

# National Coalition for Independent Action

**DISSEN**  
*protect  
democra*

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

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**Newsletter No: 23**

**September 2011**

## **There are reasons to be cheerful**

I approached this month's newsletter with the usual mixture of foreboding (what dreadful things will have happened), doom (what dreadful things are going to happen next), anger (just let me get my hands on them) and beckoning exhaustion (250 emails, circulars, policy papers etc to wade through).

To my delighted surprise, I kept finding feisty stories of heroism, opposition and good solid thinking and this is well represented in the following columns. Here you can read about the people who are taking their council to court to oppose the cuts, finding alternative ways to raise money to support independent action, looking for the connections and solidarity that will make collective action more effective, refusing to conspire with the latest efforts to corral voluntary action into the currently acceptable format, and presenting alternative perspectives to the tired old rhetoric of our self-appointed sector 'leaders'.

The madness does continue, however, and the bad news has not gone away; indeed I guess we need to brace ourselves for much, much more of that as we finish this year and move into the next. But today the sun is shining, the ripe apples are falling off my tree, and the autumn chill prompts that magical mixture of nostalgia for the past and hope for the future. So let's raise a glass to those who use our ungoverned space to fight on for social justice, remind ourselves that we can, and will, get our voices heard and, in any way we can, keep on keeping on.

## **News from the Coalition**

### **Surviving hard times with integrity – Tuesday 27th September**

Organised jointly by NCIA and Aston-Mansfield Community Involvement Unit, this event will focus on the cuts, increasing demand, threats to sustainability, the impact of competition and

strategies to survive these attacks on our independence and integrity. Speakers include: **Josie Soutar** (Sheffield Alcohol Support Service), **Adrian Barritt** (Adur Voluntary Action), **Steve Clare** (Locality), **David Robinson** (Community Links) and **Andy Benson** (NCIA). There will also be practical workshops on these themes

Tuesday 27 September, from 10am to 4.30pm at Durning Hall Community Centre, Earlham Grove, London E7 9AB. Places for the conference are limited, so you should register in advance. Tickets are £12 for voluntary groups and £25 for statutory sector organisations, but are free for volunteers and people coming from unfunded groups. Best way to register is online here - <http://ciu2011.eventbrite.com/> or download a registration form here <http://bit.ly/pyJbTk> . Hope to see you there.

### **An Essay on the Big Society**

John Seddon reflects on how a 'systems thinking' method has improved public services but is now under threat from cuts, commissioning and 'big society' as the government fails to move beyond central control and large-scale initiatives. Read more - <http://bit.ly/pYhx3v>

### **Mad world, my masters: CVS says no to Transforming Local Infrastructure scramble**

Adur Voluntary Action has opted out of bids for the transforming local infrastructure fund. Adrian Barritt explains the practical and philosophical concerns that led to the decision - read more <http://bit.ly/qnizlD>.

Meanwhile Sarah Lamb, one of AVA's trustees, gives her personal take on the voluntary sector's dilemma with initiatives like these - read more - <http://bit.ly/nA3yId>

### **Next Planning Group at the TUC**

The next NCIA planning group meeting will be on Monday November 21st, 2pm to 5pm. We will be meeting at the TUC - Room 4, 5th Floor, Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3LS. Please let Melaina or Rachael know if you'd like to come - [Rachael@independentaction.net](mailto:Rachael@independentaction.net) or [Melaina@independentaction.net](mailto:Melaina@independentaction.net) .

### **NCIA Independence Audit now available**

Is your organisation managing to stay independent and true to the purpose it was set up for? NCIA challenges you to find out. Our independence audit is now available. It can be done as a self assessment, or an NCIA consultant can go to an organisation and do it with you. The Independence Audit web page (<http://bit.ly/r4vdH1>) has all the details.

We're looking for organisations who want to do the audit, and individuals who are interested in conducting audits for us. Please contact Rachael - [rachael@independentaction.net](mailto:rachael@independentaction.net).

### **NCIA responds to the Panel 'investigating the independence of the VCS'**

Baring Foundation has set up a panel to carry out a five-year investigation into the independence of the VCS. The panel has produced its first report (<http://bit.ly/pkeCGm>) and is inviting responses by the 21st September, to help form a report into the state of independence later on in the year. In our response, NCIA has urged them to revisit their terms of reference to make them relevant to current circumstances before going any further. This will be up on our website

soon. We'll let you know if we get a reply.

## **Heros, heroines, & keeping on keeping on**

### **The acceptable (and successful) face of social enterprise**

Social enterprise is an expression we use with care, if at all, over here at the NCIA, but the work of the Lincolnshire Community Foundation is most definitely social and decidedly enterprising. Their latest newsletter reveals that in the last year they have given over £½M in grants, generated £160k in earned income, taken on two community building projects, set up their own grassroots grants programme (£150k a year), and an environmental grants scheme to invest in renewable energy.

Of their direction they say, "We know that grants are harder to find. Government has chosen either to lend money or to contract out and pay for charities to deliver state services. In response, the Foundation has chosen to become less dependent on the fees we used to be paid for running government grant programmes.... Instead, we have developed our business services, attracted donations and built endowment as the basis for independent grant making. We are advising partner agencies to look at all possible ways to become self-sustaining."

You can catch the whole story here: [www.lincolnshirecf.co.uk](http://www.lincolnshirecf.co.uk) or send a pat on the back to Gordon Hunter and his colleagues at [gordonhunter@email.com](mailto:gordonhunter@email.com).

### **Community groups should keep out of public services**

A recent poll conducted by the Guardian got a resounding response to the question: "Are smaller more informal community groups better suited to supporting, rather than running, public services? A whopping 92.2% said yes. Pretty clear result then.

### **Tenants should decide future of ALMOs**

The publication of the Open Public Services White Paper allows the Defend Council Housing (DCH) campaign to say 'I told you so,' as they warn of a new wave of council housing privatisation around the corner. The threat is to transfer the country's 60 Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) (850,000 tenants) into management by housing associations. DCH warned of this two-stage privatisation threat when they campaigned against ALMOs in the first place. And they say, "The White Paper ignores the principle of Tenant Choice, and the right to a ballot on any stock transfer." Regional and national protest meetings have been happening around the country. You can plug yourself into this by visiting their website - [www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk](http://www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk)

### **Black Sisters do it again**

Yet again acting as a beacon to us all, Southall Black Sisters, Rights of Women and others have forced another government retreat, this time on the proposal to deny abused migrant women access to legal aid. The Legal Aid minister Jonathan Djanogly has confirmed the u-turn, which will allow legal aid to help people who are on spouse or partner visas to leave violent or abusive relationships and apply for indefinite leave to remain in this country. A legal challenge from SBS at the beginning of July together with some vigorous lobbying got the result.

SBS continues to press for further clarification and is demanding that all trafficked women and migrant domestic workers should be included in the scope of legal aid as the protection and

equality principles must also apply to these vulnerable groups of women. More here: <http://bit.ly/oeGMEP>

## **Red Pepper lambasts privatisation**

More support for us anti-privatisationists comes, perhaps not surprisingly, from Red Pepper magazine. Writing of the Open Public Services white paper, guest contributor Bob Colenutt says: "There is a real danger of a divide being created (and exploited by the government) between public service workers losing their jobs and conditions, and the voluntary and community sector that is being promoted by the government as an enlightened alternative." He goes on: "The left has a huge responsibility to draw together a broad alliance to fight it and restate the need for universal public services." Hurray to that. It's a strong piece and it's here: <http://bit.ly/pFyETJ>

## **Charities face strikes to protect jobs and pay**

As the cuts work their way through the system, as last we are seeing the signs that some, at least, in the vast voluntary sector workforce are not prepared to take things lying down. Although union membership is parlously low in the voluntary sector, small groups of unionised staff are beginning to make their opposition known.

At London homelessness charity **Centrepoin**t, moves towards industrial action are being taken over proposed pay cuts and redundancies, which staff believe will not be fairly distributed. Unite, which represents the staff involved said that negotiations between the charity and the union had broken down. Meanwhile over at **Action for Children**, where management is proposing a pay freeze, the ballots have already been held and 80% of those who voted were in favour of industrial action. The same thing has happened at **Quarriers**, a Scottish social care charity, where pay cuts of up to 25% have been claimed by the union. Here 76% voted for strike action. The management position here has been that cutting wages is the only alternative to cutting jobs.

.....**But top chief executives unlikely to join them.....**

Charity Finance magazine's annual leadership survey reveals that the average salary of the chief executives of the UK's top-100 charities is £166,048. This represents an increase of around 10 per cent on the average salary in 2009, which was £151,563. The top five earners in the list were all men, and when their salaries were removed the average salary fell to £138,949. Not bad at all...

## **Disabled activists and the professionals clobber ATOS**

The struggle between the government and the thousands of people it is trying to kick off disability benefits is hotting up. Disability groups, activists and professional advice bodies like Citizens Advice Scotland have been up in arms both about the policy itself and the outrageous way in which medical assessments are being carried out by the IT contractor ATOS, who are doing the government's dirty work, via a £300M contract. Criticism from reports, TV programmes, disability groups and politicians have forced a review by Professor Malcolm Harrington of the Work Capability Assessment process, the heavily-computerised system designed to determine claimants' fitness for work.

The project aims to reassess 1.6M people at a rate of 11,000 a week. Despite Harrington's acknowledgement that the system is not working 'satisfactorily', the government will not suspend the programme. Appeals are running at a rate of 400-500,000 a year, cost £50M, and

40% of these are successful.

Meanwhile ATOS, who don't much take to dissent, have been moving in to get critical websites closed down, three so far. The latest is Carerwatch, a small charity catering to the needs of sick and disabled people and their unpaid family carers. Their site was taken off line after ATOS complained to their server. Activists are regrouping and the campaigning continues - see for example <http://bit.ly/pXvcpr>. And there is to be a national day of action against ATOS on the 30th September. You can find out how to join in here: <http://bit.ly/qPTXSi>.

### **Stoke Council 'reconsiders' decision to cut support services for deaf children after legal challenge**

Stoke-on-Trent City Council has said it will reconsider its decision on support services for deaf children after a legal challenge from the National Deaf Children's Society. The charity went to the High Court on 22 August to request a judicial review of the council's refusal to reconsider its decision to make a 32% cut to these services. An NDCS spokesperson said: "NDCS used legal action as a last resort because the council ignored the concerns of parents for almost a year. It should not be necessary to take legal action to ensure the voices of parents are heard. We are pleased that the council is now willing to work alongside NDCS and parents in Stoke to ensure that deaf children reach their full potential."

### **TUC revs up to oppose the 'any qualified provider' model**

This week's TUC Congress includes motions criticising the government's Health and Social Care Bill, which "will break up the NHS and put profit ahead of patients", specifically highlighting the role of voluntary agencies in this. A Unison spokeswoman said: "Charities are spending a lot of time bidding for contracts to run services, which is completely different from how they have operated in the past and how they want to operate."

### **Greenpeace takes Government to court over nuclear expansion policy**

Greenpeace has mounted a legal challenge to the government's national policy statement on nuclear energy on the grounds that ministers have failed to take into account the Fukushima disaster in Japan this Spring. See the detail here - <http://bit.ly/okBbtH>.

### **Talking heads, talking sense**

The Directory of Social Change once again speaks it as it is. In two recent articles on their site, they take apart many of the myths that are put about by the government and our so-called leaders. In the first, Jay Kennedy demolishes grant dependency, merger-itis, double standards on the 'evidence-base' and how we are all expected to learn from business and the media. In the second, Debra Allcock has a go at market models, seeing service users as consumers, the supposed end of altruism and the idea that we all need to turn into social enterprises. You can catch these welcome outbursts of good sense here: <http://bit.ly/p3w7Bz> ; <http://bit.ly/nsZ413>.

### **The Broken of Britain – radical blog from the disability lobby**

Sensible radical stuff from 'non partisan UK-based disability campaign'. My eye was especially caught by 'Broken System not Broken People?' which elegantly ties the personal anguish of mental health problems to the misguided effects of rampant neo-liberalism. You can clock the blog here: <http://thebrokenofbritain.blogspot.com/> (scroll down to 7th September for the specific piece).

## Government nagging turns people off volunteering

Interviews conducted by NCVO's Pathways Through Participation project reveal that Government's attempts to encourage volunteering can deter people from getting involved in their communities. "Government policy was never described as a motivating factor by the interviewees, and any influence was reported negatively," it says. The report says policy-makers focus on the positive impact of people's involvement in voluntary and community activities, but says they should acknowledge that this type of participation "does not always happen in the ways policymakers and practitioners want or expect." This type of activity "frequently involves conflict and tension.... We heard examples of conflict being an intended consequence of participation with people in direct opposition to the state or other forms of authority, seeking or resisting change, enacted through lobbying local MPs or taking part in marches," it says. There you go - 'dissent protects democracy' as we are fond of saying. There's a lot in this report - have a look here: <http://bit.ly/qbg6vM>

## The bigger picture

Lest we get trapped in the detail whilst trying to protect jobs, services and communities, or even just keeping our heads down, it's good to remember the enormous and awful project that all this is about. Here's an extract from a Guardian letter last March from Peter Taylor-Gooby, Professor of Social Policy at the University of Kent:

"This government has learnt the lesson of previous attempts to cut state spending: public expenditure bounces back. That's what happened after the Geddes axe in 1922, the 1931 National Government cuts, Callaghan in 1976, even Thatcher in the 1980s and Major in the 1990s. To achieve a permanent shift to a small-state, market-centred society, it's not enough to slash state spending for the life of one parliament. You have also to change fundamentally how the welfare state works, so that private capital and the market are embedded at the heart of public provision. This is what the NHS, local government, social care, social housing, university and all the other reforms are intended to achieve. The objective is simple: the destruction of the public realm."

And in parallel, the same message comes from across the pond - the purpose of the austerity programme is to close the welfare state and pass what's left of it to the private sector. Have a listen to Professor Bob Pollin of University of Massachusetts: <http://bit.ly/qqZDXa>

## Cuts, clobberings & continued chaos

### Cuts in the capital counter Pickles pledge

The latest version of the Big Squeeze, London Voluntary Service Council's regular review of funding cuts in the capital, reveals that just over half of voluntary and community organisations in London axed services last year because of public spending cuts. According to the research, preventive services are being "disproportionately cut, particularly in advice, health and children and young people's services". 54% of the 120 groups that responded also expected more services to close in 2011/12 and 86% expected demand for their services to increase during the same period. This study concludes that "the cuts being imposed on the voluntary sector are higher than those imposed on the government and local authorities," contrary to the claim of Communities Secretary Eric Pickles, that he didn't want disproportionate cuts passed on to the voluntary sector. You can see the whole thing here: <http://www.lvsc.org.uk/campaigns/big-squeeze.aspx>



## **Watch out for the 'Islam-archists'**

Interesting guidance from the Metropolitan Police counter terrorist 'focus desk' suggests that "Anarchism is a political philosophy which considers the state undesirable, unnecessary and harmful, and instead promotes a stateless society, or anarchy. Any information relating to anarchists should be reported to your local Police."

And in another - this time public - release the boys in blue asked shopkeepers to be on the lookout for "Al-Qaeda and anarchists". They later backed down saying the appeal 'could have been better worded' and that they do 'not seek to stigmatise those people with legitimate political views'. Oh very reassuring.

## **Research reveals that deprived areas face the biggest cuts threat**

Work under the umbrella of the Third Sector Research Centre reveals that community groups in deprived areas are most at risk of public funding cuts. A consistent theme in the Centre's work is the uneven capacity of communities. Their quantitative research has begun to show how these patterns relate to underlying social and economic conditions.

Professor John Mohan, from the University of Southampton, says: "Research on registered third sector organisations operating at neighbourhood scale, for example, shows that there are fewer organisations per head in more deprived areas. Those organisations operating in more deprived areas are also more likely to be reliant on public funding. Thus the areas with fewest registered third sector organisations are also likely to be in areas most at risk from funding reductions".

More evidence therefore that the 'Big Society' is better described as 'Big Inequality'. You can bone up here: <http://bit.ly/qqWh18>

## **Dale Farm – the final showdown?**

The long running dispute between travellers at Dale Farm and Basildon Council looks like it will come to a head next week on September 19th, the date leaked for the £18M eviction. Residents are calling on supporters to come to Dale Farm help them stop the eviction. They are also calling for legal observers and human rights monitors to come down to act as witnesses. More information from: <http://dalefarm.wordpress.com/contact>.

## **National Planning Policy Framework published**

In the latest outburst of localism and people power (not), the government has published the new draft National Planning Policy Framework, which is open to public consultation until 17th October. There's a summary of the proposals on the Urban Forum site - <http://bit.ly/p5x3L1>, and a good critique from Red Pepper - <http://bit.ly/oJXswu>. Opposition is already gathering as the National Trust launches a petition opposing the changes.