

Fighting back

Previous articles in Green Socialist have pointed out that privatisation does not just affect services formerly run by the statutory sector, and also (ironically) that privatisation can sometimes go hand-in-hand with increased state control. Voluntary organisations providing public services are being compelled to adopt the methods and priorities of private businesses through tendering and commissioning procedures. However, the pernicious undermining of the very concept of an independent voluntary sector goes even further. Below, Andy Benson, from the Coalition for Independent Action, looks at how the state and business are eroding this important element of our civil society.

In the Spring 2008 edition of Green Socialist (issue No. 44, which can be downloaded from [the Green Socialist website](#)) an article by Steve Radford documented the sad decline of the independent advice sector. Squeezed between the co-optive plans of central and local government and the smell of profits from clients' misery that is attracting private sector 'competitors', many advice agencies – and the national organisations supposedly representing them – have simply rolled over. The twin strategies for survival are to accept an inevitable loss of autonomy and independence and adopt the 'business models' of the private sector that focus on 'driving up volume whilst driving down price'. Now at last, one of the national umbrella bodies – AdviceUK, with 800 advice agency members – has come out against this madness and is planning a fightback campaign.

However, the bad news of what has been happening to the advice sector does not stop there. For the whole of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) is facing pressures and assaults of the same kind. The Public Service Delivery Plan, the Government's strategy for privatising and contracting out public services, has identified a role for the re-branded 'Third Sector', alongside the private sector, as an arms-length 'delivery vehicle', expected to compete for contracts, work to Government targets and controlled via prescriptive performance management systems.

The wholesale adoption of 'procurement and commissioning' approaches by public bodies at all levels is at the sharp end of these attempts to redefine the relationships between statutory and non-statutory agencies. Traditionally VCS agencies approach statutory agencies for funding to support their plans and intentions, largely through grants programmes. In this, they have had to convince the funders that their plans are legitimate and realistic but ownership rests with the applicants and is rooted in their own assumptions about user or community needs and their aspirations to meet these needs. The process of obtaining State (or local council) funding is a negotiation between two parties, each with a view about needs and priorities.

Commissioning changes this process entirely, removing negotiation from the picture. Community needs are assessed by the statutory body, priorities identified, budgets set, specifications written and then put out to competitive tender, often after 'pre-qualification questionnaires' which select the VCS agencies deemed to be sufficiently 'fit for purpose' to be allowed to take part in the competition. Not only does this force VCS agencies willing to take part in this 'beauty contest' to abandon their own priorities in order to match the specification, it also forces ways of working that are consistent with their new 'contractor' status. The recent dispute at Shelter exemplifies the fall-out – and the need for resistance – that accompanies this redefinition of role and function.

The winners in this debacle are corporate national voluntary agencies, especially those that are in a position to bid to run local services. They have scouts out looking for contract opportunities and whole departments of bid writers, committed to the task of demonstrating their organisation's quality, efficiency and effectiveness. They make a point of speaking the commissioner's language and obeying the new 'club rules' – and they are cleaning up.

Meanwhile the historic mainstay of the UK voluntary sector – locally-based, service-providing, agencies, often with long associations with and commitment to local communities, are being shafted. They are being told that they are not large enough to achieve 'economies of scale', are too numerous for the commissioners to deal with, and do not operate in the 'new managerial' mode that is now required. Many are responding like rabbits caught in the headlights – desperately forming themselves into consortia to make themselves 'bigger and better', but with partners that they scarcely know, booking themselves onto the inevitable courses to be taught how to win tenders, and adopting business models that stress hierarchical professional and managerial objectives. Others are losing money, closing projects, and in some cases, closing down altogether.

The third arm of the VCS – small, poorly funded community groups – who have been largely ignored and marginalised by statutory agencies, remain marginalised. Despite Government rhetoric about 'empowerment' and valuing community-based action, the reality is otherwise. For example, a recently announced £6million programme to support community groups – '*Grassroots Grants*' – actually followed government action to effectively close down a previous initiative – Community Empowerment Networks – because some of them were becoming too successfully empowered and were challenging the orthodoxies and activities of their local authorities.

Apart from the fact that there is little evidence that contracting out public services results in improved services, nor that competitive tendering is the best way of deciding who does what, why does any of this matter? The answer lies in the importance of this thing called '*voluntary action*'. For whether it's stamp collecting or sedition, the VCS represents one part of the '*ungoverned space*' in which we can freely associate. This space, and what goes on inside it, is an important part of our civil society. The liberty we have to join with others to pursue shared interests, even when these bring us into conflict with others, has been fought for and won. They are precious rights. Traditionally, the VCS has been a haven and test-bed for new thinking, for community action, a way to provide services and support to people, and a platform for dissent, campaigning and social action. The VCS is much, much more than a delivery van for the State and its agents.

These issues and pressures – including the threats to independence – are being dealt with in the sector as interesting matters of debate and research. However, there is little action or resistance. Too many of the national support organisations who should be leading the defence of the sector, are already co-opted by Government money, through their club membership via working parties and suchlike, and in some cases (the *Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations* being a case in point) by their wholesale acceptance and support for the 'new order'.

The *Coalition for Independent Action* has been set up in response to this worsening crisis, with the aim of mobilising to counter these threats. The Coalition believes that the stakes are high – that our freedom to associate, and to determine for ourselves what we do and

how we do it, is now under threat from the state and from the private sector – and that there's an implicit conspiracy between the two. What is happening to the VCS needs to be seen in a wider societal context. The State is moving to bring our free space under its 'governance' – through curtailment of our liberties, increasing surveillance, attacks on multiculturalism, creeping criminalisation and an obsessive interest in punishment.. It is through this lens that we need to view the '*public service delivery agenda*', moving grants into commissioning, increased regulation and performance management, the confidence trick of '*partnership*' and other mechanisms of diktat and control that are being wheeled out.

At the same time the private sector is moving in – directly to take over public services, sneakily via 'social enterprise' and internally through the transformation of VCS agencies into corporate, private sector, look-alikes. The strength of New Labour's commitment to private sector values and ideology, should anyone have doubted it, is now dramatically exposed in its response to the global economic meltdown – to use the community's money on a massive scale to prop up a failing and failed system.

In the Coalition we think that action is needed now to defend ourselves against these changes, or the value of what we do, and a lot more besides, will be destroyed. The problem however, is not just an external threat. Whilst the government and the state certainly have plans for us, it is also true that many of us involved in voluntary action have lost our own perspectives and agendas – and the confidence and knowledge to pursue these assertively. Without knowing what we want for ourselves, it will be difficult to resist the plans that others have for us.

The Coalition is there to support and work with those who share our concerns; combine together to expose and resist what's going on; pursue our own agendas; and be involved actively in dissent, where this is needed to protect autonomy and independence. We aim to build a strong enough voice to give confidence to those wanting to speak out and take action. We will challenge and impede, as we can, the juggernaut that is rolling over us – whether it be driven by central government, local statutory bodies, compliant voluntary organisations or profit-driven private sector companies..

In this, our focus is on grassroots action – for civil renewal, for better public services, for political accountability, for social justice. We believe that if any difference is to be made, it will happen at local level. Nationally, too many agencies are already compromised or spend too much time looking upwards to the government for the next set of instructions. We hope that these organisations too will join us, as they realise the dangers of co-option, but we're not relying on them.

Our efforts now are directed towards supporting individuals and organisations at local level, creating regional networks, sparking debate through newsletters, events, and articles and working with others on key issues such as the damage caused by commissioning.

In this, we argue that we need to re-discover the power of collective action. Individually, VCS agencies can be picked off or pitted against each other. Acting together they can create a power base from which to mount resistance.

The example of Hackney Advice Forum in East London is a good model. By campaigning collectively, the Advice Forum fought off local council plans to move advice grants into a

commissioning framework, and thus protected, for the time being, about £1.5million of grants money.

The Coalition for Independent Action is a mixed bunch: local activists and organisations; national agencies; academics; and freelance consultants. We seek people and organisations that identify with our perspective and want to do something about it. Why not contact us to find out more?