**Speaking out: why the voluntary sector needs to hold on to its campaign roots**

An important working paper was recently published by NCIA called [**Voluntary Services and campaigning in austerity UK: Saying less and doing more**](http://www.independentaction.net/2014/12/11/campaigning-in-the-spotlight/) which explores the diminishing role of campaigning by the voluntary sector. In that report, on page 15 the following observation is made:

*“Funding can, and does, act as a brake on the ability to campaign but all the examples of speaking out are associated with using – or finding room – to exercise discretion to do this. An important lesson is: how can organisations protect and extend the amount of discretion they have in order to use this with beneficiaries. Linkage and bonding with other organisations, who may appear unfamiliar collaborators at first sight, and with those operating at different scales may also provide some scope for extending and supporting campaigning.”* [[1]](#footnote-1)

Funding as a brake on ‘speaking out’ has always been an issue but never more so than now, given the tensions between the urgency of doing so as austerity measures bite , and their more prominent role as agents of the state in delivering public services. The greater that role, the stronger the brake on speaking out.

Moreover that ‘discretion’- the space to speak out - is increasingly being muzzled: confidentiality and gagging clauses in service contracts along, veiled threats and warnings by local government officials, a diminishing funding environment, are all cited in the report as combining to mute the voice of the voluntary sector. An increasingly competitive, even desperate funding environment, also mean that linkages and co-operation between voluntary organisations to forge alliances and find common ground, is undermined.

So how can organisations protect and extend the amount of discretion to speak out, as the report asks?

A solution, or at least the beginnings of a solution, may be found in an answer (or the beginnings of an answer) to a different but related set of problems that are far bigger, more dangerous, and more threatening to our democracy. The World Economic Forum, hardly a bastion of left wing activism, cites [the weakening of representative democracy](http://reports.weforum.org/outlook-global-agenda-2015/top-10-trends-of-2015/5-weakening-of-representative-democracy/) throughout the world as one of its top ten trends. And while it links the global economic crash, ensuing civil protest and the deep distrust of both politicians and the private sector, it is coy about voicing conclusions that might sit uncomfortably with its pro-market stance. This is the organisation that hosts the annual gathering at Davos after all!

So before looking at tentative steps that might re-invigorate our democracy, I want to briefly explore the ‘democratic deficit’.

In early May, probably the 6th, there will be a general election. These are now fought more on the basis of clever sound bites, blazing headlines and carefully choreographed party speeches and election broadcasts that have millions of us reaching for our TV consoles. Elections ceased in all but name some years ago. These have gradually morphed into marketing campaigns, a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of PR professionals who will present a small range of issues selected by those teams. The issues will draw on solutions suggested in party manifestos written in Westminster by a political class who know little about the lives of ordinary people and lean far more towards a corporate agenda that serves the needs of the few, than in any genuine accommodation of the needs of the majority of this country. That includes the 13.5 million living in poverty, the vast majority of whom are in paid work but do not receive a living wage; [the 1.4 million](http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/may/01/huge-increase-workers-zero-hours-contracts) on zero hours contracts; the 900,000 who sought help from foodbanks; the hidden homeless estimated to affect 14% of the population at some point in their lives.

Our role as passive consumers of party manifestos, not active shapers of our own destiny, will be to exercise customer choice by an ‘X’ on a piece of paper and then hurry home to watch X Factor or whatever suitable distraction avails itself to wash ourselves of the whole distasteful punch-and-judy spectacle that passes for politics.

In essence what we have now is a hollowed out democracy hijacked by a corporate elite intent on promoting its own narrow neo-liberal agenda at any cost. The matrix of power and wealth which ties Westminster to the City of London in an ever increasing concentration of wealth and power, promotes a joint agenda of privatisation cascades right down to local government level. Local authorities are pressured and bullied into adopting the private sector model as both the means by which departments are run and as the primary sector to outsource service delivery. All this is done in the name of ‘efficiency’ and ‘cutting costs’ as central government hands down the axe, while berating local government for failing services and cutting funding to the voluntary sector.

Voluntary organisations have a small slice of the outsourcing pie and some have even managed partnerships with much larger private companies who now dominate the market for public contracts; and while there is much to be said for the positive work voluntary organisations do and the social value they bring, as agents of the state they too are being colonised by a corporate culture that public agencies have themselves borrowed from the private sector: competitive contract tendering pitches voluntary organisations against it each other; and winning a contract may result in cuts to wages and staff conditions that mirror the more ruthless corporate approach to making a profit when they take over public services. Performance measurements laid down in contracts push voluntary organisations to be more business-like, more goal orientated, less value driven and less accountable to their beneficiaries. Innovation in service delivery with new and ever more creative and imaginative initiatives becomes an end in itself and turns charity workers into entrepreneurs. That sounds like a compliment: it is not meant to be.

Is it just me that worries at the voluntary sector new found admiration for ‘entrepreneurship’ that almost fetishes the need to constantly innovate? And their eager embrace of new financial products and investments that substitute public money for private investment? Is there not something very dangerous and risky at the giddy speed with which charities embrace a strictly business model of delivering services?

Where does campaigning and advocacy fit into all this? Is the voluntary sector en masse collectively buying into the myth that all society’s ills can be remedied through social innovation alone? Put this way, most would deny the absurdity of such a claim – but their behaviour and the widespread adoption of business methods, business-speak, management practices and marketing techniques and tools, suggest otherwise.

Somewhere a line needs to be drawn in the sand: speaking out matters; advocacy and campaigning matters. Democracy matters. For without the right to speak out without fear of threat or reprisal, voluntary organisations may lose the one vital and priceless asset that puts them far above any political party or public service: public trust. The voluntary still remains the one sector that commands huge admiration and regard by a wider public that has all but lost hope in its own political leaders and treats with deep suspicion some of the values and actions promoted by private companies.

# A way forward

Somewhere a line has to be drawn in the sand and I suggest it be done now, where you live and with a clear eye to the forthcoming election. This is about a spreading fire of grassroots activism rather than a centrally organised national campaign. It is about loose networks of community activists working together in different geographic localities and who borrow, build and share back ideas, successes and failures. Use the ideas below as a jumping off point but don’t be constrained to follow a particular plan. There is little time but enough to make a bold start – and anyway, what have we to lose?

There are three building blocks which I suggest need putting in place; they constitute a beginning, a foundation stone, an incomplete answer at best, but nevertheless a serious step towards a re-invigorated democracy that challenges head on a relentless neo liberal incorporation of every aspect of our lives and threatens not just our wellbeing, but the very planet we live on.

**The first building block seems almost banal in the face of the challenge I have just described: a simple, dedicated election website as part of a new commons belonging to no one organisation or individual.**

It will hold a clear, comprehensive record of statements and commitments made by all prospective parliamentary candidates in the local constituency where you live. The simpler the better; a wordpress blog will do. Why is this important? Pause for a moment and try this experiment: think of a political issue and then try Googling the 2010 election and see if you can find any record of what was said or promised by local prospective parliamentary candidates. No luck? Perhaps you will find scattered references across local media but don’t bother looking at their blogs or the main political party website; any awkward issues would long since have been taken down or doctored in order to comply with the current party narrative.

How is it that in an age of data deluge when vast amounts of information can be collected at the click of a mouse, we cannot even do this? And how then can we even begin to call to account our elected representatives to account when we have no clear record of what they said or promised?

In an internet age, the dictum that ‘knowledge is power’ is more true now than ever. For any democracy to flourish, we need a complete and comprehensive record of what was said at election time at the most local level: in your constituency by your prospective parliamentary candidate. This information is sacrosanct. It cannot be left to mainstream media to hold this information. It is too important so we have to do it.

But that on its own could prove a hellish task even for an army of volunteers committed to recording endless speeches and trawling through video recordings of hustings events where a fog of rhetoric makes it all but impossible to find any clarity of what prospective parliamentary candidates are actually committed to doing.

**So, the second building block would be to ensure that the website was built around a single primary document: a charter or local manifesto that sets out a series of commitments, pledges and questions that all prospective parliamentary candidates are invited to respond to and sign up to. The response must be in writing.**

The charter might be only three or four commitments – but that is a start.Candidates’ responses would form a clear record of what they committed to and what they didn’t. Letters would be posted online and open to scrutiny and comment by local people. Their responses would stay on the website indefinitely as a public record that may be used to call that candidate – now MP – to account, should later speeches and voting records be wholly at variance with the commitments they made at the time.

The charter would be put together by a loose network of community activists working with local voluntary organisations who meet, discuss and share issues of common concern. It would be open to public comment and scrutiny in its early stages by local people so that they have direct input in shaping a local agenda and vision that touches on matters that most concern them.

It is vital however that a local agenda connects to national issues to avoid a narrow parochialism that may quickly lean towards exclusivity or discrimination and rejection of other groups or communities. In many ways national issues are made more real when they are given a local dimension. The threatened closure of a local hospital brings home far more concretely the impending threat of a privatised NHS than any general discussion about privatisation of public services.

Given the very short time available, it may not be possible to draw up a local agenda or manifesto from scratch. We may have to borrow, build on and adapt national manifestos already published by groups like the CAB, MIND, Citizens UK and the Council for the Protection of Rural England. These at least will be well thought out and the product of considerable consultation and they are likely to touch a powerful chord of sympathy for that reason. Download them, adapt them to your locality and post them up for initial comment and feedback.

# From representative to participatory democracy

**The third building block would be an expansion of a local charter to include a separate series of pledges to collective action by local people to achieve a given goal or behaviour change**

This is about what people will do for themselves rather than what they expect others to do for them. The two may be conjoined: an MP’s personal pledge to commit to the UK Climate Change act and work with his party leaders for a change of policy, may be complemented by a collective pledge by say 700 local people (and growing) to minimise car use and use public transport.

This takes democracy beyond the representative model where you are essentially delegating your MP to take certain actions on your behalf; this is participative democracy in which you or rather ‘we’ are committing ourselves to set of actions that address an issue of common concern, a local cause or a required change in behaviour.

# Conclusion

If successful this approach would achieve two things: it would start to break the strangehold of an over centralised party politics which imposes manifestos written in Westminster rather than consults at the local level. It would also forcibly remind prospective parliamentary candidates that they are there to represent their constituents, not their party, to listen to the full range of public opinion, not a narrow clique of influential business interests; to take represent constituents concerns in parliament, not ‘sell’ a particular party message to constituents.

I come back to the extract of the NCIA report which I referred to at the very beginning: the need for voluntary organisations to find the ‘space’ and discretion to speak out. What I have suggested is the creation of an election platform that is a beginning of a new commons where key information to do with a community, its lived experience and common concerns, its vision of the future is shaped and distilled into a charter or manifesto based on consensus and sustained informed conversations.

It is about communities taking ownership and shaping their own futures. The online platform itself would belong to no one civil society organisation but rather represent a network of civil society organisations. **In particular it would provide both relative anonymity and a unified front that would separate out campaigning issues from the day to day delivery of services by voluntary organisations.**

If all this seems like a sledge hammer to crack a nut, that is because any genuine effort to speak out on behalf of beneficiaries cannot be done in isolation from a root and branch reform of our democracy. We have all the trappings of democracy in terms of free elections and a choice of government based on universal suffrage, but lack the spark to bring it alive: Us! For too long, we have abdicated our responsibility to shape our own futures to a political class, many of whom have never known life outside the Westminster. As a result it is now the thugs and the third rate who hold office. We need to change that. Now!

Gavin Barker

[gavinbark@gmail.com](mailto:gavinbark@gmail.com)

1. [**Voluntary Services and campaigning in austerity UK: Saying less and doing more**](http://www.independentaction.net/2014/12/11/campaigning-in-the-spotlight/) **pg 15** [↑](#footnote-ref-1)