

# Literary lessons in giving

**PG Wodehouse is widely acknowledged as the greatest comic writer of the twentieth century. Less widely known is his insight into the perils of restricted funding for charities. Yet Wodehouse has a lesson about how donors should approach their giving.**

In his short story, “Archibald and the masses”, Wodehouse describes how Archibald Mulliner decides to help the huddled masses in East London. His attempt does not entirely succeed and Wodehouse describes how Archibald seeks to impose his wishes on a reluctant child:

‘[Archibald] darted after the child with bared teeth and flaming eyes. It was his intention to overtake him and fill him up with bread, regardless of his struggles and protests. The thing seemed to him a straight issue. This child needed bread, and he was jolly well going to get it—even if it meant holding him with one hand and shoving the stuff down his throat with the other. In all the history of social work in London’s East End there can seldom have been an instance of one of the philanthropic rich being more firmly bent on doing good and giving of his abundance.’

There is a good deal of consternation right now about the consequences of rich people imposing their agenda upon charities, sometimes through restricted giving. Wodehouse’s image captures the dangers well. While some of this concern is misplaced, it is right to raise questions and try to ensure that funding supports charities in the most effective way possible.

Charities crave unrestricted funding—money without strings attached. Restricted funding can tie the organisation in knots as it tries to allocate resources where donors dictate rather than where it is most needed. Payments for vital things like overheads are often overlooked. In its most extreme form, restricted income can distort the behaviour of charities away from their mission.

When advising donors, NPC’s position is clear. We believe that donors should follow their own interests but provide unrestricted

funds. Having identified when an organisation is doing good work through our research, we recommend supporting this work without demanding any conditions. Donors invariably accept our advice; around 80% of donations directly advised by NPC are made without restrictions. For many small and medium-sized charities, such high quality funding is welcome.

The important point for donors is to give in such a way that organisations are supported and nurtured, and not short changed. Unrestricted income is the best way to do this. Too many charities do not develop as much as necessary because of poor funding. And forcing charities to accept daft restrictions is, like Archibald Mulliner’s behaviour, plain daft.

**Martin Brookes**