

Charities told to keep quiet or lose government contracts

PRESS RELEASE – 23/1/15

New research reveals that charities and other voluntary groups are often absent from campaigns to tackle the root causes of poverty. A report released today shows that voluntary groups, especially those under contract to government, face threats to remain silent about their experiences and many are fearful to speak out in case they lose their funding or face other sanctions.



The findings show a climate of fear and threats to free speech. They follow on the tails of a Charity Commission investigation into Oxfam after the charity warned of the “relentless rise of food poverty” in the UK [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-30546517> 19.12.14]. The Commission's investigation was instigated after a complaint against Oxfam by Tory MP, Conor Burns. It adds to fears raised by the ex-Bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries, who said this week that charities and campaign groups have been "frightened" into curtailing their public work by the new Lobbying Act [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-30935367> 22.01.15].

The report, *Voluntary Services and Campaigning in Austerity UK: Saying Less and Doing More*, is written by Dr Mike Aiken, a specialist in the voluntary sector and is published by the National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA), a network of people working in the voluntary sector. <http://legacy.independentaction.net/2015/01/23/campaigning-in-the-spotlight>

The NCIA report states that “Voluntary services are confronted by implicit, or explicit, pressures to ‘say less and do more’; they face gagging clauses in contracts which threaten to stop them advocating and campaigning; the provisions in the so-called Lobbying Act, passed in January 2014, create an atmosphere in which it is difficult to speak out”.

The research highlights the attempts to muzzle charities and shows who is refusing to stay silent:

- A voluntary organisation engaged in welfare services faced “subtle and menacing” bullying on more than one occasion from significant political figures to “do” and not “say”
- Voluntary groups under contract can be obliged to keep information or observations secret even when insights from their day-to-day work might help improve the service or conditions for local communities and individuals facing poverty and destitution.
- Charities which undertake significant government contracting work devote few funds to campaigning. In the case of Shelter this appeared to be less than 10% of its income.
- Despite attempts to silence voluntary groups, some still speak out (eg Trussell Trust), refuse to take government money (eg. World Development Movement) and join with campaigners to put wrongs right (eg. Keep Volunteering Voluntary, a campaign against workfare). One such charity speaks plainly: “it is a democratic country...we are saying what we see...we have evidence...it’s is about being courageous and speaking out.... so you can put things right”

The report suggests that the situation for charities is getting worse just at the point when it needs to get better - in order to give a voice to those most affected by austerity. It notes that the injunction to silence the knowledgeable voluntary organisation from talking about its experiences would be quite at home in any totalitarian regime that seeks to crush independent or divergent voices.

The report concludes that funding can, and does, act as a brake on the ability to campaign and asks: if the campaigning role is stifled who will provide the evidence to those in positions of power to effect changes; and who will support disadvantaged

communities to have their own voice? It predicts that if this trend continues voluntary organisations look set to be 'saying less' in austerity UK.

Mike Aiken said today, *"Charities have played an active role in a democratic society and this can be understood as their responsibility and ethical duty. Their voice needs to be heard and amplified, to provide a vital ingredient of evidence and to speak with authority and legitimacy to policy makers and civil servants – enabling the voice and experience of the most disadvantaged to be heard in the corridors of power and by other citizens."*

Penny Waterhouse, a Director of NCIA, said *"This research shows that some voluntary groups can, and do, speak out for a better world - if they are brave and think of their beneficiaries instead of their organisational interests and professional status. But why, in Britain, does civil society need to be brave to exercise freedom of speech? It's a bad, and dangerous, state of affairs. NCIA calls on voluntary services to exercise their civil liberties and join with activists and campaigners to advocate forcefully on behalf of their beneficiaries."*

The report is one of 17 reports published by NCIA as part of their [Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services](#).

ENDS

Notes

1. The National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA) is a growing 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 unions and people working in public services. Please see <http://legacy.independentaction.net/>.
2. The report, *Voluntary Services and Campaigning in Austerity UK: Saying Less and Doing More*, can be read at <http://www.independentaction.net/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2015/01/Say-less-do-more-final.pdf> (PDF).
3. Mike Aiken, the report's author, has led research on community development, advocacy and community participation for over 15 years. He has published articles and book chapters on social enterprises, civil society and advocacy. He has undertaken research at the Open University and lectured at the University of Sussex. He has been a member of the Voluntary Sector Studies Network for 10 years and a committee member for four years; he currently co-edits the practice section of the *Voluntary Sector Review*. Over the last ten years Mike has been an invited speaker at academic and practitioner events from Germany and Poland to Japan and Mexico. Previously he worked in the third sector for over 20 years at

Community Matters, Save the Children and Development Trusts Association. He remains active in Latin American affairs and local community action in Brighton.

4. For more information, please contact Symon Hill on 07920 037 719 or penny@independentaction.net