

Philanthropy is at the heart of our moral compass

By John Rux-Burton, Founder and Managing Partner, Rux Burton Associates

IDPE asked me to write a thought piece and I thought, what does that really mean? It could be a great opportunity to try and say something useful and simultaneously promote our products and services! Which is fair enough... we all need to live and, promoted or not, products and services sell because they add value. So that's happiness all round! But it's Christmas, and this made me think a little more about core values, rather than added value, and the role that educational philanthropy has in fixing a world that, right now, isn't very Christmassy at all.

We have a political climate similar to the early 18th Century. Both then and now were preceded by a century of catastrophic war (in some ways the Thirty Years' War makes the 20th Century seem like a barrel of laughs), mass extinction (plague and fire/influenza and third world famine), Europeanisation and Globalisation and in art, Mannerism and Post-Modernism. Which is a delightfully intellectual way of saying we have arrived at a similar epoch of polarisation, where the end justifies the means and where our moral judgement is so often fashioned by a viewpoint that is of 'our side' or of 'the enemy'. Trump's 'crimes' are self-evident to Democrats. They are equally not 'crimes' but bold governance to Republicans. Some see Boris as a philandering, corrupt, racist liar; others as a hero. Before you say 'why was my example the tousled haired, blonde, Latin-spouting, love-machine?', have no doubt, the same complaints are available for Labour in relation to Corbyn and anti-Semitism, or Jo Swinson and her role in supporting austerity during the Coalition. Like Walpole in the 18th Century, even if privately someone believes a leader scurrilous, they keep it to themselves if it serves their personal vested interest. We hold our nose and ignore the immorality offered on the ballot sheet because we are too polarised (and what is offered is too polarised) to let any minor detail like a leader's moral compass get in the way of voting for 'our side'.

Hasn't this always been the case? Well, it wasn't when Lord Carrington resigned at the start of the Falklands War. He believed the Foreign Office had failed. He was the Foreign Secretary. He had to go. He could have easily brazened it out. But he did not. The difference then was that moral duty was not applied to him by his supporters or detractors, but by himself. Our problem today is not with partisan politics. It is with leaders who do not feel the need to restrain their behaviour. And it is not that we do not know what is right and what is wrong. Were that the case, we would not have witnessed the other day a convicted murderer and an ordinary bloke take up arms (if a fire extinguisher and a narwhal tusk can be described as arms) against a knife-wielding terrorist. However divided our society today, deep down we know, as we always have, our moral responsibilities.

Philanthropy is at the heart of this moral compass. Fundamental to giving is an acceptance of personal sacrifice for the sake of another. Those guys on London Bridge were philanthropic in the extreme. Let's not, of course, go asking our donors to make a statement

like that! But their heroic decision outside Fishmongers Hall, that others came first, that they wouldn't leave it to someone else, that they wouldn't preserve themselves and ignore the needs of others, is on the same journey, just way further down the track, to someone who we get to say 'actually my cash is better in your hands'. It is such attitudes that make us human, that make us sociable and which guarantee, if we try hard enough, that today's fractured society is just a phase (by the way, please don't give me any credit for such a statement, this idea is entirely dependent on Matt Ridley's extraordinary treatise on self-sacrifice *The Origins of Virtue*).

I believe there are several aspects of educational philanthropy which are so valuable that we should all be proud of what we do and we should come back in the New Year with renewed vigour to proselytise it to the world. The first is that every time we give to our old school, we take part in a community we can feel part of all our lives. That simply isn't true for most of us in any other such positive way. Back in the jolly days of the 17th Century, many Europeans (despite a rapidly changing society) were born in the same place and knew a group of people for decades with whom we shared our lives (and deaths close together during the Thirty Years' War). We are born and often quickly scattered to the winds by boarding schools, parents moving jobs, university and our own careers. Perhaps this is one reason why we are so partisan... our party, our race, our religion: all are opportunities to sate a human need to belong in an increasingly globalising, identity effacing world. Of course, just belonging to our school community doesn't make us virtuous, though without being sanctimonious, the professed values of education and our great schools are usually decent and genuinely felt and, more often than one might expect given human frailty, acted upon. The second aspect of philanthropy is that, more often than not, we give not so we can build a fence around our community, but so we can tear such fences down. The incredible bursary programmes upon which so many schools have embarked invite others to join our community who do not 'belong' in an economic sense, but do 'belong' in an eagerness to learn, to play their part, to serve. The third aspect is that, when we give, we receive thanks. We are acknowledged as decent, as self-sacrificing and as motivated for the public good. I would suggest that those virtues are not dissimilar to the instinct Lord Carrington felt that he should take failure on the chin rather than simply save his skin. When he resigned, people told him he did not need to, but they also applauded his honour and self-sacrifice. And there you see my point. The more we make philanthropy prominent in the world, the more we persuade others not simply to give, but to take part in a way of seeing the world in terms of service not self. A sense they can be part of a community that cares, that they can do good and they will be appreciated. That is a moral compass for us all. Holy shamoly, it might even work on politicians!

We may not realise it, but the more we help people understand that giving to others is not simply good for the beneficiary, but actually makes the donor, and the society in which we all live, an enriched and better place, the more we can successfully go about our work. We won't solve the world's ills through what we do, but, a donor at a time, we can make a difference to them in a small way, alongside the huge way we do for those who benefit directly. Whatever the election brings, we can go home for Christmas and think that,



providing we don't (unlike politicians) remind ourselves endlessly of our moral superiority, we are on the side of the angels.