**Sceptical yet Supportive: Understanding public attitudes to charity**

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**Executive Summary**

* A substantial proportion of the British population supports charities by giving time and money, and the work of charitable organisations affects the daily lives of most people.
* During the 2020 COVID-19 crisis there has been an unprecedentedly high response to fundraising efforts for NHS charities, notably that organized by 99 year old war veteran Tom Moore.
* Despite evident public generosity, there are ongoing debates about the ‘right role’ for charity in relation to state provision as well as concerns about ‘poor practice’ in UK charities, often fueled by media coverage, and these have prompted a number of policy and regulatory initiatives, particularly in relation to fundraising.
* Taking a historical ‘long view’ shows that public concerns about charities and charitable practice are long-standing. This paper presents evidence from studies conducted in 1947, 1991 and 2015 which show striking consistency across seventy years in terms of: a lack of detailed public knowledge about the charity sector; ongoing debates about the scope and limits of governmental responsibility and charitable initiative; widespread concern about waste and duplication of charitable efforts; and an enduring sense of frustration with fundraising tactics.
* We thus highlight the need to be aware of the existence of a significant and enduring paradox: the reliance of British charity on *sceptical* but nonetheless *supportive* donors.
* We conclude that efforts to improve the workings of the charity sector (either through legislation or through sector-led initiatives to raise standards) should take account of this paradox by providing a balanced view of the behavior of charities.
* Charities can rightly be expected to be held to high standards of behaviour, but so too should those who wish to criticise them. If more is to be expected of charity, it is essential that there is a reasoned and open debate rather than the platitudes and ideological criticisms that have marked public discussion recently.

**Introduction**

Since the summer of 2015 in the UK there has been a succession of negative media headlines and political interventions highlighting concerns about a range of charity issues, including the methods used to raise funds, the salaries of charity chief executives, the circumstances leading to the sudden closure of ‘big brand’ charities such as Kids Company, and concerns about leadership at Oxfam and other international aid organisations. Commenting on the major media story that fundraisers had ‘hounded’ elderly poppy seller Olive Cooke to death – a story which later turned out to be unsubstantiated – then-Prime Minister David Cameron spoke of ‘[frankly unacceptable’actionsthat damage the reputation of the sector as a whole](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-law-to-protect-vulnerable-from-rogue-fundraisers), and then-Chair of the Charity Commission, William Shawcross, [described the situation as ‘a crisis’](https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/rathbones-charity-conversations-series-2015-william-shawcross-speech). A review of fundraising, undertaken by Peers from the three main political parties and authored by Sir Stuart Etherington, then-CEO of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, recommended sweeping changes to the regulation of fundraising, and the [Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmpubadm/431/431.pdf) declared that charities were in ‘the last chance saloon’.

Yet a [majority of the public continue to support charity](https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/caf-uk-giving-2019-report-an-overview-of-charitable-giving-in-the-uk.pdf) by making financial donations and volunteering their time, and both the Conservative government and the Labour opposition have recently published papers expressing far more positive sentiments about charity. The May [Government’s Civil Society Strategy](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-society-strategy-building-a-future-that-works-for-everyone) (August 2018) refers to civil society organisations as “hold[ing] our society together”, whilst the [Labour Party’s response](http://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Labour-Civil-Society-Strategy-June-2019.pdf) (June 2019) refers to this sector as “part of the fabric of the nation… the glue that binds communities”. In the general election campaign at the end of 2019, [all the main political parties pledged their support for the charity sector](https://www.cafonline.org/about-us/blog-home/public-affairs-blog/caf-hosts-the-charity-debate) and expressed a belief that charities play a central role in British society. During the COVID-19 crisis of 2020, the public has made unprecedentedly high donations to NHS charities including an 8-figure total for [Captain Tom Moore’s fundraising effort](https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/captain-tom-moore-s-fundraiser-for-nhs-charities-passes-26m.html), whilst also raising questions, amplified by the media and politicians, about the [legitimacy of voluntary income for a publicly-funded health service](https://voxpoliticalonline.com/2020/04/16/cpt-tom-moore-hasnt-really-been-found-fit-for-work-but-his-fundraising-shows-the-nhs-isnt-either/) and the [morality of fundraising costs](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/16/captain-tom-moore-nhs-walk-justgiving-urged-to-reveal-if-it-has-profited). These contrasting positions regarding the public and political approach to the idea and practice of charity are the focus of this paper, in which we dispute [the current chair of the Charity Commission’s contention](https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/voices/baroness-stowell-all-of-us-involved-in-charity-must-be-driven-by-the-needs-and-expectations-of-those-we-serve.html), expressed in December 2019, that [there is such a thing as a “common understanding of what charity means”](https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/charity-can-and-should-lead-the-way-in-taking-peoples-expectations-seriously) that those who lead and fundraise for charities can ‘uphold’ and ‘share’.

We begin with a historical overview of the changing role for charity in a welfare state, then highlight key features of charity in Britain today before presenting data on public attitudes towards charity from three time periods: 1947, 1991 and 2015. We identify much continuity, and a little change, over the past 70 years in relation to public understanding, debates and concerns about the ‘right’ role for charitable action. We show that the British public have long held a low – and arguably uninformed – opinion of charities. Surprisingly, though, this has nonetheless not prevented them from offering enthusiastic support for the charity sector. We describe this as the enduring paradox of British charity: its reliance on a sceptical yet supportive public.

**Historical overview: charity in a welfare state**

Like all social phenomena, charity is a product of its time. In the centuries before the central state took on significant direct responsibility for public welfare, charitable individuals and organisations were important (though not the sole) providers of health, education and poverty relief for those who could not provide for themselves, though [historians differ in their interpretations of the relative importance of the contributions made by charities and the state to the welfare mix](http://www.vahs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2006/03/The_Greatest_Voluntary_Tradition_on_Earth%5B1%5D.pdf). The boundary of responsibilities between the state, self-reliant individuals, and their charitably-minded fellow citizens was famously described by William Beveridge as the “perpetually moving frontier” between state and voluntary action: this shifting dynamic is one reason for the difficulty in reaching a permanent common understanding of ‘charity’.

Not only did the creation of the post-World War II welfare state affect the provenance of the funding and provision of services, it also affected understandings of the ‘appropriate role’ for charity. Many people felt the new institutions of the welfare state would render charity superfluous, yet Beveridge envisaged an ongoing role for voluntary initiative in pioneering new initiatives, especially in areas where democratic endorsement for statutory support was lacking. Seventy years later, public opinion continues to lack clarity and agreement. The role and propriety of ‘charity’ remains contested: some view it as a moral imperative and an essential means towards the maintenance of solidarity in an increasingly complex and individualised society; others see it as an unfortunate – and ideally unnecessary – throwback to previous centuries when people could not survive without the well-meaning but often capricious intervention of others.

**The Current Context: Charity in the twenty-first century**

Whilst easily dismissed as anachronistic, charitable activity continues to touch the daily lives of most British citizens. Even services that are largely the responsibility of the state either receive significant charitable donations in their own right or are delivered by organisations that rely to some extent on charitable donations. Examples include medical research, hospice provision, and a large range of activities in the fields of education, criminal justice and social care. Many facilities now in public ownership, such as hospitals, libraries, parks, art galleries, museums, swimming pools, and theatres, originated through charitable initiatives. Contemporary donors continue to fund a diverse array of activities including the arts, social welfare, medical research, and educational provision. Despite its wide reach, the embedded nature of charitable effort within the national fabric leaves many recipients unaware of the origins and ongoing income sources of the services and facilities from which they benefit.

Charitable giving is also a stable feature of British society. Optimists might note that the proportion of the population who give to charity remains more or less constant. The amounts raised typically total around £10 billion per annum, with approximately a further £3 billion from legacies, though it is questionable whether giving is keeping pace with the growth of GDP. New forms of charitable giving, including those facilitated by technological change, have emerged or expanded, and there have been occasional spikes in giving prompted by international emergencies, notably natural disasters such as the 2004 Asian Tsunami, but these have not resulted in substantial upward shifts in donations. Some evidence offers a less positive picture, such as recent [suggestions of cohort variations, for example, a decline in generosity across successive birth cohorts](https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/caf-uk-giving-2019-report-an-overview-of-charitable-giving-in-the-uk.pdf). Indeed pessimists might further argue that, given rising levels of prosperity and educational expansion, we might have expected an associated increase in charitable giving.

The data therefore suggests widespread and stable support for charity, but what of public attitudes? Have they changed over time, and if so, with what effect? These questions are the focus of the remainder of this paper

**Attitudes to charity over time: 1947, 1991 and 2015**

We use data collected in public attitudes surveys conducted in three different time periods to answer the questions set out above:

1. [Mass Observation (MO) inquiries](http://www.massobs.org.uk/) in 1947
2. The British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey in 1991.
3. A replication of the BSA in 2015

We first present and discuss data from MO, followed by a combined discussion of the two more recent studies.

*1. Defining charity in 1947*

One of MO’s routes for soliciting public opinion was via its panel of volunteer writers, who contributed responses in their own words to specific questions posed by MO. The panel members were more educated and middle-class than the general population. Around a fifth of those panel members contributing to the Mass Observation (MO) project in the 1940s thought of charity in its Biblical sense of love or as an attitude of tolerance and kindness; nearly half of the Panel saw charity as giving aid (mainly through financial donations) to organizations helping others; and the rest saw it as giving aid to all in need.

MO also conducted ‘street surveys’ to canvas the views of a wider cross-section of the public. These respondents were much less likely to mention any Biblical definition but more likely to offer contradictory views, such as stating that they did not believe in charity at all while also reporting that they always gave to flag days.. Around half of the street sample had no opinion, hadn’t made up their mind, or simultaneously expressed reasons why charity should be supported, and reasons why it should not. Likewise over half of the Panel stated that while there were aspects of charity of which they approved, there were others of which they disapproved. Thus, there were multiple conceptions of charity, and attitudes towards it were ambivalent or just vague.

*Specific views on charity in 1947*

Four sets of specific views feature in the MO data, which persist in later inquiries:

Resentment of fundraising tactics: MO’s respondents used forceful language in reference to their experiences, evoking a sense of physical threat (for example, Mass Observation respondents who were cited in the report referred to being “threatened into buying at street corners”, “bludgeoned into buying a raffle ticket” or “pounced upon and a few coppers ransom being demanded”). A feeling of “blackmail” was also reported by MO in its report as clearly having its effect on one respondent who recounted their “horror” of “refusing something to begging nuns”, including her “absurd superstition that they might curse me”. One person in twelve stated that they gave to charity “solely to prevent being pestered on flag days”, a proportion exceeding all other motivations for giving other than that “it’s for a good cause”. Respondents clearly found difficulty in refusing personal canvassers, so that a “persistent charity monger will probably get something out of me”. One negative consequence according to MO’s report was said to be the likelihood that the “giver has very little conception” of the objects to which he or she is donating, so that most gifts were “due to motives far removed from real charity”.

Administrative costs and business propositions: the MO reports do not convey a widespread sense of discontent with high salaries (as we see in more recent years) but there are views expressed by panel members about “organisation expenses and a lot of wastage”, or charities offering a “well-paid job for the organisers”. MO suggested in its report that charities which had turned into “business propositions,” with associated large offices and advertising campaigns “inevitably come to be compared with the Ministries that are also dispensing monetary aid to those in need”. MO’s report referred to a feeling that the state could do the job more efficiently and with less overlap. This argument directly anticipates later sociological concerns about organisational isomorphism, as well as political comments about large-scale bureaucratic charities in the 21st century.

The moving frontier: Strong views were expressed about how the boundary between the state and the voluntary sector was to be drawn. Hardly any respondents in the general MO sample – largely working-class people – envisaged that there would be any scope for individual charity in the post-war welfare state, whereas two-thirds of the better educated, more middle class MO panellists acknowledged that there would be an ongoing role for charity. As with survey data from later decades, there were strong views about which causes should receive government funding, with one panellist suggesting that: *“the real field for charity is those causes about which there can be a genuine difference of opinion whether they should be supported or not”.* The importance of a sphere of private charity, to allow individuals the opportunity to give to causes and experience what we would now call the “warm glow” effect of donation, was also articulated. The variation in the extent to which particular causes were endorsed was a feature of MO’s findings, and this theme recurred in subsequent attitudinal studies, illustrating the enduring absence of a common understanding of the scope of charitable activities.

**British Social Attitudes 1991, and 2015 replication**

The data from 1991 derives from a self-completion module on public attitudes in the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey (N=1,212), and in 2015 the authors of this paper commissioned a representative online survey (N=1,059) to replicate key questions to track continuities or change in the intervening years, published and discussed in full in Mohan and Breeze (2016).

From 1991 to 2015 we find ongoing evidence of changes in attitudes relating to the respective responsibilities of the state and charity. In 1991 BSA over three quarters (77%) of people disagreed with the view that governments ‘should do less for the needy and encourage charities to do more instead’. As 15% gave a neutral answer, only 6% supported a smaller role for government in alleviating need. By 2015 there was a small-scale shift in the position: 64% disagreed, 27% had a neutral view, and 9% were in some measure of agreement.

[insert Graphic 1 here]

We find further evidence of these shifts in relation to specific issues. The surveys in 1991 and 2015 both asked respondents whether government, charities or ‘both’ should be responsible for funding six areas of expenditure.

[insert Graphic 2 here]

In both 1991 and 2015 the two areas where the public most strongly believed that responsibility for funding rested entirely or mainly with government were health (represented by ‘paying for kidney machines’) and ‘housing for homeless people’, but in both cases the proportions fell substantially, from 93% to 76%, and from 86% to 65% respectively. The shift was in favour of viewing these expenditures as a shared responsibility between government and voluntary initiative, though we do not find such support across all areas of need. In 1991, two-thirds of people (65%) felt that the financing of lifeboats should be entirely or mainly the responsibility of government, but that proportion dropped to 57% by 2015. This finding highlights public confusion about how charities are funded as this is an area strongly associated with charitable endeavour: The Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) is one of the 10 largest charities in England and Wales, when ranked by levels of fundraising from individuals, and it has always prided itself on raising money from the community, and not accepting funding from government.

Animal charities are often cited as examples of the whimsical nature of charitable giving. The specific question asked in this attitudinal research, though, concerned the protection of rare animals. One might anticipate this issue becoming more salient in the public’s mind as a result of growing awareness both of environmental issues and of specific threats to rare species in fragile environments. But the public does not regard this as a priority for government. In 1991, just under a third (30%) suggested that funding for the protection of rare animals was wholly or entirely the responsibility of government, but that proportion had dropped to a fifth (19%) by 2015. Now, just over a third (35%) agree that needs in this area should be met entirely or mainly by charity.

In the final two fields of activity – holidays for disabled people, and food aid to poor countries –a majority of respondents now believe that responsibility rests in the province of charity. In both cases, the proportion favouring charitable finance has gone up from 30% to over a half (52% and 58% respectively). There has been a substantial reduction in the proportion who believe that holidays for people with disabilities should be entirely or mainly funded by government (31% to 11%), while only 21% now believe that food aid to poor countries should be entirely/mainly the responsibility of government, compared to 29% in 1991. This was consistent with the statement in the first set of questions, which asked whether charitable support should be directed to people living in Britain rather than overseas. The majority in favour of this statement has barely changed (an increase from 56 to 58%), but the minority that disagrees has halved.

Two questions reveal very little change over the 24-year period. The first concerned the confusion caused in the public’s mind by the sheer proliferation of charities. In 1991, over three-quarters of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that ‘there are so many charities that it is difficult to decide which to give to’. The corresponding proportion in 2015 was even higher, at four-fifths of respondents. Although it is sometimes argued that there ought to be rationalisation in the number of charities, it is also worth pointing out that, at least relative to population, this apparent proliferation has slowed down: the ratio of organisations to population has remained broadly consistent. There was also a marked increase in the proportions agreeing with the statement that ‘most charities are wasteful in their use of funds’, from 69% to 77%.

Turning to the broader attitudinal questions, the most significant shift was in response to the statement that ‘people should look after themselves and not rely on charities’. The proportion agreeing with this statement nearly doubled, from 28% in 1991 to 52% in 2015. This is consistent with wider changes over the same time period in the direction of greater self-reliance and individualism. The proposition that ‘government should do less for the needy and encourage charities to do more instead’ is still rejected by a majority of respondents, although the proportion rejecting this notion has dropped from 77% to 64%.

A specific question on the importance of charitable giving *per se* also revealed a shift in attitudes. The 1991 BSA survey invited responses to the proposition that ‘it is *not* everyone’s responsibility to give what they can to charities’ (emphasis in original), and three-fifths (60%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. By 2015, this figure was down to 48%, suggesting a growing acceptance of the importance of and need for charitable donations.

**Reflections on the data**

So what do these three sets of public attitudes data show us?

* Firstly, there is a lack of detailed public knowledge of the charity sector. Despite high levels of participation in charitable giving, many participants in all three studies struggled to accurately understand the role of charity and how it works.
* Secondly, there are ongoing debates about the scope and limits of governmental and charitable responsibility. However, there is no widespread sense that charity should rise up to replace government. This must give pause for thought to those who believe, or hope, that charities can pick up the slack as the state withdraws. There is a range of views on where the boundaries of responsibility for specific areas of need should be drawn. Examples are a belief in greater reliance on government funding for health and rescue (somewhat at variance with the facts in the latter case), contrasted with a preference for greater reliance on charitable funding for non-human beneficiaries, geographically distant people, and expenditures which are viewed as discretionary rather than essential, such as holidays for disabled people.
* Thirdly, there is sustained consistency in the presence of concerns about inefficiency and duplication. The public believe that the charity sector is characterised by a complex proliferation of organisations, rendering it difficult to decide which causes to support; they clearly also have concerns about wastefulness.
* Fourthly and finally, there is ongoing frustration with fundraising tactics. The evidence that widespread negative feelings about being solicited existed as far back as 1947 means that the recent explosion of concern about fundraisers in the UK – which has dominated media headlines and led to regulatory and legislative changes - needs to be re-considered. It has long historical roots and is not just the result of poor practice by today’s fundraising practitioners.
* Alongside these consistencies, there have also been a number of changes over time in terms of views about the ‘right’ role for the state and for voluntary action; the priority given to particular areas of charitable activity; and the perpetually ‘moving frontier’ in public attitudes to charity.

**Conclusion**

We identify a central paradox of British charity**:** its reliance on a sceptical yet supportive public. The British public has long provided enthusiastic support for the charity sector, while simultaneously holding a low – and arguably uninformed – opinion of charities. Whilst the data discussed above demonstrates that it was ever thus, it raises the question of what charities and their stakeholders might do in response.

Charities can do more to convince donors that they are efficient and effective organisations, and that funds are being well spent. There is a growing trend towards measuring impact and publishing reports to show what has been achieved as a result of charitable activity. Whilst this drive towards demonstrating and reporting on impact is a reasonable response to public concerns and negative media headlines, it creates a new challenge for charities to pay for meaningful monitoring of their outcomes whilst [pursuing the low overhead costs demanded by donors and journalists alike](https://rady.ucsd.edu/docs/Science-2014-Gneezy-632-5.pdf).

This development also creates a challenge for the sector’s regulators, such as the Charity Commission for England and Wales. The duties of the Commission include inter alia the promotion of public trust in charities, encouraging the better use of resources by charities, and enhancement of charity accountability. It may be unrealistic to expect the Commission to pursue these objectives to the point of investigating the efficiency and impact of every single charity. But vague – and, we would argue, unrealizable - assertions about the idea of a “common understanding of charity”, promulgated recently by the Commission’s chair, are not going to help the promotion of public trust. Nor are ideological criticisms and often evidence-free assertions about fundraising techniques, high salaries, or administrative costs. When influential people are “[sticking the boot into charity](https://mbsbham.wordpress.com/2015/10/21/sticking-the-boot-into-charity/)” – whether they be senior political figures, current and former Chairs of the Charity Commission, or newspaper editors – this hardly seems likely to stimulate public support.

Therefore the onus is on politicians and policymakers to lead by eschewing cheap shots such as [criticising fundraising costs](https://twitter.com/coyleneil/status/1251069512373407745?s=20), and by not repeating accusations that lack evidence, such as [the false assertion that elderly charity supporter Olive Cooke was ‘hounded to death’ by fundraisers](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0008jp9) – a narrative allowed to thrive for political expediency. Mud sticks: problems or misconduct identified at one or a handful of charities can be manipulated to cast aspersions on the entire charitable sector. The impact of the global pandemic on the charity sector, which [anticipates a steep decline in fundraised income](https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/charities-face-closure-as-sector-set-to-lose-4bn-over-12-weeks.html%20or%20https%3A/www.itv.com/news/2020-03-31/charities-funding-coronavirus-donations-hit-lose-out-government-select-committee/), heightens the importance of avoiding unnecessary and unfair reputational harm. Given the cross-party support for the positive role of voluntary action in strengthening society, charities ought to be able to count on support from politicians to counter harmful myths. For example government bodies and representatives could proactively take a lead on explaining the need for legitimate expenditures on charity overheads, defending the right to invest in fundraising, and giving credit when charities achieve significant impact. The wide reach of charities has impacts which improve the quality of lives for individuals and communities in many different ways, yet when charities hit the headlines the focus is often on problems rather than on positive outcomes.

Four years on from the Etherington report, which paved the way for sweeping regulatory change of fundraising, [Sir Stuart Etherington reflected in his retirement speech](https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/charities-become-introspective-says-departing-etherington/management/article/1631276) in September 2019 that UK charities had become “too inward-looking, too introspective, too worried, too anxious” and he called for greater recourse to reason and evidence in order to safeguard civil society and its beneficiaries. We echo this call, and believe it is supported by seven decades of data on public attitudes to charitable activity.

While UK donors are sceptical, they are also supportive. Maintaining or increasing levels of support from the British public must therefore involve a balancing act. Instances of egregious behaviours by charities must be called out. But scepticism about charity needs to be counterbalanced in two ways. Firstly, more needs to be done by the sector and its stakeholders to provide evidence-based responses to public criticism. Secondly, without exempting charities from scrutiny, there needs to be an awareness that unreflective, evidence-free assertions about charities risk accentuating the scepticism of the public and undermining their support.

**Further reading list**

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