

COMMENT

Britain is plagued by organisations that hate their most loyal supporters

From the National Trust to the Church of England, Britain is full of organisations that have forgotten their purpose

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Faced with a proverbial problem, the National Trust has a novel solution. After rangers at a popular beauty spot in East Hampshire complained that their bins were overflowing due to a recent influx of dog-walkers, the Trust took a somewhat counter-intuitive step ... removing dog-waste bins altogether.

This, they say, will encourage owners to take their rubbish away with them, though it doesn't take a member of the nudge unit to imagine the more likely outcome: more fouling than ever, perhaps even systematic fly-tipping of those insalubrious little baggies. Ingenious solutions which the Trust apparently failed to consider include adding more bins, or emptying them more regularly.

Perhaps I'm making a mountain out of a dog stool here, but the Trust's petty, anti-people (and anti-dog) response to this problem is the latest in a series of baffling decisions which could have been designed to provoke its core supporters. The organisation has grown detached from its founding purpose. Earlier this year an internal paper was leaked, attacking the very idea of country houses and gardens, branding this "the outdated mansion experience".

Impeccably polite, knowledgeable to a fault, the Trust's 50,000 or so volunteers are its lifeblood. Yet thousands are reportedly leaving each year. Some are fed up with the Trust's obsession with political causes; others the endless red tape, unconscious bias training and privilege awareness courses, others simply the dumbing down of exhibitions. Somehow, the Trust has managed to annoy practically everyone, from volunteers to the millions who loyally stump up their membership fees each year and detest being patronised. And now we can add East Hampshire dog-walkers to the list.

This is just the tip of a large iceberg. The entire country seems in the grip of organisations that give every impression of disliking those whose interests they claim to represent. It's a trend encompassing institutions old and new, Left and Right, political parties, civic society, and it takes many forms – from neglect to active contempt.

Naturally, it exploded during the pandemic. Universities and teaching unions abandoned their pupils, often treating in-person learning as negotiating leverage rather than a vital part of education. Many GPs turned their backs on patients too. Groups like the BMA recast face-to-face appointments as the height of entitlement rather than a not-unreasonable preference from those who pay their wages. The Church of England also behaved cravenly, ordering parishes to lock their doors; even banning clergy from going into their own churches to pray on behalf of their congregations.

Like the Trust, the CofE seems to specialise in making things soul-destroyingly difficult for volunteers. Churchwardens and PCC members, like my mother, are expected to bear much of the local heavy lifting – fundraising, helping to maintain church buildings and dealing with endless diocesan micro-management along the way. Yet as they demand more of their foot-soldiers than ever, the CofE seems indifferent to their wishes – stripping churches of their clergy, eroding the parish system. Even the day-to-day language seems alienating. Lambeth Palace apparatchiks favour unintelligible corporate jargon over any attempt to communicate the beauty or truth of the divine.

The disease transcends politics and party affiliations. Labour has paid a heavy price for abandoning what was once its core

electorate. Now, not content with imposing Gordon Brown’s economic platform on their members, the Conservative Party has targeted such totemic Tory staples as wood-burning stoves and bottles of port. How long until the Lib Dems start clamping down on bicycles and allotments?

The BBC's doomed quest to attract younger viewers has alienated loyal audiences. Meanwhile Stonewall, an organisation that once fought fearlessly for the rights of gay and lesbian people, can more often be found opposing them – joining with transgender activists in a desperate campaign to strip the advocacy group LGB Alliance of its charitable status.

Self-hating or people-hating organisations often share a few notable qualities; centralisation, excessive bureaucracy, an inability to resist faddish bandwagons, a tendency to neglect core audiences in the misguided pursuit of new ones. No arena of public life looks safe. Even the Girl Guides, not content with teaching their young charges how to do a sheepshank and build a campfire, managed to annoy parents last month with social media posts celebrating “asexuality awareness week”.

The question is, are there any organisations left that *don’t* hate their own members? One which seems mercifully free of this widespread tendency is the Women’s Institute. Despite its traditional “Jam and Jerusalem” image, WIs are busy reinventing themselves in many areas and attracting a more diverse membership. They’ve succeeding in moving with the times, while valuing their members and maintaining a shared sense of purpose. But based on Britain’s current trajectory, it can’t be long before they start trying to ban cake.

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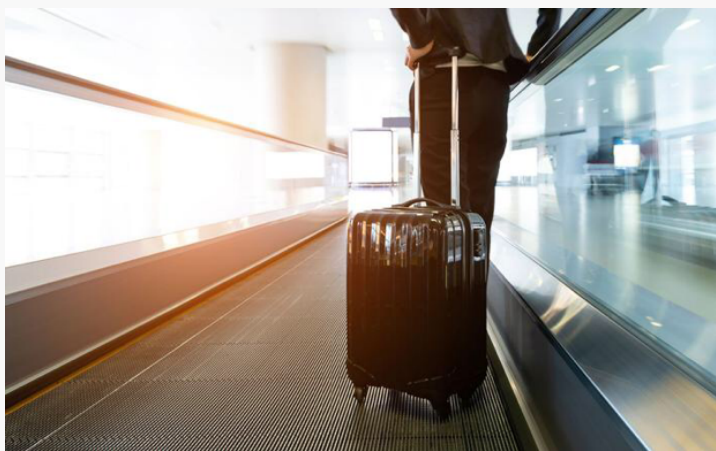
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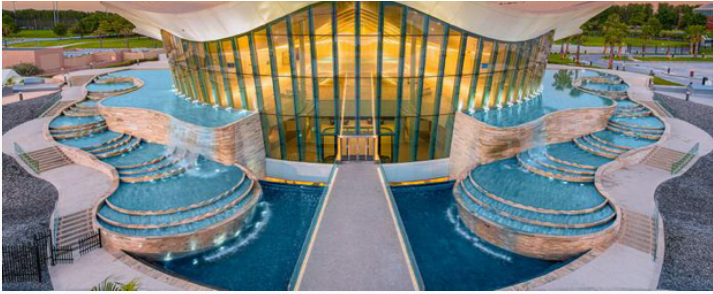


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