

“Our Good Old English Fashion”: England’s History of Campaigning for Charitable Causes

1. When the great anti-slave trade activist Thomas Clarkson was in France in 1814, the Duke of Wellington was the British Ambassador in Paris. They discussed how best to try to influence the French Government to abolish the French slave trade, after the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807. Wellington urged Clarkson to proceed “in our good old English fashion”: he meant the voluntary sector agitation that had swept the British slave trade away.
2. The campaign against the slave trade and then slavery itself was indeed the first great national, organised voluntary sector political agitation. It established the model for countless other agitations in the rest of the nineteenth century and beyond, in tandem with progressive extensions of the political franchise. Some of these later movements were for economic justice, such as the repeal of the Corn Laws, some for political justice, some for religious justice, some for moral improvements such as temperance and education, some for improving the conditions of working people in factories and mines, and some for the rights of minorities such as prostitutes, prisoners, those with mental illness or disabilities. It was common for these movements to refer back explicitly to the abolition of slavery: for example the Tory radical Richard Oastler kicked off the Ten Hours Campaign against exploitation in factories by an open letter called Yorkshire Slavery. Of the enslaved in the factories he wrote: “I heard their groans, I watched their tears; I knew they relied on me”.
3. Arguably, an even greater multiplicity of national campaigns was to follow in the twentieth century, and especially since the Second World War, when inter-generational justice has been added to the list as the environment is degraded.
4. By “political activity” I do not mean party politics. I mean activity aimed at creating, changing or supporting any law, any state policies or administrative actions by state agencies: the definition used by the Charity Commission. It includes lobbying, campaigning, advocacy, public education and mobilisation of support through the media, and I am focusing on the national and international level. When I talk of political activity in pursuit of charitable causes I mean causes that are today defined as charitable.
5. There is a topical context for revisiting the tradition of charitable political activity. Very senior people in the Conservative Party including Oliver Letwin, Chris Grayling and George Osborne, and on the Charity Commission Board have since 2012 been questioning the political activity of today’s charities. Charities’ political activities have been restrained by the curtailment of judicial review and by the Lobbying Act. The relatively new Chair of the Charity Commission, William Shawcross, has named *the politicisation of charities*, which he failed to define, as a challenge on a par with fraud, terrorist infiltration and failure to safeguard children from abuse. One of his lieutenants on the Commission Board, Prof Gwythian Prins, gave an interview to Third Sector magazine criticising the scale of charity involvement in political activity, saying they should “stick to their knitting” and warning that “the weather was changing” for political

activity. The new Minister for Civil Society, Brooks Newmark, created a stir by using the same phrase - "sticking to their knitting" - before his untimely departure from office for other reasons. The Charity Commission announced ambiguously that it may or may not review its current guidance on political activity by charities after the General Election; and this hangs in the air.

6. In fairness, one should acknowledge that the current Minister for Civil Society has said that charities are most definitely welcome in the political space but must not be party political. The Charity Commission Board has fallen largely silent on the subject of political activity for some months, which is better than what they were saying before. Overall, however, the atmosphere still feels cold and uncomprehending.
7. This is serious enough to provoke some historical questions. Why have voluntary organisations including churches got involved in contentious political activity? Why have they not stuck to uncontroversial practical action so that everyone can cheer? From which historical traditions does this sort of activity stem? My overall argument is that
 - their contribution to political discourse and decisions has always been part and parcel of what many charities have contributed to our society and
 - to ask charities to stick to their knitting is to lose touch with a history that is shared right across the political spectrum, from Wilberforce to Tom Paine, from Oastler and Shaftesbury to Cobden and Bright, from the NCCL to Mary Whitehouse, from the IPPR to the Institute for Economic Affairs.
8. In 1807, the British Slave Trade was abolished after an agitation of 20 years. Abolitionists felt it was one of the most sublime achievements in the whole of British history and Parliament's proudest moment. In fact, so long as slavery itself persisted, the market would entice men to continue the trade, legal or illegal. So the focus shifted to the abolition of slavery itself. The Great Reform Bill was carried in 1832; the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire, perhaps the most prominent issue in the first General Election under the extended franchise, followed in 1833. It is no coincidence that the significant step forward for democracy itself, and the greatest voluntary sector campaign in history so far, went hand in hand.
9. The movement to abolish the slave trade and slavery both reflected and encouraged the belief that resort to politics was not only justified but necessary if religious and moral purposes were to be effectively achieved. For enormous and structural evils, then as now, could not be addressed through practical projects and field work alone. They required a collective act of political will in the British Parliament and then internationally.
10. It was only because those Quakers, Christian freed slaves, a smattering of C of E clergy and Bishops, evangelical Christians, missionaries, dissenters, Unitarians, Baptists and secular radicals felt they had to engage with the political world and launch organised campaigns (inter-acting with slave rebellions and external circumstances such as wars) that abolition could ever have become feasible. Countless people stand on their shoulders, entering the political arena since that time in the name of charitable causes.
11. Let us take a few examples. Those who saw the beauty of the English countryside threatened by ribbon development and a commercial free-for-

- all formed voluntary organisations and agitated for the Town and Country Planning System, Green Belts, National Parks and later Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, to preserve the difference between town and country and protect our finest landscapes for ever. The national treasure of our rights of way has been fought for and protected by the political engagement and campaigning of the Open Spaces Society and the Ramblers Society among many other charities, alongside their practical projects to clear paths, repair stiles and organise walks and holidays.
12. Peasouper smogs no longer carry off many thousands of Londoners with breathing problems, thanks largely to the laws promoted by the National Smoke Abatement Society and its local predecessors: projects to assist individual asthma and emphysema sufferers were no substitute for tackling the root cause.
 13. There would be no systematic protection of animals without the political engagement of animal welfare organisations, not least the RSPCA founded by William Wilberforce and others: individual animal refuges or volunteers without legal powers would hardly do the job. Campaigning against cruelty to animals was so respectable that Queen Victoria rapidly put herself at the Head of the RSPCA. If you think Prince Charles is active in some political matters, you should listen to Queen Victoria, for example in 1886 when a pet spaniel was truncheoned to death by police in Baker's Street because of fears of rabies. An immortal telegram from the Queen to her Private Secretary on 27 May 1886 read: "Read last night St James [Palace] about dogs and lost order I protest vehemently against such tyranny and cruelty beautiful weather The Queen"
 14. When it came to the rights of children, the Victorian founders of the Children's Society, the NSPCC, Dr Barnardos and the like found that they "had to devote much of their energy to bringing about changes in the law so that "the doctrine of parental rights should not be allowed any longer to be the doctrine of children's wrongs"". ¹ Ever since, no charity could credibly seek to address systematic dangers to children by individual projects and services alone.
 15. In other areas of voluntary endeavour, The Mothers' Union found soon after their establishment as a national organisation in 1886 that they had to move far beyond prayer and religious and moral instruction if they were to defend what they understood to be Christian marriage and education. They became a formidable political lobbying and campaigning machine against secularisation of education, against relaxation of the divorce laws, and against Marie Stopes' views on birth control. The quite different National Federation of Women's Institutes, also massive, was a patriotic organisation regarding the role of rural women as key to national well-being. According to the stereotype, the WIs' "knitting" included jam-making and, well, knitting, but they also had roots in the suffragettes and from the early days in 1918 resolved that their AGM would "welcome both controversial and political issues providing they could not be described as party political". They campaigned for better social welfare provision and maternity services for women in rural areas, better electricity, sewerage and water, and later fair bus fares, equal pay and compensation for war injuries.

¹ M. Penelope Hall, *The Social Services of Modern England*, Bristol 1960, p.226

16. Help the Aged decided that in order to promote the welfare of elderly people, they should engage in their "Heating or Eating?" public awareness and policy campaign rather than simply continue raising funds for practical work. The British Legion lobbied and campaigned between the wars for the rights of disabled veterans to employment, and more recently for Honouring the Covenant (between society and those we ask to risk death for our sakes in our armed services). Without a major campaign against smoking, the British Heart Foundation among others realised that they would be treating effects without addressing a key cause.
17. Another example is the churches and other faith communities. One fifth of all registered charities include the advancement of religion as one of their objects, and one in every £6 that is given to charity goes to religious organisations. They are an integral part of the sector and are now fully subject to Charity Commission regulation including the regulation of political activity. Religious organisations have undertaken vigorous political activities before, during and after the Abolition of the slave trade and slavery, as an expression of their faith. The great Catholic Social Teaching is hardly distinguishable from the Catholic Church's knitting, it is part of it. Perhaps one of the strongest critiques of the perceived flaws of Thatcherism was the Church of England report "Faith in the City". In our own day, think of the recent papal Encyclical on the subject of global warming. Or listen to the current Archbishop of Canterbury earlier this year: "Jesus does not permit us to accept a society in which the weak are excluded," he says. "...The Church in the grace and the providence of God, holds within its hands the beauty of opportunity that can change our world, liberate the enslaved, [and] create the conditions of human flourishing."
18. This small cross section of examples suggest the following main reasons why charitable causes get political:
 - Because excluded or marginalised people cannot obtain their rights without entering and influencing the polis
 - Because external events threaten their beneficiaries, so they have to respond by enlisting the support of the wider public, of state agencies or Parliament itself
 - Because current laws or state practices (or lack of them) are part of the problem, and need changing
 - Because tackling the causes, rather than just the symptoms, of wrongs is usually political
 - Because sometimes the safety and security of vulnerable communities or people can only be won by the deliberate collective decisions of society, not by practical projects alone. To which we might add, the safety and security of all of us in the age of global warming.
19. So what were the main elements of this new and potent repertoire of political activity by voluntary organisations, originally brought together by the Abolitionists? And where did these elements come from in our history? I am now going to look at these elements one by one, so we can better understand the roots of campaigning for charitable causes.
20. The campaign was *non-party political*. In so far as there were different political tendencies, the campaign cut across them. Pitt was a great supporter of abolition; so was his bitter enemy Fox. And I have

deliberately highlighted many examples of subsequent campaigns that are by no means "left wing" in temper.

21. The abolitionist campaign was one of the first great *campaigns for human rights*. There were long traditions of political agitation, using the language of rights, in the struggles of the common people from time to time to attack unpopular impositions forced on them by the church and propertied classes; and in the struggles of the propertied classes in Parliament to thwart the ambitions of Kings to develop arbitrary powers and impose taxes for wars that undermined their interests and sense of justice. Their responses developed a theory of Parliament as the defender and promoter of the rights of free men; and these concepts and arguments could be taken up by campaigners and used for wider purposes and classes of people whom the original actors and orators did not have in mind. The success of the American War of Independence, also couched in the language of rights, was a further potent catalyst. We have all read at school about the ideas of the Enlightenment, the slow spread of more scientific and rational thought and how these played their part in preparing for the revolutions against the British in America and later against the ancient regime in France, and in the growth of political agitation for reform in Britain.
22. I should now like to conduct a small experiment with you. I am going to read out something written in 1774 and give you a choice of four names and you are going to vote for who you think said it. Here is the quotation: "Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air. And no human law can deprive him of that right, which he derives from the law of nature".² Was that written by: William Wilberforce, Dr Johnson, Tom Paine, or John Wesley.
23. The answer is John Wesley. And that makes the point that the abolitionist campaigns for human rights were *deeply rooted in the Christian religion*, possibly to a greater extent than you might think in all the excitement about the Enlightenment. A very large majority of the leading abolitionists were strongly religious people. They were drawing on an ancient interpretation of Christianity that God created men free and they became enslaved because of the sin and greed of powerful men, and that Jesus died for all men equally. We can see this in the sermons of the priest John Ball during the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 or in the demand of Robert Kett's Norfolk rebels in 1549 "that all bonde men may be ffre for God made all ffre with his precious Blode sheddyng", and in the writings of the Puritans and of the Levellers during the Commonwealth. This old tradition was often suppressed but never killed. It was now mixed with the more scientific and reasoned perspectives of the Enlightenment. The implications were clearly political. This is how the Tory Evangelical Wilberforce explained the link between religious and moral conviction and getting political in his Tract on Real Christianity: "Nor is it only by their personal conduct....that men of authority and influence may promote the cause of good morals...Religion's advancement or decline in any country is so intimately connected with the temporal interests of society, as to render it the peculiar concern of a political man."³

² William Hague, William Wilberforce, London 2008, p.131

³ Ibid. p.275

24. For nonconformists, Roman Catholics, and the Jews, in addition, engagement in political activity was also an existential issue: they were excluded from the full rights of citizens altogether until the late 1820s onwards (the Jews until the 1860s). Unless they mobilised and agitated to be admitted, they would stay out in the cold for ever. Perhaps political activity is particularly hard-wired into all those who have known bitter exclusion from the polis.
25. The abolitionists developed an *organisation with a national network of local correspondents and committees*. They built on many similar networks that had grown during the 18th century, and particularly on the network of the Quakers. Strong local organisations linked and supported by a national office, co-ordinating and spearheading national campaigns and lobbying, became part of the repertoire of charitable political activity.
26. One characteristic instrument for the abolitionist campaign was *the petition*. Familiar as this instrument is to this day, cluttering up our email boxes, the petition has an ancient pedigree at the heart of our democratic history as a nation. Petitions go right back to the days of Edward 1st and became entrenched as a means by which those not directly represented in the seat of power could plead their case to the King and his counsellors, often to do with righting perceived injustices. Indeed, early versions of the Commons referred to themselves as “petitioners and supplicants” to the King, nobles and Church leaders. That is how deeply embedded the petition is as a means of bringing a cause forward for attention and action by those in power, on behalf of those excluded from it.
27. Increasingly by the 1820s, *women were signing petitions*. The campaign had broken the gender divide in a big way. It brought many women into an active political movement for the first time. There were at least 75 separate women’s abolitionist associations between 1825 and 1833, and 31 of these were in places where there were no parallel men’s organisation. Women were also particularly important in organising the boycott of West Indian sugar (when parliamentary action had temporarily hit the buffers), another innovation using *consumer action* to advance a cause (borrowing the tactic from the American rebels against the British)⁴. One petition to the young Queen Victoria was signed by nearly 500,000 women. Once women had the experience of participation in a voluntary sector campaign, there proved to be no turning back in the longer run.
28. Similarly, *lobbying Government Ministers, Select Committees and MPs* was nothing new, and was part of the insider influencing of power going on amongst elites down the centuries. What was new was the way in which the abolitionists combined the traditional insider lobbying techniques with national campaigning and agitation for a moral cause: a fruitful combination for voluntary organisations ever since.
29. The *research and production of reliable evidence* to support such a cause was taken to new heights. Again and again, Clarkson rode hundreds of miles in epic journeys on horseback up and down the country, drumming up interest, seeding committees but above all collecting meticulously checked evidence. On one journey, he boarded 317 different ships to inspect conditions and talk to seamen and surgeons about the realities of the slave trade. He secured muster rolls at key ports and examined them into the small hours until his eyes ached, collecting information about the

⁴ Some historians estimate that 300,000 consumers may have joined this boycott.

effect of the slave trade on British seamen. Clarkson and his colleagues knew their evidence would be torn apart by vested interests unless it was cross checked and robust. They deluged the various Privy Council and Parliamentary enquiries into their subject with evidence and with witnesses who had been identified, supported and nurtured. Ministers and MPs were spoon-fed with arguments and evidence. Again and again, the abolitionists sought to win the arguments about truthful evidence and fact, as voluntary sector campaigners must do to this day.

30. Then there was a *massive PR, public education and media effort*.

Hundreds of thousands of copies of pamphlets and books were produced. Learned treatises and massive tomes of evidence were boiled down to user-friendly summaries and circulated on a mass basis to all MPs and up and down the country. Newspaper editors were lobbied and stroked and supplied with money for space and constant material to support the cause. Clarkson and his colleagues, and the Clapham sect, acted as early versions of a rapid rebuttal unit, countering all the arguments and evidence used against them. Josiah Wedgwood, Quaker member of the Abolitionist Committee, mass-produced a medallion of a kneeling slave with the motto "Am I not a man and brother?" which was then worn by men and women in all sorts of forms, the equivalent of the campaign T shirt or red ribbon of today. As the women's associations got going they had another one struck saying "Am I not a woman and sister?" And the Abolitionists found the perfect, emotive and symbolic expression of the horrors of the slave trade, known as The Print. This was a diagram of the sections of a slave ship, showing the slaves crammed in to every nook and cranny, a knockout propaganda coup all the stronger for being meticulously researched and completely accurate. It spoke far louder than words.

31. A precondition for this mass mobilisation was, therefore, a sufficient *spread of literacy and reading habits*, and a proliferation of affordable printing and of newspapers that had gathered pace during the 17th and 18th centuries. Another precondition was sufficient *freedom of expression*. During "Pitt's Terror" when fear of popular agitation and the French Revolution combined with the exigencies of war against France, the lid was held down for a while, but the underlying economic, social and cultural streams in favour of free expression proved to be irreversible once the war was over. The abolition of slavery itself was one of the first fruits of this triumph. From that time onwards, we see a continuing creative ferment of ideas and charitable causes being taken up in British politics. It was a reminder of what Milton had seen when the lid had been taken off in the 1640s:

"A nation not slow and dull, but of a quick, ingenious and piercing spirit, acute to invent, subtle and sinewy to discourse, not beneath the reach of any point the highest than human capacity can soar to....Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep and shaking his invincible locks."⁵

⁵ Quoted in Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution*, London 1961, p.174.

32. The authorities cracked down on all this at the Restoration, but after 1695 efforts to maintain a licensing system collapsed and Milton's strong man slowly revived again.
33. The abolitionists' repertoire also included *legal test cases*. This had been particularly significant in the early incubation of the movement, when Granville Sharp had won a series of cases to prove that because there was no slavery in England, a runaway or freed slave in England could not be treated as the property of his former master and, for example, kidnapped or beaten up and forced onto a ship to take them back to the West Indies. Many charities since have used test cases to test and assert the rights of their beneficiaries under an independent legal system. So another underpinning of political activities in pursuit of charitable causes both reflects and carries forward the historical development of *a robust system of common and equity law presided over by an independent judiciary*.
34. The campaign was *international*. Like many great injustices, the slave trade and slavery could not be tackled by one country alone, but were global phenomena. Wilberforce and Clarkson found themselves conversing with the Emperor of Russia, the King of Haiti, great statesmen of America and France. Even at this stage, too, the world was slowly becoming more interconnected: so more and more people could witness in person to what was going on in the West Indian colonies or the southern states of America. Within England, the roads and mail coaches were making it easier to spread words and ideas faster and more easily. Railways and telegraphs and steam ships would obviously accelerate the process before long. The experience of abolishing the slave trade and slavery would help ensure that greater connectedness would mean, among other things, concerted voluntary sector national and international political activity aimed at a fairer world.
35. How can we sum up "our good old English fashion"? It is non-party political. It is based on the longstanding tradition that Parliament and the polis need to be educated and influenced in favour of cherished moral or religious goals. It draws on the ancient roots of petitions for justice, and on the idea that if power is to be exercised justly and wisely, those wielding it cannot properly exclude the participation, experiences and beliefs of those who are not within its charmed circle. For Quakers, Dissenters, Roman Catholics, evangelical Anglicans and missionaries, as much as secular radicals, political activity was not an optional extra. It was a fundamental part of realising their dreams of building Jerusalem. As much as movements for extension of the franchise or Reform Bills, voluntary sector agitations such as the great campaigns to abolish the slave trade and slavery were part and parcel of a developing democratic society, enabling more multiple voices to be heard, more diverse experience of the realities of life to be brought into collective understanding and decision taking. It was part and parcel of how men and women with a cause use the hard won freedoms of expression and assembly and the rule of law to play their part in the political commonwealth. That is also what voluntary organisations are doing today in that long historical, non-party political tradition: pursuing charitable causes in our good old English fashion.

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