

## Article in The Times – January 2010

The major role for the voluntary sector is to raise matters of social concern, influence government policy where possible and hold the state to account for its shortcomings. Since Labour came to power in 1997 the independence of charities and community groups has been steadily eroded as the State has co-opted the voluntary sector for its own interests and intentions - 'modernisation' is the new 'privatisation'. It is not the role of the voluntary sector to run public services.

One main mechanism used for this co-option is state funding, and in particular, the practice of procurement and commissioning. This is now much more prescriptive than it ever was before, reducing voluntary agencies to the status of contractor and foisting on them inappropriate 'business management' styles borrowed from the private sector. Not only do these changes fundamentally alter the relationship between government and individual voluntary agencies, they are also sapping the life out of the sector itself. Whole swathes of voluntary sector activity – work on employment issues, for example - are now dominated by multi-million pound, corporate, charitable businesses, controlled by overpaid executives, watching the 'bottom line'.

The other mechanism that has been used to enslave the sector has been the culture of 'partnership working', based on a fictional assumption that we are all one big happy family working together. Last month saw an exemplary example of this fiction in the launch of the 'refreshed' Compact, an 'accord' that purports to set out how the Government and the voluntary sector should behave towards one another. Promoted as a means of achieving equality between the two parties, in reality the Compact is a fig leaf for unequal power relationships. When it is inconvenient to follow the guidance the Government simply breaks it — in fact, the launch of the new document was immediately preceded by a flagrant breach of the Compact by the Minister for the Third Sector herself, who at the last minute retracted funding already promised to campaigning charities.

So it was doubly disappointing that the five major organisations who are regarded as speaking for the voluntary sector recently issued a ringing endorsement of the revised Compact. We know that many people within the sector believe it is a worse document than before, largely ignoring the unfunded, volunteer-led community sector, dumping vital equalities issues and focusing instead on the government's privatisation agenda. So why are these dissenting views not represented? The answer again lies in co-option – most of these national bodies take money from the Office of the Third Sector, so they don't criticise. And those that don't have this money still want a 'seat at the table' and feel they cannot 'speak truth to power'.

We seem to be alone in speaking out at a national level, although support for our perspective is overwhelming on the ground. The issues we raise will be especially crucial this year and beyond, as public funding cuts take hold. Charities that have contracted with the State will find themselves with legally binding responsibilities for delivering public services without the means to do so. They will keep their services going with donations and the principle that public services are paid for with public money will take another hit. And the needs of community groups – a national treasure - supporting marginalised groups will still find themselves ignored. It is time we all spoke out against this.

*Andy Benson is the joint convener of the National Coalition for Independent Action.*  
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