

Friends of the Earth
Quakers in Britain
Amnesty International
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10:10 Climate Action
War on Want
Global Justice Now
Jubilee Debt Campaign
Migrants' Rights Network
Medact
ActionAid UK

5th July 2018

Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport
100 Parliament Street
Westminster
London
SW1A 2BQ

Dear Secretary of State,

Re: A joint letter from civil society groups regarding threats to our democracy

We are writing this open letter to you in National Democracy Week, a time during which the government plans to “celebrate progress and champion future democratic participation”. This is an issue we feel strongly about. As you have rightly pointed out “the greatest social and political changes in our history have come about because independent people formed associations to press for change”, and this is the very essence of civil society. While we welcome the Government’s recent Civil Society Strategy consultation, we are concerned over the lack of recognition, or engagement with, the issues civil society groups are facing. In particular, successive governments have enacted measures which limit the ability of charities to campaign and advocate on behalf of those for whom they work.

We have also witnessed successive governments enacting legislation and using rhetoric that has undermined the ability of charities, and other civil society organisations, to speak out, while simultaneously reducing the public’s trust in organisations from the not-for-profit sector. Silencing organisations that represent the most vulnerable in society is a fundamental threat to democracy. It is an issue that we feel compelled to highlight during National Democracy Week.

You have praised “the individuals and groups - often in areas of significant disadvantage - who hold their communities together, doing everything from visiting the elderly to running the youth club”. Yet the government has refused to address the impact of measures which are preventing organisations from speaking out on the issues that lead to these disadvantages. A recent report by the Sheila McKechnie Foundation found that the Lobbying Act reduces the ability of organisations to represent issues affecting their beneficiaries and enable supporters to engage in political debate, as well as reducing the ability of charities and voluntary organisations to support local democratic engagement. This is not limited only to the Lobbying Act, recently we have seen anti-advocacy clauses placed on organisations that have received funds raised from the Tampon Tax. These clauses state that they cannot use the funds to engage in “advocacy”, “appeals” and “campaigning and awareness raising”.

In its recent inquiry the House of Lords Select Committee on charities stated that “Charities are the eyes, ears and conscience of any society; advocacy is a central part of their work and a sign of a healthy democracy”. Your consultation asked how civil society can be supported “to have a stronger role in shaping government policy”. Our answer is by removing the ties which constrain us when we seek to do so.

The Civil Society Strategy consultation must be seen only as a first step in a conversation that seeks to rectify this worrying trend. It is vital for democracy that we have a robust civil society, and we ask that the government works to revitalise this.

Best wishes,

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Executive Director, War on Want

Sarah-Jayne Clifton
Director, Jubilee Debt Campaign

Paul Parker
Recording Clerk, Quakers in Britain

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