I think most people agree with me on this – just look at the number of people who supported Make Poverty History or who have been willing to buy Fair Trade goods. Yet the reality is that in the last 20 – 30 years the gap between rich and poor has steadily increased. Does that matter? I think it does. There is now overwhelming evidence to demonstrate that inequality not only blights the lives of individuals, it also corrodes the social fabric, bringing in its wake higher rates of crime and disorder; community breakdown and distrust. It undermines the good society.

If we want to make the world a better place, then we need to pay more attention to this question of inequality and injustice. That is why your work is so important. It makes a significant contribution to tackling poverty and social exclusion, both in terms of the advice that you give and through your campaigning work, which makes a real attempt to tackle the causes as well as the consequences of poverty.

And it is why we need to build alliances for change across civil society. People need jobs that pay a living wage, not just a minimum wage. And they need access to financial services, including loans, insurance and saving schemes, without having to pay extortionate rates of interest. It is why I support those who have been calling for banks to reinvest a proportion of their profits to support activities that benefit the public. And why we need to challenge the banks to do more to tackle financial exclusion. We need to address these issues if we are serious about improving the quality of life for all.

Local Voices

A good society is one where people are able to shape their future; where they can have a real say in decisions that affect their lives. That is why I welcome the commitment from all political parties to strengthen local democracy and devolve decision-making; to give people a say in the decisions that affect their lives and the life of their community.

But it is important that the voices of the under-served are heard; those who live on the margins, not just those who find it easiest or expect to be listened to. How often are homeless people asked their views on housing policies? How often are people living in poverty asked about their needs, experiences or aspirations?

But that is also why the campaigning and advocacy role of organisations like yours is so vital. Reaching out to groups that are often considered to be 'hard to reach'; giving them the skills confidence and opportunity to speak for themselves; helping them to become agents of change rather than objects of policy.

Civil society organisations have played a vital role championing unpopular causes down the centuries. Drawing attention not only to different voices, but to dissenting voices. Voices that challenge social attitudes, prejudices and practices, creating alternative futures. Making change possible. Who today questions the abolition of the slave trade? Or women's right to vote? Would we have made any progress on the issue of climate change if it were not for environmental campaigners?

By inspiring people to get involved in debates about problems and solutions, to consider what the good society might look like, these organisations strengthen democracy. Indeed, only by harnessing the idealism, passion, and commitment to collective action that is at the heart of voluntary action can we begin to reconnect people and politics; can we engage others in debates about the common good and the good society. We should encourage, not discourage people from exercising their democratic rights and from making their voices heard. That is why I believe individuals and organisations should have the right to campaign in the vicinity of Parliament – SOCPA restrictions must be removed; and the police must recognise and respect people's right to peaceful protest.

Greener

The good society is greener, as well as being fairer – indeed, social justice, financial security and environmental sustainability go hand in hand. I have no doubt that climate change is the biggest challenge facing us. It will affect everyone, but, once again, across the world, the poorest communities will be hardest hit.

Real change will require action at the global as well as the local level. Which is why NCVO was pleased to be part of the Put People First campaign, calling for a fairer global economic deal at the G20 summit in London earlier this year. It is also why more than 100 civil society organisations representing 11 million

people will turn out in London on December 5 to ask our politicians for a strong and just agreement at the UN Copenhagen climate summit.

There is a growing realisation that this is not simply an environmental issue. As Nicholas Stern has said in his groundbreaking Report on the Economics of Climate Change, climate change is fundamentally about people: it is about how people's actions impact on the environment – and how a changing environment will impact on people. If we are to build a more sustainable future, civil society organisations must develop a greater awareness of the part they play alongside government and the market.

The Government has now set targets to reduce greenhouse gases. These are directed primarily at larger business and public sector bodies. At the other end of the spectrum we are all being urged to take action as individuals. Both are important: we all have a responsibility to reduce our carbon footprint. But I don't think that anyone has yet grasped the scale of change that will be needed. Or indeed what a low carbon society will look like. That is why we in the voluntary and community sector need to work with our communities and constituencies to foster more sustainable ways of living and working and to build support for change.

Local Action

And finally, the good society is one in which people are actively involved in their communities; in which people give their time and money to causes they care about.

We know that traditional social ties are breaking down and being refashioned. Old certainties have given way to new opportunities. The news is that pubs are closing and church attendance declining. But the importance of coming together has not gone away. I do not believe that our society is broken; but I do think we can and should strengthen the glue that binds them together.

Voluntary organisations link into and work with communities in ways which enable them to reach parts of society that others do not. They create opportunities for people to talk to, and learn from each other in order to identify their collective needs – then work together to find ways of meeting them. They have had an important role to play in reducing social tensions – in building social cohesion and challenging negative and divisive attitudes, that can all too easily, become the norm

We need to strengthen those links, find new ways of building connections between people, helping to create a sense of belonging and a regard for others. Community action should be seen as something we all get involved in. Giving and volunteering can directly help strengthen communities, can reinforce a sense of common cause. It represents a move away from a self interest culture to one where contributing to the public good is seen as the mark, not just of a good citizen, but the expectation of every citizen.

That is why NCVO is joining with others, including Volunteering England and the TUC to call for the recognition and celebration of voluntary and community action through a new bank holiday. A Community Day on which we can truly

value what people do to support each other and recognise the way it makes our communities healthier, more vibrant and more inclusive.

I'd like to close today by restating our role in building the good society, a space where people come together to make that positive difference too their lives and the lives of others: to offer mutual support; to pursue shared interests; or to help those in need. A society that is fairer and greener, that depends on local voices and local action. Your work is vital to realising this vision.