

What's 2010 bringing & what's NCIAC doing 'bout it?

2010 promises to be a year of change, upheaval and hardship. On the one hand there is the prospect of a change in government following the General Election. Although the result of the election may lead to some change in the way in which the government behaves and in its choice of priorities, in truth there is little to choose between the parties, which continue to fight for the middle ground and operate according to a consensual managerial and ideological creed. Of overwhelmingly greater importance, the year will see the impact of the country's indebtedness resulting from the massive transfer of public assets to the private banking sector as, we, the people, are required to bear the cost of this. This will show itself in increased taxation, significant reductions in public spending and deterioration in the quantity and quality of public services. All parties are committed to this direction of travel.

This situation is of direct relevance to all voluntary and community sector groups and organisations that accept statutory funding or seek it. It is of particular significance for the many thousands of voluntary agencies that are now operating under contract to state bodies. For this work is now, in formal terms, and in common understandings, regarded as 'public service delivery'. Government lawyers, civil servants and officers at all levels of the statutory sector will be busy identifying any devices that can be used to remove or reduce funding, interfere with operational 'efficiency', require increased outputs and outcomes, tighten performance management, defer or avoid paying for necessary cost increases, or drive a harder bargain in new contracts.

Voluntary organisation contractors will feel this thumb on their collar and many will experience for the first time the double whammy of losing their independence and finding themselves legally responsible for providing public services without the means to do so. It is likely that charitable donations will become an increasingly important subsidy for this aspect of their work and the principle that public services should be paid for by public money will take another hit.

It will be important that the Coalition has a presence in this circumstance, to expose the issues and to look for ways in which the agencies affected can be helped to rediscover more realistic and authentic roles in relation to their users and communities.

The effects of the recession will also be felt by the largely unfunded, volunteer-based, community sector, which has remained marginalised in recent years, despite the lip service paid to empowerment and citizen involvement. Since most of these groups do not receive state funding, cuts in public expenditure will have fewer direct effects, though anyone hoping for more financial recognition from the public purse can forget that. Of significance, however, for that part of the community sector involved in deprived or marginalised communities, will be the increase in demand for their support to people and neighbourhoods experiencing hardship.

The Coalition needs to be active here too, again to keep the issues visible and to provide a home for those wanting to organise and defend the conditions and standards of life for these communities. It is here, also, that we may find the green shoots of a renaissance of the kind of voluntary and community action that the Coalition sees as the proper purpose of the sector.

And it is likely to be a bad year for the voluntary sector infrastructure industry. 2010 is the year in which many of the initiatives that have funded something of a gravy train amongst local and national second tier bodies, will begin to end. The recession and the pressure on public finance will ensure that this funding will not be renewed and we are likely to see the beginnings of substantial downsizing in this part of the sector. Though, in our view, much of this funding has been wasteful and irrelevant (capacity building, getting ready for contracts, incompetent partnership initiatives, etc.), the impact on these agencies of losing their projects and their staff is likely to be painful and distracting. Second tier agencies will also find more starkly how they are not being paid (and will not be paid) to undertake their most important role – made more important by the recession – of representing the political and structural interests of independent voluntary action. This effective leadership role, so emasculated by state co-option, is another thing that will have to be reinvented and the Coalition has an important role in helping this process along.

Lastly, it is necessary to mention the last main segment of the sector – the (mostly) national, corporate agencies, including those that scout and compete for the delivery of local public services. Although they cannot be ignored because of their impact on the scene as a whole, these agencies are not a priority for the Coalition. In truth most of them are already lost to the principles and practice of independent voluntary action and operate according to the mores of a private sector, market-driven ethos, sustained by matching management styles. There is, however, a role for the Coalition in continuing to expose the damage that these organisations can inflict on local agencies and how the quality of their services and activities can often be found to be poor.

Given the very wide landscape on which we are working, we have debated where and on what issues we should focus our attention, given current circumstances and forecasts. Though we will continue to work on a lot of different issues, and in different ways, there are a number of themes which we will stress and return to. We also hope that by concentrating on a small number of specific campaign areas, we will provide a clearer focus, both for work planning internally, and for explaining and promoting the Coalition externally.

This discussion about themes/priorities has started but isn't finished yet and so the following is not completely definitive. We want to know if we're on the right track - so post your thoughts in the comments box below about the three campaign areas suggested, which are:

- ♣ The role of the voluntary sector in the provision of public services with particular stress on the damaging and regressive intentions and effects of privatisation (both for public services and for an independent voluntary sector), and the need for new understandings about and mechanisms for state funding;

- ♣ The need to reassert one of the historic strengths of the VCS – democratic and inclusive styles of organisation and management, and to defend these ways of working in the face of a management orthodoxy imported from the private sector and which presently soak up our time and energies with no benefits for communities;

- ♣ Promoting and trying to safeguard the community sector, especially local action by local people, as a counterpoint to the increasingly tight focus of the sector 'leadership' on the more professionalised, service-providing voluntary agencies.