

Broad based organising – reflective citizenship and political action

Abstract

Post 9/11 and the London bombings on 7/7 and against the background of fear of terrorism, the role of religious institutions has often been seen as inimical to social cohesion. The fundamentalism of the Christian right or of Islamic extremists is seen as part of the problem. London Citizens is a charity which for the past 10 years has been bringing together mediating institutions such as Churches, Mosques, Schools and Trades Unions to work together for the common good. In particular I explore the concepts of authority, leadership and followership in a movement known as Broad Based Organising which owes its origins to the work of Saul Alinsky. I describe the ability to get a very diverse set of institutions and people into active membership, together with a case study of the London Living Wage campaign which has impacted on the living standards of low paid workers in London. The thesis is that the Church and other religious institutions and membership organisations have a significant role to play in developing active and reflective citizenship even in a society where lack of trust and fear of difference seem to predominate.

Introduction

This article explores the impact of Broad Based Organising, drawing on my experience of London Citizens over the past ten years. London Citizens provides a novel approach which provides faith, labour and educational institutions with a way of fully engaging with social and political action. The article is set against the political background of a decline in civic engagement, the effort of central government to engage the voluntary sector in delivering public services, an attempt to teach citizenship in schools, the worry about declining participation in democratic elections, and the overriding preoccupation with global terrorism and how to respond to it.

In the aftermath of the July 2005 bombings in London and the continuing threat of terrorist activity, media statements from religious and political leaders emphasised the need for solidarity. People reacted with shock and disbelief that ordinary young people, born in the UK, could be the suicide bombers, responsible for carnage and misery on such a scale. Various leaders appealed for people to work together to maintain a sense of the common good whatever our political or religious affiliations. Differences should be respected but violent extremism was condemned.

But this rhetoric gives rise to the serious question “How can individuals and institutions be part of a collective response?” So much of modern society is disjointed, with individuals feeling isolated and cut off from neighbours and often living at a distance from family. Membership of institutions is falling in most cases. So it is less likely that individuals will feel part of a group such as a

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Church or political association or trades union. Also much decision making is centralised with “top down” agendas and targets and little opportunity for “bottom up” initiatives.

London Citizens is a charity which has been working in East London since 1996 and in 2004 and 2005 developed South London Citizens and West London Citizens as the charity expands its membership across London. My main role has been as chair of the Board of Directors of the organisation which is a company limited by guarantee and without share capital. I also have a role as a volunteer. The charity has in membership over 80 institutions including Anglican, Methodist, Roman Catholic and Black Church congregations, Mosques, Sikh Gurdwaras, Buddhist groups, schools and students unions, youth groups, and local branches of Unison, Transport and General Workers Union and the Public Employees Union as well as not for profit organisations such as settlements and social action centres. This gives it its Broad Base for organising.

The Memorandum of Association sets out the purpose of the organisation:

“The object of the company is for the benefit of the public to develop the capacity and skills of the members of the socially and economically disadvantaged communities of Greater London in such a way that such members are better able to identify and help meet their needs and to participate more fully in society and to assist by directly promoting the more effective working of local charitable community capacity building organisations designed to pursue that aim”.

London Citizens is in the tradition of people who organised in Victorian East London. In 1888, people complained about the way the women match makers at the Bryant & May factory were being treated. The company reacted by attempting to force their workers to sign a statement that they were happy with their working conditions. When a group of women refused to sign, the organiser of the group was sacked. As a result, 1,400 of the women at Bryant & May went on strike. The Bryant & May dispute, which lasted three weeks before the management gave in, was the first strike by workers to gain national publicity. The following year workers in the docks went on strike for five weeks in the Great Dock Strike of 1889 to achieve better wages and working conditions. These were early examples of people being organised around issues of self interest which led to improved working conditions and pay and laid the foundation for the trades’ union movement. Prominent people in society lent their support including the Roman Catholic Cardinal Manning, who was very influential in getting the dock managers to agree terms with the dockers.

Community organising can trace its modern roots back to Saul Alinsky who worked in Chicago as an organiser, initially with the poor Catholic communities there. He subsequently used his organising methods to get change for the black community in South Chicago, through his local organisation, Woodlawn, by mobilising large numbers of people.

Sandford Horwitt in his biography of Alinsky described one example of this “In 1961, Alinsky decided to show City Hall in Chicago that Woodlawn was a force to be reckoned with. He combined two elements - votes, which were the coin of the realm in Chicago politics, and

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fear of the black masses - by taking forty-six busloads, 2,500 loud and passionate black citizens, down to City Hall to register to vote. No administrator in Chicago ever forgot that image." (1989, p.109)

Alinsky went on to found the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in 1940. London Citizens uses the same organising principles as the IAF in its work. In London it is not only Catholic churches and black organisations but the diversity of mediating institutions representing various faith communities, labour, education and community groups who have come together in membership. Alinsky admitted that he was unable to bring together the black community and the Jewish and Catholic communities to work together. Divisions were too entrenched in Chicago when he started to organise. Also where Alinsky was able to organise through sheer charisma, he was not so successful in building organisations which lasted. Michael Gecan, himself an organiser with the Industrial Areas Foundation, attributes this to Alinsky's protégé, Ed Chambers, who took over as Director of the IAF on Alinsky's death in 1972. He describes how Chambers responded to a call for help in 1978 from religious leaders in East Brooklyn then in deep trouble with gun and drugs crime, arson and a community under siege. Chambers told the leaders not to tackle any of the issues that were concerning them, but first build a power base from which to act.

Alinsky was extraordinarily effective as a tactician, writer, speaker and gadfly. He was the first theorist and exponent of citizens' organising in urban communities. (But) he did not create organisations that endured. That was Chamber's critical contribution to the world of citizens' organising... He had a talent for teaching people how to organise power that lasted. He had faith in their ability to build a machine that had a soul... Loose groupings of interested individuals did not have a prayer of addressing major crises – housing, crime, schools, jobs and others. Each crisis was at bottom a power crisis. Ed Chambers spent 18 months working long-distance with the leaders of what would become the East Brooklyn Congregations. They recruited twenty local institutions. They raised, to their complete surprise, nearly 250,000 US dollars in dues and grants. They sent hundreds of leaders through local training sessions and fifty through the IAF ten day training. They ran meetings that began and ended on time and lasted one hour. They did all of this work themselves, without a paid staff person, in one of the nation's poorest communities, at the very worst of times, while buildings continued to burn and bullets continued to fly... In the almost twenty three years since... they have used that power to transform their community. (Gecan, 2002, pp.9-12)

In East London we followed a similar process of spending two years from 1994 until the public launch in 1996 in getting together a broad coalition of groups. Institutions were recruited. Leaders were trained. And this was in spite of the different agendas which various groups brought to the table. What do London Churches, Mosques, Trades Unions, Schools and Community Centres have in common? Initially not that much. There were a range of different needs. Each of the member institutions was asked to identify the things which they would like to change. Many of these were very local issues such as a processing factory emitting noxious smells in a neighbourhood, or the safety around a school because of traffic levels or drug dealers. After the initial coalition building, the approach therefore was to select a limited number of issues and invite member institutions to prioritise one for immediate action in return for support on other issues at a later date. This process of mutual support, would involve research,

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Careful planning and local actions to achieve their goals. A major part of this was to engage with the people who could make the difference – identifying the power holders in London. In the case of the factory, for instance, the managing director agreed to meet a London Citizen delegation comprised of members of the local Catholic Church and Mosque and was eventually persuaded to invest over £1million in a filter on the factory chimney to stop the smell contaminating the neighbourhood.

Volunteers not only research, plan and action the issues, they also evaluate the success or failure of the actions they take and aim to build over time on the relationships they establish with people in positions of authority. They are themselves accountable to their own institutions, and expect to hold accountable those who exercise authority in various roles in wider society in both the private sector and in public and political life.

The power of London Citizens lies in its ability to mobilise large numbers of people from very diverse communities who share a moral view of what is in the public interest. The bigger actions – such as the Living Wage campaign – grew in strength from tackling smaller issues first and building on these. Small successes have given confidence to members that change for the better is possible and that they have the authority to initiate it. South London Citizens took confidence from the successes in East London and in their first year launched a Commission of Enquiry into the services of the Immigration Service based at Lunar House in Croydon. Their report *A Humane Service for Global Citizens* sets out their detailed recommendations which are being discussed with the responsible minister and senior civil servants who have said that they are committed to improvement of the service.

Case Study – The London Living Wage

In this article I wish to concentrate on the Living Wage Campaign which started in 2001 and use this as a case study for the purposes of understanding the way Broad Based Organising works at active and reflective citizenship.

Several years of research undertaken by London Citizens with people in member institutions threw up wider issues such as low pay and poor housing – needs which crossed institutional boundaries and represented wider social issues. People working as cleaners, security guards, kitchen staff, waiters, porters, nurses, children's workers, many of them from black and ethnic minorities, find it hard to live in London. The cost of housing, transport, food and clothing for themselves and their children mean many people who go to Church or Mosque have to have more than one job, and work very long hours, to make ends meet.

The department of Human Geography at Queen Mary College, London, has an ongoing research project studying the campaign and the issue of low pay for some years. Prof. Jane Wills stated that

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“It is now widely acknowledged that income inequality has widened in the UK since the 1980’s. In contrast to the previous two decades, when differentials remained fairly constant, the wage gap increased very sharply after about 1979. If we take London as an example, in 1979 the top 10 per cent of male full time earners had 2.6 times more income than the bottom 10 per cent, but by 2000 this ratio had grown to 4.16. Despite dramatic increases in the costs of housing, childcare, transportation and living expenses over the past 20 years, wages for those at the bottom have not increased very much, if at all, in real terms”. (Wills, 2004, p265)

The Living Wage campaign was launched at an assembly of 1,300 people held at Walthamstow Assembly Hall in April 2001. In addition to those from London Citizens member institutions were a range of guests and invited speakers, including the media. The campaign has used a combination of academic research and events to outline the scale of the problem; holding large public meetings to put direct and mediated pressure on local politicians and officials who are able to implement change; and directing trade union, community and media pressure on very particular targets (East London hospitals, Local Authorities, Health Authorities and global banks at Canary Wharf and most recently University campuses).

In the summer of 2001, London Citizens commissioned a team of researchers to gather information on the pay and conditions of almost 100 low-paid workers in East London. Working undercover to approach workers in hospital corridors, security offices, station platforms, canteens, public parks and the corporate splendour of Canary Wharf in the middle of the night, researchers used a simple questionnaire to expose the reality of low paid work in one of the world’s leading global cities. In the main, these workers were employed by private contractors to provide essential services such as cleaning, catering, portering, security and maintenance for a wide range of clients in both the public and private sectors.

At the time the national minimum wage was £3.70 an hour and most of those interviewed were found to earn around or just above this amount. More alarmingly, however, those who were not, or never had been, employed directly by the public sector were found to have minimal rates of overtime pay (if anything), no London Weighting, no sick pay, no company pension, and no compassionate leave. Most had only the legal minimum of 20 days holiday a year (including eight national bank holidays) and very few were claiming the in-work benefits to which they were entitled. Those workers with dependent children were found to work long hours of overtime or at a second job to try and survive.

London Citizens also persuaded UNISON to fund some research in 2001 from the Family Budget Unit (FBU) part of the Social Policy Research Unit based at the University of York. The FBU budgets have been formulated at two living standards: Modest but Adequate (MBA) and Low Cost but Acceptable (LCA). The MBA budgets are at a reasonable standard, well above poverty but well below luxury. MBA represents a living standard to which many families aspire. LCA represents a minimum income standard that is sustainable indefinitely and a threshold below which health, social integration and satisfactory levels of child

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development are at risk. They were commissioned to measure the essential expenditure incurred by various family units in East London and thus establish the income needed to support a family on the LCA standard of living. The figure they produced, despite very conservative assumptions (no debt, no special needs, availability of Council housing), was £6:30 an hour for a Living Wage in London compared with the government's Low Pay Commission which had set the National Minimum Wage at £3.70 an hour.

Two years later in early June 2003, more than 300 of these low-paid workers employed at Whipps Cross Hospital in East London, were to be found on a lively picket line outside the hospital demanding a living wage. After these workers had joined London Citizens to take part in its living wage campaign, membership of the local branch of UNISON had increased by 300 per cent amongst contract workers (from 61 to about 350), the number of stewards had increased from none to four, and the union had submitted a claim for parity in terms and conditions with National Health Service (NHS) in house staff. Contract staff employed at the Homerton and those employed at Mile End and St Clement's Hospitals had settled their claims in the same week. Through their membership of London Citizens and the living wage campaign, UNISON branches in East London had started to work together to support contract staff. This new activity, when coupled with the support of campaign organisers, meant the contract workers joined and took part in the union as never before. By working with the community, the union had gained much needed moral authority and media attention over an issue of social and economic injustice. Their claim for parity with NHS staff has since been won.

Similar actions were successfully pursued in Canary Wharf getting global banks such as Barclays and HSBC to ensure that their contracted out staff there are paid a living wage. Methods used included buying shares and attendance at Annual General Meetings, mass occupation of a bank branch in central London at a busy time of year, until those in authority at the Bank realised that it was necessary to come to the negotiating table to avoid further disruption, embarrassment and bad publicity. The highly paid chairman of a global bank was challenged by one of his cleaners to justify wage differentials at the AGM in front of shareholders. This is not an experience he would want repeated as the press coverage was very negative. As a basis for negotiation, London Citizens produced a brief report entitled "*Socially responsible contracting in London's financial districts.*"

In May 2004, London Citizens gathered two thousand people to fill the Methodist Central Hall in Westminster to set out a citizens' agenda for the candidates for the London Mayoral elections. They were there not as individuals but as representative groups from their member organisations. Some came in groups of ten, others in groups of 20, 50 or 100. The Labour, Conservative, Liberal-Democrat and Green candidates were invited.

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The candidates were asked to:

1. "Act as a public champion for a London Living Wage currently estimated at £6-70 per hour. The mayor must ensure that outsourced staff in London Transport, the Metropolitan Police and other GLA institutions get a Living Wage package. In addition the Mayor will establish a unit to monitor and expose low pay in London, especially in the NHS, and in London's hospitality industry.
2. "Establish two 'Community Land Trusts' for 2,000 affordable homes to buy or rent for low to middle income households in East and South London. These pilot projects, if successful, could be expanded to a wider range of sites."

The candidates agreed to these and two other detailed agenda items. As a result of this action, Ken Livingstone after the elections set up a Living Wage unit in City Hall and announced the London rate in April 2005 of £6.70 per hour – substantially above the minimum wage of just over £5 per hour. He has undertaken to make an annual revision to the rate and ensure that all staff for whom he is responsible receive the living wage as a minimum rate and has set up an implementation team. The revised rate for 2006-07 is £7:05 per hour. He is also identifying sites and undertaking a feasibility study for the housing initiative. London Citizens also signed an agreement with the London 2012 Olympic bid team and the London Mayor to ensure that if the Olympics came to London the Olympic area will be a living wage zone. Since the award to London of the 2012 games, action is being taken to ensure that contracts include a living wage clause.

In the Parliamentary Elections in May 2005, candidates for East London constituencies undertook that if elected they will support London Citizens in promoting the living wage to public bodies and private companies.

In the summer of 2005 a team of students was commissioned to undertake further research into the pay and conditions of low paid workers to update our findings. The report "*Making the City Work: Low Paid Employment in London*" was published by Queen Mary College in November 2005 and is available on line. The most recent aspects of the campaign concern wages paid on University College campuses and global hotel chains.

The dynamics of organising

In this next section I want to look at the dynamics of Broad Based Organising and try to show how leadership and followership, and the methods and roles involved contribute to the development of this work. A number of questions come to mind. How is it possible to get diverse groups of people working together? How do Christians, Muslims and Communists find themselves in the same room working to a common agenda? How does the organisation manage to bring into membership other membership organisations? How do you negotiate across the complex interrelatedness between different levels of institutional authority?

Primary leaders in institutions – priests, union officials or head teachers – obviously have a key role to play in allowing their institutions to join London

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Citizens. But there is also the role of Bishops or full time officers or other hierarchies which may impede or facilitate such developments. Below the primary leaders, there are those who exercise formal or informal leadership within congregations or trades unions without whose support the primary leader can be isolated. The very nature of London Citizens requires leaders who have the authority of their followers. It is not possible to gather public assemblies of 500, 1,000 or 2,000 people to transact public business without an army of followers.

The Role of the Organiser

Broad Based Organising rests on the notion of relational power. The key role in London Citizens is that of the professional organiser. Typically an organiser in Broad Based Organising is expected to undertake about fifteen one-to-one meetings with local leaders each week. It is part of the task of the organiser to keep on identifying new leaders and encouraging them to bring their followers into membership. The organiser is the person who is skilled in identifying institutional leaders and forming a relationship with them. The ability of London Citizens to bring a diverse membership of institutions together depends on the level of trust established between the organiser and the community leaders and between the community leaders themselves. Geecan describes the importance of developing such relationships in a Broad Based Organisation in East Brooklyn

In the middle of worsening deterioration, crime, arson, and abandonment, in a place that looked as if it had been repeatedly bombed and strafed, I resisted the nearly overpowering urge to rush into action and instead filled my schedule with individual meetings. And I began to develop one of the most important habits any leader or organiser can have – the habit of building new public relationships. Power in our society does not just come from the concentration of wealth on Wall Street, the dictates of great governmental agencies, the barrel of a gun, or the fanaticism of a terrorist in the cockpit of a plane. Power can come from the habit of building new public relationships. (Geecan, 2002, p. 21)

Religious leaders in many communities in London meet each other across denominational and faith boundaries. Religious leaders also have some knowledge of each other and of the reputation of those who have been active in the community. Greg Smith, a researcher based at the University of East London, describes such a network in the London Borough of Newham

A small number of Christian leaders, most of whom have lived and worked in the area for a quarter of a century or more, and who include the local Anglican Bishop and Area Dean, a well-known Baptist minister and two leading Methodists regularly interact, and for the most part operate as friends and allies. They have helped to establish a semi-formal structure known as the Borough Deans' Group in which all the major denominations and some of the new Pentecostal and charismatic Churches are represented and which has regular access to leading officers of the Inner Cities Religious Council. Through wider informal networking they can also mobilise a broad constituency of Christian Churches and agencies (Smith, 2000, p. 25)

If there is no local network of leaders who know each other in an area, the task of the organiser is made that much more difficult. It is this network of trust,

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however informal, which makes access to a wide range of institutional membership possible. As collaboration develops, the trust is enhanced.

These networks can be very extensive and are both local and global in their reach. They have significance for community cohesion and political action. These social capital networks however are not always recognised – although increasingly government in the UK is becoming aware of the contribution that faith communities can make to regeneration initiatives and the delivery of public services. The whole thrust of the ChangeUp programme sponsored by the office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Treasury has been to develop the infrastructure of the voluntary and community sector, including the faith sector. The role of the organiser is to tap into these social and religious networks. It is not a question of the charisma of the organiser, or specific sociological characteristics of the area. London Citizens began in the comparatively poorer boroughs of East London, but is now established in South London and in the comparatively wealthier parts of West London also.

This is not to say that the process is unproblematic. For instance, a priest who brings his Church into membership may move on and be replaced by a priest who has no interest in community organising. This makes for a difficulty within that congregation, since many of the lay members will have been involved and committed to the actions of London Citizens. Sometimes the lay members are able to persuade the priest to continue; sometimes the priest takes the congregation out of membership. The same is true of a change of leadership in any of the member institutions. This means that London Citizens sees member institutions moving in and out of membership as a feature of its development over a period of years.

Alinsky in a report to one of his funders described several distinguishing characteristics of the Industrial Areas Foundation, one of the continuing proponents for Broad Based Organising in the USA:

(1) It is rooted in local leadership, organizations and agencies. (2) The driving force is the self-interest of the local people. (3) Its program for action emerges out of the organizing process. (4) It is expected that many persons participate in a variety of volunteer activities and that numerous committees are functioning on a more or less continuous basis. (5) The functional relationship among problems is emphasized and the program is not narrowly constricted, which might result in attracting the support of only a segment of the local population. (6) A democratic society is one which responds to popular pressures. The organization does not shy away from involvement in matters of controversy. (7) It utilizes indigenous individuals and finds and develops its leaders from such people. (8) Self-interest is of primary significance. The organization tries to channel the diverse forces of self-interest within the community into a common direction for the common good, at the same time respecting the autonomy of individuals and organizations. And (9) it becomes self-financing at the end of about three years. Self-financing is the test of their independence. (Alinsky, 1954, p.23)

Typically Alinsky approached Christian leaders by saying they would get more members and more money if they joined his organisation. This may seem a cynical ploy but in fact it is in London Citizens own interest to offer the opportunity of more members and therefore more money for the organisations

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which join. London Citizens is not, for instance, intending to replace the trades' union movement but to work alongside the unions, whose membership and influence has grown as a result of being part of the Living Wage campaign.

Similarly London Citizens is not in the business of replacing faith institutions, but in engaging with them in their natural habitat of supporting human dignity and social justice. The Mosque is not threatened by the Church, or the Union by either, if the focus of engagement is on the campaign for justice. Tensions of theology or ideology may well exist between member institutions. But it is true that in addition to these tensions it is possible to negotiate common agendas for action which gain the consent of all.

When tensions do arise between London Citizens and a member institution, this becomes the focus of negotiation. For instance on one occasion a union branch official resented having London Citizens involved in negotiations over the Living Wage. The officer was not used to having Church people involved in what he saw as wage negotiations and therefore his preserve. It was a full time union officer from the same Union, who was supportive of the work of London Citizens, who intervened to reassure the officer concerned.

The role of organiser and of Broad Based Organising has evolved since Alinsky's time. The idea of the Broad Base was developed by Ed Chambers of the Industrial Areas Foundation and Neil Jameson, lead organiser of London Citizens. They saw that it was necessary to bring together not just faith communities (which were Alinsky's focus) but also to engage labour, not for profit agencies and education as part of the mix. The role of organiser increasingly requires both strategic and tactical skills as well as highly developed organisational ability.

The organiser as a profession has dropped out of sight in British society. Yet if you look at the history of the trades' union movement, the full time organiser played a crucial role. The grass roots constituency had to be agitated and mobilised to get rid of 12 hour shifts and fight for the 8 hour working day, paid holidays, and health and safety legislation. This meant organising people and organising money. Trades Union power was built on the ability to turn out its members, and withdraw their labour if necessary, and have enough money to support families who had no wage coming in.

Labour politics took this network of grassroots support as its foundation when Kier Hardie was elected in West Ham, East London, as the first Independent Labour MP returned to Westminster in 1892. But over the past 100 years this grassroots participation has withered as political institutions failed to engage with and became distant from their natural roots. Political parties take grassroots support for granted and the levels of participation have declined and there seems little understanding of what has been neglected and even less idea how to correct the failure. Political parties and trades unions and to some extent the

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mainstream Churches have become bureaucracies cut off from their membership base and therefore out of touch with what actually concerns their members. Membership itself has been in steady decline with no strategy for reversing the trends in sight. Focus groups and polls are no substitute for day to day engagement.

One of the intentions of Broad Based Organising is to recover the role of organiser as an important profession for those wanting to be active in community politics. It has been the role of the Citizens Organising Foundation (COF), a national charity, to which London Citizens is affiliated, to select and mentor organisers and to train them in the skills and develop the experience of organising. Currently COF has two centres of organising affiliated in the United Kingdom – London Citizens and Birmingham Citizens.

COF also organises and supports national training for Broad Based Organisations in the UK, following the pattern of the Industrial Areas Foundation in the USA to which it is affiliated. COF teaches the principles of citizenship based on developing relationships with those who have the power to make decisions. People learn the notion of democracy and leadership by the experience of doing it. Member organisations can nominate people to go on national training which helps them to explore the nature of leadership, power and the exercise of democratic politics.

Primary leaders who are unwilling to develop the leadership of their members are unlikely to be attracted to London Citizens. There is a general lack in the UK of participation by the established Church compared for instance with the Catholic Church. There is perhaps a sense that the average Church of England rector or vicar still has more power and influence in places where decisions are made than the average Roman Catholic priest. In this case there would be less incentive for Anglican clergy to participate or encourage their congregations to participate in Broad Based Organising.

London Citizens is a membership organisation comprised of other membership organisations. Organisations agree to pool their memberships for combined research and action. The decision to join London Citizens is difficult because membership requires the payment of annual dues - £600 for a small organisation; £1,200 for medium organisations and £1,800 for large congregations. This provides an important element of control for the members. Member organisations will question if they are getting their money's worth if London Citizens does not deliver. Yet this "dues" money is of crucial importance for the employment of professional organisers. No government money is accepted for the work of Broad Based Organisations which need to guard their independence as non partisan in their actions.

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Methodology - Narcissism and Social-ism

There has been a recent series of articles in *Organisation and Social Dynamics* which began with a dialogue between Pecotic and Cooper (2005). They compared the experience of collectivist values of the communist era in Eastern Europe with the more individualist values in Western culture. They argued that

“the costs of institutionalising and socially sanctioning one of these extremes at the expense of the other are high. Beneath the surface of the socially desirable there is usually hidden the presence of the other extreme which, when denied its true and constructive expression, appears in a distorted and often perverted way”. (Pecotic & Cooper, 2005, p.74)

They also drew attention to Bion who stated that

“(There is in the individual a) division between narcissism on the one hand and what I shall call socialism on the other. By these terms I wish to indicate the two poles of all instincts. This bipolarity of the instincts refers to their operation as elements in the fulfilment of the individual's life as an individual, and as elements in his life as a social, or as Aristotle would describe it, as a political animal.” (Bion, 1992, p.105)

What I find interesting about the Broad Based Organisation methodology is that it always begins by identifying the self interest of individuals and groups and then links these to collective action. It seems to offer a bridge between the two extremes, integrating individual aspiration with collective civic engagement. By appealing to the narcissistic tendencies in individuals and organisations, it seems possible to develop a democratic, socialist approach to community issues and political action. Lawrence states

“The tension between narcissism and social-ism will always exist and will never go away. *All that can be done is to restrict the growth of narcissism for the obvious reason that it is anathema to social-ism and therefore any organisational life*”. (My italics) What has to be worked at is the middle ground between extreme narcissism and extreme social-ism, or, if you will at the oscillation between the two. This is a much more doubtful strategy than either dealing with one, or the other as a binary solution”. (Lawrence, 2000, p.4)

What seems to be missing here is the realisation that self interest may in fact, though not always, coincide with the interest of the organisation as a whole or of the wider society of which it is a part. Bion saw these opposing tendencies, ego-centric and socio-centric, as complementary. This would echo my experience of London Citizens.

Task and Sentience

London Citizens is an example of a task system which through its activities takes inputs and transforms them into outputs – in such actions as the Living Wage Campaign. But I am also describing a sentient system since London Citizens demands and receives the loyalty of its members and provides a safe space in which they are able to operate. As Miller and Rice state

“An effective sentient system relates members of an enterprise to each other and to the enterprise in ways that are relevant to the skills and experience required for task performance; it also provides its members with some defence against anxiety.” (Miller and Rice, 1967, p.259)

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London Citizens champions causes which have been arrived at democratically by the membership, and are reputable causes which appeal to moral values, and this I believe assists the task and sentience systems to coincide. Each time the Living Wage campaign meets with success, it reinforces the sense that this is a worthwhile enterprise; low paid workers are getting real increases in their pay packets and in their conditions of service; members of the faith communities or union branches are encouraged as they are able to express their values in socially and politically effective ways in the process.

The organisation provides a framework of operations which offers a safe space for members to undertake what are frequently unfamiliar and anxiety provoking actions. For example, someone who may never have chaired a meeting can be asked to co-chair with two other people, a public assembly of upwards of 200 people. The professional organiser ensures that the organisation provides a container within which it is safe to take action. Before the meeting begins, those from member organisations present at the assembly are asked to authorise the people nominated to chair the event and the timekeeper to keep time. The safety for each chairperson comes partly from having two colleagues to share the role with, but also from strict timekeeping and a scripted agenda. The time-keeper is appointed to sit alongside the chairpersons. Those invited to speak are told in advance how much time they have – usually between one and three minutes. Meetings always begin and end on time. The timekeeper has a bell and is authorised to interrupt speakers who go beyond their allotted time. Each of the co-chairs has both a script to work from and clearly defined objectives for the meeting to achieve which have been thought about in advance.

Other individuals can also play carefully designed roles within this setting. Those who have specific information or experience – such as a Canary Wharf cleaner - may be asked to address such an audience, never having spoken in public before. The person will be given assistance with their script and the opportunity to rehearse. But then they present their research or testimony unaided. Given the floor, it is remarkable how articulate and moving a cleaner can be in a second language explaining the difficulties of surviving on a minimum wage, the stress of working long hours and the impact on family life.

Anxiety is also reduced in this setting by having members of your own institution present in numbers to support the events of the evening, but also to support you in taking this public risk. You can be seen to be acting on behalf of your own group as well as London Citizens. And your group is identified by name as an important part of the proceedings and recognised as a member of the campaign.

Clear boundaries around role and time and place are familiar to those who have experienced the Tavistock Institute approach. The rigidity of time and agenda in London Citizens assemblies is sometimes criticised as too controlling. However, at a caucus meeting in East London called by London Citizens before the UK parliamentary elections in May 2005, George Galloway (Respect candidate) and

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Oona King (Labour candidate) were sharing the platform. There had been a lot of media coverage of the animosity between the two candidates, because of their opposing views on the war in Iraq. The constituency had a high proportion of Muslims in the population. The tension in the audience of over 1,000 people was palpable. Each time the meeting looked as if it could be going out of control, the chair was easily able to appeal to the audience and contain the potential disruption. Partisan members were reminded that the purpose of the meeting was to transact business on the Living Wage and Affordable Housing, giving equal dignity to each candidate. The audience, aware that they had given authority to those chairing the event, exercised a mature dependency on the chairmanship and timekeeper of the meeting to keep order and transact the business of the meeting. There was real tension in the hall, but it did not feel unsafe.

Mediating institutions

London Citizens deliberately sets out to bring together into membership a diverse set of organisations which it recognises as mediating institutions. These are institutions which have a public legitimacy in their own right and receive implicit consent from the wider community to undertake their activities as part of a democratic, open society. At a macro level therefore, institutions which share this characteristic can be seen as bridges between the individual on the one hand and government and the wider society on the other. The religious institution, the trades union, the school, the youth group and the community centre can be seen in this light as important elements in the social fabric.

The fact that these institutions are often managing decline in membership makes it even more important that we pay attention to the role which they play not only in tradition but also in shaping future developments in society. They represent human value systems which have been worked out over hundreds and thousands of years. They are able to contribute to social cohesion at a time of increasing anonymity in urban society.

Horwitt quotes Alinsky who wrote,

"In our modern urban civilization, multitudes of our people have been condemned to urban anonymity - to living the kind of life where many of them neither know nor care for their neighbours. This course of urban anonymity...is one of eroding destruction to the foundations of democracy. For although we profess that we are citizens of a democracy, and although we may vote once every four years, millions of our people feel deep down in their heart of hearts that there is no place for them - that they do not 'count'". (Horwitt, 1989, p.105)

Broad Based Organising is concerned with conflict and difference but also with power imbalances in society. If one group feels dispossessed and alienated, then conflict may be uncontained and lead to violence. In this sense London Citizens is representative of a political process which is designed to obviate violence, even though it may use conflict as a precursor to negotiated change. Frequently London Citizens uses tension in an action or assembly to put pressure on a

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decision maker. This is in the best tradition of non violent direct action. Violence, terrorism and war can be seen as the ultimate failure of politics.

Sher points out that the state and its institutions are not able to take responsibility for morals and ethics or values. It is here in the middle ground that mediating institutions can play an important role.

“Faith communities, whether as local parishes, churches, synagogues or mosques, can bind the various components of society – individual to family to community – in a way no other institution can. They are value driven and disciplined, yet at the same time they allow for individual freedoms and the liberation of individual energies. There are very few fora for values, discipline and individualism to meet. A core role of faith in society is the cement that is required to bind people together meaningfully as individuals. Faith communities being value driven can do what the state cannot; remain close to the people”. (Sher, 1996, p. 15)

The alliance of faith, labour and community experienced in London Citizens is unusual but powerful when seen in action. The roots of the labour movement were often found in the faith communities of the past. Leadership in the early trades’ union movement was frequently provided by those who first learned to read in order to read the Bible and then found their literacy had a wider social significance. Those who preached on Sunday could find themselves addressing a mass audience of workers on Monday morning. Even the block voting peculiarities of the trades unions and the Labour Party can be traced back to the constitution of the Congregational Church. Over time the roots and connections became buried and forgotten. But the roots still work when put to the test. In a world where these institutions have lost their identity and authority, it is possible for them on occasion to retreat from reality. Hope that the Church or Mosque or Union can make a difference to people’s lives is sometimes transposed into very individualistic or fundamentalist views of the world. Rigid mindsets can predominate when institutions go into decline and withdraw into their shells.

What is noticeable through London Citizens is the release of energy and excitement in getting results. It is the rediscovery of identity and authority in a new context which throws light on previous contexts in which these institutions thrived.

The discovery of common agendas, joint action and shared success reinvigorates the purpose of the Church or Mosque or Union. Rather than undermine the mission of each, it makes sense of the various traditions in a new and exciting interpretation. Institutions which feel they are becoming irrelevant, as membership declines and financial problems increase, begin to gain courage as having a recognisably important place in society which both society and the institutions had forgotten.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I draw attention to the current debates about terrorism and the associated paranoia that accompanies it, where it is possible to see the increasing polarisation of society and the emergence of simplistic and

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fundamentalist answers to what are complex and difficult questions. Those who reflect on the nature of dignity and justice in our global society are appalled by the paranoid political leadership, which has lost touch with its own traditional grassroots and seems incapable of a balanced and proportionate view of the world. Extreme statements both proclaim war on terror and at the same time instil terror in their own populations.

What I have set out to do in this article is to demonstrate an alternative kind of leadership and political engagement; one that is based on full recognition of the dignity of difference¹ – to borrow the phrase from the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks. This is an alternative which is able to generate social change by engaging diverse communities in identifying and working together for their mutual good.

Broad Based Organising which I have described has as its foundation the value systems and traditions of the long established mediating institutions of faith, labour, education and charity. While these may not always seem natural allies, my experience is that they can be brought together and provide a solid membership base for civic and political engagement. They are not easily diverted from their traditions and values and so have an inbuilt protection against subversion or infiltration.

The Living Wage campaign case study demonstrates what power such institutions can exert, even at a time when their memberships are in decline and their authority and influence are not what they once were. I suggest that Broad Based Organising offers a win-win situation where the exercise of power is actually reinvigorating those institutions and giving them back a sense of identity and purpose, which has been under question from wider society.

I have described the critical leadership role of the professional organiser who keeps in touch with primary leaders in the community and grassroots contacts, and works to create a safe space within this complex organisation. This both permits groups to cross rigid boundaries in becoming institutional members, and provides support for their own members to participate as volunteers in unfamiliar and anxiety provoking actions.

I have asserted that Broad Based Organising unusually provides a very diverse membership with the ability to maintain task and sentience systems in harmony with each other in the achievement of political change. I have also posited that Broad Based Organising provides a bridge between narcissism and socialism which is unusual in that these two frequently polarise to extremes in the kind of society we live in.

Finally I hope that I have demonstrated that the role of religious and other mediating institutions is critical in helping to weave and maintain the fabric of society at a time of rapid change and uncertainty, a view which runs counter to the accepted view of religion and trades unions as anachronistic and irrelevant to

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progress in today's world. In particular it challenges the view that religion is itself the cause of violence. Rather I contend that violence is the failure of politics, and in particular the failure of politicians to address crying issues of equity and justice in a deeply divided world. Given the authority of followers, we can only accept that we get the leaders we deserve.

Religious institutions need to be able to voice the concerns of the dispossessed. Any attempt to muzzle them or silence their spokespeople, or worse, lock them up, is not only an attack on civil liberties but undermines the very institutions which can become the building blocks of future social progress. My thesis is that the Church and other religious institutions and membership organisations have a significant role to play in developing active and reflective citizenship even in a society where lack of trust and fear of difference seem to predominate.

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Some related sites:

London Citizens www.londoncitizens.org.uk

Citizens Organising Foundation www.cof.org.uk

Industrial Areas Foundation www.industrialareasfoundation.org