

Giving civil society a boost: a progressive path to the 'shared society'

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Earlier this year, the Prime Minister spoke about her 'shared society' vision. But a slogan itself will not shift us closer to a genuinely progressive civil society. [Dan Corry](#) and [Gerry Stoker](#) set out a programme of reform and explain how it could really change the way British society works.



A decade of austerity has driven cuts to public services and benefits, constraints on real wage growth, and economic stagnation in many towns and cities. Combine these trends with the continuing pressures created by an ageing population and with the fact that younger generations are facing tough times and you have a recipe for societal anxiety and division.

As the campaign and vote for Brexit showed, we are segmented across geographies, background, and attitudes. In response, Prime Minister Theresa May [has floated the idea of the shared society](#) as a way to tackle these divisions. But there is a great danger that the ambition behind that phrase will not be delivered. That it will be the next 'Big Society', David Cameron's big idea that bit the dust pretty fast.



We think that progressive supporters of this idea need to push the debate beyond sloganeering and towards a real agenda to drive change. This agenda needs to reframe the case for civil society, because the sector will require public support to obtain the new investment it requires to build a shared society. It will also need to acknowledge the weaknesses of civil society and do something about them.



We need to acknowledge where the British people are and what civil society already does. Civil society organises us. Many agencies are tiny, doing good work with a small number of people in need, with just a few volunteers and little, if any, funding. Others are larger, working at scale, employing people and raising substantial funds, providing key services to the public. In aggregate, many millions are involved, bringing meaning, purpose, and agency to their lives and those of others. For that reason alone civil society needs to be celebrated.

We should be cheering on human adaptation and inventiveness, and that is what civil society delivers. Civil society is progressive because it lets people act both individually and collectively to define and meet their needs and those of others. It pools resources, it is sensitive to difference and it is responsive to needs. To create a post-Brexit shared society, the dynamism of civil society must be boosted.

We need to see the world through the eyes of the citizen not the bureaucrat or technocrat. Let's not organise ourselves with bureaucratic boundaries or business models or unfair and cumbersome civil society contracting. Let's take the sense of place and community that people have and build through that.

We need to value the third sector as a force that, by its very existence, challenges the consumerisation and marketisation of our society. All forms of human exchange both act in the now and teach us about how to act in the future. If all we know is regulation or markets in the long-run that will condition and limit the range of human engagement. Civil society is a vital counter-balance to a world where both bureaucracies and markets have grown too strong.

So that's why we should re-center civil society. But how do we achieve it? To give civil society a boost we need action across a number of areas.

A new improvement regime

The Charity Commission should retain its role as regulator and data source. But we need to create a new style of improvement agency to help promote good practice and stamp out bad practice. There is the need for improvement at all levels of the sector. And one priority is ensuring that there is enough support for civil society, especially in areas that suffer from a lack of it—often, but not always, in more deprived areas.

A right to voice

This is the moment to maximise citizens' capacity to speak truth to power. Government may say that the restrictions brought in, like the Lobbying Act, should not stop this. But it has undoubtedly had [a chilling effect on the sector](#). This leads to an unhealthy world where a key part of a pluralistic democracy is not functioning as it should. We need a convention or charter, policed by a new Civil Society Ombudsman, that guarantees the right for charities to speak out, and that blocks attempt by governments to stop this.

A seat at the table of governance locally

We need to make it part of every unitary local government and regional government set-up to have a third sector chamber or other means of bringing on board the voice of voluntary organisations. The new mayor-led metro local governments could be a great starting point for experiment with democratic innovations in this area.

A boost for social capital in the digital age

There is also a case for simply encouraging more civil activity and activism. The digital age—increasingly populated by digital natives—opens up new opportunities and a different connective way of organising. A way that relies on 'people in a crowd' communicating and coordinating in the here-and-now about issues, and agreeing to move from their personal stories of concern to take joint action. For civil society umbrella organisations the challenge is to be open to, and to resource, this more spontaneous and dynamic form of mobilisation. The key will be to both engage digitally and to create a shared society that operates offline as well as online.

A support from government for the shared society

Whitehall needs to change itself to support the shared society. That could include targeted funds at gap areas as well as a dedicated civil society Cabinet minister and team with strong leadership in all key departments too. Parallel developments could be required at the local level.

A major civic infrastructure fund

Practically, covering the core costs of charities and community groups and their infrastructure bodies—like the local CVS—is very hard to raise private money for or get grant givers to support. There must be a national funding pot so that we can provide the infrastructure needed by the sector. A sum of £1bn, for instance, would be relatively small fry

in the great scheme of things, but would make a big difference to our ability to secure social capital.

Civil society can be disorganised and unfocused but in different ways it can also deliver the sense of solidarity, cooperation and mutual respect that is so vital to Britain in a disrupted, post-Brexit world. This is an ambitious programme of reform but it could really shift the way that British society works and start a move towards a genuinely shared—and progressive—society.

Note: the above is a summary on the authors' new pamphlet [The 'shared society' needs a strong civil society: A progressive agenda for change](#), which argues that civil society needs bolstering, reprioritising, and outlines how this can be achieved.

About the Authors

Dan Corry is Chief Executive of charity sector think tank and consultancy [NPC](#). He has had a varied career in public policy and economics, including as Head of the Number 10 Policy Unit and Senior Adviser to the Prime Minister on the Economy from 2007 to 2010.



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