

Charities and culture wars

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I am a big fan of the work of a charity specialist named Andrew Purkis. His [blog is here](#). I share his opinion that far from this government de-politicising the work of charities they are intensely politicising it, but in a way that is oppressive to the charitable work that most charities exist to promote. This [post was published by Andrew yesterday](#), and I share it with his permission:

The Chair of the Charity Commission for England and Wales, Baroness Tina Stowell, has told the Mail on Sunday that “Now would be the worst possible moment to jeopardise that [public] goodwill by getting drawn into the culture wars, on any side”. A little history might be helpful.

Many charitable purposes (as we now define them) have led charities to launch culture wars, in the sense of seeking to change the culture of society in ways that are contentious. Other charities have sought to defend society’s culture from what they see as malign influences that threaten their objects.

For example, the great campaigns against slavery had to change the cultural assumption that it was normal and acceptable to trade and own black human beings as if they were chattels without any rights or dignity. The RSPCA, founded by William Wilberforce among others, was attacking a cultural assumption that it was morally acceptable to treat animals in any way anyone wanted, torture included. The RSPB was challenging a cultural assumption that it was acceptable to devastate bird populations in order to garner feathers for posh hats. The NSPCC, supported by Barnardos and The Children’s Society and others, had to surmount the entrenched cultural assumption that parents must have completely untrammelled rights to do whatever they wanted to their children, and to advocate for a culture of child rights.

And does it really need to be said that those trying to promote the human rights, education and health of women had to challenge restrictive cultural assumptions about the roles of men and women in society? Ditto gay people? Ditto people from religious faiths, or ethnic backgrounds, that traditionally suffered discrimination as inferior? Yes,

the people rallying to these charitable causes were cultural warriors, if we must use that metaphor.

Meanwhile, on the defensive front of culture wars, the Mothers' Union in its prime, with half a million members in the early twentieth century, interpreted its traditional understanding of its religious and moral purposes to involve root and branch lobbying and campaigning to save the country from the secularisation of education, the relaxation of divorce laws, and the ideas about birth control being promoted by Marie Stopes.

Indeed, it is strange to suggest that the enormous number of organisations for the advancement of religion should have no comment to make on cultural norms and assumptions. Is the great Catholic Social Teaching something that should have been suppressed? Are not religions bound to try to influence culture in the light of their beliefs, or set up alternative and better cultures of their own? Doesn't the old hymn go "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to (a culture) war?"

Now think of all the charities trying to protect our environment. This is certainly not a purely practical or uncontentious matter. Deep seated cultural assumptions about behaviour and use of resources are engaged. If we must use the military metaphor, we are in a culture war to the death against norms of profligacy, waste, untrammelled greed and disregard for future generations.

Or listen to the voices of disabled people. Their charities are struggling against cultural norms which exclude them time and again. They will never gain effective rights and flourish fully without changing those norms.

And here's the thing. In many of these culture wars, being neutral is not an option. To pretend to have no view on whether the planet is warming is in fact to take a side. To carry on as if the Black Lives Matter challenge is nothing to do with me is similarly to take a side. To have no view on whether women, or disabled people, or gay people, should have equal rights is to take a side. To educate the public about National Trust properties without mentioning that some of the money came from the slave trade is to collude with the side that wants to downplay the fact of slavery as a foundation of significant parts of our society's wealth and heritage.

The Charity Commission tells us that charities should have values, should think about them carefully and live them out. But since they operate freely as part of society, not in some sealed off special world, in many cases their charitable objects, and their values, will carry them into taking sides, and into influencing, changing or defending the cultural norms and assumptions of society that have such a vast impact on their beneficiaries and the values they stand for.

The idea that charities should avoid culture wars reflects a pitiful stereotype that they are all uncontentious, bringing everyone together in a warm spirit

of goodwill, regardless of differing opinions about what is right, good and acceptable. That stereotype is unhistorical, unrealistic, and very far removed from the level of understanding of our sector that any Board member of the Charity Commission should have.