**Minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Common Cause**

The Executive Committee of Common Cause met at Common Cause House on January 16, 2015 at 3:30 p.m. Shri Vikram Lal, Maj. Gen. (Retd.) J.P. Gupta, Dr. Ashok Khosla and Shri Kamal Jaswal attended the meeting.

The Director reviewed the developments since the last meeting of the Committee held on November 25, 2014 and apprised the Committee of the significant civil society initiatives which are on the anvil.

**Citizens’ empowerment**

With a view to making citizens’ voice matter in the functioning of the government they choose, a group of journalists, public intellectuals, administrators, lawyers, and professionals from corporate India have come together to set up a public interest trust to be called ‘Nishthaa India’. The Trust will expose corruption, demand better governance, evaluate policy priorities and ignite public discourse on state institutions and their performance.

The objectives of ‘Nishthaa India’ are the following.

* To identify and highlight public grievances and look for ways and means to redress these, including by initiating administrative and legal procedures.
* To aggregate information on corruption in public life in India and initiate independent investigation into specific cases of corruption and abuse of power and authority by individuals and organizations
* To assist whistleblowers in exposing corruption and aid their activities.
* To use different media platforms for highlighting cases of corruption in public life in India.
* To provide credible sources of information on different aspects of governance that can be used to hold public officials accountable for their acts of omission and commission.
* To create a counter narrative by highlighting unaddressed and ignored issues in media.

Nishthaa India is scheduled to be registered on January 19, 2015. Its Board of Trustees comprises Shri Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, Shri Kamal Jaswal, Shri Vipul Mudgal and seven others with a distinguished record of service to public causes.

The foundational expenses of the Trust have partly been covered by the personal contributions of the trustees. The balance requirement in the current financial year is about Rs. 6,00,000, while the estimated annual budget for a fully ramped up organization is of the order of Rs. 44,00,000. Nishthaa India is seeking public donations and financial assistance from like-minded organizations.

The Committee welcomed this timely initiative, which has strong complementarities with the mission and objectives of Common Cause. The Committee also noted that the Society has undertaken a project captioned “Promotion of public cause initiatives by civil society”. It was decided to extend an initial financial assistance of Rs. 5,00,000 to Nishthaa India under this project.

The Committee was of the view that the Trust must mobilize donations from the general public and other institutions to meet its future needs. With a view to incentivizing these efforts, it was agreed that during the financial year 2015-16 Common Cause will give a matching contribution to Nishthaa India for any donations that it is able to raise from other sources.

**Meeting the demand for an independent, non commercial news channel**

It was observed that the Indian public was very poorly served by private TV news channels, which suffer from the twin handicaps of crass commercialism and ownership by large business houses. The public broadcasters essentially purvey news with a pro- government slant. Both lack professionalism. The Indian public certainly deserves better.

The Committee endorsed the concept of promoting a publicly funded, professionally run media house, which is not driven by advertising, or shackled by ties of ownership, and called for a collective effort of reflection with other stakeholders, who may be working on similar ideas.

**Enforcing legislative accountability**

The functioning of Parliament and the state legislatures in India is too often marred by ugly disruptions and determined obstruction by the Opposition. The presiding officers are loath to use their disciplinary powers. As a result, there has been a sharp decline in the quality of legislative debate and the time available for legislation. Important Bills having a significant bearing on the life of citizens are passed without due consideration. It was agreed that in the first instance Common Cause may launch a signature campaign to mobilize the public opinion and petition the authorities concerned to redress this sorry state of affairs.

The Committee decided that for the present Shri Vipul Mudgal may be invited to attend the meetings of the Committee as a special invitee.

The meeting ended with a vote of thanks to the Chair.

 **(Vikram Lal)**