

POWER AND SOLIDARITY: INSIGHTS FROM ENTWINED CONVERSATIONS



By Sue Tibballs and Sarah Thomas

In our Sharing and Building Power cell, we've been exploring how we can distribute power more equitably, as it lies in too few hands, and can make more of the power we have to change things for the better. Sue Tibballs and Sarah Thomas, our thought leaders for the cell, write here about what they've learnt from taking part and from the Sheila McKechnie's Foundation's wider work on power.

Over the past two years, the Sheila McKechnie Foundation (SMK) has had the privilege of co-hosting a conversation about building and sharing power for the Better Way network. Meanwhile, we have been engaged in our own separate but related inquiry into power in civil society, the Power Project. Our guide, *It's All About Power*, published mid-March, draws together insights and tools developed during the project. In this essay, we hope to share some of what we've learnt through these entwined journeys.

The voiceless, or the unheard?

The Better Way is a network across sectors committed to changing things for the

better. Building and sharing power is one of the four behaviours a Better Way has identified that how we can help drive practical action. The Power Project has a more specific focus: we were tasked with exploring the question, 'How can we grow the voice of those with lived experience of poverty and inequality in social change?' On the face of it, this was a good and simple question. But, in conversations with people from across civil society, it became clear it was not. In fact, in trying to answer it, every aspect of the question itself was challenged – from the language that frames it to the assumptions it reveals.

Firstly, it is simply untrue to assume that those with direct, first-hand experience of social inequalities are not already driving

change. From Joeli Brearley's Pregnant Then Screwed campaign, to social housing activist Kwajo Tweneboa, people with first-hand experience of all kinds of injustice are standing up and making a difference in all kinds of ways. We heard some brilliant examples, too, in our conversations with Better Way members. Not least, from the brilliant Lady Unchained and Amanda Hailes, members of Sound Delivery Media's Spokesperson Network, who shared their very different approaches to creating change – from poetry to joining a board.

The language of 'lived experience' – at least when that label was applied by us – seemed to assume an 'us' and a 'them' in a troubling way. Not everyone we spoke to wanted to be defined as a 'person with lived experience'. Many reported having both 'lived' and 'learned' experience. Others told us that focusing on individual stories of hardship meant the many other qualities and experiences they can bring were in danger of being overlooked – along with the systemic, political causes of their situation.

Beyond issues of language, we have heard that the formal social sector is not always a welcoming place, and examples of genuine, equitable partnerships with those outside the sector are rare. Stories of lived experience are, too often, used in ways that are tokenistic or even exploitative. As a result, many people prefer to pursue change outside of formal organisations, to ensure their mission is not compromised and their experiences are not co-opted.

The kinds of assumptions and practices our question revealed shore up an old model of charity and philanthropy that has no place in a contemporary social sector. Nevertheless,

our conversations with the Better Way network and many others have left us feeling optimistic. The challenges we face may be great, but there are a great many people willing to take up the challenge.

Many ways to share and build power

Our own conversations on the Power Project, and those of the Sharing and Building Power cell, hinge on one very important provocation: we need to think differently about power.

We talk a lot about power in society and in social change – speaking truth to power, devolving power, empowering others. Each of these statements assumes a binary notion of those with power and those without. But power is not static, and it is not a zero-sum game. We may find we have more or less power in different contexts, or with different people. Even world leaders often report that the systems they operate within mean they don't have the power others assume they have. It is true, also, that power is accumulative. Access to power tends to beget more access to more power. But if we begin to see power as something that is dynamic, fluid and shifting – more like a current or a flow that surrounds and runs through us all – this means that each of us can choose to use the power we have consciously and purposefully to create change, even if only in a small way.

This is a very profound shift, which the tools and insights in *It's All About Power* are designed to support. Our conversations with Better Way members over 2021 reaffirmed that, when we begin to think

differently about power, opportunities and routes for change are everywhere. For example, Phoebe Tickell and Athol Hallé asked us to experience the power of imagination in transformative change both for individuals and for society.

In 2021, we also heard from those within the so-called institutions of power themselves and what can be done to challenge the abuses of power. Kristian Tomblin from Devon County Council described the sensitive work happening there to share and build power within his institution and Jill Baker, who has worked in a number of leadership roles in the public and voluntary sector, talked about the importance of ‘servant leadership’. Sonya Ruperal explained how it is possible to build equitable and inclusive partnerships, despite the power imbalances that exist.

We have learned that sharing and building power is more of a recipe than a check list. There are some key, non-negotiable ingredients – paying people for their time, taking action to support diversity on boards and in decision-making forums, rather than simply providing a seat at the table. Simplifying processes, de-coding language, sharing resources. The rest is up to you and the people you work with to decide together. Explore how power manifests in yourself and in the groups and organisations you are part of, use the ingredients at your disposal and make a start. Perhaps most importantly, we have learned that sharing and building power means putting into practice the other elements of the Better Way model – listening to each other, putting relationships first and joining forces.

Reversing the question

As we reached the end of our own inquiry, we made the decision to reverse our question completely. Rather than ‘how can we share power with others?’ we asked, ‘How can the social sector find ways to work in meaningful solidarity with people and communities?’

This reversal was significant for us. The onus of change is on the organisations themselves – not in response to some perceived lack in people or communities, but in acknowledgement that the burden of solving social issues cannot lie solely on the shoulders of those most affected. Solidarity is the key word.

The social sector can no longer act as the ‘hero saviour’ of Victorian philanthropic tradition. Instead, it needs to reimagine its work as an ally and partner. We believe that by embedding social justice – and an understanding of power for deeper solidarity – in every part of the social change process, it can be more relevant, effective, and authentic. The result will be something that we sorely need in this moment – more human connections, stronger communities, and hope for change.

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