

*We are not an arm of the state. We have our own arms.*

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## OPEN LETTER to Lisa Nandy MP, Shadow Minister for Civil Society

17<sup>th</sup> July 2014

Dear Lisa,

I write on behalf of the National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA). We met with you last December, to talk about the state of voluntary action, in all its shapes, from large national professionally-based services right through to small local volunteer groups and campaign activists. You agreed with us then, that the authentic voice of independent voluntary action had been silenced by funding regimes; and how you wished to change the culture that had led to this. We had disagreements: you thought it's okay to privatise some public services into the voluntary sector. We don't. Despite this, we thought that you brought a fresh and enquiring eye to the tired politics that now forms a gulf between the government and civil society. As hardened cynics, we left hopeful.

We have now read the Labour Party agenda for us, One Nation Labour: renewing our bonds with the third sector, and felt our hearts sink.

The document is an entirely technocratic expression of 'business as usual'. There is no recognition of the breadth and diversity of voluntary action, whether or not formally constituted, with or without charitable objects, providing services or not. Instead your preoccupation is with the small proportion of voluntary agencies which provide services through paid staff and managed volunteers. Most civil society groups are not of this ilk. They are set up to provide mutual benefits to their members, friends and neighbours, to campaign on local issues, to enjoy company, leisure and other activities. This heart of civil society does not need Compacts to "govern relations with government", is not "a sector" and like all voluntary associations are 'owned' by the volunteers and activists who set them up and maintain their existence. For the Labour Party to start with a section called 'volunteers', as if these are essentially unpaid fodder to be deployed by managers and professionals, is starting in completely the wrong place.

There is no mention in your document of the current climate of cuts and austerity, the corrupt politics and unequal power relations that are present, the xenophobia, the hostility towards those who have little and the demonization of benefit claimants, the pressures on individuals and communities and the democratic role of voluntary action to stand up to these attacks. There is nothing about how government, and now the

private sector attempts to co-opt the spirit and self determination of people to organise around their own issues. There is nothing about comprehensive and accountable public services and how voluntary services augment not substitute for this. There is no heart or soul. And there is certainly no change of culture offered.

Instead we read a list of “One Nation Labour” interests. We read phrases such as “Labour believes charities have an important role to play in the delivery of public services” and you ask us how we can become better contractors to the State, and how our umbrella groups can help us do this. You are interested in volunteers and workers, but there is no mention of the beneficiaries and communities which bring people to voluntary work. You want us to “grow and thrive” – no doubt, in order to pick up the pieces of future Labour public services privatisation programmes. You ask us, “what regulations and standards should apply to third party campaigning? And who should enforce them?” We wonder why you would want to muzzle the action of independent self-organising groups, and how this can be different from the gagging law which you say you will repeal.

The message we take is: Labour will do just the same as the Tories but hope to do it better. Is this really what you want to say to us?

To say we are disappointed would be an understatement and we can only presume that the Labour Party hierarchy has now set you on this path. At NCIA, we are launching [the results of our Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services](#). If you and your colleagues want to join us on an alternative route for voluntary action, you know where to find us. We will be happy to pick up a real conversation.

Penny Waterhouse  
NCIA