

Can NGOs effectively Engage in the Democratic Process?

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NOT-FOR-PROFIT ORGANISATIONS can engage effectively in democracy when we purposefully go about our work. Only then can we engage in policy issues and play in politics to help us achieve our aim. Sometimes it goes wrong, horribly wrong.

To work purposefully requires a 'purpose'. Most not-for-profits aim to alleviate a need—poverty, poor health, education. Some deal directly with people in need. Some are just 'founders'. It would be impolite to name some founders, but I can name Kon Karapanagiotidis. For Karapanagiotidis it is not about personal recognition. He wants a place of hope and welcome where no asylum seeker is turned away. Karapanagiotidis is the founder and CEO of Melbourne's Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC). While occasionally reflecting on being a Greek child in country Victoria, his usual message is about justice for others. As he pleads for immigration policy to change, the ASRC continues to help asylum seekers with material aid, legal advice, social support and education. When a founder or CEO hands out their business cards, they are heard if they are advocating not attention seeking.

The ASRC advocates and goes about its work. In February 2015 the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) revoked registration of up to 1400 charities for not lodging annual information statements. Those entities have not even told the government they still exist much less demonstrated their worth. It is difficult to see how an administratively incompetent not-for-profit could engage in democracy. Competence is not just about compliance, but also about doing your work. Not-for-profits use evaluation tools—surveys, outcome assessments or research projects. These confirm for us and our funders that we do what we say we do, identify what we do well and not so well, and help us notice what is missing in the pursuit of our goals. If we have the resources, we implement the findings because it helps us pursue our purpose. If we do not have the resources or it is beyond our scope, we care and as a result raise it as a policy issue.

Not-for-profits plead for change to external factors that prevent us from achieving our goals. Schools and childcare centres, for example, are not and do not intend to replace the family home or the welfare sector, much less urban services. Nevertheless, they notice when children are at risk because it gets in the way of care and education. Local government writes numerous plans designed to facilitate analysis, consultation, decision-making and implementation of policy. In drafting an Early Years Plan, Victoria's Moonee Valley City Council consulted children directly on making the city child-friendly because not-for-profits expected it to do so. One young constituent told the planners that the best local playgrounds were scary because teenagers goofed around on them. The unintended consequence of having playgrounds designed to challenge pre-teens was a city that was less friendly to those very children. It was a powerful message. Why did council listen to those asking for the consultation of children? Because—as the adage suggests—the 23 million Australians offer 43 million opinions. It is a lot easier to know what they want when their voice is made coherent through their support for not-for-profits.

Politics is a funny thing for not-for-profits. It can distract us from our job. Members of the Catholic Church in Australia were so powerful that they split the Australian Labor Party along sectarian and ideological lines in the mid 1950s, keeping it out of office in Victoria for thirty years. Yet the Church lost sight of its operations. Harrowing evidence before the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse since 2013 demonstrates lack of regard for

complaints and good governance. As a result, conspiracy ensued, sexual abuse continued, more lives were ruined and nobody held perpetrators to account. A cycle of crime, cover-up and repeated criminal offence went on.

Other churches, schools, sporting groups and indeed governments have also been negligent but few had the power of the Catholic Church to engage in democracy and few ran as many subsidiary not-for-profits. For the Church to engage effectively in the democratic process again it needs to go purposefully about its work as an assembly of those who are baptised. Only then will it be able to identify the policy issues affecting those people and speak with authority on their behalf. Unlike CEO of World Vision Australia Tim Costello, who can tweet about foreign aid to his heart's content without being trolled, a bishop cannot get away with tweeting about health, education or especially family welfare.

The Catholic Church is an example of a not-for-profit that can no longer effectively engage in democracy. Many of the 23,000 or so registered charities would be in the same situation because they don't have a noble purpose or don't do their job or don't worry about whether or not they do it well. Not-for-profits that deliver notice barriers between us and success, and they frustrate us. As a result we will contribute to policy, politics and representative democracy, and we will do it noisily.

If we are good at our own job, not-for-profits can join the comedians and journalists. Kon Karapanagiotidis became the Hateful Humanitarian at the 2011 Melbourne Comedy Festival. Tim Costello is a member of the journalistic commentariat, advocating publicly on behalf of World Vision, including on poker machine regulation. In 2014 Costello had to explain his own words when a controversial member of parliament in a marginal electorate quoted them out of context during the Victorian election campaign. Perhaps that looked like a not-for-profit engaged in short-term thinking, something of which players in representative democracies are sometimes accused. But in my view the sight of a not-for-profit in crisis often follow years of purposeful, credible work that doesn't make the Comedy Festival guide or the Twitter feed."