



Dear Friends of RSI

Back in December, I said to our fundraising officer, Rosie: ‘What if I offer some reflections on my five years at the helm of RSI for our next newsletter?’

Well, you know what life in the charity sector is, and it’s now been five and half years. But hey – that’s an extra six months of wisdom. So, let’s go for it.

When people ask me how this job is going, I have a bad habit of immediately talking about our fundraising, because that’s probably the most hair-raising part of the Executive Director role at any small non-profit organisation. As many of you will know, this is – let us say – a challenging time to try to raise funds for a UK group: the pool of funders in this country is shrinking, which leaves the remaining ones desperately oversubscribed, and many of the internationals aren’t taking unsolicited applications. It’s not easy going. Certainly, it’s done nothing for my late-night chocolate addiction.

In the midst of all that, it can be easy to lose sight of just how much RSI is thriving.

But we are. As I drafted this letter, we were preparing to attend a star-studded rally at Westminster about an issue we uncovered in 2025 through a freedom-of-information request, successfully pitched to the press and have been helping build a movement around ever since: the systematic mislabelling of autistic children as ‘extremism’ threats by Ofsted, the UK’s regulator of schools. The biased statements we uncovered in a national training for Ofsted school inspectors are as blatant as they are wildly inaccurate. Advocates for neurodivergent people picked this up as an important cause, and now we’re on the march. Five years ago, that would have been almost impossible to imagine for us, as a small human rights organisation that’s had to fight to be heard.

The truth is that even when the financial aspects of leading a UK charity are ... not soothing, this job is a joy. I often tell our staff that the work should be fun at least sometimes, and mine truly is. This year, I’ve been able to watch ambitious, exciting plans become realities: we have an international project on environmental human rights defenders and how states misuse counter-terrorism laws against them, especially in Latin America and Southeast Asia; we’ve rooted down properly in Northern Ireland, where we got our start as an organisation in 1990 and now have both a dedicated community organiser and a free immigration advice service; we are (if I may say so) kicking a*se when it comes to our freedom-of-information work, especially on the UK government’s horrific Prevent counter-extremism programme (read: massive spying on children) but also on potential racism in decisions about whether to grant people British citizenship. We’re getting the data, we’re building the networks, we’re making progress. And all that, with a headcount of 11. I am amazed every day.

Having said all that, the ‘lesson learned’ I most want to share – even though you didn’t ask, but this is a monologue, so we’ll pretend you did! – has to do with internal culture. I have learned that an organisation will reflect its leadership to an almost eerie degree. (At one point, when I had a moment of doubt as a US immigrant in the UK and started spelling the word ‘focused’ with two s’s, other staff did, too. It was slightly unsettling.) I’ve been in this field long enough to see a variety of supervision and leadership styles, and I’ve been determined to be a kind and respectful manager who lifts others up. That was never going to go perfectly, but I’m convinced that RSI’s team is able to accomplish this incredible range of things because we are in fact kind to each other, we trust each other, and moreover, we rest. Nobody at our organisation is checking their emails on evenings or weekends unless there’s some special reason to do so. We offer generous annual leave, office closure days and TOIL, and we do our best to help people make time for the other things in their lives that matter to them. This is our secret sauce: in my perception, it helps our team remain motivated, cheerful and unbelievably effective. (They’re great ambassadors for us, as you’ll know if you’ve met them.)

So, what I’ve learned since late 2020 can perhaps best be summarised as: Be human on the job, and make sure other people can be human, too. We all accomplish more when we have reasonable expectations of ourselves and others. Boundaries and clear, attainable goals are our friends. Also, it really is possible for adversity to lead to positive change, because we have to get creative – and change is what keeps us going.

Meanwhile, for all my nail-biting, I also recognise that where sustainability is concerned, we’ve been fortunate – and our Board has been very positive and kind in making sure we don’t lose sight of this and other achievements. It’s a tough environment out there, both politically and financially, but we’re still standing -- and our people are doing inspiring work.

I know even more exciting progress lies ahead for us, and I’m grateful to you for being with us on this journey.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah St Vincent
Executive Director



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