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**AUTHOR: Gemma Edgar**

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Non-government organisations contribute to the Australian community in a myriad of ways, creating a rich, supportive and inclusive community. They help produce an active and vibrant democracy and they provide representation to marginalised members of the community. NGOs can also inform public debate, rendering it more substantive and less likely to be captured by business or more powerful members of the community.

During the years of the Howard government, however, the contributions of NGOs were not always valued. Indeed, some commentators suggest that not only did the Howard government reject NGO input, it actually employed mechanisms to silence dissenting, critical voices.

With the election of the Rudd Government, an opportunity exists to renew the relationship between the Government and the NGO sector. Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard has said, "we want to make sure the not-for-profit sector, the advocacy sector, can do what it does and have a say within the public domain."

The Rudd Government is already putting these promises into effect, raising hopes that its statements are more than just political rhetoric. For example, it has announced the removal of the controversial "gag clauses" that were frequently included in government contracts with NGOs. This has helped produce some genuine enthusiasm amongst NGOs, who are hopeful they will develop a more positive relationship with the Rudd Government.

More controversially, the Rudd Government is now proposing a national compact be developed between the Government and NGO sectors, a set of non-binding guidelines that frame the relationship. It usually includes a statement acknowledging the independence and importance of NGOs, along with a government commitment to consult with NGOs, and to ensure that funding is both adequate and long-term. In return, NGOs agree to be accountable, transparent and adopt good governance principles.

Such agreements have been developed in a number of countries, including Britain and Canada. Australian state and territory governments have also developed similar

agreements. For example, the ACT developed the Social Compact: A Partnership between the Community Sector and the ACT Government in 2004.

Compacts are usually developed with the best of intentions. Ideally, they can offer a number of advantages to NGOs. For example, they may help improve funding arrangements between governments and NGOs, ensuring that NGOs receive longer-term, more reliable funding. They may also help create mutual respect between governments and NGOs, and ensure that NGO input is a recognised part of policy development.

Unfortunately, compacts are not usually effective and do not provide long-term solutions to problems that can arise between government and NGOs. This is so for a number of reasons. First, compacts are not sustainable. They are neither permanent nor binding agreements, and as such they do not offer long-term support for advocacy NGOs. This can create problems when governments change. In the case of NSW, the Carr Labor government's Working Together for NSW compact was abandoned by the Lemmy Labor Government. If organisations base their tenability on a compact, its subsequent removal (together with the government support that created it) may leave them vulnerable.

Second, compacts are not always successful. For a compact to be effective, all stakeholders need to be across the details of the document. This rarely happens, because ensuring that relevant stakeholders understand what a compact entails requires a large amount of money and resources, which is not always forthcoming. Finally, working closely with government is not necessarily the most effective way to influence policy. Many argue that working closely with government is a form of co-optation, in which the more activist elements of NGOs are tempered by being brought "inside the tent". Far from encouraging dissent, compacts can provide convenient and neat channels for it, giving the impression that government is listening, rather than actually challenging the status quo.

While compacts may offer certain benefits, they cannot provide long-term solutions to the relationship predicament between government and NGOs. Both the Australian Government and NGOs should channel their efforts into promoting the political and cultural legitimacy of the civil sector, rather than relying on a compact. A shift in cultural attitudes, in which the worth of NGO advocacy is recognised, is the most effective defence against government attempts to undermine and constrain the sector. NGOs should, therefore, direct their energy towards promoting this message.

*Gemma Edgar is a research fellow at The Australia Institute and has just published a discussion paper on this topic.*