

**Voluntary Sector Studies Network: Day Seminar:
'Campaigning and Advocacy: Has the voluntary sector lost its voice?
Euston Thistle Hotel, Cardington St, London NW1
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The Decline and Fall of Independent Voluntary Action and Advocacy? Reflections and perspectives from NCLA's Inquiry into Voluntary Services

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1. Orientation: About NCIA



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- The National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA) started in 2004 as a ***coalition*** of people within the ***voluntary sector*** concerned about the ***decline of independent voice and advocacy in the sector***
- It's main concern has been with ***voluntary and community organisations engaged in welfare services and advocacy*** in the voluntary sector although its messages also apply elsewhere in the sector.

1. Some more orientation...

- NCIA has been concerned with the effects on ***small and medium sized voluntary and community groups*** by:
 - *contracting processes and the decline of grants*
 - *the steady advance of 'business methods' and measurement mantras*
 - *the emphasis on instrumental delivery roles*
 - *the attacks on the advocacy and voice roles*
 - *the commodification of staff and volunteer roles*
- NCIA has been concerned with how these combine with:
 - *the austerity narrative, cuts in welfare and reductions in services, and privatisation of the welfare state.*

1. And further orientation...

- NCIA has been also been particularly concerned with the ***lack of strong voice*** by many (but not all) infrastructure organisations for their:
 - *lack of vigour in supporting independent advocacy roles*
 - *lack of support for harnessing voice against austerity measures affecting the poorest in society*
 - *strong embrace for contractualisation and privatisation of the public sector*
 - *encouraging institutional processes leading to a semi-privatisation of parts of the voluntary sector.*

1. And some disorientation...

- After 10 years NCIA is closing – not because the issue has been **won** but rather a feeling that the issue may have been **lost and moved on** in many significant locations
- NCIA on its own role sees:
 - *no need to be 'sustainable'*
 - *no need to commercialise its operations*
 - *neither to exist in perpetuity...*
 - *nor to shift its mission or values*
- NCIA declined to seek additional trust funding for the organisation: instead it has:
 - *encouraged the development of the key ideas, analysis and values ...*
 - *in decentralised forums, on-line groups and key*

1. Orienting ahead...

- NCIA has ***sent a strong signal for 10 years*** on the issues
- NCIA's work suggests that ***voice and dissent*** may be moving elsewhere with:
 - *activists taking strong independent action*
 - *local groups undertaking advocacy and voice*
 - *activists working with the most disadvantaged communities*
 - *groups undertaking campaigning unafraid of the political*
- NCIA has completed a ***one year transition strategy*** to
 - *signpost partners, activists to other organisations and activists which share its values and analysis*
 - *make all its research, comment and discussion permanently available in a free and easily accessible archive at the British Library and the Bishopsgate Institute.*

Cut to the chase:
Findings and analysis from the research



Aggregated Findings (1)

[From: NCIA (2015) 'Fight of Fright: Voluntary services in 2015 – a summary and discussion of the Inquiry Findings, NCIA: London.]

- The environment for service providing voluntary organisations is increasingly hostile:
 - for the people for whom they provide services
 - for the scope and quality of services
 - for their own independence and self-determination
- The effects we noted were:
 - grants to contracts
 - role of commissioning and procurement
 - the impact of cuts on service delivering community and voluntary organisations (VSGs)
 - many VSGs face reductions in funding
 - requirements to work to fulfill statutory obligations of agencies

Findings (2)

- Large and small VSGs – large organisations compete for scaled up government contracts; local provision and knowledge is threatened and competition not collaboration ensues
- BME groups services are not considered as ‘delivery’ – sometimes it ‘dissolves into mutuality’ (Channon) & discretionary grants disappear
- Exceptions: some large charities chose not to exploit large scale contracting; sympathetic local authorities operate; uneven spread of, and application of, commissioning processes
- Social enterprise and entrepreneurialism: blurring of distinctions between private, public and voluntary sectors
- Volunteers: noted a move from self-help and community development roles to ‘unpaid workers’
- Workers – subjected to effects of low cost, high volume work on lower conditions

4. Findings (3)

- 'Scotland and Northern Ireland
- The Inquiry took place during the referendum but '*more positive messages about the future of Voluntary Service Groups*' seemed present
- Greater opposition to the privatisation of services in Scotland
- In Northern Ireland – voluntary sector is increasingly seen as a special interest group with comparisons to the private sector and a role in helping the NI executive implement policies.

Findings (4)

- 'Leadership' groups – in particular ACEVO but also NCVO have *'failed to stimulate, let alone organise, any opposition to the discriminatory and disproportionate slashing of services for poor people...'*
- 'Leadership' groups have *'explicitly or implicitly or secretly...supported the privatisation of public services'* (Independent, 14/8/2012)
- Criticisms of the funding mechanisms including payment by results have been largely confined to technical issues
- Few examples of involvement in campaigns to defend community rights or oppose cuts
- Silencing of dissent – *'the role - of advocacy, campaigning, opposing excesses, abuses and injustices...is perhaps **the** vital role of voluntary action...'* BUT *'open dissent, even mild informed criticism'* is seen as unacceptable: DO MORE AND SAY LESS!

Analysis: Understanding the causes

- Spread of the neo-liberal agenda in relation to the primacy of markets as a mechanism of social co-ordination (Crouch, 2011)
- *Dismantling of the welfare state settlement*
- *Outsourcing services, reducing provisions, reducing responsibilities of government*
- *Cuts and austerity and concentration of wealth – a deepening of social inequality*
- *Re-engineering of the voluntary sector – practically and conceptually – as concerned with market values (destruction of the social commons).*

2. What is at stake?

Independence and the key role is advocacy



2. Historically...the Role of 'Third Sector' organisations towards government

- Tocqueville, A. de (1990) argued for the importance of **organisations** outside of the state playing important roles in the political life and public life
- Mill made a similar point but was less specific about types of *organisations* (so we could think of **activities and deliberative spaces** too)

'In politics, as in mechanics, the power which is to keep the engine going must be sought for outside the machinery; and if it is not forthcoming, or is insufficient to surmount the obstacles which may reasonably be expected, the contrivance will fail.' Mill, J.S. (1861: Ch1)

- Advocacy on behalf of the disadvantaged or oppressed is a critical role played by third sector organisations.

2. And on independence...

- Clarke, R. (1990:164) ‘...the main principle...is ***that voluntary organisations are, and should be, independent of the state***....voluntary organisations in which people can run their own affairs....***The state, accordingly, has an obligation to encourage that democratic social life*** by establishing the conditions...grant aid and rate relief...under which it might best be promoted.’
- Donnison, D. (1990: viii) reminds us neighbourhood community organisations tend to ‘***neglect the need to engage in social conflict and the need to form alliances with tenants’ associations, political parties, trade unions, and ethnic groups***...capable of working on a larger scale...’
- Taylor, M. (2011) suggested three scenarios for communities with the **pessimistic scenario** characterised as one in which communities are ‘***bought off and co-opted*** into an agenda that remains relentlessly top-down...[...in which] global capital...is not only overt but also covert, ***shaping the way we see things*** and what we think is possible.’ NCIA often occupies the pessimistic quadrant!



2. Influencing: NCIA presenting evidence



People from NCIA,
community
organisations, voluntary
organisations, trade
unions and academics in
committee room of
Parliament, London,
June 30th 2: Maurice
Wren, Elizabeth Bayliss,
James Lazou, Les
Huckfield, Andy Benson

3. Approach to the Inquiry (a)



3. Approach: How NCIA's Inquiry arose:

- **Insights arose from practitioners and academics** - from their experience in the voluntary sector of '*something was in the air*' which at first sight was hard to categorise
- The repetition of this awareness helped draw people together – a common expression in an internal investigation among NCIA's supporters was: '*NCIA helped put a name to what I was experiencing*', '*it gave me a voice*', '*it is brilliant - no-one else is saying this.*'
- Exploring this 'something' takes its cue from a solid tradition in sociological thought from Mills (1959:15) about 'issues'
- '*An issue is a public matter: some value cherished by publics is felt to be threatened.*' Often there is a debate about what the value is and what it is that really threatens it. '*This debate is often without focus ...it is the very nature of an issue...that it cannot very well be defined in terms of the immediate and everyday environments...An issue, in fact, often involves a crisis in institutional arrangements...*' and:
- This experience '*...is often caused by structural changes...[...] to be aware of the idea of social structure and to use it with sensibility...is to possess the sociological imagination*' Mills (1959:17).

3. Theoretical approach

– positionality & insiders

- From the Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (1998: 205-6) perspective the NCIA work comes from a '**critical tradition**' and a '**post-positivist position**' which looks both at 'dialogic' inquiry and 'testing' certain propositions.
- Herr, K. & Anderson, G.L (2015) on '**positionality**' where there may be outsiders and insiders to social inquiry. One advantage of '**insiders**' is the extent of their existing tacit knowledge to make sense and understand the context which can generate 'co-learning' between researcher and practitioner.

3. Theory behind approach – positionality & insiders

- The approach used in this work drew from theoretical ideas of Sayer, A. (1984:74). He speaks of the development of knowledge which results when ***‘the displacement of an existing concept to a new situation actually changes [that concept’s] meaning’***
- In the voluntary sector, the ***context of welfare state services*** moving into fragmentated contracted providers, marketisation of those services, and the commodification of social welfare (the arena in which many large and medium sized charities are now moving) – ***threatens to change the meaning of ‘charity’, ‘voluntary’ and even ‘community’ organisation.***
- Same words ‘voluntary’, ‘charity’ – moving to different meanings.

3. Approach: Inquiry team

Our team of investigators in the Inquiry included:

- Established academics with a peer-reviewed papers and significant experience in social research in the voluntary sector of over 30 years
- Practitioners, campaigners, activists with front line experience in: community action, squatting, housing action, Black and Minority Ethnic communities volunteering, advice work, youthwork, disabilities, counselling, etc
- Chief executives, managers, front line staff, board members, volunteers, working in voluntary organisations including infrastructure organisations
- Political advisors and those with experience of working inside local authorities or the political machinery.

3. Specific methods

- **Our investigators worked to a series of key questions in the area of expertise with peer group supervision from a core team**
- **Undertook their investigation through a range of methods suited to their experience:**
 - Literature reviews
 - Interviews in the field with a organisations/informants through purposive sampling
 - Searched for data in practitioner or professional magazines
 - Drew on their networks/ professional contacts for insight
 - Took part in one to one or group discussions with the core team
 - Revised their work following informed comment from peers.
 - On-line: email discussion list; and web-site forum; facebook, Twitter, NatCan site. Open Democracy.

3. Engagement: Discussion & dialogue

- **Discussion and dialogue In person:**

- During 2015: Assemblies, roadshows and meetings in London, Sheffield, Durham and Brighton (total attendance 150+)
- Attendance at academic events and invited speakers (VSSN, TUC, Critical Management Conference, Committee rooms, houses of Parliament etc etc)

- **On-line:**

- Email discussion list
- web-site comments forum
- Facebook & Twitter
- NatCan site
- Open Democracy
- Blogs and articles in Third Sector, Daily Mirror, Guardian, Radio 4, local and community radio stations

4. NCIA Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services

People and topics



4. NCIA Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services (a)

- **‘Fight or Flight: Voluntary Services in 2015’** *(editors)*
- **‘The ideological Context’** *by Dexter Whitfield*
- **‘The Rise and Influence of Social enterprise, Social Investment and Public Service Mutuals’** *by Les Huckfield*
- **‘Does Size Matter Paper 1 and ‘Does Size Matter Paper 2’** *by Linda Milbourne and Ursula Murray*
- **“Ordinary Glory: Big Surprise not Big Society”** *by Mike Aiken*
- **‘Outsourcing and the Voluntary Sector’** *by Laird Ryan*
- **‘The Devil that has come amongst us: the impact of commissioning and procurement practices’** *by Andy Benson*
- **‘Voluntary Services and Campaigning in Austerity UK: Saying less and Doing More’** *by Mike Aiken*
- **‘Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services Support for Black and Minority Ethnic Older People’** *by Valerie Lipman*
- **‘Refugee and Migrant Group Action on Xenophobia and Public Policy’** *by Lisa Rodan*

4. NCIA Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services (b)

- **‘The impact of contracting and commissioning on volunteers and volunteering in Voluntary Services Groups’** *by Colin Rochester*
- **‘Lenin’s Useful Idiots? Voluntary Action and Public Service Reform in Northern Ireland’** *by Nick Acheson*
- **‘More for Less – public sector outsourcing and cuts to spending: the impact on voluntary sector workplace conditions and the role of the Trades Unions’** *by Rosie Walker and Frances Sullivan*
- **‘The position and role of national infrastructure bodies concerning the cuts to and privatisation of public services’** *by Lis Pritchard and Andy Benson*
- **‘Homes for radical action: The position and role of local umbrella groups’** *by Penny Waterhouse*
- **‘Struggling to Survive... Independently: Stories from the Frontline of Voluntary Services’** *by Bernard Davies.*
- **‘What is happening in Scotland’** *by Nicola Gunn.*

Flavours and Voices

***‘I collect food ... and distribute it to people –
I’m not paid. But we can’t rely on
mainstream organisations any more.’***

**Comment to researcher at a community centre open day,
July 2015**

Tip: listen to Mills (1970) ‘The Sociological Imagination’

Theoretical themes – jamming and counter jamming?

- Initiatives may challenge (implicit or explicitly) the *narrative* of neo-liberalism which is a cultural project (Centeno & Cohen, 2012) to persuade
- ‘Dispossession’ of the social commons (David Harvey) - may include the de-facto privatisation of the voluntary sector.
- Lukes (2005) – working on the three dimensional analysis of power ‘perceptions, cognitions, and preferences...[people] accept their role in the existing order...’ BUT there is ‘...a latent conflict...’
so contradictions between messages from those in power and people’s real interests still exist: a gap new initiatives may work on

Conclusions: For voluntary orgs

Think, reflect and act on....

1. Your core purpose?
2. Safeguarding public services?
3. Your funding?
4. Your workers and volunteers?
5. Holding your own organisation to account?
6. Holding your umbrella group or infrastructure body to account

Conclusions: Trends?

- Increasing undermining and destruction of welfare state
- Use of contracting processes and other market mechanism as dominant mode of funding
- Advocacy, voice and campaigning under extreme tension (through active pressure or self-censorship)
- Large scale voluntary sector organisations: collusion, delusion, or economic self interest?
- Undermining of the meanings of voluntary action and charity – conceptual and narrative change
- Large infrastructure organisations as natural mediators of ‘new realities’ in collaboration with government agendas
- Advocacy, voice and campaigning become marginal or decorative features from mainstream service providers
- Privatisation of the social commons
- Incorporation of large scale voluntary organisations into the institutional routines and economic structures of corporate world.

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4. Analysis

- Austerity narrative (the 'alchemy of austerity' (Clarke & Newman, 2012) reform = cuts; public = inefficiency etc
- Affect of cuts in public expenditure (welfare transfers and services)
- Mode of co-ordinating services: from 'hierarchy' to 'markets' (> privatisation and contracting)
- Neo-liberal project - organised through multi-lateral conferences & regulatory changes – George, S. (2014)
- Parts of voluntary sector - a contractor for mainstream public services in competitive market
- Voluntary sector used as 'Trojan horse' for privatising welfare state
- Advocacy – 'voice and noise' roles curbed...but:
- Are there new spaces emerging – for 'voice and noise' and