

## Cry Freedom

By Mathew Little, *Third Sector*, 20 February 2008

**Andy Benson, convenor of the National Coalition for Independent Action, wants to stave off creeping state control of the voluntary sector.**

If the voluntary sector were a country, Andy Benson would be one of its dissidents. The convenor of the National Coalition for Independent Action, which has been given core funding by the Tudor Trust, believes the sector has become enslaved to the objectives of the state (*Third Sector*, 6 February). "This is about resistance," he says, "about naming what is going on and seeing if there is potential to mobilise people to resist it."

Two years ago, Benson, who has been an independent consultant in the sector for more than two decades, took time out to investigate a growing concern that government was encroaching on the traditional freedoms of charities and community groups. With fellow consultant Penny Waterhouse, he spent 18 months eliciting the views of people in the sector.

The coalition now has a planning group of 60 activists, the public support of organisations such as the New Economics Foundation and the 1990 Trust, and 400 people on its mailing list. It also has £30,000 of annual funding for the next two years. Ironically, to describe the co-option of the voluntary sector in Britain by government, Benson adopts the language of the Pentagon.

"It comes out of the war on terror," he says. "The Pentagon says there are vast ungoverned spaces where people are organising and having free conversations with each other. It says these spaces have to be shut down or governed. And our Government is now using this expression. So we are using it back at them.

"The voluntary sector is a vast and valuable ungoverned space. It represents the principles of freedom and free voluntary association of people who do things in common because they care about them."

Benson does not believe Ed Miliband, Minister for the Cabinet Office, when he says he wants the sector to make life awkward for the Government. In fact, Benson claims, the state is closing down the sector's room to manoeuvre and undermining dissent. The creeping spread of control is most keenly felt through state funding, specifically the switch from grants to target-based contracting.

"The basic problem is that the capacity, willingness and opportunity of the sector to shape the provision it's being asked to deliver is shrinking," he says. "The fig leaf that is put over this is 'partnership'. That's a fiction."

With grants, says Benson, voluntary organisations compete over who has the best ideas, but with commissioning they compete to please the commissioner.

He says statutory bodies are increasingly showing a "with us or against us" attitude. He cites the campaign the coalition ran with the Hackney Advice Forum to preserve grants for advice

services in the London borough. The council was persuaded to maintain a £650,000 grant stream, but has since withdrawn funding from the forum. "It's pretty clear that the reason is that they see us as a source of irritation," he says.

Benson confesses to being "a bit of an old anarchist", but is careful to point out that the coalition is not against all regulation or public funding as such, and does not expect public funders to "just throw £20 notes up in the air and see where they land".

He argues for a new settlement between the state and the voluntary sector that is as much about the sector shaking off a victim mentality as the state loosening the reins. He says: "It depends on strong voluntary groups being clear about what they want to do and being prepared not to compromise, and then going into a free negotiation with a statutory body and saying 'this is our objective, we want your help and support'."

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