

Cuts, Co-options and Trojan Horses: Voluntary, Community and Third Sector Groups under a Conservative Government

The election of a majority Conservative government makes it clear that we can expect another five years of business-as-usual with regard to public services cuts, austerity, privatisation, growing inequality and diminution of rights, entitlements and liberty. The policies that drive these changes have direct and damaging effects, both on the vulnerable people and communities served by voluntary and community groups and on the groups themselves, especially those that are involved in delivering services.

Earlier this year, NCIA published [*Fight or Fright: Voluntary Services in 2015*](#)¹ which described the already parlous condition of the voluntary sector. The report is a blistering critique of the threats posed to the values and work of the sector, and challenges voluntary groups to fight for the rights of the people they serve, protect their own independence and resist the privatisation of public services. NCIA also accuses leadership bodies and major charities of squandering the unique respect and radical space that charities and voluntary groups have occupied in British society, by allowing themselves to become the willing servants of Government and of private corporations as they take over public services.

Based on extensive research over the previous year, NCIA's report shows how voluntary services have been "re-engineered" to serve and support cuts in services and spending, and assist the outsourcing of what's left. In the process, the voice of charities, whose duty is to speak out against and oppose these catastrophic changes, has been silenced by the cooption and compromise of bidding for contracts and acceptance of 'marketplace' values.

The report concludes that:

- The environment for most voluntary services, especially local groups, is difficult, hostile and getting worse for the people they exist to serve.
- There has been widespread acceptance of the shift to commercial relationships, cuts to public services and the privatisation of what remains. This has allowed both previous Labour and the Coalition Governments to use voluntary services groups to drive through policies that create desperate hardship amongst poor and vulnerable people.
- The ideological basis for these changes has been largely embraced or ignored, with voluntary groups expected to morph into "private sector lookalikes" and struggle to the front of the queue to pick up contracts. Fear of losing out has kept them in line.
- There has been a shameful failure of leadership. The sector's leadership bodies – especially but not exclusively NCVO and ACEVO - have responded to pressures from the

¹ <http://www.independentaction.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/NCIA-Inquiry-summary-report-final.pdf>

State and the private sector in complicit and supine ways. They have failed to stimulate, let alone organise, any meaningful opposition to slashing of services for poor people and disadvantaged communities, and direct cuts to these people's living standards. And they have actively promoted partnerships with private corporations with reputations for criminality, dishonesty, poor employment practice and other abuses.

Many of the report's concerns are echoed in the reports from the Barings Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector; the final 'Big Society Audit' from Civil Exchange; and initiatives such as the Declaration of Interdependence, produced by Children England and the TUC.

Penny Waterhouse, Co-Director of NCIA and co-author of the report, said:

"Our inquiry has demonstrated, in unprecedented breadth and depth that the voluntary sector is facing its biggest threat for decades and major charity leaders are colluding in practices that could kill it off. Voluntary services are faced with a choice: to regain their true role in civil society, separate from, but complementary to, the state and private sector; or continue to play the markets and become part of privatised welfare provision delivering profit-driven services of questionable quality.

8 years ago, when we began to build our Coalition, we were viewed as extremist and old-fashioned. But 'austerity' policies and outsourcing obsessions of Labour and Conservative governments have sharpened a widespread sense of injustice. Increasing numbers have come to support NCIA's principled mission to demand that we take a stand to defend the distinctive and precious contribution that voluntary services can make to a humane society."

Maurice Wren, Chief Executive of the Refugee Council, said:

*"Fight or Fright exposes the reality that, whatever the sales pitch says about empowerment, contracting means conscription. Instead of advocating, we end up rationing; instead of dissenting and challenging, we end up gatekeeping and defending the status quo. With public faith in the orthodoxies of austerity and privatisation diminishing across Europe, **Fight or Fright** provides a welcome and timely impetus for us to change the weather in the UK too."*

Fight or Fright calls for:

- voluntary services groups to speak out about and act against the cuts and privatisation of rights and services, as an ethical duty;
- the replacement of contracts by grants to support charitable aims rather than government agendas;
- current commissioning and procurement practices to be abandoned and replaced by participative and integrated funding mechanisms that are fit for purpose;
- voluntary services groups to set ethical conditions as part of any contracting, and to refuse to allow their resources, especially volunteer effort, to generate profit for private firms;
- members of representative bodies, such as NCVO and ACEVO, to make them accountable, and seek the voice and action needed to challenge cuts and austerity measures - or vote with their feet and re-build a collective voice elsewhere.

The National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA) is a network of individuals and groups acting to protect and keep to the historic tradition of civil – and uncivil – action. It is made up of national and local groups, front line services, campaigners and local activists, academics, policy and other commentators, professionals, trades unionists and people working in public services. Please see www.independentaction.net.