

Pensioners Parliament – 15th June

The ‘Big Society’ and older people

I want to start by thanking you for inviting me to address the PP, which I regard as an honour. The NPC is a testament to the fact that whatever the government of the day is up to and no matter how hard they try to spin their good news, whilst shutting down dissent and disagreement, people are not daft and good sense, plain speaking and old fashioned campaigning and social action can still be found.

Which is where the NCIA comes in. I want to begin by telling you a bit about who we are and why we are doing what we're doing. Our coalition is an alliance of individuals and organisations drawn from voluntary and community organisations and groups who are fed up with the ideas that others have got for us and determined to resist these plans. Within our society we have a proud tradition of voluntary association, built on freedoms and liberties that have been gained through struggle, the kind of liberties that millions in the middle east are themselves struggling for at this very moment. This 'ungoverned space' where we, as free citizens, come together to do whatever the hell we like is a precious - perhaps the most precious - component of a healthy, free society. We do, of course, have our own views about what goes on inside this space and see the voluntary and community sector as a haven and testbed for new thinking, for community action, a way to provide services and support to people, especially those at the margins, and a platform for dissent, campaigning and social action - and of course, to have a good time together (conviviality). Within this patchwork of activity we hold that one role is especially important - that of holding to account governments and other powerful interests for their views and their behaviour. Voluntary action exists in a space between the state on the one hand and the market and private sector on the other, it is structurally different and it has a different role. Our focus is on grassroots action - for civil renewal, for better public services, for political accountability, for social justice. [In this it should have a vibrant and comradely relationship with the TU movement, but which sadly remains largely lacking.]

The reason we established the NCIA is because we see our ungoverned space being squeezed, being caught in a pincer movement between the state and the private sector. Under New Labour we saw voluntary agencies being seen as arm's length delivery vans for government policies, and as vehicles for privatisation. Policy and practice at all levels was revised to enable voluntary action to be 'reconfigured' to achieve these aims, the largest and most significant change being the move away from grant relationships to those built on commissioning and contracts. At the same time, these same agencies were

encouraged to regard themselves more as businesses than charities or voluntary organisations and to operate like businesses. Many, especially at national level, now do. With the sniff of privatisation, the private sector itself became interested in the whole scene and is now a major player in this world of voluntary action, either explicitly or under the sheep's clothing of 'social enterprise'.

These changes have mostly affected those voluntary groups that look to receive state money - especially to run services of different kinds. Outside of that scene are the hundreds of thousands of largely unfunded community groups, working with volunteers and activists to do a million different things in their local communities. These were subjected to a different confidence trick - that of 'empowerment' and 'partnership', a succession of programmes that neither empowered people nor created genuine partnerships.

And at the same time, we all became increasingly subjected to the new mood music that people cannot be trusted, and that disagreement and dissent is dangerous and unacceptable. Surveillance, curtailment of civil liberties, increased control and regulation, attacks on multiculturalism, and creeping criminalisation - this is where we had got to by the time of last year's election. Plus, of course, let's not forget the government response to the global economic meltdown - to use our common wealth on a massive scale to prop up a failing and failed system and create the pre-conditions for the catastrophe that is now being visited upon the poor, dispossessed and vulnerable sections of our national community.

This then is the scene set for the arrival of the ConLib government with its big ideas about radically transformation. Which brings me to the 'Big Society'. What's that? we all asked and, like the Scarlet Pimpernel, we have sought it here, we have sought it there but can never quite find it. In truth it's a very clever manipulation and a classic example of how a government does one thing under the guise of doing the opposite. Not that anyone is really that fooled. When George Osborne says that 'we're all in it together', the whole nation scoffs. And the prime minister has now had to launch the Big Society three times now, most recently last month, because it has failed to develop 'traction' as they say in those quarters. But the rhetoric continues to get press coverage and the weasel words to divert attention away from the reality on the ground. Cameron can sound quite persuasive - for example this from his recent BS speech:

"In the last the left focused on the state and the right focused on the market. We're harnessing the space in between - society - the 'hidden wealth' of our

nation. We understand that neither the pursuit of unfettered individualism nor top-down state control will achieve the results people want to see - good jobs, opportunities for their children, safer streets, a rich and rewarding life. These are things we pursue and achieve together - in our families and in our communities - and it's the job of government to take account of that reality.

Sounds good. But the truth is that the government is exactly pursuing both unfettered individualism in the market and top down state control in its policies, in what it has in mind for us all. So to get specific I want to spend the rest of my short time here unpacking what the BS means in practical policy and to draw out what this may mean for older people.

OK. First off, there are six specific 'projects' that are under the umbrella of the BS:

- A small grants scheme aimed at small community groups
- A national training programme for 'community organisers
- The National Citizens Service to put 16 years olds onto volunteering programmes
- A BS Day to celebrate volunteering
- Private sector 'mentors' to help people who want to set up 'mutuals' or co-operatives to take over public services
- A BS Bank to provide loans to social enterprises.

None of these singly or together is going to make much of a dint in any of the issues or problems that the BS is intended to address. And indeed, several of them are already in trouble - the community organisers programme is delayed, the citizens service has been watered down and there are rumours that the commercial banks are withdrawing from the BS Bank. Mind you in the recent relaunch a dramatic new initiative was added - that Cabinet ministers will each contribute one day a year of their time as a volunteer! Well that should make a real difference!

Closely related to the BS initiatives is the separate policy strand known as 'localism'. This is apparently intended to shift power away from Whitehall and the town hall and return it to the people (have we ever had it?). This is enshrined in new 'rights' within the Localism Bill that is making it way through parliament and intended to commence in April 2012. The main ideas are to provide powers that will enable people to instigate local referendums on any issue, to approve or veto in a referendum a council tax increase deemed to be excessive, to express an interest in running local authority services and to provide local community groups with an opportunity to bid to buy assets of

community value. There are also proposed changes to the planning system, generally aimed at liberalising local planning procedures and decisions.

The key ideas here are the right to challenge and the right to buy. The former allows local people to challenge the local authority about a directly run service that is alleged to be under-performing. This challenge will trigger a tendering exercise to find a (quote) 'better provider'. There will be no assumptions that the local people making the challenge will be the people providing the outsourced service. Indeed the reality is that this is merely one of a number of devices intended to implement the government programme of privatisation. Libraries is a good example, which local communities are being encouraged to take over and run themselves. In the wings wait private sector companies - including one from North America called LSSI - looking to pick up 'market share'. Similarly, the right to buy is a front for the sale of community assets to, as Cameron himself put it, 'any willing provider'. It has been estimated by umbrella body Community Matters that about 5,000 council-owned buildings used by voluntary and community groups are likely to be sold before December this year - that is before charities and voluntary organisations even gain the legal right to bid for them.

What we are looking at really is a 'sale of the century'. What public services can't be closed down should be shifted out of the public sector and towards private or voluntary sector businesses and social enterprises. Privatisation is the name of the game and this is why we have made fighting this one of our three priorities within the NCIA. In this we are discussing with the TUC and other fellow travellers how we can work together to present a broad front of opposition to these plans.

And closing things down is, of course, the other policy that the BS is intended to disguise. Cuts in benefits and entitlements and the dismantling of the welfare state is, in reality, the main game here. Taken together these moves present probably the greatest threat to community life since the second world war. In parallel with cuts and closures the government is encouraging private giving and philanthropy. These changes do not challenge unequal power relations, they reinforce them and if we allow them to happen, we face returning to an earlier time in our history when poor people relied on the charity of the rich where they could get it. Even the Archbishop of Canterbury is now speaking out against the re-emergence of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor.

Lizzie has talked of the impact of these changes for individuals through the Welfare Reform Bill, and the NPC itself has drawn attention to the damaging consequences for older people of pensions reform, reduction of winter fuel

payments, the shift from the RPI to the CPI and so on. So I'd like to highlight some of the other ways in which the interests of older people are likely to be damaged.

Firstly, and most importantly, services. All local authorities have for some time been engaged in an exercise they have called the 'transformation of adult services'. At the centre of this has been the idea of 'personalisation' - that people deemed eligible for public service support should be given their own budget to choose and buy what they want for themselves. Though this concept embodies many good ideas, implementing the policy at a time of unprecedented cuts in funding is likely to be a disaster. Already users are divided into those with mild, moderate and severe needs; already only those with severe needs will be regarded as eligible and the name of the game is gate keeping that to the smallest possible number. At the same time, other community services on which many older people rely are being cut or closed, or turned into charged services. Home care, day care, and transport services for example, are now regarded as markets. Also, of course, we need to take account of residential and nursing care. The former has already been largely privatised and the current mess over Southern Cross tells us what happens when their 'business model' no longer delivers the profits on which it depends. The government's 'Vision for Social Care' anticipates more privatised services, less monitoring and inspection, and fewer legal protections. And I might add, as an overall point to make here, there is no systematic research evidence that services in the private or voluntary sectors are of better quality than those in the public sector.

Secondly, we can kiss goodbye to the traditions of advocacy and innovation represented by voluntary sector groups involved with older people. Many, possibly by now most, local Age Concerns for example, are working under contract providing services previously located within the local authority or health service. We are even beginning to see such agencies working as sub-contractors to private companies in the market for older people's services. In this situation they have very limited room for manoeuvre in deciding what they provide and how, and they are muzzled in speaking out against poor provision (indeed that may involve speaking out against themselves) or bad policy.

Thirdly, the smaller community groups that have provided softer, less service-oriented support to older people find themselves facing rising demand and disinterest in their work from funders and commissioners (too small, too fragmented, too unprofessional). In any sensible vision of a big society it is this diverse and pluralistic web of activity and support that would be seen as crucial and central.

Lastly, a word on volunteering. Older people do a lot of volunteering (though not actually retired people compared to those in work), though these figures relate to 'formal' volunteering as distinct from informal caring or involvement in local community affairs. Successive governments have tried to promote and expand volunteering and the BS is no exception. Previous initiatives have been largely unsuccessful and volunteering levels remain consistently constant. Such issues as management supervision, health and safety rules, being seen as workhorses, etc have been evidenced as reasons why older people may not volunteer in larger numbers. To this we will now be able to add the disincentive of working unpaid for private organisations which exist to make profits from hardship and misfortune.

The reality is that the welfare state, a testament to our shared and common concern to protect the weak and marginalised and extend the principle of universality, equity and equality, is really the true demonstration of our big society. Our vision of a big society is active citizens coming together in independent voluntary action, providing effective checks and balances against abuses of power, underpinned by high quality, properly accountable public services and accessible community facilities. But if we want these things we will have to fight for them. What might that mean?

As older people we are consumers, users of services, we are citizens, trustees, trades unionists, councillors, volunteers and activists - and most of all, friends, family and neighbours. We are a huge resource and have the additional advantage of being able to remember, both when things were different and how we fought off previous assaults on our common good. For many of us our background is in the politics of collective action - history has shown us that joining and acting together is the most effective way of mounting challenge to the political establishment and powerful elites that wish the things we oppose to remain in place. The world is changing and offers through new technology new ways of organising and mobilising. But the need to identify strategies of resistance and find ways to stand and act together, to say no, to present our own alternative visions of the world we want to live in, to stick to our own scripts, remains as crucial as ever. This battle can be fought at every level - as a councillor inside your local council, as a trustee inside your charity, within your local community groups, within national policy forums, within the press and the media. And even when we can't stop them, we can at least slow them down. Thanks for listening.

Andy Benson
NCIA