

# 'All the Old Punks'

Notes from ACOSVO Dinner 28<sup>th</sup> June



## Background and introduction from Graeme

In our 2017 [leadership retreat](#), participants identified how it's increasingly common and accepted for third sector leaders to sport tattoos, piercings, dyed hair, Dr Martens and so on. It occurred to me that maybe the punks are in charge now. Who let that happen?!

The generation who were teenagers in the mid-70s are now in their mid-50s and likely to be at a senior stage in their career. Have they sold out, leaving their youths behind? Or have the things that attracted them to punk also made them good leaders?

In our introductions, we picked tapes with song titles and lyrics to say what leading like a punk means to us:

Rebellion

Activism, working for change

Power in numbers, collective action, empowerment

Developing answers, not waiting for them to come

Authenticity (but with the challenge of being fully ourselves at work)

Challenging the norm, 'shaking the tree'

Fighting spirit, standing up for what we believe

Interest in non-traditional management and organisational forms

As with the initial workshop at the 2018 ACOSVO members' day, not everyone identified as a punk. But they identified with these elements of punk culture as they perceive it.

The rest of the evening set about exploring these themes and whether there are links between punk, the third sector and leadership. What are they? Do they matter? What do they mean for our practice? So, what began as a fairly frivolous idea became a more valuable question:

What can the voluntary sector possibly have in common with a moribund (but still kicking) movement that represents being angry, disaffected, exploited, misunderstood, feared, left out - and skint?

Some of our conversations used the evening's theme as a springboard for more general conversations about the state of the sector, but the links and parallels are there if we look for them.

## Identity and purpose

Punk identity gives a shorthand for knowing what someone's about. Do we have this in the voluntary sector? Or have our traditional values been co-opted by managerialism and competition to deliver public service contracts?

## Influence

A fundamental question for all of us: *why* are we charities? More organisations seem to have become arms-length delivery bodies, delivering public sector priorities and agendas. Ironically, this might partly be a consequence of having achieved influence in a relatively accessible and progressive government/policy environment.

- Where do we go once we have won the policy victories?
- How do we cure 'implementation deficit disorder' as one participant called it?
- How do we get back to action?
- Where is the vision is for the voluntary sector's purpose?

[Graeme's note: Colin Rochester's [Rediscovering Voluntary Action](#) explores some of these challenges. It advocates a return to voluntarism and the development/acknowledgement of new organisational forms for those charities who rely on public service contracts. We noted additional challenges arising from public bodies setting up arms-length 'charities'.]

## Action

We proposed that if it's hard to bite the hand that feeds us, membership and representative organisations can or should be our route to more challenging, collective conversations. Policy and advocacy organisations might be more 'punk' than we think!

And we could all do with becoming a bit more 'punk'. What is the world we want to live in? How do we want to express ourselves at work? How do we contribute to or change dominant discourses?

Confidence comes from knowing we're not alone. Collaboration has become a procurement-led euphemism for competition. If we lead like punks we'll think more about *connection*: coalitions, cooperatives and collectives.

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Thanks to ACOSVO for being open to hosting this curious coalition. Thanks to everyone for coming and contributing. And thanks to George for sharing this film which we said we'd circulate. Watch from 15.00mins for about 2 mins where there is a great chat about 'club kids' and future leadership: [https://youtu.be/jhTpRKA\\_qvY?t=880](https://youtu.be/jhTpRKA_qvY?t=880)