

## **Speech for CCVO's Annual General Meeting, June 21, 2007**

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It hardly seems like 22 months ago when people gathered in the Kahanoff Centre to wish me adieu as I embarked upon my sabbatical year. On the other hand, it seems like eight years since I got back.

Between those dates, I had the incredible good fortune to have time to think, to reflect, to travel and to meet with some truly gifted people.

I visited California and Minnesota, interviewed a number of senior people from the sector here in Canada, spent a month in England and had 10 glorious months in Australia, which also allowed me to spend a total of about a month in New Zealand.

All in search of an answer to a terribly simple question: Why are we, as a voluntary sector, so impotent?

I exaggerate somewhat. That wasn't the question that I set out to answer. It was, however, the conclusion that I reached.

Officially, I was studying the impact of charitable-sector umbrella organizations on policy related to the charitable sector. Catchy title, huh? What I found was that, with the exception of England, the impact on direct policy has been minimal.

I also have concluded that the impact on indirect policy has been negligible. By indirect policy, I do not mean to minimize its importance; I'm talking about things like conditions of granting, demands for accountability and rules on advocacy.

But it's more than that – way more. It's those sets of policies that, in the view of many, create the problems with which the voluntary sector has to deal.

In short, we're not at the policy tables. We're often part of the band-aid, but rarely part of the solution. Why should this be so?

Over the next few minutes, I want to advance to you three theorems.

First, I want to argue that we're short-sighted.

Second, I want to argue that we're a case study of "united we stand, divided we fall."

And finally, I wish to place before you the suggestion that we're way too nice for our own good.

Before I get into those arguments, let me give you a very quick snapshot of what I found in the places I visited. Of necessity, these can be only brief descriptions of what I found and of the information I gained from the interviews I conducted and the reading I did. Let me start with Australia, the place where I spent the most time and where, with any luck – and preferably a major lottery win – I would like to spend a lot more time.

The suggestion that there is a voluntary sector, as such, is of fairly recent origin in that country. Indeed, there are still some – including a number of leading academics – who argue that the concept of a voluntary sector is an academic construct drawn out of frustration. In short, they got tired of trying to figure out whether to include statistics about charities within government or the private sector categories, so they created a new one.

There are some examples of sector organizations working together. Indeed, the so-called “industry groups” are at varying degrees of organization and sophistication.

It is only in the last couple of years that there have been any real attempts to organize the sector as a sector. The creation of the Nonprofit Roundtable started with the determination of the former head of Philanthropy Australia to find ways of bringing nonprofits together to discuss common issues. For much of that time, and certainly the time I was there, the organization was spending as much time on trying to determine who could be a part of the Roundtable as it was dealing with any issues. One of the fascinating membership decisions to be made is one that allowed professional organizations to be represented at the table.

However fledgling, these attempts to organize have not escaped the notice of the Commonwealth government. John Howard has been described by one newspaper columnist as being a master at preventing the growth of any movement that could stand as opposition to his government. In dealing with the voluntary sector, Prime Minister Howard has been at his best in dividing and conquering. Whether by setting up a competing body to the Nonprofit Roundtable – a competing body where he has appointed all of the members and where only the largest charities are present – or through funding arrangements, the Coalition government Mr. Howard heads has helped prevent the coalescence of a voluntary sector.

Across the Tasman Sea, we face a different set of issues – issues that are as fascinating from a political-science perspective as they are from the perspective of an examination of the voluntary sector.

For about the last six years, the voluntary sector has spent more and more time coming together, usually under the auspices of the Community Sector Task Force. There is a growing recognition amongst subsectoral peak organizations and among individual charities that there is a commonality to many of their concerns. They have also recognized that there is strength in numbers.

The effectiveness of the Task Force has been diminished somewhat by two factors. First is the fact that most of its funding has come from government and is subject to the usual vagaries of that source of income.

But the vagaries have been enhanced by the fact that the Task Force has tied together issues affecting the community sector with issues affecting the Maori – New Zealand’s indigenous people. While recognizing that this gathering of issues makes for interesting political times, the community sector’s representatives say that it reflects a fundamental cultural value of the sector.

The Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840, established the relationship between the Maori and the Europeans, and is a critical component of New Zealand life. It is cited often and everywhere, and its full implementation is a matter of ongoing discussion and debate.

The joining together of issues of the voluntary sector and adherence to the Treaty was not a problem until a few years ago. At that time, the then-leader of the Opposition party delivered a policy speech promoting a concept entitled “One Law for All.” Like most quick phrases – similar to the Patriot Act – the title hid the meaning. The speech argued that laws giving privileges to the Maori should be repealed, creating only, in his words, one “class” of New Zealanders.

Up to that point, the New Zealand government of Helen Clark had been demonstrating significant sympathy for the Maori. Instead of terming the speech racist, the government – which is fragile at best – chose to take a harder line in dealing with the Maori. Thus, when the Community Sector Task Force sought to tie the sector’s issues so closely with the issues of the Maori, government responded negatively.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Task Force’s work, however, has been its outreach activities. Its staff, mainly composed of those with community-development experience, have gone to communities and sought out voluntary organizations of all sizes and types. At their gatherings, they talk about those things which make them similar – whether strengths or problems – rather than concentrating on their differences.

Across the Pacific, the state of the relationships within the voluntary sector look much alike in Canada and U.S., with a few subtle differences. The strongest level of voluntary-sector co-operation appears to be at the state level in the U.S.

Organizations operating at the municipal level – organizations similar to the Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations – far outnumber those which purport to represent the sector at a national level. There appears to be greater co-operation between state associations than exists in our country. And the state associations seem to be more likely than their Canadian counterparts to engage in providing “back-office” services as a means of generating revenue.

The greatest commonality I found between Canada and the U.S. was the almost total disregard the federal governments have for the voluntary sector.

England is the one country I visited that has a clear and strong leader of the voluntary sector on a national basis. The National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) is approaching its 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It is strong, it is financially viable, and when its president calls the Prime Minister, the calls get returned.

Until a few years ago, NCVO served as the umbrella of national organizations exclusively. It has now expanded its membership so that local and regional organizations can participate. In conjunction with that change, it has developed an electoral process to ensure that both regional and subsectoral interests are represented amongst the trustees.

That NCVO has had an impact on policy is beyond question. Its staff have regularly been seconded to government to work on such things as the new charities law, the introduction of new funding regimes which should make Canadians quite jealous and the devolution of services to the voluntary sector.

However, all is not without controversy in the mother country. There is an on-going and quite public battle between NCVO and the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organizations.

This latter body – ACEVO for short – has a membership made up primarily of the senior staff of the largest English charities. A key platform for ACEVO is the further devolution of government services to the voluntary sector, an approach which NCVO says should be treated with extreme caution. ACEVO argues that there are few services – up to and including the operation of prisons – that could not be more efficiently managed by the voluntary sector. NCVO suggests that taking on more and more government responsibilities threatens the independence and the very soul of the voluntary sector.

The voluntary sector is also well organized at the local level, usually under the auspices of what we would call a volunteer centre. In addition to providing some “back office” supports in some cities, these local organizations are, by statute, required to be included in the municipal planning process. I’m not speaking here of development planning or the location of sewers, but in the community planning that has been mandated by the national government.

So let’s end the world tour and talk for a few minutes about my theorems – a set of beliefs that focuses on Canada but that holds true, I think, in all of the countries I visited except, arguably, England.

My first theorem, as you’ll recall, is that the sector’s inability to impact policy occurs, in part, because we are short-sighted.

There are trees and there are forests. I’m not convinced that we’re all that good at telling them apart. Similarly, there are band-aids, and there are cures, and we tend to concentrate on the former at the expense of the latter.

Now I fully acknowledge the difficulties of concentrating on a big picture when you’re struggling to pay the phone company, or are facing yet another client in crisis or can’t hire enough staff to cope with your clientele. These are real problems, and I don’t mean to make light of them.

Yet we are not as good as we need to be at drawing the lines from our current problems to the policies that cause them. Those policies may relate to the gap in funding that Lynn Eakin

has so clearly pointed out in her research. They may relate to rules around accountability or the time it takes to submit a proposal. It may relate to the government's approach toward volunteering, or tax policy, or advocacy rules.

Yes, dealing with policy issues takes time. It takes time to understand the issues. It takes time to develop the relationships that allow your voice to be heard. It takes time to collaborate with other organizations. It takes time to write submissions.

But failing to take that time, failing to work with others, leads us to be always in a situation where we are reacting, rather than acting. And often we react after the announcement has been made, when there is virtually no chance of our changing the decision.

If we are to impact public policy – the direct and the indirect, but especially the indirect – we need to take the time to develop the skills, relationships and positions that will get us to the policy tables.

My second theorem is that we are a case study for the concept of united we stand, divided we fall. Actually, that's not totally true. Most often, we're a case study for divided we fall; we haven't yet mastered the "united we stand."

Let me be very quick to say that the voluntary sector will never, that's NEVER, speak with one voice. Nor should it. Nor will we see many situations where every agency in the voluntary sector even cares about the same issue.

But for fear of establishing "group-think," we seem to have gone too far in the opposite direction. Or, more appropriately, many different directions. When I'm talking with people from the provincial or federal governments, I'm often told that they get so many disparate, and even contradictory, requests from voluntary-sector organizations that they are left without the ammunition to make a case. The more cynical among these people say that the level of disagreement leaves government free to do whatever it wants, because it knows that there can be no oppositional coalition formed.

We need not seek unanimity. But we must seek possibilities of discussion, of learning, of supporting one another even when we are not directly affected. We need organizations like the Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations, the Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations and similar organizations across the country that can provide the venue for these discussions, for this learning. And we must reach out well beyond "the usual gang" so that we involve more and more people from the voluntary sector in these discussions and in this learning. And then we must connect to other cities, to other provinces, to marshal the forces of the voluntary sector.

This takes me to my third theorem. We are too nice for our own good.

This desire to be nice means that we don't want to think about, let alone utter, the "p" word.

We don't want to talk about power.

And because we don't want to think about it, because we don't want to talk about it, we deprive ourselves of it.

This plays out at the individual organizational level, the subsectoral level, and the sectoral level. "We're just one small agency," I was told recently by the executive director of an agency providing child-care services under a contract with its local child and family services authority.

What this person didn't recognize, or didn't accept, is that the organization has a contract because the authority needs its services. And because the authority knows that if it had to deliver the service itself, it would cost much more. Those two factors alone give that organization power.

Yet, we act powerless and thus, we are.

Eakin's research in Ontario and right here in Calgary show that funders often do not pay the full cost of service. Yet instead of fighting – together – to change that, instead of saying we refuse to subsidize what you have the responsibility to do, we are grateful for whatever we are given.

I doubt that the authority – or any other government entity – walks into *Office Depot* and says it's only going to pay 85% of the cost of whatever it wants to buy. When it hires a law firm to do some work, it doesn't offer to pay only 85% of the going rate.

So why do they believe they can do that with us?

Simple. It's because we've proven to them that they can.

Last September – in the last week of my sabbatical – the federal government announced spending cuts. By my reckoning, something in the order of \$150 to \$200 million was removed from the voluntary sector. At the same time, the government announced that the encouragement and support of voluntarism was not a core function of government.

Imagine what would have happened if the government had removed that same amount of money from agricultural subsidies, or if it had announced that support of crop insurance was no longer a core function. The tractors would have been clogging highways the very next day.

Statistics Canada figures show that the voluntary sector is a larger component of the economy than agriculture. The sector is a larger component of the economy than the entire retail industry.

Although the government doesn't grow any of its own crops, it does make plenty of use of volunteers in everything from national parks to prisons. So why, one might ask, is the promotion of voluntarism not core to the federal government?

Again, the answer is simple. They knew they could get away with it.

And they did. Oh, true, some of us wrote letters and even appeared before parliamentary committees. We pointed out that the government's actions were in direct contradiction to the accord that had been signed between the government and the voluntary sector. Other organizations, including those that might have been expected to have led the charge, stayed silent, believing that criticism would just attract more negative attention.

So nothing changed. The cuts were made and my belief is that there's a better-than-even chance that there will be more cuts announced in the months to come.

We have not been able to develop an awareness program that would let the public know of the critical role the voluntary sector plays in this country. We have not been able to convey the message that if every voluntary organization in this country closed its doors for 24 hours, there would be chaos.

The government knows that we won't do that. And they know that we cannot get our act together quickly enough – if we can do it at all – to present any effective opposition to decisions that hurt us and those we serve.

Many of us who were raised in the 70s and 80s dislike the construct of power. Those of us with liberal-arts backgrounds tend to want the world to be made up of people who consider themselves equal. It's a nice idea, and would that the world were actually like that.

But the reality is that power is a part of our society. It is practised in business, it is practised by professional organizations and it is practised by some well-to-do people. But we rarely see any examples of it being practised by us. Part of that may be because we can't get a core group of people together, part of it may be that we're afraid, and part of it is that we just want to be seen as nice people, doing good work.

While I was in Australia, the Commonwealth Government was preparing to issue a tender for a particular type of service. It had already indicated – at least unofficially – what it was prepared to pay for this service. There were probably only about eight or nine organizations in the country that had the infrastructure and expertise to bid for the contract. They decided to meet. They decided that the price was too low. So they decided not to tender.

While it is an interesting legal question as to whether this sort of action violated Australian trade laws, it had the desired effect. The government rewrote the tender document and the agencies found ways to work together to deliver the service while receiving a reasonable amount of compensation.

In that case, the power was exercised by a small group, but it was a small group that represented all of the organizations that had the capacity to take on the work the government wanted done.

When we recognize the power that could come from our acting together, when we marshal the strength and resolve of not-for-profit organizations of all sizes and characteristics, when we are able to say “we’re not going to take it any more” and have our voices heard in Edmonton and in Ottawa, then – and only then – will we be fully serving our constituents.

I am not suggesting the use of power for the sake of using it. I am not suggesting we need to take to the streets at every sign of offence, real or imagined, large or small. The power of the sector should always be used in the interests of those we serve. It should be used wisely and it should be used carefully.

But we have to recognize that we have it – or least can have it. And in some respects, preparing to use it may mean we never have to. If governments understand that we are prepared to act in concert, that we are prepared to stand up to bullying tactics, then perhaps we will change the situation so that we don’t have to use it.

Those demonstrations that we are organized and have ways of responding quickly and forcefully will ensure that we are invited to the policy tables. They will ensure that our needs and the needs of those we serve will be recognized and respected. They will change us and they will change policies.

On the other hand, failure to do so will prove the truth of that age-old adage: “We have seen the enemy and he is us.”

The Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations, along with its sister organization in Edmonton and their counterparts across the country, are taking the lead, and doing an admirable job. They – we – need to do more. We need to involve more people, we need to create greater understanding, we need to be prepared to mobilize.

If we can accomplish this, if we can start acting in concert, wisely and prudently, we can change the world – just as the voluntary sector has always done, and always seeks to do.