Independence, privatisation, 'magical consciousness' and the reality of voluntary action on the ground…. What we said to the Barings Panel on Independence

NCIA was invited to offer our views to the Barings Independence Panel at its open evidence-gathering meeting on the 26th April. We were represented by Matt Scott, who spoke of the overall contemporary context, and Elizabeth Bayliss who set out the reality on the ground of a local agency trying to hold to its own perspectives and priorities. In part, they were responding to the first annual review report published by the Panel in January of this year (you can download that here: http://www.baringfoundation.org.uk/).

Here's (an extended) version of what they had to say…….

Matt Scott – "I want to start with Paulo Freire's argument that there is no such thing as neutral education or neutral policy. Everyone starts from somewhere and with an opening position. So always one needs to ask the question 'why?' - to apply an active critical test to the context and environment in which issues are being examined and why they are being examined. My first observation is that the Panel and the report does not go far enough in its questioning or its examination of the ideologies and motivations that lie behind and explain the state of the UK voluntary and community sector (VCS). I will try to illustrate this criticism in the points that follow.

Firstly, the decline in the independence and autonomy of groups and organisations in the sector is palpable and this should no longer be seen as a contested statement. In many cases, the VCS has embraced its loss of independence and, in this sense, it can be seen as an 'inside job'. Especially at the senior level, the voluntary sector did this to itself. As for government, we need a political analysis and be willing to see the idelogoical content of what has happened. Successive Governments, have managed the decline of the welfare state and public services, and parts of the VCS helped to do by acting as a willing outrider for privatisation. .

Privatisation relies on marketisation. Marketisation plays to competitive and predatory instincts. This has created a predatory culture in the VCS, which often goes completely unchallenged. The Compact, for example, presents a near total focus on contracts and commissioning as being the essential – and inevitable – underpinning of the relationship between the state and voluntary action. Through devices such as this, the 'normality' of a marketised approach becomes imported into the DNA of the sector.

Now Governments do what Governments do, but in its enthusiasm for the 'partnership', the VCS has only itself to blame for the settlement it now finds itself a part of. And a future solution must come from the sector itself.

The Panel seeks a 'strong and independent VCS voice' but what such an assertion might mean in practice is unexplored. There are at least two important aspects to this. The first is that the present 'voice' of the VCS largely translates as large organisations operating within a London bubble, where priority is given to access to Government ministers or other powerful

establishment interests and where these bodies are membership organisations, their members are rarely if ever given the opportunity to debate the issues involved. Local groups are especially excluded from these processes.

Likewise we need to address the question of scale and of what the sector actually is. The VCS comprises many hundreds of thousands of groups and literally millions of people. Of the 900,000 civil society organisations that appear in the NCVO Almanac it is clear that the overwhelming majority are informal community groups; they are not, for example charities or social enterprises. However given the changes that marketisation and modernisation have wrought, the difference between these grassroots community groups and more established professional bodies is so great that I would argue they may no longer belong in the same sector. NCIA's vision of a strong and independent VCS is one in which there is debate, dissent, and disagreement and where the competition is not for contracts but for ideas, and for the hearts and minds of those with the energy to pursue those ideas. In this, we see a need to take sides and the side we take is one that stresses social solidarity, equality and justice and the liberating power of collective action to struggle for these objectives.

Another uncomfortable fact is the inequality within the sector. In the New Labour years when it was possible for the Office for Civil Society to claim that the VCS had doubled in size under its watch (this was around 2007), it was also possible to show that small and medium sized charities had got smaller. At a time of growth, small and medium sized groups got smaller. The meaning of this is, of course, obvious – the sector as a whole was becoming more and more divided, larger organisations prospered and a 'winner takes all' mentality – and reality – was allowed to take hold. This process has accelerated rapidly in the last two years. Many sizeable local service-providing voluntary agencies are now being told that they are too small to be sustainable and that mergers or takeovers are required to 'scale up' to the required level.

As an additional point, it is worth noting that although the Panel reports refers to marginalised communities of interest (p16) there is no specific focus on equality and equalities issues. Attention to these issues, which in reality are not marginal at all, is threatened for much the same reasons as the threats to VCS independence.

We need to have both a greater political awareness and appreciation of power, power relationships and the ways in which these influence both what happens and how damaging developments might be resisted. In the face of the concentration of social, economic and political power within our society, this takes us back to the role and importance of collective action and of the role of the VCS as a focus for collective action.

Lastly, I want to return to Paulo Freire who talked about three ways of thinking:

- 'magical consciousness' – essentially a fantasy-based view of the world, currently exemplified by the Government's assertion that we are all in this economic and political crisis "together";
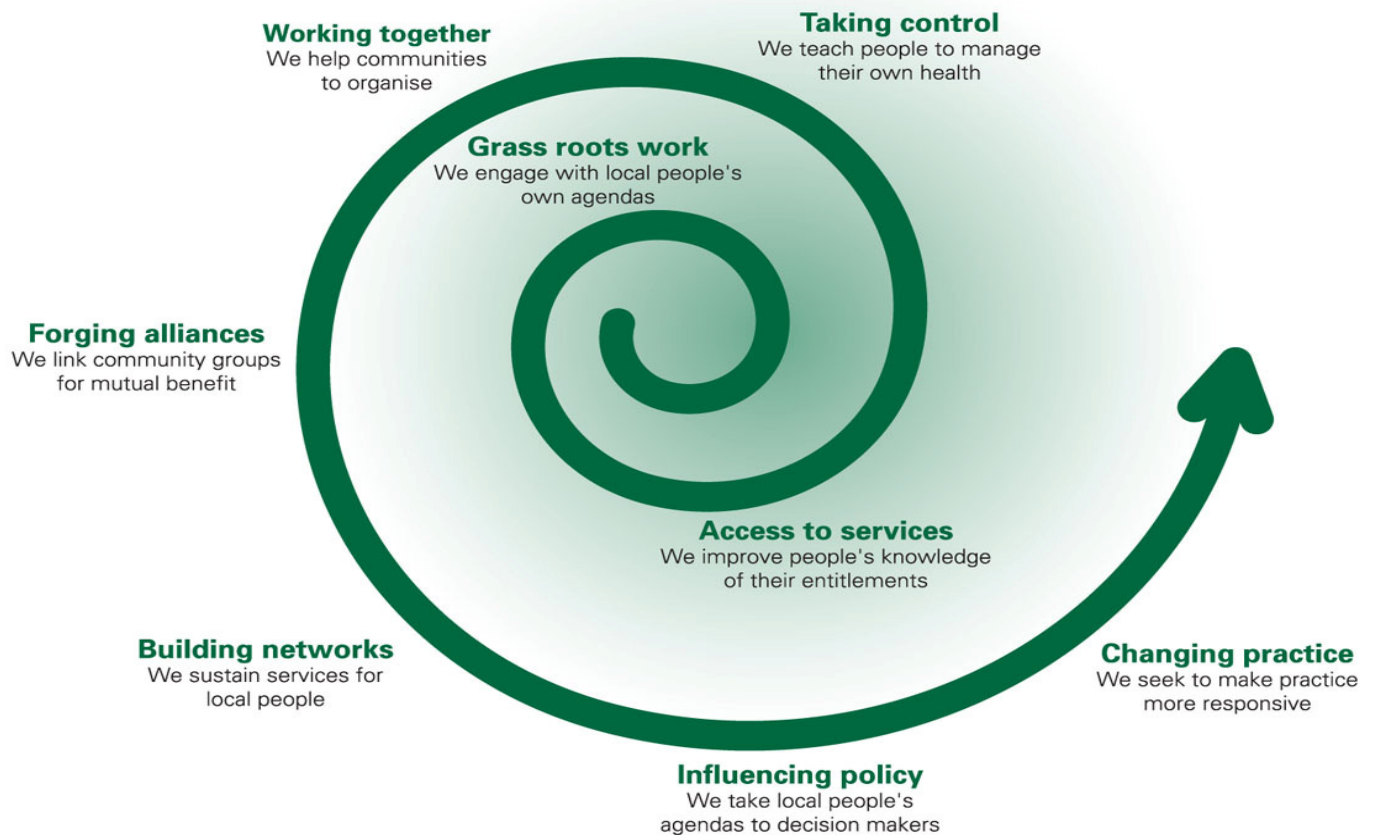
- 'naive consciousness' – which looks at a situation and 'hopes for the best'. This approach is now rife in the VCS and which maintains, for example that there may be enough contracts to go round, SERCO and CAPITA not withstanding; and finally
- 'critical consciousness' - which asks more searching and challenging questions, struggles to get the bottom of things and will be prepared to take practical action as a consequence, even when difficult or unpalatable.

Without approaching its task with a 'critical consciousness' stance, the Panel is more likely to end up curating VCS independence rather than joining with those who are actively trying to save it."

Elizabeth Bayliss – "I work for Social Action for Health, a medium-sized local voluntary organisation, working with communities in the East End of London and elsewhere. Our particular interest focuses on health and community development, and on community-based responses to health inequality. I want to talk about how the issue of independence is viewed by my organisation, working with local people and communities on the ground. But first I need to explain a little about the ways in which we work and what is important to us in this work.

Firstly, we start from a set of values which means that *we start with the people* and from the position that people have *the right to take control* of their own lives; that people's health can be improved by tackling issues such as *isolation, poverty, racism and unemployment*; and that healthy communities are *good for the whole of society.*

Our work in local communities takes many different forms and the range is represented in our *SAfH Spiral of Participation* below:

Working together
We help communities
to organise

Taking control
We teach people to manage
their own health

Grass roots work
We engage with local people's
own agendas

Forging alliances
We link community groups
for mutual benefit

Access to services
We improve people's knowledge
of their entitlements

Building networks
We sustain services for
local people

Changing practice
We seek to make practice
more responsive

Influencing policy
We take local people's
agendas to decision makers

In all of this varied work we aim to:

- Focus on local communities
- Tap into the social capital that exists in these communities
- Build partnerships with local groups
- Make sure the money flows locally
- Create paid work for local people
- Use local suppliers
- Build relationships and maintain them
- Promote action and engagement in the public arena.

Building and maintaining relationships is at the core of this, recognising that:

- It's all about mutuality based on *trust and respect* – there are no shortcuts in this!
- Our role is to *be of service*, honouring the status of those we work with
- We need to *listen to what people say*, preferably in mother tongue
- We need to *check back on meaning* and sense making
- We need to *be there* - be accessible, follow through and be accountable, reporting back on progress.

We also see ourselves as being in a position to *offer useful resources* – such as access to accurate and relevant information, training and work opportunities, or the means to learn to self manage, people taking charge of own health and health improvement, including the means to take more autonomy in their relationships with health professionals.

Much of our work is with individuals but we strive also to create opportunities for *influencing policy* and *supporting local people in doing so*. In this, we put a high premium on *following through* – not letting issues disappear, even if there is no funding to support the work.

Turning to questions of independence, we are fiercely independent as an organisation and will defend strongly our freedom to decide for ourselves, and with those we work with, both what we do and how we do it. Defending this autonomy has become much more difficult within the last decade or so. It has meant that we have had to learn how to negotiate hard. It has also meant that sometimes we don't bid for contracts that offend or subvert our values and approach and it has resulted in us handing contracts back on occasion, when they became unsustainable in these terms.

It is important to state that all of our work which is funded by statutory sources is based on contracts, and most of these are won as commissions, so we are no strangers to operating in a competitive environment. In this we have to recognise – and then juggle – the fact that there are different interests involved – those of local people, our own organisational interests and those of the commissioners and the statutory agencies that sit behind them. The latter pressures are strong and succumbing to them can be seductive. But we hold to our mission by reminding ourselves that autonomous and authentic action initiated within communities lies at the heart of a democracy when it is:

- Pluralist *(diversity is a principle of healthy life)*
- Community specific *(targeted, exclusive)*
- With local meaning *(useful, of service)*
- Accountable to members *(honesty, integrity)*
- Not supplicant *(not agents of the powers that be)*
- Fresh and local *(new ideas, new angles)*.

Where commissioners approach their task with an openness and respect for these principles, real negotiation and shared learning is possible. This becomes much more difficult when commissioners insist on specifying what, how, when and by whom work should be undertaken as well as the detailed outputs and outcomes that are expected, in advance and as non-negotiable requirements.

We are also now facing new threats to our ability to use statutory funding within a framework that is creative, mutually respectful and effective. Increasingly local commissioning practices are dominated by reference to top down government policies, priorities and assumptions, often now actually implemented by private sector organisations rather than local state institutions (the DWP Welfare to Work Programme for example). This, itself, has an influence on statutory bodies and those who work in them. Within Hackney, council officers now openly describe the voluntary and community sector as "the market". This change in language ('worklessness' for

example) is extremely significant as we use language to shape the world and how we see it. The damaging involvement of the private sector is also highly significant for local agencies as there is a loss of autonomy for 'sub-contractors' whose effort becomes subverted to creating profits for the 'prime contractors'.

The very involvement in commissioning also creates tension for voluntary groups who wish to join with others in generating shared positions – on certain policies for example – and create platforms from which to promote these. Partly this is because of the secretive and competitive culture that commissioning creates; partly because agencies that want to win contracts feel they need to be very wary of alienating those who hold the purse strings.

This shifting environment creates a new imperative for locally-based voluntary agencies to find ways of caucusing with one another and for the structures to exist whereby their views and perspectives might be effectively presented publicly and through intervention in both policy and practice. Historically the local VCS held this responsibility but too often, CVS's look to central government and to the demands of their local statutory sector for their mandate and brief, not to their community. The result is perspectives and positions that are vertical not horizontal. For example, members meetings are not valued, and where meetings are convened they are nearly always predominated by issues of funding or policy directions coming from the statutory sector.

There is also a tension between the interest in the business of keeping voluntary and community organisations going (nearly always seen as the priority) and the wider interests and concerns of local people that may not be addressed by the imperative of organisational 'sustainability'. The debate about voluntary action and its contribution to meeting community need has to be wider and more inclusive."