

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

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## Politics - not elections - is the key to understanding what's happening to the voluntary sector

We have now entered the mind-numbing pre-election slugging match between mainstream parties that have little to offer us, except continued cuts, attacks on the welfare state and cooption of voluntary groups to help privatisation along and create some new markets. So it's the right time to reflect on the real politics and influences that lie behind the Westminster Show and the catastrophic decline of independent voluntary action, most especially independent voluntary services.

We mean, of course, the influence of neo-liberalism. It's not just a political theory of interest to academics and theorists. It is a view of the world, backed up by powerful interests, which has a real impact on us all. A view that puts a price on everything, grabs profit for the few, and devalues the very things that voluntary action and involvement represents. Keeping these politics **OUT** of debate in the voluntary sector is precisely how the national 'leadership' bodies seem to see their role. No Gagging Act needed here - self censorship rules. This has been graphically illustrated by three reports that have appeared in the last month or so.

[Whose Society? The Final Big Society Audit](#) from Civil Exchange does a convincing demolition job of the Tory's failed flagship policy to hoodwink local communities into running in and out of each other's houses with a helpful cup of sugar, while public space is privatised and public services fall apart. But there is no mention of the ideology behind Big Society. The closest it comes to this is criticism of a "*market-based, public sector management model*". Based on no evidence whatsoever, the report assumes a benign political ideology for the future "*.....Whatever name it goes under, the next government will continue to look for ways to give power back to people, to make services more responsive and to encourage local action.*" Is that so?

The second report is NAVCA's [Change for Good](#) - an "*Independent Commission on the Future of Infrastructure*". This reads like an instruction manual from someone who has

been told to stick their head in a bucket of water - how big does the bucket need to be, should you use a tap or a hose, and how long can you hold your breath once the head is totally immersed? Their 'Commissioners' have accepted the principle of market forces at face value - that the world is being reshaped by the state and the private sector and that our job is 'adapt or die'.

Meanwhile, over at the Barings Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector [An Independent Mission: the voluntary sector in 2015](#) is published, the final report of their 3 year investigation. The report is an accurate and excoriating exposure of the damage that has been done to independence and self determination amongst voluntary groups, and the consequent shutdown on dissent and opposition to regressive government policies. But there is no explanation of why this has happened. As NCIA points out to the Panel's Chair - Roger Singleton - in response to the report, there is a

*"...complete absence of any causal reference to the wider environment and narrative within which the voluntary sector has been re-engineered by the state and private business interests... the influence of neo-liberal economic and political thinking, and the ways in which UK governments have applied this thinking..... it is impossible for people in the sector to understand what has been happening to them and their organisations without understanding this."*

The Barings Panel then bequeaths future action on our disintegrating environment to another 'Commission on the future of the voluntary sector'. NCVO, which holds more responsibility than most for 'leading' the sector into the cul-de-sac it now occupies, promptly [high-jacked](#) the idea by promising a generous donation of £100,000 to its work. NCIA's [letter to the Panel and the Chair's disengaged reply](#) is up on the website.

This, of course, leaves our own report [Fight or Fright](#) which self-consciously attempts to place the evidence, painstakingly assembled by our Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services, in the wider political and ideological context. *Fight or Fright* is, according to the [Institute of Race Relations](#) "... so telling, thorough and well organised that it does not bear a review, but rather a résumé. You have to read it for yourself. Refreshingly, it pulls no punches."

*Fight or Fright* was ignored by the Barings Panel and blanked by NCVO, ACEVO, and NAVCA.

## **And for a more considered, insightful review of these four reports....**

NCIA director Adrian Barratt, of Adur Voluntary Action, driven inside from a chilly Bodmin Moor, took the opportunity to ponder these four reports and record his thoughts. The result is an elegant analysis of the issues and of the forces and factors that explain the responses of the voluntary sector establishment to them. You can download Adrian's *The future of Voluntary Action - the Great Non-Debate 2015* on our website - [here](#).

**Wanna talk about this stuff? Come to the NCIA Assembly  
- 17<sup>th</sup> April**

If you're as worried as we are about the future for radical voluntary action, then try and come to our special Assembly meeting on Friday 17<sup>th</sup> April 11am - 4.30pm in London. This will be part of the conversation that we are generating about the future of NCIA and how the campaign issues we stand for can best be carried forward. There's more information [here](#). If you'd like to come along please email Mike Aiken at [mike@independentaction.net](mailto:mike@independentaction.net).

## Other news from NCIA

NCIA itself may have an uncertain future but there are three initiatives in particular that we want to see continue and flourish. Here is news of these....

### Localism Watch Update

As readers of our newsletter will know, NCIA sponsors Open Democracy's [Localism Watch](#) site. It's edited by Laird Ryan, one of our directors. Through its growing collection of blogs, essays, and postings of online resources and upcoming events, Localism Watch works to expose the true nature of the Coalition's so-called localism agenda as nothing less than a smokescreen for disenfranchising folk at the grassroots and concentrating power in the hands of those for whom privilege is the default setting.

Recent Localism Watch features offer you a [round-up](#) of dirty dealings in the planning and housing world, an analysis of how [soft power under the Coalition](#) undermines democracy and local control, and a look at how localism is likely to figure in the [party manifestos](#).

If you have a story to tell about these or other localist issues, or have ideas on how to challenge and change things, then get in touch with Laird and help us win back localism for local people.

[lairdryan@bignall.free.online.co.uk](mailto:lairdryan@bignall.free.online.co.uk)

[www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/collections/localismwatch#0](http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/collections/localismwatch#0)

### Keep Volunteering Voluntary keeps on keeping on

The Keep Volunteering Voluntary campaign continues to persuade voluntary groups to turn their back on the Government's so-called 'Help to Work' community work placements scheme, which forces people to work with charities or face their benefits being withdrawn. We're up to 540 groups signed up to the KVV pledge. There's an [article](#) about KVV on the Guardian website.

A meeting on the 19<sup>th</sup> March in London in collaboration with London Voluntary Services Council and Greater London Volunteering attracted over 70 people to discuss the impact of benefits sanctions and the dangers of voluntary groups becoming entangled with workfare that has such punitive consequences. We would like to repeat such meetings elsewhere and would welcome offers of help to host and help organise them.

We are also keen to gather information about groups that are offering placements and about the experiences of claimants who have been sent on them. The government has again refused to reveal any information about take up of the scheme, arguing in response to a recent Freedom of Information Act [request](#) that releasing this information is against the public interest!

There is so much more to be done to oppose this odious scheme and for this the campaign needs more people helping with the practical work. If you're up for this, please get in touch via the 'contact us' button on the website - [www.kvv.org.uk](http://www.kvv.org.uk).

### **Critical Studies in Voluntary Action**

One of the key findings of NCIA's Inquiry is the need to challenge the dominant ways in which the voluntary sector and volunteering are presented and discussed and present an account of voluntary action that restates its distinctive role in society. One means of engaging in this argument - and winning it - is a new independent on-line journal that has been set up by a group of academics and practitioners - and some who combine both roles - who have decided to do something about their growing dissatisfaction with the current state of voluntary sector studies.

The new journal - called *Critical Studies in Voluntary Action* - will be published on-line twice a year and the first issue is planned for the Autumn of this year. It will encourage and help to develop an alternative account of voluntary action that reflects the full range of activities involved; takes a more critical approach to discussing the role and significance of voluntary organisations and volunteering in our society; and challenges the infiltration of the culture and behaviours of the market into the non-market parts of our society.

Ideas for contributions, offers of support and requests for further information should be sent to Colin Rochester, Convenor of the Editorial Board, at [colin@practicalwisdomr2z.co.uk](mailto:colin@practicalwisdomr2z.co.uk).