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Philanthropy in a fearful world

Premium

by Fiona Higgins | March 2, 2017

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Unconstrained by short-term political cycles, philanthropy is uniquely placed to act as an advocate and defender of civil society so is it time to 'feel the fear and do it anyway?' ponders Fiona Higgins.



In the lead up to last year's US presidential election, many foundation insiders were predicting a Clinton win followed by a "golden age of public-private partnerships, along with new high-level access for funders and non-profits working on women's and family issues"[1]. How remote that notion now seems, with the US philanthropic sector left grappling with how best to respond to a previously 'unthinkable' presidency.

Some American foundation executives are conspicuously silent or agnostic about the Trump administration. Others, such as Sharon Alpert,

president and CEO of [Nathan Cummings Foundation](#), are deeply concerned about policy and program rollbacks among minority communities.

In Australia, Trump's recent undercutting of the longstanding US-Australia diplomatic alliance has caused understandable consternation. But more concerning, perhaps, is the reactionary politics his presidency also serves to legitimise, including Pauline Hanson's anti-Muslim agenda, as noted recently in the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

Trumpism is an angry, nationalist populism. It's not uniquely a Trump phenomenon but it is the force he has awoken and exploited to great effect. Populism is non-partisan, it can be left wing, right wing or both. But it has two constants. It always claims to represent "the people" against "the elites". It usually attacks the power of Big Capital and Big Parties. And it always proposes unrealistically simple solutions to complex problems.[2]

How should those of us in philanthropic circles respond to this shifting political landscape? Irrespective of our political proclivities—or where we might place ourselves along the conservative-progressive funder continuum—the Trump presidency invites us to (re)affirm four vital aspects of philanthropy's function in a democratic society. These are:

1 – Philanthropy as a political counterpoint

One of philanthropy's most important strategic agendas is to deliver a counterpoint against prevailing political wisdom. In the context of Trump, this might translate as a concentration of foundation resources towards advocating for populations that deviate from the administration's definition of normality—seemingly white, US-born, heterosexual, able-bodied, and Christian— which some have suggested "excludes the majority of Americans".[3]

Counterpoint philanthropy is not an exclusively leftist preoccupation, however. Consider the [Centre for Independent Studies](#) (CIS) in Australia: a conservative-leaning think-tank funded predominantly by philanthropy from individual members and private foundations. The CIS has a history of calling out federal and state governments of all persuasions on all kinds of issues—from education funding reform to Indigenous affairs—and was an early advocate for Noel Pearson's [Cape York Partnerships](#) and the [Teach for Australia](#) program.

Whether the counterpoint position is 'blue' or 'red' is, ultimately, irrelevant: more important is philanthropy's independence, its rigour and the patient supply of intellectual capital. Unlike any other form of funding, philanthropy has the power to support counterpoint positions over extended periods of time, unconstrained by short-term political cycles: philanthropy has the power to disrupt a despot of any political disposition.



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2 – Philanthropy as a defender of civil society

Unfortunately, many politicians—and their staffers—are preoccupied with their own re-election. This reality serves to underscore another unique power of philanthropy: to elevate matters of civil society over insidious personality politics.

Where larger-than-life personalities are monopolising the political stage (globally or locally), philanthropy has an opportunity to affirm the importance of values, ideas and civic principles underpinning government. Targeted activities of philanthropy can affirm the *trias politica* principle – the separation of powers between the executive, legislative and judicial. By partnering with think-tanks, policy groups, clearinghouses, academic centres and niche for-purpose organisations that focus on strengthening the pillars of societal governance—such as [The Ethics Centre](#)— philanthropy can prioritise the *power of ideas* rather than *rhetoric* to direct (and re-direct) civil society.

3 – Philanthropy as a fear-facer

Conservative and progressive funders alike will recognise that fear is never an ideal position from which to begin a negotiation, let alone attempt to develop credible solutions to society's most pressing problems. But wherever fear resides, there is also great opportunity—to face the wounded parts of our collective humanity and respond well (or at least, better) to our own brokenness.

Unlike governments, philanthropy can 'feel the fear and do it anyway': funding novel responses to intractable problems; funding core costs of promising initiatives over a decade or longer; engaging with the controversial or messy or just plain difficult (euthanasia, medical marijuana, inequities among Indigenous Australians, asylum seeker and refugee debates).

To this end, a key question philanthropists can ask themselves in considering a partnership or funding opportunity is this: *Is the government nervous about, or afraid of, this issue?* If the answer is yes, then it's probably a sweet spot for philanthropy.

4 – Philanthropy as an advocate

Whether it's human rights, social justice, economic fairness or environmental sustainability, philanthropy can demonstrate leadership in advocating for causes over which governments exercise power. While combining charity and advocacy can be vexed, if you're *not* using all of the resources available to you—including your capacity to advocate to change laws and government policies relevant to your funding foci—then it's possible your foundation is simply plugging governmental funding gaps.

Advocacy is an important and complementary strategy to funding frontline service delivery, and philanthropists are often uniquely placed to obtain access to the corridors of power in a way that service providers are not, and once in, to achieve disproportionate political leverage. (Think of Al Gore's philanthropically-funded social documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, and its effect at the time on the then hotly-debated issue of climate change.)

Organisational pin-ups of philanthropic advocacy in Australia include [The Reichstein Foundation](#), [The Documentary Australia Foundation](#) and the [Australian Environmental Grantmakers Network](#).

A litmus test for any philanthropist in this regard, when considering a partnership opportunity, is to ask: *What will happen if I don't support this?* If the answer is *Not much at all*, then it might be time to consider **how else** you can exert your influence, beyond funding of programs and services, to advocate for change around issues you care about.

Fiona Higgins is Senior Manager, Grantmaking & Evaluation at [Australian Philanthropic Services](#), a leading provider of PAF establishment, administration and grantmaking services in Australia. Fiona has been involved in the philanthropy and not-for-profit sector in Australia for the past seventeen years and currently serves on the board of the Royal Agricultural Society Foundation of NSW. Her prior roles include Executive Director of the Caledonia Foundation, Philanthropy Services Manager at Cambooya Services and Program Manager at the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation.

[1] David Callahan, Philanthropy in the Age of Trump: Six Predictions. *Inside Philanthropy*. <http://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2016/11/9/philanthropy-in-the-age-of-trump-five-predictions> 09 November 2016.

[2] Peter Hartcher, The twin threats facing Malcolm Turnbull: Donald Trump and Pauline Hanson. <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/the-twin-threats-facing-malcolm-turnbull-donald-trump-and-pauline-hanson-20170203-gu58x3.html> 4 February, 2017

[3] Andrew Solomon, The New Yorker, 3 February 2017.



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