

## **Why we do what we do: the democratic role of the sector in society.**

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### ***Background***

The role and future of the community services sector is being canvassed in many quarters. There are national and international debates and trends as well as local or jurisdictional initiatives. However the Victorian sector has had only an ad hoc or passing engagement with these processes and has rarely been able to bring adequate and focussed resources to bear on the issue.

Earlier this year the VCOSS Peaks & Statewide Networks Forum established the Community Sector Futures Task Group (CSFTG). This Task Group is charged with enabling the sector to establish its own agenda and aims regarding its future directions, role and sustainability, separate to any government or other initiatives that might be occurring in this area. While many of our aims and aspirations might align with others, there will be other areas where this is not the case.

A key objective of the Task Group is to more broadly engage the sector in shaping its future – initially through raising awareness and providing opportunities to discuss the issues and then to develop longer term strategies and initiatives.

This paper is the second in a series of Occasional Papers the CSFTG will commission to enable this discussion.

The paper contends that a sustainable future for the sector is dependent on a clear understanding of the democratic role and value of the sector; that if this understanding is clearly held by the public (or community) and by governments, it provides the critical basis for negotiation on equal terms of the operational and systemic changes that are necessary for a strong and healthy sector.

The author sees the sector's advocacy role as a key part of achieving this wider awareness of the role and value of the sector to democratic society, and traces the erosion of this role under the Howard government, the prospects for the sector under the new Rudd government, and concluding that the sector must take responsibility for its own place in society rather than seeking legitimacy from governments.

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## **Celebrating the Sector's Advocacy Role**

We should celebrate the democratic role played by non-government social service organisations in Australia, because the sector has an important part to play in creating public awareness, shaping public opinion and providing a rich variety of alternative visions for our society. However, in pressured service delivery situations, where resources are short, clients' needs overwhelming and economic pressure intense, this democratic role can be easily forgotten. While service delivery is to be valued, it is the sector's advocacy role that should be cherished and nurtured as an irreplaceable contribution to creating a fairer, equitable and just society. It is the reason behind why the sector does what it does.

The wider non-government sector in Australia has experienced over a decade of concerted attacks on its advocacy role by the former Howard Government, and the social service sector has been severely impacted as part of these attacks. With the inauguration of the Rudd Labor Government, welcome undertakings have been given that social inclusion is on the agenda and agreements can be negotiated between the sector and the Federal Government. However, there is a likelihood these agreements will be linked to the economic/productivity value of the sector, not its social/democratic value. This paper will argue that a primary priority should be to continue strengthening the independent advocacy role of the sector.

There are a number of legacies of the Howard years to be overcome. Firstly, there are restrictive Federal Government mechanisms which must be removed. Secondly, there is a bureaucratic culture of disrespect in many Federal Government Departments which should be challenged, and thirdly, there is a need to create public awareness of the sector's important democratic advocacy role. The long-term status and role of the sector is dependant on this last change. In all its negotiations with governments, state and federal, the sector's hand will be strengthened if its democratic role is valued by the community.

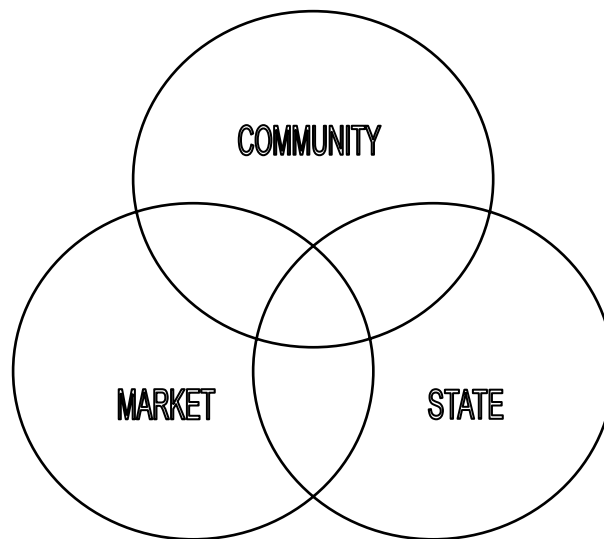
### **Definition of Non-government sector (NGOs).**

First, let us pause to be clear on terms. The large Australian social service sector is part of the wider non-government sector. This non-government sector in Australia is variously described as the nonprofit or not-for-profit sector, the community sector, the third sector, the voluntary sector, civil society and also associations. The various terms are not strictly descriptive or representative of different criteria, but tend to reflect usage by different parts of the non-government sector. I will use the term NGOs to refer to this wider grouping. In doing so, I am particularly interested in those groups which include advocacy on the nature of our society - social service organisations and social movements such as environment, international development, consumers, and women's affairs. Many of these are social movements whose modern form arose in the 1960-70s (Marsh 2002) but the social service sector has much in common with these groups and joins with them in many coalitions. This paper will use the term 'the sector' or 'social service

sector' to refer to the membership of ACOSS/VCOSS family of organisations, and NGOs or NGO sector to describe the wider grouping. The paper also primarily focuses on the broader national picture. However, many of the trends described have parallels in state governments and the principles of the democratic value of the sector are universal.

### **The role of NGOs in a democracy.**

The NGO sector is the engine of ideas in our society. It provides the vision, the diversity and alternative possibilities of the sort of society which we might become. Social scientists often divide society into three components – the state, the market and the community.



On this analysis, the NGO sector is the equivalent of the 'community'. If we think about the role each of the three parts play in articulating visions of the future, we can see that Governments are captives of the electoral cycle and find it hard to look past the next election. The market, or corporate sector, (despite corporate social responsibility) still looks to the bottom line of their economic performance. That leaves the community or NGO sector to provide the vision and be the 'engine of ideas'.

Within the NGO sector, it is the social service sector which has the responsibility to articulate the arguments for a fairer, equitable and just society. The sector has vital information from service delivery and work at the front line of social disadvantage, as well as significant research capabilities. This invaluable research material, including real life stories, can inform and enrich advocacy and the development of alternative possibilities. The sector is fortunate to have the support of many academics, but it is the sector itself which must take the lead in advocacy, because its links to community give it the appropriate mandate and responsibility. Fortunately, there seems to be increasing convergence of interest and support within the NGO sector. For example, in October 2007, the Australian Conservation Foundation, Australian Council of Social Services and CHOICE (the Australian Consumers

Association) released a joint media release on climate change and energy efficiency, including support for low-income households. Such cooperation is to be encouraged. However, the other parts of the NGO sector still rely on the social service sector to play its part in being the primary voice to promote equity, and justice in our society. Service delivery should inform and enhance this role, not subsume or overwhelm it.

As well as reflecting back to us visions of the sort of society we might become, the NGO sector is also a dynamic, ever-changing creature. One of its strengths is its ability to adapt quickly and create new organisations to meet needs. For example, the various asylum seeker and refugee groups which sprung up following the Tampa affair reflected urgent need for both support and advocacy perceived by the individuals who took action. The NGO sector also encompasses an enormous range of views on society itself, on what changes are important, and how to go about advocating. Diversity of views is a strength in a democracy, if there are mechanisms for debate. The vitality and richness of the NGO sector is a reflection of the vitality and richness of ideas and people in our society. From a democratic point of view, it is good to hear these different voices. As an advocate, it is often an advantage to have others expressing a more radical or more conservative view – it can only make one's position easier to justify! Admittedly, it can be challenging when negotiating, but having people out on the edges, pushing the envelope, all the time questioning the status quo is good for democracy. Diversity of ideas should be welcomed, not stifled.

### **The Howard Government and the NGO Sector**

The Howard Government tried to change our ideas of how NGOs fitted into the Australian democracy. Prior to 1996, there was more of a consensus that we had a public sphere – the media, public inquiries, public forums of all sorts – in which contested ideas were debated by all stakeholders. This included the corporate sector, community representatives and political parties. It was not always an equally contested public arena, but there was consensus that freedom of speech and of assembly on the part of NGOs trying to promote ideas and influence policy was a legitimate part of our democracy.

For example, in 1991, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs (HORSCCA) commenting on NGOs said,

An integral part of the consultative and lobbying role of these organisations is to disagree with government policy where this is necessary in order to represent the interests of their constituencies' (HORSCCA 1991) p 16-17.

The public sphere has been seen as important for influencing public policy by changing the understanding of state officials, by creating cultural change and by the force of good argumentation (Dryzek 2000). Ideally, the public sphere should also be a place for vision, for ideas and for the contestation of values as participants debate how they envisage their society functioning. Participation in public affairs has also been claimed to educate us in

democracy, create a sense of community and facilitate the acceptance of decisions. 'The importance of the public sphere lies in its potential as a mode of societal integration' (Calhoun 1992) p. 6. While the public sphere may be separate from the state, it is clearly geared towards the state, its policies and its actions.

However, the Howard government tried to change this view of democracy and to discourage public advocacy by a variety of government mechanisms. It has been documented elsewhere how this represented a reflection of a theory of democracy called public choice theory (Staples 2006). NGOs were commended if they did good works, such as revegetation of degraded areas and offering shelter to the homeless, but were criticised if they attempted to comment on public policy. The theory appeared in the language of the Prime Minister and his Ministers, with 'special interest groups', 'elites' and 'accountability' being some of the markers of this view of democracy. It also appeared in the recommendations coming from the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), the conservative think tank, which since 1998 has been conducting what it calls its 'NGO Project' (Johns 2005), criticising the advocacy of NGOs.

Public choice theory was developed by economists, and is a way of looking at the world that reduces human motivation to self interest. It claims interest groups and NGOs are predatory, and interfere with the market by trying to obtain benefit for their members that stifle economic growth (Marsh 2002). It denies the existence of altruism in the behaviour of NGOs and it ignores the rich variety of theories in the disciplines of sociology and psychology, which seek to explain human motivation and behaviour in a more holistic manner, inclusive of our social, intellectual, sexual and spiritual needs. It describes interest groups and NGOs making demands on the economy when they advocate for preservation of forests or increased assistance to the disadvantaged. Because the sum of the requests is greater than the economy, the groups are said to be 'unaccountable' with only elected representatives being 'accountable'. It is a very narrow view of democracy in which NGOs are not seen as legitimate players. It therefore seeks to limit the advocacy role of NGOs and rejects the view of a public sphere in which contested ideas are debated to formulate public policy.

This is what we saw under the eleven years of the Howard Government which year by year introduced mechanisms to restrict public advocacy of NGOs. De-funding is only one mechanism that tried to stifle advocacy, although it received the most publicity. The NGO sector experienced funding cuts from the moment the Howard government was elected, and those affected represented some of the poorest and most disempowered Australians (Sawer 2002). By 2002, 50 per cent of peak groups within the social-services area had lost significant amounts of funding and 20 per cent had lost funding altogether, largely because of their public advocacy (Melville 2003). Every year of the Howard Government, this process continued across all parts of the NGO sector.

Forced amalgamations were used to silence alternative views, and purchaser-provider contracts ensured that NGOs delivered services

according to the Government's agenda, rather than their own. By far the most insidious mechanism used has been confidentiality clauses, also known as 'reputation management clauses'. These appeared almost universally in funding contracts and forbade organisations from commenting publicly without the approval of the minister or the department. They are effective, efficient silencing mechanisms, which NGOs must insist the new Rudd Government abolish from government practice.

Organisations which tried to work without government funding, or to increase their proportion of private funding, found themselves losing long-held tax-deductibility status if they undertook public advocacy. From 2003, the Howard Government pursued various paths to this end. First, they drafted the Charities Bill 2003, which was dropped just prior to the 2004 election after a concerted campaign, particularly from the churches. However, in 2005, two Australian Tax Office Rulings relating to public advocacy and tax-deductibility status were successfully implemented. These were amended to be less draconian, but still affected many NGOs' ability to offer tax deductibility to donors. More recently an individual tax ruling against a small NGO, AID/WATCH, appears to have widened the definitions NGOs thought had been established by the 2005 ATO rulings. Currently, the case is yet to appear before the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, but if the ATO were to be successful, the interpretation could affect much of the NGO sector's ability to offer tax deductibility. It will be interesting to see the result, given the change of government. In 2006, the Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Electoral Integrity and Other Measures) Act introduced disclosure requirements for NGOs which cover material that arguably has no relationship to politics or elections, but require NGOs to report to the government on aspects of their activities. A further Bill in 2007, using the Trade Practices legislation lapsed with the Federal election, but it would have made individuals and organisations liable for economic loss if they called for consumer boycotts. It was aimed at animal welfare activists, but had significant implications for free speech for us all.

Since 1999, in parallel with the government's efforts, the Institute of Public Affairs has been conducting a strong public campaign to undermine NGO legitimacy. The pervasiveness of their material against NGOs in the general media is significant. The combination of the language of Mr Howard and his ministers, plus the many mechanisms to limit advocacy and the considerable public rhetoric from associates of the Institute of Public Affairs add up to a negative view of the NGO sector. The drip, drip of this world view can seep into the consciousness of a nation.

### **Federal Labor and the NGO Sector**

In November, 2006, the Office of the then Leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley, invited non-government leaders to Parliament House to a meeting given the title, Federal Labor's Community Sector Forum. The meeting was to launch a statement, 'Strong Communities Partnership'. In his speech to the Forum, Beazley specifically addressed the interests of the non-government sector, announcing Labor would:

- Guarantee consultation on all policy issues that affect the community sector;
- Establish funding principles to ensure the community sector is sustainable and achieves results;
- Build capacity within the sector so it can provide sustainable, quality services;
- Ensure uniformity of dealings and principles across government departments;
- Recognise the diversity of the community sector's structure and function; and
- Cultivate and support the important advocacy role played by the community sector (Beazley 2006).

The final dot point marked a significant distinction between the major parties' approach to the NGO sector and was a commitment which needed to be welcomed fulsomely by them (Beazley 2006). However, even as the speech was delivered there were rumblings within Labor about the Beazley leadership. Less than two weeks later, on 4 December, Kevin Rudd took over as Opposition leader and Federal Labor's Community Sector Forum and its Strong Communities Partnership slipped from view as the new leadership team of Rudd and Gillard established their positions within the Party and the electorate.

Prior to the election, Julia Gillard's full title was Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Shadow Minister for Employment and Industrial Relations and Shadow Minister for Social Inclusion. There was very little media focus on her third responsibility of social inclusion, a ministry new to our Parliament, which potentially is of significance for social services organisations. It took six months during early 2007 before clues emerged as to how the new team might view NGOs. Gillard's first speech in that capacity in April 2007 was short on detail of new Labor initiatives. It did identify measures of social exclusion using Tony Vinson's *Dropping off the Edge* report, but widened the definition of social exclusion to include those families who 'are living the Australian dream of buying their own home but feel pressured economically, socially and personally' (Gillard 2007a). The latter description might sound a bit like 'Howard's battlers' and some elements of the speech seemed to be addressing that constituency.

It was Gillard's speech to the Sydney Institute in July which announced some new initiatives relevant to social service organisations. Labor would appoint a new advisory Social Inclusion Board, similar to a ten member South Australian model. There would be a coordinating office for social inclusion in the Prime Minister's Department, and Labor would direct the Productivity Commission to develop 'a new tool to measure the contribution of third-sector organisations to our economy'. She also foreshadowed having Canberra public servants 'do stints with service providers in socially excluded communities', and referred to entering into 'partnerships' with 'state and local governments, the private sector and the community sector', linking this with developments in the UK and Canada (Gillard 2007b). The proposals were a

welcome reawakening of interest by a major political party in the social service area and must be appropriately acknowledged as such.

Gillard reiterated the same message two days before the Federal election at the 2007 ACOSS Annual Conference. In this speech setting out Labor's social inclusion agenda, she acknowledged for the first time the suppression of public advocacy under the Howard Government. After noting the sector's concern about 'depressing and punitive policy' under Howard in relation to dental health, housing, the Job Network, breaching rules and education, she said, 'closer to home for some of you – the gagging of advocacy functions which give your communities a voice' (Gillard 2007c). It was the briefest of references and no commitments were given at that stage.

Importantly, Gillard's choice of words and the general tenor of the speeches are worth noting, as they give an indication of the theoretical framework that will be driving the new Labor Government in its relationship with NGOs, and, in particular, with the social service sector. The thrust of all three speeches is to justify the importance of the sector for its economic-productivity value, rather than its social or democratic value. 'The old days of passive welfare are gone' (Gillard 2007b). The emphasis is on 'investment' in 'human capital', on 'building social inclusion through hard economics', on 'raising national prosperity', and on 'investment' from which a return will be expected. Non-government organisations are also described as the 'social economy' – a term foreign to Australia. It refers to the European Union name for the sector, *l'economie sociale*, but one can only assume that its use by Gillard was intended to reinforce the economic message.

There would seem to be a clear message that from Labor's point of view the worth of the sector is measured in relation to its economic-productivity, rather than its democratic-social value. If the NGO sector, and particularly the social services sector, wish to change this emphasis, they may have much work to do using their lobbying skills to persuade the public and the new Labor government of their important social and democratic role.

In December 2007, when announcing his new team, Prime Minister Rudd continued Julia Gillard's role as Minister for Social Inclusion. However, she will have the support of a Parliamentary Secretary, Senator Ursula Stephens, who is responsible for Social Inclusion and the Voluntary Sector. Senator Stephens will also be answerable to the Prime Minister as the coordinating office for social inclusion is situated in the Prime Minister's Department. The Senator has great expectations riding on her shoulders from the NGO sector. Apart from significant social service policy issues, there are a number of restrictive legacies of the Howard years to be overcome. Firstly, there are the government silencing mechanisms described earlier which should be removed. Secondly, there is a bureaucratic culture of disrespect in many Federal Government Departments which must go, thirdly, there is a need for regulatory reform of the NGO sector which has been identified in a number of inquiries and finally there is a need to create public awareness of the sector's important democratic advocacy role. The long-term status and role of the sector is dependant on this last change.

On the day of her appointment, Senator Stephens published a statement in the newsletter of Probono Australia, in which she said,

In order for the community and third sector to be effective, we need to restore the right to advocate to the centre of the relationship between the sector and government. The breakdown of the relationship between the community sector and government diminished Australia's democracy and also undermined our capacity to effectively combat disadvantage. We will restore the sector's independence and right to advocate and participate actively in public debate. To this end, Labor will examine contracts between Not for Profit service providers and government with a view to removing clauses that constrain this advocacy role (Stephens 2007).

This is the strongest statement to date that the Federal Labor Government recognises the problem they have inherited from the Howard Government in relation to restrictions on NGO advocacy. It is a most welcome undertaking and Senator Stephens is to be commended on the strength and speed with which she set out her agenda. However, given the thrust of Labor Party language about the economic value of the sector, Senator Stephens is going to need the sector itself to bring about a fundamental shift in understanding in the Labor Party and the general public. It is a change in which the sector itself must play an active role by articulating a positive model of democracy. In all its negotiations with governments, state and federal, the sector's hand will be strengthened if its democratic role is valued by the community.

### **Is the National NGO Sector able to Respond?**

Overcoming the pervasiveness of public choice theory and instilling alternative democratic values in relation to the role of the sector will not come easily. The formation of a National Roundtable of Nonprofit Organisations in 2004 has seen that organisation make important representations on the Australian Tax Office draft rulings mentioned earlier and on the Electoral and Referendum Amendment Act of last year. However, this has been defensive action. The Roundtable's main proactive focus has been on the need for reform of the regulatory regime affecting the sector – a necessary project, but not one which was to be undertaken with an unsympathetic government, for whom 'reform' might have been a signal for tighter restrictions. The other national organisation, the Australian Collaboration, is made up of six key advocacy groupings in the sector – environment, social services, international development, consumers, ethnic communities, churches and youth. However, it is primarily a think tank promoting a vision of Australia relevant to its constituent members. On its website under, 'Democracy Watch', it has drawn attention to restrictions on advocacy by government, but the Collaboration itself is not proactive as an advocacy grouping of the sector. Two meetings of a National Civil Society Dialogue in 2006 and 2007 sponsored by the Australian Council of Trade Unions, Australian Conservation Foundation, Australian Council of Social Services and the National Council of Churches, brought together a wide cross section of groups from many parts of the

sector, as well as trade unions. The need for a sector consciousness was recognised and important links developed, but no clear agenda has yet emerged.

### **Partnerships between Government and the NGO sector**

Victoria has been playing an important leadership role with the work of its Community Sector Futures Task Group putting energy into forward thinking about directions for the sector. The Group has demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the democratic role of the sector. Important work has also been done in Victoria with the report of the Government's Stronger Community Organisations Project. However, caution needs to be exercised to protect the democratic role of the sector as negotiations take place with government.

Nationally, and in Victoria, there have been proposals for a 'partnership', 'accord' or 'compact' between government and the sector. The UK and Canadian models have been a motivating force (Barraket 2006). Julia Gillard, as Shadow Minister for Social Inclusion, seemed open to the idea with a reference to developing 'partnerships', and to the UK and Canada. 'Partnerships' and 'collaborations' with government and the corporate sector have been promoted throughout the sector for some time (Wagner & Mlcek 2005). Already a number of state governments have whole of government 'partnership' agreements in place to regulate relationships – specifically in South Australia, and the ACT, while in Tasmania, NSW and the Northern Territory negotiations have been taking place (Casey & Dalton 2005). In Victoria, the issue is now on the table. However, the outcomes of state government agreements have not been entirely satisfactory to date (Barraket 2006).

The UK national Compact was formalised in 1998 and seeks to give a framework for how the relationship will work, including factors such as the government consulting early on policy, and agreeing to fund the full cost of public services delivered by the community sector. In operational terms, its impact is generally judged to be limited to date (Barraket 2006). In 2002, a Treasury review deemed it to have been poorly implemented, limited in scope, and there was a lack of awareness across voluntary and government agencies about its functions (HM-Treasury 2002). Other limitations of the Compact are the length and complication of the document (so that it is inaccessible to both public servants and community groups), evidence of poor practice on both sides, particularly in relation to full funding of services, and a lack of mechanisms to reward good practice or penalize non-compliance (Active-Community-Directorate 2005; Ball 2006). Some of the difficulties are compounded by local and regional initiatives throughout the UK, so that local government and local authorities also have relationships with the community sector (Barraket 2006) – a situation also found in the Australian federal system.

In Canada, where their Accord was finalised in 2001, an important feature was the inclusion of the sector in early stages of policy development.

However, here also significant limitations have been identified (Ball 2006; Barraket 2006) and Gillard refers to it being dismantled by the current conservative Canadian government (Gillard 2007b). In Ireland, where a corporatist approach has been operating to develop 'partnerships' with the community sector for a decade, it is claimed that the autonomy and independence of the sector has been grievously undermined and partnerships have seen organisations controlled and constrained by the state, so that they have difficulty representing the interests they claim to represent (Mead 2005).

There may be some value to the sector in a compact or accord helping to bring about cultural change in the bureaucracy, and Barraket gives some guidance with criteria to mitigate against some of the negatives of a partnership with government (Barraket 2006). However, a primary requirement would seem to be the clear articulation of the independence of the sector and its right to criticise policy actively and publicly without retribution. Such an agreement should not be undertaken in order to achieve democratic legitimacy. That legitimacy should flow from the model of democracy practised, not as something that is bestowed by government. It should be remembered that agreements can be undermined or repudiated with changes of government, as the Canadian situation may indicate.

Colin Ball, the former Director of the Commonwealth Foundation, has published a detailed analysis of partnerships between the government and the social services sector in the UK, Canada, New Zealand and the US for the Australian National Roundtable of Nonprofit Organisations (Ball 2006). (The Commonwealth Foundation, based in London, was set up by governments of the Commonwealth to support the work of NGOs.) Ball's advice to Australian NGOs is 'do not to get too close to government too quickly, if at all'. He goes on to say, 'Canada and the UK started off independently but then got into bed with government at an early stage after their Commissions had reported.' He notes that in New Zealand, the government initiated the whole process. He recommends giving primacy to the big picture first and ensuring that the nonprofit principles and values of the sector are well established with the general public and the government before embarking on negotiations.

So, rather than placing primacy on the need for a partnership agreement with government, the sector's key concern needs to be how to lift its importance with the public, and hence then with government. Overcoming a decade of public choice theory, the repression of advocacy and a culture undermining the legitimacy of NGOs will not be achieved by partnering with a Federal Government whose main interest is in the sector's productivity/economic value. The situation in relation to state governments, including Victoria, has many parallels to the Federal situation and caution also needs to be exercised there. In Victoria, the careful approach of the Community Sector Futures Task Group in exploring these issues is to be commended.

Within the NGO sector, there may be lessons to be learnt about organising for effective advocacy. One feature of the NGO sector is that some are organised into peak groups. A peak can provide advantages such as clarity

of voice, pooling of resources, and supply of professionalism to small groups. However, it should also be remembered that one of the disadvantages of peak groups is that they often end up with the lowest common denominator in terms of an advocacy position. Governments like to negotiate with only one body and are not sorry to see demands softened. It is interesting to look at the different ways the NGO sector has organised itself in regards to this. The Australian Council for International Development and the Australian Council for Social Services have chosen to go down the path of a peak group for international development agencies and social service organisations, respectively. In contrast, the environment movement has chosen not to take that path nationally. While there are state conservation councils which are peak groups, nationally the many environment groups work autonomously. However, they come together informally under the title of the Mittagong Forum to discuss tactics, improve skills and exchange information. Here individual environment groups liaise on issues and tactics. Interestingly, the Mittagong Forum is not an organisation for issuing media releases. It is primarily a strategy group in the broadest sense. Focus of advocacy can be divvied up and sometimes groups choose deliberately to take slightly different positions for strategic reasons. The social service sector might consider some of the advantages of the Mittagong Forum, particularly in relation to advocacy, and whether such a strategy could be incorporated in some way into their peak structures.

## **Conclusion**

The NGO sector, including the social service part of it, has experienced attacks on its legitimacy over the past decade, particularly from the policies of the Howard Government. The loss of legitimacy has flowed through to its relationships with state governments. The Rudd Labor Federal Government, needs to be influenced to recognise the democratic contribution played by the whole sector, including social service organisations. The new Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion has made an important preliminary statement on her policy towards the sector. However, it will be up to the sector itself to bring about a fundamental change in understanding of the sector's role. That change is best consolidated by ensuring community understanding of the principles and values of the sector and its democratic role. Only such a change can strengthen the hand of the new Parliamentary Secretary and consolidate the status of the sector in its negotiating.

The sector cannot ask any government to give it legitimacy. That legitimacy only comes from a model of democracy in which NGOs contribute to a vigorous public sphere, in which there is a contestation of ideas and reasoned argument, and where NGOs and the social service sector are valued for their social and democratic contribution. NGOs do not need to deviate from their core purposes to achieve this end, but they should be looking for opportunities to re-engage in the public sphere, and in so doing, when appropriate, to note the democratic role they play. Raising the value of the sector in the eyes of the public will strengthen its hand in any negotiations with government. It must always be remembered that governments will change and new governments will not continue the initiatives of their

predecessors. Only by re-instituting the sector in the mind of the public as a key democratic player will a bulwark be constructed against the vagaries of changes of government and any future attempts to undermine its important role in our society.

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