

Democracy in Australia – Civil society and public advocacy

There is no single widely accepted term to describe the myriad of community organisations and their roles in established democracies. They are at times referred to as belonging to Civil Society or The Third Sector, or as Non-Government Organisations (a description used internationally for the major public advocacy bodies), Non-profit or Not-for-profit Organisations or sometimes Community Organisations. All such descriptions recognise that organisations that are “not for profit”, and operate to promote the public good belong to a third civil society sector separate from the government and business sectors.

Within the sector there are many different types of organisations. There are bodies that promote particular causes. Australian examples are the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) and the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS). There are service organisations that provide welfare support for particular classes of people in Australia and overseas. Examples are the Brotherhood of St Laurence, the Salvation Army and Oxfam; there are also very many smaller service organisations operating at the local level. Some of these bodies defy neat classification since they both provide services and speak out on behalf of their constituencies. Finally, there is a very large number of clubs and associations that provide forums for and help and support the interests of their members.

In this paper, the overall sector is referred to as civil society and organisations that are involved with public advocacy for different social or environmental causes are referred to as advocacy NGOs. The use of these terms accords best with international usage.

No one could seriously question the significance of these different contributions made by civil society organisations to Australian society.

Public commentary and advocacy

Public advocacy makes a key contribution to public policy, democratic practice and more effective governance. When the term advocacy is employed here it refers to public advocacy used to help achieve societal and environmental benefits not to advocacy used to benefit individuals or associations acting to promote their own financial interests.

There are many roles played by civil society organisations seeking to make these public contributions. They help to disseminate information and to educate citizens. They help to broaden political agenda. They improve dialogue and strengthen communication. They help to keep a constant focus on best and relevant practice. They are essential intermediaries between citizens and their governments.

NGOS are also the harbingers of change, preparing the ground for future public policy. Although others, thinkers and scientists for example, may generate new theories and provide scientific or other evidence to back them up, it is largely civil society organisations that give them airing and currency and by those means help to get them incorporated into public policy.

The roles played by public advocacy bodies and the benefits they provide to Australian society are further discussed below.

Public advocacy as a way of participating in Australian democracy

Participation in Australia’s democracy means more than just voting at election times. The modern operation of democracy means that policy is developed and reviewed throughout the electoral term. As a consequence, an effective

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democracy needs to be, as Marian Sawer argues, both participatory and deliberative. By that she means, first, that there need to be mechanisms for citizens to participate in formal procedures such as inquiries and committee hearings, and informal mechanisms such as policy discussion in the media. Second, advocacy bodies can support the principle of deliberative democracy by helping to explain government policy proposals and their implications to concerned citizens. They can also show citizens simple ways of participating in public debates. On-line groups such as Get Up! have been particularly successful in this respect. Advocacy bodies have resources, often unavailable to individuals, to pick up these challenges on behalf of other citizens.

Very many more Australians participate in civil society organisations than belong to political parties; the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes in 2003 found that over 80% of Australians are members of at least one voluntary association. Sawer writes that the Internet campaigning organisation Get Up! has far more members than the combined members of all the registered political parties in Australia.

Public advocacy on behalf of marginalised groups

Advocacy bodies have a special role to play in representing marginalized groups in Australia. Sawer points out that they can focus the attention of governments on valid but “electorally unpopular” groups who may otherwise become the victims of wedge politics. An organisation representing these individuals can mobilize research and policy arguments in a way individuals cannot. An effective organisation can make sure, as Edgar says, that “marginalized people are not further marginalized by the inaccessibility of government”.

Public advocacy to prevent environmental degradation in Australia

Australia of all the developed countries is widely judged to be the most vulnerable to the environmental crisis facing the world. Australia’s environmental bodies have a critical role to play in ensuring that the scientists’ warnings reach a wide public and are fully understood and taken into account by decision-makers. The wholesale changes required to achieve a sustainable future require public advocacy skills of a very high order.

Public advocacy to focus attention on abuses of honest, transparent, accountable and effective government and the private sector

Honesty, transparency and accountability in government and business are only achieved by constant vigilance. It is citizen organisations that are devoted to the preservation of democratic practices that exert the pressure to alert the media and others to malpractice and injustice. It is especially civil society organisations such as the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, the Accountability Round Table, the Councils of Civil Liberties, in conjunction with university centres such as the Democratic Audit of Australia, that not only keep pressure on government to improve their democratic practices but also provide them with detailed and informed suggestions about effective ways to act.

Public advocacy to draw attention to international poverty and abuses of human rights and to environmental degradation worldwide

The Australian Council for International Development and the international aid agencies that fall under its umbrella play crucial roles in keeping public attention focused on poverty, disease and other human rights abuses and problems in the poorest countries of the world. They monitor progress towards the United Nations Millennium Goals. They lobby the Australian Government to increase its aid contribution and to focus the aid more sharply on the areas of greatest need.

International bodies such as Amnesty International are renowned for their work in uncovering and exposing human rights abuses. Others again such as the World Wide Fund (WWF) and Greenpeace, together with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), play lead roles in lobbying in international gatherings and in other ways for action to preserve the planet as a habitat for all living creatures.

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A world without such advocacy bodies would be a world with no conscience and no sustained public and private pressure to shame governments and businesses into action. It would also be one deprived of knowledge and skills to contribute to the solution of the world's problems.

Representativeness

The NGO movement speaks in its diversity for a myriad of community interests that without it would have no voice. Many of the larger organisations are also representative of extensive networks. Some such as the Australian Council of Social Service, the peak body of Australian social service organisations, are umbrella organisations that have widespread networks of member bodies. ACOSS, reports that in the financial year 2007-2008, its member organisations provided services to 3,123,990 people. Other bodies such as the Australian Conservation Foundation have a very large number of individual members (approximately 40,000) who elect the Foundation's Council which in turn elects the Executive. Both these examples illustrate how representative NGOS can be of citizen interests.

The trust in which NGOs are held

Of special note is the trust reposed by Australians (and other citizens worldwide) in civil society advocacy groups. Opinion poll after opinion poll has found the same answers. Late in 2005 the published results of a study of opinion leaders by the global public relations giant Edelman once again found that NGOS were given the highest rating for trustworthiness ahead of government, business and universities. This time the survey concentrated on the opinions of high-ranking executives, bureaucrats and senior journalists not just on the views of representative samples of citizens. The survey results illustrate better than any other argument the value placed by the community on public advocacy bodies in civil society.

Parliamentary and government acknowledgement of these advocacy roles

Advocacy organisations are important sources of specialist community expertise which governments regularly draw on. They are also sources of ideas and creativity for public policy. There have been many formal and informal acknowledgements of these roles and of the value and importance of advocacy bodies to a robust, effective and open democracy. Two examples follow.

In 1991, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs when reporting on the role of non-government organisations 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 constituents. The submission by the Department of Community Services and Health to this review also pointed out that peak bodies can help departments by airing policy debates in the public arena.

A second example is the Australian Government commissioned Productivity Commission study to examine the relationship between the civil society sector and the Government. The report states that the Government recognises:

... the critical role the not-for-profit sector plays in delivering services, advising and developing social policy, and advocating on behalf of marginalised groups. A strong relationship between the government and the sector will be crucial to the success of the agenda and related reforms.

Changes in government responses to the role of civil society

The Howard government instituted changes to the treatment of civil society organisations which included de-funding, forced amalgamations, and replacing organisational funding with contracts for services, which excluded policy or research work. Funding contracts also restricted organisations from making public statements without specific permission from government.

The Rudd Government moved early in its term to remove the gag clauses from government contracts which prevented civil society organisations from making public comment on Government policy. It also developed a

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“Social Inclusion Agenda” which recognises the importance of such organisations in advocating on behalf of Australians who are marginalised and inadequately represented in the political process.

The Rudd Government has made other encouraging acknowledgments of the role of civil society. Prime Minister Rudd has announced that he intends to establish a “compact”, that is an agreement between the Government and civil society organisations which would define their relationship.

In addition to their other provisions, the Compact and the Government’s social inclusion agenda need to make formal acknowledgements of all the roles played by civil society organisations. They also needs to fully acknowledge the importance of the right to disagree not only as democratic right but also as a means of testing draft policies and generating alternative and creative ideas for public policy.

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