

# AGENT PROVOCATEUR

Fundraisers need to help to defend philanthropy and philanthropists,  
says **BETH BREEZE**

What do Bill Gates, George Soros, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, the Rockefellers, “corrupt politicians” and “elite paedophiles” have in common? This is not the world’s worst Christmas cracker joke – this is a list of names printed on a placard at a recent anti-lockdown demonstration demanding they all be arrested. The belief that major philanthropists have nefarious hidden interests may seem confined to the realm of crankery, but the assumption that big givers are dodgy characters with self-interested agendas is commonplace and, I believe, making major donor fundraising even harder than it already is.

The current hyper-criticism of philanthropy targets even those giving the largest amounts in the best ways. The world’s single biggest individual donor in 2020, MacKenzie Scott, distributed £4.3bn in unprompted and unrestricted grants to organisations largely working for racial, gender and climate justice, with leaders having lived experience of those issues. This historically large and progressive donor is nonetheless frequently criticised in media articles by reference to her spectacularly public divorce from Amazon founder Bezos, and her philanthropy has been interpreted as a way of getting back at her ex-spouse.

Of course, there is nothing new about knocking big donors. When Andrew Carnegie and John D Rockefeller first tried to establish their charitable foundations in the early 20th century, they were described by a US senator as “a menace to the welfare of society”. Today, philanthropy remains an easy target in popular culture, meanwhile with social media feeds full of



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outrage whenever a rich person does – or doesn’t – make a big donation.

Why does this hyper-criticism of philanthropy affect fundraising success? Fundraisers rely on private voluntary giving being viewed as a good thing: something that is admired and aspirational, not disparaged and therefore discouraged. We know that giving is driven by altruistic factors such as compassion and empathy, but research shows that mixed motives is the norm: rich and not-rich donors also give to be well thought of, and to feel good about themselves. Generalised attacks on philanthropy undermine these drivers of philanthropic giving, reducing the ability of fundraisers to offer positive recognition and the “warm glow” that drives pro-social behaviour.

So, what can fundraisers do about it? Firstly, we need to stop making and repeating blanket statements and crowd-

pleasing comments about rich donors. We must of course engage with relevant concerns such as the source of wealth, but crass generalisations and cheap shots about donors’ personal relationships, their looks and taste should be off-limits. Retweeting social media memes that mock big givers might make us feel woke but discouraging philanthropy ultimately harms our causes.

Secondly, we need to disentangle critiques of philanthropy from critiques of wealth and inequality. One root of this confusion is the belief that we have to pick a side: team tax (a generous state) or team philanthropy (generous individuals). But we can have – and indeed need – both.

Well-run charities strive to attract funding across a range of income streams: from big donors, smaller donors, and from local, national and international government, as well as from the corporate sector. Many wealthy donors are on record calling for higher and more progressive tax, Gift Aid is available to every tax-paying donor, and whatever size the tax break, every donor is “down” on the deal after giving. So let’s be braver and push back on the common idea that philanthropy is just a tax dodge.

Thirdly, fundraisers can help puncture the myth that all big donors are hubristic egotists. I have never met a rich donor who believes their giving cannot be improved. And I’ve met plenty who are striving to become more ethical and effective givers.

Defending philanthropy matters to us all. If social disapproval continues to hound philanthropic donations but not the purchase of luxuries, that is good news for private yacht sales but bad news for charities and their fundraisers. ■



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Merry Christmas and a happy new year to all our readers!  
We hope you have a fantastic and well-earned festive break.  
We will be back with another jam-packed issue in February.

