

Dear Economic Secretary,

The fourteen signatories to a letter sent to you on 19<sup>th</sup> October 2012 and headed “A sustainable economic future” write as though they were the natural leaders of the voluntary and community sector. In reality, they represent no-one but themselves, and there will be very many people active in voluntary and campaigning organisations who disagree profoundly with much of the content of this letter.

We take issue on two matters of principle. Firstly, the letter attempts to commit the sectors to a party political agenda (“stands ready...”) when as charities our starting point should always be the expressed needs of our beneficiaries. Indeed, we are forbidden at law from engaging in party politics. Secondly, the letter shows no understanding of the diversity within the sector, especially between national and local organisations, and between service delivery and campaigning bodies. These independent bodies are all corralled together to “stand ready” to help deliver key government policies.

In so far as the open public services agenda is code for privatisation or termination of erstwhile public services, we question whether the sector can under charity law be supportive. We also question whether it should be expected to connive in delivery of policies about which there is growing evidence of damage caused to vulnerable people.

The letter uses the term “public service reform” without any recognition of the diversity of views that exist about the types of reforms needed. The clear inference is that the sector is, through these leaders, offering through increased levels of volunteering to compensate for shrinking public services. This is an untested and dangerous assertion that is being increasingly challenged in the academic and professional worlds.

In passing, we note the use of the term “social enterprises” without definition. This is unsurprising, because there is no legal definition, and a key claim of private sector lobbies is that the larger and freer this sector is, the greater the social benefit. Support for “social enterprise” can by no means be guaranteed to support charitable or grass roots community activity.

We find the letter’s references to government welfare reforms particularly disingenuous, because these are not reforms. They are cuts, the effects of which we observe daily, and are being monitored nationally. The letter fails to mention the increasingly important role that is opening up for voluntary and community groups – campaigning alongside service users, trades unions and public sector staff against harmful cuts. To suggest that the sector’s role is to “help individuals and families prepare for and manage change” or “preparing for their impact” in “this time of transition” is frankly offensive to our members, our self-help communities and the users of our services. Our duty, rather, is to listen to and understand the experiences and needs of local people, then act according to our best judgements and consciences. If vulnerable people are being cast in the role of unavoidable victims of economic and social change, then social policy is reverting to the inhumanities of the industrial revolution in UK, or the tragedy of enforced collectivisation in Russia.

One responsibility of the independent voluntary sector is to question and challenge policies which are unresearched, and which our users and members tell us are harmful. It is certainly not to pen letters which demean us all, by substituting a willingness to connive in almost anything, however damaging, for a constructive spirit of genuine critical thought and independence.

Adrian Barritt

NCIA

09 November 2012