

## **In Search of a Community and Voluntary Sector that Champions the Value of Equality**

### **Presentation by Niall Crowley to The Wheel's Annual Conference May 2015**

Inequality is one of the big overarching issues of our time. It is up there with climate change and environmental sustainability. Inequality was a causal factor for the economic crisis. Inequality has been exacerbated by the Government's response to crisis. Inequality provides the focus for much of the work of the community and voluntary sector. We are there to pick up the pieces, to plug the gaps from a system that is deepening inequality.

The conference asks the question whether the community and voluntary sector is there to advocate or to provide services. I am not sure that this is the right question. We are there to advocate *and* to provide services, *and* to do a bit more. The bit more is key. It starts with values.

Values are those ideals and beliefs that we hold to be important. They guide our attitudes, choices and behaviours. Shared values shape the purpose, policies, programmes and practices of the organisations we are involved in. If we are concerned about inequality we need to be explicit about *valuing* equality.

In valuing equality we should be ambitious. This is not about some illusory opportunities. It is about new outcomes for people who experience the disadvantage of inequality.

In valuing equality we should be thorough. This is about interlinked objectives that relate to the economic, political, cultural and affective domains. Equality seeks a redistribution of resources including wealth, income, jobs and public goods such as education, accommodation, and health. It seeks a redistribution of power and influence and is concerned with who is making the decisions and who gets to have a say. It demands a recognition of diversity and difference and is concerned about access to status and standing for all groups. Finally, it is concerned with access to relationships of love, care and solidarity for people from all groups and an end to physical and verbal abuse, isolation, being patronized and being mistrusted.

In valuing equality we should be comprehensive. This is about socio-economic status. It is also about identity and the experience and situation of women, lesbian, gay and bisexual people, Black and minority ethnic people including Travellers, people with disabilities, older people and young people, trans people, lone parents, people from minority religions, and carers.

If we are serious about inequality one core role for the community and voluntary sector is to champion the value of equality. This has never been more urgent in a context of growing destructive inequality and in a time when political leadership, the administrative apparatus, and even popular demands reflect no valuing of equality.

When we value equality it is evident in our communication work. What values do we express in our search for funds, our struggle to convince the power holders, and our defense of communities? All too rarely do we express the value of equality. All too often we appeal to the values of the dominant groups or we call up values that will resonate with those who hold resources. Whose values do we express? It can be the values of the funders that leave us with little room for manoeuvre, the values of the dominant group we seek to convince, or the new managerial values freshly inculcated into the sector. Equality is not a major focus in our campaigning work.

When we value equality it is evident in service provision and advocacy. It finds expression in the objectives we set and in how we deploy our resources. We aim to enhance the resources available to the groups we are working with, the influence that they can exercise, the status and standing for the diversity of these groups, and the relationships of love, care and solidarity they have access to. Impact is not about sustaining inequality but seeking to challenge inequality and to secure change for a more equal society.

When we value equality it is evident in our internal practices. It is hard to be convincing about valuing equality where we see of Board of business people and not people with disability using the service who are setting the agenda. It is hard to be convincing about valuing equality when we are determined to treat everyone the same rather than accommodate and celebrate difference: when we work with people with disability rather than recognise women and men with

disability, LGBT people with disability, or Travellers with a disability. It is hard to be convincing about inequality when our accountability is structured towards our funders, the funding public or some Board of business people rather than to the people with disabilities to whom the organisation is providing services.

It is not easy to champion equality in the current context. Funders demand an ever closer alignment with *their* purpose and values. New funding mechanism based on competitive tendering trigger an opposing set of values. Funding requirements emphasise a more managerial set of values.

Boards are selected to meet the needs of funders and to reassure the funding public. Boards drawn from the private sector, an increasing feature in the private-sectorisation of the community and voluntary sector, can hold very different value sets. Our own need for survival in an increasingly hostile context can crowd out our attempts to give value to equality.

The private-sectorisation of the community and voluntary sector, and the resultant corporatisation of the sector, promotes a managerial approach. Values of efficiency, effectiveness, outputs, and value-for-money are emphasised over anything as intangible as equality.

The question is posed as to whether charities can champion equality? If we are identifying ourselves as charities for tax exemption purposes and to meet the demands of the charity regulator we might still have a choice. If we seek to value 'charity' it is unlikely that we can convincingly champion equality as a value.

Charity is in tension with equality. When it comes to power and influence, charity turns people into supplicants rather than rights holders. When it comes to status and standing, charity turns people into a target group and their difference becomes the badge of a worthy cause. When it comes to resources, people never get to escape the grip of charity. When it comes to relationships of love, care and solidarity, charity compromises dignity with its demand that people be grateful.

When we value equality we value redistribution and social justice, participation and democracy, difference and diversity, and dignity and caring. As a society we tended to value fairness and tolerance. Fairness involves charitable notions of

everyone having some minimum but, after that, all that is available is a fair competition for advantage. Tolerance involves charitable notions of putting up with difference but can sit all too easily with contempt for difference. Fairness and tolerance coexist with and even justify inequality.

Maybe, however, we are at a moment of change as the marriage equality referendum looms. The value of equality is for once at the heart of a national debate. The Yes side has chosen to fight the referendum on the ground of equality. The No side is in contortions to implausibly argue that it is not against equality. This might provide fertile ground for the community and voluntary sector to emerge as the long term champion for the value of equality.

If the sector does not do so it will inevitably be involved in the management of inequality rather than imagining, working for and achieving a more equal society. If the sector does not do so then rather than protecting and fulfilling human rights, it will merely imprison people with its good works.

Thank you