

# Voluntary services agencies and social justice – the end of the line?

This article sets out a challenge to voluntary services agencies - where are you on social justice and more important what, in practical terms, are you doing to fight for it?

Things are bad and getting worse. Surely anyone concerned about social justice will have a problem with this government and its policies? The nakedness of a government strategy that protects the rich and targets the poor is breathtaking. For the rich, there is no recession - still living on the proceeds of the economic bubble, the stock market is back way up in the 6,000s and the top rate of income tax is cut. But at the other end of the spectrum, a catastrophe is unfolding. For example, 25% of the cuts fall on 2% of the population and not the right 2% - people with disabilities, poor families, communities already marginalised.

Accompanying this is the biggest privatisation programme this country has seen. Many voluntary agencies are conspiring with this. The Open Public Services White Paper and numerous statements make the position clear - this is ideological. There is precious little evidence that outsourcing results in better or cheaper services and quite a lot of evidence to the contrary. Public services certainly need improving, but contracting them out isn't the way.

But the problem is wider even than this - not just this government, the challenge is government itself and the role and influence of the state in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Most of what this government is doing was begun by New Labour. The whole political establishment is now focussed on private global business interests, divorced from the people, and is busy rewriting the settlement between them and us. It shows itself in the marketisation and financialisation of practically everything, in the progressive reduction or elimination of our liberties, disinvestment in public services, and in suspicious and punitive mood music which says that dissent is simply unacceptable; you're either with us or against us.

This, of course, takes us to the problem with the private sector and, in particular, the multinational private sector, bed fellows of our neo-liberal political establishment. Having swept up the profits to be made from previous nationalisation of manufacturing and utilities, the private sector is now heavily engaged in raiding the rest of our common wealth - public services. Though in government spin and newspeak, the terms 'private' and 'voluntary' are conflated, make no mistake - 'private' is much more significant than 'voluntary' in terms of the policy intentions and the struggle that faces us.

So where is the voluntary sector in all of this? Although the 'sector' is itself a misnomer, wrongly implying a homogeneity that has never existed, we are seeing a progressive de-coupling of those voluntary agencies involved in delivering services under contract and the rest - activist and community groups. Co-option of voluntary agencies, primarily through the operation of funding regimes, as arms-length delivery

vans for the statutory sector is highly advanced, including now the new role of acting as sub-contractors to the likes of SERCO and G4S . Many children's charities are already in this position. It has been clear for some time that increasing participation in service provision, alongside the 'fit for purpose' capacity building industry was really about getting us all ready for the privatisation of public services where funded services remain in existence, and for nebulous ideas of self help and 'resilience' (aka Big Society), where support for services is withdrawn altogether.

In the process, many voluntary services agencies have become indentured to their paymasters accepting in the process a damaging re-positioning of the landscape, their own operating conditions and muzzling of dissent. The Children England Report 'Perfect Storms' presents much of the evidence - tensions behind the division between very large charities and the vast number of locally based small groups; the ways the latter are undermined as 'unsustainable'; the naked and direct effect of the cuts on service capacity; costs of competition spiralling; the pressure to subsidise contracts from unrestricted income; falling staff morale; deteriorating staff conditions; problems with volunteer recruitment and - beyond the organisations themselves - the pauperisation of children and families and escalating need for help. To this can be added that commissioning is driving down standards and quality; the rush to adopt 'managerialist' styles and social enterprise approaches, is creating grotesque organisations, and that competition and the secretive behaviour it drives is destroying the collaborative approaches that are vital to successful intervention.

At the same time many of the second tier organisations that purport to 'represent' the sector, have accepted the new public services agenda with enthusiasm. NCVO, ACEVO and now NAVCA too are busy running workshops and conferences on charging for services, 'master classes' on tendering, Codes of Good Practice for sub-contracting and other active encouragement to help with the privatisation programme.

Our (NCIA) position is that this has to stop. It is time to come out and push back. We believe that the proper role of voluntary action is to offer innovative ways of tackling problems, taking risks to explore alternative or radical responses, being complementary to, not a substitute for, properly accountable public services based on rights and entitlements, and above all acting as a check and balance against abuse, unfairness, poor policy and malpractice. This is the dance that the voluntary sector should be doing with the state; and it cannot be done from a position of supine co-option. Agreeing to take over public services under contract to the state is conspiring with privatisation and what goes with it.

These are choices that involve taking sides - implicitly or explicitly. We all need to be in touch with the political and ideological nature of our work and it's no good hiding behind 'professionalism'. This is difficult of course - rising demand, a belief in your organisation, jobs to support, money to find, real concern for the privations that are being visited on our people - these are real pressures. But we are now at a crunch point and doing the right thing may mean radically reshaping your organisation and its

purpose, explicitly or implicitly. And will involve focussing on the interests of your users and communities rather than your own organisational survival.

Remember also that the voluntary sector is not confined to the service industry, indeed most of the voluntary sector has nothing to do with it. Here we see thousands of people now lining up to say no to the madness of our times. The unions of course, can also offer a focus for resistance, and are forging real connections between workplace and community-based struggles. So there is a role for the service charities, inside the tent, in forging alliances with those outside - campaign and activist groups. Professional organisations have access to resources, money, knowledge, skills, plant, and connections. These could be made available to those who are explicitly resisting what is going on, subversively if necessary.

So my challenge to you is do you really want to go back to that part of the past where the welfare of vulnerable people depended on your largesse? Or do you want to go back to that part of the past where you stood up for universal statutory services, based on rights and entitlements and fought alongside others to create a welfare state, now vilified, but which was, in reality, a magnificent social achievement?

*As a way of stimulating debate about the issues raised in this article, NCIA has begun an Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services. Between May and October, we will be collecting evidence and testimony about the conditions facing voluntary services agencies and the strategies needed to reassert their radical contribution to social justice. If you are interested to be part of this please do get in touch - [info@independentaction.net](mailto:info@independentaction.net)*

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