

Dame Julia Unwin

Brexit and UK Civil Society

Taking Back Control – High Standards Britain

The Brexit vote of 2016 was a loud wakeup call for every organisation in the country. For civil society as much as anyone else. The vote surprised ›the establishment‹ – leading politicians, broadsheet newspapers and TV channels, the commentariat, the universities and the big charitable institutions alike. What it also did was expose the deep divisions in British society and these were as much social and cultural as they were economic.

The gulf of experience between the ›core‹ and the ›periphery‹ became inescapably clear. Brexit Britain was divided between the cities and the towns, between London and the rest of England, between the nations that make up the UK. The vote also revealed the gap between those who had largely benefited – and crucially felt that they had benefited – from globalisation and modernity, and those who had not. Of course, there were many different reasons behind the decision to leave. Worries about immigration, the loss of local or national pride and the sense that political decisions were made at a remote distance also played their part in the result. But what united many who backed the decision to leave the EU was the feeling that their voices had been ignored, their concerns dismissed for too long.

»Take Back Control« proved to be a potent and mobilising slogan, and anyone interested in how people can have control of their own lives – an underlying purpose for so much of civil society – should pay attention. It is ironic indeed that the civil society that has long argued for self-governance (of places, of homes, or medical conditions) will have understood the slogan, and recognised that people felt they needed more control. So too, would the organisations arguing for more self-direction for people with disabilities, empowering them to set their own terms of life, employ their own assistants, create and nurture full and engaged lives. Those that had fought for self-determination, struggled to make sure that people could lead the lives they wanted whatever their sexuality, gender or income, all realised that this slogan was more than clever focus-group marketing. It had power and impact. Should we have been surprised?

And what of the huge raft of organisations which exist to promote and support culture, to allow us to celebrate our various and different identities, our loyalty to place, our love of scenery, the rich mixed heritage of these islands? Can they be criticised for not seeing that underlying that Leave vote are a few unpalatable facts – that many people appear to feel

bypassed by such celebrations, uncomfortable with our new diversity, felt much less pride in our places, and were not excited about our 21st century sense of identity.

For other parts of civil society there's a different lesson to be learned from the referendum result. For them, the establishment and defence of standards has long been an animating purpose. Trades unions fight first for labour standards, and then to maintain and enhance them. Trades unions and community groups campaign to make workplaces safe, and then insist on inspecting, championing and defending the rights of ordinary workers. Some charities campaign to make food safe, animals protected, the environment cleaner and greener. Others push for higher standards – of welfare, consumer rights, of environmental protection. Many of these, fought for over generations, it's true, were underpinned by our membership of the EU. What will happen now?

Regardless of the constitutional outcome of Brexit, which is now settled, apart from in Northern Ireland, or the economic impact, which is still unknown, civil society is heeding that wakeup call. The people and the organisations that make up civil society are already responding to the demands uncovered in that referendum vote.

Take the Civil Society Futures Inquiry¹ report, which I chaired. Civil society organisations and others who contributed to that report identified things we needed to do. These include:

- A greater focus on place and the importance of the differences in the UK and a recognition of the profound disadvantage experienced by some places.
- A greater connection between the national charitable institutions and local community organisations
- A stronger awareness of the need to build trust in times of great inequality and imbalance of power.
- A focus on the connecting power of re-energised civil society.

It is now almost 5 years since the Brexit vote, and it is hard to disentangle which changes that have taken place since are directly attributed to the decision to exit the EU, the way in which it was and is being done, and the impact of the global pandemic. But it is possible to identify some themes which are going to be of profound importance as we try to tackle some of these major issues. They include

- The challenge to the unity of the UK: the prospect of an independent Scotland and a united Ireland are both more possible than had been envisaged for decades.
- The economic aftershocks of both Brexit and the pandemic (and possible future lockdowns) could bring in its wake large scale unemployment, underemployment and the further growth of insecure and poorly paid work.
- The particular challenge facing young people in the UK

¹ Civil Society Futures Inquiry: <https://civilsocietyfutures.org/>

- The structural racism that is evident across the UK, and the deep damage done by it, which is calling for new and different work.
- The widening gap between some geographical sections of the UK and the rest.
- The deep damage done by the pandemic to the finances of many charitable and community organisations, whose business model is increasingly fragile.

The challenges ahead are many and varied, but they all boil down to three things—a loss of identity, pride and confidence. So there is a huge job to be done – and a re-energised and renewed civil society can help to do it.

The record of civil society in making change happen, in spite of political and structural obstacles, is a proud one. Over decades grit and determination brought about

- The provision of decent homes for people who had been living in slums.
- Changes in the lived experience of people with profound and complex disabilities, and long-term medical conditions.
- Legal protections against racism and discrimination, and progress towards a more equal society.
- Greater equality for gay men and lesbians.
- Community action against loneliness and isolation.
- Activities for young people
- Refuges for women fleeing domestic violence.
- Hospices to support people who are dying.
- Arts and cultural activities more accessible to all.
- And countless others.

None of these were by any means perfect. And all these advances need protection, as well as championing, but none of them would have been possible without the energy, focus and determination of groups of citizens coming together to demand, and make a better world.

Those qualities – ingenuity, determination, and capability – can also be mobilised in response to the new, post Brexit, post Covid challenges. We can come together to mend our dented democracy, restitch the torn social fabric, and commit ourselves once more to the biggest and most important battle of all – for climate justice and to avert the impact of climate disaster. We can continue to push for the ›high standards‹ Britain that was promised in the referendum debate alongside defending the protections which already exist, for our environment, for our safety and for labour rights.

Those qualities can also allow us to respond to the triple crises of growing inequality, potentially catastrophic climate change and the changing demography of many countries in the global north.

So what are the immediate tasks? I believe we are looking at three main priorities for civil society in the next few years.

First, civil society needs to set about healing the divisions that are now so apparent. Civil society organisations exist to bring people together and have been in the forefront of deliberative democracy initiatives which have done so much to take the heat out of some of the most difficult and divisive issues. Just as in Ireland, voluntary bodies and pressure groups played a huge part in the discussions which led up to historic votes on divorce and equal marriage, so across the UK it is community and voluntary organisations that can engage with the difficult decisions facing our country – decisions about where houses should be built, and how hospitals should be managed, and how the economy should be supported. Perhaps most importantly it is civil society that can help us prepare better for the next emergency, and the next crisis. Covid has displayed our frailty and lack of resilience. In the face of climate chaos, terrorism, cyber attack or indeed another pathogen, we need to be stronger and more ready for challenge.

Second, our arts, cultural and heritage organisations must redouble their existing efforts to instil a sense of pride in place, both locally and nationally. The condition of our public places, the way we tell our national stories, the ways in which we see ourselves, are all profoundly shaped by civil society in its role as connector of people, teller of stories, celebrator of place, builder of bridges. A country's sense of self is not formed by political speeches. The ›politics‹ lies in the hard work of communities, in towns and cities, as people work together to shape their own story that really instils pride and confidence. Local civic trusts, neighbourhood festivals, local choirs and bands can, alongside national institutions, weave an inclusive narrative about a country powered by its citizens, willing to embrace difference and proud of its potential. But without active and engaged civil society, that narrative would be very arid indeed.

And third, the fight for high standards must continue – indeed, without the umbrella of EU-wide regulations, it is more important than ever to hold the government to its promise to maintain and strengthen those standards which protect us at home, in the workplace or in society as a whole. Just as we fought for labour, environmental and consumer rights, now we need to argue for high standards in digital governance, in public health, in the nature of care and support and in the frameworks of public and political life.

Re-energised civil society brings passion and energy to each of these projects. It enables people to connect and to share, to imagine together and to work with intent and with courage towards a better, stronger society.

Brexit and its aftermath have posed enormous challenges for the UK, revealing that our social fabric had become dangerously threadbare. The Covid pandemic has also highlighted the growing gap between the haves and have-nots in our society. But shining a light on those gaps has also allowed civil society organisations to re-focus their efforts. To see more clearly where they can make a difference. In the next few years, they will be better placed to allow people to genuinely take back control of their lives. And to do any of this we need strong,

durable relationships with civil society organisations across Europe. We have so much to learn from each other.

Author

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