

Our Last Word: Fighting for the soul of voluntary action

NCIA is in its 10th year. Back in 2006 we began by saying:

“We start from the premise that the capacity of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) to take independent action, to pursue divergent interests, and become actively involved in dissent is already in jeopardy. This threat to independent action will, if unchallenged, erode and undermine our civic society, our political health, and the capacity of communities to get what they need for themselves”

Now in 2015 people working in voluntary services, and most in community groups too, acknowledge the loss of their own independence and the extent of co-option into the plans of the government and private corporations, alongside the colossal damage that has been done by cuts in rights, services, standards of living and welfare support to individuals, families and whole communities, the very beneficiaries of these groups. These changes have gone largely unchallenged, despite our best efforts and those of others who have shared our perspective.

We are now faced with the reality of five – very possibly more – years of austerity, cuts, and privatisation under Conservative rule. There is every reason to believe that the changes we have been opposing in public and voluntary services will continue and accelerate. The situation is now both desperate and dangerous. We hope that this prospect will focus the minds of the many, many people in the voluntary sector who have accepted cuts and allowed the re-engineering of their work, and lead them to realise that this has to stop.

Within NCIA, for some time we have been concerned that something different is needed beyond our attempts to jolt voluntary groups into more active resistance to the damage that is being done. This will need new people, new resources, new ways of working and new channels of communication. So we have decided to stop what we’re doing and hope that the space will be occupied by such new approaches and initiatives.



This paper is, therefore, our ‘last word’, an attempt to summarise briefly how we see the present state of independent voluntary action and what we think might be needed to create more robust, progressive opposition to the very serious damage to our civil society that is being enacted. It is principally directed towards people who are involved in providing voluntary services; this has been our core constituency over the last years and the part of voluntary action most damaged by the changes we have seen.

Voluntary groups in ‘austerity UK’

Cuts to public services and the living standards of the poorest people are the largest in living memory, with much more to come. These are the people for whom charities and voluntary groups exist and most (especially locally-based groups) face increased demand and falling income. This ‘double indignity’ should have galvanised anger and opposition within the voluntary sector but the opposite is almost entirely the case. Where there is resistance to these public policies, it takes place largely outside the world of professionalised voluntary services by those directly affected and others standing with them in practical solidarity.

The power of money

The shift in State support to voluntary groups from grants to contracts and the parallel rise of commissioning and procurement regimes explains how successive Governments have been able to 'rein in' independent voluntary groups and recast them as delivery vans for their own policies and programmes. At the same time, cuts to funding, alongside the deliberate creation of competitive markets, now means that many groups, especially those who are small or medium-sized and locally-based, are now struggling to stay afloat and maintain levels and quality of services for their users. Many have already closed down.



Outside of the visible 'service providers' the impact is also felt in informal settings – community groups and especially groups from within black and minority ethnic communities find they are expected to pick up the pieces from policies that create catastrophic hardship and discrimination, without either resources or recognition.

The winners

There is a growing gap between the larger charities and the rest. The former are better equipped to play the procurement game and many have moved into competing with each other and local groups for services contracts. Some of these charities are aggressive and predatory in their approach, driven by ambitions for market share rather than social purpose.

'Social enterprise' – the new must-have

Many voluntary groups have fallen for the lie that they will survive and prosper by becoming more 'businesslike' and 'entrepreneurial'. Turning to the private sector for finance ('social investment') creates new forms of debt dependency and new imperatives to create surpluses from their services to disadvantaged clients and communities. At the same time, dependent sub-contractor relationships with global corporations is seen as an acceptable way forward, helping private pockets to maximise profits from poverty and social need.

What about the workers?

Paid staff are on the receiving end of cuts to pay and conditions, increasing use of zero hours contracts, the exploitation of weakened employment rights and heavy-handed management. For volunteers too, the impact of contracting, professionalisation, and new 'managerialism' has shifted their role to that of unpaid labour ('forced labour' through Workfare schemes), to the detriment of personal development, acts of solidarity between 'givers' and 'receivers' and real work.



The failure of sector 'leadership'

Sector leadership bodies like ACEVO and NCVO have shamefully failed to oppose the discriminatory and disproportionate cuts to poor and vulnerable communities. Nor have they defended voluntary groups themselves from the constraints placed on them by the 'new normal'. Indeed, many national bodies have actively encouraged voluntary groups to enter the 'marketplace', bid to take over public services and form alliances with private contractors, many with reputations for criminality, dishonesty, poor employment practices and other abuses.

At local level too, most Councils for Voluntary Services have accepted cuts, competitive behaviours and subservience to commissioning regimes without question. And there are few examples of involvement of these umbrella groups in campaigns to defend community rights and oppose cuts.

The silencing of dissent

A crucial and damming effect of these changes has been the alarming extent to which the critical voice of the voluntary sector has been silenced. Open dissent, even mild informed criticism is now widely seen by local and national State agencies as unacceptable, and certainly viewed that way by many MPs and government ministers. This environment is created by legislation (such as the Gagging Act), calls for clampdowns by hysterical back bench MPs, pressure on the Charity Commission to 'toughen up' and restricting central government funding to supine and compliant leadership bodies. At local level the hegemony is assured through formal contractual mechanisms and many other more informal means. Across the landscape, voluntary services have suffered a massive loss of ability to think, act and speak independently, and especially to speak plainly and passionately where injustice and privation are being visited on their users and beneficiaries.



Why this has happened – the politics of today

The policy changes to which NCI is opposed are presented by Government and their supporters as 'common sense' responses to a changing world. However, it is clear to us that they are in reality part of an ideologically-driven programme to transform British society and the role of the state, involving:

- the dismantlement of the post-War welfare settlement and the social protections it embodied;
- the privatisation and outsourcing of public services into an unfettered market;
- Increased inequality; and
- a massive transfer of wealth from the poor to the already rich.

Voluntary groups are bit players in this, invited at the margins to join this 'race to the bottom'. Whilst New Labour appeared to regard the voluntary sector as 'preferred providers', the Tory Government sees the sector as adjuncts to private corporations, or left to pick up the pieces to meet needs from which no profit can be extracted. Too many within the voluntary sector have sown the seeds of their own demise by accepting this new role and kept silent about the consequences both for them and for their users. The election of a majority Conservative government makes it certain that this ideological project will continue.

The cost of not facing up to this situation, and taking a stand, will be very high indeed. Our 'last word' is not a counsel of defeat but a call to arms.

A message of hope



There are many, many people who are unhappy and angry about this situation, including many working inside voluntary services groups. They are pressing hard, against the odds, to keep to their core purpose, stand alongside their users and communities and work co-operatively, not competitively, with others. There are academics, writers, bloggers and trainers asserting a different narrative; individuals from different spheres finding each other, organising and speaking out about issues which affect them.

Activism – a powerful force of citizen action – is everywhere, in different shades and shapes. Countless brave, patient and insistent people are fighting daily against the onslaught on rights and entitlements, against injustice, inequality, and environmental degradation. Much of this work is defensive, trying to hang on to things we value or to prevent further damage. But that is the world we live in and that is the task that is needed.

The motivation for this hive of activity is personal and political, not professional. It depends on the views and values of individuals who are prepared to commit themselves to practical action on concrete issues - *saving a*

local service..... opposing workfare and benefit sanctions..... defending tenants against eviction..... exposing poor social care..... stopping profit-driven redevelopment plans. The future of progressive voluntary action – as has always been the case - rests with individuals.

This is as true for people working inside voluntary organisations as for outsider activists and campaigners. But insiders face particular barriers, for many voluntary organisations - especially those in the services 'industry'- have already been compromised and co-opted. They will only be brought back from this condition because individuals – frontline staff, volunteers, managers and trustees – insist that change is needed, and is possible, and are prepared to make the connections with others who can help to make it happen. It will rely on people who create or refresh their own structures and associations together. And who find and share resources which enable, not restrict, their intentions. Especially for those who feel trapped inside voluntary services, there are allies outside, as well as other insiders, with whom to connect – bringing the forces of insiders and outsiders together.



To be blunt: the future depends on the choices we make – you and I - as individuals, whether within organisations or outside of them. Here are some choices we would like to see you make:

- **Your real and core purpose** - can you show you are part of the action fighting for the rights of your users and beneficiaries and the communities from which they come? Have you joined or started campaign work which can directly improve the lives of people you work alongside [*And we don't mean only to save your own service!*]
- **Safeguarding public services** - do you make sure that you don't get involved in taking over public services? Do you stand alongside public sector workers to stop cuts and privatisation? Do you say 'no' to relationships with private companies who profit from social needs?
- **Your funding** - Do you argue and act to have grants as the main way to receive financial support for your work?
- **Fellow workers** - Do you pay a Just Wage, which ensures pay differentials of no more than 5:1? Do you only agree to a contract if your commissioner accepts payment of at least the Living Wage? Do you boycott workfare placements and have you signed the Keep Volunteering Voluntary pledge?
- **Holding your own organisation to account** - If you're unhappy with what your agency is doing, do you speak out and organise together with others in your workplace?
- **Holding your umbrella group to account** - If you're unhappy with the body or groups who say they represent you, do you organise with others to make them more accountable and genuinely speak for you?

No workfare here.



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