

United Way insignificant, disenfranchises poor

By PAUL G. REINHARDT

There has been a great deal of debate in the press lately about the merits and demerits of United Way campaigns. Many people refuse to involve themselves out of uneasiness over questioning a charitable organization.

Unfortunately, failure to take a stand in the controversy does not amount to neutrality by any means. York University like other employers makes its payroll facilities available to the United Way and flies the blue flag during the campaigns. This cooperation clearly prejudices the decision on how to donate. It also prejudices the outcome of the current public debate on that organization which is far from being resolved.

It must therefore be clear that for members of the university community an uncritical acceptance of this arrangement means in fact tacit support. Are we prepared to lend it to the United Way?

United Way champions the principle of voluntarism in the provision of social services. This voluntarism manifests itself in two ways.

First, by raising funds through donations the United Way offers

philanthropic satisfaction to those wishing to make donations. At the same time, it avoids the necessity of higher taxes.

Taxation involves compulsion and for this reason, funds raised by governments impart an excess burden on the individual that is incurred over and above the actual dollar sacrifice.

Secondly, United Way encourages voluntary help delivered directly and personally in the service of the poor. In so doing it promotes social consciousness and individual responsibility toward the need of others.

The United Way mobilizes volunteer work. Since these efforts would otherwise not be forthcoming, United Way activities generate a net profit for society that would be lost if government programmes were to replace them.

In addition, government tends to be inflexible to changing social needs. United Way is willing to experiment with new programmes to serve the poor. It can therefore give direction to public social policy.

The opponents will generally not deny that United Way is associated with good work. But there is also agreement that the effectiveness of

the agencies served is hampered by the fund raising method.

Beyond this consensus, there is a wide divergence of views as to the degree of effectiveness, and the sensitivity to needs, of the agencies supported.

The argument presented currently will stay clear of issues pertaining to the quality of social services provided. Instead it will focus on the funding method employed by the organization. Four criticisms are noted:

1. Welfare programmes that depend on voluntary contributions disenfranchise the poor. This is because the ability to contribute is related to one's income. As a consequence, those whose need is least have the greatest influence in them.

This is not the case with a government sponsored programme. It is ultimately decided upon on a one-person-one-vote basis regardless of economic status.

2. The principle of voluntarism in the payment for social goods is inoperative.

The predominance of the ability-to-pay approach to raising revenues is evidence to this effect. A social consensus has formed around progressive taxes as the most

equitable means of distributing the burden of social goods. Vast sums are mobilized in this manner for arms, roads, jails and the like and there is no logic to excluding services to the poor.

3. United Way activities have ideological overtones in that they are pictured as alternatives to unnecessary government involvement. The impression is being conveyed that voluntarism is coping with our social problems while in fact it is insignificant in comparison to government programmes.

4. Private charity has an important function in our society. United Way, however, does not qualify unequivocally as recipient.

A large proportion of its collections are induced by considerations of tax avoidance rather than compassion. United Way therefore depends, to a large extent, on tax support disguised as voluntary giving. In the absence of a suitable alternative to the United Way, many donations are made not to inhibit the work of the agencies out of protest against the organization.

Nevertheless, principle objections to the United Way have increasingly retarded its ability to attract donations. Government tables have indicated that United Way programmes are not only very small in comparison to total income earned and to public social expenditures, but that their relative significance

has declined continuously.

To repeat again, the previous arguments have no bearing on the type of work done by the supported agencies. In fact, they lend support to the position that United Way should concentrate its efforts entirely in the area of innovative social work to give direction to insensitive government.

United Way should discontinue its fund drives while still accepting donations. The lost revenues could be made up by an increase in the average income tax rate by less than 1/10 of a percent.

Clearly the cases presented involve issues over which intelligent people are bound to differ. In this situation, however, we cannot give expression to our disagreement without harming the poor.

It would be irresponsible to let opposition to the campaigns stand in the way of support for the sponsored agencies. On the other hand, individuals who oppose the United Way should have the liberty to designate their givings for the poor to an alternative fund by the same convenient payroll deduction method as is available to United Way supporters.

This option is not open and it is clear, therefore, that present donations do not represent the preference pattern of society as to the most desirable way of helping the poor.

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