

‘Now that Christmas is over, what do our donors want to give us?’

By John Rux-Burton, Founder and Managing Partner, Shared Vision

Many development offices approached Christmas with a sense a new normal was coming. Then the shortened break and a further lockdown, deep in the heart of winter, certainly challenged this optimism. The lockdown has, however, given many offices pause. And maybe it should, as we may now not get a new normal, but rather a *new different*. Last year, people endured and took stock. Now, they feel apprehensive, or at the very least, want their lives back. But, as follows every crisis, they will also want change, and that *new different* will come.

We cannot be certain what those changes will be. This isn't like any crisis in living memory. However, we can make some guesses based on previous turmoil over the past fifty years.

The last two big recessions (the early '90s property crash and the 2008 global financial crisis) both changed educational philanthropy. The first accelerated changes in funding (university loans and the death of Assisted Places). These made hot topics of student support and bursaries, which had previously been largely ignored. The second created further stresses. One was vastly increasing student loans. Another was a swathe more of the middle-class being priced out of school fees. This turned the drive for student support and bursaries from first-aid triage to a long-term care plan. Schools launched life-changing bursary programmes and philanthropy pivoted away from big capital projects. The impact of the pandemic will not be to raise university costs further, because government dare not. It will however, reduce the number of middle-class families who can access private education, and simply adding more international students in either private secondary or public tertiary to increase revenue, may not be as easy as before the pandemic.

What does this mean for giving? It may be hard to persuade alumni that their alma mater is under financial pressure. Many development professionals who encounter such an attitude rightly find it unfair, but it is a perennial issue and it is explicable. If we create brands of exceptional world-class quality, people will struggle to believe that these august halls of learning need financial support. Equally, if institutions are too successful at appearing up against it, this may discourage giving for other reasons. People do like to give to success. So, we may well have to live with the attention of potential donors giving even more towards bursaries. Most likely, it will be not simply bursaries for the sake of an individual, but also with a social purpose. Universities are creating, right now, 100% bursary funds targeted at diversity. Bursaries with the status quo openly declared as a target for change. It would be brave indeed to assume that the many wealthy donors giving to these funds, a preponderance from independent schools, will not exert similar demands on their former schools.

This was a direction of travel before the pandemic, but the pandemic has added impetus. There is likely to be a lingering feeling that our most recent disaster, like all disasters, was self-inflicted. We don't blame the Gods anymore, but old-fashioned sins, mainly in the areas of greed and sloth, were linked to the last two recessions. One can see them already being linked to both the cause and effects of the pandemic. There is already currency that globalisation, a bad relationship with the environment, and austerity, have created a perfect storm for the disease to strike hard. The response to such feelings will lead to a positive urge to help others and make our world better. Why do I say this? Because a grateful nation was still quite willing to kick out Churchill in 1948 because 'something had to change.' This response was not a post-catastrophe aberration, it is what happens after every crisis.

Independent schools are not immune to wider society, and great thought is probably needed both about launching capital campaigns over the next few years, and about the nuance of how these projects are presented. The message of a sports centre may well need to be firmly located in individual health, community solidarity, leadership and teamwork skills, rather than elite sport, for example. Of course, many such cases for support do that already, but the emphasis on the greater good may need to be even stronger in the future. If we consider the last two crises, they greatly advanced donors' enthusiasm for helping the less fortunate. Both led to a shift to the left, the first Blair, the second the coalition (to the extent that rather than simply dumping the exiting government with a violent swing, significant votes shifted to another party occupying the centre-left preventing a majority). In philanthropy, it saw a desire to provide individual benefit to the deserving individual, and to build a better society. It seems naive to think something different will happen this time.

This analysis may be wrong. But three recent events are notable. One of course is that the US has gone Democrat, across the House, the Senate and the President. Politics swings back and forth. Maybe it's no more than that. But Unilever, the second, looks rather different. Their decision to prioritise business with companies run by women and/or individuals from minority ethnic groups, is profoundly telling. It hardly matters if it's a PR stunt. It shows us that one of the world's smartest companies when it comes to marketing, which has built a truly extraordinary range of globally recognised brands, has identified this as the direction of travel. The third is the decision of the Corporation of London to remove the statues of Sir John Cass and William Beckford from the Guildhall. The Corporation is largely elected by some of the world's most powerful financial institutions. It, like Unilever, has decided a particular route will best serve its interests. This is not to test the merits of the arguments, which are strongly held. The point is simply that a body that answers to banks and livery companies, the staff and members of which make up such a proportion of the philanthropic support for education, have taken such a view. They clearly think that their backers, or their backer's customers, or both will, on balance, support such a decision. It does not affect how schools should deal with that particular point. Every case requires individual consideration as there are many factors. It simply is another example of how righting real or perceived social wrongs is likely to be a post-pandemic urge.

What does this mean? Developing capacity among a school's community is going to be vital. I do not mean simply getting lots of people to give something to small immediate projects, which will be important, as post-pandemic people will want quick wins. It is more than that. Schools will need to embrace their community more widely and create common purpose. They must inspire people to invest in a journey to wide and deserving benefit. This will mean achieving increased engagement in volunteer programmes and career networks, and wider participation in publications, so that people feel they are part of the school for life. The fracture of companionship caused by the pandemic will make people welcome communal endeavour. The sense of hardship and injustice in the economic carnage, loss of life and chronic ill-health, will hasten a desire to achieve 'levelling-up'.

It is not simply your case for support that will need attention. The last twelve months will also affect communication streams. We have seen a formalisation of online communication. It is now far more personal and local than anything we have seen since the 1700's. In the 19th century, a formal postal service which allowed relatively rapid communication over distance, made in-person meetings less essential. The arrival of the telephone put back some of the 'personal' and injected speed. It moved us back to something much closer to face to face. But then email introduced such speed that it cut across the need for the phone in many circumstances. This has changed again. Over the last twelve months, Zoom and Co has normalised the personal meeting once again. And how personal it is! Now instinctively we send a link and join each other in our kitchens, our living rooms, our bedrooms.

This has implications. Firstly, it seems that here at Shared Vision we may need to think more about calls to alumni by Zoom. But aside from that, it makes phoning people more important. People have learnt that an email is not a totem of our age, that there are better, more personal options available. If we want to develop our community, we will need to maximise both the personal and the personalisation of our communication. Only then will we meet demands, for a new-found intimacy and informality to our daily lives and how we relate to others.

All this makes me feel that regular giving is going to become more vital. So, will building that giving within a context of communication and involvement (a state beyond engagement).

This is the time to get your bursar to engage in a three-year effort to transform your school's giving culture. I spoke to a school last week where 15% of their former pupils give each year and that's where everyone needs to be – and beyond. It will probably be 18 months before any big capital campaigns can really get going. Building capacity now is the very best thing you can do. You won't be wasting your time. You will be building trust. Then when you ask 'big' in 2022, your community will respond to capacity, and in numbers.

Now is not a challenge but an opportunity. People want change and you should want it too. The change you should want is to take this new social imperative and change the culture of



your school permanently; a culture where everyone understands and invests, in every possible way, in its purpose.