

National Coalition for Independent Action

Celebrating voluntary & community action to change and challenge the world around us
www.independentaction.net indyaction@yahoo.co.uk

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Newsletter No: 11

May 2009

Snouts in the trough.....

A Coalition newsletter, written at the end the week that has just past, would be incomplete if we did not reflect on the truths revealed about the state of our democracy by the MPs expenses debacle. Following on from the extraordinary events surrounding the global meltdown and what this reveals both about the true nature of capitalism, and the 'captains of industry' who have led us into this alley, it leaves us not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

For more than two years now, we have appealed to you to 'take the scales from your eyes', to see past the rhetoric and the confidence tricks of the political establishment, to appreciate the dangers of becoming co-opted to their 'project' for us, and to find ways of asserting your own freedom and autonomy to do the things that you think are in the interests of your users and communities. To stop looking upwards to Government, MPs and the State elite for the next set of instructions, to understand that access does not mean influence and to recognise that perhaps the most useful thing you can do is to hold these people to account. As one old activist said to me when I was a young man: "Always remember that Westminster politicians of all parties, are closer to each other than they are to me and you". How much more evidence do we need before we conclude that they are not to be trusted, nor deferred to, and that their plans and pronouncements should never be uncritically received? So here's to a vibrant future for voluntary and community action, unsoiled and unsullied by the Hazel Blears, the Phil Hopes, and the Kevin Brennans.

News from the Coalition

Let's create an alternative to Community Legal Advice Networks/Centres

Our work with Advice UK has started. We're finding out about the battles between independent advice groups, with their local connections; private companies, with their profit motive; and business-minded larger advice services who just want to win whatever contract going - regardless of what they end up doing to the rich diversity of local services. It's the wild west out there, with every person for themselves. And all helped along by the Legal Services Commission's dim idea of

Community Legal Advice Networks/Centres - which crush community advice and create a servant/master relationship through Council/LSC joint procurement.

We want to create an alternative, which offers local people easy access to terrier-like rights workers, who understand the local situation; and who work together on the basis of all for one and one for all. We've found two local areas eager to work with us to do exactly this. We're looking for two more - particularly in rural areas. So get in touch if you're fed up with having your hands tied behind your back as you try to enforce the rights of local people indyaction@yahoo.co.uk

And if you want to see an example of how the alternative might look, here's a case study of the work on advice services that has been going on in Cornwall:

<http://www.navca.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/7B8DE6C8-9343-49A7-A2ED-7D2FBA0A6409/0/cancasestudy.pdf>

We want our lives back – let's find an alternative to 'new managerialism'

What sort of a manager, and management practice, is likely to protect self-determination? The Coalition has teamed up with Nottingham Trent University to find out. We've already seen the corrosive influence of mind-numbing quality assurance systems which have nothing to do with real quality; outcome-driven funding which lead us to make promises which we know we can't keep; monitoring systems which suck us dry of any enthusiasm for our work; and the decline of organisational democracy which silences the influence of frontline staff and volunteers.

We believe these practices have changed the nature of voluntary action in ways that have led to our co-option and have put out the fire in our bellies. So we're starting to collect stories about what's going on around this theme and to find examples of ways to organise which create assertive agencies and individuals. If you want to share your experiences of new managerialism or how you've risen above it, get in touch with the Coalition indyaction@yahoo.co.uk or Daniel King daniel.king@ntu.ac.uk

The 'Duty to Involve': who is involving who and why would you care?

From the 1st April, the government's new 'duty to involve' requires local authorities to inform, consult and *involve* communities in local decision-making as a matter of course..... sounds good?

Well not necessarily. Here Matt Scott assesses the chances

<http://www.independentaction.net/dutytoinvolve>.

Organising, mobilising and keeping-on-keeping-on

Defence of youth work gathers momentum

In our last newsletter we reported on the Critically Chatting Collective's open letter 'In defence of youth work'. Well it seems that more alternative voices are being heard, for this month sees the launch of 'A Manifesto for Youth Justice in Northern Ireland' from Include Youth, a long standing voluntary agency working with young people at risk. This hard-hitting document "rejects the persistent negative portrayal of children in conflict with the law as inherently anti-social or criminal", highlights the problems with current youth justice policy and sets out the alternative for a "positive, rights-based agenda". You can get the report here:

<http://www.includeyouth.org/fs/doc/Include-Youth-Manifesto-2008.pdf>

Meanwhile the challenge of the CCC's open letter is gathering momentum. A series of regional meetings - 'Developing and defending youth work' - have started. The next ones are:

- 13th June - Exeter
- 15th June - Newcastle

You can get full details from the website - <http://indefenceofyouthwork.wordpress.com/>

Voice for Change campaign needs a boost

V4C's 'Valuing the BME Third Sector' campaign appears to be in need of a lift off.

The campaign seeks greater recognition of the work the BME Third Sector does in bonding communities and promoting equality and is focussed on an Early Day Motion tabled by Alun Michael. So far only 42 MPs have signed the motion. V4C want individuals and organisations to lobby their MP to sign and also to invite them to a meeting to learn more about the contribution made by frontline BME services.

This may be doomed to failure given that many MPs will be too busy shopping at Ikea, booking themselves into expensive hotels, or working out how to avoid paying Capital Gains Tax. However, if you still have any faith left that the Westminster route is going to get you a result, have a look at the motion (one incredibly long sentence!) at

<http://edmi.parliament.uk/EDMi/EDMDetails.aspx?EDMID=37666&SESSION=899> and get further information from Martin Ball at martin@voice4change-england.co.uk

Equanomics UK plans roundtable discussions on institutional racism

Equanomics UK, the campaign for economic justice for minority communities, is holding a series of meetings on the theme of 'Institutional Racism: No Longer Appropriate for Whom?' The meetings have already begun but will continue into June and beyond. More information from Karen Chouhan on kchouhan-equanomics@ntlworld.com.

New Community Activists network for the North West

Plans are being taken forward to set up a Community Activists Network in the N.W. A two day conference for "Activists " only from the community sector is taking place about now (20th/21st May) in Chester. The aim is that, by next year, there should be an active and reasonably up-to-date network of over 100 N.W. community activists who can log on and support each other. These are basically unpaid people active in their local areas. There is a plan for a second 2 day event in September /October in Carnforth and some smaller monthly activists meetings around the region over the summer

More information from Dave Hannay on info@communitynw.org.uk or have a look at: <http://www.communitynw.org.uk/>

Petition protest at Police powers

A retired senior police officer has expressed concern about the "sweeping power" that he claims is being abused on a daily basis in all of the 43 police forces. David Gilbertson, who was assistant inspector of constabulary until he retired in 2001, has joined the former head of MI5 and the former Director of Public Prosecutions to express concern about the kind of state we are building in Britain. He has started a viral email campaign to ask people to sign a Number 10 petition against

police powers to arrest any person for any offence.

The change came in section 110 of the notorious Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005. For the first time in the history of policing in the UK it allowed anyone to be arrested for "any offence no matter how trivial and whether or not a power of arrest previously existed for that offence," says Gilbertson's email. "People can now be (and have been) arrested and detained under Section 110 for not wearing a seatbelt, dropping litter, shouting in the presence of a police officer, climbing a tree, and building a snowman."

You can add your name here: <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/PowersofArrest/>

Police accused of misusing terror laws against peaceful protests

Laws intended for counter-terrorism are being misused in an increasingly heavy-handed approach to policing protests, a new parliamentary report warns. The 70-page report, published by the Joint Committee on Human Rights after almost a year's inquiry, said it was concerned by evidence of the use of the powers, under legislation including the Terrorism Act, against peaceful protesters.

The report, which was issued before the G20 protests, the death of Iam Tomlinson and other Police assaults at the demonstration, says: "Protesters and journalists reported a number of specific incidents where they felt intimidated by the police, as well as a more general sense that the policing of protest had become more heavy-handed". There is criticism of the use of counter-terrorism laws, such as stop and search, and the requirement that protesters give advance notice to the police.

"The right to protest is a fundamental democratic right and one the state and police have a duty to protect and facilitate," said Andrew Dismore, chair of the committee. "The state must not impose restrictions unless it is necessary and proportionate, to do so."

Government buildings occupied in protest at welfare reforms

In case you've forgotten that direct action is still actually possible, despite the 'war of terror' and Police powers to arrest us for building a snowman..... you can cop two protests by the London Coalition Against poverty on You Tube here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QB5tw5FMLVg>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nM7XqGATVR4>

Bit more relevant than Gordon Brown's historic broadcast we'd say.....

'Empowering the Voluntary Sector' gets Lottery dosh

The Lottery Fund has agreed to give 3 years money to 'empower the voluntary sector' (it was probably the trendy title that did it!). This project is a collaboration between NCVO's Compact Advocacy Programme and the NAVCA/Public Law Project's previous 'Empowering the Voluntary Sector' hook-up. The funding will ensure the continuation of work around the Compact and Public Law.

In typical weasel words, the NCVO press release described the Compact Advocacy Programme as having been set up "...to help voluntary and community organisations use the Compact to improve their relationships with Government." Wrong. The Programme existed to hold the Government and State agencies to account when they were in breach of the Compact. And generally, the project

staff did this pretty well (no one can say we don't give credit where it's due!). So why can't the NCVO press office call a spade a spade?

Anyway, if you need help and support on how to use the Compact, what principles have been breached and how to best challenge whoever is dusting you over, you can [contact the Compact team](#).

Which reminds me of.....

grafitti seen on Paris walls during the near-French Revolution of May '68:

"Empowerment? - no thanks I'll take care of that"

DWP plans community work pilot for unemployed

Not sure whether to pitch this as a good news or a bad news story, but the Create Consortium, a group of not-for-profit organisations, is trying to get the DWP to agree to a pilot project that would allow unemployed people to do paid part-time work for community groups without losing their benefits.

The DWP pledged to run a pilot of the 'community allowance' in its welfare reform white paper last year. The measure would allow people receiving unemployment or disability benefit to continue to claim it while doing paid community work for up to 16 hours a week. The Consortium was set up to promote the community allowance and reckons it could create between 20 and 100 part-time jobs in almost 1,500 community organisations in the UK..

A spokesperson said "A pilot project will allow us to create an evidence base to show how the community allowance will regenerate communities, help people back into work and save the Treasury money."

The Government has agreed to allow a trial for people claiming Employment and Support Allowance, introduced last year to replace incapacity benefit, but the consortium wants it extended to people on Jobseekers' Allowance. Hmm, this could a poisoned chalice.....

The penny drops on commissioning

We're very glad to report that opposition to commissioning is becoming more visible. Here is a miscellany of items - from the frontline, a local CVS, and from national, second tier NAVCA.....

From a local Good Neighbour Scheme

In London's Hammersmith and Fulham, the Council has decided to move grants to commissions, without asking anyone if this is a good idea. Here Peter Bird, Coordinator of the Fulham Good Neighbour Scheme, tells us why the Council needs to understand what a damaging effect this will have in the area. 'Commissioning: or how to kill the goose that lays the golden egg' convincingly shows how the avowed virtues of community action are undermined by the implementation of unproven and misguided policies. <http://www.independentaction.net/goose>

From a local CVS...

Here is Adur CVS's response to NAVCA's consultation on commissioning, which we've reproduced in full.....

"The issue of understanding competitive co-operation or co-operative competition is at the centre of this. The world is not black-and-white, and somehow there must be ways through this cultural maze. I think if all stakeholders were offered the possibility of getting something out of every deal on offer, that would be a start. I supported a bid by West Sussex VOLG to run LINKS in West Sussex. It failed and the contract went to Bournemouth. The provision of befriending in Adur is now to be run from somewhere else, despite the existence of an established local service that is developing and has been trying to raise funds for years. Why should my CVS support this provider? Why should I attend LINKS meetings when none of my funders is covering the cost? Why should anyone?

Because, of course, they think it the right thing to do. But the phrase "right thing to do" derives its meaning from the community and culture within which it is used. This means that something has to be shared in common, and within a network, some sense of reciprocal balance must exist (we do "x" for nothing, but we get back "y" and "z").

The attempted redefinition of local voluntary and community action, and engagement, as someone's service provision contract (ie they get the money, you tick their boxes at your own expense) needs sustained criticism. There's nothing wrong with commissioning, but let's engage with the full complexity, and support commissioners in working with us to offer everyone a piece of the action. It's complex and time taking, but the alternative is a vacuum that used to be the diverse local voluntary and community sector, pasted over by a few regional or national brandings that emotionally engage no-one apart from those on the payroll.

Sounds like xenophobia, doesn't it? Yet today, the pigeons unleashed in the eighties and nineties economic free-for-all in Britain are coming to roost. The balancing of the needs of individual service users (for quality services, sometimes regardless of provider) and local communities/local voluntary organisations (for the responsibility, challenge and autonomy that comes with funding) is surely a priority? The on-going drum roll-call for collective love-in partnerships, accompanied by shrill piping up for self-interested competition, makes a discordant background. It'll change when enough people are determined that it does."

Janet 'tendering-for-care' Roberts shown the door

NAVCA has finally parted company with Janet Roberts of Tendering for Care ("The leading national provider of training and support for Care, Housing, Support, Voluntary and Third Sector Organisations in tendering for publicly funded contracts" - her words, of course, not ours). For some years, Janet has been taking NAVCA's training money to tell punters that grants are finished and everyone better get real about becoming aggressively competitive. Problem is that this is absolutely **not** NAVCA's position.

Following complaints, Janet has been asked no longer to darken the doorstep and Chief Executive Kevin Curley felt obliged to issue a statement clarifying NAVCA's position on the matter.

By the way Kevin, she's still got your logo up on her website.

Meanwhile..... small organisations are struggling for funding, says NAVCA

Meanwhile NAVCA research reveals that more than 80 per cent of councils for voluntary service think the funding environment for small and medium-sized organisations is getting more difficult. Half of respondents thought council grants for local organisations would be sustained beyond 2009/10, but 34 per cent did not know. The decline of grant funding was said to be a major factor in the increasing difficulties. "It sends a clear message to us that we must keep up our campaign to protect grants," said Kevin Curley.

Other findings from the research included:

- 43 per cent of CVSs were aware of local organisations working in partnership or consortia to deliver contracts, down 21 per cent from last year;;
- 33 per cent of members were aware of local organisations losing funding in competition with national charities;
- 77% of respondents said they were planning greater collaboration with other local infrastructure bodies;
- 30 per cent expected their own funding to be subject to competitive tendering in the next two years.

If you want to get into the fray, you could start by reminding yourself how bad commissioning is for you - have a look at our '23 Good Reasons to Oppose Commissioning'

<http://www.independentaction.net/sayno>

And the same message from the 'business skills' lobby

More complaints about the plight of small charities also come from another part of the sector. Fiona Halton, who heads up Pilotlight, an agency 'providing business skills to small charities' writes in the *Guardian* that: "However much a small charity may be needed and however effective and efficiently it is run, funds from government are being denied....." You can read the whole of her article here: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/may/06/fiona-halton-charities>

The lunacy continues.....

Punishment to be contracted out

Though the Government has had to climb down on its proposals for so-called 'Titan' super-prisons, substituted are plans for new prisons still bigger than any currently existing. And the Bubbists over at ACEVO are naturally delighted that Jack Straw wants the voluntary sector to run them. Until now, charities have largely been 'restricted' to providing offender management services. But Straw has opened the door (oops, may not be the right metaphor) to full frontal involvement - only voluntary and private sector providers would be eligible to bid for the construction and operation of these new-build prisons over the next three years. And he said voluntary sector providers could bid to run two poorly performing prisons, Birmingham and Wellingborough, as well as five other prisons whose contracts were due to be renewed.

Stephen Bubb, chief executive of ACEVO, was quoted as saying: "We have been calling for some time for the sector's role to be taken to the next level. This step is to allow charities to compete with the private and public sectors to run a much broader swathe of prisons and probationary services."

Now this one really does stick in our craw. Have we seriously come to the point where it is considered OK that **charities** will take on the job of punishing citizens who break the law? Not to put too fine a point on it - this is just sick.

And as a postscript to this, one of our puzzles over here at the Coalition is whether it can be assumed that ACEVO's membership actually approves of the positions taken by its eccentric Chief Executive. Answers on a postcard please.....

Volunteer for the 'National Positivity Reserve'

In a touching outburst of optimism, Richard Piper, Head of Strategy and Impact at NCVO, recently insisted that "while there's not much positivity doing the rounds these days.... the (voluntary) sector remains a 'national reserve of positivity'. In our mission statements, in our visions and in our passion for the work we do, the hope for a better world remains vibrantly alive." He goes on: "Whatever else comes out of the recession, I think we should start to really value ourselves and the impact we create in often grim environments. The sooner we properly value the role we play, the sooner we can help others to value themselves, and each other. And that's the route to a happier, fairer world." He says we need to 'trust in everyday reality', 'know our patch' and 'stay positive'.

The problem here is that the world of voluntary and community action that he so sweetly describes is precisely the world that is being dismantled by the private sector entrists, the mad commissioners, the modernisers and the transformers. And our complaint is what the f*** is NCVO doing about that?

Dame Suzi in charity charm offensive on world leaders

Meanwhile in another piece of sentimental nonsense, Dame Suzi Leather, chair of the Charity Commission, was drafted in at short notice to address the G20 meeting of world leaders and tell them how charities can act as a safety net for those who are suffering most as a result of the credit crunch. This move was reported to be a result of ministers and officials deciding that the programme, dominated by technical discussions about finance and the international banking system, needed a human face.

One official said: "It was thought that we needed to bring in some soft skills and alter the tone of the proceedings. The charm of Dame Suzi seemed to fit the bill." And although our Lady Bountiful was not herself available for comment, a commission spokeswoman said: "She is always prepared to step in and speak up for the vital role charities play in society." So sweet, just lovely, and we're sure it made all those world leaders spare a real thought for the poor and needy.

Futurebuilders to help with Government privatisation

Futurebuilders is to set up and back with finance, an 'independent consortium' to bid for large government contracts on behalf of the 'third sector' (well not our our behalf actually). It says it will recruit organisations and people with the skills needed to win contracts to run its tendering processes, as well as organisations with expertise in health, education and welfare reform to act as its delivery arm.

Ian Charlesworth, enterprise director at Futurebuilders, said: "A lot of charities said that contracting and tendering was the way they were going to have to go. But lots said they didn't have the infrastructure, the expertise or the staff to cope with the contracting regime. Many said they were set up entirely for delivery, not for tendering. We want to make sure that the big contracts

aren't all won by large private companies, and third sector organisations aren't left going cap in hand to the private sector." What Ian thinks will be the difference between his consortium and 'large private companies' beats us.

Modernise' or die

One of our correspondents was aerated about Capacity Builders latest offering....

If you follow this link, <http://www.modernisationfund.org.uk/grants/index.html> you can see how Capacity Builders are shamelessly using the recession to try to persuade voluntary groups to "take the shilling". The funds on offer cover "research" (so long as it is into collaboration or mergers which involve "cost reduction") and then support to "grow together" (up to £10,000 per lemming group, so long as it funds collaboration or merger). At some point they mention "resilience", which could mean self-reliance, independence and ingenuity aka Robinson Crusoe (actually a great model) but, of course, they mean all joining up into one corporate model, that is easier to relate to (read: control, use).

The Not-Laughing Policeman

A Liverpool driver had the smile wiped off his face when he was stopped by police for laughing at the wheel. Gary Sanders was speaking on a hands-free phone while driving to work when he got the giggles. But Mersey Tunnels Police failed to see the funny side and ordered the Liverpool businessman to pull over. A traffic officer told him: "Laughing while driving a car can be an offence." After lengthy questioning, the officer concluded there was nothing he could book Gary for and let him go.

Reports and writings

Can community campaigns against racism survive the new funding agenda?

Excellent article from the Institute of Race Relations, which tracks the impact of "the de-politicisation process which threatens all community-based anti-racist groups, be it via the government's ongoing strategic partnership strategy or courtesy of the newly emerging 'hate crimes' agenda." With echoes of the Black Sisters row, the article looks at the negative experience of the Birmingham Racial Attacks Monitoring Unit. You can clock the article here: <http://www.irr.org.uk/2009/april/ha000010.html>

Eliminating racism: Are we there yet?

New publication from Voice for Change England contains the perspectives of twenty eight 'leading' figures including representatives of BME 'Third Sector' organisations, key bodies funding BME groups, and senior civil servants. There are also contributions from Doreen Lawrence and Dr Richard Stone, who was an official advisor to the Inquiry.

The booklet assesses the impact of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, a decade on, in shaping the work of the BME Third Sector and the future role of the sector in creating a successful multi-racial Britain. Unsurprisingly, the contributors' conclusions are that "racism is still prevalent". You can read the lot at: <http://www.voice4change-england.co.uk/docs/Eliminating%20Racism%20Are%20we%20there%20yet.pdf>

Can migrant and refugee community groups influence policy?

Interesting report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation of a project that tested how migrant and refugee community organisations could change policies and practices that are crucial to the lives of their communities. 'Change from Experience' involved three groups - two refugee community organisations and a voluntary agency supporting refugee groups. Working together over 12 month period, and using methods derived from Paulo Freire's work, the project developed a narrative about the ways in which migrant and refugee groups can use their own history and experience to develop the skills to bring about change. The result is a refreshingly honest account of the gains and the difficulties involved. You can download the report at:

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/migrant-refugee-community-organisations-influence>

Rough Sleeping: Compassion v Coercion

This new Housing Justice discussion document is intended to contribute to the debate about street homelessness. In particular there are different viewpoints about the tougher enforcement tactics being used to make it harder for homeless people to stay on the streets. The publication consists mainly of the five talks under the title "Killing with Kindness" given at Bloomsbury Baptist Church in Autumn 2008. You can download the document from the [Housing Justice](#) website. Feedback is welcomed.

Barings gets the academics to work on 'independence'

Here's one to take on holiday with you. Barings Foundation has commissioned a series of articles on voluntary sector independence from academics all over the western world. The result is a 140 page whopper - 'The First Principle of Voluntary Action: essays on the independence of the voluntary sector from government in Canada, England, Germany, Northern Ireland, Scotland, United States of America and Wales', edited by Matthew Smerdon. Ben Cairns, from the Institute of Voluntary Action Research is apparently the academic of choice to tell us how things are here in England, with others telling us how it is in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Frankly, it's too long for us to have read it properly yet, but no doubt there is useful stuff here (though the Scottish contributors conclusions made me want to get the next train up to hit them with a rubber hammer)..... Maybe we'll 'commission' a review of our own. In the meantime you can download it here: <http://www.baringfoundation.org.uk/FirstPrincipleofVA.pdf> or get a hard copy by e-mailing Valerie Cadoret at Valerie.cadoret@uk.ing.com.

About this Newsletter

This newsletter is the voice of the NCIA. Views expressed are not necessarily that of everyone involved with NCIA. We aim to issue newsletters regularly to keep you informed of what we and others are doing or saying.

How Can You Participate?

Tell us your news, write articles, sound off with your opinions and feedback but - most important - find ways of taking your own practical action to defend and protect the independence of your work and aspirations.

Talk to us and others via the Coalition google group <http://groups.google.co.uk/group/ncia-discussions> or the Coalition email address - indyaction@yahoo.co.uk.

We are all volunteers here and we welcome more offers of help. If you'd like to help make this initiative prosper then please get in touch with us.

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