Power, power relations and the control of information, knowledge and learning…

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We've been asked to talk about information, learning and knowledge from the perspective of power and empowerment. My starting point therefore is this question of power – theories of power, assumptions about power, how our understanding of power and power relations shapes the way we think about the world, and how all this comes together in the 'politics of power'. And indeed, I will have more to say about power than about knowledge and learning.

Theories of power
There has been a lot of research about power and power relations and there are a number of theories – which of course conflict with one another. Put simply one stream of thought maintains that power is a discrete finite commodity – there is only so much to go round; if I am to have more of it, then you will have less. Power and relative power is therefore something to fight over. The other stream of thought (exemplified by Tannenbaum's research) maintains that power is an infinite commodity – there is enough for everyone, anyone can be and feel powerful, and people can be invited to share power, as a gift, without loss or diminution.

Partly this is to do with what kind of power we are talking about. Charles Handy helpfully categorised power 4 ways – personal power, position power, resource power and expert power. Given the rest of what I plan to say, I guess I might add political power to that list.

For my own view about this is that both extremes – power is finite, power is infinite - can be true in different circumstances, in other words appropriate and authentic theories of power are contingent. And I think that this interpretation is commonplace for us living in a liberal society, where these things can be argued over, and where most people would describe themselves as having little power but nonetheless do not feel especially disadvantaged by that (though they may feel disadvantaged by lack of money or opportunity etc.). If we lived in a fascist society, on the

other hand, I think it would be more normal for people to assume that their lack of power was an active part of the oppression that they experience.

And their application
To give an example from my own working life, when I work with an individual organisation as a consultant – reviewing management structures for example, I tend to a Tannenbaum-ist position - the internal health of an organisation depends on creating collaborative rather than competitive relationships and good management in part lies in its ability to generate enthusiasm, energy, creativity, responsibility and commitment – all characteristics that can be associated with people who experience themselves as 'powerful'.

If, on the other hand, I am working with voluntary sector representatives on a local strategic partnership, I work from a quite different vantage point on how to handle the power relations involved. In Handy's terms, in this situation, position power and resource power tend to predominate and both of these lie with Local Authority and the other statutory agencies involved.

I'll come back to this but for the moment, just to note that I think that the consensus model of 'empowerment' and power sharing is the one that has and continues to underpin the mood music behind government policy and the culture and behaviour of the state in relation to civil society and voluntary action – and I think this is a confidence trick that has been perpetrated to disguise the truth and maintain the power status quo, an excellent example of how the establishment keeps its power by pretending to do one thing under guise of doing another. Another example is community organising, 'localism' and the Big Society show. And, sadly, these confidence tricks are supported – knowingly or ignorantly - by many of the organisations in the business of knowledge creation and transfer – academic departments, research consultancies, think tanks and second tier infrastructure organisations. This complicity with the 'one big happy family' analysis was one of the major reasons why we set up the NCIA – to assert that there is a different truth out there which needs to be broadcast. In reality our experience – and our complaint - has been that virtually everyone actually knows the truth of what we are saying but is not prepared to speak it out – for fear of the personal and organisational consequences. There is a difference between what people say at the LSP meeting and what they say to each other in the pub afterwards. This co-option and compromise is what has led whole swathes of the VCS into the desperately undermined position it now finds itself.

Which brings us to the power of information, knowledge and learning. I don't who it was who first said that 'information is power' but of course, it's dead right. This assertion can be made at all levels and in most situations of course. I can't speak for him, but I imagine this was the driver behind Ian's idea for the Know How website and is mirrored also in virtually all of the capacity building 'get fit-for-purpose' work that has supported the VCS infrastructure organisations so generously for a decade or more. My criticism of the approach is not that it isn't sometimes useful to people and groups but that it has been responsible for the marginalisation of the 'politics of power' and, within that, has disconnected from the urgency of the struggle for social justice in our society. Mostly this work has been rooted in an essentially technocractic, meritocratic or managerialist perspective – you need information, knowledge, tools, skills to get better at running yourselves – together with a values-based creed that, again, is in itself benign but in the end rarely says anything that anyone will disagree with. Success is based on assumptions of confidence, competence and the ability to persuade. The idea here is that a strong and vibrant VCS would be one that consisted of thousands of groups that had got their governance sorted out, knew how to fill in a BLF application, had an impressive business development strategy, and a cracking vision statement that bangs on about equal opportunities, valuing diversity and striving for excellence in everything they do.

If there are any politics to be found here, they are the 'politics of conformity and persuasion'. What constitutes 'fit for purpose' is defined by politicians, funders, academics, consultants and other experts and has at its core, the conditions for club membership – be like this, talk like this, do these sorts of things and we will let you in – for a grant, a seat at the table, a quality mark, even, gosh, a Queen's birthday honour!

The politics of power
This does not even begin to address the politics of power. To get closer to this you have to ask what all these groups want. If what they want is somewhere to play bridge or someone to pay for the football strip on the kids' village football team, then capacity building might be all they need (though actually many of them don't need it – they already know what to do and how). But if what they want is to challenge and change the way the local council treats homeless people, or expose corruption, or stop developers evicting people for profit, then you will most definitely be confronted by the politics of power. In other words, if you want to challenge authority, not be in partnership with it, or you want to stop

authority doing something to you that you don't like, persuasion may not be enough when you find yourself confronted by personal or organisational self interest, entrenched in grossly unequal power relationships. Given the irony of discussing all this at a time when the government has got the sector into a lather about community organising, it is appropriate to be reminded that it was Paulo Freire who said that ruling establishments will never, ever, voluntarily give up their power.

And this gets also into the issue of the proper – or perhaps, rather, for me the most important - role of voluntary action in a democratic society, and related to that, the issue of dissent. This role being - to stand and act independently and away from the dominant paradigms of the establishment, think and act alternatives, speak plainly, be prepared to oppose, hold authority to account and follow your own path, which may not be that of established practice. This is becoming more and more difficult to do, or be tolerated, because it is outside the zone of acceptability. Here I reach for Hirshman's framework of engagement – the four positions of 'voice' and 'loyalty' on the one side and 'exit' and 'alienation' on the other. The dividing line is becoming more and more rigid as the arbiter of 'safety' and 'danger'. Indeed to be extreme about this, for 'exit' one can now read 'wrecker' even 'terrorist' and for 'alienation' one can read 'criminal'. And to bring this closer to home, I reach for Jonathan Davies' research at the University of Warwick – shadowing 2 LSPs he concluded that the power imbalances between statutory and community interests were so intransigent that 'principled exit' for the community representatives was more likely to get a successful result than continued 'partnership'.

Time to take sides

Plus, we all live in a time and place. Right now, more than for a long time, we are facing a catastrophe for important sections of our population – cuts in living standards, elimination of vital public services, privatisation of the rest, and the consolidation of social and economic inequality all implemented with blatant disproportionality (For example work under the umbrella of Simon Duffy's Centre for Welfare Reform has shown that between now and 2014 25% of public expenditure cuts will fall on the 3% of the population with the most severe disabilities). And all driven by a political class that shares the basic underpinning ideology that justifies this disgrace. The truth is that we know that we are not 'all in it together' and when Cameron and Osborn say this, the whole nation scoffs, while Milliband dissembles and pretends that Labour would have done it all differently. I don't think so.

These issues are not a sideshow for independent voluntary association and action, they are the main game. The government is moving more and more closely to the voluntary sector as its agent of change and its vehicle for privatisation of public services. And at the same time, there is not, as far as I know, a single LA that has refused to implement the cuts. It is time to talk not of partnership but of resistance and it here that we should look if we want to understand – in a more naked way – about how knowledge creation and the control of knowledge is used within the politics of power and how it needs to be used by those of us on the other side of the line.

It is not only the people of the Middle East who need to take sides if they are to shape their future; it is as true of us as of them. Certainly it is the case that our vision inside NCIA is to defend the 'ungoverned space' of voluntary association and voluntary action, for whatever purpose, but we also allow ourselves to have a view about what goes on inside that space and we are mad as hell about the ways in which the radical alternative tradition within voluntary action is being dismissed, abandoned or actively oppressed.

So for a starter, we think that taking sides on these issues would be a useful first step. But what then? How can academics and researchers be of practical help in advancing something that can be called, as we did in the past, 'the struggle'. Our immediate answer is go and ask the people involved in the struggle. This has the massive advantage that it begins with an assumption that people already know a lot about the stuff they are doing – it is an 'asset-based approach' as the ABCD community developers would have it.

Practical help for activists

We have started this process on a small scale, via a 'supporting activism' project. We would like to do this work on a larger scale if we could find anyone willing to put some money into it. We are asking activists what kind of information and knowledge would be of practical use to them and how this might be accessed. The kind of responses that we are getting are:

1. *exchanging & sharing experience and information* – helping activists to pool their existing knowledge and experience and to collect other evidence which supports their campaigns; this is essentially about peer contact and support – activists talk to activists.
2. *facilitating action with others* – to help people to find allies, come together, agree joint plans and take action which will further campaign aims.

3. *understanding the landscape* – to pull together understanding about the current status quo, how things work, what needs to change, who needs to be persuaded and how, tactical knowledge of policy and influencing.
4. *bringing experience from elsewhere* – having access to and applying the experiences of others in similar situations.
5. *gauging results* – to see what progress is being made, how this might be improved, tackling barriers and sharing lessons with other local groups.

So, that's me and I want to finish by leaving you with some questions. ….

- Whose views, information and knowledge influence or dominate you and your research – both what it is about and how it is conducted?
- How does your research attempt to deal with, or expose, the hegemony of the establishment in the 'politics of power'?
- What is your own experience of being on the wrong side of power inbalances? Have you ever changed your research or your reporting of it because of power relations you have been subjected to?

And lastly:

- Whose side are you on?