

GAINING POWER

CHALLENGES FACING ACTIVISTS



Final report

LONDON
Thursday, 19 July 2012



GAINING POWER

A joint event with NCIA/NatCAN
Thursday 19 July 2012

Setting the scene

National Coalition For Independent Action and National Community Activists Network shared a platform in giving people a knowledge and the ability to challenge local and national decisions and raise awareness to the changes locally and nationally.

An audience of voluntary sector, public sector and community volunteers came together to share their passions, skills and views.

NatCAN is an online forum for anyone interested in community activism. It's run by volunteers and has about 900 members. Anyone can join by signing up on its website, when they will receive regular updates, are able to take part in online discussions, and get invited to relevant meetings such as this event.

NCIA, has been active for five years, nurturing self determination in community and voluntary groups helping them act on what's important to members, neighbours and friends. Although we have been living in a hostile environment, 'something is rustling in the undergrowth, and even if we feel that the world is out to get us, there are more of 'us' than there are of 'them' was how Penny Waterhouse described it on the day. NCIA aims to find ways to support small groups achieve things that are important to them and one of those things is to resist public service privatisation – in particular to help the voluntary and community sector to resist it.

Joint chairs for the day -

Penny Waterhouse-	-	NCIA
Maxine Moar	-	NatCAN

A.M. session.

The Big Picture

What's the real action that will make a difference – that will help us to organise, connect with each other, and keep going?

“At a political level, NCIA has a saying, ‘dissent protects democracy’. But is dissent a tactic or a principle? – we can lose friends if we are too dissenting and also lose friends if we are not dissenting enough. How do we manage dissent among ourselves? No doubt many other questions will come to our minds as the day progresses, and perhaps we can begin to address some of these by this afternoon.” Penny

The first presentation to set the tone for the day was campaigning group **A World to Win (AWTW)**. The presenters were **Corrina Lotz and Paul Feldman**. This organisation has local groups in many areas, and welcomes people who would like to join with them in debating the many issues of political concern and organisation which they are involved with.

AWTW has been working out its own political analysis and wants to recommend setting up a network of 'Peoples Assemblies' with good networking and communications systems.

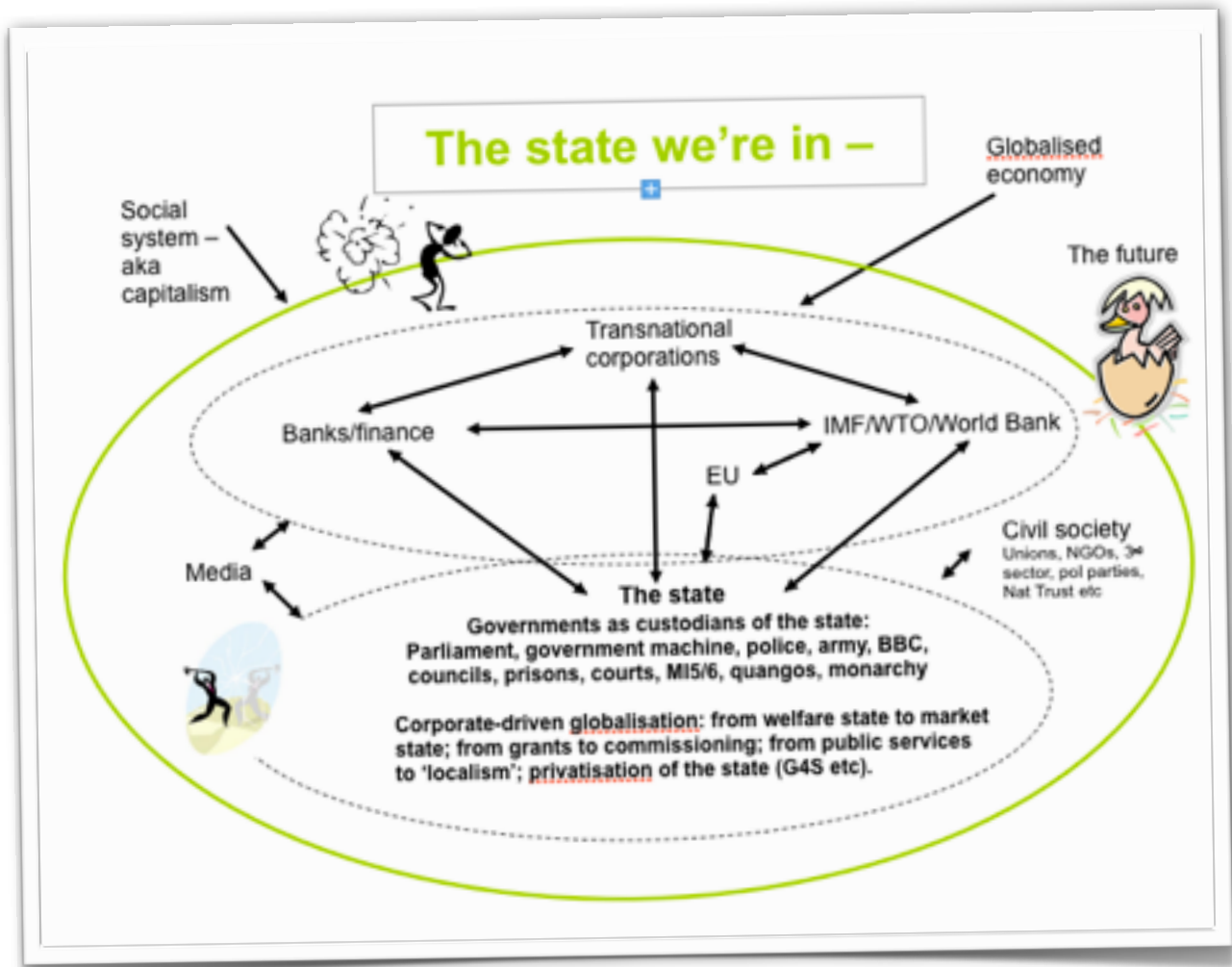
The group has been looking at the capitalist world and has decided that it can no longer be described as democratic – not even as a less than perfect democracy. It is a 'corporatocracy', controlled by trans-national corporate and financial institutions, including the IMF and the World Bank, and serviced both by national governments and the mainstream media.

Governments are following the corporate-driven globalisation policy by moving towards a market controlled world in place of the 'welfare State' consensus, which previously dominated much of the developed world. In this 'market State', financial profit is the policy driver -- State institutions, all civil services, including police/prisons/health, education, as well as infrastructure such as transport, housing, water, electricity etc. are being moved into the private sector. Voluntary organisation service providers, now renamed 'the third sector' are seen to have a useful role in assisting in the contracting out of State services, and increasingly, as sub-contractors of commercial providers..

As for the media, most of this is already in corporate hands -- even the supposedly 'non-commercial' BBC is heavily influenced by the current status quo, and increasingly forced to adopt commercial practices to fund itself. The growth of alternative media over recent years acts to some extent as an effective resistance tool, exposing behind the scenes commercial practice to public scrutiny from time to time.

AWTW has contemplated various resistance strategies which those opposed to this global commercialisation might adopt, and believes most of the traditional methods of resistance – protest movements of various kinds, including pressure for electoral reform – to be relatively ineffective as they tend to be focussed on an issue which affects a particular locality or a particular section of the community. It is important to develop a widespread network of resistance, even though this will inevitably be a fairly long and difficult process.

They felt we need to find structures that give people ownership: collective consciousness can change things.



Right now there is a disconnect between community activity and explicit political activism – how do we move beyond fragmentation and remain motivated and active even when we are not involved in a special event such as this?

Language is vital: it unites AND alienates us

Vanguards are important – people don't become political just because they've been told to.

Organising has to be around real issues – “don't close our library/hospital/childrens' centre!; get the missiles off our estate!” This cuts across apathy and holds people together.

People are busy and have difficult things to do – find a job/care for children or parents or both/struggle with money worries/inadequate housing – it's difficult to get out there and say No!

What's the process of politicisation? How do people generate a political position from their own experience? And how do they act on that?

There are egalitarian ways of running things, and ways of behaving that nurture them – how can we develop promote effective consensus models?

Powerful forces of capitalism are fragmented too -- what is it that makes them able to get the results that they want?

How has marketisation been sold to us? Is it ok that our kids are spending all day in front of computers?

30 years ago we wouldn't have believed it possible to tear down the welfare state, the NHS, social housing. How have we sleepwalked into this mess? We need to unpick how it's been sold to us.

How can we challenge the role of language and the mainstream media in persuading us to support action against our own interests? What's the best use of the alternative media?

We need to learn from what we've been through already, and from each other – develop realism and stamina --find the tools that assist our resistance and the structures that give people ownership, help us towards positive change.

We can see from the experience of the Occupy movement that it is difficult to be organised democratically in an undemocratic system – but we must overcome the tyranny of structurelessness if we are going to translate ideas into reality. How do we organise ourselves together – across generational and cultural differences – to create a working alternative society?

P.M. Session

Community Activism in the raw

Speaker 1

To start us off, **Kevin Blowe, from the Aston Mansfield's Community Involvement Unit**, spoke about the Newham Monitoring Project. This was set up in 1980, in the aftermath of the racist murder of a young asian man. Though directed by its roots in the experience of the black community, NMP works with anti-racists of all ethnicities, and sees the fight against racism as an integral part of the wider struggle for social justice.

Since 1983, NMP has offered a 24-hour emergency legal advice and assistance service to victims of racial violence or police harassment. Earlier this year, as part of its preparation for the coming of the Olympic Games to Newham, the project produced a new Basic Rights Card, and enlisted poet Benjamin Zephaniah to help publicise the service and encourage people to carry the card and put the advice service's telephone number into their mobile phones. The project also organised a number of legal rights workshops for community and youth groups in the borough, and recruited and trained Community Legal Observers to work in the tube and bus stations, and close to the various Olympic events throughout the period of the games.

The necessity for this action was borne out when, from April 2010, the Metropolitan Police set up an official dispersal zone under the powers in the 2003 Anti-Social Behaviour Act, which gave them the right to disperse any group of 2 or more people

from the whole area of central Stratford and the Olympic site, and ban them from returning within 24 hours. This, combined with anti-terrorism and curfew powers meant that young people were being forbidden to meet with their friends in the area during a spring and summer when their area had become the most exciting place to be in the whole world! The Olympic organisers and the police seem to have forgotten that people actually live in Stratford!

Kevin said that the scheme to train people to be Legal Observers was especially worthwhile. This action captured local people's imagination and enthusiasm and over 100 people came forward, from all parts of the community and with ages ranging from students to retired people. The skills they developed can be passed on to their friends and acquaintances and the action can be repeated. He said that it was also important that the NMP workers involved acted as facilitators of agreed action, not as instigators or 'leaders' – the action belonged to all its participants.

Kevin felt that while legal action had its place, it can never become the be all and end all, but is one aspect only of wider campaigning in which people develop confidence and skills. Even if the original campaign aim is not achieved people in this situation do not become burnt out, but can go on to campaign again another day.



Speaker 2

The second speaker was **Sarah Findlay, from Starter Packs**, a small charity in Glasgow's Govan district, which aims to give people who have been homeless but have now been offered a tenancy, "A Hand Up, not a Hand Out", by providing them with a starter pack of essential household items such as bed linens, cooking pots, china and cutlery etc., together with items such as table lamps, pretty cushions, "things that make a house into a home". The organisation has 10 members of staff and about 25 regular volunteers who come from a widely diverse background.

They have no regular statutory grant aid, and have resisted pressure to become a social enterprise as Sarah has experienced this as requiring them to care more about money than their principles. Sarah says they have been criticised for not being sustainable, not being businesslike, and not listening. She says, "Yep, you're right about that – we're a charity not a business. We've been around for 12 years and are going to be around for another 12! We talk about love, they talk about business planning. In between are a lot of funding rejection letters."

In fact, though, Starter Packs does have many friends as well as enemies, and they receive money donations as well as goods from a variety of charitable trust funds and other supporters. This has assisted the organisation to grow and to offer paid jobs as well as volunteer opportunities – often to socially disenfranchised people far removed from the mainstream jobs market. Several employees are young people with no previous jobs history.

The goods they distribute (to about 250-300 households a month), come from donations from individuals and from hotels and businesses who are refurbishing premises. In addition to the main project, the organisation runs two charity shops -- The Magpie's Nest, selling vintage clothes and small items, and The Magpie's Eye, with new craft objects, rare and especially beautiful vintage items, and all kinds of music-related goods, from vinyl records to 2-hand instruments. Coffee, tea, and homemade cakes tend to be offered to all on hand on frequent occasions, so that the projects always have a warm and welcoming atmosphere, which Sarah believes is an important

ingredient of their success.

Sarah says, "It takes the same effort to be happy as to be sad. I get more done now than I have ever got done by fighting". She agrees that we need fighters, but feels that the way she relates to other people opens the door to action.

Speaker 3

The third panellist was **Caroline Molloy, from the campaign Stroud Against the Cuts**, who told us about the way that local people had gone about opposing the Gloucestershire's Health Authority's desire to privatise nine hospitals in the county. She said that although it may seem intimidating, campaigners should not be afraid of using public law to achieve the aims of a campaign such as theirs. Taking legal action can stop rushed decisions, giving time to build a strong public campaign. It can also reveal vital information, and generate lots of publicity about what is going on.

Even so, carrying out a legal challenge such as judicial review means facing quite a lot of obstacles. For instance, cuts to legal aid mean that campaigners are likely to need someone who doesn't own property and is in receipt of state benefits to act as a complainant. Additionally, members of the Stroud campaign got threatening letters from the other side's legal team, so it is wise to be prepared for this type of intimidation, and important to build alliances for support.

Stroud found trade unions to be helpful allies, and too, the Labour Party, in spite of difficulties in working with them.

Even if legal challenges can only go so far, the law does make things very clear cut about matters such as who owns things and who has the power to make decisions.

Stroud faced lots of attempts to fudge ownership issues in relation to community health services – lots of fluffy talk about increasing ownership when in fact the proposal would have transferred the service from being owned by all of us to having just two owners.

There were also claims that the PCT had to act in the way proposed because it was government policy, though in fact there is a difference between policy and law – no law says everything has to be privatised and local decision makers do retain discretion to make decisions however much they pretend otherwise!

All this clarity helps a lot in raising the morale of campaigners and building wider support. It may not be able to force decision makers to make the decision you want, but since it can make them consult properly, take account of equalities, and not break other laws, it is a very useful tool. Faced with obvious public scrutiny, authorities are more likely to make better decisions.

Speaker 4

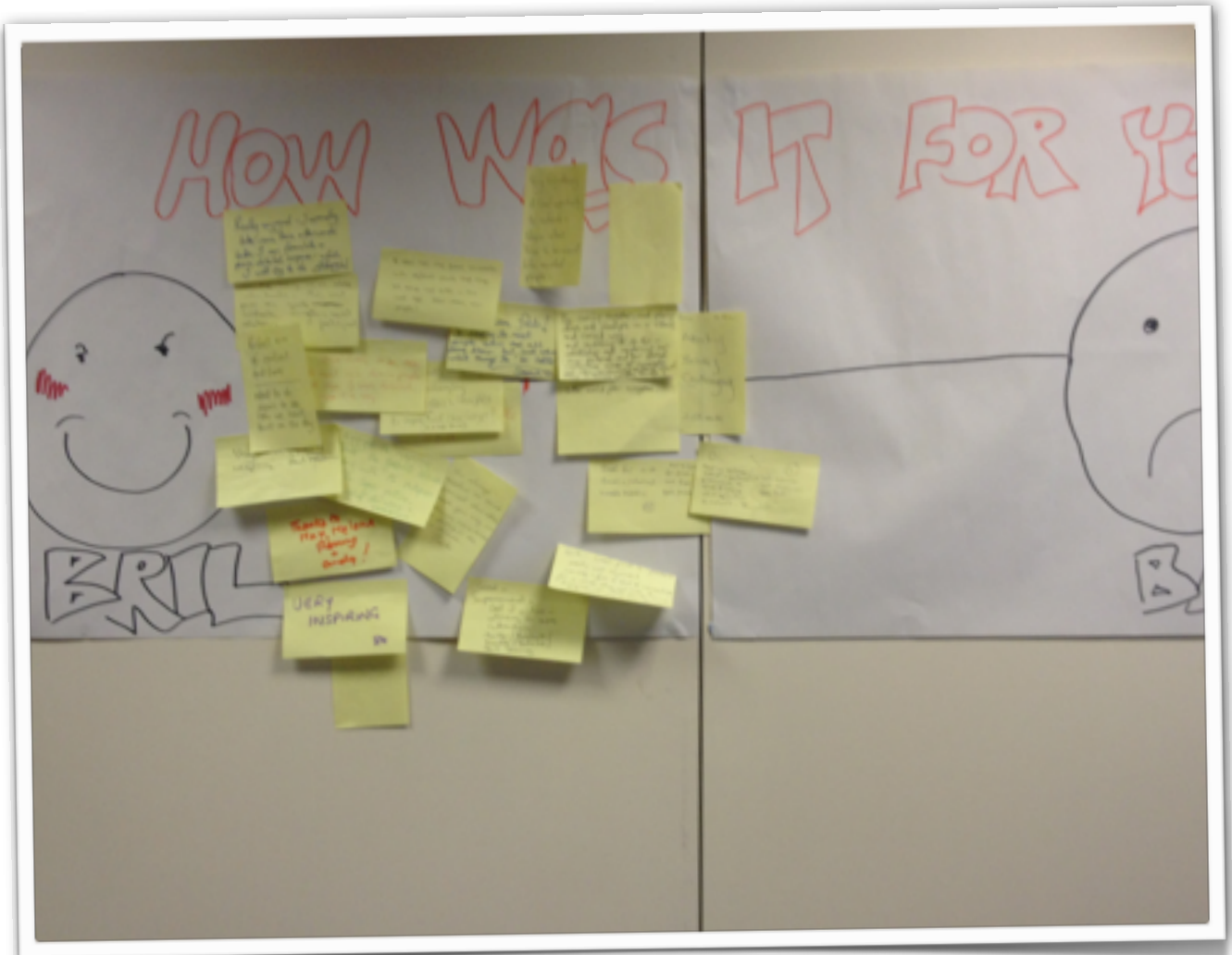
The last panel speaker was **David Lynch, from The Greenhouse Project in Dingwall, in the Scottish highlands.** The Greenhouse is a self-funded scheme, with a shop selling everything from 2nd-hand clothes, furniture etc., to local crafts and artwork and organic free range eggs. It has a café with garden where they are able to host local music and other events, and acts as an information point for everything going on in this lively community.

Dave was formerly a Christian minister, but found himself squeezed out by talking about what Jesus preached. “If you attack the money system, they panic”, he says, “We’re used to being told what we can’t do, but 10 years ago I decided I wanted to change the world. You can’t get anywhere without taking a risk, so when I found some empty premises in Dingwall, I took it on and opened a community shop there.” The project thrived, and in 2010 they were able to move to larger premises on the High Street. All profits go back into the community – they have been able to provide small grants for many local school and other community projects, many of them aimed at environmental improvements. They have also raised outside funding for some schemes – such as native trees to replace the Japanese knotweed and other invasive species polluting the River Paffery, where the Greenhouse Environmental Group is helping with a major regeneration project to revive the river and its wildlife, including the sea trout, which has been declining in numbers as a result of neglect and pollution.

The Greenhouse tries to act as a nursery for new activities in the community, hosting them until they are established enough to become separate entities, and David feels that the project is stronger for being entirely self-funded and not needing to take orders from others.

All four panelists agreed that though they came from two very different perspectives, it was important to have both organisations who would take on the State and other powerful interests as well as those who simply disengaged and demonstrated that it is possible to go your own way. As David put it, “We are all part of a whole. It’s good that people are fighting from different sides.”

A great day had by all!



And the feedback said :

“It’s been fab. So lovely to meet people who are all doing their bit and who want things to be better”

“Very enlightening. A good opportunity to network and share ideas. Nice to be around like minded people”

“Enjoyed the inspiring stories, the grassroots activism along with the bigger picture. stimulating discussion and presentations”

“Absorbing, Building, Challenging “

Recommendations from the day- thoughts from the delegates



Throughout the day there was a reoccurring theme about the media and how best to use it and a concern over corruption and whether people can believe anything they read.



Do we refuse to engage in politics and volunteering because the language used is not welcoming or enticing to the 'man in the street?' Was asked by delegates during the day.



What does a successful campaign look like and how can we share that knowledge and information? The conference was inspiring so where do we go next?