

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

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Find the activists – build a movement?

Politically, I've never expected to be on the winning side - well, let's face it, outside of the Spanish Civil War, anarcho-syndicalists have never been much of a force. But now my patience is running out. This is the feeling that emerges from compiling this newsletter. We are witnessing the break-up of our precious NHS, an attack on living standards of the poorest in our community, the criminalisation of young people and the naked consolidation of the power and wealth of the very people responsible for this debacle. Closer to home, we see community groups struggling to keep their head above water, voluntary agencies being told that their future lies in sub-contracting to privatised public services (despite the obvious absurdities of the *Work Programme*) and the second tier so-called support agencies turning themselves into pretzels to help make this a reality (see *We have ways of transforming you*).

Last night someone said to me that this now feels like the '80s - when the government attacked its own people. And the lesson from that comment, of course, is that the '80s was when the Thatcher government broke the power of opposition - both the mass movement opposition (secondary picketing, the Miner's strike...) and the oppositional spirit of the Labour Party, which then began its transformation into another version of the Tories.

Which leaves us where? You only have to read the papers, listen to the misery of those losing jobs, benefits, housing, or surf the web to know that there is no shortage of people opposed to all this crap. But the opposition lies in small, beleaguered groups fighting their corner in (mostly) local struggles (thankfully sometimes successful - see *Stroud Against the Cuts shows the way*). We have lost

the critical mass of a mass movement. Within NCIA we are talking about how we can build better alliances with groups that share our vision and perspective and in our own tiny way we are going to try and do this. But how can we re-create the connections and synergies which help us to combine, support each other with energy and hope, and build strong and effective resistance to the catastrophe that is amongst us? (Answers, please, not on a postcard, but to www.independentaction.net).

New on our website

If you haven't visited the website lately here's a flavour of what you can find there. Notes of our last *Planning Group* of course, a frank discussion of what we've been up to and what we need to do next.

Next up is a challenge to the orthodoxy of *'partnership'* from Professor Jonathan Davies, while Meta Zimmeck peels back the veil obscuring the real message behind the NAO's recent report on the operation of *the Compact*.

Commentaries on two funding programmes come from Adrian Barritt - the deficiencies of the *Social Action Fund* and how the nation's *Councils of Voluntary Services* have been falling over themselves to 'deliver' the government's idea of support to voluntary action.

January also saw the publication of the first annual report of the *Baring's Independence Panel Inquiry* into the state of the sector at the beginning of 2012. There is much in their report to support NCIA's position and we have posted our response on the site.

News and events

NatCAN conference – 23rd February – Preston

There is still time to sign up for the NatCAN conference - *What should activists do in 2012?* You can see more about this here - <http://bit.ly/uY34yS>. Though if you're not already signed up to NatCAN you may need to do this first - very easily done here - <http://nationalcan.ning.com/>

Webinar – Community Groups – Learning from each other – 15th February 7.30-8.30pm

A web-based inter-active seminar featuring NCIA's Andy Benson and Antony Carpen, leading a wide ranging (and probably anarchic) discussion of activism and anguish as we face the prospect of 2012. You can sign up for this one here - <http://www.meetup.com/21stCenturyNetwork/>

Using public law workshops still on the road

Despite cuts to their funding the Empowering the Voluntary Sector project is still running one-day workshops in using public law and the Compact. The workshops aim to equip third sector organisations to use the principles of public law and the Compact to negotiate effectively with public bodies. Content includes challenging unfair funding cuts and consultation and how identify unlawful behaviour on the part of a public body. Upcoming dates are:

- § North Devon 15.2.12
- § Plymouth 22.2.12
- § Derby 1.3.12

Workshops are also being planned for: South Tyneside; Crawley; Warwick; High Peak Derbyshire. In all cases workshops are hosted by other organisations who set charges etc. For more information get in touch with Terry Perkins at NAVCA - terry.perkins@navca.org.uk

Fighting major infrastructure projects – FoE offer training day – 25th February - Birmingham

If you're involved in fighting new major roads, nuclear power stations, biomass plants or other big steamroller projects, then this Friends of the Earth training day may be the one for you. The free event is taking place on the 25th February 10.00 - 16.00, at the Birmingham and Midland Institute, Birmingham..

The day will offer the opportunity to get to grips with the new fast track planning process and find out how you can get involved at each step. This will involve evidence from the campaign in Merthyr Tydfil, Wales, which successfully defeated a proposed mega incinerator. To book your place Charlotte Chan on charlotte.chan@foe.co.uk, or phone 020 7566 1650

New kid at NAVCA

With Kevin Curley's retirement comes a new kid on the block to take his place. Joe Irvin arrives with a distinct New Labour aroma, having been special adviser to John Prescott and part of the 10 Downing Street Policy Unit. He also has union and private sector experience. We're hoping that his union background might bring some fresh air into NAVCA on the issue of privatisation and the voluntary sector. Kevin meanwhile has been saying that now he's left he can say what he really thinks about things..... we look forward to that too....

ABCD Europe launched

There's now a website for aficionados of Asset Based Community Development called ABCD Europe. The site provides an interactive platform to "to discuss, share and deepen ways to apply the principles and practices of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) and other strengths-based approaches." If you want to join the throng then here's where you'll find it <http://abcdeurope.ning.com/>

Heros, heroines, & keeping on keeping on

Dudley folk show little enthusiasm for Localism 'community rights'

The 'Our Society Dudley' group has been asking local people what they think about the new community rights created by the Localism Act. Apart from very little knowledge of what we are apparently being offered, the project's focus groups found a lot of cynicism and more enthusiasm for improving public services than taking them over. You can read more about the work, which is being done jointly with the Urban Forum at these two blog entries -

<http://www.urbanforum.org.uk/blogs/reflections-from-dudley>

<http://www.urbanforum.org.uk/community-rights-made-real-blog/what-s...>

Pressure on the London Mayoral hopefuls – do something about income inequality!

The London Equality Group has launched a manifesto and petition on income inequality to put pressure on the candidates for the upcoming London elections. It's called My Fair London. The Mayoral and Assembly candidates are asked to agree to:

- Promote equal pay
- Monitor income inequality in London
- Lobby central government for fairer tax, pay and benefits policies
- Deliver more cheaper housing for Londoners
- Reduce transport costs for people on low incomes
- Implement the London Health Inequality Strategy

The group is aiming for 10,000 signatures and appealing to Londoners to sign up in support of this manifesto - you can do that here www.myfairlondon.org.uk

**This month's 'That Takes the Biscuit' Award goes to:
Prospect, sub-contractor to SEETEC, sub-contractor to the DWP**

Our correspondent writes that his introduction to his sub-sub-contracted Work Programme supporter was all carrot and stick. The carrot of course was 'co-operate with us or lose your JSA for 26 weeks'. The carrot was more surprising - as a Prospect 'customer' he was entitled to: a voucher for a haircut, a personal grooming kit and an alarm clock so he wouldn't miss his job appointments.

You couldn't make it up!!

New report slams nuclear misinformation

A report from Unlock Democracy and the Association for the Conservation of Energy takes the lid off the misinformation surrounding successive governments decisions to build new nuclear power stations. 'A Corruption of Governance?' summons the evidence to show how Ministers and Parliaments were misled and based their decisions on a false presentation of the Government's own analysis. You can cop this scandal here: <http://bit.ly/xUvgD5>.

Meanwhile, the no-new-nuclear activists are focussing their attention on Hinkley Point, where EDF Energy have started clearance work for two new reactors despite not yet having planning permission for the devleopment. Three hardy activists have braved the arctic blasts to occupy trees at the site, one of them being quoted as saying: "This whole application for the Hinkley C nuclear power station has been characterized by deceit and corporate bullying. We urgently need help to defend this land."

A mass rally is planned at the site for March 10th, the anniversary of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in Japan. Find out more here - <http://stopnewnuclear.org.uk>

Unite launches 'community membership pledge'

In what could be a landmark move, Unite has pledged to "organise the marginalised - and revolutionise British trade unionism". Introducing a new category of 'community membership' will allow unemployed people, students and others not in work to join the union - and for just 50p per week. This will create access to membership benefits , such as a legal advice helpline, welfare benefits check-up, debt counselling, assistance with CVs, application forms, and interviews and hardship grants. But beyond that the idea is to support members as community activists, "bringing together people across their locality who have felt left down or excluded by politics to ensure that they too have a voice at a time of economic turmoil and social change for the nation."

For information on the scheme email: community@unitetheunion.org or call the Community Membership information line 0333 240 9798 (normal landline rates) or visit <http://www.unitetheunion.org/community>.

Free legal support for community groups

Using the Law can be an effective way of slowing - even stopping - the juggernaut of regressive government policies, attacks on living standards and the other issues that fill these columns. But you need good lawyers to help with this. Stroud Against the

Cuts, who have just won a landmark victory against NHS privatisation, can't speak more highly of their lawyers Leigh Day & Co.

One source of free legal help is Lawworks who may be able to broker access to lawyers who will be prepared to help you for free. You can check them out here - <http://www.lawworks.org.uk/community-groups>

Atoms and energy – can two worlds collide or coalesce??

Interesting ideas come from Eileen Conn, a seasoned community activist from Southwark, who reckons that the clash between the institutions of empowerment and the activists doing the business is an example of two worlds colliding. The former - top down, organisationally-driven activity - she describes as atoms or matter, and the latter as energy - horizontal, informal and peer-driven flows of activity. The task, she argues, to achieve constructive synergy is to find a way of integrating these vertical and horizontal impulses, which is what she's been trying to do in her own patch for a good few years.

All this becomes a bit clearer in a short talking heads video which you can catch here - <http://www.socialreporters.net/?p=455>. Or if you want the full McCoy you can download Eileen's paper, which is on the Third Sector Research Centre's website - <http://tinyurl.com/social-eco-system-dance>. Some examples of the model in practice can be found here - <http://www.peckhamvision.org>.

Open Democracy calls for outright opposition to NHS demolition

Given that practically every professional body concerned with health care in the UK and the House of Lords has come out against the proposed NHS changes, why has there been so little popular protest from the general public? Campaign group Open Democracy argues that it's time for a wake-up call or we will find that what we value in the NHS will be gone forever. You can read more over on their website - <http://bit.ly/A1F3HZ>

And Stroud Against the Cuts shows the way

Plans by Gloucestershire NHS to privatise local community health services into a Community Interest Company, have been halted after a local cuts group took them to judicial review. In statement the PCT said that it: "... has agreed that it will start a new process to explore the best option for providing community services in Gloucestershire..... and will take necessary steps to ensure an appropriate level of staff and public engagement."

Stroud Against the Cuts will now keep up the pressure to ensure that the services remain in public management. You can congratulate them and sign their petition here - <http://www.stroudagainstcuts.co.uk/>

Lest we forget.....

'Those who make the wrong decisions, who engage in criminality, must be identified, arrested and punished, and we will make sure that happens' : Theresa May, August 11, 2011 after the riots

'The UK further states that the criminal prosecution of bank employees due to participation in tax offences is highly unlikely' : Clause in UK-Swiss tax deal agreed by George Osborne, 23 Aug 2011.

Welfare Reform – never mind the evidence

As the regressive Welfare Reform Bill is hustled through Parliament a group of outraged disabled people have produced the 'Spartacus Report'. The report slams the proposed changes to Disability Living Allowance and came after their views had been ignored: "We did everything possible to engage with politicians, lobbying MPs and Peers, writing articles, attending conferences, but at every turn we were brushed aside", says Sue Marsh, one of the authors of the report. "This is the Spartacus Report. We all own it, we all created it. It is yours, use it in any way you wish. Please join in the campaign online today if you aren't already signed up". Get the word here - <http://bit.ly/ApqYvY>

Housing Emergency - Time for an Alternative

A new push is underway to counter the Government's attack on tenants' security, rent rises, benefits cuts and the effects of these policies on living standards, housing conditions and homelessness. Called Time for an Alternative, the campaign will be launched on the 21st February at the House of Commons. Meetings are being organised around the country to build support. More details here - <http://bit.ly/x7lqxh>

Voluntary groups should get back to basics

Refreshing review of 2011 and the (mis)fortunes of the voluntary sector is to be found on the website of the Voluntary Action History Society, where NCIA activists Colin Rochester and Meta Zimmeck conclude that: "...voluntary organisations can - and should - return to their roots by:

§ focusing their attention on the needs and aspirations of their users or beneficiaries rather than what government wants;

- § remembering how they used to do things before they were overtaken by an excess of managerialism; and
 - § rebuilding their relationships with other voluntary organisations on the basis of mutual support and shared learning rather than competition.
- Clock some good sense here - <http://www.vahs.org.uk/2012/01>

Cuts, clobberings & continued chaos

Ministers off message about Nottinghamshire cuts

Ministers Nick Hurd and Eric Pickles have got their collective knickers in a twist (don't go there....) over the 34% cut to the voluntary sector budget decided by Northamptonshire Council. The issue was hyped up to a national level by NAVCA who called on the government to intervene, given Pickles' famous announcement that voluntary agencies shouldn't be 'disproportionately cut'. Hurd's response was 'nothing to do with us' in the new age of Localism. But later Pickles felt forced to say that he would step in and according to an NCVO spokesperson: "He will be bringing to the Council's attention its obligations in relation to the statutory guidance on disproportionate cuts." That should sort it then.

Meanwhile the true scale of the cuts starts to become clear

Recent evidence from NCVO and Skills-Third Sector shows how the Big Society is getting a little smaller as voluntary sector cuts bite. The research reports that over the last 12 months there has been a net reduction in voluntary sector employees of 70,000 people, equivalent to almost 1 in 11 or 9% of employees, an estimated 56,000 of whom were women. In comparison public sector employment fell by 4.3% whilst private sector employment rose by 1.5% over the same period. So despite the fuss over Northamptonshire, overall the VCS is being cut at about twice the rate of the public sector. Eric - is this a job for you? You can catch the detail here: <http://bit.ly/wW2N2U>

And Hurd continues to make it up as he goes along

Adding further confusion to the question of whether the Government does or doesn't want to interfere in local affairs, Nick Hurd, the Minister for Civil Society, has accused Suffolk County Council of "extremely bad commissioning" after it adopted a county-wide approach to funding addiction services that ignored the skills of a small charity.

At a meeting of the Parliamentary Group on Civil Society and Volunteering, Hurd praised the Ipswich addiction charity Iceni, which last year lost a council tender to

provide drug treatment in Ipswich. The Conservative-led council chose two large organisations from outside Suffolk to provide a county-wide service, mirroring commissioning decisions up and down the country.

Hurd said central government was considering what it could do to prevent this kind of situation affecting small charities like Iceni. Given that this is precisely the situation that his privatisation policies have set up, don't hold your breath waiting for the answer.

Pathetic Work Programme arrangements in tatters

Things can hardly get worse for the beleaguered Employment Minister Chris Grayling after a blaze of poor publicity about the failing Work Programme. A National Audit Office report, critical attention from the Public Accounts Committee, and thumbs down from NCVO research have all combined with damning press coverage of this flagship government project. Amongst the many failings are:

- § Overdemanding performance targets;
- § Under performance on the number of people got into jobs;
- § Low levels of referrals to voluntary sector sub contractors;
- § No checks by the DWP of the proper operation of the 'Merlin' code (a pathetic attempt to set 'supply chain standards');
- § Cherry picking of the easiest unemployed people to place in jobs;
- § Failure to protect sub-contractors from financial risk;
- § Banning contractors from publishing performance figures;
- § Forbidding anybody but the DWP talking to the press about anything to do with the programme.

Not to mention the fact that the Government paid out £65M before it all started to terminate previous welfare-to-work contracts.

None of this is a surprise to us over here at NCIA (see newsletter No 21 - <http://ymlp.com/zyWG5u>). What remains a puzzle to us is the note of surprise from the likes of NCVO - 'cause it's the model stupid! If voluntary groups accept a role as sub-contractors to the private sector, then, to be blunt, when they get shafted they have no-one to blame but themselves.

Meanwhile, the Careers Development Group, one of only two voluntary sector 'prime contractors' in the Work Programme has announced that it is negotiating a merger with the Shaw Trust. Clearly separate turnovers of £32M and £80M are just not big enough to survive in today's corporate world.

Gloomy prospects for neighbourhood renewal say academics

Academics Jonathan Davies and Madeleine Pill set out the dismal prospects for the Big Society in a new article that explores the impact of recent trends towards 'privatism' through a study of urban and neighborhood governance in Baltimore and Bristol. They argue that the self-help ideology of the big society has been prevalent in Baltimore for many years and has led not to the revitalising of deprived neighbourhoods, but their abandonment. This should be a warning to British policy makers, who need to recognise that sustaining neighbourhood revitalisation requires the very public investment now being cut by the Coalition government. You can depress yourself by downloading the whole article here - <http://bit.ly/uPFIPh>

Transforming Infrastructure – who are the winners and who are the losers?

The apparent winners of the £30m Transforming Local Infrastructure fund have been announced. 72 partnerships (see <http://bit.ly/AAFxph>) have been awarded the dosh to implement the government's ideas about what support to the voluntary sector should really look like - mergers, charging for services, social enterprises, helping privatisation along, harnessing the awesome talent of the private sector, lots of talk about 'single delivery vehicles' etc etc. But what about the losers - they who don't want to be a delivery van for government policies? Maybe they will actually be the winners in the longer run - if they pay closer attention to what their communities really need, reject the 'big is best' mantra and see their job as fighting the plans that the government has for communities rather than conspiring with them? NCIA's Adrian Barritt has a good rant on this theme and you can egg him on here - <http://www.independentaction.net/>