

We're not an arm of the state, we have our own arms

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Dear Roger,

Final report of the Panel, your launch and proposed follow up

You may have gathered that the launch of the Panel's final report has generated a fair amount of discussion both from people who were present at the event and outside of it. Some of this comment has come from people who have been involved in our own Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services, a group of 18 authors, a reference group of 62 individuals working in the sector in various capacities and a larger number who contributed evidence or who were interviewed as part of the research work. And some of the comment has focused on the extent to which the Panel's report fails to connect with and acknowledge the body of material assembled by our Inquiry. Enough has perhaps been said about this; both our work and yours stands alone and will be regarded or not by those who come across it.

It is not the reason that I'm writing to you now. There has been a lot of critical discussion within NCIA about the report, the way the Panel decided to launch it and, most especially the follow up proposed by the Panel, The Barings Foundation and NCVO. I'm writing to give you a summary of the views that gained widespread support in that discussion, because we think it important that you hear directly the disappointment and anger that has been generated.

Firstly, in relation to the report, in general we welcome its contents. The picture painted of life on the ground for people working in voluntary services groups is one that repeats views that are very familiar to NCIA followers. It supports convincingly the arguments that we have been making about the damaging direction of travel since 2006 and demonstrates the distance that the Panel has travelled in its 3 year life. It is really good to have an insider group saying these things and in the uncompromising way required to try and make people sit up and listen. However, for us, there are two areas in particular where your report has lost its way.

The first concerns the complete absence of any causal reference to the wider environment and narrative within which the voluntary sector has been re-engineered by the state and private business interests. This is a point to be made at 2 levels; the influence of neo-liberal economic and

political thinking, and the ways in which UK governments have applied this thinking. We would not expect the Barings Panel to have produced a treatise on neo-liberalism. But we do think it vital to make the connections between these global forces and what has been happening within the UK voluntary sector and for this to be a reference point for discussion and understanding. The report's failure to provide this is, we feel, a serious omission.

However, the UK government's application of neo-liberal principles is so close to the sector's recent journey that it is impossible for people in the sector to understand what has been happening to them and their organisations without understanding this. The loss of some public services and the privatisation of many others, cuts to services and living standards, dramatically rising inequality and negative redistribution of wealth, restrictions on rights and liberties, the demonisation of benefits claimants, and the marketisation and financialisation of spheres of activity in the public and civil realm (amongst other things) are deliberate and self-conscious expressions of government. They have had a devastating effect on the people that most charities and voluntary groups exist to serve and on the ways in which these agencies think about themselves, what they find themselves doing, and how their accountability has shifted away from their beneficiaries.

Chapter 3 of your report is the closest that you get to uncovering these issues. Most of them are not referred to in your report at all and, where they are, they are portrayed, without comment, in fragmented and passing terms and without any serious or thoughtful commentary on them. The cumulative effect leaves the reader thinking that changes in the sector are somehow accidental, a common sense and passive reaction to a changing world, or someone else's business. On the contrary, the changes are deliberately and ideologically driven, and are most definitely our business. The role of voluntary agencies in the privatisation of public services, and the failure to oppose cuts and the abandonment of the post-war welfare settlement in particular, is of crucial importance. The Panel's failure to go anywhere near these issues, is a great shortcoming. NCIA might not expect Panel members to share our uncompromising stance on all this but we would expect proper prominence to have been given to such a framing of the social, economic and political environment, rather than leaving this elephant in the middle of the room, exactly where it was when you started out.

Our second area for criticism of the report is its attitude towards and apparent faith in 'leadership' and, most especially, voluntary sector leadership. Attempts to repair the damage of recent years are explicitly described as a 'leadership challenge' and the course of action envisaged as 'next steps' (a 'Commission') beyond the Panel's existence, directly replicates business as usual. A group of no doubt 'senior' figures in the voluntary sector establishment will ponder weighty questions and be looked to, to provide the insight and the means to fight back against the forces that have so undermined the principles and practice of voluntary action applauded by the Panel. These leaders will be expected to use their seat at the table with ministers, civil servants, business people and others to talk them into revising their ideas and their policies and making things right again. This seems to us to be seriously naive.

Firstly it is abundantly clear that the only interest that politicians (including most Labour politicians) have in the voluntary sector is in agencies that look like, taste like and smell like private companies. And devices like contracting, indebtedness through social investment and direct crackdowns through gagging acts, etc will ensure that they do what they are told and toe the line. Secondly, the voluntary sector leaders that you are clearly turning towards with these expectations are precisely the people who have actively helped to get us all into this dreadful situation.

This takes us to the question of your launch event. Personally I was sorry to miss it, though probably the better for my anger management, given the accounts that I've received of it. Given the context of your report and its contents, the decision to provide a platform for Stuart Etherington and Stephen Bubb has been seen by many people as quite extraordinary. And to allow Etherington to scoop the event by announcing that NCVO can spare £100,000 to part fund this next body really takes the biscuit. We know that the formal position is that the Panel has been disbanded and issues of the Commission, its remit and how it might be funded rest with the Baring Foundation - and now, of course, NCVO. It may be that Panel members feel their report has been high jacked in this respect. In which case, it would be honourable to say so. These are strong comments but you may not know the depth of disrespect in which these two individuals are held by many in the sector, and how let down people feel by the dominant policies and activities of their two organisations. To entrust the future of the voluntary sector to NCVO - with or without ACEVO's familiar encouragement to further privatisation - is foolish in the extreme and will virtually guarantee that the Panel's worthy aspirations for the sector will not be realised.

I am copying this to your other Panel members and to Caroline, of course; also to David Cutler and Stuart Etherington. I would be really grateful for a response to the points raised in this letter before circulating it more widely.

With good wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Andy Benson