

What They Said

*Voices from supporters and
allies of NCIA*

NCIA (2015), London

Introduction

These quotes were collected from interviews, group discussions or posted on the NCIA website between February and April 2015 and made available on a 'Talking Wall' for participants at the NCIA 'Assembly' meeting on the 17th April 2015.

NCIA's Achievements?

'One of NCIA's main achievements has been to 'win the argument'. We have developed the analysis and provided the evidence of a serious threat to the independence and identity of the voluntary sector. Those who pooh-poohed what we had to say - like the self-appointed leaders of the sector such as NCVO and ACEVO - have had to accept we were right all along - although they - like the Baring Panel - will never acknowledge this. Of course, that battle is not yet won; they have accepted our view of the symptoms of the crisis but not its causes and we must keep battling on until we win this argument too.'

'NCIA has been a source of inspiration and necessary challenge for me when I led NAVCA and since I retired in 2012. At NAVCA I often asked myself 'how would I defend this to Andy or Penny' as we received yet another invitation to 'partner' the likes of a masterclass in 'commercialisation- how to be a good subcontractor to SERCO - (heaven help us).'

'Your analysis has helped me to understand what is happening to the voluntary sector in England and the anecdotes in the newsletter have given me compelling material for speeches I give to CVS conferences. It's vital that people who share NCIA's analysis - whether in full or in part - can continue to network and support each other in the future. Thank you to those who put so much work into NCIA over the last decade.'

'The logic of the free market is asserted to be the most rational logic available. The claim made is that each individual pursuing his or her own maximum utility results in optimum social well-being. The state's role is merely to ensure the best environment within which this rationality can proceed. The rules of this economic language game have overwhelmed our ability to speak politically in any other credible way. Those who attempt to do so, like us, can be charged with being unreasonable, unrealistic, and even dangerous.'

'Modern industrial society is socially and ecologically unsustainable. Humanity is in a condition of global ecological peril and a radical restructuring of the contemporary model of representative democracy is required to deal with it. It's time to concentrate our efforts on the wider issue - democracy.'

'I've been an admirer of NCIA for a number of years – mostly from afar because of other commitments, although I have contributed in the past. I'm looking forward to coming along to the assembly. The news that NCIA will end this year is very sad, but also perhaps the kick up the proverbial I need to get more involved. I agree with Joe that for a long time now our political agenda has been hijacked by neo-liberal managerialism, and as a trustee of Adur Voluntary Action, my experience is that sometimes I feel like an alien when I try to talk about the economic fallacies that are the cause of so much suffering and deprivation.'

'So yes, we do need to focus on the wider political issues, and we do need to pursue a radical agenda at personal and organisational level. And we also need an independent body that will represent the views of an ever-increasing number of infrastructure and voluntary organisations who are extremely unhappy with things as they are. We need a collective, rational approach that sees the bigger picture and stops us from becoming cynical, because it can be a lonely experience to be the one organisation in an area that refuses to capitulate. I don't see it as an either/or situation, rather a both/and. Paradigm change comes about by keeping on saying it in every sphere, with evidence, until they listen.'

'When we came across NCIA – it all made sense – what was happening to us – we had a name for it then – so we dropped out about 7 years ago as an organisation and we are now 'under the radar' – NCIA helped us to articulate what we wanted...'

'There's a vital need for the NCIA voice...the voluntary sector has become very managerial with all the usual suspects at the top of the tree who are not interested in advocacy and campaigning...'

'The campaign needs to continue...'

'NCIA may not be continuing but you have left an excellent legacy. I think you are saying that there are others out there who can do the job - I would have to totally disagree with that as NCIA appeared to be almost the only organisation I have come across in recent times that was able to speak out.'

'I think NCIA has had a considerable impact raising the issues and concerns that have been impacting on individuals and communities and has made a real difference. I believe that we need very strong local players activating people to take up the mantle against political centralisation and the consumerisation of social action. This network is essential if we are going to make a difference, work such as what Adrian at Adur is trying to do and what we are still pursuing in [the South West]...Getting local public sector and communities to fight together will win the day! Still optimistic after all this time!'

'A colleague at DPAC on what is needed next: '...one area we will need to be involved in within the localism agenda is the ever-increasing postcode lottery of care and support funding. Plus of course continuing privatisation of local services and cuts to funding for many voluntary organisations...what would be helpful to us would be some sort of monitoring and reporting on these areas which we could share and access easily.'

'I do hope...in whatever new form, NCIA continues to be a rallying point for the resistance. As for keeping one's head above the water, between the crassness of the gullible and the meanness of the exploiters, one can easily drown in a sea of despair. But it is the spiritual solidarity with others such as you that ultimately helps to keep us afloat.'

'NCIA? – they have been brilliant for their honesty, willingness to speak up and out, and a breath of fresh air when everyone else seems to be just playing the game. I am always signposting people to their website – whenever I pick up that glimpse of discontent...'

'We still need people like those in NCIA who are committed to challenging the status quo and the damaging ideologies that fragment our public services for private vested interests. We need a body like NCIA to continue to focus on people and communities their needs and interactions from the perspective of citizens and not consumers.'

'Our involvement with NCIA has been incredibly important for us, both as a powerful learning experience, as an antidote to a sense of isolation, and for the satisfaction of being able to contribute to an urgent national campaign. Locally, we are involved with one campaign which relates to NCIA's perspective. I find through personal contacts a slowly growing interest within councils for voluntary service across the country, stemming from a realisation of the ineptness of representation by national bodies, in the face of state policies which infringe our basic values...'

'...Within the world of voluntary action, NCIA is the only nationally co-ordinated campaign for to address what Adur VA (and I speak on behalf of our Board of Trustees, not simply myself as paid Manager) regard as the fundamental issues we are all facing. The campaign needs to continue until our collective strength is

sufficient to bring about a paradigm change in how voluntary action is perceived, and AVA will be supporting initiatives which aim towards this. We don't know what they will be, yet, but surely there are enough people across the country (I have spoken with many) who feel similarly? We need to recognise our shared beliefs and identity, and organise ourselves collectively. Easier said than done, I know, but whoever said a social movement was an easy ride?'

'While the struggle to recover the values and distinctive nature of voluntary action is far from over it is important to remind ourselves how far we have come. NCIA started with the need to sound the alarm about the way in which voluntary organisations were under attack from the insidious processes of marketisation and private sector style managerialism. The valedictory report of the Baring Commission demonstrates how successful we have been in getting acceptance of a message no-one wanted to hear. We still have to ram home the second half of the message - how and why we have got into this state and what we need to do about it. But the issue is now on the table and will not go away.'

'Someone who had stood down as a volunteer after over six years of engagement at a migrant centre because it: '...has been corrupted by dirty money from Serco...[it] operates the Work Programme - making migrants destitute, sometimes for the second time since coming to the UK - it has started charging migrants for advice services... taken on a managerial and business ethos that is utterly alien to me and other people... As for NCIA, I'm sorry that you are winding up. I've only come across you in the last couple of years. Though you've been physically distant, it's been good to read your analysis and to feel that we're not alone fighting the privatisation and consequent corruption of the voluntary sector.'

'For me NCIA helps to join up local volunteering, action + campaigning with the bigger political picture. An important role in an increasingly corporate and politically disenfranchised society.'

'The logical, evidence-based argument that NCIA has presented for years is absolutely irrefutable - but it hasn't changed anything. Why? It's because the corporate takeover of the voluntary sector is just one symptom of much wider phenomena - the dominance of an economic dogma that has limited the scope of political debate to such an extent that the formal political space has been abandoned as an arena within which change can be made.'

'We were worn out, everything had become very corporate – we were being expected to do things the public sector was doing...as a management committee we were being asked to do all those things in our own time...'

'NCIA remains a completely independent body making provision for current and future successions.'

'NCIA helped put a name to what I was experiencing', 'it gave me a voice', 'it is brilliant - no-one else is saying this.'

'The Baring Commission demonstrates how successful we have been in getting acceptance of a message no-one wanted to hear. We still have to ram home the second half of the message - how and why we have got into this state and what we need to do about it. But the issue is now on the table and will not go away.'

'I believe NCIA is one of the most important organisations around - and a great ally in the fight for social justice.'

'Even for those who do not accept its arguments in part or full there is a feeling, that something like NCIA should exist - it plays a vital role as a critic and a stimulator of debate and an organisation that can prick people's conscience.'

'...it has achieved - it's been good value and it may be the kind of initiative that is like a 'candle that burns bright for a while and then others move in to take it on.'

'We are now working in isolation...we used to be doing more collaboration in the surrounding communities and other organisations...it is hard to fund now so it falls to the bottom of the list...so now we are more in competition with each other...We are less involved in NCIA as an organisation – but more as individuals where we can be more outspoken...'

'There is a difference in style between NCIA and the way we work but the analysis is hugely helpful.'

'On a personal level if I hadn't found NCIA – even though I work in one of the most progressive organisations in this town – I could have lost my belief in an independent voluntary sector – we're being bombarded every day with things that would stop us being that.'

'I'm very at ease with NCIA's position...the voluntary sector is now an arm of the state...it's not fit for purpose...I am not applying that to all organisations...but I have resigned from the board of XX organisation.'

'NCIA has tried to stir the pot – and it has brought in individuals from various areas...but it has met with resistance from voluntary sector "leaders"...the voluntary sector has a blunted role now – there are a few exceptions and NCIA has tried to bring those voices together...'

Emerging spaces

'Who will provide the cutting edge analysis if NCIA ceases to exist - at least in its present form?'

'There's now a big gap between NCVO and similar and the sector – and the agitational nature of some groups – they simply don't get it. They say we are all "misled."'

'...There is a sense that independent critical voice doesn't get diffused because it is diverse...and the restructuring of the voluntary sector is still going on.'

'As it moves on – it would be different...voice makes people feel awkward – but in five years it will be different, austerity will be further on and the roll back of the state won't have stopped.'

'It's a generational thing – how to bring in the next generation.'

'We used to do deep work now people say "I can't do that – it's too expensive" then later someone realises there's a problem because we are not able to do the deep community work now.'

'Many of us got into youth work through the voluntary sector – the role of small organisations was very important...but there's always been a tension between youth work and the state...'

'People don't see there is anything odd happening...it all seems very remote to them...politics is seen as off putting.'

'Tenants organisations – feet on the ground but NCIA has been at the 'top level' so commissioning not the right issues.'

'Although we must defend the welfare state, I am not sure that the original designers of the welfare state found the right answers or even asked the right questions. In fact - to some extent - many of the problems we now face have arisen precisely because of the failings of the old system.'

What next?

'A group of us hope to keep the NCIA role of providing a critical analysis and presenting key evidence through the development of an online journal called Critical Studies in Voluntary Action. This initiative is supported by the directors of NCIA and offers one way forward.'

'It is a very crowded space that NCIA is in [nationally]...A unique space? It would be seen as competing...To co-opt or to convert? We could infiltrate information...the platforms are there...'

'Take the route of the professional association – they are made up of individuals... the world is changing...let's make use of that. Routes into mainstream media very established – they believe they are zenith but volume of info/opinion and self reporting...we are also a mini channel like a publicity house we're disruptive to the institution that they think they control...But meanwhile - and good for us- all around it is freestyle....'

'...I just talked to someone who wants to sign the NCIA statement, but wondered about [questioned the idea that voluntary services should not replace public services. [Instead] They are busy trying to convince local public services to engage in co-production, create productive partnerships between voluntary services and public services, and where local people want to run local services why not? better for control/accountability and may lead to better services...'

'If it is "voice" still this is important – the speaking truth to power – the question is who's up for it?!'

'The website and the media interest – it has never really taken off...'

'Occupy and ex-Occupy people on economics...Free Critical Thinking and Positive Money and Tax Justice Campaigning.'

'NCIA has got the critique but what is the model for the alternative organising principle would be – that's the next challenge...'

'People are attentive...they say "this is a weight off my mind" people agree...and all this competition – it is very expensive...'

'It is a place where people and issues across the sector come together – that is something we would miss....People are struggling at a local level and just not making connections...I'd be happy to contribute and distribute information to my communities.'

'...the highly abrasive and political stance is hard...some people come to voluntary work from quite fluffy and even conservative reasons or they come from moral or political reasons...'

'I'd go for activism – more protest – but shouting...doesn't work – slips towards violence.'

'You get dragged into being public servants...Yes we need to defend the NHS – but also it is a very bureaucratic institution...'

'NCIA needs a clear focus – it should be the role of the voluntary sector in society...Youth service and community development – both have gone...'

'Advocacy...in politics it is not a neutral space – what is going on with Muslim youth – youth work space in

civil society ...there is a real attack on Muslim charities...four charities are being investigated by the HRMC... it is about a Trojan horse – we’ve told them we’re not a business ..there is a need for the role of NCIA on the Muslim experience - this is an important part of the context.’

‘Newsletter has not been inspiring – it’s been a collection of stories...it needs to be different.’

‘More discussion and debate is good – that is the only way that we can find out...a lot of voluntary sector issues are not going to go away just because there is an election.’

‘Need quick campaigns and follow through not hundreds of pages of writing...’

‘I speak to women’s organisations - people feeling there is a collapse going on – whether cuts driven...but it needs to be asked the voluntary nature of the voluntary sector...It is not exactly the same space to NCIA.’

‘The writing – blogs, articles, NCIA has always have a good journalistic and polemical edge – in the short term this can keep the message going – it is good at it.’

‘Influence has to be local and we have to be accountable to the communities we live in.’

‘Hubs are a good idea – in different towns – national is difficult the resources are difficult...’

‘The voice is activists is not well represented in some of the views here – we need to get more into that.’

‘One of NCIA’s biggest achievements? To have provided a coherent, alternative and radical account of the changes that have occurred in the world of voluntary action that has represented a challenge to the ‘given account’ of the moribund establishment leadership of the sector, and to have provided a safe place for people who have shared our perspective.’

‘Name one important gap (if any) that opens up if NCIA closes? That individuals involved in voluntary action, especially those in the services sector, who feel alienated and unsupported in maintaining a critical stance lose the sense of connection with others and opportunities to ask for and offer solidarity.’

‘Suggest one practical action/decision or proposal that I would like to see come out of today? That mechanisms are agreed to enable people to remain in contact with one another, and especially that this includes good opportunities for exchange and common work between “insiders” and “outsiders”.’

Andy Benson (NCIA) - Lightning input at NCIA Assembly April 2015

‘Stopping the rot’ was NCIA’s call to action in 2006. While the rot continues to spread, the NCIA has done a great job in drawing attention to the issues of independence and voice in the voluntary sector. Political scientist Iris Marion Young has argued that we should judge the “health” of a public sphere by how well it functions as a “space of opposition and accountability on the one hand, and policy influence on the other” (Young 2000: 173). In England today, we can see that the health of the voluntary sector is at risk as independence and the space for dissent shrinks. What is the way forward? Will change come from outsiders and independent groups, such as NCIA? Or from what some call the ‘subversives’ working within voluntary organisations? Or both?’

Armine Ishkanian (LSE) - Lightning input at NCIA Assembly April 2015

'All around me I see collapse - collapsing institutions, systems, collapsing orthodoxy and authority. The atrophy of the mainstream political system is collapsing into a multi-party 4 nations election free-for-all. The mainstream media is collapsing as the primary narrative creator in society, as millions inform themselves, debate and share news on their own terms, in physical and virtual spaces that both media and government try, but struggle, to control. There is much to be worried, agitated and angry about - the collapse of the welfare state, the safety net for children, support for the sick and disabled, the chaos and crisis in the NHS. But collapse is also engulfing the marketplace....Serco has reported record losses on public contracts; in residential child care hedge funders and private equity finance are reporting losing their shirts, where once they saw only profit.'

'In the spaces dust and rubble of this collapse, the challenge for those of us who have seen it coming is to sow the seeds of an alternative...to show not just how service, solidarity, mutuality and support can be organised and funded differently, but also to engage and marshal people in protest and influence through different means as well. At Children England we are trying to create vehicles for people - not organisations or employees, but people as whole beings - to voice their concerns, collaborate in new ways, show solidarity and take action online. In May we organised an online petition to ban profiteers from child protection, and we won. In the summer we launched a rights based Declaration of Interdependence, rejecting competitive markets, and it got launched in the Financial Times, signed up to by unions and local authorities as well as major contracting charities.'

'For me, the voice that NCIA has created has been truly vital, courageous and genuinely influential. The next challenge is to be a force for demonstrating how different our sector and society could be. We have to offer an alternative way of making decisions for people who've genuinely never known any other way than markets and competition.'

Kathy Evans (Children England) - Lightning input at NCIA Assembly April 2015

Stop the Rot!

'We rang an alarm bell! But we didn't turn alarm into action!

'The point of voluntary action now: to resist & create alternatives!'

'The future gap: insiders & outsiders together!'

'Next? A national event in 2016: focused on specific issues & actions affecting individuals & communities!'

Penny Waterhouse (NCIA) - Lightning input at NCIA Assembly April 2015