



Darren Walker

Philanthropy's prophet

Philanthropic space is narrowing. Darren Walker saw a way to keep it open



Door Charles Keidan

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(Social) impact Opinie

In April 2023, the then President and CEO of the Ford Foundation, joined forces with five philanthropy leaders to issue a unifying call. In an op-ed in the Chronicle of Philanthropy, these leaders drilled down into what they saw as philanthropy's bedrock: the principle of donor freedom, 'the need and right of philanthropies to give freely, generously, and boldly.'

'Philanthropy makes its greatest contribution to democracy when each foundation or donor engages in the unfettered pursuit of their own mission, interests, and prerogatives,' they **proclaimed**.

The op-ed invited all of us 'to speak with one voice in support of philanthropic pluralism'. **#FreedomToGive** was the message in hashtag form.

What's not to like?

A call for donor freedom may seem uncontroversial. And perhaps it would have been if the man at its heart had not been Ford's Darren Walker.

By joining forces with the deeply conservative Philanthropy Roundtable, Walker faced accusations of weakening Ford's drive for social justice and, worse, aligning the foundation with those seeking to undermine it. Some critics argued that Walker abandoned his own injunction: to bend the arc of philanthropy towards social justice – a north star for many staff and grantees.

And that's what made the call so controversial. It was a recognition that the pursuit of social justice – a left-wing coded endeavour - was not necessarily the default mode and normative aspiration of philanthropy. Pushing funders into a social justice posture ran counter to the very donor freedom on which philanthropy depends and which Walker was now advocating. Elsewhere, Walker went further [reminding people](#) that philanthropy and capitalism were intertwined.

Conservative philanthropy commentators at the time were effusive. Writing in the Giving Review, Bill Schambra [praised](#) Walker for his 'prescience' and courage. 'Progressive philanthropy', he gushed, 'should learn from Walker's preference for pluralism and nuance over rigid adherence to abstract ideological goals.'

There was a political imperative too.

'To counter attacks from the Trump administration, philanthropy should adopt Walker's pluralism playbook,' Schambra suggested.

This was a remarkable moment in the American philanthropy conversation.

At the time, I wondered what drove Walker to reach across the divide: was it simply reading the political tea leaves on the eve of Trump's return to power? Or was it a philosophical reconsideration? But, like Schambra, I remember being impressed by the mark of leadership – a combination of strategic clarity and willingness to take positions which were or proved to be unpopular and un-orthodox in progressive circles.

And Walker did pay a price as many leaders do. His coalition for donor freedom fizzled and, within a year of Trump's re-election, he'd left the foundation.

This remarkable episode in contemporary American philanthropy history is worth recounting because it says a lot about how fashions change.

Freedom is back

The cross spectrum coalition which Walker adumbrated but never full actualised has insulated American philanthropy from the worst excesses of the Trump administration.

Today, a new group of liberal foundation leaders have effectively amplified philanthropic freedom as a first order principle. 'The very basic freedom to give and the freedom to invest according to our values is an American trait', [exhorted](#) MacArthur Foundation President, John Palfrey.

That all sounds very Walker-esque circa 2023.

And so, something heavily criticised in social justice circles just a few years ago is now embraced by mainstream American philanthropy, seeking cover from the wrath of the Trump administration. In the face of Congressional attacks, an assortment of liberal and progressive funders, and their conservative allies, have deployed a strategy of coalescence around donor freedom and philanthropic pluralism. The bedrock of philanthropy has so far proved impregnable in the face of the Trump administration.

Close observers may see signs of a deeper change happening in parallel: an awakening among liberals previously seduced by left wing orthodoxies – such as decolonisation and DEI - now recoiling from its excesses. There is an easy fluency to liberals espousing freedom.

Today, freedom of giving is cherished by philanthropy just as freedom of speech is for democracy at large – another cause which progressives are belatedly embracing.

And in Europe

These winds of change are blowing across to Europe as its societies turn to authoritarian leaders.

Europe's Ariadne network has [warned](#) that 'the narrowing of civic space increasingly entails a narrowing of philanthropic space'. It follows that keeping civic and philanthropic space open means defending donor freedom and re-doubling the commitment to Europe's democratic institutions, ideals and values. That's the core task facing European philanthropy today.

Philea, the pan European body for philanthropy is already hard at work. A [statement](#) they coordinated last year called on all funders to 'stand together for philanthropic freedoms.' The pursuit of that freedom, embedded in democratic societies, nurtured by liberal values and anchored in the rule of law will define not just philanthropy but our continent over the coming decade.

Philanthropy media

And as that happens, the World of Philanthropy - Europe's free press for philanthropy – is trying to expand its gaze to cover these developments, question our sector's orthodoxies, dogmas, and blind spots and make space for multiple viewpoints, and for the **give and take** needed in both the philanthropy conversation and democracy itself.

Donor freedom is the bedrock of philanthropy – a higher order principle. Something inveterate, essential and axiomatic. The road to social justice in an era of authoritarians depends on such freedom. Progressives should embrace it.

Darren Walker was ahead of his time. The story of his siren call – and that Chronicle op-ed – is a philanthropy parable of our times.

Over de auteurs

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