

*We're not an arm of the state – we have our own arms*

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## **Government White Paper shimmies around the disaster that awaits us**

Having just read the government's White Paper 'Open Public Services' I am reminded of two maxims. The first - 'above all else people value sincerity; if you can fake that you've got it made'. This document is full of false sincerity - the policy and plan is about giving power to people and communities, about spreading choice, about level playing fields and, in the unkindest cut of all, about *righting inequalities*. Perhaps this feature of the document lies in the influence of the Liberal Democrats, adding lots of cuddly 'power to the people' inflections and, in the process, placing the iron fist inside a velvet glove.

For the more likely truth that lies behind this display of intended vandalism towards our public services is to be found in the second maxim - 'context is all'. For instance, one can argue about the necessity of public expenditure cuts but there's no argument about the way they've been made, targeting the biggest reductions on the geographical areas and the vulnerable populations which can least bear them. *Righting inequalities?* - I don't think so. And there can be no argument about the fact that the context for this White Paper *is* the concurrent and massive cuts to services, already happening and set to continue for the rest of this parliament, at least. Once the verbiage is stripped away it is clear that the essence of government policy towards the public sector is a) cut as much spending as possible and b) contract out what is left to "any willing provider". A word and phrase count of the White Paper would easily reveal that the recurrent theme is 'open up delivery of public services to new providers'. Fulfilling these two objectives is really the objective of this exercise; the rest is window dressing.

The voluntary sector is, of course, caught up in this. It helps with the window dressing. For example the letting of the Work Programme contracts to private businesses was disguised by the DWP press release which broadcast that 289 community groups (i.e. the sub-contractors) were stepping up to help the workless. Look too at the requirements of the 'Transforming Local Infrastructure' fund, or the announcement of the 'Investment and

Contract Readiness Fund'. It is clear that, despite all the talk of devolved power, freedom and independence, the government has a single minded and doctrinaire view of the ways in which the voluntary sector can support and (if it plays its cards right) be part of the largest privatisation programme that the UK has yet seen. To conspire with this is shameful.

## **The madness continues – daft ideas, cuts & clobberings**

### **Passion for volunteering reaches the army**

Interesting comment on the government's love of volunteering came recently with Liam Fox's announcement that 18,000 thousand soldiers are going to be sent off to Job Centre Plus, whilst their place will be taken by an increase in volunteer reservists specially trained to kill. So if your stint in the Age Concern shop is getting a bit boring and you fancy shooting at people instead, it seems that your moment has arrived. The change will happen apparently in 2014 so you've a little while to have a careful think about this. You can catch the Guardian's version of the story here - <http://bit.ly/orIGwx>

### **Immigration service closes – hundreds left without legal support**

When the 300 staff at the Immigration Advisory Service (IAS) turned up for work on July 11<sup>th</sup> they discovered - via a notice on the door) that their organisation was down the chute. This immediately left their 650 current cases with no legal representation. The charity's collapse into administration is the latest assault on migrants facing deportation, stuck in a legal system designed to encourage failure. Three quarters of asylum claims are refused by the Home Office - but a quarter of those who appeal have the decision overturned. The IAS is the latest casualty of the slashing of legal aid for migration, refugee and asylum cases, alongside a dispute with the Legal Services Commission about alleged overpayments. You can see the story here: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14105065>

This follows on from the closure last year of the then biggest refugee legal service, Refugee and Migrant Justice, forced to shut its doors despite being owed £1.8million by the government in legal aid fees. And Caroline Slocock, the Chief Executive who presided over RMJ's demise, has now set up the 'Civil Exchange' with few of her pals and is touting for work on the platform that "there is a real opportunity to forge a better dialogue between government and charity". You couldn't make it up.

Meanwhile back in the bit of the sector that Caroline has moved on from, we remain stuck with upcoming cuts to Legal Aid in welfare, employment, family and other types of case, despite 5,000 objections rustled up by the Justice for All campaign - <http://www.justice-for-all.org.uk/>

### **Contracts better than grants says Bubb**

ACEVO supremo Stephen Bubb once again showed his corporatist leanings and lack of understanding of the problems facing groups on the ground, when he told MPs that grants were sometimes "problematic". "At least with a contract you have set an established

relationship with duties on both sides," he said. "Grants are a form of patronage." Bubb was giving evidence to the Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) inquiry into the Big Society.

On the provision of public services he said that charities had delivered public services for centuries: "It has been agreed that the role of the state is to provide free universal services and pay for them," he said. "But they don't necessarily have to be delivered by the state." But he then went onto defend campaigning by charities, saying "Charities can't deliver services for a managerial case; charities want a better place for beneficiaries." Seems to us that delivering for a 'managerial case' is pretty much what contracts are all about. Catch the whole dismal story here: <http://bit.ly/pTcsUP>.

### **Association of Scottish Community Councils bites the dust**

The body that provided a collective voice for Scotland's 1200 Community Councils has announced its closure. As a result of a "massive cut in funding by the Scottish government", many activities will stop immediately and others be run down to April 2012. The National Vice President, Cllr. Bob Kerr said of the Scottish Finance Secretary: "Mr Swinney ... should be ashamed when he claims to support local democracy, and then attacks the most local tier of elected representation in Scotland." You can mourn or rage about their passing here: <http://bit.ly/qQMZ8P>

### **Operation Black Vote feels the pinch**

Another announcement of cuts comes from BME campaign group Operation Black Vote. Writing in their latest emailing, director Simon Woolley said: "Like many small and medium size BME organisations up and down the county, OBV is weathering a difficult period. Due to cuts in public spending and the increased difficulty to find funds elsewhere we have been forced to lose more than a third of our staff."

### **Survey shows the onward march of privatisation**

The results of the government's 2010 National Survey of Charities and Social Enterprises (NSCSE) have just been released. The Cabinet Office gleefully commented on the results of the survey which "gathered the views of over 44,000 sector organisations on a host of issues important to their success and vitality". Well they might, for a key finding highlighted the sector's increased role in delivering public services - 31% listed this as one of their roles (up from 20%) and a massive 24% of organisations reported this to be their **main role**, compared with 14% in 2008.

The growing hegemony of the business brigade was evidenced in the finding that the number of organisations listing the delivery of other services, such as financial and business services (what?), as one of their roles had also grown from 24 per cent to 34 per cent. Whilst the number of organisations operating in community development, advocacy and volunteering had all fallen by small percentages.

There was a sting in the tail though as "those in receipt of statutory funding are less confident of success in the future". As well they might. The Cabinet Office press release is here: <http://bit.ly/kC6zDJ>

## **Get fit-for-purpose – yet again....**

The Cabinet Office and the Lottery Fund has announced a joint funding package of £50M to help local infrastructure bodies 'transform' themselves yet again. This is partly an attempt to promote efficiency savings through mergers, etc. ("more sustainable business models") and partly an attempt to force these bodies into closer relationships with private businesses and local statutory agencies. You can clock the guidance notes here -

<http://bit.ly/ou4amp>. In a separate initiative another £10M is promised to help the sector play a bigger role in public service delivery. The Investment and Contract Readiness Fund will begin next April and run for three years. You can read about this one here - <http://bit.ly/ouJYoj>.

## **National Citizen Service gets it in the neck**

The government's flagship youth programme the National Citizen Service is being attacked on all sides. NAVCA boss Kevin Curley told MPs there is a mismatch between "the very attractive rhetoric of the big society" (what a silver tongue) and the withdrawal of support for volunteer centres.

The government intends to spend £15m this year, plans a further £37m next year, and it had been estimated the initiative could cost £355m if it were to be extended nationally.

For once, dear old Stephen Bubb was also on-message, saying "What's plagued our organisations over the last decade is new government initiatives on volunteering.... If you want to get people to volunteer you have to support the organisations that support volunteers."

Meanwhile the Commons education select committee warns that the costs of the programme 'may well outstrip entire annual spending by local authorities on youth services, if just half of all 16 year olds took part in it'. That, of course won't be difficult much longer anyway, as many local authorities are shutting down youth services altogether.

## **Maude loses his marbles**

Public sector workers who have been made redundant should work unpaid as volunteer managers for charities, according to Francis Maude, the Minister for the Cabinet Office. Speaking at a recent session hosted by Christian charity Oasis, Maude said many charities had plenty of potential volunteers but were unable to involve all of them because there was a shortage of volunteer managers. "There will be a diminishing public sector workforce," he said. "I want to help train some of these people to be organisers and managers of volunteers. There is nothing more frustrating than seeing charities with too many volunteers they can't use because there is no one to manage them."

Maude did not say whether the government would fund any training, but said the suggested roles would be unpaid. Where do you start with this one??

## **Boat owners may soon be in hot water**

Publicity about the running battle between British Waterways and 'bargee travellers' (boat owners who move about a lot and thus avoid mooring charges), has turned up some rather alarming plans. The government is turning British Waterways into a charity and in the

process wants to give the new body new powers which include the ability to force entry, stop and search and make subordinate legislation. While the prospect of unregulated quasi-police charity workers jumping aboard your vessel uninvited is daunting, it's the latter that's causing the most concern for the 6,000-10,000 people living on boats trundling up and down the canals. Previous attempts to make the cruisers 'settle down' have floundered (get it?) but with new powers come new possibilities for harassment.

You can dive into this debate here: [www.gypsy-traveller.org/where-you-live/boat-dwellers](http://www.gypsy-traveller.org/where-you-live/boat-dwellers) and [www.bargee-traveller.org.uk](http://www.bargee-traveller.org.uk)

### **Lest we forget**

Next time you hear one of them saying that we're all in it together, just quote Polly Toynbee at them "There is just one extraordinary fact everyone needs to know. The cuts have fallen hardest on the most deprived councils, while the richest areas have suffered least. Whichever way the figures are construed, the highest percentage of cuts hit the poorest places hardest: Liverpool worst, followed by Manchester; Knowsley; Blackburn with Darwen; South Tyneside; Hackney; Newham; Hartlepool; Tower Hamlets and so on.

Now look up at the top and some councils actually gain - such as Oliver Letwin's Dorset. Among the least affected in spending power are such places as Vince Cable's Richmond upon Thames, Windsor and Maidenhead, Wokingham, and Michael Gove's Surrey." Click here for the full article - <http://bit.ly/haATwt>

## **Organising, mobilising & keeping on keeping on**

### **Interviewing the real 'big society'**

We've been catching up with people in our network to find out how they are managing to keep on keeping on in the face of cuts and the bombardment of information, schemes and policy announcements on localism and the privatisation of public services. Read our interview with Sarah Lamb, a trustee of Adur Voluntary Action, who talks about the cynicism of the 'big society', the spirit of local action and the power of just getting on with it. You can read the whole article here -

<http://www.independentaction.net/2011/07/29/sarah-lamb/>

Look out for a viewpoint article on our website next week where Sarah and colleagues set out their stall on the new Transforming Local Infrastructure funding scheme. If you want to be interviewed for our newsletter, please email [melaina@independentaction.net](mailto:melaina@independentaction.net)

### **Think big – revolutionary manifesto from World to Win**

It's good to know that some people are still thinking big about the kind of changes we need to make the world a fairer, more just and sustainable place. Our friends over at World to Win have just published 'Revolutionary Solutions: A Manifesto' which spans:

- Strategy for a global crisis
- Claiming democracy for the people
- Transforming the economy
- Creating a sustainable future
- Freeing culture & education from profit
- A democratic organisation

You can be inspired here: <http://www.aworldtowin.net/Manifesto/Intro.html>

## Another plug for NatCAN

We announced the launch of the National Community Activist Network in our last newsletter as a place where those of us of a particular dissenting persuasion can find kindred souls (non smoking, vivacious activist seeks fun with similar...). NatCAN seems to be off to a flying start with 250-odd members (some of them probably very odd) in the first month. Joe Taylor, the megalomaniac site organiser wants 200,000, which is a bit over optimistic. But if you haven't signed up yet, go and do it now - [http://nationalcan.ning.com/?xg\\_source=msg\\_mes\\_network](http://nationalcan.ning.com/?xg_source=msg_mes_network)

## This month's 'That Takes The Biscuit' award goes to....

### GREENICH COUNCIL

Amongst the documents for tendering community-based legal advice services is the following confusing statement:

*Between 21st June and 4th July 2011, potential applicants / bidders and others are free to ask questions about this document, the proposed services and performance standards and about the application process. Any such questions must be in writing and emailed to ????????"*

Then in the depths of the paperwork it is revealed that the Council has obviously got fed up with all this partnership and joint working, for it says:

*"Consortium Proposals / Subcontracting (Up to 5 points may be deducted)".*

## Web-based seminars tackle community development

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Network - see <http://21st-centurynetwork.com/> - has been running 'webinars' - web-base seminars where you can join a group listening to a speaker and offer comments or questions as you go. Currently three are devoted to the future of community development. On the 12<sup>th</sup> July our very own Matt Scott presented an elegant history of how we have got to where we are now and highlighted the contemporary political

undercurrents to community development. You can 'listen again' to that here: <http://bit.ly/ornaDv> (sign on as a guest adding your name, no password is needed). Next up will be Cormac Russell, of Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), on the 1<sup>st</sup> August, who will talk about "Developing Community Strengths." Then on the 21<sup>st</sup> September, Mark Parker will talk about "Organising Communities for Social Justice." You can find out more and register here: <http://www.meetup.com/21stCenturyNetwork/>

### **'Communities' controlling assets – radical or regressive?**

"Community organisations controlling assets: A better understanding" is the snappy title of a new report commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF). This looked at a range of organisations involved in asset ownership and management. This whole issue is going to gain more prominence with the promises of the government for a sale of the century that is going to enrich us all. We sent the report over to our resident expert and this is what he sent back:

"I have had a quick scan of this report. It covers the main practical and immediate policy issues well but does not place it in a wider context of (a) social movements (b) land ownership (c) the failure of state housing. So it takes out the critical politics. Thus for example it does not deal with the fact there is a range of Development Trusts, some of which are explicitly political and some that are "non political". This de-politicisation of social policy (itself a political judgement) is quite depressing and suggests in this case that community ownership is of itself a good thing when that may not always be the case, that is its politics are, in fact, the key to judging its worth. Unless there is a political analysis, the Big Society and all the rest seem progressive when overall its intention is very far from progressive or redistributive."

You can see for yourself here: <http://bit.ly/kvHYJC>

### **Unison takes a close look at mutuals**

Useful report on mutuals from Unison takes a critical look at the real agenda behind the government's cuddly co-op rhetoric. It concludes that to be taken seriously the government needs to satisfy three 'tests of faith' - extend the principles and the programme to private sector contractors providing public services now; guarantee serious, stable contracts to mutual 'spin outs' and lock up their assets in case they are taken over; and focus also on other ways of involving public sector staff in designing and delivering services.

You can download the report here - <http://www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/19946.pdf>