All Party Parliamentary Group on Civil Society and Volunteering

General election hustings – 3 March 2015, 16.00-17.30

Speakers

- Rob Wilson MP, Conservative
- Lisa Nandy MP, Labour
- Jean Lambert MEP, Green
- Martyn Lewis CBE, to chair the hustings.

Minutes are not verbatim.

Baroness Jill Pitkeathley and Susan Elan Jones MP opened the APPG. They explained that the meeting would be a hustings on civil society issues ahead of the general election. They invited Martyn Lewis to chair the debate.

Mr Lewis welcomed speakers. He noted that spokespersons for UKIP and the Liberal Democrats were invited but they did not put anyone forward.

Mr Lewis invited all speakers to give a brief introduction of their party’s approach to civil society and volunteering issues.

Mr Wilson

- The Conservative party is the party of civil society.
- The party wants to see more people engaging in voluntary work and more people donating to charity and a bigger, stronger society with a bigger, stronger, more sustainable sector.
- I am an evangelist of the work charities do and the continued growth of the sector.
- Proud that today’s charity sector is larger and better funded than in 2010.
- The watchwords for next parliament would be: sustainability, diversity and growth. These elements combined can further strengthen the sector. Only the Conservative party offers a long-term plan to achieve this.
  1. Sustainability: want the sector to be able to weather any potential financial situation. If there were to be changes beyond our control e.g. in the Eurozone, then that would not obstruct the progress of the sector. The sector should be able to thrive under any economic circumstances.
  2. Diversity: wants to see this increase in civil society.
    - Commissioners must be aware of the benefits of working with sector. Charities both large and small must be able to successfully bid for contracts. It also means supporting charities with fixed models that they know work, whether they want to scale up or remain small and specialist.
  3. Growth: wants to see the sector as a whole grow. Therefore we must continue making it easier to give money and time.
    - Proud of volunteering legacy left by Olympics and that there are now more ways than ever for people to support their charity, whether that is financially or otherwise.
**Ms Nandy**

- The charity sector is able to do great things in the most difficult of circumstances.
- For instance, funding is difficult to come by and tightly constrained. This is especially the case for small organisations, as reflected in a report published by the Centre of Social Justice. Where parts of the sector are unable to function, there is a negative knock-on impact for society.
- The Labour party would tackle the ‘competitive race to the bottom’ that organisations face.
- The party would ensure that the living wage was paid through major government contracts.
- The party would extend the secondment programme so that partnerships are built between the public and charity sectors and the private and charity sectors. By creating long-term partnerships, both sectors can learn from each other.
- Staff have been lost through funding cuts and this has the knock-on effect of damaging beneficiary trust.
- The party would carry out a study on pension provision across the sector and raise the minimum wage.
- Volunteering should be encouraged but not as a substitute for paid work. It is important that people choose to volunteer rather than that their volunteering is mandated.
- The final point is about ‘voice’. The sector should be able to speak out more on behalf of marginalised people. The party intends to repeal the Lobbying Act if elected.
- Devolution is also important. There is the opportunity for infrastructure to be developed where voluntary sector has a voice again. The voluntary sector should have an equal say in formulating strategy. This would result in unlocking the talent of communities across the country.

**Ms Lambert**

- The voluntary sector is important because it acts as social glue.
- The sector is valuable for the wide range of innovation and ideas that it produces.
- The sector’s advocacy role is vital and it must be maintained. People must be able to express their views.
- In thorough agreement with Lisa Nandy’s point about ‘voice.’
- The sector is able to bring to the fore people’s lived experiences.
- A particular cause of concern is that cuts weaken local democracy and participation is undermined.
- Many organisations and individuals have worked hard for the regeneration of communities but trust is now being worn away. The European context to this problem was also discussed here.
- It is important that we move back to finding methods that allow people to feel that they have an active role in politics.
Summary of Q&A

Questions

1) Simon Bowkett, Exeter CVS: This year’s NCVO almanac tells us that 3% of charities account for over 75% of charity spending in this country. Does the charity economy – like the wider economy as a whole – need rebalancing, and if so what measures would your party take to achieve that?

– Mr Wilson: We are trying to rebalance the economy. There has been a change of approach since 2003/4 where the government has been radically reducing grants. This trajectory continues although not as quickly as before. The focus now is on social investment and trying to bring in new sources of funding. We are reaching a tipping point where it will be possible to unlock billions of pounds of social investment. There is considerable interest from the financial community in these investments. The Conservative party intends to take this social investment approach further if returned after the general election in May 2015

– Mr Lewis: Will this approach provide opportunities for small charities?

– Mr Wilson: Yes, the party wants small charities to have access to social investment. Therefore the government has to keep changing the way it commissions contracts. They must not be too big and unwieldy. Funding should also be localised.

– Mr Lewis: If there are a lot of changes, how will charities know where they stand?

– Mr Wilson: Change reflects a learning process. Social investment is new so we must continue to learn from its application but the broad direction is right.

– Lisa Nandy: Yes, there is a problem. This is particularly true of the north. Increased cuts impact negatively on charities, particularly where the demand for help is high. The solution does not have to be large national programmes. It is better if the state works in partnership and offer small amounts of money when the sector needs it. This is the Labour party’s preferred view. Devolution offers a real opportunity for new contracts. This is especially the case with reference to the health and social programme. The work programme shows that big providers do not have all the answers. Mr Wilson is right to highlight importance of grants. This is particularly with reference to small charities. There is also scope to use the Social Value Act.

– Mr Lewis: Should it be a condition of every contract that you involve a charity?

– Ms Nandy: There is the negative impact of a power relationship in this. Eric Pickles’ comments yesterday [on ‘sock-puppet charities’] are deeply concerning.

– Ms Lambert: Charities have different roles and differing levels of access to money. The key point to consider is where the strengthening of the sector needs to happen. Some of the support has actually been taken away. The European Social Fund is an example of this. However, this approach often results in a false economy. How can assistance be returned? Fair contracts are important. Competing bodies often already have structure etc. and therefore for local charities to compete with that is difficult. There is a level playing field issue. There is a strong place for grants. Not every organisation wants a contractual provision to provide services.

2) Kevin Curley, Pickering Family Centre (North Yorkshire): Trends in local commissioning in favour of large contracts and away from grants represent a huge barrier to local charities and community groups. Will you do anything to influence local councils and clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) to help the local voluntary sector? Is it your role as a minister in a new government to tackle the CCGs?

– Ms Nandy: The hit to the voluntary sector has taken a safety network down. Communities are on the verge of collapsing. The benefit of the devolution agenda is that on the whole CCGs and Local Authorities are more likely to understand this. It is harder for national politicians who are not embedded in those communities. If elected then a method for ensuring the involvement of...
voluntary sector would be set out straight away. The voluntary sector is not involved in the Manchester devolution process. However, it is vital that the sector is involved in similar processes. The sector has the ability to hold local services to account.

- **Mr Wilson**: You cannot espouse localism at one level and then run away from it. The contract readiness fund has had a successful pilot so it will now be rolled out to help charities. Capacity building is also key. CCGs also need help with strategy and the government has been trying to work on this. NCVO have also been involved. But the party does not want to run the affairs of local authorities for them.

- **Ms Lambert**: Government has a role in terms of providing a framework. It is important to consider where localism starts and government stops. This is about political choices at a local level. There must be clarity about what is possible and what is not. The voluntary sector sometimes finds it difficult to speak out against quasi-governmental bodies. Clarity also needs to be achieved around certain clauses of the Social Value Act.

3) **Ben Darlington, Benefacto**: £1 billion of employee volunteering time is pledged by corporate firms each year in the UK but only 17% is used. Given the need that charities have for support in the post-recession environment, what will the next government’s minister for civil society be doing to increase corporate engagement with communities?

- **Mr Wilson**: The Conservative party would continue to encourage skill sharing so that businesspeople volunteer to help charities by offering the expertise they need. This helps to plug skills gaps in smaller charities. Business in the Community do a lot of good work. Companies should offer this because it benefits the volunteer and that is in business’ corporate interest.

- **Ms Nandy**: Short term volunteering is not always the most useful. However, longer-term commitments to sharing skills both ways are important. We should encourage private companies to offer volunteers but not mandate this. That is to squeeze the life out of volunteering. There is a wider debate about society and the future of communities and how they must be supported. It is important to tap into the goodwill of individuals.

- **Ms Lambert**: The core of the question is how you match the offer with real need. It is important to consider what comes of ongoing engagement with the community and who makes the choice about what the company employee does? The workforce must have a say. This is usually the most successful way to organise volunteering.

- **Karl Wilding, NCVO**: Would you implement the ‘sock puppet clause’ [see House of Commons Written Statement HCWS292 (PDF)] across government departments?

- **Mr Wilson**: Campaigning is completely legitimate and the government supports the sector’s right to do that. We should not be alarmist.

- **Mr Lewis**: Is it the case that everyone is hit by this because of a few transgressions?

- **Mr Wilson**: The practice of the local enterprise partnerships in hiring lobbyists has been unacceptable.

- **Mr Lewis**: How about private donations for political purposes?

- **Mr Wilson**: Organisations are open to use that in-line with law.

- **Ms Nandy**: No, the Labour party would not extend this to all government departments. There is a duty for the sector to speak out. It is the role of the Charity Commission to define what constitutes a charity. This should not be defined by the government. The ‘sock-puppet clause’ will have a chilling effect upon campaigning. Instead we should be welcoming the sector’s opportunity to challenge. The Lobbying Act would repealed by a Labour government and replaced with a different piece of legislation that would include all lobbyists as well as charities. The party accepts the need for transparency but solutions need to be workable and clear.
Ms Lambert: The Lobbying Act is unwelcome and anti-democratic. The independence of the charitable sector is very important. There is a distinction which should be made between party political advocacy and organisations which speaking out about their experiences.

Mr Wilding: The sector needs clarity on what we can contribute to policy making. The government is sending mixed messages – open policy-making on one hand, things like this on the other. Is the Office for Civil Society getting the message out there in government about charities’ role?

Mr Wilson: I meet lots of vocal organisations and hear their views. I sometimes act on these.

Ms Nandy: The office for Civil Society has to be rooted in a wider vision of government and society. The Labour party would not formally devolve any functions of office to other government departments.

4) Question asked on behalf of Rob Macmillan, Third Sector Research Centre, who was absent: What is the key difference between your approach/policy proposals and those of other parties, and why is that key difference important?

Ms Lambert: The Green Party recognises that a key issue is civil engagement and this engagement forms part of a work/life balance. The Party wants to see people’s rights in society increasing. An important focus for the charitable sector is access to rights.

Ms Nandy: The Labour Party sees the sector as critical friends with government and welcomes challenges from the sector. The lesson from the last Labour government is to be wary of big, top-down projects.

Martyn Lewis/ Rob Wilson: Discussion of the successes of the National Citizen Service and then the Russell Commission. The Conservative Party stands against theories of the overbearing state.

Closing remarks

Ms Lambert: It is possible for the State to facilitate success in the sector or to obstruct progress. The cuts have had a negative knock-on effect. There must be greater engagement by the state with local communities.

Ms Nandy: The sector’s voice must be embedded in decision-making processes. We have to learn from what happened to communities when the state stepped out.

Mr Wilson: We have a bigger, stronger society now than we did in 2010. The number of charities has increased and funding has increased. But a strong charity sector requires a strong economy.

About the APPG on Civil Society

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Civil Society and Volunteering exists to provide a forum for discussing issues affecting the voluntary and community sector with parliamentarians from across the political spectrum.

How to get involved?

• Come to a meeting (details below)
• Join the group – APPG members get advance notice of all of our sessions as well as an invitation to our Christmas Parliamentary Reception. Please email us for details.
• Give us a call, visit our website or follow us on twitter
Future meetings

- Tuesday 9 June 2015
- Tuesday 14 July 2015
- Tuesday 13 October 2015

Please RSVP to civilsocietyappg@ncvo.org.uk or telephone 020 7520 2473.