

# National Coalition for Independent Action

*Celebrating voluntary & community action to change and challenge the world around us*

Newsletter No: 1

March 2007

Welcome to the first newsletter of the National Coalition for Independent Action - where we celebrate the power of voluntary and community action to change and challenge the world around us.

## **What (and Who) is the National Coalition for Independent Action?**

The Coalition is a new initiative. The Coalition is made up of an increasing number of people involved in voluntary and community action who are worried about the creeping co-option of voluntary action by the State; and the struggle of voluntary and community groups to defend the interests of those they work alongside. We are a mixed bunch: local activists, organisations and networks; national agencies; academics; and freelance consultants.

Voluntary and community action forms an essential part of our democratic process. It gives us ways in which we, as citizens and residents, can influence what matters to us and to our neighbours. Our existence and our actions form part of the checks and balances we need within our democracy. But to play this role effectively, we must be able to act independently - from the State and from other powerful interests.

We believe that our capacity to take independent action, to pursue divergent interests and to speak with a dissenting voice, is in jeopardy. Much of this is due to Government policy, focussed on co-opting the 'third sector'. But it is also because many of us involved in voluntary action have lost our own perspectives and agendas, and the confidence and knowledge to pursue these assertively.

As the circle of people who have heard of the Coalition has grown, one consistent message has come through: the ability of community-based groups to represent their constituents and communities is in danger. The voluntary sector, of which we have long felt part, is splintering, into the "haves" and "have nots". Those without the power and resources of the large corporate voluntary organisations must now find common ground around common needs, perspectives, and get to work.

The threat to independent action will, if unchallenged, undermine our civil society, our political health and the ability of communities to get what they need for themselves.

The Coalition has been set up to legitimise independent action and dissent and to provide solidarity and support to those already taking such action, or wishing to do so; and join with others to champion grassroots action - for civic renewal, for better public services, for political accountability - and to resist the co-option by State interests of voluntary and community endeavour.

We are looking for people and organisations who identify with our perspective and want to do something about it.

### **NCIA Website**

Thanks to a generous volunteer contribution from Mac Jordan and Horus Web Engineering, we now have a site ready to go live. You'll hear from us soon with the details. Once on the site, you can get and share information about Stories from the Front, successes and frustrations, getting and giving help, ways to get involved, and news and links.

### **Action being taken by NCIA**

We are using our time and efforts to:

- *Spread the word and make contact* - with those who are already taking action, or who want to. We're setting up the website and hope this will widen the net and allow more people to hear about, and get support from each other. We give talks, put people in touch with each other and bring people together to talk about how they might take action together
- *Build the mailing list* – so that we can pro-actively communicate, take the initiative and build the constituency
- *Gather stories of independent action*, to show what is already being done, the consequences for local communities and voluntary action and the factors that help and hinder
- *Kick-start practical support and action* through a demonstration project, based in four local areas. This will assist local community-based action, to demonstrate what can be achieved and provide an antidote to the empty rhetoric of 'partnership' and 'community empowerment'
- *Design strategies to oppose the damaging effects of 'procurement and commissioning'* - the latest fad to hit the statutory sector to harness voluntary activity
- *Raise money for our own work*, in particular so we can respond to those who approach us for help
- *Design and test new training opportunities* – working with a major University, we are planning a pilot course to teach the skills and knowledge needed for independent action.

### **Examples of Independent Action**

Future newsletters will give you stories of independent action. Here's a taster for the moment.....

**Positive Action in Housing**, a Scottish minority-ethnic led charity. In October 2006, Scottish protests forced a four week suspension of enforced removals of asylum seekers. <http://www.paih.org/>, also <http://www.destitution.net/>

**Campaigners' victory as law lords uphold right to protest.** 14-12-06  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/humanrights/story/0,,1971587,00.html>

**Living Values: a report encouraging boldness in third sector organisations** gives many examples of bold action collected by Community Links

[http://www.community-links.org/ourwork/livingvalues\\_page153.aspx](http://www.community-links.org/ourwork/livingvalues_page153.aspx)

**Campaign against Criminalising Communities. Campacc.** To oppose all laws based on a pretext of counter-terrorism. <http://www.cacc.org.uk/>.

**SmashEDO** is an anti-war group focusing on Brighton-based MBM a sub of EDO, a US-based arms multinational that is currently number 10 on the Forbes 100 list of fastest growing companies. EDO is a Brighton-based grassroots response to EDO's complicity in murderous crimes - a banner under which people opposed to those crimes can rally. Noise Demos Every Wednesday! at EDO MBM, Home Farm Road, Brighton, 4-6pm. <http://www.smashedo.org.uk/>

### **Where to get help in taking action**

Our website will give information about where to get help and how to offer help. Examples of such help are.....

**The Compact Advocacy Programme**, set up to ensure compliance with national and local compacts between government and the voluntary sector. Based at NCVO. <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/compactadvocacy/>

**Public Law Project**, which take on cases and give advice to those wishing to challenge decisions and activities of public bodies which impact on individuals, communities and voluntary groups. <http://www.publiclawproject.org.uk/EmpowerVolSect.html>

### **Government plans for co-opting the voluntary sector**

The Coalition wants to see grassroot-led manifestos, agendas and action. Without these, the Government plans for voluntary efforts will go unchecked. Does this matter? Have a look and see what you think.....

**Cabinet Office of Third Sector.** See the plans, sign up for the newsletter [http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third\\_sector/sitemap/index.asp](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/sitemap/index.asp)

**Treasury.** The future role of the third sector in social and economic regeneration - interim report. 6 December 2006 [http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/pre\\_budget\\_report/prebud\\_pbr06/other\\_docs/prebud\\_pbr06\\_odthirdsector.cfm](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/pre_budget_report/prebud_pbr06/other_docs/prebud_pbr06_odthirdsector.cfm)

**The Communities and Local Government** office and White Paper: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1503999>. **CDX** discussion paper in response to the White Paper. <http://www.cdx.org.uk/news/policy.htm>

**Govt. move towards voluntary sector and private firms**, 7-12-06. <http://business.guardian.co.uk/prebudgetreport2006/story/0,,1966240,00.html>

### **Resistance has started**

The Coalition is no longer a lone voice in its worries about Government co-option. More and more commentators are putting their head above the parapet (though no-one except the Coalition is saying what should be done) .....

**Wake up to the dangers**, says Susie Leather of the Charity Commission <http://society.guardian.co.uk/futureforpublicservices/story/0,,2017227,00.html>

**Charities have to stop cosyng up to the state**, says Nick Seddon.  
<http://society.guardian.co.uk/secondopinion/story/0,,2007036,00.html>

**State-funded charities should lose charitable status.** Civitas report.  
<http://www.civitas.org.uk/press/prcs56.php>

**The voluntary sector's future is not for the state to determine**, so says the Directory of Social Change in its recent publication on the roles of the State, private sector and voluntary activities.  
[http://www.dsc.org.uk/charityexchange/DSC\\_policy\\_doc.html](http://www.dsc.org.uk/charityexchange/DSC_policy_doc.html)

**Minister champions the awkward squad.** Ed Miliband, devoting an entire speech to how government should "celebrate, support and uphold" the voluntary sector's inalienable right to play the awkward squad. 6-12-06 <http://society.guardian.co.uk/offdiary/story/0,,1964408,00.html>

**Reform, not permanent revolution.** The TUC's response to the UK Government's Approach to Public Service Reform Discussion Document.  
[http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/work\\_areas/public\\_service\\_reform/index.asp](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/work_areas/public_service_reform/index.asp)

### **And the big boys fight back**

**Our charities are not co-conspirators** We can take money from the government and still retain an independent voice, says Martin Narey.  
<http://society.guardian.co.uk/voluntary/comment/0,,2012509,00.html>

#### **Note on Links**

Often website links (e.g. the Home Office!) will not work properly on browsers other than Internet Explorer, and links on this email may appear or act funny in your programs. You can always get to sites by cutting and pasting the address into your browser. Please let us know technical issues you encounter with this email.

#### **Why (and What Is) this Newsletter?**

This newsletter is the voice of the planning group of NCI. This first edition is to update you on where we have got to. Future editions will give you news about our issues and will keep you informed of what we and others are doing or saying. It will be issued whenever we've got 2-3 pages of materials and resources. We will also issue Action Alerts as pressing news and opportunities for action arise. We will err on the side of inclusiveness, adding people willy-nilly to our mailing list—and of course giving every opportunity to unsubscribe.

#### **How Can You Participate?**

With news, articles, opinions, feedback and most important – practical action. Our website will have forums for debate and making connections. There will be a space to offer and to ask for help in taking independent action. You can always send news, comments, questions or requests to unsubscribe by replying to these emails, but we ask that news, comments and offers/requests for help be posted on the website, once it's up and running, to speed dissemination and ease our administrative burden. We will always need volunteer help—with moderating the online forums, adding voices to the planning group, proposing and implementing work projects—go to the Get Involved link on the website.

#### **Contact Us**

If you want to contact us directly, please get in touch with:

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