Charity – its unifying force is needed more than ever, yet it's at risk like never before

Thank you for giving me this opportunity. I can't think of a better place to make one of my last speeches as Chair of the Charity Commission than at a registered charity. I'm also delighted you've invited me, because the Social Market Foundation has distinguished itself over the years as a meeting place where those of all political persuasions and none can debate freely and productively. I will do my best to honour that tradition today.

I certainly want to reflect on what I've learned in my three years as Commission Chair, to talk about what I and the whole organisation have achieved in that time to help increase the benefit of charity to society – and also to outline the work still to do which will fall to my successor.

But more than that I want to explain the thinking that has lain behind what we have been trying to do, which I believe is fundamental not just to the future viability and prosperity of the charitable sector, but also to the broader health of our society.

It can be summed up briefly as this. That if charities – or indeed any other institution, and anybody else operating in the public eye – are to survive and thrive, we are all going to have to be far more respectful of other people's points of view. We are all relying on each other.

But before I get on to charities more specifically, let me take a step back by examining the intense world in which we live and operate today. The levels of scrutiny we all face are immense. The speed with which we can pass judgement on others is unprecedented, as is the ability to seek out those who agree with us, often to the exclusion of anyone else.

All of this makes outrage at scale much easier and, sometimes, the entire object of the exercise: all the better to make yourself heard in the current cacophony. Of course, that approach often comes at a cost. Nuanced disagreements descend into polarised divisions, motives are impugned, guilt by association becomes the order of the day. People parody others and in so doing become parodies of themselves.

In this environment a better understanding of the differences between us and the actual reasons behind them has never been more difficult or more essential. The current pandemic may have frozen all of us in place for the time being, but the places we find ourselves in reflect the fact that we are perhaps more segregated than we have been in living memory – whether that is by choice or by a lack of it.

Most, perhaps all of us on this call, have been to places and experienced things that people within living memory couldn't even begin to comprehend.

These experiences help to shape who we are, what we think, and how we feel. They are part of us. We have these things in common, but we also live alongside people who've had other experiences, who haven't had the same opportunities or who've had different ones. And yet we have seldom had less contact with those people than at any time in the modern era.

However far we travel when we can safely do so again, we really do need to get out more closer to home.

That need to understand and respect experiences and values different from our own was important before the recent political shocks of the past five years. And I think it's even more important now.

Either we acknowledge what has gone on around us, learn from it and adapt, or we ignore it as a momentary aberration, seek to learn nothing at all and just hope it won't happen again. I think that would be both wrong in principle and counterproductive in practice.

Let me say why – and I'll draw on my own personal experience.

Over my career I have been fortunate to work in some of Britain's finest public institutions – from the civil service to the BBC; and I have served Prime Ministers, whether working as a member of staff inside No 10 or as a member of the Cabinet.

In all of these roles the values that have mattered most are those that I share with the people I was born and brought up with in the East Midlands – close to blue-wall/red-wall territory.

And what are those beliefs? That rules matter and should be applied equally to everyone, that people in power have a particular responsibility to lead by example, and that knowledge – while important – counts for little without understanding. These are not outlandish values – they're held by millions of decent, respectable people up and down the country – and nor are the opinions they give rise to fringe or extreme.

Ignoring these voices or losing touch with the values that underpin them seems to me an act of monumental hubris. For too long, too many of us in positions of authority have allowed moral certitude, reinforced by over-confidence, to harden into disdain for other people's points of view and a reluctance to be held accountable by wider public opinion.

Over the past 15 years we've seen the consequences of that kind of attitude from the financial crisis, to the scandal over MPs' expenses, and the loss in trust in news media.

I applied and was appointed Chair of the Charity Commission because I could see that erosion in public trust and confidence had begun to reach parts of the charity world too. Household names not behaving as they should; putting their own reputations ahead of doing the right thing and not recognising their broader responsibility to Charity as a whole. At that time, public trust and confidence in charity was at its lowest level ever.

Some organised voices opposed my appointment because of my lack of experience and understanding when it came to the charity world. But that was a feature not a bug. I wasn't there to plead the case for charities to the public, but to make sure that a broader range of voices from the public were taken seriously by charities, especially the large and more established. And to do so because Charity matters – and it relies on everyone's support.

So, from the very start of my term as Chair, I led the Board and worked with Helen Stephenson and the rest of the Executive team to place regulating in the public interest at the heart of the Commission's work. This meant making us more responsive and inclusive in the way we listen and respond to different parts of the public, including volunteers and charity supporters up and down the country.

We moved to reassure people that their legitimate concerns over, often quite small things, would not be trivialised or ignored. We also emphasised that charities needed to be driven by their purposes in the way they go about their business not just in the difference they make. This means being respectful of basic public expectations and behaving in a way that is distinctive from other types of organisations. And over the last couple of years we have begun to see a modest recovery in public trust and confidence. This is not just a nice objective if you can achieve it, it is a statutory responsibility of the Charity Commission written into law, and for good reason.

Covid has brought home both the power of Charity and its essential fragility. The power it has to harness our generosity and goodwill for the benefit of others; but also how much Charity relies on the support it is given, in small and myriad ways, as people go about our daily lives – and how vulnerable it is to any disruption in those routines.

As a nation our charitable impulse runs as deep as it ever has. Over the last twelve months people have found new and ingenious ways to demonstrate kindness, salute courage and lend practical help to one another. From clapping for carers and NHS workers, organising mutual support via WhatsApp, to supporting the inspiring exploits of the late Captain Sir Tom Moore – whose loss this week is mourned by us all. And right now, people like St John Ambulance and the RVS enrolling local volunteers throughout the UK to help distribute the Covid vaccine in their own communities. Indeed, many charities are having to work harder than ever, adapting to a dramatic loss of income at a time of increased demand: they are having to attract new supporters or find new ways of providing support to the people who rely on them irrespective of the pandemic.

Charities remain the most effective way of bringing people together in the name of something bigger, more important or more urgent than those things which sometimes keep us apart.

This power that Charity has derives from the feeling that it belongs to all of us in one form or another, wherever we come from. That sense of genuine common ownership is rare and precious in our current world; and we should not give it up deliberately or through neglect. Charities can challenge things,

charities can shake things up, they can even change the world, but they can't, and they shouldn't go out of their way to divide people.

If Charity is to remain at the forefront of our national life it cannot afford to be captured by those who want to advance or defend their own view of the world to the exclusion of all others. Charities can adapt to the latest social and cultural trends but there is a real risk of generating unnecessary controversy and division by picking sides in a battle some have no wish to fight.

Many seek out charities as an antidote to politics and division not as another front on which to wage a war against political enemies, and they have the right to be respected. Telling these people that they'll get a fair hearing if they object to the politicisation of their favourite charities or if they take a different view is not in itself a political act; it is the role of a responsible regulator.

Hard as it may be to believe sometimes, away from Westminster or beyond the reach of Twitter, there are people who do not have definitive opinions, ready for instant expression about Brexit, the root causes of inequality, the exercise and limits of free speech, or how best to tell the story of Britain. They are the backbone of so many of our charities. They let their donations, their volunteering, their fundraising do the talking. Just because these people do not shout doesn't mean they have no right to be heard. I have tried to make their views count more during my time at the Charity Commission, I hope and believe my successor will do the same.

They will of course inherit other challenges facing the sector and its regulator. Public expectations matter. When it comes to charities this means seeing motives translated into action and the job being gone about in the right way. Standards in terms of behaviour, efficiency and effectiveness are more important than structures and the public feels entitled to make certain assumptions about registered charity status that go beyond recipients simply sticking to the letter of the law. And that doesn't change even during a pandemic and when many charities are under immense pressure.

Ensuring these expectations are met even as the range of bodies trying to become charities and the scope of things we ask charities to do keep on growing is incredibly important if the legal and financial benefits of charitable status are to continue enjoying public support.

Then there's the challenge of registered charity status itself keeping pace with the times. Charities themselves aren't the only outlet for people who want to be charitable. The charity sector needs to embrace a new generation of organisations with their own ideas for strengthening their communities and wider society.

In my view the charity register should not be like a private members' club; difficult to join but offering a place for life once you get in. Instead it should be a snapshot that captures the vast array of efforts being made in this country to improve lives and strengthen society at any given time. The Charity Commission would be better equipped to do this if it could make

registration more straightforward in some cases, combined with more power and greater freedom to remove moribund charities or those involved in wrongdoing from the register.

Finally, there's what to do when things go wrong. The reason why the Charity Commission has placed such importance on the public interest during my time as Chair is that the way charities go about their business matters as much as the difference they make. How do we know this? Because the public tells us so.

It's important to be able to draw broader lessons from cases where it is appropriate to do so, to show that there is an underlying purpose to how the Commission discharges its statutory responsibilities. We began to do this while I was Chair and I hope that as a practice it continues. More people are becoming aware of what the Charity Commission is trying to do on their behalf, and that can only help charities up and down the country who need all the support they can get to recover from the pandemic and to play their full part in helping the country to do the same.

The reason Charity matters is because it is a reflection of us at our best. Encapsulating our generosity of spirit, our impulse to give what we can and to do what we can to improve and enrich the lives of others, whether they are on our own doorstep or thousands of miles away. And like us charities come in all shapes and sizes; large and small, volunteer-led and professionally run, service-providers funded by local and national government, and the essential but often unglamorous gap-fillers fiercely independent of the state.

Some find this lack of coherence frustrating. They would like a much more focused, organised and coordinated sector speaking to the government and the outside world with one voice, usually their own. But looking back with the advantage of my three years at the Charity Commission I think it is that very variation which is the source of Charity's strength.

There are charities which bring like-minded people together, charities who unite unlike minds, different charities who want diametrically different things. Together they can all help to improve lives and strengthen society within the legal framework of charitable status.

With so much aiding and abetting polarisation these days, it has been a privilege to oversee one of the few unifying forces that stand for more pluralism in our lives. So, to the 168,000 charities on our register and the 700,000 trustees who are legally responsible for them and are custodians of something which is precious to all of us, I would just like to end by saying to them: "thank you".