Viewpoint*

If not now, when?**

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I have entitled this article, "If not now, when?" As some of you will know, this was the third of the three great questions Rabbi Hillel asked more than 2,000 years ago. It is a question that I believe is entirely appropriate for Canada's volunteer sector to be asking itself in this new millennium. If the sector does not take that question seriously, the answer may be, "When it's too late".

I want to explore those thoughts with you in several steps.

First, I'd like to consider "Talking About Charities", which just happens to be the title of a public-opinion poll Muttart commissioned. The results were released in the fall of 2000. True to Murphy's Law, they were released on the day of the funeral of Pierre Elliott Trudeau. No surprise, then, that they were not on the front page of the *Globe and Mail.*

Nevertheless, the results of that survey provide us with some important ammunition; however they also send some messages which, if ignored, might not only neutralize the positive results but also serve to create an environment none of us would like. Thus, I will be making some observations about issues I see within the sector and, particularly, the question of whether we will continue to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory by failing to operate as a sector. Third, I'd like to point out some of the opportunities and challenges that are facing us today and are likely to face us in the next short while. And finally, I'd like to offer some thoughts about what we might do to exploit these opportunities and meet these challenges.

Needless to say, this is a viewpoint and the views I express should not be taken as representing the views of the Board of Directors of The Muttart Foundation, nor should they be taken as representing the views of the Joint Table on Legal and Regulatory Reform. In some cases, the views I express may not even by my own but rather may be views I think we need to consider if we are to progress.

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* "Viewpoint" provides a forum for informed discussion of issues of wide interest to the voluntary sector. The opinions expressed are those of the authors.

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"Talking About Charities"

Late in the last century – I believe it was the spring of 1999 – Muttart's Board of Directors looked at the number of public policy issues affecting the charitable sector. The Broadbent Report on accountability and governance in the voluntary sector had put forward a series of forward-thinking proposals. There was much talk of what should happen next.

It seemed to our directors that the sector would be far better equipped to deal with the public policy issues raised by the Broadbent Report if we had some idea of how the public felt about some of those issues, so we contracted with the Canadian Centre of Philanthropy to develop a public opinion survey. Recognizing that the results of such a survey needed to be helpful in discussions with provincial governments as well as with the federal government, we deliberately asked that there be a larger sample than is normal for a national survey. We then canvassed a number of people in the sector and government about the development of a questionnaire and, finally, reduced our investigation to a handful of the questions that were perceived to be the most important.

Between April and June, almost 4,000 Canadians agreed to spend between 20 and 30 minutes of their time answering this series of questions. With this involvement by people from every province, we can consider that the results are valid for the entire Canadian population with a margin of error of plus or minus one per cent, 19 times out of 20.

Many of the results from the survey were incredibly supportive and positive for charities. Not surprisingly, those are the results that have been most talked about. In brief, they showed that:

1) Almost nine out of 10 respondents believed that charitable organizations are becoming increasingly important to many Canadians.

2) Almost eight out of 10 respondents believed that charitable organizations understand the needs of the average Canadian better than government does.

3) Almost seven out of 10 respondents believed that charitable organizations do a better job than government in *meeting* the needs of Canadians.

The survey then went on to ask people how much trust they had in people from various professions and occupations.

4) People working for charities scored very highly. Only nurses and doctors commanded a higher level of trust. Third place isn't too bad – we outranked religious and business leaders, lawyers, civil servants and politicians.

5) Canadians also showed a high level of support for the idea of charities being engaged in what some might call advocacy. More than 88 per

cent of respondents said that charitable organizations should speak out on issues like the environment, poverty and health care.

In fairness, though, that last result needs a bit of an explanation. The question was asked in the negative. We asked people whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that charities should *not* spend their time and money trying to get laws changed. Forty-seven percent of respondents *disagreed* with the notion. But almost one-third of respondents said that their view depended on what charity you were talking about. That's an understandable human reaction but it is not one that makes it easy for the development of public policy. Sadly, it's not possible to allow advocacy activities only for those charities one agrees with.

All in all, though, those results not only give the sector reason to celebrate but also provide some useful data to use as part of the Voluntary Sector Initiative.

In spite of these favourable results, some of the answers to other questions offer the sector some challenges, and I haven't heard them being addressed nearly as often. Some of those responses may simply represent misconceptions or myths about the sector. Frankly, that doesn't matter. No one said that public-policy decisions were ever made solely on the basis of *accurate* information. Nevertheless, these negative responses cannot be ignored:

6) Almost three-quarters of all Canadians say there are too many charities trying to get donations for the same causes. Numbers that high raise the fear that we may have gone beyond the recognized phenomenon of donor fatigue into something close to "donor anger".

7) Canadians also seem to be telling us we have a credibility problem. Fewer than half of them believe that charities ask for money only when they really need it.

Responses like those to 6) and 7) are hardly encouraging for a sector that is so heavily reliant on public trust.

Next, we asked Canadians what they thought about the information provided by charities – whether they wanted more, less or about the same:

8) Almost two-thirds wanted more information about programs and services while three-quarters wanted more information about how charities use donations, the fundraising costs of charities, and the impact of their work. (Now, you can believe that they want this information because of their incredible level of interest in the sector but if you chose to believe that, I'd like to interest you in buying the Brooklyn Bridge.)

But that's not necessarily the most upsetting news.

Not may Canadians know that charities in this country are monitored by the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency. What they do seem to know is that charities need to be monitored by somebody – and preferably an independent somebody.

9) More than eight in 10 Canadians want someone to pay more attention to virtually every aspect of charities' operations: how we spend money, the money spent on fundraising, fundraising methods, and the amount of money spent on programs.

I'd be interested to know how many charities and foundations want an independent body – independent of government and of the sector – doing that sort of supervision. Certainly, at least one organization has ventured the view that it should take on the responsibility of establishing operational standards for charities and then reporting how well charities measure up. Thus far, that idea hasn't seemed to receive much support but it would appear that there *is* public interest in some such concept and that's not necessarily good news for the sector.

It is not that I am opposed to accountability. Rather, as I look at the diversity of the sector, as I consider the issues of charities with budgets below $100,000 and those with budgets 10 or 100 times that, it seems to me that any "standards" are going to be so general as to be meaningless. If we are going to provide a list of "best practices" – as the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy has done with the Code of Ethical Fundraising and Financial Accountability – that is one thing. But to dictate to the broad array of charities how many times a year directors should meet or what appropriate salaries are or what an annual report should look like will not, I suggest, serve to protect the public.

And lest there be any doubt in anyone's mind, all of us in the charitable sector have an obligation – out of self-interest as well as concern for others – to protect the public from the unscrupulous few.

It seems to me that we in the sector sometimes have our priorities just a little skewed. We all cheered when Walter Stewart's highly critical book was withdrawn from publication. We have also pooh-poohed articles and television reports about fundraising practices that are abhorrent to many of us. But let us not fool ourselves into believing that the book and the reports and articles were entirely without foundation. Fundraising scams of various descriptions have been going on for years in the United States and in the United Kingdom as well as here. Governments don't like scandals. It was in response to a scandal in the mid-1950s that Alberta passed the first fundraising regulations in the country. I am not sure that in the current environment, a scandal would be met with the same tempered response. And with all due respect to the Public Trustee and Guardian, those of us in the rest of the country are quite content that Ontario should be the only province that involves itself so directly in the operation of charities.

We as a sector need to be as vigilant, as are certain media types and certain members of Parliament, to abuses by those with charitable status. And we must be just as vocal as those outside the sector in condemning them. If we are to maintain public trust, we must demonstrate that we deserve it – not just in our own agencies, but as a sector.

And therein lies the rub.

We are called, variously, the charitable sector, the voluntary sector, the third sector. But are we, in fact, a sector? Or are we a group of much smaller configurations that have been lumped together for convenience so that, when all our funds are added together, we seem much larger and more important than we actually are?

If we are, or were, a sector, don't you think it would be reasonable that we would have some idea of how many people were in the sector? We certainly know how many registered charities there are – and we can leave for another day the question of whether it's too many – but we have no good answer to what the voluntary sector consists of. We have only guesses – possibly informed guesses but still guesses – as to how many not-for-profit organizations exist in this country.

Even were we to limit ourselves to the readily quantifiable – registered charities – I would ask whether we are, in fact, a sector. Do those charities with revenues of under $100,000 – about half of the total number of charities in the country – really feel they have anything in common with the University of Toronto or the University of British Columbia or the Waterford Hospital in St. John's?

Do the women in Athabasca, Alberta who knit blankets for the Red Cross international relief effort feel any affinity for the National Arts Centre in Ottawa? Do either of them consider they have some relationship to an organization feeding the homeless in Vancouver's inner city?

Yet the public policy debates and initiatives now underway, and those we are still to face, are going to affect all those charities unless we can move forward and create some new form of designation for churches, hospitals and universities.

The reality is that, until there is some significant change in law (one I don't expect is going to come quickly), every one of the 80,000 charities in this country has something in common with the others. We all have to go through the same process to remain registered. We are all bound by the same rules. We all face the same restrictions on some forms of activity. We are all affected when the courts make rulings about what we can and can't do, about who is and isn't a charity, about when we are liable to our clients and for what. Most of us are affected by the same rules about charitable tax credits and disbursement quotas. To me, those are significant points of commonality.

Yet it seems to me that we spend a significant amount of time talking about all the differences between us. The social service charities say they have nothing in common with the arts charities. The small unstaffed charities looking for a few thousand dollars for good works say they are competing with multi-million-dollar campaigns being operated by universities and hospitals. The health groups see no point in talking with the faith communities.

One can only wonder what might happen if we spent nearly as much time talking about what we have in common and how similar some of our public-policy needs are. For example, there was a public uproar when Alberta doctors closed their offices on specified days to back up their demand for an increased fee schedule. But what would happen, I wonder, if all 80,000 charities in this country closed their doors for one 24-hour period? What would it be like? How would the public respond? How would government respond?

This is, of course, only a fantasy. I think it might be easier to herd cats than to get charities in this country to agree upon a common course of action or even to agree on a date to begin the seemingly endless task of processing the idea to death.

The fact that we are not able to enunciate a common vision – even on those central issues that do, in fact, apply to all of us – robs us of power. When governments ask for the sector's viewpoint on any one of a number of issues, they get so many responses that they tend to say "a pox on all your houses" and simply do whatever they want to do. The sector cannot, I suggest, be a significant player in public policy issues unless we find some way to marshal our strength – our numbers *and* our creativity.

There are some hopeful signs, but they are only glimmers.

The Voluntary Sector Initiative involves a much broader range of charities than have previous steps in this process. I want to congratulate the Voluntary Sector Roundtable for establishing a process that brought in more than 1,100 nominations. Yet there are still only about 70 of us sitting at the Joint Tables or in the working groups. We make no claim to representing the sector, but perhaps bring more perspectives to the table – a good thing in itself.

There are, of course, problems. The most significant, at least in my view, is the lack of representation from the smallest charities. It is understandable, but we must, and are trying, to develop ways of involving them in the conversations affecting them. If they do not feel included, we will not get it right.

One of the more exciting developments is taking place in Edmonton, Calgary and Ottawa and, I'm told, in some other cities. Groups of charities are starting to meet together to talk about creating some sort of umbrella organization to speak out for, and on behalf of the sector. In Edmonton and Calgary, these initiatives, funded by Muttart, are tentatively called Chambers of Charities. That may not be the final name but it does seem to recognize the type of role they are hoping to play.

In these communities, they have recognized the need to involve smaller charities – the three-quarters of all charities with revenues of less than $250,000 per year. It will be a challenge, but if we do not face this challenge now, when will we face if? If not now, when?

And if we do not soon begin to recognize our need to develop common positions, to learn to speak with a united voice, when will we begin to meet those needs? It's more than the need to be heard; more than the need to be part of public policy decisions; more than the need to comment on the fact that in the last federal election campaign, *none* of the parties mentioned the voluntary sector in their platforms in any significant way.

It is a much more basic need – self-preservation.

There are charities in my province that are afraid to speak out. They are afraid to tell the emperor he has no clothes. This fear is not caused by a concern about breaching the rules on advocacy. It is based on "payback". Some point to funding cutbacks affecting charities that *have* spoken out and suggest that if you upset the provincial government, there will be consequences. It is hard to know whether this is paranoia or whether there really is an "enemies list". But the result is the same. Some charities in Ontario have told me that they are sensing the same type of thing and are concerned about the impact it will have.

I think the impact is quite clear. If we are unable to raise a collective voice, if we are unable to focus on a strong collective position that this country was built on values and those values remain important, then we are going to see more necessary programs disappear. We are going to see an increasing gap between the "haves" and the "have nots". We are going to see people suffer and die needlessly. And we are going to face an even greater loss of what my friend and colleague Bob Couchman calls "the sense of reciprocal obligation" that was the basis of the development of this country.

Because of our failure to organize, because of our failure to find ways of developing common positions, because of our failure to speak out on even those issues the survey tells us people expect us to be vocal about – because of all these things, we leave ourselves open to be ignored and bullied.

If a group of women knitting blankets in Athabasca asks for an appointment to see the federal Finance Minister to talk about charitable tax credits, or seeks to approach the Prime Minister about the difficulty of obtaining charitable status, what is the likelihood that it will succeed? Contrast that scenario to a situation where we have a Canadian Chamber of Charities, a national conference to debate resolutions from our local and provincial chapters, and a call from the president of the Chamber to the Minister of Finance saying, "We'd like to talk to you about the views of 80,000 charities from coast to coast". I suggest the situation would be entirely different. I suggest we would be

consulted, we would have access, we would have influence, we would have our voices heard.

The development of such an organization will require much time and work. It will require sacrifices. The people who are willing to undertake this are not going to be able to give up their present responsibilities. They are, once again, going to have to add these organizing duties to their already overwhelming workloads. Not only do I believe that the potential benefit makes that worthwhile, I also believe that failure to do so has consequences that are unacceptable.

While I have chosen the third of Rabbi Hillel's great questions as a title, I would not want to forget his second question either: "If I am only for myself, then what am I?" Those in the sector who are perceived – rightly or wrongly – as "leaders" have a moral duty to provide leadership. If we are not prepared to stand up on behalf of other charities – and more important, on behalf of the Canadians who trust us and who need us – then what are we? Do we become a series of autonomous self-interested groups who are prepared to focus only on our particular niche?

Indeed, even the great philosopher's first question has relevance to the charitable sector: "If I am not for myself, then who is for me?"

If we, as a sector, are not willing to stand up for ourselves, if we are not able to espouse, clearly and powerfully, what we stand for, then whom do we expect to do it? And when will we do it?

And let me suggest to you that "when" is definitely now. We have some opportunities now that will not be repeated for a quarter of a century. We have a government that has put $95 million on the table to work with the charitable sector. Despite the very predictable grumblings that this money should have gone into direct grants to offset cutbacks, the reality is that we are all better served if we can fix the system.

Now I don't know of anybody who believes for a moment that we can fix everything that needs to be fixed in the two-year life of the Joint Tables. What we can do – and in my view, must do – is to expand that window of opportunity. We can create an environment, and demonstrate a capability and a willingness to work together on pubic policy issues that keeps the sector on the government's radar screen.

Let me hasten to add that this is not going to occur as a result of positional bargaining. We need to recognize that government did not come up with this initiative out of a sense of generosity. It has a problem. Whether that problem is one of public relations or of substance, it *is* a problem. And the sector has a problem, or several problems. Assuming good faith on the part of those who are sitting around the Joint Tables – and I'm prepared to make that assumption for now – I think we have a tremendous opportunity to do some creative joint

problem-solving. I think the Tables and working groups provide us with an opportunity to think outside the box, to assume that nothing is cast in stone, to develop a model of civil society that is appropriate to this country in the 21st century.

There are going to be limits to that creativity, and we are going to have to recognize those if we are to retain credibility as a sector. That requirement underlines another challenge the sector faces.

It is said that when you're up to your butt in alligators, it's easy to forget that your original intention was to clean out the swamp. We in the sector seem to be very good at handling bush fires that affect our individual organizations but we are woefully short of people who are knowledgeable about the public-policy process and about when, where and how we have opportunities to intervene in it. Indeed, I continue to be amazed at the number of people in this sector who don't even know some of their basic legal obligations.

Not long ago, I spoke with someone who believed that being involved in public policy debates meant responding to White Papers and government announcements. They were surprised when I suggested that unless they were involved in writing the green paper that preceded the white paper, they might as well save their stamps.

We need to find new ways of educating leaders in the sector, not on management issues but on how to address the "bigger picture" issues that will bring us together as a sector. We need to teach them how to choose which battles to fight, how to motivate others, how to organize quickly and effectively, and how to choose the entry points at which their involvement may pay dividends.

And we're going to have to find ways of delivering this education in rather nonconventional ways. I know of very few leaders in this sector who can commit to being in a classroom every Wednesday for six or eight weeks. We simply must learn to use technology to its fullest advantage.

That takes me to another one of my favourite soapbox issues. I am delighted to report that Muttart's Board of Directors once again agreed to provide funding to allow the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy's 2001 Symposium to be broadcast to Edmonton. The only thing that upsets me is that it has taken the sector so long to get to the point where we're doing this. Satellite feeds are not exactly new technology. Technology provides wonderful opportunities for us to overcome some of the problems that geography creates for us. Unfortunately we continue to marvel instead of using it.

There's another thing we're going to have to learn. If we are to have any hope of speaking as a sector, then we're going to have to learn to take the time to offer viewpoints and help formulate positions and policies. When Muttart funded the first research into the Chamber of Charities concept, the response rate to surveys in Edmonton and Calgary was pitifully low. When we sent

copies of the research to 300 charities and asked them to comment, we had fewer than a dozen responses. When our Board then decided to put the concept on the back burner, because of apparent lack of interest on the part of charities, we were criticized. We were told people didn't respond to the survey or the draft document because they didn't have time but they expected us to proceed anyway.

Public policy work is time-consuming. It's messy. It's not always fun. But if we want to have any hope of being successful, we'd better find the time. Let's put the bandaids away for a little while and see what we can do about curing the underlying illness. We also have to recognize that we can't argue that we don't have time to participate in discussions and respond to surveys but that, if you give us enough money, we will have the time and energy to build a brand-new national organization. For some of us with funding responsibilities, that's just a bit too much of a leap of faith.

While many of the challenges we face over the next few years will be related to public policy we must not lose sight of the internal challenges we face.

Our infrastructure, if it was ever solid, is no longer so. I fear we are not developing the next generation of leaders in the sector. Indeed, I fear we are not developing even the next generation of followers. While funding is part of the cause, I think there are other reasons we are facing human-resource problems within our organizations. In many cases, people still "happen into" the sector rather than making a conscious decision to work there. There is not widespread or accurate knowledge of what it means – the benefits and the warts – to work in the sector. There is little awareness of what opportunities exist in the sector – in any number of disciplines including those not traditionally associated with charities.

We have not done a good job of *telling* our story, let alone *selling* our story. It is thus entirely appropriate that the Centre's 2001 National Symposium had the theme "Telling Our Story".

When we do get people into the sector, our human-resources policies don't always demonstrate the type of professional behaviour I think we're capable of, and that people are entitled to demand of us. We do performance appraisals badly, if at all. Our policies are a mishmash where they exist and, as often as not, are made on an *ad hoc* basis. We have used the same old line about how different we are to avoid harnessing our buying power into dealing with things like employee benefits.

The Muttart Foundation is addressing this in a pilot project. Few charities are large enough to require a full-time human resources professional. However, our experience and that of other funders, demonstrates quite clearly that there are a lot of charities who could use some human resources help.

Stealing an idea from a United States foundation, we have established clusters of charities in three communities and a human-resources professional has been hired to work with the cluster. Some of the work will be done for the cluster as a whole; some will be done for individual member agencies within the cluster; some, we expect, will have relevance to charities beyond the cluster.

We embarked upon a two-year pilot program based on three clusters – one each in Edmonton, Calgary and Red Deer – to see what we can learn, and to see whether this is something we can build upon as we move to provide greater support to capacity-building, rather than to discrete projects.

The sector's use (or more appropriately, non-use) of technology – is holding us back. Admittedly, too many funders have shown their usual lack of understanding by saying they won't fund technology. But there are enough who have seen the light that we should be looking at ways we can increase our effectiveness as well as our efficiency.

Now it is true that we are all overworked and many people in the sector are underpaid. Dealing with these challenges will take more time and, in many cases, more money. But I suggest to you that many of the problems we face are systemic in nature. Many of the opportunities facing us can only be exploited if we look at ourselves and our sector differently.

The time for debating whether the world should change is long past. It has changed. It is continuing to change. We can either get ahead of that change or we can be lost as it passes us by.

Our values – whether in the arts, human services, health, recreation or education – have always included an ability to exceed our capabilities and others' expectations. We cannot lose that. We must find the energy within us to take full advantage of what is now facing us. We must change that which needs change, without ever losing hold – for even one moment – of those values which make us different from the other sectors.

The Canadian Centre for Philanthropy has, in the first 20 years of its existence, accomplished much in making Canadians aware of those values, those commitments, the added benefits that charities bring to our country. Their message would be much stronger if the rest of us – no matter our size, no matter our particular niche, no matter our location – began echoing the message. I would argue that the Centre has fundamentally changed the charitable sector in this country for the better and, through that sector, bettered the lives of thousands of Canadians. But there is still much to do.

The time to act is short. The time to act is now.

Because if not now, when?