



Community organising: Contributing to the renewal of politics

Sovereignty can, and should, be diffused rather than being concentrated in the power of the state. Community organising is one way we can contribute to the renewal of politics, as demonstrated by Citizens UK and the Living Wage Campaign.



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On the eve of the General Election, 2500 citizens crowded into Methodist Central Hall for a unique political event, the Citizens UK Assembly. Following on from TV contests between the party leaders, the event on 3 May 2010 became known as the 'fourth debate'. Despite its name, it could hardly have been more different from the first three. In Methodist Central Hall, Brown, Cameron and Clegg were confronted by the testimony of ordinary voters – most famously, the woman who cleaned Brown's office as Chancellor. Instead of extolling their own policy platforms, the politicians were asked to respond to a six-point 'Citizens' Manifesto'. This included demands for a living wage, the end of child detention and community land trusts. By the end of the afternoon, each leader had made significant promises to the assembly. Among the pledges secured was a commitment by Cameron and Clegg to end the detention of children seeking asylum¹ – and a promise from each contender that, if successful, they would attend another such event in 2012.

The voices heard at the assembly contrasted with those that dominated the election campaign. Those who spoke at the 'fourth debate' were disproportionately drawn from the groups politicians find hardest to reach: young people, ethnic minorities and those on low wages. Moreover, those involved in the 'fourth debate' were disproportionately religious. Most people in the hall were in delegations from churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and faith schools.

Citizens UK is the national institute for broad-based community organising. After describing the movement in

more detail, I will explore the implications of its work for a Christian understanding of sovereignty.

Introducing community organising

The origins of broad-based community organising lie in the work of Saul Alinsky in the Chicago of the 1930s. What began in one city is now a national movement, concentrated in the poorest inner-city neighbourhoods. The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) has now risen to international prominence as the movement which trained and employed the young Barack Obama as a community organiser. In the 1990s, the Citizen Organising Foundation (now known as Citizens UK) was formed as a sister organisation in this country – with new alliances now active in Germany and Australia, and partnerships developing with civil society organisations in Uganda and Zimbabwe.

Whatever the country, the heart of community organising is the intentional building of relationships. The pre-election assembly was a case in point. The 'Citizens Manifesto' was the product of thousands of one-to-one conversations, house groups and team meetings – many of them held in inner-city churches. Groups which share a local neighbourhood (mosques and temples, schools and union branches) joined with churches in 'listening campaigns' which identified issues of common concern, and agreed on specific, realistic campaign targets.

Listening campaigns are hardly a novel idea. The residents of my own area (Shadwell in the East End of London) have been at the receiving end of a whole array

of consultation exercises – usually instigated by different agencies of government. What makes community organising distinctive is that, after citizens have set their campaign targets it is *they* who act to achieve change.

Case study: The Living Wage Campaign

The Living Wage Campaign is a case in point. It was launched ten years ago, after a listening campaign in East London. Elders in local churches and mosques felt that an increasing gap was developing between the generations, with a lack in mutual comprehension and respect. No one imagined a community organising campaign could solve such a huge and long-term issue. However, it was felt that low pay was exacerbating the problem. Parents on low wages were being forced to choose between having enough time for their children and earning enough money for them. Hence, the Living Wage Campaign – the movement promoting an hourly rate of pay that would free East Londoners from such an invidious choice.

Local people not only chose the issue on which to act. They also won the victories. Early in the Living Wage Campaign, the HSBC tower in Canary Wharf was selected as a 'target'. Leaders of the religious and civic groups in the London Citizens (the local arm of Citizens UK) wrote to the management of the bank. The moral case they presented was compelling. The regeneration of the Docklands was supposed to have been about improving the life-chances of East Londoners. Yet, by and large, those who had lived in poverty beforehand were now working as low-paid cleaners, caretakers and caterers. There was little doubt HSBC could afford to write the living wage (a rate independently calculated, and around £2 above the legal minimum) into its contracts for these services.

The letters to the bank's management went unanswered. So London Citizens' members decided to 'tie up' an HSBC branch in Oxford Street in full view of the media. At the heart of the action were a group of East End nuns, laboriously depositing their church's candle money, coin by tiny coin. Within days, the bank's Chairman Sir John Bond had agreed to a meeting – and the HSBC tower was one of the first to be a living wage building.

Ten years on, employers who *don't* pay the living wage are now the exception in Canary Wharf. The London living wage has been championed by Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson in their terms as Mayor, and a research unit at City Hall calculates the figure annually. Hard-nosed multinationals now speak of a 'Business Case for the Living Wage,' because of the increases in staff retention and productivity which flow from decent pay.

The success of the campaign is not simply to be measured in money won for low-income families (£40 million at the last estimate). At least as importantly, local people have gained experience of being co-authors of their future and of their neighbourhood; of linking

faith to public action, and of cooperating across religious and cultural divides.

Broad-based community organising acts across a range of issues, so that ongoing relationships of trust and solidarity are built up. When the capital launched its Olympic bid, this is what enabled London Citizens to make a powerful response. Its campaign secured 'People's Guarantees' a living wage for the construction and service jobs generated by the 2012 Games and training to enable East Londoners to apply for these posts, and plans for a community land trust – which will make affordable housing the Olympics' longer-term legacy.

The stated aim of Citizens UK is to 'reweave the fabric of civil society'. In addition to building the capacity of local communities to shape their future, community organising builds trust and solidarity across faiths and cultures. Just this summer, when the English Defence League threatened to come to East London, the

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relationships built through common action were crucial to the united, peaceful, front against extremism.

Rethinking sovereignty

Community organising challenges some common assumptions about sovereignty. In political theory, discussions tend to focus on the legitimacy and limits of state power. By contrast, community organising sees the state as but one among a range of actors – businesses, journalists, and above all active associations of citizens. The movement recognises that sovereignty is, and should be, diffuse.

The Living Wage Campaign and the Citizens UK Assembly both reflect this less monolithic understanding of sovereignty. They reveal 'popular sovereignty' to be more than a matter of citizens electing their rulers or of exercising their purchasing power in the marketplace. Instead, they show it to be a matter of citizens engaging in ongoing reflection, negotiation and action to reshape their common life.

Politicians on the right and left have come to recognise the importance of such citizen-led action, as a counterweight to the power of state and market. David Cameron has placed this at the heart of his 'Big Society' – and cited London Citizens as a prime expression of its vision.² The movement's influence was also evident in the Labour leadership contest, with Ed Miliband adopting the living wage as a key policy, and David Miliband using the methods of community organising to build his grassroots 'Movement for Change'.³

Notes

1. This policy is in the Coalition Agreement of the new Government.
2. David Cameron, Speech to launch 'Big Society' campaign, 31 March 2010.
3. www.davidmiliband.net/movement-for-change/
4. While Milbank is a Christian socialist, he has been the major influence on Phillip Blond's 'Red Tory' philosophy. See his, *Red Tory: How left and right have broken Britain and how we can fix it* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. ix.
5. John Milbank, 'The Real Third Way: For a New Metanarrative of Capital', in Angus Ritchie (ed.), *Crunch Time: A Call to Action* (London: Contextual Theology Centre, 2010), pp. 54–55.
6. The Royal Foundation of St Katharine in Limehouse, East London.

This more diffuse understanding of popular sovereignty has deep roots in Christian thought. John Milbank (a theologian whose work has influenced both parties⁴) urges 'a pluralist distribution of sovereignty ... which more respects both human fallibility and the mere penultimacy of political purposes'.

Considering the distinctive contribution of faith to political theory, Milbank writes that 'Christians and other religious people [are] suspicious at once of an idolatry of the state and of the absolute autonomy of the sovereign individual.'⁵ He describes the reaffirmation of voluntary, civil association as the 'real third way' between laissez-faire economics and the excessive power of the bureaucratic state. It is not a compromise between these two alternatives. The renewal of civic action injects into public life what statism and consumerism both squeeze

an opportunity to explain their distinctive motivations. Thus, we can place our action in its wider context: the coming of God's Kingdom 'on earth as it is in heaven'.

Secondly, it allows us to *advance distinctive proposals that then gain wider assent*. The Living Wage Campaign was born in a Christian retreat centre,⁶ at a meeting of religious leaders (who were reflecting both on the experiences of their congregations and the teachings of their faiths). Citizens UK's campaign for a cap on interest rates also draws deeply on biblical teaching.⁷ Distinctive religious insights are not always divisive – sometimes they can be recognised and appropriated by the wider society.

Thirdly, community organising allows Christians and others to *discuss more divisive issues from a position of greater trust and understanding*. Cooperation at a grassroots level helps people of faith to move beyond the misunderstanding and parodying of one another's conviction. In the practice of community organising, people of different faiths and of none become friends and colleagues in the shared struggle for justice. If we take as our starting-point common action on the issues where we agree, this can lead on to more fruitful conversations on the issues of *disagreement*. If Christians are confident in the truth of the gospel, we should relish the opportunity to have it discussed in such an atmosphere. Community organising does not provide the forum for such conversations, but it can be an invaluable catalyst.

Conclusion

These are exciting times for Christian engagement in public life. In recent years, it has often seemed as if we were fighting a rearguard action against an advancing tide of secularism. The time for such defensiveness may now be over. Community organising is an example of the way we can contribute to the renewal of politics – broadening its understanding of 'popular sovereignty' beyond the ballot box and shopping centre. In so doing, Christians can bear faithful and powerful witness to the one from whom all sovereignty ultimately comes, and in whom our common life finds its fulfilment.

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out – value-based action by committed, organised citizens.

Christians are uniquely placed to make this vision a living reality. In Britain's inner-cities, religious congregations are among the few anchor institutions around which citizens gather – enabling them to fit their lives into a wider horizon of value and meaning, and to build relationships of mutual support and solidarity. These institutions are the essential building-blocks of community organising, and the lynchpin of its campaigns. That is why, though often confined to the sidelines of politics, faith had a central place in the 'fourth debate'.

Community organising and Christian distinctiveness

At the 'fourth debate', Baptist and Anglicans, Pentecostals and Roman Catholics stood alongside people of many other faiths and of none. For these Christians, such action was part of a wider witness – to the ultimate sovereignty of Jesus Christ over all creation.

Community organising allows the distinctive voices of its member faiths to be heard in the public square. And yet alliances like London Citizens only campaign on the issues which unite their diverse memberships. At first glance, this looks problematic. If a broad-based alliance only acts on issues which unite those of all faiths and none, is religious belief really playing a distinctive role? In what way can churches' involvement in community organising bear witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ?

Let me offer three answers, drawn from the experience of Christians in London Citizens.

Firstly, community organising allows us to *testify publicly to our reasons for action*. In the relationship-building and campaigning of community organising, Christians have

7. See Luke Bretherton, 'Neither a Borrower nor a Lender be' and Vincent Rougeau, 'Rediscovering Usury', in Ritchie (ed.), *Crunch Time*, pp. 17–52.