

# The Baring Foundation

## **Note of a Meeting of the Core Costs Club at the Baring Foundation on 18<sup>th</sup> October 2006 to discuss campaigning.**

About fifty people attended including the speakers, with a majority of the audience drawn from voluntary organisations to which the Foundation has given a major grant. The meeting followed our usual pattern of external expert speakers setting the scene followed by ‘case studies’ provided by members of the Core Costs Club.

Tessa Baring, the Chair of the Foundation, welcomed everyone and described the topic as a pertinent given the Foundation’s interest in the independence of the voluntary sector. We had recently hosted a roundtable discussion on this topic for People and Planet and the Sheila McKechnie Foundation. Should government funding come with a health warning? There was a new debate in the sector over the legal boundaries when it comes to campaigning by a charity.

Ian Leggett from People and Planet introduced the topic. It is clearly legal to campaign to raise public awareness and hence change behaviour as has been the case with drink driving. There is a myth that campaigning by charities was a recent phenomenon but one only had to remember the example of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds which finds its origins in a protest against the use of feathers in millinery towards the close of the nineteenth century. It seems that now charities don’t quite know where the limits lie – we do it, but we don’t talk about it! Campaigning passes the charitable test of public benefit as it can achieve great results – he witnessed this as a worker in Oxfam on campaigns which led up to the Jubilee 2000 campaign.

Clare McMaster spoke next from the Sheila McKechnie Foundation. SMKF has carried out research, with the Scarman Trust, that identifies the need for, in particular, smaller grassroots organisations to be equipped with the skills to influence the political agenda. It points to the public service delivery role potentially diluting commitment to users and although a closer relationship with government may provide opportunities to influence, organisations must have the will, capacity and skills to do this. SMKF feel that the spirit of campaigning is alive and well, but that the sector lacks skills, particularly around planning

Clare argued that there are resources available to support campaigning (some general text books as well as very specific guidance on how to write a press release, how to get a private members bill etc.) but that these neglect the most crucial first step in any campaign i.e. planning: identifying aims, identifying the levers, assessing organisational capacity to campaign effectively and from there deciding on tactics. In addition, there have been important developments not reflected in textbooks such as the Freedom of Information Act, the Human Rights Act and Serious Organised Crime and Police Act.

Joe Saxton from the consultancy, nfpsynergy spoke next. He took us through a recent survey on public attitudes towards charities including towards campaigning. This strongly suggested that this was not something which worried the public (although other things did such as waste). A full copy of this research is available from the Baring Foundation office on request.

Caroline Cooke and Alice Holt from the Charity Commission were the final guest speakers. The law has not changed but the report *Public Benefit, Private Action* in 2002 from the Treasury had inspired the Commission to clarify the existing position and to somewhat modify its stance as a regulator to a permissive one. The new guidance could be found in their publication CC9. In summary, a charity must pursue its charitable objects. If this can be achieved by campaigning to achieve a change in policy or the law, this is acceptable providing it is not its dominant activity. Political activity can't be the main purpose of a charity in the eyes of the courts as this is seen as a road which would lead to the undermining of parliamentary democracy. In fact, although the Charity Commission receives 'many' complaints on this subject (number unspecified) this had only led to one charity being de-registered in the last eight years.

A number of points were then raised in general discussion:

- The effectiveness, and hence impact, of campaigning is notoriously difficult to evaluate - although some larger charities have tried;
- When does campaigning become simply marketing for a charity's brand?
- The larger charities are at an unfair advantage in this respect as they can conduct a major campaign while still arguing that it is a minor part of their work;
- What are the ethical responsibilities of charities in presenting evidence fairly in their campaigning? How selective do they become in portraying the data?

- An example was given of a stream of funding from a Non Departmental which allegedly tried to limit discussion over the situation of refugees in the UK;
- Sometimes the strings attached to government funding are unnecessarily tight and this is when the Compact can be used (the subject of the last Core Costs Club meeting);
- There is a specific type of artistic activity, legislative theatre, which engages with democratic change and campaigning
- It was noted that the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) may be taking a much more permissive approach – would some charities therefore base themselves in Scotland?

To close the seminar, there were two more presentations from organisations which the Baring Foundation has funded.

Julian Corner, the Chief Executive of the Revolving Doors Agency (RDA) continued the discussion. He began by mentioning a dictionary definition of campaigning as ‘an organised series of operations in the advocacy of some cause or object’ and said that this had made him reflect that RDA as an organisation is itself a campaign. Over the last ten years they had been working for a very marginalised group – people involved with the criminal justice system who have mental health problems. Rather than fitting into existing commissioning frameworks they have created services for their users, largely though funds from charitable foundations. They had championed these services relentlessly at local and national level to get their practice into existence. At last the Government is beginning to see the point of this and in the latest Social Exclusion Action Plan has launched a national pilot scheme. Perhaps the day will come when funding for these services will mean that large, long established charities will move into this area and compete to work with this client group – marking the end of the Revolving Doors Agency and its campaign.

Susan George, the Director of Village AiD spoke last. Village AiD works in four countries in Africa on livelihood development and civil engagement. Campaigning is a central aspect of the work of the charity and of many other international development NGOs which increasingly act as advocates for the South while people from those countries run development programmes themselves using resources raised in the West. Susan argued for the increasing involvement of people from the South themselves in international campaigns. It was noticeable that there were very few Africans in the crowds at the Make Poverty History march in Edinburgh during the G8 discussions. At Village AiD in recent years

there has been an increasing involvement of Africans, for instance the Chief Executive of their partner the Sierra Leone Youth Empowerment Organisation spoke at their AGM. Village AiD is based in Bakewell in Derbyshire and an example of work of which Susan is especially proud is involving the Peak District National Park agency in the education of school pupils on poverty reduction in the South.

David Cutler