

Here We Stand

Inquiry into Local Activism & Dissent



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SUMMARY

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alternatives to
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**Where
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Summary

Background to the report

The National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA) is an alliance of individuals and groups who have come together to assert the right of people to act collectively and independently from Government and other powerful political, business and financial interests. The NCIA Inquiry was to find out the different forms of activism for social justice which were springing up locally, especially in the current circumstances of austerity and cuts; and the different models of radical support - the 'back office' for activism.

NCIA wanted to hear from people how they go about changing the world locally or safeguarding what is important to them. To know how NCIA might encourage more forms of independent action, to be part of it and to make connections for future relationships, alliances and actions. We were joined in the Inquiry by the Community Audit and Evaluation Centre of Manchester Metropolitan University. The Centre is part of the "Taking Part? Capacity Building Cluster" an ESRC funded research cluster to develop research and a critical mass around active citizenship and the exercise of community power and voluntary action.

Research questions

The Inquiry was undertaken to answer two essentially political questions:

- Where can resistance and alternatives to injustice be found?
- Where are the homes for such action?

For the purposes of this Inquiry, we were interested in independent voluntary action to safeguard equitable arrangements, to challenge and change public policies or practices, spending decisions or commercial practices that unfairly disadvantage people, perpetuate inequality and discrimination, or fragment and undermine communities. Our interests therefore lie in political advocacy, direct action and individual advocacy if it aims to change the root causes which create individual problems; and in support which provides for challenge and change.

Methodology & Approach

The Inquiry was carried out by Penny Waterhouse, a director of NCIA, and Matthew Scott, a director of the Community Sector Coalition, who contributed methodological and theoretical insights. Information was gathered from 54 personal contacts and a further 22 examples from desk research. Stories of activism came from across England and Scotland, including: Birmingham; Gloucestershire; London; West Sussex; Leeds; Nottingham; East Anglia; Manchester; Leicester; South West; North East; and Scotland. The interviews used a semi-structured approach, which covered the following topics:

- an exchange of practical actions being taken
- a sharing of views, information and political perspectives about the material issues and ways of organising
- an exploration of common cause, mutual aid, solidarity and support
- the difficulties of organising, effecting change and safeguarding community interests
- the links and other resources used by activists.

The research used semi-structured interviews as its methodology because of the emancipatory potential of open dialogue which lends itself to radical intent and which can be informed by a critical tradition¹. The research which results develops a narrative of local activism, not for quantitative analysis, but to highlight key themes, questions and pointers to practical actions for social justice.

The draft findings from the Inquiry were fed back to a meeting of 30 people engaged in activism, some of whom had contributed to the Inquiry. The discussions from this meeting have been incorporated into the final report, in particular the lessons arising for future actions.

The political and theoretical context

The dominant ideology which shapes our world today is neo liberalism, a belief in self regulating markets and the withdrawal of the state. As a consequence the goals of economic and social justice have been marginalised whilst the role of community has both elevated and narrowed² and the scope of local voluntary action increasingly shaped around the needs of the market. The capitulation by many in the voluntary sector, notably its national leadership bodies, to reactionary government agendas has polarised the sector as never before.

In this instance the activist's willingness to adopt a radical political economy, a narrative of why things are as they are, to have an analysis of power rather than an obeisance before it, has served them well, and should be instructive to all.

¹ Bentz, V. & Shapiro, J. (1998) *Mindful Inquiry in Social Research*. London, Sage and Freire, P (1996) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London, Penguin

² Defilippis, J, Fisher, R & Shragge, E (2010) *Contesting Community: the limits and potential of local organizing*. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press

Findings

The Inquiry found rising local frustration, anger and motivation for action, amidst political and personal despair and fear about the extent and impact of cuts and erosion to rights, entitlement, opportunities and services. Local authorities were viewed by those contacted as increasingly oppressive and controlling. In this context, the role of dissenting activist, of whatever form and style, was widely seen as critical to collective health and well being.

The landscape of local activism

An expanding world of local activism was discovered: safeguarding public services and fighting off privatisation; enforcing and extending rights of individuals and communities; providing community services and protecting the natural world; offering conviviality and solidarity; through both agitation and collaboration. Activities including Stroud Against the Cuts, Nottingham Eco-Action, Starter Packs Glasgow, People's Republic of Southwark, Leicester StopWatch, CarerWatch, Manchester Action on Community Care and the South West Foundation. The examples illustrate the nature of social action, the predominance of unpaid activism and informal self-organising networks, the contributions that can be made by professionalised voluntary agencies and the role played by virtual relationships. It is a world of action and energy which is rarely glimpsed through the mainstream media, or by outsiders. People - as individuals, groups or networks - tackling concrete problems affecting them and their neighbours, what one person called "social justice in practice".

Local social action is usually fragmented, fragile and small scale. Alliances are often made up of individuals not groups, based on informal links, although there is evidence of alliances building between groups. There was an emphasis on mutual aid, self help, self sufficiency, shifting alliances and cooperation. Small scale actions by individuals coming together is the backbone and reality of resistance; the task being to join together the myriad of homes springing up for such actions.

There was an absence of professionalised voluntary agencies in local struggles. Some professionalised umbrella groups were uneasy or ambivalent about the landscape but could not find a way to express this, let alone protest or find alternatives, and found themselves captured by funding regimes. However, there are examples of individual workers within co-opted voluntary agencies doing their best to keep the integrity of their relationship with clients and local people.

Forms of activism & dissent

There was a diversity of responses of what to do about local pressures and how to do it, depending on personal, organisational or political interests. A common thread amongst those taking action was the willingness to think critically, confront and challenge authority and follow their own path.

Some openly challenged injustice (active dissent), some subverted from within the system (subversive dissent), others dissent through self-reliance, and some (mostly professionalised voluntary agencies) were trying to decide whether or not to be dissidents (potential dissent). Not everyone followed a conflictual approach and sought to express their dissent through collaboration.

Tools of the trade

Time and people are the main tools of the activists' trade. Money does not prompt activism, but is a major factor in silencing it. Active dissenters are not paid to be activists, nor are they motivated by money. Subversive and potential dissenters are usually paid workers whose interest in activism is in spite of payment. Fears of losing funding or position prevent this group of dissenters from taking unfettered action. Small amounts of money can, however, make a big difference for example, for meeting rooms, office space, leaflets, legal fees. There are few sources of financial support for dissenting activism. Active and some subversive dissenters talk about the place of ideology, and a home with political analysis, to underpin and drive activism. The loss of previous homes was mentioned: the unions, the labour movement and political parties. People engaged in active dissent see the law as an important tool: to challenge and to reveal. The distinction between policy and law was noted, in order to exploit and extend the use of discretion and to force accountability and public scrutiny.

It was apparent that active dissenters generally have the "know how" and contacts they need, or can find what they need. They do not need their 'capacity' built. Social media sits at the heart of much contemporary activism: as virtual homes for dissent, providing support and solidarity, to gain contacts and intelligence; to get the message out, and for organising.

Homes for activism

The politics of organising and acting together was not straightforward. There were differences to be negotiated that could either build solidarity or division. The ability to work across a range of campaigns was seen as vital in order to generate momentum and critical mass, whilst noting that time spent making connections was itself demanding.

The overwhelming picture from those engaged in active dissent was of homes based on self-organising alliances built on personal and political relationships of mutual benefit. These alliances were driven by individuals rather than organisations. Subversive dissenters had few allies in their immediate working environment, notably amongst local voluntary organisations. Whilst some were able to connect into other networks many were isolated without a home for their activism.

There is little evidence that local voluntary representative bodies offer a home for dissent and activism though some of their members were participants in local alliances. This is despite their explicit role, and indeed sometimes charitable constitutions, which commits their interest to the needs of marginalised and oppressed populations. These agencies have resources, connections and knowledge of the local area. But their allegiances appear to rest with their funders, in particular the local authority, and they follow this lead and know very little about, dissent and activism.

Unions, as a home for activism, appeared routinely. Concern about the risk of a narrow agenda being imposed on activism was balanced with a widespread belief that unions were likely to be critical to build alliances, generate critical mass and to bring together all forms of activism and dissent for common cause.

Community development was evident as a means to support local activism, with strengths around networking and peer support, but did not appear as a home for political and social action in itself.

Among a number of centrally driven community organising programmes, Citizens UK and Locality were most well known. Whilst the former was clearly active tackling material issues on some scale, concerns were raised about both organisations – the former as top down and with questionable alliances (MacDonalds / G4S), and the latter as colluding with a government attack on public services.

Conclusion

The abundance of material and insight generated by the inquiry findings underlines the richness of the topic, and the hunger from activists to exert an active democratic and egalitarian influence.

As the Inquiry progressed it became clearer that dissent sits at the heart of civil, and uncivil, society's role. Dissent is busy and growing in all its forms. If 'power is never given'³ but taken, dissent - or at least the willingness to engage in some form of dissent - is required to meet community needs and redress imbalances of power and resources. Dissent is required when consensus, collaboration and negotiation has failed and where the stakes are high for individuals and communities. Activism, without the capacity for dissent, will not have sufficient force. Without this capacity, the democratic role of voluntary action (or civil society) is fundamentally undermined. This is already the case for many voluntary and community services co-opted by funding regimes and marketisation. The role of the dissenting activist, of whatever form or style, has now become critical for our collective health and wellbeing.

Findings from the Inquiry show that organising for social action is not a 'back office' to activism and dissent, but part of the action itself. It is not a question of support for activists, more a question of joining with activists. By safeguarding a home for activism, and the ideology on which it is based, activism and dissent is made possible. This home brings with it a combination of numbers and hands for the work, a power base from which to press for demands, and provides solidarity, encouragement, resources and skills. The principles which underpin such arrangements reveal the politics and power relationships within the endeavour.

Activists reach for the home that suits them, ideologically and personally. Those suited to active dissent and challenge, mutual aid and informal relationships, will gravitate to self-organising alliances. Those more suited to collaborative activism within a prescribed institutional framework, will work well with Citizens UK. Community development agencies may offer either approach, dependent on the political preferences of that agency and individual development workers. Subversives are often isolated without a home. The role of unions, to draw together disparate activists and dissenters is growing.

There is no doubt that organising principles are important to those involved in activism. Heated arguments about the means of organising can occur amongst activists and observers. Divisions can appear about the "right" way to organise and the relative merits

³ Operation Black Vote organising slogan: 'Power is never given'

between different approaches.⁴ The task is to find, where possible, ways to accommodate and learn from our differences in organising; and to focus on the change and critical mass that can be found in the totality of different approaches.

The theoretical background readily available from a wider community development and related social policy literature demonstrates that theory and practice do not have to be estranged, but can walk hand in hand. The radical potential of praxis, of reflection and action, make this a necessity for purpose change

What we can learn from the Inquiry

Activists and dissenters don't need to be told what to do. They already do what matters to them and they take decisions which make sense to their cause. We learn that we need:

- Alternative manifestos - the time has come to get beyond dissent and to join with others in devising ideological and practical alternatives to injustice.
- Concrete action and rallying points – to take practical actions around which to rally and organise.
- To make the connections between small groups and individuals who are the backbone and reality of resistance.
- Alliances and homes to work for social and economic justice – to use our efforts to create broad alignments.
- Personal relationships - differences and dilemmas can be understood and accommodated through personal relationships.
- Social media - to broadcast demands for social justice and to challenge the status quo.
- Honest language - to be alert to the danger of words which obscure and hide the truth of what we see and say. We can replace the language of mendacity with the language of morality.
- To get on and be out there! Be visible, to make the changes. Action and changes happen in and outside rooms.
- To keep questioning and exploring – the Inquiry identified many big unanswered questions:
 - can unions become again a home for resistance and alternatives?
 - where is the Left and is it any longer relevant to see the Left as a rallying call?
 - are voluntary services now too compromised by funding to speak out?
 - how can we support each other in our different struggles whilst acknowledging our differences?

⁴ Community organising or mobilising opposition to cuts. John Diamond NatCAN update 28.9.12. See also discussions in the NatCAN community development group <http://nationalcan.ning.com/group/community-development> (Accessed on 21st December 2012).

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