



BRIAN O'CONNELL

POWERED BY COALITION

THE STORY OF INDEPENDENT SECTOR

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INDEPENDENT
SECTOR

FOREWORD BY JOHN W. GARDNER

Brian O'Connell

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— **Powered by Coalition**
The Story of
INDEPENDENT SECTOR



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Foreword

Brian O'Connell has written extensively in this and other books about the attributes of the independent sector, so I shall comment only briefly on that subject.

Ever since colonial days, foreign visitors have commented on the extraordinary impulse of Americans to form voluntary groups and invent nongovernmental institutions to serve community purposes. Out of that impulse has come an incredible variety of such institutions—libraries, museums, hospitals, symphony orchestras, great universities, adoption services, religious organizations, civic groups, the 4-H clubs, and so on.

In 1978, when we were just launched on the preliminary discussions that led eventually to *INDEPENDENT SECTOR*, I wrote:

Thanks to the institutions of the non-profit sector, not only can citizens participate in the concerns of American life, they can participate at the grassroots level—and in doing so contribute importantly to the preservation of vital communities. There is in grassroots community activity the opportunity for sympathetic personal attention to shared problems.

Crucial to the metabolism of a healthy private sector are groups and patterns of social interaction that rarely occupy space on the front page—the family, religious congregations, coherent neighborhoods, social groups that still preserve a “sense of community.”

The past century has seen a more or less steady deterioration of American communities as coherent entities with the morale and binding values that hold people together. Our *sense of community* has been badly battered, and every social philosopher emphasizes the need to restore it. What is at stake is the individual's sense of responsibility for something beyond the self. A spirit of concern and caring for one's fellow beings is virtually impossible to sustain in a vast, impersonal, featureless society.

All experience shows that our shared values survive best in coherent human groupings (the family, the neighborhood, the community). We must recreate a society that has its social and spiritual roots firmly planted in such groupings—so firmly planted that those roots cannot be ripped out by the winds of change, nor by the dehumanizing, automatizing forces of the contemporary world.

The sector is a source of deep and positive meaning in our national life. If it were to disappear, we would be less distinctively American. The sector enhances our creativity, enlivens our communities, nurtures individual responsibility, stirs life at the grassroots, and reminds us that we were born free. Its vitality is rooted in good soil—civic pride, compassion, a philanthropic tradition, a strong problem-solving impulse, a sense of individual responsibility, and, despite what cynics may say, an irrepressible commitment to the great shared task of improving our life together.

It's a sector in which you're allowed to pursue truth, even if you're going in the wrong direction; to experiment, even if you're bound to fail; to map unknown territory, even if you get lost; a sector in which we are committed to alleviating misery and redressing grievances, to giving rein to the mind's curiosity and the soul's longing, to seeking beauty where we can and defending truth where we must, to honoring the worthy and smiting the rascals (with everyone free to define worth and rascality), to combating the ancient impulse to hate and fear the tribe in the next valley, to finding cures and consoling the incurable, to preparing for tomorrow's crisis and preserving yesterday's wisdom, and to pursuing the questions others won't pursue because they're too busy or lazy or fearful or jaded.

It's a sector for seed planting and path finding, for lost causes and for causes that yet may win, and in the words of George Bernard Shaw, "for the future and the past, for the posterity that has no vote and the tradition that never had any, for the great abstractions, . . . for the eternal against the expedient, for the evolutionary appetite against the day's gluttony, for intellectual integrity, for humanity."

After about a year and a half of preparatory study, it took fifteen months for the representatives of the various parts of the sector to create an organization that could serve as common ground for all of them and others like them. Our purpose was to serve the sector. The organizations of the sector are independent and intend to remain so. What we set out to create was a "meeting ground" for the diverse insti-

tutions of the sector, a place where they could gather to discuss common problems and plan appropriate action. The sector is tumultuous in its variety, and we did not set out to make it neater. It contains profound differences of view, and we did not intend to create an overall harmony. We were confident that members would find a core of significant shared goals and values, and in fact they did.

When one reflects on the fact that the creation of INDEPENDENT SECTOR involved two distinguished organizations voting themselves out of existence, one knows that much negotiation and selfless statesmanship was involved. The negotiations were delicate and the discussions long. Nothing came easy. But as often happens, individuals of large vision and steadfast character rallied around and made it happen. The debt was particularly heavy to Bayard Ewing, Kenneth Albrecht, Philip Bernstein, Homer Wadsworth, and James Lipscomb. They had the strength and stature among their colleagues to bring independent constituencies into a common venture, and they deserve to be listed among the founders of INDEPENDENT SECTOR.

Brian O'Connell and I worked in the closest partnership to develop the initial vision and to shape the alliances that would bring the vision to reality. I estimate that some thirty-three months elapsed from the first conversations Brian and I had on the subject to the launching of the new organization, and our conversations ranged from the broadest social perspectives to the smallest organizational details. It was an equal partnership in every way. We shaped it and launched it together.

But once the organization was launched, Brian's burdens grew immensely heavier, and mine (as chairman of the board) only moderately heavier. It fell to Brian to bring us through all the ailments of an infant organization and to cope with the tough problems of emerging adulthood. As I said on INDEPENDENT SECTOR's tenth anniversary: "Tommy Henrich, a great ballplayer of my generation, said 'Catching a fly ball is a pleasure. Knowing what to do with it after you catch it is a business.' Launching an organization is an adventure. But transforming it into a vital institution that gains strength with every passing year takes more than an adventurer. It calls for an inspired leader-manager."

And Brian fit the role of "inspired leader-manager," with spectacular results.

As a task of coalition building, the formation of INDEPENDENT SECTOR was in a class by itself. The nonprofit sector tests the limits of diversity, and we didn't want the organization to shrink from that

diversity. That made for noisy meetings and tense interactions in the early days. From the beginning, Brian and I understood that trust was a crucial ingredient in the success of the venture, and we functioned accordingly. We took great pains to be open with all parties and totally consistent in our dealings—no surprises, no hidden agendas.

An overwhelming reason for the success of INDEPENDENT SECTOR was the character and attributes of Brian O'Connell himself. He is one of the ablest leaders I have ever known, particularly in the dimensions so crucial to contemporary leadership—the capacity to cross boundaries, the gift for dealing with diversity, and skill in finding common ground and shared values. It is not possible to exaggerate the importance of steadiness and predictability in dealings with a highly diverse constituency. Brian moved as a trustworthy and trusted figure in widely diverse parts of the sector, always reaching out, always listening, always exercising extraordinarily good judgment. He was meticulous in explaining his actions, in consulting all stakeholders, in setting policies—always fair, always with a sense of humor.

He saw the sector in a broad perspective. He understood in depth and breadth the nature of the nonprofit sector and its diverse parts. He saw its problems and its possibilities. And it is much to our benefit that he has taken the time to tell the story.

February 1997

JOHN W. GARDNER
Founding Chairperson
of INDEPENDENT SECTOR

Preface

In the summer of 1995, seventeen years to the month after our first discussion about the need for some greater connectedness within the sprawling third sector, John Gardner and I stole away for two days to share thoughts and recollections about what had occurred in the blur of those intervening years.

My immediate task was to gain the benefit of John's advice on the history of INDEPENDENT SECTOR that I had been asked to write. I had even prepared an agenda. I wanted his thoughts about the book's scope, tone, and thrust and his recollections of facts, events, and people.

Eventually, those purposes were well served, but before we could make headway on any of them, it became clear that each of us needed to get down to such basic wonderments as why we had even taken on the challenge, why we had gambled so much on such a long shot, and why it had succeeded after all. It wasn't part of our plan for the time together, but we couldn't seem to look back without probing those bedrock considerations, and that started with a lot of brutally candid "Why in the world did we . . . ?" and "How did it ever . . . ?"

It wasn't that we hadn't known what we were getting into. It was more that we knew and still went ahead. And our candor was not just in admitting our doubts but also in admitting a confidence in ourselves that in retrospect appears audacious.

At times in that conversation, we asked each other genuinely and uncertainly whether we had been gamblers or visionaries, foolhardy or courageous, reckless or calculated.

We let it all hang out—two battle-scarred survivors admitting to fear and to bravery. In the end, we admitted we had thought we could win, that the cause was worth the gamble, and that the time and climate seemed right. But we also admitted that in fact we had been audacious, reckless, and foolhardy, tempered with at least some doses of courage, confidence, and vision.

We acknowledged that we had been risk takers, but that we had not blindly followed an impulse. We had thrown caution to the wind not for the daring but because something unusual seemed to be in the air.

Looking back, the origins are terribly complex, but the essential dilemma was startlingly clear: something had to be done to preserve and strengthen America's independent sector, but nothing was likely to succeed.

The obstacles and the problems, presented to us with intensity and in a growing litany, had dogged all previous efforts at creating an umbrella: a sector so broad that it defied commonality; antipathies and worse between many of the players; the disdain of university officials for grassroots organizers and vice versa; the determination of funders to keep their distance from grant seekers; fear of the very size of a coalition large enough to span the sector; lack of confidence that such a group could really do anything about the sector's problems; reluctance to pay for still another layer of representation and structure; and on and on.

Perhaps the only thing that kept us at it in those early days was that though almost everyone assured us that every solution was foreclosed, they were equally determined that something had to be tried. The contradiction suggested a chance that maybe some of the obstacles in our way could be overcome. That helped to keep us at least curious about what, if anything, might be done to ease resistance, and that in turn led to further exploration. Gradually, we moved to a consideration of whether the unnamed somebody who "ought to do something" might be us. Then it was even more urgent to look at whether there really were signs in the wind to make this attempt any more promising than all the others.

Essentially, what gnawed at us and nudged us toward commitment were six key observations. First, we found widespread conviction that the sector occupied an important place in American society, and that it deserved to be further nurtured and developed. Second, it was clear that the problems facing the sector were threatening and pervasive and constituted a potential rallying point for common endeavor. Third, a growing roster of impressive allies was ready to sign on as soon as we did. Fourth, other key figures, despite being negative or pessimistic, seemed willing to at least keep an open mind.

The fifth salient fact was that the National Council on Philanthropy and the Coalition of National Voluntary Organizations were in a position to provide some institutional underpinning. And finally, though various prior efforts may have failed to achieve ambitious goals to

unite the sector, what they had accomplished and what had been learned from them could be built on.

Beyond those positive signs, there were less tangible factors that helped tip the scales. Though we didn't actually say it to each other until seventeen years later, John and I felt that each of us would come to the task better prepared than those who had preceded us, or at least with unique experience behind us. Furthermore, the two of us seemed to represent many of the varied assets and balances necessary to the teamwork that the next stages would require.

We also agreed that the time and circumstances would probably never be better for such a project, and finally a feeling grew in both of us that it was simply the right thing to do.

So after much more testing, lining up of allies, and persuasion of other important figures to keep an open mind, we finally threw our hearts over the fence and took off on what turned out to be one hell of a ride.

Years later, after we had survived excruciating complications and crushing work schedules to see the confederation achieve impressive impact and stature, I would hear people describe the organization's founding and development as so natural that it had just fallen into place. At those moments, I didn't know whether to weep, scream, or kill.

The better outlet was to tell a story.

A farmer had taken over a long-neglected property. The fields were barely distinguishable, covered with weeds and trees. The barn had pretty much collapsed, with much of the wood deteriorating or lost to theft. The house leaned so badly, it seemed beyond renovation.

After years of struggle, the farmer finally brought the place to the point where he wanted to show it off to his parson. With great pride, he took the reverend to the fields now laden with produce, and the parson proclaimed, "The Lord doth provide."

The farmer took the reverend to the barn, wonderfully renewed and full of bellying livestock, and the parson declared, "Praise the Lord."

Finally, the minister was taken to the house, now safe and cozy, and he intoned, "The Lord works in wondrous ways."

With some exasperation, the farmer responded, "Meaning no disrespect to you, reverend, or the Almighty, but I just wish you could have seen this place when God had it to Himself."

Let me tell you the way I remember it.

*Chatham, Massachusetts
February 1997*

BRIAN O'CONNELL

Acknowledgments

John Gardner was, as usual, wonderfully encouraging and helpful at every stage of this long project, including remembering, prodding me to bring out the personal and passionate sides of the story, and making suggestions even for scope and style. For all of that, and for his willingness to write the Foreword, my considerable appreciation. In a previous book, dedicated to him, I expressed acknowledgment and gratitude for all he has meant to the existence and vitality of INDEPENDENT SECTOR. I referred to him then as “mentor, partner, and friend,” and I think of him always with appreciation, admiration, and affection.

Ann Brown O’Connell, too, has been a significant factor in this book and in the creation and development of IS. An earlier book was also dedicated to her, and now as then, I acknowledge her indispensable contributions and her abilities, warmth, enthusiasm, and total support. I’m forever grateful.

I’m indebted to Sharon Stewart at IS for her substantial help in locating and organizing a great deal of resource material necessary to the book, and to Sheila McColgan at the Filene Center at Tufts for her tireless work in processing the many drafts that were necessary to try to get the story right.

Alan Shrader at Jossey-Bass was critical, efficient, and kind—a rare and awfully nice combination in an editor. Susan Williams, assistant editor of Jossey-Bass’s Nonprofit Sector Series, and Xenia Lisanevich, production editor, were also impressively professional and friendly.

I’m also grateful to the Ford, W. K. Kellogg, and Charles Stewart Mott Foundations and to the Lincoln Filene Center at Tufts University for providing support that helped make the book possible.

Though their mention here is far, far short of what is deserved, I also want to acknowledge the thousands of people and organizations who helped build INDEPENDENT SECTOR and all that it has been able to achieve. Each one deserves to be named and thanked. We were powered by their individual caring and joint action.

—B.O.

Dedicated to the members of INDEPENDENT SECTOR and its volunteer and staff leaders. Coalitions derive their strength from the participation and commitment of the members, and they make the most of their missions and opportunities through good leaders loyal to the members. INDEPENDENT SECTOR has been blessed with an abundance of both.

The Author

Brian O'Connell is founding president of INDEPENDENT SECTOR and professor of public service at the Lincoln Filene Center for Citizenship and Public Affairs at Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts. He served as president and chief executive officer of INDEPENDENT SECTOR from 1980 to 1995.

He received his B.A. degree (1953) in liberal arts with a major in English from Tufts University, and did graduate work in public administration at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University.

Before joining INDEPENDENT SECTOR, he served as president of the National Council of Philanthropy and executive director of the Coalition of National Voluntary Organizations. For twelve years, he was executive director of the National Mental Health Association. During that time, he was an organizer and first chairman of the National Committee on Patients' Rights. For the prior dozen years, he was with the American Heart Association, and on leaving was director of its California affiliate.

O'Connell served as chairperson of the organizing committee for CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, and as the first head of its executive committee. Among his current positions are board memberships at the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the National Academy of Public Administration, and Tufts University; he is also on the advisory boards of the Peter Drucker Foundation and the Advertising Council.

He was previously a board member at the Points of Light Foundation, the Hogg Foundation, the National Assembly of Voluntary Health and Social Welfare Organizations, the Family Service Society of San Francisco, and the California Health and Welfare Association; and he was chairperson of the 1989 Salzburg Seminar on nongovernmental organizations.

O'Connell is an elected fellow of the American Public Health Association and the National Academy of Public Administration and has received several honorary degrees, including a doctorate of humanities from Fairleigh Dickinson University and a doctorate of laws from Indiana University. He is also director emeritus of the National Mental Health Association.

Among other honors he has received are the John W. Gardner Leadership Award of INDEPENDENT SECTOR; the Weston Howland Award for Citizenship of the Lincoln Filene Center; the Gold Key Award of the American Society of Association Executives; the Award for Professionalism of United Way of America; the Chairman's Award of the National Society of Fund Raising Executives; and the Distinguished Alumni Award of Tufts University.

Throughout his career, O'Connell has bridged the worlds of action and writing. Among his eleven books are *The Board Member's Book* (1985); *Effective Leadership in Voluntary Organizations* (1976); *America's Voluntary Spirit: A Book of Readings* (1983); *Board Overboard: Laughs and Lessons for All but the Perfect Nonprofit* (1996); *People Power: Service, Advocacy, Empowerment* (1995); *Philanthropy in Action* (1987); and with Ann Brown O'Connell, *Volunteers in Action* (1989).