

London Citizens and the Labour tradition

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One of the very few highlights of the 2010 general election campaign was Gordon Brown's speech to the Citizens UK Assembly in London three days before the vote. This speech was widely heralded as Brown's most impressive moment, perhaps the only time when he found a powerful voice as the representative of the Labour tradition, a tradition of social justice, social responsibility, and social organisation.

In the longer run, though, the setting of the speech will probably prove more important than the address itself. The Citizens UK Assembly welcomed all three of the major party leaders that day and asked them to pledge themselves to certain key policy commitments. It followed similar events hosted by London Citizens during the London mayoral elections in 2008 and 2004, and many local London Citizens assemblies since 1996.

The ability of Citizens UK and London Citizens to draw in the candidates in this way is testament to the astonishing success of these coalitions of community organisations. At the last general election in 2005, after all, very few had even heard of the idea of 'community organising'. Now, London Citizens is at the forefront of political debate. Since the election, it has drawn the attention of all of the candidates for the Labour Party leadership, with Ed Miliband launching a 'Living Wage' campaign along lines previously suggested by London Citizens, and David Miliband engaging in Citizens' style house meetings and one-to-one discussions.

The appeal of London Citizens, however, raises important questions for Labour and its own partisan identity. For although the organisation works in the same terrain as Labour, it is not at all clear that there is a natural affinity between the two. The contrast is immediately apparent when one considers London Citizens' structure. Organisers in London Citizens work primarily by building relationships with leaders and members of institutions in the community. They have notably steered clear of party politics and the traditional mechanisms of state and legislative action. Constituted of more than one hundred and fifty churches, mosques, schools, trade union branches, student unions, university departments, community groups, ethnic associations and charities, London Citizens develops the capacity of disadvantaged communities to identify and meet their own needs. In pursuit of this end, the organisation runs regular leadership training for its membership, where, in its own words, participants learn

leadership techniques; the role that power and self-interest have in how the world works; how to connect faith and values to action; about globalisation and its impact on families, communities and civic life; and practical strategies for rebuilding civil society institutions of faith, union, school and local association. (1)

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London Citizens represents an approach to politics that can seem, therefore, sharply at odds with that generally associated with the Labour Party. By placing its emphasis on cross-community relationships, on voluntarism, tradition, and faith, rather than on partisan campaigning and state-centered action, indeed, its approach to campaigning can often look closer to David Cameron's 'big society' than it does to conventionally understood Labour politics. Yet that connection also seems strained, especially in the light of the ever-deepening relationships between the Labour leadership candidates and the community organisers of London Citizens.

London Citizens presents us, therefore, with a conundrum. The implications of its success and its political approach are currently obscured by our lack of understanding of its precise methods and purposes. In order to resolve these issues and to ascertain the potential connections and disconnections between Labour and London Citizens more fully, one of us conducted a series of in-depth interviews with the leaders and community organisers of London Citizens over the last two years, asking what it is that is special about London Citizens' approach to political campaigning and how that relates to the Labour Party and the Labour tradition. We believe that those discussions reveal powerful lessons for Labour.

London Citizens as understood by London Citizens

When one opens a conversation with London Citizens organisers and leaders it quickly becomes apparent that a focus on the development of cross-community relationships is indeed central to both their self-image and their lived practices (2).

London Citizens' organisers hold hundreds of one-to-one meetings in order to develop relationships with individuals from each member institution, transcending the boundaries of class, region, race, and faith. Leaders from member communities are trained to conduct their own one-to-ones with their members for the same purpose. Developing these relationships depends crucially on identifying a person's values, hopes, fears, what makes them angry. When choosing issues that the organisation will pursue, a formal listening campaign is conducted in which one-to-ones are held to identify concerns that individuals want to pursue. Leaders from member institutions then decide, with the assistance of the organiser, which of those shared issues will be chosen as the subject of a campaign. The model appears to be orientated towards discovering and cooperating on shared interests just as a 'big society' model might suggest.

One leader who has been involved with London Citizens since the early 1990s, articulates this process as one of building cooperation by interacting at a 'common human level'. He explains that an organiser can not only identify interests that people share but also in this process enlist their energy and genuine interest in the common project. The organising method amounts to 'a system for discovering what our mutual concerns are'. Working with churches, mosques, schools, trade union branches and other community groups, London Citizens thus aims to strengthen association between people in local communities. It believes that the interests of community leaders are transformed by the building of relationships between them, and because they are *leaders* and have power within their institutions, this can lead to a change in those institutions' behaviour.

It would be wholly wrong, however, to think that this means that London Citizens' primary interest is in building community relations merely for their own sake. Another

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leader is clear that one of the key purposes of building such relationships lies in the possibility that they provide for securing far-reaching social and political change.

There is within me an anger about injustice and the failure of society to meet some of the extremely basic needs of ordinary people which has driven me, I think, through all my working life to say 'there must be a better way of organising than this!'

This leader is in no doubt, therefore, that these cross-community relationships are vital also because they provide the possibilities for political victories that might not otherwise be available. Many people have become 'despondent and despairing' through frustration with mainstream party politics, he charges, but 'the trust and the relationship which is already built up between people and the sheer diversity of ... the relationships at a personal level and an assembly level that [London Citizens] are able to generate' presents a new political opportunity. It might be important to 'put aside ideology or theology or whatever else drives you', he insists, but only because doing so is crucial to the process of building a coalition broad and strong enough to secure real social and political change.

This kind of reasoning is even more noticeable with regard to the widespread discussions of the place of self-interest in London Citizens' approach to politics. Whereas 'big society' commentators have sought to describe London Citizens as somehow standing 'above' the politics of self-interest, as existing in a deliberative pursuit of the common good, most of the organisers and leaders understand self-interest to be vital to politics in general and to London Citizens' approach to politics in particular. This assumption underlies their approach to negotiations with power-holders, and their understanding of individuals within civil society. Self-interest is taught as a tool for engaging politically with others. An Anglican priest in East London who has worked with London Citizens since 1998 says,

when we engage people both in our communities and the people we engage more adversarially ... We don't make the mistake of planning strategically as if their self-interest was what we think it ought to be.

London Citizens' organisers insist that reputation is an important part of the self-interest of power-holders, and they undertake direct public action in part to levy a reputational cost on uncooperative power holders through the generation of negative media. 'If we point out the reputational risk to not participating in the negotiation, that will help move it forward. It's about putting tension into that relationship'. Another organiser concurs that,

unless you hit the self-interest of the target that you are trying to move somewhere, then they're not going listen to you. Or at least experience shows that they aren't going to listen to you.

One story demonstrates how London Citizens identifies the self-interest of power holders and uses it to affect their behaviour. In 2001, a group of community leaders from London Citizens' east London affiliate, TELCO, identified the lack of time parents had for their children because of having to work into the evenings. TELCO began the Living Wage campaign, to get employers to pay families enough to maintain a basic standard of living, calculated according to an index of poverty. TELCO targeted banks in the City

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of London, which were adjacent to the East End and paid their cleaning staff poverty wages. HSBC was the first target and TELCO directed its campaigning energy towards the bank's Chairman, Sir John Bond. One participant describes how TELCO analysed his self-interest. The organisation was, predominantly, 'dealing with a hardened banker' and believed that appeals made with moral language would not overcome the imperative to make a profit. So to engage him, the organisation said 'if your bank doesn't pay a Living Wage, we're going trash your publicity, you're going be in all the papers, and not just your bank, you personally, Sir John, are going to be Scrooge'. After several public actions over a period of three years, which threatened the reputation of the bank and its chairman, Sir John agreed to a meeting with TELCO leaders and HSBC implemented the Living Wage in May 2004.

London Citizens' analysis of people's motives thus tempers the idealism of its often religious community leaders with a dose of realism. One religious leader thinks it teaches them to be more effective: 'Jesus tells his disciples to be wise as serpents and gentle as doves, and I think churches are often full of people who are gentle as doves, and organising helps them to be wise as serpents'. He wants us to recognise that the world is 'full of people with complicated motives ... you ought to have your eyes open as to the fact those baser motives are there ... that's about acknowledging and looking at reality head on'. Success is dependent on acting effectively in the world 'as it is' and so entails engagement with self-interest.

London Citizens use the trust they build, and the relational power that comes with it, to engage in controversial and sometimes confrontational political campaigns often grounded in self-interest. They target the decision-makers who have the power to give what the communities need. Sensitive to the distribution of power and sacrifice they face in the real world, they are unapologetic in their realism about the need to combat power with power. One elaborates at length on his experience with many campaigns:

We are making the decisions democratically, and we may want to manipulate something in society, or manipulate a person who is holding power in society, and may use tactics to get at that person in such a way that they do deliver what we want them to deliver, and they may feel manipulated by that process, at times, for which it seems to me we should not be apologetic. Because in order to take back power, you're gonna have to manipulate something, otherwise you're just gonna be ignored. And the last thing that London Citizens and broad-based organising wants to be is ignored. So recognition that we actually have power because of our people and because of the moral authority that we can carry. So I think it's legitimate for someone to say I feel manipulated because you turned all those nuns out and made me think twice about my refusal to meet with you, or to listen to your argument. Tough!

This brings us precisely to the point where London Citizens most fully depart from the caricature of the 'big society': in their emphasis on the use of power to win political victories. London Citizens wish to build relationships, and they focus an enormous amount of energy on doing so, but this endeavour is not only important intrinsically – as part of what it is to live a flourishing life. It is also done in order to enable previously unorganised people to build their own power to force others to recognise them and respond to their needs.

London Citizens politics and Labour politics

If London Citizens do not resemble a 'big society' approach to politics, then, it remains to be seen precisely how their kind of campaigning relates to the politics of the Labour Party? In finally answering this question, we need to note that the politics of London Citizens can be broken down into three fundamental claims.

First, as we have seen, the organisers and leaders of London Citizens insist on the importance of *relationships* between diverse citizens. Real relationships, relationships of recognition and reciprocity, are thus important for both intrinsic and instrumental reasons. They bring meaning and value to our lives, but also because they allow us to assert ourselves in our interactions with powerful others.

Second, in building those relationships, London Citizens insist on the importance of the *everyday* and of the particularities of *place*. The relationships that we build, even the most forthrightly political ones, are thus built in particular locations, on the bases of shared experiences, memories, traditions, and interactions. This is a politics of the local, of the ordinary; transformed through the building of relationships into a politics of power. It further insists that 'small' campaigns are as important as the 'big'. London Citizens has campaigned for individual hospitals, for road crossings, for living wages in individual companies. It is central to its practice, therefore, that people want a say in the decisions that immediately affect them, and that goes for what happens in the neighbourhood and workplace as much as it does for national government.

Third, London Citizens also insist that these relationships and shared experiences must be structured through broad-based *organisation*. London Citizens is explicitly conscious of plurality and diversity, working with people from many different faiths and none, a range of ethnicities, and employment backgrounds. In building shared power these people must be drawn together not only by shared experience but also by the shared structures of organisations. London Citizens does not, then, endorse the constantly fluid politics of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's 'multitude' or the social movement politics of the 1970s (Hardt and Negri, 2009). Instead, it emphasises the continual necessity of knitting people together through regular organisational practices. When citizens' organisations are robust, rooted, and have continuity across time – so the argument goes – then both the state and the market can be rendered more accountable and more susceptible to influence.

To those with a background in social and political history, it will be immediately apparent that much of this – if not indeed all – is deeply familiar. The Labour tradition, as forged by working class movements across the United Kingdom and as documented across the generations by the likes of R. H. Tawney, Raymond Williams, and Raphael Samuel, contained all of these three elements: an emphasis on relationship, on place and the everyday, and on the essential role of organisation (3). That these are not necessarily familiar to the campaigning style of the more recent Labour Party says more about it – and its focus on the technical, the global, and the short-term – than it says about the supposed novelty of the strategies of London Citizens.

We are left, therefore, with a straightforward conclusion. If Labour is to relate more effectively with London Citizens, it does not need to lose its partisanship, or to embrace the 'big society'. It needs instead to direct its attention to these three core elements of the organisation's campaigning style and to remember its own tradition.

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Notes

1. For extensive details, see <http://www.londoncitizens.org>
2. The interviews cited below have been anonymised as agreed with London Citizens. They were conducted between July 2008 and July 2010. Full transcripts are held by Stefan Baskerville.
3. See Tawney, 1953; Williams, 1999, and Samuel, 1999.