

We're not an arm of the state (or the private sector) – we have our own arms

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Newsletter No: 37

February 2014

Gagging Act protest ignored - so what next?

The behaviour of the government towards the gagging bill and the response of charities and other voluntary groups has revealed quite a lot about our contemporary landscape. The campaigning against bans on campaigning during the run up to a general election brought together a very wide range of organisations, including some who may find it hard to sit in the same room together. The lobbying of both Houses was vigorous, well argued and highly organised but, in the end, achieved little. The concessions won do not undermine the main thrust of the legislation and ensure that campaign groups who do have money to spend, will still find themselves trapped in a spider's web of compliance. Many more will button their lip for fear of falling foul of the regulations. For the government's part, it confirms the view that their sole interest in charities is as sub-contracted service providers or new philanthropists picking up the ruins of the welfare state, and they don't give a toss about democratic principles underpinning civil society.

We are all now faced with a dilemma about what to do. One of the government's clever and sneaky tricks was to use spending limits as the way to crack down on dissent. This, of course, immediately split off the 'professional' campaigners (who do have money to spend) from the 'activist' campaigners (who don't), the latter having been almost entirely absent from the struggle. Talk is now of persuading the Labour Party to scrap the Act if they get in (on which they are already back peddling); hardly a secure strategy whichever way you view it. And then waiting for the Electoral Commission to issue the 'rule book', as it is being called, to see what might be 'allowed'.

Since we know that the Electoral Commission is not going to say this Act is anti democratic and unworkable so don't pay it any attention, last week we issued a [press release](#) calling for civil disobedience as a fair reaction to an unfair Law. 38 Degrees, who have also been heavily involved in the campaign, are canvassing opinion about responses to the Act and this includes direct action options. You can vote for this course of action [here](#). If there is no effort to 'poll tax' this legislation it will embolden the government to come after us again and find other ways to silence people who don't agree with them. Of this you can be sure.

“When injustice becomes Law, resistance becomes duty.”

Note: if you want to keep up with what the Electoral Commission is saying and doing about this outrage you can get updates by registering with them [here](#).

News from NCIA

We don't want you here - Voluntary groups asked to help with 'unwelcome residents'

Remember the bill boards on white vans circulating around London last year, telling migrants to leave the UK? It caused a storm of protest and the Government, through the UK Border Agency, dropped it like a hot potato. But they don't give up in their efforts to make black and other minority ethnic residents unwelcome and to encourage a climate of xenophobia and racism.

NCIA has been told that the UKBA is asking Council's for Voluntary Services (CVSs) to participate in the “Voluntary Departures” programme, in particular to circulate through their groups a leaflet about this great offer “to leave the UK in a more dignified manner”.

NCIA has also been told recently about health workers being asked, through NHS Trusts, to adhere to the Government PREVENT Strategy (2011) and “inform on any persons who they might suspect of being radicalised' with no apparent guidance as to what this covers. This Strategy is part of the Government anti-terrorism policies and notes that “where a healthcare worker encounters someone who may be in the process of being radicalised towards terrorism, it is critical that the individual is offered the appropriate support.”

The Strategy sees an important role for charities in this, and says “the Department of Health has already made links with the Charity Commission and the National Council of Voluntary Organisations to enable further training.”

There are 25 areas targeted: 16 of which are London boroughs; all are multi-cultural areas; none are in rural areas (despite the sometimes radical and extreme views that might rest amidst green and pleasant lands).

NCIA wants to know whether your group, or others, have been approached by the UKBA to help with “voluntary departures” or are involved in any way locally with the PREVENT strategy. Please contact: laurawirtz3@gmail.com

The evidence builds....

PBR stifles innovation and presents too much risk

A new report from the Institute for Government tells us what we already know, that payment-by-results contracts stifle the voluntary sector's ability to innovate and the risk involved is too great, especially for smaller groups. Tom Gash, Director of Research at the Institute said the report ([Beyond Big Contracts: commissioning public services for better outcomes](#)): “The current approach may deliver cost reductions but is likely to exclude smaller players and reduce levels of competition, contributing to inadequate provision for service users with complex needs.”

Not sure about more competition leading to better services but there's useful evidence for those trying to persuade their manager and trustees to foreswear the approach.

Barings Panel comes out fighting

Roger Singleton, chair of the Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector, says there are insufficient safeguards to protect charities and that the voluntary sector is facing a "serious and growing threat" from government over its independence. The Panel has published its third [report](#) on the state of the sector, and this is the most hard-hitting yet, citing increased government interference in state-sponsored charities, a weak and under-resourced Charity Commission, growing political opposition to charities acting as a voice for communities and measures contained in the gagging act.

Singleton said the voluntary sector was on a "slippery slope" in which the independence of voluntary organisations was increasingly undervalued and under threat and that the sector "increasingly seen either as a delivery arm of the state or only legitimate where it provides services but does not speak out for wider social change". Pure NCIA speak and very welcome

Whistleblower on Save the Children says they don't criticise corporate sponsors

In BBC Panorama programme, communications professional Dominic Nutt revealed that Save the Children, for whom he worked between 2007 and 2009, refused to criticise companies that were corporate donors. Nutt believes that this is a widespread practice in charities. "Peers from other charities are beginning to look at this issue and are coming to me saying they are having the same problems and debates", he said.

Nutt also said that 'due diligence' audits of potential sponsors were a waste of time as no attention was paid to them. The one exception was to decline a deal with an oil company linked to the Burmese Government - "The Save the Children chief executive pulled the funding, but I was told never to ask to do that again," he said. Full story [here](#).

UNISON voices from the frontline

Unison has published 'Community and Voluntary Services in the Age of Austerity', which gives voice to frontline workers who are coping with the effects of the cuts. In contrast to the tactical 'watch your lip' pronouncements we are used to hearing from the chief executives, this report says it how it is and pulls no punches on the damaging effect both on staff and their clients. The download is [here](#).

Counting the Cuts: government stats show the true picture

A new report from the Campaign for a Fair Society uses the latest government statistics to show the true and awful effect of the cuts in public spending. People on low incomes face cuts twice as large as average; disabled people on low incomes face cuts four times larger than average; people who need help from social services face cuts six times greater than the average.

This report is released in advance of a key debate in the House of Commons, on the 27th February 2014. This debate was forced on the Government by the WOW Petition: Over 100,000 people called for the Government to make its own calculation of the cumulative impact of its policies on disabled people, which it has refused to do.

The full report is available [here](#) and the data and calculations on which it is based are also published online [here](#).

This month's 'That Takes the Biscuit' Award

DWP goes gaga on haut couture

In early January it emerged that the new DWP twitter feed had been providing free advertising for Sarah Vine, Michael Gove's wife's new online business. 'Get the Gloss' was shipped in to advise claimants on how they should dress at job interviews, with a natty little article on the DWP Facebook page. Women should wear sophisticated makeup and blokes, well, just MUST wear a tie. This novel support to the unemployed seems to have inspired Job Centres to get into the style business.

Rhondda Cynon Taf Job Centre, for example, has been handing out fashion tips. Unemployed men will make the best impression at interviews if they get hold of a fitted wool suit, classic wrist watch, a high quality silk tie and dress shoes. As the Jobcentre insists, "*It is always important to invest in a good pair of dress shoes*". While women are advised to wear a medium heel and if they must wear trousers, ensure they are hemmed and so not drag on the floor. A sensible skirt is however, preferable, along with a tailored blouse, fitted suit and good quality knitwear.

That's got that sorted out then. (With thanks to [The Void](#) for this item).

'Creaming and parking' widespread in the Work Programme

More evidence of another thing we all already know comes from the Third Sector Research Centre in a report dealing with the lamentable Work Programme. [Support for all in the UK Work Programme? Differential payments, same old problem...](#) concludes that 'creaming' (where prime contractors Hoover up the easy cases to deal with) and 'parking' (where they bury the hard ones) is widespread amongst contractors and systematically embedded within the programme. The report argues that this is the result of "intense cost-pressures and extremely ambitious performance targets, alongside overly diverse claimant groups and inadequately calibrated differentiated payment levels."

Even Dunkin-Donut's pet think tank lambasts government treatment of the voluntary sector

A new report from the Centre for Social Justice, the think tank set up by Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan-Smith, has highlighted the woes of the voluntary sector under his government. The report '[Something's Got to Give: the state of Britain's voluntary sector](#)' sets out the damage being done to the sector including:

- Increased wealth concentration in the large charities - groups with annual incomes of £100,000 or less account for only 3.5 per cent of the £38bn income of the voluntary sector, whilst those with incomes of £5M+ (1.2% of the total) snap up 69% of the money;

- 20% of the small charities polled were at risk of closing;
- TUPE and other employment protection schemes were discouraging smaller voluntary agencies from bidding for contracts;
- Local authorities were outsourcing contracts such as care for homeless or elderly people to private companies rather than voluntary organisations; and
- “There has certainly not been a radical upsurge in community action”.

Though obviously aimed at encouraging rather than criticising the privatisation programme and arguing more of the ‘level playing field’ position, the report provides evidence that can be used against the ideology of its authors.

Meanwhile another ‘State of the Sector’ report comes from criminal justice group Clinks. This reveals that 50% of survey respondents aren’t getting full cost recovery in their contracts, and 65% are relying on their reserves to cover the gap between the cost of delivery and contract payments. Mind you, Clinks continues to promote the privatisation of the Probation Service and has just received government funding to run training courses on the legal implications of sub-contracting - unlikely to urge a ‘don’t do it’ approach. You can mug up on that one [here](#).

“Very small, very quiet, a whisper” - BME groups, still no voice or influence

At a time when ethnic minority communities are being hammered by cuts and attacked by the media, evidence comes from the Third Sector Research Centre that BME voluntary groups have even less voice and influence than even two or three years ago. Funding cuts mean that these communities rely on ‘mainstream’ organisations to represent their interests but there was little confidence that they would be able, maybe not even willing, to do so. The weakening of the Single Equality Act has made things worse, nor did the Localism agenda help, especially with widely dispersed communities. Survey respondents reported that the result was that people were ‘keeping their heads down’, were less politicised, and more focussed on religion rather than race.

All together, a picture of communities turning inwards towards themselves. You can download this depressing picture [here](#).

Heros, heroines, & keeping on keeping on

Edge Fund gives out the dosh again

The Edge Fund has just completed its third round of funding, making the total distributed to radical activist groups around £120,000. You can see the latest awards [here](#). The appeal for regular donors continues and is up to 52 so far, donating nearly £10k a year. You can join this worthy crew [here](#).

Positive Action in Housing slams government policy

Glasgow-based charity Positive Action in Housing has struck out against government policy which means they have to run a ‘destitution surgery’. Using the money donated to the Winter Destitution Appeal, the agency hands out food parcels, crisis grants, clothes, bus passes and sleeping bags. One recent surgery dealt with over 200 people.

PAIH’s director Robina Qureshi said: “Our strong voice comes from seeing with our own eyes what’s wrong with social policy from the perspective and experiences of destitute, homeless and poor people from refugee and migrant communities. ... But there’s no hiding from the fact that the ‘charity’ we provide to the destitute and poor is being

used to patch up the effects of unjust government policy.... We are angry at being reduced to giving out crisis payments and hand-outs to the “invisible poor”.

The charity is currently giving out a total of £2000 each month but this is not enough and they need regular payments. If you can help then shell something out to Positive Action in Housing (SC027577) - Emergency Hardship Fund, Sort code 82-20-00 Account 00447398). Or you can give a one off donation at www.justgiving.com/winter-destitution-appeal .

People's Assembly has new website

People's Assembly has announced a new website that integrates with our social media sites, has a state of the art database and offers enormous opportunity for organising and communicating.” The new system will allow all local People's Assembly groups to control their own section of the website. This includes a blog section, calendar of events, email system, social media integration and database tools. You can have a peek at it [here](#).

Local works targets supermarkets

A new campaign aimed at tackling the harmful effects of supermarket chains on local communities has been launched. ‘Local Works’ is a coalition of over one hundred and twenty national organisations, campaigning to reverse community decline. The new action aims to use the Sustainable Communities Act to implement the Supermarket Levy, which gives councils the power to put a levy on large supermarkets in their areas and for that money to be spent to help boost local jobs, local trade, local services and local communities.

You can get more information and sign up [here](#).

‘We Own It’ get MP’s support to keep services public

We Own It, the campaign group which promotes public ownership and give consumers a stronger voice has got backing from a cross-party groups of MPs for a private member’s bill which would make public ownership the default option, give people a say over whether services are privatised and ensure private companies running services are more accountable.

Caroline Lucas, the Green MP for Brighton Pavilion, is leading on the bill, which would cover a range of services, including the NHS, public transport, and local services such as schools and libraries. Cat Hobbs, the director of We Own It, said the latest polling showed the overwhelming majority of the population supported the measures set out in the bill. "Public ownership is popular, and people are sick of the endless stream of selloffs and outsourcing deals," she said.

Cop the action [here](#) and add your own support for it [here](#).

The madness continues

Government beaten back (a bit) on judicial review

Last year, Justice Secretary Chris Grayling announced intentions to crack down on judicial review which he said were being used as a “promotional tool for countless left-wing campaigners”, including charities. These proposals brought widespread opposition from advice, legal, campaign and constitutional groups.

Now the Ministry of Justice has dropped part of the plan, which was to introduce a tougher test for which organisations could bring judicial review proceedings on behalf of individuals. However, mirroring their strategy in the gagging act of using money to shut down dissent, the government is still intending to increase the cost burden of bringing proceedings which will exclude all but the largest voluntary or campaign groups.

Melanie Carter from law firm Bates Wells Braithwaite said: “There isn’t an evidence base to show that there is abuse in this area or it has led to widespread burden. It’s linked to a broadside to reduce avenues for challenges against government.” Reflecting on the recent Lobbying Act, Carter said it highlighted a pattern of government attempts to stifle legitimate challenge. She thought that the concessions were due to the powerful lobbying influence of judges. Further coverage [here](#).

Big Society on the ropes again

Funding of £1M for Society Network Foundation and Big Society Network has been put “under review” by the Lottery. The grant [was criticised when it was awarded last May](#), because BIG had invited SNF to submit the bid without making it compete for it, supposedly on the basis of its track record, but despite the fact that SNF and BSN had been persistently late filing their accounts with Companies House and none of the nearly £3m they had already received from statutory sources had ever been recorded in any published accounts.

The latest of their government-funded projects, a children's sports initiative called Get In, never launched and no outcomes were ever recorded for the £199,900 they received. And this week it emerged that SNF appears to have half-inched the balance of this restricted grant, without the permission of grant administrator Social Investment Business, into their general coffers to reduce their deficit.

Another current debacle relates to ‘My Personal Best’, a somewhat pathetic attempt to galvanise post-Olympics interest in personal achievement. By July they had spent a cool £264k on salaries and contracts and then made payments to their partners, yes, usual suspects ACEVO, NAVCA, CSV, Groundwork UK and 21st Century. By October the project had gained the support of just 16 charities against a target of 10 large and 15,000 small and medium charities, and 5,000 grassroots groups!! Web hits topped 70,000 against a target of 1,000,000 and just 1,500 had registered against the expectation of 125,000!

You couldn’t make it up (but you can cop the sorry story [here](#) and [here](#)).

Rough sleepers sheltering in bins

A survey by Streetlink, the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management and Biffa reveals over the past 12 months nearly one in five waste industry staff reported finding people taking refuge in bins. One third of people were discovered immediately but 38 per cent were found during the lifting operation and 16 per cent when they were tipped out of bins. In 2012, two homeless people were crushed to death while sleeping in bins.

Landmine Guy with explosive pay offer

The landmine clearance charity the Halo Trust is using donated money to pay boarding school fees for its chief executive’s children, it has been revealed. Guy Willoughby, the charity’s chief executive and founder, received a salary package of between £210,000 and £220,000 in the year to March 2013. This included some £86k to keep his three kids in the style to which they have become accustomed. The trustees said that Guy often has to travel abroad (bit like migrant workers then), and anyway they have to pay this kind of money to “remain competitive”. Have a spit [here](#).

Serco and GEO get the elbow but in comes a new kid on the block

In a Home Office 'reshuffle', out of favour goes Serco and American firm GEO Group who have been running detention centres for asylum seekers at Colnbrook and Harmondsworth. These £180M contracts have been taken back and awarded instead to Mitie, a 'strategic outsourcing company', who have been running Campsfield House in Oxfordshire since 2011 and only a player in the 'asylum market' since that time.

Not that Campsfield's history of mass hunger strikes, suicide and attempted suicides, nor the major fire four months ago, spread due to the absence of sprinklers, seems to have slowed their elevation to become the Home Office's largest provider of immigration detention. You can be dismayed at the onward march of global capitalism into our public services [here](#).

Legal Aid cuts leading to redundancies

A survey of CABx and Law Centres in London has revealed that 12 of the 14 agencies contacted were planning to make staff redundant and try to use more volunteers and telephone services to plug the gap. The CAB in London was said to have suffered a 72% fall in funding for legal advice since the cuts were brought in. Law Centres are worst affected as a larger proportion of their funding had come from Legal Aid.

Primes for probation privatisation pumped up

The 'best of the best' is how Justice Secretary Chris Grayling described the winners of part one of the great probation sell-off. "This competition will deliver real value for the hardworking taxpayer and ensure we get the best in the business when it comes to rehabilitating offenders, he said."

The 30 organisations selected as eligible to bid for a slice of the £450M involved are dominated by private sector firms as expected, but there is a slice of management buy-out 'mutuals' and two voluntary agencies - Crime Reduction Initiative and the Shaw Trust - alongside others (e.g. Turning Point, St Giles Centre, Cyrenians, Catch 22) who have either turned themselves into companies or joined up with private sector bidders. Plus another 550 voluntary groups have said they would love to be sub-contractors to this lot. Shame on them all.

Events and meetings coming up

The People Versus Austerity - North London People's Assembly Pre-Budget Rally - London - March 4th

An event to launch plans for major anti-austerity actions throughout the year, with speakers including Diane Abbott, MP for Hackney North, Katherine Connelly, Student Assembly Against Austerity, Jeremy Corbyn, MP for Islington North & Chair, Stop the War Coalition, Manuel Cortes, TSSA General Secretary and Elaine Graham-Leigh, Enfield Against the Cuts & NLPAA (Chair).

The meeting will be at St. Mellitus Church, Tollington Park Road, N4 3AG, starting at 7pm. More information and to clock in [here](#) and download a flyer for distribution [here](#).

'Making the case for a fair recovery' - 11th March 5.15-6.30pm

Nicola Smith, Head of Economic and Social Affairs, Trades Union Congress (TUC) will be speaking at this event organised by the Sheila McKechnie Foundation. She will present a Trades Union perspective on current and emerging issues which will be of use to those wanting to oppose government policy and make the

case for progressive strategies for a sustainable economic recovery.

The event will take place at Resource for London, 356 Holloway Road, London N7 6PA. Tickets cost £10 but some burseries are available. You can read more and book a ticket [here](#)

Legal Justice Together - Call for Action - Manchester 15th March

One day conference in Manchester organised by [Access To Advice](#) to bring together practitioners and all those affected by cuts to legal aid and legal advice provision, to share updates on what's happening in each area of law and provision and plan campaign actions for positive change at local, regional and national level.

The day will be a mix of lead speakers, discussions and workshop sessions and will be held on Saturday 15 March 2014, 10am to 4pm at The Mechanics Institute Conference Centre, 103 Princess St, Manchester M1 6DD. You can book a place by emailing to accesstoAdvice2013@gmail.com

'The voluntary sector under attack: we can only blame ourselves' - London - 18th March

Working alongside the state invariably means accepting its policies and priorities. Traditional sector concerns with, for example, poverty, social exclusion and the impact of welfare cuts can be seen by government and politicians as a stab in the back and the wrong political ideology. Charities and the voluntary sector may now be targets for certain politicians and their supporters, to be brought into line and reminded about who is paying for them.

This roundtable meeting will ask how much of this could have been foreseen and to what extent have the actions of the sector itself invited such attacks?

6-8pm on the 18th March at London School of Economics, Room TW2, 301. If you want to go please let Christine Billings know - cbillings@btinternet.com

NatCAN national conference - Manchester - 22nd March

The next national conference of the National Community Activist Network is filling up - 60-odd registered so far. There is room for 100 so if you want to go you had better book fast. The event will focus on 'Age of Austerity - what can you do?' from the perspectives of individuals, neighbourhood groups, regional and national organisations and at the political level. Further details [here](#) and you can sign up [here](#).

Stand up to racism and fascism march and rally - London - 22nd March

A march from Parliament Square to a rally in Trafalgar Square to mark United Nations Anti Racism Day. Assemble at 11am. Further information from [Unite Against Fascism](#).