

*Letters to (not always of) Joy*

By Bob Wyatt

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A LOT HAS CHANGED SINCE BOB WYATT LEFT FOR A MUTTART FELLOWSHIP sabbatical in 2005 to address some nagging questions he had about the power of the voluntary sector to influence policy: governments have been grappling with massive deficits; innovative forms of collaborations have increased dramatically; social enterprise is on the rise; and technology has been reframing the way that people mobilize around issues. These changes have created a sense of urgency for the sector. Now, more than ever, it needs to take hold of opportunities, influence policies, and find a common voice on the issues that affect it.

In a series of essays in *Letters to (not always of) Joy*, Bob Wyatt makes a heartfelt call to action to the voluntary sector to act together and to marshal the strength and resolve to be a more effective voice at policy tables. He says: “Demonstrating that we are organized and have ways of responding quickly and forcefully will ensure that we are invited to the policy tables. It will ensure that our needs and the needs of those we serve will be recognized and respected. It will change us, and it will change policies.”

Having taken up the challenge of thinking about how the sector can have more influence, Wyatt considers why it has been ineffective and what can be learned from past developments in Canada as well as from the experiences in England, United States, New Zealand, and Australia. He cites lack of awareness about the breadth and value of the voluntary sector as a key reason for its limited influence. *Letters to (not always of) Joy* makes the case that we not only need to “brag” to the public and government about the sector – how big it is, what it does, and how it touches the lives of Canadians every day – but we also need individual nonprofit organizations of all types and sizes to see themselves as connected to something more than their specific mission or subsector. In Wyatt’s view, if we are to have influence we have to start behaving like a sector.

While he acknowledges it is difficult for individual organizations to concentrate on the big picture when they are struggling to “pay the phone company,” he asks that organizations make the connection between their immediate day-to-day problems and the policies that are a root cause of these problems. He cites, for example, issues related to accountability, granting conditions, and rules on advocacy. “Yes, dealing with policy issues takes time,” says Wyatt, “but failing to take that time, failing to work with others, leads us to be always in a situation where we are reacting rather than acting.”

Wyatt also points to the fact that the sector is more divided than united. He points to the

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view of some provincial or federal government officials who say there are so many disparate, and even contradictory, requests from the sector that it is hard for them to make a strong case. He argues that if the voluntary sector, as a sector, doesn't speak with its full power, the government is then free to serve its own interests, such as providing funding to nonprofit organizations that covers less than the full cost of services. While he doesn't believe we need unanimity in views, he does believe we must reach much more broadly to "seek possibilities of discussion, of learning, of supporting one another even when we are not directly affected. We need organizations across the country that can provide the venue for these discussions, for this learning." Further, he says, we must then "connect to other cities, to other provinces, in order to marshal the forces of the voluntary sector."

Having laid out the problem, Wyatt feels the solution is to create, support, and link voluntary sector umbrella groups that can train, advocate, defend, facilitate, and convene the sector. Central to his solution is a strong, nimble, and sustainable national umbrella organization for the voluntary sector. Without writing the bylaws, he lays out the critical role the umbrella organization can play, who should belong, who should run it, and how it can be paid for. Since writing the essays, his views shifted about whether Imagine Canada could play that role. However, he acknowledges in the Afterword that Imagine Canada could play that role because they have made significant changes that better position it to create the information and space that allows the sector to speak with a stronger voice. But he cautions Imagine Canada to "always be cognizant of the risk that it will be co-opted, that it will become an instrument to do things to its members rather than for them." Always be prepared, he says, "to tell the emperor he has no clothes."

Wyatt describes a number of key ingredients of success that need to be understood by the umbrella group and its members:

1. "We want more funding" is not a policy.
2. Policy development must be a combination of top-down and bottom-up.
3. Policy work can take on a life of its own and result in incredibly tight timelines.
4. People never will know what the voluntary sector wants if the voluntary sector does not tell them.
5. Policy work is definitely one of those areas where one can prove, yet again, the truth of the cliché "united we stand, divided we fall."
6. Policy work is far more effective when planned in advance.
7. Government wants solutions, not problems.
8. Invitations to participate in policy discussions happen because of successful relationships that are built before there is a pending crisis.
9. The best-designed policy never will be implemented if a public backlash against it will follow.

Wyatt makes it clear at the outset that he doesn't expect everyone will agree with all of his findings, thoughts, or conclusions. There is certainly a great deal of food for thought – some provocative ideas, some good sound advice, and some unresolved questions. It would be interesting to debate whether increased public awareness regarding the value and breadth of the sector actually results in positive behavior change. What are the risks the sector simply comes across as big and amorphous? It would be helpful to sit down and

consider the impact of recent collaborative approaches across subsectors and the blurring of the lines between the public, corporate, and nonprofit sectors; the new social media's ability to allow people and organizations to network and come together around issues; and the Ontario Nonprofit Network model of constellations. It would be fun, over a pint of beer with Bob, to bat around questions about how an organization can both represent the sector yet stay neutral, how it can facilitate a point of view but get the job done, and how it can do work that everyone wants done yet few want to pay for. Then, over coffee, we could consider whether all the sector needs is a good crisis to bring it together.

The essays in *Letters to (not always of) Joy* clearly demonstrate the benefits of giving a sector veteran and advocate the time to reflect on how the sector can wield more influence about those things that deeply affect it.

