

Asking the right questions about charities

Published: January 13, 2026, 3:19 am

I'm in favour of charities.

I think charities do an essential job in civil society of drawing attention to unmet need that signals change required in government policy.

I also think well run charities can innovate ways of meeting that need.

But it is only in the most exceptional of cases (and the RNLI is an anachronism that partly proves the exception) can a charity or charities actually address a need by themselves.

In my opinion this is likely to be the case for a long time to come. We have a society that is good at creating need. I stress the word need here - which is quite different from want. Need is for those things we must have to exist in society - [an issue I explore in some depth in The Courageous State](#). Whilst business continues to underpay many, overpay a few, fail to invest, does not create enough jobs and does not create enough of the goods and services that meet need whilst instead focussing on those that fuel want we will continue to require charity.

I think charity has to draw attention to those weaknesses in our society that create need. That is, and always has been its primary purpose.

It is impossible for charity to meet all those needs - most especially when it is dependent upon gifts of those dependent upon maintaining the status quo to do its work.

It is precisely because that stranglehold of dependency on wealth in the charity sector has to be broken that I support tax relief for charity.

But let's never pretend - as I heard it said last night - that charity spends money more effectively than government. It doesn't. It's subject to all the same vanities, human errors, prejudices, procedural constraints and sheer frustrations as government and business. And it is only by continually reminding itself that it exists to challenge the

orthodoxy of society that creates the need for its services that a charity can retain any of the edge that is needed to justify its existence. And when most charity is needed to address the issues arising from the inappropriate distribution of wealth, income, power and influence in society then to argue, as I also heard last night, that charity must work with and support the request of those who hold that power is just wrong in my opinion.

Charities have to be unreasonable using George Bernard Shaw's definition. He said (and I know the language is outdatedly sexist but I quote him in the context of his time):

The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.

Unfortunately I did not hear that sentiment from the Give it Back George campaign to retain tax relief for the wealthiest on all the gifts they make to charity. And that is exactly what is wrong with their campaign and why [my alternative approach](#) to tax relief for charities - that assumes all donors are equal, and treats them as such is so much more in accordance with the principles of charity.