

ALLEN LANE MEMORIAL LECTURE 2018

'Citizens are made not born; putting democracy into action'

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Thursday, 4th October 2018 at the Honourable Society of Gray's Inn
8 South Square, London WC1R 5E

I would like to start by summarising both my intent and ambition for this Lecture;

- The first half of the title for this lecture is a quote from Cicero, the early Roman Political Philosopher in 46BC.
- My last 30 years as a Community Organiser and Executive Director of Citizens UK has taught me that Cicero has a point.
- His argument is particularly agitational for those of us who make a distinction – artificial though it may be – between the three vital sectors of any healthy democracy – the Market Sector; the State Sector and Civil Society and that, though interdependent the self interest of each sector is different.
- My argument will be and has been for the last thirty years that of the three Sectors, Civil Society is by far the most important, needs most help and support – and yet is the most fractured and confused about its self interest or should I say OUR self interest.
- I will argue further that responsibility for developing citizens as democrats lies primarily with Civil Society and not the State and certainly not the Market – and that specifically with those mediating institutions of Civil Society like faith, education and voluntary association which happen to be under pressure to survive like never before and need help, allies and champions.
- Which is where Trusts and Foundations, Head Teachers; Activists; Imams; Rabbis; Priests; Union Leaders, NGO's; Organisers and Community Leaders come in.

But first thanks so much to the Trustees of the Allen Lane Foundation for inviting me to give this year's lecture – and congratulations on your 52 years of grant making. Your courageous focus on supporting 'unpopular causes' and 'actions that make a lasting difference, reduce isolation, stigma and discrimination, as well as encourage 'unpopular groups to participate' in public life is outstanding as is your more recent decision to focus on promoting 'social cohesion'.

Such decisions cannot be easy when there is need everywhere, In honouring Allen Lane I would like to also honour the many guests present who are also involved in grant making. Those of us who are recipients are grateful for your hard work, rigour and commitment.

I appreciate that it may be unusual to single out one person and thus one Foundation at such an event but please forgive me if I dedicate this Lecture to my friend and the god father of Community Organising, Eric Adams, the retired Secretary of the Barrow Cadbury Trust . It was Eric who encouraged me to leave my fairly safe job as Regional Director of the The Children's Society and start to build the first broad based Citizens Alliance in the City of Bristol in 1988.

It was Eric who went to Chicago in 1986 to attend a ten day training in Community Organising run by our partners – The Industrial Areas Foundation - and then helped sponsor others (mainly Anglican Bishops) to follow his example until there was enough of a critical mass of interest and energy for us to set up what was then called The Citizens Organising Foundation (now Citizens UK) and it was him who was persuaded to be the first Chair of the Board and saw us through the first challenging 15 years of piloting broad based Community Organising.

It was also Eric who introduced me to the impressive peer group of Charitable funders whose company he enjoyed and were concerned with the same issues of the Cadbury Trustees – it is great to see Christopher Graves and Roger Northcott here from the Tudor Trust and of course, Margaret Hyde who became the Director of Esmee Fairbairn and later a Trustee of Allen Lane - but also was the person who sort me out to deliver this Lecture!

In case you think this is just the rambling reminiscences of an ancient Organiser I apologise– because this is a relational story and is central to my argument about change summed up so well by the anthropologist Margaret Mead,

‘Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it’s the only thing that ever has’.

In 2001, as Eric prepared to retire from the Trust world he wrote a devastating critique of the direction he thought that that many Foundations were taking – which he called ‘Philanthropy and the New Civic Gospel’.

I will quote unashamedly from this paper, sometimes making it clear that it was Eric who wrote it and sometimes making his wise words my own and hoping you do not know which is which is which!

In the Summary to this paper he wrote;

‘ Some Foundations have lost sight of their original purpose and have become obsessed with their own bureaucracy. Worse still, instead of being part of the solution, we are often part of the problem by simply creating new power structures, rather than addressing existing ones that oppress people. It is time to signal the end of the ‘managerial approach’ to grant making.

What is needed is a new civic gospel. Foundations should take our place in the vanguard of the growing worldwide movement to rediscover and strengthen civil society, so that we can build a society that is based on trust, tolerance and inclusion. We should use our freedom and moral authority to make democracy the first charity’.

This call to make ‘democracy the first charity’ is the theme, core and primary argument of this Lecture and the link to Cicero.

This challenge is not aimed at the State. We expect too much of the State and Government. Whilst it is certainly important for the State to encourage people to vote at Election times, pay taxes etc. I believe the primary responsibility for teaching and mentoring people to participate in public life is the responsibility of Civil Society through the agents and institutions of Civil Society which include parents, teachers, religious and civic leaders but also Trusts and Foundations.

Eric borrowed the phrase from his friend and co-conspirator the late Bob Johnson. Bob was the Executive Director of the Chicago based Wieboldt Foundation from 1966 to 1982 – these crisis years of civil unrest and well meaning state run programmes – Johnson’s War Against Poverty; the Civil Rights Movement; the assassination of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy – led to a considered decision by Wieboldt Trustees to only fund people and people who built up and supported people, not just people – but citizens. Their whole programme of grants was allocated only to civil society organisations and community organising specifically. Johnson put his years of experience into a book he titled;

‘Why Philanthropy should make Democracy the first Charity’

In the book he argues passionately for Foundations to discern the signs of the times and invest in teaching and training people to learn to work together – and put democracy into practice. He suggested that the more traditional practices of Trusts to support social work like food banks or homeless hostels and ignore the tools and skills needed for people to get on, talk to each other and work for the common good – may satisfy the conscience of Trustees - but not help the growing cynicism about politics and the flight from public life by both rich and poor.

In 1994 Barrow Cadbury Trust offered Bob Johnson a year’s fellowship in the UK partly to explore this challenge but also to visit many leading Foundations and asked about their ‘civil society portfolio’ – he was surprised to learn that in the nineteen nineties in the UK, the phrase ‘Civil Society’, let alone the portfolio of grants earmarked specifically for the sustenance of civil society, were mostly absent.

The Roman political philosopher Cicero made his statement that ‘Citizens are made not born in 46BC’.

‘Why Philanthropy should make Democracy the first Charity’ made a similar point in 1996.

‘Citizens are made not born’ suggests that our present problems with social cohesion and participation go back a long way! The big difference is that the early Romans had learned from the ‘ancient’ Greeks that the training and mentoring of every citizen to participate in public life was critical to the health of any democracy. It is my contention that this applies even more now in the 21st Century - much more than it ever did in 46BC.

The argument of Cicero, and Aristotle, well before him, is that we are not born naturally democratic. We are born selfish because our survival in a brutal world is number one – but it is through our nurturing first by our parents and later by our elders or our institutions that we learn to be ‘virtuous’ according to Aristotle. Part of learning to be ‘virtuous’ requires us to recognise and enjoy diversity and learn that not everyone thinks like us.

Aristotle died in 322 BC but has left a great legacy in his teaching about democracy, politics and society.

He wrote; ‘Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not by accident is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society precedes the individual. Anyone who cannot lead the common life or is so

self sufficient not to need it and thus does not participate in society is either a beast or a god!

Incidentally the Greek for someone who does not lead the common life or thought they could manage without others is 'idios' or 'idiot'.

Aristotle further argued that **'we acquire virtues of character through habit, particularly habits we form as we grow older by good parenting, education and associational activity. Whilst we may not be naturally virtuous we are capable of becoming virtuous by what we do; what we learn; what is modelled for us and what happens around us '.**

This brings me to the hub of my argument and challenge in 2018; if you accept the wisdom and arguments of the founders of democracy, that one of the core roles of parents, the extended family and the second tier 'mediating' civil society institutions which support them – is crucial to nurturing 'virtuousness' and generosity of spirit - how are these institutions coping in 2018?

The statistics for membership organisation in the UK that you could broadly say are promoting 'the common good' like Faith, Trade Union or Voluntary Civic Associations are all fairly bleak with more people admitting to being an inactive member of an institution or not a paid up member of anything.

' The Church of England is facing a generational catastrophe with only 2% of young adults identifying with it, while 7% of under 24's say they have no religion. Church of England affiliation is at a record low among all age groups, and has halved since 2002 according to the British Social Attitudes survey. Trade Union membership has fallen from a high of 13.2 million in 1979 to 6.2 million in 2016.

The question is that if these mediating institutions and membership associations are losing numbers or even have lost their way what is replacing them to undertake the vital task that Cicero, Aristotle and modern day philosophers like Niebuhr, Beveridge, Richard Sennett, Charles Handy and Michael Sandel have argued – where will we learn the tools, practices and virtuous behaviour of democracy? This is even more urgent as extended families become nuclear families and the stability (for good and ill) that once was 'family' is fracturing.

In 1988, working with Eric Adams, and a small group of founding Trustees and with start up funding from Barrow Cadbury Trust I was privileged to be in a position to try and tackle these challenges and volunteered to be Citizens UK's first Community Organiser. I took on the specific brief of organising primarily with these crucial institutions of civil society and persuading them to work together for the common good and by so doing learn the tools of democracy – or the craft of politics in action.

Citizens UK's charitable objective is to 'develop the capacity of the (disadvantaged) people of the UK to participate in public life and to strengthen their institutions in the process'.

My job, which quickly became my vocation, was to revive the tradition of community organising initially in Bristol, by building a diverse dues paying alliance of institutions - with a multi issue agenda of concerns that had one primary objective – which was to be more powerful!

Power was, and still is, vital to this process so that the members stay and grow in relationship together, learn and develop their politicalness and recognise, through their experience of public life, that the determining factor in winning or losing an issue and thus strengthening the membership, is having the power to be noticed and ultimately taken seriously.

The first broad based Citizens Alliance was launched in Bristol in 1990 made up of 27 local civic groups – mostly Churches but one school and one Hindu Temple.

In 1994 I was invited to move to London and build a similar alliance in East London – in 1996 The East London Citizens Alliance (TELCO) was launched with 49 more diverse member groups including Mosques, Sikh Temples, union branches, Schools, Churches and a University Department. The organising work in East London has grown into Citizens largest and most diverse Alliance- London Citizens - made up of 228 member institutions drawn from 22 London Boroughs and able to turn out hundreds and thousands of engaged citizens at critical times and opportunities like – Elections; Vigils; Celebrations and Accountability.

There are now eleven Citizens affiliate Alliances across England and Wales covering many of our major cities and another seven being built; 47 professional Citizens Community Organisers learning through a Citizens Guild for Organisers plus several sister Projects which have grown out of the Organising work like the London Community Land Trusts (which has recently won 11 sites for nearly a thousands CLT homes) and the Living Wage Foundation which has 4,500 accredited Living Wage employers lifting thousands of low waged workers out of poverty.

Citizens has been called the 'University of the Streets' because of the focus on training, mentoring and learning – nearly 5,000 civic leaders, teachers, parents, students and clergy of many traditions have attended one of our 6 day residential 'National Training' sessions which have run three times a year for 30 years!

Citizens Budget this year is £5m – 40% from membership dues and 60% from a mix of earned income and working relationships with Trusts and Foundations – many of which are represented here today. We have a principle of not seeking or accepting funding from the State for core organising and this has served us well.

We have learned to organise for the good times and the less good times and have many stories which illustrate Cicero's challenge that Citizens are made not born! Behind each story is always a courageous family or individual prepared to testify and share their own story and life experience.

Mostly Citizens Members Organise and act locally – to make streets safer; tackle hate crime; organise for jobs paid the Living Wage; get a play ground for a member school; save the job of the lollipop road safety person etc. Many of the campaigns Citizens members vote to act on come out of authentic listening in the institutions and gathering opportunities for these precious relational institutions.

The Royal College of Nursing is an active member of Citizens Cymru Wales. In 2017 their members noticed how many elderly people with dementia were being admitted to hospital after a fall. On the back of some simple questions and conversations they concluded that the common factor in the accidents was the role of the grey zimmer frames.

They were not visible enough, particularly to a confused and fragile mind. Citizens' Organisers and membership in Wales twinned up an old peoples residential home with local member primary schools – and the children were given the task of 'shimmering up the zimmer' frames. Prizes were offered to the best decorated and most visible and a great time was had by all. This has led to some NHS Trusts now seeking manufacturers who produce rainbow or multi coloured frames – and we expect there to be a drop in admissions for falls (over zimmer frames) as a consequence.

We have found the same methods and experience can also apply when there are Mayoral or General Elections as well as at times of crisis like the financial crash ten years ago.

To illustrate my point - were you by any chance in Borough High Street on 20th June 2009 you would have seen a diverse group of about 30 people pausing at the door of St George the Martyr and then moving on quickly to a small park where the same group paused to look at a blank wall before going on to meet in an upper room in The Tabard Inn, which was built in 1307 and featured in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. These settings helped put in context the issue this group were considering.

This group of organised citizens were elected representatives of some of Citizens UK's members. They had a decision to make that afternoon and preceded it with a little taste of history – Charles Dickens set his book 'Little Dorrit' in Borough and Dorrit supposedly slept in the doorway of St George the Martyr whilst her father was held in Marshalsea Debtors Prison (the only part of which is still left is the wall that the Citizens had been staring at whilst also being reminded of the negative attitudes to debt in all the holy books – and the fact that, until the middle of the 19th century accruing debt was a crime but also rich people using their money to exploit poorer people was seen as a sin and named as Usury.

The UK governments reaction to the financial crash of late 2008 was to bail out the UK's failing banks and financial institutions to the overall tune of about £955bn of public money – this represented about £40,000 per family – and has led to a long period of austerity and massive cuts in public services which we are having to live with.

In 2008/9 Citizens UK leadership stood back immediately after the crash and invited academics, think tanks, ex bankers and others to consider what should be the reaction of Civil Society to this crisis – particularly because it was Civil Society's money that had been given to the banks. They also did a listening campaign amongst the membership on how many members were in debt themselves and what were their circumstances. At the same time, similar reflection and analysis was taking place with our sister organisation – The Industrial Areas Foundation in the USA, particularly with their Alliances in the North East of the States.

The meeting of citizens in the upper room of The Tabard Inn on 20th June 2009, was the conclusion to this period of learning and reflection and was basically a call for 'action'. The proposal before the leadership was to agree that the cause of the crash had been unregulated money or that money and the management of it was out of control. Learning from the past, the proposal was that Citizens in the UK should call for a cap of about 10% on the total cost of credit which means, in practice, the State legislating against Usury!

The action proposed was that, if both the UK and US Citizens groups agreed with this radical action then on 21st July 2009 large groups of organised and determined citizens

should visit, act on and lobby major banks and finance houses in Washington, New York, Chicago, Boston and London – all with the same demand of their respective governments.

'A statutory cap on interest rates to control credit and thus stop the exploitation of the poor'.

Citizens UK's leadership, having consulted as widely as possible beforehand, agreed to this plan and immediately set up a media team and action team to drive this campaign and prepare for July 21st and Citizens first ever cross Atlantic 'international action'.

Because of the time differences, on July 21st 2009 London Citizens were the first to act. We met in the Bevis Marks Synagogue, the only synagogue in the City of London, for readings from the Torah and a briefing about the 'action' for the press. Then a Rabbi, Imam and Priest, each carrying their holy book, led a solemn walk of 150 citizens to the entrance of the Royal Bank of Scotland in Bishopsgate. The aim was to try and present the holy books to Sir Philip Hampton, the RBS Chair. They were thrown out – with the holy books. However the whole peaceful action was covered by Newsnight and the audacity of this demand was the talking point of the evening's press and for days later.

It has been Citizens experience that it is not hope that gives rise to action so much as action that gives rise to hope which is why Citizens talks about 'action' in the public realm as the oxygen of any Citizens organisation. That is totally true with this action. We have also learned that winning such a radical proposal does take time and patience – so in November 2009 London Citizens organised an Assembly of 2,000 citizens in the Barbican – the town hall for the City of London and called again for the Cap.

In May 2010 just before the Election Day 2,500 citizens packed into Methodist Central Hall for Citizens UK's first General Election Accountability Assembly attended by Nick Clegg; David Cameron and Gordon Brown. As well as being asked to commit to work with Citizens if they became Prime Minister each Prime Ministerial candidate was also invited to agree to the Citizens Cap on Interest Rates.

Each agreed or offered to study the proposal and meet with Citizens again in the first six months of the new government. This was the first item on the News at Ten that evening.

The Assembly and deals done gave Citizens occasional access to David Cameron, the new Prime Minister and leader of the Coalition and his Deputy, Nick Clegg – as well as their Ministers. Citizens' teams raised the proposal for a Cap on Interest at meetings in Downing Street and with Ministers until, in 2013, George Osborne, as Chancellor, asked the Financial Conduct Authority to consider this Citizens proposals.

Citizens gave evidence about the obscene growth in Pay Day Lenders; Cash Shops and major players like Wonga that targeted East London and disadvantaged neighbourhoods; our member schools used their geography lessons to audit their neighbourhoods and produced maps to show how easy it was to get into debt in some places as opposed to more well off places and monitored the sky high interest rates charged to anyone who defaults. Wonga was known to charge 1509%. In 2014 the FCA accepted Citizens arguments and a formal Cap on the cost of credit was introduced to start on January 1st 2015.

On New Year's Day 2015 about 30 citizens led by the Anglican Bishop of Stepney, Adrian Newman and Dr Mohhamd Abdul Bari from the London Muslim Centre were marking

this historic event outside Wonga's Camden HQ with a big banner saying 'Respect the Cap'.

The consequence was that many payday lenders in the UK closed or relocated back to the USA throughout 2015 to 2017. By the end of 2016 Wonga announced a loss of £80 million. In July 2018 after several attempts at a bail out Wonga finally was declared bankrupt and ceased 'trading'.

Bernie Sanders wrote recently;

'There is a global struggle taking place of enormous consequences. Nothing less than the future of the planet – economic, social and environmental – is at stake. At a time of massive wealth and income inequality, when the world's top 1 % now owns more wealth than the bottom 99%, we are seeing the rise of a new authoritarian axis.'

'While these regimes may differ in some respects they share key attributes; hostility toward democratic norms; antagonism toward a free press, intolerance toward ethnic and religious minorities and a belief that government should benefit its own selfish financial interests'.

This Lecture is not intended to ignore such developments and global threats to the peace of the world. I have purposely not mentioned Donald Trump or BREXIT or any political parties or Party Conferences not because they do not matter but because I believe the solutions to these challenges can be found on our very doorsteps – in our neighbourhoods and in our civic institutions. They can also be massive distractions to local action and participation. They maybe fascinating to watch and chat about but there is little practically that we can do about these matters in our homes and institutions.

Also there is the challenge of Artificial Intelligence and the threat to our democracy of fake news. One of the most chilling quotes from Alexander Nix the ex CEO of Cambridge Analytica is;

'We just put information into the blood stream of the internet and then watch it grow, give a little push every now and then over time to watch it take shape'.

This Lecture is proposing that Civil Society needs a sophisticated and on going strategy to develop and support an involved citizenry who can give informed consent to the political decisions that affect them but also learn the tools and have the power to initiate change and challenge injustices when and wherever they take place.

For this to happen I believe that Civil Society needs to recognise and support its core institutions (political philosophers call these mediating institutions) – families, schools; voluntary associations; faith groups; almost wherever people gather in an organised association to seek the common good.

We need to develop a new generation of civic leadership who have learned and will continue to learn the tools and practices of democracy. We need to invest in and support the people and the institutions that they honour and respect and if some fail us by being too narrow or extreme we do not give up on them but simply build new institutions or reform the old.

To a large and impressive extent the National Lottery Fund is leading the way with its 'People in the Lead' strategy. They have just made the decision to add the key word

'Community' to the Funds title – soon to be renamed 'The National Lottery Community Fund' and require all who apply for grants to be very specific about how many people will be 'developed' and not just 'benefit' from and grant given.

I end, as Eric Adam does in his challenging "Philanthropy and the New Civic Gospel" paper with a quote from Lord Beveridge in his 1948 thesis called "Voluntary Action?":

Beveridge writes that;

'The first call should be on developing citizens to take the responsibilities of democracy in choosing leaders and deciding on public issues.... The making of a good society depends on the citizens acting individually or in association with each other... so the night's insane (Nazi) dream of power over others, without limit and without mercy shall fade.

So humankind shall bring back the day'.

Neil Jameson

October 4th 2018.