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Civil Voices

The vital advocacy role of the community sector

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The evidence is clear

- 2004: *Silencing Dissent: Non-government organisations and Australian democracy*
- 2007: *Silencing Dissent* book
- A decade of other research detailing the legislative and regulatory reforms intended to silence civil society advocacy
- 2017: *Defending Democracy: Safeguarding Independent Community Voices*, HRLC
- 2017: *Civil Voices*, Sarah Maddison and Andrea Carson, ProBono Australia, HRLC





Key findings from Civil Voices

- Governments continue to use funding to silence advocacy
 - Both implied threats and explicit restrictions
- State governments more active in silencing advocacy than in 2004
- Social media has transformed the way that NGOs engage in public debate
 - Not a reliable tool for getting a message to politicians
- Financial insecurity continues to limit advocacy
 - Potential risk to DGR status
- **Organisations are self-silencing**



A path of quiet advocacy

- Organisations are now ‘self-silencing’
 - Pursuing path of quiet advocacy, fear of antagonising government
 - Board composition
 - Managerial not activist
- Advocacy work is not funded so is not the priority
- 69 per cent of respondents believe that dissenting organisations risk having their funding cut
- Important implications for Australian democracy
 - Marginalised groups are not heard
 - The feedback loop to government is broken



What can be done?

- How can civil society organisations get brave again?

Look at the make-up of or your boards

Provide training for staff and support them in advocacy work

Hire a bold CEO from an activist rather than a managerial background

- Does philanthropy have a role to play in supporting advocacy?
- Current definition of charities must be protected
- Cannot rely on changes of government, must come from the sector



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Thank you

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