

Thoughts and views on ‘independence’

Introduction

The statements and direct quotations that follow are extracted from two sources:

- Four interviews with people centrally involved in the work of a local or national voluntary and community organisation;
- Responses from some of those active in the Coalition to a ‘consultation’ in October 2008 on how best to develop and organise its work.

The statements are organised around the prompt questions used in the interviews.

‘Independence’ is an organisation’s...

Ability to argue for policies, responses and solutions and not just against those that are unacceptable

- *It’s not undirected energy. You need a clarity of direction.*
- *You need to clarify who you are and what you stand for.*
- *The personal and professional challenges (are) taking the shilling and maintaining one’s self-respect and integrity.*
- *You need to have your own ideas on the work, processes, activities, costings so you can challenge and expose the flaws in what you’re being asked to do... to develop our own models of practice – be a hot house for alternative practices....*
- *Working on your principles is key... Keep the focus on what you’re passionate about. Use that passion, your pain and isolation to ‘scream beautifully’.*

Ability to identify, articulate and respond to what the users and communities want and to protect their interests

- *The Compact is control by stealth – ‘look like us’. But we don’t want to look like them.*
- *We have to connect with and articulate what (our) communities are feeling when no-one else is doing that or is interested in it.*
- *We need to offer protection against the manipulation of the innocence of young people. I’m willing to offer advice and consultation but I won’t expose (our users) to the policy-makers.*

Ability to embody and represent local knowledge, experience and energy which ‘incomer’ policy-makers and organisations are unlikely to have

- *There’s an emotional attachment (to the area) – it’s our own place, with a tradition of involvement in the locality, with a lot of people and over many years.*

Ability to provide the most responsive unbureaucratic service for a local community

- *Avoid getting old as an organisation... Social entrepreneurs are being asked to be bureaucrats.*

Willingness to say no to money ... to shut up shop and walk away

Why is independence important?

‘Voluntary action’ – the choice made by citizens to band together in pursuit of a shared interest or cause or in response to a common concern or issue - is an inherent and crucial dimension of civil society and of that society’s democratic process

- *It’s an expression of our democracy..., an outlet for unrepresented opinions and views... Policy-makers are becoming more important than the people they’re supposed to represent.*
- *Without independence, where is the accountability?*
- *There’s the moral agenda. (If we lose our independence) we’ve lost the decency argument. It’s not just about looking after ourselves.*

We need to counter the view that ‘there is no such thing as society’

- *A society can only be strong when it looks after its most vulnerable members. If the weak are denied a voice, we are all weakened.*
- *The bottom line is – the defence of individual rights... (Independence) is championing freedom.*

The state and its institutions do not have a monopoly of understanding of or prescriptions for all citizens and their communities. A plurality of insights and responses is needed for the full range of citizens’ aspirations and needs to be met.

In the current social policy context, top-down micro-management pressures are undermining the professional and ‘public service’ ethic within state institutions and narrowing the range and reducing the flexibility of their responses to local conditions and expectations. Alternative and especially locally-rooted perspectives and prescriptions are therefore even more needed.

‘The state’ now often acts through organisational structures and procedures whose resources are very badly stretched and which are very large, complex and confusing. As a result, their capacity and competence for providing what they say they will provide and for meeting the expectations of citizens and communities are often further compromised.

‘The state’ and its institutions in all their local, national and quango forms can thus be a (serious) part of the problem(s) with which often powerless and vulnerable citizens and communities are struggling. This leaves them in need of reliable, expert and independent information and advice, representation, advocacy and other services.

Pursuing independence agendas involves...

Being honest, having trust and integrity within the organisation.

Being clear and explicit about precisely what the threat to independence is and systematically addressing why a proposed policy or decision is unacceptable - what its inherent flaws are as well as why it is incompatible with ‘independence’

- *When the local authority was moving from grants to commissioning without proper or any consultation, we demonstrated how commissioning would destabilise many existing organisations; without achieving what the local authority said it wanted to achieve.*

Organising against that threat - identifying shared concerns and aspirations; convening meetings of affected groups and interests; continuing to seek and mobilise further support once action has started.

- *(We need) alliances of resistance – what’s crucial is solidarity.*
- *When people join us they feel more comfortable to challenge.*
- *Clarity, resolve and one voice confuse bureaucrats who seek to divide and rule.*

Looking for a variety of ways of organising and of making the case – for example carrying out a relevant piece of research may be as necessary as campaigning:

- *You need the evidence.*

Accepting the need in many situations to move cautiously; by developing constructive arguments and initiatives; using appropriate language

- *We call ourselves a co-op rather than a coalition or alliance*
- *It’s not always a matter of flying the red flag!*

From the start, keeping a record of what happens.

Keeping internal communications strong:

- *Everyone needs to know what’s happening, what you’re doing. No secrets.*

Engaging trustees, especially strategically:

- *No-one can finger them.*

Supporting the right to disagree with each other.

Making practical contributions to get and keep things moving – for example by offering room space or admin support for a collective response; by providing a supportive service to another organisation.

Given that the most energising common feature amongst organisations may be their commitment to independence, staying open to – proactively seeking – ways of extending the alliance beyond the original focus or issue (‘advice’, ‘homelessness’, ‘youth work’) to a wider range of groups and organisations.

To initiate and communicate about these alliances, exploiting the potential of the newer forms of ‘virtual communication’ – email, the net, texting.

Especially in high-risk situations – for example where organisations’ funding and therefore survival may be at stake – committing considerable time and attention to direct and personal contacts: to the *slow and incremental process* of bonding and trust- and relationship-building.

While remaining aware of key structural differences and avoiding getting bogged down in organisational relationships, exploiting ‘official’ political structures and processes as fully as possible: for example, locally, by raising the profile of the issues with and putting pressure on local authority officers, scrutiny committees (*It’s got no power but it can have influence*) and cabinet members.

Recognising that there may not be unanimity in favour of proposed changes or new policies within the power structures - for example, amongst councillors, between councillors and officers or between departments.

Using the local media – for example, to provide alternative accounts of events; demonstrate the strength of local opinion; embarrass local councillors and officers.

Avoiding an uncritical use of a dominant policy language – ‘partnership’, ‘empowerment’, ‘capacity building’.

Avoiding implicitly conceding that deficits and deficiencies exist in the independent but not in the state sector – for example, as implied by simply accepting a need for ‘capacity building’.

Never taking ‘No’ for an answer.

Surviving independently involves...

Recognising high-risk tactics and strategies may have to be adopted.

Being prepared at some point to take some of those risks.

Being prepared to face the possibility of operating with fewer (paid-for) resources and proceed on the basis of: ‘This is our priority so we need to do it anyway’.

- *We had to tighten our belts. We all had to become volunteers. It tested our beliefs to the limit – we were in danger of losing the core of ourselves as people. The workers went self-employed. We had to contract out our skills.*
- *You have to be willing to reconfigure – not necessarily staying in this form for ever. Be flexible in how you present and shape yourself.*

Drawing on as much organising, ‘political’, legal and other relevant experience and expertise as possible – in order to ‘hit the ground running’ – while recognising in some situations that:

- *... our few ‘intellectual allies’ are stretched to the limit.*

Looking for opportunities to develop *shared* projects with other voluntary and community sector groups – for example, with a ‘lead’ organisation and devolved day-to-day control to participating groups.

Giving help and skills to other organisations:

- *Demonstrating that you’re part of this community.*

Key lessons from the experience of defending independence in the current policy climate – critical factors for sustaining independent action

- *Remember first to look downwards to users and communities rather than upwards to paymaster and auditors. ... based on a clarity about your core mission.*

- *Think hard about getting too close to state organisations and its implications. Try to generate other funding streams.*
- *Independence is a loneliness... saying what others are not saying. There's unfamiliarity in its message which can be alien, misunderstood.*
- *Don't let them make you feel you are responsible for what they are doing to us.*
- *Trust in our own rigour.*
- *Stay agile.*
- *Don't assume you're on your own, that you're unique, especially when the attacks feel personal. The abuse by the statutory sector – we kept the secret too long. We found others with equally bad tales to tell.*
- *Try to retain an open-minded 'take' on potential allies' ideas – try not to look at them through too much of an ideological filter.*
- *Building alliances requires capacity and time..*
- *Keep the (role of) the power-holders in proportion.*
- *Don't neglect elected members.*
- *Get in early – and keep talking, keep in dialogue.*
- *Give yourself time to get together locally, to overcome the traditional fragmentation and get a collective viewpoint.*
- *Be tactical – don't put all your cards out in public too early.*
- *Don't throw the baby out with the bath-water – for example, though there's work to be done, we can call on the Compact, the LSP. Get the balance right.*
- *Use resource groups and organisations like the Coalition, the Public Law Project etc.*

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