

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

www.independentaction.net indyaction@yahoo.co.uk

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Where's the tipping point? Where's the breaking point?

A friend once said to me that my problem was that my 'circle of concern' was wider than my 'circle of influence'. Maybe this explains why I spend so much time being cross? But consider the following. Over the last week I have heard that:

- Bob Diamond of Barclay's Bank resigns in disgrace but is given £1.5M and a nice pension to make him feel better;
- A spokesperson for an official report on school examination boards says on the radio that "competition is driving down quality";
- The director of Lambeth's Children's Services declares that paying lots of money (£200k per child per year) to private and charitable care homes does not buy quality services;
- Homelessness is up by 20% in one year;
- The charity Kids Company has started feeding centres for children and families - up to 70 at one centre alone - to stick a finger in the dyke for the 2.2 million children living in poverty.

All this stuff concerns our world of voluntary action and history will ask - in looking back - what we all did about it. We're currently doing a tiny bit of research to try and sort out who, in the VCS, can be called an 'activist' in these terrible times. What's coming up, again and again, are groups that we are calling '*(maybe) getting ready for activism*'. These are mostly professionally oriented, obsessed with funding, overtly complaining about what is happening but still playing the game, trying to keep their seat at the table but feeling deeply uneasy about the cuts and compromises that are being demanded. These groups are the backbone of the historic voluntary sector. In truth they are being decimated by the commissioners, the SERCO's, the NACRO's

and the rest of the corporate charity raiders. Whether they decide to bite back or give in will be an important sign of just how lost we are in the fight for social justice and a radical alternative.

News and events

Last chance!! Gaining power: the challenges facing activists – 19th July - London

The next in our series of events to look at the crucial issues facing us will focus on activists and community action and will take place on the 19th July. This is being organised jointly with the National Community Activist Network (NatCAN) and will be at the Resource for London, 356 Holloway Road, N7 6PA.

If you're taking action on behalf of people in your area, want to share tactics with others, or find out how to get help to keep going, then this event is for you. The morning is for discussion about big issues around democracy, markets, and community action and includes a presentation on People's Assemblies from World to Win. The afternoon will hear from people active around different themes including anti-racism, anti-privatisation, provision of local services and solidarity networks. We'll be looking at how to keep going and figuring out what support activists need. There will be plenty of room for discussion. And lunch. And FREE.

To book a place, email Maxine at Maxine@grantmoarcommunities.com or you can sign up via the NatCAN website here - <http://nationalcan.ning.com/events/gaining-power-challenging-facing-activists> (if you go this route, you'll need to sign up to NatCAN first, if you haven't already done so).

Upcoming event! Shared Values, Collective Action – 26th July 1pm-5pm - London

An event from the Community Sector Coalition (CSC) to look at what's going on for community groups in these bleak times and at ways of working for individuals, groups and coalitions that can get better results. Speakers from Third Sector Research Centre, CSC and London Civic Forum plus plenty of discussion time.

The event will be at LVSC, 200a Pentonville Road, London N1 9JP. If you want to book a place then email Matt Scott at so204ms@gold.ac.uk or give him a call on 020 8692 8784

Upcoming event! Our Barnet - NOT "One Barnet", torch relay and community parade – 21st July - London

Following a successful conference on the 7th July to organise against Barnet Council's plans for a total sell-off of council-run public services, the Barnet Alliance for Public Services is holding a torch relay and community parade on Saturday 21st July. To make the point and have some fun, assemble at Friern Barnet (ex) library, Friern

Barnet Road at 10.30am for an 11am kickoff, culminating in a party at lunchtime in Victoria Park, Finchley.

The Barnet Alliance, working with Barnet Unison, have produced a load of useful evidence showing how damaging is the outsourcing and privatisation of public services. You can clock this material and find out more about their activities here -

<http://barnetalliance.org/> . Or email to: barnetalliance4publicservices@gmail.com or phone 07957-486 379.

Upcoming event! Had it with the Olympics? Get it off your chest – 28th July – noon - London

If you're sick of being assaulted by the biggest branding opportunity ever, then you might like to join the anti-Corporate Olympics protest being organised by the Counter Olympics Network (CON). 'Whose Games? Whose City?' will be shouting 'NO LIMOS! NO LOGOS! NO LAUNCHERS!' on Saturday 28th July, warming up at noon at Mile End Park, East London and then marching to Victoria Park for a People's Games for All. Billed as a 'family-friendly protest', you can get the gen

here: <http://bit.ly/MPwLfm>

Upcoming event! Wandsworth Against Cuts Benefit Night – 20th July - London

An evening of music and comedy with Arthur Smith (Comedian, BBC's 'Grumpy Old Men') Attila the Stockbroker (Political Punk Poet/Musician) Richard Anderson and The Emigres (Folk/Country Rock singer/songwriter) and Bruce McKenzie (Singer/Songwriter, Green activist). Friday 20th July, 8pm. @ The Bread n Roses, 68 Clapham Manor Street, SW4 6DZ. £6 (waged), £4 (unwaged). Here you go -

<http://bit.ly/NggRDt>

Goodbye to Rachael and Melaina.... But not goodbye from us

This month our joint-share national co-ordinators, Rachael and Melaina leave us for more artistic concerns (they both want to finish their novels). So it's the right time to say many thanks to them for their work over the last two years, leaving us better thought out and better known. We're now figuring out how we can do without them, so some things may go a bit quiet over the couple of months while we attend to this.

Meanwhile, our self styled 'sector leaders' can now once again be afraid - be very afraid - because we have got some more funding! This will allow us to continue snapping at their heels for another couple of years or so, whilst trying to provide a platform for a more positive vision and celebration of independent voluntary action, pitting itself against the truly awful status quo and not taking 'no' for an answer.

Volunteering as dissidence gets an airing

Another sign that dissidence is starting to appear on the radar is indicated by an event that took place in Newcastle on 3rd July. 'Hearing Uncomfortable Messages: Volunteering as Activism/Dissidence' was even mounted by the ESRC, not known for

its radical agenda. NCIA's Sue Robson did a storming presentation on the role of community development as radical activism. Her powerpoint presentation is available if you want to get the flavour of this - we can email you a copy if you ask - info@independentaction.net

Upcoming event! Dealing with power – anti oppression training – 20th-22nd July - Manchester

This is an "advanced training for trainers" aimed at people who are experienced activist trainers (nonviolence, direct action, facilitation, consensus decision-making and

so on) or who have helped facilitate large-scale activist or radical community organising group processes (such as Climate Camp, Occupy, G8). Participants are expected to be actively planning to engage in activist training or large-scale facilitation in the next two years. The training will look at how conflict develops in activist groups around issues of oppression and how these can be used creatively.

The training will be led by George Lakey, a longtime US activist trainer. The cost will be between £30-£70. You can get an application form here <http://peacenews.info> or call Milan Rai on 07980 748 555.

The evidence builds....

Delivering Public Services That Work (vol.2)

Another valuable source of evidence to disprove the idea that the only way of improving public services is to find someone else to run them comes from John Seddon's Vanguard Consulting. Here are a series of case histories that tell the stories of real managers - policemen, fire and rescue staff, food safety inspectors, care workers, town planners - wrestling with real issues in their daily work. All are based on the use of Vanguard's now well known approach to service improvement, and illustrate the dramatic improvements that are possible through the application of intellectual curiosity, a genuine focus on what people want from their services, and a willingness to abandon mass production, tick box, top down approaches to service design and delivery. You can order the book here (£15.50): <http://bit.ly/LbTwnF> .

"Meteoric rise in contracts" says NCVO

The latest edition of NCVO's UK Civil Society Almanac shows that earned income, generated from contracts and open market trading, accounted for over half the voluntary sector's income in 2009-10. But while open market trading has grown but a little, the majority of this increase is in contracting. Public sector contracts have now grown to one third of all voluntary sector income. Needless to say NCVO sees all this as nothing more than business opportunities - "We (the voluntary sector) are often working successfully in markets where the private and public sector also compete. This is testament to the excellent quality of the work we do, and the skills that

voluntary sector people have developed in communication, marketing and sales, as well as managing contracts." Think it's time I retired.

Commissioning is even doing in the big boys

Not normally a friend of NCIA's view of the world, New Philanthropy Capital has just produced a halfway useful survey of how big charities are faring with commissioning. This reveals an unsurprisingly depressed picture. NPC surveyed 101 charities with an annual income of more than £800,000 and which earn some of this income from government sources. Over 90% believed they now face more risk in the current commissioning environment than before, a result of new funding mechanisms (payment by results, contracts and personal budgets), pressures to operate in increasingly complex arrangements (consortia, sub-contracting and 'partnerships') and general cuts in income (especially from local government). 65% had already closed services or expected to, and nearly three quarters had made redundancies or will do in the next 12 months. Interestingly, half of the sample was being sub-contracted by other organisations to deliver public services ("...negatively affecting their finances") and nearly a third sub-contracted work out to other organisations.

The report has, however, little to say about remedies beyond tired rhetoric about increasing skills and capacity, creating level playing fields, and getting core support trusts and foundations. 'When the Going Gets Tough' can be downloaded here: <http://bit.ly/NOYxVt>

And another one – voluntary sector role in social care under-researched

Yet another research report – this time concerned with social care – concludes that "there is a relative lack of robust research relating to the role of third sector organisations in delivering social care services. This is despite the long history of this role and its growing, and changing, importance in recent and current policy contexts." It concludes that the supposed distinctiveness (and by implication quality) of non-statutory provision needs to be examined critically and specifically calls for comparative studies as to the achievement of social care outcomes "...across providers in the public, private and third sectors."

So once again we have evidence from the research community that outsourcing of public services to VCS agencies in this arena too is not based on sound evidence of improved services and better outcomes. Will this make politicians and policy makers sit up in surprise? Well, pigs might fly.

'The Role of the Third Sector in Delivering Social Care' comes from the NIHR School of Social Care Research. You can get more detail and download the report here: <http://bit.ly/KqbX6W>

Radical take on the Big Society Show gets seven out of ten

'The Big Society Debate: A New Agenda for Social Welfare?' is an attempt to look at the policy the government would most like to forget about from a radical perspective. This latter is, of course, welcome and there is some good stuff in this book (including NCIA material which is totally brilliant). But there is also some rather densely argued theoretical material that will be good for insomniacs. And maybe it's just too late since nobody really wants to talk about the big society anymore - 'yesterday's agenda' as they say down at the business schools. You can snap up a paperback copy at £19.95 by emailing Direct.order@marston.co.uk.

Heros, heroines, & keeping on keeping on

Alternatives to 'austerity'

The Labour MP, John McDonnell has released a statement outlining an alternative to austerity and is asking for expressions of support. The statement focuses on redistributive measures that would release the money needed to reform the economy, rebuild infrastructure and improve public services. He is asking for people to sign up to the statement which you can do here: <http://bit.ly/JSzvDP>

This month's 'That Takes the Biscuit' Award

NCVO wins again!

In an unprecedented two wins in a row, this month's prize goes again to NCVO and - astonishingly - for the same disregard for their reputation!! Last month it was the proud association proclaimed via the NCVO/Barclays Leadership Programme. Give the fall from grace of Bob Diamond, Barclay's own odious 'dear leader', this tie up now looks especially comical.

But no lessons learnt, for, next on, NCVO has been consulting us all about what to put in good practice guidance for those silly enough to sub-contract themselves to the private sector. And who are their partners in this jolly useful exercise - why none other than **SERCO**! Alongside G4S (today caught with its trousers down over Olympic security failures), SERCO are specialists in security and control, running prisons, detention centres, taking over Police work and in other ways acting as the strong arm of the state. Their track record and reputation is appalling and they have been the subject of several investigations for brutality and harassment (e.g. Yarl's Wood Detention Centre or Haddockfield Secure Training Centre). Most chilling was the revelation in March of this year that staff in SERCO's Australian immigration detention centres had been specifically trained in how to inflict pain on detainees in ways which would be defensible in court (have a look at the story here <http://www.corporatewatch.org/?lid=4264>).

NCVO's association with Barclays is misguided and embarrassing; NCVO's association with SERCO casts shame on the organisation. One wonders whether there are staff

inside NCVO (there are 120 of them after all) who are now prepared to stick their foot in the door and object to this kind of stuff?

Disability campaigners get a result - MPs condemn work capability test!

WinVisible have been working with John McDonnell (here he is again) to raise the anti on the ATOS Work Capability Assessments. He has tabled an Early Day Motion deploring the hardship created by the benefit cuts involved in these flawed assessments and condemns the Alice-in-Wonderland sponsorship of the Paralympics by ATOS (alongside Dow Chemical's sponsorship of the Olympics - remember Bhopal and the 25,000 people killed there?). 62 MPs have signed so far. You can check if your MP is one of them here: <http://www.parliament.uk/edm/2012-13/295> (and then hassle him/her if not).

Digger group seize eco-village site in Surrey

Nearly 800 years after the last event of any note to happen at Runnymede - the signing of the Magna Carta - the Diggers (early anarchist groups active around the time of the English civil war in the 17th Century) are back. Invoking the spirit of the original diggers, activists have occupied disused woodland in the area to spark a debate on land ownership and have declared:

"We: peaceful people, declare our intention to go and cultivate the disused land of this island; to build dwellings and live together in common by the sweat of our brows. We have one call: every person in this country and the world should have the right to live on the disused land, to grow food and to build a shelter. This right should apply whether you have money or not. We say that no country can be considered free, until this right is available to all." - the Windsor Diggers.

If you want to see how they're getting on check out: www.diggers2012.wordpress.com or give them a call on 07963 475 195 or 07905 283 114

'Our Society' – heroes and heroines not keeping on keeping on

The group that set up and have been running the social network forum 'Our Society' have decided to jack it in. The idea was "...to create an alternative space to the government's 'big society' rhetoric: one where people could network and discuss, sharing information and learning on their own terms." But activity has tailed off, reflecting the tailing off of debate about 'big society' and the realities of life for many people, where "just getting by has become the priority". The Ning platform will remain open for a time so you can start off a wake there if you're minded -

<http://oursociety.org.uk/>

Welfare Reform is Not Welfare Reform

This little treat of a 4 minute film explains why 'Welfare Reform' is not real welfare reform. It shows how the UK government is targeting the poor and disabled people for cuts and explodes some of the myths of welfare reform. This comes from our friends at the Centre for Welfare Reform in Sheffield. Sit down with a cup of tea and catch it here - <http://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/>

The madness continues

National charities "asset-stripping" local voluntary groups

More evidence of predatory corporate behaviour by national charities comes from Birmingham. Martin Holcombe, chief executive of Birmingham Settlement has complained that they have lost a money advice service through a re-tendering exercise to NACRO, despite the national charity having no experience delivering a service of this sort. He added that NACRO did not have the necessary Consumer Credit Licence and planned to deliver the contract by taking advantage of the transfer of undertakings regulations, or TUPE, which allow organisations to take over the contracts of staff who deliver services. "How asset-stripping local charities that have spent years building trust, local understanding and knowledge sits in terms of NACRO's value base is another question" said Holcombe. You can read the whole of Martin's blog here - <http://martinholcombe.wordpress.com/>

On a wider scale, NAVCA's annual survey of their CVS membership revealed, amongst other things, that the number of CVS chief executives who knew of a local organisation that has lost service contract funding in competition with a national charity had this year leapt from 33% to 56%.

New 'community rights' hit the street

The end of June saw the introduction of the last two main provisions of the Localism Act - the so-called 'community rights' to challenge the provision of Council services, and to bid for the sale of certain 'community assets' when they come up for sale. The 'right to build' relating to small scale, site-specific developments is already in force as part of the Neighbourhood Planning framework. The most troublesome of these provisions is likely to be the right to challenge as it is intended to pressure local authorities to tender out their directly run services (there is no right to challenge public services that have already been contracted out). If you want to bone up on the official line on what these rights comprise and their supposed intentions, then this is probably the best place to start - <http://bit.ly/MpgmZW> .

Meanwhile an £11.5M support scheme has been launched by the Social Investment Business, with ACEVO and Locality "...to help voluntary organisations take over the running of public services in their communities." This will include grant funding to help takeover bids. And in a separate development, Michael O'Toole has been appointed as the government's 'crown representative' for the voluntary sector. This new role is

intended to "open up more public sector business opportunities for charities and social enterprises and help improve the relationship between government and the sector." According to the Francis Maude, speaking a year ago, it is also intended "...to ensure we're really using the scale of government to push down prices." More reasons to retire....

Government cracks down on whistleblowing "by the back door"

David Lewis, professor of employment law at Middlesex University and convenor of the International Whistleblowing Research Network has accused the Government of bringing in an amendment to the law on whistleblowing "by the back door", which he believes will deter workers from making important disclosures about wrongdoing.

The protest concerns an amendment introduced into the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Bill, currently going through Parliament. The change will mean that whistleblowers will only be protected from dismissal or detriment where they can demonstrate that their action is "in the public interest". This will create much uncertainty for people wanting to expose wrong doing and will deter many from doing so. "What the bill is going to do is drop a bomb on the whistleblowing provisions by simply saying there is now going to be a public interest test for all cases in all circumstances, which completely sabotages the legislation", said Lewis. You can read more about this threat here - <http://bit.ly/LZ4ujt>

Morale in charities hits "all-time low"

Morale in the charity sector has hit an all-time low, according to results from the latest annual Charity Pulse survey of voluntary sector employees. Of the 579 employees surveyed

- only 29% think morale in their charities is high (43% last year);
- only 56% would recommend their organisations as employers (down from 70%);
- 30% said they don't think management is capable (19% last year);
- 34% don't believe it is safe to challenge their leaders (23% last year);
- and 38% now think their leaders are out of touch (up from 30%).

Given the direction of travel of which we have been complaining for years none of this is especially surprising to us. You can see the dismal picture here - <http://bit.ly/MpD6sM>