

Embargoed until 0.01 am, 21 January 2014

VOLUNTARY SECTOR LOSING POWER TO PROTECT MOST VULNERABLE

Panel calls on David Cameron to stop eroding the independence of the voluntary sector and rebuild trust

The voluntary sector is losing its ability to protect the most vulnerable in society as a result of government attacks on its campaigning activities, lack of consultation over policy changes, and funding arrangements that put the future of an independent sector at risk, according to a new report from a group of sector experts.

The third annual assessment of the Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector calls on David Cameron to take action to stop weakening the independence of the sector and to rebuild trust. *Independence Undervalued: the voluntary sector in 2014*, also calls on voluntary sector leaders to take a stand to preserve the sector's independence, which it says is vital to a healthy and compassionate democracy and the reason why so many people lend their support to charities and trust their services.

The report documents numerous instances of a serious and growing threat from the government to Britain's long tradition of independent voluntary action:

- Growing criticism by some politicians, including the Secretary of State for Justice, of charities' role as voices of communities. There is an increasingly commonly expressed view that charities should simply deliver services and not speak out against injustices – leading to voluntary organisations self-censoring because they are afraid of losing government work, appearing too political or because of gagging clauses in state contracts.
- New and proposed restrictions to the ability of voluntary organisations to challenge government decisions in the courts on behalf of vulnerable individuals.
- Restrictions to campaigning put forward in the Lobbying Bill without consultation and, despite subsequent changes, with continuing concerns about their impact.

- Cuts in government consultation periods, leaving voluntary organisations too little time to respond to important questions, despite assurances this would change.
- Damage to support in communities due to loss of public funding for local specialist voluntary organisations as public service contracts concentrate on economies of scale rather than social return.
- Many state-sponsored charities subject to government interference, for example in appointment of board members.
- A weak Charity Commission ill-equipped to maintain public confidence that charities are pursuing an independent mission that is furthering the public good and not state sponsored or driven by private gain; and lack of government compliance with a document signed by David Cameron to protect the independence of the sector, the Compact.

Panel chair Sir Roger Singleton CBE said:

“An independent voluntary sector lies at the heart of a compassionate, democratic society, a role that has become especially important as engagement with mainstream politics declines and the state reduces in size.

“Yet we are on a ‘slippery slope’, in which the independence of voluntary organisations is increasingly undervalued and under threat and there are insufficient safeguards to protect an independent future for the sector. It is increasingly seen either as a delivery arm of the state or only legitimate where it provides services but does not speak out for wider social change.

“David Cameron must act to demonstrate genuine commitment to an independent voluntary sector and rebuild trust. We also need a proper debate about its importance. The Panel will be talking with voluntary sector leaders and others during 2014 about how to generate this.”

The report calls on the government to:

- Preserve the ability of the voluntary sector to challenge government decisions in the courts.
- Regulate to outlaw Government interference in charities.
- Ensure that funding and commissioning processes support independence.
- Allow the Charity Commission to monitor and promote independence effectively.
- Follow the Compact agreed between the government and the sector.

The Panel also calls for a ‘new settlement’ between the voluntary sector and key stakeholders, particularly the government, based on a shared understanding of how an independent voluntary sector can contribute to better communities and protection for the most vulnerable.

Ends

Notes to editors

1. *Independence Undervalued: the voluntary sector in 2014* is published on Tuesday 21 January 2014. Copies of the report are available on request. **For more information and interviews**, please contact Leo Barasi: leo@dhacommunications.co.uk; 020 7793 4306 / 07830 819121.
2. The Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector was initiated and is funded by the Baring Foundation to ensure that independence is seen as a top priority by the voluntary sector and those with whom it works and to make recommendations to ensure that it is not lost. This is the third of four annual assessments about the state of independence that it will produce.
 - Its Chair is Sir Roger Singleton, CBE, appointed July 2012. Sir Roger was chief executive of Barnardo's for 21 years, and was awarded a knighthood in 2005 for services to children.
 - Nicholas Deakin CBE, Emeritus Professor of Social Policy at Birmingham University and Chair of the Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector which reported in 1996.
 - Andrew Hind CB, Editor of Charity Finance and Trustee of the Baring Foundation, formerly Chief Executive of the Charity Commission.
 - Sir Bert Massie CBE, formerly Commissioner on the Compact and of the Disability Rights Commission.
 - Julia Unwin CBE, Chief Executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and an expert on voluntary sector independence.
 - Louise Whitfield, Partner at Deighton Pierce Glynn and an expert in public law and judicial review.
 - Nick Wilkie, now at Save the Children, former Chief Executive, London Youth.

Further details can be found at www.independencepanel.org.uk